

Proximity to injustice: Leadership, basic needs, and institutional change in contexts of socially
lived inequity in higher education

by

Jessica Marie Ramirez

B.A., California State University Chico, 2020

M.A., Kansas State University, 2023

M.P.H., University of Kansas, 2025

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Leadership Communication
Staley School of Leadership

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

Student basic needs insecurity in higher education is most often understood through measures of food insecurity, housing instability, and financial hardship. While these indicators reveal the scope of student precarity, they offer less insight into how such experiences are socially lived within universities and how they shape belonging, leadership, advocacy, and institutional change. Although food insecurity serves as a central focus of this study, it is examined within the broader context of basic needs precarity and the structural inequities that influence students' experiences, opportunities, relationships, and pathways to engagement within higher education.

This qualitative, intergenerational case study examines how lived experiences with poverty, basic needs insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity influence who becomes involved in social change efforts, what sustains engagement over time, and how responsibility for equity-related work is distributed across institutional roles and generations within a predominantly White institution (PWI). Situated at Kansas State University, the study traces institutional change efforts across five decades through the experiences of historic and contemporary actors, including the leadership of Dr. Bernard Franklin, the first Black student body president at Kansas State University during the 1970s; the institutional advocacy surrounding the creation of Cats' Cupboard, K-State's on-campus food pantry; and the experiences of students navigating food insecurity, race, and belonging in the present day. By examining these interconnected histories, the study explores how struggles for representation, inclusion, and student well-being become linked to broader efforts to address inequities within higher education.

Positioned within these trajectories is my own autoethnographic journey from a food-insecure undergraduate student and campus organizer to instructor, mentor, and researcher. Autoethnography serves not as personal backdrop but as a methodological through-line for examining how proximity to inequity evolves across time, role, and institutional position. Through this lens, lived experience is conceptualized not only as a structural condition but also as a source of knowledge and expertise through which individuals interpret inequity, navigate institutions, and mobilize others toward change. At the same time, the study examines how those most directly affected by systemic inequities often assume disproportionate responsibility for the labor of institutional navigation, care, advocacy, and reform.

Grounded in Socially Lived Theory and informed by relational leadership theory, civic engagement scholarship, systems theory, and critical race theory, this study conceptualizes mobilization as relational, historically situated, and structurally embedded. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, historical analysis, and reflexive qualitative inquiry, the study examines how leadership and advocacy emerge through the intersection of lived experience, institutional context, relational networks, and historical moment.

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on leadership, civic engagement, student basic needs, food insecurity, and higher education by reconceptualizing motivation as socially lived, relational, and rooted in experiences of inequity. It extends existing research by examining lived experience not simply as a source of hardship, but as a catalyst for knowledge production, belonging, leadership, and institutional engagement. Practically, the study offers insight into how universities might cultivate more equitable and sustainable approaches to addressing student basic needs while recognizing the interconnected roles of representation, belonging, lived expertise, and institutional responsibility in shaping student success and well-being. Ultimately,

the study argues that understanding who mobilizes for change, who sustains that work, and who bears its burdens requires attending to the socially lived realities through which inequity is experienced and contested across generations within higher education.

Proximity to injustice: Leadership, basic needs, and institutional change in contexts of socially
lived inequity in higher education

by

Jessica Marie Ramirez

B.A., California State University Chico, 2020

M.A., Kansas State University, 2023

M.P.H., Kansas State University, 2025

A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Leadership Communication
Staley School of Leadership

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Approved by:

Major Professor
Drew Pearl, Ph.D.

Copyright

© Jessica Ramirez 2026.

Abstract

Student basic needs insecurity in higher education is most often understood through measures of food insecurity, housing instability, and financial hardship. While these indicators reveal the scope of student precarity, they offer less insight into how such experiences are socially lived within universities and how they shape belonging, leadership, advocacy, and institutional change. Although food insecurity serves as a central focus of this study, it is examined within the broader context of basic needs precarity and the structural inequities that influence students' experiences, opportunities, relationships, and pathways to engagement within higher education.

This qualitative, intergenerational case study examines how lived experiences with poverty, basic needs insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity influence who becomes involved in social change efforts, what sustains engagement over time, and how responsibility for equity-related work is distributed across institutional roles and generations within a predominantly White institution (PWI). Situated at Kansas State University, the study traces institutional change efforts across five decades through the experiences of historic and contemporary actors, including the leadership of Dr. Bernard Franklin, the first Black student body president at Kansas State University during the 1970s; the institutional advocacy surrounding the creation of Cats' Cupboard, K-State's on-campus food pantry; and the experiences of students navigating food insecurity, race, and belonging in the present day. By examining these interconnected histories, the study explores how struggles for representation, inclusion, and student well-being become linked to broader efforts to address inequities within higher education.

Positioned within these trajectories is my own autoethnographic journey from a food-insecure undergraduate student and campus organizer to instructor, mentor, and researcher. Autoethnography serves not as personal backdrop but as a methodological through-line for examining how proximity to inequity evolves across time, role, and institutional position. Through this lens, lived experience is conceptualized not only as a structural condition but also as a source of knowledge and expertise through which individuals interpret inequity, navigate institutions, and mobilize others toward change. At the same time, the study examines how those most directly affected by systemic inequities often assume disproportionate responsibility for the labor of institutional navigation, care, advocacy, and reform.

Grounded in Socially Lived Theory and informed by relational leadership theory, civic engagement scholarship, systems theory, and critical race theory, this study conceptualizes mobilization as relational, historically situated, and structurally embedded. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, historical analysis, and reflexive qualitative inquiry, the study examines how leadership and advocacy emerge through the intersection of lived experience, institutional context, relational networks, and historical moment.

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on leadership, civic engagement, student basic needs, food insecurity, and higher education by reconceptualizing motivation as socially lived, relational, and rooted in experiences of inequity. It extends existing research by examining lived experience not simply as a source of hardship, but as a catalyst for knowledge production, belonging, leadership, and institutional engagement. Practically, the study offers insight into how universities might cultivate more equitable and sustainable approaches to addressing student basic needs while recognizing the interconnected roles of representation, belonging, lived expertise, and institutional responsibility in shaping student success and well-being. Ultimately,

the study argues that understanding who mobilizes for change, who sustains that work, and who bears its burdens requires attending to the socially lived realities through which inequity is experienced and contested across generations within higher education.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	xix
List of Tables	xx
Acknowledgements	xxi
Dedication	xxiv
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Background of the Problem	7
Statement of the Problem.....	8
Purpose of the Study	13
Research Questions	16
Significance of the Study	18
Significance to Student Basic Needs and Food Insecurity Scholarship.....	18
Significance to Leadership and Civic Engagement Scholarship	19
Significance to Critical Higher Education and Critical Race Scholarship	20
Significance to Socially Lived Theory.....	21
Significance to Institutional Practice	22
Summary of the Chapter	23
Chapter 2 - Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations.....	26
Introduction.....	26
Theoretical Orientation of the Chapter	28
Autoethnographic Vignettes as Analytic Texts	30
Organization of the Chapter.....	31
Higher Education, Access, and Material Inequality	33
Expansion Within a History of Exclusion	33
A Changing Student Population.....	36
Rising Costs and Shifting Public Responsibility	37
From Access to Equitable Participation.....	39
Student Basic Needs Insecurity	40
The Emergence of Basic-Needs Scholarship	41
Defining Basic-Needs Security	43

From Individual Deficit to Structural Conditions	44
Conceptual and Methodological Boundaries	46
Food Insecurity in Higher Education.....	47
Defining Food Insecurity	47
Measuring Food Insecurity Among College Students	49
Estimating Prevalence.....	51
The Unequal Distribution of Food Insecurity	53
Educational and Health Consequences of Food Insecurity.....	55
Academic Performance and Persistence	56
Physical and Nutritional Health	57
Psychological Well-Being	58
Stigma, Concealment, and Help-Seeking	59
The Lived Experience of Food Insecurity	62
The Side Door	62
Reading the Vignette Through the Literature	69
Housing Insecurity and Student Homelessness	71
Defining Housing Insecurity.....	72
Measuring Housing Instability.....	73
Prevalence and Institutional Visibility.....	75
Unequal Exposure to Housing Insecurity	76
Academic and Psychosocial Consequences.....	78
Institutional Assumptions and Recognition	79
The Lived Experience of Housing Insecurity	80
Between Semesters	80
Reading the Vignette Through the Literature	84
Interconnected Basic Needs and Student Precarity	87
Precarity as Persistent Instability	88
The Temporal Organization of Insecurity.....	89
Institutional Fragmentation.....	90
Moving Beyond Resilience.....	92
From Material Precarity to Structural Inequality	93

Race, Higher Education, and Structural Inequality	93
Racialized Wealth and Economic Security	94
Unequal Educational Pathways.....	95
Race and Student Basic-Needs Insecurity	97
Predominantly White Institutions and the Experience of Marginality	98
Campus Racial Climate.....	100
Racial Microaggressions and Cumulative Strain	101
Representation, Authority, and Institutional Knowledge	102
From Racial Climate to Belonging	103
Belonging, Representation, and Validation	104
Belonging as a Relational and Institutional Experience	104
Belonging Uncertainty	106
Distinguishing Belonging From Mattering	107
Validation and Institutional Agency	108
Representation and the Possibility of Recognition	109
A Critical Understanding of Belonging	110
Positioning the Autoethnographic Vignette.....	111
The Lived Experience of Representation.....	112
“We’re Matching”	112
Reading the Vignette Through the Literature	115
Theories Guiding the Study	118
Socially Lived Theorizing	119
Knowledge From Everyday Life	120
Feminist Standpoint Epistemology	121
Lived Experience and Socially Lived Knowledge.....	122
Connecting Levels of Analysis	123
Intersectionality and Difference.....	124
Agency Within Constraint	125
Reflexivity and the Researcher’s Location	126
Contribution and Analytical Limits	127
Critical Race Theory	128

Racism as Enduring and Institutional	129
Critique of Colorblindness and Neutrality	130
Interest Convergence.....	131
Experiential Knowledge and Counter-storytelling	132
Intersectionality and Intra-racial Difference	133
Community Cultural Wealth.....	135
Racial Realism and the Limits of Reform.....	136
Critical Race Theory in the Present Study	136
Relational Leadership Theory.....	137
From Leaders to Leadership Processes	138
Meaning-Making Through Relationships	139
Relational Leadership in Higher Education	140
Mentoring, Invitation, and Recognition.....	142
Power, Conflict, and the Limits of Relationality	143
Relational Leadership Theory in the Present Study.....	144
A Relational Moment in Advocacy	144
An Idea, a Question, and an Invitation	144
Reading the Vignette Through Relational Leadership.....	146
Civic Engagement Scholarship.....	148
Defining Civic Engagement.....	148
Resources and the Civic Voluntarism Model	149
Recruitment and Social Networks	151
Efficacy, Identity, and Collective Action	152
Framing Public Problems.....	153
Critical Consciousness	154
The Sociological Imagination: A Reflexive Passage.....	155
Higher Education's Civic Mission.....	157
Inequality in Civic Participation	158
Contribution and Analytical Limits	159
Systems Theory.....	159
From Isolated Parts to Interdependent Systems.....	160

Universities as Loosely Coupled Organizations	161
Feedback, Delays, and Unintended Consequences	162
Organizational Culture and Institutional History	164
Institutional Change and Institutionalization	165
Leverage Points and Structural Intervention.....	166
Power and the Limits of Systems Theory	167
Systems Theory in the Present Study.....	168
Who Carries the Work? The Unequal Distribution of Institutional Change Labor.....	169
Proximity, Recognition, and Institutional Dependence	169
Cultural Taxation	170
Emotional and Invisible Labor.....	172
Student Activism as Labor.....	173
The Labor of Mentoring and Care	174
Burnout, Withdrawal, and the Right Not to Lead.....	175
Individual Champions and Organizational Vulnerability	176
Responsibility Across Institutional Roles.....	177
Contribution to the Present Study	177
Synthesis of the Theoretical Foundation	178
Socially Lived Theorizing as the Epistemological Starting Point	179
Critical Race Theory as an Analysis of Power	179
Relational Leadership Theory as an Analysis of Leadership Process	180
Civic Engagement Scholarship as an Analysis of Participation	181
Systems Theory as an Analysis of Institutional Organization	182
Alignment With the Research Questions	183
Productive Tensions Among the Perspectives	185
Gaps in Existing Scholarship and Rationale for the Study	186
From Prevalence and Outcomes to Meaning Over Time.....	186
Basic-Needs Insecurity and Leadership Development	187
Proximity, Critical Consciousness, and Sustained Engagement.....	188
Belonging, Voice, and Institutional Participation.....	189
Institutional Change Across Generations.....	190

The Unequal Burden of Institutional Change	191
Methodological Gaps	192
Rationale for the Present Study	193
Chapter Summary	193
Chapter 3 - Methods.....	196
Methodological Underpinnings: An Introduction to Methods	196
Philosophical and Epistemological Foundations	199
Ontological Assumptions.....	199
Epistemological Assumptions.....	201
Axiological Commitments	204
Methodological Approach	206
Qualitative Inquiry	206
The Need for a Qualitative Case Study Design	209
Why an Intergenerational Case Study?.....	210
Kansas State University as the Bounded Case.....	211
Sampling and Recruitment.....	213
Data Collection	216
Semi-Structured Interviews	216
Autoethnography as Method.....	217
Reflexive Journaling and Field Notes.....	219
Data Analysis	220
Preparing the Data.....	221
Focused Coding	223
Ethical Considerations	224
Researcher Positionality.....	225
Trustworthiness.....	228
Credibility	229
Transferability.....	230
Dependability and Confirmability	230
Methodological Limitations.....	231
Chapter Summary	232

Chapter 4 - Findings.....	234
Introduction.....	234
Participant Overview	237
Research Question One: Origins and Evolution of Engagement.....	238
Survival, Scarcity, and Financial Precarity as Early Understandings of Inequity	239
Autoethnographic Account: Arriving With Everything I Owned.....	244
Identity and Belonging Shaped Early Understandings of Inequity	247
Autoethnographic Account: Learning Advocacy Through Culture and Community.....	251
Relationships Introduced New Ways of Understanding Self and Responsibility.....	254
Autoethnographic Account: Learning to Build a Case	259
Institutional Experiences Transformed Awareness Into Leadership and Advocacy	262
Autoethnographic Account: Working at the Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry	270
Participants Rarely Described Themselves as “Future Advocates” or Leaders.....	271
Research Question One Summary	276
Research Question Two: Lived Proximity and Responsibility for Change.....	277
Responsibility Shifted From an Individual Obligation to a Moral and Relational	
Commitment	278
Autoethnographic Account: When Awareness No Longer Felt Neutral	280
Responsibility Was Cultivated Through Relationships and Lived Proximity	282
Participants Rejected the Idea That Responsibility Belonged Only to Those Closest to	
Inequity	287
Participants Rejected Deficit Explanations and Relocated Responsibility to Institutions..	290
Autoethnographic Account: From Proving Need to Questioning Its Production	294
Responsibility Accumulated Invisible Labor.....	295
Lived Proximity Changed What Participants Could See.....	299
Research Question Two Summary	302
Research Question Three: Belonging, Representation, and Institutional Inclusion	303
Belonging Served as a Foundation That Made Leadership Possible	304
Representation Expanded Participants’ Sense of Possibility Rather Than Simply Increasing	
Visibility	308

Participants Transformed the Belonging They Received—or Wished They Had Received— Into Opportunities for Others	312
Autoethnographic Account: Becoming the Scholar and Educator I Needed.....	314
Belonging Was Continually Negotiated	316
Autoethnographic Account: The Plastic Water Bottle.....	318
Research Question Three Summary	320
Research Question Four: Institutional Structures, Cultures, and Historical Contexts.....	322
Institutions Frequently Relied on Individuals for Equity Work Rather Than Assuming Institutional Responsibility	322
Relationships Transmitted Advocacy Across Generations	326
Institutional Culture Determined Whether Equity Work Became Normalized, Reactive, or Sustained	330
Participants Envisioned an Institution That Reduced Inequity Rather Than Celebrated Individual Resilience	337
Research Question Four Summary	341
Summary of Findings.....	342
Chapter 5 - Discussion, Theoretical Contributions, and Implications	345
Introduction.....	345
The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change	348
Historical and Structural Conditions: Leadership Begins Before Leadership	350
Critical Reflection and Meaning-Making: Interpreting Experience	353
Relationships, Belonging, and Invitation: Developing the Capacity to Act	356
Leadership Through Institutional Navigation: Translating Commitment into Organizational Action	360
Institutional Transformation, Maintenance, and Intergenerational Change	364
Theoretical Contributions of the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change	368
Implications for Higher Education Leadership and Practice	371
Design Leadership Education Around Inquiry, Not Adversity.....	372
Build Coordinated Basic-Needs Infrastructure	373
Create Institutional Conditions for Belonging and Participation.....	374

Support Mentoring Without Concentrating Invisible Labor	376
Move Equity Work From Individual Commitment to Organizational Capacity	377
Evaluate Institutional Change Through Equity-Minded Measures	378
Conclusion	379
Methodological Contributions	380
Incorporating Multiple Institutional Positions	382
Integrating Autoethnographic Data and Reflexive Accountability.....	383
Using Iterative Analysis Across Time and Position	385
Preserving Voice While Acknowledging Representation.....	386
Summary of Methodological Contributions	388
Limitations of the Study	388
A Single Institutional Context	389
Purposeful and Self-Selecting Participation	390
Retrospective Interpretation and Historical Reconstruction	391
Reliance on Narrative and Autoethnographic Evidence	392
Researcher Positionality and Institutional Proximity	392
Confidentiality and Contextual Detail	394
Current Scope of the Conceptual Framework.....	394
Delimiting the Study's Claims.....	395
Directions for Future Research	396
Examine the Framework Across Institutional Contexts	396
Study Disengagement, Exit, and Resistance.....	398
Follow Leadership and Institutional Change Over Time.....	399
Investigate Specific Relationships Within the Framework.....	400
Use Participatory and Collaborative Methodologies	401
Extend the Inquiry Beyond Higher Education.....	402
Concluding Direction.....	403
Chapter Conclusion.....	403
Bibliography	408
Appendix A – Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....	436
Appendix B - Participant Interview Dates and Durations	438

List of Figures

Figure 4.1. Participant Timeline of Involvement With Kansas State University	238
Figure 5.1. The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change.....	350

List of Tables

Table 4.1. Research Questions and Corresponding Analytic Patterns.....	236

Acknowledgements

Before I wrote a single page of this dissertation, I had already begun writing the story that made it possible. It is a story of people—people who opened doors for me, challenged me, believed in me, encouraged me, and quietly carried pieces of this journey alongside me. Somewhere between the first draft and the final sentence, I realized that while this dissertation may have a single author, it was never truly written alone.

First, I want to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Drew Pearl. Throughout this process, you challenged my thinking without diminishing my voice and never once made me question my competence as a writer, researcher, or scholar. You allowed this dissertation to become authentically mine while helping me become a better scholar in the process. I will always be grateful for your mentorship.

To Dr. Tom Hallaq, thank you for so willingly serving on my committee and for the opportunity to work alongside you on projects that have been deeply meaningful to me. Thank you for your generosity with both your time and your trust.

To Dr. Valerie Padilla-Carroll, thank you for being a glimmer of hope, truth, and grounded perspective—not only throughout this dissertation, but for years before it. Thank you for reminding me why we do this work: in communities, with communities, and always in service to something greater than ourselves. Thank you for trusting me to carry our work with care, competence, and integrity. More than you know, thank you for helping me imagine the kind of scholar I hope to become.

To Dr. Kara Ross, thank you for your support as both a committee member and a friend. Working alongside you has continually reminded me that making progress on the world's toughest challenges rarely fits neatly within disciplinary boundaries.

To Dr. Leah Tsoodle, thank you for so graciously serving as the proxy for my dissertation defense. More importantly, thank you for consistently showing up—for me, for communities, and for the work you do in creating a more food-secure world.

There are mentors who teach you, and then there are mentors who quietly change the trajectory of your life. Dr. Marianne Paiva, you have been both. From the moment our paths crossed nearly a decade ago, you have loved me, encouraged me, challenged me, and believed in me—often long before I believed in myself. Five years ago, we packed everything I owned into my little Honda Civic and drove halfway across the country to Kansas. You helped me move into an apartment, and as you were getting ready to fly back to California, I remember asking, *"So...you're really leaving me here?"* We laugh about that now because neither of us could have imagined what Kansas would become. It became home. It became the place where I earned two master's degrees and a Ph.D.; where I found lifelong friends, extraordinary mentors, meaningful work, and a life I love deeply. Thank you for believing in me over and over again. But perhaps most importantly, thank you for believing in me enough to leave me here. So much of the life I have built began with that act of faith.

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the countless scholars, mentors, colleagues, and friends who have poured into me over the years. In particular, I want to thank Dr. Carol Shanklin, Mary Ice, Muthoni Kiunga, Leah Roane, Dr. Mary Kay Siefers, Dr. Nancy Bolsen, Dr. Kerry Priest, and my sister, Meli Marquez, to name only a few. Thank you for checking in, celebrating every milestone, encouraging me through the setbacks, and reminding

me to keep going whenever the finish line felt impossibly far away. Your investment in me has shaped both the scholar and the person I have become. I hope you know how deeply grateful I am.

Finally, to my partner, Rico Farris, Jr.

Thank you, my love, for all of the little things that, together, became the big things. Thank you for every *"I got it—you just keep writing."* Thank you for reminding me to close my computer, step outside, breathe fresh air, and remember that the world continued to exist beyond these pages. Thank you for making me laugh when all I wanted to do was make one more edit. Thank you for cheering for me with a confidence that often exceeded my own. Most of all, thank you for reminding me, every single day, that fear and success can coexist. That I could be scared as hell and still do hard things anyway. You are my thunder buddy for life.

To everyone who has walked alongside me in ways both big and small, thank you. I hope the work contained within these pages reflects not only my own efforts but also the generosity, wisdom, compassion, belief, and love that so many of you have so freely shared with me. I am a firm believer that in one way or another, we are all just walking one another home. Thank you, to each of you, for being a guiding light along this part of my path.

Les agradezco mucho.

Dedication

There is a version of me who would never believe these pages exist.

She would never believe that one day her name would be followed by three letters she had never heard spoken in the neighborhoods where she learned to grow up too fast. She would never believe that someone like her could write a dissertation.

This is for her.

For the girl who mistook survival for living because survival was all she had ever known. For the teenager who was angry before she knew she was grieving. For the young woman who kept reaching toward a life she had never seen, never touched, never been promised—but somehow believed it was waiting for her anyway.

If I could sit beside you now, I don't think I would say much. I'd let you cry. I'd remind you to breathe. I'd tell you that none of it was your fault—not the poverty, not the violence, not the instability, not the feeling that the world expected you to remain exactly where it found you.

I would tell you that one day you will stop apologizing for taking up space. That your voice will become the very thing people ask you to use. That the parts of yourself you once tried to hide will become the very reasons people listen. I would tell you that your stubbornness was never stubbornness. It was hope. Hope wearing steel-toed boots. Hope refusing to quit. Hope waking up one more morning and deciding to try again.

You won't always recognize it while you're living it, but one day you'll understand. The life you are building is quietly building you, too. I cannot return to change where we came from. But I can make sure we do not end there, while still honoring the many parts of me those experiences have shaped.

So I dedicate this dissertation not only to the girl I was, but to every child who has ever believed that poverty was inescapable. To every child who has known hunger, lived between eviction notices, listened to adults whisper about bills they could not pay, watched parents work themselves to exhaustion and still wonder whether it would be enough, lived with violence, loved someone battling addiction, or had family separated by borders, by circumstance, or by systems that never seemed to notice they existed.

I hope someone tells you what I needed someone to tell me.

Your beginning is not your ending.

The world will try to convince you that your story has already been written.

It hasn't.

You are holding the pen.

And even when the ink feels like it is running dry, write anyway.

Hope has an extraordinary way of finding people who have every reason to stop looking for it.

To my brothers—Dominick, June Bug, Isaac, and Dimitri—we know where we come from. We carry those stories. We honor those stories. But they are not the whole story. May we never forget that every morning we wake up holding the pen once again, with the power to write the next page, the next chapter, and the rest of our story.

To my Grandmother Yvonne and my mother, Chantel, there are pieces of both of you in everything good I have become. Your resilience lives in me. Your strength lives in me. Your love—however imperfect, however complicated—lives in me. For everything you hoped I might become, I hope I have made you proud, and I hope I continue to.

To my Grandpa Dennis, thank you for reminding me that sometimes courage looks remarkably ordinary. Sometimes courage is simply taking one more step. And then another. And another. Even when the road ahead seems unfathomably long.

And finally, to my Tata. My *Santito*.

The older I become, the more I understand that love is measured less by what people say than by what they quietly do. Love looks like waking up at 3:30 every morning to go to work. Love looks like tired bodies. Love looks like showing up again tomorrow.

Even now, when I begin to doubt myself, I can hear your voice.

"Sigue echándole ganas, hija."

So I did, Tata. Day after day. I kept going.

This dissertation is a small culmination of that.

Para mi Tata:

Siempre voy a ser tu chaparrita, tu gordita, tu hermosa, tu preciosa, como una rosa acabada de cortar de tu jardín.

The only difference...

She now has a Ph.D.

Gracias. Te quiero muchísimo.

Y que Dios te bendiga siempre.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

There are some social issues one studies. Others, one survives.

Student basic needs insecurity has emerged as a growing concern within higher education, drawing increasing attention from scholars, policymakers, and institutional leaders seeking to understand the barriers students face in accessing food, housing, healthcare, transportation, and other necessities essential to academic success and well-being (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019). Yet despite a growing body of research documenting the prevalence of food insecurity, housing instability, and financial hardship among college students, much of the existing literature remains focused on measuring need rather than understanding how these experiences are socially lived within universities and how they shape belonging, leadership, advocacy, and institutional change (Nikolaus et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). Statistics can tell us how many students struggle to meet their basic needs. They reveal far less about how those struggles influence who becomes involved in social change efforts, what sustains engagement over time, and how responsibility for addressing inequity becomes distributed within institutions.

My understanding of these questions did not begin in graduate school. Long before I encountered terms such as food insecurity, basic needs precarity, or structural inequity, I stood beside my grandmother in line at a church food distribution site in Oxnard, California. The church had a formal name, though I never learned it. In my family, it was simply known as The Big Bell, named for the enormous church bell that overlooked the hilltop where local families gathered to receive food assistance. My grandmother and I had a routine. She waited in line for canned goods while I stood in another line selecting fruits, vegetables, and whatever produce happened to be available that day. It was there that I learned how to identify a

ripe tomatillo, which chiles would make my grandfather sweat during dinner, and how far my grandmother could stretch a box of donated food.

I also learned lessons that would take years to fully understand.

The food lines existed alongside other forms of instability that shaped my childhood. Before being raised by my grandparents, my brother and I moved frequently as my parents struggled with addiction. Housing was uncertain. Food was inconsistent. Both of my parents cycled in and out of jail. I knew what eviction notices looked like before I knew what the inside of a university classroom looked like. Yet because these experiences surrounded me, they often felt ordinary. Poverty was not something that happened to a few people. It was woven into the neighborhoods, schools, and communities I knew best.

Years later, sociology would provide language for experiences I had long struggled to explain. Concepts such as structural inequality, social reproduction, racialized disadvantage, and institutional exclusion helped highlight patterns I had observed throughout my life but lacked the vocabulary to describe (Bourdieu, 1986; Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Looking back, I recognize that I was learning about systems long before I learned how to name them.

My path into higher education was neither linear nor expected.

After being expelled from a traditional high school, I enrolled in a continuation school for at-risk youth, a setting often viewed as a final stop for students unlikely to succeed elsewhere. Neither of my parents had graduated from high school. College was not a family expectation. It was a possibility introduced by educators who encouraged me to enroll in community college courses while still completing high school requirements. For much of my adolescence, I had internalized the belief that I was not particularly smart because that is what many adults had told

me. It was not until I began succeeding in college classrooms that I started questioning those assumptions.

Higher education became both refuge and revelation.

Yet college did not insulate me from the realities of poverty. During my undergraduate years, I experienced food insecurity and periods of housing instability, including sleeping in my car when university housing closed and returning home was not an option. These experiences fundamentally shaped how I understood higher education. While many institutional narratives frame student success as a matter of effort, motivation, or resilience, my experiences suggested something different. Students do not enter higher education from equal starting points, nor do they navigate college under equal conditions.

It was during this time that I became increasingly aware of an institutional contradiction. Hundreds of meal swipes expired at the end of each semester while students throughout campus struggled to access food. The contradiction was impossible to ignore. What began as frustration evolved into inquiry, and inquiry eventually became organizing. Working alongside faculty mentors and campus partners, I helped establish Swipe Against Hunger, a campus initiative that redirected unused meal swipes to students experiencing food insecurity at California State University, Chico. What initially emerged from lived experience ultimately became institutional policy.

At the time, I understood this work primarily as advocacy.

Years later, I came to understand it differently.

What connected the food pantry lines of my childhood, my experiences navigating food insecurity as a college student, and my efforts to establish Swipe Against Hunger was not simply hardship itself. It was proximity to inequity. Those closest to inequity often possess forms of

knowledge unavailable to those observing it from a distance. They understand barriers that remain invisible within institutional reports, policies, and statistics because they encounter those barriers in their daily lives.

Yet I also began noticing another pattern.

The individuals most directly affected by inequity often appeared to assume disproportionate responsibility for addressing it. Students experiencing hunger advocated for food access programs. Students navigating exclusion worked to create spaces of belonging. Individuals closest to social problems frequently became the people most invested in solving them.

This observation raised a series of questions that would ultimately guide the present study.

Why do some individuals become involved in efforts to address inequity while others do not? What sustains engagement over time? How does proximity to inequity shape pathways into leadership and advocacy? And why does responsibility for identifying and addressing inequity so often fall upon those most directly affected by it?

These questions followed me to Kansas State University.

Graduate school was never part of my original plan. Following my undergraduate studies, I intended to join the Peace Corps and pursue community-based work focused on public health and poverty alleviation. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those plans, I accepted an opportunity to pursue graduate education at Kansas State University. Like many newcomers, my understanding of Kansas was shaped more by assumptions than reality. I arrived expecting one place and encountered another.

For the first time in my educational journey, I regularly found myself as one of only a few people of color in classrooms, meetings, and professional spaces. Questions of race, visibility, representation, and belonging became increasingly salient. Research on students and faculty of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) has long documented experiences of racial isolation, tokenization, and exclusionary campus climates (Hurtado et al., 1999; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Smith et al., 2007). Yet these experiences also revealed the profound importance of representation.

One afternoon during my first semester as a graduate teaching assistant, a student stopped me before class and smiled.

“Jess,” she said excitedly, “we’re matching.”

Instinctively, I looked down at my clothes.

We were not.

Then I realized what she meant.

Our hair was pulled back in nearly identical styles. Large gold hoop earrings framed both of our faces. She later shared how meaningful it was to see someone who looked like her standing at the front of a college classroom. After class, I sat quietly in my office reflecting on that conversation. As an undergraduate student, I had rarely encountered Black or Brown women occupying positions of instructional authority. In that moment, I realized representation was not simply about visibility. It was about possibility. It was about seeing evidence that people who looked like us could occupy spaces of expertise, leadership, and influence.

Belonging emerges as a central thread throughout this dissertation. Across generations, participants describe struggles not only for material resources but also for recognition, representation, inclusion, and institutional legitimacy. Whether navigating food insecurity, racial

marginalization, or broader forms of exclusion, participants repeatedly describe efforts to create spaces where they and others might feel seen, valued, and supported. These experiences suggest that belonging is not merely an outcome of institutional life; it is often a condition that shapes whether individuals remain engaged, assume leadership, and sustain efforts toward change.

Situated within these broader dynamics, this dissertation examines how experiences of poverty, basic needs precarity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change across generations within a predominantly White institution. Through an intergenerational qualitative case study situated at Kansas State University, the study traces institutional change efforts across five decades through the experiences of historic and contemporary actors, including the student leadership of Dr. Bernard Franklin during the 1970s, the institutional advocacy surrounding the creation of Cats' Cupboard, and the experiences of contemporary students navigating food insecurity, race, and belonging in the present day.

Positioned within these trajectories is my own autoethnographic journey from food-insecure undergraduate student and campus organizer to instructor, mentor, and researcher. Autoethnography serves not as personal backdrop but as a methodological through-line through which questions of leadership, responsibility, belonging, and institutional change can be examined across time, role, and institutional position. Grounded in Socially Lived Theory and informed by relational leadership theory, civic engagement scholarship, systems theory, and critical race theory, this study conceptualizes lived experience as both a structural condition and a source of knowledge production.

At its core, this dissertation asks: How does proximity to inequity shape who mobilizes, who sustains engagement, and who bears responsibility for institutional change within higher

education? By tracing these trajectories across generations, institutional roles, and historical moments, this study seeks to highlight not only how inequity is experienced and contested, but also how lived experience becomes a source of knowledge, belonging, leadership, and advocacy. More importantly, it examines why responsibility for addressing inequity so often becomes concentrated among those who know it most intimately and what that pattern reveals about institutional change within higher education.

Background of the Problem

Long before I understood poverty as a structural condition, I understood it as a place. It was the apartment on Hummingbird Street where peeling paint hung from the walls, and water stains stretched across the ceiling like veins. It was the trailer parks, crowded apartment complexes, and neighborhoods where children learned to distinguish between the sounds of fireworks and gunshots long before they learned algebra. It was the county jail visitation rooms where conversations with parents took place through thick glass partitions and black telephones attached to walls by coiled metal cords. It was the church on the hill known throughout my family simply as The Big Bell, where my grandmother and I stood in line for food alongside neighbors, classmates, and families whose lives looked remarkably similar to our own.

At the time, I did not think of these experiences as unusual.

The people who lived next door to us were poor. The people who lived down the street were poor. The families standing beside us in food pantry lines were poor. As a child, poverty appeared less as an exception than as a social reality shared by the people around me. Looking back, what I interpreted as normal was, in fact, evidence of deeply entrenched structural inequalities shaped by race, class, geography, and public policy (Wilson, 2012; Rothstein, 2017; Desmond, 2016).

This distinction matters because one of the central challenges within contemporary discussions of student basic needs insecurity is the tendency to individualize what are fundamentally structural problems. Food insecurity is often discussed as a matter of insufficient food. Housing insecurity becomes a matter of unstable housing. Financial hardship becomes a matter of inadequate income. While these descriptions are technically accurate, they often obscure the broader social, historical, and institutional conditions through which insecurity is produced and experienced (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019).

The present study begins from a different assumption: basic needs insecurity is not merely a collection of material deficits. It is a socially lived experience that shapes how individuals understand themselves, relate to others, navigate institutions, and engage in efforts to create change.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past decade, student food insecurity and basic needs insecurity have emerged as significant areas of concern within higher education scholarship and practice. A growing body of research has documented the prevalence of food insecurity, housing instability, homelessness, and financial hardship among college students across institutional types (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020). These studies have been instrumental in demonstrating that substantial numbers of students struggle to meet their basic needs while pursuing higher education and that these challenges disproportionately affect students from historically marginalized backgrounds, including first-generation students, students of color, former foster youth, parenting students, and students from low-income households (Maroto et al., 2015; El Zein et al., 2019; The Hope Center, 2023).

While this scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of the scope and consequences of student basic needs insecurity, much of the literature remains focused on prevalence, risk factors, and educational outcomes. Researchers have examined the relationship between food insecurity and academic performance, persistence, mental health, physical health, and degree attainment (Bruening et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2021; Nikolaus et al., 2020). Similarly, studies of housing insecurity have highlighted the ways unstable living conditions undermine student success and well-being (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Collectively, this work has established that basic needs insecurity represents a substantial barrier to educational opportunity; however, it provides more insight into the existence of inequity than into how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to it.

Despite these important contributions, significant questions remain regarding how experiences with poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, racial marginalization, and institutional exclusion influence students' pathways into leadership, advocacy, and social change efforts. While scholars have documented the existence of basic needs insecurity, considerably less is known about how these experiences are socially lived within higher education institutions and how they shape individuals' perceptions of responsibility, belonging, and institutional accountability.

A similar limitation exists within scholarship on civic engagement and leadership development. Researchers have identified numerous factors that influence participation in advocacy and social action, including recruitment, opportunity structures, social networks, identity development, and institutional support (Verba et al., 1995; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Komives et al., 2005). However, these bodies of literature have devoted comparatively little attention to the ways lived experiences with material hardship, marginalization, and exclusion

function as catalysts for engagement. As a result, limited research examines how proximity to inequity influences who becomes involved in efforts to address systemic problems, how engagement is sustained over time, and how individuals make meaning of their participation in institutional change efforts.

Critical race scholars have further demonstrated that students, faculty, and staff from historically marginalized backgrounds often perform disproportionate amounts of emotional, relational, and organizational labor within predominantly White institutions (Padilla, 1994; Smith et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 2013). Concepts such as cultural taxation, racial battle fatigue, and the minority tax illustrate how responsibility for addressing inequity is frequently placed upon those most directly affected by it (Padilla, 1994; Joseph & Hirschfield, 2011). Despite the relevance of these concepts, they have rarely been examined alongside student basic needs initiatives, food insecurity advocacy efforts, or campus responses to material inequities. Consequently, important questions remain regarding how burdens associated with institutional change are distributed and experienced across different forms of marginalization.

Taken together, these gaps reveal a significant limitation within existing scholarship. Although researchers have examined student basic needs insecurity, leadership development, civic engagement, and institutional inequity as separate areas of inquiry, relatively little research has explored the intersections among them. Specifically, limited attention has been given to understanding how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape who becomes involved in social change efforts, what sustains engagement over time, how individuals develop leadership identities, and how responsibility for equity-related work becomes distributed across institutional roles and generations.

This gap is particularly evident in studies that examine institutional change within higher education. Much of the existing literature focuses on contemporary student experiences or evaluates specific interventions such as food pantries, emergency aid programs, and meal assistance initiatives (Freudenberg et al., 2019; Kezar et al., 2020). Far less attention has been devoted to understanding how advocacy, leadership, and mobilization unfold over time within a single institutional context or how historical moment, social identity, and proximity to inequity shape efforts to recognize and address inequities across generations.

Kansas State University provides a unique context through which to examine these questions. As a predominantly White, land-grant institution with a history of student activism, racial integration efforts, and growing attention to student basic needs, Kansas State University offers an opportunity to explore how institutional change emerges through the interactions of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members across generations. Examining these processes within a single institutional setting allows for a deeper understanding of both continuity and transformation in how inequities are recognized, interpreted, and addressed over time.

Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship treats lived experience primarily as a risk factor, demographic characteristic, or predictor of adverse outcomes. Students are categorized as food insecure, low-income, first-generation, or marginalized, yet comparatively little attention is devoted to understanding how those experiences generate knowledge, shape leadership identities, inform perceptions of institutional responsibility, or motivate engagement in efforts to create change. By focusing primarily on vulnerability and risk, existing approaches may overlook the ways individuals draw upon lived experience as a resource for interpretation, advocacy, and mobilization. This study addresses that limitation by conceptualizing lived experience not only

as a structural condition but also as a source of knowledge production, meaning-making, and social action.

The problem, therefore, is not simply that student basic needs insecurity persists within higher education. Rather, despite growing awareness of food insecurity, housing instability, racial marginalization, and other forms of inequity, limited research has examined how these lived experiences shape pathways into leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change. Even less is known about how proximity to inequity influences who assumes responsibility for addressing institutional problems, how such engagement is sustained over time, and how the burdens associated with equity-related work become distributed across students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Without this understanding, institutions risk continuing to rely upon those closest to inequity to identify problems, educate others, and sustain reform efforts while failing to recognize the labor, expertise, and burdens embedded within that work.

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond documenting need toward understanding how inequity is experienced, interpreted, and transformed into action. It requires attention not only to the existence of hardship but also to the social processes through which hardship becomes leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change. Responding to this need, the present study employs an intergenerational qualitative case study to examine how lived experiences with inequity shape mobilization, belonging, leadership, and responsibility within a predominantly White institution across five decades. In doing so, the study seeks to highlight how institutional change emerges, who sustains it, and what that process reveals about the relationship between lived experience and social transformation within higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, intergenerational case study is to examine how lived experiences with poverty, basic needs insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change within a predominantly White institution (PWI). While food insecurity serves as an important empirical context for the study, it is examined within the broader framework of student basic needs precarity and the interconnected social, economic, and institutional conditions that shape students' experiences, opportunities, and engagement within higher education.

This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining mobilization as a socially lived process that emerges through the intersection of lived experience, relationships, institutional contexts, and historical circumstances. Rather than conceptualizing engagement solely as an individual characteristic or psychological disposition, the study explores how involvement in advocacy and institutional change develops through experiences with inequity, opportunities for participation, and evolving understandings of responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship in leadership studies, civic engagement, critical higher education research, and student basic needs by offering a more integrated understanding of how individuals become involved in efforts to address institutional inequities.

Situated at Kansas State University, this study employs an intergenerational design that traces institutional change efforts across five decades. Through the experiences of historic and contemporary actors, the study examines how struggles related to representation, belonging, student well-being, and institutional accountability become linked to broader efforts aimed at addressing inequity within higher education. Specifically, the study explores three interconnected trajectories: the student leadership of Dr. Bernard Franklin, the first Black student body president

at Kansas State University during the 1970s; the institutional advocacy surrounding the creation and development of Cats' Cupboard, Kansas State University's campus food pantry; and the experiences of contemporary students navigating food insecurity, race, belonging, and leadership in the present day.

Positioned within these trajectories is my own autoethnographic journey from a food-insecure undergraduate student and campus organizer to instructor, mentor, and researcher. Autoethnography serves not as a personal backdrop but as a methodological through-line that provides insight into how relationships to inequity evolve across time, role, and institutional position. Through reflexive engagement with my own experiences, the study considers how lived experience may function simultaneously as a source of knowledge, a catalyst for engagement, and a site of responsibility.

Grounded in Socially Lived Theory and informed by Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory, this study examines how individuals draw upon experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional exclusion to make meaning of inequity, navigate institutions, and engage in efforts aimed at creating change.

More specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine how participants describe the origins and evolution of their engagement in food insecurity and broader equity-related efforts.

This objective focuses on understanding the formative experiences, relationships, and institutional contexts that contribute to participants' involvement in advocacy and change efforts. Particular attention is given to moments of awareness, mentorship, recruitment, and opportunity that influenced pathways into leadership and engagement.

2. Explore how lived proximity to structural inequity shapes perceptions of responsibility for initiating and sustaining institutional change.

This objective investigates how experiences with poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, racial marginalization, and exclusion influence individuals' understandings of obligation, accountability, and leadership. It also examines whether proximity to inequity generates heightened expectations for advocacy and whether responsibility for equity-related work is distributed unevenly across institutional actors.

3. Analyze how motivation, engagement, and leadership evolve across time, role, and institutional position.

Central to the intergenerational design of the study is an examination of how individuals' relationships to inequity change over time. This objective considers how engagement shifts as individuals move from student to professional, from recipient of services to provider of support, or from activist to administrator. It further explores how changing institutional positions influence perceptions of possibility, responsibility, and risk.

4. Examine how institutional structures facilitate, constrain, or shape the sustainability of mobilization efforts across generations.

This objective situates individual experiences within broader organizational contexts by exploring how institutional policies, leadership cultures, resource allocations, power dynamics, and historical conditions influence the development and sustainability of equity-related initiatives.

The purpose of this study extends beyond documenting experiences of food insecurity or basic needs insecurity. Rather, it seeks to understand how lived experiences with inequity shape leadership, belonging, advocacy, and institutional engagement across time and context. Particular

attention is given to the ways lived experience informs understandings of responsibility, influences pathways into change efforts, and shapes the sustainability of equity-related work within higher education.

By examining these processes across generations within a single institutional context, the study contributes to scholarship on leadership, civic engagement, student basic needs, food insecurity, and higher education. Theoretically, it advances understanding of mobilization as a relational, historically situated, and socially lived process. Practically, it offers insight into how institutions might better support both those engaged in equity-related work and the communities those efforts are intended to serve.

Research Questions

This study examines how lived experiences with inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change within higher education. Particular attention is given to how individuals make meaning of inequity, become involved in efforts to address it, and understand responsibility for equity-related work across institutional roles and generations.

The overarching research question guiding this study is:

How does proximity to inequity shape who mobilizes, who sustains engagement, and who bears responsibility for institutional change within higher education?

To address this overarching question, the study is organized around four interrelated research questions:

1. How do participants describe the origins and evolution of their engagement in food insecurity, basic needs, and broader equity-related efforts?

This question examines the experiences, relationships, and institutional contexts that participants identify as influential in shaping their involvement in advocacy and social change efforts.

2. In what ways does lived proximity to poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and other forms of structural inequity influence perceptions of responsibility for initiating and sustaining change efforts?

This question examines how experiences of hardship, exclusion, and marginalization influence perceptions of responsibility and obligation. Particular attention is given to how responsibility for equity-related work is distributed across institutional actors and the extent to which those most directly affected by inequity are expected to lead efforts to address it.

3. How do experiences of belonging, representation, and institutional inclusion shape leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement over time?

This question examines how experiences of inclusion, exclusion, visibility, and representation influence leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement across time and institutional contexts.

4. How do institutional structures, cultures, and historical contexts facilitate, constrain, or shape the sustainability of mobilization efforts across generations?

This question examines how institutional policies, leadership practices, organizational cultures, resource allocations, and historical conditions influence the development and sustainability of equity-related initiatives across generations.

Collectively, these questions move beyond understanding food insecurity solely as a condition of material deprivation. Instead, they examine how lived experiences with inequity influence leadership, belonging, advocacy, responsibility, and institutional engagement across

time and context. Through an intergenerational case study design, the study seeks to illuminate how lived experience becomes a source of knowledge, motivation, and action within higher education.

Significance of the Study

Student basic needs insecurity has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing higher education in the twenty-first century. As colleges and universities enroll increasingly diverse student populations, growing numbers of students pursue higher education while navigating food insecurity, housing instability, financial hardship, and other forms of precarity that directly affect their ability to participate fully in academic life (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019; The Hope Center, 2023). While scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of the prevalence and consequences of these challenges, important gaps remain in understanding how lived experiences with inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change. This study addresses those gaps and contributes to several areas of scholarship, theory, and practice.

Significance to Student Basic Needs and Food Insecurity Scholarship

First, this study contributes to scholarship on student food insecurity and basic needs insecurity by shifting attention from prevalence to lived experience. Existing research has been instrumental in documenting the scope of food insecurity and housing instability among college students and establishing their relationships to academic outcomes, mental health, and student success (Bruening et al., 2017; Nikolaus et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2021). However, much of this literature remains focused on measuring need rather than examining how students experience, interpret, and respond to insecurity within institutional contexts. By foregrounding

these experiences, the study expands understanding of basic needs insecurity as both a material condition and a socially lived process.

By centering the experiences of individuals who have navigated food insecurity, poverty, racial marginalization, and institutional exclusion, this study responds to growing calls for qualitative and interpretive approaches capable of capturing the complexity of students' lives and the meanings they assign to them (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). In doing so, it highlights how experiences of insecurity shape not only material outcomes but also perceptions of belonging, responsibility, institutional legitimacy, and engagement.

Importantly, this study also situates food insecurity within a broader framework of basic needs precarity. Rather than treating hunger as an isolated issue, the research examines how food insecurity intersects with housing instability, financial hardship, belonging, race, and institutional access. This broader lens offers a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions shaping student experiences and the pathways through which individuals become engaged in efforts to address inequity.

Significance to Leadership and Civic Engagement Scholarship

Second, this study contributes to leadership scholarship by examining how lived experiences with inequity shape pathways into leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement. Traditional approaches to leadership have often emphasized individual traits, competencies, or behaviors (Northouse, 2022), whereas relational perspectives conceptualize leadership as a socially constructed process emerging through relationships, interactions, and shared meaning-making (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Komives et al., 2005). Building upon these perspectives, the present study demonstrates how proximity to inequity can function as a catalyst for leadership engagement and social action. Rather than conceptualizing motivation as an individual

characteristic, the study explores how engagement emerges through lived experience, relational networks, institutional contexts, and historical circumstances. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views leadership as socially situated and deeply connected to questions of identity, power, experience, and social context (Komives et al., 2005; Dugan, 2017).

The study also contributes to civic engagement scholarship by examining how individuals become involved in social change efforts and what sustains that involvement over time. Existing research has highlighted the importance of recruitment, opportunity structures, mentorship, and civic learning experiences in shaping participation (Verba et al., 1995; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, less attention has been given to how lived experiences with material hardship, exclusion, and structural inequity influence civic engagement trajectories. By examining mobilization through an intergenerational lens, this study demonstrates how proximity to inequity can serve as a motivating force for civic participation, leadership, and collective action. It further offers insight into how engagement develops, evolves, and is sustained across changing institutional and historical contexts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of civic engagement as a relational, socially lived, and historically situated process.

Significance to Critical Higher Education and Critical Race Scholarship

Third, this study contributes to critical higher education scholarship by examining how responsibility for addressing inequity becomes distributed within institutional settings. Research on predominantly White institutions has consistently documented the ways students, faculty, and staff from historically marginalized backgrounds often perform disproportionate amounts of emotional, relational, and organizational labor (Padilla, 1994; Smith et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 2013). Concepts such as cultural taxation, racial battle fatigue, and the minority tax have

illuminated how institutions frequently rely upon those most affected by inequity to educate others, mentor peers, and advance equity-related initiatives (Padilla, 1994; Joseph & Hirschfield, 2011).

This study extends these conversations by examining how such dynamics operate within student basic needs advocacy and institutional change efforts. Participants consistently describe situations in which lived experience confers both legitimacy and responsibility. Individuals closest to inequity often possess valuable knowledge regarding institutional barriers, unmet needs, and opportunities for change. Yet they are also frequently expected to assume leadership roles in addressing those challenges. By examining this tension, the study contributes to ongoing conversations regarding cultural taxation, institutional responsibility, and the distribution of equity-related labor within higher education.

The study further contributes to scholarship on belonging and representation within predominantly White institutions. Research has consistently demonstrated that belonging influences student engagement, persistence, and success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Museus, 2014). Yet belonging is often discussed as an outcome rather than a mechanism through which leadership and advocacy develop. By examining how experiences of inclusion, exclusion, visibility, and representation shape participants' engagement with social change efforts, this study reconceptualizes belonging not simply as an outcome of institutional life but also as a mechanism through which leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement develop.

Significance to Socially Lived Theory

This study also contributes theoretically through its application and extension of Socially Lived Theory. Grounded in traditions that view lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge production (Smith, 1987; Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004), Socially Lived Theory

provides a framework for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to social realities from positions shaped by their lived experiences.

Within higher education research, students and employees who experience food insecurity, poverty, racial marginalization, or exclusion are often categorized according to demographic characteristics or risk factors. Less attention is given to the ways these experiences generate knowledge, shape interpretations of institutional life, and inform efforts to create change. This study conceptualizes lived experience not merely as a condition to be measured but as a source of expertise capable of generating insight into institutional processes, leadership development, and organizational change. Through this lens, lived experience becomes both a site of inequity and a source of knowledge from which inequity can be understood and challenged.

By examining lived experience across multiple generations and institutional roles, the study extends Socially Lived Theory into conversations regarding leadership, belonging, advocacy, and organizational change within higher education. In doing so, it demonstrates how lived experience shapes not only how individuals understand inequity but also how they respond to it, mobilize around it, and make meaning of their responsibility to address it.

Significance to Institutional Practice

Beyond its scholarly contributions, this study offers practical implications for colleges and universities seeking to address student basic needs more effectively and equitably.

Across the United States, institutions have invested significant resources in food pantries, emergency aid programs, meal assistance initiatives, and other interventions aimed at supporting students experiencing hardship (Kezar et al., 2020). While these efforts remain important, questions persist regarding how institutions identify needs, engage stakeholders, and sustain change efforts over time.

Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in its ability to bridge scholarly conversations that are often examined separately. By integrating research on student basic needs insecurity, leadership, civic engagement, belonging, critical race scholarship, and institutional change, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how lived experiences with inequity shape engagement within higher education.

At its core, this research argues that experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional exclusion do more than create barriers to student success. They can also become sources of knowledge, catalysts for leadership, foundations for belonging, and pathways into advocacy and institutional change. Yet these same experiences may place disproportionate burdens on those closest to inequity, positioning them as both recipients of institutional shortcomings and agents of institutional transformation. This tension represents one of the central insights of the study and raises important questions regarding responsibility, equity, and the sustainability of change efforts within higher education. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for scholars seeking to explain how mobilization occurs, but also for institutions committed to creating more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable educational environments.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter introduced the problem of student basic needs insecurity within higher education and situated it within broader conversations regarding leadership, advocacy, belonging, equity work, and institutional change. While a growing body of scholarship has documented the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity, housing instability, and other forms of basic needs insecurity among college students, less attention has been given to understanding how lived experiences with inequity shape pathways into leadership, advocacy,

and efforts aimed at creating institutional change. Similarly, limited research has examined how responsibility for addressing inequity becomes distributed across students, faculty, staff, administrators, and institutions themselves. To address these gaps, this chapter introduced the study's purpose, significance, and research questions and provided conceptual definitions of key terms that frame and inform the investigation.

Following this introduction, the remainder of this dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 presents the literature review and theoretical framework guiding the study. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach employed in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings organized around the four research questions guiding the study. Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by interpreting the findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework, discussing implications for higher education research, leadership scholarship, and institutional practice. The chapter also presents the study's contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and offers recommendations for future research.

Notably, because a guiding methodological premise of this study is that knowledge is socially situated and that researchers inevitably interpret the world through their own lived experiences (Berger, 2015; Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), brief autoethnographic reflections are incorporated throughout the dissertation where they meaningfully contribute to the analysis. These reflections are not presented as the primary source of evidence nor as the focus of the study. Rather, they serve to acknowledge my own proximity to the phenomena under investigation and to make transparent the experiences that shaped the questions I asked and the interpretations I ultimately constructed. Consistent with traditions of reflexive qualitative inquiry and autoethnographic scholarship, these reflections function not to privilege my own experiences but to situate the research process within the broader

understanding that knowledge is relational, contextual, and co-constructed (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011; Richardson, 2000). Throughout the dissertation, these narratives are intentionally integrated only where they deepen understanding of participants' experiences, emphasize the interpretive process, or provide additional context for understanding the socially lived realities explored in this study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

Introduction

Student basic-needs insecurity has become an increasingly urgent concern within higher education. A growing body of scholarship documents the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity, housing instability, homelessness, financial precarity, and other unmet material needs among college students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). This research has challenged assumptions that students' academic experiences can be understood independently of the conditions under which they eat, sleep, work, travel, care for family members, and meet other daily needs. Access to college does not necessarily provide access to the material, relational, and institutional resources required to participate fully once enrolled.

Yet basic needs insecurity is not solely a material condition. Hunger and housing instability occur within institutional environments where students also negotiate identity, visibility, dignity, relationships, and belonging. Students must decide whether to disclose their circumstances, seek assistance, trust institutional representatives, or continue managing hardship privately. These decisions are shaped by more than the availability of a food pantry or emergency grant. They are also influenced by stigma, racialized inequality, prior encounters with institutions, access to supportive relationships, and beliefs about who is entitled to receive help (El Zein et al., 2019; Henry, 2017; Maroto et al., 2015; Weaver et al., 2020). Understanding basic needs insecurity therefore requires attention to how material conditions are experienced and interpreted within the broader social world of higher education.

These experiences are not distributed evenly. Racialized wealth inequality, unequal K–12 educational opportunities, housing discrimination, labor-market stratification, immigration policy, and differences in access to family resources shape students’ material circumstances before they enter college (Oliver & Shapiro, 2019; Rothstein, 2017; Sharkey, 2013). Once enrolled, students from historically marginalized populations may encounter additional barriers related to campus racial climate, representation, institutional unfamiliarity, and unequal access to mentoring and social capital (Harper, 2012; Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000). Food insecurity or housing instability cannot be separated neatly from these conditions because students experience them simultaneously rather than as discrete variables.

Existing scholarship provides substantial knowledge about the prevalence, distribution, and educational consequences of basic-needs insecurity. Higher education research has also established the importance of belonging, mentoring, civic engagement, leadership development, and institutional context. These conversations, however, have often progressed along separate scholarly paths. Basic-needs studies have concentrated largely on measurement, risk factors, educational outcomes, and programmatic responses (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2020). Belonging scholarship has examined students’ experiences of connection, recognition, and institutional membership (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Leadership and civic engagement research has investigated how individuals develop leadership identities, enter collective action, and build the relationships necessary to address shared concerns (Dugan, 2017; Komives et al., 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Verba et al., 1995). Organizational scholarship has considered how institutional cultures, structures, and systems enable, constrain, and sustain change (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Senge, 2006).

Each body of literature illuminates an important portion of the phenomenon examined in this dissertation, but none independently explains how experiences with inequity may shape later understandings of leadership, responsibility, and institutional change. Less is known about how people interpret proximity to poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional exclusion; how those interpretations develop through relationships and institutional experiences; or why some individuals become engaged in efforts to address conditions they have experienced or witnessed. Scholarship also leaves unresolved questions about who performs equity-related labor, how that responsibility becomes distributed, and what allows change efforts to continue after the people who initiated them leave.

This chapter brings these literatures into conversation. It establishes the historical and empirical context necessary for understanding student basic-needs insecurity and examines how material hardship intersects with race, belonging, leadership, civic engagement, and institutional life. The purpose is not to suggest that every experience with inequity produces advocacy or that leadership follows a predictable developmental path. Rather, the review identifies what existing scholarship can explain, where its explanatory boundaries remain, and why an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation is necessary for the present study.

Theoretical Orientation of the Chapter

This study is grounded in socially lived theorizing and informed by Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory. Socially lived theorizing is a feminist approach to knowledge production that begins with the everyday experiences of people historically excluded from determining what counts as authoritative knowledge (Kang et al., 2017). It reflects the feminist understanding that personal experiences are shaped by political, economic, cultural, and institutional forces and must therefore be

interpreted in relation to those larger conditions. By connecting micro-level experience with meso-, macro-, and global structures, socially lived theorizing makes it possible to examine how circumstances frequently attributed to personal choice are patterned by social location and relations of power (Kang et al., 2017).

This orientation is grounded in a broader tradition of feminist standpoint epistemology, Black feminist thought, and situated knowledge. Smith (1987) argues that inquiry should begin from people's everyday lives while examining how those lives are organized through social relations extending beyond immediate experience. Harding (1991, 2004) similarly contends that knowledge is socially situated and that beginning inquiry from marginalized lives can expose institutional relations that dominant perspectives leave unexamined. Collins (2000) demonstrates how Black women's social locations can produce critical knowledge of interlocking systems of race, gender, class, and power. Haraway (1988) further rejects the possibility of a detached and universal knower, emphasizing that knowledge is always partial, embodied, and produced from a particular location.

Beginning with lived experience does not mean treating every personal account as complete, self-explanatory, or inherently correct. Scott (1991) cautions against invoking experience as if its meaning were transparent or existed outside discourse, history, and interpretation. Feminist standpoint scholars likewise distinguish an experience from a critically developed standpoint; social location creates possibilities for knowledge, but those possibilities require reflexivity, interpretation, and attention to power (Harding, 2004). Within this study, lived experience refers to what individuals encounter in their everyday lives, while socially lived knowledge refers to the understanding that can develop when those experiences are interpreted in relation to broader historical, relational, and institutional conditions.

The additional theoretical perspectives guiding the study contribute distinct forms of explanation. Critical Race Theory identifies how racism and other forms of power become embedded within institutional histories, policies, practices, and dominant accounts of merit and opportunity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Relational Leadership Theory explains leadership as a socially constructed process emerging through interaction rather than as an individual possession or positional authority (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Civic engagement scholarship illuminates how resources, identities, relationships, invitations, efficacy, and opportunities affect participation in collective life (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Systems Theory situates individual action within interconnected organizational structures, cultures, policies, and feedback processes (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006). Together, these perspectives establish the theoretical foundation for examining experience, interpretation, relationships, mobilization, and institutional context without introducing the conceptual framework developed from this study's findings in Chapter 5.

Autoethnographic Vignettes as Analytic Texts

Throughout the chapter, selected autoethnographic vignettes place my experiences in conversation with the scholarship under review. Autoethnography connects personal experience to cultural and institutional analysis, using the researcher's life as a point of entry into social conditions that extend beyond the individual account (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). Consistent with this tradition, the vignettes are not included as memoir, as representative accounts of all students experiencing hardship, or as substitutes for empirical literature. They are used as analytic texts through which concepts such as stigma, concealment, precarity, representation, and institutional access can be examined at the level of everyday experience.

Each vignette is positioned after the relevant literature has established the broader empirical and conceptual context. This sequencing is intentional. It prevents my experience from being used to establish prevalence or generality while allowing the narrative to reveal emotional, relational, and embodied dimensions that aggregate findings can leave obscured. Following each vignette, I return explicitly to the literature to interpret the experience, consider its limits, and identify what becomes visible when personal experience is situated within larger institutional and structural conditions. This movement between experience and analysis reflects autoethnography's dual commitment to evocative representation and disciplined cultural interpretation (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011).

The vignettes also require reflexive caution. My experiences are shaped by my identities, historical location, institutional roles, and present perspective. They cannot stand in for participants' narratives or for all students who have experienced food insecurity, housing instability, racial marginalization, or exclusion. Reflexive autoethnography does not eliminate the researcher's subjectivity; it makes that subjectivity visible and accountable within the production of knowledge (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). The vignettes should therefore be read as situated accounts that illuminate particular relationships between personal experience and institutional life while remaining open to complication by other evidence and experiences.

Organization of the Chapter

The chapter begins by situating contemporary student basic-needs insecurity within the historical expansion and economic transformation of American higher education. It then examines the development of basic-needs scholarship before reviewing literature on food insecurity, housing instability, student homelessness, and the interconnected condition of

precarity. The first two autoethnographic vignettes are positioned within these empirical sections to illuminate the concealed and socially negotiated dimensions of food and housing insecurity.

The discussion then turns to race and structural inequality, with particular attention to the experiences of students of color within predominantly White institutions. Scholarship on campus racial climate, belonging, representation, and validation establishes how institutional environments shape students' access to recognition, relationships, resources, and participation. A third vignette examines representation through an encounter from my experience as a graduate teaching assistant.

The final portion of the chapter develops the theoretical foundation guiding the study. It examines socially lived theorizing, Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory in greater depth, clarifying the contribution and limitations of each perspective. A final autoethnographic vignette concerning *Swipe Against Hunger* situates relational leadership and civic engagement within an experience of advocacy while maintaining the distinction between the existing theoretical literature reviewed here and the conceptual contribution presented later in Chapter 5. The chapter concludes by identifying the empirical and theoretical gaps addressed by the present study.

Understanding those gaps first requires situating basic-needs insecurity within the historical development of American higher education. The next section therefore examines how expanded access, changing student populations, rising educational costs, and shifting public responsibility created the contemporary conditions in which material insecurity has become increasingly visible.

Higher Education, Access, and Material Inequality

Contemporary student basic-needs insecurity must be understood within the historical development of American higher education. Colleges and universities are frequently presented as engines of economic mobility, democratic participation, and individual opportunity. Higher education can produce meaningful economic, civic, and social benefits, but access to those benefits has never been distributed equitably (Carnevale et al., 2018; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Marginson, 2016). The history of American higher education is characterized by expansion alongside exclusion: institutions have gradually opened to broader populations while continuing to reproduce inequalities associated with race, class, gender, citizenship, and wealth (Geiger, 2015; Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2019).

This history matters for the present study because basic-needs insecurity did not suddenly emerge when researchers began measuring it. Students have likely navigated hunger, unstable housing, inadequate healthcare, transportation barriers, and financial hardship for as long as economically marginalized students have pursued higher education. What has changed is the visibility of those experiences, the composition of the student population, the cost of attendance, and the degree to which scholars and institutions recognize material security as central to educational participation.

Expansion Within a History of Exclusion

Early American colleges were created primarily to educate White men for religious, political, and professional leadership. Their curricula, admission practices, and institutional cultures reflected narrow assumptions about who possessed the capacity and social authority to participate in advanced education (Geiger, 2015; Thelin, 2019). Women, Black Americans, Indigenous peoples, members of lower socioeconomic classes, and other marginalized

populations were excluded formally or directed into separate and unequally resourced institutions. Higher education functioned not only as a pathway to knowledge but also as a mechanism through which status, culture, and opportunity were reproduced across generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wilder, 2013).

The Morrill Act of 1862 expanded the nation's public higher education infrastructure by granting federally controlled lands to states to fund colleges focused on agriculture and the mechanical arts. This expansion is often described as a democratizing development because it broadened the purposes and populations associated with collegiate education. However, the land-grant system was financed through lands acquired from Indigenous nations, linking the growth of public higher education to dispossession and settler colonialism (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). Its benefits were also distributed through a racially segregated system. The second Morrill Act of 1890 led to the establishment or designation of Black land-grant institutions in former Confederate states when those states refused to admit Black students to White institutions, but these institutions received systematically unequal support (Neyland, 1990; Williams & Williamson, 1988).

The land-grant tradition therefore reflects a contradiction that continues to matter for public universities: an institutional commitment to access and public service developed through structures that did not serve all populations equitably. This contradiction cautions against treating expanded institutional capacity as equivalent to inclusive educational opportunity. An institution may broaden admission while leaving intact the economic, cultural, and organizational conditions that determine who can participate fully after entering.

Higher education expanded further during the twentieth century. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, provided educational benefits to

returning veterans and contributed to rapid enrollment growth after World War II. Community colleges also expanded, creating geographically accessible pathways into postsecondary education for populations previously excluded from four-year institutions (Cohen et al., 2014; Thelin, 2019). The Higher Education Act of 1965 subsequently increased federal involvement through financial aid programs intended to reduce economic barriers to enrollment (Heller, 2011).

These policies contributed to the movement from an elite system toward mass higher education, but they did not eliminate structural inequality (Trow, 1973, 2007). The GI Bill, for example, was administered through local institutions and housing systems already structured by segregation. Black veterans faced discrimination in admission, housing, lending, and access to predominantly White institutions, limiting their ability to benefit equally from a policy formally available to them (Katznelson, 2005; Turner & Bound, 2003). Similarly, federal financial aid expanded access while operating within a stratified higher education system in which institutional type, selectivity, resources, and completion opportunities remained strongly associated with race and socioeconomic status (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Posselt et al., 2012).

Expansion therefore changed who could enter higher education without removing the unequal conditions under which students entered. Students arrived with different levels of family wealth, familiarity with college systems, K–12 preparation, access to professional networks, and capacity to absorb unexpected expenses. These resources influenced not only admission but also where students enrolled, whether they attended full time, how much they worked, and what happened when financial disruption occurred (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Perna, 2006).

A Changing Student Population

The population enrolled in contemporary higher education differs considerably from the residential, financially dependent, full-time student around whom many traditional institutional practices were designed. Today's students include greater numbers of first-generation students, students of color, adult learners, veterans, parenting students, students with disabilities, financially independent students, and students combining enrollment with substantial employment and caregiving responsibilities (Radwin et al., 2018). Many move between full- and part-time enrollment, attend more than one institution, stop out and return, or pursue degrees through pathways that do not follow a continuous four-year timeline.

These differences are sometimes described through the category of “nontraditional” students. That label has become increasingly inadequate because the circumstances it identifies are not peripheral to contemporary higher education. Employment, caregiving, commuting, financial independence, delayed enrollment, and part-time attendance characterize a substantial portion of the student population (Choy, 2002; Radwin et al., 2018). Continuing to call these students nontraditional can preserve the traditional student as the institutional norm even when that norm no longer represents how many students experience college.

Institutional assumptions nevertheless continue to shape policy and practice. Financial aid packages may underestimate housing, transportation, food, childcare, technology, and healthcare costs. Student services may operate during hours that conflict with employment or caregiving. Campus involvement may be organized around unpaid time that commuting and working students do not possess. Faculty members may interpret an absence, missed assignment, or lack of participation as limited motivation without knowing that the student is managing unstable housing, hunger, employment, or family responsibility.

These assumptions matter because institutions are not neutral settings into which students simply bring individual differences. Institutional cultures communicate which experiences are expected and which are treated as deviations requiring students to adapt (Museus, 2014; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Students whose families possess extensive college knowledge may have access to guidance about financial aid, course selection, faculty interaction, housing, and institutional procedures. First-generation students may possess substantial familial and community strengths while still encountering systems built around forms of knowledge their families have had fewer opportunities to acquire (Kiyama, 2011; Yosso, 2005). When institutions mistake unfamiliarity with their procedures for a lack of ability or aspiration, they convert organizational assumptions into student-level deficits.

The mismatch between student realities and institutional design is particularly consequential during periods of financial disruption. A student with family wealth may respond to an unexpected medical bill, vehicle repair, or delayed financial aid disbursement by drawing on savings or family assistance. A student without that buffer may lose transportation, miss work, fall behind on rent, reduce food consumption, or leave college temporarily. The academic consequences of the same expense therefore depend on resources extending beyond the classroom. This is one reason financial hardship cannot be explained adequately through tuition price alone.

Rising Costs and Shifting Public Responsibility

The cost of college includes tuition and fees as well as housing, food, transportation, books, technology, healthcare, childcare, and the income students forgo or reduce while enrolled. These living expenses can constitute a substantial portion of the total cost of attendance, especially at community colleges and public institutions where tuition is comparatively lower

(Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Students do not experience these costs as separate categories. They encounter them as competing claims on limited resources.

Over the past several decades, the financing of public higher education has shifted increasingly toward students and families. Declining or inconsistent state support, rising institutional expenses, and policy narratives framing higher education primarily as a private investment have contributed to higher tuition and greater dependence on loans, employment, and family resources (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Heller, 2011; Marginson, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Financial aid has expanded educational access, but aid levels and eligibility rules do not always reflect the full costs or changing circumstances students experience.

This cost shifting does not affect all students equally. Family wealth shapes whether students can receive help with tuition, rent, deposits, transportation, emergencies, or unpaid educational opportunities. Racial disparities in family wealth, produced through histories of housing discrimination, labor-market exclusion, unequal education, and intergenerational resource transfer, influence how much financial risk students and their families can assume (Oliver & Shapiro, 2019; Pfeffer, 2018). Two students with comparable income may therefore possess very different capacities to withstand an interruption in employment or an unexpected expense.

Employment can provide essential income and valuable professional experience, but long or unpredictable work hours may reduce the time and cognitive energy available for coursework, faculty interaction, campus involvement, and rest (Darolia, 2014; Perna, 2010). Students may also increase borrowing, reduce course loads, or move between enrollment and employment as their financial circumstances change. These responses are often evaluated as individual choices,

even when they are constrained by the structure of college costs and the limited availability of other resources.

The framing of college as an individual investment further influences how hardship is interpreted. When higher education is understood primarily as a private benefit, students may be expected to absorb the risks of enrollment through debt, work, sacrifice, and family contribution. Material hardship can then appear as a personal budgeting problem rather than an outcome shaped by public policy, institutional pricing, labor conditions, housing markets, and unequal family wealth. Critical higher education scholars argue that this market-oriented framing weakens the conception of education as a public good and relocates collective responsibility onto individual students (Giroux, 2014; Marginson, 2016; Saunders, 2010).

From Access to Equitable Participation

The expansion of higher education represents genuine progress, but enrollment alone is an incomplete measure of educational opportunity. Students must also possess or obtain the resources necessary to remain enrolled, learn, develop relationships, and participate in the broader life of the institution. Formal admission provides entry; it does not ensure material security, institutional recognition, or equal access to educational experiences.

This distinction has challenged traditional approaches to student success. Foundational models emphasized academic integration, social integration, involvement, and students' interactions with institutional environments (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975, 1993). These models substantially advanced understanding of persistence, but many were developed around assumptions that students had sufficient material resources to participate in the academic and social practices being examined. More recent scholarship has complicated those assumptions by

attending to diverse pathways, cultural contexts, family relationships, and institutional responsibility (Museus, 2014; Rendón, 1994; Tinto, 2012).

A student cannot participate consistently in class when transportation is unreliable. A student may be unable to join unpaid campus activities when employment provides the income needed for rent and food. A student experiencing housing instability may remain enrolled while devoting significant attention to finding a safe place to sleep. These circumstances do not indicate a lack of commitment to education. They reveal that participation depends on conditions not captured by admission or enrollment.

Equitable access must therefore include more than opening institutional doors. It requires examining whether students can obtain the material resources, institutional knowledge, relationships, and support necessary to use the opportunities formally available to them. This shift from admission to participation provides the historical and structural context for the emergence of student basic-needs scholarship. As researchers began examining students' material circumstances directly, food insecurity, housing instability, and related forms of precarity became visible not as peripheral personal difficulties but as central questions of educational equity.

Student Basic Needs Insecurity

The recognition of student basic-needs insecurity marks an important shift in higher education scholarship. Rather than treating food, housing, transportation, healthcare, childcare, and financial stability as circumstances external to education, this literature examines them as conditions affecting students' ability to participate in college. The term basic-needs insecurity provides an umbrella for related forms of material hardship that may occur separately but

frequently overlap and intensify one another (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2021).

This broader language is useful because students' lives rarely conform to the administrative categories through which universities organize support. A student may simultaneously experience inconsistent access to food, difficulty paying rent, unreliable transportation, unmet healthcare needs, and insufficient technology. Even when one need is addressed temporarily, instability in another area can undermine the student's educational participation. Basic-needs insecurity therefore describes more than the absence of a particular resource. It captures the uncertainty produced when access to the conditions necessary for daily life cannot be maintained reliably.

The Emergence of Basic-Needs Scholarship

Food insecurity, housing instability, and financial hardship among college students are not new phenomena. Their relatively recent emergence as a recognized field of study reflects changes in scholarly attention and institutional language rather than the sudden appearance of student hardship. For decades, the "starving college student" circulated as a normalized cultural image, often portraying hunger as a temporary inconvenience or expected feature of student life. This framing could minimize meaningful differences between occasionally eating inexpensive food and experiencing sustained uncertainty about whether food or housing would be available (Henry, 2017).

Material hardship also remained difficult to see because many students continued attending class, working, and participating while concealing their circumstances. Institutional data systems typically recorded enrollment, grades, credits, and completion but did not capture whether students skipped meals, slept in vehicles, moved repeatedly, or delayed medical care.

When students withdrew or performed poorly, the material conditions contributing to those outcomes could remain undocumented. Their experiences were therefore more likely to appear as individual academic difficulties than as evidence of a broader institutional concern.

Early studies of food insecurity among college students began challenging this invisibility by applying established household food-security measures within postsecondary populations. Subsequent research documented food insecurity across community colleges, public universities, minority-serving institutions, and other sectors of higher education (Bruening et al., 2017; Gaines et al., 2014; Maroto et al., 2015; Patton-López et al., 2014). Although study designs and prevalence estimates varied, the consistency with which researchers identified material hardship made it increasingly difficult to dismiss student hunger as rare or anecdotal.

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab and later The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice contributed substantially to the national visibility of the issue through large, multi-institutional studies of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2021, 2023). These studies expanded the scope of inquiry beyond food and demonstrated that many students were navigating multiple unmet needs. They also helped move the conversation from isolated campus services toward broader questions about affordability, financial aid, public benefits, and institutional responsibility.

Independent studies, systematic reviews, and multisite research further established basic-needs insecurity as an interdisciplinary area spanning higher education, public health, nutrition, social work, and policy research (Bruening et al., 2017; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). This interdisciplinary development was necessary because no single outcome captures the effects of material insecurity. Researchers have connected unmet needs with academic performance, physical and mental health, persistence, employment, and

social participation, making basic-needs insecurity relevant to both educational and public-health inquiry.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified attention to these issues by disrupting employment, campus housing, meal access, transportation, childcare, and family support. Students who depended on campus employment, dining halls, computer laboratories, or temporary housing arrangements experienced the consequences of institutional closure immediately. Pandemic-era studies revealed both newly produced hardship and the fragility of arrangements students had already been using to remain enrolled (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2021; Owens et al., 2020). The pandemic did not create student basic-needs insecurity, but it made existing dependencies and institutional gaps more difficult to ignore.

Defining Basic-Needs Security

There is no single universally adopted definition of student basic-needs security. Definitions vary according to the population, research purpose, and resources being examined. In general, the concept refers to reliable access to the material and social resources necessary to maintain well-being and participate in education. These resources commonly include nutritious food, safe and stable housing, healthcare, transportation, technology, childcare, utilities, and sufficient financial resources to meet recurring and unexpected expenses (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2021; The Hope Center, 2023).

The word reliable is especially important. A student may have food today while remaining uncertain about the remainder of the week. A temporary place to sleep does not necessarily constitute stable housing. Access to a borrowed computer may allow completion of one assignment without providing dependable technology for the semester. Basic-needs security

involves continuity, adequacy, and the ability to anticipate access—not merely the temporary presence of a resource.

Basic-needs insecurity also exists along a continuum. Some students experience acute crises, such as eviction, homelessness, sudden job loss, or an inability to obtain food. Others live with recurring instability that may not meet formal thresholds for emergency assistance but still requires continual adjustment. They may alternate between paying bills late, reducing food consumption, borrowing money, increasing work hours, postponing healthcare, or moving among temporary living arrangements. A binary distinction between secure and insecure can therefore obscure variation in severity, duration, and the strategies students use to manage limited resources.

The concept is broader than poverty as measured through annual income. Income remains essential, but annual measures may not reflect timing, volatility, debt, family obligations, local living costs, or access to emergency support. Two students reporting similar income can have different levels of security depending on housing costs, family wealth, caregiving responsibilities, transportation needs, eligibility for public benefits, and the availability of someone who can help during a crisis (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hardy & Ziliak, 2014; Pfeffer, 2018). Basic-needs research therefore directs attention to students' actual access to resources rather than assuming that income alone captures their material circumstances.

From Individual Deficit to Structural Conditions

One of the most consequential contributions of basic-needs scholarship has been its challenge to deficit-oriented explanations of student hardship. Students experiencing food or housing insecurity are often described through the language of poor budgeting, limited financial literacy, inadequate preparation, or irresponsible decision-making. Individual financial choices

can matter, but they occur within conditions shaped by tuition, wages, housing markets, financial aid, public-benefit eligibility, transportation systems, family wealth, and institutional policy (Broton, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Deficit explanations can also obscure how much skill is required to remain enrolled under conditions of scarcity. Students may coordinate multiple jobs, compare transportation costs, stretch meals, negotiate temporary housing, monitor financial aid, and maintain academic responsibilities simultaneously. These strategies demonstrate resourcefulness, but they also consume time and cognitive capacity that students with greater material security can devote elsewhere. Interpreting such students primarily as lacking financial knowledge can misrecognize structural constraint as personal deficiency.

A structural approach changes the questions institutions ask. Instead of asking only why a student failed to obtain food or pay rent, it asks whether the institution's cost-of-attendance calculations reflect local living expenses, whether aid arrives when bills are due, whether work schedules are compatible with course requirements, whether services are accessible to commuting and parenting students, and whether public policies exclude students from available assistance. This does not eliminate individual agency; it situates agency within the options and constraints students actually encounter.

The shift toward structural explanation has also generated debate about institutional responsibility. Campus food pantries, emergency grants, temporary housing, benefits navigation, and basic-needs centers can provide meaningful support. At the same time, emergency services may manage the immediate effects of insecurity without changing the conditions that produce it (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Kezar et al., 2020). A pantry may

reduce hunger while tuition, rent, wages, financial aid rules, or public-benefit restrictions continue generating need.

This tension does not make direct assistance unimportant. Immediate resources can protect health, preserve enrollment, and communicate institutional care. The analytical challenge is to distinguish between responding to a student's present need and addressing the organizational or policy conditions that make the need recurrent. Basic-needs scholarship increasingly requires attention to both.

Conceptual and Methodological Boundaries

The growing use of the basic-needs framework has created greater visibility, but it also raises conceptual and methodological challenges. Studies do not always define housing insecurity, homelessness, transportation insecurity, or financial hardship consistently. Some rely on validated measures, while others use locally developed questions or composite indicators. Samples vary by institutional type, geographic location, recruitment strategy, and response rate. These differences complicate direct comparison across studies and make a single national prevalence estimate difficult to establish (Nikolaus et al., 2020).

Survey-based research may also underrepresent students who have stopped attending, lost stable internet access, left institutional housing, or become disconnected from campus communication. These students may be among those experiencing the most severe hardship. Conversely, voluntary surveys focused explicitly on basic needs may attract respondents with greater personal interest in the issue. Both possibilities require caution when interpreting prevalence estimates.

Further, an umbrella term can conceal meaningful differences among specific experiences. Food insecurity has established measurement tools and a substantial empirical

literature. Housing insecurity encompasses conditions ranging from unaffordable rent and frequent moves to couch surfing, vehicle residence, and literal homelessness. Transportation, technology, childcare, and healthcare insecurity have different causes and consequences. Treating them as interconnected should not erase the need for conceptual precision.

For this reason, the following sections examine food and housing insecurity separately before returning to their overlap. Food insecurity is addressed first because it has generated the largest body of empirical research within higher education and provides an important foundation for understanding how material deprivation influences academic participation, health, stigma, and institutional help-seeking.

Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Food insecurity is the most extensively studied dimension of student basic-needs insecurity. Research across nutrition, public health, social work, and higher education has established that unreliable access to food is a consequential feature of college life for a substantial number of students (Bruening et al., 2017; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Landry et al., 2022; Nikolaus et al., 2020). However, interpreting this literature requires conceptual precision. Food insecurity is not synonymous with hunger, poor diet quality, or occasionally eating inexpensive food. It is a measurable condition involving constrained or uncertain access to adequate food.

Defining Food Insecurity

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food security as access by all members of a household, at all times, to enough food for an active and healthy life. Food insecurity occurs when financial or other resource constraints limit the availability, quality, variety, or adequacy of

food. The definition encompasses both uncertainty about obtaining food and behavioral changes made in response to inadequate resources (Bickel et al., 2000; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2023).

The USDA distinguishes among four levels of food security. High food security indicates no reported limitations in food access. Marginal food security involves anxiety about food sufficiency or occasional indications of insufficient food with little or no reduction in intake. Low food security is characterized primarily by reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet without substantial evidence of reduced food intake. Very low food security involves disrupted eating patterns and reductions in the amount consumed because of insufficient money or other resources. For most reporting purposes, high and marginal food security are classified as food secure, while low and very low food security are classified as food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2023).

These categories are analytically useful, but the distinction between marginal security and food insecurity deserves attention. Students classified as marginally food secure may still experience anxiety, dietary compromise, or recurring uncertainty that affects well-being. Research involving households has found that marginal food security can be associated with adverse health and developmental outcomes even when respondents do not cross the conventional threshold for food insecurity (Cook et al., 2013; Laraia et al., 2006). Treating marginal security as equivalent to complete security may therefore obscure meaningful forms of precarity.

Hunger is related to food insecurity but is not interchangeable with it. Hunger describes an individual physiological sensation, whereas food insecurity refers to the economic and social conditions constraining access to food. A student can experience food insecurity without reporting persistent hunger by reducing dietary quality, relying on inexpensive foods, eating

irregularly, or obtaining meals through friends and campus events. Conversely, a student may experience temporary hunger for reasons unrelated to resource constraint. Maintaining this distinction prevents a structural condition from being reduced to a bodily symptom.

Food insecurity is also different from nutrition insecurity. Food security traditionally emphasizes consistent access to sufficient food, while nutrition security adds explicit attention to whether foods support health and well-being (Mozaffarian et al., 2021). A student may consume enough calories while relying on foods that are inexpensive, shelf stable, or immediately accessible but limited in nutritional quality. The distinction is especially relevant in higher education because students' food choices may be constrained by cost, transportation, cooking facilities, storage, work schedules, and campus dining arrangements.

Measuring Food Insecurity Among College Students

Much of the college food-insecurity literature uses instruments developed by the USDA. The 18-item U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module assesses food-related anxiety, dietary compromise, and reductions in intake among adults and children. The 10-item Adult Food Security Survey Module focuses on adult experiences, while the six-item short form offers a lower-burden alternative when survey space is limited (Bickel et al., 2000). These instruments assess conditions over a specified period, commonly the previous 12 months or 30 days.

The use of standardized instruments has allowed researchers to compare findings across campuses, but their application to college populations presents challenges. The measures were developed primarily for households, while students may live in residence halls, share housing with unrelated roommates, move between households, or receive food from several sources. A student may purchase food independently while sharing a refrigerator and kitchen with people whose resources are not pooled. The meaning of “household” can therefore be ambiguous.

Students' access to food may also fluctuate with academic calendars and financial aid cycles. A student may have greater security immediately after an aid disbursement and experience scarcity near the end of the semester. Residence-hall closures, changes in dining-plan access, seasonal employment, and travel between campus and family homes can further complicate recall. Twelve-month measures capture exposure across time but may not identify when insecurity occurred or how it corresponded with enrollment.

Meal plans introduce another difficulty. Possessing a meal plan does not necessarily guarantee unrestricted access to adequate food. Plans vary in the number of meals provided, where and when they can be used, and whether unused balances carry forward. Students may exhaust meal allowances early, experience limited access during breaks, or be unable to obtain food compatible with medical, religious, or cultural needs. Measurement based only on whether a student has a meal plan can therefore overstate security.

These concerns do not invalidate USDA measures. They indicate that survey administration and interpretation require attention to the circumstances of college life. Nikolaus et al. (2020) found substantial variation in estimated prevalence associated with sampling and survey protocols, while Ellison et al. (2021) cautioned that household measures have not been fully validated for the distinctive living and resource arrangements of college students. Researchers have consequently called for greater consistency in reference periods, scoring, unit of analysis, and reporting practices (Landry et al., 2022; Nikolaus et al., 2020).

Food-security measurement also captures constrained access but does not fully explain how students experience or respond to that constraint. A scale can identify whether a student skipped meals or worried about food, but it may not reveal the strategies used to conceal hardship, the meanings attached to assistance, or how insecurity affects relationships with peers

and institutions. Quantitative measures are therefore essential for estimating distribution and association, while qualitative inquiry remains necessary for understanding interpretation and social experience.

Estimating Prevalence

Early college food-insecurity studies often relied on individual campuses and relatively small convenience samples. Patton-López et al. (2014), for example, documented food insecurity among students at a public university in Oregon, while Maroto et al. (2015) identified substantial food insecurity among community college students and found an association with lower self-reported grade point averages. Gaines et al. (2014) and Morris et al. (2016) similarly found meaningful levels of food insecurity within university populations. Although these studies differed in sampling and measurement, together they challenged the assumption that college food insecurity was isolated or exceptional.

Systematic reviews subsequently demonstrated that the issue extended across institutions and geographic regions. Bruening et al. (2017) reviewed peer-reviewed and gray literature and found consistently elevated estimates, although the included studies varied considerably in quality and design. Nazmi et al. (2019) similarly identified substantial food insecurity across U.S. higher education while emphasizing inconsistency in sampling and measurement. These reviews established the seriousness of the issue but also demonstrated why prevalence estimates should not be combined uncritically.

Nikolaus et al. (2020) conducted a scoping review of 51 study samples and reported estimates ranging from 10% to 75%, with a weighted estimate of approximately 41%. That range should not be interpreted as evidence that nearly identical student populations experience radically different conditions. It reflects genuine institutional and regional variation as well as

differences in sampling, survey instruments, reference periods, response rates, and classification decisions. Only a small number of the included studies used representative sampling, limiting the ability to infer national prevalence from the pooled literature.

Large multi-institutional studies conducted by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab and The Hope Center contributed evidence across broader institutional samples. These studies repeatedly identified food insecurity among students attending two- and four-year institutions, with especially high levels among community college students and populations facing other forms of material hardship (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2021). Because participating institutions and students were not always selected through nationally representative sampling, these findings should be interpreted as extensive multisite evidence rather than a precise national estimate.

More recently, federal data have strengthened the national evidence base. An analysis of the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study estimated that approximately 23% of undergraduates experienced food insecurity. Because those data were collected during the COVID-19 period, they reflect a historically unusual moment, but their nationally representative design confirms that food insecurity affects millions of students and is not limited to campuses participating in basic-needs surveys (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024).

The apparent difference between the federal estimate and the higher estimates reported in many campus studies does not mean that one body of research is necessarily incorrect. National samples include students across institutional and living arrangements, while individual campus studies may examine populations with greater economic vulnerability. Survey timing, sampling, item wording, and response patterns also affect classification. The strongest conclusion supported by the literature is not one universal percentage. It is that food insecurity affects a

substantial share of college students, with prevalence varying meaningfully across populations and institutional contexts.

The Unequal Distribution of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity occurs across higher education, but it is not randomly distributed. Students with limited income, low family wealth, financial independence, high unmet financial need, or unstable employment face greater exposure because they have fewer resources available to absorb fluctuations in expenses (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; El Zein et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Pell Grant receipt, although not equivalent to poverty, is also frequently associated with food insecurity because it identifies students with substantial demonstrated financial need.

First-generation students are often at elevated risk. Their families may provide considerable emotional encouragement and other forms of support while possessing fewer financial resources or less familiarity with college systems (Means & Pyne, 2017; Yosso, 2005). First-generation students may also feel pressure to support family members rather than draw resources away from them. Cuite et al. (2023) found that first-generation status was consistently associated with food-security risk over time, illustrating that the relationship cannot be reduced solely to one semester's financial circumstances.

Students attending community colleges frequently report especially high levels of food insecurity. Community colleges enroll large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds, working adults, parenting students, and students living independently. These institutions also tend to possess fewer per-student resources than selective four-year universities despite serving populations with substantial material needs (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Maroto et al., 2015).

Institutional sector therefore reflects both student composition and differences in institutional capacity.

Racial and ethnic disparities appear consistently throughout the literature. Black, Indigenous, and Latino students frequently report higher levels of food insecurity than White students (El Zein et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2020). These differences should not be interpreted as effects of race understood as an individual characteristic. They reflect racialized inequalities in family wealth, employment, housing, K–12 education, financial aid, and access to intergenerational resources (Oliver & Shapiro, 2019; Rothstein, 2017). Race operates through social structures that shape exposure to economic risk and the resources available when hardship occurs.

Students who are parents may encounter additional costs for childcare, housing, transportation, and food for dependents while balancing employment and coursework. Former foster youth, students experiencing family estrangement, and financially independent students may lack the informal safety nets assumed by financial aid and institutional policy. International students can face employment restrictions and limited eligibility for public assistance, while students with disabilities may carry additional healthcare, transportation, or dietary costs. Research has also identified heightened vulnerability among students identifying as LGBTQ+, particularly when family rejection or loss of financial support affects their housing and material security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2021).

These categories overlap. A first-generation Black student who is parenting, working, and attending a community college does not experience each condition independently. Intersectionality explains how systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and family status interact to produce circumstances that cannot be understood through single-category

comparisons alone (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991). An intersectional analysis asks not merely which demographic variables predict food insecurity, but how institutional and social systems combine to distribute material vulnerability.

Attention to unequal distribution also requires avoiding deficit-based interpretations. Higher prevalence among a population does not indicate that members of that population are less capable of managing resources. It indicates unequal exposure to costs, constraints, and disruptions, combined with unequal access to wealth and institutional support. This distinction is essential because demographic disparities can otherwise be reported descriptively without examining the structures producing them.

The prevalence literature has established that food insecurity is widespread and stratified, but prevalence alone does not convey what food insecurity does to students' educational lives. The next section examines its academic, cognitive, physical, psychological, and relational consequences before turning to the stigma and concealment that often shape whether students seek assistance.

Educational and Health Consequences of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity affects students through multiple, interconnected pathways. Its consequences cannot be reduced to hunger during class or inadequate dietary intake. Uncertain access to food influences physical health, psychological well-being, cognitive attention, use of time, social participation, and students' ability to meet academic expectations (Bruening et al., 2017; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Loofbourrow et al., 2023; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). These effects may accumulate even when students remain enrolled and outwardly appear to be progressing successfully.

Academic Performance and Persistence

Research consistently associates food insecurity with adverse academic outcomes. Food-insecure students report lower grade point averages, greater difficulty concentrating, higher likelihood of missing class, and increased consideration of stopping out or withdrawing (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Maroto et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2016; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). Although much of this literature is cross-sectional and cannot establish that food insecurity independently causes lower achievement, the consistency of associations across institutions indicates that material security and academic participation are meaningfully connected.

Several mechanisms may explain that relationship. Students may miss class or study time because they are working additional hours, traveling to obtain food, waiting for assistance, or managing health consequences associated with inadequate nutrition. They may avoid remaining on campus when they cannot afford meals between classes or may schedule courses around employment rather than around the times most conducive to learning. Required textbooks, transportation, rent, utilities, and food compete for the same limited resources, making academic participation dependent on continual financial tradeoffs (Broton, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Henry, 2017).

Food insecurity may also interfere directly with attention and learning. Students who have not eaten adequately can experience fatigue, headaches, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Beyond these physiological effects, uncertainty itself occupies mental attention. Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) account of scarcity proposes that urgent unmet needs consume cognitive bandwidth by directing attention toward immediate resource problems. Within college, this may mean that a student is physically present in class while mentally calculating how to

obtain dinner, whether groceries can last until an aid disbursement, or which bill can be postponed.

The scarcity framework should not be used to portray students experiencing food insecurity as cognitively deficient. The problem is not a lack of intellectual ability; it is the cognitive load created by circumstances demanding constant monitoring and adjustment. The same student may demonstrate substantial organizational skill in coordinating food, work, transportation, and coursework while having fewer cognitive and temporal resources available for academic tasks. Understanding this distinction relocates the problem from student capacity to the conditions under which that capacity must be exercised.

Food insecurity can also affect persistence indirectly. A student may reduce a course load to increase work hours, take a leave of absence to restore financial stability, or withdraw after a crisis involving food, rent, transportation, or healthcare. Institutional records may classify these outcomes as academic underperformance or voluntary departure without capturing the material conditions that contributed to them. Consequently, the educational effects of food insecurity may be underestimated when institutions examine grades and enrollment without asking about students' daily access to resources.

Physical and Nutritional Health

Food insecurity can constrain both the amount and quality of food students consume. Students may skip meals, reduce portions, rely on inexpensive calorie-dense foods, or limit dietary variety to stretch available resources. Limited transportation, inadequate cooking facilities, lack of food storage, and demanding work schedules may further narrow what foods are practically accessible (Bruening et al., 2017; Gaines et al., 2014; Mirabatur et al., 2016).

These strategies may alleviate immediate hunger while compromising nutrition. Food insecurity among college students has been associated with poorer self-reported health, disrupted eating patterns, and reduced dietary quality (Freudenberg et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2014; Loofbourrow et al., 2023). Students managing chronic health conditions or dietary restrictions face additional challenges because medically appropriate foods may be more expensive or less available through dining halls and emergency food programs.

The relationship between food insecurity and health is not necessarily linear. Food insecurity can coexist with higher body weight because inexpensive food may be energy dense but nutritionally limited, food intake may alternate between restriction and availability, and chronic stress can influence eating patterns and metabolic health (Dinour et al., 2007; Franklin et al., 2012). Visual appearance therefore cannot determine whether a student has adequate access to food. Assumptions that hunger has a particular body type can contribute to invisibility and discourage recognition of need.

Physical health effects can subsequently influence education. Fatigue, illness, headaches, and sleep disruption may interfere with attendance and concentration. Students may also delay medical or dental care to preserve money for food, housing, or tuition, allowing manageable health concerns to worsen. Food insecurity thus operates within a broader set of tradeoffs rather than as an isolated nutritional issue.

Psychological Well-Being

Food insecurity is consistently associated with stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and lower self-reported well-being among college students (Bruening et al., 2017; El Zein et al., 2019; Raskind et al., 2019). The direction of these relationships can be complex. Material insecurity may contribute to psychological distress, while mental-health challenges can affect

employment, academic participation, and the ability to navigate assistance systems. Cross-sectional evidence cannot fully separate these pathways, but it demonstrates that material and psychological well-being are closely connected.

Uncertainty is itself a significant source of stress. Students may not know whether work hours will remain stable, whether aid will arrive on time, whether family members can help, or whether available food will last. This uncertainty requires repeated decisions under constrained conditions. Students must determine which meals to skip, whom to ask for assistance, what explanation to provide, and how long they can continue before seeking institutional support.

Emotional consequences can persist even after food is obtained. Receiving assistance may bring relief while also producing shame, anger, embarrassment, or fear of judgment. Students can be grateful for a resource and simultaneously troubled by needing it. Treating food assistance as a simple transfer of goods overlooks this emotional complexity and the social meanings attached to need.

Stigma, Concealment, and Help-Seeking

The availability of a resource does not ensure that students will use it. Studies of campus food assistance have documented low participation even among students who meet food-insecurity thresholds (El Zein et al., 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Limited awareness, inconvenient hours, transportation, eligibility confusion, concerns about food quality, and uncertainty about whether one's need is severe enough can all reduce use. Stigma intersects with these practical barriers by shaping whether students want to be seen entering a pantry, disclosing hardship, or identifying themselves as someone who needs assistance.

Goffman (1963) describes stigma as a process through which an attribute becomes socially discrediting within a particular context. Later scholarship emphasizes that stigma is

produced through labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within unequal relations of power (Link & Phelan, 2001). Applied to food insecurity, the stigmatized condition is not simply insufficient food. It is the meaning attached to needing assistance within a culture that frequently attributes economic hardship to personal failure.

Students do not need to experience direct ridicule for stigma to affect their behavior. Anticipated stigma—the expectation that others may judge, avoid, or devalue them—can influence disclosure and help-seeking before any negative interaction occurs (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). A student may visit a pantry at a less visible time, conceal food inside a backpack, avoid discussing hardship with friends, or delay seeking help until available resources are exhausted. These practices are forms of information management intended to preserve a desired social identity.

The normalized image of the “starving college student” can intensify this concealment. Because some deprivation is culturally portrayed as an ordinary part of college, students may minimize their circumstances or believe they have not suffered enough to deserve assistance. They may compare themselves with someone imagined to be in greater need and conclude that taking food would deprive another person. Henry (2017) describes college food insecurity as a form of hidden hunger in which students continue performing the expected identity of a capable college student while privately managing inadequate food.

Students may also experience tension between their institutional identity and their need for assistance. College attendance is often understood as evidence of progress, independence, and future mobility. Entering a food pantry can disrupt that narrative by making visible the persistence of conditions students believed education would help them escape. Assistance may

therefore carry meanings associated with family history, class identity, childhood poverty, or previous experiences with public and charitable support.

The design of institutional services can either reduce or intensify these concerns. Highly visible locations, complex eligibility procedures, intrusive documentation, and language distinguishing “needy” students from the broader campus community can communicate suspicion. Conversely, confidential access, respectful interaction, flexible hours, clear eligibility information, and integration with other student services may reduce the social costs of seeking help. Even well-designed services, however, operate within broader cultural narratives about deservingness and individual responsibility that institutions cannot address through logistics alone.

Food insecurity also affects social participation outside formal assistance. Students may decline invitations to restaurants, avoid events requiring payment, or withdraw from peers when they cannot reciprocate shared meals. Because eating is a common form of social connection, limited food resources can restrict access to relationships and campus experiences in ways not captured by dietary measures. A student may be academically enrolled while becoming socially peripheral.

These relational consequences establish an important connection between food insecurity and belonging, but that connection will be examined more fully later in the chapter. At this point, the literature demonstrates that food insecurity encompasses an interaction among material constraint, institutional access, social identity, and anticipated judgment. To understand that interaction at the level of daily experience, the following autoethnographic vignette returns to my first encounter with a campus food pantry.

The vignette is intentionally placed here, after the literature has established the definition, distribution, consequences, and stigma associated with food insecurity. It is not offered as evidence of prevalence or as a representative account of college hunger. Instead, it provides a situated account of how food insecurity can be experienced through memory, concealment, identity management, and the physical organization of institutional support. The analysis following the vignette returns to the scholarship to examine what became socially and institutionally meaningful about walking through a side door.

The Lived Experience of Food Insecurity

The Side Door

It is the beginning of my first semester at Chico State.

For several weeks, I have become increasingly skilled at pretending I am not hungry. The packages of ramen I brought from home are disappearing faster than I expected. A can of black beans is no longer a side dish; it is dinner. Hot Cheetos, something that has always reminded me of home in Southern California, have stopped being a snack and become a strategy. If I am still hungry after finishing the ramen, I eat enough of them that my stomach begins to burn. The discomfort dulls my appetite just enough that I can convince myself I am no longer hungry.

I do not think of this as food insecurity.

I think of it as making things work.

It is a warm afternoon in late August when my resident advisor decides that our building at University Village should take the campus tour we never received during move-in. Nearly three weeks have passed since most of us unpacked. We already know how to find our classrooms, which bus takes us to campus, and which one stops near the Safeway grocery store. Even so, six of us gather outside our building and follow her toward campus.

The sun hangs high over Chico, heating the concrete beneath our feet. Cars move steadily along Nord Avenue while the bus exhales compressed air as it pulls away from the curb. Our resident advisor, Janet, points toward one building after another.

“That’s the Student Health Center,” she tells us. “You can see a doctor there, and counseling services are inside, too.”

She explains where to find the library, the Student Success Center, and Financial Aid. Each stop introduces another office or program created to help students succeed.

As we walk toward the Bell Memorial Union, Janet explains that the building contains the bookstore, student organizations, study spaces, and food. The rest of the group continues listening, but my attention drifts toward the tinted windows covering the lower corner of the Student Success Center.

A sign is taped inside one of them.

Across the top, Willie the Wildcat, Chico State’s mascot, smiles broadly while holding a canned food item. Beneath him, printed in bold maroon letters, are four words:

Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry.

An arrow points toward a side door.

I stop walking. The conversation around me continues. Someone asks whether Flex Cash works in the Union. Someone else wants to know whether it stays open on weekends. Janet answers without noticing that I have fallen a few steps behind.

Food pantry.

Two ordinary words collapse nearly five hundred miles between Chico and the church my family called the Big Bell.

For a moment, I am no longer standing outside the Student Success Center. I am beside my grandmother, waiting for our turn to collect food from volunteers in dark green aprons. Paper grocery bags filled with canned food are lined against the church wall. When we reach the front, a woman asks the only question required of us.

“How many?”

“Seven,” my grandmother responds.

There are five of us living at home.

I look up at her, ready to correct the number. She sees the question forming on my face before I can ask it.

“There are seven in our home,” she repeats.

The volunteer directs us toward the larger paper bags. My grandmother walks over, studies them quickly, and reaches for the one she believes contains the most food. As we move toward her white van, I begin to speak.

“But, Grams—”

“Hush up.”

She hugs the grocery bag against her body and continues walking. Neither of us says anything else. I do not understand everything about that moment, but I understand enough to know that it is not something we discuss. Saying seven instead of five means something to my grandmother. It means a larger bag. More cans. Food that might last longer.

Back on campus, Janet’s voice pulls me into the present. The group has already started moving. I look once more at the sign and hurry to catch up.

For the next several days, I think about the pantry. I know exactly where it is. Every morning, as the bus from University Village pulls onto campus, I look toward the corner of the

Student Success Center. Each afternoon, as I wait for the bus home, my eyes find the tinted window again.

The pantry was not an intentional stop on our tour. Janet did not point toward it or explain how to use it. Still, I noticed it.

Food pantries were familiar throughout my childhood. I knew the plastic bags—and, when we were fortunate, the larger paper bags—filled with canned vegetables, pasta, peanut butter, and whatever else had been donated. I knew how leftovers became the next day's lunch and sometimes dinner. I knew that making food last required creativity, calculation, and silence.

Yet I had convinced myself that college would be different. Earning my place at a university felt like crossing an invisible finish line. It was proof that my life would become more stable than the one I had left behind in my grandparents' trailer.

The pantry sign unsettled that belief. It reminded me that making it to college had not separated me from the conditions I believed education was supposed to change.

Still, I waited.

I told myself that I could stretch what I had a little longer. Maybe I had overreacted. Maybe another portion of my financial aid would reach my account soon. Maybe I simply needed to budget better.

Each explanation was easier to accept than walking through the side door.

A few days later, late on a Friday afternoon, I finally decide to go. The timing is deliberate. I assume most students will be thinking about weekend plans. Some will be leaving town. Others will be heading downtown, meeting friends, or returning to their apartments. Campus, I reason, will be quieter than it has been all week.

Before leaving University Village, I empty my backpack. I remove every notebook, pen, and loose piece of paper. If I bring food back, I do not want anyone to wonder where it came from. I sling the empty bag over my shoulder and walk to the bus stop.

During the ride, I rehearse explanations that I hope I will never need.

Maybe I was studying at the library.

Maybe I stopped at the Union.

Maybe I met with a professor.

None of those explanations is true, but I feel more prepared to say almost anything than to admit that I am going to a food pantry.

When the bus reaches campus, I begin walking toward the Student Success Center. The closer I get, the slower I move. The entrance is exactly where the sign said it would be: two glass doors covered by the same dark tint as the surrounding windows.

There is no line. No crowd. Just a side door.

Students move across campus behind me, laughing with friends and talking on their phones, unaware of the debate taking place in my head. I take a breath, pull the door open, and step inside.

The room is smaller than I expected. Fluorescent lights hum overhead. Metal shelves hold canned vegetables, soup, pasta, cereal, peanut butter, granola bars, and other nonperishable food. A refrigerator stands against one wall, with a small freezer nearby. A woman sitting behind a folding table looks up and smiles.

“Hi. Is this your first time here?”

“Yeah.”

The word comes out before I have time to think. Then, without her asking for an explanation, I begin offering one.

“My resident advisor was giving us a tour a few days ago,” I say. “She showed us where this was and said we should come check it out. So, I just thought I’d stop by.”

The explanation comes out much faster than I intend. She has not asked why I am there. She has not questioned whether I belong, whether I need food, or whether I deserve to take it. Yet I feel compelled to justify my presence, as though walking through the door requires a story that separates me from the people for whom the pantry was created.

The truth is much simpler.

I am there because the ramen has started making my stomach hurt.

I am there because Hot Cheetos have become a way to quiet my hunger.

I am there because I need food.

The woman listens patiently. Her expression suggests that she has heard similar explanations before.

“Go ahead and sign in with your student ID,” she says. “After today, you’ll just swipe your ID when you come in. Then you can take whatever you need.”

That is it.

No questions about my income. No request to prove my circumstances. No interrogation about why I need help.

I pick up the clipboard and write my name and student identification number. My hand feels strangely unsteady. Then I move toward the shelves.

I take two cans of vegetables. Beans. Soup. Pasta. Peanut butter. Peaches.

I choose slowly, worrying that taking too much will make my need appear excessive. Even in a room created to provide food, I feel obligated to look modest in my hunger.

When I finish, I arrange everything carefully inside my backpack and close the zipper. The bag feels noticeably heavier against my shoulders as I walk toward the door.

Not because of the food.

Because of what I believe it says about me.

For the first time in weeks, I know there will be something to eat when I return to my apartment. That should be the feeling I carry with me. Instead, what I remember most is looking toward the bus stop and seeing several friends waiting for the bus back to University Village.

My heart drops.

The explanations return immediately. I was at the library. I stopped at the Union. I met with a professor.

I am not concerned about explaining why I stayed on campus late on a Friday. I am concerned about explaining the food inside my backpack. Without thinking, I change direction and take the longer route around the building, hoping my friends will board before they notice me.

With each step, the cans shift inside my bag.

Beans against peaches. Peaches against corn. Corn against soup. Dry pasta moving inside its cardboard box.

The sound is quiet, but in my mind it is impossibly loud. I become convinced that everyone can hear it—that the contents of my backpack announce where I have been and what I needed.

I feel shame. Anger. Anxiety. Disappointment.

And whatever the combination of all those feelings is called.

Every Friday for the next several weeks.

Reading the Vignette Through the Literature

Years later, I have language for what I was experiencing. I can name food insecurity, hidden hunger, stigma, anticipated judgment, identity management, and scarcity. At the time, I knew only that I wanted to eat and did not want anyone to know how badly I needed to.

The vignette illustrates a difference between the presence of a resource and the experience of access. The pantry existed, required little documentation, and was staffed by someone who treated me with respect. Yet several days passed between discovering it and entering it. During that period, no formal eligibility requirement prevented me from seeking assistance. The barriers were interpretive and relational: I was unsure whether my circumstances justified using the pantry, what entering it would communicate about me, and whether I could continue presenting myself as the college student I wanted others to see.

This distinction is consistent with research demonstrating that students may know about food resources and still delay or avoid using them because of stigma, uncertainty about eligibility, limited visibility, or concern that others need the assistance more (El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017; Tanner et al., 2023). Accessibility therefore cannot be measured only by whether a program exists. It also involves whether students recognize themselves as legitimate users, understand how to enter, and believe they can do so without unacceptable social consequences.

The location of the pantry carried a similar contradiction. It was inside the Student Success Center but entered through a side door. The resource was part of the institution and yet remained outside the official tour of services intended to support students. No one deliberately concealed it from me, but it occupied a peripheral position within the way campus support was

presented. That physical and informational arrangement reflected the broader invisibility of food insecurity: assistance was available, but the need for it remained difficult to acknowledge publicly.

The empty backpack, Friday-afternoon timing, rehearsed explanations, and changed walking route demonstrate how anticipated stigma can organize behavior before direct judgment occurs. Goffman's (1963) account of information management helps explain why I attempted to control who knew about the pantry visit. Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) similarly show that concealable stigmatized identities can generate psychological strain through decisions about disclosure and the expectation of devaluation. I was managing access to information about myself as carefully as I was managing food.

My insistence on taking only a small amount also reflected uncertainty about deservingness. No pantry employee imposed that limit. I imposed it on myself. Research on charitable and public assistance shows that recipients frequently navigate cultural distinctions between people understood as legitimately needy and those considered irresponsible or undeserving (Katz, 2013; Poppendieck, 1998). Because I continued attending college and could still make something for dinner, I questioned whether my need was serious enough. The pantry's open-access policy reduced administrative scrutiny, but it could not immediately undo the moral judgments I had already internalized.

The memory of the Big Bell further demonstrates that institutional help-seeking is never entirely contained in the present moment. The campus sign activated earlier experiences with poverty, family resourcefulness, and silence. My response to the pantry was shaped not only by my immediate food supply but also by what food assistance had meant throughout my childhood. Socially lived theorizing is useful here because it connects a micro-level decision—whether to

enter one campus office—to family history, class identity, cultural narratives of self-sufficiency, and institutional arrangements governing assistance (Kang et al., 2017).

The experience also disrupted my understanding of educational mobility. I had imagined college admission as evidence that material instability belonged to an earlier part of my life. Finding a pantry on campus revealed that educational access did not erase the conditions students carried with them or the inequalities shaping their ability to remain enrolled. This realization would acquire different meaning later, but at the time it was experienced primarily as disappointment: I had reached the institution associated with opportunity and still needed the same form of assistance my family had used at home.

The vignette does not establish that all students experience campus food assistance in this way. Some may use pantries without shame, learn about them through trusted peers, or understand basic-needs support as an ordinary institutional resource. Others may confront greater surveillance, documentation, cultural exclusion, or practical barriers than I did. My account instead makes visible how food insecurity can be lived through an interaction among material need, memory, identity, institutional design, and anticipated social judgment.

Food insecurity was not the only form of material instability shaping my undergraduate education. The uncertainty surrounding food later intersected with an even less visible challenge: not having a stable place to live. The next section examines housing insecurity and student homelessness before presenting a second vignette situated within that literature.

Housing Insecurity and Student Homelessness

Housing provides more than physical shelter. Stable housing affects sleep, safety, privacy, transportation, food preparation, hygiene, storage, study, and the ability to maintain predictable routines. Within higher education, housing instability can disrupt nearly every aspect

of academic participation while remaining largely invisible to faculty, staff, and peers (Broton, 2021; Hallett & Freas, 2018; Trawver & Hedwig, 2020).

Housing insecurity has received less sustained scholarly attention than food insecurity, in part because it is difficult to define and measure. College students may move between residence halls, family homes, shared apartments, temporary arrangements, vehicles, and friends' couches without identifying themselves as homeless. Their circumstances may be unstable and unsafe even when they have a roof on a particular night. Understanding student homelessness therefore requires moving beyond images of visible street homelessness and examining the broader continuum of housing instability.

Defining Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity is an umbrella term encompassing conditions in which access to safe, stable, adequate, and affordable housing is uncertain. It may include difficulty paying rent or utilities, living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions, moving frequently, staying temporarily with other people, receiving an eviction notice, or occupying housing that consumes an unsustainable portion of income (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Kushel et al., 2006). These experiences vary in duration and severity, but each can undermine the stability required for education.

Housing affordability is one dimension of security rather than its equivalent. A student may meet rent by reducing food consumption, delaying healthcare, increasing work hours, or using high-interest debt. The fact that rent has been paid does not necessarily indicate that the housing arrangement is sustainable. Similarly, an inexpensive arrangement may remain unsafe, overcrowded, geographically inaccessible, or contingent on an unstable relationship.

Homelessness refers to the most severe forms of housing deprivation, but legal and institutional definitions vary. Narrow definitions emphasize residence in shelters, vehicles, public spaces, or places not ordinarily intended for habitation. Broader educational definitions may also include individuals who share housing because of economic hardship, live temporarily in motels, or move among unstable arrangements. These differences affect who is recognized as homeless and who qualifies for assistance.

The distinction is particularly consequential for college students. Students who sleep on a friend's couch may say they are "staying with someone" rather than experiencing homelessness. Those living in vehicles may describe the arrangement as temporary or explain that they are between leases. Students who return to unsafe family environments during academic breaks may technically have somewhere to go while lacking housing that is stable or appropriate. Self-identification may therefore underestimate need when students' understanding of homelessness is limited to shelters or street residence (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017; Hallett & Freas, 2018).

Housing status can also change rapidly. A student may move from a residence hall to an apartment, lose employment, fall behind on rent, stay briefly with a classmate, sleep in a vehicle, and later return to family housing. A single survey question asking whether the student is currently homeless may miss much of that movement. Measurement must account for the duration, frequency, adequacy, and reason for an arrangement rather than relying only on where someone slept the previous night.

Measuring Housing Instability

Unlike food insecurity, housing insecurity does not have one nationally standardized measure used consistently across college studies. Researchers commonly ask about experiences such as inability to pay full rent or utilities, frequent moves, doubling up, eviction, temporary

residence with others, shelter use, or sleeping in a vehicle or other place not intended as housing (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2023). Some studies combine these indicators into a broad classification, while others report each experience separately.

This variation makes prevalence difficult to compare. A study defining housing insecurity only through literal homelessness will produce a substantially lower estimate than one that includes rent difficulty, overcrowding, or frequent moves. Reference periods also vary. Current housing status captures immediate conditions but overlooks earlier episodes, while a 12-month reference period captures more instability without showing whether it occurred during enrollment or how long it lasted.

The unit of analysis creates additional complications. Dependent students may be connected to a family household while living elsewhere during the academic year. Parenting students must secure housing appropriate for children as well as themselves. Students sharing apartments may divide rent without functioning as one financial household. Residence halls provide housing during the semester but may close during breaks, leaving some students without a safe alternative. These arrangements do not fit easily within household measures developed outside higher education.

Survey administration can further exclude students experiencing the greatest instability. Institutional surveys generally require current contact information, internet access, and some continuing connection with the college. Students who have stopped attending, lost access to technology, or moved abruptly may not receive or complete a survey. Housing-insecurity estimates based on enrolled respondents may consequently omit people whose housing circumstances have already interrupted their education.

For these reasons, housing data should be interpreted as evidence of the scope and forms of instability rather than as a single definitive national rate. Consistent definitions and validated measures remain important priorities for the field.

Prevalence and Institutional Visibility

Multisite studies indicate that housing insecurity affects students across institutional sectors. The Hope Center's surveys have repeatedly found substantial levels of difficulty paying housing expenses, frequent moves, temporary residence with others, and homelessness among participating students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2021, 2023). Community college students frequently report especially high levels of instability, reflecting both the populations these institutions serve and the limited residential infrastructure available on many two-year campuses.

The Hope Center's 2023–2024 Student Basic Needs Survey reported that 48% of respondents experienced at least one indicator of housing insecurity during the previous year and 14% experienced homelessness. These figures came from more than 74,000 respondents at 91 participating institutions and therefore provide extensive multisite evidence, but they are not nationally representative. Participating institutions and students may differ from the broader college population, and the survey's broad operationalization captures multiple forms of housing difficulty (The Hope Center, 2025).

Independent studies have nevertheless documented similar concerns. Crutchfield and Maguire (2018) identified extensive housing insecurity across the California State University system. Trawver and Hedwig (2020) documented overlapping food and housing hardship at an open-enrollment university, while Kornbluh et al. (2022) connected housing insecurity with

multiple dimensions of student well-being and success. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that housing instability is not confined to institutions in one region or sector.

The visibility of housing need remains limited, however. Colleges rarely collect housing-status information routinely after enrollment. Financial aid forms may identify some unaccompanied homeless youth, but they do not capture all students who become housing insecure during college or who fall outside age and dependency criteria. Faculty members typically receive no indication that a student is living in a vehicle, moving among temporary arrangements, or spending substantial time locating a place to sleep.

Students may actively protect that information. Disclosure can create fears about pity, judgment, intervention, family involvement, or the possibility that others will question the student's capacity to remain enrolled. Students may also believe that their circumstances are temporary or insufficiently severe to warrant the term homelessness. The result is a form of hidden instability in which students continue attending class while privately managing where they will sleep, shower, store belongings, and complete coursework (Hallett & Freas, 2018).

Unequal Exposure to Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity is shaped by the broader housing market as well as by students' access to family and institutional resources. Rising rents, limited affordable housing, security deposits, utility costs, transportation expenses, and irregular wages can place stable housing beyond reach even when students are employed. Campus housing may be unavailable, unaffordable, or restricted by academic calendars and enrollment status.

Students with family wealth may receive help with deposits, rent, furniture, transportation, or emergency expenses. Those without that support must absorb the same costs through earnings, aid, borrowing, or shared housing. Family conflict, abuse, rejection,

immigration circumstances, or caregiving obligations may also make returning home impossible or unsafe. Housing insecurity therefore cannot be understood through income alone; it is also shaped by the availability and suitability of relational safety nets.

Black and Indigenous students, students receiving Pell Grants, former foster youth, students with disabilities, parenting students, and students with histories of involvement in the criminal legal system report especially high levels of basic-needs insecurity in multisite research (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2025). These disparities reflect structural inequalities in housing, wealth, employment, healthcare, and educational access rather than inherent vulnerability within the groups themselves.

Former foster youth face distinctive housing risks because they may enter college without a permanent family home to return to during breaks or emergencies. LGBTQ+ students may lose family support because of identity-based rejection. Parenting students must secure housing that is both affordable and appropriate for children, often while coordinating childcare, employment, and enrollment. Students with disabilities may encounter limited accessible housing and additional healthcare or transportation costs. These circumstances illustrate why housing policy cannot be designed around an assumed student who can return safely to a financially stable family household.

Geography also matters. Students attending institutions in high-cost housing markets may compete for scarce rentals, travel long distances, or accept overcrowded conditions. Rural students may encounter lower rents but limited transportation and fewer shelters or public services. An institutional response that is workable in one location may therefore be inadequate in another.

Academic and Psychosocial Consequences

Housing instability disrupts the routines through which academic work becomes possible. Students need time and space to sleep, study, store materials, access technology, and prepare for class. A student moving among temporary locations may carry books, clothing, food, and personal documents throughout the day because no secure storage is available. Even when a vehicle provides temporary shelter, concerns about safety, temperature, parking restrictions, hygiene, and police contact can interfere with rest.

Broton (2021) found that housing insecurity was negatively associated with academic attainment, reinforcing concerns that instability contributes to interrupted educational pathways. Kornbluh et al. (2022) likewise connected housing insecurity with lower academic performance and poorer psychosocial outcomes. As with food insecurity, cross-sectional relationships require caution, but qualitative accounts clarify several mechanisms through which housing affects education.

Hallett and Freas's (2018) interviews with community college students experiencing homelessness revealed the substantial labor involved in maintaining enrollment without stable housing. Students coordinated transportation, sleep, hygiene, food, employment, and coursework while attempting to prevent others from discovering their circumstances. Their educational participation depended on improvisation and repeated problem-solving rather than on the stable routines assumed by most institutional practices.

Sleep is especially consequential. Crowded housing, vehicles, shelters, unsafe environments, and temporary arrangements may provide limited privacy or uninterrupted rest. Sleep deprivation can affect attention, memory, emotional regulation, and physical health, thereby compounding academic difficulty (Hershner & Chervin, 2014). The student may appear

disengaged or unprepared when the underlying problem is the absence of a secure place to sleep. Housing instability can also restrict social relationships. Students may avoid inviting friends into their living environments, decline social activities that require money or transportation, and conceal where they are staying. Dependence on friends or relatives for temporary housing can create unequal relationships in which continued shelter depends on compliance, gratitude, or silence. A couch may provide immediate protection while leaving the student uncertain about how long they are welcome.

The psychological effects include anxiety, vigilance, embarrassment, exhaustion, and a diminished sense of control. Students must make decisions about where to park, whether a location is safe, when they can shower, where they can charge devices, and how to explain their circumstances. These demands can persist throughout the day, making housing instability a continuing cognitive condition rather than a problem confined to nighttime.

Institutional Assumptions and Recognition

Many institutional practices presume that students possess a stable residence. Registration, financial aid, identification documents, parking permits, mail, internet access, and emergency communication may require a consistent address or reliable technology. Coursework assumes access to a place where students can read, write, attend online meetings, and store materials. Attendance policies may presume that transportation begins from the same location each day.

Academic calendars create additional vulnerability. Residence halls may close during holidays or between terms, while housing eligibility can depend on current enrollment. A student who reduces credits because of financial difficulty may lose access to institutional housing, further intensifying the conditions that made full-time enrollment difficult. These feedback

relationships demonstrate how policies designed for administrative consistency can produce instability for students whose lives do not match institutional assumptions.

Identifying housing insecurity requires careful, non-stigmatizing inquiry. Asking only whether students are homeless may fail because many do not use that term. Questions about where students have stayed, whether they can remain there, whether they have moved because of financial difficulty, and whether they feel safe can produce a fuller account. Institutions must also be prepared to respond; asking students to disclose housing instability without providing meaningful pathways to support risks collecting sensitive information without reducing harm.

Housing interventions range from emergency grants and temporary lodging to rental assistance, housing partnerships, year-round residence options, and safe-parking programs. Each addresses different points on the continuum and carries different resource requirements. Temporary responses may protect students during a crisis, but the broader challenge involves the availability and affordability of stable housing.

The literature establishes that student housing insecurity is varied, frequently hidden, and educationally consequential. What survey categories cannot fully convey is how instability reorganizes the ordinary details of a student's day: where belongings are kept, when sleep is possible, how safety is judged, and what must be concealed to continue appearing like everyone else. The following vignette examines those details through a period when my car became the only place I could reliably sleep.

The Lived Experience of Housing Insecurity

Between Semesters

The academic year is ending at California State University, Chico.

All around me, students are preparing to go home.

Boxes appear in residence-hall corridors. Cars pull into loading spaces with their trunks open. Parents carry bedding, lamps, and plastic storage containers out of the buildings. Friends talk casually about summer plans, childhood bedrooms, and how long they will stay home before returning to campus.

Their conversations reveal an assumption I had rarely questioned: when the academic year ends, students go somewhere.

They go home.

I listen while knowing that no home is waiting for me.

My grandparents' small trailer is already crowded with family members. Returning there would mean adding another person—and everything I own—to a space already stretched beyond its capacity. My mother's continuing struggles with addiction have again made her housing unstable. There is no bedroom being kept for me, no empty closet, and no place where I can leave boxes until the next academic term.

I have completed another year of college. Soon, I will begin a summer internship. On paper, my life appears to be moving forward.

I just do not have anywhere to live between those two points.

Eventually, my car becomes the only place I can count on at the end of each day.

I do not initially call myself homeless. The word feels too large and too final. In my mind, homelessness looks like something more visible than my situation. It looks like a shelter, a sidewalk, or a person carrying everything they own. I have a car. I have belongings. I am enrolled in college. I have an internship approaching.

I tell myself that I am between places.

Temporarily displaced.

Figuring something out.

Almost anything except homeless.

Looking back, what I remember most is not fear. There may have been moments when I felt afraid, but fear is not what stayed with me. What I remember is uncertainty and the series of calculations it required.

Where can I park tonight without attracting attention?

How long can I remain there before someone notices?

Where can I shower?

Where can I change clothes?

How much money is left?

Which expenses can wait?

Where can I keep my belongings?

Who can know?

Who absolutely cannot?

No single question is impossible to answer. The exhaustion comes from answering all of them repeatedly, knowing that each solution is temporary.

The car provides shelter, but not stability. It gives me somewhere to sit and a place to keep what I own, but it does not provide the privacy or predictability I associate with housing. Every location feels conditional. Even when no one asks me to leave, I remain aware that someone could.

My days continue. I show up where I am expected. I prepare for the internship. I respond to friends. I carry on conversations without mentioning where I slept. Outwardly, little appears to have changed.

That appearance requires work.

I learn to separate what people can see from what I am managing privately. Clothing must remain presentable. My body must not reveal that access to a shower requires planning. My belongings must look contained rather than carried because I have nowhere else to put them. My tiredness needs an ordinary explanation.

I do not want anyone to interpret my circumstances as evidence that I am incapable of succeeding in college. I have worked too hard to reach this point. Admitting that I am sleeping in my car feels as though it might change how others understand everything else I have accomplished.

This is one of the contradictions I cannot name at the time: college is supposed to represent mobility, but my actual mobility consists of moving my car from one place to another because I have nowhere I am permitted to remain.

I am still a student. I am still preparing for a professional opportunity. I am also homeless, even if I cannot yet use that word for myself.

Eventually, a faculty mentor learns what is happening.

I do not remember the moment primarily as a dramatic disclosure. What remains with me is that someone recognized that what appeared ordinary was not. She opened her home to me, providing the stability I had been attempting to construct one night at a time.

Her decision changed the remainder of my summer. It allowed me to direct attention toward the internship rather than toward finding a safe place to park. It gave me a place to sleep, shower, keep my belongings, and wake up without first solving where I would go next.

I remain deeply grateful for what she did. I also understand the experience differently now.

I was helped because one person learned enough about my circumstances to act. Had she not noticed—or had she cared but lacked the ability to offer housing—I do not know how long I would have remained in my car. There was no institutional process guiding me toward her. I did not disclose my circumstances to an office and receive coordinated assistance. Support arrived through a relationship and an act of individual generosity.

At the time, that generosity was enough to change my circumstances.

Years later, it leaves me with a question: How many students remain invisible because no one happens to notice?

Reading the Vignette Through the Literature

The vignette exposes how institutional time can produce housing vulnerability. The closing of a residence hall appears administratively routine, but it assumes that students possess another residence to which they can return. For students without stable family housing, academic breaks can remove not only a room but also access to food, internet, transportation, storage, hygiene facilities, and community. The calendar separates institutional responsibility from the periods in which students may face their greatest instability.

This arrangement reflects a broader tendency to organize higher education around an assumed student whose family can provide a secure home between terms. Goldrick-Rab (2016) demonstrates how policies frequently rely on family support even when students' actual access to that support is limited. Former foster youth, students experiencing family estrangement, students from overcrowded households, and those whose families face poverty, addiction, abuse, or housing instability may remain enrolled without having a safe home elsewhere.

The difficulty I had naming the experience is equally significant. I understood homelessness through its most visible and severe representations. Because I had a vehicle and

expected the situation to be temporary, I located myself outside that category. Hallett and Freas (2018) found similar ambiguity among college students who moved among cars, couches, and temporary arrangements without consistently identifying themselves as homeless. When institutional assistance depends on self-identification, students who do not recognize their circumstances in the available language may never approach the systems designed to support them.

My car provided immediate shelter while preserving instability. It allowed me to avoid sleeping outside and gave me somewhere to store belongings, but it did not supply the safety, privacy, sanitation, or control associated with adequate housing. This distinction illustrates why housing status cannot be assessed solely through whether a person has a roof or enclosed space. Housing security concerns whether that space is safe, stable, adequate, and available without continual threat of displacement (Broton, 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

The daily calculations described in the vignette demonstrate the temporal burden of housing insecurity. Time that might otherwise have been available for rest, preparation, or relationships became devoted to parking, hygiene, storage, safety, and concealment. This helps explain why housing insecurity can affect academic attainment even when students remain highly motivated (Broton, 2021). The burden lies not only in the absence of shelter but in the continual labor required to compensate for that absence.

Concealment served a protective purpose. By continuing to appear prepared and functional, I attempted to preserve both privacy and the identity I had constructed as a successful college student. Disclosure carried uncertainty. I could not know whether others would respond with support, pity, judgment, or doubt about my ability to continue. The invisibility of housing

insecurity is therefore not merely an institutional failure to collect information. It can also be a strategy students use to protect dignity and maintain control over how they are perceived.

My mentor's response demonstrates the importance of relationships while also exposing the limits of reliance on individual intervention. Her assistance was immediate, humane, and consequential. It provided something that a list of referrals could not have supplied in that moment: a safe place to stay. At the same time, the outcome depended on proximity to someone who recognized my circumstances and possessed the personal resources to respond.

Institutions cannot assume that every housing-insecure student will encounter such a person. Nor should faculty and staff be expected to use their homes or personal finances to compensate for gaps in institutional support. Relational care can provide a pathway into assistance, but sustainable responses require organizational capacity, clear referral systems, emergency resources, and housing partnerships that do not depend on chance or personal rescue (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Kezar et al., 2020).

The experience also complicates institutional measures of success. During this period, I remained connected to college and was preparing for an internship. Those visible indicators could be read as evidence that I was progressing successfully. Neither captured the instability underlying that progress. Persistence can coexist with profound hardship, and enrollment alone does not indicate that a student's basic needs are secure.

This account is not representative of every student experiencing housing insecurity. Vehicle residence may be safer or more dangerous depending on location, weather, policing, disability, gender identity, family composition, and access to money. Students without vehicles face different constraints, while parenting students must consider the safety and stability of their

children as well as themselves. The vignette instead illustrates how a student can remain institutionally connected while lacking the stable housing that institutional participation assumes.

Food and housing insecurity were not separate episodes in my educational life. Both emerged through limited and unstable access to resources, and each affected decisions about money, transportation, safety, disclosure, and participation. The next section examines these overlaps directly, using the concept of precarity to explain why student hardship is better understood as an interconnected condition than as a series of independent needs.

Interconnected Basic Needs and Student Precarity

Food and housing insecurity are analytically distinguishable, but students rarely experience them as independent conditions. Food, housing, transportation, healthcare, childcare, technology, utilities, and financial stability draw upon overlapping resources. A disruption in one area can therefore create consequences across several others. Research consistently finds substantial overlap among food insecurity, housing instability, and additional unmet needs, suggesting that student hardship is better understood as an interconnected material condition than as a collection of isolated deficits (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2021; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018).

This interconnectedness changes the meaning of individual decisions. Reducing food consumption may allow a student to pay rent. Delaying a medical appointment may preserve money for transportation. Increasing work hours may stabilize income while reducing time for coursework and childcare. A vehicle repair may determine whether the student can attend class, remain employed, and reach affordable food. Each decision temporarily protects one need by placing pressure on another.

Material security therefore cannot be assessed by asking whether a student has resolved one immediate problem. A bag of groceries may provide food for several days without addressing an overdue utility bill. Emergency aid may prevent eviction while leaving the student unable to purchase required course materials. Temporary housing may provide a place to sleep without offering transportation to campus. These interventions can be essential, but their effects remain shaped by the larger configuration of resources and obligations within the student's life.

Precarity as Persistent Instability

The concept of precarity provides language for understanding this broader condition. Precarity describes exposure to instability, uncertainty, and limited control over the resources required for everyday life. It is not simply a state of having too little at one point in time. It involves the continuing possibility that employment, housing, food, healthcare, transportation, or other forms of security may be lost or become inaccessible (Butler, 2009; Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011).

Butler (2009) distinguishes the universal vulnerability of human life from politically and socially produced precarity. All people depend on others and on social institutions, but they are not equally exposed to insecurity or equally protected from its consequences. Public policy, labor markets, family wealth, racism, citizenship, disability, gender, and institutional arrangements distribute vulnerability unevenly. Precarity is therefore not an accidental condition experienced randomly across a population; it is shaped by social relations that make stability more available to some people than to others.

Standing (2011) uses the term *precariat* to describe a population experiencing insecure employment, limited occupational identity, and reduced access to social protections. Although his analysis focuses primarily on labor, it is relevant to students whose educational participation

depends on low-wage, temporary, or unpredictable work. A student's class schedule may change each semester, while work hours fluctuate weekly. Financial aid arrives periodically, but rent, food, utilities, and transportation require continual payment. The resulting instability is produced partly through the misalignment of institutional and economic timelines.

Precarity should not be treated as synonymous with poverty. A student may fall below an income threshold while possessing stable housing, predictable family support, or access to emergency resources. Another may report slightly higher income but face volatile employment, high rent, debt, caregiving responsibilities, or no financial safety net. Income volatility and limited assets affect whether people can smooth consumption across time and respond to unexpected costs (Hardy & Ziliak, 2014; Pfeffer, 2018). Precarity directs attention to that uncertainty and to the consequences of lacking dependable protection against disruption.

The concept also clarifies why apparently small expenses can produce disproportionate consequences. For a student with savings or family assistance, a flat tire may be inconvenient. For a student with no financial buffer, the same repair can interrupt transportation to work, reduce income, threaten rent, and ultimately destabilize enrollment. The significance of the expense lies not only in its dollar amount but in the number of systems dependent on its resolution.

The Temporal Organization of Insecurity

Precarity is experienced through time. Students must anticipate when resources will arrive, how long they will last, and what will happen if an expected payment is delayed. Financial aid may be sufficient on paper across an academic term but unavailable when a housing deposit, utility bill, or medical expense is due. Employment income may cover recurring

expenses but fluctuate during examination periods, academic breaks, or changes in work scheduling.

This timing creates cycles of relative stability and acute scarcity. A student may purchase food and pay bills after an aid disbursement, then gradually restrict spending as resources decline. Housing may remain stable during the semester but become uncertain when residence halls close. Employment may be available during the academic year but disappear during breaks, or work hours may increase precisely when academic demands are highest.

Cross-sectional measures can miss this movement. A student surveyed immediately after receiving aid may appear materially secure even if that security cannot be sustained. Another surveyed during a crisis may be classified as insecure without the measure identifying the institutional timing that contributed to the crisis. Longitudinal and qualitative research is especially valuable for understanding these fluctuations and the decisions students make in anticipation of them (Broton, 2020; Cuite et al., 2023).

Time is also consumed through navigation. Students must locate programs, determine eligibility, assemble documentation, attend appointments, travel between offices, and repeat their circumstances to different personnel. Administrative-burden scholarship describes these demands as learning, compliance, and psychological costs associated with accessing public or institutional support (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). A resource may be formally available while remaining difficult to use because obtaining it requires time and energy from people who possess the least flexibility.

Institutional Fragmentation

Universities commonly divide student needs among administrative units. Financial aid addresses educational expenses, housing offices manage residence, dining services provide meal

plans, counseling centers respond to mental health, academic advisors focus on enrollment, and student-affairs offices coordinate emergency assistance. These divisions may be organizationally necessary, but they do not reflect how students experience hardship.

A student referred from one office to another must translate a connected life into separate institutional problems. Rent difficulty may be treated as a housing concern, reduced food consumption as a pantry referral, missed class as an academic issue, and anxiety as a counseling need. Each response may be appropriate within its unit while no one examines the relationship among them. Fragmentation can therefore produce partial assistance without a coordinated understanding of the conditions affecting the student.

Systems Theory describes how organizational outcomes emerge through interactions among parts rather than through the operation of each part independently (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006). Applied to basic needs, this perspective suggests that the effectiveness of any service depends partly on its relationship with financial aid, academic policy, housing, employment, transportation, and community resources. A pantry cannot compensate for every gap in the system, just as an advisor cannot resolve a housing market or a counselor eliminate financial precarity.

Institutional fragmentation can also obscure responsibility. When each office addresses only the portion of a problem falling within its formal role, students become responsible for coordinating the complete response. They must know which resources exist, communicate among units, manage conflicting requirements, and determine what to do when no office claims authority. The institution may possess numerous services while students continue experiencing it as difficult to navigate.

A coordinated approach does not require one office to solve every problem. It requires shared recognition that needs overlap, clear referral pathways, communication across units, and attention to whether students successfully reach the support to which they are referred. Without such coordination, the number of available programs may overstate the institution's actual capacity to respond.

Moving Beyond Resilience

Students who remain enrolled under conditions of precarity often demonstrate considerable adaptability. They budget carefully, work, borrow, share resources, alter schedules, seek assistance, and develop creative strategies for meeting immediate needs. These actions can appropriately be recognized as forms of agency and persistence. However, an exclusive focus on resilience can shift attention away from the conditions requiring extraordinary adaptation.

Bottrell (2009) cautions that resilience discourse can normalize structural disadvantage by celebrating individuals who withstand difficult conditions while leaving the production of those conditions unexamined. Similarly, Southwick et al. (2014) argue that resilience must be understood within social, cultural, and environmental contexts rather than as an individual trait alone. A student's ability to persist does not make insecurity educationally acceptable, nor does departure demonstrate insufficient determination.

The distinction matters because institutional success stories often highlight students who overcame hunger, homelessness, or poverty. Such narratives can inspire, but they may also imply that hardship becomes manageable when students possess enough motivation. They rarely account for people who were equally capable but encountered a crisis at the wrong time, lacked one supportive relationship, or exhausted the resources required to continue.

A structural analysis asks a different question. Rather than asking only how students survive precarity, it examines why educational participation requires survival strategies and which institutional conditions could reduce that burden. This does not erase students' agency. It refuses to use their agency as justification for leaving inequitable conditions unchanged.

From Material Precarity to Structural Inequality

The basic-needs literature demonstrates that material insecurity is interconnected, temporally unstable, and shaped by institutional arrangements. It also shows that exposure to precarity is not evenly distributed. Students enter higher education with unequal access to wealth, housing, healthcare, transportation, family support, and institutional knowledge. Those inequalities are produced through longer histories of racial, economic, and political stratification.

The next section situates student basic-needs insecurity within those histories. It examines how race and structural inequality shape material conditions before college and continue influencing students' experiences within higher education, particularly at predominantly White institutions. This move is necessary because disparities in food and housing insecurity cannot be explained adequately through income or individual decision-making alone. They must be understood in relation to the systems that have historically organized who possesses resources, whose needs institutions recognize, and who is expected to adapt.

Race, Higher Education, and Structural Inequality

Racial disparities in student basic-needs insecurity cannot be explained adequately by treating race as an individual demographic characteristic. Race does not create material insecurity through an inherent quality of students or communities. Rather, racial categories acquire material consequences through policies, institutions, and social practices that distribute wealth, housing, education, employment, healthcare, and political power unequally (Bonilla-

Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2015). Understanding why Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other racially marginalized students experience disproportionate basic-needs insecurity therefore requires attention to the structures shaping their lives before and during college.

This structural approach differs from merely identifying race as a statistical risk factor. Demographic associations can establish that disparities exist, but they do not explain how those disparities were produced. When research reports that students of color experience higher food or housing insecurity without analyzing racialized systems, it risks making race itself appear causal. A more defensible interpretation asks how racism has organized access to the resources that protect students from material instability.

Racialized Wealth and Economic Security

Family wealth is one of the clearest mechanisms connecting historical racial inequality with contemporary educational opportunity. Wealth includes assets such as home equity, savings, retirement accounts, and other resources that families can use to finance education or respond to emergencies. Unlike income, which reflects money received during a particular period, wealth provides a reserve that can be transferred across generations and used to absorb financial disruption (Oliver & Shapiro, 2019; Pfeffer & Killewald, 2019).

The racial wealth gap was produced through policies and practices that expanded asset ownership for White families while excluding or exploiting Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other communities. Enslavement, Indigenous land dispossession, racially restrictive covenants, redlining, unequal access to federally supported mortgages, employment discrimination, and uneven implementation of public benefits all contributed to current differences in asset ownership (Darity et al., 2018; Katznelson, 2005; Rothstein, 2017). These are not merely historical events with effects confined to earlier generations. Because wealth accumulates and

transfers over time, past exclusion shapes present access to housing, neighborhoods, schools, credit, and educational support.

Homeownership illustrates this intergenerational relationship. Federal housing policy and discriminatory lending helped many White families purchase homes in neighborhoods where property values later appreciated while restricting Black families' access to the same opportunities (Rothstein, 2017). Home equity subsequently became available to finance college, provide down payments, absorb medical expenses, or support adult children. Families excluded from those markets lost not only an earlier housing opportunity but also the future benefits generated through appreciation and inheritance.

Income differences alone cannot account for this history. Black and White households with comparable income may possess substantially different levels of wealth because of unequal access to intergenerational transfers and differential exposure to debt (Darity et al., 2018; Hamilton & Darity, 2017). Consequently, a financial aid system focused primarily on annual income may not capture differences in a family's capacity to respond when rent increases, employment changes, or a student faces an unexpected expense.

These disparities become visible in college through what families can provide. One student may receive help with tuition, a housing deposit, a meal plan, a vehicle repair, or an unpaid internship. Another may contribute money to family members while attempting to meet educational expenses independently. Both may be equally committed to college, but they participate with different levels of protection from financial disruption.

Unequal Educational Pathways

Racial inequality also shapes the educational pathways leading to college. Residential segregation and reliance on local property wealth have contributed to substantial differences in

school resources, curriculum, staffing, facilities, and access to advanced coursework (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2011). These differences affect academic preparation, but they also shape access to counselors, college information, application support, and institutional networks.

Ladson-Billings (2006) describes these accumulated inequalities as an education debt, emphasizing that contemporary disparities reflect historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral obligations rather than a temporary achievement gap. This framing is important because “gap” language can compare students’ outcomes without accounting for the unequal investments and opportunities that produced them. Students do not arrive at college from equivalent educational systems and then diverge solely because of individual effort.

College opportunity is further stratified by institutional sector and selectivity. Students from racially and economically marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately concentrated in institutions with fewer financial resources, lower per-student spending, and limited capacity to provide comprehensive support (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Posselt et al., 2012). Community colleges and regional public universities play essential access roles but frequently receive fewer resources than selective institutions serving wealthier populations. The students with the greatest material needs may therefore attend institutions with the least capacity to address them.

Racialized financial pathways continue after enrollment. Black students, in particular, are more likely to borrow for college and often accumulate greater debt than White students because of differences in family wealth, institutional attendance, and the resources available to finance education without loans (Addo et al., 2016; Houle & Addo, 2019). Debt can affect course loads, employment decisions, graduate education, homeownership, and the ability to support later

generations. Educational financing can thus reproduce rather than resolve racial wealth inequality.

Race and Student Basic-Needs Insecurity

Studies of college basic needs repeatedly find racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity, housing instability, and homelessness (El Zein et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2025). Black and Indigenous students often report especially high levels of unmet need, while Latino students also experience elevated risk in many institutional samples. These patterns persist across different campuses and survey designs, although their size varies.

A structural interpretation situates these findings within racialized differences in wealth, employment, housing, debt, and access to family assistance. It also recognizes that students of color are not homogeneous populations. Immigration history, citizenship, tribal sovereignty, language, gender, class, disability, sexuality, family status, and institutional type shape experiences within and across racial groups. Broad categories can reveal unequal patterns while concealing substantial variation.

Intersectionality is necessary for examining these relationships. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) developed intersectionality to explain how systems of power interact in ways that cannot be understood by examining race and gender separately. Within basic-needs research, an intersectional analysis considers how race may interact with gender, parenthood, disability, sexuality, immigration status, and class to produce distinctive material and institutional conditions (Bowleg, 2012). The purpose is not to accumulate demographic disadvantages but to identify how systems operate together.

For example, a Black parenting student may encounter housing discrimination, childcare costs, employment constraints, and campus policies designed around students without dependents. An undocumented Latina student may navigate limited financial aid, employment restrictions, family responsibilities, and fear associated with institutional disclosure. An Indigenous student may confront material insecurity alongside geographic displacement, inadequate institutional recognition of tribal identities, or limited access to culturally responsive support. Each experience reflects a configuration of social and institutional relations rather than the additive effect of separate identities.

Deficit-oriented interpretations can obscure these structures. Students of color experiencing food insecurity may be described as lacking financial literacy even when their circumstances reflect high housing costs, insufficient aid, low wages, or obligations to family. Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth challenges institutional frameworks that recognize only dominant forms of capital. Students may bring extensive familial, linguistic, resistant, navigational, social, and aspirational knowledge while still confronting organizations that do not recognize those resources as valuable.

Recognizing cultural wealth does not mean denying material inequality. Community strength cannot replace adequate food, stable housing, or financial resources. The analytical task is to avoid treating students as culturally deficient while also refusing to romanticize their ability to persist under unequal conditions.

Predominantly White Institutions and the Experience of Marginality

The institutional setting of this study is a predominantly White institution. The term predominantly White institution, or PWI, describes more than an institution in which White students constitute a numerical majority. It also directs attention to organizational histories,

cultural norms, policies, symbols, and assumptions developed within higher education systems that historically centered White participation and authority (Brown & Dancy, 2010; Gusa, 2010; Patton, 2016).

This distinction is important because numerical diversity does not automatically transform institutional culture. A university can enroll a more racially diverse student population while maintaining curricula, traditions, hiring patterns, decision-making practices, and support structures that continue to treat White experience as normative. Students of color may be formally included while remaining underrepresented in faculty roles, senior leadership, particular academic fields, or spaces associated with institutional authority.

Gusa (2010) uses the concept of **White institutional presence** to describe how racialized practices and assumptions become embedded within predominantly White campuses. These conditions do not require every individual to express explicit racial hostility. They can operate through normalized traditions, standards of professionalism, curricular omissions, spatial arrangements, and institutional responses that appear race neutral while privileging dominant cultural expectations.

Critical scholarship similarly cautions against treating higher education as separate from the racism operating throughout society. Patton (2016) argues that postsecondary institutions have been shaped by histories of settler colonialism, slavery, segregation, and exclusion that continue influencing their structures. A PWI should therefore not be understood simply as a contemporary demographic category; it is an institution located within a longer history of who was permitted to learn, teach, lead, and produce authoritative knowledge.

Campus Racial Climate

Campus racial climate refers to the institutional environment created through historical legacies, compositional diversity, psychological perceptions, behavioral interactions, and organizational policies and practices (Hurtado et al., 1998, 2012). Climate is not measured adequately through enrollment demographics alone. It encompasses how students interpret representation, curriculum, relationships, institutional responses, and the frequency and consequences of racialized encounters.

Studies of PWIs consistently find that students of color may experience isolation, stereotyping, discrimination, and pressure to represent their racial groups (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000). These experiences vary among individuals and institutions, but they demonstrate that formal access does not guarantee full membership. Students may participate academically while remaining uncertain whether their identities, histories, or knowledge are valued.

Institutional responses to racial incidents are particularly consequential. Silence, delayed action, or generalized diversity statements can communicate that racial harm is peripheral to institutional priorities. Conversely, responses perceived as transparent, accountable, and connected to material action may strengthen trust. Campus climate is therefore produced not only through the occurrence of racialized incidents but also through what institutions do after they occur (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Climate also affects whether students use institutional resources. Students may hesitate to disclose financial hardship, mental-health concerns, or experiences of discrimination when they do not trust that faculty and staff will understand them. A program can be formally available while feeling culturally unsafe or disconnected from students' communities. Material support

and racial climate consequently intersect through students' judgments about where they can seek assistance without encountering dismissal, misunderstanding, or surveillance.

Racial Microaggressions and Cumulative Strain

Solórzano et al. (2000) define racial microaggressions as subtle verbal, behavioral, and environmental messages that communicate racial insult, exclusion, or devaluation. These interactions may be intentional or unintentional, but their significance lies in their cumulative and contextual effects. A single comment can appear minor when separated from the broader pattern through which students are repeatedly questioned, stereotyped, or rendered invisible.

Microaggressions in higher education can involve assumptions about academic ability, surprise at a student's performance, pressure to speak for an entire racial group, mispronunciation or dismissal of names, exclusion from study groups, or curricula that marginalize the knowledge of communities of color (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Environmental microaggressions may appear through the near absence of faculty of color, institutional symbols associated with racial exclusion, or facilities and services that do not reflect the communities enrolled.

The concept has generated debate regarding definition, measurement, intention, and the classification of particular interactions. Those debates reinforce the importance of examining context and pattern rather than presuming that every ambiguous encounter can be categorized conclusively. For this study, the concept is useful not as a label for every uncomfortable interaction but as a means of recognizing how recurring messages can shape students' perceptions of legitimacy and safety.

Smith et al. (2007) developed the concept of *racial battle fatigue* to describe the psychological and physiological strain associated with continually navigating racialized

environments. This strain may include anxiety, frustration, hypervigilance, exhaustion, and pressure to anticipate or respond to racial encounters. Research involving Black students and faculty demonstrates that the cumulative burden of racism can affect well-being and educational participation even when no single incident appears decisive (Franklin et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2007).

Material insecurity can intensify this burden. A student managing hunger or unstable housing may have limited capacity to absorb racialized stress, while racial exclusion may reduce access to the relationships and institutional resources that could mitigate material hardship. These conditions interact within the student's life, even when research or institutional services address them through separate categories.

Representation, Authority, and Institutional Knowledge

PWIs also shape whose knowledge is recognized as authoritative. Students from marginalized communities may possess direct knowledge of institutional barriers while being positioned as recipients of services rather than contributors to institutional analysis. Their accounts may be treated as anecdotal until supported by data recognized by administrators, even when those accounts identify patterns that institutional systems have failed to measure.

Critical race scholarship identifies experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling as essential for examining institutional realities obscured by dominant narratives (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-stories do not reject empirical evidence. They challenge the assumption that official records or dominant interpretations provide a complete account of institutional life. This is especially relevant to basic-needs insecurity, where students often recognize material barriers before institutions collect data capable of confirming them.

Representation within faculty, staff, and leadership roles can influence whether students encounter people who recognize their experiences without requiring extensive explanation. Numerical representation alone cannot guarantee responsiveness, and employees who share a racial identity with students do not necessarily have identical experiences. Nevertheless, representation can expand the range of perspectives present in curriculum, mentoring, decision-making, and institutional problem definition (Griffin et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

The absence of representation can also concentrate labor among the few faculty and staff members from marginalized communities who are present. Students may seek them out for mentoring, advocacy, and support, creating responsibilities that institutions do not always recognize or compensate. This unequal distribution of institutional labor will be examined later in the chapter in relation to leadership and organizational change.

From Racial Climate to Belonging

The literature reviewed here demonstrates that race shapes both students' material resources and their experiences within higher education. Historical inequalities influence the resources students can draw upon, while institutional environments affect whether they are recognized, supported, and able to participate without continually negotiating racialized assumptions. These relationships make it impossible to treat basic-needs insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional context as separate concerns.

The next section examines belonging as one way students interpret their relationship with the institution. It considers how belonging is produced through recognition, representation, validation, and access to meaningful participation. Importantly, belonging will not be framed as a personal feeling that students must generate for themselves. It will be examined as a relational

and institutional condition shaped by who is welcomed, whose presence is affirmed, and whose knowledge is allowed to matter.

Belonging, Representation, and Validation

Belonging has become a central concept in higher education research because it describes how students understand their relationship to the people, communities, and institutions around them. At its core, belonging involves a perception of acceptance, connection, value, and legitimate membership within a particular environment (Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2019). It is not simply the presence of friendship or the absence of conflict. Belonging concerns whether students understand themselves as people whose identities and participation are recognized as meaningful within the institution.

Psychological scholarship identifies the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Within higher education, this need takes on institutional significance because learning occurs through relationships, participation, and exposure to evaluation. Students are repeatedly asked to enter unfamiliar spaces, disclose ideas, take intellectual risks, request assistance, and imagine themselves as members of academic and professional communities. Their willingness to do so is shaped partly by whether those environments communicate that their presence is expected and valued.

Belonging as a Relational and Institutional Experience

Early student-persistence models emphasized academic and social integration as important to continued enrollment (Tinto, 1975, 1993). These models helped establish that students' relationships with institutional environments matter, but they have also been criticized for implying that students must separate from prior communities or assimilate into established

campus norms to succeed (Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1992). Such assumptions can position institutional culture as fixed and evaluate students according to how effectively they adapt to it.

Contemporary belonging scholarship places greater responsibility on institutions. Students do not independently generate belonging through attitude or effort; they interpret messages communicated through interactions, policies, curricula, physical spaces, traditions, and institutional responses (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Belonging is therefore relational because it develops through encounters with others and institutional because those encounters occur within organizational structures that distribute recognition and authority.

Research associates stronger belonging with academic engagement, institutional commitment, psychological well-being, and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011). These associations do not mean that belonging alone determines whether students succeed. Financial resources, academic preparation, health, family responsibilities, and institutional opportunity remain consequential. Belonging is one condition within a larger educational environment, not an explanation that should replace attention to material or structural inequality.

Belonging can also vary across settings. A student may feel strongly connected to a cultural organization while remaining alienated from an academic department. Another may belong within a peer group but feel invisible in the classroom. Students can experience attachment to a university while distrusting particular administrative systems. Treating belonging as one global institutional feeling may therefore conceal the localized relationships and spaces through which it is produced (Nunn, 2021; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

This variation is especially relevant for students whose identities are marginalized within dominant campus cultures. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found that belonging among diverse students involved safety, mattering, acceptance, and the ability to be authentic. Tachine et al. (2017) demonstrated that Native students' belonging can be sustained through family and community relationships extending beyond campus rather than through separation from home. Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environments model similarly emphasizes cultural familiarity, community connections, collectivist orientations, and institutional agents committed to students' success.

These perspectives challenge the assumption that belonging requires students to become more similar to the institution. A student should not need to suppress language, culture, family commitments, racial identity, disability, gender expression, or social class to be recognized as a legitimate member of an academic community. When inclusion depends on conformity, the resulting attachment may be conditional rather than equitable.

Belonging Uncertainty

Walton and Cohen (2007) use the term *belonging uncertainty* to describe doubt about the quality of one's social connection within academic settings. Students experiencing belonging uncertainty may interpret an ambiguous interaction, critical feedback, or temporary setback as evidence that people like them do not belong. This uncertainty can be especially salient for members of groups who are underrepresented or subject to negative stereotypes.

Belonging uncertainty does not imply that students misunderstand otherwise inclusive environments. Their concerns may be grounded in actual histories of exclusion, recurring microaggressions, limited representation, or observed institutional inequities. Psychological processes and institutional conditions must therefore be examined together. Efforts to strengthen

belonging should not simply teach students to reinterpret exclusion more positively while leaving the exclusion itself unchanged.

Belonging interventions have demonstrated that carefully designed messages and opportunities for reflection can improve some students' academic and psychological outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton et al., 2023). However, such interventions are most ethically defensible when accompanied by institutional efforts to improve climate, curriculum, representation, material support, and accountability. Otherwise, the responsibility for adapting to an inequitable environment remains with the student.

Distinguishing Belonging From Mattering

Belonging and mattering are closely related but conceptually distinct. Belonging concerns perceived membership and connection, while mattering refers to the belief that one is noticed, important, and consequential to others (Elliott et al., 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). A student may participate in a campus community yet remain unsure whether anyone would notice their absence or care about their experience.

Schlossberg (1989) introduced *mattering* as an important consideration for adult learners and other students positioned at the margins of institutional life. She argued that institutions communicate mattering when students believe they receive attention, are considered important, are needed, and are appreciated. These messages can arise through seemingly ordinary interactions: a faculty member remembering a student's name, an advisor following up after an absence, or a staff member recognizing a concern before it becomes a crisis.

Mattering helps clarify why numerical inclusion is insufficient. A student can be counted within enrollment statistics without believing that their presence affects the institution. Institutions may celebrate diversity while failing to recognize individual students' knowledge or

respond to their concerns. Belonging requires more than being present among others; it requires some indication that one's presence has meaning.

Validation and Institutional Agency

Validation Theory offers a related explanation of how institutional actors influence students' confidence and participation. Rendón (1994) developed the theory through research with nontraditional students, many of whom were first-generation, low-income, or students of color. Validation occurs when institutional agents actively affirm students' capacity to learn, contribute, and succeed.

A central feature of validation is that it is initiated by institutional representatives rather than made conditional on students first demonstrating confidence or asking for support. This distinction matters because students who are unfamiliar with higher education may not know which questions to ask, how to approach faculty members, or whether assistance is intended for them. Expecting students to initiate every supportive interaction privileges those who already possess institutional knowledge.

Rendón identifies both academic and interpersonal forms of validation. Academic validation affirms students as capable learners and contributors to knowledge. Interpersonal validation recognizes their identities, experiences, and presence within the institution. These forms may overlap, but they are not identical. A student can receive praise for academic performance while perceiving that their cultural identity is ignored, or feel personally welcomed while receiving little affirmation of their intellectual capacity.

Later scholarship has extended validation by emphasizing its relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Validation is not accomplished through one encouraging interaction if policies, curriculum, and organizational practices

continue communicating exclusion. Individual affirmation can be consequential, but institutional validation requires consistency between interpersonal messages and broader organizational conditions.

Validation is particularly relevant to help-seeking. A student who has previously encountered respect and care may be more willing to disclose food insecurity, housing instability, or racial harm. Conversely, a student who has experienced dismissal may reasonably conclude that further disclosure carries risk without likely benefit. Institutional relationships therefore influence not only emotional connection but also whether students make their needs visible.

Representation and the Possibility of Recognition

Representation concerns who is visible within positions of knowledge, authority, leadership, and institutional influence. Numerical diversity is one dimension, but representation also involves whose scholarship appears in curricula, whose histories are preserved, who participates in decisions, and whose ways of knowing are treated as legitimate (Ahmed, 2012; Museus, 2014; Turner et al., 2008).

Seeing faculty members, staff members, administrators, and peers who share meaningful aspects of one's identity can interrupt assumptions about who belongs in higher education. Representation may provide cultural familiarity, create opportunities for mentoring, and expand students' ability to imagine themselves within academic or leadership roles. Research on faculty diversity emphasizes that faculty of color contribute to mentoring, curriculum, institutional service, and student engagement in ways that benefit the broader educational environment (Antonio, 2002; Griffin et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

Representation should not be reduced to role modeling. Faculty and staff from marginalized groups are not present merely to serve as symbols for students. Such framing can instrumentalize their identities while overlooking their scholarship, professional expertise, and right to equitable working conditions. It can also create expectations that they will mentor every student who shares a perceived identity.

Students may experience both invisibility and hypervisibility when representation is limited. They may feel unseen as individuals while simultaneously being treated as representatives of an entire group. Faculty and staff from marginalized backgrounds can encounter similar dynamics, becoming highly visible as symbols of diversity while remaining excluded from meaningful authority. Representation is therefore consequential, but its effects depend on institutional climate, workload, decision-making power, and the quality of relationships surrounding it.

Numerical representation also cannot substitute for structural change. Ahmed (2012) cautions that institutions may display diversity as evidence of inclusion while leaving established distributions of power largely intact. A photograph, hiring announcement, or diversity statement can communicate progress without changing whose recommendations shape policy or whose concerns receive resources. Representation becomes more substantive when presence is accompanied by voice, authority, support, and the capacity to influence institutional life.

A Critical Understanding of Belonging

Belonging is often presented as an unquestionably positive institutional goal, but critical scholarship asks what students are being invited to belong to and under what conditions. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes belonging from the politics of belonging, which concerns the boundaries through which communities determine who is included and who remains outside.

Institutional belonging is therefore connected to power: someone defines the norms of membership, determines which differences are acceptable, and decides whose claims upon the community are recognized.

This perspective complicates language encouraging students to “find their place.” The phrase can imply that the institution already contains appropriate spaces and that students are responsible for locating them. A critical approach instead asks whether institutional spaces were designed with particular students in mind, whether they can enter without assimilation, and whether they possess the authority to reshape those spaces.

Students may also challenge an institution because they belong to it, because they have been denied belonging, or because they hold commitments to communities beyond the institution. Advocacy cannot be interpreted simply as evidence of attachment or alienation. A student’s criticism may express investment in what the institution could become, while disengagement may represent a reasoned response to repeated exclusion.

Belonging should consequently not be measured only through satisfaction or institutional loyalty. It also involves safety, authenticity, recognition, access to relationships, and meaningful participation. An institution in which students feel welcomed but unable to question prevailing practices offers a limited form of belonging. Equitable belonging must include the capacity to participate without surrendering identity and to exercise voice without losing membership.

Positioning the Autoethnographic Vignette

The scholarship reviewed here distinguishes among several related concepts. Belonging concerns legitimate membership and connection. Mattering concerns whether one is noticed and regarded as consequential. Validation involves active affirmation from institutional agents.

Representation shapes who is visible within positions of knowledge and authority. These concepts converge in everyday encounters, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

The following vignette examines one such encounter from my experience as a graduate teaching assistant. Its significance lies not in demonstrating that shared appearance automatically produces belonging or that representation resolves institutional inequality. Instead, it illustrates a moment of mutual recognition in which a student's observation prompted me to reconsider both her experience in the classroom and my own history within higher education.

The vignette is placed here because the literature provides the conceptual distinctions necessary to interpret it. Without that foundation, the interaction could appear to be only a warm exchange between an instructor and a student. Read through scholarship on representation, validation, mattering, and belonging, the moment raises deeper questions about who students expect to see at the front of a university classroom and what becomes visible when that expectation is interrupted.

The Lived Experience of Representation

“We’re Matching”

It is my first semester teaching Introduction to Global Food Systems Leadership.

I am standing near the front of the classroom preparing for class when one of my students approaches me. She is smiling.

“Jess,” she says, “we’re matching.”

I look down at my clothes, trying to determine what she means. Nothing I am wearing appears particularly similar to her outfit.

She laughs gently and points toward us.

Our hair is pulled back in similar styles. The edges of our hair are slicked in precise wave formations across our hairlines. We are both wearing large gold hoop earrings. Around her neck is a gold chain with a small pendant representing home. Around mine, a thin gold chain. Her comment is simple and playful, but it carries an immediate sense of familiarity.

She is not talking about our clothes.

She is talking about seeing something of herself in me.

We continue speaking as the other students enter and find their seats. She tells me that she is the only student of color in that section. Then she explains how much it means to see someone who looks like her standing at the front of a college classroom at Kansas State.

Her words catch me off guard.

I know that representation matters. I have read the literature. I understand the arguments about faculty diversity, institutional belonging, validation, and the importance of seeing people from historically marginalized communities in positions of authority.

Still, I am not prepared for the directness of the moment.

I am her graduate teaching assistant. I am focused on preparing the day's material, remembering students' names, managing the class period, and determining whether I look confident enough to be standing in front of the room. I have spent much of the semester thinking about whether the students see me as someone qualified to teach them.

I have not considered that my presence might answer a question another student is carrying about herself.

For much of my own education, authority rarely looked like me. My professors rarely shared my racial or cultural background. Researchers, administrators, and institutional leaders

were generally presented to me through identities different from my own. I had become so accustomed to this absence that I rarely named it.

I understood higher education as a place I could enter, but not necessarily as a place designed with someone like me in mind. I learned how to participate within the environment available to me without expecting to see my own identities reflected in the people who represented academic knowledge and institutional authority.

Standing in front of that classroom, I realize that I have crossed into a position I once understood as belonging almost exclusively to other people.

The student's comment makes that transition visible.

"We're matching."

The words continue to stay with me after class ends. They remind me that representation is often experienced through details that might appear inconsequential to someone else: hair, jewelry, skin tone, language, names, gestures, or the recognition of something familiar in an unfamiliar environment.

Her observation also changes how I understand my role. Until that conversation, I thought primarily about what I needed to teach. I had not considered that who was teaching could also shape the classroom.

The interaction does not transform the racial composition of the university. It does not remove the student's isolation as the only student of color in the section. It does not guarantee that she will feel represented elsewhere on campus or that my presence alone will produce belonging.

But for a brief moment, neither of us is invisible to the other.

She sees herself reflected in someone standing at the front of a university classroom.

I see, perhaps for the first time, that I have become the person I rarely encountered during my own education.

Reading the Vignette Through the Literature

The student's statement was an act of recognition. She identified a perceived similarity and assigned meaning to it within a setting where she otherwise experienced racial difference. The interaction was significant not because shared appearance established identical identities or experiences, but because it disrupted her expectation of who would occupy instructional authority.

Representation often works through this disruption. When students repeatedly encounter authority through a narrow range of identities, that pattern can appear natural rather than institutionally produced. Seeing a faculty member or instructor from a historically underrepresented background can challenge implicit associations between expertise and dominant identity (Museus, 2014; Turner et al., 2008). The student's response suggested that my presence made an alternative arrangement visible.

The encounter also involved interpersonal validation. I did not intentionally create the moment, but my presence communicated something the student understood as affirming: someone who appeared familiar could occupy the front of the classroom. Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory is useful here because it emphasizes how institutional agents can affirm students as legitimate members of academic communities. In this case, validation did not begin with explicit praise or advice. It emerged through recognition and the possibility represented by who was teaching.

At the same time, the interaction demonstrates why representation and validation should remain conceptually distinct. My presence provided representation, but validation depended on

the meaning constructed through our exchange. Representation made the encounter possible; the student's willingness to name its significance transformed visibility into a relational moment. Had I dismissed her comment or treated it as irrelevant, the same numerical representation might not have produced the same experience.

The vignette further illustrates that recognition can be reciprocal. The student saw something of herself in me, while her comment prompted me to reinterpret my own educational history. Until that moment, I had understood the absence of faculty who looked like me as ordinary. Her observation made that absence newly visible. Autoethnographic reflection allows the encounter to be examined not only for what it may have meant to the student but also for how it changed my understanding of institutional authority and my location within it (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011).

This reciprocity does not make our positions equivalent. I held instructional authority in the classroom, while she was a student being evaluated within it. We also could not assume identical racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or educational experiences based on perceived similarity. Shared appearance may create an opening for connection, but it should not erase differences or produce an expectation of automatic understanding.

The moment also exposes the limits of representational presence. Being the only or one of few instructors of color may create meaningful possibilities for students while leaving the broader institutional environment unchanged. Ahmed (2012) cautions that institutions can use the visible presence of marginalized people as evidence of diversity without altering underlying distributions of authority and labor. Representation can become symbolic when individuals are displayed as institutional accomplishments but lack sufficient support, security, or influence.

Similarly, students should not have to depend on chance encounters to see themselves reflected in academic life. One instructor in one classroom cannot compensate for limited faculty diversity, curricular exclusion, or an inequitable campus climate. Nor should instructors from marginalized backgrounds be presumed responsible for providing all culturally affirming mentoring. Meaningful representation requires attention to recruitment, retention, workload, professional recognition, and participation in decision-making—not visibility alone (Griffin et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

The student's statement nevertheless mattered. It made visible how belonging can be influenced through an encounter that would not appear in enrollment data, retention reports, or institutional diversity statements. The university did not change structurally in that moment, but the boundaries of what the student and I imagined as possible shifted slightly. This is one reason qualitative and autoethnographic accounts contribute to belonging scholarship: they reveal the small interactions through which institutional membership is interpreted.

The vignette also reinforces that belonging is not merely comfort. The student's comment concerned who could stand at the front of the room, claim knowledge, and be recognized as an instructor. Her sense of connection was therefore related to authority and possibility. Critical belonging requires examining not only whether students feel welcomed but whether they can imagine themselves as people entitled to produce knowledge and influence institutional life.

For me, the encounter became a moment of reflexivity. I had entered the classroom concerned with whether I would be perceived as legitimate. The student was also evaluating legitimacy, but from another direction. She was not questioning whether I belonged at the front. She was telling me that seeing me there mattered.

The literature reviewed thus far establishes the empirical terrain of the study: material insecurity is shaped by structural inequality, experienced within racialized institutional environments, and interpreted through relationships that can affirm or undermine belonging. The next major section turns from that empirical foundation to the theories guiding the research. It begins with socially lived theorizing, which provides the primary orientation for understanding how everyday experiences become sources of knowledge about institutions and relations of power.

Theories Guiding the Study

No single theoretical perspective fully accounts for the relationships among basic-needs insecurity, racial marginalization, belonging, leadership, civic engagement, and institutional change. Each body of scholarship directs attention toward a different dimension of the study. Socially lived theorizing establishes why everyday experience is a legitimate starting point for producing knowledge about institutions. Critical Race Theory explains how racial power becomes embedded within institutional structures, dominant narratives, and apparently neutral practices. Relational Leadership Theory conceptualizes leadership as a social process rather than an individual possession. Civic engagement scholarship identifies the resources, relationships, invitations, identities, and opportunities that shape collective participation. Systems Theory situates those processes within interconnected organizations whose structures can reproduce or disrupt inequity.

These perspectives are complementary, but they are not interchangeable. Each carries distinct assumptions, concepts, and analytical limitations. The purpose of this section is therefore not to merge them into the conceptual framework later developed from this study's findings.

Instead, it establishes how each informed the questions asked, the evidence treated as meaningful, and the interpretations pursued during the research.

Socially Lived Theorizing

Socially lived theorizing serves as the study's primary epistemological and theoretical orientation. Kang et al. (2017) describe it as the creation of feminist theory and knowledge from the everyday experiences of people historically excluded from academic knowledge production. It begins from the premise that personal experiences do not occur outside politics, economics, culture, or history. Everyday life is one location where the effects of these larger forces are encountered, negotiated, and sometimes challenged.

The feminist assertion that “the personal is political” captures this relationship. Popularized through feminist organizing during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the phrase challenged interpretations of domestic labor, reproductive control, violence, sexuality, and economic dependence as private matters disconnected from public power (Hanisch, 1970). Feminists demonstrated that circumstances experienced individually could be patterned across groups because they were produced through shared institutional and political arrangements. The purpose was not to suggest that every personal experience is automatically political in the same way. It was to reveal that conditions commonly treated as private may have structural origins.

Applied to higher education, this orientation makes it possible to examine hunger, housing instability, racial exclusion, or uncertainty about belonging as more than individual circumstances. A missed meal may initially appear to be a private financial problem. Socially lived theorizing asks how that experience is connected to financial aid, wages, housing costs, family wealth, public-benefit policy, transportation, and institutional assumptions about students.

The individual experience becomes an entry point for investigating relationships that extend beyond the individual.

Knowledge From Everyday Life

Socially lived theorizing is grounded in a broader feminist challenge to conventional knowledge production. Traditional academic inquiry has often treated the researcher as a detached observer capable of producing knowledge independent of social location. Feminist epistemologists reject that view, arguing that all knowledge is produced from particular historical, embodied, and institutional positions (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987).

Haraway (1988) describes knowledge as situated, partial, and embodied. Her critique of the “view from nowhere” challenges claims that researchers can see without being socially located. Acknowledging location does not require abandoning rigor or concluding that all interpretations are equally adequate. It requires researchers to identify the conditions shaping what they can observe and to remain accountable for the limits of their perspective.

Smith (1987) similarly begins inquiry from the standpoint of people’s everyday lives. Her sociology examines how local experiences are organized by relations that extend beyond immediate settings, including administrative systems, professional practices, policies, and texts. The everyday world is not analytically important because it is small or private. It is important because institutional relations become active within it. A financial aid policy, for example, becomes socially consequential through the timing of a student’s rent, food purchases, work hours, and decisions about enrollment.

This movement from everyday experience to social relations is central to the present study. Participants’ accounts are not treated merely as subjective reactions to an institution whose objective reality exists elsewhere. Their experiences provide access to how institutional

arrangements are encountered and interpreted from particular locations. At the same time, no individual account is assumed to provide a complete view of the institution. Each reveals certain relationships while leaving others outside the person's experience.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Feminist standpoint theory offers a deeper explanation of why inquiry should begin from marginalized lives. Hartsock (1983), Harding (1991, 2004), Smith (1987), and Collins (2000) argue that social location shapes what people are positioned to know. People occupying marginalized locations often must understand both their own worlds and the expectations of dominant institutions to navigate everyday life. Those in dominant positions are less frequently required to understand how institutions appear from below.

This asymmetry can create an epistemic advantage, but that advantage must be described carefully. Marginalization does not make a person automatically objective, politically conscious, or correct about every institutional process. A standpoint is not identical to identity or individual opinion. Harding (2004) describes standpoints as achieved through critical engagement with social location and relations of power. Experience provides material for knowledge, but interpretation is necessary.

Collins's (2000) Black feminist thought further demonstrates that knowledge develops through collective histories, dialogue, and community practices rather than through isolated individual experience. Black women's standpoint is shaped through encounters with interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and class inequality, but it is also developed through traditions of resistance, care, cultural expression, and intellectual exchange. This perspective resists treating marginalized people only as recipients of oppression; they are also theorists of the conditions they navigate.

The distinction between experience and standpoint protects the study from two errors. The first would be to dismiss experience as merely anecdotal and therefore irrelevant to institutional knowledge. The second would be to treat experience as self-explanatory and beyond interpretation. Socially lived theorizing avoids both by treating everyday experience as a necessary starting point that must be examined through history, theory, comparison, and reflexivity.

Lived Experience and Socially Lived Knowledge

Within this dissertation, lived experience and socially lived knowledge are related but distinct concepts. Lived experience refers to what individuals encounter and perceive through participation in social life. It includes material conditions, relationships, emotions, bodily experiences, institutional encounters, and the meanings available to individuals at a particular moment.

Socially lived knowledge develops when those experiences are interpreted in relation to broader social and institutional conditions. This knowledge is not simply information accumulated through having endured hardship. It involves recognizing patterns, questioning individualized explanations, and connecting local events to relations of power that may initially remain obscured.

A student can experience food insecurity without possessing the language or evidence needed to identify its structural dimensions. The student may interpret hunger as a personal budgeting failure because that explanation is culturally available and institutionally reinforced. Later exposure to research, relationships, or collective dialogue may produce a different interpretation. The material experience remains part of the student's history, but its meaning changes as it becomes connected to broader conditions.

Scott (1991) cautions scholars against presenting experience as transparent evidence that explains itself. Experiences are interpreted through language, culture, identity, and historically available categories. The task is not only to document that an experience occurred but to examine how it became intelligible, how it was named, and what social relations made it possible. This caution is especially important in a study concerned with retrospective meaning-making.

The distinction also prevents the study from implying that hardship necessarily produces leadership or advocacy. People can experience the same structural condition while understanding it differently. Some may recognize a systemic pattern, while others retain an individual explanation. Some may understand the structure but lack the time, resources, safety, or desire to act. Socially lived knowledge creates analytical possibilities; it does not determine a single response.

Connecting Levels of Analysis

Kang et al. (2017) explain socially lived theorizing through movement among micro, meso, macro, and global levels of analysis. These levels are not separate realities. They are analytical positions that reveal different relationships within the same phenomenon.

The micro level concerns individual experience and interpersonal interaction. In this study, it includes a student skipping a meal, sleeping in a vehicle, deciding whether to disclose need, or interpreting a classroom interaction.

The meso level concerns groups, organizations, and communities. It includes student organizations, academic departments, residence halls, mentoring relationships, campus pantries, and administrative units through which institutional life is organized.

The macro level concerns social institutions, public policy, dominant ideologies, and national structures. Financial aid policy, racialized wealth inequality, housing markets, labor systems, and cultural narratives of individual responsibility operate at this level.

The global level includes transnational economic processes, migration, global food systems, political conflict, and international relations that shape local institutions and personal lives. Although this study is bounded within one U.S. university, participants' experiences may still be influenced by immigration, global labor, food production, or transnational family relationships.

Moving across these levels helps prevent reductionism. A micro-level explanation may illuminate how a student experiences shame but not why food insecurity is unequally distributed. A macro-level account may explain racialized wealth inequality while failing to capture how that inequality is navigated in a pantry, classroom, or mentoring relationship. Socially lived theorizing requires attention to both.

This multilevel approach shares affinities with C. Wright Mills's (1959) sociological imagination, which connects personal troubles with public issues. Mills argues that individuals can understand their experiences more fully when biography is situated within history and social structure. Socially lived theorizing adds an explicitly feminist and intersectional commitment to beginning from lives historically marginalized within dominant knowledge production.

Intersectionality and Difference

Social location is multidimensional. People simultaneously occupy positions shaped by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, citizenship, age, family status, and other relations. Intersectionality explains that these are not separate identities whose effects can simply

be added together. They are constituted through interacting systems of power (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

This distinction matters for socially lived inquiry. There is no singular experience of food insecurity, racial marginalization, womanhood, poverty, or college attendance. A Black woman, an undocumented Latino student, a White first-generation student, an Indigenous student, and an international student may encounter similar institutional policies through substantially different social relations. The purpose of beginning from experience is not to flatten those differences into a shared narrative of marginalization.

Intersectional analysis also guards against assuming that one identity is always the most salient. The significance of race, class, gender, or another social location may shift across settings. A student may experience class visibility in a dining hall, racial hypervisibility in a classroom, and cultural familiarity within a student organization. Socially lived knowledge develops through examining how these positions interact within specific contexts.

Agency Within Constraint

Socially lived theorizing recognizes both structure and agency. Structural conditions shape the opportunities and constraints people encounter, but they do not eliminate the capacity to interpret, resist, organize, or act. Conversely, acknowledging agency does not mean that individuals can overcome every barrier through effort.

This balance is important for studying leadership and institutional change. An approach focused only on structure could portray people as passive products of institutions. An approach focused only on agency could attribute change to exceptional individuals while ignoring the resources, risks, and historical conditions affecting what they could accomplish. Socially lived

theorizing examines how people act from within the conditions they seek to understand or change.

Agency can take forms that institutions do not recognize as leadership. It may involve sharing food, warning peers about a harmful policy, creating informal support networks, translating institutional information, refusing an exclusionary practice, or preserving community knowledge. Feminist and critical traditions have long challenged definitions of political action that privilege formal organizations or publicly visible leadership while overlooking care, survival, and resistance within everyday life (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984).

At the same time, survival should not be romanticized as resistance. A student rationing food may be exercising agency within scarcity, but the act does not make scarcity empowering. Socially lived theorizing can recognize resourcefulness without presenting deprivation as developmentally desirable.

Reflexivity and the Researcher's Location

Because knowledge is situated, socially lived theorizing requires reflexivity. Reflexivity involves examining how the researcher's identities, experiences, institutional relationships, and theoretical commitments influence the questions asked and interpretations developed (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). It is not a declaration that removes bias once positionality has been acknowledged. It is a continuing analytical practice.

My experiences with poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, racial identity, leadership, and Kansas State shaped my interest in this study. They influenced what I noticed in the literature and what I recognized in participants' accounts. Those experiences provided forms of proximity, but they did not give me automatic access to participants' meanings. Similarity could support understanding while also creating a risk that I would presume too much.

Reflexivity therefore required attention to both resonance and difference. When a participant's account reminded me of my own experience, the resemblance became a reason to inquire further rather than assume equivalence. My autoethnographic vignettes make one part of this interpretive location visible, while the methodological procedures described in Chapter 3 explain how reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis.

Socially lived theorizing and autoethnography are related but not synonymous. Socially lived theorizing is the epistemological orientation establishing why everyday experience can produce knowledge about social structures. Autoethnography is a methodological and representational practice through which my experience is examined as cultural and institutional data (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008). Keeping that distinction clear strengthens the methodological coherence of the study.

Contribution and Analytical Limits

Socially lived theorizing contributes three essential commitments to this dissertation. First, it establishes lived experience as a legitimate starting point for institutional inquiry. Second, it requires movement between personal experience and broader relations of power. Third, it treats knowledge production as situated, reflexive, and accountable to people whose experiences have frequently been excluded from academic authority.

Its limits are equally important. Socially lived theorizing does not, by itself, provide a detailed account of how racial power operates within higher education. It does not fully explain how leadership is constructed through relationships, why people enter civic action, or how organizational systems sustain and resist change. Those questions require additional theoretical perspectives.

Critical Race Theory provides the next layer of analysis. It sharpens attention to the historical and institutional production of racial inequality, the apparent neutrality of policies, and the importance of experiential knowledge in challenging dominant accounts of educational opportunity.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory provides the primary framework through which this study examines race, racism, and institutional power. Emerging from legal scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, Critical Race Theory developed in response to the limits of conventional civil-rights approaches and Critical Legal Studies. Early critical race scholars argued that legal equality and formal nondiscrimination had not eliminated the structures through which racial inequality was produced and maintained (Bell, 1980, 1992; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1989; Matsuda, 1987).

Critical Race Theory is not a single, unified doctrine. It encompasses a body of scholarship whose concepts have developed across legal studies, education, sociology, and other fields. Scholars differ in emphasis, but they share a commitment to examining how race and racism operate through institutions, policies, discourse, and everyday life rather than only through explicit individual prejudice (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018).

The application of Critical Race Theory to education is particularly relevant to this dissertation because colleges and universities frequently present themselves as race-neutral institutions committed to merit, access, and opportunity. Critical Race Theory asks how those claims coexist with persistent racial disparities in resources, representation, educational outcomes, campus climate, and institutional authority (Harper, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016).

Racism as Enduring and Institutional

One of Critical Race Theory's foundational propositions is that racism is ordinary and embedded within the organization of American society. Racism is not limited to exceptional acts committed by openly prejudiced individuals. It operates through laws, policies, institutional routines, cultural assumptions, and distributions of resources that can reproduce racial inequality without requiring explicit racial language (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

This understanding shifts analysis from individual intent toward institutional consequences. A policy may be designed without an explicitly discriminatory purpose and still produce unequal effects because it operates within a society already structured by racialized differences in wealth, housing, education, employment, and political power. Critical Race Theory therefore asks not only whether a decision-maker intended to discriminate, but also whose interests a policy serves, whose experiences informed its design, and which inequalities it leaves intact.

Within higher education, institutional racism can operate through admissions, financial aid, curriculum, faculty hiring, campus policing, disciplinary practices, residential arrangements, and definitions of academic merit. These processes may appear unrelated when examined separately, yet together they shape who enters institutions, what resources students possess, whose knowledge is recognized, and who advances into positions of authority (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016).

Treating racism as institutional does not imply that all racial outcomes are produced intentionally or that every institutional actor holds identical beliefs. It means that racial inequality can be sustained through ordinary participation in systems whose histories and

standards have been structured unequally. This distinction is essential for analyzing a predominantly White institution without reducing the inquiry to whether particular individuals identify themselves as racist.

Critique of Colorblindness and Neutrality

Critical Race Theory challenges colorblind approaches that treat the refusal to acknowledge race as evidence of fairness. Colorblindness can appear egalitarian because it emphasizes equal treatment, but it may obscure how formally identical treatment operates across unequal starting conditions (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Crenshaw, 1988; Gotanda, 1991). A policy that ignores race does not necessarily escape the influence of racial history.

This critique is closely connected to Critical Race Theory's skepticism toward abstract liberalism. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) use this term to describe commitments to formal equality, incremental change, and neutral procedures that may inadequately address structural inequity. Equal opportunity is limited when people reach the same institutional process with substantially different access to wealth, schooling, housing, health, and political protection.

Merit provides a relevant example. Academic institutions often treat grades, test scores, leadership experience, unpaid involvement, and professional networks as neutral indicators of achievement. Critical scholarship asks how access to those credentials is shaped by prior opportunity and who participated in defining them as legitimate measures (Guinier, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Questioning merit does not mean rejecting achievement or academic standards. It means examining how standards are constructed, which forms of knowledge they reward, and whether they reproduce existing advantage.

Colorblindness is particularly consequential in basic-needs research. Reporting racial disparities without naming racism can turn race into an unexplained student characteristic.

Critical Race Theory instead directs attention toward racialized wealth, debt, housing, employment, financial aid, and institutional climate. It asks how apparently neutral systems contribute to unequal exposure to food and housing insecurity.

Interest Convergence

Bell's (1980) theory of *interest convergence* proposes that advances toward racial justice are most likely to occur when they converge with the interests of dominant groups. Bell developed this argument through analysis of school desegregation, contending that racial reform was supported partly because it advanced national political and economic interests rather than because White institutions had fully committed to Black equality.

Interest convergence does not suggest that reforms lack value or that people supporting them are always motivated by self-interest. It provides a framework for examining why certain changes become institutionally acceptable while others remain marginalized. Equity initiatives may receive support when they improve retention, enhance institutional reputation, attract funding, respond to public pressure, or reduce legal risk. Support may weaken when reforms require substantial redistribution of resources or authority.

Within higher education, basic-needs initiatives can converge with institutional interests in persistence, completion, enrollment management, and public reputation. Those alignments can create meaningful opportunities for students. Critical analysis nevertheless asks whether the institution's commitment remains when student needs conflict with financial, political, or reputational priorities. It also asks whether students are valued primarily because retaining them supports institutional outcomes or because access to adequate food, housing, and dignity constitutes an institutional responsibility.

Interest convergence is therefore useful for analyzing both change and its limits. An institution may adopt a pantry while avoiding questions about wages, tuition, housing, or financial aid. It may celebrate diversity while resisting changes to governance or resource allocation. Symbolic and incremental reforms can improve students' experiences while leaving more fundamental arrangements unchallenged.

Experiential Knowledge and Counter-storytelling

Critical Race Theory recognizes experiential knowledge as essential to understanding racial inequality. Matsuda (1987) describes “looking to the bottom” as beginning analysis from the experiences of people who encounter the consequences of law and policy most directly. Their accounts can reveal institutional processes that remain invisible from positions of greater power.

In education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as a method of examining and challenging dominant narratives about race, merit, opportunity, and educational success. Majoritarian stories frequently portray institutions as neutral, disparities as products of individual effort, and exceptional success as evidence that barriers no longer exist. Counter-stories reveal what those narratives omit.

Counter-storytelling is not the simple inclusion of personal stories without analysis. Counter-stories are theoretically informed accounts that situate experience within historical and institutional relations (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). They can draw from interviews, composite narratives, biography, history, and other forms of evidence. Their purpose is both epistemological and political: they expand what counts as knowledge while challenging explanations that normalize inequality.

This principle aligns closely with socially lived theorizing but contributes a more explicit analysis of race and racism. Socially lived theorizing establishes why everyday experience can

generate institutional knowledge. Critical Race Theory examines how racial power determines which experiences are dismissed, which narratives become dominant, and whose accounts receive authority.

Counter-stories are particularly important in studying basic-needs insecurity. Institutional data may indicate how many students use a pantry, but they may not reveal why students avoid it, how racialized assumptions affect help-seeking, or why students believe their experiences will not be understood. Participant narratives can expose those relationships while also demonstrating that students are interpreters of institutional conditions, not merely recipients of services.

The use of experiential knowledge nevertheless requires care. No participant can represent an entire racial group, and shared identity does not guarantee shared interpretation. Researchers select, organize, and contextualize the stories presented, retaining substantial power over representation (Denzin, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology therefore requires reflexivity about whose stories are included, how they are framed, and what claims the researcher develops from them.

Intersectionality and Intra-racial Difference

Critical Race Theory rejects the treatment of racial groups as internally uniform. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality demonstrates that systems of racism, sexism, class inequality, and other forms of power interact to produce experiences that cannot be understood through a single analytical category. Her work emerged from the legal erasure of Black women whose discrimination claims did not fit frameworks treating race and gender separately.

Intersectionality is not simply a statement that people have multiple identities. It is an analysis of how institutional systems construct and respond to those identities in relation to one

another (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). Within higher education, an intersectional approach asks how race interacts with gender, sexuality, disability, immigration, parenthood, class, and institutional status to shape material security and educational participation.

Critical race scholarship has also generated related traditions that address experiences inadequately captured within a Black–White racial framework. LatCrit examines the intersections of race with language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and colonial relations affecting Latino communities (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Valdes, 1996). TribalCrit centers colonization and Indigenous sovereignty, recognizing that Indigenous peoples’ relationships with educational institutions cannot be understood through race alone (Brayboy, 2005). AsianCrit examines racialization, migration, citizenship, and the model-minority myth affecting Asian American communities (Museus & Iftikar, 2014).

BlackCrit scholars further argue that antiblackness requires analysis beyond generalized accounts of racism or students of color. Dumas and Ross (2016) contend that Black suffering and resistance can be obscured when Black experiences are folded into broad diversity categories. These developments demonstrate that Critical Race Theory remains an evolving field whose concepts must be applied with attention to specific histories and structures.

For the present study, this means avoiding a single narrative of racial marginalization. Participants’ racial identities intersect with different family histories, economic positions, institutional roles, and generational contexts. Critical Race Theory provides a framework for analyzing racial power without presuming that all participants of color encounter the institution identically.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth challenges deficit interpretations of marginalized students and communities. Drawing from Critical Race Theory, Yosso identifies aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital as forms of knowledge and capacity cultivated within communities of color.

This framework critiques applications of cultural capital that compare marginalized students with dominant institutional norms and conclude that they arrive with insufficient resources. Students may possess extensive knowledge of navigating hostile environments, maintaining family and community relationships, communicating across languages, sustaining hope under constraint, and resisting inequity. Institutions may fail to recognize these resources because they do not resemble the forms of capital traditionally rewarded in higher education.

Community cultural wealth is relevant to basic-needs research because students experiencing material hardship are often described primarily through what they lack. A deficit account may document insufficient money, food, or housing without recognizing the relationships and knowledge students use to survive. A strengths-based analysis can identify those capacities while maintaining attention to the material and structural inequalities that make them necessary.

As with resilience, cultural wealth should not be used to romanticize hardship. Navigational or resistant capital does not eliminate the institutional obligation to address food insecurity, housing instability, or racism. Students' strengths are not substitutes for equitable resources.

Racial Realism and the Limits of Reform

Bell's (1992) racial realism challenges assumptions that racial progress is inevitable or permanent. From this perspective, racism is deeply embedded within American institutions, and reforms remain vulnerable to retreat, reinterpretation, or symbolic implementation. The concept does not require abandoning efforts toward change. It encourages a clear assessment of the persistence of racial power and the limitations of reforms that leave foundational arrangements intact.

Within higher education, racial realism cautions against treating increased enrollment, diversity statements, multicultural spaces, or equity initiatives as evidence that institutional racism has been resolved. These developments can be meaningful while remaining incomplete and politically vulnerable. Critical analysis asks whether reforms change students' daily experiences, redistribute resources and authority, and remain supported after public attention declines.

This perspective is especially important for intergenerational inquiry. Changes one generation experiences as hard-won achievements may appear ordinary to students who encounter them later. Conversely, rights and resources assumed to be permanent may weaken under new leadership or political conditions. Institutional history must therefore be examined as contested rather than as a steady movement toward greater equity.

Critical Race Theory in the Present Study

Critical Race Theory informs this study in four primary ways. First, it directs attention away from racial identity as an individual predictor and toward the institutional and historical production of racialized outcomes. Second, it supports the treatment of participants' experiential knowledge as analytically consequential. Third, it provides concepts for examining apparently

neutral policies, dominant narratives, and uneven institutional responses. Fourth, it requires attention to the intersections of race with class, gender, immigration, and other relations of power.

The framework also shapes the questions brought to leadership and institutional change. It asks who is expected to identify inequity, whose interpretations are believed, which reforms receive support, and who carries the labor of making institutions more equitable. These are questions about power, not only participation.

Critical Race Theory nevertheless does not fully explain how leadership emerges through relationships or how individuals coordinate collective action. Nor does it offer a complete organizational account of how change moves across interconnected institutional units. Relational Leadership Theory adds the next analytical dimension by shifting attention from leadership as an individual attribute toward leadership as a process constructed among people.

Relational Leadership Theory

Relational Leadership Theory shifts the unit of analysis from individual leaders to the social processes through which leadership is constructed. Rather than asking primarily which traits, behaviors, or competencies make a person effective, relational scholars examine how people create meaning, negotiate authority, develop identities, and coordinate action through interaction (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 1988; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leadership, from this perspective, is not located entirely within one person. It emerges through relationships among people operating within particular social and organizational contexts.

This distinction is especially important for a study examining institutional change across students, faculty members, staff members, administrators, and alumni. Many people who influence institutional life do not occupy formal leadership positions. Conversely, holding a title

does not guarantee that leadership will occur. A relational perspective makes it possible to examine how leadership develops through conversation, trust, conflict, invitation, shared interpretation, and collective action without assuming that authority flows only from the top of an organizational hierarchy.

From Leaders to Leadership Processes

Much traditional leadership scholarship has focused on leaders as identifiable individuals. Trait approaches examined personal characteristics associated with leadership, while behavioral, contingency, charismatic, and transformational theories investigated what leaders do and how their actions affect followers or organizational outcomes (Bass, 1985; Stogdill, 1948; Yukl, 2013). These traditions generated substantial knowledge about influence and effectiveness, but they frequently retained a distinction between leaders and followers and treated leadership as something exercised by one group upon another.

Relational approaches challenge that separation. Uhl-Bien (2006) distinguishes between entity perspectives, which study relationships among identifiable individuals, and relational perspectives, which understand leadership itself as socially constructed. An entity approach might examine how trust between a leader and follower affects performance. A relational approach asks how interaction produces the categories of leader and follower, whose claims to leadership are recognized, and how particular understandings of authority become accepted.

The second approach is especially consequential for this study. Students may influence institutional policy without being formally designated as leaders. Staff members may coordinate change across units without possessing senior authority. A person may be recognized as a leader in one community and not in another. Leadership identities and authority are produced through social recognition rather than derived exclusively from organizational position.

DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe leadership identity as constructed through reciprocal processes of claiming and granting. A person may claim a leadership identity through action or communication, but the claim becomes socially meaningful when others grant or recognize it. Similarly, people may invite someone into leadership before that individual views themselves as a leader. This process helps explain why leadership cannot be understood solely through private self-concept.

Relational Leadership Theory also focuses on organizing rather than only influence. Leadership can emerge when people construct a shared understanding of a problem, align their efforts, and develop commitment to collective action (Drath et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The outcome is not necessarily consensus. People may disagree about strategy, responsibility, or the meaning of the problem while still participating in a leadership process that changes how the group acts.

Meaning-Making Through Relationships

Relationships are consequential not only because they provide emotional support but also because they shape interpretation. People develop understandings of institutions through conversation with peers, mentors, colleagues, and communities. A student may recognize a personal struggle as part of a broader pattern only after hearing that others have encountered similar conditions. A staff member may reinterpret a recurring student concern after colleagues identify connections across organizational units.

Relational leadership scholars describe this meaning-making as a process through which social realities are constructed rather than merely discovered (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). People enter interactions with different experiences and

institutional positions. Leadership involves negotiating among those interpretations sufficiently to create direction and coordinated action.

Dialogue is central to this process, but dialogue should not be romanticized as unrestricted or inherently equitable. Organizational position, race, gender, professional status, and access to information shape who can speak, whose interpretation appears credible, and which concerns reach decision-making spaces. A relational account must therefore examine not merely whether interaction occurs but also the power relations organizing that interaction (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

This critical attention to power differentiates relational leadership from a general claim that relationships matter. Nearly every leadership theory recognizes some form of relationship. Relational Leadership Theory makes relationships constitutive of leadership while asking how those relationships produce identities, authority, meaning, and coordinated action.

Relational Leadership in Higher Education

Relational approaches have influenced scholarship on college-student leadership development. Komives et al. (2005, 2006) found that students' understandings of leadership could develop from leader-centered views toward more collaborative and interdependent conceptions. Relationships with peers and adults, group involvement, reflection, and opportunities to practice leadership were important throughout that process.

The Relational Leadership Model likewise describes leadership as a purposeful, inclusive, empowering, ethical, and process-oriented practice (Komives et al., 2013). Purpose provides shared direction; inclusion attends to difference and participation; empowerment concerns both individual agency and collective capacity; ethics addresses values and

responsibility; and process emphasizes how people work together rather than only what they achieve.

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development similarly frames leadership as collaborative, values based, and directed toward positive social change rather than formal position (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). Its attention to individual, group, and societal values has been influential within student affairs and leadership education. Although the model is distinct from Relational Leadership Theory, both challenge heroic and hierarchical definitions of leadership.

Shared and distributed leadership are also related but should not be conflated with relational leadership. Shared leadership concerns the distribution of influence across members of a group, while distributed leadership examines how leadership activity is stretched across people, tools, and situations (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2006). Relational Leadership Theory focuses more fundamentally on the social processes through which leadership and organizing are constituted. A group may distribute tasks without transforming its underlying relationships or assumptions about authority.

Within higher education, these distinctions matter because universities are characterized by decentralized authority, professional autonomy, shared governance, and organizational boundaries. Institutional change frequently requires coordination across students, academic departments, student affairs, senior administration, and community organizations. No single actor necessarily possesses the knowledge or authority required to address a complex concern (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Students occupy a particularly important relational position. They often experience institutional practices directly but possess limited formal power to alter policy or allocate

resources. Their influence may depend on relationships with faculty members, staff members, administrators, alumni, and community partners who can provide access to information or decision-making spaces. A relational perspective makes these connections visible without treating students as dependent on institutional authorities for all forms of agency.

Mentoring, Invitation, and Recognition

Mentoring relationships can function as important sites of leadership development. Mentors may provide information, institutional access, emotional support, challenge, sponsorship, and opportunities for reflection (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Kram, 1985; Nora & Crisp, 2007). In higher education, mentoring can be especially consequential for students who possess limited familiarity with institutional processes or see few people with similar identities in positions of authority.

Mentoring should not be reduced to the transfer of advice from an experienced person to a novice. Developmental relationships can alter how both participants understand an issue and themselves. Relational mentoring scholarship emphasizes mutuality, growth, authenticity, and connection rather than one-directional instruction (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins, 2016).

Invitation is one mechanism through which such relationships open pathways to leadership. A mentor may ask a student to join a project, introduce them to an institutional partner, or communicate that an idea deserves serious attention. These actions do not create leadership capacity from nothing. They recognize and provide a setting for capacities that might otherwise remain institutionally invisible.

Recognition can be particularly meaningful for people who do not identify with dominant images of leadership. If leadership is associated with charisma, confidence, public speaking, or formal office, students engaged in care, organizing, research, or community support may not

recognize their work as leadership. Relational recognition can expand the range of actions through which leadership becomes intelligible.

Power, Conflict, and the Limits of Relationality

Relational language can create the impression that collaboration and trust are sufficient to overcome institutional inequality. Critical relational scholars caution that relationships occur within unequal systems and can reproduce domination as easily as they enable collective action (Fletcher, 2004; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). A student and senior administrator may have a respectful relationship while possessing vastly different authority, security, and control over resources.

Consensus can also conceal conflict. A shared purpose may be defined primarily by the most powerful members of a group, while disagreement is interpreted as a failure to collaborate. Inclusive leadership therefore requires more than inviting people into an existing process. It requires attention to who sets the agenda, what forms of knowledge are accepted, and whether participants can challenge institutional assumptions without losing access or standing.

Fletcher (2004) identifies a postheroic leadership paradox in which organizations publicly value relational practices such as collaboration and shared responsibility while continuing to reward individual achievement and heroic leadership. The people performing relational work may remain invisible precisely because the work appears informal, communal, or natural. Women and members of marginalized groups can be especially likely to provide this labor without receiving equivalent authority or recognition.

Relationships can also create obligations that become burdensome. A student who is trusted by peers may become responsible for repeatedly translating their needs to administrators. A faculty member from an underrepresented group may become the person students seek for

culturally responsive mentoring. Relational Leadership Theory explains why these connections matter, but Critical Race Theory and scholarship on cultural taxation are needed to examine how relational labor becomes distributed unequally.

Relational Leadership Theory in the Present Study

Relational Leadership Theory directs this study toward leadership as an interactional process. It supports attention to mentoring, invitation, recognition, dialogue, coalition building, trust, and shared meaning. It also permits leadership to be examined across formal and informal roles rather than limiting analysis to people holding designated positions.

The theory does not presume that all relationships are supportive or that collaboration eliminates power. Relationships can open opportunities, restrict participation, reproduce hierarchy, or create unequal obligations. Critical Race Theory remains necessary for examining how racial power shapes those processes, while civic engagement scholarship provides a more specific account of how people are recruited into and sustain participation.

The following vignette illustrates how an idea about student food insecurity acquired institutional possibility through a mentoring relationship. It does not present the mentor as the source of my concern or position one conversation as the origin of my leadership. I entered the relationship with knowledge developed through my own experiences. What the relationship provided was recognition, challenge, and an invitation to move from concern toward inquiry and action.

A Relational Moment in Advocacy

An Idea, a Question, and an Invitation

Long before I possessed the language of leadership theory, I knew that students were experiencing hunger. I knew because food insecurity was not an abstract issue to me. I had lived

it as a child and again as an undergraduate. By the time I began thinking seriously about bringing Swipe Against Hunger to Chico State, I did not need to be convinced that the problem mattered.

What I lacked was an understanding of how an experience carried privately could become an issue the institution would recognize.

I walked into Marianne's office with an idea. I believed students should be able to donate unused meal swipes so that other students could access meals. The idea felt both simple and urgent to me. Food already existed within the dining system. Students had meals they would not use. Other students needed food.

From my perspective, the connection was obvious.

Marianne did not dismiss the idea. She also did not tell me that caring deeply would be enough.

She asked questions.

What evidence did I have that students at Chico State were experiencing food insecurity?

How did the dining system work?

Who would need to be involved?

What assumptions was I making?

What would it take for the institution to understand the issue as more than one student's concern?

Her questions changed the character of the idea. Until then, I had been carrying what I knew through experience. Marianne asked me to investigate how that knowledge could be documented, communicated, and connected to institutional processes.

She did not take the work from me. She treated me as someone capable of doing it.

That distinction mattered.

I left her office with more questions than answers, but I also left believing that the idea deserved to be pursued. Her response communicated that student hunger was not too small, too private, or too uncomfortable to bring into institutional conversation.

Looking back, I understand the encounter as an invitation. Marianne invited me to take my own knowledge seriously while also asking me to make it accountable to evidence, context, and the people the initiative was intended to serve.

The concern was already mine.

The relationship helped me see that the work did not have to remain mine alone.

Reading the Vignette Through Relational Leadership

The encounter illustrates how leadership can develop through recognition rather than assignment. Marianne did not appoint me to a formal role or give me a leadership title. She recognized the idea as worthy of inquiry and treated me as capable of advancing it. Her questions functioned as a form of validation while also creating accountability.

This interaction reflects DeRue and Ashford's (2010) argument that leadership identities are socially constructed through claiming and granting. I entered the conversation by making an implicit claim: student hunger was an institutional issue, and I wanted to do something about it. Marianne granted legitimacy to the concern without simply endorsing every assumption attached to my proposed solution.

The relationship also connected experiential and institutional knowledge. My familiarity with food insecurity allowed me to recognize the problem's human significance. Marianne's questions directed attention toward evidence, stakeholders, and organizational processes. Neither form of knowledge was sufficient by itself. The interaction created a space in which they could be brought into conversation.

Relational leadership did not eliminate differences in authority. Marianne possessed institutional knowledge and professional standing I did not yet have. That difference could have closed the conversation if she had treated my idea as naïve or outside my role. Instead, she used her position to expand my capacity to participate. Empowerment in the Relational Leadership Model involves precisely this combination of individual agency and supportive conditions that enable collective work (Komives et al., 2013).

The vignette should not be read as a story in which one mentor discovered or created my leadership. Such an interpretation would minimize the experiences and commitments I carried into the office. It would also reproduce a heroic account with the mentor as the pivotal individual. The analytical significance lies in the relationship: experience, institutional knowledge, recognition, and challenge became connected through interaction.

The encounter further demonstrates why relational leadership is not synonymous with encouragement. Marianne did not simply tell me that the idea was good. She asked me to gather evidence and understand the system. Relational support included challenge, responsibility, and an expectation that concern be translated into a more informed form of action.

What began in that office ultimately required relationships extending far beyond one mentor and one student. A meal-swipe initiative necessarily involved dining services, students, administrators, policies, and organizational resources. Relational Leadership Theory helps explain how participation could expand across those connections. Civic engagement scholarship, considered next, provides a more specific framework for examining why people participate, how they are recruited, and what resources allow engagement to continue.

Civic Engagement Scholarship

Civic engagement scholarship examines how people participate in collective efforts to address public concerns and contribute to community life. The term encompasses a wide range of activities, including voting, political organizing, volunteering, mutual aid, community-based research, advocacy, public deliberation, protest, and participation in civic organizations (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Ehrlich, 2000; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). These activities differ in purpose, risk, visibility, and relationship to institutional power, making civic engagement a broad field rather than a single form of behavior.

Within this study, civic engagement is especially relevant to understanding how concern about inequity becomes participation. Relational Leadership Theory explains how leadership is produced through interaction, while civic engagement scholarship offers a more focused account of who participates, how people are recruited, and which resources enable or constrain sustained involvement. This literature also helps distinguish awareness of a problem from the capacity to act upon it.

Defining Civic Engagement

Ehrlich (2000) defines civic engagement as working to make a difference in the civic life of communities while developing the knowledge, skills, values, and motivation necessary for that work. This definition includes both political and nonpolitical action. It recognizes that people contribute to public life through formal institutions as well as through community relationships and everyday problem solving.

The breadth of the term can create conceptual ambiguity. Voting, volunteering at a food pantry, organizing a protest, conducting community-engaged research, and serving on a university committee can all be categorized as civic engagement, yet they relate to power and

structural change differently. Adler and Goggin (2005) argue that civic engagement should be understood as a multidimensional concept involving community service, collective action, political involvement, and social change.

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) distinction among personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens clarifies these differences. A personally responsible citizen may donate food or follow rules. A participatory citizen may organize the food drive or coordinate volunteers. A justice-oriented citizen asks why hunger exists and which systems reproduce it. These orientations can overlap, but they reflect different understandings of civic responsibility.

The distinction is directly relevant to basic-needs work. Providing food to students can meet an immediate need. Organizing a campus pantry can create collective capacity. Investigating financial aid, wages, housing, and public policy can challenge the conditions producing food insecurity. None of these actions should be dismissed, but they should not be treated as analytically identical.

Critical service-learning scholarship makes a similar distinction. Traditional service learning may emphasize helping communities and developing students' skills, while critical service learning explicitly examines power, inequality, and the structural production of community problems (Mitchell, 2008). Without that analysis, service can reinforce assumptions that communities need assistance because of internal deficits rather than because resources and opportunities are distributed unequally.

Resources and the Civic Voluntarism Model

One of the most influential explanations of civic participation is the Civic Voluntarism Model developed by Verba et al. (1995). The model organizes nonparticipation around three broad explanations: people may lack the resources to participate, lack the psychological

engagement or motivation to participate, or remain outside the networks through which they would be asked to participate.

Resources include time, money, and civic skills. Participation requires time to attend meetings, communicate with others, travel, gather information, or complete organizational work. Financial resources can support transportation, childcare, technology, donations, and the ability to reduce paid employment. Civic skills include communication, planning, meeting participation, public speaking, and organizational knowledge that make engagement more feasible (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995).

These resources are distributed unequally. People managing food insecurity, unstable housing, low-wage employment, caregiving, or unpredictable transportation may care deeply about an issue while having limited capacity to attend meetings or perform unpaid work. Participation patterns should therefore not be interpreted simply as differences in civic commitment. Unequal resources create unequal opportunities for voice.

This relationship presents an important tension for the present study. People with the closest proximity to inequity may possess distinctive knowledge and strong motivation to address it while also having the least discretionary time and financial security. The individuals most affected by a policy may be least able to participate in the meetings where that policy is discussed. Civic engagement can consequently reproduce inequalities even when participation is formally open to everyone.

Civic skills are similarly shaped by institutional opportunity. Schools, workplaces, religious organizations, voluntary associations, and families provide uneven access to experiences through which people learn to organize, deliberate, write proposals, or communicate with officials (Brady et al., 1995; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Higher education can cultivate

these capacities, but students who work long hours or remain peripheral to campus organizations may have fewer opportunities to develop them.

Recruitment and Social Networks

The Civic Voluntarism Model's emphasis on recruitment is especially important: people often participate because someone asks them (Verba et al., 1995). Invitations provide information about opportunities, communicate that participation is wanted, and reduce uncertainty about how to enter an unfamiliar space. They can transform general concern into a concrete action.

Social-movement research similarly demonstrates that interpersonal networks influence recruitment and continued participation. McAdam (1986) found that prior organizational ties, interpersonal connections, and biographical availability affected involvement in high-risk activism. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) distinguish among sympathy with a movement, identification with its goals, willingness to participate, and actual mobilization. Agreement with an issue is therefore only one part of the process.

Networks matter because they create trust and reduce the costs of participation. A student may be more willing to attend an organizing meeting when invited by a friend, mentor, or faculty member. Relationships also provide information about what will happen, who will be present, and whether the student's contribution will be valued. This aligns with Relational Leadership Theory while giving recruitment a more specific role in explaining civic action.

Recruitment is not neutral. People tend to be invited through existing networks, and those networks can reproduce social inequalities. Students already connected to faculty members, organizations, or leadership programs may receive repeated invitations, while equally capable students remain unseen. Those with marginalized identities may be invited primarily to address

issues associated with those identities, concentrating equity labor among people already affected by the problem.

Efficacy, Identity, and Collective Action

Psychological engagement includes interest, knowledge, political efficacy, and a sense of connection to public issues. Political efficacy refers to beliefs about one's ability to understand and influence political or institutional processes. Internal efficacy concerns perceived personal capacity, while external efficacy concerns whether institutions are responsive to participation (Campbell et al., 1954; Niemi et al., 1991).

This distinction helps explain why knowledge of inequity may not lead to action. A student may understand a problem and possess relevant skills while believing that institutional leaders will not listen. Repeated dismissal can reduce external efficacy by teaching people that participation is unlikely to produce a response. Conversely, a successful interaction or visible institutional change can increase the belief that engagement matters.

Collective efficacy extends this understanding beyond the individual. Bandura (2000) argues that people's shared belief in their capacity to act together affects collective effort and persistence. Individuals may doubt what they can accomplish alone while believing that an organized group can exert meaningful influence. Student organizations, coalitions, and community partnerships can therefore provide both practical capacity and a sense of collective possibility.

Civic identity also shapes participation. People are more likely to sustain engagement when civic action becomes connected to how they understand themselves and their relationships with communities (Youniss et al., 1997). However, civic identity is not necessarily established

before participation. Involvement can also reshape identity as people acquire skills, build relationships, and interpret themselves as people capable of contributing to collective life.

Collective identity concerns a shared sense of “we” developed among people engaged in action (Melucci, 1995; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). It does not require complete agreement or identical experience. It provides enough common understanding for participants to define a problem, identify a constituency, and coordinate action. Within campus advocacy, collective identity may develop around being students, members of a racial or cultural community, people affected by food insecurity, or members of a university believed capable of doing better.

Framing Public Problems

Participation also depends on how a problem is interpreted. Social-movement scholars use the concept of *collective-action frames* to describe how groups diagnose a problem, assign responsibility, propose solutions, and motivate participation (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). A frame makes some aspects of an issue visible while leaving others less prominent.

Student hunger can be framed as a consequence of poor budgeting, an emergency requiring charity, a threat to academic success, a public-health concern, or an outcome of educational and economic policy. Each frame identifies different causes and implies different responses. A budgeting frame directs attention toward student behavior. A charity frame emphasizes donation. A student-success frame highlights retention and academic performance. A structural frame examines wages, financial aid, housing, and public benefits.

Frames also influence institutional support. An equity initiative may gain attention when advocates connect it to institutional priorities such as persistence or completion. That alignment can be strategic, but it may narrow the issue by valuing assistance primarily because it improves

institutional metrics. Critical civic engagement keeps ethical and structural questions visible alongside strategic framing.

Narrative can be especially powerful in framing public problems. Ganz (2010) argues that public narrative connects stories of self, community, and urgency to motivate collective action. Experiential accounts can make an issue understandable and morally consequential, but they should not be used as emotional substitutes for evidence. Effective advocacy may require both narrative knowledge and systematic data.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness provides a bridge between lived experience and civic engagement. Freire (1970/2000) describes critical consciousness as developing the capacity to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against oppressive conditions. It involves reflection and action, or praxis, rather than awareness alone.

Subsequent scholarship commonly distinguishes among critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011). Critical reflection involves analyzing inequality and questioning explanations that blame individuals for structurally produced conditions. Political efficacy concerns beliefs about the capacity to create change. Critical action involves individual or collective efforts to challenge inequity.

These dimensions do not necessarily develop in a fixed order. Action can create opportunities for reflection, just as reflection can motivate action. A person may participate before possessing a fully developed structural analysis and acquire that analysis through organizing. Another may understand inequality clearly while remaining unable or unwilling to act. Critical consciousness is therefore better understood as an iterative relationship among

interpretation, efficacy, and action than as a linear developmental sequence (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Research on youth sociopolitical development demonstrates that critical consciousness can be cultivated through dialogue, mentoring, community participation, and engagement with social issues (Ginwright, 2010; Watts et al., 2003, 2011). Schools and universities can support this development by creating opportunities to examine power and connect scholarship with community action. They can also suppress it by discouraging critique, treating political questions as inappropriate, or rewarding service while resisting structural analysis.

Critical consciousness should not be presented as an achievement possessed only by formally educated people. Communities affected by inequality have long developed analyses of the systems they navigate. Academic concepts can provide additional language and evidence, but universities do not create critical knowledge from nothing. Socially lived theorizing and community cultural wealth both caution against treating institutions as the sole source of political understanding.

The Sociological Imagination: A Reflexive Passage

C. Wright Mills's (1959) concept of the sociological imagination provides related language for connecting biography and history. Mills distinguishes personal troubles from public issues, arguing that experiences interpreted as private failures may be produced through economic systems, institutional arrangements, and historical change.

For much of my childhood and adolescence, I understood my family's poverty primarily through individual responsibility. I knew what instability felt like, but I lacked a framework for asking why it persisted in some families and communities more than others. I often directed

frustration toward my parents' decisions because personal choice was the explanation most readily available to me.

My first sociology course disrupted that explanation. I encountered terms such as social stratification, structural inequality, systemic racism, and intergenerational poverty. After class, I opened my laptop and searched for concepts I had written in my notebook. One source led to another. I discovered that scholars had spent decades examining conditions resembling those I had understood only as my family's private circumstances.

The realization was both relieving and unsettling. Structural analysis did not erase individual decisions or their consequences, but it changed the scale of the questions I was asking. I began to wonder why hardship was concentrated within particular communities, why some families possessed financial buffers while others did not, and why students arrived at college with such different levels of protection from crisis.

This experience did not immediately turn me into an advocate, nor did one course determine the direction of my life. Its significance was interpretive. It provided language that allowed personal experiences to become sociological questions. Research became a means of examining conditions I had once understood primarily through blame.

Read through critical-consciousness scholarship, the shift involved movement from an individualized explanation toward structural reflection. It did not complete the process of civic engagement. Relationships, opportunities, skills, and institutional access were still required before reflection could become organized action. The passage is included here to demonstrate that experience and interpretation are distinct: I had lived poverty long before I could situate it within broader systems.

Higher Education's Civic Mission

American higher education has long claimed a role in preparing people for democratic and civic participation. This mission appears in liberal education, service learning, community engagement, student leadership, and public scholarship (Astin et al., 1999; Colby et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000). Colleges and universities are not only settings where students acquire occupational knowledge; they are also institutions through which people encounter public questions, diverse perspectives, and opportunities for collective action.

Research on service learning finds that well-designed community engagement can support academic learning, civic responsibility, and interpersonal development (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). However, benefits depend on design. Experiences that lack preparation, reflection, reciprocity, or analysis of power may reinforce stereotypes and position communities as sites where privileged students practice helping (Mitchell, 2008; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Critical community engagement emphasizes partnerships in which community knowledge shapes goals, decisions, and evaluation. It asks who defines the problem, who benefits from the project, and whether participation changes institutional relationships or merely completes student learning outcomes. These questions align with the present study's concern with experiential knowledge and institutional responsibility.

Universities must also recognize that students' civic lives extend beyond institutionally sponsored programs. Students organize through cultural groups, mutual-aid networks, faith communities, employment, families, online spaces, and social movements. Narrow definitions of civic engagement can overlook forms of participation common within marginalized

communities, particularly informal care, translation, resource sharing, and resistance (Collins, 2000; Ginwright, 2010).

Inequality in Civic Participation

Civic engagement is often treated as an individual virtue, but participation is structured by inequality. Time, money, civic skills, institutional access, and recruitment are distributed unevenly (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Unpaid civic work can be especially difficult for people balancing employment, caregiving, health needs, or material insecurity.

Institutional recognition is also uneven. Serving on a formal committee may be recorded as leadership, while helping classmates obtain food or translating institutional information for family members may remain invisible. Definitions of civic engagement can privilege public, formal, and institutionally approved activity while overlooking relational labor occurring within marginalized communities.

Risk further differentiates participation. Students challenging institutional practices may face reputational consequences, damaged relationships, or concern about academic and professional opportunities. Employees may face different risks depending on role security and organizational authority. Political efficacy cannot be understood apart from whether people reasonably believe that participation is safe and institutions are responsive.

These inequalities complicate the expectation that those closest to injustice should lead efforts to address it. Experiential knowledge may motivate engagement and improve institutional understanding, but the people possessing that knowledge may also carry the greatest costs of participation. Later in the chapter, scholarship on cultural taxation and invisible labor will examine this unequal burden more directly.

Contribution and Analytical Limits

Civic engagement scholarship contributes several essential insights to the study. It explains how resources affect participation, why recruitment and social networks matter, how efficacy shapes action, and how collective identities and frames organize public problems. Critical-consciousness scholarship adds an account of how individuals connect personal experience with structural inequality and develop possibilities for action.

The literature also establishes that motivation, opportunity, and capacity are distinct. A person may care but lack time. Another may possess resources but feel no connection to the issue. A third may be motivated and capable but never invited into an organization. Participation emerges through the interaction of these conditions rather than from civic character alone.

Civic engagement scholarship is less equipped to explain how organizations themselves respond once members begin pressing for change. Universities contain policies, hierarchies, professional cultures, resource systems, and feedback processes that shape what happens to civic action after it enters the institution. Systems Theory provides the next perspective for examining those organizational relationships and the conditions under which change is resisted, absorbed, or sustained.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory provides a framework for examining universities as interconnected organizations rather than collections of independent people, programs, and offices. It directs attention toward relationships among components, patterns that develop across those relationships, and outcomes that cannot be explained by examining any one part in isolation (Bertalanffy, 1968; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Meadows, 2008). This perspective is especially valuable for studying basic-needs insecurity because food, housing, financial aid, employment,

transportation, academic policy, and student support are organized through different institutional domains even though students experience their effects together.

Systems Theory does not explain why inequity exists or how racial power shapes institutional arrangements. Critical Race Theory and socially lived theorizing remain necessary for those questions. Systems Theory instead helps trace how policies, practices, resources, and relationships interact to produce institutional outcomes. It asks where information travels, where it stops, how one intervention affects other parts of the organization, and why persistent problems may continue despite the presence of people committed to addressing them.

From Isolated Parts to Interdependent Systems

General Systems Theory emerged partly as a challenge to reductionism—the assumption that a phenomenon can be understood fully by separating it into individual components. Bertalanffy (1968) argued that living and social systems possess properties arising through interaction among parts. The behavior of the complete system cannot always be predicted by examining each component independently.

An institution of higher education illustrates this principle. Financial aid affects whether students can pay tuition, but it also influences housing, food, transportation, employment, and credit load. Housing location affects transportation, access to campus services, and time. Employment supports material needs while competing with coursework and campus participation. Academic policies influence eligibility for aid and housing. These relationships mean that a decision in one area can create consequences elsewhere.

Interdependence does not imply that all components are equally powerful or equally connected. Senior leadership, governing boards, state policy, donors, faculty governance, student organizations, and administrative offices possess different forms of authority. A systems analysis

must therefore examine the structure and quality of relationships rather than merely state that everything is connected.

Systems also operate within larger environments. Katz and Kahn (1978) describe organizations as open systems that exchange resources, information, and people with their surroundings. Universities are affected by government policy, labor markets, housing markets, public opinion, demographic change, philanthropic funding, accreditation, and political conditions. Institutional responses to student basic needs are shaped by forces extending beyond campus boundaries.

This open-systems perspective prevents the institution from being treated as entirely autonomous. A university cannot independently control local rent, wages, federal financial aid, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program eligibility. It can, however, decide how it calculates costs, structures employment, coordinates services, uses institutional funds, communicates with students, and advocates within public policy. Systems Theory helps distinguish external constraints from internal choices without treating either as the sole cause.

Universities as Loosely Coupled Organizations

Universities are complex because authority and information are distributed across academic and administrative units. Weick (1976) describes educational organizations as loosely coupled systems in which components are connected but retain substantial autonomy. A change in one unit may have limited or delayed effects elsewhere. Policies can be adopted centrally while being interpreted differently across departments.

Loose coupling creates both opportunity and difficulty. Local autonomy may allow an individual office, academic program, or student organization to innovate without waiting for institution-wide approval. At the same time, successful practices may remain isolated, and

students may receive inconsistent responses depending on where they seek assistance. One department can become highly responsive while the broader institution remains unchanged.

Birnbaum (1988) similarly demonstrates that colleges and universities contain bureaucratic, collegial, political, and symbolic features. Decisions may depend on formal procedures, professional consensus, negotiation among interests, or institutional meaning and tradition. No single model explains every part of the university. Change strategies effective in a centralized administrative unit may fail within faculty governance or a student-led organization.

This complexity is relevant to basic-needs initiatives. Establishing a pantry may require coordination among student affairs, facilities, dining services, procurement, risk management, development, communications, and student organizations. Each unit may understand the issue through a different mandate. Dining may focus on contracts and food safety, student affairs on access and well-being, facilities on space, and senior leadership on finance and institutional risk. Progress depends partly on whether those interpretations can be connected.

Loose coupling can also conceal responsibility. When authority is distributed, each unit may plausibly claim that another controls the relevant decision. Students can be referred repeatedly without reaching a person authorized to resolve the problem. Organizational complexity then becomes an experience students must navigate rather than a condition the institution coordinates on their behalf.

Feedback, Delays, and Unintended Consequences

Feedback occurs when the output of a system returns as information that influences subsequent action. Reinforcing feedback amplifies a pattern, while balancing feedback counteracts change and pushes the system toward stability (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000).

These concepts help explain why institutional problems can intensify or why reforms lose momentum.

A reinforcing cycle may occur when material insecurity reduces academic performance, diminished performance threatens financial aid, and reduced aid deepens material insecurity. A balancing process may occur when an emergency grant prevents immediate withdrawal and temporarily restores stability. Neither example implies inevitability; it demonstrates how institutional conditions can interact over time.

Information is itself a form of feedback. Student disclosures, service-use data, climate surveys, retention patterns, and advising conversations can alert an institution to emerging needs. However, feedback affects the system only when information reaches actors with the authority and willingness to respond. If offices collect data without sharing them, or if experiential accounts are dismissed as isolated, the institution may continue operating without learning from the consequences of its practices.

Time delays complicate institutional learning. The effects of a policy change may not become visible until students miss classes, accumulate debt, or leave the institution. Leadership transitions and budget cycles can further separate a decision from its consequences. By the time an outcome appears, the original decision-makers may no longer occupy their roles, weakening organizational accountability.

Interventions can also produce unintended consequences. Requiring extensive documentation may protect scarce resources while discouraging students from applying. Limiting assistance to full-time students may exclude those who reduced enrollment because of hardship. Creating a highly visible pantry may increase awareness while intensifying concerns

about stigma. Systems thinking requires anticipating how people will encounter an intervention rather than evaluating only whether the program was implemented.

Organizational Culture and Institutional History

Formal structure does not fully determine organizational behavior. Institutional culture includes shared assumptions, values, traditions, symbols, language, and expectations through which members interpret what the organization is and how it should operate (Schein, 2010). Culture influences which problems are treated as legitimate, what evidence is considered persuasive, and which forms of change appear compatible with institutional identity.

Kezar and Eckel (2002) found that institutional culture is central to transformational change in higher education. Change strategies are more likely to take hold when they engage an institution's existing meanings and practices rather than treating culture as an obstacle external to implementation. At the same time, appeals to tradition can protect arrangements that marginalize particular populations.

Historical context is therefore part of the system. A university's prior responses to student activism, racial integration, financial hardship, or public controversy shape contemporary trust and expectations. Students and employees enter an institution containing policies, spaces, and narratives created through earlier struggles, even when the history of those struggles is no longer widely known.

Institutional memory can reside in documents, routines, facilities, and people. When an initiative depends primarily on one employee's relationships and knowledge, turnover can remove that memory. The program may continue nominally while losing the practices that made it effective. Organizational learning requires mechanisms through which knowledge becomes available beyond the people who first developed it (Argote, 2013; Walsh & Ungson, 1991).

Institutional Change and Institutionalization

Change can occur at different depths. An institution may adjust a procedure, create a program, modify a policy, or reconsider assumptions underlying its organization. Eckel et al. (1998) distinguish transformational change from more limited adjustment by emphasizing depth, pervasiveness, intentionality, and cultural effect. Not every change must be transformational to be valuable, but the distinction prevents the existence of a new initiative from being treated automatically as evidence of broader institutional change.

Kezar (2018) demonstrates that higher education change can be understood through multiple perspectives, including scientific management, evolutionary, social cognition, cultural, political, and institutional approaches. Different problems require different explanatory lenses. Technical change may depend on planning and resources, while cultural change may require altered meaning, relationships, and identity. Political change requires attention to interests, conflict, and power.

Institutionalization occurs when a new practice becomes embedded within organizational roles, resources, policies, routines, and expectations. A program dependent on temporary funding, one student organization, or an individual champion remains vulnerable even when it has operated successfully for several years. Sustainable change requires some transfer of ownership from particular advocates to the institution (Kezar, 2018; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011).

Institutionalization does not mean that a practice should become fixed permanently. Student needs, political environments, evidence, and institutional conditions change. Sustainability involves continued support and adaptation, not repetition without evaluation (Coburn, 2003; Stirman et al., 2012). A pantry, mentoring initiative, or multicultural center may require revision as the population and context evolve.

Institutional theory adds another dimension by examining how practices acquire legitimacy. Organizations often adopt structures because they are professionally accepted, legally encouraged, or used by peer institutions, not only because internal evidence demonstrates effectiveness (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). A university may establish a basic-needs center partly because such centers have become recognized features of student support. Adoption can create meaningful capacity, but the symbolic value of a program does not guarantee adequate staffing, funding, or influence.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) use the term **institutional work** to describe intentional efforts to create, maintain, or disrupt institutional arrangements. This concept makes visible the labor through which change is advanced and sustained. Institutional transformation does not occur because a system recognizes its own deficiencies. People gather evidence, build coalitions, frame problems, negotiate resistance, secure resources, and maintain practices after initial attention declines.

Leverage Points and Structural Intervention

Meadows (1999, 2008) describes leverage points as places where intervention can alter system behavior. Some leverage points are relatively shallow, such as changing a numerical parameter or adding a resource. Others concern information flows, rules, goals, or the assumptions from which the system operates.

Within student basic-needs work, adding pantry hours may improve immediate access. Creating automatic referral systems changes information flow. Revising eligibility rules alters institutional constraints. Including basic-needs security within strategic planning changes formal goals. Challenging the assumption that student hardship is a private problem addresses the paradigm through which the institution interprets need.

Deeper leverage does not make immediate intervention unnecessary. Students need food and housing while structural reforms are pursued. Systems thinking instead asks whether short-term assistance connects with longer-term changes or becomes the only response.

Leverage points also involve power. Not everyone has equal authority to change rules, budgets, goals, or organizational assumptions. Students may identify a high-impact intervention while lacking access to the decision-makers capable of implementing it. Coalition building and shared leadership can broaden influence, but formal authority remains consequential.

Power and the Limits of Systems Theory

Systems language can appear politically neutral. Terms such as interdependence, feedback, and adaptation describe organizational relationships without necessarily identifying who benefits from existing arrangements. A system can be highly stable and still profoundly inequitable. Stability is not synonymous with justice.

Critical systems scholars therefore argue that systems analysis must examine boundaries, values, and power (Midgley, 2000; Ulrich, 1983). Every analysis decides what belongs within the system, whose perspective defines the problem, and which outcomes matter. A university may define food insecurity as a retention problem, while students understand it as a matter of dignity and justice. Both perspectives identify consequences, but they do not assign the same meaning or responsibility.

Systems Theory can also diffuse accountability if institutional outcomes are attributed to “the system” as though no people make decisions within it. Structures constrain action, but they are maintained through budgets, policies, interpretations, and everyday practices. Naming systemic complexity should not become an excuse for inaction.

Critical Race Theory strengthens systems analysis by asking how institutional arrangements are racialized and whose interests apparent neutrality protects. Socially lived theorizing grounds the analysis in how systems are encountered by people. Relational Leadership Theory explains how meaning and action develop among institutional actors. Civic engagement scholarship clarifies who has the resources and opportunities to participate. Systems Theory connects these processes organizationally but cannot replace their attention to knowledge, race, relationships, or participation.

Systems Theory in the Present Study

Systems Theory directs this study toward the institutional relationships surrounding individual experience. It supports examination of how policies, offices, resources, organizational cultures, and external environments interact. It also provides concepts for understanding feedback, unintended consequences, institutional learning, and the difference between creating a program and embedding responsibility.

The theory is particularly useful for examining sustainability across generations. Students graduate, employees change positions, and administrators leave. An equity initiative that remains dependent on the people who initiated it may disappear with them. Systems Theory directs attention toward what becomes embedded in the institution and what remains attached to individual labor.

That labor is not distributed evenly. The literature reviewed across the five theoretical perspectives repeatedly points toward a final issue requiring focused attention: people with the closest knowledge of inequity are often expected to perform the work of explaining, addressing, and sustaining institutional responses. The next section examines cultural taxation, emotional labor, and the unequal distribution of responsibility for institutional change.

Who Carries the Work? The Unequal Distribution of Institutional Change

Labor

The literatures reviewed throughout this chapter raise a question that is often obscured when institutional change is described through programs, policies, or leadership outcomes: Who performs the work required to make inequity visible and sustain the response? Colleges and universities may present equity initiatives as institutional accomplishments, even when much of the labor behind them originated with students and employees personally affected by the conditions being addressed.

This labor includes more than formal committee service. It can involve supporting students in crisis, mentoring beyond assigned responsibilities, documenting overlooked problems, translating experiences for institutional audiences, organizing peers, educating colleagues, responding to racial incidents, and preserving programs when administrative attention shifts. Some of this work is visible and rewarded. Much of it remains informal, uncompensated, or interpreted as a natural extension of identity and care.

Proximity, Recognition, and Institutional Dependence

People closest to inequity may recognize institutional problems earlier because they encounter their consequences directly. A student experiencing food insecurity understands limitations in campus food access that may not be visible to a financially secure administrator. A faculty member of color may recognize patterns of racial isolation or exclusion that colleagues interpret as unrelated incidents. Experiential knowledge can therefore improve institutional understanding.

However, recognizing a problem and being responsible for resolving it are not equivalent. Institutions can rely on people with marginalized identities to identify, explain, and respond to

inequity without transferring sufficient authority or resources to them. Experiential knowledge then becomes both valuable and extractable: the institution benefits from proximity while the person bears the cost of making that knowledge usable.

Ahmed (2012) describes diversity work as both the work of transforming institutions and the work performed by those whose presence is marked as diverse. Diversity practitioners often encounter institutional resistance not as explicit opposition but as delay, redirection, symbolic commitment, and the repeated requirement to demonstrate that a documented problem exists. The institution may adopt the language of diversity while making change difficult to accomplish.

This creates a paradox. People may be invited to share experiences because the institution values authentic knowledge, yet their accounts may be treated as anecdotal until translated into forms recognized by administrators. Once translated, the knowledge can become detached from the people who produced it. Institutional reports, strategic plans, and public narratives may preserve the initiative while obscuring the labor and conflict through which it emerged.

Cultural Taxation

Padilla (1994) introduced *cultural taxation* to describe additional responsibilities placed on faculty members from racially and ethnically marginalized groups. These responsibilities may include mentoring students of color, serving on diversity committees, representing the institution publicly, interpreting cultural issues, and educating colleagues. Although such work can be personally and professionally meaningful, it is often distributed inequitably and insufficiently recognized within promotion, tenure, workload, and compensation systems.

Subsequent research has documented how faculty of color perform substantial mentoring and service that institutions depend upon but do not consistently reward (Baez, 2000; Griffin et al., 2011; Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Turner et al., 2008). Students may seek relationships with

faculty members who share aspects of their identity or have demonstrated cultural understanding. Those relationships can support belonging and success, but they can also produce workloads that differ considerably from those of colleagues with similar formal assignments.

Faculty women of color frequently experience this burden at the intersections of race and gender. They may be expected to provide emotional support, committee labor, cultural translation, and institutional care while navigating questions about their own legitimacy and authority (Harley, 2008; Joseph & Hirshfield, 2011; Turner, 2002). Intersectional analysis is necessary because the work is not distributed through race or gender independently.

Cultural taxation can occur alongside epistemic exclusion, in which a scholar's knowledge, research area, or intellectual contribution is devalued because of social identity or disciplinary assumptions (Settles et al., 2021). An institution may rely on a faculty member's racial identity for mentoring and diversity service while failing to recognize the person's scholarship as central to the academic enterprise. The faculty member becomes institutionally valuable through service but remains marginalized within knowledge production.

Staff members can experience related expectations. Professionals from marginalized communities may become informal points of referral for students whose needs extend beyond the employee's assigned role. Their offices can function as trusted spaces because students anticipate cultural understanding or reduced judgment. Yet this relational labor may not appear in performance measures, staffing calculations, or workload allocation.

The problem is not that faculty and staff care for students or choose to contribute to equity work. The problem arises when institutions treat those contributions as naturally available because of identity, depend on them operationally, and fail to distribute or reward the work equitably.

Emotional and Invisible Labor

Hochschild (1983) developed the concept of *emotional labor* to describe the management of feeling and emotional expression as part of paid work. Although originally applied to service occupations, the concept has been extended across educational and professional settings. Faculty and staff may regulate frustration, provide reassurance, respond calmly to crisis, and absorb students' distress while maintaining institutional expectations of professionalism.

Emotional labor is racialized and gendered. Wingfield (2010) demonstrates that workers' emotional expectations are shaped by race and organizational context rather than applied uniformly. Employees from marginalized groups may be required to manage their responses to discrimination while also supporting others affected by similar conditions. They can be expected to remain composed, educational, and available even when institutional events affect them personally.

Invisible labor includes work necessary to organizational functioning that remains unrecorded or unrecognized because it occurs informally or is understood as care rather than expertise (Daniels, 1987). In higher education, this may include checking on a student after a racial incident, helping someone locate emergency food, translating an institutional process, mediating a conflict, or maintaining relationships across campus units.

The invisibility of this work does not make it inconsequential. It can determine whether a student accesses assistance, remains enrolled, or develops trust in the institution. Yet because it is difficult to count and often occurs through private interactions, it may receive less recognition than formally documented teaching, scholarship, fundraising, or administrative outcomes.

Relational Leadership Theory helps explain why this labor can produce meaningful change. Critical scholarship is necessary to examine who is expected to perform it and under

what conditions. Celebrating relational leadership without attending to workload and power can transform unequal labor into evidence of institutional community.

Student Activism as Labor

Students also perform substantial institutional-change labor. They organize demonstrations, create mutual-aid networks, collect data, serve on committees, write proposals, educate peers, meet with administrators, and maintain organizations while completing coursework and employment. Institutions may celebrate this activity as student leadership while overlooking its time, emotional demands, and unequal distribution.

Linder et al. (2019) argue that student activism should be understood as labor. Activists frequently address institutional conditions affecting their own identities and communities, requiring them to relive or publicly explain experiences of marginalization. The work may interfere with sleep, academic performance, employment, and relationships, even when the institution later benefits from the reforms produced.

Student activists from marginalized communities can face a double bind. Institutions may request their participation to demonstrate inclusion while limiting their decision-making authority. If students decline, their perspectives may be absent. If they participate, they may spend substantial time educating people with greater institutional power. The burden of making a process equitable can therefore be placed on those with the least formal authority.

Black student activists, women of color, queer and trans students, undocumented students, disabled students, and other marginalized populations may also encounter heightened personal risk. Advocacy can involve public visibility, exposure to harassment, strained relationships with administrators, or concern about academic and professional consequences. These costs complicate narratives portraying activism primarily as a developmental opportunity.

Student activism can certainly support learning, identity development, efficacy, and community. Recognizing those benefits should not transform institutional failure into an educational experience students ought to have. Students should not need to encounter racism, hunger, inaccessible facilities, or threats to their communities in order to acquire leadership skills.

Turnover presents an additional challenge. Students graduate, transfer, stop out, or become unable to continue. Organizations lose historical knowledge, relationships, and procedural expertise. New students may have to reconstruct prior proposals and educate administrators about concerns earlier groups had already documented. Without institutional memory, student leadership becomes cyclical labor rather than cumulative change.

The Labor of Mentoring and Care

Mentoring is one of the most consequential forms of relational work within higher education. Mentors provide institutional knowledge, psychosocial support, challenge, sponsorship, and access to networks (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Kram, 1985; Nora & Crisp, 2007). For students navigating racial marginalization or basic-needs insecurity, a mentor may become the person through whom institutional assistance becomes accessible.

An ethic of care can help explain why people assume such responsibilities. Tronto (1993) and Held (2006) conceptualize care as attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others rather than as private sentiment alone. Care is both relational and political because societies and institutions determine whose needs are noticed, who provides care, and whether that labor is supported.

Higher education frequently praises care while organizing it as an individual choice. A faculty member who helps a student find housing may be celebrated as exceptionally

compassionate, but the need for personal intervention may indicate the absence of an adequate institutional response. Extraordinary care can protect students while simultaneously concealing organizational gaps.

Institutionalizing care does not mean replacing relationships with impersonal procedures. It means creating conditions in which care is possible without requiring individuals to use unlimited personal time, money, or emotional capacity. Workload recognition, referral systems, emergency resources, professional support, and coordinated services can reduce the extent to which student well-being depends on one person's private intervention.

Burnout, Withdrawal, and the Right Not to Lead

Sustained equity work can produce exhaustion, disillusionment, and burnout. Gorski et al. (2019) found that racial-justice activists experienced burnout through emotional strain, internal movement pressures, and the continuing weight of injustice. Within institutions, slow decision-making, repeated resistance, leadership turnover, and symbolic responses can intensify these effects.

Racial battle fatigue adds another layer for people who are simultaneously affected by racism and working to address it (Smith et al., 2007). They may be expected to process their own reactions, support others, and explain the institutional significance of an event. The separation between personal experience and professional responsibility becomes difficult to maintain.

Withdrawal should not automatically be interpreted as diminished commitment. Leaving a committee, reducing mentoring, stepping away from activism, or exiting an institution may be a necessary act of self-preservation. Civic engagement scholarship demonstrates that participation depends on resources and biographical availability, not moral character alone (McAdam, 1986; Verba et al., 1995).

The right not to lead is particularly important for marginalized people. Experiential knowledge may position someone to recognize injustice, but it does not create an obligation to disclose trauma, represent a community, or perform institutional repair. Institutions should not treat proximity to inequity as an unpaid assignment.

Individual Champions and Organizational Vulnerability

Institutional-change efforts often begin with committed individuals who gather evidence, build coalitions, and sustain attention. Change scholarship recognizes the importance of such champions while also warning that initiatives remain vulnerable when they depend on one person's energy or relationships (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Dependence on champions can allow institutions to appear responsive without changing their structures. As long as a committed employee or student keeps the initiative functioning, the organization may avoid assigning permanent staff, recurring funding, or formal authority. The person's success in compensating for institutional gaps reduces the immediate pressure to address those gaps.

When champions leave, the initiative may decline, revealing that the institution adopted the appearance of change without developing the capacity to sustain it. This pattern is especially likely when knowledge is informal, funding is temporary, and responsibility remains outside formal roles. Institutionalization requires more than continued activity; it requires embedding the work within structures that can survive personnel transitions (Coburn, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011).

The language of passion can also obscure exploitation. Describing someone as passionate recognizes commitment, but it can imply that intrinsic motivation is adequate compensation for

expanded responsibilities. Equity work may be meaningful and still require workload, authority, funding, and professional recognition.

Responsibility Across Institutional Roles

Responsibility for institutional change operates at multiple levels. Students, faculty members, and staff members may exercise relational and ethical responsibility by responding to conditions they encounter. Administrators possess different responsibilities because they control policies, resources, personnel, and institutional priorities. Governing bodies and public policymakers shape the broader conditions under which institutional decisions occur.

A shared commitment to change should not be interpreted as equal responsibility. People possess unequal authority to alter systems and unequal protection from the risks of advocacy. Distributing participation broadly can strengthen institutional knowledge, but distributing accountability so widely that no one remains answerable can weaken change.

This distinction is essential for interpreting collective leadership. Shared leadership can bring multiple perspectives into decision-making, but senior leaders cannot transfer their formal obligations to students or marginalized employees. Participation should expand institutional capacity without disguising where authority resides.

Contribution to the Present Study

Scholarship on cultural taxation, emotional labor, student activism, care, and organizational change establishes that equity work is distributed unevenly. It also reveals a persistent tension: the people closest to institutional inequity may possess knowledge essential to change while simultaneously bearing disproportionate costs for producing that change.

What remains less fully understood is how individuals come to assume these responsibilities, how the burden shifts as they move across institutional roles, and what allows

equity work to continue across generations. The present study addresses these questions by examining participants whose relationships with one institution span different periods and positions.

Before identifying the specific gaps guiding the study, the next section synthesizes the theoretical foundation established in this chapter. That synthesis clarifies how socially lived theorizing, Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory operate together without collapsing their distinct analytical contributions or introducing the conceptual framework developed later in Chapter 5.

Synthesis of the Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study brings together socially lived theorizing, Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory. These perspectives are not combined into a new model in this chapter, nor are they treated as stages through which individuals necessarily progress. They operate at different analytical levels and answer different questions about knowledge, power, relationships, participation, and institutions.

Their combined value lies in preventing any one dimension of the study from becoming the entire explanation. Lived experience cannot be interpreted apart from social structure. Relationships cannot be assumed to operate outside power. Civic participation cannot be explained without attention to unequal resources and invitations. Institutional change cannot be understood solely through the intentions of individuals. The theories are used together because the phenomenon crosses each of these domains.

Socially Lived Theorizing as the Epistemological Starting Point

Socially lived theorizing establishes the study's primary orientation toward knowledge. It begins with everyday experience while requiring movement beyond personal description toward the historical and institutional relations organizing that experience (Kang et al., 2017; Smith, 1987). Feminist standpoint epistemology and Black feminist thought further establish that knowledge is situated and that inquiry beginning from marginalized lives can expose institutional processes obscured from dominant locations (Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004; Haraway, 1988).

This orientation determines why participants' accounts are treated as sources of institutional knowledge rather than as personal reactions existing outside the institution. A student's account of hunger, exclusion, or advocacy can illuminate how policy and culture are encountered in daily life. At the same time, socially lived theorizing does not presume that experience explains itself. Interpretation, reflexivity, historical context, and comparison remain necessary (Scott, 1991).

Socially lived theorizing therefore answers an epistemological question: How can everyday experience become a source of knowledge about institutions and social conditions? It does not independently explain the racialized operation of power, the construction of leadership, the distribution of civic participation, or the organization of university systems. Those questions require the remaining perspectives.

Critical Race Theory as an Analysis of Power

Critical Race Theory provides the framework for examining how race and racism shape institutional history, policy, culture, and definitions of merit or neutrality. It prevents racial disparities from being interpreted as products of racial identity itself by directing attention

toward the systems that distribute wealth, educational opportunity, recognition, and institutional authority (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016).

Its emphasis on experiential knowledge and counterstorytelling also reinforces the study's epistemological commitments. Participants' accounts can challenge dominant narratives presenting higher education as equally accessible or institutionally neutral (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical Race Theory adds that whose account is believed is itself a question of power.

The theory further sharpens analysis of institutional change. Interest convergence, racial realism, and critiques of colorblindness offer ways to examine why some reforms become acceptable, why other proposals encounter resistance, and how formally neutral responses may leave racialized arrangements intact (Bell, 1980, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Gotanda, 1991).

Critical Race Theory therefore addresses a structural question: How does racial power organize the conditions participants experience and the institutional responses available to them? Its role is not to suggest that race is the only relevant relation of power. Intersectionality, Black feminist thought, LatCrit, TribalCrit, and related traditions remain necessary for attending to intraracial difference and the interaction of race with gender, class, immigration, sexuality, disability, and colonial relations (Brayboy, 2005; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Relational Leadership Theory as an Analysis of Leadership Process

Relational Leadership Theory shifts attention from identifying leaders to examining how leadership is constructed through social interaction. It supports analysis of mentoring, recognition, invitation, trust, dialogue, shared meaning, conflict, and coalition building (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This makes it possible to study leadership among people who

do not hold formal authority while also questioning whether positional leaders are producing collective direction and commitment.

The theory is particularly important for understanding how individual knowledge becomes shared. An experience may remain privately interpreted until relationships provide language, challenge, support, or access to others with related concerns. Relational Leadership Theory explains how meaning and capacity can develop between people rather than solely within individuals.

Critical Race Theory places an important boundary around this relational analysis. Relationships are not automatically equitable, and collaboration does not dissolve differences in authority. The ability to speak, set agendas, define shared purpose, or withdraw safely remains shaped by institutional and social power (Fletcher, 2004; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Relational Leadership Theory is therefore used critically rather than as an assumption that positive relationships produce just outcomes.

This perspective addresses a process question: How do relationships shape the development and practice of leadership? It does not fully explain why people enter collective action or how unequal access to resources constrains participation. Civic engagement scholarship adds those dimensions.

Civic Engagement Scholarship as an Analysis of Participation

Civic engagement scholarship explains how people move from concern toward participation. The Civic Voluntarism Model identifies time, money, civic skills, psychological engagement, and recruitment as central influences on whether people participate (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Social-movement scholarship adds collective identity, framing,

networks, and political opportunity to the explanation of mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1986; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Critical-consciousness scholarship is especially important because it explains how individuals may connect personal experience with structural inequality and develop possibilities for action (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 1970/2000; Watts et al., 2011). Its relationship with socially lived theorizing is complementary. Socially lived theorizing establishes experience as a starting point for knowledge, while critical consciousness focuses on reflection, efficacy, and action in relation to oppression.

The resource model also prevents the study from treating engagement as evidence of superior moral commitment. People may recognize inequity but lack the time, security, invitation, or belief in institutional responsiveness necessary to participate. Those closest to a problem may face the greatest barriers to sustained involvement. Civic disengagement must therefore be interpreted within material and institutional conditions rather than attributed automatically to apathy.

Civic engagement scholarship addresses a mobilization question: What resources, relationships, identities, and opportunities influence whether concern becomes collective participation? It does not explain fully what happens when that participation enters a complex organization. Systems Theory provides the institutional lens required for that analysis.

Systems Theory as an Analysis of Institutional Organization

Systems Theory situates people and initiatives within relationships among policies, organizational units, resources, cultures, and external environments (Bertalanffy, 1968; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Meadows, 2008). It is useful for examining how changes in financial aid, housing, dining, academic policy, or student services can create effects across institutional boundaries.

The concepts of loose coupling, feedback, time delay, and institutionalization help explain why universities may respond unevenly and why initiatives remain vulnerable when knowledge or responsibility is concentrated among a few individuals (Kezar, 2018; Weick, 1976). Systems Theory also distinguishes the implementation of a program from a deeper change in institutional routines, resources, or assumptions.

Critical Race Theory and critical systems scholarship prevent this analysis from treating the organization as politically neutral. A system can function as designed while producing inequitable outcomes. Systems analysis must therefore ask who defines system goals, whose feedback is recognized, and which outcomes the institution seeks to stabilize (Midgley, 2000; Ulrich, 1983).

Systems Theory addresses an organizational question: How do institutional structures and cultures enable, constrain, absorb, or sustain efforts toward change? It connects individual and collective action with the organization without reducing institutional outcomes to the intentions of particular people.

Alignment With the Research Questions

The perspectives guiding this study overlap across the research questions, but each contributes particular analytical leverage.

The first research question examines how participants' engagement in food insecurity, basic-needs, and equity-related efforts originated and evolved. Socially lived theorizing directs attention toward how participants interpreted their experiences. Relational Leadership Theory supports examination of mentoring, invitation, and shared meaning, while civic engagement scholarship identifies the resources and networks through which participation became possible.

The second research question considers how proximity to poverty, food insecurity, and racial marginalization shaped participants' understandings of responsibility. Socially lived theorizing and feminist standpoint epistemology establish proximity as a potential source of knowledge without treating experience as determinative. Critical Race Theory identifies the structural conditions producing unequal experiences, while scholarship on cultural taxation and care raises questions about how responsibility becomes assigned.

The third research question examines belonging, representation, and inclusion in relation to leadership and sustained engagement. Belonging and validation scholarship clarifies the institutional conditions under which people experience recognition and legitimate membership. Relational Leadership Theory explains how those conditions are developed through interaction, while Critical Race Theory examines the power shaping representation and institutional inclusion.

The fourth research question addresses the sustainability of mobilization across generations. Systems Theory and organizational-change scholarship focus attention on institutional memory, feedback, resource allocation, leadership turnover, and institutionalization. Critical Race Theory adds a historical analysis of how gains remain contested and why institutional change should not be presumed permanent.

The overarching research question brings these dimensions together by asking how proximity to inequity shapes mobilization, sustained engagement, and responsibility for institutional change. The theoretical perspectives provide complementary ways of examining that question, but none supplies a predetermined answer. The study uses them as interpretive lenses rather than as propositions participants' accounts must confirm.

Productive Tensions Among the Perspectives

The theoretical framework is strengthened by tensions among its components. Socially lived theorizing values experiential knowledge, while Scott's (1991) critique of experience requires attention to interpretation and discourse. Critical Race Theory centers racial power, while intersectionality resists treating race as separable from other systems. Relational Leadership Theory emphasizes connection, while critical relational scholarship exposes unequal authority within relationships. Civic engagement scholarship identifies participation, while resource models explain why participation itself is stratified. Systems Theory maps interdependence, while critical systems scholarship asks whose interests the system serves.

These tensions are analytically productive. They prevent the study from romanticizing lived experience, relationships, civic action, or institutional change. Experience can produce knowledge without guaranteeing a particular interpretation. Relationships can enable leadership while reproducing hierarchy. Civic engagement can expand voice while placing additional burdens on marginalized people. Institutional change can improve conditions while remaining incomplete or vulnerable.

Most importantly, the theoretical foundation preserves a distinction between individual development and institutional responsibility. Understanding why someone becomes engaged does not explain why the institution failed to act earlier. Recognizing the leadership produced through hardship does not make hardship educationally desirable. Documenting care and advocacy does not justify institutional dependence on unpaid or invisible labor.

The next section identifies the specific gaps in existing scholarship that emerge from this theoretical and empirical review. Those gaps establish the need for an intergenerational study

examining how lived proximity to inequity, leadership, belonging, responsibility, and institutional change are understood across roles and historical periods.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship and Rationale for the Study

The literature reviewed throughout this chapter provides substantial knowledge about student basic-needs insecurity, racial inequality, belonging, leadership, civic participation, and institutional change. It establishes that material insecurity is widespread, unequally distributed, and consequential for students' educational experiences. It also demonstrates that leadership and civic engagement are relationally and institutionally situated rather than products of individual disposition alone. Nevertheless, important questions remain at the intersections of these bodies of scholarship.

These gaps do not necessarily indicate that entire topics have been ignored. In many cases, the limitation is one of connection. Scholars have developed sophisticated explanations within separate fields, but comparatively less research has examined how the phenomena addressed by those fields interact within individual lives and institutional histories.

From Prevalence and Outcomes to Meaning Over Time

Basic-needs scholarship has been especially effective at documenting prevalence, identifying demographic disparities, and establishing associations with academic and health outcomes (Bruening et al., 2017; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). This work was necessary to make student food and housing insecurity visible as matters of educational equity rather than isolated personal difficulties.

Researchers have also examined campus pantries, emergency aid, public-benefit access, and other institutional responses (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018;

Kezar et al., 2020). These studies have helped clarify what institutions can do to address immediate needs and which barriers prevent students from using available support.

Comparatively less research has followed how individuals interpret basic-needs insecurity after the immediate period of hardship has passed. Qualitative studies document stigma, concealment, identity management, and the daily strategies students use while experiencing food or housing insecurity (Hallett & Freas, 2018; Henry, 2017; Weaver et al., 2020). Less is known about how the meaning of those experiences changes as students become alumni, employees, educators, administrators, or mentors.

This temporal gap matters because retrospective interpretation may differ from meaning in the moment. A student concerned primarily with obtaining food or housing may later understand the experience as evidence of a policy failure, a source of professional commitment, or a reason to challenge institutional assumptions. Existing prevalence and outcome studies are not designed to capture that development.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how participants interpret experiences with inequity across different periods of their educational and professional lives. It does not assume that hardship produces advocacy. It asks how meanings change and what other conditions influence whether experience becomes connected to institutional engagement.

Basic-Needs Insecurity and Leadership Development

Leadership-development scholarship has examined identity, involvement, mentoring, reflection, group participation, and relational processes extensively (Dugan, 2017; Komives et al., 2005, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This literature explains how people may move beyond leader-centered understandings and develop more collaborative approaches to leadership.

However, leadership scholarship has given comparatively less attention to material insecurity as a context of leadership development. Poverty, food insecurity, unstable housing, racialized economic inequality, and the labor of navigating institutional assistance are seldom centered within dominant leadership-development models. When social identity is considered, material conditions may still remain peripheral.

This omission matters because leadership opportunities themselves require resources. Organizational involvement, unpaid service, internships, meetings, and campus activities assume access to time, transportation, food, and financial stability. Students experiencing scarcity may develop substantial leadership capacity through survival, caregiving, mutual aid, or advocacy while remaining outside formal programs where leadership is recognized.

Critical leadership scholars have challenged individualistic and culturally narrow assumptions within the field (Dugan, 2017; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). The relationship between socially lived inequity and leadership emergence nevertheless warrants further empirical examination. The present study contributes by placing experiences with basic needs, poverty, race, and institutional exclusion within an inquiry focused explicitly on leadership and responsibility.

Proximity, Critical Consciousness, and Sustained Engagement

Civic engagement scholarship explains participation through resources, recruitment, efficacy, identity, and social networks (Brady et al., 1995; McAdam, 1986; Verba et al., 1995). Critical-consciousness research further demonstrates how reflection on structural inequality can be related to sociopolitical efficacy and action (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011).

This literature clarifies why awareness is insufficient and why people need pathways into collective participation. Yet the relationship between proximity to a particular inequity and long-

term commitment to addressing it remains underdeveloped. Experiencing or witnessing injustice may produce anger, empathy, critical analysis, withdrawal, silence, or no sustained response. The conditions affecting those different pathways require closer examination.

Duration is especially important. Initial mobilization and sustained engagement are not the same phenomenon. An invitation, crisis, or event may produce participation, but continued involvement can depend on relationships, resources, efficacy, identity, organizational capacity, and the personal costs of the work (Klandermans, 2004; McAdam, 1986; Verba et al., 1995). Studies focused on one moment of participation may not capture how commitments change across roles and life stages.

The present study therefore examines both entry and continuation. It asks not only how participants became involved, but also what allowed, required, or constrained their engagement over time. This approach creates space for examining persistence without treating sustained advocacy as a moral expectation.

Belonging, Voice, and Institutional Participation

Belonging scholarship has established strong relationships with student engagement, well-being, persistence, and institutional commitment (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Critical and qualitative studies have further shown that belonging is relational, localized, and shaped by institutional culture rather than solely by individual perception (Museus, 2014; Nunn, 2021; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Less is known about how belonging relates to students' willingness to exercise institutional voice or participate in change efforts. Belonging may provide relationships and confidence that support participation. A strong attachment to an institution may motivate people

to improve it. Exclusion may also mobilize critique by making inequity visible, or it may lead people to withdraw because engagement appears unsafe or futile.

These possibilities should not be reduced to a simple claim that belonging causes leadership. The relationship is likely conditional and multidirectional. Participation may strengthen belonging by creating community, while activism may expose students to conflict that weakens institutional attachment. Students may belong deeply within a cultural organization while challenging the university more broadly.

The present study examines how participants describe these relationships without prescribing one pathway. It considers representation, validation, trust, and community alongside experiences of marginality, asking how each influenced leadership, advocacy, and continued engagement.

Institutional Change Across Generations

Higher education change scholarship offers extensive analysis of organizational culture, leadership, strategy, shared governance, political processes, and institutionalization (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Systems Theory further explains universities as open, loosely coupled organizations in which change may spread unevenly and produce unintended consequences (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Weick, 1976).

Much institutional-change research examines a bounded initiative, reform period, or group of designated change agents. These approaches clarify implementation but may be less suited to understanding how institutional developments are experienced across generations. A program created through earlier advocacy can become an ordinary part of campus life for later students, while the labor and conflict behind it disappear from institutional memory.

Intergenerational analysis can reveal how different cohorts inherit, interpret, and alter institutional conditions. Mannheim (1952) emphasizes that generations are shaped by historical location, while life-course scholarship demonstrates that biography, linked lives, and historical time influence development (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003). These traditions have not been integrated extensively into research on basic-needs advocacy and leadership within higher education.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing participants from different periods of one institution's history into the same case. It does not treat one participant as representative of a generation or attempt to establish a definitive institutional chronology. Instead, it examines how earlier and later perspectives illuminate continuity, change, and institutional memory.

The Unequal Burden of Institutional Change

Scholarship on cultural taxation, invisible labor, emotional labor, student activism, and diversity work demonstrates that equity-related responsibilities are distributed unevenly (Ahmed, 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Linder et al., 2019; Padilla, 1994). Faculty and staff from marginalized communities may provide extensive mentoring and institutional service, while student activists may perform work that universities later claim as evidence of institutional progress.

The literature documents the existence and consequences of this labor, but questions remain about how individuals come to understand it as their responsibility. Formal roles provide only a partial explanation. People may assume work because of identity, experience, relationships, professional commitments, or the belief that no one else will act.

There is also a need to distinguish individual willingness from institutional obligation. A student may feel responsible for peers experiencing hunger, but that responsibility does not

eliminate the university's authority over resources and policy. A faculty member may choose to mentor extensively, but institutional reliance on that choice can create inequitable workloads.

This study examines how responsibility is narrated across institutional roles and generations. It asks who initiates change, who sustains it, what the work costs, and whether responsibility becomes embedded institutionally or remains dependent on particular people.

Methodological Gaps

The literatures reviewed here rely heavily on cross-sectional surveys, single-site studies, and research focused on one institutional population. These designs have produced essential knowledge, but they are not always suited to examining how meaning and responsibility develop across time or how the same institution appears from different positions.

Research focused only on current students cannot show how experiences are reinterpreted after graduation. Studies limited to administrators may explain formal decision-making while missing how policies are experienced. Research centered on advocates may overlook disengagement, while institutional histories may privilege official records over the memories of people whose labor was never formally documented.

The intergenerational, multi-positional case study used in this dissertation responds to these limitations by including students, alumni, faculty members, professional staff members, and former administrators whose relationships with Kansas State span nearly five decades. The autoethnographic throughline adds a reflexive account of my own location within the phenomenon without positioning that account as representative of participants. Chapter 3 explains these methodological decisions and their limitations in detail.

Rationale for the Present Study

Taken together, the gaps identify a need for research connecting material inequity with leadership, belonging, civic engagement, and institutional change. Existing scholarship explains each domain in considerable depth, but the relationships among them remain less clear. In particular, additional inquiry is needed into:

- How people interpret proximity to poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity.
- How those interpretations change across educational and professional roles.
- How relationships, belonging, and institutional context influence mobilization and continued engagement.
- How responsibility for equity work becomes assumed, assigned, and sustained.
- How institutional change is remembered and experienced across generations.

The present study addresses these questions through an intergenerational qualitative case study at a predominantly White, public land-grant university. It uses socially lived theorizing as its primary epistemological orientation and draws upon Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory as complementary analytical perspectives. These theories guide the inquiry without predetermining its findings and without introducing the conceptual framework developed later in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

This chapter established the historical, empirical, and theoretical foundation for the study. It began by situating contemporary basic-needs insecurity within the expansion and economic transformation of American higher education. The literature demonstrated that broader access has not eliminated inequalities in the material resources required for educational participation.

The review then examined student food and housing insecurity, emphasizing definition, measurement, unequal distribution, educational consequences, stigma, concealment, and help-seeking. Scholarship on precarity showed why unmet needs should be understood as interconnected and temporally unstable rather than as isolated deficiencies. The autoethnographic vignettes rendered selected dimensions of these conditions at the level of everyday experience while remaining situated within, and limited by, the broader literature.

The chapter next considered race, predominantly White institutional contexts, belonging, representation, and validation. These literatures demonstrated that students' material and educational experiences are shaped by histories of racial inequality and by institutional messages about recognition, authority, and membership. Belonging emerged as relational and institutionally produced rather than as a personal quality students either possess or lack.

Finally, the chapter established the five perspectives guiding the research. Socially lived theorizing legitimizes everyday experience as a starting point for knowledge while requiring critical interpretation. Critical Race Theory identifies the racialized operation of institutional power. Relational Leadership Theory explains leadership as constructed through interaction. Civic engagement scholarship clarifies the resources and pathways shaping participation. Systems Theory situates those processes within interconnected organizational structures and cultures.

The review identified a central limitation across the existing scholarship: basic needs, leadership, belonging, civic engagement, and institutional change have rarely been examined together across institutional roles and historical periods. Addressing that limitation requires a design capable of preserving lived experience while analyzing its relationship to institutional context. Chapter 3 presents that design, including the study's interpretivist-constructivist

foundations, intergenerational qualitative case-study approach, autoethnographic component, participant recruitment, data collection, analytical procedures, ethical commitments, and strategies for trustworthiness.

Chapter 3 - Methods

Chapter 2 established the conceptual and scholarly foundation for this study by examining the literature on student basic needs insecurity, structural inequality, belonging, civic engagement, and leadership while introducing the theoretical perspectives that guide this inquiry. Collectively, this body of scholarship suggests that leadership, advocacy, and institutional change are shaped not only by individual characteristics or formal positions, but also by lived experiences with inequity, relationships, and the institutional contexts in which those experiences unfold. Building upon that foundation, this chapter turns from the conceptual and theoretical framing of the study to the methodological approach used to examine these socially lived processes. Because this study seeks to understand how participants construct meaning from their experiences and how those experiences shape leadership and institutional change over time, the methodology presented here was intentionally designed to capture the complexity, context, and relational nature of those processes.

At its core, this study examines how proximity to inequity influences who becomes involved in efforts to create institutional change, what sustains that engagement over time, and how responsibility for equity-related work becomes distributed across institutional roles and generations within a predominantly White institution (PWI). These questions extend beyond whether students experience hardship. Instead, they ask how individuals make meaning of those experiences and how that meaning comes to shape leadership, civic engagement, and institutional action.

Methodological Underpinnings: An Introduction to Methods

I designed this study to address those gaps through an intergenerational qualitative case study situated at Kansas State University. Rather than examining contemporary experiences in

isolation, this study traces leadership and mobilization across multiple generations of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and institutional advocates connected through a shared organizational context. Bringing these perspectives into conversation creates an opportunity for me to examine not only how individuals experience inequity, but how institutional histories, relationships, and historical moments shape who becomes involved in creating change, how that engagement evolves over time, and why the work of institutional transformation so often becomes concentrated among those living closest to injustice. Central to this methodological approach is the recognition that inequity is never experienced apart from context. Experiences of poverty, food insecurity, exclusion, and belonging are not simply individual events. They are socially, historically, culturally, and institutionally situated experiences that shape how individuals understand themselves, others, and their responsibilities within their communities. Because these experiences are relational and dynamic, they cannot be adequately understood through methodologies that prioritize measurement alone. They require approaches capable of examining meaning-making, contradiction, memory, relationships, and the historical conditions through which leadership emerges.

I adopted a qualitative methodology because it offered the best opportunity to explore how individuals interpret their lived experiences and construct meaning from them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than seeking prediction or causal explanation, qualitative research prioritizes depth, context, and interpretation, making it particularly appropriate for investigating leadership as a socially lived process. The intergenerational case study design further allows me to examine these experiences across multiple historical periods while remaining grounded within the specific institutional context in which they unfolded.

My methodological approach is further informed by the theoretical framework explored in Chapter 2. Socially Lived Theory positions lived experience not merely as the subject of inquiry but as a legitimate source of knowledge capable of highlighting broader institutional, cultural, and structural processes. Consistent with this perspective, participants' narratives are understood not simply as accounts of individual experience but as situated forms of knowledge through which larger questions of leadership, inequity, belonging, and institutional change become visible. Methodology, therefore, is not separate from theory. Rather, it serves as the means through which the central propositions of Socially Lived Theory are investigated.

A distinguishing feature of this research is the integration of autoethnography as a methodological through-line woven throughout the research rather than presented as a separate component. Running throughout the study is my own evolving relationship with the phenomenon under investigation, from a food-insecure undergraduate student and campus organizer to graduate student, instructor, mentor, and researcher. These experiences are not included as personal backdrop or personal reflection. Instead, they function analytically, providing an additional lens through which questions of proximity, responsibility, leadership, belonging, and institutional engagement can be examined across changing institutional roles and historical moments. In doing so, autoethnography serves not only as a method of reflexive inquiry but also as a bridge connecting multiple generations of institutional experience.

This integration reflects an epistemological commitment to reflexivity and situated knowledge. As researchers, we do not stand outside the phenomena we study. Rather, we enter research carrying histories, identities, relationships, and experiences that inevitably shape the questions we ask, the relationships we develop, the interpretations we construct, and the knowledge ultimately produced (Ellis et al., 2011; Pillow, 2003). Within research examining

food insecurity, poverty, race, and educational inequity, acknowledging these relationships is not a methodological weakness but an essential component of scholarly rigor.

The remainder of this chapter outlines the philosophical assumptions that informed my study before describing the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, qualitative intergenerational case study design, and integration of autoethnography. It then details the methodological decisions guiding participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations that together shaped every aspect of my research.

Methodology is often described as a collection of procedures through which research is conducted. I have come to understand it somewhat differently. It is the means through which the primary research questions of this dissertation become answerable. By aligning philosophical assumptions, theoretical commitments, and methodological decisions, this study is designed to examine leadership not as an individual attribute but as a socially lived, relational, and historically situated process. The chapters that follow build upon this methodological foundation to explore how participants, and I alongside them, understand, navigate, and respond to inequity within higher education.

Philosophical and Epistemological Foundations

The philosophical foundations of my research acknowledge that reality is neither singular nor universally experienced. Instead, reality is understood as emerging through individuals' interactions with social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. These assumptions provide the foundation for my study's ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments.

Ontological Assumptions

Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be understood to exist (Crotty, 1998). Within qualitative inquiry, ontological assumptions shape how researchers

conceptualize the social world they seek to investigate and, consequently, influence the methodological approaches used to examine it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study is grounded in a constructivist ontology, which assumes that social reality is neither singular nor universally experienced. Rather, reality is multiple, relational, and socially constructed through the ongoing interaction of individuals, institutions, histories, cultures, and systems of power (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998).

From this perspective, higher education is not understood as a single institutional reality experienced uniformly by everyone who participates within it. Instead, it comprises multiple realities that coexist within the same organizational setting. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators may occupy the same campus, interact with the same policies, and participate in the same institutional structures, yet experience those structures in profoundly different ways. These realities are shaped by individuals' social identities, institutional roles, historical locations, relationships, and experiences with privilege, marginalization, and inequity.

The same institutional environment, therefore, may hold fundamentally different realities for different people. A campus food pantry may represent temporary assistance for one student, daily survival for another, institutional failure for an advocate, and organizational success for an administrator. Likewise, a policy intended to promote student success may be experienced as supportive by some while simultaneously creating barriers for others. Leadership itself is not assumed to exist as a fixed characteristic or universally recognized phenomenon. Rather, it exists as a socially situated process that is experienced, enacted, and understood differently across institutional contexts and lived realities.

Importantly, recognizing multiple realities does not imply that reality is arbitrary or disconnected from broader structural conditions. Although individuals experience institutions

differently, those experiences unfold within organizational, historical, political, and social systems that both constrain and enable human action. Critical Race Theory and Systems Theory reinforce this ontological position by recognizing that institutional realities are inseparable from the historical structures of power, racism, policy, and organizational systems through which they are produced and maintained (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, participants' realities are simultaneously personal and structural—they emerge through the interaction of individual lives with institutional and societal conditions that extend beyond any one person's experience.

These ontological assumptions shaped the overall design of the present study. Because reality is understood as multiple, contextual, and relational, no single participant or institutional role could provide a complete understanding of leadership, basic needs insecurity, or institutional change. Instead, the intergenerational case study was intentionally designed to examine how multiple realities intersect, diverge, and converge across students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni. Bringing these perspectives into conversation allows the study to illuminate the complexity of leadership and institutional change as phenomena that are socially lived rather than uniformly experienced.

The epistemological assumptions presented in the following section build directly upon this ontological foundation. If reality is understood as multiple, relational, and socially constructed, then understanding that reality requires an approach to knowledge that privileges lived experience, interpretation, and the meanings individuals construct through their interactions with others and with the institutions they inhabit.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and the ways knowledge is generated, understood, and justified (Crotty, 1998). Whereas ontology addresses assumptions about the nature of reality, epistemology asks how that reality can be known and whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. The present study is grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist epistemology that understands knowledge as socially situated, relationally constructed, and shaped through lived experience. From this perspective, knowledge is not an objective truth waiting to be discovered independently of those who observe it. Rather, it is constructed through individuals' interactions with one another, with institutions, and with the broader historical, cultural, and social contexts in which their lives unfold (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Consistent with this epistemological position, lived experience constitutes a legitimate and indispensable source of knowledge. Individuals who have experienced poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, institutional exclusion, or other forms of inequity possess ways of knowing that cannot be fully captured through institutional reports, quantitative indicators, or policy documents alone. Their experiences illuminate dimensions of institutional life that frequently remain invisible within dominant organizational narratives. Accordingly, participants' stories are understood not merely as descriptions of personal experience but as situated forms of knowledge that reveal how institutional systems are encountered, interpreted, negotiated, and, at times, transformed.

This understanding aligns closely with the theoretical perspectives guiding the present study. Socially Lived Theory proposes that knowledge develops through the interaction of lived experience, reflection, relationships, and the social environments individuals inhabit. Experiences become meaningful through reflection, reflection is deepened through relationships,

and these relational processes shape how individuals understand institutions, justice, responsibility, and leadership. Knowledge, therefore, is viewed as dynamic rather than static, continuously evolving as individuals interpret new experiences and negotiate changing social contexts. Participants are understood not simply as individuals recounting events, but as active interpreters whose understandings provide critical insight into the processes through which leadership, advocacy, and institutional change emerge.

Critical Race Theory further strengthens this epistemological position by challenging assumptions that dominant institutional perspectives represent objective or universal knowledge. Instead, CRT scholars argue that the experiential knowledge of historically marginalized communities provides essential insight into how systems of power and inequality operate within educational institutions (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstories and lived experiences do more than document inequity; they expose institutional assumptions, illuminate forms of exclusion that have become normalized, and reveal possibilities for institutional transformation that might otherwise remain obscured. Consistent with this perspective, participants' narratives are treated as valuable sources of institutional knowledge rather than simply accounts of individual experience.

Taken together, this epistemological stance positions knowledge as relational, contextual, and continually constructed through experience and interaction. It also provides the foundation for understanding participants as experts of their own socially lived realities. Because this study seeks to understand how experiences of inequity shape leadership, advocacy, and institutional change, participants' interpretations of those experiences are treated not merely as data to be collected, but as legitimate forms of knowledge through which these socially lived processes can be understood.

Axiological Commitments

Axiology concerns the role of values within the research process and recognizes that inquiry is never entirely value-free (Crotty, 1998). Every stage of research, from the questions scholars choose to investigate to the ways findings are interpreted and shared, is shaped by commitments, assumptions, and ethical responsibilities. Rather than attempting to eliminate these influences, qualitative research encourages researchers to acknowledge them transparently and examine how they inform methodological decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). The present study embraces this position, recognizing that research examining food insecurity, poverty, racial inequity, leadership, and institutional change is inherently value-laden because these topics concern questions of justice, opportunity, and human dignity.

At the heart of this dissertation is a commitment to the belief that higher education should not merely expand access to opportunity but also cultivate conditions in which students can fully participate, belong, and thrive. This commitment does not assume that institutions are inherently oppressive or incapable of promoting student success, nor does it reduce participants' experiences to binary narratives of oppression or resilience. Instead, it recognizes universities as complex social systems that can simultaneously expand opportunity, reinforce existing inequities, and produce divergent realities for those who inhabit them. Thus, the purpose of this research is not to evaluate institutions as wholly successful or wholly deficient but to understand how individuals experience those institutions and how those experiences give rise to pathways toward leadership, advocacy, and institutional transformation.

This value orientation also reflects a commitment to community-engaged scholarship. Throughout this dissertation, participants are understood not simply as sources of data but as collaborators whose experiences contribute essential insight into institutional life. Their stories

are treated with care, respect, and intellectual seriousness because they represent more than individual memories; they illuminate broader social, historical, and organizational processes that cannot be understood through institutional records or quantitative measures alone. This approach aligns with traditions of community-engaged and participatory scholarship that emphasize reciprocity, mutual learning, and the ethical responsibility of researchers to honor the knowledge participants bring to the research process (Israel et al., 1998; Stanton, 2008).

Closely connected to this commitment is the principle of reciprocity. Research involving communities affected by inequity has too often extracted stories without producing meaningful benefit for those whose lives become the subject of scholarly inquiry. This study seeks to intentionally approach research differently. Although no single dissertation can resolve the inequities participants describe, it can contribute to broader conversations that inform institutional practice, leadership development, and future scholarship. Throughout the research process, participants' narratives were approached not as resources to be collected but as gifts of trust carrying ethical obligations for careful interpretation, respectful representation, and responsible dissemination. In this way, reciprocity extends beyond returning findings to participants; it reflects an ongoing commitment to conducting scholarship that serves both academic and institutional communities.

If there is one value that sits at the heart of this dissertation, it is the belief that lived experiences matter. They matter not only because they reveal the consequences of institutional policies and practices, but because they illuminate possibilities for creating institutions that are more equitable, more responsive, and more fully capable of supporting the people they serve. These commitments provide the ethical foundation for the methodological choices described throughout this chapter and reinforce the core premise of the dissertation, that leadership for

institutional change begins by listening carefully to those who have lived closest to the inequities institutions seek to address.

Methodological Approach

Qualitative Inquiry

Methodology should never be chosen simply because it is familiar or widely accepted. It should be chosen because it is capable of answering the questions we are asking. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The research questions guiding my dissertation ask how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change across time. More specifically, they seek to understand how individuals interpret experiences of inequity, how those experiences influence their sense of responsibility, and how they ultimately become translated into sustained commitments to collective action. These are questions of meaning, interpretation, identity, and process. They are, at their core, a methodological approach capable of highlighting the complexity of human experience rather than reducing it to measurable variables or predetermined categories.

For that reason, I employ a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry offered the best opportunity to examine phenomena that are context dependent, socially constructed, and deeply embedded within human experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than seeking to identify universal laws or establish causal relationships, qualitative research prioritizes understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning within the social worlds they inhabit. This emphasis aligns closely with the conceptual framework developed throughout Chapters 1 and 2, which positions leadership not as an

individual trait but as a socially lived process emerging through relationships, reflection, institutional context, and lived experience.

My decision to employ qualitative methods reflects the nature of the phenomenon itself. Leadership, belonging, advocacy, and institutional change are not static variables that exist independently of those who experience them. Instead, they are dynamic, relational, and continually negotiated within specific historical, cultural, and organizational contexts. Likewise, experiences of food insecurity, racial marginalization, and poverty cannot be fully understood through measures of prevalence or frequency alone. Two individuals may report similar experiences of food insecurity while interpreting those experiences in profoundly different ways. Quantitative measures can identify that both students experienced food insecurity. They cannot fully explain why one experience became the foundation for leadership while another did not.

This distinction is central to my study. Existing scholarship has already established that student basic needs insecurity is widespread and associated with numerous educational, psychological, and health-related outcomes (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020). Consequently, the purpose of this research is not to determine whether food insecurity exists or to estimate its prevalence within higher education. Rather, it is to understand how lived experiences with inequity are interpreted, how they shape individuals' relationships with institutions, and how they become connected to leadership, advocacy, and institutional transformation. Such questions require participants to tell stories, reflect upon pivotal moments, describe relationships, and make sense of experiences unfolding across years and, in many cases, decades. These forms of understanding are uniquely accessible through qualitative inquiry.

When I first began thinking about this study, I found myself returning to a question that no survey could answer: Why do some people who experience inequity carry on while others spend decades trying to change the institution itself? That question is not about frequency. It is about meaning. It is about interpretation. It is about the stories people tell themselves regarding what happened, why it mattered, and what responsibility, if any, they carry because of it. Those are fundamentally qualitative questions.

Qualitative inquiry also recognizes that meaning is often discovered through conversation rather than extracted through standardized instruments. I never approached interviews as opportunities to verify predetermined hypotheses or confirm existing theoretical assumptions. Instead, they served as spaces in which participants reflected upon experiences, revisited memories, and connected events across time. In many instances, participants described recognizing patterns in their own lives only as they narrated those experiences during the interview process. This understanding is consistent with interpretivist traditions that view knowledge as emerging through dialogue and reflection rather than existing as fixed information awaiting collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The emphasis on narrative is particularly significant given the central premise of this dissertation. Stories do more than recount events; they reveal how individuals organize experience, assign meaning to hardship, construct identities, and understand their relationships to others and to institutions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). A participant's account of visiting a campus food pantry, organizing a student initiative, mentoring another student, or challenging an institutional policy is not valuable simply because it documents what occurred. It is valuable because it reveals how that individual understands the experience, what meanings they attach to it, and how those meanings influenced subsequent decisions, relationships, and

commitments. For this reason, narrative becomes an essential methodological tool for examining the developmental processes through which leadership becomes socially lived.

Choosing a qualitative methodology was, thus, never simply a methodological decision. It was a philosophical one. It reflects a philosophical commitment to understanding leadership as it is experienced rather than as it is presumed, measured, or abstractly defined. If I hope to understand how proximity to inequity becomes transformed into leadership and institutional change, then the stories of those who have lived closest to that inequity are not simply one possible source of evidence; they are the most appropriate place to begin.

The Need for a Qualitative Case Study Design

Case study methodology is particularly well suited for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are inseparable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Rather than isolating variables from the environments in which they occur, qualitative case studies examine how meaning is constructed through the interaction of individuals, organizations, histories, and social contexts. This approach aligns with the purpose of this study, which seeks to understand how lived experiences with inequity shape leadership, advocacy, and institutional change within a single university.

The phenomena examined in this study—including student basic needs insecurity, belonging, leadership, civic engagement, and institutional transformation—are inherently contextual. They emerge through relationships among students, faculty, staff, administrators, institutional policies, organizational culture, and broader systems of inequality. Examining these processes outside the institutional setting would obscure the very conditions through which they develop. A qualitative case study therefore provides an appropriate methodological framework

for examining these interconnected processes holistically rather than as discrete variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Consistent with constructivist case study traditions, the purpose of this research is not statistical generalization but the development of a rich, contextualized understanding of a particular case that can generate theoretical insight and illuminate processes relevant to similar institutional settings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). The emphasis is on understanding how leadership and institutional change are experienced, interpreted, and enacted within a specific organizational context.

Why an Intergenerational Case Study?

A distinctive feature of this study is its intergenerational case study design. Rather than examining a single cohort of students or one institutional stakeholder group, this research brings together participants whose relationships with Kansas State University span multiple decades, institutional roles, and historical contexts. This design reflects the central assumption underlying the study: leadership is not simply an individual act occurring within a single moment but a socially situated process that develops across relationships, institutional histories, and evolving organizational contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The decision to adopt an intergenerational design emerged directly from the research questions. This study seeks not only to understand how individuals become engaged in efforts to address student basic needs insecurity and broader inequities, but also how those commitments are sustained, transmitted, and reshaped across time. Questions concerning institutional change, leadership development, and organizational learning cannot be fully understood by examining a single generation of participants because these processes unfold across historical periods and through the accumulated work of multiple actors (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 2006).

An intergenerational perspective also recognizes that universities possess institutional memories that extend beyond formal policies and archival records. Organizational cultures are shaped through the cumulative actions of students, faculty, staff, and administrators whose advocacy, relationships, and everyday leadership gradually influence institutional priorities and practices (Kezar, 2018; Weick, 1995). Many contemporary initiatives addressing student basic needs exist because earlier generations recognized unmet needs, challenged prevailing assumptions, and created new pathways for institutional response. Examining participants across generations makes it possible to understand not only what institutional change looks like, but also how it emerges, evolves, and endures.

Finally, the intergenerational design aligns with the theoretical framework guiding this study. Socially Lived Theory conceptualizes leadership as a developmental and relational process that emerges through lived experience, critical reflection, relationships, and collective action over time. An intergenerational case study provides the methodological structure necessary to examine these processes longitudinally within a single institutional context, revealing how experiences with inequity become transformed into enduring commitments to leadership and institutional change across successive generations of university life.

Kansas State University as the Bounded Case

Consistent with qualitative case study methodology, this study is bounded by a single institutional case: Kansas State University. Bounding the study within one institution provides the contextual depth necessary to examine how leadership, student basic needs insecurity, belonging, and institutional change are experienced within a shared organizational environment while remaining attentive to the historical, cultural, and relational factors that shape those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Kansas State University was selected because it represents an information-rich case (Patton, 2015). As the nation's first operational land-grant university, Kansas State is grounded in a historic mission of expanding educational opportunity, public service, and community engagement. At the same time, like many institutions of higher education, it continues to grapple with questions of access, equity, student success, and institutional responsibility. These characteristics make Kansas State an appropriate setting for examining how members of a university community recognize inequities, mobilize around unmet student needs, and contribute to institutional change.

The university also provides a particularly compelling context because of its sustained history of efforts to address student basic needs. Over several decades, students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and community partners have contributed to initiatives supporting food access, student well-being, and broader equity efforts. Rather than emerging from a single office or administrative initiative, these efforts reflect the cumulative work of individuals and groups whose leadership developed through relationships, advocacy, and collective action. Examining these efforts within a single institutional context makes it possible to understand how leadership is cultivated, sustained, and transmitted across generations.

Kansas State further represents an important context because it is a predominantly White institution (PWI). As discussed in Chapter 2, experiences of belonging, leadership, and institutional participation are shaped by race, socioeconomic status, and broader systems of power. Examining these dynamics within one institutional setting allows the study to explore how structural inequities and organizational contexts intersect while maintaining the contextual depth central to qualitative case study research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012).

Finally, Kansas State provides a unique opportunity to examine institutional change through the perspectives of individuals occupying multiple roles within the same organizational system. Participants include current and former students, alumni, faculty, staff, administrators, and community advocates whose relationships with the university span multiple decades. Collectively, these perspectives illuminate how institutional knowledge is created, how commitments to equity evolve, and how leadership is experienced differently across positions while remaining situated within the same organizational context.

My own relationship with Kansas State University also informed the study. I have experienced the institution as a graduate student, student advocate, and faculty member. Rather than reducing the need for rigor, this familiarity required ongoing reflexivity to distinguish institutional knowledge from institutional assumption (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Throughout the research process, I engaged in continual reflexive practice to critically examine how my positionality shaped data collection, interpretation, and meaning making. This reflexive stance is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Taken together, these characteristics make Kansas State University more than the physical location of the research. It constitutes the bounded case through which the socially lived processes of leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change are examined. By focusing on one institution across multiple generations of participants, this study seeks to understand not only how leadership emerges in response to inequity, but also how those efforts become embedded within the evolving life of an institution.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participant selection was guided by purposeful sampling, with criterion sampling and maximum variation sampling serving as complementary strategies to identify participants

capable of addressing the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, qualitative sampling prioritizes participants who possess firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation and can provide conceptually meaningful insight into the experiences being studied (Lincoln et al., 2018; Patton, 2015).

Purposeful sampling aligned closely with the aims of this study, which sought to understand how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership, belonging, advocacy, and institutional change. These questions required participants whose experiences intersected meaningfully with these phenomena rather than a randomly selected sample of the university community. Accordingly, participants were selected because they could illuminate different dimensions of leadership as a socially lived and relational process within the bounded case of Kansas State University.

Criterion sampling established the inclusion parameters for participant selection (Patton, 2015). Participants were required to (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) have a substantive connection to Kansas State University as a current or former student, alumnus, faculty member, staff member, administrator, or institutional leader, and (c) possess direct experience with, or sustained involvement in, student basic needs, food insecurity, equity initiatives, student advocacy, leadership development, or institutional change. Importantly, participants were not selected solely because they had personally experienced food insecurity. Rather, each occupied a position that enabled them to contribute meaningful insight into how institutional inequities are experienced, recognized, and addressed.

To support the study's intergenerational design, maximum variation sampling was used to intentionally recruit participants representing diverse institutional roles, lived experiences, and

historical perspectives while remaining connected through the same organizational context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Participants included current students, recent graduates, alumni, faculty, professional staff, administrators, and community advocates whose relationships with Kansas State University spanned multiple decades. This variation allowed the study to examine both continuity and change across generations while identifying common patterns in how leadership, belonging, and institutional responsibility developed over time.

Recruitment proceeded through purposive outreach using publicly available institutional records, university websites, organizational histories, and professional networks to identify individuals whose experiences aligned with the study's conceptual aims. Prospective participants received individualized email invitations describing the purpose of the study, participation requirements, confidentiality protections, and informed consent procedures. Because data collection occurred during the summer months, recruitment relied primarily on electronic communication, facilitating participation from both current members of the university community and former students and administrators no longer residing near campus.

As data collection progressed, snowball sampling was used as a supplementary recruitment strategy (Noy, 2008). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to recommend additional individuals who met the established inclusion criteria and could contribute meaningful perspectives to the study. Snowball sampling proved particularly valuable for identifying individuals connected to earlier periods of institutional history whose contributions to student advocacy and institutional change were not readily identifiable through public records. All referrals were independently evaluated using the same sampling criteria before recruitment invitations were extended.

Sampling and recruitment remained iterative throughout the study, consistent with qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). As interviews were completed and preliminary analysis progressed, recruitment decisions were informed by the developing conceptual needs of the dataset rather than predetermined quotas. Recruitment concluded when the participant group provided sufficient conceptual breadth and depth to address the research questions and interviews consistently generated rich, theoretically meaningful accounts of leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change across generations within the bounded case of Kansas State University.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. This approach is well suited to qualitative inquiry because it allows researchers to explore how individuals interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and understand the social contexts in which those experiences occur (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Consistent with the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to examine how participants understood the relationships among lived experience, leadership, belonging, student basic needs, and institutional change while maintaining a common interview protocol aligned with the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

The interview protocol consisted of broad, open-ended questions that invited participants to reflect on their educational and professional journeys, experiences with student basic needs and institutional inequities, leadership development, relationships that shaped their engagement, and their perspectives on institutional change. Although each interview followed the same general protocol, probing questions were used to clarify responses, encourage elaboration, and

explore emerging ideas, allowing participants to emphasize the experiences they considered most meaningful (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, a format that accommodated participants located across multiple geographic regions and supported participation during the summer data collection period. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. With participants' informed consent, each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' language and narrative structure. Throughout analysis, attention was given not only to participants' words but also to features of their narratives, including pauses, emphasis, emotional expression, and moments of reflection, which often provided important contextual insight into how participants made meaning of their experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Consistent with an interpretivist approach, interviews were conducted as conversational exchanges rather than rigid question-and-answer sessions (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Participants were encouraged to guide the direction of their narratives, revisit significant experiences, and reflect on how their understandings had evolved over time. This flexible, relational approach generated rich narrative accounts that illuminated not only what participants experienced, but also how they interpreted those experiences and connected them to broader processes of leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change.

Autoethnography as Method

A distinctive feature of this study is the integration of autoethnography alongside semi-structured interviews. Autoethnography recognizes the researcher's lived experience as a legitimate source of inquiry, using systematic reflection to examine broader social, cultural, and institutional processes (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than attempting to remove

myself from the research, I acknowledge that I am situated within the phenomenon I seek to understand. Consistent with the interpretivist and constructivist foundations of this study, my experiences became another source of data to examine alongside participant narratives, existing scholarship, and the conceptual framework guiding this research.

This study draws specifically on analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). My experiences are not presented as stand-alone autobiographical accounts or as explanatory frameworks for participants' stories. Instead, they function as analytic entry points that are continually placed in conversation with participants' narratives and the broader institutional context. At times, my experiences converged with those of participants; at other times, they complicated or challenged my assumptions. These moments of convergence and divergence strengthened the analysis by encouraging continual reflexivity rather than privileging my own perspective.

This approach was particularly appropriate given the focus of the study. The questions guiding this research—how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership and institutional change—are questions I have also navigated. My relationship with Kansas State University has evolved over time as a food-insecure undergraduate student, campus food pantry user, student advocate, graduate student, instructor, mentor, and faculty member. These experiences do not make me an objective observer of the case; they make me a participant within it. Recognizing that position required ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process.

Accordingly, autoethnography served not as a substitute for participant perspectives, but as one source of evidence among many. By situating my experiences alongside those of participants, I was able to examine how institutional change is experienced, interpreted, and

remembered across generations while remaining transparent about the role my own experiences played in shaping the research.

Reflexive Journaling and Field Notes

Reflexive journaling and field notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document methodological decisions, analytic insights, and my evolving interpretations of the data (Emerson et al., 2011; Finlay, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following each interview, I recorded observations about the conversation, emerging questions, initial analytic ideas, and reflections on my own assumptions and responses. These notes often captured contextual details—such as pauses, emotion, emphasis, or unexpected connections—that were not fully conveyed through transcripts alone.

Because my own experiences intersected with many of the topics discussed by participants, reflexive journaling also served as an important strategy for examining how my positionality influenced data collection and interpretation (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, I used reflexive writing to critically consider how my experiences shaped the questions I asked, the patterns I noticed, and the meanings I constructed throughout the study.

The journal also became an integral part of the analytic process. As interviews accumulated, I documented emerging patterns, revisited earlier interpretations, and recorded decisions regarding coding, category development, and theoretical connections. This recursive movement between data collection, reflection, and analysis reflects the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry, where understanding develops through continual engagement with both participants' narratives and the researcher's evolving interpretations (Charmaz, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began alongside data collection and continued throughout the study. Rather than treating analysis as a discrete phase that followed interviewing, I approached it as an iterative process in which data collection, reflection, coding, and interpretation continually informed one another (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview shaped subsequent interviews, prompted new analytic questions, and led me to revisit earlier transcripts, reflexive journal entries, and relevant literature as my understanding of the phenomenon evolved.

This recursive approach was essential given the purpose of the study. My goal was not simply to identify common experiences, but to understand how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shaped leadership, belonging, advocacy, and institutional change across generations. Doing so required moving beyond descriptive categorization to examine how participants made meaning of their experiences, how those meanings evolved over time, and how individual narratives converged and diverged within the broader institutional context of Kansas State University.

Throughout the analytic process, I moved continually between participants' narratives, reflexive memos, theoretical literature, and the conceptual framework guiding the study. As interviews accumulated, patterns began to emerge across participants who occupied different institutional roles and historical moments. Rather than viewing coding as an end in itself, I used coding as a tool to deepen my understanding of these broader processes.

Consistent with the interpretivist orientation of this study, analysis was understood as an interpretive process rather than a purely technical one. The procedures described in the following sections, including transcript preparation, initial coding, focused coding, constant comparative

analysis, and theme development, are presented sequentially for clarity. In practice, however, analysis unfolded recursively through continual movement between the data, reflexive engagement, and emerging interpretation (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

Preparing the Data

Following each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' language and narrative structure. I reviewed every transcript while simultaneously listening to the original recording to ensure accuracy, completeness, and fidelity to participants' intended meanings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). During this process, I also documented initial analytic observations, including recurring language, emotional expression, pauses, and emerging connections across interviews. These observations were recorded through analytic memos and reflexive journal entries and informed subsequent stages of analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Emerson et al., 2011).

To protect confidentiality, all transcripts were reviewed for identifying information. Participants requesting confidentiality were assigned pseudonyms. Two participants, Bernard Franklin and Sarah Barrett, elected to be identified by name because of their longstanding public leadership roles and the historical significance of their contributions to Kansas State University. Their identities are presented with their explicit informed consent.

Once finalized, transcripts were imported into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis software program used to organize transcripts, codes, analytic memos, and supporting documents. Dedoose facilitated the management and retrieval of data throughout the analytic process; however, the interpretive work remained my responsibility. Thus, meaning emerged through sustained engagement with participants' narratives, reflexive memo writing, and

continual comparison across interviews rather than through the software itself (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021).

Preparing the data also represented the beginning of analysis. As transcripts accumulated, I repeatedly reread interviews individually and comparatively, allowing me to recognize recurring ideas, identify points of convergence and divergence, and begin viewing participants' narratives as interconnected accounts of leadership, belonging, institutional responsibility, and change across generations. These early observations informed the coding process that followed and strengthened the iterative relationship between data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

Coding proceeded in two iterative stages informed by constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) and established qualitative coding practices (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the process, coding remained closely connected to analytic memo writing and the constant comparative method, allowing codes and interpretations to evolve alongside continued engagement with the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2021). Rather than viewing coding as a process of simply categorizing interview responses, I used coding to examine how participants constructed meaning from their experiences and how those meanings related to the broader processes of leadership, belonging, advocacy, and institutional change.

Initial Coding

Initial coding involved a close, line-by-line reading of each transcript to identify meaningful actions, experiences, relationships, and processes reflected in participants' narratives (Charmaz, 2014). At this stage, I remained intentionally open to the data, resisting predetermined categories and allowing participants' stories to guide the analysis. Whenever appropriate, I

employed Dedoose coding, using participants' own words as early codes to preserve the language through which they understood and described their experiences (Saldaña, 2021).

Initial coding emphasized remaining close to participants' narratives while documenting emerging ideas through analytic memos. I paid particular attention to recurring experiences, emotionally significant moments, turning points, relationships, and participants' interpretations of leadership, belonging, and institutional responsibility. Memo writing accompanied coding throughout this stage, providing space to record questions, challenge assumptions, and document emerging conceptual connections before moving toward broader interpretation (Charmaz, 2014).

Focused Coding

Focused coding involved revisiting the initial codes to identify those that were most conceptually significant and analytically useful for addressing the research questions (Charmaz, 2014). Rather than emphasizing frequency alone, I considered the explanatory power of individual codes and their ability to illuminate broader developmental processes across participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This stage shifted the analysis from describing individual experiences to examining relationships among participants' narratives across institutional roles and generations.

As patterns emerged, I continually compared codes within and across transcripts using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process involved comparing participants' experiences across different institutional positions, historical periods, and social identities while remaining attentive to both convergence and divergence within the data. Throughout my focused coding process, analytic memos continued to play a central role. Memos documented evolving interpretations, relationships among codes, and emerging theoretical insights, creating an ongoing record of analytic decision making (Charmaz,

2014; Saldaña, 2021). These memos ultimately informed theme development, the findings presented in Chapter 4 and the construction of the conceptual model presented in Chapter 5.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to participant recruitment, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with the approved protocol. While IRB approval established the procedural foundation for ethical research, I viewed ethics as an ongoing responsibility that extended beyond institutional requirements and informed every stage of the research process, including recruitment, interviewing, analysis, and representation (Ellis, 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Orb et al., 2001; Tracy, 2010).

Before each interview, participants received an informed consent document outlining the purpose of the study, participation requirements, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality procedures, and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were encouraged to ask questions before the interview began and remained free to decline any question they did not wish to answer. Because the study explored experiences related to food insecurity, poverty, racial marginalization, belonging, and institutional change, interviews were conducted with an emphasis on empathy, respect, and psychological safety. Participants guided the depth and direction of their narratives, and moments of silence, emotion, or reflection were treated as meaningful aspects of the conversation rather than interruptions to it.

Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms for all participants except Bernard Franklin and Sarah Barrett, who elected to be identified by name because of their longstanding public leadership roles and historical contributions to Kansas State University. Both

provided explicit informed consent for the use of their names. Audio recordings, transcripts, analytic memos, reflexive journals, and related research materials were stored on password-protected, university-approved systems accessible only to me and my dissertation chair. All research materials will be retained and destroyed in accordance with IRB requirements.

Beyond these procedural safeguards, my primary ethical responsibility was to represent participants' experiences with care, accuracy, and respect. Throughout analysis and writing, I returned continually to participants' narratives to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the meanings they intended to convey. Consistent with the relational commitments underlying this study, I approached participants not simply as sources of data, but as individuals who entrusted me with experiences that deserved thoughtful and ethical representation.

Researcher Positionality

Some researchers choose their research topic. Others spend years realizing that their research topic quietly chose them.

I have returned to that idea often while writing this dissertation because it has forced me to ask a question I never anticipated asking myself: When did this research actually begin? The obvious answer would be graduate school, where I learned how to design qualitative studies, write interview protocols, and think critically about research. Another reasonable answer would be my first sociology course, where I encountered concepts such as structural inequality, food insecurity, and intergenerational poverty for the first time. Yet the longer I spent listening to participants reflect on their own journeys, the more I realized that our stories rarely begin where we think they do.

Again and again, participants traced their commitments to leadership back to experiences that seemed ordinary at the time but became transformative only in retrospect. Their stories

challenged me to examine my own in much the same way. Within qualitative inquiry, researchers are not viewed as neutral instruments standing outside the phenomena they seek to understand. We bring histories, identities, values, and experiences that inevitably shape the questions we ask, the relationships we build, the meanings we construct, and the knowledge ultimately produced (Finlay, 2002; Lincoln et al., 2018; Pillow, 2003). The goal, therefore, is not to eliminate those influences or pretend they do not exist. Rather, it is to acknowledge them transparently, examine them critically, and remain accountable to the ways they shape the research process. This commitment to reflexivity became particularly important throughout this research because my relationship to the phenomenon under investigation extends well beyond academic interest.

Long before I encountered terms such as food insecurity or basic needs insecurity, I knew what it felt like to stand beside my grandmother in a food pantry line at The Big Bell. At the time, I thought I was helping her choose tomatoes that would last a little longer or produce that was less bruised than the rest. Years later, I realized I had been learning something much more significant. I was learning what scarcity felt like long before I had language to describe it. My grandparents became the steady foundation of my childhood while my mother battled addiction and our family navigated the uncertainty that accompanied it. Looking back as an adult, I recognize that those experiences shaped far more than my understanding of poverty. They shaped the questions I found worthy of asking, the problems that captured my attention, and ultimately the scholar I would become. They did not make me an expert on the lives of others, but they profoundly influenced why questions of food insecurity, belonging, leadership, and institutional responsibility have never felt abstract to me.

That proximity also required continual humility. One of the greatest misconceptions within qualitative research is the assumption that shared experiences necessarily produce shared understanding. They do not. During interviews, participants occasionally described experiences that felt strikingly familiar: a first visit to a campus food pantry, the quiet calculations involved in stretching limited resources, or the complicated emotions associated with asking for help. Those moments undoubtedly resonated with my own experiences. Yet resonance is not equivalence. Two people can live through remarkably similar circumstances and carry away entirely different meanings. My responsibility as a researcher was therefore not to search for my own story within participants' narratives, but to become increasingly curious about where our experiences converged, where they diverged, and what those similarities and differences revealed. Rather than assuming understanding, I learned to ask participants to tell me what those moments meant to them, even when I believed I understood them myself.

My positionality also shaped the relationships that developed throughout the research process. Participants often spoke with remarkable openness about experiences of hunger, racial marginalization, advocacy, institutional frustration, and belonging. I do not believe that openness emerged simply because of my interview protocol. I believe it was also influenced by the relational nature of the conversations themselves. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that leadership is socially lived and that knowledge is co-constructed through relationships. The interview process reminded me that research operates in much the same way. Participants were not passive sources of information. They were collaborators in the construction of understanding. More than once, participants paused in the middle of an interview and remarked that they had never thought about a particular experience in that way before. Those moments reminded me that

qualitative interviews are not simply places where knowledge is collected. They are often places where new understanding begins to emerge, for participants and researchers alike.

Perhaps the most significant way my positionality evolved throughout this study was through changing institutional roles. I have experienced Kansas State University as a food-insecure student, student advocate, graduate teaching assistant, and now as a faculty member. Each role revealed a different institution and expanded my understanding of leadership, responsibility, and institutional change. Questions that once seemed straightforward as a student became more complex as an educator. This evolution reinforced one of the central ideas of this dissertation: proximity to inequity is not fixed. It changes as individuals move through institutions, assume new responsibilities, and encounter systems from different vantage points.

For these reasons, I view positionality not as a limitation to acknowledge and move beyond, but as an ongoing ethical responsibility. Throughout the study, my experiences functioned as a reflexive lens through which I continually examined my assumptions and analytic decisions. Through analytic memos and reflexive journaling, I remained attentive to where participants' stories resonated with my own and where they challenged my assumptions. This process reinforced a lesson that extends beyond this study: our lived experiences shape the questions we ask, but it is through listening carefully to the experiences of others that those questions become deeper, more nuanced, and ultimately more meaningful.

Trustworthiness

Recognizing my positionality within this research heightened my responsibility to conduct the study with methodological rigor and transparency. Rather than viewing trustworthiness as something established after data collection and analysis were complete, I approached it as an ongoing commitment embedded throughout the research process. Consistent

with qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness was strengthened through deliberate attention to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

These principles guided every stage of the research, from participant recruitment and data collection to coding and interpretation. The strategies described below were designed to enhance the rigor, transparency, and coherence of the study while remaining consistent with its interpretivist and constructivist foundations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Credibility

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative analysis, triangulation, and continual reflexive practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than treating interviews as isolated accounts, I engaged in repeated readings of transcripts throughout coding and analysis, allowing interpretations to develop gradually as new interviews, analytic memos, and relevant literature informed my understanding (Charmaz, 2014). Credibility was further strengthened through the study's intergenerational design, which brought together perspectives from students, alumni, faculty, staff, administrators, and community leaders across multiple decades. These diverse perspectives allowed me to examine both convergence and divergence across participants' narratives. I also triangulated interview data with reflexive journals, analytic memos, documentary evidence, and historical materials to situate participants' experiences within broader institutional and theoretical contexts (Patton, 2015). Together, these strategies strengthened the depth and credibility of the study's interpretations.

Transferability

The purpose of this study was not to produce statistically generalizable findings, but to develop a rich, contextualized understanding of leadership, advocacy, and institutional change within a single institutional case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To support transferability, I employed thick description (Geertz, 1973), situating participants' narratives within the historical, organizational, relational, and cultural context of Kansas State University. By providing detailed descriptions of the case, participants, and institutional environment, readers are equipped to determine the extent to which the findings may resonate with or inform similar contexts. Although this study is grounded in one predominantly White, land-grant institution, the processes identified throughout the analysis, including the relationships among lived experience, leadership, belonging, and institutional responsibility, may offer insight for scholars and practitioners working across diverse higher education settings.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability were supported through a transparent and systematic research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the study, I maintained an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding iterations, analytic memos, reflexive journals, and the development of themes and conceptual relationships. My process of analysis remained iterative rather than linear, with earlier interpretations continually revisited as new interviews and emerging patterns deepened my understanding (Charmaz, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Reflexive journaling further strengthened confirmability by providing an ongoing record of how my assumptions, positionality, and analytic decisions were examined throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003).

Methodological Limitations

Like all qualitative research, this study is bounded by methodological decisions that shaped both the questions it could answer and the conclusions that could be drawn. Rather than viewing these boundaries as weaknesses, I understand them as reflections of the study's purpose and design. Acknowledging these limitations provides important context for interpreting the findings and considering their application beyond this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

First, this study was intentionally designed as a single, intergenerational case study situated at Kansas State University. As a qualitative case study, its purpose was to develop a rich, contextualized understanding of leadership, student basic needs, belonging, and institutional change within one institutional setting rather than to produce statistically generalizable findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Because higher education institutions differ in their histories, cultures, missions, and student populations, the findings should be understood within the context of this bounded case. Readers must determine the extent to which the processes identified in this study may be applicable to other institutional settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Second, although the intergenerational sample intentionally included participants representing diverse institutional roles and historical periods, it does not represent every perspective within the university. The findings reflect the experiences and meanings constructed by those who chose to participate. Other members of the university community may have interpreted similar events differently or emphasized different aspects of institutional life. Such variation is expected within interpretivist qualitative inquiry, which recognizes that social reality

is understood through multiple, contextually situated perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2018).

Third, all interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom during the summer months. While virtual interviewing limited opportunities for in-person observation, it also increased accessibility by allowing participants from multiple geographic locations to participate. Participants elected to keep their cameras on throughout the interviews, supporting rapport and allowing observation of nonverbal communication that enriched interpretation of their narratives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

This study also reflects a particular moment in the ongoing history of Kansas State University. Institutions evolve over time as leadership, policies, student populations, and organizational priorities change. Consequently, the findings represent participants' understandings of the institution during a specific historical period rather than a definitive account of institutional life. Future research may reveal how these processes continue to evolve.

Finally, as an interpretivist researcher, I acknowledge that my positionality shaped every stage of the research process. While I employed reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, triangulation, and an audit trail to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study (Charmaz, 2014; Finlay, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), another researcher may have emphasized different aspects of the data or developed alternative interpretations. Rather than diminishing the study, this possibility reflects the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach guiding this study and the procedures used to examine how lived experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and institutional inequity shape leadership, advocacy, belonging, and institutional change. Grounded

in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, this research employed an intergenerational qualitative case study design situated at Kansas State University. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, analytic autoethnography, and reflexive journaling and were analyzed through an iterative process of coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theme development (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the study, methodological decisions were guided by commitments to reflexivity, trustworthiness, and ethical qualitative inquiry, ensuring that both participants' narratives and my own autoethnographic experiences were interpreted with transparency, rigor, and care.

Having established the methodological foundation for the study, Chapter 4 presents the findings. Drawing from participants' narratives alongside my autoethnographic reflections as sources of data, the chapter examines how lived experiences became pathways into leadership, advocacy, and institutional engagement across generations. Together, these narratives provide the empirical foundation for the conceptual contributions and theoretical model developed and presented in the fifth final chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of an intergenerational qualitative case study examining how proximity to inequity shaped leadership, advocacy, belonging, and responsibility for institutional change within higher education. As detailed in Chapter 3, the study drew on semi-structured interviews with eleven participants whose relationships with Kansas State University extended from the early 1970s to the present. Autoethnographic accounts were analyzed alongside participant interviews as an additional source of data. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across generations, institutional roles, and lived experiences while preserving the historical and relational contexts in which participants' accounts were situated.

The findings encompass experiences with food insecurity and other basic-needs challenges, as well as poverty, racial marginalization, exclusion, and unequal access to institutional support. Participants described how these experiences influenced what they noticed, how they interpreted inequity, when they became involved, and what responsibility they believed individuals and institutions held for creating change. Their accounts also demonstrated that engagement did not follow a single path. For some, it began with survival and material hardship. For others, it developed through identity, mentorship, education, professional responsibility, or encounters with students whose experiences made institutional inequities more visible.

The overarching research question guiding this study was:

How does proximity to inequity shape who mobilizes, who sustains engagement, and who bears responsibility for institutional change within higher education?

Four interrelated research questions informed the analysis:

1. *How do participants describe the origins and evolution of their engagement in food insecurity, basic needs, and broader equity-related efforts?*
2. *In what ways does lived proximity to poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and other forms of structural inequity influence perceptions of responsibility for initiating and sustaining change efforts?*
3. *How do experiences of belonging, representation, and institutional inclusion shape leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement over time?*
4. *How do institutional structures, cultures, and historical contexts facilitate, constrain, or shape the sustainability of mobilization efforts across generations?*

The chapter is organized according to these four questions. Each section begins with the patterns most directly responsive to that question and then presents the participant and autoethnographic evidence supporting them. This structure does not suggest that participants experienced leadership, belonging, advocacy, and responsibility as separate processes. Their accounts frequently crossed analytic boundaries. An experience of material hardship, for example, could shape an individual's sense of belonging, sharpen the recognition of institutional inequity, and later inform a commitment to advocacy. To avoid repeating evidence, each account is presented where it contributes most directly to the findings and is referenced, rather than reproduced, when it also informs another research question.

Autoethnographic accounts are incorporated selectively throughout the chapter. They are not included as reflective interruptions or as substitutes for participant testimony. Instead, they function as data that illuminate points of convergence, tension, and difference between my experiences and those described by participants. Each account is positioned within the analytic

pattern to which it most directly contributes and is identified clearly so that readers can distinguish my narrative position from participant evidence. This approach preserves the methodological role of autoethnography while ensuring that participant voices remain central to the case.

Table 4.1. Research Questions and Corresponding Analytic Patterns

Research question	Analytic patterns
RQ1: Origins and evolution of engagement	1. Survival, scarcity, and financial precarity created early understandings of inequity. 2. Identity and belonging shaped participants' earliest understandings of inequity. 3. Relationships introduced participants to new ways of understanding themselves and their responsibilities. 4. Institutional experiences transformed awareness into leadership and advocacy. 5. Participants rarely described themselves as "future advocates" or leaders.
RQ2: Proximity and responsibility	1. Responsibility shifted from an individual understanding to a moral and relational commitment. 2. Responsibility was cultivated through relationships and lived proximity. 3. Participants rejected the idea that responsibility belonged only to those closest to inequity. 4. Participants rejected deficit explanations and relocated responsibility to institutions. 5. Responsibility generated substantial invisible labor. 6. Lived proximity changed what participants could see.
RQ3: Belonging, representation, and inclusion	1. Belonging provided a foundation from which leadership became possible. 2. Representation expanded participants' sense of possibility rather than merely increasing visibility. 3. Participants transformed the belonging they received—or wished they had received—into opportunities for others. 4. Belonging remained continually negotiated.
RQ4: Institutional and historical conditions	1. The institution frequently relied on individuals to perform equity work instead of assuming institutional responsibility. 2. Relationships transmitted advocacy across generations. 3. Institutional culture influenced whether equity work became normalized, reactive, or sustained. 4. Participants envisioned an institution that reduced inequity rather than celebrated individual resilience.

Participant Overview

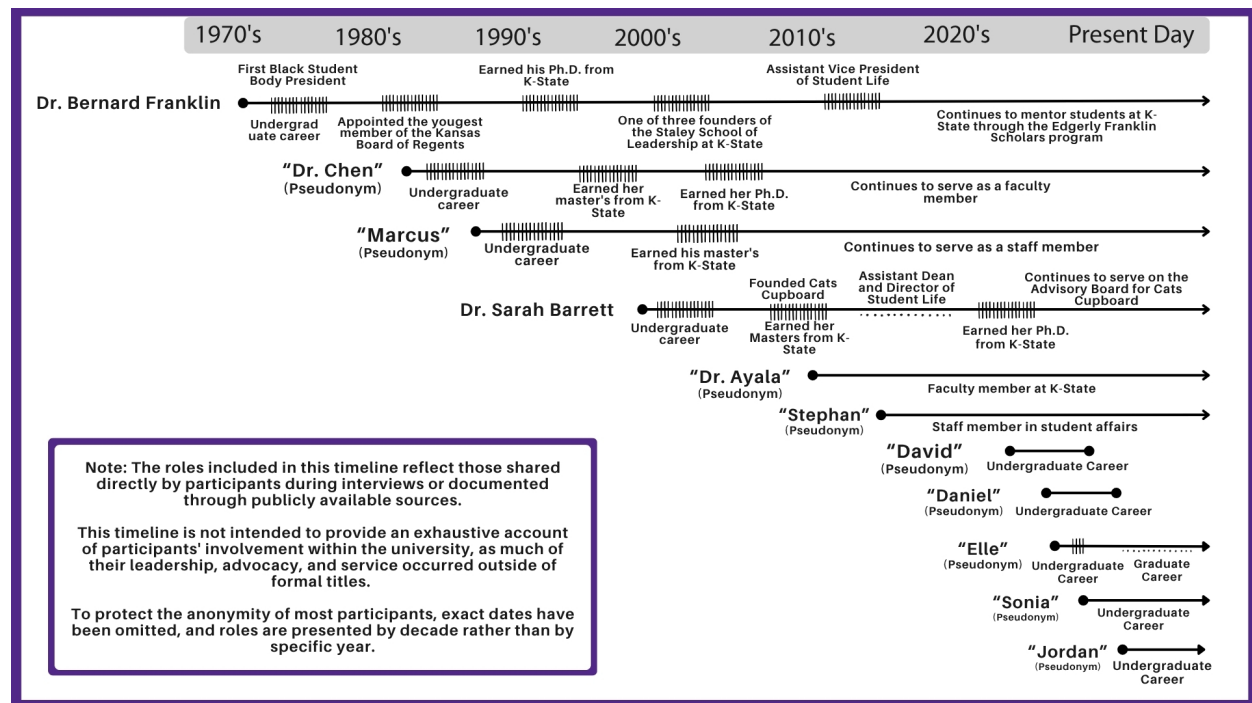
The participant group included eleven current students, alumni, faculty members, professional staff, and former administrators whose experiences with Kansas State University spanned more than five decades. This intergenerational composition provided multiple perspectives on how inequity was encountered, interpreted, and addressed under changing historical and institutional conditions.

Participants entered the institution from different social positions and occupied different levels of institutional authority. Some described firsthand experiences with poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, racial marginalization, and exclusion. Others discussed mentoring students, developing basic-needs initiatives, leading organizational change, or advocating for more equitable policies and practices. Several participants occupied more than one of these positions over time—for example, moving from being a student experiencing institutional barriers to becoming a faculty member, staff member, or administrator responsible for responding to them.

The participant group therefore made it possible to examine institutional change from several vantage points without treating any participant as representative of an entire generation or constituency. Current and recent students described contemporary conditions of student life. Alumni reflected on earlier institutional climates and on how they came to understand their own leadership. Faculty and staff described how advocacy operated within professional roles, including responsibilities that were not always formally assigned or institutionally recognized. Former administrators contributed perspectives on both the possibilities and limitations of organizational change.

Pseudonyms are used for nine participants, and identifying details have been limited where necessary to protect confidentiality within a single institutional case. Dr. Bernard Franklin and Dr. Sarah Barrett represent intentional exceptions. Both held publicly documented roles connected to events and initiatives examined in this study, and both provided explicit informed consent to be identified by name.

Figure 4.1. Participant Timeline of Involvement With Kansas State University



Note. Figure 4.1 situates participants across the institutional timeline. The figure identifies selected roles and experiences shared in interviews or documented through publicly available sources. It is not intended as a comprehensive record of participants' service or advocacy, much of which occurred outside formal titles. Rather, it illustrates the generational reach of the case and the overlapping periods during which participants encountered, interpreted, and attempted to change the institution.

Research Question One: Origins and Evolution of Engagement

The first research question asked:

How do participants describe the origins and evolution of their engagement in food insecurity, basic needs, and broader equity-related efforts?

Participants did not identify a single point at which they became advocates. Their engagement developed through accumulated experiences that altered how they understood inequity, themselves, and their capacity to act. Five patterns organized these accounts: survival and financial precarity created early understandings of inequity; identity and belonging shaped what participants noticed; relationships introduced new responsibilities and possibilities; institutional experiences transformed awareness into action; and participants rarely imagined themselves as future advocates or leaders before becoming involved.

These patterns describe the origins and development of engagement rather than offering a fixed sequence through which every participant progressed. Some participants encountered several conditions simultaneously, while others understood the importance of earlier experiences only retrospectively. Across their accounts, however, advocacy appeared less as a predetermined aspiration than as a developing response to what participants had lived, witnessed, and learned through relationships.

Survival, Scarcity, and Financial Precarity as Early Understandings of Inequity

For several participants, inequity was first understood through the practical work of surviving it. Poverty, food insecurity, unstable housing, immigration-related uncertainty, and working-class family life were not initially described as abstract social problems. They were conditions participants and their families learned to navigate. The language of inequity often came later, after participants encountered educational settings, relationships, or professional roles that helped them reinterpret what they had experienced.

Sarah Barrett located the origins of her engagement in the material insecurity that shaped her adolescence. College planning remained distant because her attention was directed toward meeting immediate needs:

“In my life, I'm going to go way back in my life, especially in high school, it was the priority and the focus was really just on survival.”

“So it was like, will we have place to go home to tonight, will we have food on the table, like throughout my entire high school career, I never even had a bed to sleep on.”

“So it wasn't really like college was top of mind, and thinking about, like, next steps in my future, it was more, like, present focus.”

“College was like not even a thing to me. I didn't even really (she pauses)

“Like, I took the ACTs, but didn't even really, like, send out my scores, definitely didn't send them to K-State.”

Barrett's financial insecurity continued after she enrolled at Kansas State. Each semester required her to determine whether she could remain in college while also helping support her family:

“Every single semester that I was there, I sat in my financial aid advisor's office.”

“And he told me that I did not have enough money to stay there.”

“And so when he said, 'You can't afford to be here,' I heard, 'You don't belong here.'”

“Part of the burden financially for me too was that I was still sending money home to keep the lights on and keep a roof over my younger siblings' head.”

“I really... I couldn't make the numbers work even working multiple jobs throughout the day.”

Her account showed that financial precarity affected more than whether she could pay a bill. Being told repeatedly that she could not afford to remain at the university became entangled with whether she believed she belonged there. At the same time, the visible markers of her campus involvement concealed the conditions she was managing privately. Barrett served as a Wildcat Warm-Up director while experiencing food insecurity:

“I was actually a Wildcat Warm-Up director, so that's like the top notch. There's like orientation leaders and then the directors are like over their peers. I was one of the directors, so I am, like, something, right? (She laughs.)

“So I was one of five directors over the orientation leaders .”

“It just... it kills me, the juxtaposition between, like, the power that I held, being someone that people looked up to, and someone that people thought was like, 'Oh, she's outgoing, she's successful, like, oh, look at this great student.'”

One experience during an orientation event remained particularly vivid. As others discarded food left over from the event, Barrett saw a resource that could sustain her for several days:

“One of the things that we would do was like part of orientation had this big party at the Union. And we're, like, cleaning up.” (She smiles.)

“And I actually have pictures from this day, which is so interesting because it takes me back.”

“Yeah, we were cleaning up and we had done like sandwich platters and, you know, random things and people were just throwing away the food.” (She pauses)

“And I was like, what? We are wasting so much food!”

“So I took home a couple of the platters.”

“Mind you, walked home, right? Like I didn't have a car in college and things like that, but walked home with these giant platters from the Union. And...I just ate off of those.”

Barrett continued eating from the platters as the food deteriorated, modifying what remained so that it would last longer:

“You know, like, after day 3, it gets a little mealy, you know, like the lettuce and the tomato, and you can, like, scrape that off, and then, you know, maybe you want to fry the meat, like the ham. Because it's also getting a little mealy, and then by the very end, which at the moment, I'm like, why didn't it occur to me that, like, deconstruct the sandwiches? (She laughs.) But I just left them whole.”

“And so by, like, you know, your 20th sandwich. Ten days in. I would just take off the bread, toast it under the oven or the broiler, and then just make my sandwich.”

“And I lived off of repurposed food, free food, anything I could get my hands on. Because if not, I might not have anything to eat. Like, I just didn't have enough money to pay for food when there are so many other expenses.”

This was not an isolated strategy created in college. Barrett understood it as part of a longer practice of “making do” under conditions of scarcity. She illustrated how scarcity could narrow even the range of options a person allowed herself to consider:

“Even after, like for a while, like after college, like I didn't even have a shower curtain in my bathroom. I used a sheet that was put up with hair clips. Because I didn't even allow myself to walk down the aisle that had the shower curtains. (She pauses.)

And I think about, like, a poverty mindset. And not even poverty mindset, just like a... What is it? Like a lacking... I don't know what the word is, like you just... yeah, a lacking

mindset, like you can't even open yourself up to the possibility, which now, looking back, as someone who's financially stable."

"I could have got a plastic shower curtain for 99 cents. But scarcity overrides that judgement. If you know you don't have that money to even spend, why even walk down the curtain aisle? Why would I even do that? Because I knew the money wasn't there. Like, I knew I couldn't spend it, so why even walk down there?"

"You just make do, and so that's what I did throughout my entire time. I made do."

"I knew how to get food, I knew how to go without."

Barrett's account established an important distinction within this pattern. She did not describe hardship as automatically producing advocacy. Instead, her experiences gave her practical knowledge of scarcity—how it shaped decisions, remained hidden, and coexisted with visible success. The connection to advocacy emerged later, when her professional responsibilities placed her in conversation with students whose experiences resembled her own:

"But when I became an administrator. My charge was to essentially advocate for students so that they could matriculate; So they could be successful on campus. And I found myself listening to all these stories of all these students, non-traditional, first-generation, third-generation students trying to make it work." (She pauses.)

"And I saw myself in them."

For several participants, awareness of inequity began before they possessed language for describing it. Poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, immigration-related uncertainty, and working-class family life were initially experienced as conditions to navigate rather than as structural problems to analyze. These experiences nevertheless shaped what participants later recognized in students and institutions.

Autoethnographic Account: Arriving With Everything I Owned

Barrett's description of entering college with an existing knowledge of scarcity converged with my own transition into higher education. I arrived at California State University, Chico with everything I owned packed into a black Honda Civic. I did not understand that detail as analytically significant at the time. It was simply how I moved to college.

I was not leaving a childhood bedroom behind. There was no closet of belongings waiting for me during academic breaks and no family home where I could store what did not fit. Everything I owned traveled with me. The move felt less like a temporary departure for college than an attempt to establish distance from the instability that had defined much of my childhood.

While unloading my car, I watched another student move in with the help of her parents. Reusable grocery bags held fresh fruits and vegetables. Cases of drinks, frozen foods, snacks, and household supplies followed. In my car were two large boxes of ramen noodles, canned goods taken from my grandmother's pantry, plastic water bottles, and several bags of Hot Cheetos my grandfather had quietly saved for me.

At the time, I experienced the difference primarily as embarrassment. I did not yet have the language to connect what I saw to unequal access to money, family support, transportation, food, and the other resources that make entering college easier. I only knew that our arrivals looked different.

That difference became more visible after I befriended another student, Maddie. The first time I visited her apartment, her refrigerator was full. Flavored drinks lined the shelves; snacks filled the cabinets; and the freezer contained foods I considered luxuries. She casually mentioned that her mother placed a grocery order for her each week. I laughed and responded as though this arrangement seemed ordinary. Internally, I was stunned.

Several weeks passed before I invited her to my apartment. My refrigerator was nearly empty except for water bottles on the bottom shelf. I had no snacks to offer her. I was rationing Hot Pockets, ramen noodles, canned goods, and the remaining bags of Hot Cheetos for as long as I could make them last.

What I remember most clearly is not hunger alone, but the isolation surrounding it. Like Barrett, I knew how to go without. What I did not know was how to acknowledge being poor within an environment where poverty seemed invisible. I had entered the university with extensive knowledge about surviving scarcity, but without language for understanding why students occupying the same campus could experience college so differently.

Daniel similarly described entering higher education without the forms of familial knowledge many institutions presume students possess. As a first-generation student whose parents immigrated to the United States, he learned to navigate college without an established roadmap:

“I’m a first-generation college student, so there wasn’t really a roadmap in my family for what college was supposed to look like. My parents couldn’t tell me what FAFSA was, what office hours were, or how to pick a major because they had never gone through that process themselves. It was a lot of figuring things out as I went.”

“Both of my parents immigrated to the United States. For part of my childhood, both of them were undocumented.”

“Growing up, I didn’t fully understand what that meant. I just knew they worked incredibly hard. They took jobs nobody wanted. They sacrificed financially. They sacrificed time with family. They carried stress that I don’t think children are supposed to understand. But I did my best to make sense of our situation.”

“As I got older, I realized that every opportunity I've had exists because of sacrifices they made.”

Marcus also traced his understanding of unequal opportunity to childhood and to the collective practices through which communities responded to limited resources:

“I grew up understanding that opportunity isn't distributed equally.”

“I also grew up understanding that communities often survive because people take care of one another.”

“That perspective has stayed with me.”

His own education required continuous employment:

“I'll tell you this, Jess, I struggled my way through school.”

“From the time I was 16 I was working, some summers, I worked two jobs, and that didn't change when I went to college, I just had more bills.”

Stephan likewise described financial instability as a familiar condition in the working-class community where he grew up. His earliest understanding of basic needs came from observing the everyday ways families and neighbors filled gaps for one another:

“Honestly, my awareness started before I ever worked in higher education. I grew up in a community where financial instability wasn't unusual. People helped each other out because they had to. Extended families often lived together, neighbors shared meals with each other, especially for the holidays, and local community organizations filled gaps when resources were limited.”

“Those experiences taught me that resilience and hardship often exist simultaneously. One doesn't cancel out the other.”

“I think growing up in a working-class family made me very aware that financial hardship isn't always visible.”

Across these accounts, participants' earliest understandings of inequity developed through conditions they initially experienced as ordinary features of family and community life. They learned how to stretch food, work while attending school, support relatives, navigate unfamiliar systems, and recognize hardship that was not readily visible to others. These experiences did not determine that participants would become advocates. They did, however, provide knowledge that later affected what participants recognized in institutional settings and in the lives of other students.

The next pattern examines a different but overlapping origin of engagement: how racial identity, exclusion, and the search for belonging shaped participants' earliest awareness of inequity.

Identity and Belonging Shaped Early Understandings of Inequity

Material hardship was not the only condition through which participants first became aware of inequity. Several participants described learning about power, exclusion, and difference through racialized experiences that began well before college. These encounters shaped how participants understood themselves, what they looked for in higher education, and which institutional conditions they later recognized as barriers to belonging.

Elle traced this awareness to one of her earliest memories. As a young child, she experienced racial exclusion before she possessed the language to explain it:

“I remember being the only black child in my kindergarten class and I remember when there were finally two of us; I was in second grade.”

“I remember a young girl who I really enjoyed playing with during recess, her name was, Leila, I’ll never forget that, and I remember her mother coming to visit our class one day, and of course, she saw us playing together.”

“The very next day, when I went to play with Leila again, she told me her mother said she couldn’t play with me because I was Black.”

Years later, Elle still remembered the confusion and sudden awareness produced by that encounter:

“Because I was fucking Black, Jess.” (she pauses)

How sad is that? At that moment in time, I was both so confused, so naive and yet so blatantly aware of the world I was in.” (she pauses)

“I was only five.”

Elle’s account located her earliest understanding of inequity in an interpersonal encounter, but the meaning she assigned to it extended beyond one childhood friendship. The experience taught her that her racial identity could affect whether other people believed she belonged, even in an ordinary setting such as a classroom or playground.

That awareness continued through her later educational experiences. Elle described being racially isolated as an athlete and encountering comments that reinforced her difference from her peers:

“I would say my experience was again quite different from that of my peers. I was originally the only Black athlete on my team, and yeah, people would say racist things.”

Although Elle later found meaningful opportunities for campus involvement, those experiences did not erase her earlier encounters with exclusion. Instead, they became part of the context through which she understood the importance of creating conditions in which other

students could participate without having to separate their racial identities from their institutional lives.

Bernard Franklin similarly entered college with an understanding of education shaped by racial separation. He did not remember high school as a place where he had developed a positive academic or leadership identity:

“I wasn't involved in high school. In fact, I hated high school. Kids fought at my high school. The Black kids and the white kids were separate. So, my notion of school was not very positive.”

“So I didn't come with any leadership from high school. Not at all.”

Franklin's account is important because it separates early awareness of inequity from an early identification with leadership. He understood racial separation, but he did not arrive at Kansas State believing that he would become a student leader or institutional advocate. His later engagement developed only after relationships on campus helped him understand that his experiences and perspective could become a basis for action.

For Jordan, racial identity shaped both what he understood about predominantly White educational environments and what he sought when he entered college. Reflecting on his schooling before Kansas State, he described becoming aware of how little many of his White classmates understood about Black people:

“Going to a predominantly white high school, as my prominent years of learning, and just being around them, and just seeing how little they knew about Black people.”

At Kansas State, Jordan actively sought a form of community he had not experienced in the same way before college:

“Being able to finally get to a school where I'm not the only Black person.”

“Wanting to be in a community of Black people.”

“Trying to push the productivity of the Black student body and the university at a predominantly white institution.”

Jordan did not characterize this search for community as merely a preference for joining students with similar backgrounds. He described it as necessary to understanding himself:

“Not having my family here and being completely on my own. Listen, I am very receptive to white people, but I need to be more around people of color, or Black people, just to better understand who I am as a Black man.”

“Not knowing who I am as a man and just openly needing to be around my people can be very dangerous in not knowing that.”

Finding Black community gave Jordan a stronger foundation from which to understand his identity and his capacity to contribute to the lives of others:

“I know who I am as a Black person because I've been around Black people.”

“I've been around people wanting the same things.”

“I can be a productive Black male in society.”

“I can help my brothers.”

Jordan's account demonstrated that belonging was not simply an outcome of his involvement. It was one of the conditions that made involvement possible. His growing connection to Black students helped him understand himself more clearly and gave his campus participation a collective purpose.

David also arrived at Kansas State with substantial experience navigating predominantly White settings. At the time, he viewed the university's racial environment as familiar rather than unexpected:

“At eighteen, I would've told you I chose K-State because it felt like a good school, it was close enough to home without being too close, and I liked the opportunities I thought it would give me.”

“I knew it was a predominantly White institution, but honestly, growing up in Kansas, that wasn't something that scared me.”

“It was familiar.”

“I had spent most of my life navigating predominantly White spaces, so I figured college would be more of the same.”

Nearly a decade later, David understood his decision differently. What he had wanted from college was not only a degree or access to particular opportunities. He had also been searching for a setting in which he could imagine a different future:

“Now, at twenty-seven, I think what I was really looking for was possibility.”

“I wanted to be somewhere that challenged me, somewhere that would open doors, somewhere I could leave different than I arrived.”

“And I did.”

“Just...not always in the ways I expected.”

David's retrospective account revealed the difference between entering an institution accustomed to racial isolation and experiencing full belonging within it. Familiarity with predominantly White environments helped him anticipate how to move through the university, but it did not eliminate the need for community, recognition, or institutional change.

Autoethnographic Account: Learning Advocacy Through Culture and Community

My own earliest encounters with collective advocacy occurred before I understood them as political participation. Beginning in first grade and continuing into high school, I participated

in *Danza Azteca*. Through dance, ceremony, regalia, and community gatherings, cultural identity was not something discussed only in the abstract. It was enacted collectively.

My grandparents, brother, cousin, and I traveled in my grandmother's white minivan to gatherings and demonstrations across California and, at times, to Arizona and Nevada. Arizona held particular significance because of my family's Pascua Yaqui roots. We packed the van with regalia, food, water, lawn chairs, and whatever else would be needed for the day. These trips connected family, Indigenous identity, Mexican American cultural traditions, and collective action in ways I did not yet know how to separate.

In Oxnard, California, where I grew up, demonstrations supporting farmworkers and the United Farm Workers movement were part of my early understanding of community life. I remember walking through city streets alongside dancers and protesters, hearing chants of "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*." At the time, I understood the words through repetition, movement, and the people surrounding me before I understood their broader political history.

My grandfather—my tata—usually drove ahead to where the procession would end. He would leave my grandmother with a lawn chair, an umbrella, and an ice chest before returning in the minivan to follow behind the march. He carried water, extra drumsticks, and bullhorns. When the heat became too much, he picked up dancers who could no longer continue. Blisters on the soles of my feet felt normal and, in some ways, became evidence that I had contributed.

These experiences taught me that advocacy included more than the people holding signs or speaking into microphones. It also depended on those carrying water, preparing food, transporting people, watching children, tending to exhausted dancers, and ensuring that everyone reached the end of the route. I saw collective action sustained through forms of care that were necessary but not always publicly recognized.

My tata frequently reminded us that what we possessed had not simply been given. Someone had struggled for it, and we therefore carried an obligation to protect and extend it for those who came after us. I can still hear him saying, “*What I do for you, I get nothing from it. Nada. Zero.*” He would then explain that he did it without expecting repayment because it was the right thing to do.

At the time, I did not describe these experiences as leadership development or equity education. They were part of childhood, family, and cultural belonging. In retrospect, they provided an early understanding that identity carried history, that rights and resources had been contested, and that responsibility could extend beyond individual benefit.

My mother offered a different model of advocacy. She spoke when she believed someone was being treated unfairly, often loudly and regardless of who might become uncomfortable. As a child, I found this embarrassing. I would ask her to stop, conscious of the attention gathering around us. Her response was consistent: “*No Jessica, that's bullshit. People shouldn't be treated like that.*”

What embarrassed me then was her refusal to remain quiet when silence would have been easier. Only later did I recognize how much of that disposition I carried with me: the instinct to notice when something was wrong and the difficulty of pretending otherwise once I had seen it. My early understanding of advocacy therefore emerged not from a formal title or program but from culturally situated experiences of family, protest, care, and speaking against unfair treatment.

The accounts of Elle, Franklin, Jordan, David, and my own childhood differed substantially in their circumstances. They nevertheless showed that identity shaped early understandings of inequity through both exclusion and connection. Racialized encounters taught

participants that belonging could be withheld, while culturally and racially affirming relationships demonstrated what collective belonging could make possible.

These experiences did not lead automatically or uniformly to institutional advocacy. Elle's childhood exclusion, Franklin's segregated schooling, Jordan's search for Black community, David's familiarity with predominantly White environments, and my participation in culturally grounded collective action each acquired additional meaning through later relationships. The following pattern examines how mentors, peers, educators, and trusted institutional figures helped participants reinterpret their experiences and recognize responsibilities they had not previously imagined.

Relationships Introduced New Ways of Understanding Self and Responsibility

Participants' engagement did not develop from lived experience alone. Mentors, peers, educators, and trusted institutional figures helped participants interpret what they had experienced, understand how institutions operated, and imagine themselves as capable of responding. These relationships did more than provide encouragement. They introduced participants to forms of knowledge, responsibility, and participation that had previously seemed inaccessible.

Bernard Franklin's transition to Kansas State was made possible in part through relationships that helped his family view the university as a place where he could be supported. He remembered university representative Meryl Shmidt speaking directly with his parents before he enrolled:

"So Meryl sat and told them that, you know, we're in the second year or so of recruiting. Meryl promised that he would take good care of me. He would look out for me. He gave that kind

of father consent that satisfied my mom and dad that K-State, indeed, would be, you know, a place where Bernard could grow and learn and would not be harassed.”

This assurance was significant because higher education was unfamiliar to Franklin’s family. He recalled making the transition to college largely on his own:

“I don't remember my mom and dad even driving with me to move in. I think I packed up my car, and I drove. I just don't remember them being there.”

“College was very foreign to them. I think they were somewhat intimidated. Intimidated, one, that they didn't know the process. And I think they probably were a little intimidated about what we would do. It's kind of like, 'Well, you checked in at high school. Why don't you just check in when you get to college?' I think that's kind of what they thought. You just kind of arrived there, and you start.”

“I remember other families. Their moms came in, and they set up their bed, and they got their boxes out.”

Recruitment brought Franklin to the university, but relationships with older student activists changed how he understood his position within it. Shortly after arriving, he became connected with students involved in antiwar, women’s rights, and other activist movements:

“I got familiar with a group of anti-Vietnam, women's rights... and I don't remember how I got involved with this group, but this was a group, and I don't mind saying it, that was accused of burning down Nichols Gym. They were pretty radical.”

Franklin did not believe that he initially impressed these students through expertise or an already developed political perspective. Instead, he thought they recognized his willingness to learn:

"I think they saw curiosity in me. I don't think I said anything that was eye-opening or illuminating to them. I just think they saw my wide eyes. They saw my eagerness."

"And so I interacted with them. I kept going, and so me and a Latina became, like, prodigies, students of theirs."

The older students provided Franklin and Nadine with an informal education in institutional operations. Their conversations addressed subjects that first-year students would not ordinarily be expected to understand:

"We would meet almost nightly for weeks where they were pouring into us how a college campus runs." "How budgets are set up."

"It was like a foreign language to Nadine and me. We had no idea, as freshmen, what the heck they were talking about."

These relationships made the institution more legible. They showed Franklin that university structures were not fixed or beyond students' reach and that recruitment created obligations extending beyond admitting Black students. The older activists also communicated that Franklin and Nadine would be responsible for continuing work their mentors could not complete before graduating:

"The seniors that we met... They infused Nadine and I with this sense of responsibility that we couldn't just come here and sit back and let K-State be... Silo Tech... ag... whatever. We needed to come in and really bring them, not to their knees, but bring them to a point where they understand: 'If you're going to recruit us, you've got to be sensitive to our needs.'"

Franklin was explicit that he did not arrive at this responsibility independently:

"And so I would have never taken that on without them seeing leadership in me and saying, 'We think you can do it.'"

“Not necessarily seeing leadership in ourselves, we took the mantle and said, 'Okay, they think we can do this. Let's go.'”

The relationship between recognition and action was central to Franklin’s account. His mentors first saw a capacity that he did not yet see in himself. Acting on their confidence then allowed him to develop confidence through experience:

“And then once you start seeing success, then you say, 'Okay, let's keep going.'”

“Let's keep moving it.”

Daniel similarly learned about food insecurity and institutional support through peers rather than formal university communication:

“Nobody gave a presentation during orientation. Nobody talked about food insecurity in class.”

“I learned because another student actually helped me. And that relationship seriously made all the difference.”

“Later, another friend told me about emergency grants K-State offered.”

“Again, something I would've never known otherwise.”

For Daniel, these relationships revealed not only the existence of resources but also a limitation in how students encountered them:

“That's what really struck me. So much support exists, but students often only find it through word of mouth and by then, they're already in a state of need.”

His account showed peers functioning as informal interpreters of the institution. Students shared knowledge that had not reached them through orientation, coursework, or official communication. Receiving help also changed Daniel’s understanding of how consequential a single relationship could be for someone attempting to navigate an unfamiliar system.

Sonia likewise described relationships as central to her decision to attend Kansas State and to the development of her academic interests. Her initial interest in environmental science was connected to the effects of environmental conditions on communities with which she identified:

“During high school, I was in an environmental science course that introduced me to a lot of environmental factors that impact BIPOC communities...”

“A community that I certainly am centered around, especially the Hispanic community, since I am from Kansas City, Kansas.”

Her commitment to Kansas State developed through contact with people who made the institution feel more navigable:

“What really brought me to be committed to K-State was the opportunity to meet those advisors, make those connections...”

“...allow me to establish friendships, connections...”

“...which I believe is ultimately important when you're coming to college with the goal of making those connections.”

Those relationships provided an entry point into educational experiences that broadened Sonia's understanding of food systems and their implications:

“Being exposed to our agriculture sector and our food system on a global perspective allowed me to really open my eyes and not look at things from such a narrow perspective.”

“I wanted to learn about things.”

“I wanted to explore the complexity of our food system.”

“I wanted to make sure I understood it before I had an actual definition for it.”

Elle also identified a relationship as the point at which food insecurity became more than a general concern. Her participation in the Global Food Systems Leadership secondary major brought her into contact with information and people who helped her connect a preexisting concern for others with a more specific understanding of hunger:

“Once I learned about food insecurity I actually became very interested in it. I really wanted to help. I thought it was important for people to actually be involved in making changes in the world.”

“What really got me was when I first met you, Jess, through the Global Foods program. You really taught me the ins and outs of it.”

Elle connected that new knowledge with concerns she had carried for years but had not previously organized around a particular issue:

“I had always felt very strongly when I saw homeless people. Or people that couldn't eat. Driving through the poorer areas of town. I just felt very strongly about trying to address why these people are struggling. I mean, I just couldn't make sense of why they do not have the basic things that they need?”

Her account made my own role within the case visible. I was not only collecting Elle's later reflections; I had been part of the relational context through which she first developed a more detailed understanding of food insecurity. Including this interaction as data requires acknowledging that participant and researcher experiences did not begin at the interview. Our prior relationship shaped the knowledge Elle brought to the conversation and the way she described its development.

Autoethnographic Account: Learning to Build a Case

My relationship with Marianne Paiva similarly changed how I understood advocacy. As an undergraduate, I believed recognizing a problem and identifying a plausible response should be enough to produce action. Students had unused meals remaining on their dining plans while other students were struggling to eat. A meal-donation program appeared to offer a direct way to connect those resources. I assumed the apparent logic of the idea would make its value self-evident.

Marianne challenged that assumption. She did not dismiss my anger or ask me to become less invested. She showed me that entering institutional conversations required more than being certain that a problem existed. We needed evidence demonstrating the prevalence of student food insecurity, the number of unused meals, and students' willingness to participate in a donation program.

With her guidance, I developed and distributed surveys, examined existing research, and learned to present the proposed program as an evidence-based response rather than an individual appeal. The process changed how I understood the relationship between experience and institutional action. My experience allowed me to recognize the problem, but research helped me communicate it in a form that administrators could evaluate and act upon.

The experience also changed how I understood myself. In sociology courses, I encountered terms that described circumstances I had lived without being able to name. I went home and searched for those terms, moving from one article to another as though I were finding a book of explanations for my life. At times, I read scholarly descriptions of poverty, food insecurity, racial inequality, and incarceration and thought, *“well yeah, I could’ve told you that,”* or *“all they had to do was come to my neighborhood and they would’ve seen that times 10.”*

Some of the scholarship was difficult to understand, even when it described experiences familiar to me. I remember thinking that the articles were not written for people like me to read. They seemed written for other scholars, including people who might never have experienced the conditions being examined. That recognition introduced another possibility: I could become a scholar who studied these issues from the knowledge of having lived them and who wrote in ways that people from my family and community could understand.

Marianne's mentorship did not create my concern about hunger. It helped transform that concern into a way of asking questions, gathering evidence, and navigating institutional decision-making. As in Franklin's account, the relationship made unfamiliar processes more legible. It also allowed me to imagine a role for myself that I had not previously considered.

Relationships continued to shape my engagement beyond the meal-swipe initiative. In fall 2018, I enrolled in a sociology of human stress course taught by Marianne. She invited students to help provide a meal at Safe Space Winter Shelter, an emergency shelter operating in temporary locations such as churches and gymnasiums. I initially volunteered in part because I knew there would be a home-cooked dinner.

Once there, I met people whose circumstances reminded me of home. Only weeks earlier, my mother's husband—the father of my three younger brothers—had been deported to Mexico. His sudden absence left my mother supporting the household with one income. She subsequently lost her housing, and she and my brothers began staying with relatives while she continued struggling with addiction.

The people I met at the shelter did not feel distant from my family. Their experiences made the boundary between the person providing assistance and the person needing it feel unstable. I continued returning, first as a volunteer and later as an overnight shelter worker

completing twelve-hour night shifts while attending classes and working at the Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry. The work gave me a form of hope: if people in Chico were creating places of care for those experiencing instability, perhaps someone elsewhere was doing the same for families like mine.

That relationship did not resolve my family's circumstances, nor did it remove my own financial insecurity. It gave my concern somewhere to go. Mentorship, participation, and proximity connected personal experience to concrete opportunities for action.

Across participants' accounts, relationships served several distinct functions. They made unfamiliar institutions understandable, shared information that formal channels had failed to communicate, connected personal concern with opportunities to participate, and affirmed capacities participants had not yet claimed for themselves. Relationships did not merely recruit participants into existing work. They changed how participants interpreted their experiences and what they believed they could or should do in response.

The next pattern examines how institutional involvement, coursework, employment, and encounters with students turned this developing awareness into more sustained forms of leadership and advocacy.

Institutional Experiences Transformed Awareness Into Leadership and Advocacy

Relationships gave participants access to new knowledge and possibilities, but institutional experiences provided the settings in which that awareness became sustained involvement. Coursework, student organizations, employment, service programs, and professional roles placed participants in recurring contact with inequities that could no longer be understood as isolated events. Through these experiences, participants learned how institutional

decisions were made, discovered resources that were often difficult to locate, and identified opportunities to act within the roles they occupied.

Daniel described participating in several forms of campus leadership during his undergraduate career:

“Honestly, I stayed pretty busy.”

“I served in Student Government, held a leadership position within my fraternity, participated in several university committees, and spent a lot of time working with communities throughout Kansas through different service and engagement initiatives.”

Although these activities appeared different from one another, Daniel understood them as connected by a shared intention:

“Those experiences all looked different, but they were connected by this idea of trying to leave things a little better than I found them.”

Participation also taught him how the university operated and whose perspectives were most likely to shape its decisions:

“I learned how institutional decisions get made, who gets invited into those conversations, and unfortunately who often gets left out.”

Daniel did not describe becoming involved in food insecurity through a formally assigned advocacy position. Instead, he incorporated the issue into the spaces where he already had access:

“It wasn't through an official position. It started with conversations. Once I realized how common food insecurity was, I couldn't stop noticing it. Whenever opportunities came up in Student Government or other organizations, I tried to bring those issues into the conversation. I

wasn't necessarily leading campus-wide food security initiatives, but I advocated wherever I had influence."

His engagement became more personal when his own financial circumstances made him one of the students he had begun noticing:

"Honestly...when I became one of those students."

"I was working two jobs while carrying a full course load, and despite doing everything people tell you you're supposed to do, I still struggled to afford groceries."

A friend recognized what Daniel had been presenting as humor:

"One day, a friend noticed I was constantly talking about budgeting or joking about skipping meals until payday. But I think she knew I wasn't joking."

"She asked, 'Have you ever been to Cats' Cupboard?'"

"I literally had no idea what she was talking about."

Learning that the university operated a food pantry produced both relief and a broader realization about the number of students who might be struggling:

"First, relief."

"Second, complete shock."

"I couldn't believe something like that existed."

"Then I realized if a university had created a food pantry, there had to be far more students struggling than I ever imagined."

Daniel's experience with Cats' Cupboard changed the scale at which he understood the issue. His immediate need led him to a resource, while the existence of that resource indicated that his circumstances were not unique. Looking back, he described a shift from focusing on his own survival to questioning how institutional systems functioned:

“Early on, I wanted to solve my own problem.”

“Now I think much more about systems.”

“How do we build institutions where students don't have to rely on luck or a helpful friend to know that resources exist?”

Elle’s institutional involvement developed through a related process. Learning about food insecurity through the Global Food Systems Leadership program gave her a more specific understanding of hunger, and she carried that awareness into subsequent campus and professional roles:

“I kind of took that understanding into every role that I was doing. I became involved in SNAP work on campus.”

“I didn't really know anything about SNAP at the time. Through dietetics I also learned about WIC. Now I'm working for a job where we discuss the student lunch program, the summer foods program, and also the child and adult care program that all feeds people who are hungry.”

Through these roles, food insecurity became visible as a condition affecting people across educational and community settings. Elle described reaching a point at which she could no longer overlook the possibility that students around her were going without food:

“There would be people who you don't even know that are coming to class and they're starving. What is it if I have a snack in class and someone else doesn't. I just couldn't unsee it.”

Jordan’s experience with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program also transformed personal knowledge into a resource he could share with other students. He spoke directly about receiving SNAP while attending college:

“Being a former and current SNAP recipient. I feel like we all need to be on SNAP as college students.”

“I feel like we should utilize the money that we are essentially entitled to.”

“Being able to have 100, 150 extra dollars, or 50 extra dollars, for food can go a long way. Even with the prices of food, I still think it's beneficial to have extra money in your pocket to eat.”

Knowing how to access SNAP changed Jordan's confidence when he encountered students experiencing circumstances similar to his own:

“Just learning that I can help people with the knowledge I have really changes my confidence when I come across someone that actually are like me and need the help.”

For Jordan, institutional knowledge became a form of practical advocacy. His experience did not remove his own need for assistance. It allowed him to help other students identify and navigate a resource that could affect their ability to eat.

Professional roles produced similar changes for faculty and staff participants. Dr. Chen initially understood faculty work through the responsibilities formally recognized by the institution:

“When I first accepted this position, I thought my primary responsibilities would be teaching, research, and service. Those are the things listed in the faculty handbook.”

Her interactions with students revealed another set of responsibilities that did not appear in the formal description of her position:

“What I didn't realize was that there was another job description that wasn't written down anywhere...Mentor...Translator...Advocate...Sometimes therapist...Sometimes big sister.”
(She pauses) “Occasionally stand-in mom.” (She smiles)

“Those responsibilities don't show up in annual evaluations the way publications do, but they're every bit as real.”

Dr. Chen did not describe mentoring and advocacy as roles she deliberately pursued when she entered the faculty. They developed through repeated encounters with students:

“Oh, it absolutely developed naturally.”

“I always tell people that students choose their mentors long before mentors choose their students.”

What appeared initially to be academic advising often became a conversation about the broader conditions affecting a student's ability to remain and succeed at the university:

“I've had students come into my office for what they said was a fifteen-minute advising appointment. Two hours later we're still talking. (she laughs)

“Not about classes.”

“About family.”

“About imposter syndrome.”

“About loneliness.”

“About whether they belong here.”

“This isn't advising.”

“Now I understand...”

“Actually, maybe this is the most important advising I'll ever do.”

Dr. Ayala also entered higher education with a narrower understanding of faculty responsibility:

“Maybe for some people, they wanted to, but I don't think that really ever crossed my mind.”

“Teaching. Research. Engaging with students. Those were the priorities I understood as a new faculty member—earning tenure, publishing, developing courses, learning the culture of the institution.”

Her understanding changed as students sought support for circumstances that extended beyond course content:

“Students started coming by, asking for advice that had little to do with my classes.”

“They wanted guidance about graduate school, financial struggles, family expectations, mental health, or simply navigating university which often felt overwhelming.”

“Eventually I realized that much of my work centered around helping students navigate systems that weren't always designed with all students in mind.”

When asked what most shaped this change, Dr. Ayala identified the students themselves:

“Honestly, students taught me.”

“Students would say things like ‘I'm having trouble concentrating,’ or ‘I've been missing class because I work late every night.’”

“As I listened more carefully, you could hear the patterns.”

The individual circumstances students disclosed varied, but their cumulative effect altered how Dr. Ayala understood academic performance:

“One student admitted they hadn't eaten since yesterday because they were trying to make their meal plan last until the end of the semester.”

“Another mentioned sleeping on a friend's couch after losing their apartment.”

“I remember another student apologizing for submitting an assignment late because their computer had broken down and they couldn't afford repairs.”

“That changed the way I thought about academic success.”

Stephan similarly described his involvement in basic-needs work as an extension of what students repeatedly brought into his professional role:

“My involvement happened naturally because students kept bringing these issues into my office.”

“What’s interesting though, is that the conversation is still happening at the same rate like my previous institution, just now it’s more individual conversation, students coming into my office, students talking to each other about it trying to make things work, so I would say that’s how my involvement kind of got started, at least here at K-State, was because students were, or should I say, are having these conversations, and because many students of color that I work with see me as a trusted individual, those conversations make their way into my office.”

Repeated conversations led Stephan to collaborate across campus and to consider how students encountered support:

“Eventually I began partnering with colleagues across campus to improve referral systems and make sure students knew where to find support. I also became involved in conversations about reducing stigma around using campus resources.”

Although his formal positions changed, he found that students’ nonacademic needs remained present throughout his work:

“My official responsibilities have evolved, but the heart of my work has remained the same. I’ve worked in advising, student success programming, retention initiatives, and collaborative projects across academic and student affairs. Every position has involved helping students solve problems that often extend well beyond academics.”

Over time, Stephan’s attention expanded from helping individual students navigate immediate problems to considering how institutional conditions might be changed:

“I’ve also become more focused on changing systems instead of only responding to individual situations.”

“Helping one student is meaningful.”

“Helping create a policy that supports hundreds of students is equally meaningful.”

“Those two approaches aren’t in competition.”

“They complement one another.”

Autoethnographic Account: Working at the Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry

I found the Center for Healthy Communities while trying to determine how I might access CalFresh, California’s version of the SNAP program. At that point, the pantry was not an organization I imagined joining professionally. It was a place I approached because I needed food.

Walking into the pantry required acknowledging a need I had become practiced at concealing. The people who greeted me wore gray polo shirts displaying the Center for Healthy Communities logo. I remembered the logo and later recognized it when I encountered an internship opportunity with the organization. That visual connection mattered. The same institution I had entered as someone seeking assistance became a place where I could participate in assisting other students.

Working at the pantry also changed my relationship with food. For the first time in a considerable period, I had consistent access to fresh fruits and vegetables. I began carrying raw produce to class and eating it throughout the day. What might have appeared to others as a personal food preference represented a marked change in what was regularly available to me.

The pantry placed me on both sides of a distinction institutions often make between the person receiving assistance and the person providing it. I was a student experiencing food

insecurity, an employee helping distribute resources, and eventually an advocate working to expand access. Those positions were not sequential or neatly separated. They overlapped.

This overlap affected how I interacted with students entering the pantry. I recognized the effort required to walk through the door, the careful ways students sometimes minimized their circumstances, and the importance of being welcomed without having to prove that their need was severe enough. The work gave me an institutional role, but the knowledge I brought to it came partly from occupying the same position as the students I served.

Across these accounts, institutional participation provided more than exposure to inequity. It gave participants recurring opportunities to connect what they knew with what they could do. Student organizations taught Daniel how decisions were made. Food-assistance programs gave Elle and Jordan practical knowledge they could carry into other settings. Faculty and staff roles brought Dr. Chen, Dr. Ayala, and Stephan into sustained contact with needs that exceeded their formal job descriptions. The Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry allowed me to recognize that receiving support and participating in advocacy were not mutually exclusive positions.

None of these participants described institutional involvement as the execution of a career plan formed before college or employment. Their roles developed incrementally as particular experiences became difficult to ignore. The final pattern under Research Question One examines this absence of a predetermined advocacy identity and the ways participants understood leadership only after they had already begun practicing it.

Participants Rarely Described Themselves as “Future Advocates” or Leaders

Despite their later involvement in student leadership, mentoring, basic-needs initiatives, and institutional change, participants rarely described advocacy as an identity they had planned

to assume. They generally recognized a need, entered a relationship or institutional setting, and began acting before they understood those actions as leadership. In their accounts, advocacy developed through practice rather than through the pursuit of a predetermined title.

Bernard Franklin was especially direct about the difference between how his work might now be described and how he understood it while it was occurring:

“I don't know that we stopped to think about leadership in the sense that you all use leadership today in Leadership Studies.”

“That wasn't a concept that we focused on.”

“We might have focused more on advocacy.”

“Not thinking of ourselves as leaders, per se.”

“We didn't use leadership.”

Franklin's account did not reject the significance of what students accomplished. Instead, it showed that the language of leadership was not central to how he and his peers approached their work. Their focus remained on the conditions facing Black students and on what needed to change within the university.

David similarly described entering college with an understanding of leadership that later proved inadequate:

“Before college, I thought leadership meant having answers.”

“College completely dismantled that idea.”

“I learned leadership often means asking uncomfortable questions that everyone else hopes somebody won't ask.”

David's changing definition emerged from experience. Leadership became less about possessing certainty and more about naming concerns that others had avoided. His account also

demonstrated that participants could be practicing leadership while simultaneously revising what they believed leadership meant.

Daniel likewise described involvement as an accumulation of opportunities rather than the enactment of a long-standing ambition. His participation in Student Government, fraternity leadership, university committees, and community engagement gave him increasing access to institutional conversations. Advocacy became part of those roles because he repeatedly encountered issues he believed needed to be raised. He did not wait for a position devoted specifically to food insecurity, nor did he initially describe himself as leading a campus-wide movement. He acted in the settings where he already possessed some influence.

Faculty participants offered comparable accounts. Dr. Chen did not enter adulthood with a clearly defined aspiration to become a professor or institutional advocate:

“You know, I don't think I grew up imagining I'd become a professor.” (laughs)

“I don't know many little girls who say, 'One day I'm going to spend my life writing grants and grading papers.'”

“That wasn't really my dream.”

“What I always knew was that I wanted to help people.”

“I just didn't know what that would look like.”

Her understanding of what helping others could look like developed partly through professors who had affected her own educational experience:

“I was fortunate to have professors who changed my life when I was in college.”

“I eventually realized that I wanted to become that person for somebody else.”

Even after entering the faculty, Dr. Chen's understanding of her professional identity continued to change:

“When I first started, I probably would have described myself as a teacher and researcher.”

“As the years passed, my role expanded naturally.”

“I wasn't recruited into a formal initiative.”

“But all I knew was that students coming into my office every semester were coming to K-State with a lot of ambition and little money.”

Dr. Chen's account illustrated how advocacy could become embedded in a professional role without being formally assigned. She did not enter a designated initiative and then begin noticing student need. Repeated encounters with students expanded her understanding of what being a faculty member required.

Dr. Ayala similarly rejected the idea that she had entered higher education intending to assume an advocacy role. Her initial priorities centered on the responsibilities typically communicated to new faculty members. The less visible dimensions of her work emerged later, when students began bringing financial pressures, family expectations, mental health concerns, and difficulties navigating the university into her office. Her role changed in response to what she encountered rather than according to a plan established at the beginning of her career.

Participants' retrospective accounts also revealed that an advocacy identity could become recognizable to others before it felt intentional to the person carrying it. David described eventually becoming known through his involvement:

“Eventually, advocacy almost became my identity.”

“Sometimes before people even knew my major, they knew I was 'the student who's always doing the work.'” (He smiles.)

That identity carried pride, but it was not uncomplicated:

“I carried that proudly.”

“But I also carried it heavily.”

David recalled recognizing how others had come to position him during a committee meeting:

“I remember sitting in a meeting, I don't even remember which committee anymore, and somebody looked around the room and said something like, 'Well, what do the Black students think?'"

“And everybody looked at me. Not because I had done anything wrong. Because I'd become the representative. I walked away from that meeting asking myself, how did I become this person?"

“I didn't apply for that job.”

“It happened because there was a need and it was affecting people I cared about. My friends.”

David's experience exposed a tension within this pattern. Advocacy developed through concern for people he knew, but sustained involvement also made him institutionally recognizable as someone expected to represent a much larger group. The role was not one for which he had applied, and the expectations attached to it exceeded any single position he held.

Across participants, leadership was more often recognized retrospectively than anticipated prospectively. Franklin and his peers understood themselves as advocates rather than as leaders. David revised his definition of leadership through the work of asking difficult questions. Daniel used the influence available within existing roles. Dr. Chen and Dr. Ayala expanded their professional identities in response to students. In each case, engagement preceded the language participants later used to explain it.

Research Question One Summary

The first research question examined how participants described the origins and evolution of their engagement in food insecurity, basic needs, and broader equity-related efforts. Five patterns characterized these accounts.

First, survival, scarcity, and financial precarity created early forms of knowledge about inequity. Participants learned to navigate hunger, unstable housing, limited family resources, employment, immigration-related uncertainty, and unfamiliar educational systems before they necessarily understood these conditions structurally. Second, racial identity and experiences of belonging shaped participants' awareness of exclusion and their search for affirming communities. Third, relationships helped participants interpret their experiences, navigate institutions, access resources, and recognize capacities or responsibilities they had not previously identified. Fourth, institutional experiences provided settings in which awareness became repeated and increasingly sustained action. Finally, participants rarely described themselves as people who had always intended to become advocates or leaders.

Taken together, the findings showed that engagement developed through accumulation rather than through a single entry point. Lived experience alone did not automatically produce advocacy, and indirect exposure did not prevent it. Participants became involved as experiences, relationships, and institutional opportunities altered what they noticed and what they believed they could do. These findings establish how engagement began and evolved. The next research question turns from the origins of involvement to participants' understandings of responsibility: how proximity to inequity influenced who they believed should initiate change, who was expected to sustain it, and where that responsibility ultimately belonged.

Research Question Two: Lived Proximity and Responsibility for Change

The second research question asked:

In what ways does lived proximity to poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, and other forms of structural inequity influence perceptions of responsibility for initiating and sustaining change efforts?

Participants described responsibility as something that developed through experience rather than something determined solely by a title, job description, or formal assignment. As inequity became more visible through their own lives and their relationships with others, participants increasingly understood responding as a moral and relational obligation. At the same time, they resisted the assumption that people most affected by inequity should be solely responsible for correcting it.

Six patterns organized these findings. First, responsibility shifted from an individual decision to a moral and relational commitment. Second, relationships and lived proximity cultivated a sense of responsibility. Third, participants rejected the idea that responsibility belonged only to those closest to inequity. Fourth, they challenged deficit explanations and relocated responsibility to institutions. Fifth, participants described the invisible labor generated when institutions relied on particular individuals to sustain equity work. Finally, lived proximity changed what participants could see, including needs and patterns that remained less visible to those at greater distance.

Together, these patterns demonstrate that proximity influenced responsibility without making proximity a prerequisite for action. Participants who had experienced inequity directly often recognized its effects quickly and personally. Those who encountered it through sustained

relationships also described becoming accountable for what they had learned. Across both forms of proximity, awareness increasingly made neutrality difficult to maintain.

Responsibility Shifted From an Individual Obligation to a Moral and Relational Commitment

Participants rarely described responsibility as a formal decision to add advocacy to an existing list of duties. Instead, responsibility developed as repeated encounters with inequity changed what they believed they could ethically disregard. Once participants understood the consequences of institutional conditions for people they knew, remaining uninvolved became increasingly inconsistent with their sense of justice and care.

Bernard Franklin described responsibility during his undergraduate years in direct terms:

“I don't think we had a choice.”

“Jessica, when you know an environment needs to change, you do what you have to do.”

Franklin did not present advocacy as a calculated choice based on personal benefit or professional advancement. His account framed action as a response to conditions he believed were clearly wrong:

“Right was right.”

“Truth was truth.”

“Justice was justice.”

This understanding of responsibility was moral because it was grounded in Franklin's convictions about what should occur. It was relational because those convictions were enacted in response to the experiences of Black students with whom he shared the institution.

Responsibility did not depend on receiving a formal assignment or occupying an administrative

position. It followed from knowing that the campus needed to change and believing that awareness required action.

Marcus similarly described responsibility as exceeding the technical requirements of his position. Over time, he came to understand his work as connecting institutional conversations with the lives of students affected by them:

“I’ve tried to be someone who asks difficult questions when necessary.”

“Someone who reminds colleagues that behind every retention statistic is an actual student.”

“Someone who encourages students to see themselves as leaders rather than simply recipients of support.”

Marcus’s account contrasted institutional abstraction with relational knowledge. Retention could be discussed as a statistic, but his contact with students prevented the number from remaining impersonal. Responsibility involved bringing students’ lives back into conversations where institutional language could otherwise obscure them.

David made a related connection between responsibility and the people he cared about. As discussed in Research Question One, he did not seek a generalized role as the representative of Black students. He became involved because institutional concerns affected his friends. His account showed responsibility becoming relational before it became publicly associated with his identity as an advocate. The needs of people he knew gave institutional issues an immediacy that made noninvolvement difficult.

For Elle, responsibility also extended beyond responding only to concerns that directly affected her own racial or social communities:

“People should be doing more for the people within our community.”

“I do a lot for people who are not a part of my community.”

“And that's important because it takes all of us to be one community.”

Elle's statement presented responsibility as reciprocal without restricting it to sameness. Her willingness to act for people outside her immediate community informed her expectation that others should also respond when inequity did not affect them personally.

Autoethnographic Account: When Awareness No Longer Felt Neutral

My understanding of responsibility continued changing after I became a faculty member. I initially understood the position through its formal expectations: teaching courses, supporting student learning, conducting research, and completing service. Those responsibilities appeared identifiable and bounded.

Students' experiences made those boundaries increasingly difficult to maintain. Conversations that began with an assignment or an absence often moved into housing instability, food access, financial pressure, family responsibilities, discrimination, or uncertainty about belonging in college. No single conversation transformed how I understood my role. The repetition did.

Over time, I began to recognize that students were not bringing entirely separate problems into my office. Although their circumstances differed, similar barriers appeared across their accounts. Students delayed asking for assistance because they feared judgment, did not know what resources existed, or had previously learned that disclosing a problem did not guarantee meaningful support. By the time some students spoke with me, the situation had already become a crisis.

Initially, I understood responsibility primarily as responding well when a student asked for help. Continued proximity changed that understanding. I began asking what it would mean to

create conditions in which students did not have to reach a crisis before they were noticed, believed, or connected with support.

This did not mean that I could resolve every circumstance a student disclosed. It meant that claiming neutrality became more difficult once I could recognize recurring patterns. Teaching could no longer be separated cleanly from the conditions affecting whether students could attend, concentrate, complete their work, or imagine remaining at the institution.

Like Franklin, I did not experience this change as the adoption of a new professional identity. Responsibility expanded because knowing altered what I believed my role required. Awareness without response increasingly felt incompatible with how I understood education and my relationships with students.

Across these accounts, responsibility was not described as an abstract commitment to “equity work.” It became recognizable through particular people and circumstances. Franklin responded to an environment he knew needed to change. Marcus connected institutional statistics to actual students. David became involved because his friends were affected. Elle extended responsibility across community boundaries. My own understanding changed through the accumulation of student disclosures.

This moral and relational orientation helps explain why participants continued acting even when advocacy fell outside their formal responsibilities. It does not, however, explain how this commitment was cultivated or why particular people were so frequently positioned close enough to recognize institutional harm. The next pattern examines how lived experience, trust, and sustained relationships brought participants into proximity with inequity and shaped the responsibility they felt to respond.

Responsibility Was Cultivated Through Relationships and Lived Proximity

Participants' sense of responsibility developed through sustained contact with people experiencing inequity. This proximity was sometimes grounded in participants' own histories and sometimes created through professional or educational relationships. In both forms, proximity gave institutional problems a human and immediate character. Participants were not responding only to information about inequity; they were responding to people who trusted them with its consequences.

Marcus described how students' perceptions of his identity and institutional position placed him in an unassigned advocacy role:

"You know, it's funny, no one ever said, 'Marcus you have made it to the other side. You are Black. And you will now be the spokesperson for the Black students you serve at K-State.' No one ever said that."

"But you feel it." (He pauses.)

"Yeah, you feel it."

Students approached Marcus because they believed he might understand their experiences and could help them navigate the university:

"Students who look like you look to you to be the bridge; to do something about the issues they face here on campus."

"They do."

Marcus then connected this experience directly to my position within higher education:

"And I'm sure as a young woman of color and a faculty member, you feel it too from students."

"And if you haven't, you will just give it time."

The role Marcus described was relational rather than formally delegated. Students identified him as someone who might recognize the significance of their concerns, take those concerns seriously, and understand the risks associated with raising them. Their trust created a sense of responsibility even when institutional documents did not.

Marcus recalled students seeking his guidance after experiencing racial microaggressions from faculty members:

“Sometimes, especially earlier in my career, a student would come into my office sayin' 'Marcus! Marcus! This professor just said this and it was usually a microaggression of sorts, 'and, and, I don't know what to do but I know it's wrong so what do I do, and I don't want to jeopardize my grade.'”

In these conversations, students were not only determining how to respond to a faculty member. They were weighing whether speaking would threaten their academic standing. Marcus understood why students turned to him, but he also questioned why their options for support appeared so limited:

“And I'm sitting there listening to this student and just thinking to myself like, 'damn, can't somebody else help this poor student? (laughs)”

“Surely I can't be the only one who gives a damn about professors making racist remarks.”

Marcus named this dynamic as an unwritten feature of working at a predominantly White institution:

“There's an unwritten role you have as a person of color at a PWI, when you hold even a little bit of power, in the eyes of students at least, to fight injustice-- to fight the good fight.”

His account showed how proximity could be produced through shared identity, perceived understanding, and unequal institutional power. Students' trust brought Marcus closer to experiences that might remain unknown to colleagues who were not viewed as safe or likely to respond.

Dr. Ayala described another form of proximity. Her personal experiences did not mirror every circumstance students disclosed, but they helped her recognize that financial hardship could exist without being immediately visible:

"Growing up, my family was very careful with money."

"There were periods when every expense had to be planned, and education represented hope for a different future."

Her later experience as an international graduate student deepened that understanding:

"When I became an international graduate student, I learned firsthand what it meant to live on a limited stipend while navigating an unfamiliar culture. There were times when unexpected expenses created real stress."

"Those experiences taught me that financial hardship isn't always visible but they are very much real for a lot of our students."

Dr. Ayala did not claim that her experiences gave her complete knowledge of students' lives. Instead, those experiences made particular forms of hardship more recognizable. They created a basis for listening without assuming that academic difficulty reflected a lack of effort or commitment.

Sarah Barrett described her professional training as another factor affecting what she heard in conversations with students:

“I was a trained and licensed therapist, and so I asked questions that went beyond the student experience. And so at one point I was just like this is bonkers, we have too many students that are like food insecure.”

“Which food insecure wasn't even really a word then. It was just like starving college student.”

Barrett's training led her to ask questions extending beyond students' visible academic performance. Those questions brought recurring experiences of hunger into view before the institution commonly used “food insecurity” to describe them. Responsibility developed partly because deeper listening revealed that what might appear to be separate student difficulties formed a recognizable pattern.

Dr. Chen also described students as changing how she understood both advocacy and herself as an educator:

“Other times, it feels like I've lived several different careers during those ten years because the university has changed, our students have changed, and honestly, I've changed too.”

“My students have made me a more understanding person.”

She did not portray proximity only as exposure to difficulty. Relationships with students also affected the emotional orientation she brought to her work:

“People assume advocacy makes you cynical.”

“Sometimes it does.” (She laughs.)

“But mostly, it's made me hopeful.”

Continued contact with students changed how Dr. Chen approached academic expectations:

“I also think they've made me gentler.”

“When I was a younger professor, I believed my job was to challenge students.”

“Now I still challenge them, but I also recognize that I rarely know everything they're carrying.”

“That realization has made me a much better educator.”

Dr. Chen's account showed that responsibility was cultivated through an incomplete but growing awareness of what students might be managing. She did not abandon academic challenge. She reconsidered how she enacted it after recognizing that she rarely possessed full knowledge of the circumstances affecting a student.

Across these accounts, proximity operated through several pathways. Shared racial identity contributed to students viewing Marcus as a trusted advocate. Dr. Ayala's family and graduate-school experiences sensitized her to financial stress that might not be externally apparent. Barrett's professional training prompted questions that revealed patterns of student hunger. Dr. Chen's relationships with students changed how she interpreted her responsibilities as an educator.

Proximity therefore did not require identical experiences. It required sufficient relational contact for inequity to become recognizable in the life of another person. Participants' accounts also exposed a potential institutional problem: the people most likely to be trusted with these experiences could become the same people most frequently expected to respond. The next pattern addresses participants' rejection of the assumption that responsibility for change should remain with those closest to the harm.

Participants Rejected the Idea That Responsibility Belonged Only to Those Closest to Inequity

Although lived proximity often strengthened participants' commitment to act, they rejected the conclusion that people most affected by inequity should therefore hold primary responsibility for addressing it. Participants distinguished between the knowledge produced through proximity and the burden of institutional response. Those closest to harm could identify problems that others failed to see, but that insight did not absolve other members of the university community from acting.

Elle described this tension through the institution's response to reports that Immigration and Customs Enforcement might appear at Kansas State. Regardless of whether the reports were confirmed, she remembered students experiencing fear while waiting for institutional leaders to communicate:

"Yes absolutely yes."

"Even when you know... when there was talk going around about ICE literally showing up at Kansas State University and we were the ones expected to call and make changes. Why was there no announcement made by our admin? Rumor or not, people were scared. But they said nothing."

In the absence of a visible institutional response, Elle contacted multiple public and university offices herself:

"I personally called the mayor."

"I called the governor."

"I called K-State."

"And asked what are we going to do about this."

Elle understood the lack of response as a transfer of responsibility onto the students experiencing the threat most directly:

“They didn't want to do anything because they felt that it was our burden to handle.”

Her concern was not limited to this incident. She described a broader pattern in which people subjected to racial harm were also expected to manage the response:

“A lot of the times even on the team I was on they are expecting when I was dealing with people who were making microaggressions, racist comments, they are expecting me to be the one that's handling that information.”

“They're expecting me to be the one that starts making those changes.”

“And I don't feel like that is fair.”

Elle's account showed how institutional silence could convert proximity into obligation. Because she recognized the urgency of the situation and was willing to speak, responsibility moved toward her rather than toward people with greater formal authority. Her action should not be interpreted as evidence that this allocation of responsibility was appropriate. She acted while also explicitly challenging why action had been left to students.

Elle believed this pattern persisted partly because people treated inequities outside their immediate experience as someone else's concern:

“I think a lot of people think that it's not their problem.”

“It's not their issue.”

“Oh I shouldn't be involved with that because I'm not a political person.”

Her observation identified distance as a rationale for disengagement. By characterizing a concern as political, personal, or belonging to another group, individuals could avoid considering their own relationship to the conditions producing it.

Elle also identified how her intersecting identities and visible leadership affected others' expectations of her:

"I do think that it's because I'm a woman."

"I'm Black."

"I'm educated."

"I look ambiguous."

"I am a leader."

The presence of someone perceived as capable of responding could allow others to withdraw:

"People are like oh you know the burden's off of me."

"I don't need to deal with this."

Elle rejected this transfer of responsibility. Her willingness to act did not mean that others were released from doing so. Nor did her proximity to marginalized communities make racial inequity, immigration-related fear, or institutional silence exclusively hers to address.

Participant accounts therefore complicated any simple relationship between proximity and responsibility. Proximity affected who noticed harm, who received disclosures, and who felt urgency. It often explained why particular individuals mobilized quickly. At the same time, participants opposed using proximity as the basis for concentrating responsibility among students, faculty, or staff already carrying the consequences of inequity.

This distinction was especially important for understanding institutional change. The experiential knowledge of those closest to inequity could inform action, but relying on those individuals to initiate, explain, and sustain every response reproduced an unequal distribution of

labor. Participants called for broader participation from people whose identities or circumstances did not place them closest to the problem.

The next pattern extends this finding by examining where participants located responsibility when inequities recurred. Rather than explaining student hardship through individual choices or deficiencies, they increasingly identified institutional policies, practices, and assumptions as appropriate targets of change.

Participants Rejected Deficit Explanations and Relocated Responsibility to Institutions

As participants encountered similar forms of hardship repeatedly, they became less willing to explain inequity through individual decisions or presumed student deficiencies. Their accounts challenged interpretations that attributed food insecurity, financial instability, or academic difficulty to poor planning, inadequate effort, or an unwillingness to seek help. Instead, participants asked what institutional conditions produced recurring barriers and why students were expected to navigate those barriers individually.

Marcus described how students typically communicated basic-needs challenges without using institutional or research terminology:

“The students.”

“Very few students ever walk into your office saying, 'I'm food insecure.'”

“They say they're thinking about leaving school.”

“Or they ask if there are emergency scholarships.”

“Or they mention they've been sleeping on a friend's couch because they couldn't afford rent.”

Hearing these accounts repeatedly changed how Marcus interpreted them:

“You start hearing those stories enough times that you realize these aren't isolated situations.”

Marcus used the metaphor of a recurring song to describe how apparently different disclosures became recognizable as versions of the same underlying pattern:

“Let me just say this, once you hear enough of the same story just different iterations, you can't unhear it. It's like an echo of what I've been hearing for years now, some years, some semesters, more than others, but the song they sing remains the same. Some students will come in singing it at the top of their lungs, others will come in humming along to the beat, but after a while, you begin to see the similarities in the tune, you know what I'm sayin'.”

This repetition shifted Marcus away from evaluating students' behavior and toward investigating the circumstances surrounding it:

“When students tell me they're struggling financially, I don't immediately think, 'Why didn't they plan better?'"

“I ask myself, 'What's happening in their life that brought them here?'"

“I've learned that curiosity is much more useful than judgment.”

“Working with students has reinforced that lesson over and over again.”

The circumstances students disclosed demonstrated why explanations centered on individual budgeting or motivation were inadequate:

“Sometimes students are supporting parents.”

“Sometimes they're sending money home.”

“Sometimes they're choosing between buying groceries or replacing a laptop that stopped working.”

“Those aren't hypothetical situations.”

“Those are conversations I’ve had.”

Marcus’s account redirected attention from whether a student had behaved correctly to the material and relational demands affecting the student’s choices. What could be characterized institutionally as an individual failure to plan might instead reflect family support obligations, insufficient income, housing instability, or an unavoidable expense.

David likewise rejected treating food insecurity, race, first-generation status, employment, and family responsibilities as separable dimensions of student life:

“Race never exists by itself. Some of the Black students I knew were also first-generation students. Some came from low-income families. Some were working thirty hours a week. Some were supporting family members back home. Some were navigating food insecurity. Some were doing all of those things at once.”

During a campus event emphasizing belonging, David questioned the absence of basic needs from the conversation:

“How are we talking about belonging while some students literally can’t afford dinner tonight?”

“I don’t know if this really makes sense but if we’re talking about belonging, we should also be talking about that. Those conversations shouldn’t be separate.”

David’s account showed how institutions could recognize one aspect of student experience while overlooking the conditions affecting whether students could participate at all. An institutional commitment to belonging remained incomplete when it did not account for hunger, employment, family obligations, and financial precarity.

Sarah Barrett described encountering a different form of institutional resistance during the early effort to establish food insecurity as a campus concern. She and others brought recurring student experiences to administrators:

“We had told Dr. Bosco and talked to other people, and we're like, 'Are you seeing this? Are you hearing this about students?'"

“And they essentially were like, 'Yeah, but this is all anecdotal, right? Like, this is a snapshot. This is what you're seeing.'”

The response positioned repeated student accounts as insufficient evidence of an institutional problem. Although the concern had become visible to people working directly with students, broader recognition required advocates to demonstrate that the experiences represented more than isolated cases.

Marcus explained why this distance could occur in institutional policy conversations. Faculty members and administrators could discuss university decisions while remaining materially removed from their consequences:

“Every policy discussion eventually comes back around and directly impacts the student experience and I think it's easy to forget that when you're a faculty member or an administrator because higher ed, this environment, is only part of your life, and then you go home to a nice house, not everybody, but usually a nice house, food, etc. and for a good amount of our students, this is the bulk of their lives for a handful of years until they reach that degree. Or don't.”

His account located responsibility in the relationship between institutional decisions and students' ability to continue their education. Policies were not neutral administrative instruments. They shaped the environment students had to navigate, often during a period when the university occupied a central place in their daily lives.

Autoethnographic Account: From Proving Need to Questioning Its Production

My undergraduate advocacy initially focused on demonstrating that student food insecurity existed. Administrators needed evidence that unused dining-plan meals and unmet student needs were sufficiently widespread to justify action. Collecting data was necessary to move the meal-swipe proposal forward, but it also revealed an institutional asymmetry: students experiencing hunger were expected to make that hunger visible in forms the institution considered credible.

At the time, my attention remained directed toward establishing the program. I was proud that students, faculty, staff, dining services, and the campus food pantry created a mechanism through which unused meals could reach students who needed them. That work produced a concrete resource.

Only later did my questions change. I began asking why students experiencing food insecurity had to identify the problem, collect evidence, build partnerships, secure approval, and help create the institutional response. The existence of student-led action demonstrated capacity, but it also revealed where responsibility had initially been placed.

This reflection does not diminish the importance of the program or the relationships that made it possible. It distinguishes between students participating meaningfully in institutional change and institutions depending on students to compensate for conditions they did not create. My experience shifted from asking how we could redistribute unused meals to asking why access to food depended on excess within one system being redirected through the labor of students in another.

That shift paralleled participant accounts. Repeated exposure made individual explanations less convincing. The central question was no longer why a particular student did not

have enough food or had failed to locate an existing resource. It became why predictable forms of hardship continued to be addressed as separate emergencies.

Across the data, participants relocated responsibility by changing the questions they asked. Marcus moved from judgment toward curiosity about students' circumstances. David connected basic needs with institutional claims about belonging. Barrett questioned why recurring reports of hunger remained categorized as anecdotal. Marcus linked policy decisions to the material realities of students' lives. My own account moved from proving that need existed to questioning why students carried so much responsibility for producing the response.

Participants did not deny individual agency or dismiss the value of peer support, mentorship, and student leadership. They challenged explanations that treated inequity as the cumulative result of deficient individual choices. When similar hardships appeared across students, semesters, and institutional roles, participants understood them as conditions requiring an institutional response.

Relocating responsibility to institutions did not mean that individuals stopped doing the work. In many cases, participants continued supporting students while also pressing for broader change. That dual commitment generated forms of labor that were essential to students but frequently unassigned, unmeasured, and unseen. The next pattern examines the invisible labor that accumulated around those expected to remain responsive.

Responsibility Accumulated Invisible Labor

Participants' willingness to respond did not eliminate the costs of doing so. Responsibility accumulated through time spent listening, advising, translating institutional processes, managing crises, representing communities, and carrying the emotional effects of what others disclosed. Much of this work occurred outside formal assignments and remained

difficult to document through conventional measures of student leadership or professional performance.

Marcus described the expectations placed on him as meaningful but exhausting:

“And I do my best to live up to that role, and, and, I won't sit here on this video call with you Jess and tell you that it isn't a lot.” (He pauses)

“That it isn't exhausting.”

“Because it is.”

“It absolutely is.”

The emotional weight became especially visible after a racial incident on campus.

Marcus recalled spending much of the following week supporting students:

“Students were angry, scared, frustrated, exhausted.”

“I spent most of that week listening.”

“Sometimes for an hour at a time.”

His attention remained focused on students until he recognized that he had not processed the incident himself:

“By Friday afternoon I realized I hadn't really processed any of it myself because I'd been so focused on supporting everyone else.”

Marcus explained that this emotional dimension of advocacy was rarely apparent to those outside the work:

“That's something many people don't see.”

“Staff who do this work are often absorbing students' emotions while trying to remain steady for them.”

“You don't want students to feel like they have to take care of you.”

“So you carry a lot internally.”

He named the work directly:

“Sometimes people refer to it as invisible labor, and I think that's exactly what it is.”

Marcus’s account showed that listening was not passive or incidental. Students needed a person who could receive anger, fear, and exhaustion without requiring them to manage the listener’s response. Providing that steadiness required Marcus to delay his own processing and carry the emotional consequences privately.

The labor was invisible in several ways. It occurred through conversations that might not appear in formal records. Its value rested partly in maintaining confidentiality, which limited how fully Marcus could describe it to others. It also depended on emotional regulation: the more successfully he remained steady for students, the less visible the effort required to do so became.

Bernard Franklin described a comparable accumulation of responsibility during his undergraduate years. Looking back, he questioned whether he would recommend that students assume the same level of institutional work:

“I don't know that I would recommend it today, because that's not what I came to K-State for.”

His advocacy affected how he experienced college itself:

“What I want to be clear about is there are many days I look back at this, and I think how much I must have missed about being an undergraduate student.”

Franklin characterized the level of responsibility he carried as work resembling institutional administration:

“I was functioning as a para-administrator.”

“I worked my ass off.”

“I didn't party.”

“A lot of Nadine's friends, my friends, they would talk about us because we didn't go to the parties.”

“If I went to a party, I probably went, if I remember, maybe on Saturday night.”

Franklin's account complicated narratives that celebrate student leadership without attending to its cost. He and Nadine contributed to changing the university, but that work also displaced parts of the undergraduate experience they had ostensibly come to Kansas State to receive. Referring to himself as a “para-administrator” captured the mismatch between his status and the institutional responsibilities he performed.

Marcus and Franklin occupied different roles and historical periods, yet both described responsibility exceeding the boundaries of their formal positions. Marcus performed emotional and relational work that was largely unseen within his staff role. Franklin performed work resembling administration while still an undergraduate student. In each case, institutional needs were met partly through labor that the university had not formally assigned, adequately recognized, or fully absorbed.

Invisible labor also accumulated because advocacy did not consist of a single intervention. Participants remained available across incidents, semesters, and cohorts of students. Each conversation might appear individually manageable, while their cumulative effects were substantial. The people known to be responsive became more likely to receive future disclosures, increasing both their capacity to recognize patterns and the amount of responsibility directed toward them.

This finding does not suggest that participants regretted supporting students or regarded their relationships as burdens. Marcus emphasized the importance of remaining steady for

students, and Franklin continued to describe the moral clarity that motivated his advocacy. The tension lay in how much the work required and how easily institutions could benefit from it without making its demands visible.

Participants' accounts therefore distinguished between the value of advocacy and the fairness of its distribution. Work could be deeply meaningful while still being unevenly assigned. It could support student persistence while simultaneously exhausting the individuals performing it. It could produce institutional improvements while limiting the educational or professional experiences of those who carried it.

The final pattern under Research Question Two examines the perceptual consequence of this proximity. Participants' repeated contact with students enabled them to recognize connections and recurring conditions that were less apparent from more distant institutional positions. Lived proximity changed not only whether participants felt responsible, but what they were able to see.

Lived Proximity Changed What Participants Could See

Participants described proximity as affecting perception. Direct experience and repeated contact with students enabled them to notice hardship that could remain obscured by academic performance, campus involvement, professional language, or institutional assumptions. Proximity did not give participants complete knowledge of another person's circumstances. It made them less likely to presume that visible participation or apparent success indicated the absence of need.

Stephan illustrated this pattern by comparing two institutional environments. Before joining Kansas State, he worked at a Hispanic-Serving Institution where students discussed financial and family responsibilities more openly:

“When I began working at the Hispanic-Serving Institution, I saw many of those same realities reflected in our students. Students openly talked about commuting long distances, helping support their families financially, caring for younger siblings, or balancing school with full-time work. Food insecurity wasn't hidden. People talked about it.”

“There wasn't necessarily less stigma, but there was greater acknowledgment that these challenges existed.”

At that institution, employment during college was treated as a common part of student life:

“At my previous institution, working while attending college was viewed as normal.”

When Stephan arrived at Kansas State, he encountered students managing similar circumstances but communicating about them differently:

“When I transitioned to Kansas State, I noticed students were often much more hesitant to disclose those same struggles. Sometimes they apologized for needing help. That difference really stayed with me.”

The contrast changed what Stephan noticed. Financial hardship existed in both environments, but institutional context affected whether students spoke about it openly, disclosed it privately, or apologized for needing assistance. Silence therefore could not be interpreted as evidence that a problem was absent.

Stephan's account also showed why institutional comparisons based only on visible demand could be misleading. If students at one institution openly discussed food insecurity while students at another concealed it, the second institution might appear to have less need. Proximity to private student conversations revealed that need had not disappeared; it had become less publicly acknowledged.

Other participant accounts reinforced this distinction between visibility and prevalence. Faculty and staff frequently learned about hardship only after students entered trusted spaces and disclosed circumstances that were not apparent in classrooms, meetings, or institutional data. Students often described the immediate academic consequence—an absence, a late assignment, difficulty concentrating, or consideration of withdrawing—before naming the material condition contributing to it.

Participants' own histories also affected what they recognized. Those who had navigated financial scarcity noticed how students concealed need, stretched resources, or prioritized family obligations. Participants who had experienced racial isolation recognized why students might assess whether a person or space felt safe before speaking openly. Those who had learned institutional systems through peers were more likely to notice when support depended on informal information networks.

Lived proximity also revealed connections among concerns that institutions could treat separately. Participants encountered students managing food insecurity alongside employment, family support, housing instability, racial marginalization, transportation problems, and uncertainty about belonging. Seeing these conditions together made explanations centered on a single behavior or decision increasingly difficult to sustain.

The perceptual effect of proximity was cumulative. A single disclosure could be interpreted as exceptional. Repeated disclosures across different students and semesters made recurrence visible. Participants began recognizing familiar patterns even when students used different language or entered the institution through different offices.

At the same time, participants did not claim that people with lived experience possessed automatic or universal insight. Their accounts were more specific. Experience sensitized them to

particular possibilities. Relationships gave them access to information that students did not disclose everywhere. Continued engagement allowed them to compare encounters over time. Proximity expanded what they could see while reminding them that visible institutional life represented only part of what students were carrying.

Research Question Two Summary

The second research question examined how lived proximity to inequity influenced participants' perceptions of responsibility for initiating and sustaining change. Six patterns emerged.

First, responsibility became moral and relational as participants connected institutional conditions with the lives of people they knew. Second, shared experience, trust, and repeated relationships cultivated responsibility by bringing participants into sustained contact with inequity. Third, participants rejected the assumption that those closest to harm should bear primary responsibility for changing it. Fourth, repeated encounters led participants away from deficit explanations and toward questions about institutional policies, practices, and accountability. Fifth, the responsibility assigned to trusted advocates accumulated as substantial invisible labor. Finally, lived proximity changed what participants could recognize, particularly when hardship remained concealed or was communicated indirectly.

Together, these findings clarify that proximity influenced mobilization without providing a fair basis for distributing responsibility. People closest to inequity often noticed problems earlier, received more disclosures, and felt greater urgency to respond. Yet participants consistently questioned institutional arrangements that depended on those same individuals to identify the problem, educate others, support affected students, and sustain the response.

The findings also demonstrate that responsibility was shaped by institutional position. Students could recognize urgent needs while lacking formal authority. Faculty and staff could possess some institutional access while performing advocacy outside their assigned responsibilities. Administrators could hold greater decision-making authority while remaining more distant from students' daily experiences. Participants' accounts therefore separated experiential knowledge, relational responsibility, and institutional authority rather than assuming that they resided in the same people.

The next research question examines belonging, representation, and institutional inclusion. It considers how participants' ability to enter, remain, and lead within the university was shaped by whether they experienced recognition, community, and spaces in which they did not have to minimize or continually explain themselves.

Research Question Three: Belonging, Representation, and Institutional Inclusion

The third research question asked:

How do experiences of belonging, representation, and institutional inclusion shape leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement over time?

Participants described belonging as more than admission, enrollment, or physical presence on campus. Belonging involved being recognized, having access to relationships and spaces that offered support, and believing that one could participate without concealing important dimensions of identity or circumstance. Participants' accounts also showed that belonging was neither uniformly available nor permanently secured. It could be cultivated through community, expanded through representation, and disrupted by institutional decisions or everyday experiences of exclusion.

Four patterns organized the findings. First, belonging provided a foundation from which leadership and sustained participation became possible. Second, representation expanded participants' sense of what was possible rather than merely increasing the visibility of underrepresented people. Third, participants attempted to transform the belonging they received—or wished they had received—into opportunities for others. Finally, belonging remained continually negotiated as participants moved through spaces that offered affirmation, conditional inclusion, or exclusion.

Belonging Served as a Foundation That Made Leadership Possible

Participants described belonging as a condition that supported persistence, involvement, and leadership. Relationships and affirming communities gave participants places from which they could interpret institutional experiences, recover from exclusion, and develop confidence. Belonging did not eliminate inequity, but it reduced the isolation of navigating it alone.

Bernard Franklin recalled that Kansas State intentionally placed Black students near one another during his early years at the university:

“K-State did a good job of putting Black kids together.”

“We didn't have those DEI kinds of issues. In fact, DEI wasn't a word or a concept. But Meryl had a good notion that Black kids need to be in community and in proximity for support.”

“And so there were probably five or ten Black guys in Marlatt Hall, which gave me an immediate support system.”

For Franklin, proximity to other Black students provided support within an unfamiliar institutional environment. The community did not make the broader campus uniformly welcoming, but it gave him relationships through which to navigate it.

Franklin's account also demonstrated why that support was necessary. He remembered having multiple White roommates whose families reacted to learning that their sons had been assigned a Black roommate:

"I went through several white roommates because several of their families were a bit shocked that their son had a Black roommate."

"They wore it in their eyes, but they were not disrespectful in words."

"But I knew."

The absence of an explicit racial statement did not prevent Franklin from recognizing the response. His description, *"But I knew,"* captured how exclusion could be communicated without being formally acknowledged. The support of other Black students existed alongside these reminders that his presence was not accepted equally across the campus community.

The transition was particularly pronounced because Franklin came from an environment in which Black community surrounded his daily life:

"I came from an all-Black church, all-Black grocery store, all-Black neighborhood, all-Black everything, to a white campus."

Belonging at Kansas State therefore required more than adjusting to college. It involved moving from a predominantly Black social environment into an institution where race affected residence-hall interactions, access to culturally relevant resources, and assumptions about who the campus was prepared to serve.

David summarized the importance of relational belonging concisely:

"Community kept me here."

"College can feel incredibly isolating when you're struggling financially."

"Knowing people cared made all the difference."

David's account connected belonging with persistence. Community did not necessarily remove the financial difficulty he experienced, but it influenced whether he faced that difficulty alone. Knowing that other people cared gave him a reason and a means to remain connected to the institution.

Participants also challenged institutional approaches that encouraged involvement without first addressing whether students possessed the resources necessary to participate. Daniel described basic needs as a precondition for many of the activities universities associate with belonging:

"I actually think it's incredibly invisible."

"Universities spend a lot of time talking about belonging, getting involved, finding your community, joining clubs, and those things absolutely matter."

"But we rarely start with the basics."

"Can students afford to eat?"

"Do they have stable housing?"

"Are they sleeping somewhere safe?"

"Those questions determine whether someone even has the capacity to participate in all those other opportunities."

Daniel's account demonstrated that invitations to become involved were not equally actionable. A student managing hunger, unstable housing, or unsafe sleeping conditions might have little capacity to attend organizational meetings, remain on campus after class, or pursue unpaid leadership opportunities. Belonging could not be separated from the material conditions that made participation possible.

Sarah Barrett similarly connected basic-needs support with students' ability to develop relationships and remain enrolled. Explaining the broader significance of Cats' Cupboard, she stated:

"Maybe they can go out and hang out with their friends and feel like they have a sense of belonging and feel like they're connected to their peers and to the campus, and then they stay longer. And then when they actually stay longer, they graduate."

Barrett extended this connection to the promise of higher education as a pathway toward greater opportunity:

"That's why getting a college education is seen as a mechanism for social mobility, right? Like, if that is our only option, we're going to take it and we're gonna figure it out. But yeah, we got to get the resources."

In Barrett's account, providing food was not separate from fostering belonging. Access to basic resources could allow a student to spend time with peers, remain connected to campus, persist, and graduate. Food assistance therefore affected more than an immediate meal; it influenced the conditions under which participation became possible.

Across these accounts, belonging operated as both relational and material. Franklin's Black peer community offered support within a racially unfamiliar environment. David remained because he knew people cared about him. Daniel emphasized that students needed food and safe housing before they could fully participate in campus opportunities. Barrett connected basic-needs resources with peer relationships, persistence, and graduation.

These findings do not position belonging as an individual feeling produced solely through friendship. Belonging was shaped by whether students could access community, whether the institution recognized their needs, and whether material conditions allowed them to participate.

Once participants experienced a sufficient foundation of support, they were better positioned to become involved and exercise leadership.

The next pattern examines representation as one mechanism through which this foundation expanded. Participants described representation not only as seeing people with similar identities, but as encountering evidence that they could occupy institutional spaces, be understood without extensive explanation, and imagine possibilities that had previously seemed unavailable.

Representation Expanded Participants' Sense of Possibility Rather Than Simply Increasing Visibility

Participants distinguished representation from the mere presence of people from underrepresented groups. Visibility mattered, but representation became consequential when it created trust, reduced the need for self-explanation, affirmed that participants could occupy institutional roles, or expanded what they imagined possible for themselves and others.

Dr. Chen described her approach to representation through the idea of becoming a familiar and affirming presence for students:

"I always say I try to become a small piece of home."

"Not home itself."

"Nobody can replace someone's parents or grandparents or community."

"But maybe I can become one familiar place on campus."

Dr. Chen did not claim that a faculty member could replace students' families or communities. Instead, she hoped to provide one institutional space in which students experienced familiarity and recognition. She described noticing a physical change when some Black students entered her office:

“But there is something different when a young Black student walks into my office and immediately exhales.”

“Sometimes they don't even realize they're doing it.”

“Their shoulders drop.”

“Their voice changes.”

“You can almost see them thinking, 'Okay...I don't have to explain myself here.'”

“That's powerful.”

The significance of representation appeared in the students' ability to lower their guard. Their response was not simply recognition that a Black faculty member was present. It was the expectation that they might be understood without first translating or defending their experiences.

Dr. Chen explicitly challenged definitions of representation limited to visual similarity:

“I often tell colleagues that representation is about much more than visibility.”

“People love to say, 'Well, students just need to see someone who looks like them.'”

“That's certainly part of it.”

“But representation also creates psychological safety.”

“Sometimes students don't need me to solve anything.”

“They just need one conversation where they don't have to translate their experience.”

Her account identified representation as relational. A student could see someone with a similar identity without necessarily experiencing understanding or safety. Representation became meaningful when it altered how the student could participate in the interaction—whether the student could speak directly, expect recognition, and avoid performing the additional labor of making an experience legible.

Representation also shaped participants' sense of future possibility. Jordan described his enrollment as significant not only for himself but for family members who might follow:

"I am the first person in my family to go to a university. And so to be able to open a door for my family, and then watching this door getting shut behind me is very frustrating and makes me very angry."

Jordan understood himself as opening a pathway that had not previously existed within his family. His presence at the university could make college more imaginable and navigable for others. At the same time, his reference to watching the door close behind him showed that representation alone could not guarantee continued access. A person could become evidence of possibility while also witnessing institutional changes that made the same possibility less available to those who came next.

Jordan also questioned how the university recognized the achievements of Black students. He pointed to the Black Student Union's repeated regional success:

"When BSU is now 18 out of the last 21 or 22 years winning Best Black Student Union in the Big 12, no one hears about it."

"We don't talk about it."

"We just quietly let these organizations win what they're winning at."

"And the only people who know are the people in our organization."

The concern was not that Black students lacked accomplishment or leadership. The concern was that their achievements remained largely visible within their own organization while receiving limited recognition across the institution. Jordan's account therefore distinguished being represented on campus from being incorporated into the broader story the university told about excellence and leadership.

Bernard Franklin offered a historical example of the difference between recruiting students and creating an environment that reflected their presence. Once Black students arrived at Kansas State, ordinary campus resources continued to be organized around White students' needs and preferences. Franklin remembered the difficulty of obtaining appropriate hair products:

"We were wearing afros at the time, and I had a pretty decent afro. And so, when you have an afro, you need moisturizing, conditioning shampoo. You can't use what was a popular product back in that day, which was Prell. Prell was a shampoo that took oil out of the hair. So we didn't even give that a second thought. We knew we were not using white Prell on our hair. So none of us had cars. There wasn't a Walmart in town. So if we didn't have products from home, we were borrowing conditioning shampoo from friends."

After joining the Union Governing Board, Franklin used his position to raise the issue:

"And then I got on Union Governing Board, and I said, 'To hell with this. Y'all recruited us, and you don't even have the right shampoo.'"

His concern extended beyond a single product:

"So I said, 'We need...' We didn't have Mahogany cards from Hallmark then, but I said, 'We need products that reflect us. We need snacks that we like. We need food in Derby and Kramer that we like.'"

Franklin rejected the assumption that an environment designed without Black students in mind would become welcoming simply because they had been admitted:

"It's just nonsense that you think what you created would make us feel at home."

"And so, Jess, they had recruited Black kids, but the campus was not prepared for us in a personal way."

His account demonstrated that representation required institutional adaptation. Recruiting Black students changed who was present, but it did not automatically change the products, food, symbols, or assumptions embedded in campus life. Franklin's service on the governing board gave him a mechanism for translating representation into material changes that acknowledged Black students as members of the university community.

Across these accounts, representation expanded possibility in several ways. Dr. Chen's presence gave students a space in which they anticipated recognition rather than explanation. Jordan understood his education as opening a door for his family and challenged the limited institutional recognition of Black student excellence. Franklin used formal participation to press the university to reflect the students it had recruited.

Representation was therefore not an endpoint measured only by who appeared in a classroom, office, organization, or leadership role. It affected whether students could imagine themselves remaining, leading, and being recognized within the institution. It also created opportunities for represented individuals to alter institutional spaces, although participants' accounts showed that this work often depended on their continued effort.

The next pattern examines how participants used the belonging, mentorship, and representation they received—or wished they had received—to create opportunities and more supportive conditions for others.

Participants Transformed the Belonging They Received—or Wished They Had Received—Into Opportunities for Others

Participants' accounts did not end with whether they personally experienced belonging. They also described trying to create for others the support, recognition, and access that had helped them—or that they had needed but not received. Their leadership frequently took the

form of building conditions that future students could enter without knowing the individuals whose efforts made those conditions possible.

Sarah Barrett's work to establish Cats' Cupboard illustrated this movement from personal experience to institutional opportunity. Her history of food insecurity gave her direct knowledge of what it meant to navigate college without reliable access to food. Later, her work with students demonstrated that the problem extended beyond her own experience. Creating a campus food pantry became one way of making support more consistently available to students who might otherwise continue navigating hunger privately.

Barrett emphasized that the pantry's value did not depend on whether current students knew who had helped create it:

"Does it matter that current students who utilize Cats Cupboard know Sarah Barrett?"

"No, not at all."

"Does it matter that it exists?"

"Yeah."

"Because as long as the work exists and the impact is sustained."

"The individuals fall away."

Barrett's account shifted the measure of leadership away from personal recognition. The important outcome was not that students associated Cats' Cupboard with its founders. It was that students could access food after those founders were no longer managing the work.

This distinction also showed how participants understood opportunity across time. The students using Cats' Cupboard might never know the conditions Barrett experienced as an undergraduate or the work required to establish the pantry. They nevertheless benefited from an

institutional resource created partly through that knowledge. Personal history informed the work, but the resulting opportunity did not remain attached to Barrett's identity.

Dr. Chen's account provided a relational version of this pattern. Her decision to become an educator was influenced by faculty members who had affected her own college experience. As her role developed, she sought to provide students with a reliable point of connection inside the university. The opportunity she created was not necessarily a formal program. It was a relationship in which students could seek guidance, discuss experiences extending beyond coursework, and encounter a faculty member willing to recognize what they were carrying.

For some participants, this effort was informed by positive experiences they wanted to extend. For others, it arose from remembering what had been missing. Participants who had entered college without family knowledge of university systems became attentive to students who needed help decoding institutional processes. Those who had struggled to locate food or financial assistance shared information and developed resources intended to make support easier to find. Those who had experienced racial isolation created spaces where other students could encounter community and affirmation.

The resulting opportunities took different forms: mentorship, peer guidance, culturally affirming spaces, access to basic-needs resources, and advocacy within institutional decision-making. What connected them was the attempt to alter another student's experience of the university. Participants did not describe belonging solely as something to possess. They treated it as something that could be extended through their actions.

Autoethnographic Account: Becoming the Scholar and Educator I Needed

My understanding of this responsibility developed as I moved farther into higher education. As an undergraduate, I frequently encountered scholarship that named conditions I

recognized from my family and community. The knowledge was meaningful, but the language often made the research feel as though it had been written for other academics rather than for the people whose lives it described.

As I became a researcher and educator, I began thinking about what it would mean to produce scholarship that people from my community could enter. I wanted my mother, relatives, former neighbors, and students to encounter accounts of poverty and food insecurity that treated their lives as sources of knowledge rather than as distant social problems. Accessibility, for me, did not mean reducing the complexity of the analysis. The people I grew up around regularly demonstrated complex forms of problem-solving, care, adaptation, and survival. The issue was whether scholarly writing recognized that intelligence and communicated without unnecessarily excluding them.

Representation in scholarship also became personally significant. I wanted Black and Brown students to encounter names, perspectives, and experiences they could recognize within academic literature. I understood that adding one scholar's name to a body of research would not transform the academy by itself. I also understood what it had meant for me to imagine that someone with my history could become a person who produced knowledge rather than only someone about whom knowledge was produced.

This orientation carried into my teaching. Students sometimes entered my office with concerns that they were not prepared for college, did not speak the language of the institution, or could not see how their experiences belonged within academic work. I recognized parts of my earlier self in those conversations. The support I tried to offer was shaped partly by what I had received from mentors and partly by what I had wished had been available sooner: direct

explanations, affirmation that lived experience could generate knowledge, and evidence that unfamiliarity with academic systems did not indicate an absence of ability.

My position as a faculty member placed me at a greater distance from the material circumstances that had shaped my undergraduate years. That distance did not erase the memory of entering educational spaces unsure whether they had been designed for people like me. It affected the opportunities I tried to create for students entering those spaces after me.

Across the data, participants transformed belonging through acts of continuation. Barrett worked toward a resource that could serve students who would never know her. Faculty participants used their institutional positions to create relationships through which students could seek recognition and guidance. Students shared information and opened paths for peers and family members. These actions extended the effects of belonging beyond the individual who had first experienced—or lacked—it.

This pattern did not mean participants could guarantee belonging for others. The opportunities they created still existed within institutional environments that could affirm students in one setting and marginalize them in another. The final pattern examines this instability and the continual negotiation required when belonging was uneven across roles, relationships, and campus spaces.

Belonging Was Continually Negotiated

Participants did not describe belonging as a permanent status achieved once they found community or entered a leadership role. Belonging varied across campus spaces, relationships, and moments in time. A participant could be highly visible yet materially insecure, connected to one community yet excluded in another, or recognized as a leader while questioning whether the institution recognized their full experience.

Sarah Barrett's decision to join a sorority demonstrated how visible participation could carry a meaning that was not apparent to others. Membership provided access to resources she needed to remain in college:

"But I joined a sorority."

"I joined a sorority because I had two meals every day."

"I had access to laundry, free laundry."

"And the kicker was I didn't have to pay my rent every month."

"So I could work really hard, work odd jobs, do random things, and get that money and pay it by the end of the semester versus ensuring that I would have to pay every month."

"And that was a deal I couldn't pass up."

"And so I joined a sorority."

From the outside, joining a sorority could be interpreted as evidence of social belonging and conventional campus involvement. For Barrett, the decision was also a survival strategy. Membership gave her food, laundry access, and a payment structure she could manage. Those benefits made participation possible, but they did not mean she could engage in the same way as members with greater financial security:

"Was I able to fully participate in the sorority?"

"No."

Barrett belonged sufficiently to access essential resources while remaining unable to participate fully. Her account demonstrated that membership and belonging were not equivalent. Students could be present within organizations while experiencing financial barriers that limited the terms of their participation.

Jordan described belonging through the institutional spaces made available to Black students. Reflecting on the elimination of the Diversity Programs Office, he emphasized that the office represented more than an administrative unit:

“That's a sense of place that we have. No matter how people feel about a certain person or whatnot, this office is still meant for us to be successful.”

The office carried meaning because students understood it as a place connected to their success. Its elimination therefore affected more than organizational structure. It altered a location through which students experienced recognition and support.

Jordan's account also showed that institutional belonging could be disrupted after students had invested in the university and imagined opening opportunities for others. His frustration came from experiencing progress and retrenchment together: entering a space as the first person in his family to attend a university while watching forms of support become less secure.

Bernard Franklin similarly rejected the assumption that students would naturally adjust once admitted:

“They think belonging and adjustment just happen.”

“They don't just happen.”

Franklin's statement condensed a pattern visible across participant accounts. Belonging required conditions that institutions and communities actively produced. Recruitment, enrollment, or a public commitment to inclusion did not ensure that students would find culturally relevant resources, trusted relationships, financial support, or spaces where they could participate fully.

Autoethnographic Account: The Plastic Water Bottle

I remember entering a meeting during my undergraduate work on the meal-swipe initiative and sitting at a long wooden table surrounded by administrators and other institutional representatives. I pulled out a chair, sat down, and took a plastic water bottle from my backpack.

The bottle had been compressed among the contents of my bag. As I placed it on the table, the plastic made a series of loud crinkling sounds. Around me were stainless steel bottles marked with university, company, and outdoor-brand logos. Mine was the disposable kind that came in a case, refilled and carried until it could no longer be used.

Nothing was said about the bottle. No one told me that I did not belong in the meeting. Yet I became intensely aware of it. The sound seemed to announce a difference I had hoped to keep private. I remember trying to make the bottle quieter and wishing I had something else to place on the table.

The meeting concerned a program intended to assist students experiencing food insecurity, and I was present because I possessed both relevant experience and knowledge of the proposed response. Even so, I did not feel that I spoke the same institutional language as the people around me. I was learning how to present data, answer administrative questions, and make the proposal appear feasible, while also monitoring how my clothes, speech, and belongings might be interpreted.

The water bottle did not create that divide, but it made the divide tangible. I could occupy a seat at the table and still feel that the room had not been organized with someone from my background in mind. My presence reflected access; my self-consciousness reflected the conditional nature of that access.

Over time, I learned how to participate more confidently in such settings. I became more familiar with institutional language, expectations, and decision-making processes. That

familiarity increased my ability to advocate, but it also required learning how to make my experiences understandable within norms I had not created.

This moment illustrates why belonging could not be inferred from participation alone. I had been invited into the room and had an opportunity to influence the conversation. At the same time, I remained acutely conscious of class difference and uncertain whether the forms of knowledge I brought would be treated as credible. Belonging was therefore negotiated through both formal access and the ordinary material signals that shaped how I experienced that access.

Participants' accounts showed similar negotiations across different settings. A student could hold a prominent leadership role while hiding food insecurity. A sorority could provide essential resources while remaining financially difficult to participate in fully. A culturally affirming office could create a sense of place and then be eliminated through institutional restructuring. A representative faculty member could offer safety within one office without making the broader campus equally affirming.

Belonging was also historically contingent. Spaces, programs, and relationships available to one cohort could be expanded, reduced, or reorganized for the next. Participants therefore did not treat belonging as a stable institutional achievement. They evaluated it through daily interactions and through whether structures of support remained available over time.

Research Question Three Summary

The third research question examined how belonging, representation, and institutional inclusion shaped leadership, advocacy, and sustained engagement. Four patterns emerged.

First, belonging created a relational and material foundation from which participation became possible. Community, care, food, housing, and trusted relationships affected whether students had the capacity to remain and become involved. Second, representation expanded

possibility when it produced recognition, psychological safety, institutional access, and evidence that underrepresented students could occupy positions of leadership. Third, participants used the belonging they had received—or wished they had received—to create resources, relationships, and pathways for others. Finally, belonging remained continually negotiated rather than permanently secured.

These findings demonstrate that belonging functioned as both a condition and a practice. Participants needed support to persist, yet many also became people who created support for others. Representation enabled students to imagine new possibilities, but visibility without recognition or institutional adaptation remained insufficient. Leadership could increase access to decision-making while also making participants more conscious of the spaces in which their presence felt conditional.

Participants' experiences also showed that belonging could not be evaluated solely through institutional messaging. It was produced through whether students had food, safe housing, culturally relevant resources, trusted people, recognized accomplishments, and places they believed were intended for their success. These conditions shaped not only whether participants remained at the university but whether they could sustain involvement over time.

The final research question moves from participants' experiences within particular relationships and spaces to the institutional and historical conditions surrounding them. It examines how structures, cultures, and intergenerational relationships influenced whether mobilization remained dependent on individual advocates or became sustained within the institution.

Research Question Four: Institutional Structures, Cultures, and Historical Contexts

The fourth research question asked:

How do institutional structures, cultures, and historical contexts facilitate, constrain, or shape the sustainability of mobilization efforts across generations?

Participants described institutional change as cumulative but uncertain. Current programs, spaces, and opportunities often reflected work initiated by earlier students, faculty, staff, and administrators. At the same time, participants cautioned that progress did not sustain itself. Institutional commitments could expand, weaken, or disappear as leadership, resources, and organizational priorities changed.

Four patterns organized the findings. First, institutions frequently relied on individuals to perform equity work rather than assuming responsibility structurally. Second, relationships transmitted histories, knowledge, and commitments across generations. Third, institutional culture influenced whether equity work became normalized, remained reactive, or continued over time. Finally, participants envisioned institutions that reduced the production of inequity rather than relying on or celebrating students' ability to endure it.

Institutions Frequently Relied on Individuals for Equity Work Rather Than Assuming Institutional Responsibility

Participants repeatedly attributed important changes to individuals who recognized a need and persisted despite limited institutional support. Their accounts celebrated what these advocates accomplished while questioning why progress depended so heavily on their willingness to perform work the institution had not yet assumed.

Bernard Franklin reflected with pride on the changes he and other students helped produce:

"I'm proud of what we accomplished."

"I'm proud that we changed K-State."

"I'm proud that students who came after us benefited from some of the things we fought for."

That pride coexisted with a different assessment of where responsibility should have resided:

"But I wish the institution had done that work itself."

"I really do."

"Because then I could have just been a student."

Franklin's account distinguished between valuing student advocacy and accepting institutional dependence on it. The changes mattered, and later students benefited from them. Yet the work also required Franklin to give up portions of an undergraduate experience that should not have been contingent on his willingness to function as an institutional change agent.

Sarah Barrett described a similar dependence during the development of Cats' Cupboard. Before the university acted, advocates first had to establish that student food insecurity was a credible campus concern:

"So we did the initial research."

"Which was then backed by a campus climate survey."

"So then we had more credit. And then people started to believe us. But then they were like, well, what to do about it?"

Recognition did not immediately produce material support. Barrett recalled submitting multiple requests before securing space:

“I did the application for space. For our first space we got rejected.”

“I made a second application for space, got rejected.”

“Then I just started hustling, trying to figure out how we were going to pay for the thing after finally getting a space on the third try.”

Barrett’s repeated use of “we” reflected that the effort was collective, but her description of “hustling” also conveyed how much the initiative depended on advocates assembling the resources necessary to make it viable. The institution did not move from evidence to implementation through an established basic-needs process. Individuals continued pushing the work forward after rejection.

Administrative interest increased as the initiative gained credibility and momentum:

“So most of our admin were on board at this point.”

“There were a couple folks that were really interested.”

“We had started talking to other schools that did food pantries.”

“And then there was just a lot of momentum around it.”

This progression demonstrated that institutional support was not absent in every phase. Once advocates had produced evidence, persisted through rejected applications, consulted other institutions, and generated momentum, administrators increasingly participated. The sequence nevertheless showed that the initial burden of establishing both the problem and the response rested heavily on individuals closest to the work.

Barrett later described a marked change in how the university publicly related to Cats’ Cupboard:

“Nobody supported.”

“I remember thinking, we could never sell this. We could never get people to give to this.”

“And then we become the golden child.”

“I mean, they push Cats' Cupboard like it's their job, and it is.”

“So the tide has turned over the years. But it was definitely an uphill battle.”

The pantry's movement from limited support to institutional promotion demonstrated that universities could adopt and normalize initiatives after individuals established their legitimacy. It also exposed a temporal gap: the people initiating the work carried the greatest uncertainty and resistance before the program became something the institution readily claimed.

Elle identified the risk of continuing to organize change around this model:

“But that will never be possible if we keep relying on passionate students and a few committed faculty and staff to carry out this change.”

“Students graduate, faculty and staff, they may move on.”

“It has to be embedded in the institution.”

Her account named turnover as a structural threat. Students leave after graduation, and employees change positions or institutions. When knowledge, relationships, and responsibility remain attached to particular advocates, every departure places the work at risk.

Dr. Chen made the same concern explicit across institutional roles:

“Students graduate every four or five years.”

“Faculty retire.”

“Administrators change.”

“If equity depends entirely on passionate individuals, then every transition becomes a risk.”

“Real institutional change happens when support is built into the culture rather than attached to particular people.”

Together, these accounts showed a recurring pathway: individuals recognized a need, gathered evidence, developed a response, navigated resistance, and built enough momentum for the institution to participate. This pathway produced meaningful change, but it left initiatives vulnerable during their early development and during later leadership transitions.

Participants did not argue that individual initiative was unimportant. Their accounts demonstrated the opposite. Student, faculty, staff, and administrative advocates were essential to nearly every change discussed. The concern was whether institutions converted that work into durable structures or remained dependent on continued extraordinary effort from a small number of people.

The next pattern examines one mechanism through which advocacy persisted despite this vulnerability. Participants described relationships across generations as carrying institutional history, practical knowledge, and unfinished commitments from one cohort to the next.

Relationships Transmitted Advocacy Across Generations

Participants described institutional change as work inherited through relationships. Students did not always know the histories behind the spaces, programs, and opportunities they encountered. Alumni, mentors, colleagues, and organizational networks made those histories visible and helped newer generations understand that existing resources had been created through earlier advocacy.

David's understanding of the Morris Family Multicultural Student Center changed after he learned what preceded it. When he arrived at Kansas State, the building seemed like an established part of campus:

"I don't think people fully understand what that building represents."

"When I got to K-State, the three-story Multicultural Student Center was still relatively new."

"To me, it was just...there."

"It was where organizations met."

"It was where we studied."

"It was where we'd decompress after long days."

"It became home for a lot of us."

The center supported community without requiring current students to know the advocacy that had produced it. Its physical presence made the outcome of earlier work appear ordinary. Conversations with alumni and fraternity members gave David access to the history that the building itself could not tell:

"But then I started hearing stories from older alumni and brothers in my fraternity. They'd tell us about when multicultural programming was basically confined to a downstairs area that wasn't remotely big enough for the number of students using it."

Those accounts changed how David interpreted the relationship between institutional space and community:

"Imagine trying to build community when the institution has literally limited the space available for your community."

“That expansion didn't happen because somebody woke up one morning and decided it would be nice.”

“Students fought for that.”

“For years.”

“Multiple generations of students.”

Learning this history changed the meaning of the center. A building David initially experienced as simply present became evidence of sustained student mobilization. The stories also changed how he understood his position in relation to students who came before and after him:

“That changed how I viewed advocacy.”

“I realized I was benefiting from work I hadn't done.”

“Which also meant somebody after me deserved to benefit from work I was willing to do.”

“That's how institutional change happens.”

“Not in one generation.”

“In many.”

David's account showed relationships transmitting more than information. Alumni narratives produced a sense of historical location and responsibility. Once he understood that he had inherited the results of earlier advocacy, his own work became connected to students he might never meet.

The intergenerational timeline presented in Figure 4.1 provides additional context for this pattern. Participants' relationships with Kansas State overlapped across decades even when their undergraduate experiences did not. Dr. Bernard Franklin's student advocacy began in the 1970s,

followed by decades of institutional and public leadership and continued mentorship of students. Dr. Sarah Barrett's trajectory moved from undergraduate experience into the establishment of Cats' Cupboard, administrative leadership, and continued service on the pantry's advisory board. Faculty and staff participants maintained longer-term relationships with changing cohorts, while current and recent students encountered the structures earlier advocates helped create.

These overlapping institutional relationships allowed knowledge to move in multiple directions. Alumni shared histories with current students. Students made contemporary conditions visible to faculty and staff. Long-serving employees connected current concerns with earlier efforts, and programs created in one period became sites of participation for later cohorts.

The transmission of advocacy was therefore not a simple handoff from an older generation to a younger one. Participants occupied different roles over time, and their relationships sometimes crossed conventional generational boundaries. Former students returned as mentors. Students influenced the priorities of faculty and administrators. Staff members retained knowledge while student organizations changed leadership. Current participants reinterpreted earlier accomplishments in light of contemporary needs.

David's experience also demonstrated the fragility of intergenerational transmission. Without alumni and fraternity members sharing the history of multicultural programming, the center might have remained a useful but historically unexamined space. Students could benefit from an institutional change without knowing how it occurred, what resistance preceded it, or why it might need continued protection.

Relationships helped preserve this knowledge when formal institutional memory was incomplete. They communicated that progress had been contested, that existing resources were

not inevitable, and that future students should not be required to begin every effort from the beginning.

At the same time, relational transmission alone could not guarantee sustainability. Alumni stories and mentorship could carry commitment forward, but programs and spaces remained subject to institutional priorities, resource decisions, and changes in leadership. The next pattern examines how institutional culture determined whether advocacy became part of ordinary university practice, emerged primarily in response to crises, or remained sustained across time.

Institutional Culture Determined Whether Equity Work Became Normalized, Reactive, or Sustained

Participants described institutional culture through what universities did during ordinary periods as well as how they responded during moments of crisis. Programs could become normalized when support was incorporated into everyday practices. Equity work could remain reactive when action followed only after a visible incident. Even established gains required continued attention because institutional priorities, leadership, and student experiences changed over time.

Sarah Barrett described the development of Cats' Cupboard as requiring more than opening a physical space. Advocates also had to change how members of the campus community understood need, abundance, and help-seeking:

"We had to do a lot of socialization around this idea that we are a campus of abundance, and there's more than enough to go around, so take what you need."

"Don't be Kansas nice, take what you need. It exists, it's here, we'll find a way."

This work included challenging assumptions that asking for food indicated personal failure or that students would misuse the resource:

“We had to socialize people around it's okay to ask for assistance and that's okay. And then people are not taking advantage, and this is a real need.”

“So those are, like, the major things we were fighting against.”

Barrett's use of “socialization” indicated that the pantry could not become fully accessible through infrastructure alone. Students and employees had to learn that using the resource was legitimate, that need did not require shame, and that assistance was intended to be used. Institutionalization therefore involved changing the meanings attached to support.

Barrett also described how institutional leadership affected whether student advocacy remained visible. After leaving her administrative role, she perceived a change in the presence of a clearly identifiable student advocate:

“As an administrator, I felt a lot of pride, but also a lot of frustration with the bureaucracy. And now, having been removed from it. Now, mostly just disappointment.”

“I guess I don't feel like there's an advocate for students in the same way as there was before.”

“But maybe Dr. Bosco's a unicorn, right?”

“Like, he is who he is.”

“And that's not, you know, to discredit any of the current administration.”

“I think they do care about students. And I think they work really hard. But at this point, I don't see that there is a student advocate on campus. And so I think that's disappointing.”

Her account did not equate care with sustained institutional advocacy. Leaders could care about students and work diligently while the institution still lacked a role or presence participants recognized as consistently carrying student concerns into decision-making.

Bernard Franklin examined institutional culture through a campus response to a recent racial incident. He was meeting with Edgerly-Franklin Scholars on the day a racial slur was displayed in the Bosco Student-Athlete Center:

“So I was on campus the day the N-word was displayed in the Bosco Center.”

“I was having dinner with the EF (Edgerly Franklin) Scholars.”

“We were at Olive Garden, and they came in rather somber.”

“And I’m thinking, ‘What the heck’s going on?’”

“So I asked them.”

“And they told me that there was a Black guy with this sign saying, ‘Say this, and I’ll give you candy.’”

“Which was just the most egregious thing I’ve ever heard of.”

Franklin focused not only on the incident but on the absence of an immediate institutional statement:

“And they [the university] hadn’t issued a statement.”

“So I met with the dean of students for coffee the next morning.”

“And they still had not issued a statement.”

“And then I’m saying to myself...”

“I’m watching students who were once like me go in and out of the Union, having conversations, and they’re not saying anything.”

“And so I reverted, for just a moment, back to Bernard as a college student.”

The incident prompted Franklin to compare current students' responses with his memories of student activism during the 1970s:

"That's my fear today."

"The oppressor mindset, that we can't protest, we can't do this, we can't do that, is affecting people."

During dinner, he asked students how they understood what had occurred:

"Even when I sat there at dinner at Olive Garden, I'm asking the kids what they think, and they're kind of looking at me like, 'We don't know.'"

"It's like, what do you mean you don't know?"

Franklin imagined a more immediate confrontation:

"Why didn't somebody go up and grab the sign?"

"Why didn't you push him out of the way?"

As students explained what they had heard, he learned that White students had intervened:

"And I heard a white male student said the N-word."

"And from what I understand, then a white female said, 'Say it again.'"

"And he said it again."

"And she slapped him."

Franklin continued questioning why the students at dinner had not been directly involved:

"Why weren't you all there?"

"Don't tell me what you heard happened."

"Why weren't you all there to confront him or confront the whole situation?"

He ended this portion of his account without resolving the generational difference he perceived:

“So I don't know, Jessica.”

“I don't know where we've lost courage. Fortitude. Strength. I don't know.”

Franklin's account conveyed disappointment, but it also revealed how historical context shaped expectations of mobilization. His undergraduate activism informed what he believed students should do in response to overt racism. Current students' uncertainty occurred within a different institutional and political environment, including different understandings of personal safety, protest, discipline, and organizational response. Chapter 4 does not adjudicate which response was correct. The account demonstrates that expectations for advocacy varied across generations and that institutional silence increased the pressure on students to determine a response themselves.

Marcus similarly cautioned against interpreting earlier progress as evidence that equity work had been completed:

“I think institutions sometimes assume that because progress has been made, the work is mostly finished.”

“I don't believe that's true.”

He acknowledged meaningful changes he had observed:

“Yes, we've made progress.”

“I've watched this campus become more diverse.”

“I've seen more intentional conversations about inclusion.”

“I've watched students organize, advocate, and hold institutions accountable in ways that are incredibly encouraging.”

Those changes coexisted with recurring incidents that reminded Black students of continuing racial inequity:

“But then something happens, a racial slur, a hate-filled social media post, or another incident that reminds our Black students they are still viewed differently by some people.”

Marcus did not interpret these incidents as proof that no progress had occurred. Instead, he described them as evidence that progress required continued maintenance:

“Those moments don't erase the progress.”

“But they remind us that progress requires maintenance.”

“You can't stop doing the work simply because conditions have improved.”

Barrett used a pendulum to describe the same instability:

“I think the pendulum always swings back and forth. And even though I don't believe we're in a good place right now. That doesn't mean that there isn't potential for change. And that doesn't mean that it's not better in some ways than it has been before.”

“I mean, I think that's just the takeaway is nothing is constant.”

“There's always change.”

Her experience of institutional change also involved the slow movement of a large organization:

“Even though it feels like you're, like, moving a ship like the Titanic, and you're like, there's never gonna be any change, this place is all bureaucracy.”

“That is the one constant.”

“There is always change.”

“There's always a new administration.”

“There's always a new policy.”

“Even though it's probably the same policy from four policies ago.”

“There's always change. And I think that is just reflective of life.”

Barrett concluded that institutional movement required both persistence and urgency:

“If people want to be the change. I think you just have to lean into that.”

“Because on some level, like, that is the promise, right?”

“Even if it does feel stuck.”

“Change can happen.”

“But you just have to be willing to be patient.”

“And also brave enough to be impatient.”

Across these accounts, institutional culture shaped sustainability through several mechanisms. It influenced whether asking for assistance was normalized or stigmatized, whether racial incidents generated a timely institutional response, whether progress was treated as complete, and whether changing leadership preserved or weakened established commitments.

Participants did not describe culture as uniformly progressive or resistant. Cats' Cupboard moved from an uphill struggle to a highly promoted institutional resource. Campus diversity and conversations about inclusion expanded while racial incidents continued. Administrative change created new possibilities while also making prior commitments less certain. Institutional culture was therefore experienced as dynamic and contested.

The final pattern examines the institutional outcome participants sought within this changing environment. Rather than defining success through the endurance of individual students or advocates, they called for structures that reduced the inequities students were being required to survive.

Participants Envisioned an Institution That Reduced Inequity Rather Than Celebrated Individual Resilience

Participants valued the resourcefulness and persistence students demonstrated, but they rejected resilience as an adequate institutional response to inequity. Their accounts shifted attention from how successfully students endured hardship to whether universities could reduce the conditions requiring that endurance.

Elle located primary responsibility for student food insecurity with people who possessed institutional authority:

“I think our school, our administrative leaders, and directors have a duty and a responsibility to ensure no one on our campus is food insecure.”

“I understand that student food insecurity isn't a 'K-State issue.'”

“College students across the country experience it at alarmingly high rates.”

“But why can't there be a K-State solution?”

Although college food insecurity extended beyond one university, Elle did not regard its national prevalence as a reason for institutional inaction. She connected Kansas State's identity as a land-grant institution with its capacity to develop a substantive response:

“We are the FIRST land grant institution.”

“What better way to show we are using what we are learning in the classroom to better our communities, than having our campus be the first campus in the country to have zero or even a significantly low food insecurity rate among our students.”

“Why can't WE be the ones to spearhead this?”

“Our university?”

Elle's questions moved beyond whether the university could provide emergency food. She asked whether it could define reducing student food insecurity as an institutional objective and organize its authority, knowledge, and resources accordingly.

Sonia similarly identified administrators and the Student Government Association as responsible because they influenced the costs and conditions affecting students:

"...they prioritize and allocate a lot of funding..."

"...as well as the Student Government Association."

"I believe they have that responsibility."

"They have access to control those factors that impact on-campus housing and tuition."

"Our school administrators and Student Government Association all have that responsibility."

"...to address food insecurity on campus."

Sonia did not believe that this responsibility was being fulfilled adequately:

"But it's just not being carried out effectively."

"It's not really being addressed or talked about in a responsible manner."

"...or in a way for students to be equipped and prepared to overcome these challenges."

Her account connected responsibility with control. Students could advocate and share their experiences, but administrators and governing bodies held authority over funding, tuition, housing, and other institutional conditions. Responsibility therefore extended beyond encouraging students to use available resources.

Elle acknowledged Cats' Cupboard as an important support while questioning whether an emergency resource could address the conditions producing need:

"Also, Jess, I know we have 'Cats Cupboard and don't get me wrong, that's great."

“But you and I both know that is a Band-Aid solution for a wound that is only going to continue getting worse.”

“At what point will we realize that the Band-Aid we have employed can no longer contain the wound?”

The metaphor distinguished alleviation from prevention. The pantry could respond to immediate hunger, but its existence did not by itself alter tuition, housing costs, wages, financial-aid structures, or the other conditions affecting students’ access to food.

Sonia also argued that food-insecure students could not remain the primary constituency expected to care about the issue:

“Food insecure students can't be the only ones or even the main ones to care about college food insecurity and until that changes, until we have people willing to care and act on issues that don't affect them directly, this will always be an issue.”

Her account linked sustainability with shared responsibility. If mobilization depended primarily on students currently experiencing food insecurity, the people with the least time, financial security, and institutional authority would remain responsible for maintaining the response.

Marcus expanded this vision beyond food insecurity by describing how belonging was built through ordinary institutional interactions:

“I'd also say that belonging isn't created through one event or one statement after a crisis.” “Belonging is built in ordinary moments.”

“It's a professor learning students' names.”

“It's a staff member checking in after a difficult week.”

“It's seeing people who look like you in positions of leadership.”

“It's knowing someone will believe you if something happens.”

“Those everyday experiences shape whether students stay.”

Marcus's account positioned institutional change within routine practice rather than only special initiatives or crisis responses. Policies and programs mattered, but students also experienced the institution through whether faculty knew them, staff followed up, leadership reflected them, and people believed their accounts.

He then directly challenged narratives that made student resilience the primary evidence of institutional success:

“I also hope researchers, faculty, everybody, remembers that resilience shouldn't become the story.”

“Our students are resilient. Yes. Incredibly resilient. But I don't want us to admire resilience so much that we stop asking why students have to be so resilient in the first place. Does that make sense?”

“The goal shouldn't be producing students who can endure hardship. The goal should be creating institutions where they don't have to endure so much unnecessary hardship to succeed.”

Marcus concluded by distinguishing the celebration of endurance from the pursuit of more equitable conditions:

“That's the difference between celebrating resilience and pursuing justice.”

“I think higher education has the capacity to do both, but we should never confuse one for the other.”

Across these accounts, participants envisioned institutional responsibility at multiple levels. Universities could respond to immediate need, but participants also wanted them to examine the policies and resource decisions contributing to that need. They wanted responsibility

distributed beyond the students most affected. They expected equity to appear in ordinary relationships and practices, not only in formal statements or responses after a crisis.

Participants' vision did not dismiss resilience or the programs currently supporting students. Cats' Cupboard, mentoring relationships, multicultural spaces, emergency support, and student organizations remained important. Participants questioned whether the success of these responses could obscure the conditions making them necessary.

The desired institutional outcome was therefore not simply a larger capacity to help students survive hardship. It was a reduced need for extraordinary survival. Participants envisioned a university in which students did not have to experience crisis before becoming visible, rely on informal relationships to discover essential resources, or carry primary responsibility for changing conditions they lacked the authority to control.

Research Question Four Summary

The fourth research question examined how institutional structures, cultures, and historical contexts shaped the sustainability of mobilization across generations. Four patterns emerged.

First, institutions frequently depended on individuals to initiate and perform equity work. Participants valued those contributions while questioning why students and a small number of committed employees were required to establish problems, develop responses, and sustain momentum. Second, relationships transmitted advocacy across generations by preserving institutional history and connecting present opportunities with earlier struggles. Third, institutional culture affected whether equity work became part of ordinary practice, appeared mainly in response to crises, or remained vulnerable to changes in leadership and priorities.

Finally, participants envisioned institutions that reduced inequity rather than treating students' ability to endure it as the desired outcome.

The findings showed that institutional change accumulated without becoming permanent. Students inherited spaces and programs created by earlier advocates, but each generation encountered new conditions and continuing inequities. Programs could move from marginal initiatives to normalized institutional resources, while other forms of support could weaken or disappear. Progress therefore depended on whether institutions retained knowledge, distributed responsibility, committed resources, and incorporated equity into routine practice.

Participants also distinguished between institutionalizing a response and resolving the conditions that produced the need. A program could become sustainable while the underlying inequity persisted. Food pantries could provide essential assistance without eliminating student food insecurity. Multicultural spaces could foster community without ending racial exclusion. Mentors could help students navigate systems that remained difficult to access.

For participants, sustainable mobilization required both continuity and revision. Institutions needed structures capable of outlasting individual advocates, relationships that transmitted knowledge across generations, and a willingness to reassess whether established responses remained adequate. The chapter's concluding section brings the findings across all four research questions together without moving into the theoretical interpretation reserved for Chapter 5.

Summary of Findings

This study examined how proximity to inequity shaped mobilization, sustained engagement, and responsibility for institutional change within higher education. Across eleven participant interviews and the accompanying autoethnographic data, proximity influenced what

people recognized, why they became involved, and how they understood their obligations to others. It did not, however, determine a single pathway into leadership or provide a fair basis for deciding who should carry the work.

Participants' engagement developed through accumulated experience. Material hardship, racialized exclusion, family histories, educational opportunities, and institutional encounters shaped what participants understood about inequity. Relationships then helped them interpret those experiences, navigate unfamiliar systems, and recognize possibilities for action. Participants generally began responding to needs before identifying themselves as advocates or leaders.

Proximity also affected responsibility. People with direct experience or trusted relationships frequently recognized institutional problems earlier and received disclosures that remained invisible elsewhere. This knowledge often produced a moral and relational commitment to respond. Participants nevertheless rejected arrangements that placed primary responsibility on students and employees already closest to the consequences of inequity. They distinguished being able to recognize a problem from possessing the authority and resources needed to address it institutionally.

Belonging influenced whether participants could remain engaged. It was produced through community, material support, representation, recognition, and access to trusted spaces. Participants also demonstrated that belonging could be partial and unstable. Formal membership or institutional visibility did not guarantee full participation, and support available in one setting could be absent or withdrawn in another. Many participants responded by creating for others the relationships, resources, and opportunities they had received or wished had been available to them.

Across generations, institutional change depended heavily on individuals who preserved knowledge, mentored students, built programs, and pressed the university to respond. Their work produced spaces and resources later cohorts could experience as established parts of campus. Yet participant accounts showed that gains remained vulnerable when responsibility, history, and operational knowledge stayed attached to particular people.

Taken together, the findings answer the overarching research question by showing that proximity operated simultaneously as a source of knowledge, a catalyst for action, and a mechanism through which responsibility became unevenly distributed. Those nearest to inequity often mobilized because they could see its consequences clearly. They sustained engagement through relationships, community, and a commitment to those who would follow. At the same time, they consistently argued that institutional change could not remain dependent on their endurance.

The findings therefore identify a central tension within the case: individuals and relationships made institutional change possible, but sustainability required the institution to assume responsibility for maintaining and extending that work. Participants did not envision eliminating student leadership or relational advocacy. They envisioned an institution in which such leadership contributed to change without being required to compensate continually for institutional inaction.

Chapter 5 interprets these findings through the theories and scholarship guiding the study. It examines how the relationships among lived proximity, belonging, responsibility, leadership, and institutional sustainability contribute to understanding who is mobilized to pursue change, whose labor sustains it, and how higher education institutions might assume responsibility beyond reliance on individual advocates.

Chapter 5 - Discussion, Theoretical Contributions, and Implications

Introduction

This study examined how lived proximity to inequity shapes who mobilizes, who sustains engagement, and who bears responsibility for institutional change within higher education. Drawing on interviews with eleven participants whose experiences spanned nearly five decades of Kansas State University's history, the study explored pathways into advocacy related to food insecurity, basic needs, racial equity, belonging, and institutional change. Participants represented different generations and institutional roles, yet their accounts converged around a central finding: leadership emerged through the interpretation of lived experience within particular relational, historical, and institutional contexts.

Participants rarely described entering higher education with the intention of becoming advocates or institutional change agents. Their engagement developed as experiences with poverty, food insecurity, racial marginalization, exclusion, mentorship, and institutional support changed how they understood themselves and the university. These findings complicate leadership-development models that begin primarily with leadership identity, organizational involvement, or the acquisition of competencies. Although those processes remain important, participants' accounts indicate that leadership development may begin earlier, within the social and structural conditions that shape what individuals experience, recognize, and understand as requiring action (Komives et al., 2005; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Lived experience did not automatically produce leadership. Participants became mobilized as they interpreted their experiences through reflection, relationships, and encounters with institutional systems. For some, personal experiences with scarcity or racial marginalization became the basis for recognizing structural inequity. For others, proximity developed through

listening to students, forming relationships across difference, or witnessing institutional practices that conflicted with their commitments. This distinction is important because individuals can encounter similar conditions without interpreting them in the same way or assuming the same responsibility for changing them. Experience became consequential when participants connected what appeared personal or isolated to broader patterns of power, inequality, and institutional practice—a process consistent with scholarship that treats situated experience as a source of critical knowledge (Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004; Smith, 1987).

Relationships were central to this meaning-making process. Mentors, peers, faculty members, staff members, families, and student organizations helped participants interpret their experiences, recognize their capacity to act, and enter spaces of leadership that they might not otherwise have considered. These findings affirm relational approaches that conceptualize leadership as a socially constructed process rather than the behavior of an isolated individual (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). They also extend that scholarship by showing that relationships were not merely settings in which leadership was practiced. Relationships shaped what participants recognized as inequitable, whom they understood themselves to be responsible to, and whether they believed institutional change was possible.

Belonging performed a similarly developmental function. Existing higher education scholarship has established belonging as consequential for persistence, well-being, engagement, and academic success, particularly among students whose identities have historically been marginalized within predominantly White institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Participants in this study also described belonging as a condition that made leadership possible. Experiences of recognition, representation, trust, and psychological safety enabled them to develop relationships, express

concerns, and imagine themselves as legitimate institutional actors. Conversely, exclusion and institutional neglect sometimes motivated participants to create for others the belonging they had been denied. Belonging therefore operated as both a resource that supported leadership and an institutional condition participants sought to transform.

Participants' accounts also shifted responsibility away from formal position alone. Responsibility accumulated as participants encountered inequity repeatedly and developed relationships that made disengagement increasingly difficult to justify. Students assumed responsibilities that exceeded their institutional authority, while faculty and staff often acted beyond the boundaries of their formal roles. This pattern illustrates the ethical and relational character of responsibility, but it also exposes an institutional danger: universities may become dependent on the uncompensated labor of students and employees—particularly people from marginalized communities—to identify and address inequities the institution has failed to resolve (Ahmed, 2012; Lerma et al., 2020; Rideau, 2021). Participants therefore distinguished between initiating change and institutionalizing it. Individuals could identify problems, organize others, and develop new responses, but sustainable change required institutions to embed those commitments within policies, resources, practices, and structures.

Finally, institutional change did not represent the conclusion of participants' leadership. Changes secured by one generation became part of the environment inherited by the next. Bernard's generation challenged racial exclusion and expanded institutional possibilities that later students encountered as established features of campus life. Sarah's work with Cats' Cupboard helped transform the university's response to student food insecurity, yet subsequent participants continued to identify unmet basic needs and limitations in institutional responsibility. As organizational-change scholarship suggests, reforms dependent on individual

champions remain vulnerable to turnover, shifting priorities, and the loss of institutional memory (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Participants similarly emphasized that institutional progress required maintenance, reassessment, and renewed action.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that proximity to inequity shaped leadership through a recursive and intergenerational process. Historical and structural conditions shaped participants' experiences; reflection and relationships helped them interpret those experiences; belonging influenced their capacity to act; and institutional navigation translated responsibility into advocacy and organizational change. Those changes then altered the conditions inherited by later generations, creating new opportunities, contradictions, and responsibilities. Leadership was therefore neither a fixed identity nor a linear progression toward institutional transformation. It was a socially lived process continually reconstructed across people, relationships, and institutional contexts.

This chapter develops that interpretation through the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change, the conceptual framework generated from the study's findings. The chapter first introduces the framework and discusses its interconnected components. It then explains how the findings extend scholarship on leadership development, relational leadership, belonging, civic engagement, and institutional change. The remaining sections consider implications for higher education leadership and practice, methodological contributions, study limitations, and directions for future research.

The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change

The findings informed the development of the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change, presented in Figure 5.1. The framework explains how leadership can emerge through the interaction of historical conditions, lived experience, reflection,

relationships, belonging, institutional navigation, and collective action. Rather than depicting leadership as a sequence of universal stages, it represents development as recursive. Participants moved repeatedly among experience, interpretation, relationship building, action, and renewed reflection as their roles and institutional contexts changed.

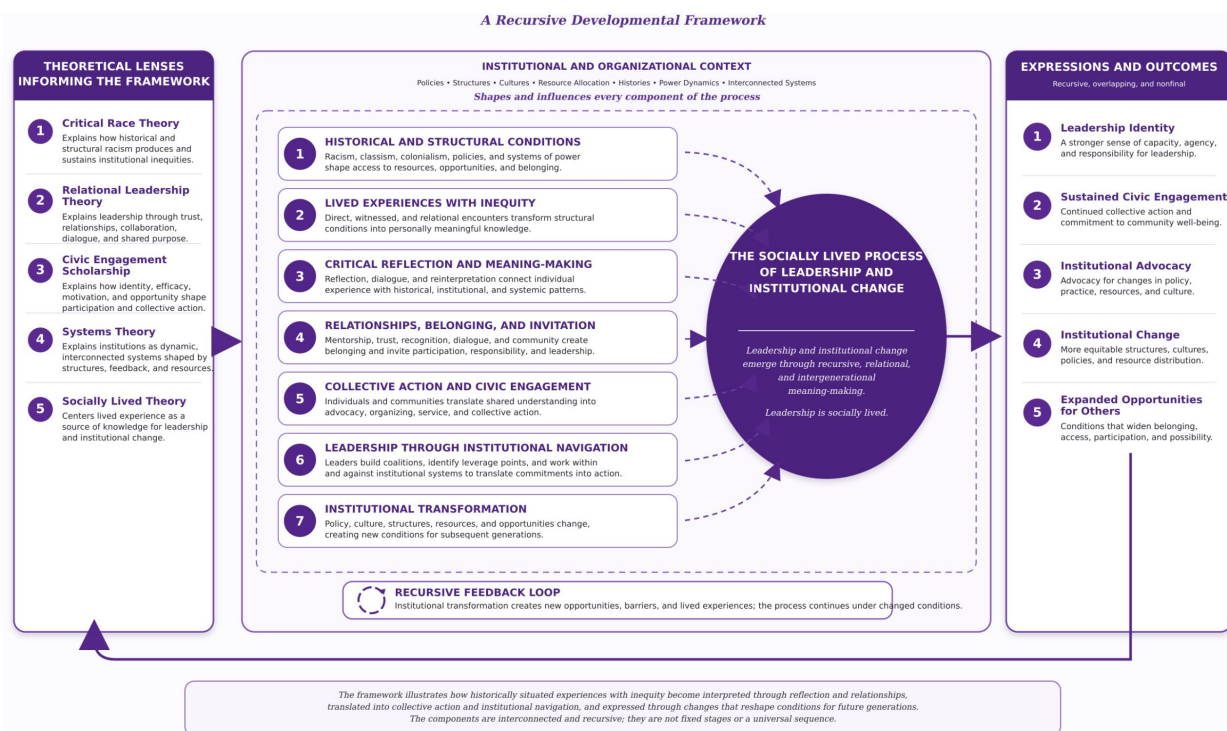
The framework makes three central claims. First, leadership development is historically and structurally situated. Individuals enter institutions with experiences already shaped by race, class, family history, educational opportunity, immigration, and unequal access to institutional resources. Second, proximity becomes developmentally significant through interpretation. Experiences with inequity—whether lived directly, witnessed, or encountered through relationships—must be understood and connected to broader institutional conditions before they consistently produce responsibility or action. Third, institutional transformation creates rather than concludes future leadership processes. Changes produced by one generation reshape the institutional conditions encountered by the next, making change cumulative but neither permanent nor complete.

The framework brings together insights from several bodies of scholarship without attempting to replace them. Critical Race Theory helps explain how racial inequities become normalized within institutional structures and why experiential knowledge is necessary for recognizing them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2000). Relational Leadership Theory clarifies how leadership emerges through social interaction and collective meaning-making (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Civic engagement scholarship explains how resources, identities, efficacy, relationships, and opportunities influence participation (Verba et al., 1995). Systems and organizational-change perspectives illuminate how institutional arrangements constrain action and why sustainable change requires coordination across policies,

practices, cultures, and resources (Kezar, 2018; Senge, 2006). Socially Lived Theory positions experience as a source of knowledge through which these structural and relational processes are interpreted.

The contribution of the framework lies in connecting these perspectives through a single recursive process. It places lived proximity to inequity before formal leadership identification, treats belonging as a condition of leadership development, conceptualizes responsibility as relational rather than merely positional, and understands institutional transformation as an intergenerational process. The sections that follow examine each component and demonstrate how participants' experiences illuminate the relationships represented in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1. The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change



Historical and Structural Conditions: Leadership Begins Before Leadership

The first component of the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change locates leadership development within the historical and structural conditions that precede formal

involvement. Participants entered higher education with experiences already shaped by race, socioeconomic status, family history, immigration, educational opportunity, and unequal access to institutional resources. These conditions influenced what participants encountered, how they interpreted institutional life, and which possibilities for engagement appeared available to them.

This finding expands leadership-development scholarship that often begins with organizational involvement, interpersonal relationships, or the formation of a leadership identity (Dugan, 2017; Komives et al., 2005, 2006). Participants' accounts suggest that the foundations of leadership were established earlier. Childhood experiences, family histories, community relationships, and encounters with educational inequality shaped their understandings of fairness, responsibility, and institutional power before they entered leadership positions or identified themselves as advocates. Leadership development was therefore embedded in participants' social locations and historical circumstances rather than beginning only when they became involved on campus.

Bernard's experience illustrates the importance of this historical context. He attended Kansas State during a period when predominantly White institutions were enrolling greater numbers of Black students without necessarily transforming the cultures, curricula, and support systems that had been constructed through histories of racial exclusion. The formal expansion of access did not automatically produce substantive inclusion, a pattern documented throughout the history of racial integration in American higher education (Harper et al., 2009; Patton, 2016; Williamson-Lott, 2018). Bernard's leadership emerged partly through confronting this contradiction. He had gained admission to the institution, yet the absence of culturally relevant products, representation, and institutional responsiveness communicated that Black students remained outside the university's assumed center.

Sarah's pathway emerged from a different structural position. Her experiences with poverty and food insecurity shaped her education long before she became involved professionally in student support or helped establish Cats' Cupboard. The financial aid system recognized her enrollment without adequately accounting for the material conditions required to remain enrolled. Her experiences reflect broader evidence that access to college does not guarantee access to the food, housing, transportation, and financial stability necessary to complete a degree (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Hallett & Freas, 2018). When Sarah later encountered students facing similar conditions, she recognized institutional barriers not as abstract policy failures but as realities she had previously navigated herself.

Other participants likewise connected their engagement to conditions that preceded their formal leadership. Daniel's experiences within a first-generation and immigrant family influenced how he understood educational opportunity and sacrifice. Elle's childhood encounters with racism shaped how she recognized racial harm and responded to threats affecting her community. Jordan, David, and Sonia entered institutional spaces in which race, representation, and belonging influenced their access to relationships and opportunities. Faculty and staff participants described how their identities, professional locations, and sustained contact with marginalized students shaped what they could see within the institution. Across these differences, leadership was situated within larger systems that distributed opportunity, recognition, security, and institutional authority unevenly.

Locating leadership within these conditions does not mean that social position determines whether an individual will become an advocate. Participants with different histories sometimes arrived at similar commitments, while shared experiences did not necessarily produce identical

responses. Structural conditions established the environments participants inhabited, but interpretation, relationships, belonging, and opportunities for action influenced how they responded. This distinction guards against treating hardship as inherently transformative or assuming that people who experience inequity bear a natural responsibility to correct it.

The framework instead shifts the initial analytical question. Rather than beginning only by asking why certain individuals become leaders, it asks what historical and institutional conditions shape what people experience, what they are positioned to recognize, and whether they have access to meaningful opportunities for action. This move responds to critiques of leadership scholarship that detach individual development from race, power, culture, and organizational context (Dugan, 2017; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). In this study, leadership began before participants claimed the identity of leader because the knowledge from which their leadership developed was already being formed within their everyday lives.

Critical Reflection and Meaning-Making: Interpreting Experience

Proximity to inequity provided participants with situated knowledge, but critical reflection shaped what that knowledge came to mean. Reflection refers to more than recalling an experience; it involves examining the assumptions through which an experience has been understood and reconsidering its significance in relation to broader social conditions (Brookfield, 2017; Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1991). Through this process, participants connected events that initially appeared personal or isolated to recurring institutional patterns and reconsidered their own relationships to those patterns.

This distinction is important because experience is not self-interpreting. People make sense of events through existing beliefs, social identities, cultural narratives, and institutional

norms, all of which influence what becomes visible or remains unquestioned (Mezirow, 2000; Weick et al., 2005). Several participants initially understood financial insecurity, racial exclusion, or difficulty navigating the university as individual problems. Reflection enabled them to question explanations centered on personal deficiency and recognize how policies, histories, organizational practices, and unequal distributions of power shaped those experiences. In this sense, critical reflection supported the development of critical consciousness by connecting personal circumstances to their structural origins (Freire, 1970/2000; Jemal, 2017; Watts et al., 2011).

Sarah's changing interpretation of her undergraduate food insecurity illustrates this process. As a student, her immediate concern was surviving college with insufficient financial and material support. Her circumstances required practical responses rather than sustained analysis of the systems producing them. After entering student affairs and hearing similar accounts from other students, she began to interpret her experience differently. What she had once navigated as a private struggle became evidence of institutional assumptions about who students were, what resources they possessed, and how much deprivation they could endure while remaining enrolled. Reflection did not alter what happened to Sarah; it changed the questions she asked of the institution because of it.

Bernard also reinterpreted his undergraduate experiences over time. Encounters he had once understood through the immediate necessity of responding to racial exclusion later became part of a broader assessment of institutional integration, preparedness, and responsibility. From the perspective afforded by subsequent decades, he could distinguish between changes that expanded access and those that transformed the conditions under which Black students

participated. His reflections demonstrate how meaning can change as individuals acquire historical perspective and observe what later generations inherit from earlier struggles.

Professional roles created comparable opportunities for reinterpretation. Marcus's sustained conversations with students complicated explanations that treated student challenges as separate or individually produced. Dr. Chen came to understand advising and mentorship as more central to her faculty role as students repeatedly brought experiences into her office that formal academic structures did not address. Stephan's work across institutional settings prompted him to reconsider how everyday practices communicated whether students were recognized and supported. In each case, reflection involved revising an earlier understanding in response to accumulated evidence rather than simply acquiring additional experience.

Although reflection included private introspection, participants frequently engaged in meaning-making through dialogue. Mentors asked questions, students disclosed experiences, peers offered interpretations, and classroom or organizational conversations supplied language for conditions participants had previously recognized only partially. This form of dialogic reflection is consistent with scholarship that understands meaning-making as socially situated and leadership learning as developed through interaction rather than cognition alone (Cunliffe, 2004; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Other people did not determine what participants should conclude, but they often disrupted assumptions and made alternative interpretations possible.

Critical reflection did not produce uniform conclusions or guarantee action. Individuals can recognize structural inequity while remaining uncertain about their responsibilities, constrained in their capacity to respond, or unwilling to assume the risks associated with advocacy. Reflection instead created a point of potential reorientation. It allowed participants to

identify a discrepancy between institutional conditions and their developing commitments, after which they had to decide whether and how to respond. This preserves an essential distinction within the framework: critical awareness may inform leadership, but it should not be treated as equivalent to leadership.

Reflection also remained open to revision. Participants reconsidered earlier experiences as their institutional roles, relationships, and access to authority changed. As did I throughout this process. A circumstance interpreted one way during college could acquire different significance when the participant later encountered it as a faculty member, staff member, mentor, or administrator. The framework therefore treats critical reflection as an iterative meaning-making practice rather than a discrete developmental stage (Cunliffe, 2004; Mezirow, 2000). Through that practice, participants developed interpretations of inequity and responsibility that could be tested, expanded, or challenged in relationships with others.

Relationships, Belonging, and Invitation: Developing the Capacity to Act

If critical reflection helped participants interpret inequity, relationships influenced whether they could act on that interpretation. Mentors, peers, students, faculty members, staff members, family members, and community partners provided access to information, language, opportunities, and institutional spaces. More importantly, these relationships communicated that participants' perspectives were credible and that their participation could matter. Leadership often began not with self-selection but with another person extending an invitation, recognizing a capacity, or making an unfamiliar opportunity accessible.

This pattern is consistent with leadership scholarship demonstrating that leadership identities are socially constructed through processes of recognition, interaction, and affirmation. Individuals may claim a leadership identity, but that claim becomes meaningful when others

recognize and reinforce it (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). College students likewise develop more relational understandings of leadership through group participation, mentoring, adult support, and opportunities to practice leadership with others (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). Participants in this study added a critical dimension to this process: recognition mattered because it countered institutional messages that had previously rendered them peripheral, unqualified, or unseen.

For Bernard, older Black students modeled forms of participation and advocacy that broadened his understanding of what was possible. Jadhida's advisors connected her with opportunities that linked food security, civic engagement, and leadership. Daniel described peers who quietly helped him access resources without intensifying the shame that can accompany help-seeking. These relationships did more than encourage involvement. They reduced uncertainty, opened institutional pathways, and allowed participants to enter spaces that might otherwise have remained inaccessible.

Invitation was especially consequential for participants who did not initially identify as leaders. Research on leadership identity demonstrates that recognition from others can support movement away from leader-centric definitions and toward an understanding of leadership as collective work (Komives et al., 2005; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Participants similarly described becoming involved because someone asked, noticed, introduced, or trusted them. This finding complicates institutional practices that depend on students to arrive already confident, connected, and prepared to volunteer. When access to leadership depends primarily on self-nomination, institutions may reproduce inequalities in social capital, familiarity with university systems, and confidence navigating predominantly White environments (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

Belonging affected how participants received and responded to these invitations. Belonging involves more than membership or physical presence; it reflects an individual's perception that they are valued, recognized, and able to participate authentically within a community or setting (Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2019). Within higher education, belonging is shaped by interactions among identity, campus climate, relationships, representation, and institutional culture rather than by individual adjustment alone (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Participants' accounts affirmed this relational and contextual character.

Black Student Union, the Multicultural Student Center, Leadership Studies, mentoring relationships, and trusted faculty offices served as sites where participants experienced recognition and developed confidence in the legitimacy of their perspectives. These spaces did not eliminate institutional inequity, but they offered localized environments in which participants could speak, question, learn, and build relationships with reduced fear of dismissal. Such experiences resemble Rendón's (1994) concept of validation, through which institutional agents affirm students as capable learners and legitimate members of the academic community, particularly when students have received few prior messages that they belong.

Participants also distinguished belonging from assimilation. Feeling included did not require suppressing identity, translating every experience for others, or conforming to dominant institutional expectations. Marcus emphasized ordinary interactions in which students trusted that they would be understood without having to establish the legitimacy of their needs first. Dr. Chen described students entering her office with a sense of familiarity and safety. Stephan recognized that shared cultural experience could reduce the explanatory burden students carried into help-seeking relationships. These accounts align with scholarship emphasizing culturally

responsive environments in which students' identities, knowledge, and communities are reflected and valued rather than treated as barriers to institutional success (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Belonging nevertheless remained conditional and uneven. Participants could experience affirmation within a student organization, mentoring relationship, or academic unit while encountering exclusion elsewhere in the university. This suggests that belonging should not be described as an individual attribute that students either possess or lack. It is produced through ongoing interactions and can vary across institutional settings (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Supportive enclaves may protect students and cultivate leadership, but their existence does not absolve the broader institution of responsibility for the conditions that make such protection necessary.

Relationships also changed how participants understood accountability. Knowing particular students, hearing their experiences, and witnessing the consequences of institutional practices made generalized commitments to equity more concrete. This resembles an ethic of care in which responsibility arises through attentiveness and responsiveness to others rather than through adherence to role expectations alone (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013). Participants did not act simply because they held authority. They acted because relationships made institutional consequences visible and created obligations they believed they could no longer disregard.

Over time, several participants became the people who extended recognition and invitation to others. Bernard mentored students from a position informed by the older Black students who had once guided him. Sarah sought to build forms of support she had needed as an undergraduate. Dr. Chen endeavored to provide students with "a small piece of home," while David described cultivating belonging for younger students. This intergenerational transfer was

not the replication of a fixed leadership style. Participants drew upon what they had received—and what had been absent—to create different relational possibilities for those who followed.

Within the framework, relationships, belonging, and invitation convert individual interpretation into a supported capacity for participation. Relationships provide access and recognition; belonging strengthens the sense that one's presence and knowledge are legitimate; and invitation opens pathways into collective work. These conditions do not complete institutional change, but they help explain how participants moved from recognizing inequity to engaging others in response. The next component examines how they navigated institutional systems to translate that engagement into policies, programs, resources, and organizational practices.

Leadership Through Institutional Navigation: Translating Commitment into Organizational Action

The next component examines how they navigated institutional systems to translate that engagement into policies, programs, resources, and organizational practices. Once participants became engaged, they confronted a different challenge: understanding how to move an institution from recognizing a problem to responding to it. Universities are not unitary organizations in which decisions flow predictably from a central authority. They are loosely coupled systems composed of divisions, departments, policies, professional norms, resource arrangements, and competing priorities (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2018; Weick, 1976). Within these conditions, participants had to identify where decisions were made, whose support was necessary, and which strategies could move an issue across organizational boundaries.

Institutional navigation required knowledge that participants generally acquired through practice. They learned how to frame problems, gather evidence, locate resources, cultivate

administrative allies, and adjust their approaches when proposals stalled. They also learned that different audiences responded to different forms of justification. A student's account might establish the human urgency of a problem, while institutional data, financial projections, or alignment with university priorities could be necessary to secure formal approval. Effective navigation therefore involved translating community knowledge into forms legible within administrative decision-making without allowing institutional language to obscure the experiences that made action necessary.

Sarah's work to establish Cats' Cupboard illustrates this translational labor. Recognizing student food insecurity did not provide the space, funding, staffing, authorization, or operational infrastructure required to create a campus pantry. Advancing the initiative involved documenting need, responding to rejected proposals, identifying supportive decision-makers, building partnerships, and modifying strategies as institutional conditions changed. Her experience demonstrates that change agents often engage in what Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) describe as institutional work: intentional efforts to create, disrupt, or maintain the practices through which organizations operate.

Bernard encountered a similar challenge in a different historical period. Concerns about food, personal-care products, representation, and campus climate initially appeared as immediate issues affecting Black students' daily lives. His advocacy exposed their shared institutional source: Kansas State had recruited Black students without adequately reconsidering the assumptions embedded in its services and culture. Addressing those concerns therefore required more than obtaining individual products or responding to discrete incidents. It required pressing institutional actors to recognize Black students as members of the university whose needs should

inform routine decisions. What appeared administratively minor carried broader significance because it revealed whom the institution imagined when designing campus life.

Participants working in faculty and professional staff roles likewise observed that institutional structures divided students' lives into administrative categories. Food assistance, financial aid, housing, transportation, academic performance, mental health, and belonging were addressed through different offices even though students experienced them simultaneously. Marcus and Stephan described navigating across those boundaries to connect students with support, while Dr. Chen encountered concerns that exceeded the conventional boundaries of teaching and advising. Their experiences reflect a central systems insight: organizational problems cannot be understood fully by examining individual units when the causes and consequences extend across the relationships among them (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006).

Cross-boundary work was consequently essential. Participants built coalitions among students, faculty members, staff members, administrators, and community partners who possessed different forms of knowledge and authority. Shared leadership scholarship similarly demonstrates that complex institutional change depends on distributing expertise and influence across organizational levels rather than relying exclusively on senior leaders (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Coalitions gave participants access to information and resources they did not possess independently, but they also required negotiation among different priorities, vocabularies, and assessments of risk.

Institutional navigation further required participants to manage the tension between urgency and organizational pace. Students experienced hunger, exclusion, and financial instability in the present, whereas institutional responses moved through meetings, reviews, budget cycles, and administrative transitions. Research on higher education change shows that

institutional culture, readiness, leadership, and sensemaking affect whether an initiative gains support and how quickly it advances (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Participants learned to anticipate these conditions, but they did not regard procedural complexity as a sufficient justification for delay. Sarah's response to repeated rejection was neither passive patience nor simple persistence. She changed the proposal, expanded the evidence, developed new partnerships, and searched for different points of institutional leverage.

This work also revealed the difference between formal authority and practical influence. Senior administrators could authorize resources and policies, but participants without positional authority often shaped what reached the institutional agenda. Students named overlooked problems, staff members connected information across units, faculty members legitimized concerns within governance structures, and coalitions created pressure that no individual could generate alone. Leadership in this context was distributed across actors who possessed different combinations of experiential knowledge, institutional access, credibility, and decision-making power (Bolden et al., 2009; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Spillane, 2006).

However, recognizing distributed influence should not obscure differences in risk. Students, contingent employees, junior faculty members, and employees from racially marginalized groups may face greater consequences for challenging institutional practices than people with secure positions or formal authority. Critical scholarship has shown that institutional diversity work is frequently assigned to—or informally assumed by—people whose identities make inequity especially visible to them, even when they lack the protection, compensation, or authority necessary to sustain that work (Ahmed, 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Lerma et al., 2020). Strategic navigation was therefore not simply a neutral leadership competency. Participants'

ability to advocate depended partly on where they were positioned and what institutional costs they could absorb.

The institutional-navigation component explains how participants attempted to convert recognition into durable organizational response. They combined experiential knowledge with evidence, coalition building, cross-boundary coordination, and an understanding of institutional decision-making. The result was not always transformation; proposals could be delayed, diluted, redirected, or rejected. Nevertheless, institutional navigation created the possibility that concerns previously carried by individuals could become reflected in organizational priorities, resources, and practices.

Institutional Transformation, Maintenance, and Intergenerational Change

Institutional transformation occurred when advocacy altered the conditions under which the university operated. A new program could address an immediate need, but transformation required a deeper shift in institutional assumptions, routines, relationships, resource commitments, or definitions of responsibility. Higher education scholars distinguish such changes from isolated innovations because transformation affects organizational culture and practice across multiple dimensions rather than adding a temporary activity to an otherwise unchanged institution (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Participants provided evidence of change at different levels. Some efforts produced tangible resources, programs, spaces, or procedures. Others changed which issues could be discussed publicly, whose experiences were treated as credible, or what the institution accepted as part of its responsibility. Cats' Cupboard, for example, provided food to individual students, but its broader institutional significance was the recognition of food insecurity as a legitimate student-success concern. A problem once treated as anecdotal or private became visible within

the university's infrastructure. The creation of multicultural programs and spaces similarly supplied material resources while also signaling that students historically positioned at the margins had claims upon the institution.

This distinction matters because program creation and institutionalization are not synonymous. An initiative may exist while remaining dependent on temporary funding, discretionary space, or the labor of a small number of advocates. Institutionalization requires new practices to become supported through recurring resources, organizational roles, policies, shared expectations, and accountability mechanisms (Kezar, 2018; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). Participants repeatedly identified this vulnerability. They had witnessed programs gain momentum under one administrator and lose support under another, while student-led initiatives faced predictable disruptions as their founders graduated.

Sarah's account of Cats' Cupboard demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of institutionalization. Establishing the pantry created a durable resource and changed campus conversations about basic needs. Yet continued operation did not mean that student food insecurity had been resolved or that responsibility was fully embedded throughout the university. Leadership transitions, resource decisions, political conditions, and changing student needs could still affect the institution's response. The pantry represented meaningful organizational change, but it also required continued investment, assessment, and adaptation.

Bernard and David's accounts demonstrate the intergenerational consequences of such change. Bernard participated in efforts to make the institution more responsive to Black students during an earlier period of campus history. Decades later, David entered an environment containing spaces and opportunities created through struggles he had not witnessed. Learning the history of the Multicultural Student Center changed his understanding of that space: what

appeared to be an ordinary institutional feature became evidence of sustained student advocacy. This illustrates how organizational change can become detached from the memory of the conflict and labor that produced it.

The loss of that history carries practical risks. When reforms are perceived as natural or inevitable, later institutional actors may underestimate their fragility and the reasons they were created. Organizational memory is preserved not only through individual recollection but through policies, routines, records, symbols, and shared narratives (Argote, 2013; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Participants' emphasis on institutional history therefore concerned more than honoring earlier advocates. Historical knowledge helped later generations understand which conditions had changed, which remained unresolved, and why existing resources required protection.

Participants accordingly distinguished innovation from maintenance. Institutions often recognize the creation of a new initiative more readily than the routine labor required to sustain it. Yet sustainability depends on whether an intervention retains support, adapts to changing conditions, and continues producing meaningful benefits after its initial implementation (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012). Marcus described progress as producing obligations of stewardship. Once an institution adopted a commitment, maintaining that commitment became part of the work rather than evidence that the work was complete.

Maintenance should not be confused with preserving programs unchanged. Student populations, material conditions, political environments, and understandings of equity evolve. A program that responded effectively at one moment may become insufficient or reproduce new exclusions if it is protected from evaluation. Coburn's (2003) account of sustainable change emphasizes not only continuation but depth, spread, and shifts in ownership. Applied here,

institutionalization required initiatives to become integrated across relevant areas of the university while remaining responsive to the people they were intended to serve.

This understanding also changes how institutional progress should be evaluated. The existence of a pantry, multicultural space, committee, or diversity statement provides evidence of activity, but not necessarily of transformation. Assessment must consider whether students can access the resource, whether the initiative has adequate authority and funding, whether responsibility is distributed across the institution, and whether inequitable outcomes have changed. Equity-minded institutional inquiry similarly requires organizations to examine how their own practices produce disparities rather than attributing unequal outcomes to students themselves (Bensimon, 2005; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Participants were especially clear that progress should not depend on each generation enduring the same harm and repeating the same advocacy. Bernard questioned why students remained responsible for teaching institutions to recognize their needs. Elle challenged approaches that relied on passionate individuals to sustain equity commitments. Marcus resisted celebrating resilience when resilience had become necessary because institutional barriers persisted. Their accounts reject narratives that romanticize struggle as a developmental opportunity. Successful transformation should reduce the amount of compensatory labor demanded from those most affected by institutional inequity.

The intergenerational dimension of the framework therefore reflects both inheritance and unfinished responsibility. Later generations inherit resources, language, relationships, and institutional possibilities created by earlier action. They may also inherit incomplete reforms, forgotten histories, and structures that reproduce inequity in altered forms. Institutional transformation changes the environment in which subsequent experiences occur, but it does not

establish a permanent state of equity. New conditions must be interpreted and evaluated in relation to emerging needs.

This feedback relationship completes the conceptual framework. Institutional transformation reshapes the historical and structural conditions encountered by later generations, but the direction of that change is not inherently progressive. Gains can expand, stagnate, or recede depending on how they are resourced, remembered, and maintained. The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change therefore presents transformation as a provisional institutional achievement—one that can alter future possibilities while remaining dependent on collective stewardship and accountability.

Theoretical Contributions of the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change

The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change offers an integrative conceptual framework grounded in patterns across eleven participants, multiple institutional roles, and nearly five decades of institutional history. It does not propose a universal sequence of leadership development or a causal theory applicable across all institutions. Instead, it identifies relationships among lived experience, leadership development, belonging, responsibility, and institutional change that existing perspectives illuminate individually but do not fully explain together.

The study was informed by Socially Lived Theory, Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, and Systems Theory. Socially Lived Theory centered knowledge developed through everyday encounters with social conditions. Critical Race Theory illuminated how institutional histories, racial power, and dominant assumptions shaped participants' experiences and whose knowledge the university recognized as legitimate

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Relational Leadership Theory explained leadership as constructed through social interaction rather than possessed exclusively by individuals (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Civic engagement scholarship clarified how resources, identities, networks, and opportunities influence participation (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Systems Theory situated action within interconnected organizational arrangements that both enable and constrain change (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006; Weick, 1976).

The framework's contribution lies not in revising any one of these traditions independently, but in explaining their interaction over time. Leadership Identity Development scholarship identifies involvement, reflection, group participation, and adult support as important to developing collaborative leadership identities (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). Relational scholarship explains how leadership is produced through interaction and collective meaning-making (Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Critical theories establish that experience and interpretation are shaped by unequal relations of power (Collins, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Harding, 2004). Organizational-change scholarship explains how actors negotiate institutional cultures and structures to implement and sustain change (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). The present framework connects these insights by demonstrating how socially situated knowledge can become relationally interpreted, collectively mobilized, and institutionally consequential.

A second contribution is the framework's integration of leadership development with institutional history. Leadership and institutional-change scholarship frequently examine how organizational contexts influence action, but participants' intergenerational accounts revealed a reciprocal relationship: institutional conditions shaped participants' leadership, while collective

leadership altered the conditions inherited by those who followed. This relationship is consistent with theories of structuration, which explain social structures as both the medium and outcome of human action (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). The present study extends that reciprocal understanding across generations by showing how programs, spaces, organizational routines, and institutional narratives produced through earlier advocacy became part of later participants' developmental environments.

The framework also distinguishes the emergence of responsibility from its institutional allocation. Relational ethics helps explain why attentiveness to others can produce a sense of obligation (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013), but the findings demonstrate that personal obligation and institutional accountability are not equivalent. Individuals may come to feel responsible for responding to inequity even when they lack the authority or resources to resolve it. Institutions may then benefit from that commitment without incorporating the work into formal roles, budgets, policies, or accountability structures. This distinction is especially consequential because equity labor is often concentrated among students and employees from historically marginalized communities (Ahmed, 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Lerma et al., 2020). The framework therefore connects the development of individual responsibility to the organizational question of whether responsibility becomes equitably and sustainably distributed.

Finally, the framework introduces maintenance as part of leadership and institutional change rather than as a secondary task occurring after change has been achieved. Organizational scholarship recognizes that innovations remain vulnerable when they are not integrated into institutional cultures, routines, resources, and systems of accountability (Coburn, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). Participants' accounts show why this matters developmentally: whether an earlier reform is maintained shapes what later generations experience and what forms

of leadership they must undertake. Maintenance therefore influences both the durability of institutional change and the starting conditions of subsequent leadership.

The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change should not be interpreted as a replacement for the theories informing this study. Nor does this case establish that all leaders move through identical components in a fixed order. Conceptual frameworks instead connect related concepts and theoretical traditions to provide an organized interpretation of a phenomenon while remaining open to empirical examination and refinement (Jabareen, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Accordingly, this framework offers a contextually grounded explanation derived from convergent patterns across eleven participants, multiple institutional roles, and nearly five decades of institutional history. Its contribution rests in its analytic and theoretical transferability rather than statistical generalizability; it identifies relationships that may help researchers interpret comparable processes while allowing institutional context and participant experience to remain consequential (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Its value, therefore, lies in guiding interpretation, practice, and future empirical inquiry without prescribing a universal or linear pathway through which leadership must develop. The next section applies these theoretically informed relationships to higher education leadership and institutional practice.

Implications for Higher Education Leadership and Practice

The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change has implications for how colleges and universities educate leaders, organize student support, cultivate belonging, allocate responsibility, and evaluate institutional progress. Because this framework emerged from a single institutional case, these implications should be adapted to differences in institutional mission, history, resources, governance, and student population. They nevertheless

provide practical directions for institutions seeking to connect leadership development with equity-oriented organizational change.

Design Leadership Education Around Inquiry, Not Adversity

Leadership education should help students examine how social position, institutional history, and systems of power influence leadership problems. Competency development remains valuable, but competencies alone do not prepare students to determine whose interests an organization serves, why particular problems persist, or how institutional arrangements distribute authority and opportunity. Critical leadership education therefore requires attention to context, power, identity, and the assumptions through which leadership is defined (Dugan, 2017; Guthrie et al., 2013; Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

Curricular and co-curricular programs can support this work through structured reflection, institutional case analysis, community-engaged learning, intergroup dialogue, oral history, and examination of local policy and organizational data. Reflection should require students to connect experience with evidence and historical context rather than merely describe personal reactions. Critical reflection becomes educationally consequential when learners examine previously unchallenged assumptions, consider alternative interpretations, and assess how their actions may reproduce or interrupt inequitable conditions (Brookfield, 2017; Mezirow, 2000). Dialogue across difference can deepen this process when it is facilitated intentionally and accompanied by attention to identity, power, and conflict rather than framed as exposure alone (Gurin et al., 2013; Nagda et al., 2009).

Institutions must also avoid treating marginalized students' experiences as instructional material for others. Students should retain agency over whether and how they disclose experiences with poverty, racism, immigration, hunger, or exclusion. Leadership educators can

use published narratives, institutional histories, community knowledge, and structural analysis without requiring students to recount trauma or defend the legitimacy of inequity. Trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies emphasize choice, psychological safety, transparency, and respect for the knowledge students bring while resisting practices that make disclosure a condition of participation (Carello & Butler, 2015; Gay, 2018; Harrison et al., 2020).

The practical objective is not to reproduce adversity in the name of leadership development. It is to provide the interpretive tools, ethical grounding, and institutional knowledge students need to recognize and address inequity without first being harmed by it.

Build Coordinated Basic-Needs Infrastructure

Institutions should treat food insecurity and other basic-needs challenges as matters of educational access and student success rather than peripheral social-service concerns. Food insecurity is associated with poorer academic performance, compromised physical and mental health, and increased risk of interrupted enrollment (Bruening et al., 2017; Maroto et al., 2015; Nikolaus et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). Housing instability, transportation barriers, childcare demands, healthcare access, and financial precarity can compound these effects, making single-issue responses insufficient (Broton, 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Hallett & Freas, 2018).

A coordinated approach should include a clearly identified point of entry through which students can access food assistance, emergency aid, housing support, public-benefits navigation, transportation resources, and referrals without repeatedly recounting their circumstances. Coordination does not necessarily require placing every service in one office, but it does require shared protocols, accurate referral information, responsible data practices, and mechanisms for ensuring that students are not lost between units. Basic-needs personnel should be integrated into

enrollment management, financial aid, academic advising, student affairs, and institutional research rather than isolated from the areas most likely to identify emerging need.

Institutions should also reduce the administrative burden associated with seeking assistance. Complex applications, documentation requirements, limited service hours, unclear eligibility rules, and repeated referrals can discourage access among students already managing scarcity. Administrative-burden scholarship demonstrates that learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs can prevent eligible individuals from obtaining public and institutional support (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Simplified applications, extended access hours, multilingual information, confidential screening, and trained benefits navigators can reduce those barriers.

Campus pantries remain valuable, but they should be positioned within a broader prevention and support strategy. Emergency food distribution cannot correct inadequate financial aid, unaffordable housing, insufficient wages, or policies that exclude students from public benefits. Institutional leaders should therefore use service data and student experiences to identify upstream policy conditions contributing to need. This approach moves basic-needs practice beyond charitable assistance toward institutional accountability for the conditions affecting students' ability to participate fully in higher education.

Create Institutional Conditions for Belonging and Participation

Belonging should be treated as a campus-wide design responsibility rather than delegated to individual students or a small number of identity-based offices. Research consistently connects belonging with engagement, persistence, well-being, and educational success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). However, belonging is produced through the cumulative effects of curriculum, representation, advising, physical space,

organizational culture, policies, and everyday interaction. Institutions cannot create it through messaging alone.

Campus leaders should examine where students encounter recognition and where institutional practices require assimilation. Culturally engaging environments strengthen students' connections to their cultural backgrounds, provide access to meaningful relationships, validate community knowledge, and cultivate a sense that students' identities are assets rather than obstacles (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). This requires sustained investment in cultural centers, identity-based organizations, accessible gathering spaces, representative curricula, and personnel with the preparation and resources to support diverse student populations.

Faculty and staff interactions are particularly consequential because institutional validation often occurs through ordinary educational encounters. An advisor who explains an unfamiliar process, an instructor who communicates confidence in a student's ability, or a staff member who follows up after a missed appointment can alter whether a student understands the institution as navigable and responsive. Validation Theory emphasizes that institutional agents should initiate affirming interactions rather than expect students—particularly first-generation and historically underserved students—to demonstrate confidence before receiving support (Rendón, 1994; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Institutions should incorporate these practices into professional preparation, performance expectations, advising models, supervisory practices, and resource allocation. Belonging cannot depend entirely on individual warmth or goodwill. Staff members need manageable caseloads, faculty members need appropriate preparation and support, and students need multiple pathways to trustworthy relationships. The relevant institutional question is not simply whether students

report belonging globally, but where, with whom, and under what conditions they experience recognition and meaningful participation.

Support Mentoring Without Concentrating Invisible Labor

Mentoring should be recognized as consequential educational labor and supported accordingly. Developmental relationships can strengthen academic integration, confidence, institutional navigation, and professional development, especially for students unfamiliar with higher education systems (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Rendón, 1994). Effective mentoring may also connect students with networks and institutional knowledge that are not distributed equally through formal instruction.

However, institutions should not assume that faculty and staff who share students' racial, cultural, or first-generation identities will absorb unlimited mentoring responsibilities. Faculty of color frequently perform disproportionate advising, mentoring, diversity, and service labor because students seek culturally affirming support and institutions rely on a limited number of employees to provide it (Griffin et al., 2011; Jimenez et al., 2019; Padilla, 1994). This labor may remain undervalued in workload, promotion, and compensation systems even when it is essential to student success.

Institutional leaders should audit the distribution of mentoring and equity-related labor across departments and employee groups. Workload policies should recognize intensive mentoring, advising, community engagement, and diversity work as substantive contributions. Institutions can further distribute responsibility through team-based mentoring, peer mentoring, cross-unit networks, formal referral partnerships, compensated faculty or staff roles, and professional development for all employees. These structures should expand students' access to support without diminishing the value of culturally specific relationships.

The goal is not to prevent students from choosing mentors with whom they identify. It is to ensure that students have multiple sources of support and that the employees providing high levels of relational labor receive time, resources, recognition, and institutional protection.

Move Equity Work From Individual Commitment to Organizational Capacity

Equity initiatives should be designed to survive personnel transitions. Individual champions are often essential for placing overlooked issues on the institutional agenda, but initiatives remain fragile when knowledge, relationships, and responsibility are concentrated in one person. Sustainable change requires integration into recurring budgets, permanent or appropriately secured roles, policies, operating procedures, governance arrangements, assessment systems, and institutional planning (Coburn, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011).

Institutions should therefore develop succession plans and preserve the histories of equity initiatives. Relevant decisions, partnerships, implementation knowledge, and community relationships should be documented in forms that remain accessible after students graduate or employees leave. Advisory groups should include people affected by the initiative but should not transfer operational responsibility to them. Cross-unit governance can distribute knowledge and reduce vulnerability while maintaining clear lines of accountability.

Senior leaders remain particularly responsible for converting institutional commitments into capacity. Public support for an initiative has limited value if it is not accompanied by authority, staffing, funding, and access to decision-making. Shared leadership can expand participation and expertise, but it should not become a rationale for senior leaders to diffuse responsibility or assign institutional problems to committees without the power to address them (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Accountability requires clarity about who has authority to act, which

resources have been committed, what outcomes are expected, and how progress will be reviewed.

Equity initiatives should also be reassessed rather than preserved automatically. Sustainability involves continued effectiveness and adaptation, not the indefinite continuation of a program in its original form (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012). Institutions should evaluate whether services remain accessible, whether participation reflects the population intended to benefit, and whether changing conditions require a different response. Maintenance is therefore an active organizational function rather than the absence of change.

Evaluate Institutional Change Through Equity-Minded Measures

Traditional indicators such as enrollment, retention, completion, and program participation remain important, but aggregate measures can conceal substantial differences among student populations. Equity-minded assessment requires disaggregating outcomes and examining how institutional practices contribute to disparities rather than attributing unequal outcomes primarily to student characteristics (Bensimon, 2005; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Institutions should ask not only which students persist, but which students must expend disproportionate effort to do so and which institutional conditions create that burden.

Assessment should combine quantitative indicators with evidence about students' experiences. Relevant measures may include access to basic-needs resources, time required to obtain assistance, unmet demand, referral completion, sense of belonging, trust in institutional personnel, experiences of validation, participation in decision-making, and perceptions of dignity and safety. Qualitative interviews, focus groups, open-ended survey responses, and participatory assessment can clarify why patterns appear and reveal consequences that administrative data do not capture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Institutions should also assess the sustainability of their own commitments. Relevant questions include whether initiatives have recurring funding, whether responsibility appears in permanent roles, whether staff turnover disrupts services, whether institutional history is preserved, and whether students continue to perform work that should belong to the organization. These measures shift evaluation from documenting activities to determining whether institutional capacity has changed.

Finally, assessment must lead to action. Collecting accounts of inequity without changing policies or allocating resources can deepen distrust and reproduce the burden of repeatedly asking marginalized communities to document harms the institution already knows exist (Ahmed, 2012; Bensimon, 2005). Leaders should communicate what was learned, what will change, who is responsible, what resources will be provided, and how affected communities will participate in evaluating the response.

Conclusion

These implications call for coordinated institutional practice rather than a collection of isolated interventions. Leadership education, basic-needs support, belonging, mentoring, organizational capacity, and assessment are administered through different areas of the university, but their effectiveness depends on how those areas work together. The practical contribution of the framework is to direct institutional attention to those connections and to the distribution of authority, labor, resources, and accountability within them.

For higher education leaders, the central task is not to manufacture adversity that students must overcome or to depend on exceptional individuals to compensate for organizational shortcomings. It is to create the educational, relational, and structural conditions through which students and employees can participate meaningfully without carrying inequitable burdens.

Doing so requires institutions to recognize situated knowledge, support critical inquiry, coordinate material resources, distribute mentoring labor, institutionalize equity commitments, and evaluate whether organizational practices reduce rather than merely manage inequity. The following section considers how the study's intergenerational, multi-positional, and autoethnographic design contributed methodologically to developing these conclusions.

Methodological Contributions

This study's methodological contribution lies not in inventing a new method but in combining intergenerational case construction, multi-positional sampling, autoethnographic data, reflexive practice, iterative analysis, and participant-centered representation to examine institutional processes across time. Each approach has an established methodological tradition; their integration made it possible to analyze individual accounts as historically situated perspectives within a shared institutional case. The value of this design rests in what it made analytically visible while recognizing the interpretive and contextual limits of the knowledge it produced.

The study brought together eleven participants whose relationships with Kansas State University spanned nearly five decades. This was a cross-sectional, retrospective design rather than a longitudinal study that followed the same participants over time. Its temporal value came from placing accounts formed during different historical periods in analytical conversation. Life-course scholarship emphasizes that experiences are shaped by historical time, social location, transitions, and relationships with others (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003). Generational perspectives similarly demonstrate that people who encounter an institution during different periods may interpret comparable events through distinct historical and cultural conditions

(Mannheim, 1952). These principles supported an examination of how participants understood the university they entered and how that environment differed across periods.

The design did not treat participants as representatives of entire generations. Age, period, and cohort effects cannot be disentangled reliably through eleven retrospective interviews, nor can one participant's account stand for everyone who attended the university during the same decade. Instead, each narrative provided a historically located perspective that could be compared with other accounts for convergence, divergence, continuity, and change. This approach preserved the particularity of individual experience while allowing institutional history to become analytically relevant (Riessman, 2008; Stake, 1995).

The intergenerational design also complicated linear institutional narratives. Organizational histories often emphasize official decisions, prominent leaders, or the formal creation of programs. Participants' accounts revealed how institutional developments were experienced before, during, and after their formal recognition. Oral-history scholarship demonstrates that retrospective narratives do more than report past events; they reveal how people interpret the meaning of those events from the standpoint of the present (Portelli, 1991, 1997). Consequently, differences among participants' recollections were not treated automatically as errors to be resolved. They could also indicate differences in institutional position, access to information, or the significance participants later assigned to an experience.

Retrospective accounts nevertheless require caution. Memory is selective, reconstructive, and shaped by present identities and concerns (Riessman, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The study therefore did not use interview narratives as transparent reproductions of institutional history. They were analyzed as participants' current interpretations of earlier experiences. This

distinction is methodologically important because the study sought to understand meaning and development, not produce a comprehensive chronological record of Kansas State University.

Incorporating Multiple Institutional Positions

Participants occupied positions as students, alumni, faculty members, professional staff members, and former administrators. This variation allowed the study to examine a bounded institutional case without assuming that the university was experienced uniformly. Case study research supports the use of multiple perspectives when a phenomenon cannot be separated meaningfully from its organizational and social context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Purposeful variation can further reveal how a process changes across positions while identifying patterns that persist despite those differences (Patton, 2015).

Institutional role affected what participants could observe and influence. Students often encountered policies through their immediate consequences, while faculty and staff could describe the professional routines, organizational boundaries, or decision processes surrounding those consequences. Alumni interpreted earlier experiences through later developments, and participants who moved from student to employee positions could compare the institution from more than one organizational location. The study could therefore examine how institutional realities were constructed through interconnected but unequal vantage points.

These perspectives were not used as if they provided independent verification of a single objective account. Participants held different forms of knowledge, operated with different degrees of authority, and sometimes interpreted comparable conditions differently. Qualitative triangulation is strongest when it expands and complicates understanding rather than forcing diverse accounts into artificial agreement (Denzin, 2012; Mathison, 1988). Accordingly, convergence across roles strengthened the interpretive significance of a pattern, while divergence

remained analytically valuable because it could reveal how institutional location shaped perception.

The sampling strategy also resisted privileging administrative knowledge as the definitive account of institutional life. Students and employees closest to a policy's consequences possessed knowledge that might not be visible from senior decision-making positions. Critical qualitative traditions emphasize the importance of examining whose accounts are recognized as authoritative and how institutional power shapes knowledge production (Collins, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Smith, 1987). Including multiple roles did not eliminate those power differences, but it made them available for analysis.

Integrating Autoethnographic Data and Reflexive Accountability

My autoethnographic accounts constituted a source of data rather than merely introductory context. Autoethnography connects personal experience with cultural, social, and institutional analysis, using the researcher's life as a site through which broader conditions can be examined (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). My experiences with food insecurity, racial identity, first-generation college navigation, belonging, advocacy, and institutional life informed the study's questions and provided material for examining how the same institution was experienced from my own historically and socially situated position.

The inclusion of autoethnographic data did not position my experience as representative of participants or as a standard against which their accounts were evaluated. Autoethnographic inquiry is strongest when it moves outward from personal experience toward cultural interpretation while maintaining attention to the specificity and limits of the researcher's account (Adams et al., 2015; Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). My experiences offered one location

within the case. Participants' accounts confirmed some of my understandings, complicated others, and exposed experiences and historical contexts I had not personally encountered.

This approach required more than acknowledging that I possessed relevant experiences. Reflexivity involves sustained examination of how the researcher's identities, assumptions, relationships, and interpretive choices shape the production of knowledge (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Reflexive journaling and analytic memoing created a record of emerging assumptions, emotional responses, interpretive decisions, and questions requiring further examination. These practices did not remove subjectivity; qualitative researchers have long challenged the possibility that subjectivity can be eliminated from interpretive inquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead, reflexivity made my involvement more visible and open to scrutiny.

Shared experience may have supported rapport by reducing the distance between researcher and participant, but similarity should not be equated with automatic understanding. Researchers who identify closely with participants may overlook differences, presume shared meanings, or privilege accounts that resonate with their own experiences (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). I therefore treated moments of recognition as invitations for further questioning rather than evidence that participants and I understood an experience identically. This distinction was especially important because shared institutional affiliation did not erase differences in race, age, generation, role, authority, or historical context.

Reciprocity within interviews also carried ethical and analytical implications. Limited self-disclosure could communicate transparency and support a conversational interview environment, yet the interview's purpose remained the exploration of participants' experiences. Relational qualitative interviewing requires attentiveness to how disclosure, rapport, and power

affect what participants choose to share and how their accounts are interpreted (Ellis, 2007; Roulston, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The autoethnographic throughline therefore functioned as both data and an obligation to examine my influence throughout the study.

Using Iterative Analysis Across Time and Position

Analysis proceeded through repeated movement among transcripts, codes, memos, autoethnographic material, research questions, and theoretical concepts. This iterative process allowed interpretations to develop through continued engagement with the dataset rather than through a single cycle of coding. Qualitative analysis commonly involves moving between portions of data and the developing whole, refining categories as relationships become more visible (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Comparisons occurred across participants, roles, historical periods, and forms of proximity to inequity. Earlier interviews informed issues explored in subsequent conversations, while later accounts prompted renewed examination of earlier transcripts. Constant comparison can be used beyond formal grounded theory to clarify conceptual properties, identify variation, and test the adequacy of developing interpretations across cases or data segments (Charmaz, 2014; Fram, 2013). In this study, comparison helped prevent the analysis from becoming a collection of separate participant profiles.

Memo writing was particularly important because it preserved the development of analytical decisions. Memos documented emerging relationships, contradictory evidence, possible theoretical connections, and distinctions that required refinement. Analytic memos provide a bridge between coding and conceptual interpretation by making the researcher's evolving reasoning available for review (Birks et al., 2008; Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al., 2020).

They also helped distinguish patterns supported across accounts from interpretations rooted primarily in my own experience.

Existing theories functioned as interpretive resources without becoming predetermined coding containers. A theoretically informed qualitative study must remain attentive to concepts established in prior scholarship while allowing empirical material to challenge, qualify, or connect those concepts in unanticipated ways (Charmaz, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Critical Race Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, civic engagement scholarship, Systems Theory, and Socially Lived Theory helped sensitize the analysis to power, relationships, participation, organizational interdependence, and experiential knowledge. The conceptual framework developed through examining relationships among those domains rather than forcing participants' accounts to reproduce any one theory.

The resulting framework should therefore be understood as an interpretive product of this bounded case. Case studies can generate concepts and theoretical propositions with relevance beyond the immediate site, but those propositions remain accountable to the conditions under which they were developed (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Future inquiry can examine whether the relationships identified here are useful in other institutions, not whether this sample statistically establishes them as universal.

Preserving Voice While Acknowledging Representation

The findings chapter incorporated extensive verbatim quotations to keep participants' language, emphasis, and interpretation visible. Quotations can demonstrate the relationship between data and analytical claims, preserve features of participants' meaning-making, and allow readers to evaluate how an interpretation was developed (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006;

Maxwell, 2013; Tracy, 2010). This was especially important in a study centered on experiential knowledge and institutional histories that might otherwise be reduced to abstract themes.

Quotations, however, do not speak independently of the researcher. The selection, length, arrangement, and contextualization of excerpts shape how participants are represented (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Riessman, 2008; Sandelowski, 1994). Including participants' words could not eliminate my interpretive authority or guarantee that every dimension of their account was preserved. For that reason, quotations were used as evidence within an explicit interpretive argument rather than presented as self-evident proof.

Attention to voice also required resisting two representational extremes. Reducing participants to brief illustrative fragments would disconnect their statements from the experiences that gave them meaning. Conversely, allowing quotation volume to substitute for analysis would leave the reader without a clear account of why particular excerpts mattered. Qualitative representation requires balance between evidentiary depth and analytical responsibility (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2010). The study therefore used participants' language to support interpretation while maintaining a distinction between what participants said and the claims I developed across accounts.

This representational approach was also epistemological. Treating participants as knowledge producers required attention not only to the events they described but also to the explanations, questions, and institutional critiques they developed from those events (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Their accounts were not included merely to humanize conclusions reached elsewhere. They constituted substantive interpretations that shaped the study's analysis.

Summary of Methodological Contributions

Together, these methodological choices demonstrate the value of constructing a higher education case across historical periods, institutional positions, and researcher experience. The intergenerational design introduced temporal comparison without claiming longitudinal evidence. Multi-positional sampling made organizational location analytically visible without treating perspectives as interchangeable. Autoethnographic data placed my experience within the study while reflexive practices addressed the interpretive responsibilities created by that inclusion. Iterative comparison supported conceptual development, and the deliberate use of participant quotations strengthened the evidentiary connection between narrative and interpretation.

The strength of this approach lies in its capacity to hold personal meaning, institutional context, and historical change within the same analysis. Its limitations are equally important: retrospective narratives are selective, the researcher remains involved in every stage of interpretation, and a bounded case cannot establish universal applicability. The following section addresses these and other limitations directly, defining the conditions within which the study's findings and conceptual framework should be understood.

Limitations of the Study

The findings and conceptual framework should be interpreted within the boundaries of the study's institutional setting, participant sample, temporal design, data sources, and researcher positionality. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to develop an in-depth interpretation of a socially and historically situated process rather than estimate prevalence, test causal relationships, or produce statistically generalizable conclusions. Qualitative case studies can support analytic transfer by identifying concepts and relationships that readers may examine in

other settings, but transferability depends on the degree of correspondence between contexts rather than sample size alone (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

A Single Institutional Context

This study was bounded within Kansas State University, a predominantly White, public land-grant institution in the Midwestern United States. Its history, geographic location, governance, student population, leadership programs, and organizational culture influenced the conditions participants described. Land-grant institutions also occupy distinctive historical relationships with public service, access, agriculture, and racialized educational opportunity that may not correspond directly with private institutions, community colleges, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, or institutions outside the United States.

The findings therefore should not be interpreted as representing higher education generally. Concepts developed within a case remain connected to the setting in which they were observed, even when they offer useful insights for other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Detailed attention to institutional context supports readers in determining whether particular interpretations may be transferable, but it cannot establish that the same relationships will operate similarly elsewhere (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The single-site design also limited institutional comparison. Because all participants were connected to Kansas State, the study could not determine which patterns reflected broader features of higher education and which were especially influenced by this institution's history and culture. A comparative design involving institutions with different missions, racial compositions, resource levels, and governance arrangements could reveal how context changes the relationships represented in the framework.

Purposeful and Self-Selecting Participation

Participants were purposefully recruited because they possessed experiences relevant to food insecurity, basic needs, racial equity, belonging, leadership, or institutional change.

Purposeful sampling was appropriate for obtaining information-rich accounts of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). However, it also shaped the range of perspectives included in the study.

People willing to participate may have been more reflective, more engaged with equity-related concerns, or more inclined to interpret their experiences through leadership and institutional responsibility. Individuals who encountered inequity but did not become involved, withdrew from advocacy, left the institution, or declined to participate may have developed substantially different interpretations. Their absence limits the study's ability to explain nonparticipation, disengagement, burnout, or decisions to exit the institution. This is especially important because barriers to participation may systematically exclude people whose experiences would challenge narratives centered on sustained engagement.

The sample also included participants from several roles and historical periods, but it did not contain enough individuals within each category to support systematic comparisons among students, alumni, faculty members, staff members, administrators, racial groups, or generations. Variation strengthened the range of perspectives available for interpretation, but no subgroup should be treated as representative of a broader population. In qualitative inquiry, sample adequacy depends on the specificity, relevance, and richness of the information available for the study's purpose (Malterud et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014). Nevertheless, additional participants within each institutional position could have revealed greater variation and more negative or disconfirming cases.

Retrospective Interpretation and Historical Reconstruction

Several participants discussed events that occurred years or decades before their interviews. Retrospective narratives provided access to participants' changing interpretations, but they were not direct records of past events. Memory is reconstructive: later experiences, present identities, institutional changes, and repeated retelling can influence which events people remember and how they organize those events into meaningful narratives (Riessman, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Schacter, 1999).

This limitation is particularly relevant to an intergenerational study. Differences between earlier and later accounts may reflect historical change, but they may also reflect differences in memory, life stage, social position, or the questions participants considered important at the time of the interview. The study was not designed to isolate these influences. It consequently cannot establish a definitive chronology of institutional change or attribute a particular development to a single person, event, or generation.

Participants' retrospective interpretations were still valuable because the meaning assigned to an experience over time was central to the research questions. Oral-history scholars caution that the interpretive character of memory is not merely a defect; how individuals reconstruct the past can reveal its continuing significance in the present (Portelli, 1991, 1997). Nevertheless, meaning and historical verification are different analytical objectives. Greater use of archival materials, meeting minutes, student publications, institutional reports, and contemporaneous records could have strengthened the historical dimension of the case and clarified how participant accounts corresponded with documented institutional developments.

Reliance on Narrative and Autoethnographic Evidence

The study relied primarily on participant interviews and autoethnographic material. These sources provided access to interpretation, identity, and meaning that administrative records or surveys could not capture. However, they offered limited evidence of institutional practices as they unfolded in real time. The study did not include sustained observations of meetings, classrooms, student organizations, advising encounters, or administrative decision-making. It therefore cannot compare participants' accounts systematically with observed behavior.

Interviews are relational events in which participants respond not only to research questions but also to the interviewer, perceived expectations, and the circumstances of the conversation (Roulston, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants may emphasize experiences that support a coherent account, omit events they consider sensitive, or present themselves in ways consistent with their current identities. The study's findings represent interpretations co-constructed through those encounters rather than unmediated access to participants' internal experiences.

Using additional data sources could have produced a more extensively triangulated institutional case. Triangulation does not necessarily yield a single definitive truth, but it can expose differences among what institutions document, what participants report, and what researchers observe (Denzin, 2012; Mathison, 1988). Future studies could combine interviews and autoethnography with observation, archival analysis, policy review, institutional data, and participatory methods.

Researcher Positionality and Institutional Proximity

My relationship to Kansas State University and my experiences with several of the issues under investigation shaped every stage of the study. They influenced the research questions I

considered important, the language I used, the participants with whom I developed rapport, and the patterns I recognized during analysis. Insider knowledge can provide access to contextual meanings and institutional relationships that may be difficult for an external researcher to obtain. It can also produce assumptions of shared understanding, make familiar practices less visible, and complicate the researcher's ability to question interpretations that align closely with personal experience (Berger, 2015; Chavez, 2008; Mercer, 2007).

My institutional relationships may also have influenced what participants chose to disclose. Some may have felt greater trust because of shared experiences or institutional familiarity, while others may have withheld criticism because they understood me as connected to the university. Rapport cannot be assumed to operate uniformly, and apparent similarity between researcher and participant does not eliminate differences in identity, status, authority, or experience (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003).

Reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, repeated transcript review, comparison across participants, and attention to contradictory accounts strengthened the transparency of interpretation. These practices did not neutralize my positionality or eliminate alternative readings. Reflexivity is not a mechanism for achieving complete objectivity; it is a means of examining the conditions under which knowledge is produced and acknowledging the researcher's continuing interpretive authority (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Another researcher working with the same material might emphasize different relationships or construct the conceptual framework differently.

The use of autoethnographic data intensified this interpretive responsibility. My experiences were both part of the phenomenon and part of the analytical lens through which participant accounts were examined. Although I sought to distinguish my narrative from

participants' narratives, the two inevitably influenced one another. The study should therefore be read as a situated interpretation developed through my interaction with participants and the institution rather than as a detached account produced from outside the case.

Confidentiality and Contextual Detail

Protecting participants' confidentiality required balancing anonymity with sufficient contextual information to make their accounts meaningful. This challenge was especially pronounced because the participant group included people connected to visible institutional initiatives and historical events. Specific combinations of role, decade, identity, and institutional involvement could make individuals recognizable even when names were removed.

For that reason, exact dates and some identifying details were omitted, generalized, or organized by decade. These protections reduced the precision with which certain institutional developments could be described. Qualitative researchers must continually balance the analytic value of contextual detail against the possibility of deductive disclosure, particularly within bounded communities where participants may be identifiable through the substance of their experiences (Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015). Consequently, some historical and organizational context that might have strengthened interpretation could not be included.

Confidentiality also cannot be guaranteed absolutely when participants discuss publicly known initiatives or events. Pseudonyms and the removal of direct identifiers reduce risk but may not prevent knowledgeable readers from inferring identity. This limitation should be recognized in interpreting the level of detail presented throughout the findings.

Current Scope of the Conceptual Framework

The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change was developed from patterns within this case; it has not yet been examined across independent samples or

institutional settings. The framework should therefore be understood as provisional and contextually grounded rather than validated as a universal model. Conceptual frameworks organize relationships among ideas and provide direction for interpretation and inquiry, but their usefulness must be assessed through continued application, critique, and refinement (Jabareen, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

The framework also should not be interpreted as establishing causal relationships among its components. Interview narratives can illuminate perceived connections and developmental meaning, but they cannot determine that proximity, reflection, belonging, or relationships necessarily cause leadership or institutional change. Nor does the framework establish a fixed temporal order. Components may overlap, recur, remain absent, or operate differently across individuals and contexts.

Finally, the framework focuses on the emergence and sustainability of equity-oriented leadership. It does not explain all forms of leadership or institutional change, including leadership directed toward preserving inequitable structures. Power can be exercised to resist reform, limit institutional recognition, or reproduce existing arrangements. Although participants discussed institutional resistance, the study's sampling and research questions centered primarily on those working toward change. A fuller theory of institutional leadership would also require sustained examination of opposition, countermobilization, organizational inertia, and the interests served by maintaining existing conditions.

Delimiting the Study's Claims

These limitations define the appropriate scope of the study's conclusions. The findings offer a contextual interpretation of how eleven participants understood proximity, leadership, responsibility, and change within one institutional case. They do not establish prevalence,

causality, institutional consensus, or universal developmental stages. The conceptual framework provides a theoretically informed set of relationships that can guide interpretation and future inquiry, but it remains open to revision.

Acknowledging these boundaries strengthens rather than diminishes the study's contribution by clarifying what the evidence can support. The next section identifies research needed to examine the framework across contexts, incorporate perspectives underrepresented in this case, and investigate dimensions of leadership and institutional change that the present design could not address.

Directions for Future Research

This study answered some of the questions that brought me to the research, but it also left me with new ones. Most importantly, it showed how much remains unknown about the relationships among lived experience, leadership, and institutional change across time. The Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change should therefore be treated as an invitation to further inquiry rather than a framework that future studies must confirm. Its value will depend on whether other researchers can use it, question it, identify what it overlooks, and revise it in response to evidence from settings and participants beyond this case (Jabareen, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Examine the Framework Across Institutional Contexts

The most immediate next step is to examine how the framework operates across different types of colleges and universities. Kansas State's land-grant mission, predominantly White institutional context, geographic location, and organizational history influenced what participants experienced and how change unfolded. The relationships identified here may appear differently

within community colleges, regional comprehensive universities, private institutions, and minority-serving institutions.

This work should not treat institutional type as a demographic variable added to an otherwise unchanged design. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and other minority-serving institutions have distinct histories, missions, relationships with their communities, and experiences with state and federal policy (Gasman & Conrad, 2013; Gasman et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2013). Comparative research should examine how those institutional histories shape what counts as belonging, whose knowledge carries authority, where responsibility resides, and how leadership is mobilized.

Institutional comparison would also help distinguish relationships that travel across settings from those especially dependent on a particular organizational culture. Comparative case studies could examine institutions that differ in size, governance, racial composition, resource availability, political environment, or commitment to student basic needs. Such designs are valuable not because they produce context-free conclusions, but because they clarify how similar processes operate under different conditions (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018).

International research could further challenge assumptions embedded in a framework developed within U.S. higher education. Concepts such as leadership, advocacy, belonging, race, and institutional responsibility are culturally and politically situated. Researchers working in other national contexts may identify different relationships among community, state responsibility, educational access, and collective action. Those differences should be understood as opportunities to reconstruct the framework rather than deviations from an American norm.

Study Disengagement, Exit, and Resistance

One of the questions I continue to carry from this study is what happens to people who recognize inequity but do not—or cannot—remain engaged. Because participants were selected partly for their proximity to advocacy and institutional change, the study was better positioned to explain sustained involvement than withdrawal, refusal, burnout, or exit. Future research should intentionally recruit people who stepped away from equity work, left an institution, declined leadership opportunities, or decided that the personal costs of advocacy were too high.

This is not a marginal question. The ability to exercise voice depends on access to time, money, security, relationships, and institutional protection. When those resources are absent, people may remain silent or leave even when they possess a clear understanding of institutional inequity. Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit, voice, and loyalty offers one foundation for examining these choices, while research on activist burnout and racialized stress demonstrates that sustained justice work can generate substantial emotional and physical costs (Gorski et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2007). Studying disengagement would help prevent the framework from implying that continued leadership is the expected or morally superior response to inequity.

Future studies should also examine people who resist equity-oriented change. Institutional transformation involves conflict as well as collaboration, and organizations contain actors who benefit from existing arrangements or interpret reform as threatening to their interests, authority, or understanding of the institution (Ahmed, 2012; Kezar, 2018). Research focused only on advocates risks depicting institutional resistance as an impersonal feature of bureaucracy rather than something reproduced through decisions, interests, and organized opposition. Including institutional gatekeepers, skeptical stakeholders, and opponents of change would provide a fuller account of how power operates.

Follow Leadership and Institutional Change Over Time

Longitudinal research is particularly important for examining a framework organized around development and institutional inheritance. The present study relied on retrospective accounts, allowing participants to explain how they currently understood experiences from earlier periods. A prospective design could follow students, employees, or advocacy groups as their interpretations, relationships, and institutional positions change.

Qualitative longitudinal research is well suited to studying processes that unfold unevenly, change direction, or acquire new meaning over time (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003). Researchers might begin with students entering an advocacy organization and continue interviewing them as they assume leadership, graduate, enter professional roles, or disengage. Similar designs could follow faculty and staff through role changes or leadership transitions. Repeated interviews, observations, and reflective materials would allow researchers to examine when responsibility intensifies, weakens, or shifts and whether participants later reinterpret experiences differently.

Institutional initiatives should also be followed beyond their launch. Organizational research often privileges moments of innovation while giving less attention to what occurs after public attention, start-up funding, or founding leaders disappear. Longitudinal case studies could trace basic-needs programs, multicultural centers, leadership initiatives, or equity policies across administrative transitions and budget cycles. Combining interviews with meeting records, budgets, policies, student publications, and assessment data would make it possible to examine how change is maintained, adapted, symbolically preserved, or dismantled (Pettigrew, 1990; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Stirman et al., 2012).

This temporal work would also create opportunities to recover institutional memory. Oral histories involving earlier advocates could be analyzed alongside archival records and the experiences of current students. The aim would not be to produce a single uncontested history, but to understand how institutional narratives are constructed, which contributions are remembered, and what is lost when the labor behind established programs or spaces disappears from collective memory (Portelli, 1991; Walsh & Ungson, 1991).

Investigate Specific Relationships Within the Framework

Future studies should examine individual relationships within the framework rather than attempting to evaluate it only as a complete model. One important area concerns the relationship between belonging and institutional participation. Existing research has established belonging as consequential for persistence, engagement, and well-being (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Further research could investigate when belonging encourages students to exercise voice, when exclusion mobilizes advocacy, and when either condition leads to withdrawal.

This work will require greater conceptual precision. Belonging to a student organization, academic program, cultural community, or university as a whole may have different implications for leadership. A student may feel deeply connected to peers while distrusting the institution, or may feel academically included while experiencing racial isolation elsewhere. Researchers should therefore examine belonging at multiple ecological levels rather than relying only on a global measure (Hurtado et al., 2012; Museus et al., 2017). Mixed-methods designs could pair validated belonging measures with interviews, social-network analysis, observation, and participation data to examine how relational environments influence voice and action (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Responsibility also warrants closer study. Future research could explore how students and employees distinguish caring about an issue from feeling obligated to act, as well as how authority, job security, identity, professional ethics, and institutional role influence that distinction. Comparative studies among students, faculty members, staff members, and senior administrators could reveal when relational responsibility becomes institutional authority—and when it does not. This work could also examine whether formal recognition and compensation sustain engagement or alter how participants understand the work.

Researchers should further investigate the conditions under which lived experience becomes a recognized form of expertise. Institutions frequently invite personal testimony while reserving decision-making authority for people with professional credentials or administrative status. Future studies might examine whether participatory governance, advisory councils, student representation, or co-designed programs redistribute authority or simply collect experiential accounts without changing who controls institutional responses. This distinction is central to determining whether inclusion is substantive or symbolic (Arnstein, 1969; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2006).

Use Participatory and Collaborative Methodologies

The framework's emphasis on experiential knowledge creates a strong rationale for participatory research. Critical participatory action research engages people affected by a problem as collaborators in defining questions, interpreting evidence, and determining what action should follow (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014). In basic-needs research, for example, students experiencing food or housing insecurity could help design the study, interpret institutional data, evaluate services, and develop recommendations. Their involvement should extend beyond supplying stories or validating conclusions already reached by researchers.

Collaborative autoethnography could also deepen the intergenerational dimension of this work. Rather than relying on one researcher's autoethnographic throughline, multiple participants could examine how their personal narratives intersect with shared institutional histories (Chang et al., 2013). A collaborative project involving students, alumni, faculty members, and staff members could reveal where interpretations converge and where institutional position produces fundamentally different accounts.

Participatory approaches do not eliminate power differences. Researchers and institutional leaders may still control funding, timelines, publication, and access to decision-makers. Ethical participatory research must therefore address compensation, authorship, confidentiality, decision-making authority, and the potential consequences of criticizing an institution (Fine & Torre, 2021). Without those commitments, participation can become another means of extracting knowledge from the people already carrying the consequences of inequity.

Extend the Inquiry Beyond Higher Education

Although this framework emerged within a university, its central relationships may be relevant to other organizational settings. Healthcare systems, public agencies, schools, nonprofit organizations, social movements, and community-based organizations also contain people whose experiences with inequity inform how they understand responsibility and institutional change. Research in those settings could determine which elements depend on higher education and which reflect more general relationships among experience, collective action, and organizational transformation.

Such extension should proceed cautiously. Applying the framework elsewhere should not mean transferring its language unchanged or presuming that leadership operates similarly across sectors. Grassroots movements, public agencies, and healthcare organizations differ in authority,

professional norms, accountability, community relationships, and exposure to state power. The purpose of cross-sector research would be to identify meaningful variation and limits, not to expand the framework's reach without sufficient evidence.

Concluding Direction

Future research should place the framework under genuine empirical and theoretical pressure. Studies that only seek confirming examples would offer limited value. The more consequential work will identify where its relationships fail, where additional conditions are necessary, and where experiences do not lead to the outcomes this case made visible. Conceptual frameworks become stronger through revision, boundary setting, and engagement with disconfirming evidence—not through protection from critique (Jabareen, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

For me, the most important question moving forward is not whether every participant or institution follows the same process. It is how institutions shape what people are able to recognize, what action they can sustain, and what burdens they must carry to create change. Research that remains attentive to those questions can refine the framework while keeping its central ethical concern in view: institutional transformation should not depend indefinitely on those most affected by inequity having to prove that inequity exists. The final section returns to that concern and considers what this study ultimately asks of higher education, leadership scholarship, and the institutions we collectively inherit.

Chapter Conclusion

When I began this study, I believed I was asking why some people become advocates for students experiencing food insecurity and other basic needs and equity issues. That question was personal. I had known food insecurity as a student, and I had also experienced what it meant to

become involved in efforts such as Swipe Against Hunger while still trying to navigate college myself. For a long time, I understood that work primarily through the language of service and advocacy. This study required me to ask a more difficult question: Why did students have to convince the institution that hunger or exclusion or [you, the reader, can fill in the blank] was real before the institution accepted responsibility for addressing it?

Participants' stories showed that this question extended well beyond food insecurity. Across generations, students repeatedly identified needs, challenged exclusions, created communities, and built resources that later became recognizable parts of institutional life. Faculty and staff members often carried this work alongside them, sometimes because their positions required it, but frequently because relationships made institutional inaction increasingly difficult to accept. What appeared initially to be a study of advocacy therefore became an examination of how people come to recognize inequity, how they decide what they owe one another, and what happens when personal commitment encounters institutional power.

The overarching research question asked how proximity to inequity shapes who mobilizes, who sustains engagement, and who bears responsibility for institutional change. The answer that emerged is neither simple nor deterministic. Proximity did not automatically produce leadership. Some participants knew inequity through their own experiences, while others came to understand it through family, community, students, or colleagues. What mattered was not proximity alone but whether participants had opportunities to interpret what they encountered, connect it to broader institutional conditions, and act with others. Mobilization became possible when participants could move from knowing that something was wrong to understanding that it was neither isolated nor inevitable.

Sustained engagement required something more. Participants needed relationships, communities, access to institutional knowledge, and some belief that their efforts could matter. They also needed the time, security, and authority to continue—resources that were not distributed equally. This finding complicates any interpretation that presents sustained advocacy solely as evidence of commitment or character. People may care deeply about an issue and still be unable to bear the personal, professional, or material costs of addressing it. Institutions should therefore be cautious about celebrating the advocates who persist without examining the conditions that make such persistence necessary.

The question of responsibility became the study's most consequential ethical concern. Participants often assumed responsibility before the university did, but their willingness to act did not make institutional dependence on that labor just or sustainable. Students should not have to experience hunger before universities take basic needs seriously. Black students should not have to repeatedly explain why representation, safety, and cultural recognition matter. Faculty and staff members from marginalized communities should not be expected to absorb unlimited mentoring and equity labor because institutions have failed to distribute that work appropriately (Ahmed, 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Lerma et al., 2020). Experiential knowledge should inform institutional action, but possessing that knowledge should not condemn individuals to carrying the institution's responsibility indefinitely.

This distinction is central to the Socially Lived Process of Leadership and Institutional Change. The framework recognizes the leadership produced through lived experience without romanticizing the conditions that made such leadership necessary. It honors what participants created while refusing to suggest that future generations should be required to recreate it. Its central contribution is therefore not simply an explanation of how leaders develop. It is an

account of the relationship between what institutions create in people's lives and what people, in turn, struggle to change within institutions.

The intergenerational design made that relationship especially visible. Some participants remembered fighting for resources, recognition, and spaces that later participants encountered as ordinary features of the university. Yet institutional memory did not always preserve the labor behind those changes. When progress becomes detached from its history, institutions may begin to regard hard-won gains as inevitable, permanent, or no longer in need of protection. Participants instead described progress as an inheritance carrying obligations. Each generation receives an institution shaped by those who came before, but it also inherits unresolved inequities, fragile commitments, and decisions about what will be maintained.

I leave this study with a different understanding of leadership than the one with which I began. Leadership is not best measured by how much hardship a person can endure or how much institutional failure an individual can compensate for. It is revealed in the ways people make inequity visible, build relationships across difference and time, create possibilities that did not previously exist, and press institutions to accept responsibilities they have too often displaced onto individuals. Yet the ultimate measure of institutional change is not whether an institution continues to produce exceptional advocates. It is whether those advocates leave behind conditions in which fewer people must fight simply to eat, belong, be recognized, or participate fully.

This study does not offer a final explanation of how leadership develops or how institutions change. It offers a grounded account of eleven people whose lives intersected with one university across nearly five decades and whose experiences reveal how institutional history

is carried forward through people. Their stories demonstrate that change is cumulative but not guaranteed, collective but unevenly burdened, and meaningful without ever being complete.

I began by asking why certain people mobilize in response to inequity. I conclude with a question directed more clearly toward institutions: What would it mean for a university to learn from the people who have carried its unfinished responsibilities—and then to ensure that those responsibilities no longer depend on them alone? That question reaches beyond Kansas State University, beyond basic needs, and beyond this dissertation. It asks higher education to consider not only the leaders it hopes to develop, but also the conditions it creates, the knowledge it recognizes, the labor it relies upon, and the institution it leaves for those who come next.

Bibliography

- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Addo, F. R., Houle, J. N., & Simon, D. (2016). Young, Black, and (still) in the red: Parental wealth, race, and student loan debt. *Race and Social Problems*, 8(1), 64–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-016-9162-0>
- Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by “civic engagement”? *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(3), 236–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792>
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>
- Antonio, A. L. (2002). Faculty of color reconsidered: Reassessing contributions to scholarship. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(5), 582–602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2002.11777169>
- Argote, L. (2013). *Organizational learning: Creating, retaining and transferring knowledge* (2nd ed.). Springer.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Addison-Wesley.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297–308.
- Astin, A. W., Sax, L. J., & Avalos, J. (1999). Long-term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years. *The Review of Higher Education*, 22(2), 187–202. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1999.0001>
- Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). *How service learning affects students*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Baez, B. (2000). Race-related service and faculty of color: Conceptualizing critical agency in academe. *Higher Education*, 39(3), 363–391. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003972214943>
- Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Goldrick-Rab, S., Looker, E., Richardson, B., & Williams, T. (2020). *#RealCollege during the pandemic: New evidence on basic needs insecurity and student well-being*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

- Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00064>
- Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). *Rethinking case study research: A comparative approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315674889>
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Bell, D. A., Jr. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611–639. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>
- Bensimon, E. M. (2005). Closing the achievement gap in higher education: An organizational learning perspective. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2005(131), 99–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.190>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Bickel, G., Nord, M., Price, C., Hamilton, W., & Cook, J. (2000). *Guide to measuring household food security* (Rev. ed.). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.
- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254>
- Birnbaum, R. (1988). *How colleges work: The cybernetics of academic organization and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545417>
- Bolden, R., Petrov, G., & Gosling, J. (2009). Distributed leadership in higher education: Rhetoric and reality. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(2), 257–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143208100301>

- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465–480. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2018). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bottrell, D. (2009). Understanding “marginal” perspectives: Towards a social theory of resilience. *Qualitative Social Work*, 8(3), 321–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325009337840>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). Sage.
- Bowleg, L. (2012). The problem with the phrase women and minorities: Intersectionality—an important theoretical framework for public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(7), 1267–1273. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.300750>
- Brady, H. E., Verba, S., & Schlozman, K. L. (1995). Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(2), 271–294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082425>
- Brayboy, B. M. J. (2005). TribalCrit: An American Indian theory of education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-005-0018-y>
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Broton, K. M. (2020). A review of estimates of housing insecurity and homelessness among students in U.S. higher education. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 29(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1677009>
- Broton, K. M. (2021). Poverty in American higher education: The relationship between housing insecurity and academic attainment. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, 1(2), 18–45. https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jps129147
- Broton, K. M., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2018). Going without: An exploration of food and housing insecurity among undergraduates. *Educational Researcher*, 47(2), 121–133. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17741303>

- Brown, M. C., II, & Dancy, T. E., II. (2010). Predominantly White institutions. In K. Lomotey (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of African American education* (Vol. 1, pp. 523–526). Sage.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412971966.n193>
- Bruening, M., Argo, K., Payne-Sturges, D., & Laska, M. N. (2017). The struggle is real: A systematic review of food insecurity on postsecondary education campuses. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 117(11), 1767–1791.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2017.05.022>
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.
- Campbell, A., Gurin, G., & Miller, W. E. (1954). *The voter decides*. Row, Peterson.
- Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3), 262–278.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>
- Carnevale, A. P., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Separate and unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational reproduction of White racial privilege*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Carnevale, A. P., Van Der Werf, M., Quinn, M. C., Strohl, J., & Repnikov, D. (2018). *Our separate and unequal public colleges: How public colleges reinforce White racial privilege and marginalize Black and Latino students*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Left Coast Press.
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K.-A. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Left Coast Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 474–494.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1589>
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Choy, S. P. (2002). *Nontraditional undergraduates: Findings from “The condition of education, 2002”* (NCES 2002-012). National Center for Education Statistics.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

- Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032006003>
- Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F. B., & Kisker, C. B. (2014). *The American community college* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Colby, A., Beaumont, E., Ehrlich, T., & Corngold, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility*. Jossey-Bass.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C. A., & Singh, A. (2023). *Household food security in the United States in 2022* (Economic Research Report No. 325). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Cook, J. T., Black, M., Chilton, M., Cutts, D., de Cuba, S. E., Heeren, T. C., Rose-Jacobs, R., Sandel, M., Casey, P. H., Coleman, S., Weiss, I., & Frank, D. A. (2013). Are food insecurity's health impacts underestimated in the U.S. population? Marginal food security also predicts adverse health outcomes in young U.S. children and mothers. *Advances in Nutrition*, 4(1), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.3945/an.112.003228>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: “Student voice” in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359–390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x>
- Corden, A., & Sainsbury, R. (2006). *Using verbatim quotations in reporting qualitative social research: Researchers' views*. Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1988). Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in antidiscrimination law. *Harvard Law Review*, 101(7), 1331–1387. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341398>
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Crisp, G., & Cruz, I. (2009). Mentoring college students: A critical review of the literature between 1990 and 2007. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(6), 525–545. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9130-2>
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.
- Crutchfield, R. M., & Maguire, J. (2018). *California State University Office of the Chancellor study of student basic needs*. California State University Office of the Chancellor.
- Cuite, C. L., Dietz, K. E., Bates, L. R. J., & Brescia, S. A. (2023). Changes in food security status during undergraduate enrollment. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 55(2), 86–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2022.08.004>
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2004). On becoming a critically reflexive practitioner. *Journal of Management Education*, 28(4), 407–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562904264440>
- Cunliffe, A. L., & Eriksen, M. (2011). Relational leadership. *Human Relations*, 64(11), 1425–1449. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711418388>
- Dachler, H. P., & Hosking, D. M. (1995). The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism* (pp. 1–28). Avebury.
- Daniels, A. K. (1987). Invisible work. *Social Problems*, 34(5), 403–415. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800538>
- Darity, W., Jr., Hamilton, D., Paul, M., Aja, A., Price, A. E., Moore, A., & Chiopris, C. (2018). *What we get wrong about closing the racial wealth gap*. Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and Insight Center for Community Economic Development.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. Teachers College Press.
- Darolia, R. (2014). Working (and studying) day and night: Heterogeneous effects of working on the academic performance of full-time and part-time students. *Economics of Education Review*, 38, 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2013.10.004>
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8), 2411–2441. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1289308>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press.

- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105–126.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800107>
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–88.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437186>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- DeRue, D. S., & Ashford, S. J. (2010). Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(4), 627–647. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.4.zok627>
- Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. Crown.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. D. C. Heath.
- Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Voight, A. M., & McWhirter, E. H. (2016). Critical consciousness: A developmental approach to addressing marginalization and oppression. *Child Development Perspectives*, 10(4), 216–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12193>
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Dinour, L. M., Bergen, D., & Yeh, M.-C. (2007). The food insecurity–obesity paradox: A review of the literature and the role food stamps may play. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 107(11), 1952–1961. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2007.08.006>
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. K. (Eds.). (2018). *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Dowd, A. C., & Bensimon, E. M. (2015). *Engaging the “race question”: Accountability and equity in U.S. higher education*. Teachers College Press.
- Drath, W. H., McCauley, C. D., Palus, C. J., Van Velsor, E., O'Connor, P. M. G., & McGuire, J. B. (2008). Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6), 635–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.09.003>
- Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives*. Jossey-Bass.

- Dumas, M. J., & Ross, K. M. (2016). "Be real Black for me": Imagining BlackCrit in education. *Urban Education*, 51(4), 415–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916628611>
- Eckel, P. D., Hill, B., & Green, M. F. (1998). *En route to transformation*. American Council on Education.
- Eckel, P. D., & Kezar, A. J. (2003). *Taking the reins: Institutional transformation in higher education*. Praeger.
- Ehrlich, T. (Ed.). (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education*. Oryx Press.
- Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs*, 22(3), 283–300. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>
- El Zein, A., Mathews, A. E., House, L., & Shelnutt, K. P. (2018). Why are hungry college students not seeking help? Predictors of and barriers to using an on-campus food pantry. *Nutrients*, 10(9), Article 1163. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10091163>
- El Zein, A., Shelnutt, K. P., Colby, S., Vilaro, M. J., Zhou, W., Greene, G., Olfert, M. D., Riggsbee, K., Morrell, J. S., & Mathews, A. E. (2019). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among U.S. college students: A multi-institutional study. *BMC Public Health*, 19, Article 660. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6943-6>
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06128.x>
- Elder, G. H., Jr., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. T. Mortimer & M. J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3–19). Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-306-48247-2_1
- Elliott, G. C., Kao, S., & Grant, A.-M. (2004). Mattering: Empirical validation of a social-psychological concept. *Self and Identity*, 3(4), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000119>
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>
- Ellison, B., Bruening, M., Hruschka, D. J., Nikolaus, C. J., van Woerden, I., Rabbitt, M. P., & Nickols-Richardson, S. M. (2021). Viewpoint: Food insecurity among college students: A case for consistent and comparable measurement. *Food Policy*, 101, Article 102031. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102031>

- Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mur011>
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E., Jr. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* Jossey-Bass.
- Feagin, J. R. (2006). *Systemic racism: A theory of oppression*. Routledge.
- Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2021). *Essentials of critical participatory action research*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000241-000>
- Finlay, L. (2002). “Outing” the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>
- Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0043>
- Fletcher, J. K. (2004). The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(5), 647–661. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.07.004>
- Fletcher, J. K., & Ragins, B. R. (2007). Stone Center relational cultural theory: A window on relational mentoring. In B. R. Ragins & K. E. Kram (Eds.), *The handbook of mentoring at work: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 373–399). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976619.n15>
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Fram, S. M. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1569>
- Franklin, B., Jones, A., Love, D., Puckett, S., Macklin, J., & White-Means, S. (2012). Exploring mediators of food insecurity and obesity: A review of recent literature. *Journal of Community Health*, 37(1), 253–264. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-011-9420-4>
- Franklin, J. D., Smith, W. A., & Hung, M. (2014). Racial battle fatigue for Latina/o students: A quantitative perspective. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 13(4), 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192714540530>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.; M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1970)
- Freudenberg, N., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Poppendieck, J. (2019). College students and SNAP: The new face of food insecurity in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(12), 1652–1658. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305332>

- Gaines, A., Robb, C. A., Knol, L. L., & Sickler, S. (2014). Examining the role of financial factors, resources, and skills in predicting food security status among college students. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 38(4), 374–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12110>
- Ganz, M. (2010). Leading change: Leadership, organization, and social movements. In N. Nohria & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of leadership theory and practice* (pp. 527–568). Harvard Business Press.
- Gasman, M., & Conrad, C. F. (2013). *Minority-serving institutions: Educating all students*. Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.
- Gasman, M., Nguyen, T.-H., & Conrad, C. F. (2015). Lives intertwined: A primer on the history and emergence of minority-serving institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 8(2), 120–138. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038386>
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Geiger, R. L. (2015). *The history of American higher education: Learning and culture from the founding to World War II*. Princeton University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. University of California Press.
- Ginwright, S. A. (2010). *Black youth rising: Activism and radical healing in urban America*. Teachers College Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's war on higher education*. Haymarket Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
- Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the price: College costs, financial aid, and the betrayal of the American dream*. University of Chicago Press.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). *Still hungry and homeless in college*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab.
- Gorski, P. C. (2019). Fighting racism, battling burnout: Causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(5), 667–687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981>

- Gotanda, N. (1991). A critique of "Our Constitution is color-blind." *Stanford Law Review*, 44(1), 1–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228940>
- Griffin, K. A., Bennett, J. C., & Harris, J. (2013). Marginalizing merit? Gender differences in Black faculty discourses on tenure, advancement, and professional success. *The Review of Higher Education*, 36(4), 489–512. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2013.0040>
- Griffin, K. A., & Reddick, R. J. (2011). Surveillance and sacrifice: Gender differences in the mentoring patterns of Black professors at predominantly White research universities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(5), 1032–1057. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211405025>
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2006). Toward a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4), 451–472. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2006.0031>
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>
- Guinier, L. (2015). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. Beacon Press.
- Gurin, P., Nagda, B. A., & Zúñiga, X. (2013). *Dialogue across difference: Practice, theory, and research on intergroup dialogue*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gusa, D. L. (2010). White institutional presence: The impact of Whiteness on campus climate. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(4), 464–489. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.p5j483825u110002>
- Guthrie, K. L., Jones, T. B., Osteen, L., & Hu, S. (2013). *Cultivating leader identity and capacity in students from diverse backgrounds*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hagerty, B. M. K., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, K. L., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 6(3), 172–177. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417\(92\)90028-H](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H)
- Hallett, R. E., & Crutchfield, R. (2017). *Homelessness and housing insecurity in higher education: A trauma-informed approach to research, policy, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hallett, R. E., & Freas, A. (2018). Community college students' experiences with homelessness and housing insecurity. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 42(10), 724–739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2017.1356764>
- Hamilton, D., & Darity, W., Jr. (2017). The political economy of education, financial literacy, and the racial wealth gap. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, 99(1), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.2017.59-76>

- Hanisch, C. (1970). The personal is political. In S. Firestone & A. Koedt (Eds.), *Notes from the second year: Women's liberation* (pp. 76–78). Radical Feminism.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Cornell University Press.
- Harding, S. (Ed.). (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. Routledge.
- Hardy, B. L., & Ziliak, J. P. (2014). Decomposing trends in income volatility: The “wild ride” at the top and bottom. *Economic Inquiry*, 52(1), 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecin.12044>
- Harley, D. A. (2008). Maids of academe: African American women faculty at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of African American Studies*, 12(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-007-9030-5>
- Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, 36(1S), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0047>
- Harper, S. R., & Hurtado, S. (2007). Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2007(120), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.254>
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 389–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2009.11779022>
- Harrison, N., Burke, J., & Clarke, I. (2022). Risky teaching: Developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(7), 912–927. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1786046>
- Hartsock, N. C. M. (1983). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In S. Harding & M. B. Hintikka (Eds.), *Discovering reality: Feminist perspectives on epistemology, metaphysics, methodology, and philosophy of science* (pp. 283–310). D. Reidel. https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48017-4_15
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and White first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 803–839. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9052-9>

- Haveman, R., & Smeeding, T. (2006). The role of higher education in social mobility. *The Future of Children*, 16(2), 125–150. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2006.0015>
- Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford University Press.
- Heller, D. E. (Ed.). (2011). *The states and public higher education policy: Affordability, access, and accountability* (2nd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Henry, L. (2017). Understanding food insecurity among college students: Experience, motivation, and local solutions. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 41(1), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12108>
- Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.7758/9781610448789>
- Hershner, S. D., & Chervin, R. D. (2014). Causes and consequences of sleepiness among college students. *Nature and Science of Sleep*, 6, 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NSS.S62907>
- Higher Education Research Institute. (1996). *A social change model of leadership development: Guidebook* (Version III). University of California, Los Angeles.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986120>
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- Hosking, D. M. (1988). Organizing, leadership and skilful process. *Journal of Management Studies*, 25(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1988.tb00029.x>
- Houle, J. N., & Addo, F. R. (2019). Racial disparities in student debt and the reproduction of the fragile Black middle class. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(4), 562–577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218790989>
- Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, C., Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments: The scholarship on creating and assessing conditions for student success. In J. C. Smart & M. B. Paulsen (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 27, pp. 41–122). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2950-6_2
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324–345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2673270>

- Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., & Allen, W. R. (1998). Enhancing campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity: Educational policy and practice. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(3), 279–302. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1998.0003>
- Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., & Allen, W. R. (1999). *Enacting diverse learning environments: Improving the climate for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing community partnerships in public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 19, 173–202. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.19.1.173>
- Jabareen, Y. (2009). Building a conceptual framework: Philosophy, definitions, and procedure. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(4), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800406>
- Jemal, A. (2017). Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *The Urban Review*, 49(4), 602–626. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0411-3>
- Jimenez, M. F., Lavery, T. M., Bombaci, S. P., Wilkins, K., Bennett, D. E., & Pejchar, L. (2019). Underrepresented faculty play a disproportionate role in advancing diversity and inclusion. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, 3(7), 1030–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-0911-5>
- Joseph, T. D., & Hirshfield, L. E. (2011). “Why don’t you get somebody new to do it?” Race and cultural taxation in the academy. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(1), 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2010.496489>
- Kaiser, K. (2009). Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(11), 1632–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732309350879>
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400101>
- Kang, M., Lessard, D., Heston, L., & Nordmarken, S. (2017). *Introduction to women, gender, sexuality studies*. University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/introwgss/>
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Katz, M. B. (2013). *The undeserving poor: America’s enduring confrontation with poverty* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Katznelson, I. (2005). *When affirmative action was White: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America*. W. W. Norton & Company.

- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4560-67-2>
- Kezar, A. J. (2018). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading, and enacting change* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315121178>
- Kezar, A. J., & Eckel, P. D. (2002). The effect of institutional culture on change strategies in higher education: Universal principles or culturally responsive concepts? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(4), 435–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2002.11777159>
- Kezar, A. J., & Holcombe, E. M. (2017). *Shared leadership in higher education: Important lessons from research and practice*. American Council on Education.
- Kiyama, J. M. (2011). Family lessons and funds of knowledge: College-going paths in Mexican American families. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 10(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2011.531656>
- Klandermans, B. (2004). The demand and supply of participation: Social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 360–379). Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch16>
- Komives, S. R., Longerbeam, S. D., Owen, J. E., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2006). A leadership identity development model: Applications from a grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0048>
- Komives, S. R., Lucas, N., & McMahon, T. R. (2013). *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longerbeam, S. D., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6), 593–611. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0063>
- Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life*. Scott, Foresman.
- Kushel, M. B., Gupta, R., Gee, L., & Haas, J. S. (2006). Housing instability and food insecurity as barriers to health care among low-income Americans. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21(1), 71–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2005.00278.x>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F., IV. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819509700104>

- Landry, M. J., Gundersen, C., & Eicher-Miller, H. A. (2022). Food insecurity on college and university campuses: A context and rationale for solutions. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 122(3), 519–524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2021.10.021>
- Laraia, B. A., Siega-Riz, A. M., Gundersen, C., & Dole, N. (2006). Psychosocial factors and socioeconomic indicators are associated with household food insecurity among pregnant women. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 136(1), 177–182. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/136.1.177>
- Lederer, A. M., Hoban, M. T., Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., & Eisenberg, D. (2021). More than inconvenienced: The unique needs of U.S. college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Education & Behavior*, 48(1), 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120969372>
- Lee, R., & Ahtone, T. (2020, March 30). Land-grab universities: Expropriated Indigenous land is the foundation of the land-grant university system. *High Country News*. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/>
- Lerma, V., Hamilton, L. T., & Nielsen, K. (2020). Racialized equity labor, university appropriation, and student resistance. *Social Problems*, 67(2), 286–303. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spz011>
- Leung, C. W., Epel, E. S., Ritchie, L. D., Crawford, P. B., & Laraia, B. A. (2014). Food insecurity is inversely associated with diet quality of lower-income adults. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 114(12), 1943–1953. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.06.353>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 108–150). Sage.
- Linder, C., Quaye, S. J., Lange, A. C., Evans, M. E., & Stewart, T. J. (2019). *Identity-based student activism: Power and oppression on college campuses*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429060588>
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363>
- Loofbourrow, B. M., & Scherr, R. E. (2023). Food insecurity in higher education: A contemporary review of impacts and explorations of solutions. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(10), Article 5884. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105884>
- Lucas, C. J. (2006). *American higher education: A history* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In P. Kecskemeti (Ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge* (pp. 276–322). Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1928)
- Marginson, S. (2016). The worldwide trend to high participation higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems. *Higher Education*, 72(4), 413–434. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0016-x>
- Maroto, M. E., Snelling, A., & Linck, H. (2015). Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and association with grade point average. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6), 515–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2013.850758>
- Martinez, S. M., Esaryk, E. E., Moffat, L., & Ritchie, L. (2021). Redefining basic needs for higher education: It's more than minimal food and housing according to California university students. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 35(6), 818–834. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117121992295>
- Mathison, S. (1988). Why triangulate? *Educational Researcher*, 17(2), 13–17. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X017002013>
- Matsuda, M. J. (1987). Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 22, 323–399.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- McAdam, D. (1986). Recruitment to high-risk activism: The case of Freedom Summer. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(1), 64–90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228463>
- Meadows, D. H. (2008). *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Means, D. R., & Pyne, K. B. (2017). Finding my way: Perceptions of institutional support and belonging in low-income, first-generation, first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(6), 907–924. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0071>
- Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 41–63). University of Minnesota Press.
- Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980601094651>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass.
- Midgley, G. (2000). *Systemic intervention: Philosophy, methodology, and practice*. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-4201-8>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Mirabitur, E., Peterson, K. E., Rathz, C., Matlen, S., & Kasper, N. (2016). Predictors of college-student food security and fruit and vegetable intake differ by housing type. *Journal of American College Health*, 64(7), 555–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1192543>
- Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50–65.
- Mitra, D. L. (2006). Increasing student voice and moving toward youth leadership. *The Prevention Researcher*, 13(1), 7–10.
- Morris, L. M., Smith, S., Davis, J., & Null, D. B. (2016). The prevalence of food security and insecurity among Illinois university students. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 48(6), 376–382.e1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2016.03.013>
- Mozaffarian, D., Fleischhacker, S., & Andrés, J. R. (2021). Prioritizing nutrition security in the United States. *JAMA*, 325(16), 1605–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.1915>
- Museus, S. D. (2014). The culturally engaging campus environments model: A new theory of success among racially diverse college student populations. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 29, pp. 189–227). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_5
- Museus, S. D., & Iftikar, J. (2014). An Asian critical theory framework. In S. D. Museus (Ed.), *Asian American students in higher education* (pp. 18–29). Routledge.
- Museus, S. D., & Quaye, S. J. (2009). Toward an intercultural perspective of racial and ethnic minority college student persistence. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33(1), 67–94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.0.0107>
- Museus, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2017). The impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *The Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 187–215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0001>

- Nagda, B. A., Gurin, P., Sorensen, N., & Zúñiga, X. (2009). Evaluating intergroup dialogue: Engaging diversity for personal and social responsibility. *Diversity & Democracy*, 12(1), 4–6.
- Neale, B. (2019). *What is qualitative longitudinal research?* Bloomsbury Academic.
- Neyland, L. W. (1990). *Historically Black land-grant institutions and the development of agriculture and home economics, 1890–1990*. Florida A&M University Foundation.
- Niemi, R. G., Craig, S. C., & Mattei, F. (1991). Measuring internal political efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study. *American Political Science Review*, 85(4), 1407–1413.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1963953>
- Nikolaus, C. J., An, R., Ellison, B., & Nickols-Richardson, S. M. (2020). Food insecurity among college students in the United States: A scoping review. *Advances in Nutrition*, 11(2), 327–348. <https://doi.org/10.1093/advances/nmz111>
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed., updated). University of California Press.
- Nora, A., & Crisp, G. (2007). Mentoring students: Conceptualizing and validating the multi-dimensions of a support system. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 9(3), 337–356. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.9.3.e>
- Northouse, P. G. (2022). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage.
- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Sociology*, 23(3), 327–344.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580908088915>
- Nunn, L. M. (2021). *College belonging: How first-year and first-generation students navigate campus life*. Rutgers University Press. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978807686>
- Oliver, M. L., & Shapiro, T. M. (2019). *Black wealth/White wealth: A new perspective on racial inequality* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2015). *Racial formation in the United States* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>
- Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2009). A critical review of race and ethnicity in the leadership literature: Surfacing context, power, and the collective dimensions of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), 876–896. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.005>
- Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2010). Building bridges from the margins: The work of leadership in social change organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(2), 292–307.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.01.008>

- Owens, M. R., Brito-Silva, F., Kirkland, T., Moore, C. E., Davis, K. E., Patterson, M. A., Miketinas, D. C., & Tucker, W. J. (2020). Prevalence and social determinants of food insecurity among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nutrients*, 12(9), Article 2515. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12092515>
- Padilla, A. M. (1994). Research news and comment: Ethnic minority scholars, research, and mentoring: Current and future issues. *Educational Researcher*, 23(4), 24–27. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X023004024>
- Patton, L. D. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education*, 51(3), 315–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915602542>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Patton-López, M. M., López-Cevallos, D. F., Cancel-Tirado, D. I., & Vazquez, L. (2014). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 46(3), 209–214. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2013.10.007>
- Payne-Sturges, D. C., Tjaden, A., Caldeira, K. M., Vincent, K. B., & Arria, A. M. (2018). Student hunger on campus: Food insecurity among college students and implications for academic institutions. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 32(2), 349–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117117719620>
- Pearce, C. L., & Conger, J. A. (Eds.). (2003). *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229539>
- Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 21, pp. 99–157). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4512-3_3
- Perna, L. W. (Ed.). (2010). *Understanding the working college student: New research and its implications for policy and practice*. Stylus.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1990). Longitudinal field research on change: Theory and practice. *Organization Science*, 1(3), 267–292. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1.3.267>
- Pfeffer, F. T. (2018). Growing wealth gaps in education. *Demography*, 55(3), 1033–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-018-0666-7>
- Pfeffer, F. T., & Killewald, A. (2019). Intergenerational wealth mobility and racial inequality. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 5, 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119831799>
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>

- Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective identity and social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.283>
- Poppendieck, J. (1998). *Sweet charity? Emergency food and the end of entitlement*. Penguin Books.
- Portelli, A. (1991). *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and meaning in oral history*. State University of New York Press.
- Portelli, A. (1997). *The battle of Valle Giulia: Oral history and the art of dialogue*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Posselt, J. R., Jaquette, O., Bielby, R., & Bastedo, M. N. (2012). Access without equity: Longitudinal analyses of institutional stratification by race and ethnicity, 1972–2004. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1074–1111. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212439456>
- Quinn, D. M., & Chaudoir, S. R. (2009). Living with a concealable stigmatized identity: The impact of anticipated stigma, centrality, salience, and cultural stigma on psychological distress and health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(4), 634–651. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015815>
- Radwin, D., Conzelmann, J. G., Nunnery, A., Lacy, T. A., Wu, J., Lew, S., Wine, J., & Siegel, P. (2018). *2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16): Student financial aid estimates for 2015–16* (NCES 2018-466). National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018466.pdf>
- Ragins, B. R. (2016). From the ordinary to the extraordinary: High-quality mentoring relationships at work. *Organizational Dynamics*, 45(3), 228–244. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.07.008>
- Rankin, S. R., & Reason, R. D. (2005). Differing perceptions: How students of color and White students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(1), 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0008>
- Raskind, I. G., Haardörfer, R., & Berg, C. J. (2019). Food insecurity, psychosocial health, and academic performance among college and university students in Georgia, USA. *Public Health Nutrition*, 22(3), 476–485. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003439>
- Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). *Reason & rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Reardon, S. F. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances* (pp. 91–116). Russell Sage Foundation.

- Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01191156>
- Rendón Linares, L. I., & Muñoz, S. M. (2011). Revisiting validation theory: Theoretical foundations, applications, and extensions. *Enrollment Management Journal*, 5(2), 12–33.
- Renn, K. A., & Bilodeau, B. L. (2005). Leadership identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student leaders. *NASPA Journal*, 42(3), 342–367. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.1504>
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–948). Sage.
- Rideau, R. (2021). “We’re just not acknowledged”: An examination of the identity taxation of full-time non-tenure-track women of color faculty members. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(2), 161–173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000139>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.
- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community & Mental Health*, 2, 163–182.
- Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright Publishing.
- Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. Sage.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2003). *Longitudinal qualitative research: Analyzing change through time*. AltaMira Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Saltmarsh, J., Hartley, M., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). *Democratic engagement white paper*. New England Resource Center for Higher Education.
- Sandelowski, M. (1994). Focus on qualitative methods: The use of quotes in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 17(6), 479–482. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770170611>
- Santamaría, L. J., & Santamaría, A. P. (2012). *Applied critical leadership in education: Choosing change*. Routledge.

- Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J., & Kitzinger, C. (2015). Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice. *Qualitative Research*, 15(5), 616–632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>
- Saunders, D. B. (2010). Neoliberal ideology and public higher education in the United States. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 8(1), 41–77.
- Schacter, D. L. (1999). The seven sins of memory: Insights from psychology and cognitive neuroscience. *American Psychologist*, 54(3), 182–203. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.3.182>
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Scheirer, M. A., & Dearing, J. W. (2011). An agenda for research on the sustainability of public health programs. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101(11), 2059–2067. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300193>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1989(48), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119894803>
- Scott, J. W. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, 17(4), 773–797. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448612>
- Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (Rev. ed.). Doubleday.
- Settles, I. H., Jones, M. K., Buchanan, N. T., & Dotson, K. (2021). Epistemic exclusion: Scholar(ly) devaluation that marginalizes faculty of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(4), 493–507. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000174>
- Sewell, W. H., Jr. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229967>
- Sharkey, P. (2013). *Stuck in place: Urban neighborhoods and the end of progress toward racial equality*. University of Chicago Press.
- Shotton, H. J., Lowe, S. C., & Waterman, S. J. (Eds.). (2013). *Beyond the asterisk: Understanding Native students in higher education*. Stylus.
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Northeastern University Press.

- Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). "Assume the position . . . you fit the description": Psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4), 551–578.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207307742>
- Snow, D. A., Rochford, E. B., Jr., Worden, S. K., & Benford, R. D. (1986). Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), 464–481. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095581>
- Solórzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2696265>
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>
- Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1), Article 25338.
<https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 76–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800107>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford Press.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stanton, T. K. (2008). New times demand new scholarship: Opportunities and challenges for civic engagement at research universities. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 3(1), 19–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197907086716>
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society*, 43(3), 1066–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X10382877>
- Sterman, J. D. (2000). *Business dynamics: Systems thinking and modeling for a complex world*. Irwin/McGraw-Hill.
- Stirman, S. W., Kimberly, J., Cook, N., Calloway, A., Castro, F., & Charns, M. (2012). The sustainability of new programs and innovations: A review of the empirical literature and

- recommendations for future research. *Implementation Science*, 7, Article 17.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-7-17>
- Stogdill, R. M. (1948). Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature. *The Journal of Psychology*, 25(1), 35–71.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1948.9917362>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all*. Routledge.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315297293>
- Suddaby, R. (2006). From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(4), 633–642. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2006.22083020>
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>
- Tachine, A. R., Cabrera, N. L., & Yellow Bird, E. (2017). Home away from home: Native American students' sense of belonging during their first year in college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 88(5), 785–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.1257322>
- Tanner, Z. R., Loofbourrow, B. M., Chodur, G. M., Kemp, L., & Scherr, R. E. (2023). Food insecurity and utilization of campus food resources differ by demographic and academic group. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(2), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.122.018>
- Thelin, J. R. (2019). *A history of American higher education* (3rd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tierney, W. G. (1992). An anthropological analysis of student participation in college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 63(6), 603–618.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1992.11778391>
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Trawver, K. R., & Hedwig, T. (2020). Food and housing insecurity and homelessness among students in an open-enrollment university. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 29(1), 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1676987>
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education*. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.
- Trow, M. (2007). Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since World War II. In J. J. F. Forest & P. G. Altbach (Eds.), *International handbook of higher education* (pp. 243–280). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-4012-2_13
- Turner, C. S. V. (2002). Women of color in academe: Living with multiple marginality. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(1), 74–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2002.11777131>
- Turner, C. S. V., & Bound, J. (2003). Closing the gap or widening the divide: The effects of the G.I. Bill and World War II on the educational outcomes of Black Americans. *The Journal of Economic History*, 63(1), 145–177. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050703001761>
- Turner, C. S. V., González, J. C., & Wood, J. L. (2008). Faculty of color in academe: What 20 years of literature tells us. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(3), 139–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012837>
- Uhl-Bien, M. (2006). Relational leadership theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 654–676.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.007>
- Ulrich, W. (1983). *Critical heuristics of social planning: A new approach to practical philosophy*. Haupt.
- Vaccaro, A., & Newman, B. M. (2016). Development of a sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students: An emergent model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(8), 925–942. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0091>
- Valdes, F. (1996). Foreword: Latina/o ethnicities, critical race theory, and post-identity politics in postmodern legal culture: From practices to possibilities. *La Raza Law Journal*, 9, 1–31.

- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Walsh, J. P., & Ungson, G. R. (1991). Organizational memory. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(1), 57–91. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1991.4278992>
- Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, 331(6023), 1447–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1198364>
- Walton, G. M., Murphy, M. C., Logel, C., Yeager, D. S., Goyer, J. P., Brady, S. T., Emerson, K. T. U., Paunesku, D., Fotuhi, O., Blodorn, A., Boucher, K. L., Carter, E. R., Gopalan, M., Henderson, A., Kroeper, K. M., Murdock-Perriera, L. A., Reeves, S. L., Ablorh, T. T., Ansari, S., . . . Krol, N. (2023). Where and with whom does a brief social-belonging intervention promote progress in college? *Science*, 380(6644), 499–505. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade4420>
- Watts, R. J., Diemer, M. A., & Voight, A. M. (2011). Critical consciousness: Current status and future directions. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2011(134), 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.310>
- Watts, R. J., & Hipolito-Delgado, C. P. (2015). Thinking ourselves to liberation? Advancing sociopolitical action in critical consciousness. *The Urban Review*, 47(5), 847–867. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0341-x>
- Watts, R. J., Williams, N. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2003). Sociopolitical development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1–2), 185–194. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023091024140>
- Weaver, R. R., Hendricks, S. P., Vaughn, N. A., McPherson-Myers, P. E., Willis, S. L., & Terry, S. N. (2022). Obstacles to food security, food pantry use, and educational success among university students: A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(8), 2540–2549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1873789>
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2391875>
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409–421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>
- Wilder, C. S. (2013). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. Bloomsbury Press.
- Williams, T. T., & Williamson, H., Jr. (1988). Teaching, research, and extension programs at historically Black (1890) land-grant institutions. *Agricultural History*, 62(2), 244–257.

- Williamson-Lott, J. A. (2018). *Jim Crow campus: Higher education and the struggle for a new Southern social order*. Teachers College Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (2012). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Wingfield, A. H. (2010). Are some emotions marked “Whites only”? Racialized feeling rules in professional workplaces. *Social Problems*, 57(2), 251–268.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.2.251>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>
- Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A., & Yates, M. (1997). What we know about engendering civic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40(5), 620–631.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764297040005008>
- Yukl, G. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>

Appendix A – Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Data Collection Instrument: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The interview process is guided by an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in Socially Lived Theory, relational leadership theory, and critical qualitative inquiry. As such, the questions below are intended to function as conversational guides rather than rigid or exhaustive scripts. Follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes may be used depending on participant responses and the natural direction of the conversation. Participants may decline to answer any question and may pause or discontinue the interview at any time.

Interviews are expected to last approximately **60–120 minutes** and will be audio recorded with participant consent.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Background and Institutional Context

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your connection to Kansas State University?
2. How would you describe your role(s) within the university over time?
3. What experiences or circumstances initially shaped your awareness of food insecurity or basic needs issues within higher education?

Lived Experience and Institutional Belonging

4. In what ways, if any, have your personal experiences influenced how you understand issues such as food insecurity, poverty, housing instability, or institutional inequity?
5. How have your experiences within higher education shaped your sense of belonging, inclusion, or exclusion?
6. Were there particular moments, interactions, or experiences that significantly influenced how you viewed the institution or your place within it?

Leadership, Advocacy, and Mobilization

7. How did you first become involved in food insecurity advocacy, leadership, or related equity efforts?
8. What motivated you to become engaged in this work?
9. Can you describe any specific moments that felt especially meaningful, difficult, or transformative in your involvement?
10. How would you describe leadership within these initiatives or efforts?
11. In your experience, who tends to carry the responsibility for initiating or sustaining institutional change efforts related to student basic needs?

Institutional Structures and Relationships

12. What kinds of institutional support, mentorship, or relationships helped facilitate your engagement?
13. What barriers or challenges did you encounter while engaging in this work?
14. How do you think the university has responded to issues related to food insecurity and student basic needs over time?

15. In what ways do race, class, identity, or institutional position shape who is heard, supported, or expected to lead within these efforts?

Sustainability, Burden, and Reflection

16. How has your relationship to this work changed over time?
17. Have you ever experienced exhaustion, frustration, or emotional burden related to this work? If so, how would you describe those experiences?
18. What helps sustain long-term engagement in advocacy or institutional change efforts?
19. Looking back, how do you understand your role in relation to institutional change?

Closing Reflection

20. Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel is important to understanding food insecurity, leadership, or institutional change within higher education?
21. Is there anything you feel researchers or institutions often misunderstand about these issues?

Researcher Reflexivity and Adaptive Interviewing

Consistent with qualitative and interpretive research traditions, interviews will remain responsive to participant narratives and emerging themes. While this protocol provides structure across interviews, the researcher (Jessica) may adapt follow-up questions based on participant experiences, historical context, and institutional role. This flexible approach allows participants greater agency in shaping the conversation while supporting deeper exploration of socially lived experiences, institutional meaning-making, and relational dimensions of leadership and advocacy.

Appendix B - Participant Interview Dates and Durations

Note. IRB Approval was granted on May 29, 2026. Interviews began June 3, 2026 and concluded on June 24, 2026.

Participant	Interview Date	Interview Time	Duration of Interview
Sonia	06/03/2026	7:00 pm CST	104 minutes
Jordan	06/05/2026	6:30 pm CST	96 minutes
Dr. Ayala	06/08/2026	9:00 am CST	85 minutes
Marcus	6/09/2026	2:00 pm CST	109 minutes
Dr. Bernard Franklin	06/11/2026	1:00 pm CST	118 minutes
Elle	06/11/2026	5:00 pm CST	107 minutes
Dr. Chen	06/15/2026	9:30 am CST	114 minutes
Stephan	06/17/2026	2:00 pm CST	104 minutes
David	06/21/2026	11:30 am CST	81 minutes
Daniel	06/23/2026	3:30 pm CST	73 minutes
Dr. Sarah Barrett	06/24/2026	5:30 pm CST	112 minutes