

# Challenges to implementing shared equity leadership

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## Introduction

The current political and cultural climate in the United States makes diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education more challenging. Creative approaches to DEI leadership are needed to navigate this dispiriting environment and continue the necessary work of dismantling inequitable systems and structures that privilege a declining group of mostly White, male, cisgender and heterosexual students. One such creative approach is shared equity leadership (SEL), which combines individual and institutional transformation and includes many more people across the institution in the work of leadership for equity, instead of narrowly focusing on DEI-centered personnel or offices. SEL is predicated on the idea that effective DEI leadership requires a collaborative approach rather than one that is siloed or isolated to a single leader or office. Our [earlier research on SEL](#) indicated that this approach can be effective across many different institutional contexts and can take several different organizational forms that can be tailored to fit institutional cultures and characteristics (Kezar et al., 2021; Holcombe et al., 2022). However, we had not yet explored some of the challenges to implementing SEL. In this practice brief, we highlight some of the common challenges we identified in our recent research report, as well as recommendations for how to navigate these challenges. This brief has two main sections. The first section covers five common challenges that were ultimately navigable for most institutions, while the second section describes three big challenges that had the potential to derail SEL efforts if not intentionally addressed.

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## Common but navigable challenges

Our interviews with campus leaders showed that there were a set of common challenges that most campuses faced as they transitioned to a more shared approach to DEI leadership. These challenges were ultimately navigable—that is, they did not derail or shut down the work—but they seemed to crop up consistently across nearly every campus in our study.

### Common challenge 1: Transitioning to a shared leadership approach

Shared equity leadership represents a change to the way most campuses do their DEI work—from focused in a single department or unit (typically led by a chief diversity officer) to shared more broadly across the organization. Many campuses experienced challenges that were specific to transitioning to a shared leadership approach. This transition represents a shift in organizational routines, or the regular patterns and ways of operating within the organization (Becker, 2004). Old routines include things like not needing to coordinate with others across campus, only undertaking DEI-related initiatives that are very specific to one's local context rather than connected to broader institutional goals or depending on the DEI office to implement DEI-specific projects. SEL requires new routines, such as cross-campus coordination, benchmarking local goals and initiatives with broader institutional ones, and embedding responsibility for decision-making in unit-level leaders such as deans or directors. There was still a lot of ambiguity around these new routines on most of the campuses we studied, and so there was a continuous need to navigate and re-navigate these new ways of operating.

#### Navigating challenges to shared leadership

Campuses used several strategies to navigate these ambiguities that arose when attempting to share leadership related to DEI more broadly. These included developing a shared vision for DEI work, establishing clear and transparent lines of responsibility for specific goals and strategies, developing communications plans to publicize their new shared approach to DEI work, and creating new cross-campus coordination routines and structures.

### Common challenge 2: Accountability

Another challenge that campuses faced was how to create new accountability structures that would help institutionalize their new SEL routines. Given the shifts with broader distribution of authority and responsibility noted in the last section, it is logical that they would face challenges around developing a new system of accountability. Campuses struggled with several different aspects of accountability. First, some campuses that began their SEL work from a

more bottom-up or middle-out approach rather than a top-down approach found difficulties holding senior leaders accountable for DEI leadership. Second, campuses struggled to decide what to measure and how to measure it. Third, they didn't always know how to help people develop a sense of self-accountability when it comes to leadership for DEI.

#### Navigating challenges to accountability

Leaders described several strategies for navigating accountability challenges. These strategies included involving senior leaders in planning and goal setting earlier on so they have more buy-in, being clear and public about how progress on DEI strategic plans would be reported, and leveraging the values of competition and cooperation among deans to get them to take their college's DEI goals seriously. Campuses in our study were also experimenting with measuring a variety of new metrics and processes under a DEI umbrella, including hiring, incentives and rewards, classroom practices, campus climate, and faculty and staff behavior.

### Common challenge 3: Disparities in leaders' personal journeys

Campuses also struggled with disparities in individuals' personal journey work toward critical consciousness. As a reminder, the personal journey toward critical consciousness is the notion that for leaders to effectively transform their institutions, they must first do the important work of transforming themselves. When leaders—particularly some White leaders and others from privileged identities—struggle to engage in this work, it presents a challenge for the rest of the campus's leadership team that is working to implement SEL. For example, many leaders in our study described the challenge of working with White leaders who either outright refused or more implicitly deflected attempts to engage in conversations about their own privilege and the role of Whiteness and racism in driving inequity on campus. These types of experiences eroded trust and detracted from the campus's ability to do this work collaboratively.

#### Navigating challenges to disparities in personal journeys

The primary strategy participants used to support leaders who were struggling to engage authentically in their personal journey involved one-on-one coaching or mentoring to help White leaders grow and learn. Participants also noted the importance of respectfully “calling out” and “calling in” leaders who struggled with White fragility or bias. “Calling in” refers more to helping leaders understand and reflect on their struggles, often privately, while “calling out” is about interrupting instances of bias or prejudice in the moment and not always privately. When public callouts were necessary, leaders did so in ways that were respectful and empathetic.

#### **Common challenge 4: Unevenness in different departments or units across the organization**

Campuses also struggled with unevenness across the organization when it came to distributing leadership for DEI. Some units or departments had subcultures that were more resistant or challenging to break through. This is closely related to the notion of some individuals not authentically engaging in their personal journey but distinct in that this unevenness went beyond individuals and was embedded in departments or programs. For example, faculty leaders working in STEM departments and honors programs described the challenges they faced in getting their colleagues to rethink traditional standards of excellence or achievement and center equity in their curriculum and pedagogical design. The values promoted by these gatekeeping or compliance cultures are often antithetical to the values of SEL, making these spaces on campus slow and difficult to change.

#### **Navigating challenges with unevenness across the organization**

The main strategy for navigating this challenge described by leaders in our study involved harnessing the more proactive units to apply positive peer pressure on laggards. Though it is not easy to apply consequences or punishments for those units lagging behind, positive peer pressure seemed to be an effective way of pushing along those units or departments that were not moving forward at a pace aligned with others.

#### **Common challenge 5: Working together across differences in power and privilege**

A fifth challenge campuses faced as they worked to implement SEL was working together effectively across different levels of power and privilege. SEL includes leaders across all levels of the organizational hierarchy—from senior leaders to mid-level leaders to ground-level leaders and even students. While this breadth of power and responsibility is a key source of strength for the SEL approach, campuses did struggle sometimes with these power differentials. Several participants pointed out that junior faculty or staff, especially those of color, faced much more risk when standing up and challenging the status quo than did more senior leaders, especially tenured faculty. Similarly, DEI leaders themselves had different levels of power and authority within the institution. For example, on campuses that had formal DEI representatives or leaders within each college or unit, participants described a wide variety of titles, salaries and positionings within the unit that led to significant differences in what these leaders were able to accomplish in their roles.

#### **Navigating challenges with working together across differences in power and privilege**

Strategies to navigate this challenge varied depending on whether campuses had formal DEI leaders positioned

throughout the organization or not, though all campuses benefited from leaning into the SEL practice of “diminishing hierarchy.” This practice involves taking specific actions to minimize the impacts of power differentials. Its enactment—and responsibility for navigating this challenge more generally—should fall primarily on the more powerful or senior leaders in these spaces to minimize power differentials and make safer environments for those with less power and privilege to feel comfortable participating fully. On campuses with formal DEI leaders distributed throughout the organization, a more standard and consistent positioning of DEI leaders within each unit would diminish some of these challenges. Some sort of organization-wide guidance on seniority and salary range would ensure DEI leaders have similar abilities to impact change within their local spheres of influence.

### **Significant challenges with the potential to derail SEL efforts**

Our research also uncovered several challenges that were much more difficult to overcome for leaders. These are the challenges that, if not addressed, could derail efforts to implement SEL, which is why we’re highlighting them. These challenges deserve extra attention from leaders trying to implement SEL because they’re critical to the success of SEL efforts.

#### **Big challenge 1: Poor relationships and lack of trust**

Relational challenges are crucial to resolve if campuses want to make meaningful headway implementing SEL. Because SEL is a collaborative approach, the leaders who are collaborating must have, if not positive relationships, then at least functional ones for this approach to work. The campuses in our study that struggled the most to implement shared approaches to equity leadership almost universally struggled with challenging relationships as well. A key driver of negative relationships was a lack of *transparency* (an SEL value) and *trust* (an SEL practice). Mistrust and suspicion fed into negative relationships and contributed to an ongoing cycle of dysfunction and stagnation, with little advancement or progress on equity goals.

#### **Navigating poor relationships and lack of trust**

We suggest different strategies for navigating this challenge depending on the current state of relationships on campus. If relationships are already negative or even toxic, often a reset of some sort is required, such as a public apology, a new strategy or cultivated efforts to rebuild trust. If relationships aren’t actively negative but also not particularly strong, leaders have somewhat of a stronger foundation from which to build. Strategies for building stronger relationships

include SEL practices and values—e.g., building trust and emphasizing transparency in communication across campus. These strategies involve spending time meeting with different groups, listening and hearing their views, and understanding their perspectives before making decisions and moving forward.

### **Big challenge 2: Lack of senior leadership support**

Our original SEL study focused on campuses with senior leadership support for shared approaches to equity work. Almost universally, our research participants noted the importance of presidential support and advocacy for these approaches to be successful institution wide. Public declarations of support from presidents had a significant impact on leaders' ability to recruit others across campus and to convince skeptics that their engagement was important. Campus leaders we have worked with since our original research was conducted have reiterated this idea and shared how they struggled to implement SEL without senior leadership buy-in and support. Presidents can doom SEL efforts if they're unsupportive, signaling that they don't value DEI efforts or that they believe that a more siloed and largely symbolic approach will be sufficient.

#### **Navigating lack of senior leadership support**

Strategies for calibrating the right level of senior leadership support included translating SEL goals into language that resonates with senior leaders; denoting one or a few cabinet members to ensure senior leaders aren't overly involved or micromanaging the efforts; and creating board committees focused specifically on DEI and SEL efforts.

### **Big challenge 3: Hostile state political climate**

A final challenge to SEL implementation that has the potential to bring the work to a halt is a hostile political climate at the local or state level, especially for public institutions. When we collected our original SEL data (2020–2021), there was a broad sense of support in

higher education for DEI and antiracist work specifically in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests. However, shortly thereafter a political backlash to DEI efforts began, especially in more conservative-leaning states, and continues at the time of this writing. This political landscape has been greatly discouraging to leaders who care about making higher education more diverse, equitable and inclusive and presents challenges to leaders as they continue to do this work.

#### **Navigating hostile state political climate**

Leaders shared a few strategies that help them navigate hostile political environments and still make progress on their equity goals. These strategies included creatively emphasizing different equity foci (depending on the level of political opposition), developing positive relationships with political opponents, and embedding the work across campus in ways that makes it pervasive and difficult to excise.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Working to dismantle inequitable systems and structures in higher education is inherently challenging work because it goes against the centuries-long status quo. Doing this work in a manner that is collaborative and relational, where responsibility and influence are distributed rather than centralized in an office or single role, can bring even more challenges as it pushes up against another set of status quo values and norms around leadership and power. We hope highlighting some of the common challenges encountered on campuses in our study that were implementing SEL can help other campuses undertaking this work for the first time anticipate and head them off. For more details on the challenges and navigation strategies covered in this brief, please see our full report on challenges to implementing SEL. For additional information about creating the infrastructure for SEL that can help mitigate some of these challenges, please see [our earlier SEL reports](#).

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Holcombe graduated from Vanderbilt University with a double major in political science and Spanish in 2008. After teaching elementary school in Atlanta with Teach for America, she moved to New York City to pursue a master's degree in politics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Upon completing her master's degree in 2011, Holcombe worked at Mercy College, managing several programs including a college access partnership, an academic advising and mentoring program, and a new co- and extra-curricular assessment initiative within the Division of Student Affairs. Holcombe earned her PhD in Urban Education Policy at USC Rossier School of Education, where she was a research assistant at the Pullias Center for Higher Education.

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