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Exposing the Pervasive Culture of Whiteness at Predominantly White Institutions: A Narrative Analysis of White Deans of Students' Understanding and Role in Responses to Campus Racial Incidents

Jennifer Helen Reid

EXPOSING THE PERVASIVE CULTURE OF WHITENESS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF WHITE DEANS OF STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING AND ROLE IN RESPONSES TO CAMPUS RACIAL INCIDENTS

A Dissertation Presented

by

JENNIFER H. REID

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ABSTRACT

EXPOSING THE PERVASIVE CULTURE OF WHITENESS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF WHITE DEANS OF STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING AND ROLE IN RESPONSES TO CAMPUS RACIAL INCIDENTS

August 2024

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Deeply embedded in U.S. higher education institutions is a culture of whiteness that benefits white students, staff, faculty, and administrators through racist policies, structures, and cultural norms designed to uphold whiteness. This culture not only minimizes the presence of racism, but also is pervasive on college campuses, where administrators often fail to recognize blatant racism and treat ongoing campus racial incidents as isolated events. Despite the frequency of racial incidents, campus responses are typically ineffective, failing to address the underlying institutional practices that reinforce white supremacy and further harm those affected. This study explored the experiences of white deans of students at predominantly white campuses, focusing on their understanding of whiteness and its

influence on their responses to campus racial incidents, revealing their investment in whiteness. Utilizing a qualitative narrative research approach with 11 white deans of students, this study effectively captured and conveyed their individual stories and professional experiences, uncovering key findings. The deans often relied heavily on their professional diversity, equity, and inclusion counterparts, deferring to them in handling racial incidents. Additionally, the participants displayed reluctance in describing racial incidents, raising concerns about communication and transparency in addressing racist incidents. The results also highlighted the deans' recognition of the symbolic significance of power and decision-making spaces within higher education, typically occupied by white administrators. However, the deans overlooked deeper, systemic manifestations of racism within their institutions and viewed themselves as powerless to address the daily struggles faced by those directly experiencing racism. Fundamentally, the white deans in this study exemplified the racial challenges present in U.S. higher education. This study offers important implications for white deans of students and other senior white leaders, who play influential roles within educational institutions and possess significant power to shape policies and practices. These leaders must recognize how institutional processes, often designed to cater to the needs of white students, have contributed to creating a hostile environment for BIPOC students. The findings collectively provide a valuable understanding to guide the future efforts of white deans and senior leaders at predominantly white colleges and universities in improving racialized campus cultures.

DEDICATION

To the countless BIPOC individuals who have endured neglect and abuse within predominantly white oppressive systems, and to the Activists of Color who have dedicated their lives to challenging these systems, I want you to know that I conducted this study to work alongside you in disrupting these systems, ever acknowledging my privilege to do so.

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INTRODUCTION

Racial incidents are on the rise at U.S. colleges and universities, where hate, violence, and bullying are increasingly emulated on campuses, having serious injurious impacts on Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color[1] (BIPOC) students (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Further, the national public consciousness has been raised by ongoing police brutality and the fatal shootings of Black Americans by police officers at much higher rates than any other race or ethnicity (DeGue et al., 2021). Serious racialized incidents are also increasingly prevalent at historically and predominantly white institutions, where white[2] people account for 50% or more of student enrollment (Garcia et al., 2011; Garibay et al., 2020). Though campus leaders have asserted that race relations on campus are generally

[1]In this dissertation, I use the term "BIPOC" (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) intentionally to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups and to demonstrate solidarity with communities of color while acknowledging that People of Color face varying types of discrimination and prejudice. Additionally, I use the term BIPOC to emphasize the systemic racism that continues to oppress, invalidate, and deeply affect the lives of Black and Indigenous people.

[2] Current guidance from the American Psychological Association states that "racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized. Therefore, [writers should] use 'Black' and 'White' instead of 'black' and 'white'" (APA, 2020, p. 142). Although I adhere to APA stylistic guidelines in all other areas of this dissertation, my choice to not capitalize "white" aligns with this study's commitment to interrogating the pervasive culture of whiteness in American higher education. In addition to "Black," the term "BIPOC" is capitalized in this study, which sought to both honor the histories and identities of Black people and reject the dominant white culture that has historically oppressed them along with Indigenous people and other People of Color.

positive (Jaschik, 2017), responses from white administrators to campus racial incidents are exceptionally ineffective (Burke Galloway, 2020; Davis & Harris, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Vega, 2021). Specifically, campus responses to campus racial incidents fall short because they prioritize the symbolic over substantive change and fail to address the systemic issues at the heart of racial injustice. Racial incidents on American college campuses have severe consequences for BIPOC students, happen with alarming frequency, and require urgent attention by higher education researchers and practitioners.

Contrary to idealized images in college viewbooks, racial incidents are highly prevalent on U.S. campuses. For instance, in 2020 alone, 571 hate crimes were documented at postsecondary institutions across the U.S., as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023). These incidents encompassed a range of offenses, including aggravated assault, vandalism, and racially-themed parties and other celebratory gatherings (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). Race was found to be the motivating factor in more than half of these on-campus hate crimes. As per the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2023), racial incidents, not classified as hate crimes, also occur alarmingly frequently on American college campuses. Since 2019, the journal's website has documented over 100 such incidents, underscoring a widespread issue within higher education institutions. For example, during the fall of 2023, the website reported multiple racial incidents, including spectators shouting racial slurs at a men’s basketball game at historically Black Norfolk State University, racial slurs being painted on the residence of the president of the University of California in Berkeley, and, in 2022, a racial slur directed at Black students was discovered on the window of a residence hall common area at Worcester State University in Massachusetts. At historically and predominantly white institutions, racialized incidents are

on the rise and institutional leaders are often more concerned with repairing the institution's public image than addressing the systemic nature of racism (Briscoe, 2022; Cole & Harper, 2017).

Garibay et al. (2020) defined campus racial incidents as "problematic and derogatory actions and behaviors that promote negative stereotypes and convey negative messages to marginalized groups" (p. 8). Yet, other forms of racism occur regularly, exemplified by disturbingly common incidences of racial microaggressions on U.S. college and university campuses, but their underreporting poses significant obstacles to measuring their universality and impact (Vega, 2021). Despite the seriousness of these racial conflicts, including microaggressions, Vega (2021) found that higher education administrators frequently reduce them to "isolated incidents that are disconnected from the aspects of campus culture and climate" (p.146), implying that campus racial incidents are only studied when they "manifest to public eruptions" (p.150). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that racial incidents and tensions are more common at historically and predominantly white institutions (Eschmann, 2020), where white individuals exhibit "powerful silences around race" (Flintoff et al., 2015, p. 20) and demonstrate "white ignorance," which exempts them from accountability for racist policies and behaviors (Matias & Boucher, 2023).

A culture that minimizes racism is ubiquitous on American college campuses where administrators are frequently blind to blatant racism and view campus racial incidents as isolated incidents resulting from ignorance (Vega, 2021). Vega (2021) found that white administrators frequently perceived racial diversity initiatives as indications of past racial conflict on college campuses and believed that racial conflict is "not as prevalent or severe—currently" (p. 150). This perception aligns with Harper and Hurtado's (2007) consciousness-

powerlessness theory, which suggests that white administrators often perceive themselves as serving the interests of both their organization and their students. However, given that racial conflicts primarily impact students, this undermines administrators' capacity to effectively handle these issues as representatives of the institution. Consequently, campus administrators fail to recognize the inadequacy of their responses and demonstrate a lack of urgency in addressing them (Davis & Harris, 2016).

The prevalence of reported, underreported, and unreported hate crimes and campus racial incidents highlight overt and covert racial hostilities on U.S. college campuses. While research on the impacts of race and racism on students who are the victims of campus racial incidents has increased, few studies have examined campus responses to these incidents (Johnson et al., 2022; Sue et al., 2009). Furthermore, little research has focused on responses to campus racial incidents at historically and predominantly white institutions and the specific role white campus administrators have in those responses (Garibay et al., 2020). Nevertheless, current practices reveal that white campus administrators' responses to such incidents are generally ineffective, perpetuate racist campus climates, and reinforce the culture of whiteness and white supremacy (Briscoe et al., 2022; Matias & Newlove, 2017).

Historically, pervasive whiteness in the U.S. has profoundly influenced all facets of society, including laws, politics, education, and economic systems. This culture of whiteness also permeates U.S. higher education institutions, where white students, staff, faculty, and administrators have benefited from racist policies, structures, and cultural norms designed to uphold whiteness. Consequently, whiteness remains a central issue within American education, though it has received insufficient attention in scholarly discourse, particularly regarding responses to racial incidents and administrators' roles in challenging the culture of

whiteness. Researchers have found that white campus administrators exacerbate racist campus climates by perpetuating hegemonic ideologies through their ineffective and reactive responses to racial incidents (Dowd et al., 2015; Espinosa & Mitchell, 2020; Museus et al., 2015). Overall, responses to campus racial incidents fall short because they prioritize appearances over substantive change and fail to address the systemic issues at the heart of racial injustice. Even when initial responses seem promising, the lack of sustained action and follow-through undermines their effectiveness and perpetuates injustice (Davis & Harris, 2016).

Problem Statement

Despite the commonness of campus racial incidents, responses often adhere to an ineffective pattern: white campus administrators condemn the acts, offer verbal reassurances, anticipate negative press, and then rely on superficial pledges of change, such as forums and trainings, without addressing the underlying institutional practices reinforcing white supremacy (Garibay et al., 2020). This cycle rarely leads to sustained commitment to addressing the root causes of the racialized campus climate exacerbating harm to those affected (Davis & Harris, 2016; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2012). Consequently, this study centered on white higher education administrators, comprising approximately 83% of executive positions in both private and public postsecondary institutions in the U.S. The investigation particularly targeted white administrators holding the position of "dean of students," tasked with managing student life and conduct. Deans of students possess formal and informal decision-making authority in many aspects of American higher education, including responding to campus racial incidents. Yet, their

inadequate responses to campus racial incidents within the culture of whiteness has largely failed to address systemic racism on college campuses (Cole & Harper, 2017).

Moreover, despite growing emphasis on campus diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and anti-racism policies, white administrators often struggle to adequately confront racial bias, discrimination, and instances of violence. This inadequacy results in negative outcomes, including increased tension, a lack of trust between students and administrators, and further marginalization of BIPOC students (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). Additionally, research indicates that white campus administrators, particularly deans of students, also benefit professionally, often exploiting under the guise of altruism their purported antiracist stances while actually benefitting from systems of pervasive white hegemony (Lapayese et al., 2014, p. 11). Research on organizational conflict also reveals that white campus administrators undermine other groups, especially nonwhite racial groups, to maintain their own power, privilege, resources, and positive self-image (Vega, 2021). This underscores the need to explore how both individual and structural epistemologies of ignorance are upheld by white campus administrators, perpetuating ignorance within systems, whether due to a limited understanding or a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the culture of whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017; Mills, 1997).

Examining white administrators' responses to campus racial incidents is also crucial for understanding their comprehension of the social construction of race and whiteness, particularly in American higher education, where racism is inescapable (Coates, 2013). However, whiteness is not just about individual white people. Matias and Newlove (2017) described whiteness as a concept that extends beyond race, impacting and being adopted by BIPOC people as well, reaching beyond individuals’ belief into institutional and systemic

systems. Notably, whiteness, as defined by Harris (1993), is an "ideological proposition imposed through subordination" that permeates all aspects of American life, including higher education (p. 1730). This comprehensive influence, encompassing culture, ideology, racialization, and more, centers whiteness within American higher education, highlighting the urgency of understanding its ramifications on campus racial incidents, the intricacies of race within academia, and white campus administrators' perceptions of the role they play in its maintenance (Harris, 1993; Matias et al., 2019).

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, white campus administrators benefit from the culture of whiteness (Harris, 1993) yet they often express feelings of voicelessness when faced with racial incidents on campus (Vega, 2021; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Despite their positional, societal, and informal authority, white administrators frequently experience a sense of powerlessness and apprehension, fearing being labeled "troublemakers" for highlighting instances of racism (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 19). Davis and Harris (2016) also identified a phenomenon they labeled the "powerless paradox," wherein white administrators neglect to establish sufficient policies or protocols for handling racial incidents due to a misguided belief that they have already effectively addressed such issues (p. 136). The intersection of privilege and perceived powerlessness underscores the complex dynamics within which white campus administrators operate, highlighting the need for deep reflection and proactive measures to dismantle systemic racism.

An examination of responses to racial incidents by white campus administrators necessitates a critical analysis of whether they have an awareness of the concept of whiteness, the degree to which this awareness shapes their responses to campus racial incidents, and whether they consciously or unconsciously perpetuate whiteness. College and

university administrators are uniquely positioned to foster transformation and improve campus racial climate following racial incidents (Kezar, 2008). However, as currently practiced, white administrators' responses to racial incidents are neither fast nor effective enough. This study is an important investigation into the influence of whiteness in higher education, examining the status quo for campuses that remain entrenched in racism, where racial incidents continue unabated and are met by ineffective responses, resulting in irreversible damage to BIPOC students.

Research Questions

This study addressed a primary research question:

1. How does white college administrators' understanding of whiteness influence how they respond to and make sense of campus racial incidents?

In addition, the following sub-question helped narrow the study's focus:

2. In what ways do white administrators' perceptions of the college environment, including the pervasive culture of whiteness and the campus racial climate in historically and predominantly white institutions, shape how they respond to racial incidents and reveal their potential investment in whiteness?

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated how white campus administrators perceived the pervasive culture of whiteness, their self-interest in racism's benefits, and the impact of these factors on their responses to campus racial incidents. It underscores the necessity for higher education leaders to scrutinize the role of white campus administrators in addressing such incidents and how their actions may either exacerbate or perpetuate racism. Existing literature highlights the significance of cultural, historical, and sociological dimensions of whiteness, which shape

the sense-making processes of individual white campus administrators and are intricately linked to their responses to racial incidents (Bondi, 2012; Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017; Matias & Boucher, 2023; Watt, 2007).

Without individual and substantive systemic changes, institutions risk perpetuating the oppressive cultures and policies that promote and maintain racist campus environments. This research explored the association between white campus administrators' awareness or lack thereof of their whiteness and its contributing role in their responses to campus racial incidents. Central to this inquiry was a focus on understanding how their awareness of whiteness and experiences affected their professional handling of campus racial incidents at historically and predominantly white higher education institutions in Massachusetts. This study also investigated how issues of power and privilege were addressed in white administrators' responses to campus racial incidents within racialized campus climates.

Significance of the Study

Higher education institutions and their leaders should be deeply concerned about current campus responses to racial incidents. This study is conceptually significant in that it fills key gaps in the understanding of racism, campus racial climate, responses to racial incidents, and the pervasive culture of whiteness at historically and predominantly white institutions. Racial incidents are endemic and happen with distressing frequency at colleges and universities. Slow, ineffective, and mediocre responses promote more racial incidents. Yet, there is potential for a social transformation in higher education if white campus administrators can critically examine their role in creating and maintaining racist campus environments.

This study offers insight into the specific role of whiteness in responses to campus racial incidents by white deans of students—a role that that is significant but has gained little attention in the literature. Regarding practice, this exploration informs the work of deans of students and other professional staff in student affairs divisions since these professionals are often asked to respond to campus racial incidents (Shaw Bonds & Callier, 2022). In addition, professional associations, such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), will find the results of this study relevant as they explore structural investments for antiracism n competencies.

Further, white campus administrators may garner insights from this study into how their racial awareness and privilege inform their responses to racial incidents by recognizing processes that lead administrators to dismantle structural, implicit, and explicit racism. On a personal level, white deans of students may engage in serious reflection on their investment in whiteness and the ways it elevates them and is denied to others (Matias & Boucher, 2023)—resulting potentially in a dismantlement of whiteness through their own administrative practice and changed campus policies. Indeed, administrators and other higher education leaders can change their campus cultures by acknowledging the important role that white deans of students play in ensuring that the experiences of BIPOC students are free from the injurious effects of campus racial incidents and racism. This study serves as a wake-up call for white administrators who have lingered in the "learning stages" of awareness, engaging in performative actions of antiracism. White administrators must be held accountable for dismantling the pervasive cultures of whiteness that uphold racist environments on historically and predominantly white campuses.

The results of this study are also useful to critical race theorists and those who study whiteness due to the connectedness between whiteness and responses to campus racial incidents on college campuses. Additionally, this research informs the field regarding the complexity of whiteness, whiteness as property, and the role that interest convergence has on white campus administrators. This examination is also timely, given the campus protests brought on by inadequate campus responses to racial incidents—and the violence that subsequently impacts individual faculty, students, staff, and campus communities-at-large—becoming more widespread (Jenkins & Goodman, 2015; Schmidt, 2008). Higher education institutions and, by extension, campus administrators are paramount players in increasingly important dialogues around racial justice in the U.S. This study reveals how white administrators reinforce but also have the power to dismantle racism in higher education.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I explore each literature area, outlining and describing important theories, and frameworks, as well as identifying themes and trends from relevant empirical studies. I conclude the chapter with a conceptual framework, which is informed by the literature and by the foundation outlined in Chapter 1. This literature review builds a foundation for this study's overall purpose, which was discussed in Chapter 1, and for this study's design and analysis, which will be discussed in later chapters. This review also synthesizes historical and recent scholarly literature on campus racial climate and the pervasive culture of whiteness in U.S. higher education to outline factors that contribute to campus racial incidents and to inadequate responses to those incidents. Although it is important to note that the literature has addressed the growing racial diversity of the college student population, specifically within the classroom, the literature is not as extensive in its analysis of the greater campus racial climate and its connection to campus racial incident responses by white campus administrators (Harris et al., 2017; Roska & Whitley, 2017).

White individuals hold most leadership positions in U.S. higher education, either by default or design, thus play a significant role in responding to racial incidents (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). In fact, according to the American Council on Education (2020), the majority (74%) of student affairs professionals and deans of students are white. Moreover,

white men hold most leadership positions in higher education institutions, except at historically Black institutions and some minority-serving institutions. This lack of racial diversity is a longstanding trend in the academy; consequently, many white campus administrators are unprepared to respond effectively to campus racial incidents due to their lack of awareness of whiteness and structural and explicit racism. Moreover, while some may be unaware, others may actively choose to uphold whiteness, perpetuating systemic inequities and maintaining the status quo. Many white administrators also lack the capacity to deal with the complexities of racism in their responses to incidents and the subsequent fallout, leading to racially unjust administrative practices. Their lack of preparation may be due to a low (or absent) awareness among administrators that racial tensions represent a significant problem on their respective campus until a racial incident brings it to their attention. Campus leaders' capacity to plan for and respond to racial incidents also requires an understanding of the complex historical and sociopolitical realities of race and racism on campus. Yet, scant research has explored how their responses to racial incidents are informed by their understanding of whiteness and the campus racial climate within which they operate.

Briscoe (2022), Yao et al. (2021), Rowan-Kenyon et al., (2022), and Evatt-Young and Bryson (2021) studied white student affairs professionals regarding the complexities of whiteness, antiracist leadership, and campus racial climate. However, these scholars did not give specific attention to white campus administrators' role in responding to campus racial incidents. This literature review will further illuminate the multifaceted elements that contribute to how white campus administrators make meaning of whiteness, their own racial identity, and their role in responding to campus racial incidents. The review concludes with a presentation of the conceptual framework for this study, which was established by aligning

elements from two theoretical lenses: critical race theory (CRT) and the privileged identity exploration (PIE) model.

Campus Racial Climate

Key to understanding campus racial incidents and ineffective responses to those incidents is the overall campus racial climate, including the inclusiveness of campus culture and policies, structural barriers to student access and success, and the prevalence of both overt and covert racial discrimination and bias. Cabrera (2022) contended that, overall, U.S. college and university culture is white-normed, and discrimination is often knowingly and unknowingly reinforced by white campus administrators, faculty, students, and staff. Further, hostile racialized campus climates and negative racialized interactions significantly impact BIPOC students' sense of belonging and wellness within college environments (Locks et al., 2008).

Evatt-Young and Bryson (2021) maintained that higher education institutions fall short in their pursuit of racial equity because they do not critically examine how whiteness manifests in campus policies and administrative practices, which in turn contribute to a hostile campus racial climate in which racialized incidents are becoming more common (Bauman, 2018). Further, higher education leaders have overlooked the underlying societal systems that foster a climate in which racial incidents can occur, thus supporting the existing racial paradigm of white supremacy in higher education (Gusa, 2010). The current racial structure is also supported by majority white faculty, staff, and students who uphold whiteness while ignoring and suppressing the identities and experiences of BIPOC students (Matias et al., 2019). Despite an increase in campus racial climate research, including a significant body of literature on the experiences of BIPOC students in American higher

education, few studies have examined the connections between campus racial climate, white campus administrators' responses to campus racial incidents, and whiteness (Hurtado et al., 2008; Museus et al., 2017; Pendakur et al., 2019). This highlights the need to consider the overall racial climate and "individual-level contexts where diversity dynamics play out" since "too few higher education researchers have incorporated the study of individuals" (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015, p. 130).

Campus racial climate refers to the prevailing attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations around race, ethnicity, and diversity within a college or university community (Hurtado et al., 2008). This concept acknowledges that students experience their education within distinct racial contexts shaped by external and internal structures. To characterize the factors contributing to a campus's racial climate, Hurtado et al. (1998) developed a model comprising five interconnected dimensions: historical, compositional, psychological, behavioral, and organizational. Each dimension is related to the others, and they are not mutually exclusive. The historical dimension pertains to the impact of past discriminatory practices on the present-day climate. By contrast, the compositional dimension examines the representation of individuals from diverse backgrounds among students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The psychological dimension is linked to intergroup relations and their perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict within the institutional context. The behavioral dimension pertains to the formal and informal interactions between individuals of different races. Finally, the organizational dimension highlights how institutional structures and policies perpetuate group-based privilege and oppression, leading to an unequal campus climate characterized by racialization. By applying Hurtado et al.'s (1998) dimensions of campus climate, researchers can gain insight into racialization on college campuses while

also seeing how the broader racial climate influences campus administrators in their professional practice.

Compositional diversity, which refers to the representation of different social and demographic groups, including by race and ethnicity, is also widely recognized as a critical factor in shaping and contributing to the campus racial climate at American colleges and universities (Nguyen et al., 2018). Although it is widely accepted that an increase in compositional diversity leads to a more positive racial climate, some research has suggested that this is not always the case and, in fact, may escalate racism and racial tensions (Hurtado et al., 2012). Moreover, the historical exclusion of BIPOC students from historically and predominantly white campuses has resulted in underrepresentation in numbers and systemic barriers, perpetuating power imbalances and privileges to white people that contribute to racist campus climates (Bourke, 2016). Simply counting BIPOC students without addressing these deeply entrenched issues is insufficient and reinforces exclusionary practices and racial inequities, particularly if championed by white campus administrators who view compositional diversity as an accomplishment in creating an "inclusive campus environment" (Iverson, 2012, p. 152).

Hurtado's (1992) pioneering work on campus racial climate highlights how overt racial conflicts persist within college environments and American society. Hurtado argued that such conflicts should be viewed as significant racial issues that endure within colleges and beyond, rather than as isolated incidents. The recent national movement for racial justice, ignited by the unjust killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery (to name only three), has placed necessary pressure on colleges and universities. This movement has also drawn attention to the devaluation of Black bodies, police brutality, and racial

trauma experienced by Black individuals and other People of Color in the United States (Tausen et al., 2023). Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge the severe impact of highly publicized deadly violence on Black college students who are themselves vulnerable to police violence. To dismantle racist structures on college campuses, higher education leaders—specifically white campus administrators—should be acutely aware of the ongoing and dangerous racial climate in the United States (Hurtado et al., 2015).

Student Perceptions and Impacts

Research has shown that BIPOC students' perceptions of their campus racial climate have significant negative implications for their academic success (Antonio, 2004; Cabrera, 2012; Savas, 2014). Additionally, for Black students attending historically and predominantly white institutions, the campus racial climate is often detrimental to their academic performance and sense of belonging due to their continuous experiences with overt and covert racism (Feagin, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2000). Previous studies have found that Black students regularly face racial microaggressions—subtle, nonverbal, and automatic actions meant to undermine them—which pose a constant burden for them (Morales, 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). Such actions represent a significant component of Black–white interactions, making it challenging for Black students to succeed, given their experience of multi-level racism in campus environments (i.e., individual, institutional, societal, and cultural) (Oseguera, 2010).

Scholars have also documented the harmful mental health effects of racism (Tausen et al., 2023). Race-based traumatic events, characterized by sudden and emotionally distressing experiences beyond one's control, can significantly impact the overall mental well-being of Black people (Henshaw, 2022). Smith (2014) introduced the term "racial battle fatigue" to

describe the cumulative effects of racial hostility that Black faculty and students experience at historically and predominantly white colleges and universities. Further, police brutality and lethal force in the United States are other examples of racial trauma that have substantial mental and physical consequences due to the indirect but still damaging exposure to police violence (Patton et al., 2016). Research finding have also suggested that highly publicized incidents of police brutality can cause negative health outcomes akin to those of other traumatic events, such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks, through the body's stress response (Henshaw, 2022; Patton et al., 2016). These symptoms can predict negative health outcomes like anxiety and depression, as seen in racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011). Additionally, Black students exposed to direct and indirect racial violence in American society perceive greater hostility within racial campus climates than their white peers, whose values are more likely to align with institutional values (Savas, 2014).

Institutional Racism and the Chilly Climate

Harper (2012) found that most higher education researchers examine racial differences in college access and student outcomes. However, scant literature has considered the role of institutional racism and its impact on campus racial climate. Hurtado et al. (2015) found that one of the most frequently cited reasons for this lack of consideration on behalf of institutions was a reluctance on the part of white students, faculty, and administrators to discuss race and racism. Harper and Hurtado (2007) analyzed the main themes in the existing campus racial climate research and found that “race is a four-letter word and is an avoidable topic” on most college and university campuses, indicating that race-related conversations happened infrequently (p. 16). Yet, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and others in 2020 and subsequent highly visible protests, many U.S. colleges and universities issued

statements and general letters of support for Black people, communicating shared values, solidarity, and commitments through these public statements (Wesley et al., 2021). At least on a surface level, many institutions are now more open to engaging in race-based dialogues. Many institutions have offered strategies for action, such as open campus-listening sessions, short-term working groups, and the formation of task forces (Wesley et al., 2021). Colleges and universities have also reported that they have implemented policy changes since 2020, including resource investment, such as funding new initiatives related to diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and belonging programs, seeking new grant funding, and hiring additional staff to work on DEI initiatives (Wesley et al., 2021). But as detailed in Chapter 4, these efforts have not impacted the overall campus racial climate at predominantly white institutions.

Indeed, several studies have highlighted an ongoing chilly campus racial climate at educational institutions that claim to prioritize racial equity (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Sturm, 2016). At the core of this chilly climate is the institutional normalization of whiteness, which influences white administrators' responses to racial incidents on campus. The climate is characterized by seemingly innocuous and neutral actions and practices that have long been accepted as part of the institutional culture. Solórzano et al.'s (2000) research illuminated the connections between a chilly campus racial climate and white campus administrators. Their findings showed that a positive campus racial climate comprises four critical elements: the participation of Students, Faculty, and Administrators of Color; a curriculum that accurately represents the historical and contemporary experiences of BIPOC students; programs that support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of BIPOC students; and a college or university mission that

reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism. If implemented and practiced effectively, these elements improve the responses of white campus administrators to racial incidents on campus (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Ineffective Responses to Campus Racial Incidents

Increased focus on campus racial climate has led to a growing awareness fueled by several nationally recognized incidents on U.S. college and university campuses. One such incident occurred in early October 2015 at the University of Missouri campus, where multiple factors contributed to a heightened awareness of their racialized campus climate. The Black community in Missouri was reeling from the shooting of an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, by police and the subsequent decision by law enforcement not to prosecute his killer (Izadi, 2015). Additionally, the use of military-style force by local police during protests drew attention to police brutality and racial bias in policing in the national conversation. BIPOC students also chronicled and drew attention to other campus racial incidents on social media, leading to increasingly contentious student discussions. At the same time, the university had enrolled a record number of students and needed to maintain or increase its student enrollments since they were dependent on the tuition revenue.

Consequently, both the chancellor of the University of Missouri, R. Bowen Loftin, and the president of the University of Missouri System, Tim Wolfe, resigned after students protested racism on their campuses (Syrluga, 2015). President Wolfe's mismanagement of the racial incidents drew students, faculty, and staff condemnation. Wolfe reportedly said he was "not completely" aware of systemic racism, sexism, and patriarchy on the campus (Izadi, 2015, p. 4). These incidents highlight how racism and race-based organizational conflict can

rise to crisis levels in higher education when white university leaders fail to respond effectively and are unaware of highly racialized campus climates.

Vega (2021), Conley (2016), and Davis and Harris (2016) indicated that responses by campus administrators to racial incidents have been largely ineffective. Administrators often depict such incidents as isolated events perpetrated by individuals outside the community (Conley, 2016). The response typically involves a statement that the perpetrator is no longer a part of the community, suggesting that the person was never a genuine member of the community to begin with, and that the community can continue per usual without any impact from racism (Davis & Harris, 2016). Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) described a minimization culture among white people, which tends to view discrimination through a narrow lens of overtly racist acts, leading to the misperception of other incidents as individuals being overly sensitive or playing the "race card" (p. 34). Vega's (2021) research showed significant differences in how students and administrators perceive campus responses to racial incidents. In the author's study comparing predominantly white and minority-serving institutions, Vega found that while administrators believed they handled incidents adequately, students had different opinions. In one case, an administrator believed they responded appropriately until students voiced dissent, indicating that the administration was unaware of the students' true feelings. University leaders frequently respond to racial incidents by launching diversity plans and initiatives. Still, research has shown that these efforts are inadequate in improving hiring practices, curricular content, and the overall campus racial climate (Vega, 2021). Moreover, despite the continued prevalence of racism on college campuses, diversity initiatives are becoming broader and less focused, weakening efforts to address racism and campus racial incidents (Vega, 2021). Ineffective responses and

a minimizing culture that downplays racial incidents contribute to significant alienation as well as distrust between BIPOC students, faculty, staff, and campus administration (Davis & Harris, 2016).

Campus responses to racial incidents are typically slow and ineffective often failing to address the underlying systemic issues and perpetuating a cycle of harm and marginalization for BIPOC students (Conley, 2016). Administrators frequently take days or even weeks to investigate, formally respond to, or take disciplinary or legal action against the perpetrators of the racist incident (Miller et al., 2015). Moreover, administrators fail to address the systemic racism underlying racist incidents, reinforcing the racialized campus climate (Miller et al., 2015). Campus responses to racial incidents can be described as "muddled through" as administrators struggle with an ineffective decision-making process (Lindblom, 1959, p. 80). According to Schmidt (2008), administrators tend to make predictable mistakes when responding to racial incidents on campus, prioritizing the mitigation of negative media attention over the victims of racism. For instance, the University of Virginia was ill-prepared for the Unite the Right Rally in 2017, and the president's dismissive description of the protesters as "tourists" exposed the institution to potential lawsuits and intense negative media scrutiny (Stripling, 2017). Simultaneously with an escalation in reports of hate crimes, racial animus has increased in the U.S. (Hurst, 2023). Scholars have shown that the larger racial and sociopolitical environment negatively influences American college campuses as well (Baker & Britton, 2024; Museus et al. 2008). Given the current national racial climate and these increasing incidents of racism on college campuses, there is a need for further research to identify effective and proactive approaches for white campus administrators in addressing systemic racism.

Balsamo (2020) asserted that improving the campus racial climate requires effective responses to racial incidents. Despite student protests and calls for racial equity, colleges and universities often fail to restore stability and faith in their institutions. Many institutions make performative statements declaring support for BIPOC students, but their subsequent actions (or lack thereof) reveal their true values, beliefs, and practices, which are often rooted in racism and pervasive whiteness (Museus et al., 2017). Inadequate responses to racial incidents can exacerbate these practices, leading to more student protests, the resignation of high-ranking officials, an increase in racial incidents, and further harm to students (Gardner, 2016; Schmidt, 2015). As Davis and Harris (2016) outlined, effective responses are transparent and comprehensive and address both the racist act, the perpetrator, and the underlying structures that enable explicit and structural racism. Such reactions also support affected students and the broader college community, and they intentionally foster a campus climate in which racism and discrimination are not normalized (Burke Galloway, 2020).

White Racial Identity Development

Understanding white racial identity development is helpful when trying to understand responses to campus racial incidents because it sheds light on how white individuals perceive and navigate issues of race. As white individuals navigate through the stages of racial identity development, as delineated by scholars such as Helms (1997) and Tatum (2003), they may gain a heightened awareness of their racial identity and the privileges inherently linked to it, although not all may progress through these stages. They suggest that this awareness can influence how they interpret and respond to racial incidents on campus. For example, individuals in earlier stages of development may be less likely to recognize their own biases and privileges, leading to defensive or dismissive responses to incidents of

racism. Conversely, those in later stages of development may be more likely to acknowledge their biases and privileges and actively work to challenge racism and promote antiracist practices. Therefore, an understanding of white racial identity development can provide insights into the underlying attitudes and perspectives that inform responses to campus racial incidents, ultimately informing efforts to address and prevent such incidents in higher education settings.

Helms (1997) offers a model consisting of five stages of white identity development: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, and autonomy. In the contact stage, white individuals are often oblivious to racism and tend to view racial differences as unimportant. In the disintegration stage, individuals become conflicted over racial moral dilemmas and begin to acknowledge their membership in a socially dominant group. The reintegration stage is characterized by regression, whereby individuals retreat into white culture and idealize their whiteness. In the pseudo-independence stage, individuals attempt to understand racial, cultural, and sexual orientation differences. In the autonomy stage, individuals search for an understanding of the personal meaning of racism and become more active in combating it.

While Helms's (1997) model provides a useful framework for understanding white identity development, it has been criticized for its narrow focus on privilege and identity development, not on the concepts related to the pervasive culture of whiteness. Rowe et al.'s (1994) critique pointed out that the title of Helms's model is a misnomer in its ostensible purpose of "explain[ing] how whites develop[ed] attitudes toward their racial group membership" (Carter & Helms, 1992, p. 192). However, instead of doing so, Helms mainly described how white individuals develop different "levels of sensitivity to and appreciation

of other racial/ethnic groups (i.e., racial attitudes), but little about white identity" nor awareness of whiteness (Rowe et al., 1994, p. 131).

Antiracism

Du Bois (1899) emphasized race relations as the core issue within the American white supremacist framework, asserting that without white acknowledgment and cross-racial solidarity, racism will persist (Teranishi et al., 2004). In other words, until the white majority is willing to confront racism and engage in cross-racial solidarity, racism will prevail (Teranishi et al., 2004). The discourse around antiracism in U.S. higher education informs the discourse regarding campus racial incidents, responses to them, the prevailing culture of whiteness, and the historical backdrop of antiracist activism, sometimes described as "allyship." Antiracism emerged from the anti-slavery movement, led by privileged individuals collaborating with marginalized groups to dismantle systems that impeded their rights, equal access, and ability to thrive in American society (Ruchames, 1963).

Paulo Freire (1970) urged white individuals to not view themselves as the proprietors of history or the liberators of the oppressed but to instead commit to fighting alongside marginalized people. Similarly, Love (2000) proposed a liberatory consciousness for challenging oppressive systems and also outlined a framework for allyship comprising awareness, analysis, action, and accountability, stressing the importance of avoiding burdening marginalized groups with educational responsibilities. While Wise (2008) suggested that white people engage meaningfully in race work through a process of "working through whiteness," a strategy for actively engaging in the deconstruction of race, whiteness, and racist policies (p. 266). Additionally, some scholars argue that white individuals can only become effective racial justice allies by disengaging from the power and domination inherent

in whiteness (Linder, 2015; Patton & Bondi, 2015). Yet for white administrators' this is influenced by historical and social factors that impact their awareness of racism and whiteness (Applebaum, 2019; DiAngelo, 2011; Saul, 2013). White individuals bear the inherited privileges of history, necessitating introspection and interrogation of their racial identity and biases (Mistler, 2017). That is, whites must confront their implicit biases and reckon with the realities of whiteness to effectively contribute to antiracist efforts (Tevis, T. & Foste, 2022).

The Privileged Identity Exploration Model

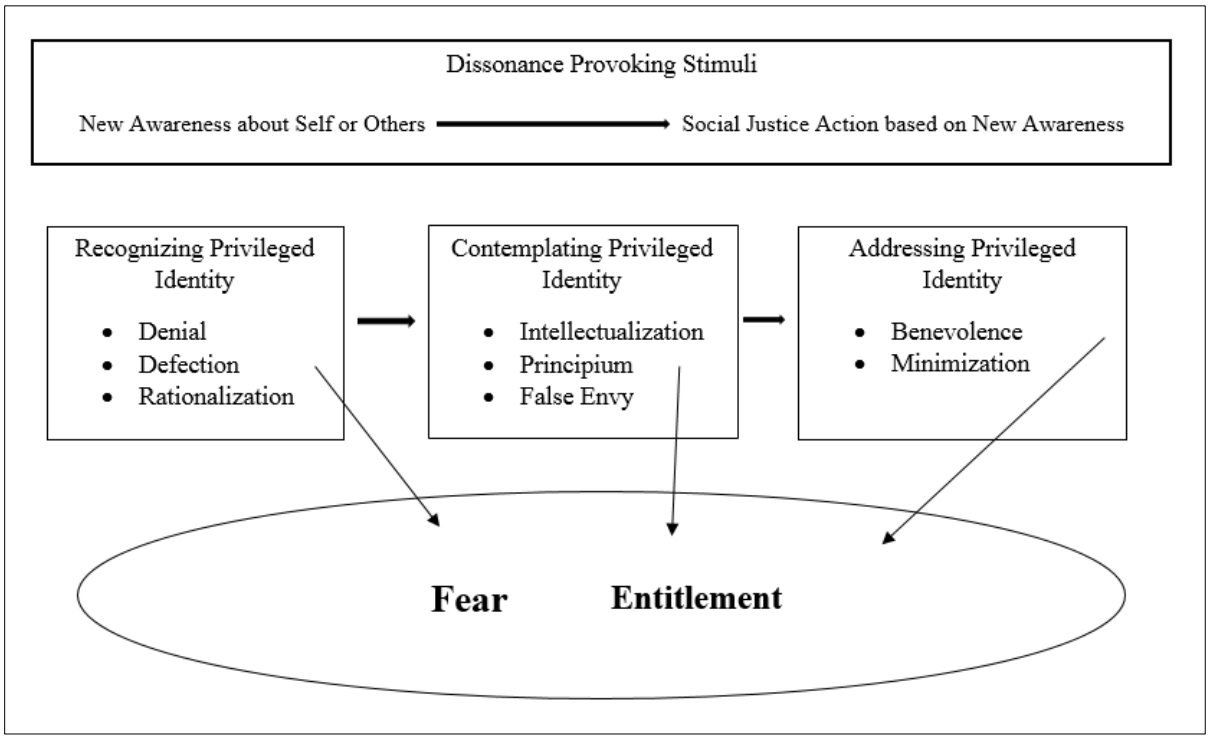
Watt's (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model is also useful for gaining a deeper understanding of white individuals' privileged identity and the pervasive culture of whiteness. The model suggests that exploring and understanding one's privileged identity is crucial for pursuing social justice and equity. The PIE model assists practitioners in applying strategies focused on raising individuals' critical consciousness by encouraging them to dialogue about their privileged identities. Practitioners also use the model to anticipate defensive behaviors and to prevent productive dialogue from derailing.

Watt (2007) conceptualized this cultural competence framework for individuals with privileged identities to self-reflect and understand how their elite status influences their experiences and interactions with others. Cultural competence, described as "the set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals" that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations (Chun & Evans, 2016), is an important conceptual skill for students, faculty, and administrators. The PIE model comprises six stages: unawareness, awakening, guilt/shame, understanding, responsibility, and action, each building upon the previous one, and incorporates three phases: contact,

disintegration, and reintegration. The contact phase entails recognizing one's privileged identity and understanding its social and historical context. The disintegration phase involves discomfort and loss as individuals acknowledge the negative impacts of their privilege. The reintegration phase involves reconstructing one's identity, committing to racial justice, and taking action to dismantle systemic oppression. Additionally, the model identifies eight defensive reactions that individuals with privileged identities may exhibit when prompted to reflect on their social, political, and economic position. These defense mechanisms are commonly observed during discussions on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in educational settings. Furthermore, the model underscores the significance of accountability and allyship in fostering social change (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model



Note. Source: Adapted from Watts (2007).

The PIE model also incorporates dissonance-provoking stimuli from new awareness about ones privileged self to social justice action based on new understanding of other oppressed identities (Watt, 2007). The defense mechanisms organize the model at the second and third levels. The phases of development include recognizing one's privileged identity, contemplating that privileged identity, and addressing it (Watt, 2007). The model is particularly relevant for white college administrators because it highlights specific dimensions of privileged identity and defensiveness frequently present among overrepresented identity groups, such as white women in this field.

Critical Race Theory

Building upon Harris's (1993) concepts in 1995 Ladson-Billings and Tate introduced critical race theory (CRT) to the field of education, asserting that racism remains a significant factor in both higher education and society. The CRT movement includes activists, educators, and scholars seeking to transform the relationship between race, racism, and power; as CRT scholars continue to find that racism extends to and within all structures, including American higher education (Harper, 2012; Patton, et al., 2015; Reason, Broido et al., 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, et al., 2004). CRT draws from a wide range of literature on critical theories in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies and is used to attempt to transform the racialized environments embedded in every level of American education, from early learning through higher education (Solórzano et al., 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1998; & Espino, 2012). CRT was selected for this research because of its potential to transform higher education by providing researchers and policymakers with a theoretical strategy that "works towards the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 24).

Scholars and practitioners have used CRT to study the American higher education system by examining how racial power dynamics and systemic racism shape policies, practices, and experiences within institutions, particularly concerning the experiences of BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. CRT posits that racism is not only the result of individual actions, but also a structural issue deeply ingrained in U.S. society. CRT is also useful in critiquing how colleges and universities perpetuate systemic racism and racialized campus cultures. CRT emphasizes the intersectionality of race with other forms of oppression, such as gender, sexuality, class, and ability, while centering the experiences and perspectives of

BIPOC people (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the field of higher education, CRT has served as a useful tool for examining issues such as affirmative action, college access, campus climate, student success, diversity, inclusion, access, and equity (Crenshaw, 1995; Harris et al., 2015; Savas, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000). In relation to this study, CRT informed further understanding of how race operates in these contexts and the factors that influence white campus administrators' responses to campus racial incidents and their awareness of the pervasive culture of whiteness. Some scholars have described CRT as comprising five tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), while others have offered up to thirteen guiding CRT principles (Crenshaw, 1995). However, the two most relevant concepts of CRT that will are used for this study are whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and interest convergence (Bell, 1980). Harris's concept of whiteness as property is a theoretical framework that explores how whiteness operates as a form of property, conferring privileges, advantages, and entitlements to white individuals within society. Harris argues that whiteness is not just a racial identity but also an asset that grants its possessors certain rights and benefits. These rights include the ability to access resources, opportunities, and social advantages that are denied or restricted to non-white individuals. Harris contends that whiteness as property is deeply ingrained in the legal and social fabric of society, shaping institutions, policies, and individual interactions. This framework highlights how systems of oppression are maintained and perpetuated through the protection and reinforcement of white privilege. In the following section I will also explore Harris's (1993) four property rights—the right to disposition, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to status and property, and the right to exclude—in more detail giving more strength to the overall concept. Together the concepts outlined here will increase understanding of the systemic structures granted to white

people that offer greater political and social security to white individuals and show how these rights are implemented and maintained in American higher education.

Whiteness as Property

Whiteness is an invisible sociocultural law, ever-present in every aspect of American society highlights how whiteness operates as a form of property in the U.S. providing material and symbolic advantages to those possessing it (Harris, 1993). Developed as a legal theory, Harris argued that whiteness, like property, is a socially constructed and legally protected entity that confers certain rights, privileges, and advantages to those who hold it. These include the right to disposition, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to status and property, and the right to exclude. Harris described how whiteness as property has historically been used to justify racial inequality and exclusion in many areas of society, such as housing, education, and employment. She argued, whiteness functions as a legal construct in that it is an individual and collective asset that can be bought, sold, and inherited, and it confers certain privileges and advantages upon its holders. In higher education, white students often have greater access to resources and opportunities than BIPOC students; this access is rooted in historical and ongoing racial inequities, resulting in a system that prioritizes and rewards whiteness. This is evident in how standardized tests, college admissions, and funding for public education often favor white students and institutions while disproportionately negatively impacting BIPOC students (Barber et al., 2020).

Whiteness as property also reinforces the idea that whiteness is the norm or default and that any deviation from this norm is inferior or problematic (Harris, 2019). This leads to the marginalization of BIPOC students and a lack of representation in educational materials and curricula (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Whiteness as property pervades every aspect of higher

education and its policies, including responses to campus racial incidents distorting perceptions of meritocracy without recognizing how minoritized students must overcome systemic barriers and both covert and overt racism (Cabrera et al., 2017).

The Right to Disposition

Harris's (1993) right to disposition refers to the ability of individuals, particularly those from dominant racial groups, to control and allocate resources, opportunities, and advantages based on their racial identity. Throughout American history Black individuals in the U.S. have experienced significant economic and social oppression. In American higher education, this manifests in policies and practices that exclude Black individuals from access to education and limit their ability to build wealth and social status. For example, white students are more likely to be admitted to prestigious universities and colleges, receive scholarships and other financial aid, and access resources and networks that help them succeed in academia (McNair et al., 2020). White students are also more likely to have been beneficiaries of privileges passed through previous generations (Lewis & Shah, 2021). For instance, legacy admissions give preference to the children of alumni, disproportionately benefit white students due to historical patterns of exclusion and privilege. This perpetuates racial inequalities by granting preferential treatment to individuals who already hold a position of advantage, reinforcing existing power dynamics and hindering efforts to create a more equitable admissions process. By examining legacy admissions through the framework of the right to disposition, a better understanding of how these policies contribute to systemic racial disparities in higher education occurs. Lastly, the right to disposition also allows white individuals to shape the culture, curriculum, and policies of American higher education institutions in ways that perpetuate systemic racism and exclusion and to continually pass

those roles on to further generations of white people. For example, white faculty members are more likely to receive tenure and promotions, which enables them to advance their research and ideas, while BIPOC faculty face greater scrutiny and bias in their work (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019; Liu et al., 2022).

The Right to Use and Enjoyment

Harris (1993) described the right to use and enjoyment as the ability of property owners to enjoy and utilize property as they see fit and she argues that white people use their whiteness in the same way under protection of the law. Like other types of physical property, such as a home, land, or a business, whiteness is an asset that white people work to protect (Harris, 1993). In American higher education, this aspect of property rights is seen in how white students and faculty members utilize and benefit from various college and university resources. For instance, white students often have access to a wider range of academic and extracurricular activities, better-funded programs and departments, and more robust career and networking opportunities than BIPOC students (Espinosa et al., 2019). This disparity in access to resources and opportunities in American higher education is attributed to historical and systemic factors rooted in racial inequality that have disproportionately disadvantaged BIPOC communities, leading to generational wealth gaps and limited access to quality education. Additionally, higher education funding reflects and perpetuates existing social and economic inequalities. Predominantly white institutions tend to receive more funding than minority-serving institutions, leading to disparities in resources, infrastructure, and program offerings. This results in better-funded departments and programs that predominantly benefit white students and faculty (Aguilar-Smith, 2021). Research has also shown that disciplinary practices in higher education often disproportionately target BIPOC students, leading to

higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and involvement with campus police. This disparity in disciplinary outcomes reflects broader societal inequalities and reinforces the idea that whiteness affords certain individuals greater protection and leniency within academic institutions (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Harris's (1993) notion of the right to use and enjoyment also manifests in various social and cultural aspects of college or university life. White students and faculty members may be more likely to feel a sense of belonging and connection to the campus community, which can enhance their overall higher education experience (Duran et al., 2020). BIPOC students, by contrast, often experience feelings of marginalization, isolation, and alienation, negatively impacting their academic performance and mental health (Locks et al., 2008; Museus et al., 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Harris's concept of the "right to use and enjoyment" also pertains to the historical and systemic advantages that white individuals enjoy in American society where whiteness is privileged. This idea intersects deeply with the notion of white privilege which can be traced to the 1930s, when W. E. B. Du Bois used the term "psychological wage" to describe how poor white workers benefited from the racial hierarchy in the U.S. Peggy McIntosh (1998) also offered her interpretation of the term in "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which examines the unearned advantages and benefits afforded to white people based solely on the color of their skin. McIntosh described white privilege as "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" that white people are given at birth and that BIPOC people are denied (p. 97). However, scholars have criticized the idea of an invisible backpack of privileges, arguing that while it may be cathartic for white individuals to identify their privileges, it does little to actively combat

racism and does automatically translate into meaningful actions for racial justice (Cabrera, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013).

Further, some discussions of white privilege have also considered the feelings of white persons (e.g., guilt, despair, etc.) who engage in the process of understanding the implications of their whiteness; however, it is important to note that the experiences of racism for BIPOC people can be severely traumatic and should be considered with priority. Victims of dangerous racist incidents and microaggressions on college and university campuses should be prioritized over any potentially uneasy or uncomfortable feelings experienced by white individuals engaging in revelations about their white privilege. Ashe (2012) noted that white people discussing white privilege can "feel dangerous, can be off-putting, and feel racist" (p. 17). Despite this apprehension, Tatum (2003) argued that white educators must become aware of and accept their whiteness in a non-defensive, nonracist way, without guilt.

Gusa's (2010) theory of white institutional presence, influenced by Harris's (1993) right to use and enjoyment, also underscores how whiteness permeates historically and predominantly white institutions, disadvantaging BIPOC students while privileging white students. This concept reveals the embedded ideologies and practices that prioritize whiteness within institutional settings, shaping students' social and academic experiences. Gusa (2010) emphasized that institutions, even in the absence of explicit racism, cultivate a hostile environment through unchecked white cultural norms ingrained in their language, practices, traditions, and knowledge perceptions. This underscores how whiteness maintains systems of dominance and oppression, perpetuating racially charged atmospheres by normalizing institutional policies and practices. Additionally, Gusa also highlighted the

absence of diverse cultural perspectives relevant to BIPOC students, which hinder their learning and development, while white students remain shielded from the realities of racism due to pervasive white norms.

The Right to Status and Property

In American higher education, the concept of the right to status and property, offered by Harris (1993), underscores the social and economic advantages tied to one's position or standing. White students and faculty historically benefit from this privilege through enhanced access to educational and employment opportunities, bolstered social networks, and other resources that contribute to their overall social and economic standing (Silver, 2020). This privilege is deeply entrenched within the fabric of colleges and universities, operating both at individual and institutional levels (Matias & Newlove, 2017). As gatekeepers of institutional policies and practices, white deans of students have the power to address and dismantle these inequities, but their actions may be influenced by their own racial biases and the preservation of the status quo. Matias and Newlove (2017) further delineate various aspects of this phenomenon for white individuals, including white privilege, racial entitlement, and a sense of superiority, all of which contribute to internalized racism and negative repercussions for BIPOC individuals within historically and predominantly white educational institutions. Despite outward displays of antiracist rhetoric, many white administrators often fail to actively relinquish their privilege, perpetuating systems shaped by white cultural norms that marginalize and exclude BIPOC students, staff, and faculty (Harper, 2012). Moreover, the right to status and property safeguards the esteemed reputation of white individuals within American society, a standing reinforced by the legal system, which treats the reputation and status of white individuals as property and enforces laws to protect them (Harris, 1993).

Within the landscape of U.S. higher education, where the majority of administrators are white and have been socialized within a system that upholds and defends their whiteness, it is imperative to scrutinize how this right manifests through campus policies, potentially perpetuating systemic inequities, whether knowingly or inadvertently (Patton et al., 2007, Bondi, 2012).

The Right to Exclude

Harris's (1993) concept of the right to exclude highlights the power held by white individuals and institutions to refuse access to resources, spaces, or opportunities for BIPOC individuals. This exclusionary power is evident in American higher education through admissions criteria, employment practices, and resource allocation (Patton, 2016). Historically, discriminatory policies within colleges and universities marginalized Black individuals, resulting in their underrepresentation, particularly in science-related fields (Allen et al., 2022; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Legislation like the G.I. Bill further perpetuated this exclusion by favoring white men, limiting educational access for BIPOC individuals (Katznelson, 2005). This dynamic extends to resource distribution within institutions, where white students and faculty often receive more funding, research opportunities, and support compared to their BIPOC counterparts (Hanson, 2008; Park et al., 2020). Additionally, the right to exclude is entrenched in legal frameworks and the administrative structures dominated by white individuals, who shape and protect the policy and decision-making processes (Harris, 1993).

It is evident that understanding whiteness as property provides a critical lens for examining the pervasive influence of systemic racism within higher education institutions. By recognizing how whiteness operates as a form of property, granting privileges and

advantages to white individuals, this study is shaped by the above mentioned concepts as a lens to understand how these dynamics shape responses to campus racial incidents and perpetuate racial inequalities.

Interest Convergence

Strengthening Harris's concept of whiteness as property for this study is Bell's (1980) concept of interest convergence, revealing how racial progress often hinges on the alignment of marginalized groups' goals with those of privileged whites. Harris's framework suggests that whiteness operates as a form of property, granting advantages to white individuals and institutions. Similarly, Bell's concept theorizes that advancements in racial equality are only achieved when they coincide with the interests of those in power, highlighting the deliberate manipulation of circumstances to maintain control. In American higher education, for example, interest convergence is observable in affirmative action policies, initially introduced to address legal challenges and court rulings that mandated efforts to desegregate higher education institutions while ostensibly promoting diversity and equity (Berry & Stovall, 2013). These policies, however, also served the interests of predominantly white institutions by allowing them to maintain a semblance of compliance with anti-discrimination laws while simultaneously preserving their status and reputation (Park & Liu, 2014). By promoting diversity and equity, these institutions could attract a broader pool of students and secure federal funding, enhancing their competitive advantage in the higher education landscape (Berry & Stovall, 2013). Bell's argument underscores the fleeting nature of progress in racial equality, with racial patterns adapting to uphold white dominance. Thus, the continued use of affirmative action policies today reflects a convergence of interests between marginalized groups seeking access and the interests of predominantly white

institutions by aligning with their goals of maintaining prestige, competitiveness, and financial stability (Hu et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework

A review of the preceding literature areas informs the conceptual framework for this study. Overall, the literature revealed that change is needed in higher education specifically for white deans of students who contribute to poor responses to campus racial incidents. The literature also reveals some of the potential elements necessary for change to occur in their awareness and understanding of their privilege and the power white campus administrators have in improving the campus racial climate. The conceptual framework for this study includes elements of individual understanding and enactment, motivation, and context. Specifically, this study was informed by two frameworks: critical race theory (CRT; Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the PIE model (Watt, 2007). Specifically, this study was guided by two of CRT's important concepts—whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and interest convergence (Bell, 1980), along with the PIE model (Watt, 2007). Rather than consider a single overarching theory to frame the research, I intertwined relevant pieces from both frameworks to build a conceptual lens. These frameworks served multiple purposes, including helping to describe contextual relationships, and provided intellectual tools for collecting data, generating interpretations, and analyzing the research findings (Mertens, 2015).

Applying CRT's concept of interest convergence as a theoretical lens enhanced my analysis of how and why racial progress is achieved or hindered based on the alignment of interests among white campus administrators—in this case, in examining instances when racial equity and justice may have been pursued or when self-interest prevailed. My analysis

was also aided by an examination of the convergence or divergence of interests in campus racial politics, policymaking, and social change. Harris's concept of whiteness as property was also quite useful as a lens to understand the ways the white deans in this study leveraged their racial identity to assert control over educational resources, opportunities, and advantages. This framework highlighted the entrenched privileges afforded to white administrators, students, and faculty within academic institutions, perpetuating systemic inequalities and reinforcing the notion of whiteness as a form of social and economic capital. Employing whiteness as property and interest convergence via this conceptual framework supported my critical analysis of how whiteness operates as a form of property to maintain and reproduce racial inequities inequalities and helped to explore the conditions under which racial advancement occurs based on interests among white administrators. Whereas the PIE model was a useful frame for revealing the defensive behavior presented by white study participants engaged in dialogue about campus racial incidents as it provided an additional lens for examining how white campus administrators recognize, contemplate, and address their privileged identities in pursuit of critical consciousness (Watts, 2007). The PIE model was also useful for understanding the defensive behaviors that occur during dialogues with white individuals about race. Thus, revealing how participants perceived engagement in an exploration of their privileged identity as discretionary and employed defensive mechanisms to evade it—which I investigated using an interview protocol guided by this conceptual framework.

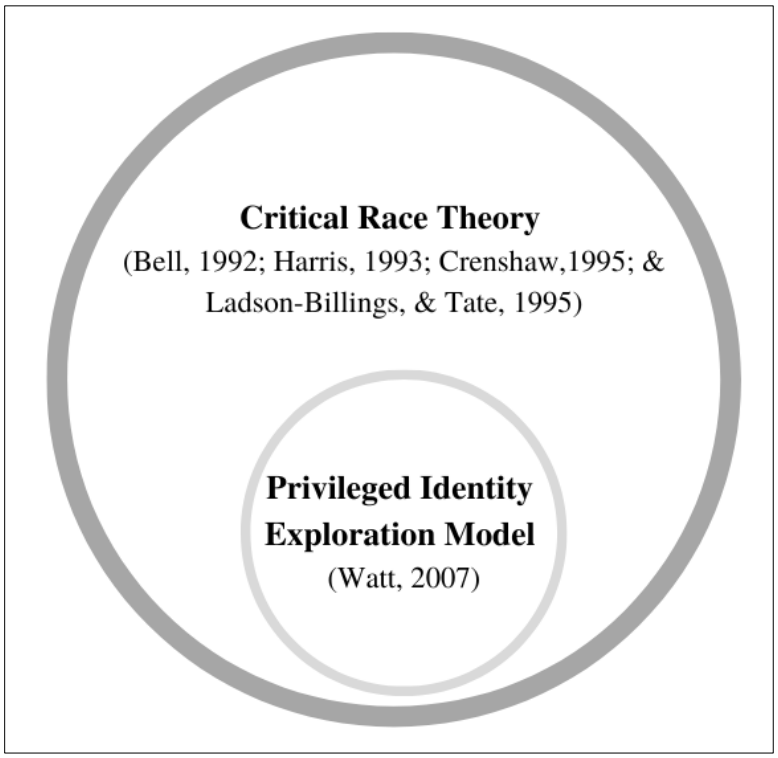
Notably, some CRT scholars (e.g., Bondi, 2012; Bergerson, 2003) have cautioned white scholars (among whom I am included) about engaging with CRT. This caution arises from the long history of white individuals “appropriating knowledge and cultures for their

benefit" (Bondi, 2012, p. 401). Both Bondi (2012) and Bergerson (2003) urged white scholars to be mindful of the critiques put forth by Black scholars, highlighting that the use of CRT can potentially perpetuate colonization. As a white scholar, I must clarify that my researcher positionality does not center myself or my interests. I utilized CRT as a foundation to deconstruct, challenge, and critique racism within myself and organizations and used the theory to examine whiteness and its implications in racist structures (Cabrera, 2022). Like other scholars who identify as white, such as Bergerson (2003) and Bondi (2012), and who incorporate CRT in their research, I adopted it to help explore the processes and systems that perpetuate white supremacy in U.S. higher education, all while maintaining a critical awareness of my privilege in doing so.

This review of the literature and description of the study's conceptual framework help illuminate the omnipresence of whiteness in American higher education, the existence of racialized campus climates, and the important role that white campus administrators have on American college and university campuses. The chapter highlighted the conceptual tools used in this study to deepen understanding of the factors that inform responses to campus racial incidents by white campus administrators, and it examined whiteness through historical, political, social, and economic lenses that influence the perspectives of white administrators. Understanding how white administrators perceive their own whiteness and the strategies they employ to protect it can empower educational institutions to address racism, dismantle racist systems, and prevent campus racial incidents.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study was guided by the need to understand white college administrators' awareness of whiteness and its role in their responses to campus racial incidents to dismantle the pervasive culture of whiteness within historically and predominantly white institutions. This chapter begins with a restatement of the research questions, followed by a description of the research paradigm and the selected strategy of inquiry. The chapter then outlines the research design, discusses my role as researcher, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and considers the trustworthiness of the research.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following primary research question:

1. How does white college administrators' understanding of whiteness influence how they respond to and make sense of campus racial incidents?

In addition, the following sub-question helped narrow the study's focus:

2. In what ways do white administrators' perceptions of the college environment, including the pervasive culture of whiteness and the campus racial climate in historically and predominantly white institutions, shape how they respond to racial incidents and reveal their potential investment in whiteness?

Research Paradigm

As described in Chapter 2, qualitative research has frequently been used to study whiteness in higher education (Ashe, 2012; Bondi, 2012; Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017) and campus racial climates (Tausen et al., 2023; Victorino et al., 2013; Yao et al., 2021). Qualitative research views context as critical and examines issues holistically. It was used effectively in this study to explore white campus administrators' responses to campus racial incidents and their understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness. A qualitative approach holds a significant advantage over quantitative research, in conveying individual stories and personal experiences, therefore increasing its reliability. Krathwohl (2009) stated that qualitative researchers have the flexibility to combine different methods in innovative ways that suit their research needs, with the only limitations being "their imagination and the requirement of presenting their findings persuasively" (p. 20). In this case, the research questions, combined with the strengths and limitations of the study setting, determined the methods employed in this research design. A qualitative method also allowed me, in my researcher role, to locate myself "in the world" of my participants and give voice to them in a way that quantitative research would not allow (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3).

Qualitative methods are also well-suited for comprehending the significance of social and human predicaments—in this case, how identity influences deans of students' experiences, which can be captured through in-depth interviewing (Creswell, 2009). A deeper understanding is developed through dialogue, as the interviewer and the participant "co-construct" meaning and delve into the participants' view of the world (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 176). Qualitative research is also a powerful tool for understanding institutional and individual racism, antiracism, colorblind ideologies, and whiteness, and helps generate both

common themes and detailed descriptions of individual experiences (Edwards, 2006; Patton & Bondi, 2015; Reason, Broido, et al., 2005).

Strategy of Inquiry: Narrative Research

Presently researchers in the social sciences are engaged in the telling of stories that span a range of narrative approaches (e.g., autobiography, autoethnographies, biography, personal narratives, life histories, oral histories, etc.) (Squire et al., 2014). In this study, I used narrative research methodology to examine white deans of students' experiences (Clandinin et al., 2007). In my work, I carefully considered critiques from scholars like Denzin (1997) and hooks (1991) who challenged the assumption that anyone should inherently possess the authority to tell the stories of others. Narrative research involves working with narrative materials of various kinds including a personal journal, film, or speech. In my study, the narrative materials came into existence as part of the research—as I collected narrative material. Specifically, I interviewed research participants and asked them to speak about their personal experiences, encouraging them to talk at length about their experiences as deans of students (Squire et al., 2014). As a white campus administrator and doctoral student, I was informed by my own exploration of my white racial identity, which informed this inquiry, writing, and research. The research process was informed by the positionality and subjectivity of my life history, professional experiences (as a college administrator), and awareness of whiteness, as well as those of the study participants.

Narrative research prioritizes understanding a phenomenon or experience rather than constructing a logical or scientific explanation (Kramp, 2004). This study used narrative research to identify common themes and generate detailed descriptions of individual

experiences. The significance of this approach lay in its emphasis on the storyteller—in this case, white deans of students—since the personal narrative is considered the primary source of knowledge (Daiute, 2013). According to Kramp (2004), life experiences are best understood through the telling of personal stories, rather than through the observations of researchers. This study thoroughly examined white campus administrators' understanding of their place in their responses to racial incidents along with their understanding of whiteness.

Research Design

This section describes—and offers a rationale for—the following components of the research design: research context; participant recruitment; data collection; data analysis and interpretation; insider-outsider status; role of the researcher; credibility; transferability; limitations.

Research Context

This study focused on white individuals occupying the role of dean of students at institutions of higher education located in the state of Massachusetts. Massachusetts is well known for its leadership in education, healthcare infrastructure, and climate innovation, and has a reputation for being politically progressive or liberal. However, according to a recent report by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (*Hate Crimes in Massachusetts*), in 2022, prejudice against race and ethnicity or national origin was the most widely reported bias motivation, representing 59.3% of hate crimes in the state. Additionally, Massachusetts has also seen an alarming surge in hate crimes in recent years, with increased white supremacist activity, including the distribution of racist, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQ+ fliers and other propaganda (Lazar, 2023). These disturbing trends reinforced the need to conduct this study in Massachusetts. Furthermore, white individuals residing in the state

often associate themselves with progressive ideologies, potentially fostering a phenomenon of complacency, misguided beliefs in their liberal stances, and consequent neglect of substantive engagement with antiracist efforts. This phenomenon was observed among the white deans in this study, who outwardly subscribed to antiracist principles but exhibited a lack of corresponding meaningful actions.

As of October 2023, Massachusetts had approximately 100 colleges and universities, most of which employed a professional administrator in a role commonly referred to as dean of students or a similar title with slight variations. According to National Student Affairs Personnel Administrators (NASPA), a dean of students is a senior administrator responsible for overseeing student affairs and services, with a primary focus on cultivating a secure and inclusive campus environment. As a result, deans of students are responsible for intentionally creating programs, services, and experiences that foster students' holistic development and learning that extends beyond the classroom (Long, 2012). Deans of students also have at least some oversight and input in addressing issues related to racial dynamics on campus which was critical to the context of this study.

Participant Recruitment

I created a comprehensive database encompassing all accredited colleges and universities within Massachusetts with the goal of conducting at least 8 to 10 interviews for this study. In order to populate the database I conducted an online search to ascertain the racial identity of each institution's respective dean of students, with particular attention to any accompanying photographs on their official webpages. I was able to determine the appeared racial identity of nearly every dean of student through this method with the occasional aid of other websites such as LinkedIn or Google to confirm. This investigation revealed that at

least 65% of the administrators in the position of dean of students at Massachusetts colleges or universities had a white appearance. I removed participants from the database who worked at institutions that were either especially small (under 500 total enrollment), such as small seminary schools or institutions did not serve undergraduate students such as law schools or an optometry college. I reached out directly to 60 deans of students via email and was able to immediately schedule 6 interviews from that first email request. For the remaining interviews I sent a second round of emails using criterion sampling and was able to schedule the remaining interviews. My goal was to interview participants who worked at a variety of institutions—small, large, public, private, and at both four-year and two-year institutions. Among the participants, three were already known to me professionally, and two were introduced through mutual colleagues. Identifying a dean of students from a public community college posed a greater challenge for this study, despite several outreach efforts I made via email. Eventually, I made a connection facilitated by a mutual colleague's introduction. Notably, recruiting participants for this study was generally quite straightforward. Each dean who responded to my email inquiry readily expressed willingness to participate in an interview and then connected me promptly with an administrative colleague whom I worked with to schedule the interview.

During the data collection period—September 25, 2023 to October 17, 2024, the deans of students in this study oversaw nearly 100,000 students enrolled in their respective institutions, accounting for just over one-fifth of the total student enrollment in Massachusetts. At the time of the interviews, nine of the 11 deans worked at institutions where the student population was predominantly white (i.e., more than 50% of the student population). Two deans worked at historically white institutions where the white student

population was less than 50%, with a majority of BIPOC students—a large research university had 38% white students and a highly selective large university had 35% white students. However, all participants were affiliated with a historically white college or university—in alignment with Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022), who classified the majority of U.S. colleges and universities as historically white institutions. I adopt their viewpoint that "race-neutral aspects of American higher education institutions, such as history, demography, curriculum, climate, and symbols, encapsulate, signify, and perpetuate whiteness and white supremacy" (p. 1497).

I employed a method for identifying a pool of prospective participants who met the criteria of "excellent" participants, as defined by Morse (2007). I sent an initial email message to the participants from the previously mentioned database (Appendix A). I intended to involve 10 participants in this study and ended up with 11. All the participants met the primary sampling criteria: They were employed full-time as a senior college administrator (e.g., dean of students, assistant/associate vice president) in a student affairs department at a Massachusetts historically or predominantly white institution; identified as white, and had at least 10 years of professional experience with some responsibility responding to or being involved with or (at minimum) being aware of campus responses to racial incidents.

Each campus administrator in this study was aware of at least one campus racial incident during their professional practice and the subsequent campus response to that incident. While all participants self-identified as white, they did have other cultural or social identities (e.g., sexual identity, gender identity, and/or social class) that allowed them to identify as less privileged. I also included the following statement of inclusivity in my initial email communication to potential participants:

> Because I value inclusiveness, I hope that the participants in this study will be diverse in many ways, including ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, social class, dis/ability, and religion. However, the study's primary purpose is to explore racial identity among white college administrators. Recognizing that you have many dimensions to your identity, do you identify as white? (Robbins, 2012)

This statement helped me identify each prospective participant's self-identity while introducing participants to my study and provided them with a statement about the values and beliefs that guided this research. Additionally, using open-ended language in the initial invitation email allowed me to highlight my attentiveness to the multiple dimensions of social identity that the participants possessed.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this analysis was in-depth individual interviews via narrative research. The stories in my research were told by 11 white college administrators working for historically and predominantly white colleges and universities in Massachusetts. I used an interview protocol (Appendix B) consistent with intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2006), which allowed me to explore my research topic in depth. As Charmaz (2006) wrote, "An [intensive] interview goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation and examines earlier events, views, and feelings afresh" (p. 26). Drawing from the work of Robbins (2016) and Patton and Bondi (2015), the interview protocol served as an interview guide with well-planned open-ended questions and ready probes.

Each participant provided consent for the interview process (see Appendix C), including authorizing audio and video recording during the interviews (see Appendix D). These interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform. I elicited

reflections from participants, leaving me free to focus on listening to and engaging with them, always keeping in mind the narrative nature of this study; that is, the focus was on their experiences and emphasizing their stories. I told each participant that I was interested in their story, no matter where it took the narrative. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness and the participants' knowledge and perceptions of responses to campus racial incidents. Each interview took about 1 hour.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using the Owl transcription platform, an advanced tool that automatically converts spoken language into written text with accuracy. I edited each transcript for small errors, and I also checked the authenticity of the transcription by watching and listening to the interviews several times while reading along with the transcription. As a member check, I shared the interview transcription with each study participant, and just two deans made slight grammatical changes to their original transcripts. Their narratives were analyzed using focalization (Holley & Colyar (2012), a method that involves the researcher establishing a clear perspective through which the narrative unfolds, thereby facilitating the organization of overarching themes from the narratives.

Critical race theory (CRT) and the privileged identity exploration (PIE) model were used as lenses throughout the coding and analysis process, as illustrated in Figure 2. CRT's concepts of interest convergence and whiteness as property guided my examination of the participants' narratives as they reflected on their social and cultural assumptions and aided in determining how they viewed responses to campus racial incidents and their understanding of

whiteness. The PIE model offered a framework for examining their responses to and observations of their privileged racial identity and their defensive reactions.

Coding of the interview data occurred in three stages using my conceptual framework as a guiding lens. During the first stage, open coding, the data were reviewed to better understand the entire dataset (Creswell, 2009). Transcripts, notes, researcher memos, and reflections were also reviewed to gain a deeper understanding of shared ideas, conversations, concerns, etc. In the second stage, axial coding combined the original codes to refine them by merging overlapping or redundant codes. A final qualitative codebook organized similarly coded data into categories to ensure greater accuracy and coherence within the codes (Creswell, 2014). In the concluding coding phase, I engaged in restricted coding to identify connections between codes and categories, culminating in the identification of the overarching themes detailed in Chapter 4. Subsequent analysis of these themes led to the refinement of more targeted themes, which were then scrutinized through the lenses of CRT and the PIE model, which together served as the guiding conceptual framework.

Insider–Outsider Status and Role of the Researcher and Positionality Statement

Scholars influence inquiry through their own subjective positions (Martínez-Alemán et al., 2015). Especially in critical inquiries, researchers must consider their own subject positions while closely examining any preconceptions that result from their own social positions. As a higher education professional, by design I engaged participants who may have shared many identity characteristics with me. As a white woman working as a mid-level academic affairs professional in public higher education for 20 years, I was able to develop a rapport with the participants as an “insider.” This led the participants to view me as sympathetic to and understanding of their experiences and to be open with me as they

reflected on their experiences with campus racial incidents and their awareness of whiteness (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

I have intentionally engaged with the topics of whiteness, racial identity, racism, and antiracism in higher education since I started the higher education doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts Boston in June 2014. However, my efforts to understand racism and confront my own biases represent a process I have engaged in since childhood. Like most white people, I grew up in a predominantly white community and had few interactions with BIPOC people until I attended college. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argued that "most people in their daily lives do not come into contact with many persons of different race or social station. We converse with, and read materials written by persons in our own cultures" (p. 33). This white isolation often reinforces bigotry, fear, and racism. During my upbringing, I developed interest in the dissonance between America's lofty ideals and the enduring marginalization of Black Americans, perpetuated through a caste system of social hierarchy enforced by laws, institutions, and violence. This awareness was further nurtured by my mother, who actively encouraged and participated in discussions with me on this topic. Yet, I was socialized in, educated in, and influenced by the American social environment that upholds a pervasive culture of whiteness. However, through my experiences in this doctoral program, I have learned a great deal more about the experiences of BIPOC people, particularly American college students, through a decolonized historical lens and engagement with the contemporary literature. Although I have begun grasping the endemic racism prevalent in the United States and the pervasive culture of whiteness that permeates every system and environment, I acknowledge that my own journey of learning has only just started, and there is much more ground to cover. Further, as a white, cisgender female, my

positionality has granted me institutional access, allowing me to navigate the ideologies, practices, and curricula that uphold whiteness in society and in higher education. While I engage in self-reflection regarding my role and the role of other white individuals in perpetuating systems of oppression and whiteness in academia, I acknowledge that there is much more I can actively do to dismantle the pervasive culture of whiteness within this context.

As an administrator seeking change, it is crucial for me to continuously examine the aspects of this profession that enable individuals like me, who may be aware of the inherent inequities within the field, to act as gatekeepers, safeguarding and advocating for a system that perpetuates a culture of whiteness and responds ineffectively to racial incidents on campus. Leonardo (2009) held that white supremacy is a process that benefits every white individual, thus making it the responsibility of each white person to dismantle the supporting structures. Having benefited from this oppressive system, I am obligated to expose the ideologies and systems that contribute to inadequate and often harmful responses to campus racial incidents.

Through a commitment to liberation, I conducted this study of white campus administrators' awareness of whiteness to examine responses to campus racial incidents. By doing so, my intention was to help scholars and practitioners finally address, in a substantive way, systemic racism and understand their own investment in white ideology. Specifically, I aimed to explore how racial incidents might present an opportunity for white administrators to challenge the pervasive culture of whiteness in higher education.

Credibility

To ensure the credibility of this study, I engaged deeply with participants, used persistent observations, and triangulated interview data via member checks. I also applied Mertens' (2014) four main elements of trustworthiness—transferability, credibility, dependability, and conformability—to guide the study. Providing rich, thick descriptions established transferability, while credibility was established through evidence from my observations, interpretations, and conclusions. Dependability will be established over time if different researchers replicate my results, while conformability was established by allowing the participants and the context, rather my biases or preconceptions, frame the results. Conformability was achieved through reflexive journaling, member checking, and peer debriefing to identify and address my biases and assumptions.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. Guba and Lincoln (1982) proposed that to judge the soundness of qualitative research, researchers must establish that the results of that research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participants in the study. In this research, transferability was demonstrated by providing sufficient detail around the context of my research setting so that others can decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another situation with which they are familiar and whether the findings can be justifiably applied to the setting.

Limitations

Mertens (2014) noted that it is not possible to “design and conduct the perfect research study” (p. 435). Therefore, as the researcher, I recognized and discussed the

limitations of the study throughout this process. Rallis and Rossman (2012) noted that "findings are tentative and conditional; that knowledge is elusive and approximate; and that our claims should be humble, given the extraordinary complexity of the social world we want to learn more about" (p. 135). First, in this study, there were limitations related to access. While white deans of students granted me access to them, some were hesitant to share certain examples of racism or racial incidents because they were concerned that they or their institution would be reported unfavorably. In response, I reassured my participants of their confidentiality and my intention to share their honest observations to contribute to the study of higher education, in an area that has received little attention. I made every effort to protect the confidentiality of each participant and their institution. However, it is quite possible that white deans who had encountered even more egregious instances of campus racial incidents and inadequate responses at their historically and predominantly white institutions chose not to participate in this study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the study findings and describes the context through which study participants understood responses to campus racial incidents and the pervasive culture of whiteness in higher education. The chapter begins with a brief profile of each participant and a description of the research setting. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym by which they were identified in this study, giving a human face to the findings, as expressed through selected quotations from their individual narratives.

During this study, 11 white campus administrators participated in semi-structured interviews. Each participant held the position of dean of students or a closely related professional role; for instance, four participants held the title of associate vice president, and one held the title of vice president. Each participant had a decade or more of experience in the higher education field, with the majority having spent their entire careers there—often 25 years or more. They all worked at historically or predominantly white institutions in Massachusetts and identified as white. The participants represented a range of institutional types, including both 4-year public and private institutions of various sizes. Additionally, one participant worked at a public community college. Three of the 11 identified as queer or gay. Table 1 provides a description of each of the study participants.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Name	Institution Type	Terminal Degree (JD, EdD, or PhD)	Gender Identity
Jason	Large public university	Yes	Male
Sebastian	Small private university	Currently enrolled	Male
Penny	Large private university	Yes	Female
Ann	Medium public university	Yes	Female
Andrew	Large private university	Yes	Male
Ethan	Small private college	Yes	Male
Bethany	Small private college	Master's degree	Female
Karl	Small private college	Yes	Male
Mark	Medium public university	Yes	Male
Natalie	Small private college	Yes	Female
Donna	Medium public community college	Yes	Female

Note. In the context of this study, small colleges are characterized as enrolling 5,000 or fewer students, medium-sized colleges fall within the range of 5,000 to 15,000 students, and large colleges have enrollments exceeding 15,000 students.

Eight of the 11 participants were aged 50 or older and had extensive experience in the student affairs field, with some having accumulated 25 to 30 years in progressively responsible roles. Three participants were in their mid-30s yet had spent most of their professional careers in higher education. Gender distribution among participants was nearly equal, with 45% identifying as female and 55% as male; none identified as transgender. All the deans had master's degrees, and all but two held terminal degrees, either a PhD, EdD, or

law degree. One participant indicated they were enrolled in a doctoral program. All participants identified as white and possessed shared understanding that their role, at least in part, involved responding to campus racial incidents at their respective institutions. Although additional demographic details were collected, they are not disclosed here to protect the participants' confidentiality.

In times of campus crisis, deans of students play a pivotal role managing emergencies and devising responses to ensure the well-being of students. Additionally, most deans of students oversee student conduct, making their position essential in managing responses to racial incidents. One participant said her role was to ensure that "students not only thrive but also feel a strong sense of belonging," underscoring a common understanding among the deans that it was their role to contribute to students' sense of inclusion. Another participant concisely defined their role as "the chief student advocate, so [as] to be a sounding board, a resource, a champion for students."

Findings

The purpose of this study was to critically explore the professional and personal experiences of white deans of students at historically or predominantly white institutions. Specifically, my goal was to examine how white campus administrators understood and responded to campus racial incidents and their perceptions of the pervasive culture of whiteness within higher education environments. Analysis of the interviews revealed a set of patterns highlighting the deans' understanding of the culture of whiteness at their respective institutions and of campus responses to racial incidents.

Context, Perceptions, and Role: Deans' Understanding of Campus Responses to Racial Incidents

Given the pervasiveness of racist incidents on college campuses, I asked the study participants to describe their understanding of the role they played in responding to campus racial incidents and the impact those incidents had on their campus community. Almost every participant viewed the dean of student's role as somewhat diffused—that is, as part of a collective institutional responsibility they shared with other colleagues in collaboration with the members of a campus bias response team. Collectively, the deans understood a bias response team to be a committee established by higher education institutions to address instances of bias or hate on campus. Comprising campus staff, faculty, administrative leaders, and sometimes students, these teams aim to respond effectively to such incidents. In discussions about responses to racial incidents on campus, 9 of the 11 participants either referenced their existing bias response team or expressed a desire to establish one soon. The deans had a shared understanding of the role these teams play. Generally, bias response teams support individuals who encounter discrimination or harassment based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other protected characteristics. While these teams also address campus racial incidents to some extent, awareness of this responsibility varied in the deans' responses. Notably, despite acknowledging the presence of a bias response team, none of the participants viewed it as a formal entity designated specifically to address campus racial incidents, highlighting a contradiction in who on campus was ultimately responsible for responding to such incidents. Further, each participant highlighted a professional DEI colleague, who had various titles, in their discussion of the bias response team, and they consistently interconnected these two entities.

The findings comprise six themes that emerged from the data analysis:

1. “We have a DEI person” highlights the deans’ overreliance on and deference to their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional colleagues in responses to campus racial incidents and the connectedness the deans perceived between the DEI professionals and campus bias response teams.
2. “And are these racial?” delves into the reluctance of the deans to acknowledge and classify racial incidents as racial incidents, despite the prevalence of such occurrences on campus. This theme also highlights the paradox of the deans leaning heavily on written campus antiracist statements while simultaneously failing to address systemic racism within the institution.
3. “Who I'm inviting to the table” relates to the deans’ understanding of the concept of the “white decision-making table” in higher education, representing spaces of power and influence within institutions. The theme highlights the deans’ agency in extending invitations to BIPOC colleagues to this symbolic table. Additionally, it centers on the prevalence of senior white leadership in historically and predominantly white institutions and explores how the deans perceived and interacted with racist white leaders and colleagues.
4. “That George Floyd piece” refers to a performative acknowledgement of the murder of George Floyd. This theme explores how the deans engaged superficially with learning about systemic racism in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, often resulting in performative acknowledgments rather than substantive action.

5. “It’s like a test … [let me] Google [that] real quick” highlights the challenges deans faced comprehending the pervasive culture of whiteness and its relevance to their roles as leaders. This theme also relates to the deans feeling discriminated against, their lack of in-depth understanding of white privilege, and their defensiveness in conversations about white privilege.
6. “Completely personal” highlights the intersection of personal and professional relationships for the deans, namely their relationships with BIPOC family members and colleagues. It also relates to how these personal connections informed their professional practice around campus racial incidents, particularly given the predominantly white communities where they resided.

“We Have a DEI Person”

“We have a DEI person” was the first theme to emerge from the data collected, highlighting the deans’ overreliance on and deference to their DEI professional colleagues in responses to campus racial incidents. This theme also highlights the connections the deans established between what many of them called “the DEI person” and their campus bias response teams. The deans had a shared understanding that their DEI colleague(s) were responsible for cultivating a diverse campus community, overseeing trainings and programs, and having expertise on issues related to race. The DEI colleague appeared particularly influential in how the deans constructed their role in responses to campus racial incidents. Most of the deans felt that their DEI colleagues had more authority, expertise, and responsibility in responding to campus racial incidents, thus lessening their own sense of responsibility. For instance, when asked to provide an example of a campus racial incident, Donna, dean of students at a community college, said, “I don't know the specifics of it

because Bob [her associate dean] managed it. I've been sort of watching the emails go back and forth with him and our DEI person." Further, almost every dean mentioned a campus bias response team in conjunction with their DEI colleague. For example, Karl, a dean of students at a small private institution, said, "Our Associate Provost for DEI has really taken on a lot of the DEI initiatives around campus, and in some of that is responding to [incidents], and is advising us [the campus bias response team] how best the community can respond to those [incidents]." Donna mentioned her DEI colleague—whom she referred to as the "DEI person"—six times during our interview. Her and the other deans' phrasing tokenized the DEI professionals, reducing them to the role of addressing DEI issues on campus, and implied that DEI work is the sole responsibility of BIPOC people rather than a collective effort involving everyone, including the white deans themselves.

The deans also linked their campus DEI colleagues to a lack of formal guidelines or policies on their respective campuses for responding to campus racial incidents. I asked the participants:

> Who else is involved in handling racial conflicts on your campus? What guidelines are you given to recognize, report, and respond to racial conflict? And what sort of guidance or instructions do you receive for identifying, reporting, and addressing racial incidents?

Most of the study participants were quick to share that there were in fact no formal processes or written institutional guidelines, outside of what may be found in the formal student code of conduct, for responding to campus racial incidents. Participants also expressed frustration about what they perceived as poor campus responses and/or limited responses that were out of their hands, such as outcomes from formal student-conduct or employee-grievance

processes. For instance, when asked about formal guidelines around responding to campus racial incidents, Penny, dean of students at a large private university, stated,

> I wouldn't say we have guidelines that are written down in terms of responding. We have developed lots of practices, and this is something that we've been trying to hone in on, so last year I put together a bias reporting working group that had folks from all around the institution to focus on our process and our responses to improve our various communications and outreach and just our general awareness and transparency. But I wouldn't say there's any guidelines that are written down…. I would say it is actually part of our culture to *not* have guidelines like that, that are sort of set-in stone.

The absence of formal processes or written institutional guidelines for responding to campus racial incidents, as shared by study participants like Penny, highlighted systemic failures within their institutions. This lack of structured guidance beyond formal student codes of conduct reflected broader institutional cultures that prioritizes flexibility and discretion over rigid policies as the study participants, like Penny, emphasized the reliance on informal practices and ad hoc approaches rather than adherence to predefined guidelines that hold perpetrators accountable for racism. In addition, Penny offered her observations about the injuries that occur due to poor responses to racial incidents on her campus. She explained,

> I think on our campus, Black students are particularly impacted by racial incidents, I think, because in some ways they, they make up such a small percentage of our undergraduate population. I'm sure it's also embedded in lots of other factors. But I would say, in my experience, students of color, but Black students specifically seem more impacted by these incidents. I think that sometimes the damage is from the

> incident itself, and sometimes then there's that secondary damage from the institutional response. There's a word for that, that I'm forgetting … institutional trauma maybe? But anyway, not causing institutional trauma. I think we can't always control what happens, or you can't always control what thousands of students do, but we can control how we respond to it. And so, making sure that we're not causing more damage and how we react and respond, I think that is *something* that we can do, and I think it requires a lot of thoughtfulness and a lot of folks working together to bring different perspectives.… We need to find a way to be willing to do that hard work.

Penny's remarks revealed her understanding of the prevalent and serious racial incidents inflicted upon Black students on her predominantly white campus. Despite the recent formation of a bias reporting working group, Penny acknowledged poor campus responses to racial incidents. She highlighted the unique vulnerability of Black students, who she viewed as disproportionately affected due to their small representation within the undergraduate population and the systemic factors that contribute to their marginalization. Notably, Penny underscored the concept of institutional trauma, suggesting that the institutional response to racial incidents on her campus exacerbates the harm experienced by Black students.

Another participant, Natalie, one of the younger deans of students at a small private college, shared her understanding or rather lack of understanding of the campus bias response team on her campus. She said, “I actually don’t know what the current name is; it’s always an acronym that changes.” She shared that since she was “new in her dean role,” she was just starting to become more involved in campus responses to racial incidents. She said, “I’ve been here for 9 years. I've seen a lot. But I was more kind of on the ground.” Previously, she

said, she would be directed to respond in a specific way; that is, it was her responsibility to implement a campus response to a racial incident, but she had no input into the response. Further, Natalie's lack of familiarity with the name of the campus bias response team reflected the disconnectedness between her role as dean of students and engagement with campus responses to racial incidents at institution. As one of the younger deans of students, Natalie revealed that being new in her role she was only beginning to engage with campus responses to racial incidents. However, her tenure of 9 years at the institution suggested a significant period of time during which she may have been relatively disengaged from issues of racial equity and inclusion as a decision maker. Natalie's lack of elaboration or examples suggests a continuing need for her to develop a deeper understanding of and accountability for addressing responses to campus racial incidents within her role as a dean of students. Like Penny, Natalie also shared her perception of poor and limited responses on her campus, despite the existence of a campus bias response team:

> A lot of times I just want somebody to *not* do that again, and I want them to learn and sometimes I want [the perpetrator] to be fired and those things can come true, but often they don't. And so, I think we work with counseling and some other folks to talk about [poor responses]. How do you continue when you maybe didn't get what [you] wanted out of this thing? How do you succeed here if your expectation wasn't met in terms of a response?

Like Penny and Natalie—both younger deans in their mid- to late 30s working at private colleges—Mark, dean of students at a medium-sized public university shared that while his institution has a bias response team, it had not necessarily improved responses to racial incidents. Mark noted,

> I started and led the [bias response] team here for 3 years and we've had so many amazing, deep, meaningful conversations and still ended up like, “What do we do?” You know, there's definitely no … there's no easy answer for how to respond to these things. But our response is critical, even if it's “there's no finding here” … or if it's sending a message out to the community as a whole or to the community that was hurt to provide [them with] resources.

Mark's observation underscored the intricate challenges inherent in addressing racial incidents, as he suggested that even response teams themselves lack definitive solutions on how to effectively respond to such incidents. Despite his leadership in forming a bias response team for three years, Mark acknowledged the difficulty of finding effective solutions to these incidents, and he also appeared resigned to a sense of powerlessness in there being from his perception no clear-cut answers. Ethan, a queer dean of students at a small private college with more than 30 years of experience, also noted that his institution did not have a formal approach to responding to campus racial incidents. He indicated that this responsibility was shared among many individuals and noted that, at times, his white identity had precluded him from responding in certain circumstances, inferring that he leaned on or deferred to BIPOC colleagues:

> I usually try to have more of a group approach. You know, when something happens, it's pretty rare that I'm making a decision on my own; I’m consulting with other colleagues. Because I have my own identities that are salient to me and sometimes that opens my eyes to things others don't see, and other times it causes me to have some blind spots.

Ethan implied that being white may have precluded him from seeing and addressing racism because of his "blind spots," so a "group approach" informed his campus responses. However, he did not explicitly state that he relied on BIPOC colleagues; instead, he offered that,

> Every person on the team is either a Person of Color or somebody who identifies as queer, and it's about four people who identify as People of Color and three people identify as Black. And so, it has changed the nature of our conversations … because it does have an impact on the nature of the conversations and the things that we think are important in the way that we approach things.

Despite the group approach, Ethan also noted that his campus does not have a bias response team, which he attributed to a recent period of unusually high turnover among senior leadership. He reported that, in just a few years' time, more than 10 vice presidents had been hired and then left their roles. When he shared that his campus did not have a formal bias incident response team, he said sardonically, "There were folks who said, 'Just wait until the new president gets hired and starts.'" Like other deans, he also highlighted his DEI colleague's role in responding to campus racial incidents:

> She's only been here a year … and so it kind of depends on the nature of the incident…it could involve the director of our intercultural student affairs, there's a core team and then a bigger pool of folks who might be pulled in based on the context of the situation.

As shown here, Ethan chose his language very carefully, only implying that the responsibility for responding to campus racial incidents was in the hands of his DEI colleagues.

Karl, an experienced dean from a small private college, also shared his understanding of the response structure for racial incidents, again linking that responsibility to his DEI colleague. He said: **“**We have a bias team. As dean of students … I sit on that committee; it's chaired by our director of intercultural affairs, as well as our associate vice president for DEI.” Bethany, an experienced dean of students at a small private college, alternated between discussing their campus bias response team, acknowledging the presence of a DEI office and colleagues, and deferring to those colleagues' authority and expertise:

> I think we have a quick and well-established [bias response team] bringing the right people to the table to talk about the severity of the incident and the impact. We have an office on our campus of diversity, equity, and inclusion. One of those members is a part of our bias incident team. But that whole department kind of helps us understand … the larger impact and what response we should have.

Sebastian, a young dean of students who had worked his way up from an entry-level position at his small private college to dean in less than 10 years, also emphasized the role his DEI colleagues played in responding to campus racial incidents. He explained that the campus diversity education office had recently been moved out of his area (i.e., student affairs) to the president’s office:

> So, we have a bias reporting process on campus … that responds to these incidents. We have a new president … and one of his initiatives was to pull diversity education out into its own office, which was something that needed to be elevated. So, the changes have occurred a little bit differently because … diversity education staff play a large role in the bias response process, and we follow up with students and have conversations with them.

Sebastian's response suggests that he recognized the significance of “diversity education” on his campus, indicating a need for it to be given greater prominence, possibly in its own office. This, however, underscores the deans’ apparent discomfort addressing campus racial incidents, as they appeared to readily defer to campus DEI professionals. Both Sebastian and other deans were hesitant to take a leadership stance in addressing racial incidents and the racialized atmosphere on their respective campuses. This hesitation appeared to be rooted in uncertainty and discomfort about issues of race, racist incidents, and racialized campus climates. Donna, an experienced gay dean of students at a community college, also deferred to the “DEI person,” saying,

> He's educating people not only about a process, but he's also intervening in situations that help people understand “that's not okay,” and we know that, but we sometimes need a little extra … you know, he's the executive director, so he has more sort of pull around this type of stuff, and this is his specialty … obviously.

Donna’s emphasis on her colleague’s professional title, “executive director,” indicated her nod to his authority and expertise, which were perhaps greater than that of colleagues with the title of director or even dean, but she did not explicitly state that. Yet, Donna and the other deans’ frequent use of the term "DEI person" indicated their desire to appear neutral, professional, and even collegial, this approach may inadvertently perpetuate racial stereotypes or biases.

Further, while only two deans specifically noted the race of their DEI colleagues, they all implied that these colleagues had a BIPOC identity. Additionally, on the surface, the subtext offered by most of the deans in their reluctance to plainly describe the role racial identity has in this important work revealed itself in each interview. Perhaps due to fear that

their use of direct language might be scrutinized or challenged or even seen as racist. However, avoidance of explicitly stating the race of their professional colleagues indicated a subtle acknowledgment of power dynamics within the institution. By frequently referring to their diversity, equity, and inclusion colleagues as the "DEI person," Donna and her fellow deans inadvertently or deliberately distanced themselves from direct engagement with racism and responses to campus racial incidents, relying instead on their colleagues to address these issues. This approach, while aiming to maintain a sense of neutrality and professionalism, perpetuated racial stereotypes or biases by reducing the role of DEI professionals to a singular identity rather than recognizing their multifaceted expertise. Overall, the subtle subtext revealed in this finding highlighted revealed the language and behaviors used by the white deans regarding campus diversity and inclusion efforts and their tendency to rely on others to lead those efforts.

“And Are These Racial?”

The second theme—“And are these racial?”—explores the deans’ reluctance to acknowledge and classify racial incidents, despite the prevalence of such occurrences on campus. It also highlighted the paradox of deans leaning heavily on campus antiracist philosophies, policies, or statements while simultaneously failing to address systemic racism within the institution. Notably, even though all participants were aware that our interview would focus on campus racial incidents and corresponding campus responses to those incidents, seven of the 11 deans exhibited a disinclination to respond to the question, “Can you provide an example of a racial incident that you handled recently, how you came to know about it, and what steps you took to handle it, and what the outcome was?” The disinclination of the deans to respond to questions about specific racial incidents despite their

ability to define such incidents in a general sense highlighted a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The deans possessed language to discuss racism in abstract terms, yet they struggled to provide concrete examples of racism within their own institutions. The study participants revealed their broader reluctance and discomfort with acknowledging and addressing racism, particularly when it required them to confront their own complicity or privilege.

Many participants were reluctant to share an example of a recent campus racial incident and their response to it. Instead, they exhibited extended silences, sometimes over a minute, and displayed hesitation in their responses through long pauses, thus revealing their discomfort in discussing campus racial incidents, especially regarding their own involvement in responding to those incidents. Many of the deans were also unable to give clear, simple accounts of the incidents, instead their responses were meandering and filled with long pauses where they were searching for their words or thoughts. For instance, Ethan one dean hinted at his reluctance to delve into the topic when he stated, "Let me think of one that has happened that I have personally handled…" and then he said in a quizzical tone of voice "And are these racial?" Similarly, after just a few minutes into our interview, I asked Penny the same question, she appeared reluctant to share an example of a campus racial incident, and became preoccupied with the time we has spent talking, even though we were less than 10 minutes into our interview. After a long pause, she shifted several times in her seat, looked off screen, paused, and said, "Sure … by the way, if I'm taking too long to answer and rambling, you can just tell me" and then after another long pause, she added in a questioning tone of voice "I'm just trying to think if there has been something recently." Ethan, who was previously concise in his responses, also offered several long pauses, struggled to respond,

then said, “I hesitate to use the sign example [referring to a racist sign that was posted on campus by an outside group that he had mentioned previously] because it was a pretty quick and was a finished matter,” and then he went on to share a nearly 10-year-old example of a campus racial incident that had happened on another campus that was connected to their campus only “tangentially,” as he said. Like Ethan, Ann also struggled with her response, saying, “Um, let me think of what one I would want to talk about that would be helpful” followed by several extended pauses before she eventually shared an example but avoided speaking plainly and directly about the actual incident and the race of those involved. Another dean, Andrew said, “Fortunately, it hasn't been so recently [that a campus racial incident has happened,] and I'm okay with that.” Thomas, a dean at large, private highly selective institution also could not provide a recent example, he said, “The one that comes to mind first is that there was quite a bit of activity and protest following the murder of George Floyd; I think it triggered a lot of on campus activism,” thus conflating a campus racial incident with racial activism. Lastly and notably, Mark, who was unable to provide an example, sighed, and paused for several long moments, and then said, “Just got to think about it for a minute, fortunately, nothing, like, major” which contradicted a previous response where he had acknowledged poor responses to campus racial incidents by the campus bias response team of which he had led the formation.

The above examples illustrated the reluctance and discomfort many participants experienced when asked to share examples of recent campus racial incidents and their responses to them. Their uncertainty is evident in their extended silences, hesitant responses, and meandering accounts, which revealed their reluctance to engage with campus responses to racial incidents. Some participants struggled to recall recent incidents, while others

attempted to deflect or downplay the significance of racial incidents on their campuses. Their responses ranged from avoiding direct discussion of racial incidents to conflating activism with incidents of racism, which highlighted their avoidance and lack of leadership in campus responses to racial incidents.

Additionally, rather than recognize and address directly the racial dimensions of the incidents that had occurred on their campuses, some deans sidestepped by inserting white people into their examples and viewing students through a colorblind lens, suggesting that the racial events could have happened to anyone regardless of their race. For instance, when asked to describe a campus racial incident, Ann, an experienced dean of students from a medium-sized public university, was reluctant to make direct mention of the racial identities of the students involved in the incidents. That is, she said there were "incidents where specific students were targeted in an ongoing manner over a period of time" but did not state explicitly that the targeted students were from a racially marginalized group. She continued, "So … if I was the person being targeted … like a person who is white with blonde hair, they might say [the perpetrators of the racist attack], 'white people with blonde hair' blah blah blah." It was confusing to follow her example because she was essentially describing racial incidents perpetrated against white people. So, after more than 5 minutes, I asked Ann for some clarification. I asked her if the example she provided, in which she referred to a "white person with blond hair," was her attempt to describe an actual racist incident, in which a person from a nonwhite racial group was targeted. She responded,

> Yes, it was always a Person of Color [targeted], and it always included at least a reference to their color, but yes it … was a negative racial comment to a person who

> was also gay. Yeah, so it had another layer added to it … referenced their gender. So, it might have been about a Black with a Black woman characteristic.

Ann's hesitance to directly address the racial identities of those involved and her awkwardness in discussing race when prompted highlighted her overall discomfort addressing actual issues of racial harm within her institution and her inclination toward colorblindness.

Additionally, several deans in the study displayed unease in acknowledging the presence of racist campus environments, preferring instead to emphasize their institution's commitments to antiracism, fostering of a "welcoming environment," or "diversity" efforts. For instance, throughout our interview, Ann, without prompting, commented that her campus was "*very* antiracist" and aligned herself with strong "antiracist" policies on her campus. She offered spontaneously,

> The other thing that happened on our campus is our president and our chief diversity officer created an antiracist statement. And so, we are *very* antiracist, we have a very clear antiracist statement that guides our work.… We are very public to say we don't just say, "We have nice diversity initiatives"; we say that we are an antiracist campus, and we do initiatives to assure that that's true. We try to make sure we have information on our websites and in our conversations, and we don't hedge away from the concept of being an antiracist campus.

Without prompting, Ann mentioned her campus's antiracism statements throughout the interview, presenting herself as a racial justice-focused practitioner despite her apparent inability to plainly describe racial incidents in which racist actions were enacted by white students against BIPOC students.

Penny, dean of students at a large private institution in her mid-30s, also showed reluctance to directly discuss campus racial incidents. When I asked her to share an example of a racial incident and the campus's response, she elaborated for nearly 7 minutes on what she called a "complex incident" and its subsequent "consequences" without ever mentioning the race of any of the involved parties or actually describing what happened. Later, I learned that this incident was a verbal racist event that had occurred within a classroom at her institution—but only after I asked Penny directly if she would share the nature of the incident and the races of those involved. Penny's initial account was filled with broad strokes, leaving the specifics of the incident and the affected parties unclear. She neither identified the racial backgrounds of those involved nor clarified if the altercation was between students or involved faculty. When I asked her to clarify, it appeared she was wary of portraying her institution negatively in my study and minimized the incident:

> So, they reported that a student basically called another student, a Black student, a "slave" in a class. That was the gist of it…. By the time we finally met with the students … that wasn't exactly what happened. And there was a lot of, kind of, … there was a little bit of truth to that, but it was more complex than that. And still concerning. And I think because they were so … kind of tired by that point … and were *very impacted*, but also impacted by almost more so by the aftermath and the *incident itself.*

As evidenced in the preceding quote, Penny, who had previously been concise and articulate in her interview responses, struggled with and did not plainly indicate that the student who called the Black student a slave was white. Penny did eventually but reluctantly describe some of the repercussions of the incident, though she still spoke in generalities. Despite the

victim's reluctance to engage in campus judicial proceedings, Penny distanced herself from her perception of the inadequate handling of and response to the incident. She explained that administrators on the campus bias response team pursued a complaint against the white student for "bias-motivated conduct. Nevertheless, the white student was eventually deemed not culpable for bias-motivated conduct, despite the blatant racism of their actions. With a tone and facial expressions that conveyed defeat and embarrassment, Penny said,

> The hearing officer found there was not enough evidence, given … all the complexity and what was said and that the other student [i.e., the victim] didn't end up participating [in the judicial process]. But we did put [the perpetrator] through a process, and there was *some* [emphasis added to indicate her sarcasm] accountability. But yeah, that one just stood out because it was *very* complex.

Penny's use of the word "complex" inferred her understanding that the situation was indeed not complex but instead was made more complex by the way it was mishandled by others (e.g., the faculty member, the disciplinary board, etc.). Paraphrasing sentiments she heard from Black students regarding their experience on her campus, Penny, unprompted, also said,

> "It's just these awful, awful comments or, sometimes it's like calling me the N word or sometimes it's just like making fun of me or saying like, 'Oh, you don't belong here or you know who got you in here, right?' It's just those types of comments that I think honestly are just so prevalent for some that I think that's what I see a lot, it is just a lot, and also alcohol-fueled in a lot of ways, too."

Despite Penny's initial reluctance to plainly describe a very serious racist incident on her campus, she ultimately revealed that her campus is indeed racist. Through her tone, inflection, facial expressions, and indirect language during our conversation, she hinted at a

sense of deeper responsibility for the well-being of students (along with the institution's racist reputation). Like other white deans in the study, Penny was reluctant to confront the racial dynamics on her campus, only dabbling in her introspections on her institution's shortcomings in addressing racism on campus. However, it appeared that her experience of describing this racist situation provided her a moment of realization or insight.

Ethan, a gay dean of students at a small private college with more than 30 years of experience, emphasized the regularity with which he encountered reports of racial microaggressions, the subtle but harmful comments or actions BIPOC people often experience during interactions with white people that undermine their experiences or identities. Like Ann's earlier observation, Ethan emphasized the "progressive" nature of his campus environment without any prompting, in contrast to its instances of racism. Ethan stated,

> We pretty frequently have students who experience microaggressions in the classroom and are struggling with how they manage that. How do we balance the whole sense of academic freedom with helping change culture—and we're a pretty progressive place, right?

Karl, an experienced dean with over 25 years of professional experience at a small private institution, shared that BIPOC students experienced frequent racial microaggressions in classrooms on his campus, perpetrated by white faculty. While he highlighted that his "community is really continuing to become more diverse," emphasizing his institution's strides toward increased diversity, he downplayed the racism students experienced. For example, he described inadequate responses to racist incidents on his campus while also distancing himself from certain colleagues:

> As always happens, the gut reaction is more training … but there's been significant pushback from faculty, so the … training became mandatory. Again, something we've always done in student affairs, but for [other] people it's never been mandatory to be in some of these discussions and to confront things like privilege and microaggressions. Very intelligent people just can't wrap their head around it or are unwilling to wrap their head around it. So, I've definitely noticed some differences in terms of folks across the institution. We obviously have *some* amazing faculty allies. But that's probably, quite frankly, some of our bigger issues here on campus [referring to faculty who perpetrate racial microaggressions].

Similarly, Natalie, a young dean at a small private college, hesitated when asked to share an example of a recent campus racial incident while simultaneously demonstrating her awareness of the pervasive racism at her institution:

> I think it's microaggressions that impact our students the most. I know, we don't get a lot of reports or even in anecdotal conversations about … blatant acts of racism, right? But we're hearing *a lot* about microaggressions. And just a complete lack of awareness on the part of students, faculty, and staff, of what kinds of messages they're sending, what kinds of different treatment they are giving people…. I hear that all the time, and it's definitely a problem here.

As shown here, Natalie was aware of pervasive racial microaggressions experienced by students on her campus, but she failed to plainly acknowledge the race of the students victimized by this racism. Instead, she described the students as "people," again demonstrating hesitance to discuss directly the racial incidents and the races of those involved.

Further, like other deans, Natalie chose to highlight her campus's "welcoming environment," a phrase that served as a subtle way of implying "not racist." However, this assertion stood in sharp contrast to the actual environment she detailed in her description:

> We have this sense that at our best, our mission says that all are welcome without distinction, and I think we pride ourselves on that. But when these incidents happen—and they do happen, whether those are microaggressions in the classroom, whether those are student-on-student moments of real … either lack of education and lack of understanding of what's appropriate or even targeted specific racism—it reverberates through the community. And I think what it does is then builds a level of skepticism, or sometimes distrust of … [paraphrasing the thoughts of students] "If I report this, is anything going to happen or does the administration even understand?"

As this quote suggests, Natalie offered forgiveness to perpetrators of microaggressions for their "lack of education" and "lack of understanding" in an effort to distance herself from racism. Mark, an experienced dean of students at a medium-sized public university, also acknowledged that, despite "the work being done" to address racism, his campus environment was indeed racist, while distancing himself from the perpetrators of racial microaggressions:

> You know, I've heard things, I hear things, mainly about … students' experiences in the classroom. Sometimes they are not where they should be. Again, being at a PWI, there could be one, maybe two, Students of Color in a classroom of all white peers.… I've heard this way too many times, and it makes me cringe, but a faculty member … turns to the only Black student in the class and says, "Tell me what your experience is … your people's experience," targeting a Black man or woman or whatever. I mean,

> God, really? … So that is absolutely happening. So, I think there's a lot of work to be done on our campus. I think student affairs folks in general are really truly doing it and moving the needle forward. I think academic affairs needs to come a long way.

The preceding quote reflects Mark's perspective on the issue of racism within the campus environment. Mark acknowledged ongoing campus efforts to address racism but highlighted the persistence of racist incidents, particularly in the classroom. He described instances of Black students being singled out or stereotyped by faculty members based on their race. Mark expressed discomfort and frustration with these incidents and suggested that academic affairs still had much to do to effectively address racism, whereas he felt that student affairs staff were more apt to be actively engaged in addressing racism.

Sebastian, a young gay dean of students at a small private college, also provided an example of campus racism while describing a situation in which he avoided directly addressing a student who used racist language, under the guise of creating a "safe space" for white students who make racist statements. He said,

> I had a student that came up and was really flustered talking with our admin. She said, "I *need* to meet with the dean, I *need* to meet with the dean!" I had a group of students outside waiting to come in … for a meeting. But okay, I'll give her 5 minutes. She presented as white-identifying, and she came in and was like, "I'm in this class, and I know it's colored history month, I mean Black History Month, and all we're doing is watching movies on colored people and are talking about how terrible the cops are, and my family [is] in law enforcement, I come from a long line of police enforcement, and *I feel really uncomfortable!*"

Sebastian went on to say:

> So I know some of our students are challenged when they come to us, especially when they come from a very white community with a family that has not had a conversation about their own privilege and whiteness, right? And then they are dropped into this environment that is really different than many students have experienced in the past. So being able to address, kind of, situations like that, you know, I hope that we can have some learning.

As a follow up, I asked him how he responded to the white student's use of the dehumanizing racist term "colored." He responded in a meandering manner, as if he was considering for the first time that he was responsible for addressing the student' language directly, though he did not state that explicitly:

> Well, I had to keep my composure, and I had to say, like, "Okay, like, I appreciate you coming in and feel safe and comfortable coming to talk to me, but, like, this is really something that needs to be a conversation in academics," and we have an associate dean in academics who is really good at navigating these processes and I tag him in and allow him when I need help … help … and I got in contact with him.… I think he had deep conversations and understanding with the student and helped her [here he uses a questioning tone] … I hope…. [long pause] …. I realize that … you know, like, just because this is her worldview, it's not everybody's worldview, and I'm kind of confident in … [the academic dean's] … you know … abilities to work with students and, like, listen and hear.

In the preceding scenario, Sebastian demonstrated his reluctance to directly address instances of racism, particularly when they involved white students. Despite the white student's use of dehumanizing language and expression of discomfort with discussions about Black History

Month and police enforcement, Sebastian seemed to prioritize creating a "safe space" for the student over confronting the racist language and sentiments she expressed. Instead of directly addressing the student's racist language and attitudes, Sebastian deflected responsibility to an associate dean in academics, suggesting that the issue should be dealt with in an academic context rather than by the dean of students. He avoided a direct conversation about race and therefore failed to hold the student accountable for her language and attitudes. Overall, Sebastian's handling of the situation he described raises questions about his commitment to addressing racism on campus and his willingness to engage in difficult conversations about race and privilege with his students.

Lastly, Andrew, a dean of students at a large private university, was also unable to cite a specific example of a racial incident on his campus but rather offered his view of the underlying racism amplified at highly selective educational institutions like his. He described how individual racial incidents reverberated throughout the campus community:

> And so, there's a subtext there of our underlying interactions around race, is questions of inclusion. And someone's … place in our community … and so I think that's what drives a lot of racial conflicts on this campus. Is that that subtext of selectivity? And I think one of the components is that an individual conflict or incident can become impactful for an entire community. Because of a sense of interconnectedness along racial identity lines. And so, what would be seen as an interpersonal, [for example] a roommate conflict. If it has a racial lens that is shared, it will not only be students of that individual racial category, but also people who see shared interest with that race.

The deans acknowledged the presence of widespread racism within their historically and predominantly white campuses characterized by notable segregation, yet, paradoxically, they

indicated they were not responsible for taking decisive action, revealing hesitation and inefficiency in addressing overarching racism experienced by the students in their care. The deans also excluded themselves from other white professionals whom they perceived as perpetrators of subtle racism, while simultaneously acknowledging the pervasive presence of racism on campus, albeit downplaying its significance. Finally, the deans were visibly uncomfortable as they grappled with their stated values or intentions regarding campus racism and the actual practices or systemic structures they upheld in their role as deans. This suggests that while the deans strove to act in an antiracist manner, when faced with campus racial incidents, they reacted in contradictory ways or, worse, did not react at all or deferred to others to respond.

“Who I'm Inviting to the Table”

The theme “Who I'm inviting to the table” centers on the deans’ right to invite others to the white decision-making table in higher education, representing spaces of power and influence within institutions. It highlights the power the deans have in extending invitations to people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to this symbolic table. Additionally, this theme relates to the prevalence of senior white leadership in predominantly white institutions and showed how the study participants perceive and interact with problematic white leaders and colleagues. Generally, the deans acknowledged their power to invite BIPOC colleagues to the table, and though they may not have stated it explicitly, they understood how the table has been dominated historically and structurally by white individuals, particularly those from privileged backgrounds. They indicated that other white individuals on their respective campuses held key leadership positions, administrative roles, and influential academic positions and noted that responses to campus racial incidents are approved and new policies

are created at this symbolic table. The deans also suggested that the table represents a space where voices of BIPOC faculty and staff are often marginalized or completely absent, potentially leading to missed opportunities for diverse perspectives, innovative solutions, and a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges in higher education—contributing potentially to institutional racism.

Several of the deans indicated that they felt it was important to include BIPOC faculty and professional colleagues at the decision-making table; however, there was a noticeable gap between this sentiment and actual implementation, likely perpetuating systemic imbalances or a racialized campus culture. Although some of the deans hinted at the need to extend invitations to BIPOC colleagues, it is uncertain if any proactive steps were taken to do so since the participants did not share any relevant examples. Of particular concern, some of the deans acknowledged that their institutions placed the onus of spearheading DEI initiatives on Faculty and Staff of Color, expecting them to represent diversity and address racism on campus. This approach not only burdens BIPOC staff and faculty further, but also fails to instill a collective DEI commitment among all staff and faculty regardless of their race. One dean also highlighted their institution's tokenization of BIPOC faculty, staff, and students but indicated that they felt powerless to address it. For example, Sebastian described his campus leadership, which was overwhelmingly white, and shared about his power to invite "others" to the table:

> I also have the privilege of working with a diverse student body. I'm surrounded by Students of Color all the time, and that's something I also recognize—that, as a white leader, I need to be always thinking about the space that I'm taking up ... at the table and who I'm inviting to the table. We're having these conversations and being

> intentional about always ensuring that our representation matches what our student body looks like.

Sebastian also shared,

> I think our students are challenged by white leadership and white faculty. I think that oftentimes, we ask our Staff and Faculty of Color to do *more* to be the *representation* that's not at the table instead of changing institutional practices to make sure that we are being more intentional in who we're hiring and how we are … navigating as an institution.

Sebastian's statement suggests that students face a racist campus due to the predominance of white leadership and faculty in their institution. He emphasized the need for systemic change in hiring practices rather than placing the burden solely on Staff and Faculty of Color to provide representation. This indicates his awareness of the influence of white culture on students and the necessity for change to address this issue effectively.

Penny, a dean at a large private university, also discussed the metaphorical white table and her power to invite others to it.

> Yes, I think it's like … including more voices at the table … and making sure they're not all the same voice and I think then really caring about and taking seriously what folks have to say as well. I think that as an administrator, specifically, walking into spaces, designing something, or writing a policy … just really trying to [say], "Wait a minute, whose voice *isn't* here? What assumptions am I making?"

Like other deans in this study, Penny acknowledged the lack of racially representative voices at the decision-making table, but her discussion lacked reference to concrete actions or solutions for addressing this issue. Despite acknowledging the importance of including

diverse voices and of questioning assumptions, she did not describe specific steps or initiatives that she actively engaged in to ensure the inclusion of BIPOC perspectives in administrative processes and decision making.

Karl, an experienced dean at a small private college, shared an example of a campus racial incident, the subsequent "awful" campus response to the incident, and its connection to the metaphorical decision-making table.

> And the problem you have when it's white individuals making a decision like this, when it impacts a Person of Color, maybe the decision would have been the same, ultimately, but my guess is there's no way it would have been handled the same. Were there more people involved and more people that brought something different to the table? Vis-à-vis identity and particularly racial identity.

Karl also recognized that the table, controlled by white leaders at his institution, represented most of decision-making and influence. However, given the predominantly white leadership on his campus, it remained unclear whether Karl truly advocated for inclusion of BIOPOC individuals at the table.

Like Karl, Natalie shared her understanding of her power to bring her BIPOC colleagues to the table. She said, "I think we should be making sure, if we're in a room that feels overarchingly white, that we're saying who else needs to be brought into this space and really being intentional about that." In contradiction to this statement, however, Natalie also shared her apprehension about diversifying white spaces:

> I do think there are still a lot of times where there is trepidation right inside those spaces … to not step too far, too far in and not offend, and so I think there's a hyper awareness … almost more so when it's a white majority of colleagues and only one or

> two Colleagues of Color, right? I think there are some of us that are better at it than others. I think there are some who just don't get it.

Natalie and the other deans identified issues related to diversity and inclusion, acknowledging their power to bring racially diverse individuals to the decision-making table. Yet, despite recognizing the importance of intentional inclusion, they were apprehensive about diversifying predominantly white spaces. None of the deans offered examples of extending invitations that led to the inclusion of racially diverse colleagues at the metaphorical table. By contrast, some deans expressed hesitation, fearing that reaching too far might compromise their own authority and privilege.

Several deans highlighted the predominantly white leadership at their respective institutions, which they viewed as problematic for their campus. While most of the deans did not explicitly state their reasons, their remarks hinted at a shared value for diverse leadership and its significance in fostering an inclusive and equitable environment for all members of the campus community. For example, Sebastian, a dean at a small private institution, shared,

> We also have very white leadership. I'm really cognizant of that as an institution…. I think every person in the cabinet is white, too. I'm in every accreditation committee, and every person on that committee is white, so I'm cognizant of the fact that our staff and our faculty don't match our students.

In this response, Sebastian indicated that representative leadership is important and suggested that the lack of diversity among campus leaders, all of whom were white, was a problem.

Penny, dean of a large private institution, also shared her observations of the senior white leadership at her institution and noted that she used her whiteness to influence them in their decision making:

> I'm sure [my whiteness has] benefited me in lots of ways that I'm not thinking of or able to articulate, but I think that with senior leadership there can be gaps in understanding and belief about what students go through. And I think that as a white person [long pause]—I'm trying to think of the right way to say this [long pause]—where it's kind of the way I sound … to be a white person that is not too forceful … like with an agenda or threatening to them … I think sometimes I try to just generally be a really good listener and be very calm, kind, and deliberate. And I think that in some ways, I've had the most influence, like, above me, in helping folks understand.

As shown in this comment, Penny acknowledged the inherent privileges and advantages she used in her communications with senior white leaders. Yet, her use of the term "gaps of understanding" when referring to senior white leaders subtly minimized their biased or racist perspectives and policies. This suggests her choice to refrain from directly labeling the leadership as racist while still acknowledging a significant need for improved awareness and comprehension of racial issues among senior leadership. She also grappled with how to effectively communicate her perspectives and insights without appearing confrontational or threatening to others. However, she indicated that she felt she was a good listener with a "calm" demeanor, indicating that she believed that white normative qualities had allowed her to influence those in senior positions. Penny also shared,

> It's no secret that a lot of our leadership is white men. And there are certainly kind of blind spots there and lots of assumptions that can get made…. And I think I've been able to use my whiteness in some ways to be able to influence decision making because of how I've been able to approach those and how people receive me differently because of my race.

Again, Penny's choice of language showed her hesitation in directly labeling the leadership as racist, though she still acknowledged a significant need for improved awareness and comprehension of racial issues within the ranks of senior leadership. Penny also shared her understanding of the preservation of her organization's "legacy" by senior white male leaders and the board of trustees:

> Most of the leadership is still white, and I think that … it does taint the decisions that this powerful group makes. I think most of our board of trustees are also white, and so I think there's this tension between wanting to protect or preserve the legacy and the people who have been here a long time but also to evolve and progress … and I just, I don't' think we're really there yet.

Additionally, Penny noted that the white male leadership at her institution was unwilling to publicly share or reflect on issues related to race, hinting at a racist campus culture of silence:

> I think our culture here is wonderful in so many ways and can have really great dimensions to it … but we're an institution that is very concerned with our image. We're an institution that does not tend to share much at all. I mean, if you look at other institutions like [institution name omitted], they will put report after report on their website about various very recent things—I'm sure responses or experiences of students probably around race or Title IX…. They just are very transparent and open with data. We are the polar opposite. We don't share anything … that we don't have to, and I think sometimes that also privileges whiteness.

Penny highlighted her nuanced perspective of institutional culture, particularly within the context of transparency and racial dynamics. While she acknowledged positive aspects of her campus's culture, she also pointed out the strong emphasis on image preservation and a

reluctance to share information. Additionally, she implied that this lack of transparency may inadvertently uphold structures of privilege, particularly privilege benefiting whiteness.

Karl, a dean at a small private institution, also shared observations regarding his campus culture being led by "all white senior leaders," in referencing a racial incident that had been poorly handled by senior leaders on his campus:

> The senior leaders … we're all white.… The president's a white male … our provost was a white male.… Who's in the room when these decisions are being made? Because there were some things that were obviously missed, maybe the outcome would have been the same, but maybe the manner in which they had made that decision… would have been a little better.

Karl also noted that the cabinet at his institution was "overwhelmingly white":

> It used to be also pretty female heavy and [now] it has swung the other way in the last few years, as cabinet positions have changed. And so, it's a pretty white male cabinet and…unless they are also doing this work and I don't sit on cabinet, so I'm not saying they don't. But I think it's really easy to look at that and go, "Unless there's more representation, you are automatically privileging experiences of whiteness." And you are maybe not having those conversations that we have on a daily basis about who's in the room and what voices aren't being heard.

Within this theme of "Who I'm Inviting to the Table," multiple deans expressed unease about the overwhelmingly white leadership at their institutions. Some participants emphasized (albeit subtly) the significance of diverse leadership in fostering an inclusive and equitable campus. Others doubted the ability of white leaders to comprehend and address racism. Rather than explicitly label senior leaders as racist, the deans appeared to question their

competency. And though they expressed a willingness to protect the institution's reputation, they also conveyed a sense of powerlessness to address racial issues at the senior levels of the institution.

Additionally, the deans shared their understanding of the challenges created for BIPOC students by the overrepresentation of white staff at their respective institutions. Some deans identified a lack of racially diverse role models and mentors, limiting the ability of BIPOC students to connect with staff who share similar cultural and racial backgrounds. Other deans understood how the absence of racially diverse representation contributes to an institutional culture that insufficiently reflects diverse perspectives and the contributions of varied racial and ethnic groups. Some deans also understood that a lack of diversity among staff reinforces systemic biases within the institution. For instance, Sebastian, a dean at a small private college, said, “When I think about our student services, financial aid, student accountants, I mean … all the people are white.” He noted that this resulted in BIPOC students feeling uncomfortable navigating those offices that are staffed primarily by white individuals. He said BIPOC students frequently sought him out, along with other members of his staff, for assistance navigating those processes. He then added that he was overwhelmed by the additional burden this placed on him and his staff:

> [This is] challenging for me as an administrator because I already have a lot on my plate, right? And then I'm meeting with students to, like, do X, Y, and Z, and I think I've tried to work to change mindsets on campus, but …. my team does this as well, I'm not speaking just about me, but student affairs in general—I think it is often just a dumping ground for things.

Like Sebastian, Andrew, dean of students at a large private university, shared an observation regarding the overrepresentation of white staff in certain offices and its disservice to students:

> You could look at it as progress and say there's progress and growth in diversifying the staff. But it is important also to look at a departmental level and say, “Hey, within this area of finance and treasury, why is it that this area is still overwhelmingly white? Why is it that some of the trades are overwhelmingly white?” So it's even across socioeconomic or credentialing levels. There are some concentrations of whiteness within administration, certainly within faculty departments. And so, I think that's the work that we're at now. How do we do that work on a more granular level so it's equally distributed across the institution?

In the preceding quote, Andrew shared his views of the overall progress and growth in diversifying staff at his institution while highlighting a need for the institution to examine specific departments, such as finance and treasury, where the staff was still majority white.

Sebastian also shared his sense of powerlessness to effect real systemic change by addressing the overrepresentation of white staff on his campus. He said,

> I think there's a lot of white individuals that work at the college that understand what their role is and are helping to not uphold whiteness and helping to make space for our Students of Color. And then I think that there's others that just think that we're diverse and inclusive because we are diverse and that’s it. As an administrator, I need to navigate that. I can't change everyone's opinion. I can't change all of the culture. You know, I'm not the president, but I do my best by being able to navigate who is a safe person to have students have a conversation with and who wouldn't just be a swing and a miss, you know?

Sebastian expressed his awareness of varying attitudes among white individuals at the college regarding diversity and inclusion. Yet, he was quick to point out his sense of powerlessness and lack of active engagement in activities that dismantle whiteness. Instead, he and other deans seemed to avoid interacting with racist colleagues and seeking out individuals with whom it was safe for students to engage.

Additionally, though the deans did note overall progress in diversifying staff, they also identified the need to address specific departments in which white staff members were still predominant. This perspective highlighted the importance of examining diversity at a granular level to ensure equitable distribution across all areas of the institution. This finding also underscores the ongoing work needed to dismantle structures of privilege and the complexities of enacting meaningful change in campus racial culture.

"That George Floyd Piece"

Every participant in this study mentioned George Floyd—some many times. George Floyd was a Black man murdered on May 25, 2020, by Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer who pinned down Mr. Floyd by kneeling on his neck for over 9 minutes. George Floyd's murder, recorded by onlookers and viewed by millions of people during the COVID-19 quarantine, ignited extensive protests in the United States and globally that called for an end to police brutality and systemic racism. The fifth theme that emerged from this study, "That George Floyd piece," refers to the participants' performative acknowledgement of the murder of George Floyd. This was evident when Mark referred to the racial reckoning after the murder as the "George Floyd turn" and later struggled to recall the name of another incident, seemingly conflating Mr. Floyd's murder with the actions of Kyle Rittenhouse, a white man, who shot three men during protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This casual

conflation demonstrated a lack of deep understanding or empathy regarding the severity and impact of racial violence, reducing it to a mere footnote in their discussion. The study participants also revealed how they engaged superficially with learning about systemic racism in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, often resulting in performative recognition rather than substantive action. The participants were bound to acknowledge Mr. Floyd's murder and the subsequent aftermath, which spotlighted persistent issues of racial injustice, police aggression against Black Americans, and systemic racism in the United States. However, the deans' comments quickly pivoted to their post-Floyd professional journeys of education and awareness without providing specific references or examples of serious engagement in antiracism activities. They mentioned undertaking "extensive readings" and attending "numerous training sessions" without pinpointing sources or describing resulting personal transformations. Their references to Mr. Floyd's death came across as obligatory, and their discussions reflected a sense of detachment from its violent reality.

For instance, rather than describe a specific campus racial incident, Mark, a dean at a medium-sized public university, acknowledged George Floyd and the subsequent aftermath of his murder. By mentioning George Floyd and subsequent events, Mark keenly positioned himself as one committed to antiracism efforts and aligned with the national racial justice movement focused on policing. In contrast to his concise responses earlier, Mark found it difficult to be succinct and straightforward when asked to share an example of a recent campus event. He responded,

> Just got to think about it. Fortunately, nothing, like, major. Well, no, let me backtrack. So obviously, as you're aware … the last several years, 4 maybe 5 in higher education, there's really the George Floyd turn, I think campuses and campus

> administrators, like, officially woke up and realized how much work we really have to do, and so we still have a ton of work, in my opinion. Anyway, and then from there, there was a series around police, policing, and particularly policing within Black and brown communities. And it began with George Floyd, but then there has been several others.

He also shared his thoughts, which were likewise meandering and disorganized, on his learning that occurred after Mr. Floyd's murder:

> Just self-learning. A lot of reading, whether it's articles, books, the webinars, especially, again, during COVID, George Floyd time, I was just, you know, joining and participating. There was an antiracist institute, like things like that, where it was designed for white people to [explore] how … we do this work. So, I took advantage of anytime something came up, I registered for it or was on it, [but] I still definitely have slowed down given [that I'm] back to the full pace of everything, going to conferences, obviously I always seek out sessions when I can around DEI work and race-related work … of course.

Mark's mention of reading and trainings does suggest effort, but it was unclear if he fully comprehended the profound impact and violence of racism in America. This raises questions about the depth of his commitment to addressing the issue beyond surface-level acknowledgment—especially when he offered the following:

> I'm in this boat where sometimes I'm afraid to … really truly dialogue … because [I'm] afraid to say something … like … that's hurtful…. I've learned that sometimes you just have to be open and authentic, and [there] has to be grace in this work. And so, we have to be willing and able to talk with each other and, if we get it wrong, to

have an adult professional conversation, saying, “Look that that wasn't right the way you said that.”

As this quote makes clear, Mark expressed fear of making mistakes when engaging in dialogues about race. He acknowledged his fear that he would say something hurtful or make a misstep while emphasizing his desire to be met with grace by others in such conversations.

Similarly, Natalie, a dean at a small private college, also connected George Floyd to a period of learning and reflection. She said, “A lot of it came from COVID and the aftermath of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. We have an institutional action plan to address racism and a commitment to do better. And I think some of the reporting came out of that.” She also shared her experience with learning after Mr. Floyd’s ’murder:

> I've been reading a lot more. You know, we've been reading like … *White Fragility* …we've been reading a lot of different things to educate [ourselves]. We’ve been doing that as a group to educate ourselves and have conversations. And I'm seeing myself more like … “Oh, shoot, yeah, I want to do that … or are those white tears? You know those are.” I'm more aware of it in a way that I wasn't certainly even, like, 10 years ago, and I think that George Floyd piece was very powerful.

The ambiguity of Natalie's comments arose from uncertainty about the sincerity of her engagement in reading and group learning. It remains unclear whether her actions stemmed from a genuine desire to understand, with the intention of implementing meaningful systemic change on her campus. Like Mark, Natalie did not offer any examples of how Mr. Floyd’s murder impacted her or may have changed institutional policy on her campus. The repetition of surface-level, matter-of-fact references to George Floyd raises questions about whether Mr. Floyd had become a symbolic obligation for a broader racial reckoning, one that the

deans felt obligated to align with, rather than a sign of their deeply personal commitment to addressing systemic racism on their respective campuses. For the white deans in this study, the use of Mr. Floyd as a reference point indicates an external obligation rather than a genuine internalized commitment to addressing campus racism.

"It's Like a Test … [Let Me] Google [That] Real Quick"

The purpose of this study was to investigate participants' understanding of the culture of whiteness at historically and predominantly white higher education institutions within the context of their role as dean of students. The theme, "It's like a test … [let me] Google that Real Quick" highlights the challenges deans face in comprehending the pervasive culture of whiteness and its relevance to their leadership roles. This theme also relates to their struggles understanding and incorporating awareness of pervasive whiteness into their leadership responsibilities. The majority of the deans—Jason, Penny, Ann, Bethany, Ethan, Mark, and Natalie were hesitant and somewhat unclear in their responses when asked to share their understanding of the term *culture of whiteness*. They paused for a long time or asked for clarification, with Karl even joking flippantly in response to my question, "It's like a test … [let me] Google [that] real quick." This theme also foregrounded the deans' tendency to overlook deeper systemic manifestations of racism and to instead focus on their own exhaustion, and the ways some deans demonstrated defensiveness in conversations about their own privilege.

The deans' responses regarding the term culture of whiteness comprised a range of understanding, from nuanced attempts to define the concept to more simplistic or vague descriptions. While all deans acknowledged the term, the depth of their comprehension varied. Some of the deans were notably brief in their responses, after having previously been

more verbose in their responses to other questions. Sebastian, a dean at a small private college, said briefly, “I would just say the pervasiveness of whiteness [is] everything in our society and everything we do. I would say that that's the most straightforward way to say that.” Penny, a dean at a large private university, was also brief in her response; after a significantly long pause, she said, in a questioning tone, “I think it means not being open to other perspectives, to other life experiences, to remain sort of stagnant, if you will, or wanting to preserve the status quo, I guess.” Ethan, dean of students at a small private college, offered, “That means just the unacknowledged assumption that whiteness is the norm. The way I do things is the norm, and everything else is different or an exception.” Karl, dean of students at a small private college, said in response, “I would say culture of whiteness is … any given culture that exists, dominated by white people, history, culture, art, like all those sorts of things.” Finally, Donna, dean of students at a medium-sized community college, simply offered, “Hmm … the air we … it's the air we breathe. It's the water we swim in. Yeah.”

Four deans provided longer responses, yet unlike their earlier responses to other questions, which were mostly succinct, these were extended and sometimes included unrelated information. The participants’ responses began clear and focused but ultimately meandered, indicating a shift in their comfort level as they struggled to articulate their thoughts, resulting in less structured and more verbose replies (as with Mark). For instance, Ann, dean of students at a medium-sized public institution, said,.

> I think the culture of whiteness in higher education recognizes that we were a system developed through a white male hierarchy. And that over time, we've had to continue to recognize that there's more people in this world than white males that need to be

> educated and get their PhDs and EdDs…. Our business was based in white, the white male higher hierarchy. I think white women were able to get in a little quicker. I think we have more female leadership. But we still have many white leaders in higher education. And I think a lot of our white senior administrators are still in the soft skills, the student affairs piece, the diversity equity inclusion piece. So, I think … we are working through a culture that was based in whiteness. I think we continue to have systems in place that promote the white privilege we have as white people, me being one of them … because of our understanding, because of our experience, because of our wealth.

Ann's stream-of-consciousness response reflects her limited understanding of the term culture of whiteness. Although she touched on valid points, including the historical development of higher education through the "white male hierarchy," ongoing disparities in leadership dynamics, she did not provide concrete examples or evidence of how the culture of whiteness manifests within her institution. Though she was aware of the term whiteness she spoke broadly, not relating it to her campus or the field of higher education. She did not delve into specific policies or practices that perpetuate or reinforce it. Later during her response she talked at length, offering even more peripheral observations focused on her own personal experiences with her BIPOC child. She offered information about her daughter's experiences selecting a school where she would find representation, with peers, within the neighborhood, with her preferred ethnic food, etc., suggesting Ann's inclination toward exploration of the topic as she was likely making meaning of the topic during the interview.

Jason's response about the term culture of whiteness emphasized how white people ignore or dismiss the experiences or contributions of BIPOC people. His response indicated

his openness to the concept, but unlike his previous responses, here he was disorganized, less clear, and more tangential:

> I guess from what I would think it means to me is that … it's a culture that does not choose to understand or choose to recognize the different experiences of folks of a different race. So, who are nonwhite. So, culture of whiteness, just sort of takes on all the things that ignore, I guess, the experiences and the cultural aspects and the cultural contributions of other racial identities to just focus on … well this is our culture. This is not culture when in fact it is a culture among many.

Like Jason, it appeared that Mark, a dean at a medium-sized public university, was open conceptually to the notion of a culture of whiteness but struggled to apply the idea to his campus and to his role on campus:

> Well, it's how we're built, right? You know, as a society … whether I like it or not … and why I think some of the far right around this work … like, they won't … and still discriminate … they don't want to lose control of the control … that way people have the power, that's the word, power. You know and I bet … this is my opinion though. So, I think culture of whiteness is that white people are at the top of the pyramid and have the power and … we dictate the way…because I'm white, but I don't know. White people dictate, sort of, societal norms and how we approach this work. I think that's what white culture would mean to me.

In his digressive response, Mark struggled to articulate his thoughts and feelings on this topic, perhaps signaling that he found the question challenging. Mark acknowledged his position as a white person and reflected on the societal implications of this identity, adding depth to the response. However, when he said, "because I'm white, but I don't know," he

indicated a level of uncertainty and discomfort in articulating thoughts about race. This ambiguity could be an area for further learning for him.

Like Mark, Bethany, a dean at a small private institution, offered her understanding of the concept of the culture of whiteness using terms like "privilege" and "inequity," succinctly capturing key aspects of the topic, but she did not elaborate further or provide any specific examples to support her observations. Nor did she connect a culture of whiteness to her role as dean of students. Additionally, while Bethany was concise in her response, her tone of voice was questioning throughout her response. She said,

> I guess … the culture of whiteness is a culture of privilege. And it's a lack of recognition that people's experiences are different than those of us who are white and … if it's a culture of whiteness, then it's a perpetuation of inequity. And … allowing microaggressions, allowing inequities, allowing people to not have to understand their privilege.

Similarly to Bethany, Natalie, a dean of students at a small private college, offered her thoughts in a questioning tone of voice:

> Well, I think for me, I think about a culture in which the default is the assumption that as a white person everybody is going to think like me, understand the things, and that it's almost a culture that would say things like, "I don't see color," right? I think of that as a culture of whiteness. To say the way that my world works is going to work for everyone else and I don't have to think about anyone else's experiences … [it's] monochromatic in that way.

Natalie's response centered on her personal understanding of a culture of whiteness. This approach was grounded in her individual experience, but as with several of the other deans, it

did not touch on the broader implications of the culture of whiteness within the higher education context or even within her own role as dean of students at her institution.

Lastly, Andrew, a dean at a large private institution, offered his thoughts on the culture of whiteness, demonstrating a more nuanced understanding of the concept, but again, like the other deans, he did not link the term to his professional practice or apply it to his institution, and he struggled to articulate his thoughts on the concept. Throughout his response, he stopped for long pauses, shifted in his seat, and looked off screen several times. He said,

> I think for me it's really looking at whiteness as a construct; I think it is a really important [aspect] for me. The way I think about it is, when I hear a culture of whiteness, I think about the ways in which people have used that for personal gain, and to recognize that there is not an intrinsic … culture, and so the fact that it's so pervasive and relevant to discourse … yet it's not a real thing. Makes me think it's doing some specific work that is motivating. I think ultimately socioeconomic exploitation … I don't think that whiteness is a culture. I think it's a tool … a tool for exploitation. And that's the lens I look at when people reference it.

Whether their responses were notably brief, longer, or tangential, all the participants had a general frame of reference for the term culture of whiteness and were open to the concept. However, none connected the concept to the historically and predominantly white higher education institutions where they worked, nor did they state how they had attempted to dismantle whiteness or share any plans for attempting to dismantle it in the future. Additionally, the majority of the deans appeared to grapple with the topic for the first time

during the interview, suggesting that the interview process itself served as a learning experience.

Further, when asked how institutional culture at their respective institutions might uphold benefits of whiteness, some of the deans focused on their overt individual privileges, such as not having to fear police interactions, rather than focusing on broader institutional impacts. For example, Bethany, a dean at a small private college, shared that despite her efforts to educate herself, she struggled to understand the culture of whiteness. She expressed experiencing "exhaustion" when confronting uncomfortable conversations and addressing stereotypes or biases within her community. Bethany discussed how she navigated the tension between her purported commitment to antiracist culture on her campus and her view that she had done as much as she possibly could:

> Well … I'm still part of a culture of whiteness, and I've been at this for a long time, and I still have a lot of work to do and a long way to go. I've cared about this and educated myself as much as I can. But … it's not something that I can't separate myself from entirely. So, it impacts me and there are conversations … uncomfortable conversations that I am in with people [and it's] exhausting, to call people out on the things that they say or the attitudes that they reflect or the stereotypes and generalizations that they draw. It's exhausting. And I'm not perfect, right? And so, I also recognize that I'm not the spokesperson for how to do this completely right. But I recognize that it is my role and I want that responsibility. But it is difficult work.

Bethany acknowledged that despite her efforts to educate herself and engage in uncomfortable conversations about racism and stereotypes, she still had much to learn and improve upon, but she also wanted to draw my attention to her feeling of exhaustion and her

challenges holding others accountable. Despite the difficulties she faced, Bethany expressed a commitment to engaging in the work of dismantling systemic racism.

By contrast, Karl, a dean at a small private college, initially appeared unfamiliar with the concept of a culture of whiteness, displaying a lack of prior knowledge of the term given that he offered the aforementioned quote with a joking tone of voice, he said “It's like a test … [let me] Google [that] real quick.” Despite this, he attempted to provide a response, reflecting his desire to engage with the topic despite his initial unfamiliarity: “I think it's good to know … that's an uncomfortable answer. But I think it's undeniable that it must be [but I] have never interrogated it … totally just on the spot thinking of it.” He went on, “But do I think it plays a role? It probably does.… We are [a] culture of whiteness here, and I would say it probably impacts me and it probably impacts my decisions.” Like others, Karl was making sense of the concept through his response during the interview.

Mark, a dean of students at a medium-sized public university also grappled with the concept of a culture of whiteness for the first time during this interview, as reflected in his tangential response, suggesting that he was coming to terms with an unfamiliar concept. He said, “We have to be a place where we’re learning and growing and accepting and respecting, and it can’t just be from the white lens.” He also shared that he had recently been promoted and had a new title with additional responsibilities, and he offered a comparison between how he “could” have acted before and how he thought he could respond now, since he had more institutional authority: “I could listen, I could be empathetic, I could be supportive, but I'm in a position [now] that I could make changes, to make their experience better, so 100% it's influential to who I am and the work I do.” Mark suggested that he now possessed greater institutional power to effect systemic change than he did in the past but did not offer any

examples or plans for how he would engage in antiracism with his additional institutional power.

Lastly, Natalie, a dean of students at a small private college, offered her understanding of the role whiteness has in the culture at her institution:

> It would be wildly disingenuous to say that it doesn't, right? Because I think my default way to think is based in my [white] identity, right? And what I understand and who I am and the experiences that I've had. I think it has to be there.… But I think what I would say is that I'm working to right it daily … weekly to ensure that it doesn't then inform every decision that I make, right? And that takes time.

Natalie acknowledged the influence her white identity had on her thinking and decision making, but the question at hand was how institutional culture on her campus upheld benefits of whiteness, to which she was not able to draw a connection. Additionally, her use of questioning language, such as repeatedly saying "right?" at the end of sentences, suggests a lack of confidence or a desire for validation. While she articulated an intention to work on minimizing the impact of her whiteness on her decisions, her uncertain tone left room for doubt regarding the depth of her commitment.

While analyzing the interviews, patterns emerged that revealed varied depths of understanding of and engagement with the pervasive culture of whiteness among the deans. While some deans provided succinct definitions, others attempted to delve deeper into the complexities, with responses ranging from personal reflections to broader social commentaries. Yet, for most of the deans, this question illuminated their lack of comfort, as expressed through their hesitancy and shifts in response style.

Additionally, some of the deans subtly portrayed their whiteness as a hurdle or

challenge to overcome. Though this study did not intend to examine in depth the deans' understanding of the concept of white privilege, each of the deans in the study mentioned white privilege multiple times. While their intention might have been to demonstrate an awareness of systemic issues and show their commitment to antiracism, their frequent mention of white privilege without delving into deeper discussions about systemic racism and taking tangible actions indicated only a surface-level understanding. Further some of the deans may have overemphasized their acknowledgment of white privilege to compensate for guilt or to distance themselves from being perceived as contributing to racist campus climates. While self-awareness is crucial to engaging in antiracism, it should be accompanied by concrete efforts to address and dismantle systemic inequities.

One participant said glibly, "I think I have white privilege. So, it's benefited me in areas that white privilege does," while another said, "I've tried to check my privilege, I don't think it's easy to set white privilege down because it's something that is just sort of happening to you. You benefit from it whether you seek it or not." Another dean shared, "You try to reduce or eradicate it as much as you can even though it's something that you can't get rid of," while another said, "I've been aware [that] the world that I live in is built for me. And I've tried to be cognizant of that, although I'm sure I'm not," indicating a gap between the rhetoric and their professional practice.

Although the deans readily acknowledged their white privilege, they hesitated to explore its profound influence across diverse life domains, especially within higher education institutions. Despite the importance of engaging in a nuanced discussion to raise awareness about systemic advantages and disparities, many of the deans did not clearly express a sense of personal responsibility in actively addressing systemic inequities on their campuses. Some

deans mentioned their participation in DEI trainings as an effort to educate themselves, but I questioned the genuineness of these remarks, especially since there was a notable absence of detailed engagement or meaningful dialogue on privilege. Also, none of the deans reflected on their actual power to address systemic racism as a dean of students.

Notably, four of the deans openly recognized their white privilege while subtly portraying their whiteness as a challenge. The deans claimed they were committed to racial justice; however, they also made spontaneous remarks that diverged from or did not fully align with those stated commitments. For instance, Jason, a dean at a large public university, indicated that he was afraid that by acknowledging his privileges, he somehow would undermine his personal achievements or work ethic. This reaction can be understood within a broader context of defensiveness and resistance to recognizing systemic advantages associated with his white racial identity. He said,

> Whether it's the fact that I'm white, the fact that I'm male, the fact that … I have a white beard, so I present as a little bit older. Back pre-COVID, when I wore a suit every day, all of those things play into an image of authority, of intelligence, of wisdom of things. And did I occasionally play on those opportunities? Yeah … to help get things done, sure, I would do that.

Jason then pivoted, unprompted, to draw attention to the negative perception of the impacts he experienced because of his white identity:

> But I also think that's within one realm of my work, [but] in the other realm of my work all those things …only paint me in a negative way. And so, I had to sort of overcome them as opposed to utilize them. So, you know, in some places, what was

> very helpful, in other places … I had to be able to … just overcome the fact that I'm an old white dude. So, there was that … there's that piece as well.

In another point in our conversation, Jason again acknowledged his privilege while pointing out the potential drawbacks for him as a white person:

> The older white man with a title, right, so there's … times when I can say *something* and it's listened to, right? Or you know … people just make assumptions about things because of what they see when they look at you.

Jason appeared to reference his whiteness, gender, and age as potential drawbacks or negative factors in his professional life. His reference to having to overcome the "fact that I'm an old white dude" may also reflect a defensiveness and resistance to accepting the existence or implications of white privilege. Similarly, Ann, dean at a medium-sized public university, said, "I might be too white, and I might be too old and too much of a vice president" in reference to how she was perceived by students. Like Jason and Ann, Bethany, dean at a small private college, readily acknowledged her whiteness and the advantages it brought, but she also drew my attention to potential drawbacks:

> Well, I think there's an ease to being white, right? There's the assimilation to every work environment I've ever had that has been very easy for me. I've worked with primarily with white people at primarily white institutions. And so, I haven't had to navigate … [and] that's been easy for me. And I think as a downfall, my identity as a white person makes me probably less credible, less trustworthy to Students, Staff, and Faculty of Color who might need to or want to interact with me … have conversations with me, but they have no idea, like, what I know, or who I am, or how I want to change systems.

The deans subtly portrayed their whiteness as a challenge to overcome while also acknowledging their white privilege, demonstrating hesitancy to delve into the deep-seated influence of whiteness in higher education. The deans did not express a clear sense of personal responsibility in addressing systemic inequities their institutions, and there was a notable absence of detailed engagement with their own privilege and a lack of reflection on their actual power to address systemic racism.

"Completely Personal"

The final theme, "Completely personal," highlights the intersection of the deans' personal and professional relationships, with a focus on their relationships with BIPOC family members and colleagues. This theme relates to how personal connections informed their professional practice related to campus racial incidents, particularly within the context of predominantly white communities where they resided. Some deans also noted either their own membership in a marginalized group or their relationships with BIPOC individuals in their personal or professional lives. Additionally, three deans mentioned their queer identities during the interview. Donna, dean of students at a community college, exemplified this theme through both her personal identity and her proximity to BIPOC students at her institution:

> As a white woman who identifies as queer, I know a minute piece of what it's like to be discriminated against, so that informs my world, in the sense that I know what it's like to not be safe in an environment or to be a minority in an environment. But I also think … I have worked at small private institutions that are predominantly white and, in retrospect, I feel like I got a huge educational upload of information of what it's like to be in an environment that's incredibly diverse [at her current institution]. My office is right on a main drag … and I can hear students talking in their language, and

> I have no idea what language it is. No concept, no concept of it, is it like a Latin language? Or an African language? It's all very different, right? And it's very amazing!

As revealed in the preceding quote, Donna indicated a superficial engagement with BIPOC students by overhearing them speak languages other than English in the hallway outside her office, but for her, this proximity was a point of pride as she enthusiastically shared her positive impression of the students. This superficial engagement with BIPOC students was not surprising given her previous disengagement with issues of race on her campus, where she readily deferred to her DEI colleague as the "expert." Ann, a dean at a medium-sized public university highlighted her personal familial relationships with BIPOC individuals as an influential factor in her responses to campus racial incidents:

> I think the other thing that influences me, which is completely personal, is … my husband is Mexican and my daughter is Asian. So, looking at it in the lens of … family, I try to look at things now and [consider how] my daughter respond[s] to racial incidences in high school, I probably wouldn't have responded that way. But I'm also not a Person of Color.

Sebastian also indicated that his personal relationship with his partner influenced his professional views and practice in responses to campus racial incidents:

> I'm in an interracial relationship. My partner is Brazilian, so I talk about race every single day of my life. I also see it even more, since meeting my partner, the way that People of Color are treated and go through the world, which shapes my worldview. I often will go to the doctors with him because he's treated differently than I would be

> treated at the doctors. And he's a [medical professional], right? I think that has helped shape my understanding of my viewpoint.

Andrew, a dean at a large private institution who had extensive professional experience at highly selective institutions, discussed that though he had grown up in an almost "exclusively white town," his attendance at a religious high school with greater racial diversity impacted his perspective on race. He shared how he ended up becoming close friends with a Black student. According to Andrew, this social contact was formative to his understanding his own privilege. He also described an experience during college that helped him develop even more awareness of his white privilege and that he connected to his current perspective on his role as a dean:

> I lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood, and even though the school itself was not predominantly Black, the neighborhood was almost exclusively Black, and also pretty significantly economically disadvantaged. And so, for me in college, that was a real sort of firsthand, immersive experience of inequity in this country about what it means to live in an underserved Black community. That was a very eye-opening experience for me on a personal level.

Andrew also shared his experience working closely with Black male colleagues:

> When I spend time with my two closest friends and see the calculations they make—and these are people who, unlike me, actually have ivy degrees and, you know, are on paper more credentialed than I am—calculating how [they] navigate certain places—and this is not navigating places in Mississippi, this navigating places in [he named several progressive cities in the Northeast]. This sense of how quickly [they] have to

> establish [their] affiliation or [their] right to be somewhere. I think that happens all the time.

The theme of "Completely personal" underscores the influence personal connections had in shaping the perspectives of the deans on race, as they shared insights gained from close ties with BIPOC individuals in their responses to racial incidents. However, the mention of personal relationships with BIPOC individuals by only three of the 11 deans also makes clear the deficiency in racial diversity within the personal and professional spheres of most of the deans and the impact that white isolation had on their lives. Several of the deans mentioned that they lived in predominantly or all-white communities, which was notable since most of the participants foregrounded the importance of the racially integrated context of their work lives at least once during the interview, demonstrating a stated commitment to "diversity" in their work. Yet, in their personal lives, they lived in mostly white homogenous communities. The deans subtly, and sometimes plainly, volunteered that even though they lived and worked primarily in communities with majority white populations, those communities were indeed quite "progressive" in their view, which, again, implied "not racist." For instance, Donna, a dean from a medium-sized public community college shared,

> I live in [omitted town name—a predominantly white community known for being politically liberal and LGBTQIA friendly], so that should tell you a little something, right? So, my friends … are predominantly white, not all of them, but most of them are predominantly white.

This observation highlighted a recurring theme related to the gratitude the deans felt for the progressive views shared by their friends, family, and colleagues from their mostly white personal and professional communities—suggesting that the members of their communities

were well-intentioned, non-racist white people. For instance, Ethan, dean at a small private college, said, “I think I have a pretty progressive friendship circle. But my neighborhood is almost all predominantly white— actually my neighborhood is all white. Most people I see outside of work every day are white.” But he then suggested that in social settings he sought opportunities to confront potentially biased or racist comments: “I find myself challenging people or trying to find a way to interrupt a conversation. And that reminds me how easy it is to fall into this pattern when you're not interacting with folks who don't look like you.”

By contrast, other deans revealed that they actively avoided discussions about race with friends, family, and colleagues who, while “well-intentioned,” may not have possessed a deep understanding of racism, leading the deans to perceive these individuals as “less educated.” The deans shared that they avoided conversations with certain individuals whom they believed harbored racist views. For instance, Penny, a young dean at a large private university, said:

> I think with other white people, I mean, to be to be honest, like, there are certain white people that I am much more likely to engage in conversations about this. There are certain folks, particularly maybe in my family, that I just know it would not turn out well, and there's, like, a dissonance there because in some ways, it's like I *should* be bringing it up, but I just sometimes don't feel like I have the bandwidth emotionally or whatever to just go there. I know that there's plenty of white people who feel like racism, maybe it's not … that really big of a deal anymore … so I think it's difficult to feel like that [conversation] will be productive.

Penny recognized that given her role as dean of students, it was her responsibility to address racism in her professional environment and knew that she should practice antiracism outside

her work environment, but she revealed that she often did not due to her lack of emotional bandwidth.

Andrew, a dean with many years of experience at a large private university, emphasized that he associated mostly with individuals who were aligned with his "personal values," that is, friends and family whom he viewed as not racist. However, he also alluded to occasional tensions or disagreements when engaging with family members who in fact harbored implicit or explicit racist perspectives. As an example of this contradiction—whereby he assumed an outward antiracist stance but avoided confrontation with others whom he viewed as not aligning with his values on race (just like Penny did)—Andrew said:

> There's not a place where I don't talk about it. I don't do a ton of self-editing…. I guess, fortunately, I think [my] job expectations do align with my own personal values. I do wholeheartedly believe that' there's systemic racism in this country and it's … something that this country's never resolved. Outside of work, I can't think of an incident where I'd feel I shouldn't talk about it, or [where] I feel uncomfortable talking about it, because I think it's critically important to the health of our society. I talk about it with my kids a lot. I talk about it with my wife, who works also in education. I talk about it with my sibling, so it feels pretty seamless to me.

Later in the interview, however, Andrew revealed that he did avoid engaging with certain family members whom he felt were not aligned with his values on race:

> I don't have a ton of friends [who] don't work in education. I'm not in a ton of spaces where I feel like, "Oh, there's a lot of code switching that's happening," [but] I think that there are degrees of awareness in my family. I think sometimes it can be problematic and lead to conflict. I think, particularly around in-laws and others that

> support Trump, not necessarily things that anyone has said, but in actions of endorsing a candidate who, I believe, is deeply, deeply, profoundly racist. Then it draws into question like, “Well, what is your position on this?” With that said, I think there's not a ton of editing as far as beliefs or comments, but … it has impacted the frequency of contact with family members in that case.

Bethany, a dean with over 30 years of experience at her small private institution, shared experiences similar to Penny’s and Andrew’s in which she avoided difficult or confrontational conversations about race outside her workplace:

> Being in higher education is an opportunity that I've had to evolve in my understanding and my ability to have conversations and be responsive, but that doesn't match or mirror most of my friends and family outside of my work …. [because] their scope of understanding and comfort in being able to have these conversations [is limited], and [their ability] to take action is … more limited. And so, I think my comfort is more in my work with my work colleagues, and that comes just from people desiring to be responsive and change systems and be inclusive and make sure things are equitable. It's the work we do, but it doesn't match most of my outside-of-work life.

The white deans inadvertently enabled complacency among their white friends and family by suggesting they "aren't fully aware" of the significance of racism. Such statements excuse inaction and undermine the urgency and collective responsibility required for higher education leaders to engage actively in antiracism. The deans’ approach in their personal lives mirrored their hesitancy in describing racist incidents on their respective campuses. For

example, Mark, dean of students at a medium-sized public university, referenced his professional colleagues' knowledge of racism and racial justice issues:

> I mean, certainly there's some that are more educated than others in this area and are … able to have an open mind … because I think most people in student affairs are open to this work, right? They are just not *fully* where I'm at, like, with the importance level of his work.

Like other deans in this study, Mark suggested that professionals in student affairs have progressed further in their understanding and active participation in antiracism. Bethany also portrayed her student affairs colleagues as "well-intentioned" (coded language for "not racist") but did not hold them accountable for difficult and confrontational conversations addressing race and racism on campus. She explained,

> My general impression is that the staff that I work with and collaborate with are very, very, well-intended people who are sometimes uncomfortable with conversations about race [in regards to] how to understand the student experience or how to be perceived as understanding the student experience. So, there's definitely a level of discomfort on the part of a lot of our white staff here. And I think they're all well intended. I think they're all seeking education and training. But I think that there's still a level of discomfort.

This finding highlighted how the study participants contribute to complacency among their white peers by downplaying the significance of racism and excusing inaction. Their statements suggest a lack of urgency and a reluctance to fully engage in antiracism efforts. For instance, Bethany's assertion that some professionals in student affairs are not fully aware of the importance of antiracism work implies a hierarchical view of understanding,

with herself positioned at a more enlightened level. Her characterization of her colleagues as "well-intended" but uncomfortable with conversations about race indicates a reluctance to hold them accountable for their actions or lack thereof. By attributing their discomfort to good intentions rather than addressing it as a barrier to progress, she revealed the culture of avoidance and complacency at her predominantly white institution. Overall, this finding revealed the predominantly white spaces the deans choose and the discomfort they displayed in engaging in difficult conversations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter contains a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the key findings, a consideration of the study's limitations, implications for white deans of students and senior campus leaders, as well as implications for practice and future research.

Summary of the Study

Racial incidents on American college campuses have severe consequences for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff, happen with disturbing frequency, and require attention by higher education researchers and practitioners. Despite the prevalence and endemic nature of campus racial incidents at predominantly white institutions, higher education administrators frequently minimize the impact of these events or classify them as isolated incidents, implying that campus racial incidents are only studied when they "manifest to public eruptions" (Vega, 2021, p.150). Nevertheless, current practices reveal that white campus administrators' responses to such incidents are generally ineffective, perpetuate racist campus climates, and reinforce the culture of whiteness and white supremacy (Briscoe et al., 2022; Matias & Newlove, 2017). The purpose of my study was to understand white college administrators' understanding of whiteness and their role in responses to campus racial incidents. By understanding these experiences, my study sought to offer ways to improve responses to campus racial incidents at predominantly white institutions and deepen the

understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness for white campus administrators. My research was guided by the following questions:

1. How does white college administrators' understanding of whiteness influence how they respond to and make sense of campus racial incidents?
2. In what ways do white administrators' perceptions of the college environment, including the pervasive culture of whiteness and the campus racial climate in historically and predominantly white institutions, shape how they respond to racial incidents and reveal their potential investment in whiteness?

I used narrative research methodology to examine white deans of students' experiences to determine how they formed their responses to campus racial incidents. The primary data source for this analysis was in-depth individual interviews through with 11 white deans of students' working for historically and predominantly white colleges and universities in Massachusetts. This study was informed by a theoretical framework comprised of the PIE model (Watts, 2007) and two key components from critical race theory—whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), interest convergence (Bell, 1980).

Overall, this study's findings highlight white deans of students' understanding of campus racial incidents, the subsequent responses to those incidents, and their understanding or lack thereof the pervasive culture of whiteness. The deans' narratives revealed alignment between their personal and professional experiences, demonstrating their reliance on their professional peers, particularly evident in their deference to DEI colleagues in addressing campus racial incidents. This connection extended to their overemphasis on DEI professionals and their respective campus bias response teams, which resulted in the deans not asserting themselves as leaders in addressing campus racism. The white deans of

students' reluctance to plainly describe racial incidents raises serious questions about communication and transparency in addressing racial issues on campus. Furthermore, the results revealed the deans' understanding of the symbolic significance of the symbolic table within higher education, representing spaces of power and decision-making. However, the findings indicated that though the deans expressed a desire to racially diversify this proverbial table, they did not engage in tangible actions to do so. The deans also overlooked deeper, systemic manifestations of racism within higher education and viewed themselves as powerless to address the daily struggles faced by those who directly experience racism at their institutions. Collectively, the findings offer understanding and insight to guide the future work of white deans of students and other senior leaders at historically and predominantly white colleges and universities.

Scholars have pointed to whiteness as the central racial issue in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2017). This study revealed this centrality, and the deep investment white campus administrators have in upholding whiteness both knowingly and unknowingly through their lack of engagement in responding to campus racial incidents and through their poor responses thus likely perpetuating harm and inequities to BIPOC students (Lapayese et al., 2014). Although the deans did acknowledge some of their privileges, they simultaneously were unaware of how they benefited from a system where they could engage when they wanted to and disengage when it was convenient for them. The aim of this study was to bring them to light and this study revealed the white deans of students' failures in acknowledging dimensions of systemic racism perpetuated by them and the pervasive cultures of whiteness at their respective institutions. As the norms of white-centric dynamics unfold within American society, they also shape the racial atmosphere and culture within colleges and

universities (Cabrera, 2009; Gusa, 2010). At their core, the white deans in this study serve as stark embodiments of the racial challenges present in American higher education. For this reason, it is crucial to explore how white higher education professionals can actively work toward translating the aspirational ideals of antiracism into tangible actions and outcomes.

Discussion

The deans' responses addressed the central research question—"How does white college administrators' understanding of whiteness influence how they respond to and make sense of campus racial incidents?"—as well as the sub-question—"In what ways do white administrators' perceptions of the college environment, including the culture of whiteness and the campus racial climate in historically and predominantly white institutions, shape how they respond to racial incidents?" The discussion that follows was shaped by critical race theory (CRT; Crenshaw, 1991; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the privileged identity exploration (PIE) model (Watt, 2007).

As predicted, CRT concepts—whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and interest convergence (Bell, 1980) were useful in examining how the white deans profited from normativity of whiteness by overlooking the pervasive culture of whiteness on their respective campuses. The notion of whiteness as property further underscored this dynamic, highlighting how the institutionalization to whiteness perpetuated systemic advantages for white students, while interest convergence theory showed how addressing racist incidents and racism conflicted with the self-interests of the white deans. The results also demonstrated how interest convergence played a role in the study participants' support for racial justice efforts or response to racial incidents, occurring when these actions aligned with their own interests or provided some form of benefit. The deans addressed racial issues to help

maintain or improve their own position and that of the institution—or to serve the interests of the institution. For example, regarding responses to campus racial incidents, the majority of the participants were hyper aware of their role in protecting the reputation of the university to avoid negative publicity. On the other hand, the findings also revealed how interest divergence occurred as well, when the interests of those in power, in this case the study participants or other senior white leaders at their respective institutions, did not align with the interests of BIPOC students affected by racial incidents. They prioritized their own interests, such as maintaining the status quo or avoiding difficult conversations, over addressing the needs and concerns of marginalized students which resulted in inadequate or harmful responses to racial incidents, as the priorities of the study participants diverged from the interests of those affected by racism.

In addition, the PIE framework highlighted the defense mechanisms employed by the deans during the interviews when faced with dissonance-provoking stimuli. The deans employed several defensive strategies within the interview context as they grappled with their privileged identities, including denial, deflection, rationalization, and minimization (Watt, 2015). The deans' responses revealed defensive rather than productive behaviors, highlighting the need for future research to uncover positive behaviors that motivate white deans to actively deconstruct whiteness, challenge oppression, and engage in genuine antiracist practices.

The findings also revealed the white deans' disengagement from their leadership roles in certain contexts. Rather than utilizing their skills and privileges to impact positive change, they frequently neglected the potential to improve the co-curricular and academic experiences of students, especially those from underrepresented racial backgrounds on their

historically and predominantly white campuses. Additionally, the deans tended to avoid participating actively in campus responses to racial incidents, preferring to defer this important work to other colleagues. Finally, the participants were reluctant to engage in open conversations about race and showed an inclination to prioritize performative acts of antiracism over meaningful engagement. The following are the six key findings that emerged of the study:

“We Have a DEI Person”

The finding “We have a DEI person” highlighted the study participants’ deeply concerning tendency of deferring to and demonstrating an overreliance on their DEI professional colleagues in responses to campus racial incidents. This finding indicated that the white deans did not take an active role in campus responses to racist incidents; in fact, they took a very limited role in leading and addressing racial matters in general on campus. Instead, they deferred to what several deans frequently called the campus “DEI person.” Ostensibly, the deans were content to defer all, or the vast majority of the stress, labor, and workload of campus racial matters to their DEI colleagues. As anticipated by the conceptual framework outlined in Bell's (1980) interest convergence theory, the white deans in this study—representing the dominant group—demonstrated their inclination towards adopting an "antiracist" persona. They were also motivated, at least minimally, to endorse the standard written responses following campus racial incidents, particularly when such actions coincided with their personal self-interest or with the agenda of their respective institutions. Additionally, the overreliance the deans placed on DEI professionals to handle racial incidents reflected a convergence of interests where white deans sought to maintain their status and avoid discomfort by outsourcing the responsibility of addressing racism. By

delegating this task to DEI professionals, they avoided challenging the status quo and potentially disrupting their own positions of power and privilege. This behavior perpetuates a cycle where the interests of white individuals are prioritized over the urgent need for racial justice and equity on campus. This was exemplified by Donna, who referenced her campus "DEI person" four times during our interview, she said, "You know, he's the executive director, so he has more, sort of, pull around this type of stuff, and this is his specialty … *obviously*." By elevating her colleague's expertise and positioning him as the primary authority on such matters, Donna effectively sidestepped her own accountability in addressing campus racial incidents by positioning her DEI colleague as expert and primary authority on racial matters thus effectively she maintained her own power and privilege. This pattern also aligned with findings from other studies suggesting that while DEI work can support equity causes to a certain extent, it often primarily serves only white interests (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2024; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019).

The white deans also frequently deferred to their respective campus bias response teams regarding responses to campus racial incidents. My theoretical framework is useful here as well through Harris's (1993) concept of whiteness as property in understanding the behavior of the white deans. In this case, the white deans' reluctance to actively engage in addressing racial incidents on campus can be seen as a means of preserving their whiteness as property. By deferring to bias response teams and distancing themselves from active involvement, they maintained their positions of privilege and avoided confronting the uncomfortable truths about systemic racism within their institutions. Despite their formal leadership roles within their institutions and the fact that several of the deans participated in the initial establishment of bias response teams, they failed to take proactive steps beyond

these initial efforts. This reluctance to engage in meaningful collaboration with the teams or to address the deeper structural issues of racism showed their desire to protect their own interests and maintain the status quo. Overall, this behavior exemplifies how whiteness as property operates within both individual and institutional contexts, allowing the white deans and the organizational structures that support them to evade accountability for addressing racism.

"And Are These Racial?"

This theme highlighted the discomfort, apprehension, and reluctance exhibited by the white deans when addressing racial incidents on their campuses, while also showcasing the role whiteness played in supporting their disengagement. Despite being aware that the focus of their interview would be on campus racial incidents, a significant portion of the study participants displayed discomfort and hesitancy when prompted to discuss specific incidents. Many struggled to provide clear examples; instead, they generalized or downplayed the severity of the incidents. This discomfort often manifested through extended pauses, vague responses, jokes, and attempts to shift the conversation away from the topic of racism while some of the study participants even inserted colorblind examples rather than plainly describing the races of those involved. The colorblind approach when discussing race offered by several of the white deans not only obscured the systemic realities of racism, but also perpetuated structural advantages (property) for them, thus underscoring how colorblindness served as a mechanism for sustaining racial hierarchies within their respective institutions (Cabrera et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the reluctance of the white deans of students in this study to directly discuss racial incidents was also accompanied by an overemphasis on the institution's

antiracism policies and initiatives, showing a disconnect between stated commitments and campus realities. Unprompted, the deans drew attention to the purported antiracist stance of the institution, downplaying the persistent racial issues on their campuses. This contradiction suggests a discomfort or a lack of willingness to confront the realities of racism within their institutions; instead, they appeared to prefer to rely on superficial displays of commitment to diversity and inclusion. As Ann boldly proclaimed several times, “We are *very* antiracist,” when all other observations she shared indicated the opposite. Despite repeatedly asserting that her institution is "very antiracist," her descriptions of ongoing racial incidents and pervasive microaggressions experienced by students suggested otherwise. This finding highlighted a significant dissonance between the professed beliefs of the white deans in this study suggesting their alignment with the concept of being antiracist appeared to be more about adopting an identity rather than actively engaging in meaningful actions to address racial inequities. Which align with Reason’s (2014) provocative question, “When did antiracism become an identity and not a description of action?” The deans readily embraced an antiracist label yet failed to implement concrete actions and behaviors aimed at dismantling racist systems and structures that aligning with their professed stance.

The participants disengagement from tackling campus racism also aligned with the defensive behaviors provided in the PIE model, where defensive reactions are offered to first protect one's existence, rather than an engagement with privilege to enact systemic change (Watt, 2007). Also, the study participants inability to provide examples or to acknowledge the inadequacy of their own responses raises the concerning possibility that responses to such incidents on campus are indeed inadequate and also likely much more problematic than recent research has indicated (Briscoe, 2022).

Furthermore, this finding highlighted how the study participants leveraged their whiteness as a form of property, through prioritization of comfort. For instance, when Sebastian encountered a student who revealed a very racist attitude using racist language, he said to the student, "'I appreciate you coming in and that you feel safe and comfortable coming to talk to me.'" Harris's (1993) concept of the right to exclude is useful here for showing the inherent power of whiteness used by Sebastian in this case, in foregrounding her racial comfort, his response to the student's racist attitude also reflected a prioritization of his own comfort and safety, which was enabled by his whiteness. By expressing appreciation for the student's willingness to engage in conversation, Sebastian created a sense of comfort for himself while minimizing the seriousness of the racist incident.

"Who I'm Inviting to the Table"

This theme revealed the deans' understanding of the dynamics surrounding power, representation, and decision-making spaces and their role in shaping these spaces. Even though the deans recognized their power to invite others to the proverbial table, they failed to show any tangible actions or examples of how they extended invitations to their BIPOC colleagues to these powerful spaces. The symbolic table signified a physical manifestation of the spaces of authority and influence, controlled by the deans themselves along with other senior white leaders, where decisions impacting the institution were made. Harris's (1993) concept, the right to exclude, is useful for understanding the power wielded by whiteness to determine who is included or excluded from campus structures of spaces of power. The participants' inaction also highlighted a phenomenon of interest divergence, wherein the preservation of current power dynamics overshadowed genuine endeavors towards fostering inclusivity and equity. Instead, performative, or symbolic statements were prioritized.

Gusa's (2010) term "white institutional presence" is also useful in understanding the dynamics of whiteness and the role the proverbial table plays via the "customary ideologies and practices rooted in the institution's design and the organization of its environment and activities" (p. 477). The gaps between the white deans acknowledgment and action underscore how the study participants perpetuate and tolerate white institutional presence, where institutional ideologies and practices are deeply rooted in whiteness.

"That George Floyd Piece"

The study participants' responses to the murder of George Floyd revealed a pattern of performative acknowledgment rather than genuine engagement with issues of systemic racism and antiracism efforts within their predominantly white institutions. Despite referencing Mr. Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests calling for an end to racial injustice, the deans' comments lacked depth and sincerity and appeared obligatory, like an empty gesture. Instead of condemning the inhumanity of his murder, they merely referenced Mr. Floyd as a point of conversation, using his name casually. This was evident when one dean referred to the murder of Mr. Floyd as "that George Floyd piece" and another dean referred to the racial reckoning after the murder as the "George Floyd turn" and later struggled to recall the name of another incident, seemingly conflating Mr. Floyd's murder with the actions of Kyle Rittenhouse. Such superficial engagement with this violence showed a sense of detachment from the grave realities of racism. As predicted the PIE model was a useful component of the conceptual framework as it revealed how the study participants struggled to engage in meaningful dialogue about realities of racial violence, in this case lethal racism further underscoring the need for an interrogation of their privileged identities and role in upholding whiteness.

Moreover, the white deans of students in this study also centered their references regarding Mr. Floyd to their individual paths of self-education and awareness. They emphasized their participation in training sessions and reading materials, yet they mentioned reading in a general sense; the only specific book cited by just two of the deans was *White Fragility*, with no substantive insights shared. The deans mentioned their attendance at DEI training sessions, but it was clear that neither the readings nor the training sessions had a significant impact or were memorable enough to prompt specific actions. The PIE model calls for student affairs professionals to be highly aware of their biases to develop a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive influence of whiteness and their role in upholding and protecting it. However, the deans' responses to George Floyd's murder indicated a superficial engagement as their responses were marked by performative gestures rather than genuine efforts to address systemic racism within their respective predominantly white institutions.

"It's Like a Test … [Let Me] Google [That] Real Quick"

The theme "It's like a test … [let me] Google [that] real quick" comprises a spectrum of comprehension among the white deans in their understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness at predominantly white institutions, revealing numerous methods they used to ignore issues of race while unintentionally or intentionally recreating the existing racial paradigm. Notably, one of the white deans of students in the study joked when asked about his understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness: "It's like a test … [let me] Google [that] real quick." While some deans provided nuanced definitions, others struggled to articulate an understanding of the concept. Their responses ranged from concise descriptions to meandering reflections, indicating varying levels of comfort and familiarity with the topic.

For instance, Sebastian and Penny offered brief but insightful responses, highlighting the pervasiveness of whiteness and its resistance to other perspectives, but both failed to elaborate on the concept or connect it to their own practice as deans suggesting their inclination to protect whiteness (as their property). On the other hand, Ann's response exemplified a disjointed understanding, touching on her knowledge of history and her personal reflections without offering concrete examples or policy implications. One dean encountered the concept of whiteness for the first time during his interview. When asked about how institutional culture on his campus might reinforce the benefits of whiteness, he responded with uncertainty: "That's interesting, I think ... um ... can you repeat that question for me?" After a prolonged pause, he remarked, "I can't speak to the knowledge of it, but I think this is a perception question." His hesitation and ambiguity, along with his response, suggested that he viewed whiteness as a matter of perception not as reality. This highlighted how whiteness remained largely unexamined, unchallenged, and protected by the white deans of students in this study working on campuses where whiteness is the norm and the existing racial paradigm of white supremacy is upheld (Gusa, 2010).

Moreover, some deans drew attention to themselves and framed their understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness in the context of their individual white privilege, subtly portraying their whiteness as a challenge to overcome. The participants defensiveness and resistance to recognizing systemic advantages associated with their white racial identity were shown to align with Watt's (2007) "defense modes" that are displayed by those who are beginners in exploring their privilege (p.116). For example, Jason expressed discomfort acknowledging his privileges and even framed his whiteness as potentially detrimental in certain contexts: "I had to sort of overcome them [i.e., his whiteness, his gender, his age] as

opposed to utilize them … the fact that I'm an old white dude." The white deans of students in this study demonstrated how they perpetuated whiteness, often in subtle, unnoticed ways, even by themselves.

Regrettably, even when the study participants understood the concept of a pervasive culture of whiteness, they minimized their role as influencers of this atmosphere within their respective institutions. The deans conveyed a sense of powerlessness to address the issues at hand. For instance, Sebastian expressed, in an exacerbated tone, "I can't change everyone's opinion. I can't change all the culture. You know, *I'm not the president*." Additionally, while nearly all the study participants mentioned their participation in DEI trainings, they failed to reflect on their actual capacity to enact change as a result of this participation. This lack of introspection is troubling, as it suggested their failure to recognize their role in perpetuating systemic racism within their predominantly white institutions. Their investment in avoiding acknowledgment of their true racial identities and the pervasive whiteness within their institutions reflected their desire to protect their own privilege and maintain the status quo, rather than actively working towards meaningful change that will reduce racial harm to BIPOC students.

"Completely Personal"

Proximity (or lack of proximity) to BIPOC family, friends, students, and colleagues illuminated the personal connections that shaped the perspectives and actions of the white deans of students in this study regarding race and racism on campus. Some study participants noted that personal experiences and familial relationships influenced their responses to campus racial incidents. For instance, Jason, Sebastian, and Ann each highlighted the importance of their familial ties in shaping their perspectives on racial incidents. Likewise,

Donna, who identified as a queer white woman, connected her encounters with discrimination to the challenges faced by racially marginalized communities. However, despite these insights, the deans failed to leverage their personal relationships in a substantive manner to actively confront whiteness and tackle racism as campus leaders.

This finding also revealed the very limited racial diversity within the personal and professional circles of most of the study participants. Despite wanting to align themselves with the diversity efforts at their respective institutions, all the deans noted that they resided in predominantly white communities and socialized primarily with white individuals. The portrayal of their predominantly white neighborhoods as "progressive" served to justify or downplay the lack of racial diversity in their personal lives. This portrayal can be easily understood through Harris's (1993) concept of whiteness as property, which again like it did with the other study findings revealed how the white deans embrace whiteness, its privileges, and advantages while they attempted to downplay the prevalence of whiteness in their daily lives to preserve their own comfort and privilege within these spaces. Overall, this finding underscored how whiteness as property operates to shape the social environments and experiences of the white deans, influencing their personal relationships and professional interactions.

The above-mentioned findings revealed the deep investment in whiteness among the deans of students in this study, influenced by a combination of personal and institutional factors, whether consciously or unconsciously. This trend persisted regardless of the institutional type, encompassing the predominantly white institutions where the study participants were employed. Whiteness prevailed in all represented institutional types. Inevitably each dean constructed and maintained both their individual whiteness as the

normative standard of identity, which conferred on them numerous social and professional advantages within their predominantly white campus environments. The deans have been socialized and conditioned as white people living in the U.S. into a society that privileges whiteness and marginalizes BIPOC people. By their own admission they have benefitted from systemic advantages and privileges that are built into our society and have aided them in their access to quality education and employment opportunities. Yet, their engagement and reflection of these systemic advantages is so normalized that they are nearly invisible to them, leading to their unconscious investment in maintaining the status quo including their disengagement in campus racism and responses to racial incidents. Some of the deans were consciously aware of their own fear of challenging whiteness because they were afraid of losing their own privileged position. Shown by their resistance to engage in responses to campus racial incidents, defensiveness in discussions about race, and their lack of engagement in the dismantlement of systemic racism on their campuses. Even when the study participants were aware of the inequities perpetuated by whiteness, they engaged in rationalization to justify their own privilege and complicity. Several deans even attributed their success solely to their individual merit. Overall, the white deans of students in this study were invested in whiteness due to the pervasive influence of their shared history, socialization, structural advantages, and fear of losing privilege. Recognizing and challenging this investment is essential for white deans of students and for other leaders at historically and predominantly white institutions.

Implications

The study results have several implications for practice and future research. In this section, I provide an overview of implications, relative to the focus of my study, for white

deans of students. Further, I describe implications for senior leaders of predominantly and historically white institutions to consider.

Implications for Higher Education Practice: White Deans of Students

Previous research highlighted the crucial role white faculty and staff play in fostering antiracism within educational institutions as influential figures for white students (Reason, Miller, & Scales, 2005). However, it is imperative for white deans to go beyond mere role modeling for white students and performative antiracism and work to actively dismantle the pervasive culture of whiteness within their institutions. White deans of students should vigorously engage in efforts to dismantle the pervasive culture of whiteness for several reasons: perhaps mostly importantly, because it is the right thing to do, especially since deans of students are responsible for the well-being and sense of belonging for students. They must engage in steps to ensure positive well-being and a true sense of belonging specifically for BIPOC students who inevitably experience racism within every other aspect of American society. As influential figures within educational institutions, white deans of students hold significant power to shape policies, practices, and improve racialized campus cultures. White deans of students have a responsibility to ensure equitable opportunities and experiences for all students, regardless of race. White administrators also have a unique role in addressing systemic racism within higher education institutions since they can use their positions of power to advocate for structural changes that promote equity and racial justice, such as diversifying hiring practices and creating equitable and non-harmful work environments for their BIPOC colleagues. They must support efforts within the academic realm to revise curriculum to include diverse perspectives and they can reallocate financial resources to support BIPOC student initiatives. By demonstrating a commitment to antiracism and

actively engaging in dismantling whiteness, they may inspire others to do the same and create a culture of accountability within predominantly white institutions. This requires not only addressing explicit acts of racism but also challenging the underlying systems and structures that perpetuate racial inequities.

Do the Work*:* Engage in Deep Introspective Work to Understand and Dismantle the Pervasive Culture of Whiteness

White deans must engage in deep introspective work to gain a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive culture of whiteness and to interrogate their role in perpetuating it. Superficial learning through "trainings," "conference sessions," and "reading" is no longer sufficient, as abundant resources are available to facilitate deeper learning. White individuals should confront their whiteness by engaging in ongoing, reflective activities, such as prolonged discussions, readings, films, and media, aimed at challenging ingrained and often unnoticed racist behaviors. Resources may include critical-studies courses on whiteness, individual DEI professional coaching, and books. For instance, Liza Talusan's (2022) *The Identity-Conscious Educator: Building Habits and Skills for a More Inclusive School* provides a useful framework for building awareness and understanding various identity categories. Talusan's book also provides practical activities for having difficult conversations and creating more racially inclusive communities among campus faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, Layla Saad's (2020) practical guide for white self-interrogation—*Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*—is targeted specifically at white individuals who consider themselves allies in racial justice, a category in which all the deans in this study readily positioned themselves. By engaging with the daily prompts in Saad's guide, deans and other

white campus administrators can delve much deeper into their attitudes and behaviors toward BIPOC individuals, challenging notions of white privilege and fragility beyond the surface level. This introspection can facilitate deeper discussions around the insidious nature of the pervasive cultures of whiteness. This process will also encourage engagement in continuous self-examination and support developing action in combating racism and systemic bias and improving the campus racial climate.

It is crucial to approach these resources in a manner that promotes accountability without merely reducing them to self-help manuals offering a "quick fix" for whiteness. Similarly, it is important for white individuals to maintain compassion and self-understanding as they confront the depths of their own harm. Moreover, while self-engagement might appear to offer a solution to significant racial climate challenges, it cannot be effective without a dedication to tangible actions. Relying solely on passive engagement to dismantle whiteness is negligent. While white self-reflection is a crucial element of racial justice, it cannot stand alone; it must also occur within the most senior levels of the organization and within the field of higher education more broadly.

Talk the Talk: Engage in Reflective Conversations About Campus Racial Incidents Through Open Dialogue

Throughout each interview in this study, as the dean recounted instances of racist incidents and subsequent responses, whether by themselves or by others, there were micro moments of recognition, visible in their facial expressions, indicating an awareness of deficiencies in addressing campus racial issues. These moments acted as interventions, leading the deans to reconsider their approaches; as they heard these experiences out loud through their recounting to me, they appeared to realize just how awful these situations truly

were and how harmful the subsequent responses were. One dean shared, “I think it's simply the right thing to do [to understand and dismantle whiteness]. I believe our institution's survival hinges on our ability to navigate a more diverse faculty, staff, and student body.” White deans of students should engage in open discussions on racism and campus racial incidents in regular fashion, which can serve as a reflective intervention. Deliberately engaging in conversations regarding the pervasive culture of whiteness can foster self-improvement in knowledge and practice, prompting deans to verbalize their thoughts. This underscores the need to engage in reflective practices, potentially through involvement in professional groups with other white deans or through intentional, consistent supervision sessions that focus on racial awareness.

White Campus Administrators Must Also Be DEI Professionals: White Leaders' Role in Addressing Campus Racial Incidents and Fostering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

White deans and other senior leaders must shift away from viewing their DEI colleagues as the sole "experts" on race and instead take accountability for addressing campus racial incidents and improving the overall racial climate themselves. Relinquishing responsibility to DEI professionals is a harmful strategy that disengages white leaders from critical discourse. One dean admitted that she was merely “observing emails” go back and forth between colleagues and the DEI professional after a racial incident, thus showing the distance she placed between herself and the discourse. This disproportionate reliance places undue burden on individual entities or offices, thereby detracting from the important work of fostering comprehensive campus-wide and senior leadership engagement with DEI initiatives that are needed to truly address systemic racism. Consequently, this narrowness prevents the realization of substantive organizational change needed to dismantle pervasive white

cultures. It also diminishes the expertise of DEI professionals and reduces their role to a checkbox rather than recognizing their crucial contributions to campus cultural change. Furthermore, while DEI professionals offer valuable insights, they cannot fully comprehend the experiences of every demographic within the organization. Engaging leaders from all entities of the institution allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how whiteness permeates the institution. By actively and meaningfully engaging in DEI work, white campus leaders can demonstrate self-accountability and a genuine commitment to fostering lasting organizational change.

Racism Is Your Responsibility: A Call to Action for White Campus Administrators

Racially biased incidents permeate college and university campuses across the U.S., as evidenced in the continuous media coverage of these incidents (detailed in Chapter 1). The deans in this study indicated with alarming frequency that they heard from BIPOC students who were regularly microaggressed, particularly within classroom settings. This requires the immediate attention of white deans of students and other senior leaders since racial microaggressions have disastrous, cumulative effects on BIPOC students. Smith et al. (2011) found that perpetually fighting microaggressions leads to racial battle fatigue. From a psychological perspective, persistent microaggressions decrease academic performance, increase stress, and increase the likelihood of people developing depression and anxiety (Sue, 2010). Within this context, it is crucial for all senior campus leaders to consider how they talk about racial microaggressions. The term itself minimizes may actually minimize the severity of these interactions. As an alternative, Minikel-Lacocque (2013) offered the term "racialized aggressions," which more closely aligns with serious emotional reactions to steady race-based aggressions that are associated with the psychological, emotional, and

coping reactions causing racial battle fatigue. Since microaggressions are a type of racial incident, shifting the language from microaggressions to racialized aggressions is one way to name them more intentionally and to highlight the harm they do within the context of racial incidents on campus. Naming racial incidents in this way exposes the harmful impacts that these everyday covert manifestations have on students and other BIPOC community members. As the term racialized aggressions becomes more prevalent in higher education and student affairs scholarship, the framework can be used to understand racial incidents and the subsequent responses. Given that the purpose of this study was to understand white deans of students' role in responding to campus racial incidents, the responses to these incidents, and the pervasive culture of whiteness that supports them, I argue that exposing the racial nature of incidents using new language will help scholars and practitioners label them for what they are—racist—rather than shy away from the use of the term, as has become status quo in higher education scholarship, according to Harper (2012).

It Is Time to Transform Campus Culture: A Call for Active Engagement and Accountability from White Campus Leaders

It is imperative that white deans and senior white leaders allocate resources to align with their professed values and actively work to dismantle pervasive whiteness on campus. Improving responses to campus racial incidents and dismantling pervasive whiteness are responsibilities shared by every campus leader and is especially important for white deans of students. Expecting DEI professionals to lead or implement transformative organizational change is a highly ineffective strategy as it lets other leaders, specifically white campus leaders, remove themselves from addressing racial inclusion strategies. Collaboration across divisions and departments is essential for identifying strategies and implementing plans to

achieve these objectives, particularly for white deans who wish to fully engage as antiracist leaders. To mitigate overdependence on DEI professionals, senior and executive leaders must hold all campus leaders accountable for addressing oppression and marginalization on campus. This necessitates white campus leaders' active engagement in reflective practices, ensuring that they are informed and equipped to respond effectively to critical matters of race and racism. White campus administrators can also be held accountable through their performance appraisal process, and faculty can be held accountable through the tenure and promotion process. Senior leaders must critically examine the ways they respond to campus racial incidents and address the pervasive culture of whiteness. In doing so, it is crucial to understand the concepts of whiteness as property and to consider the theory of interest convergence, particularly as it pertains to the behavior of white deans of students.

Interest convergence, a concept within CRT, posits that advancements in racial equity materialize solely when they intersect with the interests of the dominant group. In the context of addressing campus racism, this theory spotlights the behavior of white deans of students who avoid confronting racial issues because doing so does not benefit them directly or align with their own interests. Moreover, if addressing racism does not align with broader institutional goals or priorities, white deans may not see it as necessary or may actively avoid it to maintain the status quo. Thus, it is essential for white senior institutional leaders, such as presidents, cabinet members, and boards of trustees, to recognize and address these dynamics. They must actively work to create environments where addressing racism is not only seen as necessary, but also aligns with the broader interests of the institution. This requires fostering a culture in which racial justice and equity are central to institutional goals and the voices and experiences of marginalized communities are valued and prioritized, not

just performatively. To achieve this, all staff and faculty, including members at the most senior levels, such as boards of trustees and other governing entities, must engage in critical self-reflection and dialogue, challenging themselves to confront the ways their own interests may converge with or diverge from efforts to address racism on campus. By centering the theory of interest convergence in their approach to addressing campus racism, white campus leaders can work toward creating more equitable and inclusive campus climates with accountability measures.

Higher education leaders also need to address the pervasive culture of whiteness within higher education, especially at historically and predominantly white institutions. This recommendation is grounded in the understanding that the culture of whiteness encompasses several key aspects, each of which plays a significant role in perpetuating racial inequality and marginalization. First, the pervasive campus culture of whiteness is characterized by dominance and power, whereby white individuals historically and presently hold disproportionate power and privilege. This dominance extends across the institution shaping its norms and perspectives to the serious detriment of BIPOC students, staff, and faculty members. This normativity is a defining feature of whiteness, whereby white norms are treated as the default or standard against which other cultures are measured. This normativity also leads to the marginalization and erasure of non-white cultures, manifesting in language, curriculum, aesthetics, values, campus customs, and, most notably, responses or lack of responses to campus racial incidents. Remarkably, when asked to describe responses to campus racial incidents, many of the deans in this study explained that there was no official response because the student who was injured “didn’t want to pursue it.” This shows that the campus culture is so destructive that injured students are reluctant and unwilling to pursue

complaints against those who are racist toward them. This pervasive culture of whiteness also perpetuates racial hierarchies, positioning white administrators at the top while systematically disadvantaging BIPOC campus members.

Implications for Future Research

This study has important implications for future research. This research could be expanded by examining other distinctive identities and variables. While the study investigated white deans of students, all participants identified exclusively as either male or female; thus, this research did not involve those with gender identities beyond the binary, such as transgender individuals. As a result, this study lacked diversity in gender representation, thus presenting an opportunity for further research to explore beyond the limitations of the gender binary. Also, there is potential to investigate the identities of white campus administrators beyond their racial identity. Subsequent research could explore the intersecting and overlapping identities of white deans, including identities of social class, spanning from low-income to upper-class backgrounds. In addition, future research could examine administrators' hierarchical status, which may correlate with factors such as age and tenure as new versus senior-level deans.

Alternatively, future research could help identify and scrutinize white deans of students who exhibit commendable effectiveness in confronting systemic racism, highlighted through their own introspection and assumed leadership roles valued within the student affairs field and/or by DEI advocates. Such research could identify white deans of students or other white campus leaders who, through conscientious practices, actively contribute to the deconstruction of whiteness. Further research may employ a strengths-based methodology, attempting to ascertain first the presence and characteristics of individuals who actively

engage in authentic antiracism. These areas of inquiry offer opportunities to look more deeply into the experiences of white deans tasked with addressing campus racial incidents, as additional layers of identity may yield varied findings. Finally, this study was conducted in Massachusetts, in the New England region of the United States, and therefore may not be generalizable to other regions. Future research could investigate the experiences of white deans of students outside of New England region.

In this study, institutions were classified based solely on whether they were predominantly white or historically white. Although the findings did not meaningly differ for the two campuses with a higher proportion of BIPOC students, there is potential to enhance the research findings by exploring diverse institutional types, such as Hispanic-serving institutions with white deans of students. Future studies could consider additional factors like institutional size, public versus private status, curricular emphasis, single-sex colleges, religious affiliations, and potentially elite status. Exploring the experiences of white campus administrators across specific institutional types may unveil how racialized experiences intersect with organizational norms and missions, potentially leading to more nuanced findings.

Conclusion

I began this study with what I see as a major problem in predominantly white institutions—exceptionally poor responses to campus racial incidents (Leonardo, 2009), highly racialized campus climates, (Locks et al., 2008) and the maintenance of a culture of pervasive whiteness (Williams, 2020). However, since the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent national conversation on systemic racism, more than ever, white campus administrators and institutions themselves inevitably, proudly, position themselves as

antiracist. Yet despite their purported stances they have continued to perpetuate systems of oppression and reinforce white hegemony (Lapayese et al., 2014) thus revealing the performative nature of their antiracism. As Williams (2020) noted "whiteness is more than an identity; it is a systemic issue built into the bedrock of educational institutions in the United States" (p. 95). White campus administrators must understand the institutional processes that have been built to meet the needs of white students and have created a hostile environment for BIPOC students. Racial justice work is not a label that can be claimed simply by working in a specific role, such as dean of students or by association with an institution that has offered an antiracist statement on their website. Rather it can only be claimed by deep and active engagement in individual and institutional change.

For white deans of students who intend to engage in an interrogation of whiteness they need to truly understand how saturated whiteness is in U.S. society and embrace the leadership they have in addressing it at the campus level and in their chosen field. White deans of students have more power than they realize and while they may have fallen into pre-established narratives that marginalize and harm BIPOC students unconsciously perpetrating systems of oppression—they do have the potential to transform racialized campus environments. Bell (1980) suggests that without a commitment to a larger vision and a continually evolving strategy for achieving it, there is no hope for overcoming America's long history of racism. Thus, one cannot claim to be "very antiracist;" one must wholeheartedly commit to a larger vision that involves change strategies to achieve this goal, by consistently adapting and refining approaches that involve deep engagement with race, racism, and the pervasive culture of whiteness. White campus administrators must use their privileged social identities if we are ever to be successful in dismantling whiteness.

Epilogue: To My Fellow White Campus Administrators

In concluding this study, it is imperative to address a critical reality that might unsettle some readers, particularly white administrators, who are inclined to distance themselves from the deans' narratives. The truth is, the findings presented in this research are not isolated to a select few "ill-informed white deans"; rather, they permeate the fabric of our institutions, shaping the experiences of all administrators socialized within the constructs of whiteness. White campus administrators, including myself, must understand that institutional systems, especially historically and predominantly white institutions, have been built to meet the needs of white students, faculty, and staff and thus have created a hostile environment for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. It is a discomforting but necessary acknowledgment that we are all implicated in the perpetuation of systems of oppression, whether consciously or unconsciously. Thus, my call to action extends to those of us who may have recoiled at the behaviors described in this study but do not see ourselves represented here. I ask us to collectively confront the uncomfortable truths embedded within our institutional structures and within our own white identities, especially since racial justice work is not a label that can be claimed simply by working in a specific role, such as "dean of students," or by living and working in a "progressive" or "liberal" state, or by association with an institution that has offered an antiracist statement on their website. It is incumbent upon every white administrator to engage in deep introspection, to interrogate the ways we perpetuate or challenge systems of oppression, and to commit wholeheartedly to dismantling the pervasive culture of whiteness within our educational institutions.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Dean:

I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston. I am reaching out to extend an invitation for your participation in my dissertation study. My research focuses on college administrators who possess an awareness of race on campus (e.g., racial incidents, campus racial climate, etc.) and who also self-identify as white.

Because I value inclusiveness, I hope that the participants of this study will be diverse in many ways including ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, social class, dis/ability, and religion. However, this study is exploring the experiences of white college administrators, specifically those who are in a role like yours (Associate Vice President/Dean of Students).

If you agree to participate, I would be happy to work with your assistant to schedule a single virtual interview (60 to 75 minutes via Zoom) or I can work directly with you if you provide me with your availability. I'm hoping to conduct interviews within the next few weeks.

Thank you so much for your consideration. Please contact me if you have any questions or to let me know if you are willing to participate.

Gratefully,

Jen

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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Authors note: Keeping in mind that this is a narrative study—the focus will be on the personal experience of the study participants and emphasizing stories. With that stated it is helpful to have interview questions that will be used as a guide. This interview will focus on the participants perceptions and awareness of whiteness, the pervasive culture of whiteness in higher education, and their experiences and perceptions of campus racial incidents and the subsequent responses.

Interview Guide Questions
At the start of the interview, review human subjects and obtain documentation of informed consent; ask if they have any questions for me.

- Warm-up/rapport-building topics/questions:
    - How are you?
    - Thank you for the information you provided in your initial interest form.

I will tell the participants that I am interested in their story, no matter where it takes the narrative.

SECTION ONE: Campus Racial Incidents

1. In your own words, how do you define a "campus racial incident"?
2. What effect do racial incidents have on your campus?
3. How do you assess the varying degrees of seriousness among different incidents?
4. What is your role in handling racial incidents or racial conflict on your campus?
5. Who else is involved in handling racial conflicts on your campus?
6. What guidelines are you given to recognize, report, and respond to racial conflict? Are they effective? How so?
7. Please provide an example of a racial incident you handled recently. How did you learn about it? What steps did you take to handle it? What was the outcome?
8. What are examples of racial incidents in which you chose *not* to intervene? What factors influenced your decision in that instance?
9. What factors contribute to your present viewpoints and reactions towards campus racial incidents? For instance, are they influenced by training(s) you have attended, courses you may have taken, discussions with colleagues, or conversations with your supervisor?

SECTION TWO: "Being White"

1. How often do you have conversations about race? With whom do you have conversations about race most often? When talking about race with other white people, what do you tend to notice or experience?

2. Let’s transition to talking about your professional role as an administrator and your racial identity. What has influenced your understanding of whiteness and your understanding of whiteness as a campus administrator?
    - Specific courses (or curriculum as a whole)?
    - Specific relationships?
    - Interactions with faculty or students?
    - Family or friends?
    - Personal experience.
3. In what ways has your identity as a white person benefitted you in your role as a campus administrator?

SECTION THREE: Pervasive Culture of Whiteness

1. How might institutional culture at your school uphold benefits of whiteness? For example, some administrators identify that allocation or resources is one-way institutional culture benefits whiteness.
2. In what ways do you think the current culture of your institution may unintentionally favor certain racial or ethnic groups?
    - In the allocation of resources?
    - In campus policies?
    - Cultural norms and practices?
3. What have you observed related to racism on your campus that has most impacted BIPOC students, faculty, or staff? What examples come to mind?
4. In your own words, what does the phrase ‘culture of whiteness’ mean to you?
    i. To what extent do you think the ‘culture of whiteness’ influences your attitudes and behaviors as an administrator?
    ii. If it does, could you provide some examples of how you perceive thi’ influence?
    iii. If it doesn't, what factors do you believe contribute to this separation?
5. As campus leaders, we are always looking to take action. What actions have you identified for yourself or your campus culture – that can help dismantle racism in our field?
6. Finally, I’m curious what this was like for you? What did you experience as we were doing this interview?

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of Massachusetts Boston
Department of Leadership in Education
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3393

Study of Campus Administrators and Campus Racial Incidents

Introduction and Contact Information
You are asked to take part in a research study. **Participation is voluntary.** The researcher is Jennifer Reid, Doctoral Candidate in the Higher Education program at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Boston. The faculty advisor is Tara L. Parker, PhD, Professor, Higher Education. Please read this form and feel free to ask questions. If you have questions, Jennifer will discuss them with you. She can be reached at Jennifer.Reid001@umb.edu and her telephone number is (508) 264-1084.

Description of the Project:
This study involves research. The purpose of this research is to examine the role campus administrators play in responses to campus racial incidents. Your participation in this study will take 75 minutes.
If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer interview questions and discuss your perceptions and experiences.

Risks or Discomforts:
A risk of participation is a loss of confidentiality. Everything possible will be done to protect your information. All your personally identifiable information will be anonymized. A pseudonym will be used for your name and all data will be encrypted and stored in the safest ways possible. After this study is complete all identifiable information and the recording of this interview will be destroyed.

You may feel uncomfortable during the interview. You may skip any questions or stop participating at any time.

You may speak with Jennifer to discuss any distress or other issues related to study participation. You are encouraged to contact your campus mental health office or your employee assistance provider if you need other resources such as counseling.

Benefits:
There is no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. Your participation may help us learn more about campus responses to racial incidents.

Confidentiality:
Your part in this research is **confidential**. That is, the information gathered for this project will not be published or presented in a way that would allow anyone to identify you. Information gathered for this project will be encrypted and password protected and only the researcher (Jennifer) will have access to the data.

You will be assigned a pseudonym so that your specific identity (e.g., name, where you work, etc.) can only be linked to your data via a coding system known to only Jennifer. Personally, identifying information will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study, which will be in May 2024.

Voluntary Participation:
The decision whether or not to take part in this research study is voluntary. If you do decide to take part in this study, you may end your participation at any time without consequence. If you wish to end your participation, you should tell Jennifer and she will end the interview immediately. Whatever you decide will in no way penalize you.

Questions:
You have the right to ask questions about this research before you agree to be in this study and at any time during the study. If you have further questions about this research or if you have a research-related problem, you can reach Jennifer Reid at (508) 264-1084, Jennifer.Reid001@umb.edu and/or her faculty advisor, Tara L. Parker, at (617) 287-7606, Tara.Parker@umb.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact a representative of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, which oversees research involving human participants. The Institutional Review Board may be reached by telephone or e-mail at (617) 287-5374 or at human.subjects@umb.edu.

Acknowledgement of this consent was gained verbally during the beginning of each interview.

APPENDIX D

CONSENT TO VIDEO RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION

Study of Campus Administrators and Campus Racial Incidents
Jennifer Reid, Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education, University of Massachusetts Boston

This study involves the video recording of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the video recording or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to view the recordings.

The recordings will be kept for 9 months. The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

Immediately following the interview, you will be given the opportunity to have the recording erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to recording or participation in this study.

By agreeing to each stated item, you are consenting to participate in that specific procedure:

- ❑ having your interview recorded;
- ❑ having the recording transcribed;
- ❑ use of the written transcript in presentations and written' products.

Participant's Verbal Consent was provided to researcher
Date_____

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