

Article

“We’re Not Going to Overcome Institutional Bias by Doing Nothing”: Latinx/a/o Student Affairs Professionals as Advocates for Equity

Michelle M. Espino * and Juanita ArizaDepartment Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education, University of Maryland,
College Park, MD 20742, USA

* Correspondence: mespino@umd.edu

Abstract: Higher education institutions continue to be contested environments where the goals of equity and inclusion are often at odds with the permanence of institutional racism. Through a multi-case study of 19 Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators who worked at 16 predominantly white, private four-year universities, the authors uncovered the ways that (a) private universities grant agency to Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators to serve student needs but restrict agency to address the inequitable organizational structures; (b) constituent groups within private universities, namely faculty, mark the racialized boundaries of power and decision-making through credentialing; and (c) private universities use silence as a means of controlling Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals administrators’ equity work. Although Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators have a significant role to play in advancing equity work inside higher education institutions, these racialized organizations will create barriers that maintain whiteness and white interests. Without addressing power structures and the bureaucracy of decision-making at private institutions, progress on equity throughout the organizational structure may be limited. Implications for research and practice for Latinx/a/o administrators are discussed.

**Citation:** Espino, M.M.; Ariza, J.

“We’re Not Going to Overcome
Institutional Bias by Doing Nothing”:
Latinx/a/o Student Affairs
Professionals as Advocates for Equity.
Educ. Sci. **2022**, *12*, 716. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12100716>

Academic Editors: Sam Museus and
Billy Wong

Received: 11 August 2022

Accepted: 29 September 2022

Published: 18 October 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral
with regard to jurisdictional claims in
published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors.
Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.
This article is an open access article
distributed under the terms and
conditions of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: Latinx/a/o; university administration; equity; racism; private universities; racialized organizations

1. Introduction

Enacting equity is challenging at best on college campuses where the very foundation and structure of higher education uphold white supremacy [1]. Although various constituent groups within the university strive for a common purpose, their specific interests may focus on maintaining the status quo; feigning an interest in change; or actively engaging in transformational change, where access and opportunity is often predicated on social networks, social status, and proximity to whiteness [2–4]. Those intrepid students, faculty, administrators, and senior leaders who advocate for equity must traverse hostile work environments, binding institutional structures, recalcitrant constituencies, and tangled bureaucracies. A constituency that is often overlooked and seldom considered for the potential power they could wield in equity work is mid-level administrators.

Mid-level administrators have at least 5 to 15 years of experience, are the largest group of administrators with organizational oversight, and play a vital role in interpreting and communicating the goals and values of the academic organization [5–7]. They are often constrained by academic organizational structures as they buffer policy ideas from senior leadership and policy implementation by early career administrators [5]. Despite the vast role and responsibility that mid-level administrators play, they tend to be overlooked within the literature, although more studies are focusing on this critical position within higher education administration [6,8,9]. There is significantly less published research detailing the experiences of racially and ethnically minoritized mid-level administrators who may be

more likely to advocate for equity and justice, including Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators who work in student affairs divisions [10,11]. We utilize the term Latinx/a/o, which includes racial/ethnic heritages from Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Central America, South America, as well as gender inclusive terms that move beyond the gender binary (for a comprehensive review of the evolution of the term Latinx, please see Salinas and Lozano [12]). In citing existing research, we utilize the terms used by the author(s) (e.g., Hispanic, Chicana/o, Latina, and Salvadoran, to name a few).

The purpose of this manuscript is to uncover how 19 Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs administrators at 16 predominantly white private four-year universities negotiated organizational barriers and supports to advocate for equity on their campuses. Although scholars have analyzed the experiences of Latinx/a/o college students and racially and ethnically minoritized administrators at private universities [13,14], to our knowledge, there are no studies that have specifically focused on the experiences of Latinx/a/o administrators working at private universities. The ethos of tradition at private colleges lends to organizational structures that are steeped in obscure decision-making processes and unwritten rules designed to exclude racially and ethnically minoritized students, faculty, and administrators [15]. We draw from a conceptual framework based on institutional racism [3] and racialized organizations [16] to understand how academic organizational structures at private universities affect Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators as they engage in equity work. The findings indicate that private universities grant agency to Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals to serve student needs but restrict agency to address inequitable organizational structures; constituent groups within private universities, namely faculty, mark the racialized boundaries of power and decision-making through credentialing; and private universities use silence as a means of controlling Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals' equity work.

2. Background

Mid-level administrators are accustomed to fostering effectiveness with limited formal authority and might finesse the processes in place to address equity issues [10]. Cooper and Saunders [17] noted that the most desired skills for mid-level administrators were:

Personnel management and leadership skills, such as resolving interpersonal problems and conflicts, building effective working teams, collaborating with others, implementing effective decisions, persuading others, and understanding organizational behavior (p. 187).

Mid-level positions carry a level of precarity. Translating ambiguous or contradictory messaging from institutional leaders to front-line staff can create staff resistance and significant cognitive and emotional strain for mid-level administrators [18]. As seasoned professionals, mid-level administrators are less likely to receive formal training because colleagues tend to assume they do not need as much professional development as entry level professionals [3]. The learning curve for mid-level professionals may be steep considering mid-level roles can include aspects of supervision, budgetary management, and general leadership [18].

This unique organizational positioning can also create opportunities to “lead from the middle” and engage with institutional change. However, it is uncertain whether this form of leadership and advocacy is experienced similarly for racially and ethnically minoritized mid-level managers [19]. Rather, administrators of color can face perilous organizational environments in which racial stereotypes surface, “confident, assertive leadership traits are often perceived as being arrogant and pompous . . . [and] collaborative, democratic leadership styles are viewed as uncertain and indecisive” [20] (p. 92). Navigating spaces that are paradoxical in nature can create a constant tension that midlevel administrators must engage in to pursue institutional change.

2.1. Latinx/a/o Student Affairs Administrators

Much of the early research on Latinx/a/o administrators has centered the experiences of Mexican American and Chicanx/a/o leaders. More research is needed to understand

the experiences across the Latinx/a/o diaspora, especially AfroLatinx/a/o and Black Latinx/a/o racialized experiences, the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Latinx/a/o administrators, and Latinx/a/o administrators who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming [21]. The literature that is available notes that, historically, Latinx/a/o senior leadership and administrator positions were responsible for serving minoritized populations and emerged from student activism and community outcry.

For example, the first research study about Latinx/a/o administrators focused on Chicano administrators at two-year and four-year colleges in the Southwest and the factors that contributed to their appointments into leadership positions as chairs, deans, directors, and coordinators [22]. Having Chicano representation in leadership occurred because of student protests, local community pressures, and campus-level affirmative action policies that created the infrastructure needed to increase the number of Chicanos and Latinos hired in administration [22]. However, affirmative action policies designed to increase and sustain representation were summarily dismantled by the courts. As a result, Latinx/a/o representation in administration and faculty ranks waned, especially at so-called elite higher education institutions where equity and inclusion took on more symbolic than substantive forms [3,23]. In fact, Latinx/a/o administrators represent only 8% of all student affairs professionals, while Latinx/as/os represent 17% of the students enrolled in college [24].

As Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators attempt to navigate white power structures, they may feel limited in their ability to manage campus politics, although they will often accept additional burdens to address student demands and educate the campus about racially and ethnically minoritized student populations [25,26]. They are not only asked to manage their teams and resolve conflict but are also recruited to meet the demands of Latinx/a/o students on their campuses with limited organizational resources, even if that responsibility is not part of their position description [11]. Latinx/a/o administrators are often the only ones and/or the first Latinx/as/os in a mid-level role and experience tokenization throughout their careers [25–27]. They are often siloed into diversity-related functional areas, potentially limiting their access to future leadership opportunities [28]. Latinx/a/o mid-level managers must balance job responsibilities while serving as mentors and resources for students and their families. Because of their connection to various constituencies, they can also serve as guides for students at the institutional, departmental, and individual levels [25].

Unfortunately, enacting equity on college campuses is often viewed as part of a political agenda and racially and ethnically minoritized leaders, including Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators must have the critical political navigation skills necessary to traverse hostile environments [4]. Prior research has highlighted how Black and Latinx/a/o senior university leaders navigate structural barriers and challenges such as chilly institutional climates, limited access to mentors and role models, limited professional development opportunities, and overt and covert sexism and racism [27,29,30]. According to Kezar [4], Black and Latinx/a/o senior leaders often rely on institutional data to prove that enacting equity and inclusion is not a personal matter, rather an “institutional imperative” (p. 437). If these experiences are occurring at the senior level, it is vital to gain greater clarity on how Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs professionals do equity work, especially at private four-year universities.

2.2. Private University Environmental Contexts

Private universities in the U.S. occupy a distinct autonomous space in education, free from certain regulations, that allow for more institutional control [15]. Private university governance is hierarchical, where decision-making is concentrated among a select group that sets policies befitting the institutional profile [15]. Constituencies at private universities tend to be much smaller than public institutions and may have less influence on decision-making [15]. For private universities that are liberal arts colleges, student affairs administrators describe their work as “student-centered (versus administrative-centered), practical (as opposed to theoretical), and service-oriented (rather than business-oriented)” [31]

(p. 102). Student affairs administrators are likely to have generalist appointments with an array of responsibilities. Their ability to traverse various functional areas and departments can result in greater collaboration among other university stakeholders, however tensions may arise when too many individuals are involved in the decision-making process [31].

Private universities may tout their commitments to “a democratic and participatory academy that seeks to challenge and provoke the critical consciousness of its students toward self-actualization”, but “remain circumscribed ‘within the ivory tower’” [32] (p. 36). Retaining a sense of nostalgia and tradition within private universities creates a multitude of barriers to equity work. To create institutional change from the ground up, administrators at private universities must first observe how certain institutional actors within the political environment become gateways to resources, staff capacity, and strategic mission [33]. They should use creative structural and cultural strategies such as setting expectations, engaging in cross-institutional dialogue, and investing in staff development, that carry some risk as they leverage partnerships across the institution [31,33]. In a study regarding partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs at private four-year universities, Kezar [33] found that senior administrative support and leadership were the most significant resources for accomplishing collaborative initiatives. However, when the focus is on diversity and inclusion, it is difficult to implement a diversity agenda without being able to leverage one’s power and positional authority. It is not enough to read the political landscape when it comes to implementing diversity initiatives, rather one must be able to do something about it [4].

3. Conceptual Framework

Much of the research on mid-level student affairs administrators focuses on individual experiences without a structural analysis of differential power structures, bureaucracies, “organizational . . . norms and explicit practices [that] teach, support, and reward” racism [3] (p. 14). Therefore, we draw from research on institutional racism [3] and racialized organizations [16] to construct a framework that a) draws attention to organizational structures and racialized boundaries within which Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators are nested; and b) illustrates how the organizational setting of private four-year universities and its various (sub)cultures, (in)formally communicates whether and how Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators can advance equity within the organization [34,35].

Institutional racism is woven throughout the fabric of the academic enterprise, whereby higher education “promote[s] the material interests (wealth, power, and status) and symbolic interests (assumptions, cultural styles, and visions) of white elites” [3] (p. 35). A vast system of organizational culture and norms often obscure recognition of the covert nature and permeation of racialized processes throughout the organization [35]. Universities operate as “contested systems” in which various constituencies “work together for overarching goals and purposes”, yet have differing objectives “based on their identity, role, [and] functional unit . . . ” [3] (p. 47). The tensions among groups create the illusion that the fight for scarce resources is race neutral and color evasive, when the deeper issue is that these resources are racialized, and this strife exists to maintain whiteness.

Any intervention to address institutional racism must interrogate the racialized processes involved in “the distribution of social, psychological, and material resources” [16] (p. 29) across eight dimensions: “mission, culture, power, membership patterns, social climate and social relations, technology, resources, and boundaries” [3] (p. 52). Any of these dimensions can hinder those who wish to address institutional racism, and yet, also have the potential to enact institutional transformation if groups of individual actors within and external to the academic organization can work together to address racism in structures, policies, and practices. What proves challenging is the quick shifts of the status quo to protect white interests and whiteness within the organization, making institutional change a moving target [36]. These efforts to address institutional racism must be sustained through force, time, and cooperation across diverging interests.

To understand how Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators are traversing various organizational dimensions to advance equity, we considered Ray's [16] theory of racialized organizations, which is defined as "meso-level social structures that limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group" (p. 36). There are four tenets that guide Ray's [16] theory: a) "racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; b) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources; c) Whiteness is a credential; and d) the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often racialized" (p. 23). Ray's theory has been applied to two higher education studies focusing on mid-level administrators that helped illuminate how we view private universities as racialized organizations [10,14].

Bazner [10] analyzed the experiences of racially and ethnically minoritized mid-level student affairs administrators and confirmed previous research on the challenges they faced. Participants expressed frustration with having to translate the reasons certain institutional decisions were made and they were often relegated as "sounding boards" for their white colleagues whenever a racist incident occurred on campus or within the larger society. Participants also noted that racially and ethnically minoritized professionals who adhered to white norms were more likely to have access to institutional resources, noting that whiteness was a credential for accessing power and status [10]. Yi et al. [14] drew from symbolic frames in organizational theory to understand how symbols of diversity, equity, and inclusion at four private universities "reinforce[d] whiteness" despite being touted as central to institutional transformation (p. 2). They determined that "obtaining access to power shape[d] the agency of individuals within the organization to influence their environment" [14] (p. 3). Participants noted the importance of presidents and chancellors as symbols of hope for change, which minimized the consistent efforts of marginalized students and staff to create change on their campuses. By upholding positions of hierarchical power, participants further reified the dynamics of racialized organizations.

Based on previous literature, we view private universities as meso-level social structures that maintain whiteness by diminishing the agency of Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators to enact justice and equity within the organizational structure. Because resources (i.e., funding, time, personnel, to name a few) and status are distributed in a manner that maintains the material and symbolic interests of white elites, it is not surprising that private universities behave in irrational ways. Although there are hierarchies within the academic organization, much of the bureaucratic structure is decentralized and various divisions and units function as their own "fiefdoms" [3] (p. 59). To redistribute resources and monies to support any form of institutional change may mean cutting resources and potentially blocking access to power for some, unless there are additional resources that can be unlocked as incentivizing mechanisms. Otherwise, these fiefdoms may continue maintaining their exclusionary boundaries or decouple initiatives from daily policies and practices of that department or division, leaving the initiatives as mere symbols of commitment to equity and inclusion [10,16].

The symbolic progress of equity and justice made at private universities obstructs institutional change. Whiteness is maintained in decision-making processes because racial and ethnic diversity is emphasized in "line positions and in peripheral rather than in core units or offices, unless racially and ethnically minoritized professionals "demonstrate loyalty to the prevailing culture" [3] (p. 60). The relative abundance of Latinx/a/o entry-level professionals is not reflected in the mid-level administrator ranks; neither of which hold the power necessary to carry an equity initiative forward. When equity initiatives fail, one should question whether racially and ethnically minoritized mid-level administrators had any agency within the organization to fully enact these initiatives, especially if they are Latinx/a/o [16]. Unless they can access political and social capital to navigate white power structures, Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators face a predicament: buttressing formal power and directives from senior leadership while breaking down resistance among those who are expected to engage in equity work, many of whom do not fully understand

or care to envision racial justice within the organizational environment [3,20]. Some will attempt to “play the game” and build strategies to align with white interests, while inevitably maintaining the status quo at private universities [34]. Some will cloak racial justice in innocuous terms like *diversity* to pull constituencies into deeper discussions about advancing equity, at their own professional detriment [36]. These barriers to equity are reminders of gatekeeping mechanisms that relegate Latinx/as/os as guests at the institution who do not have a rightful place in leadership [36]. If they do find their way into senior leadership, the institution will attempt to “hold them accountable for keeping their particular constituencies in check, thereby easing the life of senior white and male power holders” [3] (p. 273). By the time Latinx/a/o administrators reach senior leadership, will they still be willing to disrupt the status quo?

4. Methodology

This study is the first phase of a qualitative multi-case study about leadership experiences of Latinx/a/o mid-level university administrators. For this manuscript, we formulated the following research question: How do racialized organizational structures at predominantly white private universities affect Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators’ equity work?

We employed a multi-case study, meaning that each participant was treated as a mini case to understand their experiences within situated contexts; in this instance, Latinx/a/o student affairs administrators who are located at the mid-level of administration at predominantly white private four-year universities [37]. In a multi-case study, the researcher-interpreter analyzes each case individually before analyzing across cases and interpreting connections within a bounded system; in this instance, the bounded system is private four-year universities located in the U.S. [37]

The sample is drawn from a larger sample of 69 Latinx/a/o student affairs administrators who attended a Latinx/a/o-centered national leadership institute in 2015, 2016, or 2018. Accepted institute applicants received a participant recruitment letter and consent form. Study participants submitted a demographic form with pseudonym, social identifiers, professional title, years of experience, and geographic region. To pare down the larger sample, we searched for participants ($n = 19$) who were working at predominantly white private four-year universities ($n = 16$). At the time the data were collected, participants had an average of 10 years of experience in the student affairs profession; with most working in residence life or diversity and inclusion. Five participants were working at their alma maters (see Table 1).

Interviews were conducted prior to each institute via online video or teleconference and lasted an average of 90 minutes. The semi-structured interview included questions about participants’ family histories, motivations for pursuing student affairs careers, professional development opportunities, and perceptions of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The interviews were transcribed via the research team and a transcription service, and then verified. For the first two cohorts, completed transcriptions were sent to participants as part of a member-checking process. Unfortunately, we did not complete member-checking for the 2018 cohort due to time restrictions.

4.1. Data Analysis

In organizing a multi-case study, one must first determine the quintain or “phenomenon . . . to be studied” [37] (p. 6). We focus on how Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals do equity work at predominantly white four-year private universities. Michelle treated each participant as a mini case to understand their approaches to equity work within their situated contexts. She wrote thorough analytic memos focused on forms of equity work, structural challenges and supports, and participants’ motivations for pursuing equity despite the barriers [38]. Then, we read across the analytic memos and, drawing from the conceptual framework, interpreted how the cases were connected within the

bounded system of predominantly white four-year private universities [37]. Finally, we crafted vignettes that showcased the most salient themes across the sample.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information (n = 19).

	Total	Women	Men
Ethnicity			
Chilean	1	1	-
Cuban	1	1	-
Dominican	1	1	-
Ecuadorian	1	1	-
Mexican	5	4	1
Nicaraguan	1	-	1
Puerto Rican	6	5	1
Venezuelan	1	-	1
Bi-Ethnic	1	1	-
Bi-Racial	1	-	1
Highest Level of Education			
Master's of Arts	12	10	2
Ed.D.	2	1	1
J.D.	1	1	-
Ph.D.	4	2	2
Professional Level			
Advisor	1	1	-
Coordinator	2	1	1
Assistant Director	2	2	-
Associate Director	4	2	2
Director	4	4	-
Assistant Dean	1	1	-
Associate Dean	3	3	-
Dean of Students	1	-	1
Associate Vice President	1	-	1
Functional Area			
Academic Affairs	2	2	-
Assessment	1	1	-
Career Development	2	2	-
Diversity and Inclusion	4	3	1
Residence Life	5	4	1
Student Activities	1	-	1
Student Success	1	1	-
Dean of Students Office	3	1	2

4.2. Positionality

Michelle graduated from a private four-year, religiously affiliated, Hispanic-serving institution and worked at several small, private universities as an early career student affairs administrator. One of the universities, located in a predominantly white and affluent area in a large metropolis, labeled itself the “Harvard of the South” and projected its wealth through major building projects, curated lawns, and major capital campaigns. As the advisor to the programming board, Michelle was entrusted to promote learning opportunities for students through the various activities and events students coordinated. As the only ethnically minoritized professional in the office and one of few Latinas in the student affairs division, racially and ethnically minoritized students began to gravitate to Michelle’s office and join the programming board. During her time at the university, she advised the first Black, the first Latina, and the first South Indian presidents of the programming board. She recalls an instance during her annual evaluation when her supervisor encouraged her to recruit students who more accurately represented the campus community, which she interpreted as: “There are too many racially and ethnically minoritized students on your board and

you need to be more inclusive of white students". After she left to pursue doctoral studies, the programming board returned to "reflect the university".

Juanita graduated from a public, four-year institution in the Midwest and has worked on college campuses and in higher education adjacent roles in pursuit of equity for minoritized student populations. She was usually the only one who could translate for Spanish-speaking students and families, making sure they were well-informed throughout their college-going processes, and had to advocate to make sure that families who were not forgotten. Similar to Michelle, she encountered a supervisor who warned her that too many students of color had been chosen as orientation leaders and that the group needed to be more representative of the predominantly white campus. As the only Latina in most of her professional settings, she believes it is her responsibility to bring the Latinx perspective to the table.

4.3. Limitations

The 2015 cohort was required to select between "Male" and "Female" on the participant demographic information form, rather than indicating their gender identity(ies), which are fluid. We believed it limited our examination of the role of gender expression in doing equity work. Using accurate pronouns honors participants' identities and lived experiences, therefore, we use the pronoun "they" rather than incorrectly assigning gender pronouns to participants' narratives from Cohort 2015. Future research should acknowledge and incorporate gender and gender expression when recruiting participants, gathering demographic information, and analyzing data.

This study included participants who applied and were accepted to a selective leadership institute that centered Latinx/a/o identities in higher education, which may have affected how participants articulated the roles of racial and ethnic identities as central to their work in higher education. Not all institute attendees volunteered for the study, which could have excluded divergent perspectives regarding equity work and institutional racism.

5. Findings

All the participants worked at private universities because they wanted to ensure that racially and ethnically minoritized students felt a sense of belonging in elite spaces, and that privileged students were challenged to learn about diversity and inclusion. All participants engaged in some form of equity work at their institutions, such as advising marginalized student organizations outside of their job responsibilities, participating on university committees focused on marginalized student populations, persuading senior leadership to continue funding programs for minoritized students, mentoring early career Latinx/a/o administrators, and facilitating diversity and inclusion workshops for students and faculty. The findings indicate that private universities grant agency to Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals to serve student needs but restrict agency to address inequities in organizational structures; constituent groups within private universities, namely faculty, mark the racialized boundaries of power and decision-making through credentialing; and private universities use silence as a means of controlling Latinx/a/o mid-level professionals' equity work. Consistent with case study methodology, we offer vignettes that reflect the themes and represent shared experiences.

5.1. The Parameters of Agency

Participants were encouraged to envision innovative programs that would address student needs, often without funds or resources. Few participants noted opportunities to move past programming to crafting more equitable policies and practices. We offer two examples of participants who had a keen understanding of how the institution operated; May, who was forced to leave an institution because their work was challenging senior leadership and Ruby, who managed to build coalitions across various constituencies.

5.1.1. May: Working in Elite Spaces as Resistance

As an Assistant Dean of Students, May hoped to advocate for students of color at liberal arts institutions. As a Latina professional, they were frustrated with experiencing the same racist issues they witnessed Latinx/a/o students experience when they attended a private university 20 years prior. However, they felt compelled to give back to their community and the next generation of students. They made the conscious choice to work at private institutions “because they’re very elitist, and obviously there are students of color who go there, and first-gen students, but I didn’t want anyone to go through a similar experience of not belonging”. May believed that being in a leadership position would help Latinx/a/o students know that it was possible to be successful.

May positioned themselves within elitist private institutions to conduct their equity work as a form of resistance. They understood the organizational environment, particularly the decision-making process and an institutional culture that refused to participate in benchmarking across other institutions. May offered this reasoning, “small liberal arts schools . . . function as this bubble, that we are the best things ever . . . and [we] don’t need to look at . . . best practices. And so often there’s a disconnect”. By May’s description, it seemed that private universities solely focused on maintaining their own traditions, without much consideration for trends in higher education. They explained, “Maybe you might look at your sister school, but that’s it”.

Working in a “bubble” also meant that the institution guarded itself against current sociopolitical events. The university concentrated power at the senior level and there was a lack of accountability to those external to the institution. May offered several examples that contrasted how other colleges responded to the Black Lives Matter movement, student activism, and the experiences of undocumented students while their institution offered limited acknowledgment,

There’s just this hesitancy, or just this lack of awareness that happens. So . . . oftentimes, institutions are coping at the same time as their populations are on campus, which does more harm than good, and makes students feel like they’re just a pawn, and they’re there to educate the institution as opposed to the institution [educating them].

As an equity advocate, May was frustrated with the lack of action by campus leaders. They believed that the best approach was to react quickly and support students in ways that engaged critical topics rather than not react at all.

May’s record of working at private universities honed their skills as an institutional leader who could navigate difficult environments. At a previous private university, they sought opportunities to have difficult conversations about oppression and social justice with students, but much of their work was underfunded and under-resourced. Despite the challenges, May created initiatives that enhanced the university’s reputation. They explained, “the institution was also being praised for initiatives that they had not institutionally supported. They were all being supported by scholars’ funds, by donations, or by people working for free”. May often worked overtime for months, even when their efforts were not rewarded. Their advocacy began to bring unwanted attention by senior leadership,

There was just a lot of racial tensions on campus, a lot of policing, a lot of the institution questioning my intentions when . . . I’m the type of person who just does my job. But at some point in time, the president and the senior administrator felt threatened by the work that I was doing, and wanted me to silence students in different ways in which I did not feel comfortable doing. Ultimately, I didn’t do it.

The racial tensions and distrust became untenable, and May’s last form of resistance was to leave the institution. They explained, “I felt that as someone who’s teaching students to advocate for themselves, and knowing that they deserve better, that I had to show them what that also looked like in real life”.

As May sought a new position, they were determined to be authentic and found an institution that valued their transparency. Although May was in a better environment than their previous institution, they still experienced frustration at the institution's lack of commitment to equity. Toward the end of the interview, May spoke about their desire as a professional to maintain "my morals, and my values, and who I am as a woman, as a Latina, and what I believe in, justice, and equity, and empowering students". However, they also understood that they work in a field and space that despite the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, "most colleges don't actually like [equity work] because they want to exist as they exist because it's worked for the privileged population".

As noted by most of the participants, May enjoyed working at private universities because of the challenge in addressing equity and justice in elite spaces, while also creating spaces of refuge for minoritized students. Despite the limited resources and lack of funding, May created initiatives that would build the reputation and prestige of the university. Their commitment was to the students but acknowledged that there was a point when the work environment would be too difficult to navigate. They were willing to resign from their position to find another environment that may be similar but would be more accepting of their commitment to equity.

5.1.2. Ruby: You've Never Had to Navigate White Patriarchal Society

Ruby's primary work is with the campus alert team, which connects with students who are experiencing difficulties. She had worked in multicultural affairs for many years and believed that she would always carry "that lens with me", but she was concerned with staying in that functional area. She explained,

I was starting to feel really pigeon-holed in that work ... as like, 'Of course! You're Latina, so you run a multicultural center' sort of pigeon-holing. I really started to feel like folks didn't look at me as I could do much else. [T]here were no opportunities for me to move up at my current institution. Or, if there were, I guess they didn't think it was for me. We'll say that.

Ruby strategized her career options and believed that her equity perspective was needed in senior leadership positions. She knew of,

... too many people without that lens sitting at dean, assistant and associate dean, and higher positions ... and aren't thinking critically about those issues when they come up. Or, even when they don't come up. We [Latinx/as/os] need to be the ones that bring them up sometimes.

Ruby decided to hone her crisis management skills and was proud to be "someone that might be able to figure out how to serve a student best. I love that I may be able to catch something that no one else might be able to catch". Her efforts to support students included training faculty, which she enjoyed. She shared a few examples of the conversations she had with faculty,

'[T]his is how you work with difficult students'. Or, 'These are some of the things to look for in your classroom. Every student on campus is going to have a faculty member. They may never darken my door, they may never join a club, or organization, we may never see the student, but they're always going to have a faculty member. That's why you're so important, because if you notice something going on with a student then you can tell us. And we can try and help. You can try and help too as a faculty member'.

Ruby's experience affirmed her skills as a "change catalyst" and as someone who could "steer the boat in some ways". The next goal was to navigate a conservative institutional climate and Ruby noted various missed opportunities for the institution to engage with diversity and inclusion, such as gender inclusive bathrooms, using appropriate pronouns, or uncovering why international students were included in the diversity numbers touted by the university. She shared, "[I]f we have the right momentum and people in place,

some of that can change . . . and [I can] present the reasons why this type of [equity] work is important for our students, for our bottom line as an institution". One of her colleagues who is part of the same cultural diversity task force wondered if Ruby was "frustrated every day when you go to these meetings, or when you sit in a room with folks [who do not understand diversity issues]". Ruby seemed to approach the lack of understanding as a learning opportunity and relied heavily on friends and colleagues who could validate her experiences when she was frustrated with the incremental progress on equity work. She explained,

We're all learning, all of the time. I was there one time too, and I had to learn. [C]ertainly you don't always have to be the person doing that [equity] work. I mean, you need a day off too like everybody else, and you need self-care, and so do I. Those are the days that I text my friends or send an email to the people I trust to be like, 'I cannot believe this thing happened in my life. What do you think?' You know, get that validation from folks like, 'Yeah, you're not crazy. That is terrible that that happened'. Like, great, I can go on with my day. Bad things are going to happen to you at work sometimes. You're going to bump up against someone who's a jerk.

Ruby understood the challenges of doing equity work at her institution and ensured that she was in a space that "values me and what I can bring to the table, and will let me . . . live my authentic life, for the most part". As other women-identified participants noted, her authenticity was often surveilled and she knew that wearing natural hair was not encouraged, while wearing suits was required. She was accustomed to this surveillance because "I've been navigating this patriarchal system my whole life. So, it's not like I don't know how to fit in where I need to fit in". When her white male supervisor explained that all the "people in charge are white men . . . but I'm trying to work really hard to change that", Ruby appreciated his honesty and thought, "Cool, I can be down with that".

As other participants noted, most of the white people who worked on campus seemed afraid to discuss equity issues with students and with colleagues. Ruby noticed that many of her white colleagues seemed to be uncomfortable with the ease with which she was able to connect with students and faculty of color in ways they could not. She explained,

Because I grew up in an urban environment with Black and Latino people, I have had to learn over the years how to navigate in a white patriarchal society to be where I am in the world. But, [white people have] never had to learn how to get along with Black people, right? So, . . . I get a pass from students . . . like, 'Okay, she gets me'. Students ain't going to trust nobody right away, I don't care who you are. But, they're going to be like, 'Oh, all right. [S]he gets it. Oh, she understands'. But, in such a way that . . . the white administrators just can't do it. [T]hey never had to learn that.

Ruby's narrative illustrates how a strong sense of agency in navigating white patriarchal environments as well as her professional experiences in multicultural affairs have offered the critical skills necessary to work across constituencies that are often reticent to equity issues. She remains focused on taking on senior leadership positions so that she can add an equity lens to decision-making.

5.2. Racialized Boundaries of Power

Our analysis revealed several forms of racialized boundaries within private academic organizations that hindered participants' ability to earn promotions, engage in coalition-building, and promote social justice initiatives. All the women-identified participants shared various instances when their professionalism was questioned, and their perspectives were ignored. Most participants noted that various constituent groups (faculty, students, administrators) created racialized boundaries by using the doctorate as a credential for offering informed perspectives on equity issues or university business. Several participants expressed frustration with the extensive energy and strategy required to convince senior

leaders that equity was an imperative. We offer three vignettes that focus on the policing of “professionalism”, hindering Latinx/a/o administrators from engaging in critical university issues, and defying racialized boundaries.

5.2.1. Maria: I Can’t Always Piece Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Apart

Maria’s longevity at the institution meant that they had helped students who were now starting families and having their own careers. They found fulfillment in “the relationship that I’ve built with colleagues and students over the years, it allows me to feel like I am making an impact and paving a path and facilitating an experience that is good for students”. They enjoyed working at a small, private liberal arts college. Maria shared,

... the smaller liberal arts, undergraduate enterprise is really where I am at my best, just because it is a smaller, tighter knit community and ... I feel where my strengths lie is in relationship building, and I think that is particularly important in small places.

Maria felt supported by their supervisor to take on additional responsibilities outside of their position description, such as advising a women of color student organization, supporting a scholarship organization in the community, and attending conferences about race and racism. Maria aspired to senior leadership, yet their goal of becoming a Dean of Students was thwarted by raced-gendered stereotypes. They were a finalist for a Dean of Students position and felt supported by the Vice President, but they believed they were judged by their appearance and affect,

I cannot always piece those things apart, but I feel quite convinced that as a finalist for some of these Dean of Students roles, ... the feedback from the department was ... around my voice being too strong for the voice of a woman and that was unclear to me on how that overlaps with being Latina as well, ... but ultimately, I felt like I needed to alter ... my appearance in order to be heard as professional and be given the opportunity that I wanted ...

Maria decided to alter their appearance by pulling “my hair back entirely and wear[ing] suits, smaller jewelry, and ... tame down my shoes and dress much more conservatively”. They hoped to be taken more seriously but were still uncertain “whether those pieces of my identity were interfering with my capacity to be seen professionally”. Unfortunately, Maria consistently received messages that “I dressed too loudly and that if I wanted to be taken seriously, I needed to take a less maternal approach to my work”. Maria was racialized as maternal because of their approach to working with student groups by creating partnerships and attempting to demonstrate good will by baking cookies. It is unclear why a senior leader would interpret their approach as unprofessional, but Maria received the messages as “very gendered feedback and the feedback around my loud or bright clothing ... actually it was more around my ... ethnicity ... So that’s been very challenging for me”. Maria grew resentful of white men and “when they walk into a room, and they don’t have any of those considerations, right? Are my earrings too big? Do I need to tame my hair for people to listen to what I have to say in the same way?”

Maria struggled to adhere to white norms of professionalism while also wanting to live authentically. They shared,

... the capacity to live authentically personally and professionally is too important and the message that I think that I carry it’s too important for it not to be a part of my narrative and a part of the way that I do my work.

After attending a conference session focused on Latinx/a/o new professionals and their needs, Maria shared their insights with their supervisor, who asked, “What is it that you need as a Latina here on this campus at this time?” At Maria’s previous institution, the human resources department sponsored racial and ethnic affinity groups and they missed having the opportunity to engage with other Latinx/a/o professionals. Their supervisor then offered them the “opportunity” to create a similar version on campus and offered to

finance “‘a happy hour, or a luncheon, or whatever you think might be helpful’. To think of pulling people together on this campus . . . was very exciting”. Maria was appreciative that their supervisor wanted to engage them in a conversation about their identity and ways to feel supported, and now they were tasked with creating a new program outside of their job responsibilities.

Several women-identified participants expressed frustration with how white supremacist definitions of professionalism kept them from advancing into senior roles, despite their credentials and levels of experience. Maria’s experience with misogyny seemed to pervade most of their current experiences and they often felt that they could not be professional and authentic. Although Maria appreciated their supervisor’s questions about supporting them as a Latina, much of what was offered would not address the systemic oppression that hindered Maria’s experience. Perhaps it would provide a salve so that they could continue navigating a hostile work environment, but even the opportunity meant extra emotional labor to create a space of comfort.

5.2.2. Audrey: I Am an Advocate but Not an Expert

Audrey was the Director of Residence Life at their alma mater and one of the few Latina administrators on campus, which was in one of the most diverse towns in the state. They described the campus as unique because of the numerous “political structures that you are navigating on a daily basis where we tread cautiously on this campus”. Their primary focus was on the administrative part of housing, and they had limited direct contact with students. Fortunately, they had some flexibility to taking on projects that supported students, “being at a small campus that is really focused on social justice and equity, as long as you do your job and know your job, you can support other programs . . .”. As a result, they advised the first-generation college student [FGCS] club and “provide[d] some support for an [FGCS] initiative that we have in our division”. They noted that the initiative wasn’t under their “purview” so they could not guide the initiative in a meaningful way. Audrey viewed their role as an advocate because, “I’m always at the table . . . whether it’s advocating for certain living spaces for our students and advocating for how our housing floor plans are arranged to be more inclusive. [T]hat really energizes me on a daily basis”.

Audrey knew that “our students of color are struggling”, but believed that students did not want their help because they were “part of the administration”. They also noticed that “our students haven’t recognized the privilege they have by having access to education, so they’re very loud, but . . . they’re not effective in their loudness”. Although they wanted to “impart that wisdom” of being a former student, it seemed that students gravitated more to faculty for support of their activism. They felt like,

... an outsider to them. I’m not someone who’s part of their . . . familia . . . I don’t know when this shift happened, but it’s been very hard for me, especially because I was a part of those groups, [and] I can’t come back and have that sense of community . . . with those populations. I have learned to work around that. I’ve learned to accept it . . . We talk about how our students consider themselves as social justice warriors, and they think they’re experts when we know they’re not. They have experiences that hold value in what they share and what they voice, but anyone who opposes or even has a sense of questioning is considered a non-expert and not worthy of their time.

It is difficult to determine who Audrey refers to as “we”, but it is evident in their narrative that the administration was held in low regard by students and faculty. Because they do not have a doctorate, they believe that their experience is quickly discounted “even though some of these faculty members were my faculty members and they know who I am. That’s been a hard road to walk on recently”. Audrey recounted several times throughout the interview that they were not viewed as an expert of their own lived experience as Latinx/a because “we’re not in the classroom teaching our students about our experiences,

nor are we provided with that opportunity. If we ask for it, we're told, 'No, this is not your place'".

However, Audrey found other ways to advocate. For example, the university offered a summer bridge program for minoritized students. The director, who was retiring, knew that their departure could mean an end to the program. They asked Audrey to advocate on their behalf, which led to a confrontation with a vice provost. Audrey shared,

Being at the table, I was very proud that I was able to challenge a VP and [say], 'You need to reconsider [cutting this program]. We highlight these programs ... in our [admissions] packets that highlight ... how proud we are of our diverse programs but yet you're trying to do this to fit a few more bodies on campus. This demonstrates to me that the college is not committed to the mission'. That took that VP's breath away ... I was the only one saying that to that person. That space was the right space to say that.

Later, they shared the incident with their team and the associate dean for the division, who seemed unsure of their tactic. Audrey was resolute, "[I]t was an opportunity for the college to reflect on where they stand", and the college leadership decided not to cut the program. This incident reminded Audrey that they had to find ways to elevate programs serving diverse student communities, leveraging the college's quest for prestige to keep programs that would enhance their reputation and enroll more students. They were proud of their advocacy,

I think that was one of my proudest moments that I was able to have the energy, to have the confidence to do that ... and be like, 'No, I'm not going to stand for that. We need to be more supportive of our ... programs ... '. [W]hen I do speak up, I think I am listened to. Whether it offends people sometimes or in that one instance, it offended [the vice provost] ... I'm starting a conversation that no one was wanting to have.

Audrey believed that their advocacy was present in every aspect of their work, and they encouraged others to be strategic when challenging the institution, "have some political savviness in how we interact because we always know we're on display. [Y]ou're going to be looked on as either the loud Latina, the angry Latina or the quiet Latina and the shy Latina ...".

Audrey understood what they brought to the decision-making table, and they reminded the institution to remain true to their mission. Their story illustrates how various constituencies within the institution can hinder equity work, including the student body. The campus culture seemed to denote administration as the barriers to social justice, while faculty members were the ones most capable of supporting students. Audrey noted how not having a doctorate also kept them from being viewed as a viable resource, even when discussing issues that were specific to their identity as a Latina. The lack of a credential kept them from collaborating across campus and may have labeled them negatively with senior leadership.

5.2.3. Raul: Defying Those in Power

As an undergraduate, first-generation college student, Raul felt out of place attending a private university. He recognized "the power the community could have to get someone through an unfamiliar situation" and the opportunity to have a career supporting students,

[S]tudent affairs people help build those communities and help manage those communities and make sure they exist not just for students now, but they exist for students in the future, and ... that kind of drew me ... to the profession and also informs the work that I do now and the way that I do it ...

Raul now worked at his alma mater, which he described as an institution with, ... a ton of politics here and so ... we don't always get to do ... what's best for our students. We sometimes have to do what's best for ... people up at the

top that make a lot of money and are removed from . . . the day to day of what's happening here with the students on campus and so that's a lot of bullshit that we have to deal with

Raul's work was grounded in community. In a previous role at the same institution, Raul experienced some "wins" in his equity work. He led a social justice spring break retreat for students that included "critical dialogue about issues that mattered and also . . . some fun as well". He was proud that many of the students eventually held jobs "in fields related to social justice in some way, shape, or form, or in government". Once he moved to another position, his former supervisors assumed he would carry on the spring break program without compensation. When he did not offer to organize the retreat, the trip was discontinued.

Raul noted other instances when he coordinated social justice-centered programs and would receive reprimands from his supervisor, who discouraged him from focusing on diversity and inclusion. Raul continued providing programs that students wanted and needed by reading between the lines of his supervisor's directives. He offered an example,

I [was] called into the office . . . just for them to give me shit about [a social justice program]. They didn't say . . . *not* [emphasis added] to do the program but, 'We don't like it', and I said, 'Okay, well, I'm going to keep doing it and you're going to keep not liking it and we can move on from there'. So . . . I'm going to keep doing what I want to do unless someone literally tells me that I can't do it and they just happen to be my supervisor but other than that I just keep doing what I do . . . because I think it's important . . . and, by the way, the students keep turning out for this program, so there's clearly a need for it.

The dismantling of a meaningful program and receiving reprimands for doing equity work made Raul question the priorities at the institution, which he viewed as detrimental to student learning. He exclaimed,

[Those in power] don't need proof, you don't need arguments, you don't need reasons, you don't need anything, all you need is power because when you have the ability to decide then it doesn't matter. You can just say, 'Nah, I don't think that's right. [Social justice programming] doesn't feel right, so it doesn't matter, even if students like it. [T]hey might like it, but it's not good for them' and that's what happens too often, and people that have power but don't understand [the importance of equity work], they wield that.

Those in positions of power included leaders of the student affairs division, which did not encourage staff to apply many of the competencies and benchmarking processes that are hallmarks of the field. Raul denounced the division as not operating consistently with the values of the profession.

Raul's negative experiences also made him critical of the institutional culture and distrustful of his colleagues. He shared, "I don't really have anybody here at the university who I would say I would trust [T]here are people that give me advice . . . solicited or not, but I don't know if they have my best interests in mind". Because of his distrust, coalition-building among colleagues proved difficult. Few seemed to understand the challenges that marginalized and minoritized students experienced. There seemed to be a line of communication that he and his white colleagues did not cross. He explained,

I work almost exclusively with white people, and they come from a variety of backgrounds themselves. . . . I don't know if any of them understand what it means to be poor, per say I'm not aware of any of them being first-generation college students. [T]hey don't ask a lot of questions, I'll say that much. I don't know if that's just being polite or being uninterested . . . [and] it's not like I offer up a whole lot either. . . . I have to do the explaining to people about what it's like [to be poor or first-gen] and draw from my own experiences and share that.

Sometimes that's valued, sometimes I don't think it is, but . . . it doesn't come natural to the folks here to talk about that.

Attempting to engage in critical conversations took significant energy, vulnerability, and strategy. Raul felt pressured to articulate his message about equity in the strongest way possible,

I've got to be excellent at convincing people about things that I think they don't already agree with, and I can't be just okay. I can't be good. I have to be excellent because my arguments have to be so strong if I'm sharing a different perspective because otherwise it's seen as an opinion and it's not seen as valued

Raul understood that students were best supported when decisions were made at the highest levels of leadership, therefore, he needed to harness his persuasive skills at the decision-making table. He stated,

. . . having that diverse perspective at a table where decisions are being made or being in a place where I am to make decisions is really valuable I'm in a position where I have a certain amount of decision-making ability and certainly . . . my background experience . . . history, heritage . . . form the decisions that I make. [W]hen I feel like I am one at a table of like six or seven . . . I do my best, but oftentimes . . . you can't get the room to move in the way that I think it should, but when I'm the one making those kinds of decisions, I don't have that type of problem.

Raul remained committed to advancing equity and defying senior leaders. He believed his commitment was not for him, but for the students he served. He shared this advice for early career Latinx/a/o administrators,

[I]f you do this job selflessly then you end up getting a lot out of it, but if you do the job trying to get a lot out of it, [i]t just doesn't work that way [T]his is the kind of job you say, 'I'm going to make this about everybody else and not about me. I'm going to try and support students as best as I can. I'm going to try to have great relationships with people across campus so we can work together, so we can do great things for our students'. [I]f you do that, you're going to be in a really good spot, you'll have a great reputation, and . . . you'll be set up for whatever you want to do in the future

Several participants in the study were working at their alma maters and each demonstrated a commitment to making the environment more welcoming to minoritized students. Raul's narrative illustrated how he remained defiant, continuing to offer programs and services that students needed, and crossing over unjust boundaries. It is possible that his identity as a man could offer some allowance in his resistance, in contrast to several of the women-identified participants. Yet, he was still able to finesse the political environment to remain working at the institution and moving up the ranks.

5.3. *Silence as Control*

We uncovered a tactic that private universities used to ensure that equity work would not succeed: silence. Participants noted multiple instances when programs were supported but not funded; speaking out came at a cost, especially if participants were the only racially or ethnically minoritized professionals in the room; and some silenced themselves either because they did not have the credentials to elicit credibility or they worried that they would project negative stereotypes of being "hot-headed". We offer two narratives that illustrate how diversity initiatives were decoupled from the formal organizational structures to ensure failure, and how some participants could not find ways to break through the silence, thus, perpetuating the status quo.

5.3.1. Dominique: Navigating My Experience beyond Diversity Work

Dominique had worked at several private universities, one of which was a women's college. Throughout their professional experience, they found ways to support the academic success of Black and Latinx/a/o students. They aspired to become a dean of students or a vice president for student affairs but seemed to believe that they needed to separate their commitment to diversity from their leadership approach. They shared, "I will always wear the diversity lens in my approaches in my work, but . . . how do I articulate . . . my strengths beyond diversity work?"

As the interview progressed, Dominique's concerns were based on their experiences working in an academic college at the university, which operated as a fiefdom. The academic college seemed to decouple diversity initiatives from the daily practices at the institution. Dominique explained,

These types of diversity initiatives are so siloed there's no sort of intentional collaboration . . . across the college with faculty . . . to really . . . address the needs across the board [I]t's not like a strategic plan, it's not like a diversity mission, it's not like a diversity plan from the president, from the provost coming down. [W]e're working through the division doing . . . ad-hoc planning because that's what we think we need . . . to do, but the president nor the provost nor the dean of the college are actively engaged in these conversations . . . as far as long-term planning

Dominique was frustrated that the few members of the college who were committed to diversity were paid to do diversity work. They thought they might be "too hopeful or too idealistic" to accept that most of their colleagues were not invested in diversity efforts. At first, they worried that speaking out would make them seem like "the hot-headed Latina", but they grew weary of remaining silent.

Dominique's narrative illustrates how private universities decentralize diversity initiatives to various colleges for implementation. By decoupling initiatives from formal processes, individual colleges and units are left to determine the best approach to enact equity. Inevitably the initiative will fail because, as Dominique indicated, planning is ad-hoc, inconsistent, and has limited investment, by design.

5.3.2. Max: Silencing Myself

Max was an Associate Director of Multicultural Affairs and had experience working at several private institutions. They were drawn to private universities, particularly in the Ivy League, because "the access to resources . . . makes student affairs work that much easier to accomplish in working with underrepresented students". However, selective institutional environments can create tenuous experiences for racially and ethnically minoritized students and administrators. Max described the environment saying,

[B]eing at an institution that is so privileged, at least from a financial standpoint, it attracts select colleagues, faculty, and even students that are also privileged in a variety of ways and may not have the sense of humility that would be needed to support underrepresented students or to understand the experiences that underrepresented students have.

Although Max preferred to work in a privileged environment, they struggled being one of the only people of color "witnessing the people that are in positions of power here at the university do not look like me, do not share a similar cultural background". They struggled to find mentors "I can really connect with in meaningful ways here", despite serving as a mentor for many students.

As a multi-racial administrator, Max was not always certain whether to disclose their racial and ethnic identities, especially when doing equity work,

When I feel that it's necessary . . . and appropriate to share my background with others, I will. This may not be the right setting to . . . acknowledge and celebrate that side of me, when working with administrators and faculty, for the most part.

They believed that their multi-racial identity was silenced in the work environment because there were few racially and ethnically minoritized colleagues who would “naturally understand where I’m coming from”. Max believed that there were “unwritten rules or expectations that I may not be aware of”, which inspired them to seek professional development opportunities and access the tools, skills, and networks necessary to make it to the decision-making table. They believed that only when they were in a position of power could they fully express “certain aspects of being Latino that . . . would benefit others”. Max resigned themselves to silencing their identity because they did not believe it would make a difference. They shared, “It’s more about who’s in the position of power to be able to make certain decisions that would benefit Latinos. It would not be worth the fight [to share my identity]”.

As an alumnus of an elite private university now working at a similar institution, it is unclear whether Max received messages about decentering their racial and ethnic identities early in their professional career. Although they were dedicated to pushing equity work forward, they did not see the relevance of their racial and ethnic identities as part of that process. With limited agency, they acquiesced to the status quo, which limited their efficacy within the institution.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this manuscript was to uncover how Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators at predominantly white private four-year universities negotiated organizational barriers and supports to advocate for equity on their campuses. Drawing from research on institutional racism [3] and racialized organizations [15], we expected that the struggle to advance equity would be connected to resources and coalition-building, especially at private universities. These institutions rely heavily on tuition dollars and could potentially limit funding and resources available to address inequitable policies and practices. Based on participants’ narratives, we uncovered racialized boundaries to accessing power, limiting agency to student programming that was often underfunded and under-resourced, and silencing processes that had any possibility of moving the university towards more justice-oriented policies and practices.

Participants understood that they were traversing hostile work environments rooted in “tradition” and reputation and were not always effective in sharing their message of equity across constituent groups. Some accessed social and political capital to have a seat at the decision-making table, while others remained blocked from engaging in equity work at the organizational level. Participants were aware of the political dimensions of their campus environments and remained steadfast in their commitments to equity, despite the challenges.

To access the highest levels of power, creating alliances with multiple constituencies on campus proved beneficial to participants, but they encountered numerous barriers. Faculty tended to be the constituency that created the most barriers for Latinx/a/o administrators, either by situating student activists against participants who were part of the administration or disregarding participants’ academic and professional training because they were not scholarly experts. By not having a doctorate or a faculty role, participants’ perspectives were seldom welcomed, and some chose to silence themselves, believing that the doctorate would be the key to accessing power. Women-identified participants noted multiple instances when credentialing was connected to “professionalism”. Many shared narratives about being negatively perceived because of their “loud attire” or for supporting students in authentic ways. Some expended significant emotion and energy to speaking up at meetings and wondered if their assertions would be perceived as fulfilling “angry Latina” stereotypes.

The findings illustrate the way racialized boundaries are established by private academic organizations, which dole out limiting forms of agency to maintain control. Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators were granted limited agency to enact structural and systemic change. The equity work that was happening on each campus was mostly focused on the student level, while attempts at challenging systemic inequity were not encouraged by institutional leadership. Whiteness and white interests were consistently maintained within the organization creating a sense that participants' advocacy could reach a certain point. The frustration experienced by the participants was palpable when discussing institutional rhetoric on diversity, equity, and inclusion, yet inaction in policies and practices. At times, participants engaged in refusal by either crossing boundaries or leaving the institution.

The findings illustrate the difficulty in advancing equity without a coalition of advocates. Some of the participants were the only, or one of few, administrators that identified as Latinx/a/o in their departments or even their institutions. Without allies, they found it difficult to navigate conversations regarding systemic change, particularly if they were seen as "pushing their agenda".

7. Conclusions and Implications

This study contributes to the increased focus on scholarship about Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators, the translators of policy ideas and policy implementation, and advocates for equity, who navigate predominantly white institutions of higher education. As institutional racism continues to unfold in new iterations and unearths the inequities that have been embedded in these academic organizations since the first institutions brutally forced Indigenous communities from the lands upon which their academic buildings rest, the narratives shared show a line of resistance and refusal. We offer some considerations for research and practice.

In interrogating higher education institutions as racialized organizations, researchers should analyze how the institution relies on animosities between faculty and administrators to ensure that equity work is relegated to student-level programming, rather than in addressing systemic oppression in the curriculum, policies, and in resource allocation. Further work should analyze how various institution types (community colleges, liberal arts colleges, large public universities) implement their racialized boundaries to limit the success of equity initiatives. Finally, we recommend that future research analyzes more deeply the raced-gendered boundaries experienced by women-identified, Black or

AfroLatinx/a/o, and transgender or gender non-conforming Latinx/a/o administrators as they navigate racist, misogynistic, and patriarchal academic systems.

In terms of practice, we wish to honor the dedication and commitment that is necessary for Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators to continue to serve as champions of equity and inclusion. As the only ones or one of few, Latinx/a/o administrators have learned to survive hostile work environments to reach middle management. National trainings and community groups should be offered to affirm and train Latinx/a/o early career and mid-level administrators in students affairs and academic affairs on strategy, coalition-building, power, and resistance.

At the end of every interview, we asked participants to offer advice to the next generation of Latinx/a/o administrators. Tony's experience as a first-generation college student who earned a doctorate at an Ivy League institution and whose father had a second-grade education believed that he could persevere in elite spaces. The challenge was acknowledging that private universities, by virtue of their historical and ongoing racist structures, create obstacles that slow down, eliminate, or reverse the advancements made to address inequities and injustice. He challenged other racially and ethnically minoritized administrators to ask themselves,

Are you willing to go . . . work hard, get more skill sets . . . knowing that more than likely you're not going to be promoted because you're the wrong color?
Are you there for the long run? If you expect it's going to be fun and games, pick

a different career. Are you willing to go to places where you're going to be, . . . shitted on, but you know long term that experience is going to help you get to another level? Are you willing to work with people that you know that you're more qualified, but based on their ethnicity, it doesn't matter? Are you okay with that? And if they say they are, then I would say if you do all that and you put up with a lot of the adversity, eventually it's going to pay off. That's the grit. I would say the reward is being able to change the life of individuals that . . . otherwise would not have been able to have been successful if it wasn't for your intervention.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M.E.; methodology, M.M.E.; formal analysis, M.M.E. and J.A.; investigation, M.M.E. and J.A.; resources, M.M.E.; data curation, M.M.E.; writing—original draft preparation, M.M.E. and J.A.; writing—review and editing, M.M.E. and J.A.; visualization, M.M.E. and J.A.; project administration, M.M.E.; funding acquisition, M.M.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded in part by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Channing Briggs Small Grant.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland, College Park (protocol code 800613-9; 9 August 2015).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: We thank Molly F. Morin, Cinthya Salazar, Ashley Hixson, Nancy Camarillo, and Marinel Martinez-Benyarko for assisting in data collection between 2015 and 2018.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funder had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

References

1. Dennis, M. The skillful use of higher education to protect white supremacy. *J. Blacks High. Educ.* **2001**, *32*, 115–123. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Ahmed, S. A phenomenology of whiteness. *Fem. Theory* **2007**, *8*, 149–168. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Chesler, M.; Lewis, A.; Crowfoot, J. *Challenging Racism in Higher Education: Promoting Justice*; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, MD, USA, 2005.
4. Kezar, A. Understanding leadership strategies for addressing the politics of diversity. *J. High. Educ.* **2008**, *79*, 406–441. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Ackerman, R.L. *The Mid-Level Manager in Student Affairs: Strategies for Success*; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators: Washington, DC, USA, 2013.
6. Adams-Dunford, J.; Cuevas, F.; Neufeldt, E. Navigating your career as a mid-level manager. *New Dir. Stud. Serv.* **2019**, *166*, 29–40. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
7. Wilson, M.E.; Liddell, D.L.; Hirschy, A.S.; Pasquesi, K. Professional identity, career commitment, and career entrenchment of mid-level student affairs administrators. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* **2016**, *57*, 557–572. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Martinez-Benyarko, M.; Espino, M.M.; Camarillo, N. They're my life advisory board: Latinx/a/o mid-level student affairs administrators' mentoring experiences. *J. Stud. Aff. Res. Pract.* **2022**, *59*, 419–434. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
9. Rosser, V.J.; Twombly, S.B. Women administrators: An overview on women in higher education. In *Women and Minorities in United States Higher Education*; Renn, K., Ortiz, A.A., Eds.; ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, CA, USA, 2003; pp. 459–466.
10. Bazner, K.J. Views from the middle: Racialized experiences of midlevel student affairs administrators. *J. Divers. High. Educ.* **2022**, *15*, 572–582. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
11. Luedke, C.L. Person first, student second: Staff and administrators of color supporting students of color authentically in higher education. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* **2017**, *58*, 37–52. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Salinas, C., Jr.; Lozano, A. Mapping and recontextualizing the evolution of the term Latinx: An environmental scanning in higher education. *J. Lat. Educ.* **2017**, *18*, 302–315. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
13. Perez, D., II; Taylor, K.B. Cultivando logradores: Nurturing and sustaining Latino male success in higher education. *J. Divers. High. Educ.* **2016**, *9*, 1–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Yi, V.; LePeau, L.; Chang, T.; Museus, S.D.; Mathew, S.; Saelua, N.; Haywood, J. Symbols contested: An analysis of how symbols advance and hinder diversity, equity, and inclusion. *J. Divers. High. Educ.* **2022**. advance online publication. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

15. Levy, D.C. Private institutions of higher education. In *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education*; Clark, B.R., Neave, G.R., Eds.; Pergamon Press: Oxford, UK, 1992; pp. 1183–1195.
16. Ray, V. A theory of racialized organizations. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* **2019**, *84*, 26–53. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Cooper, D.L.; Saunders, S.A. The doctorate in student affairs: Essential skills and competencies for mid-management. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* **1999**, *40*, 185–191.
18. Mather, P.C.; Bryan, S.P.; Faulkner, W.O. Orienting mid-level student affairs professionals. *Coll. Stud. Aff. J.* **2009**, *27*, 242–256.
19. Taylor, C.M. Leading from the middle. In *The Mid-Level Manager in Student Affairs: Strategies for Success*; Ackerman, R.L., Ed.; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators: Washington, DC, USA, 2007; pp. 127–154.
20. Baber, L.D. Living in paradox: Midlevel leadership in administrative affairs. *New Dir. Community Coll.* **2020**, *191*, 89–97. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Gonzalez, A. Advancing Latinx leadership at California community colleges. *J. Appl. Res. Community Coll.* **2022**, *28*, 93–106.
22. Esquibel, A. The Chicano Administrator in Colleges and Universities in the Southwest. Doctoral Dissertation, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA, 1977.
23. Espino, M.M. Sacrificing a Latina/o presence in the professoriate: An analysis of affirmative action as racial remedy and silent covenant. *Assoc. Mex. Am. Educ. J.* **2015**, *9*, 42–56.
24. Pritchard, A.; McChesney, J. *Focus on Student Affairs, 2018: Understanding Key Challenges Using CUPA-HR Data*; College and University Professional Association for Human Resources: Knoxville, TN, USA, 2018.
25. Garcia, L.R. The intersections of race and gender for Latina midlevel leaders. *New Dir. Community Coll.* **2020**, *191*, 117–126. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Pertuz, S.B. The Chosen Tokens: Exploring the Work Experiences and Career Aspirations of Latina Midlevel Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Doctoral Dissertation, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ, USA, 2017.
27. Mena, T. A Few of Us (Algunos de Nosotros): A Multiple Case Study Using Critical Race Theory to Examine Lived Experiences of Latino/a Senior Student Affairs Officers at Selected Public and Private Two-and Four-Year Colleges and Universities. Doctoral Dissertation, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA, 2015.
28. Morales, J.D. Hispanic Leaders in Minnesota: Narratives of Hispanic Administrators in Minnesota's Colleges and Universities. Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2000.
29. Hylton, D.G. In Her Own Voice: A narrative Study of the Persistence Strategies of Eight African American Women Vice Presidents for Student Affairs at Predominately White Institutions. Doctoral Dissertation, Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA, 2012.
30. Sobers, S.T. Can I Get a Witness? The Resilience of Four Black Women Senior Student Affairs Administrators at Predominantly White Institutions. Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA, USA, 2014.
31. Hirt, J.B.; Amelink, C.T.; Schneiter, S.R. The nature of student affairs work in the liberal arts college. *NASPA J.* **2004**, *42*, 94–110. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Paperson, L. *A Third University Is Possible*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2017.
33. Kezar, A. Achieving student success: Strategies for creating partnerships between academic and student affairs. *J. Stud. Aff. Res. Pract.* **2003**, *41*, 1–22.
34. Alemán, E., Jr.; Alemán, S.M. “Do Latin@ interests always have to ‘converge’ with White interests?”: (Re)claiming racial realism and interest-convergence in critical race theory praxis. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2010**, *13*, 1–21. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Chesler, M.A.; Crowfoot, J. An organizational analysis of racism in higher education. In *Organization and Governance in Higher Education: ASHE Reader Series*, 5th ed.; Brown, C., II, Ed.; Pearson Learning Solutions: London, UK, 2000; pp. 436–469.
36. Ahmed, S. Embodying diversity: Problems and paradoxes for Black feminists. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2009**, *12*, 41–52. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Stake, R.E. *Multiple Case Study Analysis*; Guilford Publications: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
38. Saldaña, J. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed.; SAGE Publications: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2016.