

Racialized Equity Labor, University Appropriation and Student Resistance

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ABSTRACT

We coin the term “racialized equity labor” to describe the often uncompensated efforts of people of color to address systematic racism and racial marginalization within organizations. Using a year-long ethnographic and interview study of a majority-minority public university, we focus specifically on the racialized equity labor of college students who, like many faculty and staff of color, often labor to make their campuses comfortable and functional for historically underrepresented populations. We identify a cycle of racialized labor appropriation whereby: 1) people of color identify problems in the racial environment of their organizations and work to solve them; 2) leadership responds by blocking efforts and/or denying issues; 3) external and/or internal pressures force introspection and push leaders to resolve an organizational threat (e.g., to the university’s public image of diversity); and finally, 4) leadership appropriates racialized equity labor, and in doing so converts it into a diluted diversity initiative. Those engaged in racialized equity labor may resist appropriation, but the cycle takes a toll on activists. The ways in which organizations respond to racialized equity labor offers insight into the reproduction of racial inequities, despite the hard work of people of color to create meaningful racial change.

KEYWORDS: racialized equity labor; racialized organizations; diversity work; student activism; institutional Whiteness.

“This school is run on student labor.” -Gabriel

In recent years, students of color from around the United States have demanded that their colleges and universities address systemic and structural racism.¹ Their demands also reveal the extensive labor that students from historically underrepresented groups often undertake to make universities comfortable for those who do not identify as White. For example, a 2015 statement by Black students at the University of Missouri reads:

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1 See <http://www.thedemands.org> for demands from 80 campuses and groups.

It is important to note that, as students, it is not our job to ensure that the policies and practices of the University of Missouri work to maintain a safe, secure and unbiased campus climate for all of its students. We do understand, however, that change does not happen without a catalyst. [We have] invested time, money, intellectual capital and excessive energy to bring to the forefront these issues and to get administration on board so that we, as students, may turn our primary focus back to what we are on campus to do: obtain our degrees.

Although scholarship acknowledges the labor of faculty and staff of color to improve the racial environment in universities (see [Ahmed 2012](#); [Hirshfield and Joseph 2011](#); [Matthew 2016](#); [Moore 2017](#)), the efforts of racially minoritized students are often overlooked.²

We offer the term “racialized equity labor” to describe the struggle of organizational actors, from a variety of positions, to address race-based marginalization and inequality. People of color typically engage in this labor, although some White allies may join them. In many organizations, like universities, racialized equity labor goes undercompensated, uncompensated, or even punished. Leadership often attempts to appropriate it as a solution for organizational challenges, such as achieving a positive reputation or meeting external standards. In the process, racialized equity labor may be converted into something less transformative.

In this study we ask: What does the racialized equity labor of college students look like? What is the process by which universities utilize this labor? And how do student activists experience and respond to university appropriation? Our data are drawn from a year-long ethnographic study of a public majority-minority institution; we highlight interviews with student activists, most of whom are Black or Latinx and devote time, energy, and resources to racialized equity labor—triangulating their accounts with reports by other actors. We describe a cycle of racialized labor appropriation: 1) people of color identify problems in the racial environment of their organizations and work to solve them; 2) leadership responds by blocking efforts and/or denying issues; 3) external and/or internal pressures force introspection and push leaders to resolve an organizational threat (e.g., to the university’s public image of diversity); and finally, 4) leadership appropriates racialized equity labor, and in doing so converts it into a diluted diversity initiative. We argue that activists may respond by resisting appropriation, but participating in the cycle comes at a price.

UNIVERSITIES AS RACIALIZED ORGANIZATIONS

[Ray \(2019\)](#), building on the work of [Bonilla-Silva \(1997\)](#) and [Omi and Winant \(2014\)](#), articulates racialized organizations theory, which recognizes organizations as a meso-level setting in which both individual- and macro-level racial inequality are reproduced through racialized practices and policies; as such, organizations are both embedded in and supportive of larger racialized structures. Universities are no exception. However, the nature of universities as racialized organizations has changed over time, as Whites have employed different strategies to hoard educational opportunities through higher education ([Berrey 2015](#); [Warikoo 2016](#); [Wooten 2015](#)).

Higher education in the United States was restricted to Whites until after the Civil War, when Black colleges and universities developed. It was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that desegregation of predominately White institutions (PWIs) occurred ([Haynes 2006](#)). Initially, affirmative action policies boosted the enrollment of students of color. For Latinx students, demographic growth and increases in high school graduation also supported college attendance ([Fry 2011](#)). Legal challenges, however, have dismantled affirmative action, limiting the presence of students of color in top universities ([Ashkenas, Park, and Pearce 2017](#); [Berrey 2015](#); [Moore 2018](#)). Currently, around 13 percent of undergraduates identify as Black and 18 percent as Latinx

2 We use “minoritized” instead of “minority” to accentuate the ongoing, socially constructed process of marginalization that occurs even when groups subject to racial and/or ethnic discrimination represent a numerical majority in specific institutional contexts (see [Benitez 2010](#)).

(NCES 2017), but they are mostly concentrated in open-access and for-profit colleges (Carnevale 2016; Cottom 2017).

PWIs face widespread pressure to serve a more racially heterogeneous population (Karabel 2005; Warikoo 2016). However, public perception of diversity is often more consequential than numeric diversity. Most schools include a small percentage of affluent or high-achieving students of color who are expected to slide into existing infrastructure, without drawing attention to racial inequities in school policies and practices (see Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015). Not surprisingly, PWIs can be uncomfortable, even hostile, for students of color (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Lee and LaDousa 2015; Wilkins 2014; Strayhorn 2013). These students may experience racial microaggressions, receive messages that they do not belong, and encounter infrastructure that best serves White students (see Nenga, Alvarado, and Blyth 2015; Ray and Best 2015; Watkins, LaBarrie, and Appio 2010).

“Institutional Whiteness,” however, is not only about student body composition (Ahmed 2012; Brayboy 2003; Ray 2019; Urciuoli 2018). For example, as Vargas and Villa-Palomino’s (2018) study of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) indicates, Latinx students are rarely centered in HSI’s Title V programmatic efforts. Instead, colorblind logics benefitting White students dominate, even though it is Latinx students that qualify HSIs to compete for these funds. Majority-minority schools are often in effect White spaces because staff, faculty, and administrators are White, and practices and policies are modeled after PWIs (Vidal-Ortiz 2017). Indeed, most majority-minority institutions started as PWIs. Inequities in university leadership representation, in particular, may create a challenging environment for students from underrepresented backgrounds, as well as for faculty of color (Ahmed 2012; Matthew 2016; Moore 2017). Representational inequities among students can also mean that even on majority-minority campuses some minoritized groups remain numerically marginalized.

Racialized Equity Labor

Most campuses include some paid employees whose official job is “diversity work” that makes visible a stated (if not substantial) commitment to multiculturalism (Ahmed 2012). Faculty and staff of color who are not hired for this purpose are also often expected to engage in labor that creates the perception of diversity (Matthew 2016). Many are also motivated to push for substantial change, due to a deep commitment to “lift as we climb” (Moore 2017). As a consequence, women of color, in particular, experience “identity taxation,” as their marginalized social identities may lead to high levels of service commitments not experienced by their White peers (Hirshfield and Joseph 2011).

Students also play a key role in shaping the racial environment in universities, as evidenced in social movement scholarship on student protest. Campus “hotbeds of activism” during the 1960s were central to both the Civil Rights and Peace Movements (Rogers 2012; Van Dyke 1998). Student protest again came to a head in the 1990s, due to fears about losing gains established in the 1960s, such as classes in Chicano and African American studies (Armbruster-Sandoval 2017; Rhoads 1998). We are now entering a new period of activity as pockets of college students—particularly students of color—have been invigorated around issues of racial discrimination, student debt, and immigration policy. In fact, national data show the highest percentage of students, especially students of color, who indicate there is a “very good chance” they would participate in a protest since the beginning of data collection in 1967 (Eagan et al. 2016).

Thinking comprehensively about the labor of students, staff, and faculty of color is useful, as these groups typically support each other. Their efforts to address systematic racism and racial marginalization can be understood as racialized equity labor. The labor is racialized in terms of who does it (the burden is not shared across racial groups) and the driving need; institutional Whiteness ensures that, even at majority-minority institutions, people of color often feel like outsiders. Because efforts to improve conditions are often uncompensated, it is more accurately called “labor” than “work,” which

implies payment.³ This is especially problematic because, given the racialization of wealth, racialized equity laborers often come from low-income backgrounds and/or were the first in their families to attend college. As a result, they often face additional struggles, such as limited economic resources and knowledge of how universities operate (see [Armstrong and Hamilton 2013](#)).

Racialized equity labor runs up against what [Thomas \(2018:141\)](#) refers to as a diversity regime—or “a set of meanings and practices that institutionalizes a benign commitment to diversity, and in doing so obscures, entrenches, and even intensifies existing racial inequality by failing to make fundamental changes in how power, resources, and opportunities are distributed.” Diversity regimes reflect a shift away from affirmative action, which was oriented toward redistributive social justice ([Berrey 2015](#)). Multiple forms of “difference” are placed on equal footing, thus deprioritizing efforts to address racial inequities ([Moore 2018](#)). Surface-level modifications, rather than organizational transformation, often result ([Bell and Hartmann 2008](#)). Thus, while racialized equity labor can encompass some aspects of institutional diversity work, the goals are rarely fully aligned, and are often in direct opposition.

Even when there is a stated commitment to “diversity,” organizational leadership may block efforts to promote structural change with a “brick wall” of resistance ([Ahmed 2012](#)). Tensions may come to a head in moments of forced inward organizational reflection. This may occur when external actors, such as accreditors, point out racial disparities (e.g., in graduation rates) or state legislatures apply pressure to serve historically underrepresented students within the state. Internal actors, such as student activists, can also prompt action. If visible enough, activists threaten a university’s image of diversity.

When seeking to quell unrest, save face, protect reputation, or address accountability issues, leadership may draw on racialized equity labor as a valuable resource and take credit for the labor of people of color. As [Ahmed \(2012:135\)](#) articulates, “The commitment of champions can be how the university itself appears to be committed. . . . The university might even appropriate their commitment ‘as its own.’” Appropriation, however, rarely leaves the original intent and extent of the project intact, as leadership tends to favor diversity initiatives that maintain the status quo.

Appropriation encourages resistance. Yet the ability to resist the racialized appropriation cycle depends on the positionality of those doing racialized equity labor. Students may be uniquely situated to vocally fight against their universities, as evidenced by engagement in forms of “spectacular speech” (e.g., hunger strikes, see [Armbruster-Sandoval 2017](#)) that faculty and staff may support, but rarely join, given financial reliance on employment by the university. At the same time, racialized equity labor can feel particularly risky for students, whose life trajectories may depend on college completion and success. The “taxation” (see [Hirshfield and Joseph 2011](#)) of those doing racialized equity labor often extends across the university and to other organizational settings, most notably workplaces, as discussed in the conclusion.

DATA AND METHODS

Data come from a case study of a majority-minority university conducted from July 2016 to August 2017. The study draws on interviews with students, staff, faculty, and administrators, as well as ethnographic observations, and university documents. Western U is a public research university comprised mostly of Latinx students, followed by Asian students, and finally Black students, who represent less than eight percent of the student body.⁴ A majority of students at Western U are first-generation and from low-income households. Less than one percent of the student body is from out-of-state. Like many public universities, the school operates on a limited budget.

3 Racialized equity labor falls under the broader umbrella of “racial tasks” as theorized by [Wingfield and Alston \(2013\)](#). Racial tasks include all forms of ideological, interactional, and physical labor that minoritized individuals must perform in White spaces (e.g., self-presentation efforts, emotional work, and efforts to smooth interactions with White peers).

4 The names of the university, student organizations, and individuals have been changed to pseudonyms.

Table 1. Characteristics of Student and Employee Samples

	<i>Purposeful Student Sample (N=22)</i>	<i>Random Student Sample (N=33)</i>	<i>University Employee Sample (N=20)</i>
Race			
Black	6	14	6
Latinx	13	19	9
White	3	0	2
Asian or Pacific Islander	0	0	3
Gender			
Woman	12	23	9
Man	8	10	11
Trans or Non-Binary	2	0	0

The larger project from which these data were derived examined how organizational features of majority-minority research universities shape the experiences and outcomes of low-income Black and Latinx students.⁵ We did not set out to study students' racialized equity labor; however, this issue emerged almost immediately in the 55 student interviews that we conducted. Our work relies heavily on a purposeful sample of 22 students who were identified as activists and leaders at Western U by a team of eight undergraduate researchers involved in the project. Table 1 displays the racial and gender breakdown of our student and employee samples. Note that activists are almost entirely students of color, and only around a third identify as men. Although not displayed in the table, several identified as queer and a few were undocumented. The multiply marginalized status of many activists may have made them more attuned to racial inequities on campus and more likely to take action.

The study also includes 33 interviews with a random sample of first and fourth year Black and Latinx students on campus, generated with the assistance of Western U registrar staff. Random student interviews offered a way to gauge student support of activist efforts and to obtain other reports on university infrastructure. Ten students included in the random sample, most of whom identified as Black, also happened to be self-identified activists. Because the Black student population on campus is so small, a high proportion are recruited into racialized equity labor. These interviews provided crucial data on one of the cases illustrated below. Women were overrepresented in the random sample due to the gender composition of students of color on campus, and to their greater likelihood of responding to our inquiries. Students in both the purposeful and random samples received a \$25 gift card as compensation.

Interview guides for both sets of respondents included questions about family background, academic experiences, finances, social life, friendships, racial relations on campus, and experiences with university personnel and infrastructure. Student activists were also asked to cover the history of the organizations and efforts in which they were involved, goals associated with their labor, and university responses. The first author conducted almost all of these interviews; the second author and a graduate student who was part of the research group conducted five of the 55 student interviews.

Gaining the trust of our student respondents, particularly activists, proved to be a challenge. Recruiting participants required having others vouch for us. As researchers, we occupy an outsider position to the students in our study, many of whom are distrustful of university representatives. The first author, who identifies as Latina, fielded a number of questions from suspicious student activists at the start of the interviews, such as: *How is this study going to benefit students and not exploit them?*

5 Latinx, while often treated as an ethnic category, is also a racial category; that is, it is externally imposed, and places those who share different ancestry and phenotype into hierarchical categories associated with distinct moral and cultural attributes (see Golash-Boza 2016).

And *Why are White people involved?* Several respondents expressed their relief upon seeing that the interviewer was a person of color. Interviewers were careful to reassure respondents of our interest in students' voices. Despite difficulties along the way, we believe that we were able to establish a level of trust that enabled students to engage in in-depth, frank discussions.

This article is told from the perspective of students; however, we use 20 interviews with university employees to support students' reports. Employees include 18 faculty and staff who had regular contact with student activists and two high-level administrators. Many were people of color who were also undertaking racialized equity labor. The second author conducted these interviews, and they covered job duties, interactions with students, race relations at Western U, and assessments of university support infrastructure for students of color. University personnel were not compensated for their participation as this was against university policy.

Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 2.5 hours, with the average interview lasting about an hour. They were audio-recorded and transcribed with respondents' permission. The first and second authors, the team of undergraduate students, and two graduate students conducted ethnographic observations of campus events, such as university-wide panel discussions, student organization meetings, cultural events, and student-led protests. University-related documents, including reports, posters, and online material were also collected and analyzed.

A total of 75 interview transcriptions and around 500 pages of fieldnotes were analyzed using the qualitative software program Dedoose. The first author coded student interviews, the second and third authors coded interviews with university employees, and the first and second authors coded ethnographic fieldnotes. Data analysis occurred in stages. We started with open coding. During this stage, authors coded for explicit mention or discussion of student labor and university appropriation, while also attending to new themes as they emerged from the data. Next, we applied focused codes to pinpoint university actions and processes, attitudes towards student activists, and the toll of student labor. We wrote and shared theoretical memos to explore themes and patterns, develop and test hypotheses, and refine theories, which we expanded into the core sections of the article.

FINDINGS: STUDENT LABOR AND UNIVERSITY APPROPRIATION

At Western U, students did a considerable amount of labor to make campus spaces welcoming, comfortable, and functional for historically underrepresented populations. They often engaged in recruitment work, effectively staffed and ran cultural spaces and groups at the university, advocated for the needs of marginalized students with the administration, and helped to build new infrastructure and programming. With few exceptions, students of color—especially women and queer students of color—did this work.

Despite its majority-minority status, Western U is a White space that many of our interviewees experienced as unsafe. Student respondents from both purposeful and random samples routinely mentioned the lack of representation among faculty, staff, and administrators. We received numerous reports of racial discrimination, concentrated among Black students. Latinx students were frequently the targets of anti-immigrant sentiments and online attacks. The presence of armed campus police was perceived as threatening, particularly by activists. Activists argued there was no accountability after campus police shot and killed a Brown student (armed only with a knife) one year before the study began. The election of Donald Trump also affected students' sense of physical safety and emotional wellbeing. In the wake of the election, many on campus needed support but could not find it. Intersecting and multiply marginalized identities related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and legal status compounded students' vulnerabilities. Thus, activists' engagement with racialized equity labor was a direct response to seemingly constant threats to their safety.

We observed a pattern characteristic of student-led racialized equity initiatives: students identified a need on campus, found a solution, and engaged in grassroots efforts, but encountered inaction or resistance from administration. They persisted, eventually succeeding in drawing the attention of

leadership. In response, university leadership appropriated student labor in ways that helped to solve pressing institutional problems, often transforming students' intended projects along the way. Below we illustrate this full cycle with two cases—the Multicultural Center and AfroDiaspora Hall.

The Multicultural Center

Western U provides very little cultural programming for its students. As a result, many different groups of students have spent years fighting for safe spaces to learn and celebrate their cultural histories, engage in their intersecting identities, recognize and confront inequities in university policies and infrastructure, and receive culturally-informed support services. The Multicultural Center (hereafter, the Center), a student-led and student-run initiative, may be situated in this longer legacy of student struggle for space in which to comfortably exist.

Days after the shooting of a student of color on Western U's campus, a group of students—still reeling from the traumatic events—attended a multi-university conference for students of color. When advised by students on other campuses to turn to their multicultural center for support, Western U students were both bewildered and angered that their campus did not offer one. As Fernando describes:

We're like, "What is a multicultural center?" . . . Towards the end of the conference, we were able to congregate and talk for real. [We asked,] "What are we going to do, having come to this conference, with the [violent] incident. . . on our minds?" [As] we spoke, we [realized that we] need a space for students to exist as who they are. Why don't we have these resources? We're first generation students of color, marginalized, and [in] this super conservative community. . . How can [the university] not have this support?

This moment launched a movement for a multicultural space.

Almost immediately, activists were confronted with administrative impediments. For example, they were told to reduce their group to 15 students, as leadership would not meet or correspond with more than that. This smaller group of students was then asked to put together an official proposal for the space. Respondents involved in the multicultural center movement recalled being overwhelmed by such a request, which seemed more appropriate for staff or faculty—not low-income, first-generation students who had to juggle paid labor and classwork, and had limited familiarity with how universities work. Administrators also took issue with students' desires to create a "safe space" solely for students of color, and articulated that it needed to be open to many different groups on campus. Angered by this, Vesta explained, "This university is a safe space for White folks. . . . It's only when marginalized folks [try to organize, it's] like, 'Oh look at them, they want to be alone.' And, it's like no."

Students also received inconsistent reports from administrators who claimed the large-scale campus development project included space for a multicultural center. The space, however, was not labeled in the plans. According to one high-level administrator, "So, it's dedicated but it's not. . . . It doesn't say in the plans 'Cultural Center' because. . . . We've dedicated a space for a cultural center, but I can't tell you where it is yet because I don't know, right." Although there was no official designated space for a multicultural center, the plans did include designated space for a pool. As one staff member who oversees numerous programs for first-generation, undocumented, and foster care system-involved students commented, this reflected university priorities: "Somewhere in the priority, you know, a multicultural center or a student center is not on that list. It's not on the immediate list. . . . There are discussions about having a natatorium [pool], but there's no discussion about a multicultural center."

Administration did not act until students involved in the movement for the Center became more vocal. Activists attended a system-wide meeting where, as Cynthia describes, "We spoke up in public

comment, asking about multicultural centers and really highlighting the fact that we don't have any, and we're advertised as [a] diverse [campus] . . . that [is] first generation and low income. And then the system board was asking questions about that, and that's when things started moving."

This public airing of student concerns, along with other events (see the next section), led the university to hire an external consultant to evaluate the school's strengths and challenges in relation to diversity and inclusion. Students were direct with the consultant, who produced a report calling for university action. As the report stated, "Western U students are excellent and primarily responsible for leading efforts to hold WU accountable and push the university to enhance its diversity efforts. While some faculty and staff have been supportive (particularly in light of recent campus protests), the students are leading in ways that might be expected or required of professional staff on some campuses." The report advised that not just one, but multiple, well-staffed cultural spaces would be needed.

These events forced an institutional response. Leadership offered students a small conference room seating roughly eleven people, for a campus of around 7,000 undergraduates. When officials announced the plans for opening the Center in an email sent to the campus community, they not only changed the name of the space, they also made no mention of the student labor that went into it. As Vesta reported, "We're like, 'Wait, they took the name, they took everything, but don't even acknowledge that it was students,' you know? This was announcing it as if it [were a Vice Chancellor's] initiative or something. . . . Way to invisibilize all the years of student work."

Students might have accepted invisibility if leadership had fully implemented their plans for the Center. Yet, the room provided by the university lacked funding, adequate space for gathering, a projector for speaker presentations, administrative support, and staff. As student organizers explained in a public statement posted online:

The Center at Western U would like to clarify that the space is currently not a department able to provide support and services for communities of color in stress. . . . Unfortunately the Center does not have professional staff with quality experience and knowledge specifically hired to serve the needs of the students of color on campus, and we hope students continue to ask our administration to provide the campus with a bigger space, funding, and resources that reflects the needs of students of color on campus and those with intersecting identities. So what is the Center currently? Great question! [It] is currently student run and student led. This means that everything done in the space is done by WU students of color, predominantly queer and trans students of color.

Racialized equity labor had been turned into diversity work: the school had interest in providing this space, especially on the heels of the negative cultural inclusion report. However, the Center remained under-resourced, limiting its impact.

AfroDiaspora Hall

Several years ago, Tasha and Tiffany, two enterprising Black women, founded AfroDiaspora Hall, a living/learning community whose mission is to increase retention and four-year graduation rates among Black students. The idea for AfroDiaspora Hall came about during their first year in college when the two women attended a conference for African and Black students that drew from several universities. In comparing Western U to other campuses with supportive programs for Black students, the two women saw that something needed to be done.

Their efforts to move AfroDiaspora Hall from idea to actualization entailed substantial racialized equity labor. As university officials confirmed, Tasha and Tiffany's work included routine meetings with top leadership and staff (as a housing representative explained, "I met with them weekly"), recruitment at orientation and other events, and acting as liaisons between Residence Life staff,

students, and their parents. They wrote grant proposals, hosted study sessions, and conducted workshops and other events (usually paying the expenses themselves, despite the fact that both women were from low-income households). They created a book loan program, which they operated out of their residence, formed a community partnership with the local Boys & Girls Club, and even organized Western U's first annual Black Family Day. They were not compensated for this labor and, at least initially, encountered university resistance.

For instance, Tasha and Tiffany had to contend with the accusation that they were being exclusionary in promoting a space for Black students “[There were] a lot of questions of like. . . ‘Why are you trying to seclude all the Black people?’ . . . [And responses like,] ‘We’re fine. We’re the most diverse campus, and we don’t need something like this. You’re gonna make the campus climate worse’ type of thing.” They also faced administrative barriers, including initial placement in an expensive apartment-style dorm that was antithetical to community building, and being assigned a White RA with no interest in AfroDiaspora Hall’s mission (despite having a qualified resident apply for the position). A miscommunication between Housing and Admissions resulted in AfroDiaspora Hall being cut by more than half of its residents; Tasha and Tiffany fielded angry calls from students and parents affected by this incident.

Paralleling actions across the country, in 2015 Western U’s Black Student Union issued a list of demands, which included a Black Resource Center. Black students on campus also protested what they considered a “hostile, anti-Black campus climate.” After these events, the external consultant was brought to campus. University officials began to take notice of AfroDiaspora Hall—even promoting the program to the consultant. Administrators, however, failed to mention that AfroDiaspora Hall is an entirely student-led effort. Tasha and Tiffany recalled the consultant’s shock upon hearing this:

People actually assumed this was a paid [position] or program on campus. But it was still being student ran. . . So that’s one of the things [the consultant] commented on. She was like, “Oh, I thought this was a university program because [I was] asking what [university] support [is available], [so] why is this student org coming up?”. . . And we’re like, “Maybe we should reintroduce ourselves. (Laughter). We are AfroDiaspora Hall. It’s us.” At that point, we started realizing like, okay. . . people are seeing us.

Shortly after the consultant submitted her report, the university started to publicly promote AfroDiaspora Hall as a housing and cultural option for Black students.

The administration, however, stopped short of recognizing the labor of Tasha, Tiffany, and other students involved in the initiative. As AfroDiaspora Hall’s faculty advisor recalled, Tasha and Tiffany were upset after a university official involved in campus climate used AfroDiaspora Hall as an example of university-provided support for Black students:

[The university official] said, “What is the university doing for you guys, to help? And Tasha and Tiffany were basically like, “Nothing, the university is not doing anything.” And then the campus [climate] person was like, “Well I’ve heard about this housing that they have for [Black] students.” And [the two women] were like, “No, we do that for ourselves. [Recently] the university has supported us, but this is our mission, our idea. It’s not the university giving to us.” They were really upset by that.

The university now advertises AfroDiaspora Hall on its website. But, as the two women reported, “It was almost like we had to prove ourselves in order to receive [university] support.” The housing unit continues to lack resources—making it impossible for it to be provisioned at a level consistent with the vision of its founders. Most recently, the university combined AfroDiaspora Hall and non-member students on the same floor, with some even in the same rooms.

The Multicultural Center and AfroDiaspora Hall are only two examples of student-led initiatives. We selected these cases as we interviewed the students at the center of the efforts, conducted parallel interviews with administrators and university employees, and thus had the most detailed information. However, five additional instantiations of the racialized labor appropriation cycle were reported to us; these involved the Black Student Union; an undocumented student ally group; Lambda (an LGBTQ organization that was, at the time, comprised of students of color); MEChA (an organization to promote Chicana unity and power); and a parallel Multicultural Center effort at the graduate level. These groups had varying levels of success in drawing organizational attention to the problems that they faced (step #3 in the cycle), and also experienced varying degrees of explicit appropriation. It is worth noting, however, that even when leadership ignores the struggles of people of color on campus, universities continue to benefit from racialized equity labor.

RESISTANCE TO UNIVERSITY APPROPRIATION

Activists rejected appropriation of their labor as “diversity work” primarily benefitting the university (Ahmed 2012). Most adopted a more explicit social justice orientation, and were frustrated when their labor was utilized to save money or achieve a public image of university commitment to diversity. They developed four techniques to resist appropriation of their labor: reject diversity discourse, go underground, reclaim university events, and protest.

Reject Diversity Discourse

Many activists developed sophisticated critiques of diversity discourse as utilized by university leadership. For example, when asked, “Do you think this university celebrates diversity?” Ricardo responded, “Western U promotes its diversity a lot. That’s the first statistic you see when you look. . . on the website. . . . It’s being promoted, but you know, Día de los Muertos is a big Latino event and we organize that. The Pride Week—that was Lambda. Black History month. . . that was Black Student Union.” What Ricardo is hinting at is the existence of a diversity regime, whereby a shallow organizational commitment to diversity obscures the racial equity labor that goes into producing racial inclusion.

When students refused to accept the dominant racial discourse on campus, they challenged the dominant cultural framework through which the administration made use of racialized labor. Alex explained, “We’re trying to advertise ourselves as this campus of inclusion, of diversity when we’re not. I know a lot of. . . the student leaders on our campus [are] coming to hate the word diversity ‘cause it’s so coined by these individuals with power to exploit. . . . Throwing [it] around like we’re a diverse campus—it’s disgusting.” Similarly, at one cultural event, an activist stated that she was “so tired of hearing diversity and the way administration uses this rhetoric to further its agenda.” She closed by yelling, “Fuck diversity!” and was met with thunderous cheers.

Go Underground

Some groups, at least initially, formed in secret and met off campus, in order to avoid further appropriation. According to Gabriel, “There’s that environment currently where if students organize something and it’s successful, they make sure that administration. . . does not get their hands on it. Because [we] know that over time they would take over it. . . . We’ve seen a lot of things that are student led, that are student initiated, being. . . retitled like, oh Western U has done this.” Activists not only feared the university would claim their labor as its own; they also feared that upon doing so, administrators would change, if not erase, the original intent. Indeed, when universities appropriate racialized equity labor, they often absorb the efforts of laborers, but not their goals. Going underground was an attempt to circumvent that process.

Reclaim University Events

Activists also found ways to reclaim university events that involved appropriation of their labor. For example, two high-level administrators were originally slated to speak at the grand opening ceremony of the Multicultural Center. Activists were upset by what they perceived as yet another university attempt to dilute and erase years of student labor. They successfully mobilized to have the officials taken off the ceremony's agenda. As a professor and advocate described, "One of my favorite moments of the year was the opening of the [Center]. . . . [Students] had given all these. . . radical speeches. And then [I was] looking and seeing a high level official at the very back, literally all by himself. [I was] watching the look on his face as speaker after speaker is getting up there and not thanking him."

In another case, undocumented students were asked to regularly serve on panels at UndocuAlly trainings for personnel and students at the school. However, many began to feel like the trainings were exploitative of undocumented student experiences and labor. One student used her time on the panel to assert that undocumented students are tokenized and minoritized by WU. She went on to claim that the university uses its undocumented student population in order to appear deeply committed to serving marginalized students; the school benefits from the free advertisement it receives when media outlets come to campus to interview and profile undocumented students. The student went on to criticize the undocumented student "trend" in recent scholarship and challenged attendees to hold their colleagues accountable for unethical research.

Protest

Finally, students utilized protest techniques. For example, during a groundbreaking ceremony for a campus development project, members of a recently formed activist group staged a protest in which they chanted, "We demand dignity and respect!" while holding signs that read, "We are done being your profit!" They also issued demands, including the call for a fully functioning and professionally-staffed multicultural center. This list of demands was later ceremonially delivered to top-level leadership in a loud and visible protest through an administrative office area. In another case, the Multicultural Center group led a number of digital protests online, organized around provocative and effective hashtags, such as #ExploitedStudentLabor.

THE TOLL OF STUDENT LABOR

Students engaged in racialized equity labor because they saw it as necessary to exist in spaces that many experienced as hostile. They communicated a deep-rooted commitment to serving their campus communities. Yet, this labor came at a personal cost.

Student activists were usually of color and often poor. With limited personal resources, many who engaged in racialized equity labor reported experiencing exhaustion, mental health concerns, hunger, and housing insecurity. As Gabriel explained:

I know some folks who have two jobs, and they [are] worried about paying rent, paying for food. It's a lot of student labor, and you have very weary students. . . very tired student leaders that. . . feel tied to those communities because they realize. . . they're the only ones that really have pushed for anything more, have kept fighting for things.

In what follows, we highlight the emotional costs of racialized equity labor, as well as the impact that it has on the academic and career progress of students of color.

The Emotional Toll

As Hochschild ([1983] 2012) explains, emotional labor is demanding and often falls to those who are already marginalized. The same dynamics were at play on campus. Student leaders reported three

primary drains on their emotional wellbeing: coping with administrators, dealing with unsupportive peers, and supporting communities in need.

Relations with administration were difficult. As Victor explained, “It can be bad between activist student leaders and administration because there is always that [administrative] sense of, ‘Oh they’re out to get me.’ When in reality, no, we are out to change the problems that exist within our university and [administrators] have the power to change them.” As Cynthia indicated, the combativeness was unwarranted—especially because power dynamics worked in the favor of administration: “[Administrators] are really taking. . . advantage of the fact that we are first generation and we are low income and that we are POC [people of color]. . . We are not gonna question somebody who’s older than us. . . . There are these weird power dynamics.” Students reported that administrators engaged in actions that highlighted power discrepancies, such as sending a copy of the receipt for Center furniture to involved students. Activists’ interpretation of this event was inflected by social class: Being from predominantly low-income households, they perceived that sending the receipt was an attempt to highlight how much students were costing the university. As one student put it, administrators wanted to “make sure we knew how much we were taking from student fees.”

When facing administration, student leaders were afraid of personal and community repercussions; they went in anticipating resistance and were prepared to be painted as “ungrateful.” As Carmen indicated:

It’s really annoying to see how the university takes advantage [of students] in every way that it can, but when we question it or when we stand up against it, they’re all ready to like whip us. . . . And me being undocumented, coming into the spaces and questioning admin. . . I’m scared, you know? I’m scared because I’m putting not only [myself] on the line, but also my communities. . . . They are basically saying, “We’re doing so much for you. How dare you question [us]? How dare you ask for more?” But I think we’re entitled to it, you know.

A high-level administrator confirmed this tense, and often difficult-to-navigate, relationship: “Sometimes a student protests [and] the [parent] in me wants to, while respecting the right, wants to say well why didn’t you just come and talk to me? Why did it happen this way? What happened to trying to work things out in a way that I value? . . . So sometimes things do hurt a little and bother me a little, but you can’t do your job unless you can let that go.” Thus while encounters were experienced as highly charged and personal on both ends, only students reported feeling unsafe.

Student leaders also consistently encountered racially charged backlash in response to protests and cultural events from other students on campus. Black student organizations, in particular, were often the targets of racism, with their events referred to as “ghetto” and, in one case, “nigger voodoo shit” by non-Black students. Immediately following Western U’s first Black Family Day, Black student organizers were met with an online barrage of racial slurs and messages, such as “What are all these ghetto Black people doing on campus?” Students were hurt by the comments of their peers and had to manage the responses of their upset parents who were now concerned about the school their youth attended.

Likewise, when the Black Student Union issued their demands, disapproving students took to Facebook to voice their opposition. As Nikki described, “The comments were basically saying. . . You don’t need resources on campus to excel [and] if you do [then] you’re dumb. If you’re not smart enough to excel on your own then you shouldn’t be here. . . . You don’t need resources just for your own race. . . . It was mostly White [students].” Latinx and undocumented students also found themselves on the receiving end of hate-filled comments online, usually overlaid with anti-immigrant sentiments. Alejandra, for example, recalls the backlash against students mobilizing for Chicano Studies: “We were also told some pretty nasty things, on Facebook especially. . . . They were [said] by other students, and I think a couple faculty. [Comments] like go back to your country if you want

[Chicano] studies.” The constant online presence of unsupportive students was so overwhelming that some activists chose to deactivate their social media profiles.

Even when peers did support the efforts of student activists, support usually did not entail involvement. In talking about the Center, Gabriel noted, “I think some students are supportive [but] they don’t want to deal with it because they know it’s very tedious work. So they’re like, ‘That’s great, I hope that works out for you, and I hope that when you have it we can use it.’” Similarly, Vesta explained:

More students. . . would come up to me and be like. . . “What are you doing to get the [Center]?” And I’m like. . . “I’m sorry, but what are you doing? I’m tired, I’m working with high schoolers, I’m doing research, I’m taking classes. . . . [and] I need to get paid. What are you doing? You can organize without me, you know? You don’t need me. . . Y’all are capable of organizing too, so organize.”

Vesta’s comments accentuate the frustration of dealing with unsupportive students. However, activists rarely blamed peers for the lack of help; rather they attributed responsibility to administrators specifically, and the education system generally, for expecting minoritized students to “keep their heads down” and “get through this with the least cost possible.”

Student leaders also described being exhausted and overwhelmed by the amount of emotional support they provided for other marginalized students. As Alejandra stated, “I think mental health is a big issue in our [Latinx] community. Especially when you’re constantly giving and giving and giving so much because you care about the organization, to the point where it starts to affect you because it’s so tiring and it’s so draining.” The situation was exacerbated by inadequate mental health services at Western U, whereby long waits (several weeks to a month) and a lack of practitioners of color made it challenging for students to seek professional help. Organizers thus had to incorporate a great deal of care work into their campus efforts, while they went without the same support.

Emotional labor became even more crucial after the election of Donald Trump. Activists disseminated information to frightened undocumented students, led protests, held open-mic nights, provided LGBTQ safe spaces, and organized healing circles. With this added labor, many student organizers were nearing their breaking point. According to one undocumented activist, “We were struggling ourselves. We didn’t know what to do. We were also worried. We didn’t know [how] to inform [undocumented students]. . . . [And we were] also looking for that support to bring to them as well. So [it’s] hard, you know.” Fearful of government policies that would target them, their families, and their communities, students needed support more than ever. Gabriel explained, “[Students] are afraid. . . . They really need the help [and] they’re not receiving it. . . . Communities are [sequestering] themselves [and] really tightening up together; they’re healing. . . And again. . . there’s no admin helping out, it’s a lot of student labor. I know student leaders that had a lot of folks cry on their shoulders and that’s very tiring for them.”

The Academic and Career Toll

The high degree of emotional labor, combined with time and resource demands, strained activists’ abilities to engage in their student role. As Nikki reported, “I’m pleased with the work that we did. But there’s costs. . . [especially to] academics, trying to balance both. That took a toll on me. . . . I didn’t know how to handle it right.”

Many activists reported either being placed on academic probation or knowing a student activist who had been academically dismissed. According to Alex:

The student leaders in our queer and trans community are exhausted. I would share a decent number of them [have been] academically dismissed. And I would argue that it was not because the academics were challenging, it was because they were balancing academics along with

everything else [and] they weren't being supported as who they were. So they were trying to do that themselves on top of staying on top of their academics, which is not fair. . . The campus advertis[es] itself as like this hub of diversity, hub of intersectional identity. And we do have that demographic, but then again that demographic is not being supported.

As Alex makes clear, the academic toll of student labor is not the result of academic inadequacy, but instead occurs when students must take on and navigate enormous responsibility.

Students were not the only ones to report the negative academic consequences of engaging in student labor. The limited professional support staff members on campus were also concerned. WU's social justice coordinator made the following observation:

It really is amazing how much stuff that they do. I'm also baffled and somewhat conflicted on how much they do. I get student involvement; however, I also want you to do what you need to do in the classroom. . . I mean they are. . . event planners and managers, right. And where are they finding [the] support [they need]? Yes they're finding it through individual folks, but how great would that be if there was a center where they can come. I pose that question.

Without a fully functioning multicultural center, activists had to take on functions that centers traditionally provide, and many of them experienced harsh academic consequences.

Although racialized equity labor is a major asset to organizations like universities, it is often unpaid and difficult to put on a resume. Reflecting on her college experience, Tiffany noted, "My family [is] like, 'You didn't do any research; you didn't do any internships.' And I'm like, 'I had AfroDiaspora Hall [and] that [took up all] my time.'" Tiffany developed many skills in college—but employers or graduate programs may not recognize them. If research on the college admissions penalty for students of color who are concerned with racism is any indication (see [Thornhill 2018](#)), applicants may even be penalized if they choose to disclose their involvement in racialized equity labor during college.

Many activists, who had been going full force in providing racialized equity labor, were suddenly adrift as they neared the end of school. For Stacey, this resulted in the painful decision to step down from her activist role:

I just recently left [my organization]. I was their Communications Director and our Historian. I left because I needed to figure certain things out personally. . . and they kind of got in the way. . . . I can't do both. . . . Either it's my career, because I'm about to graduate, or y'all. I'm still here for y'all, I'm still talking highly of y'all, and I'm still willing to help and support, but this I need to focus [on]. I'm cleaning certain stuff up for my career and then I'll be back. So, yes, I had to leave. . . . It was hard.

As Stacey continued to articulate, advancing her career was important primarily for her ability to give back in even more significant ways. She explained, "Let me go, take opportun[ities], and make bigger ones and then come back and see how I can apply it here."

Support staff also pointed out the ways in which student labor threatened future success. Recalling a meeting with a recently graduated student, one staff member explained:

I was at a meeting [with a] student who identified as being undocumented and as being. . . part of other marginalized communities. . . She graduated this May. And she was very pessimistic about her education here. She was very disappointed and felt like, "I did a lot of work on diversity. I did so much work that focused on educating others, but yet, I don't know what I'm gonna do after I graduate." For a student to leave so disappointed and to share this with other administrators, I thought was very sad and it also made me feel angry at the fact that our institution just bled her out.

This student was not alone, as many of our interviewees reported leaving Western U personally drained. As Fernando worried, “I can only do so much, you know. I have [had] to sacrifice a lot. . . I feel like my college experience has been trying to make something better and that something is actively working against it. Is this what my college is supposed to be like? Like all this work all the time?”

DISCUSSION

As we demonstrated above, student activists often undertake significant unpaid labor to make the campus environment safe and habitable for themselves and their minoritized peers. We referred to their efforts as racialized equity labor because it is largely done by and for people of color, many of whom are also multiply marginalized, as they cope with the “institutional Whiteness” that is often present, even at a majority-minority institution (Ahmed 2012). Students’ racialized equity labor, although often overlooked by scholarship, typically occurs alongside, and frequently in collaboration with, that of faculty and staff of color (Ahmed 2012; Hirshfield and Joseph 2011; Matthew 2016; Moore 2017).

Although we focused on racialized equity labor on a specific campus, the voices of people of color at universities around the country suggest that patterns described in this article are not confined to Western U. If anything, we might expect a greater need and a more hostile climate for racialized equity labor at many of the nation’s most prestigious, and predominately White, schools—as many have insidious histories of racial exploitation (Byrd 2017). In contrast, schools with supportive infrastructure and staff, particularly multiple cultural centers that are semi-autonomous from the university, may significantly reduce the burden of racialized equity labor. Who is likely to do this labor, and the degree of pressure placed on members of particular groups, may vary with the racial composition of both students and employees at the university. Our data also suggest that intersecting statuses, such as gender, sexual identity, citizenship status, and social class matter for engagement with racialized equity labor.

How universities respond to racialized equity labor offers insight into the existence of “diversity regimes” that reproduce the status quo (see Thomas 2018)—despite the hard work of people of color to create meaningful racial change within organizations. We identify a cycle of racialized labor appropriation occurring in universities, but also potentially in other organizations where leadership is predominately White—for example corporations, as well as non-profit, professional, and charitable organizations. In these spaces, people of color name inequalities built into infrastructure, policy, or practices and work to address these issues. Initial responses from leadership are often dismissive or characterized by resistance, but external and internal actors can force action, often by posing reputational or accountability concerns for the organization. Problematically, however, leadership typically proceeds to appropriate racialized equity labor in service of organizational goals. In doing so, they often erase or downplay the labor of people of color and convert it into benign diversity work.

The racialized labor appropriation cycle can also be seen in the evolution of racialized affinity groups or employee resource groups (ERGs) in corporations. In most cases, employees of color fought for these forums in their workplaces, in what has been described as a “bottom-up phenomenon” impacting most Fortune 500 and mid-sized companies (Welbourne, Rolf, and Schlachter 2017; also see Berrey 2015). ERG volunteers typically spend additional, unpaid time to improve their workplaces for those sharing similar identities (Douglas 2008). Recently, ERGs have also been engaged in diversity work that primarily benefits corporations. This includes targeted image improvement and market research projects. For instance, Adelante, PepsiCo’s Latinx ERG, was involved in the development of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and Tapatío-flavored Doritos and Ruffles for Frito-Lay—a division of PepsiCo.⁶ This labor proved profitable for PepsiCo, as the corporation gained product sales and positive press.

6 See PepsiCo’s internal report of Adelante’s receipt of the 2011 ERG of the Year Award at the LATINA Style 50 Awards at: <http://origin-www.pepsico.com/live/story/pepsicos-adelante-named-2011-employee-resource-group-of-the-year-at-latina-style03072012397>.

As this example suggests, appropriated racialized equity labor can be a boon for organizations. It reduces the cost of climate initiatives, as equity labor is often free and lessens the likelihood of negative attention from events such as protests or boycotts. Leadership often appropriates this labor as a means of bolstering claims to providing a positive, diverse, and multicultural environment. Doing so may allow the organization to meet racial representation goals and to market products to people of color. This is a form of commodification. For example, when Western U uses AfroDiaspora Hall to secure more students of color, the labor of students of color is transformed into a good to exchange for profit and public attention. The university benefits without incurring the costs of providing infrastructure to fully support historically marginalized groups.

Racialized equity labor is, in contrast, a form of identity taxation for many people of color within organizations, as they are drained of energy, time, and resources that could be devoted to other pursuits (see Hirshfield and Joseph 2011). For university faculty, such pursuits include obtaining tenure and job security. For college students, the need to engage in racialized equity labor may make it difficult to achieve academically, graduate on time, and prepare for the workforce. The need or desire to resist appropriation of that labor, and its transformation into diluted diversity initiatives, adds an additional layer of stress, frustration, and work for already taxed populations. The racialized labor appropriation cycle, therefore, reproduces racial inequalities within organizations—all while masking their existence.

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