MAKING EQUITY EVERYONE'S WORK

THE RACIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE INSTITUTE: DEEPENING OUR WORK THROUGH SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

2025

ACE American Council on Education®

Pullias Center *for* Higher Education
Promoting Equity in Higher Education

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE

REJI
RACIAL EQUITY & JUSTICE INSTITUTE

Bridging Equity Research and Equity Practice

Supporting Student Success and Institutional Transformation through Racial Equity

Contents:

The REJI was honored by the request from the Pullias Center and the American Council on Education, the two organizations that collaborated to create the model of shared equity leadership, to provide resources that will aid practitioners in applying SEL to their daily equity efforts.

This booklet is intended to offer practitioners a summary of key SEL monographs; share SEL inquiry questions to help inform campus-based practice; provide SEL resources (including the original monographs on which these summaries are based.

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REJI RACIAL EQUITY & JUSTICE INSTITUTE

Since its inception, the REJI has provided a core of resources to member campuses and organizations including:

- A yearly curriculum that provides resources and a structure to aid campus and organizational teams in building their capacity to engage in racially equitable change strategies.
- The provision of video and print resources on racially equitable practices.
- Convenings with national equity-minded scholars and racial equity practitioners intended to enhance the equity-minded competencies of our members.
- A racial equity action planning process model (adapted from Curren, et al., 2016) that aids members in identifying institutional performance gaps (Bensimon & Spiva, 2022) across the institution, setting racially equitable goals, and implementing and assessing the goals.
- Suggested accountability structures that include the expectation that REJI teams report out on the progress on their racial equity action plans to their presidents at the end of each semester; there is also the expectation that the REJI team on each campus or organization meet with their senior leadership teams at the end of every academic year sharing on progress made for racial equity goal advancement and obstacles to the work so these can be transparently addressed.
- The creation of equity-minded competency development materials focused on key functional areas in higher education that support individual practitioners as well as institution-wide transformation.

www.reji_bsu.org

Leading for Equity

Higher education is at an inflection point. Over the next four years, the number of Students of Color attending higher education in America is expected to be approximately 50%. Yet the academy's ability to support the success of Students of Color continues to lag dramatically behind the success of their White peers leading to disproportionate levels of racially marginalized students stopping out and their subsequent decreased social mobility (Weissman, 2024).

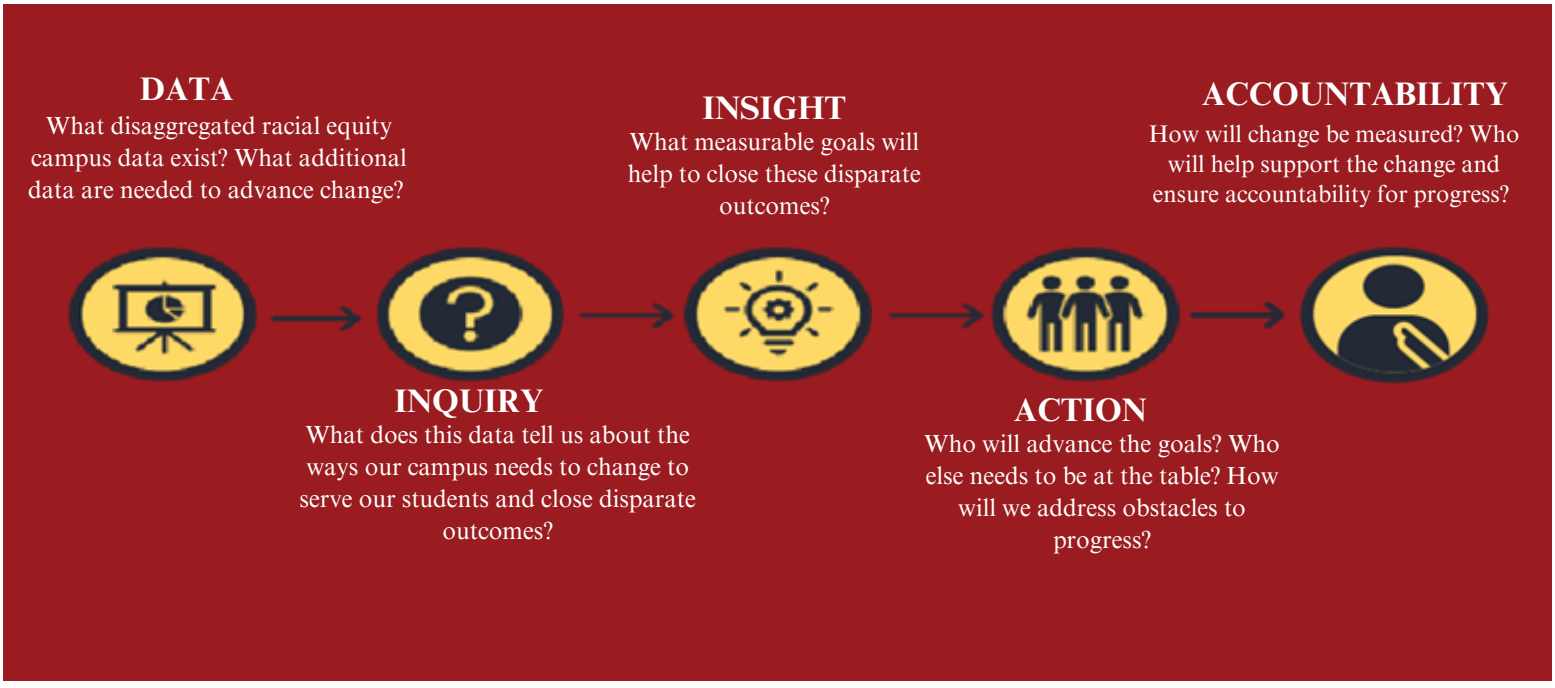
During this same time period higher education will need to respond to Presidential Executive Orders as well as multiple state legislative prohibitions intended to curtail a range of activities in and out of the classroom focused on diversity, equity and inclusion issues. These realities, left unchecked, are expected to have a chilling effect on college applications, admissions, and success for students from underserved groups: including Students of Color, LGBTQIA+ students, undocumented immigrant students, low income students, and others from historically underserved communities. To meet this challenge and support the success of our students, higher education needs proven strategies focused on equitable student success.

The Racial Equity and Justice Institute

The Racial Equity & Justice Institute (REJI) – a data and research driven learning and action consortium led by Bridgewater State University -- has helped member campuses and affiliated higher education organizations create racially equitable programs and policies since 2014. **Our work actualizes one simple idea -- that by centralizing effective racial equity practices into the academy's policies, practices, and pedagogies all students succeed at higher rates, and long-standing racialized disparate outcomes begin to close.** As of June 2025, the REJI's 40 member campuses include community colleges, regional comprehensive universities, and research universities; together these campuses serve 178,221 students, 91,523 of whom are Students of Color.

The REJI's Model for Advancing Racially Equitable Student Success

Presidents must request membership in the REJI and charge an institutional cross-functional team. This institution-specific approach respects the varying cultures and missions of campuses and advances long-term commitment and transformation. The direct engagement of campus presidents and governing board members with the REJI helps to ensure transparency and success. REJI members are supported as they engage in inquiry and action as shown below:



REJI RACIAL EQUITY & JUSTICE INSTITUTE

The campus-based REJI teams utilize the REJI's Racial Equity Action Plan to set and advance institution-specific racial equity goals intended to aid them in moving from data, to inquiry, to insight, to action, to accountability. The figure below provides the REJI Action Plan with inquiry questions intended to aid practitioners as they set and advance their institutional racial equity goals.

The REJI's Integrated Equity-Minded Action Planning Tool (adapted from Curren et al. (2016)).

Institutional obstacle to racial equity you seek to address	Overview of equity-minded data informing work in this area	Description of measurable equity-minded goal	Action steps intended to help achieve equity goal	Timeline for action completion	Identification of those responsible for action completion	Describe how progress toward equity goal will be measured	Identify accountability structures and supervisors who will receive ongoing progress reports on equity action plan
What is the problem? How do we know it is a problem? What are our students telling us they need to succeed?	What do the data tell us about what the institution/ division needs to do better to address disparate outcomes? What do the data tell us about institutional/ divisional strengths that can be scaled to address disparate outcomes?	Begin to consider how the project/activity will need to change to eliminate disparate outcomes. As you consider potential goals, how will the goals ensure that your institution is equity-minded into the future?	For the goal(s) selected, what are clear and specific actions needed to advance the goals? What resources are needed? How can the actions associated with goal completion leverage existing institutional processes and structures? What obstacles need to be addressed?	When will each action be completed? What process will be followed if the timeline for action completion stalls?	Who will be responsible for the completion of each action? Name specific individuals. Should these duties be added to existing job descriptions?	How is your goal measurable (beyond a yes/no)? Utilize close-to-practice data. If progress is demonstrated in advancing measurable equity, how will you scale it? If the intervention proves to be less effective than needed to address the disparate outcome, what are your next steps?	Who will your work be reported to? How often will reports be shared? How will lessons learned contribute to the institutionalization of equity-mindedness at the institution? What is your next step forward for equity-mindedness based on these results?

Questions offered by Colligan and Gentlewarrior (2025)

At the end of every semester, teams report out to their presidents and trustees on the progress made on each of these goals, the ways in which institutional practice and policies have changed as a result of their efforts, the obstacles faced in advancing their racial equity efforts and plans to address the obstacles to equity-advancing goal work.

The REJI – Bridging Theory and Research with Equity-Advancing Practice

The REJI's practice model just described bridges theory and research offered by preeminent racial equity scholars, practitioners and leaders with the "close to practice" wisdom (Dowd, et al., 2018) of practitioners working and leading on campuses. As outlined and demonstrated in the REJI's second free access practitioner handbook sharing evidence-based racially equitable practices (Gentlewarrior, et al., 2024), the REJI is greatly informed by the theory and practice of equity-mindedness as conceptualized by Dr. Estela Bensimon and her colleagues at the Center for Urban Education.

Inquiry questions that will aid equity-minded practices:

- **Evidence-based**: Based on our disaggregated institutional student data, which groups of students are not enjoying parity in outcomes as compared to our students overall?
- **Race Conscious:** Based on quantitative and qualitative data most campuses need to focus on Students of Color in our change efforts. How can we inform our change efforts with the assets and needs of racially marginalized students? Based on our data, what other students are not experiencing parity in student success at our campus? How can we inform our student success efforts with their assets and needs?
- **Institutionally Focused**: Rather than blaming students experiencing disparate outcomes, what changes should our institutions, departments, or individual practitioners make to address and eliminate these disparate student outcomes?
- **Systemically Aware**: As we prepare to set goals to better support our students, what systems, policies, practices, and/or pedagogies do we have in place that are not student-ready and are serving as obstacles to the success of our students?
- **Equity Advancing**: Based on the equity-minded data and inquiry process, what measurable goals will we set and hold ourselves accountable to advance the success of our students?

Equity-mindedness emphasizes practices for individual practitioners to engage in to advance racial equity within their work. Efforts are underway to apply equity-mindedness to institution-wide transformation (Gentlewarrior, Liera, Rall, & Artze-Vega, 2025; Gentlewarrior, Gonell, Paredes, & Shama, 2024; Liera & Desir, 2023).

CHALLENGE

Readers less versed in equity-minded practice are encouraged to benefit from the robust literature on equity-mindedness that prepares us to close disparate outcomes experienced by Students of Color and other student groups and support the success of all attending our institutions.

RESOURCES

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education (McNair, Bensimon, Malcom-Piqueux, 2020 -- https://www.aacu.org/publication/from-equity-talk-to-equity-walk-expanding-practitioner-knowledge-for-racial-justice-in-higher-education).

Center for Urban Education Racial Equity Toolkit (Bensimon and CUE Colleagues -- CUE Racial Equity Tools).

Taking Equity-mindedness to the Next Level: The Equity-minded Organization (Liera & Desir, 2023 -- Frontiers | Taking equity-mindedness to the next level: the equity-minded organization

Shared Equity Leadership: Scaling Equity Work Campus-wide

The second foundational theory that informs the REJI is Shared Equity Leadership (SEL). SEL is a research and practice driven model that emphasizes tenets and practices that help advance equity through both individual and institutional change practices. Recognizing that equity work requires personal work to advance equity, SEL emphasizes the journey individuals need to engage in to enhance the critical consciousness that equity leadership requires. Addressing the common lament of equity workers that "only the choir" is involved in transformation efforts, SEL is also built on the premise that "equity is everyone's work" and offers a research-based approach to building a critical mass of individuals, departments and divisions in the work of campus-wide equity work through the application of specific values and practices.

Bridging Equity Research and Equity Practice

SEL aligns with and helps to advance the REJI's model of practice in a number of key ways:

1. **Both models are premised in the necessity of advancing equity to support the success of our students,** enhancing campus climate for all, and addressing long-standing inequities and disparate outcomes. As pointed out by Kezar and Holcombe in the *REJI Practitioner Handbook, Volume 2*, it is hard to argue against shared equity leadership practice that is engaged in campus-wide, characterized by personal and institutional transformation, and centers students' needs and their success (2024, pp. 25-43).
2. **The REJI and SEL** recognize that racial equity work requires both personal and institutional transformation.
3. **SEL and the REJI** emphasize using evidence, inquiry, and setting and advancing measurable goals in our work for equity.
4. **Shared Equity Leadership** is premised on the importance of equity work being engaged in institution-wide. The REJI recognizes that racial equity is the work of everyone on campus; our use of cross-functional teams is a demonstration of this.
5. **Inquiry** is key to both the REJI's work and shared equity leadership. SEL enhances our understanding of the fact that we all need to interrogate our practices to ensure equity-minded practice. Every SEL monograph includes inquiry questions that can help inform equity-minded practice.
6. **Accountability** (to ourselves, our campus community and the REJI) is key to advancing the work.

SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP: MAKING EQUITY EVERYONE'S WORK

Adrianna Kezar, Elizabeth Holcombe, Darsella Vigil, and Jude Paul Mathias Dizon
Pullias Center for Higher Education (2021)

Summary prepared by Sabrina Gentlewarrior and Luis F. Paredes

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SEL TOPIC:

Equity is Everyone's Work

Shared equity leadership (SEL) is a model of practice that aids practitioners in engaging campus/organizational members institution-wide in the work of "dismantling inequitable structures and policies" and advancing racially equitable student success (Kezar, et al., 2021, p. 34). Rather than viewing the work of equity as the responsibility for a single person (such as a Chief Diversity Officer) or specific division, SEL contends that in order to advance equity -- particularly during this counteroffensive to the work -- it is important to leverage the efforts of individuals across the organization to infuse equity-minded practices into their unique roles (Harper, Holcombe & Kezar, 2025).

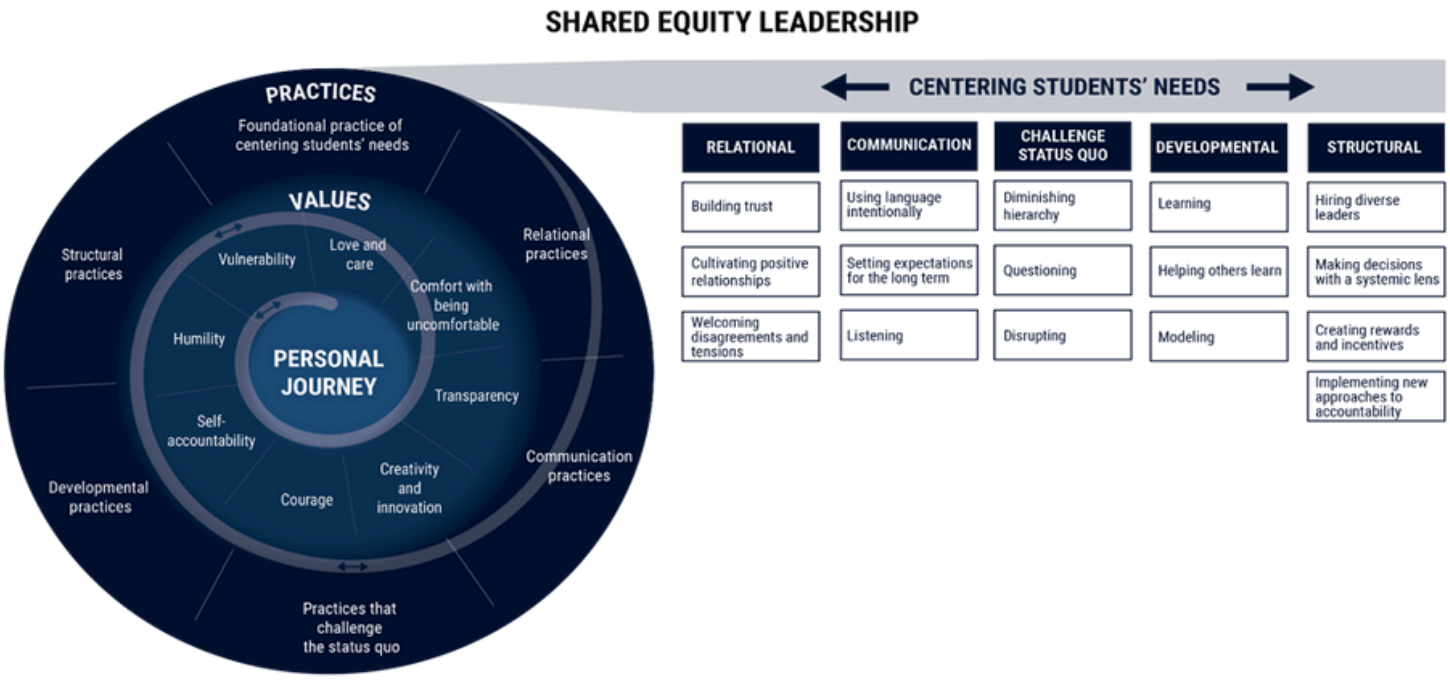
Equity Leaders Engage in a Personal Journey Toward Critical Consciousness

SEL contends that equity leaders engage in personal journeys to prepare to engage in the work. The commitment and drive to engage in shared equity leadership practice often emanates from one of the following sets of experiences:

1. Equity leaders may share the marginalized identities of the students they seek to serve and draw on their lived experiences of resilience, community, and surviving minoritization.
2. Other equity leaders may become aware of inequities later in life – often due to "experiencing marginalization for the first time" (Kezar, et al.,2021. p. 11).
3. Still other equity leaders may not have experienced marginalization, but entered the work after learning about the oppression of others of due to their relationship with those that are facing oppression.

As shown in Figure 1, leaders engaged in SEL draw on their personal journey toward critical consciousness, as well as values and practices that are emblematic of this model of institutional transformation.

Overview of Shared Equity Leadership Model (Kezar & Holcombe, 2024, p. 28)



SEL Leaders Share Common Values

Shared equity leadership is characterized by the values provided in Table 1. While some of these values are typical in other theories of leadership, some of the SEL values – such as love, care and vulnerability – underscore the deeply personal and relational nature of shared equity leadership. According to Kezar & Holcombe (2024) "the values represent a way of being, showing up, and relating to others as a leader. Individual leaders learn to embody the values of SEL through their personal journey work as well as through working with others who model the values" (Kezar & Holcombe, p. 29).

See table 1 for an overview of the values highlighted in the SEL Model.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIONS OF SEL VALUES (KEZAR & HOLCOMBE, 2024, P. 30)

Love and Care	Leaders feel and display love and care for those with and for whom they are working. They approach any relationship with a deep sense of caring and compassion, even if they disagree or have had contrasting experiences.
Comfort with being uncomfortable	Equity work sometimes requires leaders to sit with the emotions and pains of others -- even when uncomfortable -- rather than immediately jumping to finding solutions. It is important for leaders to be comfortable with such feelings of discomfort.
Transparency	Transparency means that leaders are honest, clear, and open about decision-making, successes, failures, and challenges of their work.
Creativity and imagination	Creativity and imagination are necessary because there are no universally agreed-upon ways of doing equity work and leaders must imagine new possibilities.
Courage	Courage means standing up for equity even when it's not popular or easy and remaining dedicated in the face of resistance or skepticism.
Accountability to Self and Others	Leaders must hold themselves accountable for doing the work, getting results, learning about equity, challenging their preconceived notions, and being willing to change their beliefs and practices as they continue to learn and grow. Leaders must also be accountable to one another and the community for doing the work.
Humility	Humility means admitting when one has done something wrong or when something has not worked well. Leaders understand that they do not have all the answers or solutions, their experience isn't everyone's experience, and they have things to learn from other people.
Vulnerability	Vulnerability means being able to open about difficult personal experiences or being willing to risk exposing one's true self, even without knowing exactly how that will be received. Being vulnerable helps leaders build connections, trust one another, and better understand others' perspectives and experiences.
Mutuality	Mutuality underpins all the other SEL values, emphasizing a shift away from traditional egoistic notions of leadership focused on the individual leader and instead embracing notions of leadership as a reciprocal and collective process.

Practices

Shared Equity Leadership is also characterized by "ongoing regular activities that leaders perform both individually and collectively in order to accomplish their equity goals" (Kezar, et al, 2021, p. 20). The authors stress that no one leader or institution is expected to utilize all of these practices. These 16 practices have been summarized into six domains as illustrated in Table 2.

Relational and communication practices suggest effective ways of working with others and across differences. Developmental practices build knowledge and skills, fostering individuals' ability to engage in equity work. Practices that challenge the status quo encourage leaders to call out the entrenched policies and practices that reproduce inequities, while actively working to dismantle them. Structural practices support leaders to implement concrete changes to organizational structures and culture (Kezar & Holcombe, 2024, p. 31).

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW OF SEL PRACTICES (KEZAR & HOLCOMBE, 2024, P. 31)

Foundational Practice	Relational Practices	Communication Practices	Developmental Practices	Practices that Challenge the Status Quo	Structural Practices
Understanding and centering students' needs	Building trust	Using language intentionally	Learning	Diminishing hierarchy	Hiring diverse leaders (or composing diverse teams)
	Cultivating positive relation-ships	Setting expectations	Helping others learn	Questioning	Systemic decision-making
	Welcoming disagreemen ts and tensions	Listening	Modeling	Disrupting	Creating rewards and incentives
					Implementing new approaches to accountability

Shared Equity Leadership Recommendations (Kezar, et al., 2021, pp. 37-38):

- Thoughtfully and carefully select a diverse set of leaders to participate in the shared equity leadership effort.
- Carefully orient and socialize the team to shared equity leadership.
- Provide and require ongoing training.
- Create spaces that support leaders' personal journeys.
- Openly discuss and model values.
- Make data accessible and understandable.
- Be transparent about institutional history.
- Make equity leadership commonplace.
- Reflect on how institutional, local, state [and federal] context shape both equity goals and leadership approaches.
- Engage with emotions.
- Be flexible and creative with accountability and measures of success.
- Incentivize and reward the work

EQUITY-MINDED INQUIRY QUESTIONS TO UTILIZE WHEN ADVANCING THIS ASPECT OF SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

1. **Reflect on who is already engaged in the work for racial equity at your campus/organization:**
   - What strengths can you leverage from those already engaged in racial equity work at your institution?
   - What skills/resources are less well developed in those engaged in the work? (This will aid you in ensuring that you either develop those skills/resources or prioritize inviting new team members that have these skills/resources to join you).
   - As you get ready to welcome new campus/organizational members to your racial equity team, what pre-work do you need to do so those newer to the work know they are truly welcome and needed in order to advance racial equity at your institution?

2. **As you consider your personal journey to critical consciousness as a racial equity leader:**
   - What motivates you to engage in the work for racial equity?
   - What sustains you as you do the work?
   - What, if any, healing is still needed as you engage in the work? How are you engaging in your healing work?
   - What gifts do you bring to the work that are unique to you?
   - How does your institution support/encourage the personal journey work necessary for equity leadership?

3. **Think about the values that characterize the ethos of the racial equity work being done at your campus/organization:**
   - What values most inform your institution's equity work?
   - What values are less utilized or are missing in our institution's equity work?
   - Would the work for equity at your institution be enhanced if you informed your work with these missing values? If so, how can you begin to draw on these values in your equity efforts?

4. **Examine the recommendations for shared equity leadership offered above:**
   - What 2-3 SEL recommendations are your institution most effectively leveraging? How do you know this?
   - What 2-3 SEL recommendations would help to advance your intuition's racial equity efforts? How will you gain support for these recommendations?
   - Utilize the REJI racial action plan format and create a plan for moving these recommendations forward.

REJI Action Plan Template:

READ THE FULL ARTICLE:

https://pullias.usc.edu/download/shared-equity-leadership-making-equity-everyones-work/

Recommended Resources

SEL Organizing for Shared Equity Leadership Video

https://reji-bsu.org/video-library/

EMOTIONAL LABOR IN SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP ENVIRONMENTS: CREATING EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTIVE SPACES

Darsella Vigil, Elizabeth Holcombe, Natsumi Ueda, and Adrianna Kezar
Pullias Center for Higher Education (2022)

Summary prepared by Yolany Gonell

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SEL TOPIC:

The report explores the concept of emotional labor within the context of Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) in higher education. It highlights the emotional challenges faced by leaders engaged in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Authors provide examples for campuses struggling to rethink their accountability systems as they broaden responsibility for DEI work and emphasizes how SEL can help distribute the emotional burden more evenly across leaders, creating supportive environments where emotions are acknowledged and processed collectively.

Additionally, the report outlines specific SEL values and practices that support emotional labor, such as building trust, cultivating positive relationships, and embracing vulnerability. It also provides recommendations for institutions to better support emotional labor, including creating intentional spaces for emotional processing, establishing healing circles, and formalizing coaching and mentoring programs.

SEL Alleviates Emotional Labor

At the core of Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) lies the principle that effective leadership begins with self-reflection. "Leaders must first engage in their own personal development—what we refer to as the journey toward critical consciousness—before they can drive meaningful change within their institutions. This inward journey involves examining one's identity, lived experiences, and the broader systemic and structural inequities that shape our environments" (Vigil et al., 2022, p.1). When a campus cultivates a critical mass of leaders committed to this reflective work, they are better equipped to collaborate using shared values and transformative practices that advance equity and foster cultural change.

> "*SEL is a leadership approach that scales DEI work and creates culture change by connecting individual and organizational transformation" (Vigil et al., 2022, p. 1).*

The emotional labor associated with equity work in higher education often involves DEI leaders navigating microaggressions and resistance from those reluctant to engage in open dialogue, necessitating advanced facilitation, socio-emotional, and code-switching skills (Alcalde & Henne-Ochoa 2022). Additionally, Leaders of Color are frequently expected to act as racial issue experts solely based on their race and to educate privileged groups by drawing on their own deeply personal emotional traumas and experiences.

Cultural taxation as a form of emotional labor that disproportionately affects Faculty and Staff of Color in higher education. It is described as:

"The obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the service was performed" (Padilla 1994, 26).

Cultural Taxation can include:

- Uncompensated committee service for ethnic representation.
- Pressure to educate White colleagues on race and equity issues.
- Avoidance of direct race talk to maintain comfort for dominant groups.
- Expectation to serve on DEI-related task forces without recognition.
- Devaluation of equity-focused research.
- Lack of acknowledgment or reward for DEI service contributions.
- Judgment or censure for speaking out against racism, while White colleagues are praised for similar actions.
- Tokenization—being expected to represent both one's identity group and the institution's diversity goals.
- Emotional burden of managing others' emotions, especially White colleagues' discomfort or fragility.
- Alienation or punitive consequences, such as demotion or dismissal, for engaging in DEI work.

The authors raise considerations around power dynamics; "those with more power are able to express emotions in different ways than those who are more marginalized, and emotions are interpreted differently by those with different identities and experiences, which gives political weight to emotions" (Vigil et al., 2022, p.6). Fear and anger arises when leaders:

- Anticipate backlash or punishment for speaking out about inequities or injustices.
- Navigate emotionally charged conversations where they must manage others' discomfort while suppressing their own.
- Work in environments with historical or ongoing trauma, where the emotional stakes are high and institutional support may be lacking.

Anger is a result of emotional labor because it builds up over time as leaders are forced to suppress or manage their emotional responses in order to maintain professionalism, avoid conflict, or protect their positions. Additionally, fear is a result of emotional labor because leaders must constantly regulate their own emotional expressions to avoid professional or social consequences. They may fear being labeled as "too emotional," "angry," or "difficult," which can lead to isolation or even retaliation.

Coping Mechanisms for Managing Emotional Labor

The authors of the report point out that managing others' emotions is a significant and often overlooked form of emotional labor, particularly in the context of equity work. Leaders of Color frequently find themselves in the position of educating White colleagues about race, racism, and systemic inequities. This process often involves not only sharing knowledge but also managing the emotional reactions of those colleagues—especially when they are confronted with their own privilege or complicity in oppressive systems. These reactions, sometimes described as manifestations of "White fragility," can include guilt, defensiveness, or discomfort. Leaders of Color are expected to hold space for these emotions while simultaneously suppressing their own feelings. This dual burden—managing others' emotions while masking one's own—requires a tremendous amount of emotional labor and can lead to serious emotional and physical consequences:

- **Feelings of Isolation:** DEI leaders, especially those from marginalized groups, often feel isolated as they navigate the emotional challenges of their work without adequate support.
- **Distrust and Frustration:** The emotional labor involved in DEI work can lead to feelings of distrust and frustration, particularly when leaders face resistance or minimization of the issues they raise.
- **Fatigue and Alienation:** The ongoing emotional demands can result in fatigue and a sense of alienation from their colleagues and the institution when they are often met with minimization, denial, resistance, or even gaslighting when they try to point out inequities or propose solutions.
- **Burnout:** The emotional labor involved in DEI work creates a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations.

SEL identified the following strategies that are often used by individuals, particularly Leaders of Color, to navigate the emotional toll of equity work in higher education.

1. **Disengaging**: This involves consciously stepping back from emotionally taxing DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work or unsupportive environments. It includes setting boundaries, such as saying no to additional responsibilities or avoiding spaces that are dismissive or emotionally draining.

2. **Seeking Validation and Support**: Leaders often cope by building affirming relationships and collaborative spaces where they can share and process their emotions. This strategy fosters healing and a sense of belonging, helping leaders feel seen and supported in their work.

The strategies of disengaging and seeking validation and support are commonly used by individuals, particularly Leaders of Color, to navigate the emotional toll of equity work in higher education because they are often left to manage this burden alone. These leaders frequently face environments where their emotional labor is unrecognized, undervalued, or even penalized. Disengaging becomes a necessary act of self-preservation, allowing individuals to set boundaries and protect their mental and emotional well-being when faced with dismissive or unsupportive spaces. It is a way to reclaim agency in situations where they are expected to carry the weight of DEI work without adequate institutional backing.

On the other hand, seeking validation and support is a proactive coping mechanism that helps leaders counteract the isolation and emotional strain of equity work. By building affirming relationships and creating collaborative spaces, they can share their experiences, process emotions, and find solidarity with others who understand the challenges they face. These strategies are not just about survival they are about creating conditions for healing, resilience, and sustained engagement in equity work.

Institutional-level Strategies that Alleviate Emotional Labor

Shared Equity Leadership emphasizes the importance of systemic, rather than individual, responsibility. Institutions are encouraged to center People of Color in decision-making processes related to emotional labor support, ensuring that strategies are informed by those most affected. The report highlights two institutional-level strategies that SEL environments can foster to alleviate emotional labor:

1. **Alleviating the Burden of Proving Equity Work Matters:** In SEL environments, a critical mass of leaders collectively engaged in DEI efforts means that individuals—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—no longer bear the sole responsibility of making the case for equity. This shared understanding and commitment help reduce feelings of isolation and burnout; and the emotional labor of constantly justifying the importance of equity work is reduced.
2. **Creating Supportive Spaces to Process Difficult Emotions:** SEL fosters emotionally supportive environments where leaders can openly share and process emotions like anger, sadness, and frustration. These spaces validate emotional experiences and prevent them from festering into disengagement or burnout. Seeking support and validation involves leaders working collaboratively with other team members to articulate and affirm feelings and experiences in order to obtain a sense of healing and belonging (Rendon 1994; Strayhorn 2018).

Values that build trust and cultivates positive relationship

To alleviate emotional labor in Shared Equity Leadership environments, certain core values play a vital role in building trust and cultivating positive relationships. These values help create emotionally supportive spaces where leaders feel safe, seen, and supported especially when navigating the emotional demands of equity work.

1. **Comfort with Being Uncomfortable:** This value emphasizes the importance of being able to sit with and process strong emotions such as anger, disappointment, and sadness. Leaders who are comfortable with discomfort can better support their colleagues by listening and probing deeper into their emotional experiences.
2. **Vulnerability:** Displaying vulnerability allows leaders to have honest conversations about their emotions, validating and affirming those experiencing them. This creates opportunities for collective emotional processing and support.
3. **Love and Care:** Demonstrating love and care involves checking in on colleagues' emotional well-being, particularly after emotionally taxing encounters. Prioritizing individuals' well-being over business as usual helps honor equity leaders' humanity and minimizes emotional burdens.

In SEL environments, all leaders are expected to engage in a personal journey toward critical consciousness, which includes taking responsibility for their own learning and emotional responses. More importantly, SEL cultivates an environment where a critical mass of leaders are engaged in equity work and the responsibility for educating and supporting others is more evenly distributed.

Institutional Strategies for Supporting Emotional Labor

Institutions can support emotional labor by implementing strategies that create emotionally supportive and equitable environments.

- **Center People of Color in Decision-Making**: Ensure that Leaders of Color are central in developing strategies to support emotional labor.
- **Create Intentional Spaces for Emotions**: Integrating emotional check-ins and processing time into regular meetings.
- **Establish Healing/Community Circles:** Regularly hold healing or community circles for the campus community to process emotions and traumas.
- **Formalize Coaching and Mentoring:** Develop and reward formal coaching and mentoring programs that include emotional support.
- **Acknowledge Historical Traumas:** Publicly recognize and address historical and ongoing traumas related to racism and oppression.

To initiate these strategies, individuals and teams can start by advocating for intentional spaces within meetings to process emotions, such as regular check-ins or reflection activities. They can also propose the formation of community circles or peer support groups such as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that allow for collective emotional processing. Mid-level leaders can model SEL values like vulnerability, care, and comfort with discomfort in their daily interactions, setting a tone that encourages openness and trust. Additionally, staff can work with leadership to formalize mentoring and coaching programs that include emotional support as a core component, and push for recognition of this work in performance evaluations. By taking these steps, individuals can help embed emotional support into the fabric of institutional culture, making emotional labor more visible, shared, and sustainable.

EQUITY-MINDED INQUIRY QUESTIONS TO UTILIZE WHEN ADVANCING THIS ASPECT OF SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

1. What opportunities arise when more individuals are tasked with achieving racial equity objectives?
2. What strategies can we implement to distribute the emotional burden of racial equity work more equitably?
3. How can we create spaces for leaders to process and share their emotions safely?
4. How can we build trust and positive relationships among leaders to support emotional labor?
5. What steps can we take to acknowledge and address historical and ongoing traumas within our institution?

READ THE FULL ARTICLE:
https://pullias.usc.edu/download/emotional-labor-in-shared-equity-leadership-environments-creating-emotionally-supportive-spaces/

Recommended Resources
Emotional Labor in Shared Equity Leadership Environments Video
https://reji-bsu.org/video-library/

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP: APPROACHES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE WORK

Elizabeth Holcombe, Jordan Harper, Natsumi Ueda, Adrianna Kezar, Jude Paul Matias Dizon, and Darsella Vigil
Pullias Center for Higher Education (2023)

Summary prepared by Latrina L. Denson and Yolany Gonell

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SEL TOPIC:

"Shared Equity Leadership is a leadership approach that scales diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work and creates culture change by connecting individual and organizational transformation. Capacity building is defined as an ongoing investment at multiple levels that is meant to support and develop a repertoire of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to collectively lead equity-minded change efforts" (Holcombe, et al., p 3). To create environments where SEL can thrive, campuses need to build capacity for both shared leadership and DEI. This distinction is important because shared leadership capacity building involves working and leading collaboratively, whereas capacity building for DEI is more focused on the knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness necessary to make progress toward DEI-related goals. Most importantly, an important part of the SEL model recognizes that various capacity-building approaches is needed to help implement and enhance SEL as leaders work towards culture change and organizational transformation.

Three main areas of capacity building

"Capacity Building are activities that strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills and behavior of individuals, and improve institutional structure and processes, so that the organization can efficiently meet its goals in a sustainable way" (Brix 2018). The authors define capacity building in the following ways:

- **Personal capacity building** involves individuals building the knowledge, skills, and capabilities to do racial equity work and to share leadership. Strategies for building personal capacity include professional development, trainings, and workshops as well as coaching, mentoring, and peer feedback.

- **Collective capacity building** helps groups of leaders learn how to work together effectively across differences and in solidarity. Collective capacity-building strategies include professional learning communities and communities of practices, affinity groups, and healing circles.

- **Organizational capacity building** approaches focus on changes to structures and processes that support a particular organizational goal—in this case, the goal of promoting equity by making it everyone's work. Campuses build organizational capacity by creating cross-cutting groups and structures; hiring, onboarding, and promoting diverse leaders; and incentivizing and rewarding the work.

The table below summarizes the different levels of capacity building and strategies in SEL (Holcombe, et al., p.25)

TABLE 2. CAPACITY-BUILDING STRATEGIES AND GOALS

Strategies	Goals
Personal: Individuals build knowledge, skills, and capabilities to do DEI work and to share leadership.	
Professional development training and workshops	1. Allow participants to understand themselves and facilitate their personal journey 2. Develop participants' knowledge about DEI topics 3. Develop participants' capacity to engage across differences
Coaching, mentoring, and peer feedback	1. Provide tailored knowledge, advice, and feedback in equity work 2. Facilitate their personal journey by having deeply personal conversations 3. Help newcomers to DEI work develop and grow quickly
Personal and collective	
Storytelling	1. Help leaders from non-marginalized backgrounds develop understanding and empathy for colleagues and students experiencing marginalization 2. Build solidarity, community, and belonging among leaders from minoritized and non-minoritized backgrounds 3. Motivate, inspire, and help people sustain their conviction that the equity work matters and is worth the challenges
Collective: Leaders learn with and from others in a group or team setting as they build relationships and community to support both DEI work and shared leadership.	
Professional learning communities or communities of practice	1. Build a critical mass of leaders 2. Share best practices and strategies 3. Build community and relationships among SEL leaders
Affinity groups	Build support networks, solidarity, and a sense of belonging by being in a community of people who share similar backgrounds
Healing circles	Allow participants to process, grieve, and heal from oppression and discrimination
Organizational: Leaders create new systems, structures, and processes within which SEL occurs.	
Hiring, onboarding, and promoting diverse leaders	1. Expand a pool of leaders who effectively engage in DEI work 2. Bring diverse voices and perspectives into the institutional decision-making on DEI work
Incentivizing and rewarding the work	1. Motivate everyone, regardless of their level of commitment to equity work, to take part in the DEI work 2. Facilitate faculty and staff to be accountable for their DEI work 3. Allow them to use their normal work hours to do DEI work 4. Recognize and reward emotional burdens of the DEI work
New messaging and communication processes	Establish new processes to communicate and share about new SEL work
Cross-cutting structures and groups	1. Pull together DEI work happening in separate pockets 2. Exchange experiences and perspectives 3. Look for areas of collaboration 4. Create centralized resources and information hubs 5. Provide a space for longer-term strategic thinking 6. Bring together whichever experts have the knowledge and skills to solve a particular challenge at a particular moment in time

Alignment Between Capacity Building Strategies and SEL

Capacity-building strategies do not just prepare individuals and institutions to practice SEL—they are themselves expressions of SEL values in action, reinforcing a culture where equity leadership is shared, relational, and transformative.

- **At the personal level,** professional development workshops and coaching foster self-awareness, empathy, and humility, helping individuals reflect on their identities and biases. These experiences cultivate values like self-accountability and comfort with discomfort.
- **Collective strategies**, such as storytelling, affinity groups, and healing circles, build relational trust and solidarity, requiring and deepening values like vulnerability and mutual care. These spaces allow leaders to share lived experiences, challenge the status quo, and build community across differences.
- **Organizational strategies**, like inclusive hiring, cross-cutting structures, and transparent communication, embed SEL values into institutional systems. For example, hiring diverse leaders and rewarding equity work reflect the values of creativity, imagination, and transparency, while also structurally supporting equity goals.

Resources Recommended For SEL Capacity Building

1. General Resources on DEI Skill-Building

These resources—such as racial equity workshops, anti-racism webinars, and DEI conferences—support the SEL values of:

- **Self-accountability** and **humility**: by encouraging personal reflection and growth.
- **Comfort with being uncomfortable**: through confronting systemic inequities and personal biases.
- **Transparency**: by fostering open dialogue about race, identity, and power.

These resources also build developmental practices by deepening critical consciousness and understanding of structural inequities.

2. Building Collaboration Skills and Shared Leadership

Programs like Courageous Conversation and Community Dialogues promote:

- **Mutuality** and **vulnerability**: by encouraging shared storytelling and relational trust.
- **Creativity and imagination**: by reimagining leadership as a collective, equity-driven process.
- **Relational practices**: such as listening, trust-building, and helping others learn.

These resources are especially aligned with relational and communication practices in the SEL model.

3. Equitable and Inclusive Teaching

Resources like ACUE's inclusive teaching modules and USC's Equity-Minded Teaching Institute support:

- **Love and care**: by centering student needs and inclusive pedagogy.
- **Accountability**: by embedding equity into teaching practices.
- **Transparency**: through clear expectations and inclusive course design.

These align with developmental and structural practices, helping educators model SEL values in the classroom.

4. Diverse and Equitable Hiring

Resources such as ACE's *EQUITY AND INCLUSION: Effective Practices and Responsive Strategies and NACE Implementing Meaningful Measures to Hire, Retain, and Cultivate Diverse Talent in Higher Education* promote:

- **Creativity and imagination**: by rethinking traditional hiring practices.
- **Transparency** and **accountability**: through structured, bias-aware processes.
- **Challenging the status quo**: by disrupting exclusionary norms in recruitment and advancement.

These resources support structural practices and help institutionalize equity in leadership pipelines.

5. Incentivizing and Rewarding Equity Work

Tools like DEI-inclusive performance evaluations reflect:

- **Transparency**: by making equity work visible and valued.
- **Accountability**: by tying DEI contributions to formal recognition and rewards.
- **Love and care**: by acknowledging emotional labor and community contributions.

These align with communication and structural practices that reinforce equity as a shared responsibility.

The SEL model emphasizes that equity leadership is not confined to formal authority or specific job titles, it is a collective, values-driven process that requires leaders at all levels to engage in both personal and organizational change. Preparation starts with embracing a personal journey toward critical consciousness. This involves reflecting on one's own social identities, experiences, and positionality within systems of power and privilege. Leaders must examine how their identities shape their perspectives and influence how they are perceived when enacting SEL values and practices. Next, individuals should identify the SEL values and practices they are best positioned to enact based on their functional role and organizational position. Understanding these alignments helps individuals leverage their strengths to contribute meaningfully to SEL. Additionally, preparation also requires building coalitions, engaging in collaborative learning, and participating in institutional efforts that support equity. Lastly, leaders should seek out professional development opportunities, join equity-focused committees, and create spaces for dialogue and reflection with colleagues.

EQUITY-MINDED INQUIRY QUESTIONS TO UTILIZE WHEN ADVANCING THIS ASPECT OF SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

1. How do institutions explore the ways in which systems and policies perpetuate racial inequity?
2. How can you create processes to ensure that professional learning communities on racial equity are supported and routinized on our campuses/organizations?
3. What are the best practices for facilitating healing/community circles that support leaders from marginalized racial backgrounds? What are the considerations that should be explored?
4. What changes do we need to make to our hiring processes to ensure they are equitable and inclusive?
5. How can we design incentives and rewards that effectively recognize and support racial equity work?

READ THE FULL ARTICLE:

https://pullias.usc.edu/download/capacity-building-for-shared-equity-leadership/

Recommended Resources

Building Capacity for Shared Equity Leadership Video

https://reji-bsu.org/video-library/

LEADING FOR EQUITY FROM WHERE YOU ARE: HOW LEADERS IN DIFFERENT ROLES ENGAGE IN SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

Elizabeth Holcombe, Adrianna Kezar, Jordan Harper, Darsella Vigil, Natsumi Ueda, and Jude Paul Matias Dizon
Pullias Center for Higher Education (2022)

Summary prepared by Sabrina Gentlewarrior and Yolany Gonell

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SEL TOPIC:

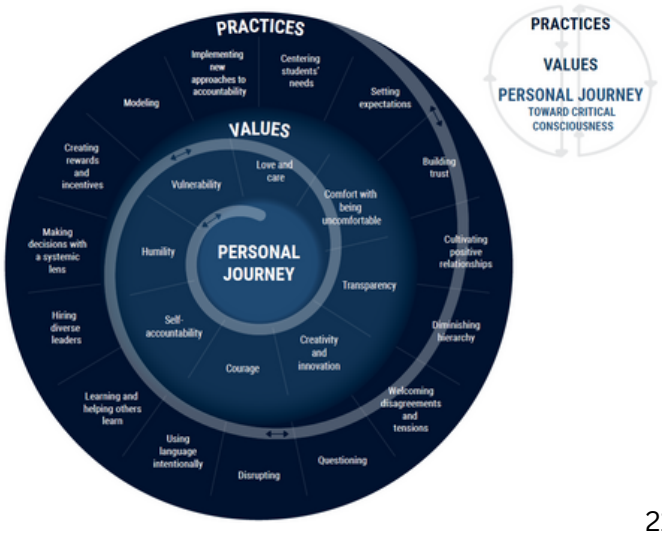
Equity is Everyone's Work

Rather than viewing the work of equity as the responsibility for a single person (such as a Chief Diversity Officer) or specific division, Shared Equity Leadership contends that in order to advance equity -- particularly during this counteroffensive to the work -- it is important to leverage the efforts of individuals across the organizations to infuse equity-minded practices into their unique roles (Harper, Holcombe & Kezar, 2025). SEL aids us in scaling equity work to every role on campus by encouraging and supporting individual, collective and organizational transformation.

Leaders engaging in this work must be on a personal journey toward critical consciousness, and they embody and enact a set of values and practices collectively in the course of doing this work (Holcombe, et al., p. 5). In the SEL model, the journey toward developing critical consciousness can unfold in various ways. Many campus leaders have shared that their personal encounters with exclusion and discrimination deeply influenced their dedication and passion for engaging in equity leadership. Others have drawn from their professional experiences, highlighting years of training and learning that shaped their commitment to social justice. Although each leader's path is shaped by their unique personal and professional backgrounds, a common thread among them is a shared sense of empathy and personal connection to the work. This journey has not only deepened their understanding of themselves and their students but also reshaped how they perceive and aim to transform the inequitable institutions they are part of.

People come to me with ideas [for how to do DEI better in other roles like HR]. . . . And . . . that's great. But what do you want to do in your role, around your job description and your team's work? What is the big idea in your space? That's what I'm interested in. Not what you think other people can do. So it's always like, "They can do this, and I am free from any responsibility." But DEI is the core of every single job—every single job. It's a way of being and walking through this world. And so we need to get people to focus in on what they have choices around, what they have control over, and the changes they can make from a more equitable space. And that will help distribute the sense of responsibility (Holcombe, et al., 2022, p. 2).

FIGURE 1: SHARED LEADERSHIP EQUITY MODEL



Roles Are Not Deterministic

SEL emphasizes that while different leadership roles may lend themselves to certain Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) values and practices, these roles do not rigidly determine how someone can or should lead. Instead, leadership in SEL is flexible and deeply personal. Any leader, regardless of role, can engage in any SEL practice depending on their personal strengths, skills, and experiences.

Social Identity Shapes Leadership

The authors provide considerations on the ways that a leader's social identity (e.g., race, gender) can influence how their leadership behaviors are perceived. For example (Holcombe, et al., 2022, p. 5):

- A woman or Person of Color showing vulnerability might be penalized or seen as weak.
- A White man showing the same vulnerability might be praised as authentic or courageous.
- Similarly, Leaders of Color may be expected to speak out on equity issues more than their White peers.

SEL requires leaders to be introspective and intentional. Recognizing how identity and role intersect helps leaders understand their influence, limitations, and opportunities for growth. It also encourages empathy and shared responsibility across the leadership spectrum. As leaders do the work, it is important for leaders to consider how identity dynamics can create unequal expectations and risks, which leaders must be aware of and navigate thoughtfully. Leaders are encouraged to also reflect on how their identities shape their leadership—whether they are aware of it or not. For some, identity is central to how they lead. For others, especially those from dominant or non-minoritized groups, identity may not be something they've had to consider.

Alignment of Values

While SEL is a universal framework, the way it is enacted can vary depending on a leader's role. For example, faculty members and those in academic affairs such as deans, provosts, or directors of teaching and learning often engage with SEL through practices that align with their responsibilities in education, curriculum, and faculty development.

More broadly, each role on campus comes with different responsibilities, relationships, and types of influence. These shape:

- What kind of equity work a leader can do.
- How they can do it most effectively.
- Which SEL values and practices they are likely to lean into.

See Table 1. Practices by Functional Role (Holcombe, et al., 2022, p. 6)

TABLE 1. PRACTICES BY FUNCTIONAL ROLE

		Faculty Roles	Academic Affairs Roles	Student-Facing Roles	DEI-Specific Roles	Roles in Fields or Units with Historical Legacies of Exclusion	Boundary-Spanning Roles
Relational Practices	Building Trust		✓		✓		
	Cultivating Positive Relationships		✓	✓	✓		✓
	Welcoming Disagreements and Tensions				✓		
Communication Practices	Using Language Intentionally					✓	✓
	Setting Expectations						✓
	Listening			✓			
Practices That Challenge the Status Quo	Diminishing Hierarchy				✓	✓	
	Questioning	✓				✓	
	Disrupting	✓			✓	✓	
Developmental Practices	Learning	✓					
	Helping Others Learn	✓	✓				
	Modeling	✓	✓		✓		
Structural Practices	Hiring Diverse Leaders		✓				
	Making Decisions with Systemic Lens		✓				
	Creating Rewards and Incentives		✓				
	Implementing New Approaches to Accountability						
Foundational Practice	Understanding and Centering Students' Needs			✓			

Advancing Equity in Key Functional Roles

This shared equity leadership monograph emphasizes the ways that those in key functional roles advance equity-minded practices.

Faculty/Librarians often leverage their key role with students to: share what they learn from students with others on campus to encourage equity-minded change; support the learning of others about issues of diversity, equity and inclusion; model equity-oriented practices; challenge inequitable practices through inquiry.

Academic Affairs Administrators utilize a range of SEL practices to advance equity including: building trust and cultivating relationships with faculty/librarians and those outside of academic affairs in order to advance the work; helping others learn is also a key equity strategy; these leaders also engage in the structural practices of hiring diverse colleagues, using an equitable frame when making decisions and creating institutional structures that offer rewards and incentives to advance the work for equity.

Student-Facing Roles engage in the foundational practice of "understanding and centering students' needs" (Holcombe, et al., 2022, p. 14) by seeking student input, inquiring how institutional policies and practices affect students' experience, and advocating for change when structural barriers to students' success exist.

DEI-Specific Roles often support personal and organizational transformation by: supporting people's personal journeys and development as they engage in equity-minded work; use inquiry to challenge the status quo to encourage more equitable practices; build relationships with those across campus to support them in their efforts for equity.

Roles in Fields or Units with Historical Legacies of Exclusion are those individuals with marginalized identities serving in roles that are typically held by those with majoritized identities. These individuals often utilize the SEL practices of challenging the status quo, using inquiry to examine practices, and choosing their language with great intentionality in an effort to advance equitable awareness and change.

Boundary Spanning Roles, or those who work across organizational boundaries, cultivate positive relationships, use language intentionally, and develop true partnerships with those on and off campus as they work together to advance equitable change.

Equity Advancing Leadership in Other Key Roles such as facilities, finance, development and advancement, and the presidency is also briefly introduced. This section illustrates that equity-minded leadership can be infused into an array of campus roles. Readers seeking more in-depth information are encouraged to read the text on this topic edited by Kezar and Posselt (2020) and to benefit from the REJI's Transformation through Equitable Action Model offering function-specific equity-minded competency development materials (Gentlewarrior, Liera, Rall, Artze-Vega 2025).

Leveraging Our Roles or Position in the Hierarchy on Behalf of Equity

In addition, our place within the organizational hierarchy also tends to influence the SEL practices we utilize to advance equity.

Senior leaders often utilize inquiry to encourage campus members to examine policies and practices from an equity lens. They set expectations regarding the importance of the work and make clear that institutional transformation takes time. They prioritize providing the necessary resources to help advance the work for equity. Those in senior leadership can also hire diverse leaders at their institution. Finally, upper leaders hold themselves and others accountable to the expectation that equity-minded goals will be set and advanced.

Mid-level roles have the unique opportunity to influence individuals across institution. They interact with individuals in many roles in the campus community and leverage their unique blend of strategic and operational expertise in order to advance equity. These leaders use language intentionally in an effort to advance equity, model equity-minded practices, and often demonstrate humility as they navigate disagreements and multiple perspectives as they work to advance equitable practices.

Ground-level roles "are especially effective in enacting relational practices and developmental practices and the leveraged existing structures and forums to enact them" (Holcombe, et al., 2022, p. 38). These leaders are especially adept in helping others learn and employing creativity and imagination in the work.

EQUITY-MINDED INQUIRY QUESTIONS TO UTILIZE WHEN ADVANCING THIS ASPECT OF SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

1. What unique perspectives, skills, resources do I have that will allow me to advance equity at my institution?
2. How can I leverage my role and place within the organizational hierarchy to advance equity-minded practice?
3. Who are campus members that are likely to want to read my emails, meet with me, support my efforts? How can I collaborate with them to advance equity?
4. Who are campus members that I don't interact with often, but who seem important to advance the equity goals I am working on? How can I build relationships with them in order to collaborate in our equity-minded efforts?
5. How can I convey to others that are doing good racial equity work, that I value their contributions and want to support them?

READ THE FULL ARTICLE:
https://pullias.usc.edu/download/leading-for-equity-from-where-you-are-how-leaders-in-different-roles-engage-in-shared-equity-leadership/

Recommended Resources
Leadership Moves and Levers to Implement Shared Equity Leadership Video
https://reji-bsu.org/video-library/

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY MEANS SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY: RETHINKING ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

Adrianna Kezar, Elizabeth Holcombe, and Darsella Vigil
Pullias Center for Higher Education (2022)

Summary prepared by Cathleen McCarron and Yolany Gonell

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SEL TOPIC:

Shared Accountability is rooted in expanding the number of stakeholders who take personal responsibility to lead equity work and track its progress. As faculty, staff, administrators, executive leaders, and board members assume responsibility for advancing equity across an institution and into the community, this widespread accountability can be leveraged to create a culture of equity-mindedness and shared equity leadership.

This report helps us as practitioners recognize that Shared Accountability is rooted in expansion. Moving a campus toward Shared Accountability can be accomplished by:

- increasing the number of employees who "take ownership" for advancing equity, no longer relying solely on the work of Chief Diversity Officers and Equity Committees;
- broadening the scope and type of metrics used to assess progress on advancing equity;
- extending the accountability timeframe to change campus culture to be equity minded.

This report asks a series of interrelated questions related to shared equity accountability and concludes with a list of challenges.

Who Is Accountable and to Whom?

Accountability for DEI work has traditionally been situated with equity committees and/or a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). Often these committees have little real power, and the expectation for a single officer/office to make transformational change is not possible given the siloed nature of many institutions. Expanding accountability to leaders at all levels across all divisions is integral to making measurable progress and creating a culture of equity mindedness. To whom institutions are accountable has also expanded. No longer is accountability limited to external stakeholders (e.g., boards, legislatures); it extends to the entire campus community and local communities.

SEL requires a shift in mindset. There is a clear distinction between accountability and responsibility, which are often mistakenly used interchangeably. Responsibility refers to the expectations tied to a person's defined role or position. It is task- or project-focused, emphasizing what individuals are expected to do based on their job functions and the value they bring to the table.

In SEL environments, accountability means being answerable not just for completing tasks, but for the impact those tasks have on advancing equity goals. This includes being accountable to a broader set of stakeholders, such as the campus community and local partners, not just to senior leadership or external bodies. Additionally, accountability means that there are opportunities to develop systems that not only assign responsibilities but also track and evaluate the outcomes of those responsibilities to ensure progress toward equity is real and not transactional.

Figure two below offers an overview of SEL's expanded accountability practices (Kezar, et al., 2022, p. 7)

FIGURE 2: EXPANDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

What Are People Accountable For?

There are several distinct ways individuals and institutions can be held accountable within a Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) framework. These forms of accountability are deeply aligned with SEL values such as transparency, self-awareness, collaboration, and a commitment to culture change. Here are the key ways people can be accountable, along with how SEL values align with each:

1. **Individual Accountability (Self-Accountability**). Individuals take ownership of their behaviors, values, and contributions to equity goals. This aligns with SEL's emphasis on personal transformation and critical consciousness, where leaders reflect on their own identities and roles in systemic inequities.
2. **Role-Based Accountability.** People are accountable based on their formal roles—such as deans, faculty, or staff—with specific DEI-related goals tied to their job functions. SEL supports this by embedding equity into performance systems and annual evaluations, reinforcing the value of integrating DEI into everyday responsibilities.
3. **Collective Accountability**. Units, departments, and cross-functional teams share responsibility for outcomes. This reflects SEL's collaborative nature, where leadership is distributed and success depends on mutual support and shared goals.
4. **Community Accountability.** Institutions are accountable not just to internal stakeholders but also to the broader campus and local communities. This aligns with SEL's value of transparency and the importance of building trust and reciprocity with those impacted by institutional decisions.
5. **Behavioral Accountability.** Individuals are evaluated based on specific behaviors that promote equity, such as fostering inclusive teams or engaging in DEI learning. This supports SEL's focus on modeling inclusive practices and creating a culture of belonging.
6. **Process Accountability.** Institutions track how equity is embedded in processes like hiring, curriculum development, and professional development. SEL values intentionality and systemic change, which are reflected in these process-based measures.
7. **Climate and Culture Accountability.** Institutions assess the lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff through climate surveys and other tools. This aligns with SEL's goal of transforming institutional culture to support equity and inclusion.
8. **Outcome Accountability.** Traditional metrics like graduation rates or faculty diversity are still used, but similar to the REJI, SEL encourages disaggregating data and combining it with qualitative insights to ensure meaningful progress.
9. **Temporal Accountability.** SEL promotes both short-term and long-term accountability. While immediate actions are necessary, true culture change requires sustained effort over years. This reflects SEL's value of patience and strategic vision.
10. **Public Accountability.** Progress is shared transparently with the campus and external communities, inviting feedback and reinforcing trust. This supports SEL's emphasis on openness and shared learning.

What Are People Accountable For?

Accountability mechanisms outlined in the Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) model involves a strategic, multi-layered approach that aligns with both organizational structure and culture. In the SEL framework, accountability extends well beyond traditional outcome metrics like graduation rates or demographic representation. While these quantitative indicators remain important, SEL emphasizes a more holistic and transformative approach to accountability that includes behaviors (e.g., fostering inclusive work environments); processes (e.g., hiring, professional development, curriculum reform); and climate and culture (e.g., campus racial climate assessments, and student experience surveys).

How Should Accountability Be Enforced?

Enforcing accountability within the Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) framework requires a shift from traditional top-down compliance models to a more integrated, values-driven approach that is embedded in the culture, systems, and daily practices of an organization.

Accountability should be clearly assigned and personalized. Instead of vague references to roles or departments, SEL encourages naming specific individuals in DEI plans and assigning them responsibility for particular goals. This personal connection increases ownership and follow-through. For example, rather than stating that "the admissions office" is responsible for increasing student diversity, the plan might name the director of admissions directly. Some strategies include implementing regular check-ins, public reporting, and performance management systems which integrate DEI into faculty and staff evaluations. Some institutions are tying DEI performance to budget allocation and resource distribution. The Racial Equity and Justice Institute's Acton Plan provides a model for integrated planning and accountability in order to advance campus-based equity goals. See below:

REJI | RACIAL EQUITY & JUSTICE INSTITUTE

Transforming a university or college into an equity-minded institution requires changing structures at multiple levels of the organization. As a practitioner, you can focus on using equity-minded data and inquiry to transform your practice. *(Our gratitude to Dr. Estela Bensimon for the theory and practice of equity-mindedness.)* Use this **REJI Racial Equity Action Plan** to develop actionable steps to guide your equity-minded practice (adapted from Curren et al. (2016)).

Racial Equity Goal _____(Give the goal a title or brief description)

Institutional Obstacle to Racial Equity You seek to Address	Overview of Equity-minded Data Informing Racial Equity Goal	Description of Measurable Equity-minded Goal	Action Steps Intended to Help Achieve Equity Goal	Timeline for Action Completion	Identification of Those Responsible for Action Completion	Describe How Progress Toward Equity Goal will be Measured	Identify accountability structures and supervisors who will receive ongoing progress reports on the racial equity action plan

Challenges in Implementing SEL Accountability

Implementing accountability within the Shared Equity Leadership (SEL) framework presents several challenges, many of which stem from the shift away from traditional, hierarchical models of leadership toward more distributed and collaborative approaches.

1. **Confusion Between Responsibility and Accountability.** Many leaders conflate responsibility (task ownership) with accountability (ownership of outcomes). This misunderstanding can result in distributed responsibilities without mechanisms to track or evaluate impact, weakening the effectiveness of SEL.
2. **Overemphasis on Short-Term, Measurable Goals.** When accountability is tied to performance reviews or institutional metrics, there's a tendency to prioritize easily quantifiable, short-term goals over more complex, long-term cultural changes. This can lead to superficial compliance rather than meaningful transformation.
3. **Faculty Autonomy and Role Structures.** Faculty roles often come with a high degree of autonomy, making it difficult to enforce accountability uniformly. Performance systems are more commonly applied to staff and administrators, leaving gaps in how faculty are held accountable for DEI contributions.
4. **Fear of Punitive Use of Data.** Some stakeholders worry that accountability data could be used punitively rather than for growth and development. This fear can create resistance to transparency and hinder honest engagement with equity metrics. There are also "detours" to attaining data due to staff not having enough time to gather or code data - this is seen as "too much work".
5. **Lack of Infrastructure and Training.** As accountability becomes more distributed, many employees may lack the training or tools to collect, interpret, and act on equity data. Without adequate support, accountability systems may be inconsistently applied or misunderstood.
6. **Union and Policy Constraints.** In some institutions, collective bargaining agreements or rigid policy structures can limit the ability to revise performance systems or distribute accountability in new ways.

Despite these challenges, the SEL framework encourages institutions to view accountability as a evolving process, one that requires ongoing dialogue, flexibility, and a commitment to learning.

EQUITY-MINDED INQUIRY QUESTIONS TO UTILIZE WHEN ADVANCING THIS ASPECT OF SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

1. What actions will I take to hold myself personally accountable for contributing to an equity-minded campus?
2. What specific goals within my role and responsibilities can I set, measure, and report on that will advance equity on campus?
3. How can I motivate and support others in my department and across campus in their efforts to lead equity efforts, track their progress, and sustain interest in this work for the long-term?
4. How can I contribute to the long-range goal of creating an equity-minded campus culture?

READ THE FULL ARTICLE:
https://pullias.usc.edu/download/toolkit-shared-responsibility-means-shared-accountability/

Recommended Resources
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https://reji-bsu.org/video-library/