“At some point, the rubber meets the road”: A Case of Racialized Recruitment and Yield Practices at One Historically White Land-Grant in the Deep South

by

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Abstract

This critical qualitative case study interrogated the racialized recruitment and enrollment practices at one historically and predominantly white land-grant institution in the Deep South. The purpose of this study was to interrogate how Magnolia University, nested within the increasingly hostile post-affirmative action/anti-DEI legal landscape, prioritized engaging with Black prospective students. Five participants – three professional staff members and two currently enrolled Black student leaders – responsible for supporting recruitment and enrollment efforts were interviewed. To make meaning of the data, Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations was employed as an analytic framework using writing as inquiry techniques. Findings reveal how the positive credentialing of whiteness at Magnolia University guided the unequal resource distribution and differential agency of institutional actors responsible for engaging with prospective Black students. As such, Magnolia University is currently at a crossroads between prioritizing (over)compliance with inequitable legislation and their espoused DEI values. Implications for practice, policy, and future research that prioritizes Black student recruitment, enrollment (and retention) for historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions like Magnolia University are discussed.

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Admittedly, I have struggled to write this section most of all. I'm stuck somewhere between not knowing what to say and feeling uncertain that I even have enough paper to write everything that deserves to be said. Most simply, I am abundantly grateful for so many (named and unnamed) people throughout my life. I would not be here without you.

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HPWLG Historically and Predominantly White Land-Grant

TREES To Recruit and Enroll Emerging Scholars

Chapter 1: Introduction

I come to this research with close to ten years of experience working in an undergraduate admissions office at my alma mater, a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution. For the better part of my life, including my time as an undergraduate student, I was best described as an introvert – the antithesis of energetic or outgoing around strangers – who steered clear of anything that required me to speak in front of large groups of people. As such, I was adamantly opposed to being involved in some of the more coveted, well-known student leadership positions like that of campus tour guides or orientation leaders. Those are two commonly cited student leadership experiences (Phair, 2014) that I simply did not share with other entry-level admissions professionals.

Instead, I began my professional working career as an admissions advisor with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at my alma mater after completing a two-year graduate assistantship in the same office. The assistantship helped fund my pursuit of a higher education administration master's degree and was also, unbeknownst to me when I began, the launching pad for the last decade's worth of my personal and professional growth. I started the master's program and assistantship with a notable level of uncertainty about my future career trajectory, but I found solace in knowing that if I ended up hating the program or the assistantship it was *only* two years of my life and I would walk away with some transferable skills. As I reflect back to the uncertainty I felt then, I am abundantly grateful for the experiences that have led me a career in undergraduate admissions and this related and culminating (passion) project you are reading today.

If we start at the beginning of my collegiate experiences, it is worth noting that I was a psychology and sociology double major and spent six consecutive semesters as an undergraduate

research assistant at a nearby juvenile adjudication center. This research experience was the first time I truly recognized and began to critically think and question the racial inequities in our society. One constant across those six semesters was that young Black men were disproportionately overrepresented in this population held at this facility. This reality prompted me to increase my own understanding of the broader racialized school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014), the connection between institutionalized racism and K-12 school discipline in my home state (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2020), and the extended segregation of the public higher education system (Allen et al., 2007; Harris, 2021a).

I was nearly twenty years old when I started working as a research assistant. I went through my life for nearly two decades being educated and socialized in predominantly white spaces and I did very little thinking about my own race, racism, my complicity in white supremacy, and related structural inequities. This research experience was a pivotal turning point for my own white identity development (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1995) and a more critical awareness of the ways in which whiteness has shaped my own understandings as well as the systems and institutions that I operate within (Foste & Jones, 2020; Yancy, 2018).

Admittedly, I had mixed feelings about pivoting from a potential career path that extended this forensic psychology adjacent career path to one in education. As a soon-to-be college graduate, I was not yet ready to commit to doctoral training and decided to pivot towards the field of higher education after working with first-year summer orientation as a peer academic advisor. Committing to a two-year master's program in higher education administration felt more manageable and felt like an opportunity for a more joy-filled career. And yet, I felt like I was somehow opting out of any burgeoning social justice values by following a career in education instead of an adjudication system. This short-lived feeling was grounded in nothing more than a

blissful ignorance of this country's racialized system of (higher) education.

My memory of my master's experience was also one grounded in the status quo of whiteness at a historically and predominantly white institution. Curriculum that was built by and taught predominantly by white men. Counter that experience with the curriculum and professors that I interacted mostly closely with during my doctoral studies – critically-aligned coursework taught by scholars who continued to expand my understanding of my identities, my experiences, and my complicity with systems of oppression that intersect with the field of higher education. My doctoral studies experience that I am describing here is consistent with the following statement from the Critical Studies Working Group at Auburn University (n.d.): "We enact our opposition through scholar-activism to transform systems and structures in education toward humanization, justice, and equity. We are committed to educational praxis that opens, develops, and sustains critical consciousness around inequity, injustice, and oppression and supports those becoming critically conscious."

It has been through this intentional self-reflection and learning alongside other critically-aligned higher education professionals (broadly) and admissions professionals (more specifically) from all across the country that has better sharpened my values and transformative efforts. In late July 2023, for example, I attended a national conference for college admissions professionals committed to creating more equitable admissions processes. It took place just a month after the highly anticipated and expected Supreme Court decision to ban the use of race in the admissions review process. So the conference provided the physical space for like-minded admissions professionals to commiserate through our disappointment (that was knocking on the door of despair) towards a resolute solidarity in prioritizing the needs of historically underrepresented populations, particularly Black prospective students, in the face of an

increasingly anti-Black landscape surrounding higher education. This current project can also be described as an actionable continuation of the knowledge that was co-constructed at this conference.

As such, I am inherently connected to and intertwined with the work in this study. Beyond the obvious reason if it being the culminating project for my doctoral program, it is also a direct reflection of my ever-evolving scholarly identity that has been shaped by all of the experiences I have shared here. I understand that I continue to learn from engaging with different communities of individuals as well as my own position as a white higher education scholar-practitioner concurrently educated within and employed at a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution. This work is guided by my own interests in critiquing oppressive systemic and institutional forces like racism and capitalism, especially as it relates to college admissions process.

Background and Context of the Study

The current body of literature regarding the intersection of race and admissions most often focuses on the decision process (Hossler et al., 2019; Bastedo et al, 2021) particularly at selective or "highly rejective" (Poon et al., 2023) institutions (Bastedo et al., 2018; Bowman & Bastedo, 2016; Stulberg & Chen, 2013). Only 2% of the higher education institutions across the country admit less than 25% of applicants (Pew Research Center, 2023) and yet, highly selective institutions are often looked to as leaders in the field of admissions (Poon et al., 2023). As if the decisions they make function as the guiding North Star for the remaining 98% of admissions offices across the country. To be sure, their influence is notable but there is a missed opportunity in the current admissions-related literature regarding both the context and focus of these studies.

My line of research is: 1) situated within historically and predominantly white land-grant

institutions rather than those that are exclusively highly selective, and 2) focused on the recruitment and yield[1] processes rather than the application review process. Scholarship interrogating admissions review practices is critical for scholars and practitioners alike, but that is a small sliver of the responsibilities of admissions offices. Importantly, the iterative nature of this research process further supports the reality that there are other offices and institutional actors outside of central admissions offices (think: academic colleges, student affairs, identity-based student centers) that are impactful in engaging with prospective students. In other words, institutions engage with prospective students well-before and well-after admissions decisions are made. It is imperative that institutions interrogate recruitment and yield policies and practices with the same fervor. In many ways, this current study is informed by and is a direct response to Poon et al.'s (2023) call to action for future research that extends into different institutional types

[1] A note about "yield": Transparently, I have used the word "yield" in the crafting of my research questions. I have kept it in the final versions of the research questions to maintain the integrity of this language which is colloquial in the field of college admissions. Most simply, the yield rate is the percentage of admitted students who ultimately enroll at the institution. One blog post affiliated with a higher education Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) platform aptly describes the purpose of a yield rate as a metric to assess how effective institutions are in getting admitted students to enroll at their institution: "A high enrollment yield typically suggests that an institution has successfully *enticed and convinced* [emphasis added] admitted students to choose them over other options, while a low yield may signal missed opportunities or room for improvement (Winthrop, 2024). The concept of the "enrollment cliff" – the stark decline of high school graduates (i.e., future college students) – has been looming over those in enrollment management for several years now. Notably, a number of colleges have gone through mergers or closed entirely in recent years. Financial troubles are often cited as the driving force, which could be connected back to this concept of yield. Too low of a yield rate and colleges will fail to "fill" their freshman class. Do this too many years over and the decrease in tuition-driven revenue can leave an institution unable to operate (reminder to add citations). Many institutions have programming whose intended audience is admitted students. These "yield events" often occur during the spring semester of their senior year of high school when many are solidifying their decision of what school they plan to attend the following fall semester. These events are meant to give admitted students a preview of what their student experience could look like at said institution. Perhaps entice or convince students to enroll.

It wasn't until a committee member – sincere thanks to Dr. Baggett – raised concerns about that verbiage that I began to interrogate its etymology, additional meanings, and potential troubled use when referring to humans. It's one thing to associate "yield" with its agricultural roots to understand how many ears of corn, for example were yielded in a particular growing season. It's another to use that language to describe how many students an institution was able to yield to meet their enrollment and, relatedly, fiscal goals. This neoliberal and consumerist approach to is one that the field of college admissions – myself included until quite recently – has seemingly adopted without critique.

Again, I have chosen to maintain this language in the research questions but most often shift to "enrollment" language throughout the rest of this report. It was also language that I used throughout the interview process as this was less technical, more understandable across participant profiles

as well as a further critical exploration of the ways in which racialized institutional practices and competing institutional priorities perpetuate racial inequities, especially for Black prospective students.

The necessity and timeliness of the current study is supported by several factors. To begin, historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions are an under-utilized focus of study in the literature. And yet, their history as well as modern-day espoused institutional values provide ample opportunities for valuable critiques. While foundational texts describe that some minoritized populations (i.e., non-elite families with first-generation college-going children, women, and people of color) were gaining access to an advanced education (Thelin & Gasman, 2010) with the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, there is a more complicated and nuanced context surrounding land-grant institutions. While more students began to enroll in these institutions, access was still limited to young, rich, white men, and was also at the expense of Indigenous (Lee & Ahtone, 2020) and Black enslaved peoples (Harris, 2021a). It is interesting to consider that these institutions were built under the guise of being "the peoples' college" (Campbell, 1995, p. 26) all while perpetuating the exclusive, white supremacist foundations of the original colonial colleges.

According to Iverson (2012), most institutions of higher education demonstrate their espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments via administrator-led diversity councils that publish diversity action plans that will highlight the need to "increase demographic diversity in their faculty, staff, and student populations" (p. 150). This and other similar strategies that purport to advance institutional diversity goals have been increasingly implemented at historically and predominantly white institutions in response to federal legislation like the Higher Education Act of 1965 and subsequent increase of Black students at these institutions (Patton et

al., 2019). And yet, many scholars have critiqued these strategies as nothing more than superficial commitments to DEI work while maintaining the status quo of institutionalized whiteness (Ahmed, 2012; Casellas Connors, 2021; Patton et al., 2019; Reed, 2023).

If a common actionable goal of these diversity action plans is to increase the compositional diversity of these universities, little progress has been made at land-grant institutions. When comparing 2020 Census results (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) to the most recently available Common Data Sets for each historically and predominantly white land-grant, only five of the 50 institutions have an undergraduate student population where Black students are overrepresented compared to the racial composition of the overall state population. For example, 3.96% of students at West Virginia University are Black while 3.61% of their state identifies as Black. Of the 50 land-grants I pulled data for, 41 of them have a predominantly white (meaning 51% or greater) undergraduate student body. Some could argue that this underrepresentation is itself a manifestation of the original purpose of these institutions. Wilder (2013) provided a substantive and haunting detail of the anti-Black atrocities that helped to found and sustain the higher education system in this country that supports this notion. These institutions need to do their own self-reflection to rectify their racialized histories, present (competing institutional commitments), and future possibilities. Purported DEI commitments are enacted through diversity action plans while simultaneously deprioritizing the needs of (current and prospective) Black students, so we have more work to do.

As this study has evolved from a granular idea to a full-fledged project, the sociopolitical and legislative landscapes in which higher education is situated have become increasingly contentious and hostile. This context is important to acknowledge for the purposes of this case study (Diem et al., 2023) and my own lived experience as a higher education scholar-practitioner

with a vested interest in how this climate has encouraged inequitable outcomes across the field of college admissions. Right-wing politicians and think tanks across the country have strategically undermined racial equity in K-16 educational spaces by equating DEI initiatives and conversation about race(ism) as divisive and anti-American (Conyers & Fields, 2025; Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020; Sheppard, 2025). Most notably, public universities located in Republican-controlled states have been designated as a focus point for Claremont Institute – a right-wing think tank that has partnered with a network of academics, Capitol Hill strategists, and politicians to advance anti-CRT and anti-DEI legislation that has already impacted public universities across the country, including HPWLGs in the Deep South (Confessore, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

The historic and enduring underrepresentation of Black students at the vast majority of these institutions is further complicated by the on-going attacks on race-conscious affirmative action policies. At the federal level, landmark Supreme Court cases like *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978 and *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003 established and upheld, respectively, the constitutionality of the consideration of race in the undergraduate college admissions review process. At the state level, nine states had banned the use of race-conscious admissions at public institutions prior to the summer of 2023 and have seen declines in the racial diversity of the collegiate student bodies across those states (Fernandez & Garces, 2022). Furthermore, the much-anticipated U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* banned the practice of race-conscious admissions as of June 29, 2023. This decision has functionally reversed legal precedent for race-conscious admissions practices and set a new legal precedent for color-evasive admissions practices.

Some scholars like OiYan Poon (2023) were thoughtful in interrogating the language

used by justices of the majority opinion. Language like "race-based admissions" (rather than "race-conscious" was employed throughout the majority opinion and is now a legally grounded misrepresentation of the admissions review process. The implication is that an applicant's race is the basis for the admissions decision they receive rather than, at most, a single factor in a more complex review process. This misrepresentation of more nuanced holistic review process set forth by previous legal precedent of *Bakke* and *Grutter* cases, further stokes the ever-growing flames set by opponents of race-conscious affirmative actions.

It is important to articulate that this decision is very narrowly focused on the admissions review process itself with no mention about banning the use of race-conscious decisions regarding scholarship awards or targeted outreach efforts (Garces et al., 2023). However, politically conservative attorneys general in states like Missouri echoed the Supreme Court's use of "race-based" language in a mandate to all University of Missouri system schools banning the use of "race-based standards to make decisions about things like admissions, scholarships, programs, and employment" (Bellows, 2023).

Interestingly, Ray (2019) indicated that institutions have been known to adopt "affirmative action, diversity, and anti-discrimination policies out of fear of government sanctions… but retroactively claim benevolent intent" (p. 42). The current sociopolitical landscape regarding attacks on DEI work (Confessore, 2024; Lu et al., 2023) as well as the U. S. Supreme Court's most recent ruling and responses by some attorneys general suggest that the exact opposite may now be true. In other words, there is evidence that institutions will enact similar interpretive overreaches (Harper, 2023) over the U. S. Supreme Court's decision because of their fear of being sued (i.e., repressive legalism, Garces et al., 2021).

Taken altogether, I am particularly concerned about potential downstream effects of this

ruling as it relates to equitable recruitment and yield practices of Black prospective students at historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions. Institutions that already have a troubled history and enduring legacy of exclusionary racialized policies, practices, and procedures. As such, it is important to (as proactively as possible) interrogate the role that these rulings and institutional responses play in the recruitment of Black students at HPWLGs. Given my long-term profession alignment with this work, I come to this work with my own curiosities and concerns.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to interrogate how one historically and predominantly white land-grant (HPWLG) in the Deep South, nested within the increasingly hostile post-affirmative action/anti-DEI legal landscape, prioritized the recruitment and yield of Black prospective students. Of particular interest was the role that competing institutional priorities play in jeopardizing equitable recruitment and enrollment practices. This study analyzed how recruitment and yield practices are racialized at these institutions by asking:

1) What role does the post-affirmative action (and anti-DEI) legal landscape play in the recruitment and yield of Black students at HPWLGs?
2) How do competing institutional priorities reproduce racial inequities in the recruitment and yield processes?

Foundational and Analytic Frameworks

This study inherently and strategically employed Critical Race Theory as a foundational framework. Born out of a lineage of critical legal studies that interrogated the perpetuation of white supremacy through the U.S. legal system, Critical Race Theory, as a scholarly field, extends the premise that race(ism) is similarly central to the structures of American society and

its educational system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Paradoxically, anti-CRT legislation that exalts a color-evasive understanding of this country's founding while arguing that racism is a mythical "divisive concept" (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020) functions as a self-incriminating gesture that further supports the necessity of such a framework. Given this study's focus on how meso-level organizational responses to macro-level forces (i.e., these same pieces of legislation) reproduced racial inequities at one HPWLG, it was necessary to employ theoretical frameworks that aligned with these endeavors.

The analysis for this study was guided by Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. The advent of this framework came from Ray's assessment of theoretical shortcomings in the work of both organizational scholars and scholars of race and ethnicity wherein these two fields were missing key elements of the other. Rather than adhering to the organizational theory status quo of considering organizations to be race-neutral entities, Ray (2019) intentionally centered race in his theory. In his view, foundational organizational theorists took a race-evasive approach by failing to acknowledge that the formation of many organizations was "partially premised on the expropriation and exclusion of racial others" (Ray, 2019, p. 29).

This is a particularly relevant framing given the racist underpinnings of the U.S. higher education system, broadly, and historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions, more specifically – both of which similarly relied upon the expropriation of Indigenous lands and the labor of enslaved Black peoples to develop these institutions. As such, I wanted to be intentional with employing a framework that directly addresses concepts like race, racism, and systemic whiteness. This theory of racialized organizations was particularly appropriate given the assertion that "racial inequality is not merely 'in' organizations but 'of' them, as racial processes are foundational to organization formation and continuity" (Ray, 2019, p. 48). This has

ultimately become a guiding quote for my on-going work as it aligns with my rationale for focusing on historically and predominantly white land grant institutions.

Ray (2019) developed four tenets that explain how racialized organizations: 1) distribute resources unequally, 2) promote whiteness as a credential, 3) decouple formal rules from informal practices, and 4) shape the agency of racial groups unequally. The first tenet is rooted in the reality that organizations strategically and intentionally distribute resources unequally across racial lines. Similarly promoting whiteness as a credential means that proximity to whiteness can lead to greater access to resources, individual agency, and perceptions of "merit" or deservingness. Racialized organizations can also diminish individual agency of racially minoritized individuals due to their subordinated position in a racialized hierarchy. Finally, when organizations have espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments, for example, but fail to authentically enact those commitments in practice, decoupling has occurred.

While this theoretical framework was originally developed to explain how a broad variety of organizations reproduce racial inequalities, it has been more recently employed within higher education contexts to illuminate perceptions of gendered and racialized faculty workloads (Misra et al., 2021), structural racism in medical schools (Nguemeni Tiako et al., 2021), the racialization of college student leadership programs (Irwin, 2023), and the durability of racialized admissions practices a highly rejective institutions (Poon et al., 2023).

Relating it all back to my work, this was a helpful critically interrogating the racialization of recruitment and yield practices at one HPWLG in the Deep South. My aim was to be in conversation with micro-level institutional agents (i.e., staff members and student leaders responsible for engaging with prospective students) regarding macro-level forces (i.e., federal and state polices) to learn about meso-level (i.e., Magnolia University) responses that informed

racial inequities within these processes.

Research Design

In alignment with my positionality and epistemological leanings, this study employed a critical qualitative case study methodology. This methodology was appropriate given my interest in interrogating an understudied phenomenon (i.e., racialized recruitment and yield practices) within a bounded system (i.e., one historically and predominantly white land-grant institution in the Deep South). My focus on this being a critically-aligned study is also intentional. According to Charmaz (2017), critical inquiry is "embedded in a transformative paradigm that seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and justice" (p. 35). I aim to do all of this within the context of recruitment and yield practices at HPWLGs. Directly naming oppressive forces like power and racism within the recruitment and enrollment processes at this particular institutional type further aligned with the use of the critical case study methodology.

I used purposive sampling techniques at both the case-level and the participant-level (Posselt, 2016). The selected institution met the classification of being a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution and is located within a state with on-going anti-DEI legislative efforts. Beyond the more universal ramifications of the recent federal legislation (i.e., *Student for Fair Admission v. Harvard*), choosing an institution that was actively situated within a hostile state-level sociopolitical landscape added an additional layer of nuance regarding better understanding how competing institutional priorities play a role in the recruitment and yield of Black prospective students.

The data in this study came from three distinct but related sources: interviews with three professional staff member with diverse responsibilities related to the recruitment and enrollment processes; interviews with two currently enrolled Black student leaders who themselves were

recruited to attend Magnolia University and are now responsible for engaging with prospective Black students; and publicly available documents (i.e., articles in student-run newspapers, minutes from faculty senate meetings, minutes from board of trustees meetings, institutional websites).

A variety of purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit individual participants. Leveraging my personal networks, I was connected to professional staff members at Magnolia University who oversaw student organizations that had a mission to engage with prospective students of color. These program coordinators supported my recruitment efforts, which resulted in two students agreeing to participate. Recruitment for professional staff members included leveraging this connection with one of the program coordinators who agreed to participate as well as individual contacting staff members who had publicly available job titles and/or descriptions that were consistent with recruitment and enrollment responsibilities. Ultimately, the participant pool consisted of five individuals – three professional staff member and two currently enrolled Black students – at Magnolia University. Being in conversation with these two types of institutional actors will provide a layered understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Data were collected through a set of 1-2 interviews lasting roughly 60 minutes each. Interviews were conducted December 2024-February 2025. The majority of which took place after Donald Trump's second presidential inauguration on January 6, 2025. Consistent with case study methodology, this context is worth emphasizing given role that the increasingly hostile federal sociopolitical landscape played in the lived experiences of most participants. In keeping with Bhattacharya's (2020) guidance, the interviews were guided by the following domains to allow for the necessary flexibility to conduct semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational interviews: experiences with their role, the role of land-grant institutional status, the role of state

and federal agency, perceived agency in their role.

I made meaning of the data through iterative writing as inquiry analytic techniques (Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Richardson, 1997, 2000) while being guided by the four tenets of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations.

Limitations

Future studies following this line of inquiry would benefit from extending this work in ways that I could not. First, practical time constraints associated with this dissertation study limited its temporal scope. A longitudinal case study would provide an even more robust understanding of how the on-going federal and state legislative forces will shape these same recruitment and enrollment practices. Second, inclusion of senior-level administrators (like university presidents) and general counsel members would support a more nuanced interrogation of how these macro-level forces are interpreted and institutionalized by the institutional actors with the most political capital. Finally, inclusion of a wider variety of institutional actors from divisions of student affairs, outreach, and academics would illuminate a more holistic understanding of how Magnolia University engages with prospective Black students.

Delimitations

I have been intentional with selecting the context of my scholarship, the research participants, and the documents I collected as a means to appropriately limit the scope of my study. Focusing on historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions is both an understudied context for admissions-related scholarly inquiries and also an inherently limited pool of institutions. Speaking with front-facing staff members and current students who are directly responsible for helping to recruit and enroll students – but do not hold the political capital or power to dictate institutional policies (like that of a university president) – illuminated

the racialization across Magnolia University's ecosystem and the role that racialization played in the processes of recruiting and enrolling Black students.

Significance of the Study

Interrogating the racialized recruitment and yield practices at one HPWLG and the competing institutional priorities that shape these practices is important when centering the needs of Black prospective students. Black students have been historically excluded from these higher education spaces (Harper et al., 2009; Harris, 2021a; Wilder, 2013) and continue to experience inequitable access throughout the college recruitment process (Morgan et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2024). The increasingly divisive, anti-DEI (more specifically, anti-Black) legislative landscape that surrounds higher education creates an even more urgent need to better understand and interrogate current racialized recruitment and yield practices, especially since these institutions tout espoused DEI commitments (Iverson, 2012). From an institutional perspective, it is my hope that this study will lead to further interrogations and changes to institutional practices and polices that will honor, rather than further marginalize and exclude, Black prospective students.

Definition of Terms

This section includes a detailed list of key terms that are used throughout this study.

- *Historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions (HPWLG)* – Institutions that were established after the massage of the Morrill Act of 1862 and continue to have a predominantly white study body.
- *Historically underrepresented students* – While the focus of this study is on the recruitment and yield of Black students, it is important to highlight the broader term of "historically underrepresented students" given its presence in the literature. For the purpose and within the context of this study, historically

underrepresented students are those that meet at least one of the following categories that are underrepresented within historically and predominantly white land grant institutions: students of color, first-generation students, low-income (i.e., Pell Grant-eligible) students.

- *Recruitment* – Policies and practices implemented by undergraduate admissions offices to encourage prospective students to apply to the institution.
- *Yield* – Polices and practices implemented by undergraduate admissions offices to encourage admitted students to enroll at the institution.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this dissertation is detailed in the following four chapters. The second chapter will provide an overview of literature that contextualizes the topic of racialized recruitment and yield practices at HPWLGs. The third chapter will provide an overview of my critical qualitative case study methodology along with related concepts like my positionality, participant selection, data collection and analysis, and issues of trustworthiness and ethics. The fourth chapter will detail my interpretations and re-presentations in the form of a full case study report including themes that are aligned with my guiding methodological framework. The final chapter will highlight implications for practice and policy at HPWLGs as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a substantive overview of the varied topics and literature that not only contextualizes but also supports the necessity of this study. A study that to explores racialized recruitment and yield practices at historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions and the competing institutional priorities that shape these practices.

For both professional and personal reasons, I am a firm believer in the utility of learning from the past. As it specifically relates to the intersection of racism and higher education in this country, particularly the sustained presence of systemic racial inequalities in college access and espoused institutional commitments, the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) statement regarding their racial justice commitments (n.d.) is even more meaningful: "We must truthfully confront our history of racial injustice before we can repair its painful legacy. EJI believes we need a new era of truth and justice that starts with confronting our history of racial injustice."

In an effort to situate the current study and honor EJI's work, I begin with a historical overview of the founding of higher education institutions in this country leading towards land-grant institutions established by the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. Detailing the historical legacy, purpose, and accessibility of these institutions will serve as a foundation for the rest of the literature review. Building upon the inequitable and racially exclusive historical underpinnings of these institutions, I then detail relevant aspects like the fluid definitions of merit in the admissions process as well as institutional diversity commitments as it relates to serving Black students, in particular. I then describe and trouble the often-intertwined concepts of race-conscious admissions via affirmative action and merit. I end with an overview of college recruitment efforts with a particular focus on the role of "diversity admission officer" – institutional agents who are often responsible for serving as the face of institutions to recruit

prospective students from historically underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., students of color, first generation students, low-income). Taken together, these individual components – the historical founding of U.S. higher education institutions, the landscape around institutional diversity, the intersection of race-conscious admissions policies and the notion of merit, and the role of admissions offices and admissions representatives – help to establish the nuanced, complex context surrounding the recruitment efforts of Black prospective students at historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions.

College Access: A Historical Overview

The history of higher education in the United States of America precedes the country's founding as an independent nation. Harvard College, now Harvard University, was the first to be established in 1636, less than three decades after the emergence of the first American colony (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Over the next 130 years, eight additional colonial colleges were established to serve as educational, religious, and civic bastions for their communities. These institutions were specifically founded by and for the advancement of the white (as well as male, affluent, and Christian) elite through the expropriation of Indigenous lands and at the expense of enslaved Black people (Nash, 2019; Singh, 2021; Stein, 2016, 2020; Wilder, 2013).

This is a particularly relevant framing given the racist underpinnings of the U.S. education system. While the colonial colleges (i.e., the first historically and predominantly white institutions of higher education) were gaining traction, white supremacist efforts were concurrently limiting education access for Black people. Anti-literacy laws like the Negro Act of 1740 prohibited free or enslaved Black people from learning to read or write (Sandles, 2023; Span, 2005) while the post-Civil War landscape continued to promote state-sanctioned limits on Black education often beyond the primary level (Anderson, 1988; Wingfield, 2023).

Beyond the necessity of applicants being white men, very little was known about colonial college admissions requirements prior to Broome's (1903) investigation and compilation of institution-specific documents from Harvard's inception through the beginning of the 19th century. Entrance requirements originally placed a strong emphasis on mastery of the classics and languages like Latin (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). For example, the College of Rhode Island's (now Brown University) 1783 College Laws detailed the following academic standards for admission:

> No Person may expect to be admitted into this College, unless, upon examination by the President and Tutors, he shall be found able to read accurately construe and parse *Tully* and the Greek Testament, and Virgil; and shall be able to write true Latin in prose, and hath learned the rules of Prosody and Vulgar Arithmatic" (Thelin, 2021, p. 18).

These requirements were narrowly tailored to select subjects but, as Brubacher and Rudy (1958) aptly stated, "presupposed a really high order of linguistic ability" (p. 13). A level of linguistic ability that was only afforded to young white men with access to private tutors to compensate for the scarcity of public secondary schools well into the 19th century (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958; Leslie, 1997). With this anti-Black foundational context in mind, it should come as no surprise that no American college or university admitted Black students until the 1830s (Anderson, 2002).

While the earliest advocates for colonial colleges were interested in quickly developing well-attended colleges modeled after Oxford and Cambridge with the primary aim of educating ministers – i.e., the "universal militia of Christ" (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958, p. 8) – attendance remained low for many years. Very few jobs, if any, at the time required a college education so the return on investment for something that functioned primarily as a status symbol was beyond

justification for most families. According to Thelin and Gasman (2010), less than 5% of traditional college-aged individuals, eighteen to twenty-two year old, ever enrolled in college throughout the 200-year span of the 18th century to the 20th century (p. 3). The persistence of low attendance at Harvard and the like necessitated that all qualified applicants be admitted (Leslie, 1997) as these institutions had what Broome (1903) described as "a bitter struggle for existence against poverty" (p. 19).

It was not until the mid-19th century that admissions requirements at Harvard were edited to include a variety of subjects beyond Latin and an emphasis on "a good moral character" (Broome, 1903, p. 42). According to Karabel (2005), this moral character factor in admissions to schools like Yale, Princeton, and Harvard gained traction during this time and maintained momentum throughout the mid-20th century. It was one of the first strategic enrollment management decisions that these institutions took towards actively insulating themselves from any significant changes in the traditionally white and Christian composition of their student bodies. In other words, subjective factors like "moral character" allowed for anti-Semitic views to reign supreme throughout the admissions decisions at the time and ensured that academically qualified Jewish applicants were restricted from enrolling at the same rates as their Christian counterparts (Karabel, 2005; Leslie, 1997).

Relatedly, Kett (2013) provided a historical lineage of merit within the American sociopolitical landscape. Within this historical framing, he also made an intriguing connection by stating that "merit and honor were cousins of character" in the political landscape as early as the American Revolution. It is not a far leap to see how merit, honor, and character are also deeply intertwined in the earliest days of college admissions and inequitable access to a college education in this country.

Merit

Merit has been found to be a fluid concept (Park & Liu, 2014; Posselt, 2014) based on institutional values, goals, and mission, which directly mirrors the complicated history of exclusion orchestrated by these same institutions (Karabel, 2005). In the simplest of terms, Harris (2022) equated merit to deservingness or worth. Paradoxically, this succinct definition is broadly contested in practice, especially when it is situated alongside race. Merit, much like race, is socially constructed (Posselt, 2014) but has real, tangible effects within a racially hierarchical society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). I will employ this definition throughout this study when exploring how recruitment and yield practices of Black students are racialized. In other words, are Black students viewed as worthy of being recruited and encouraged to enroll as their white counterparts? What follows is a further expansion and troubling of the concept of merit(ocracy), its fluidity within the historical context of college admissions, and its interaction with race and racism.

In *The Diversity Bargain*, Warikoo sought to understand the ways in which students enrolled at elite institutions in the United States (Harvard and Brown) and Britain (Oxford and Cambridge) understand the intersection of racial diversity and merit in the elite college admissions process. In setting up this comparison, she explained that the differences in how these institutions define merit is based upon their institutional mission. The European model for higher education, she argued, was always intended to be a hierarchical social sorting tool – to educate the elite in "canonical knowledge" and keep separate from the rest of society (p. 29). There is also a strong emphasis on admitting students for the potential to contribute to their intended field of academic studies. As such, these institutions conceptualized merit as a strict academic metric of success devoid of considering personal circumstances.

On the other hand, Warikoo described the American model of higher education as one that is more embedded into society with the mission of "making contributions to civic and social life" (p. 29) and an emphasis on valuing diversity of circumstances, identities, and backgrounds. This evaluation of merit is said to align with a holistic review process where many factors are considered. While this distinction between American and British elite institutions implies that American institutions are more accessible and grounded upon a mission of civic duty (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958), it should not be forgotten that these institutions were built upon a racially-biased, inequitable system of determining who was worthy to be granted access to be educated at these institutions (Harris, 2021; Wilder, 2013). The reliance on standardized test scores as an "objective," academic measurement of merit exemplifies this point.

The decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century saw a noticeable standardization of the college admissions process with the advent of the College Entrance Examination Board examinations (Veysey, 1980) as well as regional accrediting agencies promoting uniform requirements for college applicants (Beale, 1970). The advent of these standardized entrance exams is both an example of and perpetuation of the sinister nature of white supremacy. What was originally marketed as and ultimately crystalized into our modern-day culture of higher education as a quantifiable metric of merit has racist roots. As Kendi (2019) explains, the racist history of standardized testing began in 1869 when eugenicist pioneer, Francis Galton, hypothesized that there were significant intellectual differences along racial lines but he failed to create metric to go along with this hypothesis. Less than 40 years later, the first IQ test was manufactured to confirm, with no scientific support, Galton's racist hypothesis. Carl C. Brigham, known eugenicist and Princeton University professor, was inspired by this work and created the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926. Brigham believed that the test "would reveal the natural

intellectual ability of White people" (Kendi, 2019, p. 102). It is important to interrogate why this eugenic tool has endured for nearly a century, especially at the expense of Black prospective students. This test was manufactured as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the creator's intent – to serve as an *objective* way to prove that Black students are less intelligent and academically qualified for collegiate-level studies under the guise of scientific theories (Ladson-Billings, 1998) while ignoring the contextual barriers that Black students encounter because of limited access to standardized test preparation resources as well as college preparatory classes (Redden, 2020).

That higher education and the field of college admissions has, on the whole, failed to interrogate the racist history of standardized college entrance exams is an example of revisionist history (Bell, 1980) – replacing the accurate historical context with a narrative that is more comfortable the dominant, privileged culture and status quo. It should be no wonder then that these standardized tests continue to align with family income (Sandel, 2020) by over-rewarding upper-middle-class white people (Guinier, 2003, p. 193) and perpetuating the color-evasive myth of meritocracy (Boeckenstedt, 2021; Ward, 2020).

(Myth of) Meritocracy

This concept of a meritocracy is considered to be a uniquely American ideal (Guinier, 2015) and yet it is grounded in nothing more than satire. British sociologist, Michael Young, published a book in the 1950's that warned of a social sorting system based on a formula of intelligence + effort = merit. Warikoo (2016) explained it well when she said, that Young's dystopian view of a meritocracy enabled elites to "perpetuate class privilege across generations, with consent from the lower class based on the perceived legitimacy of the meritocracy" (p. 15). Ward (2020) troubled the concept of meritocracy when she asserted that it is **"**the belief that

everyone has access to the same resources for success with no acknowledgment of historical or contextual realties especially in the pursuit of a college education" (p. 8). Scholars like Ward (2020, 2021) have astutely critiqued the myth of meritocracy in the U.S. higher education system, particularly regarding access to these institutions via admissions processes. Ward (2020) specifically stated that the "reproduction of racialized social injustice prevails when meritocracy is legitimized" (p. 9). To her point, we have centuries worth of history to show that meritocracy has been legitimized in the college admissions process.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to include conceptions of merit as well as the myth of meritocracy in the exploration of racialized recruitment and yield practices of Black students at historically and predominantly white land grant institutions. If similar conceptions of merit and the myth of meritocracy are framing the recruitment and yield practices then Black prospective students face racially-biased barriers beyond the admissions decision process itself. It is also necessary to acknowledge the historical realities of these institutions (heeding the advice of Ward, 2020) since they have played a complicated role in the expansion of the American higher education system.

History of Land-Grant Institutions

Originally, land-grant institutions were created to fill, what same federal legislators, saw as a void in the higher education system (Harris, 2021; Johnson, 1997). As the country was growing both in the size of the population as well as agriculture and technical labor opportunities, cites of advanced education, research, and training for these jobs did not exist (Harris, 2021a). As such, land-grants filled this void by having a purported "open-door policy" (Thresher, 1966) particularly for the citizens of the specific state within which the institution resided (Utah State University Extension, 2022). However, this narrowly tailored increase in

access was also at the expense of Indigenous peoples whose land was claimed by way of treaty or seizure (Lee & Ahtone, 2020). As such, it is important to further explore the contentious land-grant history by leaning on and uplifting the works of scholars like Lee & Ahtone (2020) for their conceptualization of these institutions as "land-grabs" and Harris (2021a) for a more complete overview of the etiology and racist history. Under the guise of increasing college access to more people with the popular moniker of being the "peoples' college" (Campbell, 1995, p. 26) land-grant institutions created by the 1862 Act were still limited exclusively to white students. Stein (2020) asserted that there is a level of romanticism and revisionist history tactics when framing the purpose of land-grants if we, as a society, fail to admit that these institutions have colonialist and white supremacist backings.

Foundational texts within student affairs preparation programs (i.e., Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Thelin & Gasman, 2010) describe that previously marginalized populations (i.e., non-elite families with first-generation college-going children, women, and people of color) were gaining access to an advanced education with the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890. This perspective insinuates that these institutions were established to further democratize higher education – to make advanced learning, framed as public good, more accessible to all people (Singh, 2021). To develop a more complete understanding of the racialized context surrounding this legislation, look no further than the 1890 extension. This extension allotted (an inequitable amount of) federal aid to Historically Black Colleges and Universities in lieu of historically white land-grant institutions established thirty years early integrating their student bodies (Harris, 2021; Singh, 2021).

Earliest entrance requirements to the historically white land-grant institutions only required evidence of one year of education beyond the eighth-grade level (Hawkins, 1997). As

such, these institutions struggled to prove their legitimacy as higher learning while aiming to meet the needs of prospective students as well as the institutional financial needs by enrolling tuition-paying students (Johnson, 1997). Most of the original 1862 land-grant institutions now fall under the "selective" or "more selective" category by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education for selectivity. Additionally, based on reviews from the most recently accessible Common Data Set for each of the original land-grants, 41 have a predominantly white (meaning 51% or greater) undergraduate student population. What does it mean when the vast majority of these institutions racial student demographics do not represent their state – where in white people are overrepresented in the student body while Black people are underrepresented in the student body, for example? These institutions may purport to value diversity as an institution but what does that really mean?

In thinking about the ways in which these historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions purport to value Black students while historically excluding them on the basis of fluid, oppressive conceptualizations of merit, it is important to highlight the ways in which related institutional commitments are enacted in policies like diversity action plans.

Espoused Values: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Espoused institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments have been increasingly implemented at historically and predominantly white institutions in response to federal legislation like the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Patton et al., 2019) as well as broader sociopolitical contexts like the racial justice movement following the 2020 murder of George Floyd (Grace et al., 2024; Meikle et al., 2022). These espoused DEI commitments are often enacted in institutional documents like diversity action plans. Given this study's interest in exploring how competing institutional priorities may reproduce racial inequalities in the

recruitment and yield of Black students, it is necessary to first highlight the existence of espoused DEI commitments through these institutional documents.

According to Iverson (2012), diversity action plans "are a primary means by which universities advance recommendations regarding their professed commitment to a (more) inclusive and equitable climate for *all* members of the campus community" (p. 152) and are also tools that land-grants institutions use to "increase access and retention of historically underrepresented populations" (Iverson, 2008, p. 2). And yet, the fair criticism is that these are superficial and merely symbolic institutional commitments (Ahmed, 2012; Iverson, 2012). Critics of these institutional tactics, like Ahmed (2012) argue that the institutionalization of diversity language actually functions to promote institutional whiteness. In other words, using language like *diversity, equity, and inclusion* rather than directly naming things like *race* and *racism* works to obscure any actionable steps restorative justice and transformation at the institutional, systemic level. This phenomenon is also consistent with and supports the employment of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, particularly the tenet related to the decoupling of formal rules (i.e., commitments stated in diversity action plans) from practice (i.e., the reality).

Ward (2020) presented both a critique and call to action regarding diversity statements, written documents often part of institutional diversity action plans, when she stated, "eloquently written diversity statements should be supported by actions that promote racial equity and inclusion and these actions should be clearly conveyed in ways that express an institution's commitment to understanding the role of race and racism in access to higher education for both MPOC (minoritized people of color) and white applicants" (p. 12).

As it related to diversity work in student affairs practice more specifically, Garcia et al.

(2021) found that student affairs practitioners were often guided by their personal social justice commitments rather than any diversity action plans or statements that their institution had published. Many practitioners interviewed were not even aware of the specific content in these institutional diversity plans. Particularly troubling, practitioners of color in this study often shouldered the labor of implementing diversity initiatives while operating in spaces that were predominantly white and were also spaces of whiteness. While admissions office across the country are not always considered within student affairs by way of an institution's organizational chart, the work of Garcia and colleagues (2021) is worthy of consideration when interrogating diversity work within admissions offices. Especially as it relates to enacting purported institutional diversity commitments at historically and predominantly white institutional through potentially racialized and inequitable recruitment practices. Ultimately, the on-going anti-DEI (more specifically, anti-Black) legislative landscape that is currently enveloping the field of higher education (Lu et al., 2023) is shifting the ways in which institutions are legally allowed to support these efforts broadly and Black students more specifically (Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024).

Anti-DEI Legislative Landscape

Right-wing politicians and think tanks across the country have strategically undermined racial equity in K-16 educational spaces by equating DEI initiatives and conversation about race(ism) as divisive and anti-American (Conyers & Fields, 2025; Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020; Sheppard, 2025). Most notably, public universities located in Republican-controlled states have been designated as a focus point for Claremont Institute – a right-wing think tank that has partnered with a network of academics, Capitol Hill strategists, and politicians to advance anti-CRT and anti-DEI legislation that has already impacted public universities across the country, including HPWLGs in the Deep South (Confessore, 2024). The state-level anti-DEI legislative

efforts is further complicated, informed, and inspired by the recent federal legislative ban of race-conscious admissions practices. What follows is a detailed overview of the legal landscape surrounding affirmative action in college admissions.

Race-Conscious Admissions Practices

The legal lineage of affirmative action in college admissions will be detailed to further ground the increasingly divisive sociopolitical landscape surrounding the current study. Before doing so though, it is worth acknowledging how the concept itself seems to be woefully misunderstood across scholarly and mainstream discourses. Crenshaw (2006) foresaw the need to reframe the purpose of affirmative action even if it, by name and policy, were to ever be dismantled. As she described, the common metaphor used in this debate is running a race wherein affirmative action policies allow some runners to start ahead of others. In other words, affirmative action would give preferences to some runners while disadvantaging other in the process. Crenshaw adjusts this metaphor by suggesting that affirmative action policies do not give preferences to the runners but rather make improvements to the running surface itself. Without affirmative action policies, the surface that runners are racing on have obstacles that affect some more than others: "Structural inequality, exclusionary institutional practices, trans-generational disadvantages and even unconscious biases are just a few of the conditions that crowd the lanes of would-be recipients of affirmative programs" (p. 132).

In this same piece, Crenshaw (2006) critiqued the community of affirmative action advocates for not properly, substantively, meaningfully challenging "the fundamental baselines of merit which allegations of preferential treatment leave affirmative action defenseless" (p. 123). This is an important consideration and reframing given that the affirmative action debate often incorrectly pits the concept of merit (again, the myth of meritocracy) and institutional

commitments to enrolling a racially diverse class against one another, wherein merit is often regarded as a legitimate and favorable consideration while it is unfair and problematic to consider race (Hirschman et al., 2016).

Lineage of Affirmative Action in College Admissions

The system of U.S. higher education has attempted to parallel the broader society with the adoption of affirmative action policies to assist with race-conscious admissions practices. Three landmark Supreme Court cases will now be discussed. The first two *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) were argued and decided on the same days—1 April and 23 June 2003, respectively—but represent two very different applications of race-conscious admissions at the University of Michigan.

In *Gratz v. Bollinger*, the primary issue was whether the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LS&A)'s system of racial preference for incoming freshman applicants violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Two applicants, Jennifer Gratz and Patrick Hamacher, who were denied admission to the University's LS&A in 1995 sued after learning more about the admissions process. At the time, the Office of Undergraduate Admissions considered a number of factors when making decisions—high school grade point average, standardized test scores, leadership experience, and race were just some of the factors. Each factor considered was also associated with a certain number of points that could be awarded to each applicant. During a review of individual files, applicants had the opportunity to earn a maximum of 150 points, while 100 points guaranteed admission. If an applicant was considered to have a minority status (i.e., African American, Hispanic, or Native American), they automatically received 20 points. Even though diversity of the undergraduate student population was arguably a compelling interest of the university, it failed here because the admissions process into LS&A was not narrowly tailored. The "extra credit" given to certain applicants for membership to a minority

status was found to be the equivalent of a quota system and thus violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The background of the *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) case is very similar to that of *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003). The University of Michigan's Law School also had a compelling interest to compile a diverse student body. In their words, the School wanted a "critical mass" of underrepresented minorities (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans) and their admissions process reflected that goal. Each applicant's file was evaluated on several hard variables (i.e., personal statement, recommendation letters, essay, undergraduate GPA and LSAT score) and soft variables (i.e., recommenders' enthusiasm, quality of undergraduate institution, rigor of undergraduate course selection and overall diversity). Barbara Grutter, a white in-state applicant who was denied admission in 1996 filed suit claiming she was reversely discriminated against on the basis of her race. In a split decision, the Court found that the Law School conducted a highly individualized holistic review of each applicant's file and their diversity was only one factor of many that was considered. The School even state that they would like nothing more than to stop using racial preferences in their admissions process and would do so as soon as possible. Unlike the practices analyzed in *Gratz v. Bollinger*, the Court found the Law School's current use of racial preferences to be narrowly tailored. At no point in time did any applicant receive "extra credit" for their minority status. This particular holistic review process and did not resemble an unconstitutional quota system and thus did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment or Title XI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Although both *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) set a precedent for race-conscious admission policies, *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016) was thought to have settled and further solidified the legality of race-conscious admissions practices.

In 1997, the state of Texas passed the Top Ten Percent Plan which requires universities in the state system to automatically accept applicants who graduate in the top 10% of their high school

class. Applicants who do not meet this requirement for automatic acceptance are reviewed for admission based on two components: their Academic Index (AI) and Personal Achievement Index (PAI). The AI combines an applicant's SAT score and high school grade point average. The PAI is a much broader category that consists of a holistic review of an applicant's essays, recommendation letters, resume and other "special circumstances." The addition of "special circumstances" (i.e., an applicant's socioeconomic status, family responsibility, race, etc.) as a factor in the University's admission process was a direct result of *Grutter v. Bollinger*. Like the University of Michigan, the University of Texas system also has a compelling interest to compile a diverse student body and the administration believed that this new process would be the best way to achieve that goal.

During the spring of 2008, Abigail Fisher applied for admission to the University of Texas-Austin. She didn't meet the requirement for automatic acceptance because she wasn't in the top 10% of her high school graduating class, so her file (including her AI and PAI) were individually reviewed by admissions officers. Any applicant that isn't accepted during this holistic review round, had an AI and PAI score that fell below the designated cutoff as determined and agreed upon by each of the admissions offices within the state system. Fisher's score fell below this cutoff so she was denied acceptance into the Fall 2008 incoming freshman class at UT-Austin. Fisher, a white in-state applicant, filed suit after receiving her admissions decision arguing that the University's use of racial preference discriminated against her and other Caucasians by violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

In *Fisher I* (2013), the Supreme Court vacated the U. S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit's original decision citing that it did not properly hold the University's admissions policies to a standard of strict scrutiny as set forth by *Grutter v. Bollinger*. The case was sent back to the Fifth Circuit for further review, but the 2014 decision remained the same. The lower court believed that UT-Austin had sufficiently demonstrated that their holistic admissions process was narrowly tailored to help achieve the institution's goal of developing a more diverse student body. Fisher then filed a

petition of certiorari and the Supreme Court agreed to hear her case for a second time in June 2015. In *Fisher II* (2016), the Supreme Court announced their split decision on 23 June 2016 upholding the decision of the lower court. Ultimately, this decision solidified the use of race-conscious admission policies in higher education so long as they are narrowly tailored towards the institution's justifiable diversity-related goals until the most recent cases seen before the U.S. Supreme Court. Notably, Ed Blum, a right-wing conservative legal strategist, has been a long-time opponent of race-conscious admissions practices and was heavily involved in both Fisher cases. During this lineage, he founded the Students for Fair Admissions non-profit that played a pivotal role in the recent landmark Supreme Court case.

Where Are We Now? On June 29, 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, henceforth referred to as SFFA v. Harvard. While the majority opinion of the politically conservative-leaning Court made no direct reference to "affirmative action," this decision has functionally reversed legal precedent for race-conscious admissions practices and set a new legal precedent for color-evasive admissions practices. The Court cited that "race-based" admissions practices at Harvard College and University of North Carolina violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Some scholars like OiYan Poon (2023) have been thoughtful in interrogating the language used by justices of the majority opinion. Language like "race-based" rather than "race-conscious" was used. This is a, now legally grounded, misrepresentation given that no admissions decision were ever based on race even when a limited number of institutions considered race as a single factor in their more holistic review process.

While many legal scholars and higher education professionals attuned to this landscape were unsurprised by the outcome of the ruling, the magnitude with which the majority opinion showed regarding their foundational (and politically-motivated and intentional?)

misunderstanding of affirmative action policies and a commitment to what I am referring to as an "either-or-fallacy." By either-or-fallacy, I am specifically referring to assertions – particularly in Justice Clarence Thomas' concurring opinion – that merit and racial diversity are mutually exclusive:

> This vision of meeting social racism with government-imposed racism is thus self-defeating, resulting in a never-ending cycle of victimization. There is no reason to continue down that path. In the wake of the Civil War, the Framers of the Fourteenth Amendment charted a way out: a colorblind Constitution that requires the government to, at long last, put aside its citizens' skin color and focus on their individual achievements (*Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard*, 2023, p. 55).

This view of a "colorblind Constitution" as a model document fails to acknowledge that close to half of the Constitutional Convention delegates were actively participating in the slave trade as enslavers (Mintz, n.d.) while also encouraging higher education institutions to take a color-evasive approach in determining an applicant's deservingness to be admitted.

Sulé and colleagues (2022) completed a critical discourse analysis of online comments about the earliest iterations of this Supreme Court case. From that discourse analysis, emerged their understanding of how affirmative action is framed in public discourse. These scholars raised a question to the effect of: "Does affirmative action undermine the concept of merit by benefitting Black students at the expense of white students?" Not to express their agreement but to raise the common rationale in the public discourse amongst white folks – that "affirmative action is deemed antithetical to traditional ideas of merit when white people are not perceived to be the primary beneficiaries" (p. 420). By and large, white students that were interviewed by Warikoo (2016) supported affirmative action (i.e., race-conscious admissions) policies so long as

it benefitted them by providing them with diverse learning environment. In this way, diversity becomes a commodity that is framed to benefit white students, many who continue to believe that their entrance to their university was of their own "merit." Within the context of the Court's argument that the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment has been violated, they shared that "eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it" (p. 4). Implying that affirmative actions via race-conscious admissions policies unfairly benefit students of color at the expense of more deserving white students – ultimately and unironically echoing the work of Sulé et al. (2022) and the white students interviewed by Warikoo (2016).

Repressive Legalism

For the purpose of this study, it is critical to articulate that the entire legal lineage of challenges to the use of affirmative actions via race conscious admissions practices are very narrowly tailored to the admissions review process. There is no legal precedent that directly details how race can be used as a factor in the awarding of scholarships and financial aid (or other common yield strategies) or any targeted recruitment/outreach efforts (Garces et al., 2023). Furthermore, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education (2023) have reiterated their support of colleges and universities employing race-conscious outreach and recruitment efforts to support racial justice college access efforts. And yet, institutions have already begun to act on misinterpretations of this ruling by eliminating the use of race as a factor in scholarship awards (Bailey, 2023). For example, politically-conservative attorneys general in states like Missouri used "race-**based**" language in a mandate to all University of Missouri system schools banning the use of "race-based standards to make decisions about things like admissions, scholarships, programs, and employment" (Bellows, 2023). There is also evidence that institutions will enact similar interpretive overreaches (Harper, 2023) over the U. S. Supreme Court's decision because

of their fear of being sued – which is at the heart of the concept of repressive legalism (Fernandez & Garces, 2022; Garces et al., 2021)

Interestingly, Ray (2019) indicated that institutions have been known to adopt "affirmative action, diversity, and anti-discrimination policies out of fear of government sanctions… but retroactively claim benevolent intent" (p. 42). The current sociopolitical landscape regarding attacks on DEI work (Lu et al., 2023) as well as the U. S. Supreme Court's most recent ruling and responses by some attorneys general lead me to believe that the exact opposite could now be true. In other words, institutions may now misinterpret the *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) ruling by ceasing the use of the same "affirmative action, diversity, and anti-discrimination policies out of fear of government sanctions" (Ray, 2019). As such, it is important to, as proactively as possible, interrogate the role that these rulings and institutional responses may play in the recruitment of Black students at HPWLGs. Given that I am closely aligned with this work, I am come with my own curiosities and concerns.

Taken altogether, I am particularly concerned about potential downstream effects of this ruling as it relates to racialized recruitment and yield practices at historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions. Institutions that already have a troubled history and enduring legacy of exclusionary practices on the basis of race.

College Admissions Process, Structure, and Personnel

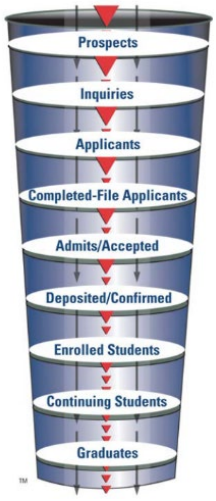
While the aforementioned legal landscape regarding college admissions (see: see: Gratz, Grutter, Fisher, and SFFA) has iteratively ruled on how admissions offices can review applicants files, the current study was intentionally in its focus elsewhere. There is a breadth of impactful scholarship that interrogates undergraduate admissions review practices, particularly at "highly rejective" (Poon et al., 2023) institutions, with the aim of producing for equitable outcomes for

historically underrepresented students (Bastedo et al., 2018; Bastedo et al., 2021; Bowman & Bastedo, 2018; Hossler et al., 2019). Scholarship regarding recruitment and yield efforts of historically underrepresented students (often defined as: students of color, low-income, first generation) is far less developed.

The current study seeks to add to this line of scholarship by focusing on different segments of the admissions funnel (Figure 1). The admissions funnel details how prospective students can move through the college admissions process – from the point of being classified as a "prospect" through targeted institution-initiated recruitment efforts to being an "applicant" after submitting an application to being an "enrolled student" should they choose attend an institution after receiving a favorable admissions decision. To this end, engagement with admissions offices may begin for some students well before their application is reviewed (as institutions work to *recruit* them to apply) and could extend well after they receive their decision (wherein institutions will work to enroll admitted students through *yield* efforts). The current study seeks to extend literature related to inequitable admissions practices by critically exploring the ways in which recruitment and yield practices at historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions are racialized. Further interrogating recruitment and yield practices will also provide a more complete picture of the role that institutions play in "shaping" their class through strategic enrollment management efforts (Hossler, 2015).

Figure 1

Admissions Funnel



Note: Noel Levitz (2009) White Paper – Retooling the Enrollment Funnel: Strategies and Metrics for a New Era

Advent of Enrollment Management

Post-World War America saw an influx of an ever-diversifying body of college applicants with the support of a variety of federal legislative policies like the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This so-called "massification era" of American higher education lead to the enrollment of approximately nine million college students nationwide (Gumport et al., 1997) and nearly 50% of the country's population of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds by the 1970s (Thelin & Gasman, 2010). Interestingly, the Post-World War influx of students was also accompanied by a counteracting pendulum force of a projected decrease in high school graduates by the mid-1970's (Coomes, 2002). The relatively newfound diversity in the types of people that were granted access to a college education (i.e., people of color, women, veterans) and the decrease in high school graduates (i.e., "traditional" college students) led to the

necessity of an even more strategic institutional approach to working with and attracting prospective college students as well as an even more strategic approach to enrolling a class that met institutional goals. This strategic approach to managing enrollment gave rise to the concept of strategic enrollment management.

Former dean of admissions at Boston College, Jack Maguire is credited with coining the term "enrollment management" in the late 1970's to describe how the institution was approaching the multi-faceted strategy of analyzing data and leveraging financial aid and marketing efforts to proactively recruit and enroll students (Hill, 2018). While a more formalized approach to enrolling students was conceptualized less than fifty years ago, recruitment efforts date back to the formative years of higher education in this country.

The racialized and classist roots of higher education should be revisited here: Original access to higher education in this country was reserved specifically for white and wealth men (Anderson, 2002; Brubacher & Rudy, 1958; Wilder, 2013). The same can be said for the makeup of the merchant and farming classes of the time. Early colleges were strategic in recruiting sons of wealthy, white merchants and farmers in an attempt to help their fledgling institutions survive financially (Hossler, 2004; Leslie, 1997). So the growth of a select, relatively homogenous group of college students in the earliest years of higher education in this country can be explained by racialized, classist recruitment efforts. Hossler (2004) detailed that emerging colleges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries relied on the work of their president – who often functioned as the primary faculty member, fundraiser, and chief admissions officer – to travel around the country to entice the children of wealthy farmers and merchants to attend (and fund the growth of) that particular institution.

More recent strategic enrollment management techniques relate to the awarding of

scholarships as a yield strategy as well as the purchasing of the names of prospective students as a recruitment strategy. First, the distribution of merit aid to provide some families "looking for bragging rights" to feel incentivized to enroll their student at a discounted tuition rate (Selingo, 2021). An increasing emphasis on merit-based scholarship aid across the field of higher education has come with racially disparate awarding outcomes. In other words, one report found that merit-based scholarships, originally a publicly funded type of aid intended to increase college access, are more frequently awarded to white students and students attending college preparatory schools (Marin, 2002). Second, Selingo (2021) detailed that the College Board and ACT, as standardized testing agencies, began selling the names of test takers (i.e., prospective students) in 1972. This cash cow for the testing agencies also allowed institutions who were now competing to recruit and enroll students to more actively target certain students that may not otherwise find their way into an institution's admissions funnel or marketing funnel on their own.

Regarding the staffing of admissions office, it is also worth noting that the dean of admissions administrative position was first recorded in the 1920s (Hossler, 2004) and it is noted that Princeton hired its first admissions director in 1922 to assist with their interests in developing a selective admission review process (Leslie, 1997). As of 1963, most admissions offices averaged two staff members – the "chief admissions officer" (i.e., dean) and their clerical assistant (Hodum & James, 2010, p. 317). By the late 1980's and the post-massification era, the average size of admissions staffs had grown to twelve (Hodum & James, 2010) while that average more than doubled to twenty-nine staff members according to results of 2016 EAB survey. The growth of admissions staff sizes has been matched by the evolution of individual roles. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for staffing and factors like institutional type

and size impact staffing responsibilities (AACRAO, 2015), the overarching, strategic approach to enrollment management is now the responsibility of positions like the "Vice President/Dean of Admission and/or Enrollment Management" while student-facing recruitment efforts (i.e., traveling to attend college fairs and visit individual schools, talking with and advising students, etc.) are the responsibility of "admissions counselors" (Phair, 2014). In addition to staff members in central admissions office, there has been a growing trend for individual academic colleges to have staff members that actively recruit for specific academic programs (rather than for the broader institution). This is a growing segment of the professional recruitment staff population such that the Southern Association for College Admission Counseling, the professional organization for the Deep South states, has a "Campus Programmers & Campus Tour Guides" special interest group to support these professionals.

Responsibilities, Competencies, and Training of Admissions Professionals

As Olson (2018) described, "a recruiter's influence goes far beyond handing out a college application. They are, first and foremost, ambassadors for their school" and conversations between admissions professionals and students, especially first-generation students, can demonstrate the life-changing effects that the pursuit of a college education can have for students. So the work that admissions professionals, especially that of entry-level and front-facing roles of recruiters is incredibly important but there are noted concerns related to this profession.

According to a recent NACAC (2018) report, the profession of college admissions continues to be a predominantly white field and there is a noted lack of training for these positions (Sutton, 2018). NACAC (2022) implored for admissions offices to engage with implicit bias training for admissions professionals responsible for reviewing applications as part of a

holistic review process. The necessity of implicit bias training for recruiters who interact with students directly as part of institutional recruitment efforts could also be equally beneficial given the potential downstream effects of the most recent *SFFA v. Harvard* case.

According to a report by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), 45.8% of admissions coordinators and counselors (i.e., entry-level recruitment-focused jobs) in 2022 were in position less than two years and 24.8% had been in the position 2-3 years (as cited in Zahneis, 2023). Taken together, close to 71% of entry-level admissions professionals had been in their job less than three years as of 2022.

A potential result of a predominantly white field that lacks proper training, particularly as it relates to working with students from underrepresented backgrounds, could be inequitable recruitment practices like that of Thornhill (2019) and Salazar et al. (2021). Bowman & Bastedo (2018) also found that admissions professionals "who were employed at their alma mater provided less equitable recommendations" during the admissions review process (p. 430). Need to try to find stat about the number of admission counselor who work for their alma mater.

In the present study, I intentionally recruited professional staff members and current students who have front-facing recruitment responsibilities. These institutional actors, especially at an HPWLG in the Deep South rarely cited in the literature but are often tasked with navigating the liminal space between recruiting and enrolling historically underrepresented students and the competing institutional priorities that make that work even more complicated.

Rationale for Current Study

In addition to the literature that has been cited thus far, I want to reiterate my deep connection with this work as well as my positionality as it relates to my values by providing a guiding quote from Posselt & Desir (2022):

> Equity is a process of reconfiguring structures, cultures, and systems to close gaps and empower historically marginalized and excluded groups… To seriously address the fact of inequities, we need to confront the direct and indirect processes through which our professional practice makes and remakes racial inequalities. Pursuing equity in practice means attending to and intervening on the layers of racialization in our practice as professionals. (p. 87).

Foundational and Analytic Frameworks

This study inherently and strategically employed Critical Race Theory as a foundational framework. Born out of a lineage of critical legal studies that interrogated the perpetuation of white supremacy through the U.S. legal system, Critical Race Theory, as a scholarly field, extends the premise that race(ism) is similarly central to the structures of American society and its educational system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Paradoxically, anti-CRT legislation that exalts a color-evasive understanding of this country's founding while arguing that racism is a mythical "divisive concept" (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020) functions as a self-incriminating gesture that further supports the necessity of such a framework. Given this study's focus on how meso-level organizational responses to macro-level forces (i.e., these same pieces of legislation) reproduced racial inequities at one HPWLG, it was necessary to employ theoretical frameworks that aligned with these endeavors.

Analysis for this study is guided by Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. While this theoretical framework was originally developed to explain how a broad variety of organizations reproduce racial inequalities, it has been more recently employed within higher education contexts to illuminate perceptions of gendered and racialized faculty workloads (Misra et al., 2021), structural racism in medical schools (Nguemeni Tiako et al., 2021), the racialization

of college student leadership programs (Irwin, 2023), and the durability of racialized admissions practices a highly rejective institutions (Poon et al., 2023).

The advent of this framework came from Ray's assessment of theoretical shortcomings in the work of both organizational scholars and scholars of race and ethnicity wherein these two fields were missing key elements of the other. As he explained, early approaches to organizational theory were woefully incomplete as they failed to account for the impact of race and racism in the development of organizations. While, in his view, scholars of race have not fully considered the nuanced role that organizations play in the "production of racial ideologies or the social construction of race itself" (Ray, 2019, p. 30).

Rather than adhering to the organizational theory status quo of considering organizations to be race-neutral entities, Ray (2019) intentionally centered race in his theory. Importantly, he asserted that these foundational accounts "neglect that organizational formation was partially premised on the expropriation and exclusion of racial others" (Ray, 2019, p. 29). This is a particularly relevant framing given the racist underpinnings of the U.S. higher education system, broadly, and historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions, more specifically – both of which similarly relied upon the expropriation of Indigenous lands and the labor of enslaved Black peoples to develop these institutions.

Ray (2019) further detailed how his conceptualization of organizations as racial structures involves a more intentional effort to acknowledge the interaction between macro-institutional forces, meso-level organizations, and micro-level instances of racial inequality. Even more importantly, it calls for a concerted focus on meso-level analysis of organizations like colleges and universities along with the organizational units (e.g., admissions, financial aid, scholarships, student affairs) that compose them in order to more fully understand the roles they

play in racialization processes (Poon et al., 2023). Highlighting these multiple and interacting levels was beneficial for the present study which aimed to be in conversation with micro-level institutional agents (i.e., diversity admissions officers) regarding macro-level forces (i.e., 2023 Supreme Court decision to ban race-conscious admissions) to illuminate meso-level (i.e., HPWLGs, broadly; admissions offices, specifically) responses, policies, practices, and procedures regarding the recruitment and yield of Black students.

To further his goal of deliberately blending theories of organizations and race, Ray (2019) leaned heavily into Sewell's (1992) social theory which described the composition of any social structure as a combination of schemas and resources. In this view, a schema can be described as a taken-for-granted, assumed set of rules that, much like a parasite, continues to gain strength and longevity when fueled by resources. Ray (2019) aptly detailed his racialized version of this schemas-resources connection by relating it to the Jim Crow South – laws that enforced anti-Black racial segregation and subordination (i.e., a schema) strategically imposed racially disparate access to resources. In other words, these laws both normalized and legalized the expectation that Black people would "work in menial jobs, attend segregated schools, and sit apart on public transportation" (p. 32).

In order to better operationalize this schemas-resources connection in racialized organizations, Ray (2019) developed four tenets that explain how racialized organizations: 1) distribute resources unequally, 2) promote whiteness as a credential, 3) decouple formal rules from informal practices, and 4) shape the agency of racial groups unequally. What follows is a more detailed description as well as a cursory overview of how each tenet may show up in the recruitment of Black prospective students and historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions.

Tenet 1: Racialized Organizations Distribute Resources Unequally

At the root of this tenet is the reality that resources are strategically and intentionally distributed unequally across racial lines. At the organizational (rather than individual) level, Ray (2019) provided the example that predominantly white organizations are better resourced than those with a larger proportion of people of color. This reality is clear when it comes to the underfunding of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) compared to historically and predominantly white institutions (HPWIs) (Brown & Burnette, 2014; Sav, 1997, 2010). Similarly, Harris (2021b) asserted that "Black colleges do more with less for those who have already had less" (p. 18) when describing the disparity between endowments of predominantly Black and predominantly white institutions.

To acknowledge this continued comparison within the context of my current study, I want to reiterate my position – I do not seek to pit HBCUs against HPWIs or to infer that historically and predominantly white land grant institutions are superior. Far from it. Instead, I believe that historically and predominantly white institutions have an obligation to do more with the disproportionately favorable amount of resources they have received in order to provide equitable access to Black students. Importantly, HBCUs have had to take on the burden of serving as their own advocates and activists for the state-level financial support that they deserve. *United States v. Fordice* (1992), *Knight v. Alabama* (1994), and *The Coalition for Equity and Excellence in Maryland Higher Education v. Maryland Higher Education Commission* (2013) are three court cases where HBCUs in Mississippi, Alabama, and Maryland, respectively, successfully sued their states citing racially discriminatory higher education systems and the historical underfunding of their institutions.

Another element of the unequal distribution of resources in racialized organizations

revolves around routines within an organization. According to Ray (2019), "the connection between material resources and organizational routines show why explicit prejudice and discrimination are insufficient to explain continued racial inequality" (p. 40). In other words, routines within the organization are racialized and access to certain resources are not equally accessible. It is necessary to interrogate routines at HPWLGs as it relates to the recruitment and yield of Black students.

Tenet 2: Racialized Organizations Promote Whiteness as a Credential

Similar to Harris' (1993) concept of whiteness as property, this tenet argues that proximity to whiteness can lead to greater access to resources, individual agency, and perceptions of "merit" or deservingness. Scholars like Pager (2007), on the other hand, suggest that Blackness can also be a negative credential limiting access to similar resources or opportunities. These two views demonstrate how anti-Black discrimination is at the center of this credentialing process that ultimately glorifies whiteness within organizations (Omi & Winant, 1994).

According to Ray (2019), affirmative action policies are, at their core, an attempt to compensate for the impact of the credential of whiteness limiting equal access of minoritized peoples to organizations. Now that the affirmative action of considering race in the college admissions review process is illegal, it will be necessary to interrogate how HPWLGs and their admissions offices have responded in their efforts to recruit and yield Black students. Responses that adhere to a race-neutral approach to recruitment and yield, even though that is beyond the scope of Supreme Court decision, show support for the credential of whiteness through repressive legalism (Fernandez & Garces, 2022; Garces et al., 2021).

Adherence to race-neutral organizational initiatives ultimately reifies racial

discrimination and protects whiteness at the organizational level (Ray, 2019). Within the context of college admissions, some proponents of standardized test indicate that they are a better measure than high school GPA (which, in their opinion, is a measure vulnerable to grade inflation) of future academic achievement (Knox, 2024). To claim that standardized tests, like ACT and SAT, are race-neutral metrics would support this credentialing of whiteness tenet of racialized organizations as this would ignore the racialized underpinnings of the advent of these same standardized tests. Beyond the ways in which standardized tests are considered in the admissions review process (which is, by design, outside of the scope of the current study) it will be important to consider the ways in which racialized credentialing is present in the recruitment and yield processes at HPWLGs. For example, inequitable access to costly standardized test preparation programs and college preparatory curriculum disproportionately disadvantaged Black students (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Redden, 2020). These racialized differences should also be considered given a recent report indicated that public research universities were most often engaging in off-campus recruiting events (i.e., high school visits and attending college fairs by admissions officers) in predominantly white and affluent out-of-state locations (Salazar et al., 2021).

Tenet 3: Racialized Organizations Decouple Formal Rules from Informal Practices

When organizations have espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments, for example, but fail to authentically enact those commitments in practice, decoupling has occurred. As previously mentioned, diversity action plans are ways that institutions profess their commitments to developing more inclusive and equitable campus communities, and are tools that HPWLGs use to make claims of increasing access to historically underrepresented students (Iverson, 2008). Unfortunately, comparing student enrollment data to the most recent Census

data would suggest that HPWLGs are falling short enacting these commitments. After comparing undergraduate student enrollment data via the most recent publicly available Common Data Set for each HPWLG and the racial demographic makeup of each state via the 2020 Census data, I found that 45 HPWLGs have a Black undergraduate student enrollment that is under-representative of their state's population.

Ray (2019) argued that this "decoupling allows organizations to maintain legitimacy and appear neutral or even progressive while doing little to intervene in pervasive patterns of racial inequality" (p. 42). Even before 2023 SCOTUS, these data suggest that there have been competing institutional priorities preventing institutions from meeting their espoused equity and access values. What does this look like now? Does recruitment and yield processes look similarly race-neutral?

Tenet 4: Racialized Organizations Shape the Agency of Racial Groups Unequally

An individual's location within a racialized hierarchy will ultimately dictate the amount of control they have over their own independent actions. Said differently, racialized organizations can diminish individual agency of racially minoritized individuals due to their subordinated position in a racialized hierarchy. According to Ray (2019), a key way that organizations shape the agency of individuals is by controlling how they can use their time. Across several examples, Ray illuminates that racialized organizations strategically force Black people to spend more time than white people (who are positioned higher in the organization) on the same tasks. Ray (2019) also anticipated critics who may have wanted to play 'devil's advocate' by suggesting that individuals, regardless of their racial identity, have the same ability to exert their agency by leaving organizations where they are not fulfilled. To this potential critique, he raised the potentially negative and further marginalizing effects that could come with

minoritized people being excluded in this way.

For the purpose of my current study, it is important to illuminate the variety of ways that agency is differentially shaped throughout the recruitment and yield processes at HPWLGs. When thinking of the Black prospective student perspective, how might their agency be limited throughout the process? Additionally, it is also important to interrogate the ways in which admissions offices are structured. Do professional staff members and current students, especially those with minoritized racial identities, have full control over their time at work in order to fulfill their professional responsibilities and goals?

Connection to Current Study

Following in the footsteps of scholars like Poon et al. (2023), I want to continue to extend this theory into the field of higher education. It is important for educational scholars and practitioners to think about the pervasive racial schemas and the resources that are manipulated to sustain them within the educational organizations that inhabit. What might this look like within enrollment management – including policies, practices, and procedures throughout the entire admissions funnel?

Furthermore, this will be a helpful frame given that I am trying to interrogate institutional recruitment and yield practices. My aim is to be in conversation with micro-level institutional agents regarding macro-level forces to learn about meso-level responses to the 2023 SCOTUS decision and on-going state-level anti-DEI legislation as well as their recruitment and yield policies, practices, and procedures. Being in conversation with a variety of related documents will not only strength my research design of a case study but will also help develop a more rich understanding of the phenomenon of racialized recruitment and yield of Black students at this specific HPWLG in the Deep South.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a substantive overview of the varied topics and literature that not only contextualizes but also supports the necessity of this study. A study that aims to critically examine the recruitment efforts of historically underrepresented students at historically white land-grant institutions. This was achieved by critically engaging with literature related to the historical founding of higher education institutions (specifically HPWLGs), diversity action plans and institutional commitments, the intersection of race-conscious admissions and merit, as well as my theoretical framework.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to interrogate how one historically and predominantly white land-grant (HPWLG) in the Deep South, nested within the increasingly hostile post-affirmative action/anti-DEI legal landscape, prioritized the recruitment and yield of Black prospective students. Of particular interest was the role that competing institutional priorities play in jeopardizing equitable recruitment and enrollment practices. This study analyzed how recruitment and yield practices are racialized at these institutions by asking:

1) What role does the post-affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape play in the recruitment and yield of Black students at HPWLGs?
2) How do competing institutional priorities reproduce racial inequities in the recruitment and yield processes?

To answer these research questions, I employed a critical qualitative case study methodology along with Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to make meaning of the interview data. This case's bounded context, as conceptualized by Merriam (1998), was Magnolia University (pseudonym). Magnolia University is a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution located in the Deep South. In keeping with the racialized history of land-grant institutions – the dispossession and marginalization of Black and indigenous peoples as well as the passage of this act taking place during the American Civil War – my conceptualization of the "Deep South" is inclusive of all former Confederate states.

A set of 1-2 semi-structured interviews with three professional staff members (Johnson, Smith, and Williams) and two currently enrolled Black student leaders (Mavin and Star) at Magnolia University were conducted between December 2024-February 2025 with the majority taking place after the presidential inauguration on January 6, 2025. Johnson and Smith both

participated in one interview each while Williams, Mavin, and Star participated in two interviews each. On average, the interviews last 56 minutes with the shortest being 49 minutes in length and the longest being 77 minutes in length.

What follows in this chapter is a discussion of my positionality, my employment of a critical qualitative case study methodology, and my research design. I then outline my criteria for case selection as well as participant and document selection. Finally, I use my methodological and conceptual frameworks to make meaning of the data. I will also detail how I will ensure trustworthiness and other key ethical considerations that are consistent with my methodological framework.

Positionality

My passion for this line of research comes from direct experience of close to ten years working in an undergraduate admissions office at my alma mater, a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution as well as my doctoral training under the tutelage of critically-aligned faculty.

My focus on this being a critically-aligned study is, therefore, intentional. According to Charmaz (2017), critical inquiry is "embedded in a transformative paradigm that seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and justice" (p. 35). Furthermore, "critical inquiry usually begins from a researcher's explicit value position" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). Scholars like Abrica and Oliver Andrew (2024) assert that the on-going anti-DEI movements and the institutional DEI work itself are both rooted in hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy. Because of my 10-year career experience as an admissions professional at a HPWLG in the Deep South, I want to highlight this reality and my complicity in the system that I am hoping to help transform from the inside.

Though I am not utilizing a grounded theory methodology, I am intentionally choosing to borrow from the work of Charmaz (2017) regarding her concept of *methodological self-consciousness* as a "deeply reflexive gaze on how our perspectives, privileges, and priorities affect our data, actions, and nascent analyses" (Charmaz, 2020, p. 167). This will be a helpful tool to employ given my proximity to this line of scholarly inquiry.

Regarding the focus of analysis for this work, I also heed the guidance of Strunk and Betties (2019) who argued that critical scholarship should move beyond an individual-level analysis and towards a systems-level analysis where "institutions must be the targets of critical inquiry" (p. 77). This further supports my employment of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations as a guiding framework.

As I reflect on how I have learned to be a better admissions professional, higher education scholar, and human, I keep coming back to the growth I have experienced because of the communities I have engaged with. Whether that has been engaging with peers and professors in classroom settings, other scholar-practitioners in research settings, and fellow admissions and school counseling professionals. While I am confident in the authority I bring to this work because of my professional and scholarly training, I do not claim nor want to be the singular voice in this study. As such, a critical constructivist lens is appropriate considering that it uplifts a reality that is co-constructed across multiple voices and perspectives (Merriam, 1998) and relationships with oppressive forces like racism, whiteness, and capitalism (Collins, 2003).

Research Design

Given my positionality and epistemological leanings, a critical qualitative case study method following the methodological guidance of Merriam (1998), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Bhattacharya (2006, 2017), and Diem and colleagues (2023) is well-aligned. Their theory-laden

approach, specifically from a constructivist lens – the belief that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) – frames their conceptualization and guidelines for this methodological approach. While Stake's (1995) conceptualization of this methodology fails to account for and does not fully align with critical epistemologies, I do agree with his belief that that "knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). In this way, I do not believe that there is one universal reality when it comes to recruiting and enrolling prospective students and the broader college admissions process. I am also of the belief that I constructed my own meaning-making throughout the analysis process. Themes, patterns, and findings do not exist without my own interpretation as the researcher. As a critical scholar, my constructing, interpreting, and re-presenting was intrinsically informed by onto-epistemological leanings. For example, I believe that racism is endemic to these institutions. That racism is "not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly" (Ladson-Billings, 2013) but rather built into the very foundation of all HPWLGs. Yet, the sinister ways in which racialized inequities within the recruitment and enrollment processes were reproduced at Magnolia University may not be the same as that of a different HPWLG.

It was my goal to be in conversation with micro-level institutional agents regarding macro-level forces to learn about meso-level responses, policies, practices, and procedures. Being in conversation with a variety of related documents also strengthen my research design of a case study as a form of member checking.

Critical Qualitative Case Study Methodology

In alignment with my positionality and epistemological leanings, this study employed a critical qualitative case study methodology. This section details my scaffolded approach to explain my rationale for my implementation of this methodology. This methodology was

appropriate given my interest in interrogating an understudied phenomenon (i.e., racialized recruitment and yield practices) within a bounded system (i.e., one historically and predominantly white land-grant institution in the Deep South). My focus on this being a critically-aligned study is also intentional. According to Charmaz (2017), critical inquiry is "embedded in a transformative paradigm that seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and justice" (p. 35). I aim to do all of this within the context of recruitment and yield practices at HPWLGs. Directly naming oppressive forces like power and racism within the recruitment and enrollment processes at this particular institutional type further aligned with the use of the critical case study methodology

While there are variations in perspectives, many methodologists describe a case as a unit or phenomenon of interest within a bounded system (Bhattacharya, 2016; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Bhattacharya (2016) cautioned scholars against rigid, inflexible conceptualizations of this research design and asserted that "it is up to the to create the boundary of what a case out to be with justification from existing literature and theoretical perspectives" (p. 110). In following that guidance, my professional and scholarly interests in interrogating recruitment and yield practices at HPWLGs is inherently well-aligned with a case study method.

For the purpose of this study, I chose to interrogate racialized recruitment and enrollment practices (the phenomenon) at Magnolia University because it was an HPWLG in the Deep South situated in a state that with an increasingly hostile anti-DEI sociopolitical climate. My original intent was to bound the case in time to account for any material impacts from the *SFFA v. Harvard* (2023). In other words, I was initially focused on conducting interviews after this decision with interview questions focused on looking back at the first admissions cycle (Fall 2023-Spring 2024) that took place in a post-affirmative action landscape. While accounting for

this original goal, the case was further bounded in time given that interviews were conducted between December 2024-February 2025 – from a few weeks following Donald Trump being re-elected through the first few weeks of this presidential term when anti-DEI sentiments were stronger than ever before.

Features of Case Study Research

According to Merriam (2009), a case study can be further defined by the following features: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. What follows is an explication of how these features show up in this study and why I choose not to fully align with Merriam's approach regarding holistic descriptions in case study research.

By focusing on a particular phenomenon (i.e., racialized recruitment and yield practices) within a specific context (i.e., at one HPWLG), my study is *particularistic*. According to Merriam (1998), the "specificity of focus makes [case study] an especially good design for practical problems – for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice" (p. 29). The practical and imperative concern of racially equitable access to a college education further supports the use of this design. This study can be seen as *descriptive* and *heuristic* given that it aims to "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30) all through thick description throughout the final report.

I believe that knowledge is always partial and incomplete based upon our specific social locations (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992), so I agree with Bhattacharya's (2017) perspective that a "holistic understanding" for case study research is not a realistic goal. In her words, "This is because no matter how hard we try, we are not able to capture the whole. At best, we are documenting what we are able to understand, gather, interpret, analyze in the moments of time we have shared with the participant and are invested in reporting the results of our inquiry" (p.

109-110). In an effort to acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge within this case, it is also important to reiterate the specific context that surrounds the boundaries of this case. Many HPWLGs, including Magnolia University, purport to have institutional DEI values (Iverson, 2012; Lewis et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019) that guide their practice, but they may not hold in the burgeoning legislative attack on these same values (Ekpe, 2023; Lu et al., 2023). The ways in which Magnolia University leaders chose to respond to macro-level forces – like the sociopolitical climate informed by the *SFFA v. Harvard* (2023) decision and the coordinated state-level anti-DEI legislative attacks – reflected the rank order of competing institutional priorities. A trend of (over)compliance to these pieces of legislation (i.e., repressive legalism from Garces et al., 2021; interpretive overreach from Harper, 2023) at the expense of espoused institutional DEI values also occurred in the present study.

Case and Participant Selection

As Posselt (2016) detailed, sampling occurs at both the case-level and the participant-level-in case study research. At both levels, I used purposive sampling techniques to determine an appropriate institution and participants to best assist in answering the research questions. Criteria for case selection included a historically and predominantly white institution that:

1. Received this institutional type designation from the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and have an undergraduate student population that is at least 51% white, and
2. Is not located in states that had already banned race-based affirmative actions prior to the U.S. Supreme Court's summer 2023 decision, and
3. Is located in a state with on-going state-level anti-DEI legislative efforts.

Criteria for the selection of staff members included university employees who:

1. Were employed at the selected institution and are responsible for supporting efforts to

recruit and/or enroll prospective students

2. Have been employed at the selected institution since at least January 2023. This will allow for these admissions professionals to have experience in working at the institution prior to and after the Supreme Court's decision to ban the use of race in the admissions review process.

Criteria for the selection of Black student leaders included students who:

1. Were enrolled at Magnolia University since at least January 2023.
2. Were currently serving in at least one student leadership role that included recruitment and enrollment responsibilities (i.e., campus tour guides, orientation leaders)
3. Identified as Black/African American.

Participant Recruitment

I used purposive sampling techniques (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) at both the case-level and the participant-level (Posselt, 2016). The selected institution met the classification of being a historically and predominantly white land-grant institution and is located within a state with on-going anti-DEI legislative efforts. Beyond the more universal ramifications of the recent federal legislation (i.e., *Student for Fair Admission v. Harvard*), choosing an institution that was actively situated within a hostile state-level sociopolitical landscape added an additional layer of nuance regarding better understanding how competing institutional priorities play a role in the recruitment and yield of Black prospective students.

A variety of purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit individual participants. Leveraging my personal networks, I was connected to professional staff members at Magnolia University who oversaw student organizations that had a mission to engage with prospective students of color. After initially connecting with these coordinators, I emailed them additional

information regarding my study and requested their support in recruiting student participants (Appendix 3). These professional staff members supported my recruitment efforts by emailing the student leaders in said organizations to make them aware of the opportunity to participate in my study – two students were recruited using this approach. Initial email communication with each student participant included a copy of this study's information letter. One of these coordinators also agreed to participate. I continued to leverage my professional networks as well as publicly available staff directories to reach out to other professional staff members. Based on information (like job titles and descriptions) in these directories, I reached out via email (Appendix 2) to those individuals who had responsibilities consistent with the recruitment and enrollment processes – i.e., staff members within the central admissions office, staff members affiliated with the university's orientation program, and staff members that recruited for individual academic colleges on campus. The remaining two professional staff members were recruited using this approach. Initial email communication with professional staff members also included a copy of this study's information letter (Appendix 4). Being in conversation with these two types of institutional actors will provide a layered understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Ultimately, the participant pool consisted of five individuals at Magnolia University. Coincidentally, four of which (two staff members and two students) had current or former affiliations with a program housed within the central admissions office that was responsible for engaging with prospective underrepresented students. For confidentiality purposes, this program will be referred to as TREES, a pseudonym which honors the efforts of the program "To Recruit and Enroll Emerging Scholars." The professional staff members affiliated with this program (Williams and Johnson, pseudonyms) were in a unique position of having to navigate a

professional landscape restricted by Magnolia University's institutional responses to the anti-DEI sentiments held by state legislators. The staff member employed within one of Magnolia's academic colleges (Smith, pseudonym) provided a unique perspective related to recruitment efforts outside of a central admissions office. Finally, the student leaders (Mavin and Star, pseudonyms) illuminated the nuanced experience of being a Black student on Magnolia's campus having been recruited themselves and now participating in volunteer positions that allow them to engage with prospective Black students.

Interlude: Original Recruitment Woes

Selecting an institution where I had pre-established professional relationships to facilitate buy-in with recruitment and trust-building for any participants was a strategic decision I made early in the planning process. Notably, the institution that is featured in this case study was not my original site as recruitment efforts were not fruitful there. Requests either went unanswered or were met with swift and commanding responses (particularly from administrators like general counsel members) that their involvement would not be relevant to my study. While I cannot be certain, I find the silence from admissions professionals to be a completely reasonable response to the divisive, current climate (several staff members across Texas were fired for vocalizing their DEI commitments just a few months before my recruitment efforts, Managan, 2024). The dismissal from administrators is likely a mixture between my neophyte recruitment skills – perhaps I could have better explained why their involvement was relevant and meaningful – and a desire to maintain some false illusion of non-involvement and culpability regarding institutional policies, procedures, and responses to these macro-level forces.

The selected site still met my priority for personal connection and also, somewhat coincidentally and serendipitously, led me to being able to recruit Black current student leaders

as my primary data source. These students' unique lived experience – having gone through their own college admissions process – and having the nuanced responsibility of recruiting students in this particular setting within the evolving legal landscape led to an even more meaningful interrogation of the racialized landscape at Magnolia University than I could have ever originally anticipated.

Data Collection Methods

One benefit of case study research is the flexibility that this approach allows researchers to have regarding the design of the study, the type of data to collect, and how to analyze the data (Merriam, 1998). With that said, some scholars have expressed concerns that this flexibility can also correlate to methodologically inept studies and have advocated for scholars to prioritize methodological credibility by providing an in-depth description of their decisions (Hyett et al., 2014). As such, my approach to data collection and analysis is detailed below.

Data Sources

The data in this study came from three distinct but related sources: interviews with three professional staff member with diverse responsibilities related to the recruitment and enrollment processes; interviews with two currently enrolled Black student leaders who themselves were recruited to attend Magnolia University and are now responsible for engaging with prospective Black students; and publicly available documents (i.e., articles in student-run newspapers, minutes from faculty senate meetings, minutes from board of trustees meetings, institutional websites).

Semi-Structured Interviews

To facilitate the process of answering this study's research questions, a set of 1-2 semi-structured interviews with three professional staff members (Johnson, Smith, and Williams) and

two currently enrolled Black student leaders (Mavin and Star) at Magnolia University were conducted between December 2024-February 2025 with the majority taking place after the presidential inauguration on January 6, 2025. Johnson and Smith both participated in one interview each while Williams, Mavin, and Star participated in two interviews each. I began each interview by introducing myself and my rationale for the study. We also reviewed the information letter as well as their rights as a participant (i.e., they had the opportunity to opt out at any point in time) before receiving their consent to move forward with the interview. I also asked for each participant's permission to allow me to record the interview to assist with my transcription process. From there, I aimed to building initial rapport with each participant before delving into each guiding interview domain.

Earlier in my doctoral program, I studied the work of Patricia Hill Collins and other Black feminist scholars to inform an interview-based class project. In her book *On Intellectual Activism* (2013), I was struck by the struck by the story she shared of her first time teaching a Black women's studies course to a group of eighth graders. She asked them, "Who is the person you most admire in your life?" She expected the students to report back with names of famous African Americans and, instead, they all shared similar responses like "my mother" or "my grandmother" because of the lessons they learned from them, their resilience, and the impact they had on the entire family. Since that project, I have chosen to include a similar question in the initial stage of any interview. For the purpose of this study, it helped in building rapport with each participant by learning more about individual people and core values that they hold dear, and how those intersect with their current lived experiences as a student or professional staff member at Magnolia University.

In keeping with Bhattacharya's (2020) guidance, the interviews were guided by the

following domains to allow for the necessary flexibility to conduct semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational interviews: experiences with their role, the role of land-grant institutional status, the role of state and federal agency, perceived agency in their role. I frequently asked follow-up, probing questions to gain greater insight and clarity of their experiences. On average, the interviews last 56 minutes with the shortest being 49 minutes in length and the longest being 77 minutes in length. Interviews were recorded using Zoom as the primary audio/visual source and the iPhone Voice Memo application as the secondary audio source. I also took notes in a physical notebook to record key concepts I wanted to return to, notable facial expressions and mannerisms, and immediate connections to conversations with other participants.

Institutional Documents as Member Checking Tool

Publicly available institutional documents (including website that detailed organizational missions, values, and goals; Board of Trustee meeting minutes; faculty senate meeting minutes; articles from student-run newspapers) were also analyzed. I am keenly aware of the risks that come with agreeing to participate in a study such as mine (see Managan, 2024 for a review of student affairs professionals across the state of Texas who were punished for being committed to DEI efforts). As such, I used publicly facing documents as a form of member-checking – validating the narratives and my own meaning making of individual interviews.

Data Analysis

I made meaning of the data using a combination of iterative writing as inquiry analytic techniques (Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Richardson, 1997, 2000). Analysis at the heart of this critical qualitative case study, consistent with the broader design of this study, is guided and organized by the four tenets of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. Before detailing my analytic process, I want to explain my rationale for this writing as inquiry analytic approach

is it likely runs counter to more traditionally systematic, widely used approaches like coding à la Saldaña's (2021) coding manual.

I am grateful that my doctoral studies have included various experiences working on research teams that prioritized an analytic process that was structured around multiple rounds of coding using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (i.e., NVivo, ATLAS.ti, Dedoose) to support these efforts. While educational, the process felt overly prescriptive and inflexible (Diem et al., 2023); akin to following a (post-)positivist scientific method that is incongruent with my critical onto-epistemological stance. Kincheloe and Mclaren (2011) went so far as to describe it as "oppressive" and argued further that

> critical theorists claim that instrumental/technical rationality is more interested in method and efficiency than in purpose. It delimits its questions to "how to" instead of "why should." In a research context, critical theorists claim that many rationalistic scholars become so obsessed with issues of technique, procedure, and correct method that they forget the humanistic purpose of the research act (p. 289).

Much like Richardson (2000) though, I have, more often than not, felt pressured – by whom other than myself is still a mystery – to write the perfect report/essay/dissertation on the first try. That the writing reflected knowledge already gained rather than part of the meaning making process. Somehow coding as an analytic method felt too inflexible and writing assignments, for the better part of my educational career, have fallen squarely at the intersection of my own struggles with anxiety and perfectionism. At the risk of this becoming a self-centered confessional tale (Van Maanen, 2011), I want to name this experience directly as it is a point of personal growth and transformation throughout this research process.

Writing as inquiry also afforded me the opportunity to more authentically engage with

the participants stories long after we were together in the interview. To become "intimately enmeshed with the words" of the participants (Mitchell & Clark, 2021, p. 2), I made the conscious decision to manually transcribe each transcript. Given the expedited timing of the data collection process, this meant that I was simultaneously transcribing (and beginning to analyze) transcripts as I was conducting other interviews. Iteratively returning to all transcripts, audio/visual files, the theoretical framework, and research questions while applying writing as inquiry techniques gave me the methodological freedom to continue making connections across the data while reflexively acknowledging my role in the meaning making process. Electronic files including Zoom audio/visual recordings, Voice Memo secondary recordings, and interview transcripts were stored on Auburn University's password protected Box drive.

Importantly, I valued the meaning making that came from literal pen-to-paper and marker-to-whiteboard writing. I printed out all de-identified transcripts – each line was numbered, and I intentionally decreased the far-right margin in Microsoft Word to allow for room for physical note taking on each. Analytic writing happened during the hours that I devoted to analysis after work hours and on the weekend, but I also kept a journal within arm's reach when "an earworm" (principle one in Mitchell & Crane, 2021) came to me at any hour of the day. Written notes, musings, and wonderings would then be reorganized and resynthesized in an iterative fashion. Admittedly, this commitment to pen-and-paper doubled the workload as I had to ultimately type, rather than physically write, the remainder of this report; however, I stayed true to the method that worked best for me rather than adhering to a less authentic approach.

The four tenets of the Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organized guided my analysis. Admittedly, my thinking and writing incorporated a more standard thematic analysis technique wherein I used sticky notes to initial mark where a participant's narrative aligned with one of the

tenets. I had purchased a pack of mini-Post It notes for a different purpose but it serendipitously contained four different colors – one for each tenet. Multiple tenets were represented in some narratives and these overlaps were critical to my conceptualization of the ways in which these tenets interacted with one another in this study.

In addition to the analytic memos made and sticky notes placed on transcripts as well as more substantive, stream of consciousness writing (principle two of Mitchell & Crane, 2021) in my journal, I also utilized a whiteboard to reimagine the connections between participant narratives and individual tenets. Ray (2019) made no claim of how these tenets may specifically manifest in an organization, just that they are all built into racialized organizations. Various analytic writing techniques helped me developed a more nuanced understanding of how participant experiences illuminated organizational (meso-level) processes through each tenet. It was this whiteboard exercise that helped me identify the plot points and the winding storyline (principle three of Mitchell & Crane, 2021) that my writing was always working towards. This exercise and subsequent writing helped me develop a concept map (Figure 2) that depicted my understanding of how Magnolia University reflected the characteristics of any racialized organization. For example (and as will be detailed in the following chapter), the vast majority of students and staff interviewed reported inhibited individual agency in their roles. These narratives were often associated with limited resources. As such, I theorized that individual agency was often medicated by unequal resource distribution.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In Lather's (2003) reconceptualization of validity in qualitative research (particularly transformative, critical approaches) she stated, "once we recognized that just as there is no neutral education there is not neutral research, we no longer need apologize for unabashedly

ideological research and its open commitment to using research to criticize and change the status quo" (p. 190). I appreciate this stance as it seeks to further legitimize critical work and emphasize the scholarly imperative of establishing trustworthiness throughout the research process. As such, I have leaned on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness for naturalistic observers as it aligns well with a constructivist paradigm (Seale, 2003). These criteria include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

When comparing to more positivist standards for trustworthiness, the *credibility* criteria is an appropriate replacement for internal validity. Rather than trying to prove that the results of a study are consistent with one singular truth, a study can be found to be credible when the researcher has made efforts to represent "multiple constructions [of reality] adequately" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). As such, I prioritize the crystallization of data (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000) by offering thick descriptions of participant profiles and narratives, utilizing research reflexivity, and employing multiple approaches to writing as inquiry analysis.

Transferability replaces external validity or generalizability. From this perspective, it is not a goal of qualitative, naturalistic inquiry to produce results that can be generalizable to the masses. Rather, researcher should position their findings in a way that readers can confidently apply lessons learned to other settings. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is the responsibility of the research to provide readers with "sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible" (p. 298). This is also consistent with Merriam's pragmatic approach to case study research (Harrison et al., 2017). Case study research methodology is often employed in the field of education because it is an applied field with real-world problems. To that end, it is important to consider transferability to ensure that findings can be trusted by readers and can be used as a guide for future applications to improve real-world educational

policies, practices, and procedures. To do so, I employed purposive sampling techniques (for the selected institution and individual participants) and developed thick descriptions throughout the final report.

The *dependability* criteria should replace reliability or replicability. Much like the previous reframing, a naturalist observer does not seek to create researcher that is perfectly replicable – that implies that there is a singular truth, a "tangible and unchanging 'out there' that can serve as a benchmark" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299). Instead, a study is dependable when it accounts for multiple realities with multiple data sources and also accounts for the influence of the researcher on the construction of the findings and interpretations. Relatedly, the *confirmability* criteria replaces objectivity or neutrality of the researcher. To ensure that my study is both dependable and reliable, I employed Charmaz's (2017) concept of *methodological self-consciousness* as a means to deeply and reflexively make sense of my own epistemological beliefs as well as my "perspectives, privileges, and priorities that affect [my] data, actions, and nascent analyses" (p. 167).

Limitations

Merriam (1998) detailed potential limitations of case studies and they relate to: 1) the accessibility and appeal of the final report, and 2) oversimplification of findings. First, concerns regarding how accessible and appealing the final report will be is of concern not only to this particular research design but also any scholarly work. I do not have any self-righteous presumptions that my dissertation will be more accessible or appealing than any other dissertation that has come before mine, but I am inspired by Patricia Hill Collins' (2013) approach to intellectual activism at is both approach to folks within and beyond the academy. I am guided by a pragmatic desire for any meaningful scholarship to transform practice, so I have

plans to bring this work into practitioner spaces. This could include continued engagement and collaboration with participants for future projects, publications and presentations with professional associations, and on-going improvement in the polices, practices, and procedures with which I engage on a daily basis as an admissions professional.

The second potential limitation assumes that all scholars who employ case study methodology agree with Merriam's (1998) assertion that a holistic description is an implied goal. Guba and Lincoln (1981) raised this critique by stating that case studies "tend to masquerade as a whole when in fact they are a part – a slice of life" (p. 377). Reiterating my previously mentioned alignment with Bhattacharya (2017), I do not view case study methodology as a means to report a monolithic, universal truth. This divergence from Merriam's perspective for case study research means this potential limitation is already accounted for in my own approach to this methodology.

In addition to these limitations and the means I will use to address them, I also want to highlight my decision to not conduct any observations. Some readers may feel that this decision could weaken the rigor of my study since observational data is a common hallmark of case study work. And yet, the inherent flexibility of this decision (Diem et al., 2023) has allowed me to confidently make decisions that best suit my endeavors to answer my research questions. While observations may be appropriate and necessary for some case studies, I was able to engage with participants and institutional documents that allowed for a robust understanding of the political and cultural context of Magnolia University.

Delimitations

I have been intentional with selecting the context of my scholarship, the research participants, and the documents I collected as a means to appropriately limit the scope of my

study. Focusing on historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions is both an understudied context for admissions-related scholarly inquiries and also an inherently limited pool of institutions. Speaking with front-facing staff members and current students who are directly responsible for helping to recruit and enroll students – but do not hold the political capital or power to dictate institutional policies (like that of a university president) – illuminated the racialization across Magnolia University's ecosystem and the role that racialization played in the processes of recruiting and enrolling Black students.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of my methodological approach to this study wherein I employed writing as inquiry techniques to analyze the data within the critical qualitative case study. I detailed my entire research design, my positionality, and issues of trustworthiness in ways that are consistent with my methodological framework, guided theoretical framework, and onto-epistemological stance.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study sought to interrogate the recruitment and enrollment practices at one land-grant institution and was intentional in its focus on the intersection/interplay between micro-level institutional actors, meso-level organizations, and macro-level forces. I was less concerned with interrogating any one individual's actions when interacting with prospective students, for example, but was rather more interested in interrogating any meaningful discrepancies between an institution's espoused DEI values and its formal practices and (lack of) response to the increasingly hostile climate surrounding the K-16 U.S. education system.

Even in the earliest days of my doctoral studies, I was working towards a dissertation topic that had something to do with college admissions. I began these studies in January 2018, two years into Donald Trump's first presidency so I was increasingly interested in better understanding the sociopolitical climate surrounding the field of higher education as it was where I spent most of my waking hours – whether in my professional workplace on an undergraduate admissions office or in a graduate-level classroom space. Add to that my increased awareness of my relatively barrier-free, racialized K-16+ trajectory and that the historically white land-grant that I had deep ties to was but one of many of its kind with a race-evasive memory/conceptualization of its accessibility.

As I was nearing the end of my doctoral coursework, so too was the U.S. Supreme Court nearing their verdict in the SFFA v. Harvard (2023) case. As I previously detailed, the lifetime of this case intersected with the lineage of previous Supreme Court cases (particularly *Fisher v. Texas)*, the short-lived racial reckoning of 2020, and sociopolitical anti-CRT/anti-DEI culture war. This temporal context was continuing to shape my thinking of the specific purpose I wanted this study to serve. I was intentional in centering my curiosity of the role that the *SFFA* decision

may play in the entire "enrollment funnel" (Noel Levitz, 2009) rather than an exclusive focus on the admissions application review process. I hypothesized that an (un)intentional practice of repressive legalism (Garces et al., 2021) was likely to occur. That colleges and universities across the country, notoriously risk-averse institutions, would swing the pendulum so far towards the "race-neutral" standard set forth by the *SFFA* majority opinion that engagement with prospective students would become similarly race-evasive.

All participants in this study were quick to dismiss the effects of this Supreme Court's decision on their recruitment and admissions practices or lived experiences. However, the anti-DEI legal landscape was something that was frequently cited as cause for current angst and concern for the future. I want to highlight this noticing for several reasons. 1) It may not be the case amongst others at this same institution, 2) it may not be the case amongst peer institutions, 3) it may, ultimately, be impossible to make a true distinction between the *SFFA* decision and anti-DEI laws that have been proposed and passed across many states. They are two sides of the same coin.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What role does the post-affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape play in the recruitment and yield of Black students at HPWLGs?
2. How do competing institutional priorities reproduce racial inequities in the recruitment and yield processes?

To answer these research questions, I conducted individual interviews with five participants from Magnolia University (pseudonym) – three professional staff members and two Black current undergraduate students. The three professional staff members represent different facets of the recruitment and enrollment processes. Smith was responsible for recruitment, enrollment, and

retention efforts for a specific academic college at Magnolia. Johnson has worked in the central admissions office with experience in admissions-focused and orientation-focused roles. Williams worked in the central admissions office and one of their many responsibilities included working directly with the TREES program. The two undergraduate students that participated both identified as Black and both had a variety of student leadership experiences, including with the TREES program.

I was initially confident that this study could come at a meaningful point in history as it would give me the chance to talk to current students and professional staff members about a year and a half after the Supreme Court's *SFFA v. Harvard (2023)* decision. This would account for one full admissions cycle (for the high school graduating class of 2024) where the ban on race-conscious admissions practices was fully in place. At the risk of dismissing my original intent, the timeliness of my study was also inherently entangled with the first few weeks of Donald Trump's second presidency.

As such, my forethought for a flexible interview protocol was necessary for ways I did not even predict. In keeping with Bhattacharya's (2020) guidance, the interviews were guided by the following domains to allow for the necessary flexibility to conduct semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational interviews: experiences with their role, the role of land-grant institutional status, the role of state and federal agency, perceived agency in their role. In the same way that my thinking regarding my dissertation topic evolved over the years, I wanted to make space for a similar kind of evolution throughout this actualized project as needed. This was especially important given the timing of my interviews – all of which were conducted between mid-December 2024 – early February 2025 with most taking place after Donald Trump's second presidential inauguration on January 6, 2025.

I highlight the timing of these interviews given the uncertainty that came with each new (official or impending) presidential executive order or reports from national news outlets. For example, I had conducted the bulk of interviews and was in the early, iterative stages of interview transcription and data analysis by late January. The tragic accident between an American Airlines plan and U.S. Army helicopter at Reagan Airport occurred on January 29, 2025. While at work the next day, I vividly remember glancing at my phone after a push notification from *The New York Times* caught my eye: "Breaking News: Trump Blames DEI and Biden for Crash Under His Watch." I recall whispering, "you've got to be kidding me" to myself. A now involuntary reflex of exasperation that is an all-too-common occurrence. Less than a week later and a day before my final interview, President Trump announced his desires to close the U.S. Department of Education.

I share these examples to reiterate the increasingly hostile context in which this study (and lived experience of participants and researcher) were situated. It is possible that all of this will feel outdated or irrelevant by the time it is published – the role of state-wide anti-DEI legislation plays in Black student recruitment and enrollment practices may not seem necessary when there is a functional federal ban on this work. Serwer (2025) opined that this federal administration's ideological goal of "restoring America's traditional hierarchies of race and gender" could best be described as the "Great Resegregation." However, the perspectives of these participants provide meaningful insights into the racialized system of higher education and how it manifests, specifically, at a predominantly and historically white land-grant like Magnolia University.

I utilized writing as inquiry techniques (Mitchell & Clark, 2021; Richardson, 1997, 2000) to analyze the data and describe the my interpretations of the data in a way that aligned with my

analytic framework of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. Ray's original conceptualization emphasized that all organizations – as racial structures – exhibit each of the four tenets but did not detail how the tenets may relate to and interact with one another. In an effort to extend the reach of this organizational theory, Figure 2 depicts my understanding of how the four tenets interacted with one another in the present study. It will also serve as a guide for how the "findings" will be presented.

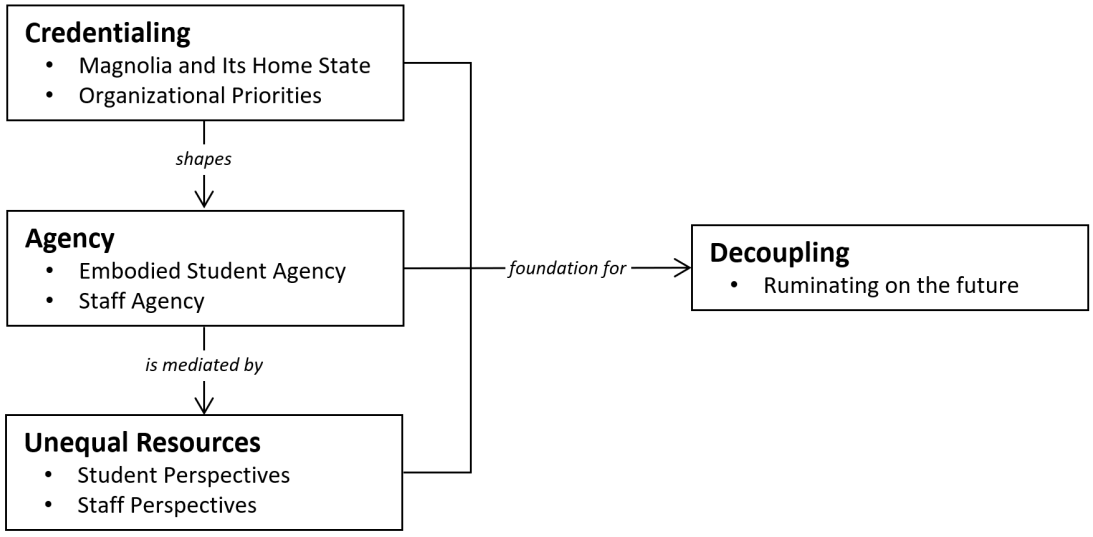
I would like to pause here to briefly interrogate and directly name an issue I have with the title of this particular section of any research report. When it comes to findings, what is actually being found and by whom in the research process? Richardson (1997) noted the prevailing practice of using construction metaphors to describe theory – through the use of words and concepts like *foundation, construct,* and *framework*. A widely accepted approach to talking about theory "presupposes a metaphor that we are usually unconscious of using" (Richardson, 1997, p. 43). This is also how I feel about the prospect of introducing the remainder of this chapter using a metaphor that unconsciously implies that I was a passive explorer who, thanks to kismet alone, discovered the pre-existing data, themes, and connections between participants and the theoretical tenets. In keeping with my critical onto-epistemological and writing as inquiry analytic approach, I echo the following assertation from Ely and colleagues (1997): "If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about data and creating links as we understand them" (as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). With that in mind, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to detailing my interpretations, my re-presentations, and my offering of an extension of this racial organization theory through a particular interaction of its tenets.

In short, the positive credentialing of whiteness and concurrent negative credentialing of Blackness is both an external force from the broader sociopolitical climate and an internal reality

that has informed Magnolia University's organizational priorities. This credentialing has shaped the agency of both student and staff participants. Their agency was often mediated by the unequal resource distribution across the university. Taken together, these three tenets serve as a foundation for ruminations over the possibility that the institution will further decouple the formal, espoused values of equity and inclusion as a land-grant institution from future policies, practices, and procedures.

Figure 2

Concept map detailing the organization of findings



Moving forward, I will provide a summary of the case setting at Magnolia University, a profile for each participant as well as a program that I have decided to refer to by the pseudonym TREES. This pseudonym both maintains alignment with the "Magnolia" name and serves as a cheeky nod to higher education's unspoken, collective fondness for acronyms. Magnolia University's TREES program is intended "**t**o **r**ecruit and **e**nroll **e**merging **s**cholars" and will be featured prominently throughout this chapter; however, other formal and information institutional recruitment practices will be interspersed throughout the chapter. Finally, the tenets of the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and the interaction between them that I

identified will serve as a roadmap for this chapter.

(The Case of) Magnolia University

According to Carnegie Classification, Magnolia is a large, primarily residential campus. Its full-time student population is well-above the 10,000 student threshold to be considered a large four-year institution. My decision in selecting "Magnolia" as a pseudonym is intentional. As a life-long resident of the state of Alabama, the nuances of southern culture have both shaped my identity and interest in critiquing the status quo. Even something as potentially innocuous as a tree was subject to my analysis. While the intricacies of this study have evolved over the years spent in my doctoral program, I had always imagined that it may center the experiences of folks at one college of university in the Deep South.

A journal entry from one of these early imaginings centered around my curiosity in integrating the symbolism of the southern magnolia into this study. The impetus for the journal entry was my recollection of a particular southern magnolia tree that was in the background of many childhood memories. This particular tree, matching the height of the neighbors' two-story house that was built behind it, was a focal point of the view from the front of my childhood home. This magnolia tree held nothing more than a passive spot in my childhood. Even as a child, I was too risk-averse to even consider climbing up the limbs of any tree, but its annual blossoms and grandeur were enough. Enough for me, as a relatively emotionally-regulated adult, to be journal about my disappointment when the tree was cut down by a newer set of homeowners.

It was only in my present-day thinking of pseudonyms that I recalled this journal entry and began doing additional research. According to the floral-centric Instagram account, The Garden of Bob (2023), southern magnolias often symbolize "Southern hospitality, grace, and

charm." Other reports described the trees as "aristocratic" (University of Georgia Extension, 2017) and the region stretching from North Carolina to Texas as the "magnolia belt" (Hale, n.d.). Many such trees were planted in port cities across the Deep South; the same port cities that were particularly active in the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Equal Justice Initiative, 2022).

There is a welcoming wave of nostalgia when I think back to that neighboring magnolia tree from my childhood. For me, magnolia trees are linked with hospitable memories. All the more reason to critique the status quo in southern culture that equates these trees to the concept of *Southern hospitality.* To be hospitable is to be "friendly and welcoming to strangers or guests" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). To whom was the Deep South most hospitable to across its history – during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, after the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act and the founding of historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions, in the current year of 2025? In this study, I aim to interrogate the ways in which these institutions operate as racialized organizations during the process of recruiting and enrolling Black students. As such, I found only fitting for this study to take place the institution I refer to as Magnolia University.

Introduction of Study Participants and TREES Program

What follows is a detailed summary of the five participants along with an interlude detailing a recruitment program that I am referring to by the pseudonym TREES. To maintain the confidentiality of the three professional staff members that participated, I have used gender-neutral pronouns for each and have selected pseudonyms that support this effort. In keeping with the geographic context, these pseudonyms are three of the most popular surnames – Smith, Johnson, and William – across states in the Deep South (Cohn, 2023).

Smith

Smith was over a decade into their career at Magnolia University and has held several

positions across campus with responsibilities ranging from college admissions, recruitment, retention, engagement, outreach, and academic advising. They began this increasingly complex career as an admissions counselor at a peer institution. The primary responsibility of this role was traveling across their "territory"[2] to recruit prospective freshman students to apply for admission and, if admitted, enroll at the institution. It took only a matter of months for them to realize that they were "missing the [current] student interaction piece" that they were able to experience working with student-athletes during their graduate assistantship as they were pursuing their master's degree. This led them back to Magnolia University, their alma mater where they began working in a mid-level admissions-adjacent role for a couple of academic units. In using the "admissions-adjacent" language, I aim to highlight the distinction that many campus partners experience in these unique professional roles – they are responsible for recruiting for particular programs and may even have titles which include "admissions" descriptors, yet they are rarely responsible for reviewing admissions applications like staff members in the central admissions office. Smith described this role as being "pretty straightforward."

> I was doing a lot of the admissions work, but strictly just for those two academic units. Not processing applications, not reading files; however, I was reading scholarship files, which was very similar. But still traveled, still was on the road, still hosted campus visits. But where the student interfacing part came in was, I was the advisor for the student ambassadors for both [academic units]. And so, training them, helping them also do

[2] Much like the word "yield," "territory" is a commonplace description of an admissions representative's geographic areas focus. For example, I spent seven years serving as the admissions advisor for high school students residing in the state of Tennessee who were interested in applying to Auburn University. It would have been commonplace to describe this in any introduction as, "my territory includes the state of Tennessee." Much like the necessity of troubling the use of "yield" in the field of college admissions so too should we be doing the same for this territorial language. It has implications akin to settler colonialism's belief of being entitled to possess and control land.

recruitment for the college. That was a very unique responsibility.

After some organizational restructuring and a couple of promotions (which also included the additional responsibility of supervising professional staff members), Smith landed in a senior-level position within one academic college at Magnolia University where they aptly described their day-to-day as being "all over the place" given that they "wear multiple hats in this role." From assisting with crafting marketing materials, connecting with alumni across the state; retention, students success, and student engagement initiatives; teaching a first-year seminar course, assisting with academic advising and related bureaucratic processes (like pre-registering students for classes ahead of their orientation sessions and mid-semester degree audits for hopeful, upcoming graduates); to serving as the primary point of contact for a newer interdisciplinary program in the college.

> And so the mindset is, since I know all of our majors kind of like the back of my hand, and I can talk about them all. This is a good one for me to be kind of over, so that I can explain that to students of, of truly how interdisciplinary it is. But then it's also been done in a strategic retention manner, so that if a student is contemplating wanting to change their major out of the college, then chances are I can retain those students

Beyond leveraging Smith's knowledge as a content-expert and passion for advising students about their academic opportunities and potential, this rationale speaks to the purpose of campus partners in an increasingly competitive, neoliberal environment within higher education. The academic college will be better financially positioned should they retain a student (and their tuition dollars). This scarcity, zero-sum game mindset is further amplified when analyzed through a racialized organizational lens. As Ray (2019) explained and as will be detailed further, racialized organizations like this historically and predominantly white land-grant institution are

apt to legitimate the unequal distribution of resources.

When asked about what the mission of a land-grant institution means to them in their role, Smith was quick to share how their personal experience and identity as a first-generation transfer student positioned has informed their belief in the espoused value of accessibility for land-grants.

> Because of my first-gen status because I'm a transfer student, and because as a graduate assistant, when I was working on my master's, I worked with student athletes. (I worked in athletic academics as a graduate assistant.) So, I guess you could say my influence in higher ed has been heavily influenced by different classes that are traditionally marginalized, or who sometimes are already on the fighting side of obtaining a degree. And so that's one of the reasons why I have always loved working for Magnolia is because I think for our university being a land-grant institution, we haven't forgotten that mission. We haven't forgotten the people that we serve. I feel like most of our major decisions that we make keeps our general population of the state in mind from an affordability standpoint, from an access standpoint, from all of the different areas.

Smith has a robust affiliation with Magnolia University as an alum and long-term admissions and recruitment professional. Though their professional experiences were quite varied, Smith was the only participant in this study that had no direct experience with the TREES program. As such, I will now detail the program to better situate the remaining participant profiles.

The TREES Program

Magnolia University's Admissions Office housed a program that was intended **T**o **R**ecruit and **E**nroll **E**merging **S**cholars (TREES). Both student participants in the current study, Star and Mavin, had leadership experience serving as TREES counselors. Williams and Johnson

were two participants with professional affiliations to the TREES program. There was agreement amongst the two as to the mission of the program. According to Williams:

> The principal mission of TREES is that we are providing an outlet for students to explore how they want to be successful post-high school. And with that, and staying true to that mission, we have a session or two that is not even centered around college. It is centered around trade school, it is centered around cosmetology school, the oil field. Some different routes that they could go down. Obviously, it's not the bulk of it, because we are institution of higher ed, but it has been very important… to keep, like, one to two sessions in that every year for those students.

This program specifically supported underrepresented students who are rising seniors in high school. Any front-facing description of the program used this broader "underrepresented" description with the understanding that most attendees identify as Black. The majority of participants were in-state residents that, according to Johnson, were coming from "impoverished neighborhoods" across the state. Williams also noted that, "As you know, not all Black and Brown students are poor, but it is a disproportionate number. Specifically for [the TREES program]." Wherein the vast majority of participants are eligible for the Federal Pell Grant.

Currently enrolled Magnolia students interested in becoming TREES counselors had to apply and be selected to serve in this role. Students who were selected to serve as TREES counselors would have a variety of responsibilities related to engaging with, recruiting, and mentoring prospective students throughout the next calendar year. During each spring semester, they helped recruit high school students from across the state to register for the program. They engaged with prospective participants in-person and got students "hyped up for TREES," according to Williams. In terms of recruitment for this program, professional staff and current

students affiliated with TREES would focus on schools across the state that had a student population that was predominantly Black and Brown. Students registered to participate in the program during the spring semester of their junior year. While TREES counselors would continue to communicate with and mentor participants throughout their senior year of high school (and beyond), the core part of the TREES program was an in-person conference during each summer semester. Throughout this conference, attendees engaged with TREES counselors who functioned as mentors, learned about post-secondary educational and employment opportunities, and applied for admission to Magnolia University.

When describing the mission of the program, Mavin centered the function of TREES counselors as an additional support system for the students in attendance:

> We are here to be a vessel for these students to be able to connect with the outer world. Make sure that they're ready for the next step, because we're talking to rising seniors. So they're leaving their junior year and about to go into senior year. That means getting those last-minute ACT scores, paying your senior fees and stuff like that. And just getting ready to apply for different scholarships, apply for different colleges. So we're catching them right in between that transition. So it's important for us to make sure that they're ready for that, and that they have a support system outside of their parents during their senior year and in life. Period.

Star's interpretation of the program's mission was also shaped by their core, guiding belief that education is a key in the African American community to being able to "access better things":

> The mission of TREES is to develop students to be able to understand their options after high school and understand, like, whichever one they pick, it's tangible. And to really grasp onto that as much as they can. With these resources, learn how to ask, learn how to

advocate for themselves, and learn how to go and find things.

With my ten years of experience working in the field of undergraduate admissions, where I both served as an admissions counselor and helped train new admissions counselors at my institution and across the southeast, I was admittedly impressed with Mavin's breadth of knowledge when describing the expectations of TREES counselors. I would argue that it was comparable to that of a professional staff member regarding navigating conversations about different admissions processes (i.e., early action vs. regular decision, binding vs. non-binding decisions, different types of application fee waivers) and financial aid (i.e., sharing the intricate difference between subsidized and unsubsidized loans, guidance on having a plan to pay back loans, different types of state and federal aid). In thinking back to their own college application experience in high school, particularly the process of applying for scholarships and financial aid, they recalled:

> I didn't really know much about that. I had an amazing [school] counselor, but everybody doesn't have the counselor that I had. So they usually don't know the due dates for FAFSA. I know a lot of my students… They end up texting me, "My mama didn't do this. What does she need to do? She's confused." I'm like, "she just needs to go on there and do an e-signature and press submit."

The four individual accounts of the TREES program in the present study collectively portray it to be a physical manifestation of Magnolia University's purported mission of being both accessible and of service to the citizens of its home state.

Johnson

Johnson was a two-time Magnolia University graduate and came to their career in higher education by way of the K-12 education system. They began to be drawn to an admissions career after having organic conversations about college, student life, and the college admissions process

with many students in K-12 classroom spaces. When considering a career shift and applying for admissions counselor job, they recalled thinking, “I feel like I could do that. I could talk about Magnolia University all day long. I’d love to do that.” As an admissions counselor, they recruited students enrolled in high schools most proximate to the university – “our backyard” – and supported the TREES program.

Beyond a shared experience working in an undergraduate admissions office at a land-grant institution in the Deep South, I also saw some of myself in Johnson. They noted finding a community in their coworkers and expressed gratitude for their support in helping build their self-confidence. They confided that “Naturally, it is hard for me sometimes to make friends or to just feel confident in myself, and I look up to [my coworkers] because they’re able to see things in me that sometimes I can’t see in myself.”

This also came out when they would often finish sharing valuable insights with a phrase like, “Does that answer your question?” or “I hope that answers your question.” Though I cannot be entirely certain of the intent behind these questions, the frequency of which I did not register until data analysis, I wonder if they wer rooted in a similar struggle of self-confidence or a gnawing desire to be helpful. This musing may do more to highlight a moment of self-reflection (as I have been apt to respond similarly in interactions like these) more than anything else. Even so, Johnson described their experiences as an admissions professional as being aligned with their effort to be a valuable team player: “It’s very problem solving. I enjoy those kinds of jobs where it's: ‘Here’s this, here’s that. Take this. What’s your advice?’ I *love* being the person somebody can go to.”

When asked to describe their day-in-the-life as an admissions counselor, they shared a sentiment that I have frequently heard from other professionals in the field, “Oh, it was never the

same!" They went on to describe a variety of responsibilities: communicating with prospective students in their territory, answering phone calls and responding to emails, supporting the campus visit program (i.e., helping with check-in, presenting information sessions to visitors prior to campus tours, helping pair tour guides with visitors), and supervising the TREES program and its counselors.

Johnson recently transitioned into a professional role at Magnolia that is focused supporting the orientation programs (again, a pivotal part of any student's enrollment process) and is no longer directly affiliated with the TREES program. With that said, they attributed much of their own personal growth to that professional experience. Johnson had a "traditional" route to college in that they enrolled at Magnolia directly after high school graduation and did not cite encountering any barriers in their own recruitment, admissions, or enrollment processes. Many of their loved ones, however, were the first in their family to pursue an advanced degree and began their journeys in the community college system. This was the catalyst for their growing passion for supporting first-generation transfer students in a similar way to their involvement in the TREES program being a catalyst for critical self-reflection related to their racial identity. As a white person from an affluent part of the state, they shared the potential disconnect in lived experiences between themselves and students affiliated with the TREES program – the majority of prospective students in attendance as well as Magnolia students serving as counselors or officers identify as Black.

During the first meeting with members of the executive team (i.e., returning TREES counselors serving as officers), they recalled the concept of "code switching" being discussed amongst these student leaders. Johnson stated, "I'd never heard that term before. And I remember I felt so overwhelmed by that. And I felt so emotional because I was like, how can I do this job if

I can't speak their same language?" They also recalled that prospective students in TREES would talk to Johnson about their concerns, the biggest of which was Magnolia's status as a PWI. "Even learning that language was something new to me," said Johnson.

In an effort to build and maintain trust between themselves and students, Johnson prioritized learning more about the Black student experience at Magnolia, from student involvement opportunities to the issues that Black students commonly face on Magnolia's campus: "I think, like, the language was a big part of that. Whenever they realized I was speaking their same language and learning more about their culture and truly invested in it. That's when that trust really came to me."

Johnson's emotional responses were paired with their increased efforts to learn about, engage with, and better support Black students at Magnolia. During my interview with Mavin, a current Magnolia student and TREES officer who is described in more detail below, we discussed their relationships with and perceived level of support by various admissions professionals at Magnolia. Johnson was among the list of professionals that Mavin expressed gratitude for:

> Johnson is [white], and they were very much a big level of support. A lot of times, people that come from Black schools, they don't really… They aren't usually quick to trust people that are… that don't look like what they're used to. But Johnson is the type of person, like, they would give you the shirt off their back. So they have always been so giving and so involved in our lives and stuff.

From a racialized organizations perspective, though, these emotional responses are also a symptom of the normative, hegemonic function of whiteness. While whiteness does not exclusively equate to white skin (Nishi et al., 2016), those that most benefit from an ideology

that reifies white supremacy (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021) need not change the way they move through the world. Said differently, white people are uniquely unencumbered by the social norms of white spaces and, therefore, are not required to adjust how they show up and perform (i.e., code switch) in said spaces.

Williams

Like the previous two participants, Williams grew up in-state and was a Magnolia University graduate after transferring from a local community college. They expressed interests that spanned the gambit from college access, marketing, and politics. They valued people who "are very principled but also still very well-rounded" and this combination was one they tried to regularly emulate. They shared being guided by a variety of values and, like Smith and Johnson, report wearing "many hats" in their current professional role. Values like "faith and family" guided their personal life while equitable access to higher education was a foundational value guiding their professional identity:

> I constantly think of… honestly, a lot of things that you're writing your dissertation about: race, socioeconomic, gender, *geography*. I think, being a land-grant institution, I think a lot specifically about, like, rural students, and the different challenges that they have compared to students who live in a, in not-so-rural or more metropolitan places. I would say that a lot of just, like, general, like, sociology type of things… are the things that I constantly think about. And I would say, as far as being principled - access to education for those types of populations.

In their role working in Magnolia's Admissions Office, they helped with strategic efforts to support the daily operations of the office. From facilitating campus visits from student groups to collaborating with campus partners to execute on- and off-campus projects. Additionally, and

perhaps most meaningful for this study, they also assisted with the management of the TREES program. They emphatically affirmed the intersection between Magnolia's responsibility being a land-grant institution and TREES' purpose in providing a space for historically underrepresented students to intentionally explore post-secondary educational and employment opportunities:

> Its founding is centered on the principle that in a state like ours that has marginalized as many people as we have. At a land-grant institution that on its best day was a silent bystander and on the worst day was very participatory in that marginalization… We owe it to the people of this state – to these populations, specifically – to host a program like this, even if nobody comes.

Part of Williams' responsibility with TREES was supervising the current Magnolia students serving as counselors. I was particularly curious about any interactions they have had with counselors in light of the ever-evolving anti-DEI legal landscape in which TREES is operating. Williams reiterated their belief in transparency as an institutional actor working on behalf of a state institution: "If there are things that are happening at a public institution that we can't tell people about. There is a problem in my book. So I'm pretty transparent with them about everything." They shared that the counselors seemed receptive to this level of transparency when seeking guidance citing, "there's a reason they keep coming back to me." With that said, Williams expressed an awareness that their desire to be forthright is also mitigated by concerns of how these conversations will be received by student counselors. Finding a balance between "informing them without frightening them."

While Williams sought to be transparent with the student leaders that they supervised, they also indicated an appropriate level of transparency and support from their own supervisors. Given their interest in and awareness of state-wide political activities, there was a "certain level

of consultation" that Williams provided to inquiring leadership in the Admissions Office. They appreciated senior leadership's trust in their vision for TREES and the decision-making power they had regarding its operation. Furthermore, they recalled conversations they have had with some of their professional peers at other institutions: "I've talked to counterparts at other schools who work with programs like this, and they are… I guess, for lack of better terms, monitored very heavily, and there's a very short leash that they are on."

The degree to which Williams' work was value-driven should become more apparent through the rest of this chapter. We had robust conversations about the role that the anti-DEI legal climate played in the work they've done to recruit and enroll Black students, their concerns over the uncertainty of the direction of racial equity in today's higher education landscape, and how all of this aligned with their values. Speaking to *the* non-negotiable regarding this alignment, Williams said, "I've been very candid and frank about the day that I feel like Magnolia University is not an accessible institution for people is the day I'll walk away."

Mavin

Mavin was a current junior at Magnolia University on a pre-nursing track with intentions of going to nursing school within the next year. They described themselves as "self-driven," which was evident in their approach to their college admissions process. Mavin made the distinction that "as far as my college experience with me applying for scholarships and stuff, that was all me," while expressing their gratitude for their mother's efforts to ensure that Mavin was always able to take trips to college campuses during their own recruitment process. As an in-state student, Mavin was considering Magnolia and its peer institutions as well as a handful of HBCUs. They were particularly attuned to choosing a school that would support their future endeavors in the healthcare industry.

When asked about the most memorable part of their college search process, they quickly responded with, "probably how heavily I was recruited by Magnolia University." They noted that Magnolia made a concerted effort to personalize their experiences as a prospective student:

> For my recruitment, it was very personal to me because they were recruiting *me*. So anything that I had to do is because they invited me to do it, and wanted me to have a say-so on what I got to do… I got to make those little connections that I wanted to make, and they pretty much just rolled out the red carpet.

They recalled consistent outreach from their admissions counselor as well as multiple invitations to visit campus with opportunities to talk with students and faculty affiliated with their academic area of interest as well as the Honors College. One of their final visits to campus before enrolling was focused on their qualifications for the Saucer Scholarship (pseudonym) – one of the university's top academic scholarships. As a rising senior at Magnolia University and third-year Saucer Scholar, they spoke fondly of what the program looks for in its recipients:

> They look for well-rounded students as far as people that actually have personalities, but you're also smart. So everyone is, like, extremely smart but also very well-rounded, wholesome people. They look for people that are going to be involved on campus and just people that have a good background. So not so much like your typical private school, parents that are doctors. It's not going to always be that. It's people from different backgrounds. So I think that's the part that I really love about it, but it's also the most prestigious scholarship, so everything is paid for.

Mavin's involvement on campus was robust. After serving as a TREES counselor for the past two years, they had recently begun their one-year term as the lead officer. They also served as a student worker in the Admissions Office where they had a variety of frontline responsibilities

including: answering the Admissions Office's main phone line, assisting with check-in process before campus tours, running errands to support admissions staff, and supporting recruitment efforts as a tele-counselor. Finally, they had most recently added the duty of orientation leader to their resume. Their involvement in these opportunities could all be traced back to being a recipient of the Saucer Scholar:

> So I started off with TREES simply because of being a Saucer Scholar and being the minority in the room. I feel like I've always been the person that has done things to show other young [people] that look like me, that they can do these things. So I wanted to continue that, and TREES was the perfect way to do it. When I went to my interview, I let them know, like, I didn't get to go to TREES. People in my area got to go to TREES, and I found out about it on Instagram.

Serving as a TREES counselor and interacting with the Admissions Office through that program was what inspired them to become a student worker:

> Simply because you're forced to be in problem solving situations. And you have to solve the problem right on the spot, because a lot of the times – parents call and they are like very irritated. But this is recruitment, like, you have to make sure that the parent always feels comfortable, and that that student comes to Magnolia University at the end of the day. Or at least, and sometimes I try to remove myself so much from the recruitment aspect to like, "Hey, this is a human being. They are scared. They are nervous." So at the end of the day, we do want what's best for the student. And most of the time it is Magnolia, but sometimes it's not. So yeah, I think that being in those situations and having to solve problems (snapping) like really quickly really made me a better leader in all aspects.

With the benefit of hindsight, Mavin was able to articulate the impact that this recruitment-focused trajectory has had on their life.

Star

Though their paths to and through Magnolia are not identical, Mavin and Star shared a similar drive to be involved in various student organizations and be of service to the current and prospective Black student community at Magnolia. Star was a fourth-year Magnolia student and outgoing TREES officer. Additionally, they have had student leadership experience as a campus tour guide and financial aid peer advisor, and, at the time of our conversations, were currently participating in a major-specific internship as a student developer. They also, unofficially, facilitated intentional conversations centered around the Black student experience at a PWI. These personal conversations served as a grassroots effort for Star to foster a community that centered Black students in conversations about their experiences and growth at Magnolia all while guided by Star's interest in prioritizing how they could "stay steadfast" alongside their peers in achieving their educational goals.

Star was pursuing an Information Systems degree within the College of Business after beginning their academic career as a computer science major. It was evident by their smile throughout this section of their introduction that they were enthusiastic about this program and their student internship experience where they got to apply their growing skillset in program development. Star was gracious to elaborate, completely unprompted, on what an Information Systems degree entails. Of which I was grateful given that I am woefully unfamiliar with a degree so far removed from any social science/education curriculum I have studied: "Anything science, you know. Web maintenance. Scripting, coding, Java. You know, fun things. I call it fun. So I enjoy it. I get to, you know, feel like Tony Stark (laughs) a little bit."

While confident in their current major, Star did not always share the same level of confidence in the prospect of being a Magnolia University student. Magnolia was solidly at the bottom of Star's list of top five schools as they were going through their college search process. Their top four choices were all HBCUs but they shared that Magnolia was where "God wanted me to go." They cited gracious funding, proximity to family, and a community of people that looked like themselves as reasons they ultimately chose to enroll at Magnolia. Their time spent in Magnolia's Multicultural Center as a prospective and current student has been impactful and it's "literally where I began to flourish." They continued:

> It's where I was seeing people that looked like me go against the same challenges, break the glass ceiling that, you know, we all see and face. Defying the odds. And not just people that look like me. That's where [other racial and cultural affinity groups are] housed, that's where a lot of the foreign exchange students go. And that's where they assemble and it's like… like a Utopia. But it's, like, realistic.

When asked to go into further detail about the Utopian nature of the Center:

> If I'm being honest, we are…. All right, we're in the South, okay? In the South, we know the stereotypes that we hear, but they don't exist in there. It's like a bubble. We can have real conversations. We can be honest. We can all leave like understanding, and that's rare. Especially on this campus.

Star, like Mavin, was recruited to participate in this study because of their involvement with the TREES program. As such, I was particularly interested in how they got involved with the program. A chance encounter one summer was their introduction to TREES and is what sparked their realization that the program perfectly aligned with their fundamental belief in the value of education:

> So I was taking summer classes, as a matter of fact… And so I'd never heard of TREES, but I've seen a bunch of my peers in these like gray shirts with all of these kids and I asked, "What are y'all doing?" And they're like, "this is TREES." And I'm like, "Okay, what's that?" And it's like, "We are telling kids about options after high school other than just school." I was like, "Oh my God." This is like gold to me.

They saw TREES as an opportunity to inspire other students that look like them to further their education. Their passion for education was deeply personal – rooted in their experience as a Black person growing up in Metro Atlanta. Much like their time at Magnolia, their K-12 experience was shaped by their commitment to service through various opportunities. In addition to running cross country and taking several AP classes, Star established an anti-bullying campaign and advocated for various student needs (i.e., access to technology, WiFi, and food) at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Service has always been my niche. Always, always, always. I've always tried to find the need being that Atlanta is very, very heavy in Black history, and so my professors and teachers were like, heavy, heavy with letting us know that influence. I've got a chance myself to speak with John Lewis and Andrew Young who marched beside Dr. King, and you know, they were young when they were doing those movements and when they were making change. They talk about "Good Trouble" and, you know, what that takes and what it entails, and how to be (air quotes with hands around upcoming italicized phrase) a *catalyst for change* today because it's different.

In addition to these Civil Rights leaders, Star also attributed their value of education to many of the women in their family – that these women had been through difficult circumstances and that their education was a key factor in their resilience:

> Education was one of the values that they held dear, and so it has helped them to overcome all of the, you know, adversities that they have faced in their lives. And so, seeing the value of education. We call it *the key to freedom* in the African American community because education is our key to, you know, access to better things. Not for just us and our family, but to give other people around us.

While the mention of Atlanta and its relationship with Black history was unique to Star, it serves as a powerful reminder for the geographic and temporal context in which this study is situated.

Summary of Participants

Across their many individual differences, all participants shared the commonality of having either earned a degree or are in the process of earning one from Magnolia University. The ways in which they navigated Magnolia, their individual roles in recruiting and enrolling future Black students, and the pressures of the overarching sociopolitical climate have all been uniquely shaped by Magnolia's designation of a racialized organization.

What follows is an illumination of the ways in which recruitment and enrollment practices at Magnolia University have been shaped by the institution's legacy as a racialized organization. If we are to seek more equitable recruitment and enrollment processes for Black prospective students at HPWLGs, it is important to interrogate the organization's complicity in uplifting whiteness as a credential, shaping the agency of various institutional actors, habituating unequal resource allocations, and decoupling espoused values from organizational practices in ways that disadvantage these same students.

Magnolia University: A Racialized Organization

In a more recent article expanding the conceptualization of his own theory of racialized organizations, Ray (2023) argued that scholars who have built upon this concept have "paid less

attention to the way external factors – such as social movements and international politics – can reconfigure organizations shaping them for good or ill" (p. 1379). The current study addresses this critique by focusing on the role that the current anti-Black, anti-DEI sociopolitical movement has played in the reproduction of racial inequality (Ray, 2019, p. 28) in the recruitment and enrollment processes at one HPWLG in the Deep South.

"'Hide sounds so nefarious, but it is what it is": Racialized organizations treat whiteness as a credential

To ground the remainder of the chapter, it is prudent to emphasize the credentialing of whiteness across the entire sociopolitical context in which Magnolia University is nested. Ray (2019) highlighted Pager's (2007) interrogation of the long-term employment effects in the era of mass incarceration to better operationalize this credentialing feature within a racialized organizational perspective. In this work, Pager argued that a criminal record serves as a credential that perpetually stigmatizes those who are released from prison and begin looking for employment. An educational degree is a credential that can improve employment opportunities while a criminal record inhibits those same opportunities. An even more damning result of this study comes from a racialized organizational lens wherein white men with criminal records were more likely than Black men with no records to receive a job interview. The racialized stigma linking African Americans to criminality has resulted in Blackness becoming a negative credential – foreclosing on future employment opportunities for the purpose of Pager's (2007) study and access to equitable advanced educational opportunities for the current study.

Furthermore, I assert that the most recent and evolving lineage of anti-DEI commitments is similarly rooted in the negative credentialing of Blackness. From the promotion of anti-CRT laws to the right-wing reframe of the DEI acronym – where the myth of meritocracy and racism

intersected to produce “Didn’t Earn It” as a critique of people of color in senior-level positions, for example. Alternatively, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’ “Discrimination, Exclusion, and Indoctrination” (Diaz, 2023) which is rooted in the property interest of whiteness (Harris, 1993) wherein efforts to mitigate systemic racism were equated to a form of reverse racism that threatened the privileged status of whiteness. From these mischaracterizations to the initial ban of race-conscious admissions practices and the subsequent weaponization of the *SFFA* decision in The Dear Colleague letter published by the U.S. Department of Education on February 14, 2025. That any racial affirmative actions are “seen as illegitimate intrusions into the normal, meritocratic, neutral functioning of organizations” (Ray, 2019, p. 40) and threaten racialized social hierarchies where whiteness is privileged is descriptive of the sociopolitical context in which Magnolia is situated.

Credentialing at Magnolia and Its Home State

As with many states in the Deep South, Magnolia’s home state is not immune to the anti-DEI landscape. Interestingly, there was a consensus amongst participants that the *SFFA v. Harvard* decision banning race-conscious admissions practices had not and would not hinder the accessibility of Magnolia to Black students in the state. This runs counter to many reports across the country that attribute a decrease in racial diversity amongst recent incoming freshman classes to the Supreme Court decision (Hartocollis & Saul, 2024; Knox, 2024; Park, 2024) without improving the academic profile (i.e., average GPAs and standardized test scores) of those incoming classes (Lee et al., 2024). Smith attributed their insulation from this legislation to Magnolia’s commitment to its land-grant mission:

> I think for our university being a land grant institution, we haven't forgotten that mission. We haven't forgotten the people that we serve… We're trying to make a difference within

> our state, and part of the land-grant mission is taking care of our state and taking care of the matters, and then also providing that access to our population.

According to the professional staff members I interviewed, Magnolia's admissions process was not as selective as some of their peer institutions and was functionally aligned with the Supreme Court decision given that academic merit (as defined by GPA and standardized test scores) was already a key factor when reviewing admissions applications. Williams echoed this sentiment when they asserted, "In a world where institutions are quietly very proud about their rate of entrance being low, we are not that."

While these participants indicated that this piece of federal legislation has not played a role in their recruitment or enrollment processes, there was a different belief regarding state-level legislation. Smith detailed their perception of state legislators/politicians' beliefs regarding funding that supports institutional diversity efforts:

> I think in their argument, they think… and I don't want to put words in [their mouths]… but I think in a lot of minds, they think that we're keeping segregation alive to benefit one type of person. By having something that seems like it excludes the majority. And especially at a PWI, right? So I don't think that they truly understand (pause) what it supports or who it supports. And why the support is needed, you know?

This perceived mindset of legislators was rooted in the negative credentialing of Blackness. Their discriminatory misunderstanding of the far-reaching impact of these funds was rooted in a racialized collapsing of the different identities that compose the broader category of "historically underrepresented" students. In other words, public funds that are earmarked to support Black students at a HPWLG are – within a racialized statewide legislative body in the Deep South – a threat to the racialized social hierarchy that prioritizes and normalizes white interests.

In Smith's view, institutional leadership had taken an approach to "shift the argument" to "help lawmakers understand that DEI does not fall only in the categories that they think." According to Smith, these categories included: federal aid through FAFSA including work study programs, veterans, first generation students, students who are pregnant or are current parents. In prioritizing these students in the conversations with lawmakers, Smith argued that the institution was strategically getting lawmakers to shift their awareness and think, "Okay. We don't want that support to go away from that population. But we also can't just say we're only supporting this group and not everybody else." This approach further pits Black students against other historically minoritized groups and relies on the hope that a color evasive strategy by university leaders (i.e., not mentioning race) when speaking with policymakers would result in a continuation of financial support for all student populations.

In thinking through how university leadership may respond to future funding restrictions from state lawmakers, Williams shared similar sentiments while directly addressing the rationale for a color evasive approach by university leaders:

> If the state tries to skimp on that funding of certain populations, I could see them at that point being like, "this is where we're putting our foot down." And that's *great*… In my opinion, I think that's a little bit easier because it's more apolitical. Like in theory, everybody wants to help poor folk. So most people in [the state] would stand behind and be like, "Yeah, like, I support that mission." As compared to if [university leaders] were to stand up and be like, "No, we want to keep this program for Black students, for trans students." That would be a little more taboo.

Were it not for the negative credentialing of Blackness, conversations that center the needs of Black students would not be considered taboo. In addition to these institutional approaches to

navigating discussions with state policymakers, there had been a pattern of organizational prioritization of masking, hiding, and silencing tactics in response to these same policies.

Magnolia University, a racialized historically and predominantly white land-grant institution, is nested within the racialized sociopolitical geographic contexts of the United States and, more specifically, the Deep South in 2025. This is important to reiterate to situate this landscape as a macro-level force that Magnolia University was (not) responding to. Institutional (in)action then became a force on lower meso-level organizations (like the Admissions Office and the TREES program) and individual institutional actors nested within Magnolia University as the broader meso-level institution.

Masking, Hiding, and Silencing as Organizational Priorities

Statewide policies did not explicitly require institutions to rename or disband offices that focused on diversity efforts. Even so, Magnolia preemptively chose to change the names of related offices and job titles before being officially required by law (i.e., repressive legalism). When asked whether senior leadership at Magnolia had directly addressed the statewide policies or their renaming decisions, Smith explained that no official university-wide announcements have occurred. Notably, some changes occurred in the absence of micro-level announcements:

> Last week, for example, someone who I know was named one thing. I went to look up her file… and I just noticed that her title had changed. But there wasn't a formal announcement of, you know, “we're doing this” or “we're taking this action” or anything like that. And I haven't verified this with her but in talking with a colleague, apparently she didn't even know her title had changed when that moment happened.

Williams echoed the lack of institutional announcements directly addressing state or federal policies but indicated that there was an understanding across staff members that university

leaders (i.e., senior leadership and general counsel) were committed to the work of practitioners that were in diversity-oriented spaces. That these individuals and offices would continue to do the work of supporting historically minoritized students no matter how the institution had to "mask it" to protect the work from legislative oversight. Smith indicated a similar perception that "a lot of the actions that the university have taken have been proactive" to avoid undue scrutiny from state policymakers.

The TREES program was similarly discrete (and has been since its inception) in its front-facing description of the program's mission. Williams explained:

> And even with the mission, anywhere you read, it will read as underrepresented students. It does not specify, and we have been very strategic about the words and the verbiage that we use to try to… umm… "hide" sounds so nefarious, but it is what it is. *Hide* from certain particular audits and different things that are happening.

Despite most attendees at the TREES conference every year being Black and Brown, a broad (and race evasive) description of the purpose of the program could function as a defensive decision to avert surveillance and protect their ability to continue serving, recruiting, and enrolling Black students. It bears repeating that this tactic would not be necessary were it not for the negative credentialing of Blackness and positive credentialing of whiteness. According to Ray (2019), "whiteness is a credential providing access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies, and expanding white agency" (Ray, 2019, p. 41). The same can be said when flipping this language to "Blackness is a credential inhibiting access to organizational resources, delegitimizing work hierarchies and decreasing Black agency." When this credentialing is a foundation for political surveillance tactics (i.e., macro-level force) and state institutions like Magnolia (i.e., meso-level organization) are suspiciously quiet, there is no way to know whether

that silence is a form of racially-just resistance or a co-opting of broader anti-Black sentiments.

To that end, an interaction that Star had with one of their mentors, a Magnolia staff member with a vested interest in institutional diversity efforts, speaks to this uncertainty. I wrapped up my first interview with Star as I do most interviews – by asking whether I had failed to ask any questions that they had hoped to respond to. They quickly shared that many of the questions I had asked (often centered around their experience as a Black student and their role in recruiting other Black students) were ones they've "been wanting to get asked, you know, by administrators… These are topics that I discuss with my peers who are also matriculating these spaces with me, so this is a great endeavor for me." They continued to share that they had wanted to voice their concerns regarding Magnolia's aforementioned decision to change names of offices/job titles in response to state-level pressures. When recalling a recent meeting they had with an adult mentor to seek their guidance, Star shared, "I've had a meeting with [my mentor] and talked about, you know, 'How do we voice about these things?' And [they] told me that the best thing a lot of times is not to not to voice out loud, but to voice it in private."

In much the same way that Star shared this story as a cliffhanger ending to our first interview, I, too, will do the same. At this point in our time together, I was perplexed and intrigued by this guidance. Was it rooted in encouraging silence as deference to white expectations or encouraging Star to share their opinions in a more strategically subversive way? Regardless, this conversation highlights the interaction between the negative credentialing of Blackness, the subsequent prioritizing of silencing, and the shaping of Star's agency.

"It's nothing we haven't beared through before": Racialized organizations shape agency

Okello and White (2019) reimagined the concept of agency (Bandura, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001, 2008) that has been a foundational element in initial waves of college

student development theory (Jones, 2019). In their view, traditional conceptualizations of agency "tightropes on the brink of idealism; agency is unwilling, it seems, to grapple with the realism that undergirds oppressive realities" (Okello & White, 2019, p. 147). Their conceptualization of agency – *embodied agency* – is rooted in Black feminisms, aligns with Critical Race Theory's fundamental understanding of the permanence of racism, and intentionally acknowledges the complexities that minoritized people experience as they make meaning of their lives while continuously navigating various systems of oppression.

They use the imagery of a spring to illustrate this nuanced conceptualization. For the purpose of this study, Mavin and Star represented the springs of this metaphor. Enduring systems of oppression put pressure upon each spring, which initially responded by compressing upon itself. The spring was not unfamiliar with these pressures, though. With extensive training through lived experience and "historical memory", the spring used "creative sensibilities" to expand in response to external pressures. Each oppressive force further trained the spring to "reclaim and repurpose the momentum that was originally designed to dominate them into an upward proclamation that we would call agency" (Okello & White, 2019, p. 151). Mavin and Star demonstrated agency in the meaning making of their experiences as students at Magnolia University, while their *embodied* agency was mediated by the oppressive forces that came with navigating racialized organizations.

Embodied Student Agency

Star was guided by their desire to be a *catalyst for change*. When they encountered forms of injustice, they wanted to leverage the platforms they had nurtured through student leadership experiences and interpersonal networks in their activism. They told me the conversation they had with their mentor focused on how "students that look like myself" can feel conflicted between

their desire to be impactful in their activism without "stepping on any toes." In this instance, Star's mentor advised them to consider pursuing private conversations instead of voicing opinions on (metaphorical or literal) public stages. Since we ended our first interview on this cliffhanger of a story, I was grateful that Star further detailed their reaction to their mentor's guidance:

> It was different from what I'm used to, or what I think I'm used to, or what I think I should do. I'm used to hearing I should make my perspective be known. And so I guess, being that I would always hear it, it didn't seem like that was the way to still go. After a while, things become different and you have to find different approaches. And so I wanted to find a different approach. And not use the same approach as my peers may have used, or the same approach that people before me may have used. I wanted to try something that's, you know, new.

Star was inspired to respond to these external forces in new, creative ways. They were enthusiastic to share that the casual conversations they initiated since receiving this advice had garnered the empathy they had been so desperately seeking from their white peers. For example, they recalled a conversation they had with some fellow (white) campus tour guides who had been insulated from the realities of the inequities in the K-12 education system. Star took up the mantle of educating their peers on the unequal resource distribution across primary and secondary schools and the subsequent inequitable outcomes. They explained that their peers perceived equal resource distribution across "1A, 2A, 3A, 4A schools versus a 6A 7A or private schools." Star corrected this misconception by "telling them that resources aren't given to all different schools. And so if everybody doesn't have the same resource and access, then how can we all have equal opportunity, right?"

Star further described the "personal duty" they felt in ensuring that their peers of Black (current and prospective) students were fully supported. They recalled instances where Black prospective students visiting campus would approach them after taking a tour led by a different tour guide. One specific example highlights the mutual frustration shared with a prospective student who only learned about the existence of Multicultural Center after having an informal conversation with Star following their official campus tour.

> The student came to me after a tour and said, "Oh, my tour guide ain't show me that. I ain't know y'all had that." And it's like, "Oh no, of course they didn't." Or, you know, understanding, like, "Okay. Somebody has to do it." And so, understanding the impact that you could have on one student's life or 30 students' lives. Just obviously the simple, you know, going upstairs for 5 seconds and looping back out. Just so they can see, you know, that it's there. And knowing that, you know, you can go and find it, and it's there. It's not hiding.

An embodied agency perspective troubles the traditional view of agency as being uncomplicated by oppressive forces like racism. Star's experience, however, highlights that many things can be true at once. That Star desired to be a catalyst for change, found fulfillment in being of service to others, and felt an obligation to do what their white peers do not (have to do). Do white tour guides ever have to make this decision of how their time is spent in order to best serve students that look like them?

When asked about their feelings about recent anti-DEI legislation and if it has shaped their lived experience as a Black student (leader), Star corroborated the "historical memory" of Okello and White's (2019, p. 19) conceptualization of embodied agency by explaining:

> It doesn't make me feel any different than I probably was already feeling coming into the

> real world or college in general. And again, that's the tone, like, I speak for all my peers and myself when I say that we always kind of had a steadfast mindset on, you know, hardworking and just understanding that "Okay. I have this goal set. I have to get it."… And I mean, it doesn't feel new. I would say, it's just like, "okay, it is what it is," and so we kinda be there for each other. I guess? It's cool, though. I mean not cool, but (pause) it's nothing we haven't beared through before, I would say.

In the words of these same scholars, "The agency we propose is altogether futuristic and historical, deeply hopeful, and determinedly realistic" (Okello & White, 2019, p. 151). The embodied agency spring was constantly compressing and rebounding in response to oppressive forces, including that of internalized racial oppression.

Imposter Syndrome. Both Mavin and Star, completely unprompted by me as the interviewer, shared experiences of how they navigated feelings of imposter syndrome as students at Magnolia University. I contend that the sharing of this kind of self-doubt from both participants is reflective of their embodied agencies. According to Pyke (2010), imposter syndrome is one of the insidious and understudied manifestations of various systems of oppression. For Mavin and Star, internalized racial oppression (David et al., 2019; Fanon, 1965; Nadal et al., 2021) threatened their self-esteem and self-efficacy as Black students enrolled at this HPWLG. They made meaning from these experiences in ways that further solidified their self-worth and activism efforts to instill the same in their peers.

Star's experience with imposter syndrome was related to racial microaggressions they have experienced from some visitors on their campus tour. For context, it is a common practice for admissions offices, like Magnolia's, to randomly assign campus tour guests to a tour guide. Multiple families are often assigned to each tour guide so there is an expectation that tour guides

and guests connect with one another throughout the campus tour. They explained that this random assignment had not always been well-received by guests who did not look like Star:

> Once they see someone that looks like me it's like, "Oh." The shift in mood or the shift in interest in the university, even maybe I peeped, and so it can have an effect on, "Am I supposed to be here?" It can affect me feeling like I have imposter syndrome. I know if I'm feeling that, and I hear my peers say the same thing after or before tour. It's not just a Star thing. So it just makes me thinks about, "Wow, okay. This isn't, you know, internal or it's not, you know, a minute situation. It's not minute. It's kind of bigger than me." And a lot of times, we could not know how to go about it or not know how to bring it up, or if it's even appropriate to bring up, you know. So we just take these things on, and we, we just move along with them.

Star shared an example from an event that was hosted by the Admissions Office. As with most other campus tours, several families were combined to make up the group that they took around campus for a tour. They explained that most families were incredibly interactive and asked questions throughout. One family had a distinctly different tone along with "short-witted answers" to questions Star would ask the group. They shared the effects of that and other similar scenarios:

> It could kind of make me walk on eggshells or make me even nervous, and nobody likes to be like that. So it's just, it makes you think a lot more than you probably should in those situations, when you're supposed to be giving service or enjoying what you're doing.

Feeling the need to walk on eggshells – "to be very cautious or diplomatic for fear of upsetting someone" – is a hallmark trauma response and further reiterates the narcissism of whiteness

(Matias, 2016). As previously noted, though, Star responded to this pressure by seeking guidance from mentors and using a variety of methods to advocate for themselves and their peers

Interestingly, my final interview with Star took place the day after my first interview with Mavin where the concept of imposter syndrome was also discussed. Early in our time together, Mavin and I talked through their own college admissions process, including their memories of being recruited by Magnolia University as a candidate for the Saucer Scholarship (pseudonym) – one of the university's top academic scholarships. They remembered their recruitment process as being incredibly personalized:

> For my recruitment, it was very personal to me because they were recruiting *me*. So anything that I had to do is because they invited me to do it, and wanted me to have a say-so on what I got to do… I got to make those little connections that I wanted to make, and they pretty much just rolled out the red carpet.

They recalled consistent outreach from their admissions counselor as well as multiple invitations to visit campus with opportunities to talk with students and faculty affiliated with their academic area of interest as well as the Honors College. One of their final visits to campus before enrolling was focused on their qualifications for the Saucer Scholarship. Mavin emphasized the discrepancy they felt between their recruitment process during their senior year of high school and the earliest days of their freshman year at Magnolia as a Saucer Scholarship recipient. While Mavin knew that they had a history of academic success, receiving this specific scholarship as an incoming freshman was "something that was very special to [them]." Of the thousands that were qualified, they were among the 1% of students in their incoming freshman class to be named a Saucer Scholar. In contrast, they shared that "as a Black [person], it was very much intimidating at the time, and there's probably, like, two other Black [students] in my class." They noted that a

close friend of theirs was an upperclassmen in the program but Mavin was “still scared, and it was a little bit intimidating” despite their proximity to someone uniquely familiar with the experience. They continued with a recollection of a shared experience of self-doubt amongst the incoming class of Saucer Scholars. “When I got there and met the other Saucer Scholars, I had a little bit of imposter syndrome… just like everybody else that I know. Everyone was like, ‘Should I really be here?’”

More specifically, they pinpointed an introductory faculty-led presentation as a core memory associated with their initial feelings of imposter syndrome. That presentation included information about studying abroad, undergraduate research opportunities, and a note of encouragement for all Saucer Scholars to apply for prestigious scholarships, like Fulbright and Gilman, during their time at Magnolia.

> I knew nothing about that, so I was very confused and very… like, “what am I doing here?” Like, I was very thrown off, but (laughs) I got to learn more, and I know them now, and I understand that there's nothing that is out of my reach, or… anything that's limited to me. But in that moment, I was very scared and very confused on what I was going to do for the next four years because that can be a lot. Like, they're telling you to go to England, and they're telling you to go to Oxford and stuff. So that was a lot for me because I had never heard of that. And I was just here for [my major]. Like, I don't know anything about politics or anything like that, so it was different.

Mavin responded by leaning into their growing community of peers and mentors as well as their involvement in student leadership organizations where they could be a role model and bring awareness to programs, like TREES, that are intended to support Black and Brown students. About TREES specifically, they explained their initial interest in getting involved was to bring

awareness to the program for people like them in their hometown: “I wanted them to know that TREES is here, and there's a place for you at Magnolia University.”

TREES as an Embodied Agency Tool. I contend that the TREES program was an exemplar in an otherwise oppressive racialized organizational structure and was a tool that increased the agency and decision-making power of student leaders like Mavin and Star.

With support from Williams as a supervisor, Mavin was emboldened to ask critical questions about the current recruitment process for TREES and to feel confident in the decisions they make in their student leadership role. As a graduate of a predominantly white high school, Mavin raised concerns about missing out on qualified students who attend high schools like their alma mater. While changes had not yet been made to the recruitment process, Mavin was empowered to ask those questions in the space of the TREES program. Additionally, they attributed their growth as a leader to their collaboration, even in times of disagreement with Williams:

> Williams, specifically, has made me grow so much as a leader like, as far as like expressing my thoughts and conflicts. Like, I think a few weeks back, we were trying to pick the team, and I told them there was someone that I didn't want, and they did. And they made me explain to them why I didn't want that person. At first, I was kind of taking an offense because, like, I feel like they weren't going to hear me out, but I explained it. And they’re like, “Okay, like, I trust you. I just want to understand why you're saying this.”

In describing their multi-faceted experience in supervising undergraduate students, Johnson indicated that TREES counselors had a unique level of autonomy regarding program development and operations. Star, for example, noted the importance of engaging with high

school students in ways that were strategically interactive and mindful of their short attention spans. When asked whether they had decision-making power in their leadership role with TREES, Star responded enthusiastically:

> Yes, most definitely. Such as creating the structure of the theme. So again, going back to the attention span. Music, a lot of our kids in today's generation. They love the music. The music is what's keeping them going. The music is what's having their attention, dances, everything.

Star was given autonomy to center the interests of high school students in planning the overarching theme for the conference. Music was strategically centered throughout the conference to increase engagement from attendees during interactive, educational activities as well as more social, community-building sessions. Mavin, similarly, shared the decision-making power they had in the selection and training of TREES counselors as well as how they show up in the space as a mentor to attendees.

From their own experience with imposter syndrome, the TREES program was a space where Mavin could mentor future students who may have had similar concerns as it related to pursuing an advanced degree at a school like Magnolia. They echoed a general sentiment that the program was beneficial in that it allowed prospective students to be in community with their peers while learning how to navigate the racialized organizational system that is higher education.

> Simply because of the imposter syndrome that I was speaking of. I think that people are often intimidated by the fact that Magnolia University is a PWI. And that can be something that deters students. But when you see someone that looks like you. Is Black like you. Has been raised in the same city that you were raised in. Went to the same high

> school that you went to, and they're at a PWI making a name for themselves. And they're being posted by the Magnolia University Instagram Page. The President knows them, like, it just makes you feel like you can do it too.

Taken altogether, TREES was a creative, collective, empowering space for the student leaders I spoke with. The program supported their autonomy and embodied agency as Black students at a HPWLG.

Staff Agency

In full transparency, I was surprised by the noted level of agency across staff members in the present study. Smith's ability to wear multiple hats both professionally and personally (multiple promotions, student organization advisor, long-term leadership roles with regional professional organizations) suggests that they had control over how they used their time in professional spaces. They also indicated that they felt completely supported by the leadership of their academic college given the leader's sustained work with promoting diversity and inclusion across their field and advocating for underrepresented students.

Williams noted a similar level of appreciation for the support they felt from leadership in their office and university administrators. The introductory clause of Williams' following statement aptly reflects my reaction: "Despite popular belief, I have been very pleased thus far with leadership in regards to how they have treated TREES." They continued by detailing the current level of financial support from the institution and how that had allowed them to have more freedom to make decisions that sustain the program that they cared about so deeply. Furthermore, Williams emphasized the support they had from their immediate supervisors and the disappointing reality of the unique situation in which they were professionally situated:

> I've talked to counterparts at other schools who run, who work with programs like this,

> and they are, I guess, for lack of better terms, monitored very heavily. And there's a very short leash that they are on… I work with complete autonomy and anything - *almost* anything - dealing with TREES it is: "Williams, you just tell us what you're doing." While that may sound like a given, after talking to my counterparts, it is now something that I don't take for granted because I'm realizing that that is not.

Johnson described themselves as an aspiring problem solver, which often translated into advocating for the students they worked with in the TREES program. A programmatic emphasis during the TREES conference itself was teaching prospective students about the financial components associated with pursuing an advanced degree. For example, TREES counselors would teach attendees about the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as well as the differences between loans, grants, and scholarships. However, the intended audience for affordability and cost of attendance conversations extended beyond prospective students. Johnson shared that they would spend time talking with the Bursar's Office to advocate for payment extensions for currently enrolled TREES counselors. Some of these counselors also depended on aid from FAFSA as well as the stipend they received from the TREES program to afford to attend Magnolia. The bureaucratic caveat that led to Johnson's advocacy was that TREES counselor eligibility was dependent upon the student having registered for fall classes. However, students could not register for fall classes until the bill for their spring semester had been paid in full. Johnson elaborated on this tension:

> Some of our counselors- yes, they're coming from very affluent areas, but majority of them are coming from very poor areas, too. Like we have to work with them with FAFSAs and grants… So, it is a really hard world where I would have to talk to our [Bursar's Office] and say, "Hey, here's our situation: They're going to pay it. I can assure

you. But they can't do it without TREES." So it's just this cycle that was… it was really terrible cycle.

Importantly, (current and future) agency was often mediated by unequal distribution of resources in racialized organizations. This situation highlights the layered effect that some formal policies have on the agency of various institutional actors. Affected students were at the mercy of the institution to grant them an extension and Johnson, as a staff member, spent time (a limited resource) outside of their official professional responsibilities advocating on their behalf. Neoliberal practices – like the one featured here – reproduced inequities that shape the retention, recruitment, and enrollment of Black students. Were these current students not granted a payment extension, they would have lost their ability to serve as TREES counselors. Foreclosing on future opportunities for them to serve as mentors to their younger peers and prospective mentees who attend the conference.

While grateful for the current level of institutional support, Williams was not immune to racialized organizations shaping the agency of affiliated individuals. Prior to our interactions, Williams had recently completed the arduous process of analyzing, updating, and advocating for institutional funding for TREES. The disparity in resource allocation across Magnolia University will be detailed in the following section, but it is necessary to uplift the role it played on individual agency here. The current level of institutional funding for the TREES program was not guaranteed to continue and the TREES program itself was subject to being shaped by the broader sociopolitical climate. "We are completely and solely at the mercy of however, they decide to write the legislation, and whatever that language looks like," Williams shared. Internal debates that Williams had ahead of our conversations regarding the longevity of their career in college admissions and recruitment were rooted in ruminating about forthcoming statewide

legislation and any related institutional responses:

> And I think what I keep weighing in my head is, let's say that TREES stayed. Like TREES, flew under the radar but the whole DE and I, access and opportunity office was gone. All the resources available with it was gone. There's nothing for those students but I got TREES - this avenue to still recruit these students and, and to work in admissions office, and to recruit these students, and get them here. (long pause) How comfortable am I recruiting these students here when I know, once they get here, they're gonna be on their own and there's nothing for them? And that is a question, Katie, that I don't have the answer to, and I'm having to do a lot of soul searching right now.

Okello and White's (2019) reimagining of individual agency, informed by the power of oppressive forces, adds an additional analytic layer to the internal values conflict that Williams shared above. These scholars argued that "if power and hegemony are ever-present impositions, then it stands to reason that a great deal of energy must be devoted to maintain our meaning-making constructs, such as one's faith or cultural worldviews" (p. 150). While Williams had the capacity to explore alternative careers, their agency in controlling their professional future was intertwined with the uncertain current sociopolitical climate. They valued the college access work they got to do at Magnolia and perceived that the institution was committed to being an accessible land-grant institution. With that said, there is the possibility that Williams may grieve the institution they thought they knew should Magnolia respond to external forces in ways that align with inequitable, racialized standards. What follows is a detailing of a pattern of (current and looming) unequal resource distribution further shaping the Black student recruitment landscape at Magnolia University.

"The plea for more funding hurt us in the end": Racialized organizations legitimate the

unequal distribution of resources

Concerns over funding for initiatives that support Black student recruitment and retention were central to the conversations I had with participants. Students expressed frustrations with the perceived discrepancy in institutional funding and accessibility of knowledge between the TREES program and historically/predominantly white student organizations on campus. While the institution as a meso-level organization was disproportionately providing resources across student organizations, I contend that the TREES program further uplifted students' agency by providing the resource of support to affiliated students. Finally, staff members were deeply troubled by the prospect of decreased financial support for diversity efforts and the role that the anti-DEI landscape played in their daily interactions with student leaders.

Students and the Distribution of Resources

While both students interviewed spoke highly of the support that their direct supervisors provided, they raised frustrations in the amount of financial support and accessibility of related information for counselors. When asked whether they believed that TREES would benefit from additional financial support from Magnolia, Mavin comedically retorted that they would love to get paid more while simultaneously expressing the feeling they were already well compensated. After more thought, they shared a story that highlighted the unequal distribution of funds along racial lines. When comparing the merchandise that some historically/predominantly white student organizations had to TREES, Mavin explained:

> They have a bunch of merch. They have, like a bunch of windbreakers and stuff, and TREES was having like this same t-shirt that (laughs) we've had for years. So I was like, "Hey, can we get some more swag." And we were able to get that. So I think, like simple things like that, like just asking and seeing how much they will get, or if it's possible to

get any more.

Yet again, their advocacy and activism for their fellow students was successful. That their advocacy was required in this particular situation speaks to the burden often placed upon historically underrepresented folks to advocate for their own needs in the absence of equal resource distribution. This advocacy for additional and higher quality TREES branded merchandise was not about a boost to some superficial vanity. As Johnson explained, the increased visibility of the TREES programs amongst unaffiliated current students across campus was a mechanism to normalize and uplift this program amongst the students and staff involved with historically/predominantly white student organizations. Many TREES counselors also participated in these organizations and were often spotted wearing TREES merchandise to meetings:

> Next to [campus tour guides] next to student alumni ambassadors, next to some [student organizations] that have been around since, like God, probably like the 1950's if I had to imagine. And TREES having a seat at the table with that. That to me, just still spoke volumes of… students who are representing TREES in other student orgs as well, has definitely helped with the awareness of it.

The anti-DEI legislative landscape also played a role in how students like Star were able to access information and funding that shaped how they navigated these racialized institutions of higher education. To frame their description of the role anti-DEI legislation played on their student experience, Star first defined DEI: "Diversity, equity, inclusion – to my knowledge – is how students that look like myself, or, you know, marginalized students. That is how we gain access and opportunities to funding, to organizations, to, you know, basically serve." For Star, the impact of anti-DEI legislation meant a decrease in funding and a misrepresentation of

systemic inequality:

> Those laws cut out the funding for those orgs or those programs to get that type of funding or cut out to where we basically don't get looked at. And that's what I've taken from it. We don't get looked at, or we don't get looked at as marginalized as if we have the same playing field. Then we don't get the same opportunities as others, and so it kind of makes us have to work a little bit harder than our counterparts and peers to get access and knowledge.

While Mavin's comparison of TREES with predominantly white organizations was related to how merchandise was distributed unequally, Star's comparison was also rooted in the unequal distribution of knowledge as a resource:

> Funding isn't allocated the same way, or the ways to know about the funding, the way to get to it. It feels harder. It feels like a longer road than those counterparts and peers, or even the peers who I have who are on the "big dog" orgs that we call them, who have, you know, the big funding. It's easier to get to someone, or it seems like there's easier access in those orgs… It's, it's, it's a gap that I'm not understanding, but I'm trying to bridge, and I don't know how to bridge it, or if it's bridgeable.

These "big dog organizations" were some of the most recognizable (and predominantly white) organizations present at Magnolia – orientation, campus tour guides, and student alumni ambassadors, for example. Star's assessment further described the (in)accessibility of the resources as compounding and generational. Further deepening the divide between organizations that were predominantly white and those that were run by and for historically marginalized student populations.

Staff and the Distribution of Resources

The most significant distinction between the student and staff participants in conversations about resource distribution was the resounding concern about future funding complications guided by the current sociopolitical climate. With that said, Johnson highlighted their preexisting concerns at the intersection of budgetary constraints and some organizational processes within the TREES program. Johnson would have liked to plan and execute a more robust reunion for TREES conference attendees to have the opportunity to come back to campus and interact with their counselor during their senior year, whether it was for a tailgate in the fall or attending a general yield event in the spring. Johnson wished that they could have planned a reunion even more impactful that previous years to help with "nourishing that mentorship aspect that we have with our counselors and their students." They noted limited interaction between that year's attendees and TREES counselors during the spring semester – a pivotal time when many high school seniors are making their final college enrollment decision – because of the installment of the set of TREES counselors as well as budgetary constraints: "the reunion would be the very last thing that you do, so you're kind of left with what you have at that point." Potential mentorship opportunities that would support enrollment efforts are further mediated and limited by unequal resource distribution.

The looming enrollment cliff was referenced by most professional staff members as the foundational financial concern for the entity of Magnolia University. As previously mentioned, Williams was pleased with the current state of institutional support but indicated the pressure that the enrollment cliff was having on university-level decision making:

> I think the enrollment cliff is really what is pressing people to ask the hard questions about return on investment, which I cannot knock. Because there's a world where

> enrollment could at best halt, and at worst start to decrease… in bracing for [the enrollment cliff], and being mindful of money, and where that is spent, and the stewarding of it – [University administrators] bracing. And so, they're looking at every program with a fine-tooth comb. Candidly, I don't see a world where they're like, "no, we're not funding this program at all anymore." Realistically, I probably see where we would get a decrease in funding.

Furthermore, Smith detailed how university administrators *and* state legislators were acutely aware of the arrival of the enrollment cliff. They indicated that university administrators had likely raised state legislator awareness in their on-going advocacy efforts:

> Basically [university administrators are] advocating for more money because of the enrollment cliff and trying to put certain things in place to stay above the curve, to keep our, our universities in a position where we can survive, you know? And beat this thing. And so I feel as though, because there's been so much announcement and awareness about the enrollment cliff, the enrollment cliff, the enrollment cliff…

Paradoxically, this advocacy for additional aid from the state as a state-institution had, in Smith's view, a detrimental effect on the long-term viability of institutional diversity efforts:

> Now policymakers are saying, "Well, why would we give you more money if you have less students to work with? Shouldn't you be trying to figure out how to *cut* spending? If you're having less students, then the spending should go down with the volume of students you're gonna have. So why do we need to give you more money with less students?" So I think in the plea for more funding in order to put certain things in place to combat the enrollment cliff, it's actually potentially hurt us in the end, because now that's given lawmakers a *reason* to see what's happening "in the house."

This increased surveillance and scrutiny intersected with Williams' deep-seated value of transparency – as an employee of a public institution responsible for recruiting/enrolling prospective students and supervising current students. They indicated they found value in reiterating the current support from university administrators while concurrently emphasizing the uncertainty of possible outcomes as it most directly related to the viability of the TREES program. Williams went so far as to leverage the uncertainty of the current anti-DEI sociopolitical climate to inspire their most recent year's TREES counselors to realign with their core mission after becoming lackadaisical.

> I kept them in the loop, and in some ways used the legislation that was coming up as a rallying cry of, "This is not promised. Like, we have not arrived." And it worked and it rallied them, and they really centered back in around the mission of TREES…So it was able to galvanize them, and we were able to, in my opinion, finish the last two or three months really strong.

Mavin echoed the catalyzing nature of Williams' "rallying cry" by sharing their belief that "we have to make sure that our impact is ten times better than it is and I think it's a catalyst for us moving forward and trying to make sure that TREES is flawless, just about." They shared that that the newest group of counselors – whether organically or intentionally – was a more focused group. Even so, Mavin continued to show and model embodied agency in their acknowledgment of the impact of these external pressures on the way they act as student leaders:

> I think we just take it and roll with it in a way. But it also means that we have to make sure that we really are focusing on these students in a different way…. Not just like for fun. Like, it's actually very serious because one day they may not be able to have this, but we're being optimistic about it.

Mavin also demonstrated the hallmark creativity of embodied agency when they told me about their goal of ensuring on-going, legacy support for the TREES program. Taking on the efforts of a philanthropist, Mavin hoped to educate TREES counselors about the importance of supporting the program by paying it forward with financial donations or by employing future TREES alumni:

> After we graduate, I think that we should be trying to donate to TREES as an organization to make sure that whatever they need they're able to get. And it's something that we're working on now, but I want that to be like an *actual thing* by the time I graduate. Like, I feel that we should. So that's the direction that we're moving in, making sure that TREES is generational.

In an effort to further support the generational efforts to better recruit, enroll, and support Black students, Mavin hoped for a future where alumni of the program can help TREES "reach past campus." Mavin elaborated on what they tangibly envisioned at the start of their career: "When I open my practice a few years from now, I would want to take us TREES students in so they can do their internship at my practice." They also hoped for a future where there would be scholarships specifically to support TREES counselors. Relatedly, each of the professional staff members that I interviewed had unique but converging perspectives related to the conversation around race-conscious scholarships.

To better understand how Magnolia University utilized scholarships as tool to recruit and enroll Black students, I inquired about the presence of race-conscious scholarships and the role that statewide legislation may play in their longevity. Smith indicated that any institutional scholarships that were race-conscious were privately funded by donors rather than being funded by public dollars. Conversations between the professional staff members working for the

university's foundation – the institutional unit responsible for managing donor funds – and individual donors regarding the language in gift agreements may be happening according to Smith. Their rationale for why they believed these funding streams will be largely unaffected by any anti-DEI legislation related to the institution's responsibility to honor those gift agreements: "to just put it frankly, it's really none of our business how a donor wants to spend their money"

Williams echoed the sentiment that race conscious scholarships at Magnolia University were those that were privately funded rather than publicly funded. The TREES program, on the other hand, had been supported by institutional funds with limited, sporadic support from individual donors. Williams' detailing of the nuanced nature of funding highlighted the often-conflicting relationship between public and private funds. While the TREES program coordinator was required to submit and advocate for their annual budget, these public funds, according to Williams, have provided them a sense of comfort and control because of their historical consistency. "Private money," said Williams, "could disappear like that (snaps) because they woke up one day and decided not to [donate]." As previously noted though, the looming enrollment cliff and increased surveillance from state legislators could result in a decrease in institutional funding for the TREES program while private funding would likely not increase at a proportional rate. Speaking to Magnolia University's history and persistence as a racialized organization as well as the broader sociopolitical climate across the state, Williams highlighted the tension of private support for the TREES program: "Just the way of the world, they're not necessarily a ton of lucrative alumni who would believe in this mission."

Ultimately, the consuming concern over the viability of the TREES program as well as other resources to support Black prospective and current students was prime example of the complicity of organizations – federal and state political structures as well as individual

institutions – in the coopting of systemic racial inequality. The (current and future) inequitable distribution of financial resources inhibited the agency of these institutional actors – robbing them of the time (Kwate, 2017) they could have otherwise spent thinking about something other than unequal resource distribution. The federal and state legislation that legitimated unequal resource distribution was guided by the credentialing of Blackness such that Magnolia, as a racialized institution, was at a crossroads in the (de)coupling process.

"Giving people a quality education and being accessible are not antithetical": Racialized organizations decouple formal commitments from practice

Like many other historically and predominantly white land-grants, Magnolia University had an espoused value to improve the lives of the citizens of their state and be of service to this community by being an accessible resource for an advanced education. Given the external pressures of the anti-DEI sociopolitical climate, Magnolia was then at a crossroads in determining which of their institutional priorities were most important. Would decision makers at Magnolia legitimate practices that support these formal commitments or would they prioritize compliance with legislation that further reproduces inequities for the recruitment and enrollment processes of prospective Black students?

Smith predicted adjustments in the organizational structure on Magnolia's campus but remained confident that the resources to support underrepresented students would remain. They raised key but unanswerable questions like:

> Will the renaming or the restructuring cloud how students find those resources? Or will it not have an impact? And it's too early to tell right now. Like I said, the resources are still going be here. It's just a matter of how easily it is to find in light of some renaming or restructuring.

As previously mentioned, Star already raised a frustrating discrepancy between the visibility of the multicultural center, for example, and how frequently most tour guides included it as a stop on their campus tour route. They alluded to its proximity to other central buildings and offices – that it would only require a tour guide to "go upstairs for five seconds and looping back out." If this resource was already hiding in plain sight from many of the prospective students it aims to serve, what might the future hold if it becomes even more difficult to find in response to a renaming or restructuring process across campus?

Williams had already echoed the belief in the institution's current financial support of the TREES program but highlighted – with a similar fervor – their perception of the limits on this support. At the point of our conversations, Williams indicated that university administrators reiterated their belief in these support services and the importance of these programs, student leaders, and professional staff members. However, on-going legislative efforts could shape the way universities administrators respond in the future. To that end, they shared "to my knowledge, the university's continued to put its money where its mouth is. I have a feeling, several months from now, that's really about to get tested. So we'll, we'll see where their priorities really lie."

Of particular intrigue was the trend of inconsistent (de)coupling across organizational levels at Magnolia University. In my view, there was a notable tension between staff who work to equitably support Black students within a larger institutional context that may not always do the same. Johnson, for example, noted their adoption of a "start with yes" mentality that they learned from a senior leader in Magnolia's Admissions Office. A "start with yes" leadership model when working with underrepresented students was a tool to mitigate the inequitable structures and processes that are legitimated within racialized organizations.

Alternatively, there was a trending concern amongst most professional staff members that the entity of Magnolia was at another crossroads in their espoused mission to be a holistically accessible institution. Future legislative and political pressures could result in changes in the reach of the TREES program. According to Williams:

> What is happening on state level will not affect students' ability to be admitted into the institution. I think it will affect their accessibility and their want to come to the institution. And their ability for the institution to be as accessible for them as other, as it is for other folks

Johnson echoed a similar concern. The TREES program had a history of emphasizing various post-secondary opportunities to low-income and Black students across the state. Johnson shared concerns that drastic changes in the program could mean that these same students may no longer feel like higher education is as attainable for them. Williams further emphasized potential impacts that center the intersection of systemic racism and classism that their current recruitment plan aimed to address. Williams highlighted a significant concern were the TREES program no longer able to strategically recruit students in racially conscious ways:

> Those students who are in the margins are the ones who will suffer the most. Because those are the ones who benefit from us being able to do very strategic things like the text campaigns and the email campaigns. And, and I think what alarms me about that on a very human level is like, could we still send all of them out? Could we still do the email campaigns? Just do it widespread how we do everybody else? Yes, but… there are already so many barriers to these Black and Brown students that the laws that would be and the powers that would be… The margin of error is just so slim for these students already.

Williams expressed pride in Magnolia's history of being an accessible institution for their institution. Early in our time together, they emphasized a core belief that "giving people a quality education and being accessible or not antithetical." This is at the core of the espoused mission of a land-grant institution that was also in danger in this hostile sociopolitical climate. In the midst of the institutional pride, Williams highlighted a tension that came with Magnolia relying on their president as the primary advocate, fundraiser, and political figure. In other words, their president was tasked with leading the institution in a fiscally responsible way, which often required advocating for support from state legislators. In a "deeply red" state, these state legislators were guided by their own political interests which were increasingly aligned with broader anti-DEI sentiments. Williams indicated that Magnolia's senior leadership had historically tried to remain "apolitical". I contend that a politically neutral stance, like a race-neutral stance, is inherently biased in a system that prioritizes the needs of the majority. They expanded upon this political context and the danger of university administrators attempting to remain "neutral":

> We are completely and solely at the mercy of however, they decide to write the legislation, and whatever that language looks like… very specifically state level. There's not a lot of offense that we'll play. It'll be defense, and if it will risk anything else in terms of the broader scope of university in the eyes of the state legislature, I don't think the University will push.

The defensive move of scrubbing references to institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments from the university's websites was an observed trend in the present study. It was my original intent to gather a variety of institutional documents (i.e., training manuals, diversity action plans, trustee and/or faculty senate meeting transcripts, student-written articles) as part of

my data collection process. I used the most easily accessible and identifiable documents (i.e., student-written articles, etc.) as a form of member checking to both support my analysis and maintain the confidentiality of the participants. With that said, any diversity action plans or related documents that would formalize Magnolia University's espoused commitment to creating a more inclusive campus community and other diversity, equity, and inclusion values as a land-grant institution were noticeably inaccessible.

Scholarly interrogations of these documents have argued that they are little more than performative attempts to institutional diversity commitments (Ahmed, 2012) and can further marginalize minoritized individuals in these historically white educational spaces (Iverson, 2012). And yet, these policy documents were once, and not too long ago, readily available. Iverson's (2005, 2008, 2012, 2019) decade's long scholarly agenda highlighted the prior accessibility of these documents as it centered the diversity discourses found in these very action plans at 20 historically and predominantly white land-grants. For the present study, similar documents at Magnolia University and most of its peers proved inaccessible. Smith even took the time to look for their academic college's diversity action plan during our interview but was similarly unsuccessful. Is this removal a form of institutional masking, a defensive attempt to appear politically neutral or apolitical and preemptively comply with any anti-DEI statewide policies?

Additionally, I was unable to access what should have been a publicly available recording/transcript of a faculty senate meeting where a diversity-oriented senior university administrator spoke. Like other meetings, the link was publicly available but the link for that particular meeting was identical to the meeting that immediately preceded it. I am presently uncertain of whether this was a simple clerical error, a defensive move to insulate the institution

from surveillance regarding recent diversity-centered conversations, or a protective move to keep that administrator out of the spotlight of the watchful/critical/surveilling eyes of state legislators.

More powerful than covert, defensive responses (i.e., changing office and job titles, organizational restructuring, creatively masking data ahead of any audits) in Williams' view would be an overt, offensive, and collective move on the part of university administrators be willing to risk their political capital. They continued, "I think that they either just don't realize the political capital that they have, or they care about these programs enough, but they don't think that these programs are worth their political capital."

I have chosen to end this chapter with a quote from Williams as I think it aptly illustrated the tension that both racialized organizations and individual institutional actors within them must reckon with should they wish to more equitably recruit, enroll (and retain) Black students:

> Most higher ed leadership in very deep red states like ours try to be very apolitical because they are in a state that is deeply red, and most institutions are not deeply red, and so they navigate trying to keep their institution happy, while also trying to be in the good graces of their state legislator. At some point (long pause) the rubber meets the road, and you will either back the things that you say that you back or… you will sit back while things happen.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to interrogate the racialized recruitment and yield practices and the competing institutional priorities that shape these practices at one historically and predominantly white land-grant (HPWLG) institution in the Deep South. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What role does the post affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape play in the recruitment and yield of Black students at HPWLGs?
2. How do competing institutional priorities reproduce racial inequities in the recruitment and yield processes?

This study utilized a critical case study methodology and employed the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) to illuminate how Magnolia University positively credentialed Whiteness, unequally distributed resources, shaped the agency of various institutional actors, and decoupled their formal, espoused values from day-to-day practices. These four hallmark symptoms of any racialized organization were identified at Magnolia University in ways that directly shaped the recruitment, enrollment, and even retention of Black students. The primary dataset included a set of 1-2 interviews with two current Black undergraduate student leaders and three professional staff members who were uniquely affiliated with the broader recruitment and enrollment processes at Magnolia University. These semi-structured interviews lasted around 60 minutes each and were guided by the following domains: experiences with their role, the role of land-grant institutional status, the role of state and federal agency, and perceived agency in their role. I employed writing as inquiry analytic techniques to make sense of the participants' experiences, perceptions of institutional support for Black student recruitment, and concerns/ruminations related to the increasingly hostile anti-DEI climate in which Magnolia

University is situated. This individual sensemaking was not the end goal though. Instead, to better understand each participant's perspective from where they were uniquely situated within Magnolia would illuminate the broader racialized organizational structure (, routines, and competing priorities) that shaped the recruitment and enrollment processes of Black prospective students.

Ray (2023) broadly critiqued organizational theorists who failed to address or account for the racial context surrounding the organizations they studied and instead treated them as "hermetically sealed form the wider racialized social system" (p. 47). With that in mind, the present study directly addressed this critique by treating the on-going post-affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape as a central and evolving force within the case and across data collection and analysis processes. The analytical framework in conjunction with the writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1997, 2000) analytic techniques allowed me to make sense of the participants' experiences as well as my own as a researcher (practitioner, and human) within this context. In this chapter, I provide a summary of my interpretations and re-presentations of the data, situate them within the existing body of literature and provide implications for future practice and research.

Discussion of Findings

My aim for this study was to be in conversation with micro-level institutional agents (i.e., professional staff members and currently enrolled Black student leaders responsible for engaging with prospective students) regarding macro-level forces (i.e., statewide anti-DEI and federal anti-affirmative action legislation) to learn about how Magnolia University, the highest order meso-level organization of interest, responded and subsequently (de)prioritized the recruitment and yield of Black prospective students. Though it was not my original intent to advance Ray's

(2019) racial organization theory, my interpretation of the data included a specific interaction between the four tenets

The present study extends the scholarly conversation of the intersection of race and the college admissions process. This literature has largely focused on how the application review process (Hossler et al., 2019; Bastedo et al, 2021) particularly at selective or "highly rejective" (Poon et al., 2023) institutions (Bastedo et al., 2018; Bowman & Bastedo, 2016; Stulberg & Chen, 2013). Other scholars have interrogated specific elements of the recruitment process – the commodifying of racial diversity in admissions viewbooks (Osei-Kofi et al., 2013; Pippert et al., 2013), racialized screening of emails sent from prospective Black students by white admissions counselors (Thornhill, 2019), and what Salazar (2022) described as "recruitment redlining" wherein admissions recruiters avoid visiting high schools in predominantly Black and Brown communities (Salazar, 2022).

This study directly focused on interrogating the recruitment and enrollment processes of Black prospective students at Magnolia University, a historically and predominantly white land-grant in the Deep South. Interviews with three professional staff members and two currently enrolled Black student leaders, illuminated the role that institutional actors and the increasingly hostile anti-DEI climate play in these processes. Furthermore, the current study intentionally built upon the work of Poon and colleagues (2023) who centered competing institutional priorities within the conversation about the durability of racialized inequities throughout the college admissions process.

Throughout the next section, I take a scaffolded approach in reframing my interpretations where the research questions and the HPWLG institutional context are the higher order followed by the four tenets of the present study's analytic framework. This approach is intended to

function as a coherent organizational structure for the written summary with the understanding that it simultaneously risks oversimplifying the inherent interconnectedness of both research questions and analytic tenets in practice. Rarely, if ever, can a situation that involves the nuanced interaction between individuals, organizations, and the larger sociopolitical climate be so neatly separated.

Research Question #1

The first research question – "What role does the post-affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape play in the recruitment and yield of Black students at HPWLGs?" – reflects the culmination of my various interests around this topic and also serves as the foundation for this study. The grounding nature of this research question aligns with the credentialing tenet that similarly grounded how I presented my interpretations of the data.

Credentialing

The negative credentialing of Blackness and broader anti-Black sentiments in this country have inspired the ever-evolving anti-DEI landscape in which the field of higher education is situated. There has been an influx of recently published studies conducted by higher education scholars that have explored the ways in which this anti-DEI sociopolitical climate has influenced how: Latinx scholars navigate the academy (Montelong et al., 2025), faculty who teach about race/racism respond to legislative threats to their academic freedom (Pedota et al., 2025), identity-based student center staff navigate their professional responsibilities (Lucas et al., 2025; Ueda et al., 2024), legal counsel has shaped the institutionalization of (in)equitable policies (Lewis & Muñiz, 2024), and institutional administrators fail to effectively respond to related legislation (Conyers & Fields, 2025; Rubin et al., 2024; Smith & Gasman, 2025).

The present study adds to this growing body of literature with a unique focus on how this

landscape shapes the way Black students are recruited to apply to and enroll at one historically and predominantly white land-grant in the Deep South. The *SFFA v. Harvard* decision banning race-conscious admissions practices was an original inspiration for this line of inquiry. The increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate that surrounds the present study is one that was similarly noted by Garces & Cogburn (2015). Their study focused on an earlier iteration of this landscape by investigating how the state of Michigan's passage of Proposal 2 – a piece legislation banning race- (and gender-) conscious admissions and hiring practices – shaped the ways that University of Michigan campus administrators responsible for enacting diversity policies navigated their work. Anti-affirmative action and anti-DEI sentiments were present ten years ago and have only grown in fervor (see: Confessore, 2024).

Notably, the participants in the present study collectively agreed that the *SFFA v. Harvard* decision has not had and will not have an impact on how Magnolia University would operate. That the formalized ban on race conscious admissions practices would not hinder the accessibility of the institution to prospective Black students. This runs counter to various nationwide responses to this legislation; however, participants generally had stronger opinions about the state-level anti-DEI landscape and shared concerns about the implications for engaging with prospective Black students. There is a meaningful distinction between the two for these participants. And yet, Hassan (2025) provided a relevant perspective on the anti-Black discourse that informs anti-affirmative action sentiments: “Despite its roots targeting the unique plights of Black students to receive the same educational opportunities as white peers, affirmative action has all but dwindled to one buzzword that dictates its future in the realm of higher education: diversity” (p. 82). In other words, the decades-long legislative attack on affirmative action at the federal level and the anti-DEI state legislative landscape in which Magnolia University is nested

are both informed by the negative credentialing of Blackness.

According to Smith, university administrators who are in direct communication with state legislators have tried to reframe conversations about state funding earmarked for diversity efforts. In an effort to preserve this funding, administrators are trying to "help lawmakers understand that DEI does not fall only in the categories that they think." Categories that equate diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts with Blackness are, in the words of Williams, politically "taboo." University of Michigan administrators in the aforementioned Garces and Cogburn (2015) study similarly indicated that conversations about race were more "politically charged" after the passage of Proposal 2 and that this statewide legislative climate made planning and executing related initiatives more difficult. The findings of Garces and Cogburn (2015) as well as the present study are consistent with my framing of how the tenets of racialized organizations interact. The anti-DEI and anti-affirmative action legal landscape is rooted in the negative credentialing of Blackness which further shapes the agency of individual institutional actors.

Agency

In sharing about their experiences as Black student leaders at Magnolia University, Star and Mavin consistently demonstrated embodied agency (Okello & White, 2019). This is a reimagination of agency that acknowledges the complexities that minoritized people experience as they navigate oppressive forces – like whiteness – that are foundational to racialized organizations. The broader anti-DEI landscape that permeated Magnolia University's culture shaped their experiences as current student (leaders) with a vested interest in supporting, mentoring, and recruiting future Black students.

Strunk and colleagues (2018) examined the racialized experiences of Black students at a predominantly white institution in the Southern United States. One of their notable conclusions

was that these students indicated that attending a PWI would be beneficial in preparing them for life after graduation. That "corporate America," in the words of one participant, was also rooted in systemic marginalization and racism. Star shared a similar sentiment when they indicated that the state-level anti-DEI legislation was consistent with their current lived experience at Magnolia University and expectations for the "real world or college in general." That this racialized marginalization wasn't a new experience for the Black community, according to Star, further demonstrated the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992) that is built into racialized organizations (Ray, 2019).

Both Mavin and Star's experiences with racialized imposter syndrome (Doughty & Martin-Parchment, 2025) in conjunction with their individual values of being role models and catalysts for change influenced their interest in engaging with prospective Black students, particularly through the TREES program. Extending prior research on Black student (leader) activism at PWIs (Jones, 2020; Jones & Reddick, 2017), Star and Mavin demonstrate their activist spirits by raising questions that interrogate practices that shape the experiences of current and prospective Black students.

Star, for example, was deeply frustrated by the quiet renaming of an institutional division responsible for enacting diversity initiatives at Magnolia. While the state-level anti-DEI legislation was consistent with their expectations, Star did not respond submissively to the institution's misinterpretation and overcompliance with this legislation (i.e., repressive legalism). When they raised their concerns and shared their desire for their voice to be heard by university leaders with a mentor, they were encouraged to be similarly quiet by voicing those concerns "in private." Within a racialized and racially oppressive environment, this guidance could be a protective form of resistance (e.g., instead of public proclamations that would be them in the

spotlight of increased surveillance, Star proceeded to have individual conversations to address their concerns) or a material effect of internalizing hegemonic whiteness (Strunk et al., 2018).

In the present study, Williams highlighted a notably nuanced perspective of their professional agency. They were uniquely situated as having "complete autonomy" and significant institutional support – as a professional staff member committed to advancing Black student recruitment and enrollment efforts. On the other hand, both Williams and Johnson – two staff members with affiliations to the TREES program – demonstrated how a racialized organization inconsistently shape the agency of institutional actors. As it relates to supporting current Black students (who are responsible for engaging with prospective Black students), Johnson shared the time they spent communicating with the financial aid office on behalf of TRESS counselors who needed extensions to pay their student bill each semester. Williams shared their ruminating over how the increasingly hostile anti-DEI landscape at the state level (but fueled by the current presidential administration) may shape the livelihood of the TREES program. Were it not for this landscape, Williams could be spending their time focusing on other elements related to the recruitment and enrollment processes they are responsible for enacting. Taken together, the present study extends the scholarship of racialized time theft (Kwate, 2017).

The post-affirmative action and anti-DEI legal landscape is continuing to shape the ways that professional staff members and student leaders show up in their recruitment roles. Professional staff members like Williams and Johnson share their concerns and fears of what Magnolia's response to the increasingly hostile sociopolitical landscape could mean for how they could meaningfully engage with prospective Black students in the future. Meanwhile, both student participants appeared emboldened in their efforts to, in the words of Star, remain "steadfast" in their efforts to support current and future Black students at Magnolia.

Research Question #2

The second question that guided this study – "How do competing institutional priorities reproduce racial inequities in the recruitment and yield processes?" – was influenced by the work of Poon and colleagues (2023). These scholars were the first, to my knowledge, to name how competing institutional priorities (like balancing the, often competing, needs of faculty, trustees, alumni, and donors) shape the college admissions process. As an admissions practitioner, I encountered many iterations of these competing institutional priorities and wanted to extend their work by specifically focusing on how they may show up in the recruitment and enrollment processes at a HPWLG in the Deep South.

In the present study, a driving and foundational priority for Magnolia University (as enacted by senior-level administrators) was maintaining financial stability. As a public institution that relies upon support from state appropriations that are regulated by state legislators and politicians, Magnolia University leaders are particularly attentive to the (political) interests of these state leaders (Rubin et al., 2024). Consistent with the realities within other racialized organizations, institutional funds often unequally distributed along racial lines. Various institutional interests – espoused DEI values, mission to support all students, and maintaining financial support from the state – were both interconnected and in competition at Magnolia. As with any racialized organizations, institutional funds were often unequally distributed across racial lines and the looming institutional trend of decoupling espoused values from practice would reproduce racialized inequities for both current and prospective Black students.

Unequal Resource Distribution

The lived experiences of Star and Mavin echoed the work of Jones and Reddick (2017) who explored the ways Black students attending PWIs utilized various methods of activism to

disrupt inequitable campus practices. Many students within that study cited funding discrepancies between historically white campus organizations and predominantly Black student organizations. Both students in the present study cited concerns over unequal resource distribution and noted their habit of calling out this differential treatment as a way to improve the experiences for current students and opportunities for future students. Mavin, for example, was a graduate of a predominantly white high school. Unaware of the TREES program when they were in high school, Mavin shared their particular passion for reaching Black students in predominantly white spaces to share more about the TREES program. Limited financial resources, shared by Mavin and confirmed by Williams, meant that recruitment for the TREES program was focused on high schools that had a predominantly Black and Brown student population. Mavin noted that they pursued a variety of student leadership experiences at Magnolia, particularly TREES, because they were used to be "*the* minority in the room." Given their lived experience growing up in predominantly white (educational) spaces and for their love of the TREES program as a multi-year counselor, Mavin felt that the current recruitment strategy prevented students like them from being introduced to an impactful college access pipeline program.

Additionally, Star was attuned to the uneven access to bureaucratic knowledge and funding between predominantly white and predominantly Black student organizations. That organizations that are run by marginalized communities have a harder time accessing these resources compared to predominantly white organizations. Shared Star, "Funding isn't allocated the same way, or the ways to *know* about funding, the way to get it. It feels harder. It feels like a longer road than those counterparts or peers… who are in the 'big dog' orgs." These perceptions echo other Black student leaders who emphasized that having "insider knowledge" was critical

to navigating the bureaucratic system in the absence of equal levels administrative support (Jones & Reddick, 2017, p. 211).

These examples highlight the layered intersection between unequal resource distribution and the (in)visibility of programs that support current and prospective Black students. When a meso-level organization like an entire HPWLG or a division of student affairs (sub)consciously prioritizes tradition and the status quo, historically white organizations (and white students) will inherent material benefits while students of color and their organizations must work harder to navigate the racialized system. There has been a shifting trend of TREES counselors serving as leaders in historically white student organizations, which, according to Johnson, has helped increase awareness of the program throughout the larger campus community.

Unequal resource distribution has contributed to this discrepancy in awareness of the program among the majority of current students and limits the reach of recruitment efforts (i.e., awareness amongst prospective students). Furthermore, conversations with professional staff members regarding their concerns over resource allocation highlighted the inherently interconnected nature of the two guiding research questions and analytic framework. These staff members' concerns about resource allocation were future-oriented while being grounded in the current tension between Magnolia's espoused values as a land-grant institution and the external pressures that university leaders were only beginning to respond to. In other words, the work of engaging with Black prospective students, particularly through the TREES program, is actively being threatened by ongoing institutional responses to the statewide anti-DEI sociopolitical climate.

Decoupling and the HPWLG Context

All participants in the current study were either currently enrolled students or were

alumni who were currently employed at Magnolia University. Importantly, there was a consensus amongst the group regarding Magnolia's purpose as a land-grant institution. Smith took pride in working for Magnolia because "we haven't forgotten the people we serve." Johnson echoed the historical practical purpose of land-grant institutions (Thresher, 1966) by describing Magnolia as "the people's university." Similarly, Williams indicated that they cared deeply about college access, particularly for underrepresented students across their state, and appreciated Magnolia's current accessibility to those populations. As a student who was recently recruited by Magnolia, Mavin believed this mission materialized in their recruitment process. They stated, "I felt so seen by Magnolia is because I was in an area where they had a bunch of events, my admissions counselor was always able to be there for me and show up for me."

Participants affiliated with the TREES program similarly agreed that was intended to support underrepresented students, particularly low-income students, across the state. As a TREES counselor, Star described their aspirational goal of helping students learn about options after high school and help them feel confident that whichever route they choose is "tangible." Mavin described the TREES counselors as "vessels for these students to connect with their outer world and make sure they're ready to take the next step." It is the embodiment of the espoused mission of these land-grant institutions – the program is intended to serve as an accessible educational resource for citizens of the state. Traditional (and racialized) metrics for merit, like standardized test scores and GPAs, are not part of this program's recruitment process.

Alternatively, Magnolia's home state, like many of its peers in the Deep South, is embedded with an increasingly hostile anti-DEI sociopolitical climate. At the time of this study, legislation had not required public schools to remove diversity, equity, and inclusion language from the university's system. Even so, there was a perception of increased surveillance from

legislators and politicians with anti-DEI sentiments along with the reality that Magnolia leaders had quietly renamed offices and professional titles across campus. Neutralizing this language before it was legally required (i.e., legal repressivism, Garces et al., 2021) was concerning to several participants and was aligned with university leaders' goal of being apolitical and neutral, according to Williams.

Should Magnolia University leaders choose compliance with inequitable statewide policies (one institutional priority) at the expense of their espoused commitments to serve *all* students (an opposing institutional priority), programs like TREES will be within the crosshairs. Prior research indicated that many historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions have similar programs intended to concurrently support and recruit African American students, and that all struggled with bringing awareness to these programs (Franklin et al., 2020). In forecasting future possibilities, Williams echoed this concern, which runs counter to the current level of strategic accessibility of the program:

> What is happening on state level will not affect students' ability to be admitted into the institution. I think it will affect their accessibility and their want to come to the institution. And their ability for the institution to be as accessible for them as it is for other folks… Those students who are in the margins are the ones who will suffer the most.

My original interest in the potential downstream effects of the *SFFA v. Harvard* decision and its intersection with the looming potential of Magnolia leaders choosing to decouple their espoused diversity, equity, and inclusion values from formal practice to comply with state legislation aligns with Leong's (2025) recent scholarship. Their work interrogated the ways in which colleges and universities have communicated these specific values (i.e., racial diversity) after this landmark

decision. Magnolia University is not alone in misinterpreting these pieces of legislation, and this misinterpretation further enacts the institution's espoused values. According to Leong (2025), these decisions cannot be attributed solely to a college or university's risk-averse nature but rather "we might conclude that schools' commitment to racial diversity was always ambivalent—and thus easily surrendered when the winds shifted" (p. 1060).

Personal Transformation and Methodological Review

In keeping with a dialectical mode of thinking (Freeman, 2017), my aim throughout this research process has been to identity and interrogate points of tension in recruiting and yielding Black students at one HPWLG in the Deep South. As both an alumna and current student as well as current professional staff member (whose professional career, until recently, was focused on the undergraduate admissions process), I have a vested interest in this line of inquiry within this institutional context. Interrogating these recruitment and yield processes as well as the intersection of the current anti-DEI/anti-Black sociopolitical climate and institutional responses is aligned with "the belief that inquiry should play a transformative role in society and an emancipatory role for individuals oppressed by current and/or past social arrangements" (Freeman, 2017, p. 56).

Throughout my doctoral studies focusing on this line of inquiry, I have oscillated between a feeling just short of nihilism to a feeling approximating "critical hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Living in my own point of tension between feeling disheartened by the seeming durability of the inequitable underpinnings of these institutions and my on-going commitment to being part of a community that transforms these same institutions. In keeping with this spirit and the guidance from Diem et al. (2024) for critical case study researchers, I have continued to ask myself, "In what ways does my research have the potential to reify the structures and inequities I

seek to transform?" (p. 255). To that end, I acknowledge that any effort to improve policy and practices that center Black students at HPWLGs would likely come with the mutually beneficial (i.e., interest convergence, Bell, 1980) scenario described by Hassan (2025) wherein institutions benefit from the prestige of higher ranks associated with access, equity, and inclusion efforts.

I am proud of this study, abundantly grateful for each participant's candor and vulnerability, and the lessons I learned while conducting a critical qualitative case study (Diem et al., 2023; Merriam, 1998). The present study extended the work of Garces & Coburn (2015) in that it accounted for the perspectives of institutional actors whose work is shaped by statewide legislation (e.g., the University of Michigan's response to anti-affirmative action legislation in Garces & Coburn, 2015; Magnolia University's response to anti-DEI legislation and surveillance in the present study). The staff and students I spoke with were important groups of institutional actors who had a vested interest in Black student recruitment, enrollment (and retention) as well as the sociopolitical landscape that threatens these efforts. My ethical obligation of maintaining confidentiality meant that publicly available documents that were analyzed were used as a form of member-checking and are not an active part of this written report. That said, future critical case studies could benefit from the inclusion of other institutional actors. While I was unsuccessful in recruiting senior administrators or general counsel members, their perspectives as institutional actors who directly interact with state government officials (Rubin et al., 2024) as well as (mis)interpret and implement legislation (Lewis & Muñiz, 2024) would be valuable for future studies.

Implications for Practice and Policy

For the line of inquiry that informed the current case study, policy and practice are inherently connected. Ngaosi and Garces (2024) argued that the trend of higher education

administrators to overly comply with the external force of explicitly and intentionally inequitable legislation is evident in the policies and practices surrounding the race-conscious admissions conversation. The present study reframed the conversation away from race-conscious *admissions* practices to race-conscious recruitment and enrollment practices as well as the competing institutional priorities that shape these practices at one historically and predominantly white land-grant in the Deep South. What follows is a handful of recommendations that I encourage HPWLGs to heed when considering policies and practices that inform the Black student recruitment and enrollment processes.

First, feedback from most participants supported the necessity of prioritizing programs like TREES on these campuses. Williams' rationale for the existence of such a program bears repeating:

> In a state like ours that has marginalized as many people as we have… At *the* land-grant institution, that on its best day was a silent bystander, and on the worst day was very participatory in that marginalization. We owe it to the people of this state, to these populations, specifically, to host a program like this, even if nobody comes.

As Williams highlighted, historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions have an obligation to serve the citizens of their state and TREES was one way for such an institution to more authentically fulfill its mission of being an accessible educational resource, especially for minoritized populations and communities. The recruitment process employed by the TREES program defied the historical legacy of relying on racialized and classed metrics (like standardized test scores, GPAs, advanced classes) to determine worthiness for participation. Instead, the program encouraged any underrepresented student (a self-identified definition but often related to racial background) to participate to learn about various post-secondary

educational and career opportunities. Increased institutional funding would allow the program to expand their efforts to better recruit Black and Brown students attending predominantly white high schools.

As evidenced by the narratives of both current student leaders interviewed, the TREES program included culturally responsive programming planned and executed by TREES counselors. Engaging with the program was also mutually beneficial for the current students serving as counselors given that it was a space that supported these Black and Brown students' embodied agency (Okello & White, 2019). In the absence of this being available to these same students in historically white student organizations (as it should), the TREES program gave these student leaders the skills and resources to navigate racialized organizational structures.

On the other hand, Star shared that this research process had given them the chance to talk and critically think about their concerns regarding the (de)prioritization of Black student needs. They were able to do so within the TREES program but felt neglected by university administrators. Calling back to Star's experience, they navigated their mission to be a catalyst for change, devotion to being in service to others, and feeling obligated to engage with Black prospective students who were visiting campus and did not have affirming experiences with their white campus tour guides. Mavin, similarly, took on the role of advocating for equitable changes in institutional funding and student recruitment practices.

It is important for HPWLG administrators to listen to and include Black students in institutional reform efforts (Jones & Reddick, 2017) and directly acknowledge the racialized emotional labor (Humphrey, 2021) that comes with their lived experiences at these institutions. Furthermore, HPWLG administrators should prioritize financial support for such a program that has had a history of bolstering Black student recruitment, enrollment (and retention) efforts.

My second recommendation is for staff members affiliated with recruitment, admissions, and enrollment efforts to intentionally expand their competencies of the sociopolitical climate, particularly as it relates to their state and specific institution. I have often joked that I will never understand the feeling associated with the adage "ignorance is bliss" as it relates to this field. That is not to say that I came into this study with this pre-planned recommendation grounded in my own personal experience. Instead, the findings support the prevalence of state-level political policies (and practices of surveillance) informing institutional practices, especially as it relates to recruiting, enrolling, and retaining Black students. All professional staff participants spoke to the increasingly hostile anti-DEI sociopolitical landscape of their state but had varying degrees of understanding of the implications for their institution. A greater awareness of the sociopolitical climate and legislative policies would allow mid-level staff members, like the ones in the study, to more strategically navigate oppressive, racialized organizations and even combat instances of institutional repressive legalism. Taking the time to read and critique relevant federal, state, and institutional policies will give said staff members the awareness to know when inequitable (mis)interpretations have occurred. In much the same way that context is important to case study research (Diem et al., 2023) so too is context important in informing the practices of these individual institutional actors.

Finally, the findings of this study highlight a call to action for HPWLG administrators to ensure that institutional responses to external (legislative) forces are mission-aligned. In other words, compliance with state and federal legislation should not come at the expense of institutional values. Williams highlighted their desire for administrators to risk some of their political capital in interacting with policymakers to better support and advocate for the needs of Black students. I want to concurrently hold senior-level administrators (i.e., those with the most

political capital) accountable in this way and acknowledge the precarious position that can come with simply vocalizing endorse diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments in the current sociopolitical climate. On April 25, 2025, it was reported that the search for a new dean for the College of Liberal Art and Sciences at the University of Florida was halted at the behest of Governor DeSantis who claimed no candidates were aligned with state policies (Gary, 2025). A video compilation of the four candidates' open forums was posted on social media by a right-wing think tank claiming that they were "ALL radical DEI progressives…" (CommiesOnCampus, @CommiesOnCampus, 2025). It would require me to be completely devoid of empathy to follow this up with a blanket admonishment of all university administrators who are not loudly protesting anti-DEI efforts. Simply participating in an interview process like the one at the University of Florida, the state of Florida's HPWLG, can foreclose on professional opportunities.

However, there are risks that come with administrators remaining quiet, compliant, and complicit – namely for the purpose of this student, equitable access and belonging for Black students at HPWLGs and the broader land-grant legacy of being equitable institutions that would improve the livelihood of everyday people through teaching, research, and extension (Hurdle, 2025; Kerstin-Lark et al., 2024). To combat passive responses to what may feel like an insurmountable climate, I recommend that administrators seek partnerships both inter- and intra-institutionally. In other words, there are power in numbers and collective initiatives to oppose anti-DEI measures. Within their institution, administrators should prioritize the development of a collective body composed of other institutional actors including the board of trustees. Beyond their institution, partnering with administrators at peer institutions could strengthen efforts to oppose anti-DEI efforts and develop strategic ways to collectively navigate this climate.

Implications for Research

Interviews with the five participants in the present study illuminated the broader racialized organizational structure and competing institutional priorities that shaped the recruitment and enrollment processes of Black prospective students at Magnolia University. Historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions are infrequent cites of critical scholarship regarding college admissions practices. The ways in which these institutions engage with prospective Black students within the current post-race conscious and anti-DEI landscape is similarly understudied. As such, this study is a necessary addition to what I hope will be a growing body of literature.

While the TREES program was, inadvertently, a central focus in understanding Magnolia engaged with prospective Black students, it was not the bounded system for this case study. With that said, a more comprehensive understanding of such a program would improve our scholarly and practical knowledge regarding the ways in which such a program could support Black student recruitment, enrollment, and retention. A bounded case could include interviews with staff members and current TREES counselors (like the present study) as well as prospective student participants, parents/guardians/loved ones of prospective students, alumni of the program enrolled at Magnolia and elsewhere, and high school counselors. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program, the ways in which it supports Black students regardless of their post-secondary destinations, and how the collective, longitudinal impact is shaped by evolving legislative and funding structures.

In keeping with Star's guiding value of being a catalyst for change and their desire to be involved in institutional reform, participatory action research that centers the voices and needs of current Black student (leaders) would leverage the pre-existing student-led structure of the

organization while prioritizing the needs of affiliated students and staff members. Should institutional funding drastically change with future state-level legislation, a reimagining of the program may, unfortunately, be necessary. As such, participatory action research could leverage and extend the pre-existing embodied student agency within the program while helping continued navigation of evolving macro-level forces.

While beyond the scope of the current study, I find value in scholarship (and practice) that explores the recruitment pipeline across an institution. Admittedly, my long-term professional experience as an admissions representative inhibited my own conceptualization of "recruitment." I was reminded throughout this study that it is far more expansive than the initiatives and efforts housed within an undergraduate admissions office. In other words, there are several offices and individuals at HPWLGs that interact with prospective Black students and support them through the recruitment and enrollment processes.

In an effort to continue interrogating and transforming institutional practices, research that extends beyond the undergraduate admissions office will be beneficial to the field. The present study began this work by including the perspectives of Smith, a staff member employed within one of Magnolia's academic colleges. Given the unique emphasis on extension and outreach for historically and predominantly white land-grant institutions, I believe including the work of outreach offices that engage with K-12 students would strengthen this scholarship. Furthermore, working towards a true "integrated recruitment effort" (Hossler, 2002) that emphasizes cohesive, collaboration between outreach offices, student affairs, academic campus partners, and undergraduate admissions offices would provide a more expansive understanding of the ways in which HPWLGs engage with prospective Black students.

Finally, research that interrogates the institutional funding of Black student recruitment

and enrollment initiatives at HPWLGs is needed. The centrality of funding concerns across the participant pool was one of the more surprising occurrences for me. These findings support scholarship of Poon and colleagues (2023) and further necessitate the application of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983) as an analytic framework for this line of research at HPWLGs.

That I want to celebrate this accomplishment and this journey as I am so often (guilty) of moving right along to whatever pot that's been boiling on the back burner of my life. But don't want to lose the essence of the "catalyst for change" spirit that Star so eloquently shared.

Conclusion

As with many dissertations, this study has been many years in the making. Informed by my personal transformation after being a student and professional admissions staff member within an undergraduate admissions office at a historically and predominantly white land-grant in the Deep South. Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations was a useful analytic lens given the uniquely racialized history of HPWLGs. That "racial inequality is not merely 'in' organizations but 'of' them" was a guiding quote for this work. Throughout this study, I demonstrated how the negative credentialing of Blackness served as an external force for the broader anti-DEI sociopolitical climate in which Magnolia University was situated. This credentialing shaped the agency of the students and staff participants who were responsible for engaging with prospective Black students. Their agency was often mediated by unequal resource distribution that disproportionately deprioritized Black student organizations and left professional staff members deeply concerned about the future of initiatives that supported Black prospective students across the state.

Ultimately, Magnolia University is at a crossroads that will be dictated by ongoing institutional responses to the increasingly hostile anti-DEI legal landscape of the state. Should

university administrators continue the trend of prioritizing (over)compliance to inequitable legislation, espoused values of equity and inclusion will have been nothing more than superficial commitments. If HPWLG institutional actors with political power – particularly staff members (myself included) and senior-level administrators – claim to believe in these espoused values, it is critical that we, too, actively choose to be catalysts for change.

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Katie Morgan

From: IRB Administration
Sent: Wednesday, July 17, 2024 2:44 PM
To: Katie Morgan
Cc: Hannah Baggett; William Murrah
Subject: Morgan Approval, Exempt Protocol #24-969 EX 2407, "An Exploration of Recruitment and Enrollment Practices at One Land-Grant Institution: A Case Study"
Attachments: Investigators Responsibilities rev 1-2011.docx; Morgan 24-969 EX 2407 New Rev.pdf

Use IRB Submission Page for protocol-related submissions and IRBadmin@auburn.edu for questions and information.
The IRB only accepts forms posted at https://cws.auburn.edu/vpr/compliance/humansubjects/?Forms and submitted electronically.

Dear Ms. Morgan,

Your protocol titled "An Exploration of Recruitment and Enrollment Practices at One Land-Grant Institution: A Case Study" has been approved by the IRB as "Exempt" under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104(b)(2). Attached is a copy of your approved request.

Official notice:
This e-mail serves as official notice that your protocol has been approved. By accepting this approval, you also accept your responsibilities associated with this approval. Details of your responsibilities are attached. Please print and retain.

Expiration:
Continuing review of this Exempt protocol is not required; however, all modification/revisions to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB.

When you have completed all research activities, have no plans to collect additional data and have destroyed all identifiable information as approved by the IRB, please notify this office via e-mail. A final report is no longer required for Exempt protocols.

PLEASE NOTE: If any unfunded, IRB-approved study should later receive funding, you must submit a MODIFICATION REQUEST for IRB review. In the request, identify the funding source/sponsor and AU OSP number. Also, revise IRB-stamped consent documents to include the Sponsor at the top of page 1 and the "Who will see study data?" section of consent documents." (see online template consent documents).

Best wishes for success with your research!

IRB Admin
Office of Research Compliance
Auburn University
540 Devall Drive
Auburn, AL

Appendix 2: Professional Staff Member Recruitment Email

Dear [First Name],

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Katie Morgan and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at Auburn University. I am reaching out to you to ask if you might be willing to participate in a research study that seeks to explore undergraduate recruitment and enrollment practices and how various pieces of legislation shape these practices at one land-grant institution. I am the primary investigator for this study. The title of the study is "***An Exploration of Recruitment and Enrollment Practices at One Land-Grant Institution: A Case Study.***"

In this study, I am exploring how land-grant institutions interact with prospective students, particularly Black students, before and after admissions decisions are made. Said differently, this study will explore how students are recruited (i.e., encouraged to apply for admission) and enrolled (i.e., encouraged to enroll after being admitted) at land-grant institutions. I am also interested in better understanding the role that on-going state and federal legislation play in these interactions.

One component of this study is speaking directly with university employees like yourself to learn more about their experiences in their role as it relates to recruiting and enrolling future undergraduate students. The study involves participating in a set of 1-2 open-ended interviews that will take place over Zoom, the phone, or in-person. Each interview will be no more than 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will also have the opportunity to confidentially share relevant documents (like training manuals and institutional policies related to recruiting and enrolling students). If you complete two interviews and upload documents, your total time commitment would be no more than 2.25 hours.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete the Research Participant Interest Form [hyperlink to online form]. If selected to participate, I will contact you to set up a convenient time for an initial interview. If you have any questions, I can be reached at either kmm0025@auburn.edu or 334.703.1717.

Thank you for considering being a part of this study! Your participation is a vital part of better understanding how prospective students are being recruited to apply to and enroll at land-grant institutions. My hope is the results of this study will contribute to knowledge of ways land-grants can continue to best interact with future students and fulfill their mission of being accessible institutions of higher education.

All the best,
Katie

[Professional Email Signature]

Appendix 3: Outreach Email to Student Organization Coordinators

Dear [Coordinator's First Name],

I am emailing you today in the hopes that you can assist me in identifying participants for my dissertation study. I am studying the ways in which students, particularly Black students, are recruited to apply to and enroll at land-grant institutions. I am also interested in exploring the role that on-going state and federal legislation play in these recruitment and enrollment practices.

Please note that the students and their institution will be de-identified and will remain confidential. I will use pseudonyms for students and the university in interview transcripts, data analysis, and written reports.

Can you please forward my invitation (which is included below) to current [student leader title]? I am hoping you will encourage students who meet the participation criteria and are interested in participating to complete the Research Participant Interest Form at their earliest convenience.

I really appreciate your helping in recruiting students for this study! By participating, these student leaders will contribute to a better understanding of how prospective students are being recruited to apply to and enroll at land-grant institutions.

Thank you,
Katie

Dear [Student Leader Role Title],

My name is Katie Morgan and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at Auburn University. I am reaching out to you to ask if you might be willing to participate in a research study that seeks to explore undergraduate recruitment and enrollment practices and how various pieces of legislation shape these practices at one land-grant institution. I am the primary investigator for this study. The title of the study is "***An Exploration of Recruitment and Enrollment Practices at One Land-Grant Institution: A Case Study***"

In this study, I am exploring how land-grant institutions interact with prospective students, particularly Black students, before and after admissions decisions are made. Said differently, this study will explore how students are recruited to apply to and enroll at land-grant institutions. I am also interested in better understanding the role that on-going state and federal legislation play in these interactions.

One component of this study is speaking directly with current undergraduate student leaders (like yourself) to learn more about their experiences in their role as it relates to recruiting and enrolling future undergraduate students. Overall, the study would involve participating in a set of 1-2 open-ended interviews that will take place over Zoom, the phone, or in-person. Each interview will be no more than 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will also have the opportunity to confidentially share relevant

documents (like training manuals and institutional policies related to recruiting and enrolling students). If you complete two interviews and upload documents, your total time commitment would be no more than 2.25 hours.

Participants should be:

1) At least 18 years old
2) Directly involved with recruiting and enrolling future students and/or responsible for policy development and compliance related to recruitment and enrollment practices.
3) Serving as a [Student Leader Role Title] since at least January 2023

If you meet all three of the above participation criteria, please complete the Research Participant Interest Form [hyperlink to form]. If selected to participate, I will contact you to set up a convenient time for an initial interview. If you have any questions, I can be reached at either kmm0025@auburn.edu or 334.703.1717.

Thank you for considering being a part of this study! Your participation is a vital part of better understanding how prospective students are being recruited to apply to and enroll at land-grant institutions. My hope is the results of this study will contribute to knowledge of ways land-grants can continue to best interact with future students and fulfill their mission of being accessible institutions of higher education.

All the best,
Katie

[Professional Email Signature]

AUBURN UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

INFORMATION LETTER
for a Research Study entitled
"*An Exploration of Recruitment and Enrollment Practices at One Land-Grant Institution: A Case Study*"

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to explore undergraduate recruitment and enrollment practices at one land-grant institution and how various pieces of legislation shape these practices.

The study is being conducted by Katie Morgan, doctoral candidate, under the direction of Dr. Hannah Baggett, Associate Professor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology at Auburn University.

You are invited to participate because you are:

1. at least 18 years old
2. employed as a professional admissions staff member, employed as a senior university administrator, or serving in an undergraduate student leadership role at your university since at least January 2023
3. either directly involved with recruiting and enrolling future students and/or are responsible for policy development and compliance related to recruitment and enrollment practices

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a set of 1-2 open-ended interviews lasting no more than 60 minutes each to provide information about your experiences in your professional role. The interviews will be conducted by Katie Morgan, the Primary Investigator (PI), via Zoom, phone, or in-person at a time that is convenient for you. You will also have the opportunity to share relevant documents (like training manuals and institutional policies). With your permission the PI will contact you for a short follow-up either by phone or by email if any clarification is necessary or if any additional questions might arise. Your total time commitment will be no more than 2.25 hours.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and maintaining your confidentiality is of the utmost concern to the research team. Your personal identity and your institution will be kept confidential. You have been asked to select a pseudonym (a fake name) to use for the study. Information collected during the research process

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460: Fax: 334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu

may be used for scholarly publications or research presentations, but the identities of all research participants and the institution will remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, there are no direct benefits; however, it might provide you with an opportunity to reflect on the work you are doing and share your knowledge and experiences with others. Additionally, the generalizable benefits of this could improve policies and practices related to recruiting and enrolling future undergraduate students at land-grant institutions across the United States.

Will you receive compensation for participating? Upon completion of your part of the study, you may be compensated with a $15 Visa gift card sent to your preferred email address.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University; the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, or Technology; or the research team.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or later by contacting either Katie Morgan at kmm0025@auburn.edu or 334.703.1717 or Dr. Hannah Baggett at hcb0017@auburn.edu or 334.844.3024.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this Document for use from
07/06/2024 to ----------
Protocol # 24-969 EX 2407

Appendix 5: Interview Domains

Individual interviews will seek to explore each participant's lived experience in their role and responsibility of recruiting and enrolling future students to the land-grant institution with which they are affiliated. In keeping with Bhattacharya's (2020) guidance, the following domains will guide the interview and will allow for the necessary flexibility to conduct semi-structured, open-ended, and conversational interviews. Here, flexibility means that it is possible that not all questions will be answered in one interview and domains will be used to encourage participants to go into more detail when necessary and beneficial.

Prompts will focus on the following domains:

General Introductions

- How they came into their professional/student leadership role

Experiences with their role

- Involvement with recruiting and enrolling students
- Involvement with institutional policy development and compliance
- Navigating various institutional priorities
- Professional routines

Role of Land-Grant Institutional Status

- For their role/job responsibilities
- Relevance to recruiting and enrolling students

Role of state and federal legislation

- Institutional and individual interpretations
- Influence on their role/job responsibilities
- Relevance to recruiting and enrolling students

Agency in their role

- Decision-making
- Influence of institutional policies, institutional priorities, and various pieces of legislation

Institutional documents

- Relevance to recruiting and enrolling students
- Navigating various institutional priorities