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**(Counter)narratives and Complexities:
Critical Perspectives from a University Cluster Hire Focused on Diversity, Equity,
and Inclusion**

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Topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion continue to be accepted yet highly debated issues on college campuses. Seemingly, hiring of diverse faculty is a priority that many college campuses attempt without much regard to the organizational mechanisms which provide faculty of color support for success. One School of Education in a western land grant institution embarked on a cluster hiring process that centered diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of their position priorities. Using critical race theory, this paper provides (counter)narratives to unearth and understand the complexities of hiring diverse faculty in a cluster hire process. Discussion and recommendations are provided for future practice.

Keywords: Higher Education | Cluster Hires | Critical Race Theory

In a recent article, Gasman (2016) responded to the question as to why institutions of higher education (IHEs) lack diversity among faculty members: “The reason [IHEs] don’t have more faculty of color among college faculty is that we don’t want them. We simply don’t want them” (para. 2). This response points to the underlying racially discriminatory practices of faculty hiring. Addressing this issue, faculty in the School of Education (SoE) at one public, land grant four-year institution in the western United States attempted to begin to address the disproportional representation of faculty of color despite the changing demographics in a diverse society. In this paper, we provide a narrative of how that SoE attempted to center diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of its organizational culture by hiring a cohort cluster of four faculty whose research, teaching, and service focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The authors in this paper recognize that hiring diverse bodies does not equate to change within the organizational culture. On the contrary, the hiring and imminent retention of four faculty who challenge the status quo from a critical theory paradigm spawned new challenges and new ways of thinking as to how to go beyond the diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric and live these values in the academy. We situate our personal narratives

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from a critical race theory lens, specifically interrogating issues of power, oppression, and white supremacy using the concepts of *interest convergence* and *imperialistic reclamation*. We operationalize this theoretical lens employing narratives and counternarratives, which depict individual experiences with racism, power, and privilege. To understand the complexities of hiring diverse faculty, we begin with a review of how to engage in a successful cluster hire for diversity, equity, and inclusion. We then provide critical accounts and analyses of our experiences through our own cluster hire process, which we present through narratives and counter narratives from the hiring committee and the cluster hire faculty members. We conclude with recommendations for those who may consider a cluster hire focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the future.

Cluster Hiring for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Cluster hiring, a process in which multiple scholars are hired based on a common theme or shared research interests, is not new and is continually used throughout the nation as a way to heighten interdisciplinary synergy among hired faculty members. Institutions such as the University of California at Riverside, Indiana University, Universities of Illinois, University of Notre Dame, University of Wisconsin, and Central Florida University have utilized cluster hiring to elevate their institutional profile (McMurtrie, 2016). Given that the cluster hiring process disrupts the traditional hiring procedures, faculty are left feeling perplexed about embarking on cluster hires without clear goals and directives from senior leadership. Some institutions are hesitant to adopt the cluster hire “fad” given the lack of research on its effectiveness to produce innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration among the new hires (McMurtrie, 2016). Two reports recommend making diversity goals explicit, gaining support from deans and department heads, and establishing an infrastructure to support interdisciplinary collaborations (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008; Urban University for Health, 2015). In sum, institutions with clear goals, communication, and systemic commitment for the cluster hiring process seem to have had the most success.

The Need for Faculty Diversity

In 2014, for the first time, the nation’s K-12 students were a majority of students of color, and the percentage of that majority is projected to steadily increase (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Soon many of these students of color will attend colleges and universities, but are IHEs prepared for them? If IHEs fail to hire, retain, and promote diverse faculty, they will not be ready to work with growing students of color populations (Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). Faculty of color, however, fail to be represented in higher education due to overreaching racialized barriers (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Thus, diversity often becomes a goal within cluster hiring practices in order to address, or appear to address, representation issues. However, rhetoric about the importance of a diverse faculty must be accompanied with actions, behaviors and outcomes that nurture and sustain diversity within colleges and universities (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Diversity must advance both institutional commitment and practice beyond simplistic observations of gaps between mission statements and organizational outcomes (Rowley, Hurtado, & Panjuan, 2002). Senior administrators and influential faculty may effectually

guide their departments to adopt initiatives to recruit, hire, retain, and mentor faculty of color (Thompson, 2008).

Cluster Hiring and Institutional Diversity

Once hired, faculty of color come to universities equipped with essential components to be successful (Thompson, 2008). It is up to the institution to employ retention strategies such as seeking to understand the needs of diverse faculty members, provide financial incentives, offer mentoring, and devising community initiatives to create a positive climate (Plata, 1996). Turnover is higher for faculty of color than white faculty (Piercy et al., 2005; Price et al., 2005; Thomas & Asunka, 1995). Discrimination, lack of support, lack of collegiality, and other climate-related factors have a negative impact on faculty retention (O'Meara, Lounder, & Campbell, 2014). Higher education institutions must welcome, engage, and encourage faculty of color perspectives, and scholarship for the benefit of all students (Delgado Bernal & Villapando, 2002). Consequently, there is a great need to create a campus climate where faculty of color feel valued and are successful in the tenure track process. These efforts include incorporating policies and providing quantifiable measures to evaluate the implementation of such plans (Thompson, 2008). Davis (2002) noted that institutions most successful in increasing diversity employ proactive programs that address campus climate and support racial diversity. Other important components to consider are commitment to mentoring (Davis, 2002; Olmedo, 1990; Plata, 1996; Thomas & Asunka, 1995), supportive campus climates (Alfred, 1999; Antonio, 2002; Thomas & Asunka, 1995), and opportunities for leadership and engagement (Cuadraz, 1998; Turner, 2000). Diverse faculty may bring, among other important contributions, social justice agendas that strengthen the academy, which is beneficial to all students on college campuses.

Critical Race Theory

We utilize critical race theory (CRT) as our analytical frame to interrogate the practice of cluster hiring. Critical race theory emerged and evolved from critical legal studies in the 1970s as a scholarly response to the lack of attention given to the roles race and racism play in societal structures (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Formalized in 1989, scholars utilizing CRT have incorporated history, sociology, economics, political science, and other disciplines to understand and ultimately deconstruct the ways in which systemic racism works to entrench, adapt, and replicate itself (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Hernández, 2016; Leonardo, 2004, 2012; Rosebery, Ogonowski, Dischino, & Warren, 2010). CRT remains a relatively new theory, and one continues to evolve, particularly around the notions of intersectionality (Delgado, 2011). The foundations of CRT, in particular the idea of centering race and racialized experiences, have been explored and written about for over a century, dating back to Du Bois (1903) and Woodson (1933). CRT asserts the permanence of systemic racism as a normal and ordinary part of the everyday lives of people of color, including such examples as higher loan rates (Cavalluzzo & Wolken, 2005), disparate educational resources, and geographic food deserts (Baker, Schootman, Barnidge, & Kelly, 2006; Slocum, 2007, 2010). CRT also asserts that these conditions serve a purpose and did not

occur by accident (Bell, 1992, 2004; Delgado, 2001). As CRT has expanded its scope into different disciplines it has taken on multiple iterations: “there is not a common doctrine to which all members of CRT subscribe but there are unifying purposes” (Parsons, Rhodes, & Brown, 2011, p. 953).

Despite - and still honoring - the many valuable variations of CRT, many scholars who take up CRT as theoretical or conceptual framework ground themselves in variations of the following five tenets: CRT (1) focuses on the centrality of racism with regard to gender and class as subordinate oppressions; (2) challenges dominant, deficit ideology prevalent in education; (3) focuses on understanding and unveiling the mechanisms of racialized oppression and the ways in which peoples of color experience it; (4) works toward social justice to promote transformative solutions against racial, gender, and class subordination; and (5) utilizes interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the experiences of students of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

When operationalized in higher education, CRT has served as a powerful tool to help us unveil, understand and ultimately begin to work to dismantle systemic racism embedded within our institutions of higher learning (Crenshaw, 2011). As such, CRT provides a useful vantage point from which to ascertain the factors that contribute to the experiences of faculty of color in the academy. In this manuscript, we utilize CRT to name and understand many of our racialized experiences as ordinary and normal forms of systemic racism, born from rooted pillars within the structures, practices, epistemologies, and ideologies of higher education institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Scheurich & Young, 1997), influencing hiring practices, retention, and segregation of faculty of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Methodologically, we adopt CRT’s notion of *storytelling*, an approach which foregrounds the lived experiences of people of color as a mechanism to counter the dominant educational ideologies surrounding issues of race and other intersectional identities (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). We operationalize CRT further in analyzing our experiences by leveraging notions of interest convergence, imperialistic reclamation, and the foregrounding of counternarratives to interrogate our racialized experiences during the cluster hiring process and the aftermath.

Interest Convergence

Bell (1980), a legal scholar and parent of CRT, coined the concept of interest convergence, which postulates that advancements in racial justice are permitted only when and until they also provide profit or benefit to white interests and establishments. For example, Bell claimed that during the cold war era, *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s “separate but equal” clause was overturned by the Supreme Court in order to politically appease the global community’s growing criticisms of the United States’ glaring lack of civil and human rights (Bell, 1980; Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). Scholars have used the notion of interest convergence to understand the complex and highly-stalled diversification of higher education, both in legal and policy realms, and in institutional practices (Aguirre, 2010; Alemán, Jr & Alemán, 2010; Gafford Muhammad, 2009; Milner, 2008). While this work has functioned to unveil these persistent barricades in higher education, it is important to note that the complexities of the interactions of diversification, racial equity, white supremacy and racism in the creation of institutional

and systemic change are often left unwrapped (Castagno & Lee, 2007).

Imperialistic Reclamation

To begin to understand these complexities, and in particular some of the reactionary behavior we have witnessed and experienced, we operationalize the notion of *imperialistic reclamation*. Imperialistic reclamation asserts that whites will “brazenly and forcefully” seek to reclaim interests they feel “belong” to them which were attained by people of color during previous periods of interest convergence (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). The notion of imperialist reclamation may be predicated by the idea that whiteness tolerates or affords increased benefits to peoples of color under an enterprise of *white redemption* (Swim & Miller, 1999; Thompson, 2003), a motivation which maintains the psychological well-being of white individuals as primary concern over any secondary benefits to peoples of color (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003). In this way, whiteness may view advancements of peoples of color as conditional “gifts” which can (and should) be revoked if the recipients are not adequately grateful, appropriately-behaved, or otherwise not abiding by white norms or showing deference to white dominance. For example, Thompson Dorsey and Venzant Chambers (2014) cite the surge in reverse discrimination legal cases, such as *Fisher v. Texas*, in response to the increase in admission and enrollment of people of color at elite universities. Hughes, et al. (2016) see this surge as a salient example of imperialistic reclamation in action: “...the end is coming for race-conscious affirmative action policies in higher education that appear to benefit underrepresented racial and ethnic groups with a preference for property rights to college access returning to White beneficiaries” (p. 88). We use imperialistic reclamation as a lens to understand some of our experiences in the aftermath of the cluster hire.

(Counter)narratives: Our Methodological Approach

Often in academic spaces, narratives explaining phenomena surrounding faculty and student of color (e.g. low retention rates of faculty of color) come from dominant perspectives or mechanisms and frequently magnify and reify deficit perspectives (e.g. the false narrative that African American boys do not care about education; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counternarratives work to elevate the voices and perspectives of those marginalized groups and individuals and often offer a different set of explanations and understandings of these phenomena (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). According to Solórzano & Yosso (2002) counternarratives can function to “...challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems [and] they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position...” (p. 36). Researchers have utilized counternarratives to elevate the voices and experiences of various individuals and groups of color, including but not limited to Indigenous peoples, African American and Black peoples, and Latinx and Chicanx peoples, among others, in academic spaces (Berry, Thunder, & McClain, 2011; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Harper, 2013; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006; Milner, 2008; Stanley, 2007; Stinson, 2008). The use of counternarratives “...allows us to explore the breadth of what happens

through the structures, processes, and discourses of higher education, as well as the depth of how and in what ways [people of color] respond” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 489). To recount our experiences in ways that authentically and meaningfully elevate our voices, we operationalize *counternarratives* as foundation of our methodological approach.

Counternarratives (also called counterstories) refer to the stories told by marginalized peoples of their own lived experiences, stories which are often devalued, diminished, and even erased. Counternarratives also serve as a methodological approach which aim to centralize these marginalized stories as legitimate and valuable challenges to dominant narratives and majoritarian stories (Hobbel & Chapman, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Stanley, 2007). Through a CRT lens, we employ a counternarrative approach as a means to elevate some of our racialized and marginalizing experiences embedded within a larger narrative of success through the cluster hiring process and our first year at the university.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified three types of counternarratives: (1) personal narratives; (2) narratives of others; and (3) composite narratives. In this work, we leverage elements of all three to present multiple composites and personal counternarratives infused into a collective story of the recruitment and hiring processes and the first year as tenure-track assistant professors. Our collective story is an assemblage of focused and reflective autobiographical accounts, written either alone or in pairs, of the various stages of this year and a half time period. Set in the culture of academia, we attend specifically to the practices and norms germane to the hiring and tenure processes in academic institutions. As such, our collective story is what Aguirre (2000) refers to as an *academic story*. Operationalizing the elements of *CRT* storytelling, our academic story contains narratives which foreground our racialized experiences.

Our academic story includes the voices of seven individuals from multiple intersectional racial, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds, and from various positions with the academic hierarchy including full, associate and assistant professors. Thus, our collective story includes perspectives of both dominant narratives and counternarratives, creating at times certain tensions which we see both as a limitation as well as a strength to the methodology (which we interrogate further in our conclusions).

Assembled, our academic story reveals narratives of struggle and accomplishment in the face of interest convergence and imperialistic reclamation operating in the double standards of institutional white privilege to maintain status quo epistemologies (Bell, 2004). Our academic story reveals feelings of empowerment and support alongside experiences of marginalization, invalidations, and microaggressions (Bell, 1992; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Setting and Context

The individuals in this academic story are situated in a western land-grant, research-intensive university. Embedded in the culture of the university is a prominent commitment to inclusive excellence which, “depends on how well we welcome, value, and affirm all members of the [university] and community” (Office of Vice President for Diversity).

The university attracts many students from across the state as well as across the nation. In 2016, the overall student ethnic and racial diversity was 19%. Students of color

comprised twenty-five percent of the freshman class, up from 20% in 2015. However, diversity of faculty continues to lag, with only 15% representing faculty of color. The university has eight colleges and 55 academic departments, one of which includes the SoE. In 2015, the year of the cluster hire search, SoE represented the most diverse unit of the 8 in its college in terms of faculty: three of the 32 faculty members identified as faculty of color. The SoE is the setting at the center of our reflective narratives.

Our Academic Story

Our academic story begins with three faculty in the SoE who collaborated with one another and others to shape and implement the cluster hire process. Our collective voices include the co-chairs of the search committee, a White woman full professor and White male full professor, and a Latina associate professor (newly tenured) who served as a search committee member. The two women faculty have collaborated on research and teaching critical multicultural education and have served separately and together to advance social justice within the SoE and university through committees and partnerships. The White male was a senior faculty member with over 30 years of experience at the institution. We are committed to centering equity and excellence within our work and communities and also recognize ongoing the personal work and professional growth that lay ahead if we are to contribute to dismantling systems of privilege and promote social justice.

The Hiring Committee

The SoE has only recently begun to place diversity, equity, and excellence at its core. For several years, we were among a few disparate faculty who worked toward these ends through our courses and scholarship, the eventual development of a SoE diversity committee, and efforts such as a Diversity Dialogue series and creation of a Graduate Fellowship for Research on Diversity. We argued that diversity and inclusive excellence serves as a basis for strong scholarship and is integral to our mission as a public educational institution. However, ongoing leadership issues and lack of schoolwide commitment to equity and diversity obstructed systematic and meaningful change, particularly with respect to organizational culture both at the level of the school and the college within which it sits. We sought to effect organizational change through the college diversity committee. The college leadership was willing to support events and professional development workshops, but remained resistant to the committee's recommendations to shift policies, such as crediting research on diversity in annual evaluations equal to other kinds of publications or holding department chairs accountable for retention of diverse faculty and students.

We were thrilled when the university Vice President (VP) for Diversity proposed a "diversity cluster hire" in the SoE. The time was ripe in many ways, given the need to fill four tenure track positions in four different SoE programs and the college diversity committee's pressure for substantive change. A new director of the SoE was hired, a strong scholar committed to social justice, and he readily took up the proposal. Reception among SoE faculty to the proposed cluster hire was mixed, but generally more supportive than we had anticipated -- enough to bolster our confidence that the SoE was ready for

this approach.

Several of us joined the director in crafting the approach to the cluster hire. First, we agreed that it should not be framed as a “diversity cluster hire,” but a “cluster hire focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Our announcement stated, “In order to further the School of Education’s social justice initiatives, we seek to develop a strong cadre of faculty whose research, teaching, and outreach center on diversity, equity, and inclusion.” We knew from research that the cluster hire approach could heighten the success of each newly hired faculty member, by promoting strength in numbers, removing the possibilities of isolation, and potentially creating a community of scholars whose voices could amplify each other’s.

The search process was complex and more intense than other searches in which we had participated. Rather than create four separate committees, the director decided to create a single “super cluster hire committee” of ten, made up of faculty across program areas as well as the university Vice President of Diversity and an assistant superintendent from the local school district. We eventually formed two sub-committees each responsible for filling two of the four positions. The sub-committees were predominantly white and female, with one Latina and one male on each. The lack of compositional diversity was apparent – and also reflective of the SoE and University culture as a predominantly white institution (PWI). However, the director viewed committee members as committed to the cluster hire focus.

The focus on academic excellence, diversity, social justice, and equity resonated throughout the search process. For example, “commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion” as a required, rather than preferred qualification, played a central role in the protocols for phone and on-campus interviews, and the focus of each candidate’s research presentation. There were many tense moments within the search committee processes. For example, one committee member recounted:

...the other members looked at me as if I had committed a crime when I let them know that I wondered about the racial make-up of one of the women we were considering for an on-campus interview. Everyone stopped and I was told, ‘you cannot bring up a person’s race as part of the discussion.’ My stomach ached, and my own Latina racial alienation became silenced and invisible as the only woman of color in the room. I had said a dirty word, a word that was not supposed to be part of the discussion. Race, racism, racialization, these terms were all part of my everyday experience and vocabulary, as well as the core of my critical race theory scholarship. Why was our committee reluctant to discuss a germane issue as part of this search? Why was race excluded? Why was I being warned to stay away from the racial mine that could explode and bring about disrepair with my colleagues and this search? Isn’t this search based on diversity, equity, and inclusion and how is race not part of the nexus of diversity we sought to include from such a cluster hire?

By simply bringing up the topic of race, this committee member was abiding by white norms or showing colorblind dominance. One committee member admitted the desire to learn about racism from a white candidate because it felt safe. Reflecting about the end of the initial search process, the lone woman of color on the search committee wrote:

Pushing such boundaries meant I did not “appropriately behave” by white norms and guidelines, but it made room for ethnically and racial candidates to be highly considered. At the end of the search, one committee member let me know that had I not been on the committee, she was not sure she would have supported the candidates we chose.

The search process led us to a list of outstanding finalists. The campus visits were soon upon us. Despite general support for the cluster hire focus, some of us worried about whether the culture and structure of the SoE was in the place it needed to be to both attract and support the scholars we sought. One fear was that candidates would come to the campus interviews with expectations that we were further along in our professed core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion than our advertisements promoted. We also feared that they would be surprised by the lack of student and faculty diversity. An additional concern was related to faculty, students, or those in a predominately white community using micro aggressions toward our candidates during the interview process. The search committee and director discussed the need facilitate candidates’ experiences to feel comfortable, wanted, and supported. We agreed that we would present the SoE as it was – moving forward and making some progress, but with a long way to go toward our social justice goals. We hoped the candidates would be excited by our commitment to cultivating equity and excellence as central to our values and actions in the SoE and enthusiastic about the potential of working with their cluster hire peers and other SoE faculty engaged in critical diversity work.

By the end of the interview phase, four outstanding scholars accepted the tenure track offer to work within the SoE as assistant professors. We realize these hires would not solve all of the complexities of structural racism operating within the SoE, but it was an important step forward.

Answering the Position Call

Before the cluster hire came to fruition, there were several factors that both the university and potential candidates had to take into consideration. From the perspective of the potential candidates, looking for a cluster hire assistant professor position was not necessarily on the to-do-list for many of us. However, after seeing the call for this position, we were intrigued with the possibilities for a variety of professional reasons. Two aspects of the job description stood out to the four candidates collectively. First, the position was one that focused on scholars that carried out research focused on equity, diversity and inclusion, directly aligning with the commitments the four of us brought to our own research and teaching. The second aspect involved the idea of a cluster hire. While feelings of uncertainty were present in terms of exactly what that entailed, the idea that the University was interested in hiring others that shared commitments to equity, diversity and inclusion was exciting and left us intrigued by the prospect of supportive colleagues.

After making the decision to apply and navigating it through a round of phone interviews, the members of the cluster hire went through a three-day interview before becoming the “fantastic four.” In what follows, we share the collective reflections of these four assistant professors from the cluster hire as they reflected on the question “What got me here?” We organize these reflections around a set of questions that were considered by

the candidates during the interview process. The reflections below include perspectives from two Latina females, a White male, and a Latino/African American multi-racial male. We present these very brief descriptions of the assistant professors to provide some insight into their positionality as they navigated and questioned the job search process.

What do they mean by diversity, equity and inclusion? Although the job description specifically focused on these areas, each of us brought with us questions about how these ideas were defined and enacted in the department and across the university. Our prior experiences revealed for us that while some may speak of issues of diversity, equity and inclusion, rhetoric does not always equate to taking action to support research and teaching aimed at transformation. Our questions included: Would this university support my research surrounding underserved and underrepresented populations who are primarily people of color? How do individuals at the university define diversity, equity, and inclusion? Was this a shared vision across colleagues in the school and around campus? Is this job posting just to hire a faculty member of color?

These were all questions that were in the forefront of our minds as the interview process began. We each took the approach that while this interview process was an opportunity to share our work and interest in the job, it was also a time to ask questions surrounding equity, diversity and inclusion across faculty members. Overall, we needed to not only *hear* from faculty members and administrators about how they would support the cluster hire, but we needed to *see* it and *feel* it.

Before the on-campus interview, there were phone interviews. The individuals with whom we spoke with were faculty members that were part of the search committees who had read about our leadership experiences, teaching backgrounds, and research surrounding underrepresented and underserved populations. They asked detailed questions about how we saw our work across these three areas impacting scholarship and communities that mattered to us. This phone interview signaled a first step in answering our existing questions as faculty members communicated to each of us that they were interested in who we are and our commitments to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.

However, while our initial interactions with faculty were positive, we each still wondered about the collective vision of equity, diversity and inclusion within the school and across the campus as a whole. Although members of the search committee were well versed and interested in our work around these issues, we looked forward to a campus visit and viewed the opportunity as vital to our interrogation of the meaning and purpose behind the position description. As part of understanding the vision across faculty on campus, we wondered whom we would be allowed to meet and in what formats (one on one, large group, small group, etc.).

We brought these wonderings to our campus interviews. For us to make the move across the country for a position within this cluster hire, we knew we needed to better understand the culture of scholars we would be joining. For one of us, these fears were immediately addressed:

I got on a plane and flew in for my three-day interview. I was immediately greeted at the airport by a faculty member who was personable and asked how my flight was and how I was doing. On the drive to my hotel I came to find that they had read an article about my work and they began to engage me in conversation about implications for

that article. Throughout the three-day process I conducted a research presentation, met deans, administrators, other faculty members, students, and staff. At my research presentation I was impressed with the attendance of faculty members within the School. There were about 25 people who attended my presentation and asked me questions. To me, this showed that the School as a whole was interested in the hiring process and were invested in each potential candidate. As the interview marathon began, each person I met with was able to answer how he or she personally viewed equity, diversity, and inclusion. Individuals were also candid about some of the areas for improvement e.g. the need of course redesigns to address equity, diversity, and inclusion. I was taken on a tour of the cultural centers on campus, as well as met with individuals in ethnic studies.

Similarly, another candidate reflected:

My campus interview ended up being quite positive. I was given opportunities to meet with faculty in a variety of formats allowing me to ask more direct questions about my potential concerns. I was able to ask faculty in the School of Education about their work and commitments allowing me to begin to build collective vision of their conceptions of equity, diversity and inclusion and what they hoped the outcomes of a cluster hire might be. The interview also allowed time and space to visit with members of the university community outside of the school. These opportunities included visits to cultural centers on campus that were engaged in the work of supporting traditionally marginalized students' success. From my perspective, these visits were set up intentionally to show the ways in which a commitment to equity and diversity were not only housed with certain faculty in the school, but also in other vital spaces around the university.

These reflections represent experiences of all four of the candidates. Particularly, each candidate spoke about the importance of being introduced and given opportunities to speak with faculty across campus housed in cultural centers or other departments that were engaged in work around equity, diversity and inclusion. The attendance and engagement at our research presentations signaled a sincere interest in the types of our diversity, equity, and inclusion work. As we left the interview process, we felt confident that there were like-minded and supportive faculty within the school and across campus. However, we also wondered with whom we did not meet and did not speak. In our experience, it is often what we do not see and do not get to experience that is vital to understanding the commitments and health of a community of scholars. Thus, while most of our questions in terms of commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion were answered while on campus, we still all left the interview process wondering if what we experienced was representative of the school and university.

What is a cluster hire? A second area in need of interrogation was in connection to the idea of a cluster hire. As mentioned above, we were all intrigued by the idea that the University was interested in hiring multiple faculty interested in teaching and research in equity, diversity and inclusion. However, none of us were familiar with the idea of a cluster hire and brought with us questions about what this meant. These questions included: How

were we to be “clustered” together? Who might be the other people that were hired as part of this cluster search? Would our work and interests align closely enough that not only would we be able to advocate for each other, but also work collaboratively toward empowerment and transformation?

These questions proved difficult to gain a better understanding due to the fact that we were all engaged in the interview process during the same time frame. That is, the faculty could describe their vision for wanting to hire several positions in connection with these vital issues, but they could not speak to whom we would be working alongside. While who we were going to be clustered with could not be answered, faculty members were able to help us think their vision for bringing in a group of scholars who would not only support each other, but would also significantly impact the culture of the school of education through our collective commitments.

Making a decision. Across our perceptions there are common themes connected to the excitement of finding a position and later meeting faculty that shared and supported our work within areas of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We were looking for a place where we belonged. This excitement was also met with varying levels of skepticism based on who we are and the experiences we brought with us to the process. Despite our fears, our level of skepticism was mediated by our interactions with people who cared about our commitments and valued our work. So, what got us here? It was because we *felt* welcomed and that our research would be supported; we *saw* the resources the university had for underrepresented and underserved populations (e.g. cultural centers); and, we *heard* from faculty members and administrators how they defined diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Overall, our visit revealed enough for us to make a commitment to being part of the faculty and work toward bringing equity, diversity and inclusion from our expert vantage points to the forefront of the mission of the school of education. The next step was to move across the country, immerse ourselves in the work and culture and continue to explore the university’s commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion. There was excitement about the possibility of research and teaching agendas, and to learn from others engaged in a similar process. Amongst the excitement, there was also uncertainty; uncertainty of what we would find once the curtain was opened and allowed to be accessed into the areas of the school and college that were not experienced during the interview process.

Our First Year

In retrospect, the hiring of four full-time tenure track faculty members within our respective departments has thus far had morsels of success, tempered by bitter incidents of backlash. As we continue to understand the complexities of our collective and individual experiences, we also have begun to define for ourselves what it means to be a cluster hire under the umbrella of diversity, equity, and inclusion while simultaneously learning the many variations of what it means to those around us.

We are all untenured. Two of us are newly minted Ph.D.s and the other two are advanced assistant professors. Despite the individualized nature of the tenure process, we see ourselves as collective scholars. Over the past year, we have taken the initiative to cultivate community by celebrating our accomplishments and supporting each other through our writing, teaching, and tenure process. As an example, when our department

chair asked each of us individually, “How can we better support you through tenure?” we convened a meeting among ourselves and crafted a collective response. While each of our needs might have been different, we felt it was important to create a unified voice which, borrowing from the notion of viewing and understanding one’s racialized identity through a binocular lens (Gutiérrez, 2004), contained each of our unique individual needs as well as a set of shared needs, some of which are germane to nature of equity work.

In the same vein, we have talked about how to create collaborative research agendas given our research trajectory around issues of systemic racism. As a result, a Center for Racial Justice in Education continues to be a priority for our School of Education yet we also question the forthcoming workload associated with forming a new research center as we balance our own research agendas with these newfound administrative tasks. As we analyze our collective and individual experiences in our first year, we see elements of interest convergence and imperialistic reclamation.

In one example, a colleague who had previously openly professed in various forms to be in full support of the cluster hire, went on to significantly undermine one of us in our teaching efforts. This colleague, whom we refer to as Lucy, was in charge of organizing a set of off-campus meetings throughout the semester for a cohort of students, which would be facilitated by her for the first half of each meeting, and led by one of us for the second half.

In a meeting of all the instructors at the start of the semester, I posed a question to Lucy inquiring how diversity, equity and inclusion were currently incorporated into our program. While I didn’t intend the question to be accusatory, Lucy took what felt like a defensive tone and explained how well-travelled and educated all the students were, and that the students are all good people. Even after I inquired for further clarification, Lucy avoided answering and seemed to be indirectly indicating that very little was being done to improve and promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the program. After this inquiry, Lucy stopped initiating regular face-to-face communication with me, requiring me to contact her through email to get the location and times of the upcoming student meetings. Throughout the semester, Lucy regularly provided me with multiple incorrect times and locations of the meetings, false information about cancelled meetings, and regularly kept the students for up to 30 minutes or more into the 60 minutes allotted for me to meet with them. After the semester, I learned that Lucy had been speaking regularly with the students, blaming me for “neglecting” them. This rhetoric was grounded in exclusionary coded language: “[The professor] isn’t one of us. [The professor] isn’t part of ‘The Family’. [The professor] can’t understand us.” The students eventually took up some of this rhetoric, echoing it in their communications with me, with each other, and other students and faculty.

In another example, we felt the backlash to our hire on the college level. Initially, we wholeheartedly believed that diversity, equity, and inclusion was a value engrained in the everyday operations of our department and college. While the rhetoric is central to missions, visions, and values, through our first year we began to question how individuals within our organization are held accountable to these principles. As our first year progressed, we saw these very principles come under attack as the collective leadership of our college attempted to remove all specific language regarding diversity, equity and

inclusion from the College’s mission and vision statements. To us, this felt all too aligned with imperialistic reclamation.

Another example of this occurred during the school’s attempt to create another cluster hire under the diversity, equity, and inclusion umbrella, which was met with opposition. The backlash was codified in liberalism language. Common responses were, “We already support diversity”, “We need individuals who can teach *other* courses,” and “We already did a diversity hire, no need to do it again”. At times, this left us thinking, “Were we a *token* cluster hire?” While these microinvalidations demean not only our existence as scholars who teach broadly from an equity standpoint, they also work in reductionist ways to label (and ultimately, commodify us) as “diversity hires” – meaning our bodies, ideologies, and skin color merit our hiring while simultaneously limit our range of efficacy.

Through these examples and other instances, it became apparent to all of us that we were forging new terrains. While some of these microaggressions were targeted and others subversive, many of the challenges we faced and continue to face are products of a larger system built to support Whiteness. In this system, which may have permitted a diverse set of scholars to be hired through a temporary set of convergent interests, there exists very few support structures, pathways, or shelters for us at the institutional level. To be clear, we do have some colleagues and leadership whom embody a commitment to social change, whom we value immensely. And while we were all aware that the cluster hire was one of the first steps of the process of this change, we quickly discovered that the tools and knowledge for constructing an inclusive environment for our success were absent.

For instance, as part of our recruitment package, we were all allotted a full-time graduate student to assist with our research agendas. Many of us were looking for candidates with an interest in equity and inclusion from a critical race lens, yet the very small pool of candidates, which we were left to identify on our own, not only lacked in diversity but also in critical perspectives. While we were all aware that our university has historically been a PWI, we assumed that the notion of equity, diversity, and inclusion were practices that were reflected in the recruitment and retention of graduate students within our respective departments.

As we inquired with various colleagues about diversity and critical perspectives in our graduate student population, responses ranged from softly acknowledging the problem (“Yeah, we do lack that, don’t we?”) to something closer to defensive posturing (“Look, we’ve got *lots* of students who have worked with Peace Corps, taught overseas, and done volunteer work!”) Rarely have we encountered responses that contain actions or plans to increase the diversity among the graduate (or undergraduate) students. Rather, we have at times felt that some of our colleagues have a notion that by hiring us, diversity in the student population will simply, somehow follow. And in some cases, we have even been tasked to take this responsibility on ourselves, being told to “start recruiting.” This particular comment is congruent with some larger thematic discourse we encountered in our first year which suggested that now that we, the cluster hire, are here, there are people to do “the diversity work” in the SoE. As individuals, we come together with a unified voice to continue to attempt to respond to this discourse with the notion that we all must engage in “diversity work.”

What does it mean to be hired under the common strand of diversity, equity, and inclusion? We have concluded that much of the misunderstandings of our cluster hiring process stems from lack of experience, knowledge, and fear, which have led to a regular

flow of marginalization, microinvalidations, microaggressions, and in some instances imperialistic reclamation. As we celebrate our first anniversary as a cluster hire, we feel hopeful that while these microinvalidations occur with regularity within our organization, our leadership is listening to us. They are mindful of how shifting an organization to lead with equity takes an emotional toll on those of us who fight against injustices on a daily basis. This shift has not been an easy one. We have witnessed mistakes with our leadership assuming accountability. We have encountered challenging conversations among other faculty members, some productive, some not. We have learned that some of our colleagues are glad we are here, others are not. We have learned to begin to rely on our allies, particularly those with more seniority to use their power and influence to convey a unified message.

Attaining compositional diversity was one byproduct of the hiring process; however, we were under the impression that equity, diversity, and inclusion served as a guiding principle in all the hiring practices. Hiring four individuals who center their research on fighting inequities should not be compartmentalized to “diversity work” but rather as a compelling rationale to addressing many of our societal factors impacting our country. In neglecting to lead our organization with equity across curriculum, hiring, tenure and promotion, and retention, acts to promote equity and inclusion become silos, and those of us who embody equity and inclusion in the academy become segregated, isolated and marginalized. We knew organizational change would be challenging, messy, and complex. While support structures specific and vital to our success and survival at the university are largely absent, and arguably absent from most universities, as a cluster-turned-cohort we have each other as an emerging nexus of strength, augmented by a small cadre of colleagues both in the SoE and across the campus. While each of our individual career pathways have yet to be fully written, we already know that this nexus is an integral part of our continued development as scholars oriented and committed to social justice.

Conclusions

The cluster hiring practice under the auspice of diversity, equity, and inclusion brings both rewards and challenges. The cluster hire was born from a social justice position and advanced by the efforts from a few committed individuals and involved a complex process. Certainly, the level of isolation for the new faculty is lessened as a byproduct of the community cultivated by equity-minded individuals. At times, the four faculty meet to offer support and guidance, particularly during annual reviews when each of the faculty members debrief their process as a way to transmit knowledge to one another. The four faculty find camaraderie, and even a nexus of understanding and support with each other. The cluster hire offers a collective identity from which they have begun to leverage collaborations and at times a healthy solidarity. Those members of the hiring committee who continue to actively support the cluster hire endeavor have found new efficacies and dimensions in their continued efforts and approaches toward social justice.

With this said, we also acknowledge that a cluster of faculty hired around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a “quick fix” or a silver bullet to changing the organizational culture of the SoE. While the mere presence of four new faculty who want to challenge the status quo and center equity as a paramount value in the SoE may ignite excitement and accolades from some and perhaps many fellow colleagues, realistically,

these pre-tenured faculty cannot shoulder the burden of changing the organizational culture of our workplace. It would be an act of negligence to assume that more equity-minded professors would absolve our SoE from its years of white-over-color ascendancy teaching and practices. When viewed through the notion of interest convergence, a cluster hire oriented around diversity, equity and inclusion may have been permitted/tolerated by those who would fervently oppose it due to the convergence of material and psychic interests of whiteness on the school, college, and university levels. But as Bell (1980) wrote, interest convergence is a temporary principle. Simply put, when the university decides it has afforded our efforts surrounding social justice too many benefits or too much access, interests diverge and there is a severe backlash and a re-seizure of power – a process of imperialistic reclamation. While our ability to make claims within our organization have not necessarily been re-seized, we have seen evidence of backlash in multiple forms throughout our first year and cannot ignore the implications of these pockets of racialized backlash.

We believe transparency about the purpose and structures about the cluster hiring process is key. From constructing the job positions to welcoming new colleagues onto campus, developing a clear purpose about the cluster hires provides the search committee clarity and candidates a better understanding of the expectations of them once they accept the position. Particularly around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is important that search committees also provide details to how these values are operationalized not only within the SoE mission and strategic plan, but within the work of all faculty colleagues. From the vantage point of the newly hired faculty, they were left guessing about their role and questioning how the search committee envisioned collaboration among each other. They also appreciated that this cluster hiring around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion was the first step towards living these values.

Open communication has been the catalyst for cultivating authentic relationships with one another. Our colleagues who have tenure have been diligent about asking, “What is it that you need from us to be successful here?” has to an extent made the new assistant professors feel validated. The tougher conversations that are had are around racism and equity. In a sense, professors who have privilege and power have an obligation to have these conversations on a regular basis. Conversations around values of diversity, equity, and inclusion need to go beyond the “surface-level” rhetoric in order to address racism and white supremacy. The act of changing organizational culture requires that everyone grapples with these issues in some capacity and all professors must also be open to incorporating equity within their research and teaching agendas in order for systemic change to transpire.

Parting Reflections

During this research and writing process, we all experienced the tensions of working to unveil these experiences among each other and also institutionally. As junior authors, we all sensed an element of liberation by documenting our stories, pain, and trauma. Our greatest fear is not the potential backlash that may transpire as a result of our naming and implicating our colleagues and work environment but rather in how our traumas and experiences are received by those in positions of power and privilege. Complacency through denial, silence, and/or inaction to our experiences perpetuates white supremacy,

which further dehumanizes our presence in academia.

For the senior authors, the collaborative experience of producing this paper has led us to better understand our limitations as faculty leaders in the process of recruiting and supporting the cluster hire faculty. Some of us were well aware of the challenges in cultivating an institutional culture prepared to be inclusive of colleagues of color as well as faculty whose work centers on social justice. We did not enter the process thinking that the cluster hire faculty would do the diversity work, and yet our limited efforts to more fully engage in systemic change have led to this outcome. The power of our colleagues' narratives, their trauma and experiences, pushes us to move beyond our academic understandings of social justice work to recognizing our complicity in upholding structures, systems, and a culture that perpetuates racism. In some cases, our own social justice work within the university had cultivated our awareness of racist structures and practices, and provided us with some strategies for supporting faculty of color on our campus but had not prepared us to do the institutional groundwork necessary. We have focused on creating supports for the cluster hire faculty without attending to the institutional climate and culture.

We realize there are no easy answers for engaging in meaningful multicultural organizational change (Jackson, 2005), but our social justice imperative has taken on new meaning and urgency by seeing with new eyes how the lives of our faculty, students, and staff are affected. In retrospect, we see now that we had followed some of the advice from publications on cluster hiring from reports such as the Urban University for Health (2015), including working to ensure early buy-in from administrators, engaging faculty early in the process, and "communicating the value of the program to stakeholders across the institution." However, we did not cultivate an inclusive institutional climate and culture before, during, or since the cluster hire. In our second cluster hire attempt, we realized that there is not shared understanding among our faculty and staff of what we mean by diversity, equity, and inclusion nor by our school's "social justice imperative." Our efforts have been too incremental – supporting staff and faculty volunteers in semester length campus-based "creating inclusive excellence" training is a start. And yet we also know the limitations to mandatory "diversity training." Ultimately, our colleagues' emotionally rendered "inconvenient narratives" push us to be more vigilant and to take responsibility for continuing to seek ways to transform the systems, structures, and culture that uphold White supremacy and demean and dehumanize the people in our community.

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