

UC Santa Cruz Faculty of Color: Exposing and Reforming Structures of Whiteness in Leadership



By Dr. Rebecca Covarrubias and Katherine Quinteros



Author Bios



Dr. Rebecca Covarrubias is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Faculty Director of the Collaborative Research for Equity in Action (CREA) research group at UC Santa Cruz. As a social and cultural psychologist, she examines how institutional structures perpetuate educational inequity by privileging middle-class, white ways of being and thereby undermining experiences of low-income, first-generation students of color. She then examines how to reverse these effects through culturally-informed approaches that draw attention to students' cultural strengths. With a team of student researchers and other critical partners, she works to translate these findings into actionable practices that can shift the culture of institutions and can help students thrive.



Katherine Quinteros is a third-year doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at UC Santa Cruz. As part of the Collaborative Research for Equity in Action (CREA) research group, she aims to create and support social change efforts with an action-oriented research agenda. Her research interests focus on understanding how minoritized students and faculty navigate and resist dominant cultural practices within higher education institutions.



Introduction

After seven years of becoming a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), UC Santa Cruz launched a campus-wide strategy to hire 100 more faculty over the next decade. Key goals of this strategy are to advance research impact, diversify faculty, and improve servingness, a shift from enrolling racially- and economically-minoritized students to a holistic emphasis in serving their needs (Garcia, 2017). Balancing these goals requires consideration of campus leaders, specifically Faculty of Color (FOC), who often take on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts disproportionately (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). To further understand how the labor of FOC helps build an organizational identity as a research-intensive (R1) HSI, this research brief examines how FOC experience leadership structures within this context.

In predominantly white institutions, FOC encounter several barriers and challenges to leadership. This can involve a lack of structural diversity (e.g., demographic representation; Freeman Jr. et al., 2019; Han, 2018), disproportionate burdens of DEI work (Guillaume, 2020; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Padilla, 1994), and a devaluation of such DEI contributions in tenure and promotion review criteria (Baez, 2000; Griffin, 2013). At four-year public R1 HSIs, like UC Santa Cruz, less is known about the racialized barriers FOC encounter in leadership roles as they balance unique priorities related to servingness, research, and DEI work.

Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Tribal Colleges and Universities, HSIs were not developed with a mission to serve minoritized student populations. For this reason, many HSIs still operate as traditionally white institutions (Ledesma & Burciaga, 2015), thus maintaining structures of whiteness in higher education.

Whiteness, as a system of dominance, delegitimizes ways of knowing that deviate from these norms, including the varied contributions of FOC (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Kubota, 2019; Pérez-Huber, 2009; Settles et al., 2020; Swan, 2017). In developing a critical examination of whiteness in higher education, our research examined how power structures are “exposed, challenged, and re-formed” (Owen, 2007; p. 218). Specifically, we examined how FOC experience whiteness in structures of leadership at UC Santa Cruz, and how their own leadership efforts can reform such structures. To gain an understanding of this context, we conducted semi-structured interviews, ranging from 60–90 minutes, with 16 FOC. Nine faculty identified as Latinx, three as Asian American, two as multi-racial, one as Black, and one as Indigenous. The majority (n=10) identified as women, with five identifying as men and one as gender non-conforming. The sample included eight full professors, four associate professors, and four assistant professors.

Research Findings

FOC shared three ways in which structures of whiteness are demonstrated in university leadership. This included structural diversity of leadership, devaluation of FOC leadership efforts, and undemocratic decision-making. The FOC of this study reformed such structures by focusing their leadership efforts on the needs, voices, and lived experiences of People of Color at the university. In doing so, they promoted collective on-the-ground activities and collaborative approaches.

Question 1: How do FOC experience whiteness in structures of leadership?

Whiteness is embedded in the structural diversity of leadership and preferences for leadership characteristics.

Dr. D shared: “This university is a place in which the appointed positions are often white men... [and] white women...” adding that “[w]hen there is an administrator of color... [they are] explicitly chosen for their supposed apolitical, neutral stance.” In this way, whiteness is centered even in decisions about which FOC are selected into leadership positions. Dr. D concluded that to access upper-level leadership positions, FOC may be expected to assimilate into existing practices and are discouraged to initiate change. A culture of whiteness assumes and uses “neutrality” to maintain the status quo.

Whiteness in leadership devalues DEI efforts of FOC.

FOC shared how their efforts as change leaders were invalidated by senior leadership. Dr. H described that because DEI leadership was often considered service work and because “service” was defined narrowly (e.g., senate committee work) in the review process, the full contributions of her community-engaged efforts were often ignored. Such institutionalized structures undermine how DEI contributions of FOC sustain the university. Consequently, FOC carried disproportionate workloads because they took on additional service roles that fit more traditional definitions (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Padilla, 1994). This invalidation of DEI leadership made FOC have a “difficult time getting tenure”, as research productivity was regarded as the golden metric, especially in R1 settings (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Patton, 2016; Trejo, 2020).

Whiteness is reflected in undemocratic processes that undermine shared governance. FOC observed that campus leadership functioned in a top-down, undemocratic manner. Dr. B noted a trend in which campus leaders sent the message that, “I’m in charge and I don’t have to tell you anything.” Some FOC acknowledged the competing demands of campus leadership. Dr. B noted that such

leaders “probably are dealing with a hell of a lot of things behind closed doors.” Still, Dr. B and others argued that the lack of transparency in the communication from campus administrators, including the limitations they confronted, facilitated mistrust and feelings of exclusion from critical campus decisions. Top-down approaches that do not center the experiences of minoritized groups undermine participatory and reflexive practices that lend to building an inclusive climate that is collectively guided. Such practices also help to disrupt a white supremacy culture of traditional power norms (i.e., where power is only held by a few rather than shared) often rooted in hyper-individualism.

Question 2: How do FOC reform such structures?

FOC leadership efforts center those on the margins.

FOC viewed leadership as fostering equity and removing barriers for minoritized groups. For Dr. P, the aim of leadership was to figure out “how to make [academia] more inclusive and more accessible [for students].” Dr. O described leadership as “wanting to pave the way for ... People of Color coming behind you.” FOC importantly linked leadership to social justice that centered minoritized groups and built inclusivity (Delgado et al., 2017).

FOC leadership efforts engage grassroots processes.

FOC advocated for on-the-ground grassroots leadership driven by dedicated people committed to a cause. Dr. B noted that grassroots leaders do this work “at great personal cost because they believe in a cause.” For example, Dr. G created a critical retention space for minoritized students on campus while recognizing that “none of it is going to count [for tenure].” Yet, Dr. G could not walk away because it “makes everything else feel meaningful.” This highlights how FOC remain committed to building grassroots spaces “where real change can happen”, even at the cost of their own career advancement.

FOC leadership efforts center collaboration. FOC leadership highlighted “collaborative governance”, as Dr. I noted. FOC explained the importance of three steps in collaboration. First, FOC shared that engaging in *observation* to learn important information was crucial for understanding community needs before initiating action. Second, *listening* enabled FOC leaders to “notice when someone isn’t being heard and making sure that they’re being heard.” Finally, *adaptation* allowed for flexibility and responsiveness in one’s role, including knowing when to take lead or step back while working toward a common goal.

Implications for Practice

UC Santa Cruz FOC both exposed and navigated structures of whiteness within leadership. FOC shared how leadership demonstrated a preference for whiteness in structural diversity, in review criteria that ignored their varied contributions, and in undemocratic approaches that undermined shared governance. In response to these dynamics, FOC adopted leadership practices which centered those on the margins, utilized grassroots efforts, and embraced collaboration. The collective voices of FOC call for a need to transform structures of leadership. This need stems from a goal to build a more racially-just, equitable institution that can better serve the needs and reflect the cultural realities of an increasingly diverse student demographic.

We offer four recommendations that may promote servingness at a UC HSI and for emerging UC HSIs with regards to leadership. This means supporting institutional structures and adopting practices that are race-conscious, grounded in equity, and disruptive towards white dominance.

1. Enhance structural diversity (Garcia et al., 2019; Ledesma & Burciago, 2015). Improving structural diversity can range from hiring more FOC who are committed to disrupting whiteness to shifting the selection processes by interrogating white-centric conceptualizations of who is identified as a leader. Criteria can include demonstrated ability to: a) lead, recruit, and support diverse teams b) advance DEI c) employ anti-racist and collaborative practices.

2. Reject bureaucratic hierarchies that undermine collaboration (Garcia, 2018; Ledesma & Burciago, 2015). FOC modeled collaboration in their leadership and noted how top-down approaches undermine shared governance. A racially-just approach intentionally includes voices and representation of FOC—and others who have been marginalized—especially within decision-making processes.

3. Empower grassroots leadership (Petrov & Garcia, 2021). Grassroots leaders work to change inequitable structures of whiteness to better reflect an organizational identity rooted in servingness. Working toward a racially-just leadership structure means empowering grassroots efforts, in ways that do not co-opt or water down the processes.

4. Value and reward the leadership efforts of FOC.

Restrictive evaluation criteria undervalue the varied contributions of FOC (e.g., grassroots leadership). Shifting narrow and rigid metrics can better reward and honor the diversity of skills and efforts required to support and advance a mission of servingness.

Conclusion

As UC Santa Cruz aims to become an inclusive space for all its members (i.e., students, staff, and faculty), a strong commitment to the needs and priorities of these members is critical. FOC play a pivotal role in recognizing, representing, and addressing the needs of the communities they serve as they bring varied strengths to these endeavors. Transformative leadership can promote capacity and commitment to recognize these various strengths as avenues toward social change in the university.

Demonstrating this direction, this past year the Center for Racial Justice at UC Santa Cruz led a three-part webinar campus-wide discussion on transforming structures of whiteness within university leadership¹. Inspired by these research findings, the conversations aimed to center the voices of minoritized faculty and staff and offer a collective space where key stakeholders (e.g., staff, faculty, deans, administrators) can develop responses to these structural inequities. These conversations confirm a need for visionary change in how we regard and value the contributions of FOC and those engaged in DEI work, especially in formalized review structures. Such transformation is critical for FOC retention and success and for an educational system striving to advance a mission of servingness.

¹ Read more here: <https://crjucsc.com/news-and-events>

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