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Compassion Fatigue Among University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners

Stephen P. Loveless
University of Northern Colorado

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

COMPASSION FATIGUE AMONG UNIVERSITY DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PRACTITIONERS

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Stephen P. Loveless

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
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Accepted by Doctoral Committee

_____
Maria K. E. Lahman, Ph.D., Research Advisor

_____
Tobias Guzmán, Ed.D., Committee Member

_____
LD Ortis, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
Heather Pendleton-Helm, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

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Accepted by the Graduate School

_____
Jeri-Anne Lyons, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
Associate Vice President for Research

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practitioners' experiences of compassion fatigue and how their own identities impacted those experiences. The following research questions guided the study in order to understand better why this was occurring.

Q1 What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with compassion fatigue?

Q2 How do diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners' identities influence their interpretations and experiences of compassion fatigue?

Participants were selected from DEI practitioners at predominately White public institutions. Seven participants were interviewed to create 14 hours of narrative data collectively. Findings from the data generated the following themes.

- Compassion fatigue exists for DEI Practitioners.
- Compassion fatigue that is uniquely identity-based.
- Mental and physical health impacts.
- Hope (The power of the Helper's Heart).

The implications of these themes are directly applicable to university presidents, higher education and student affairs leadership graduate programs, and DEI practitioners.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in the United States of America were built to serve christian, heterosexual, white, land-owning men (Thelin, 2004). The systems built within these institutions are designed to meet the needs of that demographic. This means that anyone who does not hold these identities and is involved in higher education today is working within systems that were never built with them in mind (Thelin, 2004). This led to higher education administrators grappling with how to change entrenched and outdated systems to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations (L. D. Patton et al., 2019). Diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners (DEI), usually housed within cultural or resource centers in higher education, are one way in which institutions have tried to address equity gaps and provide resources to historically marginalized populations within their institutions (L. D. Patton et al., 2019).

The DEI practitioners have provided resources, education, and a home away from home for marginalized students in institutions of higher education for almost 50 years (Harris & Patton, 2017; Marine, 2011; L. D. Patton, 2010). Practitioners in these spaces are often tasked with multiple functions that include building community, educating the greater institution, and advocating systematically and interpersonally for their respective populations (Hypolite, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012; L. D. Patton, 2006). Interpersonal advocacy includes students approaching practitioners about how the institution or a person within the institution has harmed

them based off their identity, and then the respective practitioner advocating for the student by helping them to navigate the system (Hypolite, 2020).

The very nature of the DEI practitioner position is to directly engage in frequent, high intensity work with students, faculty, and staff who may be in distress or have experienced trauma based off discrimination or marginalization due to an identity they hold. This distress or trauma can be caused by systems and people, both in and outside of the university community. The DEI practitioners within cultural and resource center spaces have historically been called upon to guide institutions through social and political issues related to their respective identities (Harris & Patton, 2017; L. D. Patton, 2010). This responsibility is often carried while simultaneously supporting the communities that are harmed by these issues and can be compounded when navigating the political climate of the respective institution (Harris & Patton, 2017; L. D. Patton, 2010). This high intensity coupled with frequent encounters with trauma, creates the environment and conditions that Charles Figley (1995a, 1995b) identified as susceptible to compassion fatigue.

While experiences of compassion fatigue for higher education administrators have previously been identified (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Stoves, 2014), there is currently a gap in the literature when examining the experiences of DEI professionals in higher education and how compassion fatigue impacts these professionals, as their roles are directly tied to their personal identities. This gap highlights the relevance and significance of this research that directly impacts higher education.

Therefore, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand DEI practitioners' experiences of compassion fatigue and how their own identities impacted those experiences. The scope of this research was the past 50 years that DEI practitioners have existed in formal

capacities in institutions of higher education. The research is significant and relevant to the field of higher education because DEI practitioners are some of the few individuals in a formal capacity who are tasked with providing Social Justice education to students pursuing higher education. The impact of providing the future leaders of our country with quality DEI education cannot be understated. If we do not better understand the experiences of those we task with educating our future leaders, we, as historically White institutions and researchers, are doomed to repeat the same patterns of exploitation and oppression that created these original exclusionary systems. Therefore, my goal in conducting this DEI queer intersectional narrative inquiry research was to provide rich narratives of DEI practitioners, to hold their stories as sacred, and illustrate their unique experiences and needs as they navigate their positions, identities, and experiences of compassion fatigue.

This goal was accomplished through the following research questions:

Q1 What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with compassion fatigue?

Q2 How do diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners' identities influence their interpretations and experiences of compassion fatigue?

In Chapter II, I review the scope, relevance, and significance of the overall research area. In what follows, I will establish the context of the topic as seen in the relevant research literature. I will conclude the section by highlighting the gap in literature to illustrate the need for future Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership (HESAL) research and practice.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Access to Higher Education in the United States and the Creation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners

The United States higher education system was built to educate and maintain wealth within White, land-owning men (Thelin, 2004). Although limited access was given to Black men from Dartmouth College in 1824 and Oberlin College in 1833, these few cases were exceptions due to student protest and only admitted a small number of Black students. The majority of Black individuals in the United States could not access higher education in the 19th century (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010).

In 1837, the Institute for Colored Youth was opened and would later become Cheyney University, the oldest Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the nation (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Other HBCUs would follow with Lincoln University in 1854 and Wilberforce University in 1856 (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). These institutions would be some of the only safe places for Black individuals to continue their education in the United States for the next 130 years.

Women would also be excluded from accessing higher education until 1836 when Wesleyan College in Georgia became the first women's college in the United States (Soloman, 1985). Although more than 230 women's colleges would be created over the next 130 years, women were still prohibited from applying to most public institutions of higher education until the late 1950s (Soloman, 1985).

It would not be until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that the Supreme Court would rule, "We conclude that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Although this case would pave the legal way for Black Americans to access White institutions of higher education, many of these institutions, primarily in the American South, continued to use discriminatory admissions policies well into the 1960s (Mustaffa, 2017). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s would propel more Black and Brown youth to apply and be accepted into institutions of higher education outside of HBCUs (Mustaffa, 2017). Concurrently, women's access to higher education was changing significantly. Women were entering higher education at higher rates than ever before and challenging heavily gendered programs in higher education (Morris, 2011).

University administrators were forced to grapple with meeting the needs of their new diverse student populations (Hevel, 2016). The question of how to meet the needs of these student populations in higher education would be partially answered by the creation of university and college cultural and resource centers and spaces (Sanders, 2016). Although centers and the staff within them would create community and foster support of marginalized students, very little systematic change was created within predominately and historically White institutions to mitigate the micro and macro discrimination experienced daily by students (Sanders, 2016).
In more recent years, an increased focus has been put on diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners (DEI) in higher education (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Cultural and resource center staff, also referred to as DEI practitioners, are asked to assist institutions in creating access and support for marginalized students. Institutions and administrators do not often understand the complexity of marginalized students' experiences and frequently confuse equality with equity in practice (Renn, 2011). It is important to note that equality refers to the presence of diversity as an

indicator of achievement, while equity focuses on deconstructing systemic and structural forces that marginalize groups within those systems (Archer, 2007; Stewart, 2017). It is also important to note that a universal definition of DEI is not necessarily agreed upon in research or in practice. The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (2019) defined the three concepts as:

> Diversity includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender—the groups that most often come to mind when the term "diversity" is used—but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values. (para. 1–3)
>
> Equity provides resources according to the need to help diverse populations achieve the desired outcome. Sometimes confused with equality, equity refers to outcomes while equality connotes equal treatment. More directly, equity is when an individual's race, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and so forth do not determine their educational, economic, social, or political opportunities.
>
> Inclusion is authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities and decision/policy making in a way that shares power. Inclusion promotes broad engagement, shared participation, and advances authentic sense of belonging through safe, positive, and nurturing environments. Inclusion is key to eliminating systemic inequality.

Although these definitions may be used as a broad framework to conceptualize DEI practitioners' work today and the access they try to create, the universal agreement and understanding of each as distinct concepts, both in practice and in research is minimal.

Origins of Compassion Fatigue

Prior to the early 1990s, the American Psychiatric Association (1987) defined trauma as a catastrophic stressor that occurred to an individual and was "outside the range of usual human experience" (p. 236). This relatively narrow view of trauma would be challenged by many, including Charles Figley (1988), who argued that traumatic stress should be recognized as its own field of study. McCann and Pearlman (1990) pointed to the need to expand the definition of trauma further and coined the term vicarious traumatization in 1990 to describe a framework for understanding how individuals who help others through traumatic events have conscious or unconscious impacts on their worldview. This term and concept would evolve, beginning in 1994, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) acknowledged that trauma could also consist of secondary traumatic stress (STS), defined as the emotional impact of vicariously dealing with another's trauma resulting in mirroring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder of the primary traumatized individual.

Within the next year, Charles Figley (1995a, 1995b) would publish his work centering the terminology of compassion fatigue to discuss STS. Figley would not be the first to use the term compassion fatigue. The term was first used by Joinson (1992) to describe a particular type of burnout that they perceived among critical care nurses. However, Figley (1995a, 1995b) was the first to take the term and define compassion fatigue outside of the confines of a type of burnout and in relation to STS. As Figley (1995a) noted when introducing the term into the literature as a separate concept from burnout, "there is a cost to caring" (p. 1). Figley (1995a,

1995b) described compassion fatigue as the experience of feeling psychological stress brought on by listening and being exposed to the details of another's stressful circumstances. Figley asserted that compassion fatigue was like STS with the added element of professional burnout and interchanged the terminology of compassion fatigue and STS throughout the early literature (Figley, 1995a, 1995b; Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Figley (1995a, 1995b) characterized burnout as a "process that begins gradually and becomes progressively worse" (p. 11) and compassion fatigue as something that could "emerge suddenly with little warning" (p. 12). Although different timing can occur, compassion fatigue and burnout both share traits that are expressed as emotional exhaustion, disconnection, threats to job satisfaction and productivity, and depersonalization (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Figley, 1995a, 1995b; Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Maslach, 1982; Radey & Figley, 2007; Stoves, 2014). These traits often can be experienced with a lessening sense of empathy overall (Adams et al., 2006; Figley, 1995a, 1995b; Stoves, 2014). As Figley (1995a, 1995b) noted, empathy is important for individuals providing support but can expose helpers to trauma.

Vicarious traumatization is another term used throughout the literature that has similar characteristics as compassion fatigue and STS (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Newell and MacNeil (2010) noted that while similar, vicarious traumatization can be conceptualized as:

> A cognitive change process resulting from chronic direct practice with trauma populations, in which the outcomes are alterations in one's thoughts and beliefs about the world in key areas such as safety, trust, and control … whereas secondary traumatic stress, grounded in the field of traumatology, places more emphasis on the outward behavioral symptoms rather than the intrinsic cognitive changes. (pp. 60–61)

Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professions

Since Figley's introductory work, studies examining compassion fatigue impacts have predominately come from within medical and counseling communities (Adams et al., 2006; Alkema et al., 2008; Coetzee & Klopper, 2010; Killian, 2008; Kraus, 2005; Potter et al., 2013; Potter et al., 2010; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017).

Adams et al. (2006) studied social workers in New York City and their experiences with compassion fatigue after September 11, 2001. Using a compassion fatigue scale, the researchers measured burnout and STS. The researchers' findings indicated that further exploration with both instruments and the concept of compassion fatigue needed to be conducted to understand the impact and how to assist helping professionals experiencing compassion fatigue.

As indicated earlier, Coetzee and Klopper (2010) posited that the original concept of compassion fatigue comes from Joinson (1992) and the field of nursing. Coetzee and Klopper further used concept analysis to understand how compassion fatigue is defined and can be conceived within the field of nursing. One important finding from Coetzee and Klopper was that compassion fatigue moves on a continuum from compassion discomfort to compassion stress to compassion fatigue. Once compassion fatigue has been reached on this continuum, it can permanently alter the compassionate ability of the provider.

Alkema et al. (2008) explored the experience of hospice care providers and their relationship with compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction. The researchers surveyed 37 hospice care providers. Findings included that as levels of compassion fatigue went up, levels of reported self-care went down. The authors discussed implications for having multiple self-care techniques for providers as opposed to just a few to counter compassion fatigue. Kraus (2005) interestingly found, conversely to Alkema et al., that although self-care

behaviors were linked to compassion satisfaction, Kraus could not find a correlation between self-care techniques and a reduction of compassion fatigue.

Potter et al. (2010) used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey to understand the experiences of nursing units and outpatient cancer centers. Their findings, using the professional quality of life scale, pointed to the need to further educate providers about the risk of experiencing compassion fatigue. This research was continued by Potter et al. (2013), where a designed resiliency program for 13 oncology nurses around compassion fatigue was tested. Findings included that after attending the program, which consisted of five 90-minute sessions on compassion fatigue resilience, participants' STS scores immediately went down on the professional quality of life scale.

Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) published *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout and Compassion Fatigue Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for Helping Professions*. Similar to Potter et al. (2013), Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison's work was centered on the practical education of helping professionals and providing skills and education to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout. This included helping professionals create a self-care action plan and better understand how burnout and compassion fatigue play a role in their day-to-day lives. The self-care action plan provided by Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison was extensive and encouraged professionals to consider multiple assessment steps that include assessing the stress level of work, assessing other-care-self-care balance, assessing professional self-care, assessing personal self-care, reviewing positive strategies, assessing self-care strengths and weaknesses, and creating an action plan.

Turgoose and Maddox (2017) examined already published research on common correlates and predictors of compassion fatigue among mental health professionals. Their review

found 32 studies describing compassion fatigue in a range of mental health professionals. The key finding of their study was a lack of longitudinal studies to investigate compassion fatigue development over time. Turgoose and Maddox also found that much of the existing literature around compassion fatigue looks primarily at either identifying the presence of compassion fatigue with various methodological approaches in a profession or understanding how the education around self-care and compassion satisfaction directly impacts individuals' experiences of compassion fatigue.

It is important to note a new pattern emerging in the literature since the beginning of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This pattern includes more studies being published concerning how compassion fatigue and the pandemic are impacting helping professions and healthcare workers' experiences (Bentley, 2022; McGrath et al., 2022; Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022).

McGrath et al. (2022) examined the literature and predictors for healthcare practitioners experiencing compassion fatigue among rural and remote communities. Researcher findings from 12 related studies linked the importance of better understanding the experiences of healthcare workers so that predictors of compassion fatigue could be identified for rural healthcare workers. McGrath et al. also found that the scant literature on the experiences of this population necessitated further study.

Ondrejková and Halamová (2022) researched the prevalence and differences in compassion fatigue in multiple helping professions by recruiting 607 participants. The sample consisted of 102 nurses, 44 doctors, 57 paramedics, 39 home nurses, 66 teachers, 103 psychologists, 40 psychotherapists and coaches, 76 social workers, 39 priests and pastors, and 41 police officers. Findings included no significant difference in compassion fatigue among

professions. However, Ondrejková and Halamová did find that self-criticism was the best predictor of compassion fatigue in their study. Their recommendations included training programs for helping professions to better understand how self-criticism and self-talk contribute to compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction.

Bentley (2022) used research focused on compassion practice to alleviate characteristics of compassion fatigue in counselors in the era of COVID-19. Bentley astutely observed that although the need for self-care practice is necessary for counselors to better guard against compassion fatigue, there is a gap from knowledge to practice. The researcher concluded that more research was needed to help counselors who are overworked and overburdened by the COVID-19 pandemic find self-compassion to combat compassion fatigue.

Although research among helping professions has provided multiple perspectives on how compassion fatigue has an impact, little research exists currently to understand experiences of compassion fatigue in higher education practitioners.

Compassion Fatigue in Higher Education Administrators

While literature continues to be published on compassion fatigue in health care professions, sparse research currently exists on compassion fatigue in higher education (Raimondi, 2019). Particularly, as of this writing, no research can be found concerning the specific experiences of DEI practitioners in higher education with compassion fatigue.

The work of DEI professionals is often to empathize with individuals and then help them to navigate systems and barriers of the institution (Harris & Patton, 2017). Empathy is defined by Ross et al. (2023) as, “the ability to relate emotionally to an experience or another person’s emotions” (p. 1). Knowing that someone close to you is experiencing trauma can potentially be traumatic for you (Figley, 2002a, 2002b). For educators working with marginalized students who

may become stressed by oppressive systems, there is a possibility of experiencing a specific type of secondary trauma, that is, compassion fatigue (Hoffman et al., 2007). The DEI educators are being placed in unique situations within their institutions to support individuals who may be traumatized due to their identities without resources around resilience and compassion fatigue.

The first peer-reviewed, published work in the literature directly tied to student affairs practitioners and compassion fatigue was Stoves' (2014) research. Stoves described compassion fatigue in higher education as emotional exhaustion and disconnection, which ultimately leads to lessening job satisfaction. Their findings pointed to the unique position that student affairs professionals have as they play multiple roles within institutions of higher education, many of which can expose them to trauma. Stoves argued that student affairs professionals are susceptible to compassion fatigue because of the nature of their work. Stoves' recommendations included urging student affairs professional organizations to further research and better understand how practitioners are exposed to compassion fatigue and work on ways to mitigate that exposure.

Bernstein Chernoff (2016) researched compassion fatigue in student conduct officers. Bernstein Chernoff found that the role of the person and the role of the environment must be considered in separate context when evaluating compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction. This included considering how environments were set up for professionals' compassion satisfaction or to perpetuate environments of compassion fatigue. Part of Bernstein Chernoff's research findings were that although conduct officers are one set of student affairs professionals, compassion fatigue research needs to be done across multiple functional areas that have high frequency, high-capacity work in higher education.

Raimondi (2019) pointed to some counseling and teacher education programs that have begun to incorporate burnout, compassion satisfaction, and compassion fatigue into professional

curriculum. Raimondi recommended that similarly, higher education and student affairs leadership programs should prepare future professionals with skills to mitigate the impact of compassion fatigue. Raimondi calls on the field to continue research into best practices for compassion satisfaction for student affairs professionals.

Research from Lynch and Glass (2019) has been used to identify and measure trauma in student affairs professionals to better understand how higher education support professionals experience compassion fatigue. Lynch and Glass specifically pointed to the fact that, "it is estimated that over half of college student affairs practitioners support students through traumatic life events on at least a monthly basis" (p. 2). Lynch and Glass posited that this type of heavy exposure to trauma as well as little to no professional resources around how to mitigate the impact of trauma puts student affairs professionals at incredibly high risk for experiencing compassion fatigue.

Hoy and Nguyen (2020) examined the experiences of nine student affairs professionals whose primary service was to help undocumented students. Using a phenomenological lens, their findings indicated that predisposition to advocacy and support as well as job expectations all played a role in experiences of compassion fatigue from participants.

Perez and Bettencourt (2023) through a constructivist lens looked through data from a previous longitudinal mixed-method study to understand what organizational factors contributed to compassion fatigue. They found that the very nature of the practitioner's work being exposed to students who experienced trauma left practitioners vulnerable to compassion fatigue. They also found that staffing patterns may have an impact on staff's experiences with compassion fatigue even if the organizational culture as a whole is described as supportive.

The overarching theme I identified from the research at the intersection of higher education and compassion fatigue was more research needs to be conducted. All current publications point to the fact that higher education professionals are put in situations which are ripe for compassion fatigue with little preparation coming from graduate programs curricula or national organizations to current professionals (Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Lynch & Glass, 2019; Raimondi, 2019; Stoves, 2014). Particularly the lack of current published research at the intersection of DEI practitioners and compassion fatigue in higher education should be explored further within the research.

In Chapter III, I will explain in detail my research methodology and how it will address the gap in the literature on experiences of DEI practitioners with compassion fatigue.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practitioners' experiences of compassion fatigue and how their own identities impacted those experiences. In this chapter, I describe the research methodology I completed. I detail my positionality as researcher and the theoretical lenses I view the world and research through. In addition, I detail the methodology I used and how I have used trustworthiness strategies and analysis.

I used culturally responsive qualitative research as the framework for this study as it allows for the consideration of my own positionality as a White researcher, the intersecting nature of identity and how that influences the research, and above all maintains the story as sacred (Lahman, 2024).

It is important to acknowledge White researchers have misrepresented and misunderstood research outside of their own racial group both in past and current research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This misrepresentation continues systems of oppression against marginalized individuals (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As a White researcher, I have a responsibility to both acknowledge this fact and work to ensure that I do not perpetuate the same systems of harm and oppression (Berryman et al., 2013). It was my goal to always center the participant as the curator of their own story.

As a culturally responsive researcher, I was committed to decentralizing power, establishing a respectful relationship between participants and myself, and to maintaining

participants' voices as central to all conclusions or recommendations that are given (Berryman et al., 2013). In this specific study, part of the research process was to check with participants throughout their interviews and to ask for feedback on transcriptions, identified themes, and my own approach, which may be impacted by my privilege. Involving participants to the extent that is possible in member checking is a part of conducting culturally responsive research (Berryman et al., 2013; Lahman, 2024). Although member checking was one action, it was important for me to go beyond this action and have constant reflexivity on how my own racial worldview has shaped my socialized understanding of the world and the data that were collected. This reflexivity is critical to ensuring that data were represented accurately and with authenticity to the participants (Berryman et al., 2013).

Research Questions

Q1 What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with compassion fatigue?

Q2 How do diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners' identities influence their interpretations and experiences of compassion fatigue?

These two questions served as guiding research questions. A critical theoretical perspective framing the methods of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and a diversity, equity, and inclusion, queer intersectional narrative inquiry shaped how the interview questions branch off from the two primary research questions.

Theoretical Perspective

In this study, to enrich my perspective, I utilized three theories—interpretivism, critical race theory, and queer theory. Use of multiple theories, theoretical triangulation, is thought to strengthen a researcher's understanding of the data (Denzin, 2009).

Interpretivist researchers seek “sensemaking, description, and detail” and “meaning making is underscored as the primary goal of interpretive research in the understanding of social phenomena” (Given, 2008, p. 3). Although interpretivist origins operated in colonizing ways of research, more current and critical interpretivist theorists use interpretivist theory to amplify voice and space to historically marginalized groups (Given, 2008). Using interpretivism as part of the theoretical framework for this study allowed me to broadly consider the narratives and stories of the participants within the research while allowing them to interpret and communicate their own meaning from their stories (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020).

Due to rich, recent use of critical perspectives tied to interpretivist theoretical frameworks, I also used queer theory (Butler, 2002; Callis, 2009; Filax, 2006; Foucault, 1988) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), in conjunction with interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011) for theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 2009) to interrogate my understanding of my own interpretations of the data and enhance trustworthiness. I am a researcher who believes that identities of race, sex, sexuality, and gender uniquely shape the experiences of individuals and how they make meaning and interpret the world around them (Butler, 2002; Callis, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Filax, 2006; Foucault, 1988; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011).

Foucault (1988) challenged our deep understandings of gender and sexuality by pointing to the relatively recent origins of the concept of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Queer theory as a term was first published by de Lauretis (1991) who argued that gender presentation itself was a construction. Judith Butler (1993, 2002) would contribute to queer theory and build off Foucault’s work and further challenge binary ways of understanding gender and sexuality. Butler (2002) stated:

> If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (p. 98)

These works were conceptualized to challenge our deeply heteronormative society and understandings of how gender and sexuality influence and impact our experiences. Queer theory, at its core, questions power structures. Using a queer theory lens, I asked the research participants how and if gender played a role in the formulation of their own compassion fatigue. Using this critical lens to challenge patriarchal systems of power by illuminating erased stories and narratives from the institution in the data collected helped to enhance the culturally responsiveness of the research.

Similarly, critical race theorists examine how race influences historical and contemporary context for how participants will view the world and interpret their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Delgado and Stefancic (2023) stated:

> Our system of race is like a two-headed hydra. One head consists of outright racism—the oppression of some people on grounds of who they are. The other head consists of White privilege—a system by which Whites help and buoy each other up. If one lops off a single head, say, outright racism, but leaves the other intact, our system of White over

> Black/Brown will remain virtually unchanged. The predicament of social reform … is that "everything must change at once." Otherwise, change is swallowed up by the remaining elements, so that we remain roughly as we were before. (p. 91)

Critical race theory both acknowledges and demands the critical necessity of examining structures and systems to deconstruct the inherent privilege of White racial identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory acknowledges that White supremacy and privilege have dominated the foundations of all systems within the United States and challenges us to critically examine how that privilege has impacted people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In this study, as a White person, I used critical race theory to interrogate my own understanding and interpretation of the data that were collected. To critically interrogate my own White bias meant to situate my understanding of the power structures that my privilege gives me access to, and then consider historically and contemporarily how these systems have systematically been denied to marginalized individuals and the impact that has on their lived experiences in the data I collected.

Positionality

It is important to note that as a researcher, my positionality and identities shaped this study, and, in turn, influenced its interpretation, understanding, and ultimately the findings. I am immersed in the DEI field and have worked in higher education in DEI work for 14 years. I have my own experiences of compassion fatigue due to the work of being a marginalized person employed to change and deconstruct oppressive systems within higher education. It is these personal experiences of compassion fatigue that have propelled my own researcher position to shed light on the experiences of DEI practitioners. This influenced how the research questions were approached and in what ways I sought to understand information. My positionality within

the field also meant that I may have worked or work with many of the individuals participating in this study.

I also identify as queer, and that lens informed and influenced this research and how I approach the world. My specific experience of queerness situates me to challenge and reflect upon binary systems of thinking, particularly those equated to gender and sexuality. This lens impacts how I choose to conduct research and in what ways I choose to be reflexive in my work.

Reflexivity

It is critical to acknowledge that as a researcher I hold a White racial identity. My whiteness affords me opportunity and privilege within the society I live in and, therefore, influences how I show up in spaces, how I engage in dialogue, and whose story I have been socialized to believe. By acknowledging how my White racial identity situates me in society, I am better able to understand and use tools to consider multiple perspectives outside of the dominant identity and culture (Lahman, 2024). Six of the seven research participants identified as people of color. It was incredibly important for me to reduce the influence of my own White privilege. In order to do this, I used member checking to make sure that themes and data were represented accurately and presented data as complete stories and thoughts as to preserve the integrity of the participants' intent.

Methodology

I drew on Frank's (2002) narrative inquiry and analysis to create a diversity, equity, and inclusion queer intersectional narrative inquiry where I sought counter stories that the academy has erased within the larger dominant story of those who hold privilege. An interpretative design allowed me to ask questions about how DEI professionals interpret their lived experiences and how compassion fatigue plays a role in their experiences. I also chose interpretative methodology

as it allowed for the creation of themes that could be member checked by participants to ensure accurate and culturally responsive reporting of data (Lahman, 2024). I used narrative inquiry with semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the data collection method. Narrative inquiry uses storytelling to uncover nuance within circumstance (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry as a method places story as center, is approachable, and allows the researcher the ability to understand multiple ways of knowing narratives (Kim, 2017).

Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews allow participants to freely express their ideas within a certain range, which collects rich and direct data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). I interviewed participants once, with each interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Narrative inquiry with semi-structured interviews created a rich set of in-depth data as participants spoke to their own experiences and both researcher and participant were given the opportunity to clarify and follow up with questions to gain insight and interpret meaning from participants' narratives (Kim, 2017).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

I used purposeful sampling when determining participants as it aligned with the research design. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research for identification and selection of information-rich data (M. Q. Patton, 2002). This sampling includes identifying and selecting individuals who have knowledge about a phenomenon or interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Through this study I explored the lived experiences of seven DEI practitioners from predominantly White institutions. Participants ranged from newer to the profession to decades engaged in DEI work. Using the number of years engaged in DEI work allowed me to interview professionals who had engaged in the work within multiple contexts, all with different

opportunities for making meaning of their experiences. The decision to explore the experiences on predominantly White campuses was fueled by (a) the new emphasis within higher education institutions to have DEI as a core value (Morphew & Hartley, 2006) and (b) my assumption that these environments would lead to compassion fatigue among practitioners engaging in DEI work.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A), procedural ethics were established. However, in an intentional effort to build upon established rapport and trust, I used existing connections to identify the study's participants. While the decision to use pre-existing relationships to establish the participant pool impacted the data, so did choosing to interview strangers. I consciously made this decision and prioritized existing rapport and trust. Tillman's (2015) friendship methodology discussed how friendship can be used as a method to better gain rapport and trust and collect rich data. I believe the data in this study were more robust and accurate due to the preexisting relationships between myself and the participants. Additionally, this decision allowed me to knowingly select professionals with varying identities as an understanding of how identity impacts compassion fatigue is a core research question.

I recruited participants through a verbal/written recruitment invitation, which outlined the purpose of the study and the interview process (see Appendix B). Participants received an informed consent form (see Appendix C) as well as assurance that their identity would be protected on a locked hard drive.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of one semi-structured interview between 60 to 90 minutes in length. Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym. Participants were sent an optional pre-interview identity related survey with in-depth demographic information that

included class/socio-economic status, disability status, ethnicity, gender identity, national origin, race, religion/spirituality/worldview, sexual identity, romantic identity, pronouns, and other salient identities. I felt empowered to ask specific identity information due to pre-existing relationships with participants and to give agency to participants to claim identities that are often not given consideration. I believe that as a culturally responsive researcher, it is my responsibility to give space and opportunity for individuals to acknowledge and affirm their identities (Lahman, 2024). I asked questions about participants' interpretations of their function and goals on campus to gain an understanding and interpretation of the lived day-to-day experience of participants. I then asked questions concerning how participants interpreted their experiences of compassion fatigue as it related to their identity-based work. Questions were asked for rich narratives and stories of participants' experiences with compassion fatigue and identity. See Appendices D and E for demographic and interview questions.

To maintain trust and rapport, interviews were conducted in a private and confidential one-on-one setting. A semi-structured interview allows for both a guiding list of premeditated questions and the flexibility to ask follow-up questions as needed (Mann, 2016). By using this format, I was able to obtain in-depth information and prompt expansion as themes emerged.

Interviews were recorded and conducted synchronously utilizing the online platform Zoom. The option to disable the video feature (for recording purposes) coupled with the ability to use pseudonyms during transcriptions provided additional measures for confidentiality in the study.

Interviews were scheduled via email and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. At the start of the interview, I confirmed consent, including consent to record, and reminded the participants of key aspects of the consent form, for example, reminding participants that any

identifying information would remain confidential. Recordings were stored on a password protected hard drive. Original interview recordings and identifying information was stored separately from associated pseudonyms and was password-protected. Participants received a $50.00 Visa gift card in the form of a thank you for their time participating in the research.

Trustworthiness

Reflexivity, ethical practice, along with rigor are crucial to establishing trustworthiness in research (Lahman, 2024). I maintained ethical practice by utilizing member checking, which allows participants to verify and correct my interpretation as the researcher (Lahman, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 2009) was used to enhance rigor. Interpretivism, Queer critical theory, and critical race theory were used to interrogate my interpretations of the data and ground my understanding of emerging themes (Butler, 2002; Callis, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Filax, 2006; Foucault, 1988; Schwandt, 2007; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011). Initial interviews were followed-up with member checking with each participant concerning transcripts and created themes from the data to ensure ethical practice.

I must always consider my own reflexivity as a researcher and how my identities play a part in my understanding of the data collected to ensure trustworthiness. As a culturally responsive researcher, it is my ethical and moral responsibility to accurately understand how my White privilege and privileged identities influenced the data I interpreted and how I displayed that data (Lahman, 2024). As part of my own commitment to reflexivity, ethical practice, and rigor, I established a critical friend group. Critical friend groups have been cited in research literature as an important tool to providing feedback and create intrinsical dialogue for ethical research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Kember et al., 1997; Noor & Shafee, 2021). I sought

feedback from my own critical friend group to ensure trustworthiness as I moved through my research. Part of my commitment to my critical friend group was to ensure that I included friends that hold identities and experiences different from my own to illuminate different perspectives.

Narrative Thematic Analysis

I utilized a narrative thematic analysis. Narrative thematic analysis builds on thematic analysis which is described as, "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it does further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Analysis of individual narratives included identifying the smaller and larger stories and what meanings are being conveyed by those stories individually and collectively. Frank (2002) and Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested six stages for thematic analysis:

1. Familiarize: Reading, reading, and rereading data while writing first thoughts
2. Generate initial codes: "Coding features of the data related to the research question in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, [and] collating data relevant to each code."
3. Search for themes: Collating codes into potential themes and gathering data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Review themes to determine if the themes work to represent "the coded extracts" or "the entire data set."
5. Define and name: "Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating definitions and names for each theme."
6. Produce the report—the final opportunity for analysis: (a) "Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples," (b) "Final analysis of [the] selected extracts," (c)

> Relating back the analysis to the research question and literature, and (d) Producing a scholarly report of the analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Analysis of the data included the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages with an emphasis on narrative aspects of step 6 to look for relevant stories, vignettes, and anecdotes to be highlighted to hold story as sacred in this narrative study. Member checking was used to confirm interpretations of narratives and themes to enhance the analysis and center participants' voices (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking was central to the data analysis process and participants were given both written and verbal opportunities to provide feedback to maintain the story as scared and reduce researcher influence (Birt et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In Chapter IV, I will present the findings from this narrative study. First, I will feature a narrative description of each DEI professional, which contextualizes the data. Then I will provide themes from cross analysis and support those themes with robust quotes to enhance voice and authenticity. All themes and narrative descriptions were member checked by participants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

I began the interviews with cautious excitement as an opportunity to hear stories from colleagues across the country was anticipated as both humbling and impactful. What I had not considered fully was the incredible amount of solidarity, community, and resilience I would have the honor of experiencing by completing this research. Each of these seven research participant's narratives is an incredible snapshot into understanding the lived experience of a human trying to make social change within their world of higher education. Their narratives are presented below in blocks of quoted text to preserve the authentic representation of self-experience and mitigate the influence of my dominant identities as a researcher. Although commonalities will be discussed more thoroughly in cross-analysis, the one singular trait that continues to resonate with me long after these interviews have concluded is the enduring strength and power of those committed to helping their communities, or what I have come to think of as, the power of a Helper's Heart.

Overview Process

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practitioner's experiences of compassion fatigue and how their own identities impacted those experiences. The following research questions guided the study.

Q1 What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with compassion fatigue?

Q2 How do diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners' identities influence their interpretations and experiences of compassion fatigue?

I provide a critical analysis of the seven narrative interviews that cumulatively created 14 hours of narrative interview data. Using theoretical triangulation with interpretivism, queer theory, and critical race theory, analysis and data presentation highlight rich narratives to ensure stories are authentically reflected. Findings will be presented as participant descriptions and individual areas of note, then analysis of collective themes identified in all of the narratives.

Narrative Interviews

Audre: A Brake Pad

Audre (she/her/hers) self-identified through the pre-interview survey that she was a Black, working class, temporarily abled, queer, heteromantic, cisgender, multi-racial, agnostic raised Christian, American. All of these identities were prompted via the pre-interview designated fields. It is important to note that Audre also listed other salient identities such as first-generation graduate student and Southerner. Audre also clarified that they hold the status of mother, but she would not consider this an identity.

Audre held a terminal degree in education and her research focuses primarily on Black student experiences and retention in higher education. Audre served in the role of director of a Black student cultural center at a western regional predominantly White mid-sized institution. She had served in her current role for 3 years. She was the only full-time staff member in her cultural center whose job it was to meet the needs of 400+ Black-identified students at her institution. Our interview began with Audre sharing the story of how she got involved in DEI work.

> It was really about getting to college, realizing college was the thing that would change my life and then trying to make that happen for other people. So, the venue that I chose was student affairs and then the avenue that I chose was housing. And my experience in

> housing over that 13 years was so incredibly revelatory around the systems, processes, and practices that maintained oppressive systems. My experience as a member of an oppressive system was so traumatic and so painful and so life changing, that when confronted with the opportunity, my choice was to try to create a buffer for other people. And so, my real purpose in the work is to try to avoid other people experiencing the harm that was handsomely provided to me through my career in housing. And so that's what led me to wanting to do DEI work. I specifically chose to do DEI work with Black people because of my identity as a Black person, and so I made the choice, the extra jump to be like no, I actually want to do an in-group DEI experience. And then for me that's Black people.

Audre was asked in a follow-up question if they believe they had always been a natural helper or buffer as they self-described or if this was something they felt they had to maintain or create within themselves due to their identities and experiences in oppressive systems.

> I grew up in an abusive household and so there was no buffer. There was nothing. You were in that element as an actor. So, you were just there. Whatever happened to you, this was the story happening to you. And what I realized when I left home at 17, and I said to myself, I will never be in a situation where I don't have the ability to protect myself, and that is ironic because I then went into higher ed., where I lost the ability to protect myself again. So, it's been [being a buffer] much more intentional, I would say, as opposed to like organic process. I think my personality lends to it, but I had to purposely decide to do it.

When Audre was then asked to describe her work in higher education and how this natural buffer affect applied to her work, her reply was,

> like it's in a car, you have four wheels, you have four brakes, right? The brake is an essential part of the car. You really can't drive without it. The same way that you accelerate, you also need to stop, right? But there's not a single car in operation that gives you just a brake and a wheel. What they give you in the middle? You know why? Because physics proves that the velocity of the brake hitting the wheel will just simply shred the wheel and you will die … so, let's build a brake pad whose job it is to slowly wear down and not shred your tire. I am the brake pad of this institution. We're the brake pads, the wheel is the student, and the brake is the institution, and they know that if they press too hard, they're gonna shred that student into pieces. And so, the only way that they're not going to, the only way we're going to get motion out of that student, labor out of that student and not harm that student is if they put something in between. And that's us [DEI practitioners]. … a brake pad only has one job. It's to get burnt the fuck out. And then eventually you pop it off, you scrub the brakes and you put a new brake pad in. My center has been open 40 years; I'm the tenth director. So, that is the best example I think I can come up with about my work.

The professional burnout Audre was describing was coupled with the daily exposure to secondary trauma stress that was directly tied to identity. Audre's description of her role on campus illustrated one example of this secondary trauma stress that is directly linked to her identity.

> I tell people all the time I am the only person on this campus whose job description it is to explicitly care about Black people. That is my job description. There is no one else to give it to. It is just me. And that means that people conflate my center with me, so if they don't like me, they don't like the center. If they don't like the way I talk, they don't like

> the center's politics. If I disagree with them on one level, then the center doesn't support them. If I say yes or no, then the center said yes or no. And it's not like Audre the person is helping. It becomes, "Ohh, the center is sponsoring whatever" Whatever it's like, No, I'm just here. … people conflate whatever I do with the center. No one says that about an academic advisor. No one saying about financial aid. You could have a financial aid counselor who was on a rampage, and it's not the financial aid office, it's that person.

Audre's narratives clearly illustrated the unique experience at the intersection of professional burnout, exposure to secondary traumatic stress, and the unique nature of DEI practitioner work directly tied to identities professionals hold. The inability to set aside your role and to always be constantly on due to your identity and the nature of the work that you do creates an experience that Audre described as "perpetually exhausting."

Dee Dee: Creating Temporary Band-Aids

Dee Dee (she/her/hers) was born and raised on an American Indian Tribal Reservation and currently serves in a dual role as the director for a Native American/Indigenous student resource center and an Asian Pacific Islander student resource center. Dee Dee shared for the dissertation process it would be important to note, "American Indian denotes populations of Indigenous people to the continental United States," and within our interview and this dissertation, the terms American Indian and Native American will be used interchangeably depending on context of identity and role. Dee Dee has been the director of her current centers for 9 years and 4 years, respectively. Dee Dee worked on a predominately White campus but did not disclose more about the institutional setting as their cultural community is small and this information could have an outing affect. When asked what led Dee Dee to seek higher education, she replied,

So, I was born and raised on the [redacted] Reservation—so we, like, moved around a bit to different cities, and then my grandmother got ill. And so my family just packed everything up one day when she was diagnosed with chronic terminal disease and was like chronically ill, and so being able to spend those last few years with her, one of the things that she really instilled was the importance and the value of a different formulation of leadership, but also specifically like this concept of service as a way to be able to pay those who laid your foundation in your pathway, the way in which to pay a level of reciprocity was to be able to serve in that same type of capacity for others.

But like when I was in high school, there was severe, like, traumatic experiences that I kept experiencing. Like the high suicide rates and just alcoholism and just all of these social ills that exist on the Reservation, just consistently became a common theme when I was in my adolescent years. I became a frequent visitor to my high school counselor's office. He got me involved in several different kind of experiences. I was a ropes course facilitator and all this random stuff. I was rarely in the classroom, which is funny because as highly educated as I am, I was a terrible student [laughs].

I wanted to do that, [be a high school counselor], just to be able to give back and also just seeing the opportunity of the uniqueness of that role of being able to be a high school counselor and this unorthodox way of like approaching mental health. I didn't really know what that meant, and at the same time, like on the [redacted] Reservation, there is a historical Chief who used a phrase [that essentially stated], "use education as a way to advance the community." So, that heavily elevated the role and the influence of education.

> And so, in my mind, at 18 years old, I was like I need to become a high school counselor to be able to help other students, to be able to pursue an education. Because I think education was one of the few areas that I saw, and that my grandmother saw as well because she worked as a janitor at a branch campus. She talked heavily about how the university was one of the few places that she saw people happy and content. A lot of the students that she worked with, you know once they get their degrees, had more levels of security and safety and so that formulated a view of education.

Dee Dee shared the story of why she went into DEI work in higher education. Dee Dee's story illuminated that her passion for working to create access comes from witnessing inequities and injustice and feeling compelled to act through education because of the values instilled in her by her grandmother and tribal connections.

> When I was working on my dissertation, I was working with college students specifically because I was doing a life story project of looking at narratives of how do these students who grew up on [a tribal] Reservation navigate, make choices, and decisions throughout their life to be able to pursue higher education and how do they conceptualize academic success?
>
> Unfortunately, even though that they got like these merit scholarships, they got acceptance to these prestigious and elite colleges and universities, they were still struggling and they were dropping out at a very high rate and a lot of it was because they lacked knowledge of how to navigate the system of higher education.
>
> It had nothing to do with their level of intelligence. And it didn't have to do with even access to a certain degree around funding. And so, it was incredibly difficult for me to be able to sit in those interviews and consider the implications as a researcher and bias

about whether or not I could actually offer advice and support for them. And so, it was complicated because again, like this prestigious air of what [being a] researcher looks at an R-1 institution and trying to navigate that while simultaneously, fundamentally kind of denying who I was as a service leader, it didn't align.

I think there were many narratives and stories in which I interpreted that these spaces and these places that I was trying to tap into were just not the right place for me. I went into another existential crisis again [laughs] and I learned of an opportunity at my current institution about a position available for Director of the Native American/Indigenous Student Cultural Center.

I applied and I think through serendipity, one of the search committee members was actually one of the faculty members that my grandmother knew when she worked at the branch campus at a university. So, I think that there's these like weird, random kind of moments in life that just signaled that I was supposed to be working here and so yeah, I've been here since and trying to do what I can to be able to navigate both.

Dee Dee wanted to be clear to speak to her experiences and that those experiences did not reflect many of her own students' experiences because of an insulation from some of the social ills experienced due to her own family's privilege.

It's complicated because an added layer into my life story is these other elements of identity that I think have provided a level of structure and security to my life trajectory that a lot of Native students don't have. Specifically, my parents are college-educated. My grandfather was essentially kind of a senator for our tribal nation. My uncle was similarly a senator. I have members of my family that were in the military, et cetera.

> So, there's these multiple, different kind of avenues that provided a fostering of safety and security around my life. Even though there's these traumatic events and exposure to social ills, the level of structure of protection around it was heavily fostered for me.
>
> I think that's one of the complexities for me, that while I can have social contexts of what they're experiencing, the level of vulnerability and exposure to those social ills, there's very little that we can offer as an institution to be able to offer the same level of protection to that exposure that I was granted through my personal structures of safety and security. I think the hardest part is trying to create temporary band-aids to these long systemic issues, and simultaneously, when the system at my institution is constantly in flux, it's so hard to maintain sustainably.

Dee Dee explained how the impacts of oppressive systems both inside and outside of higher education creates barriers for her students to build authentic relationships that are so desperately needed.

> I mean, it's every year it seems like we have to recreate a new kind of security blanket for these students, and what gets exhausting is that they simultaneously will get excited to be able to work with a Native person who is highly educated, who has positional power at the university and at the same time, they experience fear that, "I can't be too vulnerable with Dee Dee" because then she might reject me. And it's one of those instances where the trauma they experience with other adults interferes with our work … in terms of their [the students'] experiences with families and that trauma of being abandoned or asking for help and not receiving it et cetera in their previous relationships. I think it's incredibly

difficult for some Native students to foster relationships while also navigating a fear of being abandoned or rejected.

Again, that goes back to the history of Native families and just the way in which boarding schools and cultural genocide happened, of taking children away from families, there's disruptions of the transmission of parental responsibility. I think for Native students there's also this sensitivity, I must be highly successful, and I must achieve at a certain level or else Dee Dee won't like me. But you know, there's always this interesting turning point, and they learn that once you realize that Dee Dee is just a Rez kid, it's a lot easier but they worry a lot about the rejection and just what that looks like. So, I think that's hard.

I asked Dee Dee how her work with Asian and Pacific Islander students differed with that of Native and Indigenous students and if there were unique aspects of working with this different cultural community.

There has been this really interesting change in my role in API [Asian and Pacific Islander] students' lives over the past few years of being one of the few, constant adult relationships that they have and that has a level of understanding and support that's unwavering because I think parents, I don't know if it's the pandemic, I don't know if it's economic insecurity, but in general, I find that in both Native and API students' their parents are having these high expectations of their children and are demanding things of them as a young adult that I just don't think you can expect anybody to fulfill. And there's like this withdrawal of funding, and like with love and care and affection, unless if they obey and abide by their demands and I am learning that there are a lot of our API students are currently experiencing these types of parental pressures.

One of the last questions I asked to Dee Dee was in context to if she felt given her resources and the student populations she was meant to serve, if she was put into an impossible situation?

> [long pause] So I think of this question as a question of agency, and I think that's the hard part. Can I leave? Yes. Can I step away? Yes. Will I allow myself to? No. Does the university expect me to do things I think that no one individual can fulfill all the multiple different things? Constantly. Do I feel that anybody can actually fulfill the expectations of capitalism at the moment? No (laughs). And so, I think it's kind of back to that logical and theoretical thing for me. I think we live in a society at the moment that nobody's being taken care of, nobody is healthy. This is where I can make an impact now. So, I do what I can.

Damarus: There Isn't Enough Time and Resources in the World

Damarus (She/Her) self-identified that she is a Black, African-American, transfeminine, able bodied, agnostic, androsexual, androromantic individual. She was currently serving as the director of a queer student resource center at a large predominately White campus in the West. When asked what brought her to roles in DEI work, Damarus responded,

> The story of what brought me into DEI work, I would first say, was born out of when I was an undergrad. In undergrad, I had a lot of, like DEI related, like roles, but I also just had a lot of different experiences. I went to college in the early 2010s and it was a time, I think, before this sort of popularity around DEI being a thing that more people wanted to participate in.
>
> So, I was kind of this, like, radicalized young person, who didn't really understand much about the world and also had a lot of frustrations about it, right? So, I am originally from the Midwest, and I grew up in a space where a lot of people looked

like me. When I came to Colorado, almost immediately, there was this switch of like, where before my queerness was a stigmatized thing, it was less so when I moved to Colorado and the opposite was true. My racial identity became much more stigmatized in predominantly White Colorado, where I went to school. And so, I dealt with a lot of very, very racist things from people. I just didn't know what to do with it and so I was very much the student who was in everyone's office and constantly oversharing and probably trauma dumping and just dealing with stuff there.

I think I felt called to engage in this work deeper because of my own experiences and I wanted to try to set myself up to be in a space where I could, like my literal job, is responding to these kinds of things … I did know, however, that I didn't want that first full-time role to be in an LGBT [lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender] enter because I didn't want to burn out too quickly. So, I also had student art background, so I oversaw a different organization for 5 years. You know, I built out DEI initiatives from that organization, while also working with my then former institutions center as well. And so really stacking my experiences to include DEI while also continuing to build tolerance for the burnout in higher education and better understand context that I would be going into. And so that is what we brought me to DEI work.

Damarus was asked to give an example story of a time when she experienced compassion fatigue related to her identity at work.

I recently, moved from my old institution 2 years ago and I've been at my new institution for like 2 years. When I was in the geographical area of my old institution, I was one of the only Black trans people. There were like maybe three or four of us at like the staff level at the institution. There was this mass leaving, where a bunch of people left last fall.

So, a couple of my old colleagues reached out to me recently and said, “Hey there’s this student who recently started and she identifies as Black and trans.” And essentially, she was navigating some very, specific struggles, and because no one else at the institution held these identities anymore, they reached out to me at my new institution and we’re like, “Hey, would you be willing to meet with this person? Here’s a little bit of information about her.” And I was like, of course!

And I think it was in hindsight, I think about our conversation. She’s so sweet. Right. She is going to classes. She was taking leadership opportunities. She’s getting connected. But I remember just feeling like the despair and the loneliness of being that one person in a space where no one else looks like you or understands all of this stuff. Of being Black and trans and living in a predominately White Western state.

And I just remember feeling so affirmed and proud that I was able to lean in for this person. But there is also this feeling of like, there isn’t enough time and resources in the world to be able to respond to these types of things. Feeling like there is so much pressure to be helpful to people and to try and support people in ways that no one else demonstratively can. I think for me it’s, because I know how bad things can get, because I have seen pieces of my own experience in this person, there is an exhaustion around, will this space ever be good for people like me? Will people like me, who actually want to live in these spaces, ever actually be able to do that?

Camille: A Failing Juggling Act

Camille (she/her/hers) self-identified as a Black woman, who was middle class, spiritual, hetero-leaning, and currently not disabled. She currently worked at a predominately White institution in a midwest urban area as the senior DEI administrator for her institution. Her

previous roles encompassed DEI work, including her last position leading and running a cultural center for Black students at a predominately White institution in the west. When asked what brought Camille to DEI work, her response was,

> I usually share that it came to me, and I didn't come to it, and I love that so much. Many people who seek out the work, engage in these steps like I'm going do this and I'm going to be licensed and I'm going. … But from the time I was in undergrad, I participated in a program to help recruit racially and ethnically diverse students. And so, it started there.
>
> But I didn't realize that was my first little start or ping of diving into the work. And I think from then, I was always just attracted to anything where I could share perspective and be the thoughtful, kind person for people who were engaging in the university. After I graduated, I didn't know about higher ed as a real profession at all, and I thought I was going to be an English professor [laughs] and I'm always so grateful that didn't work out.
>
> When I stumbled into the higher ed program and was able to learn more about the range of work I could be doing, I was like, "Ohh, this is great." When I left and graduated with my bachelor's and master's—they were back-to-back—I moved to the South to do AmeriCorps for a year, and worked specifically with Black and Brown students who were going through our high school program, and I supported them on the as they prepared for their collegiate experience and specifically the transition from high school to college. It just seemed like throughout each of my experiences, I always gravitated towards it [DEI work]. I just trusted that my energy and my desire would align with that important work.

> Then I moved to the Northeast and pursued residence life work and was tapped to plan our cultural lounge programming, and I also taught the resident assistant class. It's just always been in the fabric of all the things I've done throughout my career. And you know, I think even my transition to being a cultural center director, I don't know that I ever would have identified it as a step on my student affairs career journey, but it was clear to me that all of the work and efforts I engaged in before really prepared me for the experience.
>
> And then my current role, again it felt like the next step. I can't envision myself doing anything else, and I feel like all the things that have happened to me have been strategic, but not on my part, like, life and the universe have just ushered me into this work.

When asked to describe how the work directly connected to her identity and compassion fatigue, Camille used the following narrative to illustrate.

> Yeah. I mean, it's like you're in the work trying to navigate everything about who you are and how you show up and which parts of the systems and practices and policies you subscribe to and assimilate to all while trying to do the good work and show up for other people is a failing juggling act.
>
> Yeah, because the expectation for us to be engaged in the work means we have to work within a system. Within that system we're trying to help people navigate their own lives and then figure out how to navigate the system but be true to themselves. And so, then I'm also tired because you want me to work all the hours and be highly functioning with not enough resources, and not always adequate support. It's what many in the work

> hear——do more with less. That common refrain is a difficult one to consider when the work DEI practitioners engage in is really critical to people's belonging.

Camille encapsulated as a student affairs professional the unspoken expectations that she confronts because of the identities she holds and her work in DEI.

> In student affairs work in particular, we are instructed, we are encouraged, we are pushed to hold compassion, to express compassion without any guidance when it goes awry. So, you know, be there for the student, support the students, be the go-to person. … But what I find is that as much as we offer compassion to our students, there's never really much conversation about how we offer compassion to ourselves. And so, if we could all just hold space there——like I have so much difficulty holding compassion for myself because I've been socialized to hold it and be present for others in some really deep ways. No wonder it's hard. No wonder people are fatigued because there's typically no pouring back into self.

Camille spoke further to this lack of preparation for student affairs professionals who may be going into DEI work.

> We're never taught in our formal education about the things that are practical and that matter for us to really thrive in the work. I think about this with our undergraduate students, too. Are they taking a class on how to navigate conflict? No. Are they taking a class on what it means to take care of themselves? No. Are they taking classes on budgeting and what it means to manage money when they graduate? No, so none of the practical things, right? I think it would be helpful, especially for folks in student affairs and in DEI work. … How do you navigate the things so you can continue to be passionate and committed to the work? Because otherwise this is why people burn out

and why people leave the field. And if you don't figure it out, then you're left frustrated and irritated, and everyone activates you and you can't show up for people well.

Joél: Performance Equity and Living Out of Hope

Joél (he/him/his/el) identified through the pre-interview survey as Hispanic, middle class, cisgender, Méxican, Latino, agnostic, gay, androromantic, and undocumented. Joél currently serves at a predominately White Western institution in an academic center supporting students who hold marginalized identities. In the past, he has had multiple roles supporting DEI work including serving as an associate director of a cultural center at a predominately White institution in the West. The conversation between Joél and I started with a discussion about why he decided to attend college.

> For me, going to college meant that, as an undocumented person, especially given at the time I was fully undocumented, meaning that I didn't have any immigration relief. Right now, I have a work authorization and it's like a huge privilege for me to have, but back then I didn't. So, I had to find a way that was going to make my parents' sacrifice to come to this country worth it. I couldn't really get a job. I could get jobs, but not like a job that I would, I don't know, that was perceived to be a prestigious job or a job with benefits or things like that.
>
> I think there's this narrative if you go into education, if you get a higher education degree, it's gonna pay off. Yeah, like, good things happen to people who go to college, and you just have to put in the work. So, the thing for me was, getting a job is not an option for me, but there was an opportunity to get this college thing. So, it was actually more about "I'm doing something with my life and something that other people are proud of. It feels like I'm not only making my family proud, but I'm making their sacrifice

worth it by me being able to do some of these things." So that is one component. I think the other piece is I really like education. Education is something that I have really enjoyed. As I reflect back, educational spaces are some of the spaces that I feel people have been really accepting of my identities. It has been a space where I was able to be embraced for some of my identities, even though some of these identities were not visible. I was still in the closet in so many ways. I didn't tell my immigration status or talk about my sexual identity. But in education, people were nice to me, which I was not getting in other spaces. So, educational spaces have been a place where I found, definitely, community.

In follow-up, I asked about the story of how Joél came to DEI work. Joél spoke of his journey understanding social justice and how that journey brought him to DEI work.

It first started with my goal of going into student affairs, but even before I knew what student affairs was. … I'm going to take a step back to even just my involvement in student clubs and organizations, because I think that's where things kind of stem from for me. I learned what student affairs was through my involvement with leadership and student development pieces. So, I started to understand more about systems of power, privilege, and oppression, and I was just like, "Oh my gosh." There are words to my experiences, and there's so much more. There was a hunger to learn more. Learn more about that, and it all started with my involvement in student clubs and orgs that kind of then led to taking leadership roles within my student organizations, which lead to working with student affairs folks, who told me, "Hey, you are already kind of doing some of this work, maybe I should apply for grad school." At the time, I knew that I wanted to work doing multicultural affairs, and I think a lot of it was going back to those

first experiences through student clubs and organizations and wanting to like build this concept of helping others who have similar to same experiences as mine so that hopefully one day they wouldn't have to navigate the things that I had to navigate. So, I think at the root of it was me thinking, yes, multicultural affairs, this is where it's at. I think a lot of it was just more not knowing some things that I do know now.

Once I got to grad school, I started learning more about it in practice. Because I think initially it was just more, "yes, this concept exists," and I was like, cool. I can name them, and then in grad school-specific, like master's degree that I started to learn more about, like intersectionality. I started learning more about the complexities. I started like learning more about White supremacy. All of these things made me like, "oh, so I could be doing equity work, but there's like all these very real systems in place. It's going to make this a lot harder in a way." So, I think it came from this place of like genuinely wanting to learn more and help others and make a better place for me and others. That's really how I got into DEI practice.

Soleil: I'm Gonna Help This Person … No Matter What

Soleil (they/them/elles) indicated that they identify as Latiné, non-binary, disabled, low-income, spiritual, pansexual, and demi-romantic. Soleil worked as a program coordinator at a resource center that served students across the gender and sexuality spectrums at a predominantly White institution. When asked what brought them to DEI work, they responded with their own journey into higher education.

A position opened up as a program coordinator for the center, and at that point I was almost graduating with my undergrad, and I asked myself, what I doing with my life? So, I decided to apply to the position hoping I would get hired. In my undergrad I learned to

advocate for my needs and manifest that creation of change. Particularly around, “how we are practicing compassion and how do we center ourselves?” “How do we take care of oneself and actually do a lot of inner child healing and generational healing?” And so, before all of that, I started a podcast back in 2020. I’ve recorded very intense sessions about “how do you actually communicate and process through your emotions?” A lot of emotions or things that most people kind of sweep under the rug because of fear of engaging with the thought. So, throughout my whole undergrad experience and career, I really did a lot of advocacy work in different avenues. Whether it was through volunteering, having conversations with people, or finding myself in the right place and time. In all of those pieces, even in high school, I’ve always been driven to help people. Since I can remember, when I was younger, I always said I was going to start a revolution, go against the government and debunk these systems. I think that it stemmed from how, at a young age, I saw the inequities and experienced those inequities as a young child.

I come from an immigrant family and so our parents really struggled to figure out what the life is here in the United States meant. I was a young translator for both my parents, helping them navigate the adult world in this Western society. I lost my ability to experience my childhood, I learned to become responsible at a very young age. So, from there, I am trying to change my life so I can help change the life of my parents, siblings and future generations to come. I saw the need of my family growing up and it has paved the way for my passion in helping people learning how to grow and heal. The inequities I saw, felt, and experienced have pushed me to be there to support people in ways that they currently are struggling to conceptualize.

I asked Soleil how working with students who held similar identities to them impacts them and they responded with an incredibly vulnerable insight to what many of my participants would also describe as they did their work.

> I've reflected a lot about this question in the past. When I first started, … I jumped into my new job. I instinctively dove head straight into the ocean without any question. This fiery passion motivated me to say "I'm gonna help this person …. no matter what," and I learned very quickly what it felt like to not have work life boundaries. I started in June and by the time October came around, I was burnt out; I ran out of fuel. I didn't realize lot of the things that students were sharing were triggering me. My body finally caught up with 4 months carrying the weight of such heavy sorrow, pain and anger of the injustices. After some time, I noticed myself dissociating, especially when I was very triggered. I rarely would notice when I experienced dissociation until small moments where I would analyze how this student is sharing this traumatic story and I would feel numb. Through all of that I somehow still always figured out how to help them, to find solutions or alternatives to their situation. So, from there, it's kind of just been a journey of, "How do I hold space for this student, but not necessarily absorb all of the emotions and try and fix everything?" I have been notoriously known for being a fixer, so that is something that I've had to fucking reality check myself on because I know I can't save everything and everyone.
>
> It is easy for me to connect with students about our immigrant families, the expectations of how our LGBTQIA+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender] community perceive what it means to be non-binary. So those intersections, it becomes challenging to hold myself back on

> helping them through those situations. I found a way connect and being building that trust, but the hardest part is not doing it all for the students and giving them the tools to find their own way out of the darkness. Therefore, I haven't been fully aware of how that's impacting me because of how much I have such a big heart. I always want to embrace everyone and make sure that they feel comfortable, seen, and heard. So, I sacrificed a lot of myself at the beginning because I just felt like I needed to but didn't realize the aftereffects until my mental health really declined.

When asked to tell a story of the complexities of educating others on identity, Soleil articulated a nuanced piece of their DEI work that helps illustrate who they are and some of the impact of educating as a professional and as a family member.

> So, when I was an undergrad student, I began my journey of facilitating student safe zone education training. I started to practice how to have difficult conversations with student peers that maybe did not see the LGBTQIA+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender] community with such compassion. Now in this role as a full-time person, I've actively have challenging conversations with staff and faculty. I've been in rooms with folks who don't necessarily have a supportive mindset of our LGBTQIA+ community. I feared sharing about my non-binary identity because of previous messaging I had received such as "nonbinary people shouldn't exist" or "doesn't exist" or "why is it so complicated?" Why can't it be just like men and women? I specifically advocated to separate the distinction of sexual and romantic orientations. I aimed to debunk the misunderstanding of how often people conflate the orientations. I did this by sharing my own identities and helping folks create the awareness that they didn't have before.

> I've attempted to create these conversations with family. Particularly, with one of my siblings, it's been really challenging because they are someone who is firm in their standpoint and beliefs. On the contrary, I am someone who questions those pieces because I wonder where and when did they adopt that narrative. I constantly reflect on various ways that I can fully be open with my sibling about my identities. I dream about a point where we can understand one another and be open-minded to accept who we are in the moment without judgement or fear.

Soleil's story illustrates the unique ask of most queer DEI professionals to both advocate professionally for individuals who hold their same identities and then go home to advocate personally in family environments hostile to the queer community. Soleil expanded on their own personal struggle as someone who could not feel open or out with their family as they also support students who are going through the same difficulties.

> Yeah, I live a double life. [laughs] My family doesn't know anything. They don't know about my job. They don't know about my chosen name. They don't know the queer fluid individual I am. The hardest part is that they think they know me, when in reality there is a whole other side of me that exists. So, when I visit home, I mourn parts of myself because it's a life I used to live but it's no longer who I am. In some ways it feels like a history I cannot change.

Kathleen: A Foregone Conclusion

Kathleen (they/them) indicated that they identify as White, Irish/German/Scottish, trans/non-binary/genderqueer, middle class, agnostic, queer, and as a person who has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain. They work as a director in a center supporting students across the gender and sexuality spectrums on an urban southern

campus that is Federal designated as both a Hispanic serving institution as well as a minority serving institution. When asked to tell the story of what brought Kathleen to DEI work, they responded,

> In my undergrad, I was an RA [resident assistant] for the last 3 years that I was in college. So, I think that was probably the first kind of exposure to any sort of like diversity, you know, training, even just some of those, the exercises where like everyone is standing in a circle and you have to step forward if you're some identity or something. You know, even things like that. That was in our RA training, it was the first time I encountered a safe zone training. And we had that. I think I had, at the time I was not out as a queer or trans person, but I was a big ally, as we all were a super ally at some point in time. I had a lot of queer friends; I was doing ally training as an RA program for my floor. That stuff was really important to me. Sociology was my undergrad degree and much of what I was doing, you know, there was lot of identity stuff in sociology. I was also doing some criminal justice stuff. But after I graduated quickly like abandoned that. I had been engaged and was supposed to get married to a cis dude right after I graduated college. That kinda dissolved cause I was like "I don't know who I am." I don't know what is going on. I worked at Panera for a year trying to figure out my life. And my old hall director was like, "what about higher ed?" I was like, "what are you talking about?" She was like, "what do you think I do for a job?" I was like, "I don't know, I'm not paying attention to your life." I was 19, 20 [laughs].
>
> I applied for the higher ed program at a university which was down the street. I was accepted to that program, and I was also a GA [graduate assistant] for housing. So, in housing, they had someone from the counseling center who was queer and who was like,

"I think we should do some sort of ally training." I was like, "yes but what you are putting together is not very good" [laughs].

Other queer GAs, we were like can we help with this? So, we actually helped facilitate kind of that first training. I'm sure it was atrocious, but you know we were doing that and thought it was something. There wasn't much, there was like no queer office on that campus. There was a student org, but it was mostly undergrad, so I wasn't super involved in some of that. But it was really cool, and I feel really fortunate with my first full-time job out of grad school was that I was looking at hall director jobs but the place that I took a job at was a northern institution, it's like a small school. …. the campus is so small, it's like 5,500 students, primarily all residential students, it's like out in the middle of nowhere, it's like a literal village because of the size of its population [laughs].

So, their hall directors do 10% [of their] position in another office on campus, which is really unique compared to most places. So, we got some input in what we wanted to do, and I really wanted to work in the new multi-cultural center they were opening. And the director who was coming in also had just graduated. She and I were the same age, like worked really well together. And she was kinda like, yeah whatever you wanna do. There's already a queer group on campus. I became the advisor for that group. I think they did have an ally/safe zone training, so I took that over and kinda redid all of that. And then kinda built up that role I was in because it was new in that office and ended up helping write all the gender inclusive housing proposals which didn't go into effect while I was there but did after I left. And then we opened an LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] library and there was like plans for there to be a space in the

multi-cultural center and in doing all of that I was like, “oh I want to do this full-time” [laughs].

Housing is fine but I do not want to be in this for the rest of my life. So, I started looking at jobs … it was really, really tough, as you are aware, to get into doing queer work full-time, especially if you have not been doing it as a job title. So, like I had been in this coordinator for the multi-cultural center role but like when I would go to some of these interviews, I got on campuses for most of these places, and then it would be like, ugh what feedback can you give me? Well, really nothing, because it’s just you have the same experience as this other candidate, but they were working in a center with this title.

So that was tough. I was job searching for probably a year to a year and half before I ended up with this job. They were just opening the office and it was like the best place I could have ended up. I think out of all of those schools, some of which were pretty big-named schools, the centers were not … turned out those would not have been a good space for me to be in, for one reason or the other. So, I moved to a southern state, like did not know anything about it. I did a Skype interview with them and thought the next thing was an on-campus interview, and they were like, “oh no I think we’re gonna make a decision after this.” And I was like, “what in the fuck?” I had never been to a southern state before and they made me the offer and I said “yes” without coming down here, which I’d never do again just to be clear. It worked out but I would never do that again. But I was like, I am so wanting to get into doing this work, and realistically the people who were involved in the search committee were so like, we want you to be here, we are so invested in the center. It felt like a lot of things were already set up and it did

not feel like a situation that I would be stepping into that was gonna be a lot of resistance and a lot of push back. It seemed like everyone was very, very excited.

The irony of Kathleen's story comes from the juxtaposition of the excitement from the time they were hired into the position to their current southern states' political affairs. Kathleen was living and working in a state that is openly attacking DEI professionals. Most recently, the state disbanded centers like the one that Kathleen founded and built at their institution. I spoke with Kathleen as they tried to process this information and understand what it meant for their center, the queer student population, and for them personally as they continued to try to do DEI work in a state that has banned it.

SB [Senate Bill] ##, OK, yeah. Yeah. So southern state, there was multiple kinds of legislations being put forward and Senate Bill ##. In the last couple of months and there was like a number of things that were like going to go in and came out and put in. So essentially, the bill says that public universities in southern state are not allowed to have diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or programming. It is supposed to exclude student organizations and programs, but it's also very vague and not easy to determine how to go about not having those things because there's also things like you know, we are a Hispanic serving institution. So, like there are programs and things that need to be able to support those students and it's how would you get around doing that? Because not all of those things are going to be academic and also having this school have so many Latinx students at it, but having … very, very diminished support systems is not going to lead to them thriving or being successful. So, we have been waiting to hear for the last couple of months without any information about what is going to happen, as are other institutions in southern state.

So, there had been, I think kind of the hope or thought floating around from some of the higher ups that perhaps even if our division got dissolved, so my office is under the division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Access, and that division is the Pride Alliance, the Multicultural Center, the Office of Diversity Inclusion, which is like faculty staff facing side. They do a lot of like training series, and they do our equity and diversity conference and then the other offices, CEO [chief executive officer] and Title IX and then there's like a central division staff as well. So even if that division got dissolved, the hope was that maybe the multicultural center and the Pride Center would move to student affairs intact like we would keep our same names, you know, do all the same things.

Then last week in the morning on Monday we got a meeting put on our calendar for the afternoon and met with the resident, the VP [vice president] for student affairs and the head of HR [human resources] to let us know that general counsel had let them know that that was not going to be a possibility legally; we could not stay intact no matter where we were. So, we were notified that the multicultural center and the Pride Alliance are being moved to student affairs but that we will have to do some sort of restructure reorganization. Our office will not be able to keep its name. We'll have to change the mission statement our job titles won't stay the same. We won't know what that looks like so right now we are moving over to student affairs as of Sunday and we had a meeting yesterday with the VP for student affairs to find out who our new supervisor is going to be.

The impact of this cannot be overstated enough and informs Kathleen's experience as a DEI practitioner. Kathleen still continued with the interview and wanted to share their own experiences with serving students from their center. I followed up with Kathleen and asked in

light of all they are going through, how they created boundaries, what was the process of creating space and advocacy for themselves like and how it might look different when students are involved.

> Yeah, I mean, so when I first came here, I mean, one, this was like similar but different work than I had been doing and so like learning that was a thing plus, you know, like my own trauma and shit, I was very much a people pleaser. I'm like, "what is a boundary?" I've never heard of that before. And so was just like I am here at the disposal of students all the time and would—I mean, you know, we're doing weekend programming, we're doing evening programming, like that's a thing anyway, so like physical time that is not at work is like not that much, anyway, comparatively to someone else who might just work 40 hours and go home and have nothing to think about.
>
> But when, like I'm having a student who, you know they're active or passive suicide ideation. We're on the phone with the counselor. They've been cleared to go home for the night. But like, I'm still worrying about that, right. Where, like, I don't know a student that's can't find housing or a student that you know has come out to their parents and now they've been cut off and they don't know how they're going to stay in school are not things that I'm like, "it's 5:00, good luck, I'm going to see you Monday morning."
>
> I think it would be—I don't think that someone would be good at doing this job if they can turn off their emotion and never think about that. Now do I think that you need a balance of those things? Absolutely. But it's not going to be someone who is going to just be like, okay, bye, I'm not going to think about this.

> And really, I think you know the way that we get into this compassion fatigue is often because the people who are going to be the best at these jobs understand what people need, understand why they need it, what the impact is going to be better than other people who have not had those experiences and don't have that lens. But it's just like it just feels inescapable. You know that it's a kind of foregone conclusion for folks who are doing this work.

Narrative Themes

In this section, I move from the intimate personal narrative portraits of each individual research participant to overarching narratives found woven through all of their stories. I illustrate each of these narrative themes with quotes from the DEI practitioners. Themes in the areas of (a) compassion fatigue, (b) identity-based, (c) physical and mental health impacts, and (d) hope as a form of resilience are forwarded.

Compassion Fatigue Exists for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners

All participants were given the definition of compassion fatigue as the attrition of one's ability to help or restore oneself and/or others due to the short-term or long-term impact of helping individuals who have experienced trauma. They were then asked to describe whether they think they experience compassion fatigue in their job and if they could provide a story or example to illustrate how compassion fatigue is present in their work.

Audre pointed out that due to the very nature of the position in DEI work; her job is always ongoing. Experiences of compassion fatigue were not just present in what folks would consider typical working hours.

> I work harder now than I have ever worked in my life. And technically, I do less work. Technically, I am less busy, but it's because I am never off. I can experience compassion

> fatigue shopping at King Soopers for my job. And it could be a Saturday and I could not be at work, and I could be doing shopping for the center on a Saturday in my free time and I could still experience secondary trauma. And I'm still working on a Saturday. You know what I'm saying? Like those things still contribute even when I'm not in that building and it's constant.
>
> It takes me probably 3 or 4 days to actively disconnect my brain from my email, so like I stay on my calendar time, I stay on my e-mail inbox constantly, and if I go on vacation, it takes me probably three to 4 days to actually break the habit of thinking about my time in that way. And I've never gotten that far because I haven't had 3 to 4 days where I was uninterrupted.

Audre further described the difficulty of experiencing compassion fatigue and professional burnout specifically for DEI professionals especially when any personal issues arise. Audre had a situation like this happen in the spring of 2023 when they fractured their foot and were unable to be on campus. They described the following example to illustrate their work and compassion fatigue,

> So, I'm at home where my Wi-Fi is basically two tin cans and a pigeon, and I can't get out of my house. I cannot go to work. I'm a staff of one and my foot is fractured. So, I'm having to do things on my phone or on Zoom and hope that it's enough Wi-Fi and that I'm verbally explaining it well enough that my, you know, 20-year-old student can execute this thing for me because I can't go. I'm missing all of these meetings. Then on top of that my grad assistant decided to just release all professionalism so that was a separate issue, right? But there were probably three weeks in there where I was like, I am going to have to fucking quit this job. Like I cannot do this anymore because what I

> realized was if anything happens to me, everything stops. I am a single point of failure. And that is not only inefficient as an organization, it is risky for people, like that is a risky people process, having single point of failure … and I remember sitting in that meeting and being like, Fuck this shit. I don't even like Martin Luther King. I don't care about providing Black Heritage Month programming to a 90% non-Black campus. I do not care anymore. My foot hurts. I'm tired. Everybody in the world is pissing me off. It's snowing every single day I make $63,000 a year. Fuck you and this job.
>
> And I obviously didn't do that, but it was a low point, and it took me—I'm not exaggerating—it took me until damn near May to recover from those 3 weeks, and that was after four people quit. We had to scale down the trauma; I lost like 15 pounds. Like the trauma alone. Just to, just to get back to a point where it was like, okay, now I'm at regular stress levels.

When Dee Dee was interviewed about their own experiences of compassion fatigue, she brought up the unique practice of having to understand the amount of compassion fatigue she is experiencing so she can regulate how she interacts with the students she serves.

> I go through waves almost every year where I have to constantly check in and see where I am and my level of capability to be able to tap into the doing what I need to do because I think I am—knowing how much students are so fearful of disappointing me—I have to be very conscientious of how I show up at the center and also the level of attention and care that I can offer. And so, if I can't do that and I'm just checking in just to earn a paycheck, I think that's a very dangerous place to be.
>
> And simultaneously, though, is the realization that there's such a constant demand for me as a person and not as an employee, I think it's hard to be able to balance those

things like there just simply isn't a life work balance in that sense. And that's really hard to convey to people in society, just knowing how much of our helping skills are just simply being a human in front of another human. And also, the skills that come from being able to apply a level of empathy, and empathy just isn't necessarily my strong suit. I think one of the things I have to be really conscientious of in terms of my energy levels is that I'm a logical person. And so, when I am running on the function of just being "quote, unquote" an employee that I become incredibly logical and then I have to understand things, or that I'm too dependent on understanding it from a systemic level or theorizing, because I think that's my backup place, which I think is interesting because I think it's contradictory to most people who work in higher education [laughs]. But like when you're working with a human and you're trying to help them, it just is not a good de facto level. I can do a lot of harm, so I think that's the thing that I have to be incredibly patient with the process and so yeah.

Damarus reflected on how compassion fatigue deeply influenced her own ability to care for herself and how her work constantly places her in a position to decide to choose a student in need versus what it means to take care of herself.

It rarely impacts my ability to help other people, but it often interferes with my ability to support and take care of myself. I think that is often a conscious choice that I'm making and it's one because I have this thought process of the consequence if I'm not able to support that student are [voice cracks with emotion] more dire and more significant than the consequence of not being able to hold myself right.

I got COVID [coronavirus disease] last year, and there were some really urgent meetings that I was scheduled for, and I was like, if I don't go to these, if we reschedule

> these again, it's going to be another fucking month until we can move these things along, and it's just going to be more work for me later and people can't experience these things [oppressive systems] for another month. So. I just go. I just drug myself up and go.

Soleil expressed that they did experience compassion fatigue and struggled with their own experiences of unrealistic expectations from their institution as a DEI practitioner around having the proper resources and support to handle compassion fatigue.

> I feel like there's this invisible expectation once you start working in DEI that you have to always be on your 100% A-game and not need resources. That you have your shit together enough that you don't need to talk to someone. So, there is this expectation that you are already connected with the therapist, or if you're not, then you're doing great because you have a great support system or you need to build your support system. So obviously like a lot of these things. Influence those pieces. But I personally don't feel like there are a lot of resources for admin or professional staff members on campus, and something that I've been really advocating for is a counselor position specifically for our professional staff members within our offices because there are just some things that like as professional staff members, we hear from our students, like secondary trauma and it's freaking real. We take that stuff home.

Camille spoke to how she must manage both how others may perceive her identities and how she handles compassion fatigue simultaneously in order to be able to do her work effectively.

> If I'm thinking about myself, I'm thinking about okay well how is my Blackness and womanhood showing up? Because people are going to engage with me in a certain way

and have certain expectations and have critiques, and that's just another thing to consider, you know.

I think the most I experienced it [compassion fatigue] for sure is the latter part of my time in housing, and then solidly as a cultural center director. I don't ever want to feel that way again. So, I have some different coping strategies. I have a great therapist. I literally can't go back to those feelings and difficulty in managing it all. So, I wonder how could I have equipped myself better to manage the compassion fatigue? Because if I'm too steeped in my students' challenges or difficulties, or other people just generally, because it's not just the students, we navigate things for colleagues as well, that means I am not doing my work well either because my energy is pouring out and going out constantly.

Uniquely Identity-Based

A unique characteristic of participants' experience of compassion fatigue was that all participants also hold the same or similar identities of the individuals who they are helping with traumatic experiences. This direct connection to see an individual's traumatic experience connected to a similar identity you hold creates a unique experience of compassion fatigue.

Damarus shared her experience with helping individuals who hold a similar identity and how those interactions impact her.

Um, honestly, it is probably one of the most complicated things I've ever done. There are days when it feels empowering. There are days when it's affirming. Affirming in the sense that meeting with students, some of whom are navigating some of the same things, the same things that I had to. So, there's this part of me that is traveling back in time to my previous self. And it's affirming to think, "Hey, you weren't making things up. There

was nothing wrong with you. You weren't, you know, wrong' and to be able to provide help for them as I see them take on similar struggles."

I think other times, if I'm super honest, I think there are times of actual frustration. Because I think that, so like I'm thinking about an example right now. I'm working with a student who was referred to me because they experienced discrimination within our larger urban city community, not on campus. The reason the person was referred to me was because people were pressuring them to make them feel like they needed to do something about being discriminated against, regardless of how that impacted them. Folks will be referred to me even if it's not something that I can particularly help them with. And so in in this particular instance, I'm smacked with the reality of like, how many limitations? How can I change an urban city to not be transphobic? I can't. I also am finding more and more violence; I think particularly as we see this continuing rise around like anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender things and initiatives and people and policies, etcetera.

Damarus was able to give a further example of how her institution made assumptions about the identities she holds and how that only contributed to a lack of support received and overall compassion fatigue for her.

I was supposed to be, for all intents and purposes, a solution for the institution based on my identities. My predecessor and I held very different identities. And so, the institution looked at me as, or I was supposed to be, this sort of fix for some of these oppressive things. So, I'm saying to the institution, I'm here—these things aren't fixed. What are [they] doing now that you know that I'm still having issues in the same way that my

> predecessor was? Do you now understand that it was never about my predecessor and that it was actually about this place?

Dee Dee explained that her identity is part of her work and, therefore, she never is really about to leave the work when she leaves her institution.

> It's constant and again I think it goes back to the lack of resources as well. We're responsible for the building, we're responsible for multiple different things and students' lives don't just end once 5:00 o'clock rolls around, and neither do we. I don't get to stop being—I get to stop being an Asian Pacific Islander Student Resource Center director, but I don't get to stop being a Native American woman.

When asked how their identity impacted their experiences of compassion fatigue, Joél spoke specifically to the exhaustion they face daily due to the overlap of identity, burnout, and exposure to secondary traumatic stress.

> I think for me when it gets most exhausting, or I feel most of the fatigue, is when I already have said things multiple times, or I have brought issues up and nothing gets done. To me, it's just so clear others were not even listening. I am asked to sit on committees and bring my voice. I also know when I'm asked to sit on these committees, it is sometimes to just check some boxes cause I [am] the Unicorn, and you want to be diverse, and now you check the box. But I do have opinions. I know that you're not gonna take my opinions seriously, though, because of who I am. This is an exhaustion of my time and resources. I think those are things that I struggle with. … We try to work with students to navigate the fucking system. I put my time and efforts with that, because that brings me joy. While I understand there's a need to have some structures in place, there are people in leadership roles that are supposed to be helping the cause of removing

unnecessary structures, but they're the ones that are upholding the status quo. I'm just like, "What the fuck?" This whole time I've been spending all my time trying to do anything to make change. When, indeed, it was all performance equity work. People are cool with that status quo and that is exhausting to realize. It's like spending all this time on all these committees and all these projects that I was a part of and all the feedback that I gave. It was all for shit. That's exhausting. Like, this is so exhausting. And I think on those days I think, "Why am I even trying?"

Camille spoke directly to the fatigue that comes with seeing someone who holds the same identity as you continue to deal with the same oppressive systems that you have.

Early on, you know, the work felt easier as a newer professional because I engaged in as fun. I just got to be present and helpful. And I don't know that it was until probably the end of my work and engagement while I was in the northeast and then transitioning to the Black Cultural Center Director role where I was like, I am taking on way too much. I think having a center dedicated to students who identify across the Black and African American diaspora is essential. I wanted students to have a better life experience than me. I wanted them to be well and thrive and not just be surviving the difficulties of life. So those years were taxing, and probably the most taxing in my career thus far. I don't ever want to feel that way again I think it would be different if I didn't hold the identities. I saw myself in many of the students, too. And so, I'd be reflecting a lot about how I really didn't want you them to experience the avoidable difficulties. So as much as I tried not to take the weight of the work home with me emotionally, I would. I don't know that I had any skill around removing myself from the experiences of the students or healthily compartmentalizing.

Kathleen discussed a unique aspect of compassion fatigue for DEI educators is how their intentions are questioned and the validity of their actions critiqued while doing their work because they hold similar identities to the individuals they are helping.

> So, it's interesting, I think, one I have gotten better at the advocacy for myself, which I did not always use to be very good at. Now advocacy for students: fuck around with a student and I'm on your ass. Okay? Like there's no like, you're not going to get away with that. But I think it has been, from the beginning, especially I think once I had changed my pronouns, cause I think at one point I was doing like a she/they situation. And was like, yeah, no, it's just they/them—became very interesting because I felt really conflicted about like not that it was holding me back, but like it felt very difficult sometimes to advocate for students and spaces where I was under the impression that people were having opinions about me doing that because it was also for advocating for myself.
>
> Like, oh you just care about that—like people were not saying these things outright, but like based on peoples' body language or their responses that they were having, you know, reading into that somewhat but also my thoughts of, it's hard for me sometimes to go into spaces where I'm okay with the things that I'm advocating for are also for me.
>
> "So, are you going to take this as seriously because you think a lot of this is because I just want this, right?" That it's not because there's a huge student need for that. So, I think even though no one like outright questioned that, that was a worry, right, that I have had. I worry about those things a lot less now, right? That's like bullshit. I don't have time to deal with that but especially in the beginning, I was a lot more concerned

> with how to go about doing that and how to get people to listen and you know, pay attention and think that those were important things aside from whatever my identities were.

Mental and Physical Health Impacts

All participants made some reference throughout their interviews to the impact that compassion fatigue has on their mental or physical health.

Camille described the very real physical impact of compassion fatigue has had on her physical health.

> A couple of times throughout my career I was hospitalized. The first time I just wasn't managing my stress well at all. I definitely wasn't well a good portion of the time and went to the hospital in my next job as a cultural center director. I realized I couldn't keep putting myself in the predicament where I'd need to be hospitalized, but I also didn't know how to turn off because literally their [Black students] lives and livelihoods hinged on somebody's support. On my support.

This physical impact came up in Damarus' interview as she expressed how compassion fatigue led her to the direct attrition of her own health.

> I think there are just instances where I'm navigating a lot of stuff at work behind the scenes and I just ignore it [physical/mental health], largely because I don't feel like I have the time, like I literally don't have it. I've been due for an eye doctor appointment since before, COVID [coronavirus disease]. I still haven't gone. I'm basically just waiting for these glasses to break.

Kathleen spoke about how compassion fatigue from their work physically impacts their body and the cost that it takes on them as an individual.

> I think maybe that the way that compassion fatigue feels like it presents itself is mostly the inability to restore myself more so than the inability to provide compassion to other folks. In this role, it is hard. Certainly, it waxes and wanes as to how much capacity that I feel like I have. … And so, usually I can recover from these situations. But I think that the way that compassion fatigue feels like it shows up for me is my inability to have compassion for myself, my mental health and my physical health. I have to get a massage once a month. I carry so much stress in, emotional stress that manifests in somatic symptoms right in my body. If I go much more than 3 to 4 weeks without getting a massage, like deep tissue, like an hour and a half, like every time that I go in there my massage therapist says, whoa, you are fucked up. She will say, it's really crunchy in here. Those are not, it's not a good adjective to hear when describing someone's muscle.

Hope—The Power of a Helper's Heart

The Helper's Heart referenced in the beginning of the chapter was best encapsulated in the theme of hope. Each participant held an incredible amount of hope in order to stay motivated and combat compassion fatigue within their work. Joél articulated this theme in their own lived experience with the following narrative.

> It's really, and this is where I get stuck, cause I used to have faith, but I don't know if it's faith now. It's really hope that things are going to get better. As I look back on my experiences. I've been relying on hope and things have worked out for me so far. I can name specific things, like even when I was going through undergrad and before DACA [deferred action for childhood arrivals], I was getting a degree that I knew I wasn't gonna be able to get a job with, but I had hope I was gonna be able to get a job. Thank God DACA passed. I was like, "I have a degree and I have a work authorization" and for me it

> was like “I’m actually gonna have all these things.” Even to this day, you know, I do have hope. I have hope around my documentation status, I had hope to get a master’s degree, I had hope that one day I would get into a Ph.D. Program, and things are happening, so I live out of hope. Hope is the thing that I rely on.

When asked what it is like to work with other individuals who hold similar identities, Audre alluded to the hope that comes with the liberation of others and the purpose that comes with that liberation for herself.

> Somebody has to do this. … I say all the time, I’m so glad that God made me, that God had me be born when I was born. I couldn’t be Black not a day earlier because everything was infinitely harder for everybody beforehand, and I am not made of that stuff. I don’t have that constitution. I just don’t. The thing is people like Harriet Tubman decided we have to be free. We have to be free. And if you’re not going to help, then I’ll do it. Because we have to be free. That means that I will assume all of the responsibility in freeing myself and you, and I will also assume all of the risk of that if somebody catches us, I’m doing the shooting. If somebody finds us, I’m doing the sneaking, like I’m doing the hiding. It’s my plan and this [DEI work] is not that, but it’s the idea somebody has to be willing to be the steward. Otherwise, it doesn’t happen, and in this particular community and this instance for these students at this time, I’m willing to be theirs… That is why I am on doctoral committees. By the end of next year, there will be four new Black doctors because of me, right? That is why I want to teach. That is why I’m an advisor. That is why I do McNair [a federal funded TRIO program designed to prepare traditionally underrepresented undergraduate students for doctoral studies]. Because I want you to be free. And the only way you can be free in America is with choices. And

> the only way you can have choices in America is with an education, and so that's the goal here.

Damarus similarly discussed her motivation to create liberation through DEI work and continuing to come back to the hope of helping others. Her narrative below best encapsulated the want to help that all participants expressed, as they tried to navigate handling compassion fatigue and their own needs.

> Like I do genuinely believe, that even though this is one of the most challenging and ridiculous things I've ever been obligated to, I'm doing a lot for a lot of people and for the future. So that's why I keep coming back, because it helps me feel like I am being effective in this deeply chaotic world and that gives me a kind of peace that helps me sleep at night.
>
> Now the real question is whether or not I will ever get to a place where I'm able to do so in a way that doesn't sacrifice my own needs and doesn't demand so much of me. I think time will tell what happens there. But I come back every day. I come in and sit down at my desk every day because I know I get to help people.

In this chapter, I forwarded the findings of this narrative inquiry first by introducing each research participant through the rich narratives of the stories they shared. I then shared the major themes from the narrative which consisted of compassion fatigue existing for DEI practitioners, that this compassion fatigue is uniquely identity-based, that there are physical and mental health impacts from compassion fatigue, and how hope acts a form of resilience.

In the Chapter V, I will discuss the implication of the research for major stake holders, considerations for the research, and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practitioners' experiences of compassion fatigue and how their own identities impacted those experiences. As a researcher and professional in the DEI field, I have spent well over a decade engaging with DEI practitioners as they do meaningful work and then become burned out and burned through as they commit themselves to the profession. The following research questions guided the study in order to understand better why this was occurring.

Q1 What are the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with compassion fatigue?

Q2 How do diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners' identities influence their interpretations and experiences of compassion fatigue?

Participants were selected from DEI practitioners at predominately White public institutions. Seven participants were interviewed to create 14 hours of narrative data collectively. Findings from the data generated the following themes.

- Compassion fatigue Exists for DEI Practitioners.
- Compassion fatigue that is uniquely identity-based.
- Mental and physical health impacts.
- Hope (The power of the Helper's Heart).

Implications for Practice

Many higher education institutions center the importance of DEI work as part of their strategic missions (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Although DEI work has become more of a stated value within higher education over the past 30 years, resources to support that work have traditionally been provided as a reactive practice to student advocacy as opposed to an institutional commitment to equity (Harris & Patton, 2017; Marine, 2011; L. D. Patton, 2010). It is also common for institutions to confuse equality and equity initiatives, which can inhibit robust conversations about deconstructing systems of power. These factors influence the key stakeholders to whom this research is directed, including university presidents, higher education graduate programs, and DEI practitioners.

University Presidents

The research illustrates that DEI practitioners on predominately White campuses are physically and mentally impacted by compassion fatigue and that this impact is uniquely acute due to its identity-based nature. University presidents who are committed to socially just institutions and the development of constituents and alumni who work towards social justice have a responsibility to DEI practitioners to help mitigate the impact of compassion fatigue within their work and equally important, validate their experiences.

There are two distinct areas university presidents can immediately evaluate to better equip their institutions' DEI practitioners to combat compassion fatigue. The first is providing these practitioners access to mental health providers and resources to support mental health. As illustrated in the research, DEI practitioners are constantly exposed to and helping others cope with secondary traumatic stress due to oppressive systems. Providing DEI practitioners with resources for mental health care beyond their own private insurance is critical to supporting the

mental health and retention of DEI practitioners. As Soleil pointed out in their interview, there is an assumption that access to mental health care is a given for DEI professionals. That assumption is a form of White supremacy because it assumes that there are resources that can adequately meet the needs of all individuals. This was false for almost all participants. Participants discussed not only working on predominately White campuses but also living in predominately White communities. These communities often do not have the resources around mental health to serve communities of color or other marginalized communities. The American Psychological Association (2022) reported that as of 2021, 80.85% of the psychological workforce identified as White. The research data points to an area of future research: in what ways, as a University President, are you ensuring that mental health resources are not only available but culturally relevant and encouraged to DEI practitioners on your campus?

The DEI practitioners find themselves in what Audre described as “perpetually exhausting” conditions daily. These conditions are created when institutions place the responsibility and success of an entire community on the shoulders of one or two individuals. This institutional model is not a commitment to equity but a performative behavior that hurts DEI practitioners and marginalized student populations. A lack of appropriate financial and human resources for marginalized populations coupled with a campus that does not have a commitment to equity creates perfect conditions for compassion fatigue for DEI practitioners. These realities, coupled with budget-conscious environments, can make investments in DEI work become less of a priority for institutions. This lack of investment feeds the cycle of burning out and burning through DEI professionals who are experiencing identity-based secondary traumatic stress and professional burnout, which results in compassion fatigue. The cycle completes itself when DEI professionals leave institutions. Upon their departure, the DEI

professional is often blamed for their lack of investment or their inability to keep up with the pace of the work. Participants experiences show that university presidents may not consider how they uphold the cycle that leads to that professional leaving. By better understanding this cycle and the experiences of DEI professionals with compassion fatigue, university presidents should be equipped to make strategic investments in DEI professionals.

As the leaders of their institutions, presidents are uniquely privileged in directing university focus and resources. Many participants in the research brought up the fact that they did not think their institution fully understood their jobs or the amount of work that was asked of them. Institutions committed to DEI work will create opportunities for all faculty and staff to continue their own professional DEI development so DEI practitioners are not seen as the singular point of contact or problem solver for inequitable systems on campus.

Higher Education and Student Affairs Graduate Programs

Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership (HESAL) programs are still predominately the graduate degree that DEI professionals obtain prior to entering the field (LD Ortis, personal communication, October 6, 2021). Leadership of these programs must consider how to best equip their students as the professionals of the future. As Camille stated in the research, when referring to graduate programs,

> We're never taught in our formal education about the things that are practical and that matter for us to really thrive… none of the practical things, right? I think it would be helpful, especially for folks in student affairs and in DEI work, it's like, how do you navigate the institution so you can continue to be passionate and committed to the work? Otherwise, this is why people burn out and why people leave the field.

Lynch and Glass (2019) stated for current administrators "It is estimated that over half of college student affairs practitioners support students through traumatic life events on at least a monthly basis" (p. 2). This research compels a professional and ethical obligation from HESAL programs and national organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American College Personnel Association to create systems of support and be forward thinking in the experiences of compassion fatigue in HESAL students as well as current professionals. Without at least exposure and awareness of the concept of compassion fatigue and why DEI and student affairs professionals may be impacted, we will continue to see future professionals blaming themselves for burning out of a field that was designed to incinerate them. The standard one multicultural competency class required by most HESAL programs is an insufficient approach to prepare future professionals to go into DEI work or to fully teach student affairs professionals how to support their DEI colleagues through equity work. Leadership in HESAL graduate programs should implement long-term strategies for updating and incorporating practices out of the counseling and medical fields to create ongoing commitments to DEI work as well as self-compassion and self-care to build areas of resilience for professionals both personally and organizationally throughout the entire graduate curriculum.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners

Understanding when and how compassion fatigue has an impact is one way to mitigate its effects. By better recognizing compassion fatigue and how it may be influencing you as a person and practitioner, you can seek assistance or follow your own action plan to mitigate its impact. For each individual, this process will look different. All participants expressed that they did this work because it was a calling, and all had different ways to compassionately care for themselves in order to maintain resilience in the face of trauma. Being prepared for this type of experience

instead of internalizing it as a personal failure can help practitioners to work against the burnout cycle.

Major points for this section fit the phrase easier said than done—say no, find compassion for yourself, and seek community. Saying no is hard, and ideally, those who supervise DEI practitioners will actively work with them on how to say no in order to create healthy limits. Saying no to extra requests is easy to suggest, but in all likelihood, people in caring professions will never fully become comfortable with this. As Kathleen pointed out earlier,

> I think you know the way that we get into this compassion fatigue is often because the people who are going to be the best at these jobs understand what people need, understand why they need it, what the impact is going to be better than other people who have not had those experiences and don't have that lens. But it's just like it just feels inescapable. You know that it's a kind of foregone conclusion for folks who are doing this work.

In order for DEI practitioners to not become the foregone conclusion, we must remember that self-sacrifice in this way is another form of White supremacy that should be challenged. As practitioners who will experience daily secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, the words of Audre Lorde (1988) best sum up the advice and implications for DEI practitioners themselves, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 130).

Conclusions

I end this dissertation with considerations, limitations, and areas for future research. As a researcher whose positionality has been working within DEI in higher education for over a

decade, my professional networks are expansive. I have had the privilege of working at three different higher education institutions doing DEI work and have connections to professionals from regional and national networks. An important consideration for this research is seen in the struggle to obtain participants. When beginning this research, I made a false assumption that finding participants to interview would be relatively easy. When I began reaching out for the interview process, I found many of the colleagues who started in the profession with me had made the decision to leave the field. Although the findings of this research touch on how compassion fatigue impacts DEI professionals, I strongly believe further research needs to be completed to understand the holistic picture of why DEI professionals choose to leave the field and how compassion fatigue might play a role in the poor retention of DEI practitioners.

It is important to consider that my ability to receive authentic and vulnerable narratives as a researcher was enhanced by my previous relationships with my participants. Although this provided strong data sets, it also put me, as the researcher, in an increased position to support and comfort participants as they shared their narratives. This identity-based support while going through the interview process mirrored the compassion fatigue that was expressed by participants themselves. Future researchers who are also a part of the profession should consider how they might cope with these experiences of compassion fatigue through the research process.

Another area of further research that was beyond the scope of this study was the inherent gendered experiences of individuals doing DEI work and experiencing compassion fatigue. Some participants of differing gender identities remarked on how they were placed in a mother role as a DEI practitioner by both the students themselves as well as the institution. This caricature of the mother and, in particular, the woman of color as a caregiver to all feeds into White supremacy with racist stereotyping. Individuals across gender identities expressed

struggling with this experience and trying to meet unspoken expectations of students and the institution. This caricature can also be used as a tool of White supremacy to delegitimize practitioners by placing specific roles and expectations on them. When practitioners fail to meet these racist stereotypes, we blame them for not meeting expectations. Further research into how the intersection of gender and race specifically impact DEI practitioners' experiences of their institutions and compassion fatigue are warranted.

This research highlights the lived experiences and narratives of DEI practitioners. These practitioners are oftentimes the only individuals supporting entire communities on their respective campuses. The DEI professionals continue to serve as a driving influence for social change in leaders and future leaders within higher education. Arguably, the continued success of these professionals is dependent upon our understanding of how they experience their positions and in what ways we use this research to better equip them and ourselves to make social change. From the personal journal of Stephen Lovewell (August 11, 2023) as they completed this research,

> We do this because we want something better for folks who are like us. We want their experiences to be better, their roads to be a bit easier. We do this because someone did it for us. Maybe not in the formal capacity of a DEI practitioner, but in a found Family, and that made all the difference in the world. It gave us Hope …and so we try to give that Hope back to others through our service—through our Heart.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date:	02/14/2023
Principal Investigator:	Stephen Loveless
Committee Action:	**IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
Action Date:	02/14/2023
Protocol Number:	2302048159
Protocol Title:	Compassion Fatigue Among University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners
Expiration Date:	

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) (703) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

Category 3 (2018): BENIGN BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION FROM ADULT SUBJECTS through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (A) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (B) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement,

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Institutional Review Board

or reputation; or (C) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7). For the purpose of this provision, benign behavioral interventions are brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects, and the investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing. Provided all such criteria are met, examples of such benign behavioral interventions would include having the subjects play an online game, having them solve puzzles under various noise conditions, or having them decide how to allocate a nominal amount of received cash between themselves and someone else. If the research involves deceiving the subjects regarding the nature or purposes of the research, this exemption is not applicable unless the subject authorizes the deception through a prospective agreement to participate in such research.

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - http://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Recruitment Script

Greetings,

My name is Stephen Loveless. I am conducting a research study on the experience of compassion fatigue in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practitioners. I am using the definition of compassion fatigue which is the attrition of one's ability to help or restore themselves and others due to the short term or long-term impact of helping individuals who have experienced trauma. I am writing/speaking to you because I would appreciate the opportunity to sit down and talk with you about your personal experiences with compassion fatigue as a DEI practitioner. Participation is completely voluntary, and should you choose to participate, your identity including institution will be kept confidential in any reports or presentations.

In order to participate in the study, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Be working in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at an institution of higher education.
2. Be willing to discuss your experiences of your own identity and if compassion fatigue resonates with your experience.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences with me or if you have any further questions, please email me at sloveless@gmail.com

Thank you for your time!

Note:
The above recruitment script may be shortened to use in social media or verbally in a phone call.

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Consent Form

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Participant Interview Consent Form

Researcher: Stephen Loveless sloveless2012@gmail.com
Professor: Maria Lahman, PhD, Applied Statistics and Research Methods, Maria.Lahman@unco.edu
Phone: 970-351-1603
By signing this form, you are indicating the following.

You are choosing to volunteer to participate in the qualitative research study conducted by Stephen Loveless at the University of Northern Colorado. You understand that the goal of the study is to learn more about the experiences of compassion fatigue had by diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners. Compassion fatigue is the attrition of one's ability to help or restore themselves and others due to the short term or long-term impact of helping individuals who have experienced trauma.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You understand that you will receive a $50 gift card as a thank you for your participation. You may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one at your institution will be told.

You understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, you feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, you have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

Participation involves being interviewed by the researcher from University of Northern Colorado. The interview will last between 60 to 90 minutes. A follow up interview of 30 minutes to check transcripts and clarification may also be scheduled. Notes may be written during the interview. A digital recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue transcript will be made. You understand that the researcher will have sole access to the audio files which will be kept on a password protected computer, and that the audio recordings will be destroyed after the transcription process is completed. If you don't want to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in the study.

You understand that the researcher will not identify you by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview. While confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, we will use the best practices available to secure your confidentiality in this study.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, IRB Administrator, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant Signature	Participant Printed Name	Date

Interviewer Signature	Interviewer Printed Name	Date

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

A Qualtrics survey with demographic questions will be sent prior to the first interview. All questions are optional for participants to complete.

Pronouns:
Class/Socio-economic Status:
Disability Identity:
Ethnicity:
Gender Identity:
National Origin:
Race:
Religion/Spirituality/Worldview:
Sexual Identity:
Romantic Identity:
Other Salient Identities:

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for volunteering to share your experience of compassion fatigue with me. My research study on this subject is important because the negative emotions associated with this phenomenon can be debilitating. How to support individuals who have the unique work experience of educating other on the identities they hold themselves is important. My study seeks to share these experiences so that resources and support can be directed appropriately to higher education professionals.

Pseudonym

- Is there a specific name you would like me to use when sharing your story?

Basics/Motivation

- Please tell the story of what brought you to work in diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Experience/Identity

- Can you tell me what it's like supporting individuals who hold your same identity?
- Tell me a story when it was difficult to educate individuals who do not hold your identity?
- Can you tell me a story when helping someone who holds your same identity directly impacted you?

Compassion Fatigue

- Compassion fatigue can be defined as the attrition of one's ability to help or restore themselves and others due to the short term or long-term impact of helping individuals who have experienced trauma. What are your reactions/thoughts to this definition?
- Can you tell me about a time when having enough resources to do your work was crucial?
- How often, if ever, do you think about or feel preoccupied by work related issues outside of work?
- How often, if ever, do you practice avoidance to not think about or consider issues related to work?
- How do you set boundaries for yourself? Can you think of a time when this was difficult?

Gender/Sexuality

- Can you tell me a story of how your gender identity or sexuality intersected with an experience of compassion fatigue?
- Have you ever discussed this issue with anyone else? If so, who?

Community

- Have you found others in your field who you believe have also felt compassion fatigue?

Self-Care

- How do you take care of yourself?
- How does your identity influence how you think about self-care?
- How does your work influence how you think about self-care?
- Can you tell me story about what your best self-care looks like?

Motives for continuing.

- What keeps you motivated?
- What advice would you give to other DEI professionals?
- Why did you choose to participate in this study?
- What resource do you need to be successful?