8-18-2025

Strategies to Use Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs to Increase Employee Performance and Profitability

Kecia Bailey Alexander
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kecia Bailey Alexander

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Ashley Riebel, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2025

Abstract

Strategies to Use Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs to Increase Employee Performance and Profitability

by

Kecia Bailey Alexander

MALM, Arizona State University, 2021

BSBM, University of Phoenix, 2017

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2025

Abstract

A lack of effective strategies for implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs to increase employee performance and profitability is a concern for leaders in the education industry. This problem is significant to educational leaders because, without effective strategies for implementing DEI programs, they cannot address the gap in practice that hinders improvements in employee performance and organizational profitability. Grounded in Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, this qualitative pragmatic inquiry identified and explored the effective strategies educational leaders used to successfully implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. Participants were six leaders from both for-profit and non-profit educational institutions located in the western United States with at least 5 years of leadership experience managing at least five employees. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis. Seven key themes were revealed: (a) leadership commitment and strategic implementation; (b) inclusive hiring and promotion practices; (c) training, coaching, and professional development; (d) feedback-driven strategy design; (e) psychological safety, belonging, and emotional support; (f) cultural exposure and immersive experiences; and (g) representation and cultural relevance. One key recommendation is that educational leaders should actively champion diversity and inclusion programs to foster an inclusive culture. The implications for positive social change include the potential for education leaders to implement targeted strategies that create safe, inclusive, and supportive workplaces, thereby increasing employee performance and profitability.

Strategies to Use Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs to Improve Employee Performance and Profitability

by

Kecia Bailey Alexander

MALM, Arizona State University, 2021

BSBM, University of Phoenix, 2017

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2025

Dedication

To my incredible husband, this journey has been one of the most challenging and transformative experiences of my life, and I could not have made it through without you. From the very beginning of my doctoral program, through every long night, every early morning, and every moment I felt overwhelmed, your unwavering support, love, and patience were my anchor. There were countless days when I wasn't as present as I wanted to be, when homework took priority over conversation, and deadlines replaced date nights. You never complained. You simply stood by me, encouraging me, believing in me, and reminding me of the bigger picture. Even on vacations, when I had to retreat to our room to finish assignments, you understood. You gave me space, grace, and the quiet strength I needed to keep going. Your understanding heart, your calm presence, and your constant reassurance were the comfort I leaned on more times than I can count. You never let me forget who I was, even when I felt lost in the process. I love you.

Babe, thanks.

Acknowledgments

To my village, The Traveling Music Junkies, thank you for being the most supportive, understanding, and loving group of people I could ever ask for. Throughout this doctoral journey, there were so many moments when I wanted nothing more than to join you for fun, laughter, and adventure. But time and time again, I had to prioritize homework, deadlines, and research. I'll never forget the last Super Bowl gathering at my home. While you all enjoyed the game, the food, and each other's company, I had to excuse myself to finish an assignment. I worked into the wee hours of the morning, and when I finally went downstairs to clean up, I was overwhelmed with gratitude to see that you had already taken care of everything. That's just who you are: thoughtful, selfless, and always looking out for me. I love you all deeply for that.

To my amazing mom, your love, wisdom, and intuition have been a guiding light. You always knew exactly what to say and do, even when I didn't know I needed it. Thank you for being my rock and my cheerleader. I love you more than words can express. Finally, to my mentor, Dr. Ashley Riebel. Thank you for your unwavering guidance, encouragement, and support throughout this journey. Your insight, patience, and belief in my work helped me push through the toughest moments. I truly wouldn't have made it to this point without you. With all my heart, thank you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables iii

List of Figures iv

Section 1: Foundation of the Project 1

Background of the Problem 1

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose 2

Research Question 3

Assumptions and Limitations 3

Assumptions 3

Limitations 4

Transition 4

Section 2: The Literature Review 5

Application to the Applied Business Problem 6

Conceptual Framework: TPB 8

Potential Themes and Phenomena 10

Transition 45

Section 3: Research Project Methodology 46

Role of the Researcher 46

Nature of the Project 49

Population, Sampling, and Participants 50

Interview Questions 54

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques 55

Reliability and Validity....56
Reliability....56
Validity....57
Transition and Summary....58
Section 4: Findings and Conclusions....59
Presentation of the Findings....59
Theme 1: Leadership Commitment and Strategic Implementation....65
Theme 2: Inclusive Hiring and Promotion Practices....67
Theme 3: Training, Coaching and Professional Development....68
Theme 4: Feedback-Driven Strategy Design....70
Theme 5: Psychological Safety, Belonging, and Emotional Support....71
Theme 6: Cross-Organizational DEI Education: Building Shared Understanding Across Roles....74
Theme 7: Representation and Cultural Relevance....75
Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice....78
Implications for Social Change....79
Recommendations for Further Research....80
Conclusion....81
References....84
Appendix: Interview Protocol....92

List of Tables

Table 1 *Justification for Theme Selection Based on Data Saturation* 60

List of Figures

Figure 1 *Evidence of Saturation*... 65

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

In today's evolving global landscape, the importance of fostering a diverse workforce cannot be overstated. Organizational leaders who embrace employees from varied backgrounds and experiences are more likely to spark innovation and develop creative solutions. However, leaders in the education sector, specifically in the western region of the United States, often face significant challenges in implementing effective diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. Although some leaders prioritize diversity in their marketing and recruitment efforts, they frequently fail to create truly inclusive environments, which stalls genuine progress (Tucker, 2023). When leaders do not make progress, it can negatively impact employee performance and profitability.

When employees feel valued and included, their motivation and performance levels soar, leading to higher quality output and increased profitability. Wadhwa and Aggarwal (2023) indicated that organizations with strong diversity strategies experience a 56% increase in job performance. Since 2021, there has been a shift toward dedicating more resources to DEI programs. However, many organizations still struggle to measure the impact of these strategies and effectively communicate their benefits to a growing group of stakeholders. Additionally, the substantial investments required for DEI initiatives may lead some organizational leaders to deprioritize them due to perceived costs and a lack of immediate financial returns. These factors contribute to the ongoing challenges faced by education leaders in the western United States in implementing DEI programs that enhance employee performance and profitability.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some leaders in the education sector lack effective strategies to implement DEI strategies to improve employee performance and profitability. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. In my research project, I focused on a specific group of educational leaders who manage a diverse workforce. I employed a purposeful sampling method of at least six leaders in the educational sector who had successfully implemented effective DEI strategies to increase employee performance and profitability. Eligible participants had direct experience in the educational sector in the western region of the United States and supervised at least five employees. The primary data sources were semistructured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences and insights on managing and implementing DEI initiatives.

The conceptual framework that guided my research project was the theory of planned behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen in 1985. This psychological theory links beliefs to behavior and posits that an individual's intention to engage in a particular behavior is the primary predictor of whether they will perform that behavior (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020). TPB can support DEI initiatives in the education sector by increasing awareness of the benefits of DEI. Educational leaders can promote positive attitudes toward inclusive practices, which can lead to greater acceptance and support for DEI initiatives. Additionally, when educational leaders publicly endorse DEI initiatives, they

set a positive example and create a culture in which inclusive practices are valued, influencing the subjective norms within the institution. Overall, TPB provided a framework for understanding and promoting behaviors that support DEI in educational settings, contributing to more inclusive and equitable environments that benefit all members of the educational community.

Research Question

What effective strategies do some leaders in the education sector use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs or ideas taken as true without definitive proof, which are necessary for the research to progress because they form the foundation of a study's methodology and scope (Saunders et al., 2019). In my research project, I made the following four assumptions. The first assumption was that the educational leaders participating in my research project would provide honest and accurate accounts of their experiences and strategies related to DEI programs. The second assumption was that the TPB was an appropriate and effective framework for understanding and promoting DEI initiatives in the educational sector. The third assumption was that the findings from the selected sample of educational leaders would be transferable to other leaders and other geographical regions in the educational sector of the United States. The fourth assumption was that effective DEI programs have a positive impact on employee performance and profitability.

Limitations

Limitations refer to the inherent constraints and restrictions that may influence a research project's design, implementation, and findings. These limitations can stem from various sources. According to Backlund (2017), limitations illuminate the complex and multifaceted challenges that doctoral students encounter, highlighting the necessity for enhanced support systems and resources to facilitate their academic success. In my research project, I identified three primary limitations:

- The time frame established by Walden for the completion of my research project.
- Participants may have relied on others for insights regarding DEI initiatives and might not have possessed direct experience.
- Certain participants may have withheld information regarding their strategies and best practices. Also, the small sample size may not have been transferable to all organizations.

Transition

In Section 1, I covered the background of the problem, the business problem focus, the project purpose, the research question, and the assumptions and limitations of my research project. In Section 2, I provide a comprehensive literature review of the DEI programs in the education sector. In Section 3, I detail the research project methodology, including project ethics, the nature of the project, data collection and analysis activities, and reliability and validity. In Section 4, I present the findings and conclusions of the research, noting the implications for business practice, social change, and future research.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In my literature review, I aimed to critically assess the effectiveness of DEI programs in the United States' educational sector by exploring their impact on employee performance and profitability. Through a synthesis of existing research, this review highlights the successes and challenges of DEI initiatives, identifies gaps in the recent literature, and suggests directions for future research. Understanding the effectiveness of these programs is essential for developing strategies that not only promote inclusivity but also enhance employee experiences.

The tools and sources used to guide my research included Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Sage Journals, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and the Walden University Library. The literature search focused on keywords such as *DEI programs*, *profitability* or *profit* or *performance, social-political impacts of DEI*, *educational industry*, and *organizational leadership strategies*. I reviewed publications from peer-reviewed journals, concentrating on titles and abstracts published between 2020 and 2025 that aligned with my research topic. The review includes 32 sources, all published within the last 6 years. Of these sources, 87.5% are scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. My literature review selection process ensured the credibility of the information presented and highlighted the effectiveness and impacts of DEI initiatives in the educational industry.

The literature review is divided into four sections. In the first section, I explore the application of DEI to the business problem. In the second section, I examine the effects of DEI programs in the educational sector. In the third section, I focus on

inclusivity and interconnectedness by analyzing effective and comprehensive DEI strategies in organizations. Finally, the fourth section explores organizational commitments to addressing systemic inequities and the broader implications of DEI strategies. Section 4 highlights how these initiatives influence the workplace culture, employee satisfaction, profitability, and societal attitudes toward diversity and inclusion. Additionally, the social and political climate plays a crucial role because societal attitudes toward DEI can shape workplace policies and practices. Moreover, political decisions and legislation can support or hinder the progress of DEI initiatives.

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. The specific business problem was that some leaders in the education sector lack effective strategies to implement effective DEI initiatives to increase employee performance and profitability. The guiding research question was the following: What effective strategies do some leaders in the education sector use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability? This literature review aims to provide a critical analysis and synthesis of the literature related to DEI programs, employee performance, and profitability, focusing on their impact within the educational sector.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

Sustaining DEI practices in education requires ongoing commitment and resources to prevent declines and ensure long-term success. Hougham et al. (2024) framed their research using the organizational change theory, emphasizing the challenges

associated with maintaining DEI efforts over time. Although initial implementation of DEI practices can be strong, the upkeep of these initiatives requires continuous commitment and resources, which often diminish. A key finding of the research by Hougham et al. was that many educational organizations reported a decrease in DEI practices. Hougham et al. identified several factors contributing to this decline, including reduced funding, shifting organizational priorities, and burnout among DEI advocates. Additionally, Hougham et al. revealed a gap between the perceived importance of DEI and the implementation of related practices. This downward trend in DEI efforts presents significant implications for educational environments. Hougham et al. asserted that without sustained DEI initiatives, organizations risk becoming less inclusive and equitable, thereby undermining their mission and effectiveness. Hougham et al. emphasized the importance of continuous investment in DEI training, resources, and support to ensure long-term success. By addressing the factors that contribute to the decline in DEI practices and emphasizing ongoing investment, organizational leaders can better achieve their goals of inclusivity and equity within the educational environment.

In higher education institutions in the United States, diversity statements created by chief diversity officers play a significant role in the strategic implementation and shaping of the institution's approach. However, the importance of higher education institutions to the experiences of underrepresented students remains a topic of debate. Unangst et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative textual analysis of the diversity statements from higher education institutions that have appointed chief diversity officers, focusing on how the experiences of underrepresented students are represented and framed with

terms such as race and racism. Unangst et al. indicated that diversity statements not only support strategic implementation but also contribute to institutional meaning making. Diversity statements set the foundational principles and values that can guide all subsequent initiatives.

Conceptual Framework: TPB

This commitment to diversity can be better understood and implemented through the TPB. The TPB was developed by Ajzen in 1985 as an extension of the theory of reasoned action, which was codeveloped with Fishbein (Heilbroner et al., 1980). TPB posits that an individual's behavior is driven by their intentions, which are influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). Applying TPB to DEI programs can help in understanding and predicting the effectiveness of such initiatives (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). When employees have positive attitudes toward DEI programs, their behaviors, engagement, and participation are likely to increase. If employees believe that DEI initiatives are beneficial and align with their values, employees are more inclined to support and actively participate in these programs (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). When employees believe in the positive impact of DEI programs, they can foster a sense of ownership and commitment.

If employees intend to perform a behavior and that intention is strong, they are more likely to engage in that behavior. TPB suggests that intentions are the primary predictors of behavior (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020). By measuring the intentions of leaders and employees to engage in DEI activities, organizations can forecast the likelihood of participation. Conducting surveys and interviews can help assess the strength of these

intentions and identify the factors that influence them. Additionally, TPB evaluates the behaviors of individuals regarding DEI initiatives, enabling organizations to track participation rates, engagement levels, and the outcomes of DEI programs to determine their effectiveness. Through data collection and analysis, leaders can gain insights into how effectively DEI strategies are implemented and their impact on the organizational environment.

By applying TPB, educational leaders can develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing DEI-related behaviors, allowing for the creation of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of their DEI programs. This approach provides a systematic evaluation of attitudes, social influences, perceived behavioral control, intentions, and behaviors, establishing a robust framework for assessing and improving DEI initiatives. The influence of peers and organizational culture also plays a crucial role in TPB. When employees perceive that their colleagues and leaders support DEI initiatives, they are more likely to conform to these norms and engage in behaviors that promote diversity and inclusion (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). When leaders promote and integrate DEI into the organization's culture, employees are more likely to feel appreciated, respected, and inspired.

Furthermore, employees' belief in their ability to contribute to DEI efforts significantly impacts their participation. Providing resources, training, and support can enhance employees' confidence in their capacity to make a difference, thereby increasing their involvement in DEI programs. By examining these three components, researchers can gain valuable insights into the factors driving employee engagement in DEI

initiatives. Furthermore, understanding these elements can assist organizations in designing more effective DEI programs that align with employees' attitudes, leverage social norms, and enhance perceived behavioral control (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). Incorporating TPB into my project on the effectiveness of DEI programs allows for a comprehensive analysis of the psychological and social factors influencing employee behavior. This approach can lead to more targeted and impactful DEI strategies, ultimately improving organizational outcomes and fostering a more inclusive workplace.

Potential Themes and Phenomena

Prioritization of DEI Initiatives

Implementing DEI strategies in organizations is both significant and challenging. Since 2021, leaders at many organizations focused on DEI programs; however, numerous organizations struggled to measure and communicate their impact (Fanton, 2021). The substantial investments required for DEI initiatives often lead to them being deprioritized due to perceived costs and a lack of immediate financial benefit (Fanton, 2021). This reluctance is particularly evident among educational leaders in the United States (Fanton, 2021). As a result, the challenges in implementing DEI strategies include a lack of prioritization, insufficient resources, difficulties in measuring impact, and resistance to change. Despite these obstacles, organizations should consider prioritizing DEI initiatives due to their potential return on investment. Analyzing DEI implementation highlights the critical need for organizations to overcome barriers related to prioritization, resource allocation, and impact measurement. By addressing these challenges, organizations can unlock the benefits of DEI initiatives, including improved organizational culture,

enhanced employee satisfaction, and long-term financial gains. Educational leaders must recognize the importance of a sustained commitment to DEI efforts to foster inclusive environments that support diverse communities. Ultimately, the successful implementation of DEI strategies requires a holistic approach that integrate DEI principles into the core values and operations of the organization.

While business faculty members generally recognize the importance of DEI efforts, there are varying levels of commitment and understanding among them. Beer et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of institutional dedication to DEI principles, but also sparked questions about how strong and sustained that dedication is. Faculty members typically believe that their institution is committed to DEI, yet they express concerns regarding how deeply this commitment is implemented. Additionally, Beer et al. identified several challenges and barriers to effective DEI implementation, which include limited resources, resistance to change, and a lack of clear communication and support from leadership. Beer et al. explored how DEI efforts impact both faculty and students, noting that positive DEI initiatives can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, which can benefit the entire academic community. The impact of these DEI benefits is significant, as faculty perceptions and institutional commitments are crucial for the success of DEI initiatives. While challenges like limited resources and resistance to change may hinder progress, strong leadership and clear communication are essential for overcoming these obstacles. Ultimately, effective DEI programs can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for both faculty and students.

Effective diversity strategies can significantly enhance job performance. However, organizations often encounter difficulties in measuring and communicating the impact of these strategies. This can create hesitation to prioritize DEI initiatives, as many perceive these efforts as costly and lack immediate financial returns. However, the long-term benefits of fostering DEI can significantly outweigh these initial concerns and contribute to a more prosperous and innovative organization. According to Wadhwa and Aggarwal (2023), organizational leaders with effective diversity strategies experience an approximate 56% increase in job performance. Conversely, a single incident of exclusion can result in a 25% decrease in an individual's performance (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023). Fanton (2021) observed that since 2021, there has been a greater focus, and increased resources allocated to DEI programs. Nonetheless, many organizations still struggle to measure the impact of these strategies and effectively communicate their results to a diverse group of stakeholders (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023). Leaders may implement strategies, but they may struggle with quantifying their effectiveness and conveying the value of those results.

The time and resource investments required for DEI initiatives may cause some organizations to prioritize other areas, viewing the costs and lack of immediate financial returns as barriers. Challenges related to time, resources, and costs contribute to the reluctance of some educational leaders in the United States to implement DEI programs aimed at improving employee performance and profitability. While effective DEI strategies have the potential to greatly enhance job performance, organizations must overcome barriers such as resource allocation, impact measurement, and communication

challenges. Addressing these obstacles is crucial for the successful implementation of DEI programs, which can ultimately lead to a more inclusive and productive work environment.

DEI strategies are comprehensive frameworks designed to promote an inclusive, equitable, and diverse workplace. The importance of DEI strategies goes beyond mere compliance and can fundamentally influence an organization's culture and contributes to business success (Buttinger, 2023). By implementing effective DEI strategies, organizations ensure that every employee feels valued and included, enhancing job satisfaction, employee engagement, and reducing turnover (Buttinger, 2023). Moreover, a diverse workforce brings together a range of perspectives and ideas, fostering creativity and innovation. When individuals from different backgrounds collaborate, their combined problem-solving skills can lead to groundbreaking solutions. Diverse teams also excel in decision making by drawing from a wider array of viewpoints and potential outcomes, enabling more informed and effective decisions. Leaders who prioritize DEI strategies may attract top talent and gain a competitive edge in the job market. Some job seekers today actively look for organizations that embrace diversity and inclusion, making DEI a significant differentiator in a competitive employment landscape. Implementing DEI strategies contributes to a positive organizational culture, boosts employee morale, and enhances the organization's reputation (Buttinger, 2023). Additionally, adhering to DEI principles ensures compliance with legal and regulatory standards related to diversity and antidiscrimination, reducing legal risks and promoting a fair work environment.

Significant investment in human capital through improved hiring practices, the formation of employee resource groups, and engagement with diversity organizations is essential for organizational success and effective DEI initiatives. Buttinger (2023) and Melnkovic and Wilding (2022) highlighted the importance of such investments as crucial drivers of organizational success. This investment involves employing effective hiring techniques, creating employee resource groups, and actively engaging with diverse professional organizations.

DEI metrics are crucial for measuring the effectiveness of diversity initiatives within organizations and ensuring a return on investment in DEI programs. Melnkovic and Wilding (2022) discussed the use of HR metrics to measure the effectiveness of DEI initiatives. Metrics such as retention rates, employee engagement scores, and net earnings can help assess the impact of investments in human capital. Melnkovic and Wilding emphasized the necessity of strong leadership commitment to DEI efforts, noting that adequate leadership support is vital for fostering a cultural shift toward a more inclusive and equitable workplace. By investing in human capital and prioritizing DEI, organizations can cultivate more inclusive and supportive educational environments. Furthermore, utilizing HR metrics enables institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of their DEI initiatives and make data driven decisions. Strong leadership commitment is essential for nurturing a culture that values DEI, ultimately enhancing the overall effectiveness of DEI programs. Melnkovic and Wilding underscored the importance of strategic investments and leadership support in advancing DEI initiatives, highlighting the potential for significant positive outcomes in the educational sector. To promote an

inclusive environment, strong leadership commitment and resource allocation are necessary.

Organizations with diverse and inclusive teams outperform their competitors financially, and effective DEI initiatives require strong leadership commitment to integrate DEI principles into core values and operations. Green and Hand (2024) asserted that effective DEI initiatives require leaders to actively champion leadership commitment efforts and integrate DEI principles into the organization's core values and operations. This top-down support is crucial for fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging. Adopting DEI strategies may lead to increased profitability, enhanced customer satisfaction, and improved business performance (Green & Hand, 2024). Prioritizing DEI can create more inclusive, innovative, and prosperous organizational workplaces, ultimately achieving significant competitive advantages. Leaders in the education sector often struggle to implement effective DEI programs for several reasons. While many emphasize diversity in marketing and recruitment, they fail to create genuinely inclusive environments, hindering meaningful progress (Tucker, 2023). Although numerous organizations hold DEI events, few have comprehensive strategic plans that could enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives (Blanche, 2022). Organizations that do not fully embrace DEI miss out on diverse perspectives that can drive innovation, create new business opportunities, improve overall employee performance, and increase profitability (Tucker, 2023). When employees feel included as essential members of an organization, they are more motivated to perform at their best. Consequently, their performance intensity and the quality of their output dramatically increase. Blanche (2022) noted that

many organizations understood the significance of DEI but often lacked the necessary resources to implement meaningful changes. While 81% of human resources and DEI professionals recognized the benefits of DEI, only 34% believed they have sufficient resources to support these initiatives (Blanche, 2022). Moreover, fostering a diverse culture and an inclusive environment in the workplace is essential; however, without adequate investment, the effectiveness of DEI initiatives may be limited.

Increasing political polarization and financial constraints significantly impact the implementation and effectiveness of DEI initiatives in higher education institutions. These challenges include stakeholder resistance, limited resources, and conflicts between institutional autonomy and external pressures. Brint (2024) highlighted that polarization often leads to resistance from various stakeholders, which can hinder the overall effectiveness of DEI programs. Similarly, both Brint and Fanton discussed the financial limitations faced by educational institutions, which restrict the resources available for DEI initiatives, ultimately compromising their development and sustainability.

When implementing DEI programs, leaders may experience external demands that conflict with their institutional autonomy. Brint examined the tension between institutional autonomy and external pressures from government and other entities, complicating the implementation of DEI policies. Leaders often struggle to balance their internal goals with these external demands. Furthermore, Brint explored how cultural and social dynamics within institutions influence the success of DEI programs. Factors such as campus climate, leadership commitment, and community engagement play crucial roles in determining the effectiveness of these initiatives. Political polarization can create

a contentious environment, making it difficult to achieve consensus on DEI goals (Brint, 2024). Further, limited funding may restrict the scope of these programs, while challenges to institutional autonomy can lead to inconsistent implementation. Additionally, the cultural and social dynamics within institutions can either support or hinder the progress of DEI efforts. Brint underscored the complexity of implementing effective DEI programs in the educational sector, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies to address these multifaceted challenges. The successful implementation of DEI programs requires institutions to navigate stakeholder resistance, balance internal goals with external demands, and ensure strong leadership commitment to DEI efforts. By addressing these complexities, higher education institutions can enhance the effectiveness of their DEI initiatives and promote a more equitable and inclusive campus climate.

The ability of higher education institutions to balance fiscal responsibilities while advancing diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion initiatives (DEJI) is crucial for addressing inequitable financial practices in American higher education. Chicas-Mosier et al. (2023) presented evidence based fiscal strategies that enhance DEJI efforts without compromising financial stability. The central thesis asserts that higher education institutions can promote DEJI missions while maintaining or even improving their fiscal health. The Chicas-Mosier et al. argued that universities commonly rely on traditional revenue sources such as endowments, tuition, athletics, and research innovations which often overlook the economic benefits of increased diversity. Restructuring financial practices and implementing targeted DEJI initiatives can help institutions achieve both

equity and financial sustainability. However, there are case studies that demonstrate areas of improvement. Chicas-Mosier et al. reviewed inequitable financial practices in higher education, presenting case studies from two prominent research institutions in Alabama. The case studies highlighted the challenges and potential solutions for integrating DEJI into fiscal strategies. The Chicas-Mosier et al. emphasized the importance of inclusive financial practices, such as equitable endowment management and culturally responsive fundraising, which can improve representation and retention while ensuring financial health. Furthermore, the research by Chicas-Mosier et al. revealed the positive economic impacts of diversity, such as increased wages and rising home values in diverse communities, as well as the significant costs of exclusion, which included lost earnings and unrealized business revenue. Chicas-Mosier et al. analyzed the potential for higher education institutions to restructure their financial practices to effectively support DEJI initiatives. Chicas-Mosier et al. stressed that while traditional financial models may neglect the advantages of diversity, innovative fiscal strategies can align DEJI goals with financial sustainability. Chicas-Mosier et al. advocated for a shift in institutional standards and methods to create a more equitable and fiscally responsible university systems. This shift involves adopting evidence based fiscal initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion while ensuring a positive return on investment. The insights provided by Chicas-Mosier et al. are vital for understanding how higher education institutions can balance DEJI missions with fiscal responsibilities. By embracing inclusive financial practices and restructuring traditional revenue models, universities can strengthen their commitment to diversity and equity without sacrificing financial

stability. This approach necessitates a thorough reevaluation of current practices and a commitment to long-term, systemic change. Moreover, Chicas-Mosier et al. emphasized that it is feasible to integrate DEJI missions into the fiscal strategies of higher education. The research illustrated that through innovative and inclusive financial practices, institutions can achieve both equity and financial sustainability. By addressing historical inequities and adopting evidence based fiscal initiatives, higher education can foster a more inclusive and financially stable environment. Chicas-Mosier et al. underscored the importance of strategic investments in DEJI to cultivate a diverse, equitable, and just academic community. Thus, strategic investments in DEJI play a crucial role in cultivating a thriving and impactful academic community.

Inclusivity and Interconnectedness

Inclusive leadership also plays a vital role in fostering psychological safety and embracing diversity within organizations, ultimately enhancing DEI practices. Woods et al. (2024) investigated the importance of inclusive leadership in promoting psychological safety and openness to diversity. The study by Woods et al. was grounded in the social identity theory (SIT), which suggested that individuals derive parts of their identity from the groups to which they belonged. The SIT framework examined how inclusive leadership can strengthen team members' sense of belonging and their openness to diversity, thereby promoting psychological safety. The findings from Woods et al. revealed that inclusive leadership significantly enhanced psychological safety and openness to diversity among team members. Therefore, leaders who actively promoted inclusivity and demonstrated equitable behaviors created environments where employees

felt safe to express their ideas and concerns. This psychological safety is essential for fostering innovation and collaboration within diverse teams. Woods et al. highlighted the critical role of inclusive leadership in driving effective DEI practices. By nurturing a psychologically safe environment, inclusive leaders can encourage greater participation and engagement in DEI initiatives. Additionally, Woods et al. recommended that organizations invest in leadership development programs focused on inclusivity and equity to support long-term DEI efforts. Effective DEI initiatives must address unintended adverse outcomes and incorporate accountability structures to ensure their success.

Effective DEI strategies should be comprehensive and interconnected, supported by strong leadership accountability to foster an inclusive culture. Bhat and de los Monteros (2024) argued that these strategies should not consist of isolated initiatives but rather encompass a holistic approach. The authors highlighted the importance of DEI strategies in conducting an inventory of existing DEI interventions such as anti-bias training, climate surveys, and diversity residency cohorts to identify gaps and areas needing improvement as leadership plays a crucial role in the success of DEI strategies. Bhat and de los Monteros (2024) emphasized that leaders must be accountable for fostering an inclusive culture and actively supporting DEI initiatives. This involvement includes creating opportunities for employees to lead DEI related programs and ensuring that these efforts align with the organization’s values. Bhat and de los Monteros also identified several challenges, such as performative DEI practices and a lack of clarity regarding effective interventions.

Organizational leaders pursue various approaches to create inclusive environments but often face difficulties in implementing these strategies effectively. Bednar (2024) underscored the significance of DEI and the broader concept of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of DEI strategies and the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace. By addressing these challenges and highlighting the critical roles of leadership and measurable outcomes, Bednar illustrated the complexities involved in creating inclusive environments. Bednar provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of DEI in organizations, emphasizing the importance of strategic leadership and measurable outcomes in overcoming implementation challenges and promoting a sense of belonging.

Creating a sense of belonging and reducing tokenism through meaningful participation and inclusive practices are essential for the success of DEI initiatives. These efforts enhance engagement and improve success rates among both students and staff. Camargo (2023) and Bednar (2024) argued that when individuals feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage and succeed academically and professionally. Camargo discussed strategies to combat tokenism, which occurs when individuals from underrepresented groups are included superficially or symbolically. True inclusion, according to Camargo, necessitates meaningful participation and representation in decision-making processes. Camargo emphasized the need for inclusive practices that reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all individuals, which includes developing curricula and programs that are culturally responsive and representative. Leaders should design these curricula and programs to resonate with and reflect the

unique experiences of all individuals to ensure that everyone feels represented and supported.

Engaging with the broader community is vital for effective DEI initiatives. Camargo highlighted the importance of engaging with a wide variety of people to support DEI efforts. Building partnerships with community organizations can enhance the sense of belonging and provide additional resources and support. Fostering a sense of belonging can lead to improved engagement and success rates among both students and staff. Reducing tokenism ensures that DEI initiatives are genuine and meaningful, rather than superficial. Inclusive practices create environments where all individuals feel valued and represented. Community engagement can offer extra support and resources, enhancing the overall effectiveness of DEI programs. Camargo underlined the importance of comprehensive and authentic DEI efforts in creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. Fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring genuine inclusion is crucial for the effectiveness of DEI programs.

By addressing tokenism and implementing inclusive practices that reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences, educational institutions can create environments where everyone feels valued and represented. Engaging with the broader community and establishing partnerships with community organizations can provide additional support and resources, further enhancing the impact of DEI efforts. Overall, comprehensive and authentic DEI initiatives are vital for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments that can promote academic and professional success.

Well intentioned DEI initiatives can sometimes lead to unexpected negative consequences. To ensure their effectiveness and avoid perceptions of favoritism or reverse discrimination, it is essential to engage diverse stakeholders, establish clear accountability structures, and integrate DEI efforts into the broader organizational culture. Burnett and Aguinis (2024) examined the potential downsides of well-meaning DEI initiatives. Burnett and Aguinis emphasized the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders in targeted recruitment efforts to prevent perceptions of favoritism or reverse discrimination. Furthermore, Burnett and Aguinis highlighted the necessity of clear accountability structures to monitor and evaluate DEI initiatives. This includes setting measurable goals, tracking progress, and holding leaders accountable for DEI outcomes. Stille and Simon (2023) echoed the sentiment, asserting that effective DEI initiatives should be incorporated into the wider organizational culture and communication strategies. Like Stille and Simon, Burnett and Aguinis underscored the role of DEI programs in driving organizational success. Additionally, Burnett and Aguinis offered insights on preventing and minimizing potential setbacks related to DEI efforts. Burnett and Aguinis' evidence-based recommendations stressed the importance of inclusive recruitment, context sensitive training, clear accountability, cultural alignment, and comprehensive evaluation. Stille and Simon, and Burnett and Aguinis highlighted the importance of continuing to assess the effectiveness of DEI strategies and identify additional best practices for successful DEI implementation in future research. Additionally, fostering a sense of belonging within organizations is crucial for enhancing individual wellbeing and overall organizational performance.

A sense of belonging is crucial for both individual wellbeing and organizational effectiveness, and promoting DEI initiatives is essential for enhancing organizational performance and employee engagement. Imboden (2024) highlighted the importance of belonging as both a fundamental human need and an organizational necessity. Similarly, Olusanya (2023) explored the critical role of DEI in improving organizational performance and employee wellbeing. The comprehensive approaches to DEI initiatives presented by Burnett and Aguinis (2024), Stille and Simon (2023), Imboden (2024), and Olusanya (2023) offered a solid framework for organizations seeking to create an inclusive culture. By addressing potential challenges and highlighting the significance of accountability, cultural integration, and stakeholder engagement, these strategies can greatly improve organizational performance and employee wellbeing. Future doctoral researchers should continue to investigate these areas, providing deeper insights and refining best practices to ensure the effective implementation of DEI initiatives.

To explore the impact of fostering a sense of belonging within organizations on employee engagement, profitability, and retention rates, Imboden investigated how inclusive environments, where employees feel valued and connected, contribute to both individual and organizational health, ultimately enhancing overall wellbeing and performance. Both Imboden and Olusanya identified belonging as essential for individual and organizational health, highlighting the need to cultivate environments that promote a sense of belonging to improve overall wellbeing and performance. Fostering a sense of belonging within organizations is crucial for enhancing employee engagement, profitability, and retention rates. Imboden and Olusanya supported the notion that

inclusive environments where employees feel valued are vital for fostering individual and organizational health. Future doctoral research should continue to explore these themes, aiming to provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which belonging impacts organizational performance and identify best practices for cultivating inclusive environments. By prioritizing a sense of belonging, organizations can significantly enhance overall wellbeing and performance, ensuring long-term success and sustainability.

Implementing DEI requires comprehensive strategies to address significant gaps and challenges. Olusanya (2023) examined the importance of DEI, emphasizing its impact on both organizational success and employee wellbeing. Olusanya conducted a thorough analysis of DEI strategies, beginning with an evaluation of the current DEI landscape across various industries. Olusanya identified several significant gaps, including unconscious biases, a lack of leadership support, and insufficient cultural competency among employees. Olusanya also outlined barriers to successful DEI implementation, such as resistance to change and limited resources. Furthermore, systemic issues and entrenched organizational cultures were discussed as major obstacles to DEI efforts. Olusanya emphasized that workplace diversity enhances profitability and the overall quality of work. However, a lack of inclusion and equity can lead to feelings of ostracism and discrimination among employees. Common challenges included unconscious biases, insufficient leadership support, and inadequate cultural competency (Olusanya, 2023). Olusanya suggested several key strategies to promote DEI, including comprehensive training programs, inclusive hiring practices, and the establishment of

DEI committees. Olusanya advocated for a holistic approach, recommending that organizations integrate DEI into all their operations. Olusanya also highlighted case studies of organizations that successfully implemented DEI initiatives, providing practical insights and best practices that others can replicate. Olusanya highlighted that scholars and practitioners offer detailed insights and real world examples demonstrating how DEI programs contribute to creating inclusive and supportive workplaces.

Fostering a sense of belonging and prioritizing DEI initiatives are vital for creating inclusive and supportive work environments. Addressing challenges such as unconscious biases, lack of leadership support, and insufficient cultural competency is essential for the success of DEI programs. Implementing comprehensive strategies such as training programs, inclusive hiring practices, and establishing DEI committees' organizational leaders can enhance profitability, employee wellbeing, and overall performance. Also, integrating DEI into all operations and learning from successful case studies can help organizational leaders achieve significant positive outcomes and create a more equitable workplace.

A comprehensive model for equitable talent acquisition and retention, grounded in DEI principles, addresses critical gaps in current practices and offers actionable solutions for organizations to create more inclusive workplaces. In related research, de Souza and White (2024) presented a comprehensive model for equitable talent acquisition and retention that addressed critical gaps in current practices and offered meaningful solutions for organizations. The theoretical framework used by de Souza and White supported the idea that inherent biases and systemic constraints often hinder merit-

based opportunities. Conversely, Torrez et al. (2024) examined whether general narrative frameworks surrounding racial progress impeded the success of DEI initiatives. de Souza and White (2024) contributed to the DEI field by offering a practical and implementable model for equitable talent acquisition and retention. With a solid theoretical and methodological foundation, de Souza and White addressed critical gaps in current practices and provided actionable solutions for organizations looking to enhance their DEI efforts, paving the way for more equitable and inclusive workplaces. Furthermore, integrating DEI principles into employee benefits programs is essential for fostering an inclusive workplace culture and enhancing employee satisfaction and retention.

Overall, fostering a sense of belonging and prioritizing DEI initiatives are vital for creating inclusive and supportive work environments. Addressing challenges such as unconscious biases, lack of leadership support, and insufficient cultural competency is essential for the success of DEI programs. Implementing comprehensive strategies such as training programs, inclusive hiring practices, and establishing DEI committees can enhance profitability, employee wellbeing, and overall performance. Integrating DEI into all operations and learning from successful case studies can help organizational leaders achieve significant positive outcomes and create a more equitable workplace. Stille and Simon highlighted that DEI is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage. Organizations that prioritize DEI in their benefits offerings are better equipped to attract and retain a diverse workforce, ultimately leading to better business outcomes. Stille and Simon noted that organizations that have successfully integrated DEI into their benefits

programs showcase the positive impacts these initiatives can have on employee engagement and overall organizational performance and productivity.

Employee engagement and overall organizational performance can drive better business outcomes. Stille and Simon asserted that making DEI a fundamental aspect of employee benefits is vital for cultivating a supportive and inclusive work environment. By prioritizing DEI in their benefits offerings, organizations position themselves to attract and retain a diverse workforce, which boosts employee engagement and enhances overall organizational performance. Ultimately, by integrating DEI into employee benefits, organizational leaders can achieve positive outcomes and strengthen their strategic advantage in the marketplace.

Organizational Commitment to Systemic Inequities

Since 2022, there has been a significant social and political wave focused on DEI. The term woke has become prominently associated with DEI. Ditomaso (2024) defined woke as an awareness of social injustices and inequalities, particularly those related to race, gender, and other marginalized identities. This term often implies a commitment to addressing and rectifying these injustices through activism and policy changes. Ditomaso explored how woke strategies recognize and challenge systemic inequities. However, Ditomaso highlighted the potential for creating division or backlash if these strategies are not implemented thoughtfully. Ditomaso offered valuable insights into the complexities of woke strategies in DEI initiatives. While these strategies are essential for addressing systemic inequities, their success hinge on thoughtful and inclusive implementation.

Effective DEI strategies require moving beyond performative woke approaches to adopt comprehensive integrative strategies that address systemic inequalities and foster genuine equity and inclusion (Ditomaso, 2024). Woke strategies tend to focus solely on diversity, often neglecting the potential negative impacts on organizational unity. Ditomaso examined the effectiveness of woke and integrative diversity strategies within organizations, emphasizing their impacts on DEI and underlying inequalities. Ditomaso critiqued the superficial adoption of woke strategies, which often fail to address systemic issues. In contrast, integrative strategies aim to embed DEI principles deeply into organizational structures and cultures. Ditomaso revealed that while woke strategies are popular and visible, they often lead to performative actions that do not result in substantive change. Moreover, woke strategies can create a false sense of progress, concealing ongoing inequalities and potentially exacerbating tensions within organizations. On the other hand, integrative strategies involve comprehensive policy changes and commitment to long-term DEI goals, making them more effective in promoting genuine equity and inclusion.

Narratives of racial progress significantly influence workforce perceptions of the effectiveness of DEI initiatives. This underscores the necessity for organizations to go beyond mere performative actions and adopt more integrative approaches that directly address the root causes of inequality. Torrez et al. (2024) examined whether narratives of racial progress in the United States shape how employees view the effectiveness of organizational DEI efforts. Ditomaso (2024) stressed the importance of moving past superficial DEI measures and instead implement integrative strategies that confronted

fundamental inequalities. Ditomaso advocated for ongoing investments in DEI training, policy development, and organizational restructuring to achieve meaningful progress. Ditomaso's research offered a critical perspective for evaluating current DEI strategies. By differentiating between woke and integrative approaches, Ditomaso highlighted the necessity for deeper, systemic changes to attain genuine equity and inclusion within organizations. Both Ditomaso and Torrez et al. (2024) provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of contemporary DEI programs, as well as the risks of misinterpretations and superficial woke strategies that could distort narratives surrounding DEI initiatives. To foster true inclusivity and tackle the underlying causes of inequality, organizations must commit to sustained DEI training, policy development, and significant structural changes. By critically evaluating their DEI strategies and being aware of the impact of racial progress narratives, organizations can design more effective and authentic DEI initiatives, ultimately resulting in a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

Organizational leaders have made efforts to address systemic racism through sustained DEI efforts. Following George Floyd's murder, Segel (2021) focused on both individual and systemic biases, as well as assessed the effectiveness of these commitments and the accountability mechanisms to ensure real change. Segel examined the responses of organizational leaders to Floyd's murder a year later, highlighting the commitments made and the progress achieved in addressing racial inequities. In the wake of this incident, corporate America made significant public commitments to racial equity. According to Green and Hand (2024), one-third of Fortune 1000 organizations issued statements on racial equity, with 93% following up with internal or external

commitments. Collectively, these organizations pledged a total of $66 billion toward racial equity initiatives. While these commitments and monetary pledges represent a positive start, Segel emphasized that systemic racism is a complex issue that cannot be resolved overnight. To effectively address this challenge, organizational leaders must engage in sustained efforts to dismantle the systems that perpetuate racial inequities. This process involves understanding the role of DEI in the workplace and tackling both individual and systemic biases. Segel concluded that for real change to occur, organizations must be held accountable for their commitments. Segel provided a critical analysis of the commitments made by corporate America to address racial inequities in the aftermath of Floyd's murder. While these commitments mark a positive beginning, systemic racism necessitates ongoing efforts and accountability to achieve meaningful change. Future doctoral researchers should continue to explore the long-term impact of these commitments, focusing on the effectiveness of DEI initiatives and the mechanisms in place to hold organizations accountable. By prioritizing sustained efforts and accountability, organizations can make significant strides in dismantling systemic racism and fostering a more equitable workplace. To investigate the persistent systemic biases within higher education institutions that hinder the full participation of marginalized populations, Segel explored the limitations of performative actions and advocated for the implementation of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART) strategies to advance DEI efforts. A SMART framework ensures a structured approach with clear objectives, allowing leaders to track progress and make adjustments as needed.

Leaders often engage in performative actions rather than implementing substantive changes to address systemic racism. Ezell (2023) argued that higher education institutions frequently adopted performative measures, such as academic panels and public statements, which failed to produce meaningful change. Instead, these actions often served to placate public demand for racial justice without addressing the underlying issues of systemic racism. Ezell emphasized the need for a shift from performative wokeness to actionable policies that genuinely promote DEI. Ezell highlighted instances where universities organized high profile events and discussions on racial issues but have not followed through with concrete policy changes. Additionally, Ezell discussed the impact of these performative actions on marginalized communities, noting that they often feel tokenized rather than genuinely supported. Ezell also referenced racial justice protests and the role of higher education in perpetuating or challenging systemic inequalities. Ezell revealed that performative wokeness can create a false sense of progress, which hinders the development of effective strategies for racial equity. By focusing on appearances rather than substance, institutions risk perpetuating the very inequalities they claim to combat. Ezell called for a reevaluation of current practices and advocated for a more authentic educational institutional engagement with racial justice issues, including the implementation of policies that address structural inequities and support marginalized groups. The insights provided by Ezell are crucial for understanding the limitations of current approaches to racial equity in higher education. By moving beyond performative actions, educational institutions can develop more effective strategies that foster genuine inclusion and equity. This shift requires a commitment to

long-term, systemic change rather than short-term, symbolic gestures. Ezell underscored the importance of moving beyond performative wokeness in higher education to achieve true racial equity. The concept of trickle down racial empathy highlights the need for substantive policy changes that address systemic racism at its core. By adopting a more authentic and action oriented approach, educational leaders can play a pivotal role in advancing racial justice and creating inclusive academic environments.

The phenomenon of woke-washing occurs when organizations claim to support social justice causes without taking meaningful action. Kafka (2023) investigated how such practices can negatively impact vulnerable minority groups by creating a misleading impression of commitment to diversity; similar to Ditomaso (2024). Kafka (2023) emphasized the importance of authentic diversity values and minority representation in leadership roles to promote equitable workplace outcomes. Kafka argued that the perception of diversity values and leadership representation significantly influences the likelihood of minority individuals applying to organizations, as well as their experiences regarding identity threat, psychological safety, and organizational trust.

To investigate the impact of leadership representation and diversity ideologies on application likelihood, identity threat, psychological safety, and organizational trust among Black and Hispanic/Latinx (BHL) participants, Kafka (2023) provided empirical evidence from participants who assessed hypothetical job applications and mission statements that varied in diversity ideologies (multiculturalism, color-blind, behavioral control, and Black Lives Matter) and leadership representation conditions (low vs. high). The findings showed that Black and Hispanic/Latinx (BHL) participants were more likely

to apply to organizations with high leadership representation. In contrast, White participants exhibited varied responses based on the diversity ideology presented. Kafka found that identity threat, psychological safety, and organizational trust mediated the relationship between leadership representation and application likelihood. BHL participants reported higher levels of identity threat and lower psychological safety in low leadership representation conditions. Kafka revealed that woke-washing can undermine the effectiveness of DEI initiatives by failing to address the root causes of inequality. Kafka highlighted the necessity for organizations to go beyond superficial diversity signals and ensure genuine representation and inclusion in leadership. By creating an environment where minority individuals feel safe and valued, organizations can enhance equity and trust. Kafka advocated for consultants to support equitable workplace outcomes through organizational change efforts that focus on authentic diversity values and minority representation. Moreover, Kafka reiterated the harmful effects of woke-washing and the crucial need for authentic diversity values and minority representation in leadership to achieve equitable workplace outcomes. Kafka illustrated that organizations must transcend superficial diversity signals and adopt comprehensive strategies to address systemic inequalities. By fostering a culture of true inclusion and representation, organizations can improve psychological safety, trust, and equity for all employees, ultimately enhancing organizational performance and success.

Systemic biases and underrepresentation can limit the effectiveness of DEI initiatives by perpetuating existing inequalities. By implementing SMART strategies, institutions can set and achieve concrete DEI goals, while requiring diversity statements

in hiring to ensure that DEI considerations are integral to faculty recruitment. Ultimately, strong institutional commitment is crucial for creating a supportive environment where DEI programs can thrive. Lafferty et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of requiring diversity statements in faculty hiring processes, aligning with the views of Unangst et al. (2022). Lafferty et al. found that only a small percentage of faculty positions mandated such statements, indicating a need for more consistent and meaningful integration of DEI criteria in hiring practices. Furthermore, Lafferty et al. called for a stronger commitment from institutional leaders to prioritize DEI initiatives, which should encompass not only policy changes but also the cultivation of a culture that values and supports DEI at all levels. Lafferty et al. underscored the importance of comprehensive and strategic approaches to advancing DEI in higher education and highlighted the need for systemic change and sustained effort.

Misconceptions about organizational progress in DEI can lead to complacency, hindering the development and execution of effective DEI policies. Torrez et al. (2024) examined these common misconceptions related to organizational progress in DEI. Torrez et al. built on the racial progress narrative, which suggested that people in the United States generally believed in a gradual and consistent advancement toward racial equality. The racial progress narrative is explored in the context of organizational DEI efforts, raising the question of whether similar beliefs about racial progress existed in the workplace. Torrez et al. found that both Black and White employees tend to overestimate the progress organizations have made in achieving racial diversity, particularly in executive positions. This overestimation could be linked to the belief that organizational

progress will occur naturally without significant intervention. Additionally, Torrez et al. revealed that these misconceptions could lead to misunderstandings regarding the effectiveness of standard DEI policies. Torrez et al. discovered that when employees perceived that substantial advancements were already made or believed that they will happen independently, they may feel less urgent about implementing or supporting robust DEI initiatives. Complacency can hinder the development and execution of effective policies necessary for true equity and inclusion in the workplace. Torrez et al. provided valuable insights into the misconceptions surrounding organizational racial progress. Torrez et al. emphasized the need for more accurate assessments of DEI efforts and highlighted the importance of addressing these misunderstandings to facilitate genuine progress. By recognizing and correcting these misconceptions, leaders can better design and implement policies that promote DEI.

Far-right political groups increasingly have targeted Black history and DEI initiatives, viewing them as threats to their ideological beliefs. This opposition has impacted legislative actions and policies, undermining or restricting DEI programs. Holton (2024) highlighted efforts to censor or alter educational curricula to minimize or exclude Black history and other marginalized perspectives. Such changes may significantly impact the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of educational content, thereby undermining the goals of DEI programs. Holton also examined the challenges to academic freedom posed by these political challenges. Educators may face pressure to avoid certain topics or materials, stifling open discourse and limiting the effectiveness of DEI initiatives. Holton explored the broader cultural backlash against DEI efforts,

including public campaigns and media narratives that frame these programs as divisive or unnecessary. This backlash could influence public opinion and reduce support for DEI initiatives. The combined impact of political opposition and censorship could also create an environment in which DEI efforts are viewed with suspicion or hostility, making it difficult to implement and sustain these programs. Holton asserted that challenges to academic freedom can restrict educators' ability to teach diverse perspectives, while cultural backlash could erode public support and funding for DEI initiatives. Holton's analysis underscored the significant obstacles that DEI programs could face in the current political and cultural climate and highlighted the need for strong advocacy and support to ensure their effectiveness.

Similarly, growing opposition to DEI initiatives is largely driven by political and legislative actions aimed at undermining the need for advocacy around DEI programs. This environment poses significant challenges for educational institutions attempting to implement and sustain DEI programs. Holton emphasized the essential role that legal counsel plays in navigating the complex legal landscape surrounding DEI policies. Legal advisors can assist institutions in understanding and complying with laws while advocating for equitable practices.

To explore the role of legal counsel in effectively promoting DEI within educational institutions, Lewis and Muñiz (2024) investigated the strengths and limitations of current legal strategies and developed evidence based approaches to advance DEI goals, counteract anti-DEI sentiments, and ensure that DEI initiatives are both legally sound and effective. Lewis and Muñiz argued that comprehending the

strengths and limitations of current legal strategies is crucial for advancing DEI goals. Additionally, Lewis and Muñiz discussed various strategies educational institutions can adopt to foster DEI, such as developing comprehensive policies, providing training, and cultivating a culture of inclusion. Lewis and Muñiz stressed the importance of institutional commitment and proactive measures to counteract anti-DEI sentiments. The authors noted that the social political climate could deter educational institutions from pursuing DEI initiatives and emphasized that the involvement of legal counsel is critical for ensuring that these programs are both legally sound and effective. Lewis and Muñiz called for more research underscoring the need for evidence based strategies to navigate the challenges posed by anti-DEI sentiments. By prioritizing DEI, educational institutions can help create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment despite external pressures.

Integrating DEI principles into cross cultural performance (CCP) frameworks is essential for fostering inclusive and effective organizational environments. Feitosa et al. (2022) presented a comprehensive framework for understanding CCP through the lens of DEI, identifying three main components: catalyzing cultural differences, engaging communication, and promoting allyship. Similarly, Woods et al. (2024) established a framework that examined the impact of inclusive leadership on enhancing belonging and promoting psychological safety. Feitosa et al. (2022) argued that integrating DEI principles into cross cultural contexts was crucial for creating inclusive and effective work environments. Woods et al. called for future researchers to further investigate this integration and emphasized the role of inclusive leadership in fostering a sense of

belonging and willingness to embrace diversity among team members. By redefining CCP and highlighting the importance of emotional management, Feitosa et al. and Woods et al. provided robust frameworks for organizations to adapt DEI programs, underscoring significant implications for both theoretical research and practical applications in promoting inclusive and effective organizational environments.

Summary

Implementing DEI strategies in organizations is both significant and challenging. Since 2021, there has been a heightened focus by many organizations on DEI programs; however, numerous organizations continue to struggle with measuring and communicating their impact (Fanton, 2021). The substantial investments required for DEI initiatives often lead to their deprioritization due to perceived increased costs and a lack of immediate financial benefits. This reluctance is particularly evident among educational leaders in the United States. Through this literature review, I explored the effectiveness of DEI programs in the education sector, highlighting the challenges and potential benefits of such initiatives.

There are challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of DEI programs in organizations, and how the social political climate, limited resources, measurement difficulties, and resistance from leadership and faculty members impact DEI efforts, while also examining the potential benefits of these programs for enhancing organizational culture and employee satisfaction. Organizational leaders also struggle with measuring and communicating the impact of these strategies (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023). Furthermore, resistance from leadership and faculty members can obstruct DEI

efforts (Beer et al., 2022). Nonetheless, DEI programs have the potential to enhance organizational culture and employee satisfaction (Buttinger, 2023). DEI programs may foster a more inclusive environment in the workplace.

Overcoming barriers to DEI implementation is crucial for unlocking its benefits. Additionally, prioritizing DEI can lead to improved organizational culture, enhanced employee satisfaction, and long-term financial gains. A holistic approach that integrates DEI principles into core values and operations is essential for successful implementation. While institutional faculty members generally recognize the importance of DEI, their commitment and understanding of these initiatives can vary. Concerns persist regarding the depth and consistency of this commitment (Beer et al., 2022), and positive DEI initiatives can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for both faculty and students, ultimately benefiting the entire academic community. Moreover, strong leadership and clear communication are vital for overcoming challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change (Beer et al., 2022). Clear communication guarantees that everyone is aware of the objectives and their responsibilities, while effective leadership offers direction and vision.

Studies show that organizations with effective diversity and inclusion strategies can experience significant positive impacts. Wadhwa and Aggarwal (2023) indicated that organizations with effective diversity strategies experienced approximately a 56% increase in job performance. Conversely, a single incident of exclusion can result in a 25% decrease in individual performance. Despite the heightened focus and allocated resources for DEI programs since 2021, many organizations still struggle to measure the

impact of these strategies and effectively communicate the results to various stakeholders (Wadhwa & Aggarwal, 2023). DEI strategies are comprehensive frameworks designed to promote an inclusive, equitable, and diverse workplace. They go beyond mere compliance; they fundamentally influence organizational culture and contribute to business success (Buttinger, 2023). Additionally, significant investments in human capital through improved hiring practices, the establishment of employee resource groups, and engagement with diversity organizations are essential contributors to the success of DEI initiatives. Melnkovic and Wilding (2022), along with Buttinger, emphasized that these investments are key drivers of organizational success. Melnkovic and Wilding also discussed the use of HR metrics, such as retention rates, employee engagement scores, and net earnings, to assess the effectiveness of DEI initiatives.

Implementing DEI, action, and metrics, investments in human capital play a significant role in the workplace. U.S. Steel's human capital investment played a key role in driving substantial earnings growth and improving employee engagement and retention Additionally, Melnkovic and Wilding (2022) stressed that strong leadership commitment is crucial for fostering a cultural shift towards a more inclusive and equitable workplace. Effective DEI initiatives require commitment from leadership to integrate DEI principles into the core values and operations of the organization (Green & Hand, 2024). This top down support fosters a culture of inclusion and belonging, leading to increased productivity, enhanced customer satisfaction, and improved business performance. Moreover, leaders in the educational sector frequently face challenges when implementing effective DEI programs for various reasons, including a lack of

comprehensive strategic plans and insufficient resources (Blanche, 2022; Tucker, 2023). Although some leaders recognize the importance of DEI, some leaders struggle to create genuinely inclusive environments, hindering meaningful progress.

Increasing political polarization and financial constraints significantly affect the implementation and effectiveness of DEI initiatives within higher education institutions. These challenges include stakeholder resistance, limited resources, and conflicts between institutional autonomy and external pressures (Brint, 2024; Fanton, 2021). Moreover, balancing fiscal responsibilities with the advancement of DEJI is crucial for addressing inequitable financial practices in American higher education. Chicas-Mosier et al. (2023) presented evidence based fiscal strategies aimed at enhancing DEJI efforts without compromising financial stability. Ultimately, by prioritizing both fiscal responsibility and DEJI advancement, higher education institutions can create more equitable and inclusive environments, enhancing their overall effectiveness and sustainability.

Effective DEI strategies should be comprehensive and interconnected, backed by leadership accountability to foster an inclusive culture. Bhat and de los Monteros (2024) noted that these strategies should not consist of isolated initiatives; instead, leaders should employ a holistic approach to DEI program implementation. Bhat and de los Monteros emphasized the importance of inventorying existing DEI interventions to identify gaps and areas that require improvement. By inventorying existing interventions, leaders can concentrate on solving their specific concerns and bringing about meaningful changes.

To highlight the significance of authentic diversity values and minority representation in leadership roles, Torrez et al. (2024) examined whether the prevailing narratives surrounding racial progress hinder the success of DEI initiatives. Torrez et al. found that misconceptions about organizational progress in DEI can lead to complacency, as well as obstruct the development and implementation of effective DEI policies. Kafka (2023) highlighted the significance of authentic values surrounding diversity and the representation of minorities in leadership roles to promote equitable outcomes in the workplace. The phenomenon known as woke-washing, where organizations claim to support social justice causes without taking meaningful action, can negatively impact vulnerable minority groups by creating a false impression of commitment to diversity. The insights provided by Torrez et al. and Kafka underscored the importance of addressing misconceptions about racial progress and promoting authentic diversity values in leadership roles. Future doctoral research should continue to explore these areas, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms through which prevailing narratives and woke-washing impact DEI initiatives. By prioritizing genuine commitment to diversity and minority representation, organizations can overcome complacency and develop effective DEI policies that foster equitable outcomes for all employees.

To investigate the strengths and limitations of current legal strategies and develop evidence based approaches to advance DEI goals, ensuring that these initiatives are both legally sound and effective despite external pressure, Lewis and Muñiz underscored the critical role legal counsel plays in navigating the complex legal landscape surrounding DEI policies. Legal advisors can help institutions understand and comply with laws while

advocating for equitable practices. A strong institutional commitment as well as proactive measures are essential for countering anti-DEI sentiments. By prioritizing DEI, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, despite external pressures.

Scholars and practitioners should be intentional about DEI practices and priorities. Feitosa et al. (2022) and Woods et al. called for future research to further investigate the integration of DEI principles in cross cultural contexts and the role of inclusive leadership in fostering a sense of belonging and willingness to embrace diversity among team members. Implementing DEI strategies in the education sector presents significant challenges but also substantial benefits. Overcoming barriers related to prioritization, resource allocation, and impact measurement is crucial for the success of DEI initiatives. By addressing these challenges, organizations can unlock the benefits of DEI programs, including improved organizational culture, enhanced employee satisfaction, and long-term financial gains. Educational leaders must commit to sustained DEI efforts to create inclusive environments that support diverse communities. Ultimately, a holistic approach that integrates DEI principles into the core values and operations of the organization is essential for the successful implementation of DEI strategies.

Overall, strong leadership commitment, the use of HR metrics to measure effectiveness, and the adoption of inclusive financial practices are vital for fostering a culture that values DEI, which in turn enhances the overall effectiveness of DEI programs. Additionally, creating a sense of belonging and reducing tokenism through

meaningful participation and inclusive practices are essential for the success of DEI initiatives. Engaging with the broader community and establishing partnerships with community organizations can provide additional support and resources, further enhancing the impact of DEI efforts. Essentially, comprehensive and authentic DEI initiatives are crucial for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments that promote academic and professional success.

Transition

In Section 2, I conducted a thorough review of scholarly and professional literature, focusing on strategies for education leaders in the United States to implement DEI programs aimed at increasing employee performance and profitability. In Section 3, I outline the ethical protocols and research design, detailing the data collection and analysis methods specifically tailored for this qualitative project concerning educational leaders in the United States. Additionally, I consider how to establish reliability and validity within this context. In Section 4, I present the project's findings and discuss their implications for practical leadership, potential contributions to social change, and suggestions for future research in this area.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In Section 3, I describe the research methodology, including ethical considerations, the nature of my research project, the population and sampling approach, the interview protocol and questions, and techniques for data collection, organization, and analysis. In Section 3, I highlight the importance of validity and reliability in qualitative research. For my research project, I employed a qualitative pragmatic inquiry design to explore the effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. A qualitative pragmatic inquiry design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and strategies leaders in the western region of the United States' educational sector used. Through semistructured interviews with educational leaders, I sought to identify the motivators, behaviors, and decision-making processes used to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, my role in the data collection process was crucial. I designed the interview guide, recruited the participants, conducted the interviews, and ensured that the discussions stayed focused on the research objectives. According to Sale and Carlin (2025), the researcher is not only a passive collector of data but also an active participant who shapes the research process through their interactions, interpretations, and decisions. My responsibilities included selecting the appropriate conceptual framework that guided my research design, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, building rapport with participants was crucial to encourage them to share their experiences openly and

honestly. I asked follow-up questions to gain deeper insights. Throughout this process, I maintained objectivity and neutrality to ensure that I did not influence the participants' responses. Furthermore, I upheld ethical standards by obtaining informed consent and safeguarding the confidentiality of all participants.

My relationship with this topic was rooted in my professional background as a human resources (HR) executive. With over 30 years of experience leading solutions-oriented HR teams across various business markets, including the educational sector, I am passionate about DEI. I am committed to implementing effective solutions that contribute to an organization's success and enhance its culture. My experience and dedication to DEI initiatives gave me a unique perspective and a profound understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting DEI in educational settings.

The ethical framework for my research project was guided by the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report*, which emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Kuhnt et al., 2025). Respect for people involves recognizing the autonomy of participants and providing special protection to those with diminished autonomy (Kuhnt et al., 2025). Beneficence requires researchers to maximize potential benefits while minimizing potential harm to participants. Justice ensures that the benefits and burdens of research are distributed fairly (Kuhnt et al., 2025). By adhering to these principles, I ensured that I treated my participants with dignity, protected their rights, and conducted the research with integrity.

For my research project, I complied with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols to ensure I meet ethical standards. The IRB review process included a thorough evaluation of the proposed study to ensure that it would protect the rights and welfare of participants, and informed consent is a critical component of this process. I received IRB approval through Walden University, #06-18-25-1163972. Participants received detailed information about the research project, including its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form before participating in the interview, indicating their voluntary agreement to take part. This process ensured transparency and fostered trust between the participants and me. I did not incentivize participants through monetary gifts, but I thanked them through an email after my project's conclusion.

Participants in my research project had the right to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalties or negative repercussions. Participants were able to withdraw by informing me via email or phone; however, no one withdrew. This procedure was in place to ensure that participants retained full control over their involvement in the research and could make decisions that aligned with their comfort and circumstances.

To ensure the wellbeing of participants in my research project, I implemented several protective measures. I maintained confidentiality by assigning unique codes to each participant. Instead of using real names or personal information, I identified participants by codes such as P1, P2, P3, and so on. This approach ensured that the data I

collected remained confidential and could not be traced back to any individual, thereby protecting their identities and ensuring that their personal information was not disclosed.

I will store all data securely on password protected devices and in encrypted storage systems for 5 years. Furthermore, in my research project, I refrained from including any questions or topics that may have caused distress or discomfort to participants. By prioritizing these protections, I created a safe and respectful environment for all individuals involved.

Nature of the Project

I used qualitative methodology for my research project because it involved collecting and analyzing nonnumerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences and could be valuable in evaluating the effectiveness of DEI programs in the education sector. By conducting interviews with participants, I gained insights into their personal experiences with DEI initiatives, contributing to my understanding of the perceived impact and identifying areas needing improvement. By using the qualitative method, I was able to better understand how DEI programs are developed and deployed in a practical setting.

Pragmatism offers novel ways of looking at questions of logic, truth, and experience that depart from previous norms. The focus of pragmatic inquiry is on finding practical solutions to real-world problems. By concentrating on what works best in practice, I identified and explored actionable insights and recommendations for improving DEI programs. A pragmatic approach highlighted the importance of context, ensuring that my research was tailored to educational leaders' unique environments and

challenges. Such contextual relevance was crucial for my understanding of the dynamics of DEI strategic initiatives within various educational settings.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The population for my research project consisted of educational leaders in the western region of the United States who are involved in implementing DEI programs. I employed purposive sampling to select participants who had successfully implemented DEI strategies. Purposive sampling ensured that the chosen individuals possessed relevant experience and could provide valuable insights into effective DEI practices. To be eligible, participants must have been employed at either a for-profit or non-profit educational institution; must have had direct leadership experience in the educational sector, specifically within the western region; and must have supervised at least five employees. Participants must also have had experience working in postsecondary educational environments. I selected a minimum of six leaders to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, enhancing my research project's findings and contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

In alignment with TPB, purposive sampling was an effective approach. TPB focuses on understanding how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence intentions and behaviors. Stratton (2024) described purposive sampling as a common qualitative research design in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics, experiences, or criteria relevant to the project. Therefore, a purposive sampling method allowed me to choose participants who had specific experiences or characteristics pertinent to my research objectives. Purposive sampling

ensured that participants had direct experience with the behaviors or phenomena being studied, which is crucial for understanding the factors influencing their intentions and actions (Stratton, 2024). Overall, purposive sampling aligned well with the TPB by enabling the selection of participants who could provide meaningful insights into the attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control shaping their behaviors. This targeted approach enhanced the depth and relevance of the data collected, ultimately supporting a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing participants' intentions and actions within the context of my research.

A focused data collection method enabled me to concentrate on gathering data that directly addressed the research question, ensuring that my research remained aligned with the research question. In identifying and exploring educational leaders' implementation of DEI programs, purposive sampling involved selecting leaders who have successfully executed these strategies. Purposive sampling allowed participants to offer valuable insights into the attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control factors that influenced their implementation efforts. By using purposive sampling, I gathered rich, relevant data that supported a comprehensive understanding of the behaviors and intentions central to my research question.

I conducted semistructured interviews with the selected leaders to collect detailed information on their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control related to DEI implementation. Analyzing the data allowed me to identify common themes and patterns that align with TPB, helping to illuminate the factors that influence leaders' intentions and behaviors (Amalia et al., 2023). By applying TPB, researchers and

practitioners can gain a thorough understanding of the psychological and social factors that shape leaders' intentions and actions concerning DEI (Amalia et al., 2023). This understanding can inform the development of targeted interventions that address specific attitudes, leverage supportive norms, and enhance perceived behavioral control. Ultimately, this approach informed me of more effective and sustainable DEI programs within organizations.

Comparing the experiences of different leaders helped identify variations in attitudes, norms, and behavioral control perceptions. My analysis provided insights into how different contexts and backgrounds influence DEI implementation. By aligning the sampling process with the research questions, I ensured that my research offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing DEI implementation. This approach not only enhanced the depth and relevance of my findings but also contributed to the broader literature on DEI and organizational behavior.

To access participants, I used a combination of email invitations and professional networking platforms, such as LinkedIn. This recruitment strategy enabled me to reach a wide audience of educational leaders in the western United States' education sector who had successfully implemented DEI initiatives. I established a working relationship with participants by introducing myself and engaging in small talk to build rapport. Additionally, I periodically checked in with participants to maintain our connection and show genuine interest in their experiences and wellbeing.

I recruited a minimum of six participants, as this number is usually adequate for achieving data saturation. According to Alordiah and Oji (2024), data saturation occurs

when no new information or themes emerge from the data. When researchers reach data saturation, they can cease data collection since additional participants are unlikely to provide new insights. Achieving data saturation was essential for ensuring the richness and completeness of the data, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of my research findings.

In my research process, my role was to collect appropriate data to systematically answer my research question and comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of DEI programs in the education sector. As the primary research instrument, I coordinated all aspects of the data collection process. I conducted semistructured interviews with leaders in the education sector who have successfully implemented DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. I used semistructured interviews for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and opinions. Semistructured interviews provided the flexibility, depth, and contextual understanding necessary to identify and explore effective strategies to successfully implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. Buys et al. (2022) noted that a semistructured interview style offered a flexible conversational approach, allowing researchers to adapt questions based on the flow of the discussion. This adaptability is crucial for exploring unexpected topics that may arise during interviews. I conducted the interviews online using Zoom technology, which enabled me to gather rich qualitative data that offered valuable insights into the strategies of these initiatives.

To guide the interviews for my research project, I used a detailed interview protocol. Mendoza and Ou (2022) described an interview protocol as a structured

framework that guides the interview process, ensuring both consistency and comprehensiveness. This approach organized my data collection process, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of my findings. My interview protocol (Appendix) included an opening statement, a predetermined list of interview questions, suggestions for additional probing questions, and a closing statement. Aishath and Maslawati (2024) emphasized that an interview protocol framework (IPF) is an effective method for organizing data in qualitative research, helping to systematically develop and refine an interview protocol to collect high quality data. By implementing a well defined and consistent process for semi-structured interviews, participants were able to reflect on the strategies they used. This reflection generated valuable insights that significantly contributed to qualitative research, particularly in complex and dynamic fields such as education.

Interview Questions

I used semistructured interviews designed to elicit detailed and insightful responses, which provided a comprehensive understanding of the strategies to implement DEI programs. A full list of targeted interview questions can be found in the Appendix. The interview questions included the following:

1. How would you describe your role in implementing DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability?
2. What effective strategies have you used to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability?
3. What challenges did you face in implementing these strategies?

4. What do you do to mitigate the impact of the challenges?
5. How did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies you implemented?
6. What additional information regarding strategies did you use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability that we have not already discussed, would you like to share?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I used a semistructured interview protocol to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection. Additionally, I applied a systematic coding process to categorize and identify themes within the transcribed data. I will store all transcriptions, coding, and analysis in a digital format to ensure confidentiality and easy access for further analysis.

I used Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic process to identify recurring themes and patterns related to effective strategies to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. This process involved assigning initial codes to segments of the transcribed data that relate to the research questions, refining these codes into more specific categories and subcategories, and grouping related codes into broader themes that capture the essence of the data (Aishath & Maslawati, 2024). Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2019) defined thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. It involves a process of coding data, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. First, I immersed myself in the data to ensure I understood and could interpret the information from my participants by reading and re-reading it, noting initial ideas. Second, I generated initial codes by systematically coding interesting

features of the data across the entire dataset, collating data relevant to each code. Third, I grouped the codes into potential themes by gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Fourth, I checked to see if the themes work with the coded extracts and the entire dataset, generating a thematic map of the analysis. Fifth, I refined the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Sixth, I identified compelling examples, finalized the analysis, and related them to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report. I will securely store this raw data for 5 years.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability and validity are essential concepts in research that ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of project findings. According to Olmsted (2024), reliability refers to the consistency of a measure, meaning that reliable tools produce the same results over time under similar conditions. Dependability refers to the quality of being trustworthy and reliable. In the context of research, dependability ensures that the findings are consistent and can be replicated under similar conditions. To incorporate dependability in my research project, I implemented strategies that enhance the reliability and validity of the collected data. One effective method is member checking, as outlined by Olmsted (2024). This involves sharing my research findings with the participants who provided the data to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations and to gain additional context. This process not only strengthens the credibility of my research but also fosters a collaborative relationship with my participants, ensuring that their voices are accurately represented.

By incorporating member checking, I demonstrated a commitment to ethical research practices and enhanced the trustworthiness of my project.

Validity

Validity pertains to the accuracy of a measure, ensuring that the tool effectively measures what it is intended to measure. Olmsted emphasized that both reliability and validity are crucial for the credibility of research, as they confirm that the findings are consistent and accurately reflect the phenomena being analyzed. I ensured the validity of my research by ensuring credibility, efficient analysis, and insightful interpretation of the data. I employed triangulation to enhance the validity of my findings by cross verifying data from my sources, which include interviews, publicly available documents, and relevant literature. I analyzed the narratives provided by participants to gain a better understanding of the context and depth of their experiences with DEI programs. This analysis offered insights into how leaders can use effective DEI strategies to increase employee performance and profitability. Drisko (2025) defined transferability as the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts, settings, or populations. Transferability was crucial for my research, as I provided detailed descriptions of my research context to participants, thereby enabling them to determine whether the findings apply to their own situations. I used thorough descriptions to convey the nuances of my research environment and to ensure that my methods and results are documented. Conformity refers to the degree to which my research findings are influenced by the respondents while excluding bias, motivation, or personal interests. To achieve confirmability in my research project, I implemented strategies such as

maintaining audit trails and practicing reflexivity. An audit trail involves keeping detailed records of all my research decisions and processes, allowing others to trace the steps I took during my research project. Reflexivity required me to critically reflect on my own biases and how they could impact the research process. By adopting these strategies, I aimed to enhance the objectivity and credibility of my research project, particularly when assessing the effectiveness of DEI programs in the educational sector.

I achieved research data saturation, as outlined by Naeem et al. (2024), by systematically analyzing all data until no new themes or insights emerged. This process involved refining and expanding existing codes and themes to ensure that the data was fully explored and that my research findings were robust. By doing this, I could confirm that I had reached a point where additional data collection would provide no new information, thereby achieving saturation.

Transition and Summary

In my research project, I aimed to identify and explore effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. I stated the problem and the purpose and described the nature of the project and related ethics. I used the Ajzen's (1985) TPB as the conceptual framework for my research project. Further, I addressed assumptions and limitations, explained the significance of my research project, and reviewed the professional and academic literature. In Section 4, I discuss the findings and the implications for business practice, social change, and further research, and end with a conclusion.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of my qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore the effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. The overarching research question was the following: what effective strategies do some leaders in the education sector use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability? I gathered data from leaders in the western region of the United States' educational sector of the United States who had held leadership positions for at least 5 years. I conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom to collect the data. I audio recorded the interviews and conducted follow-up interviews with some participants who had more to add. After the interviews, I shared my summaries with the participants to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences. Participants had the opportunity to review and make corrections where necessary, ensuring that I captured their thoughts and perspectives accurately.

I created initial codes using a color scheme to categorize the data. I iteratively improved the coding and combined it to identify seven themes: (a) leadership commitment and strategic implementation; (b) inclusive hiring and promotion practices; (c) training, coaching, and professional development; (d) feedback-driven strategy design; (e) psychological safety, belonging, and emotional support; (f) cultural exposure and immersive experiences; and (g) representation and cultural relevance. The themes I identified aligned with the conceptual framework of Ajzen's TPB. Table 1 illustrates the

participants' responses that were used to identify the themes, which showed Participants 1 to 6 discussing the themes in varying ways.

Table 1

Justification for Theme Selection Based on Data Saturation

Theme	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Leadership Commitment and Strategic Implementation	Described initiating a significant shift in hiring practices by removing traditional educational requirements in favor of evaluating lived experiences, cultural fit, and capability. This strategic change was designed to level the playing field and expand access to leadership opportunities for underrepresented groups. By advocating for and implementing this policy, they demonstrated a clear commitment to equity and inclusion as a business advantage not a compliance obligation.	Demonstrated leadership commitment by advancing DEI efforts in environments where there was little to no formal support, funding, or organizational appetite. Often had to implement DEI strategies reactively, responding to emerging needs rather than through pre-planned initiatives. Despite these constraints, took initiative to advocate for internal changes to support disabled employees, coach and upskill internal teams to build persuasive DEI business cases, and push for cultural shifts even when board-level approval delayed implementation.	Demonstrates strong leadership by designing and implementing structured DEI support systems across school districts. Commitment is evident in the use of pre-, mid-year, and post-surveys, quarterly check-ins, and individual coaching sessions to ensure that DEI strategies are not only implemented but continuously evaluated and refined. Recognized the need to pivot when cultural or contextual shifts occur, showing strategic adaptability.	Demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive leadership through a structured, phased approach to team development by getting to know individuals personally, documenting their strengths and weaknesses, and then strategically grouping them to foster growth. Their use of timelines, starting small, building in the middle, and culminating in independent team function reflects a thoughtful, strategic implementation of leadership practices that support DEI goals.	Although their organization does not have a formal DEI program, demonstrates strong leadership commitment through intentional practices. As an African American leader in education, embedded DEI into the school's culture by ensuring that staff diversity reflects the student population. Emphasized that leadership must be intentional in hiring and modeling inclusive values, especially in the absence of formal structures. Their leadership is rooted in a mission-driven approach focused on student outcomes and cultural alignment.	Demonstrated strong leadership in DEI strategy by designing and delivering monthly DEI trainings. Advocating for a top-down approach, ensuring executive leadership was involved. Establishing a DEIB Council with structured onboarding, orientation, and alignment with corporate mandates. Recommending realistic goal-setting and honest dialogue between DEI consultants and organizations to avoid performative efforts. These actions reflect a deep commitment to embedding DEI into organizational culture and operations.
Inclusive Hiring and	Recognizing a gap in leadership opportunities for	Actively worked to remove educational	While not directly involved in	Supports inclusive practices by	Plays a direct role in inclusive	Influenced inclusive practices

Promotion Practices	women in a male-dominated, culturally restrictive environment, developed and proposed a comprehensive recruitment and interview strategy. Within eight months, this initiative led to the successful hiring of three women executive coaches. This outcome illustrates not only strategic implementation but also the courage to challenge systemic barriers and create pathways for diverse leadership.	barriers in hiring by promoting lived experiences and cultural fit over formal credentials. Addressed age-related biases in hiring, especially in multigenerational teams, and encouraged hiring practices that focused on the skills and talents needed for organizational growth.	hiring, supports inclusive environments by ensuring diverse voices and perspectives are present in professional development and decision-making spaces. Collaboratively helps shape inclusive cultures that can influence hiring and promotion practices indirectly by fostering equity-minded leadership and collaboration.	evaluating individuals based on learning styles and strengths, not race or background, pairing individuals with complementary abilities to promote mutual growth, recognizing and leveraging diverse talents to ensure everyone has a role and opportunity to contribute.	hiring by designing interview questions that assess candidates' cultural competence and comfort working with Black and Brown students. Observing candidates' reactions to questions about bias, using these responses to evaluate alignment with the school's values, and Prioritizing representation in hiring to ensure students see themselves reflected in staff. This approach ensures that hiring decisions are aligned with the school's DEI goals and student needs.	through new hire orientation that included DEI training, ensuring the DEIB Council was representative of diverse identities and regions, and promoting equity in leadership development by creating structured pathways for participation in DEI work.
Training, Coaching, and Professional Development	Emphasized the importance of educating leaders who may lack experience or understanding of DEI. Advocates regular coaching and teaching stakeholders in leadership roles, advocates for the inclusion of DEI-specific modules in all leadership development programs, which reflects a proactive approach to building leadership capability and	Led extensive coaching and training efforts, particularly for teams tasked with organizational transformation, which included training on networking and stakeholder engagement, and educating leaders on bias mitigation and inclusive hiring. Emphasized the need for DEI education across all levels, not just top-down, but organization-wide to build emotional	Designs and delivers professional development based on staff needs. Conducts individualized coaching sessions (15 minutes each for reflection, feedback, and next steps). Uses empathy interviews and surveys to inform training content and provides ongoing support through quarterly check-ins and	Uses a hands-on coaching model that includes observation and documentation of individual learning and performance, and assigning roles (e.g., facilitator, timekeeper, recorder) to develop leadership and collaboration skills. Provides relevant materials and research to team members based on their interests and	Engages in ongoing coaching and development by observing staff interactions with students, providing individualized feedback and strategies to improve cultural responsiveness, and meets regularly with staff who show red flags to support their growth and alignment with restorative practices. This informal but	Delivered monthly DEI sessions focused on cultural humility and belonging. Created pre- and post-assessments to measure growth and impact. Facilitated focused group discussions and ERG-style spaces for identity-based support and emphasized the importance of training facilitators to be emotionally

	embedding DEI into the organizational learning infrastructure.	intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal effectiveness.	follow-ups. These efforts build staff capacity to engage in culturally responsive teaching and collaboration.	strengths. Encourages reciprocal learning, where team members share resources and insights with one another.	intentional coaching model supports continuous professional development.	healthy and prepared to lead sensitive conversations.
Feedback-Driven Strategy Design	Emphasized the importance of using key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the success of DEI initiatives such as tracking the number of women and people of color recruited into leadership development programs. This focus on measurable outcomes reflects a strategic mindset and a commitment to accountability.	Described using employee engagement scores, ERG participation rates, and DEI hiring metrics as measures of program effectiveness. These data points informed ongoing strategy refinement and helped identify areas for improvement. They also emphasized the importance of check-ins and evaluating intervention success, showing a commitment to continuous learning and adaptation.	Uses a continuous feedback loop to shape DEI programming such as, pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, empathy interviews to gather deeper insights, adjusts programming based on feedback and observed needs, and involves colleagues in reviewing materials to identify and address potential barriers.	Leverages ongoing observation to assess team dynamics and adjusts groupings and responsibilities based on performance and growth. Encourages peer feedback and collaboration to refine strategies. Measures progress through phased timelines and visible team independence. This iterative process ensures that strategies evolve based on real-time insights and team needs.	Uses observational feedback, student and parent input, and staff behavior to inform leadership decisions. Monitors classrooms more closely when concerns arise. Uses feedback loops to determine whether staff are growing in their cultural competence and adjusts support strategies based on observed progress or resistance.	Uses multiple feedback mechanisms such as, pre- and post-evaluations to assess the impact of training and council initiatives, focus groups to provide space for staff to process current events and workplace challenges, responsive communication to address emerging issues and adjust strategy accordingly. This iterative, data-informed approach ensured that DEI efforts were continuously refined and aligned with staff needs.
Psychological Safety, Belonging, and Emotional Support	Addressed the emotional and psychological complexities surrounding pronoun disclosure, particularly in environments where such practices were mandated. By implementing team-level behavioral norms that respected	Addressed the emotional toll of mandatory pronoun disclosure policies and implemented team-level behavioral norms to support individual readiness. Highlighted the importance of creating systems for conflict resolution,	Uses a coaching model that fosters psychological safety by creating non-evaluative, reflective spaces for educators. Mindful of how cultural events or shifts may impact staff and emphasize the	Acknowledges the initial discomfort can arise when individuals are placed in unfamiliar groupings, which is addressed by encouraging openness and patience, creating safe spaces for learning and collaboration,	Uses a restorative justice model as a cornerstone approach to emotional support. Creates spaces for students to reflect, repair, and grow from mistakes. Ensures that staff are trained to engage	Advocated for the “B” in DEIB to emphasize belonging as a driver of engagement and productivity. Supported identity-based support groups (e.g., for LGBTQIA+ and African American staff),

	individual readiness, created a psychologically safe space an essential condition for authentic inclusion and sustained performance.	encouraging emotional connection and empathy in the workplace, and preventing the dehumanization of employees by recognizing their lived experiences and talents.	importance of being responsive and empathetic. The approach ensures that staff feel supported, heard, and valued.	assigning peer mediators to help resolve conflicts and maintain harmony, and ensuring that everyone has a role and is recognized for their contributions.	students with empathy, not punishment, and works to ensure that students feel seen, understood, and supported by culturally competent adults.	emphasized the need for trained, emotionally healthy facilitators to lead these groups and prevent harm. Modeled and taught self-compassion and self-care, especially for DEI practitioners and people of color, which fostered a culture of emotional safety, healing, and support
Cultural Exposure and Immersive Experiences: Building Shared Understanding Across Roles	Highlighted that leadership should extended beyond internal operations to community engagement. Advocated for organizations to support external DEI programs and bring in diverse speakers to engage staff at all levels. This outward-facing strategy reinforces the idea that DEI is not confined to internal HR policies but is a holistic, values-driven approach to leadership.	Worked to bridge generational and experiential gaps within teams, particularly in tech environment by facilitated collaboration between seasoned professionals and recent graduates, and built structures to support mutual understanding and respect across diverse roles and experiences.	Strongly supports cultural exposure as a strategy for growth and recommends visiting cultural institutions like the Museum of Tolerance, attending cultural festivals and speaker events that highlight diverse lived experiences noting that these immersive experiences help staff expand their cultural awareness and build shared understanding across roles and backgrounds.	Supports cultural exposure through cross-functional groupings that bring together individuals with different learning styles and perspectives. Encourages team members to share relevant documents, research, and current events (e.g., AI trends, executive board discussions), and promotes reciprocal learning, where individuals learn from each other's strengths and experiences. This immersive, collaborative environment builds shared understanding and respect across roles	Ensures that students are immersed in a culturally affirming environment by hiring staff who reflect the students' racial and cultural backgrounds, encourages staff to understand and connect with students' lived experiences, and promotes cultural alignment between staff and students as a strategy for academic and social success. This creates an immersive, identity-affirming educational experience for students.	Promoted cultural humility and cross-cultural understanding by encouraging staff to reflect on bias, privilege, and othering. Facilitating nationwide DEIB Council collaboration, bringing together diverse perspectives. Addressed tensions between identity groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+ vs. communities of color) and promoted unity through shared learning.

				and backgrounds.		
Representation and Cultural Relevance	Participant 1's leadership reflects a comprehensive and courageous approach to DEI. Through strategic hiring reforms, intentional leadership development, education and coaching, and a focus on psychological safety, demonstrated how DEI can be operationalized to drive both equity and organizational performance. Underscored the importance of leadership commitment, cultural sensitivity, and the intentional dismantling of systemic barriers hallmarks of effective DEI strategy in today's complex socio-political climate.	Supported representation by advocating for hiring practices that valued lived experiences, promoting awareness of DEI concepts and cultural sensitivity, and encouraging organizations to see employees as whole people not just tools within a system. Emphasis on empathy, awareness, and inclusive engagement helped ensure that DEI efforts were culturally relevant and human centered.	Ensures that professional development and coaching are culturally relevant by tailoring content to the specific needs of staff and students. Emphasis on diverse perspectives, empathy, and cultural responsiveness helps educators better serve their communities and reflect the diversity of their student populations.	As an African American woman, brings a culturally grounded perspective to her leadership. Ensures that diverse voices and learning styles are represented in team structures, recognizes the value of individual expertise and lived experience, and encourages the use of current, relevant materials to connect team learning with broader cultural and professional trends.	Representation is central to Participant 5's DEI philosophy. Intentionally hires staff who look like and understand the students, emphasizes the importance of cultural connection in student-teacher relationships, ensures that staff are culturally responsive and reflective about their own biases. This approach ensures that both representation and cultural relevance are embedded in the school's daily operations.	Representation was addressed through a nationally representative DEIB Council. Developed and facilitated raining content that reflected current events and cultural realities (e.g., George Floyd's murder). Created identity-specific spaces for reflection and healing. Encouraged self-reflection to unpack unconscious bias and promote culturally relevant engagement.

Figure 1 illustrates the number of participants and how the participants responded to each identified theme.

Figure 1

Evidence of Saturation

Theme 1: Leadership Commitment and Strategic Implementation

Leadership plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of DEI strategies that enhance employee performance and profitability. A consistent theme emerged from Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6: Intentional, informed, and emotionally intelligent leadership is essential for embedding DEI into the organizational culture. Participant 1 described designing a comprehensive recruitment and interview strategy aimed at addressing gender inequities in a male dominated environment. This effort led to the hiring of three women executive coaches. This proactive approach reflects Ajzen's TPB, which posits that behavior is driven by intentions that are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. By reshaping organizational norms and removing

structural barriers, leaders can positively influence employees' intentions and behaviors toward inclusion and equity.

Participant 4 emphasized the importance of observation, documentation, and strategic delegation, highlighting the role of peer leaders and facilitators in supporting inclusive team dynamics. This aligns with Dalessandro and Lovell, who found that leader and coworker support significantly shaped employees' attitudes and intentions toward inclusive behaviors, reinforcing the TPB's focus on social norms and perceived support as key drivers of behavior. Participant 5 highlighted the necessity for leaders to be not only diverse themselves but also deeply committed to dismantling racism and fostering inclusive environments. This echoes Blanche (2022), who found that leadership authenticity and accountability are critical drivers of DEI success. Employees are more likely to adopt inclusive behaviors when they perceive their leadership as genuinely committed to equity. Participant 6 reinforced the importance of honest goal setting, emotional intelligence, and trauma-informed leadership. Blanche and Participant 6 noted that DEI efforts must be led by individuals who are emotionally prepared and supported, particularly when facilitating identity-based groups, which reflects Bednar's (2024) assertion that fostering a sense of belonging must be a leadership priority because employees expect leaders to create environments where they feel seen, valued, and connected. Additionally, Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6 emphasized the significance of strategic communication, feedback loops, and cultural alignment.

Leaders who engage in transparent dialogue, provide emotional and professional support, and model inclusive behaviors help create a workplace where inclusive actions

are expected and integrated into TPB's subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. These findings suggest that effective DEI leadership is not merely performative; it is strategic, relational, and grounded in behavioral science. Leaders who shape positive attitudes, establish inclusive norms, and remove barriers to action are more likely to foster sustained inclusive behaviors that drive employee performance and profitability.

Theme 2: Inclusive Hiring and Promotion Practices

In today's educational landscape, inclusive hiring and promotion practices are increasingly recognized as essential for building equitable, high performing institutions. Leaders in the educational sector are moving away from rigid credential based hiring models and toward approaches that value lived experiences, cultural alignment, and potential. Participant 1 implemented a recruitment strategy to address gender inequity in a male-dominated environment. The participant designed a process that prioritized access and opportunities for women, resulting in the successful hiring of three women executive coaches. Participant 1's efforts reflect a broader trend of removing structural barriers, such as degree requirements, which have historically excluded marginalized groups. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of mitigating biases in hiring, particularly age-related and experiential biases, and advocated for building teams with diverse backgrounds and skill sets. This aligns with the views of Burnett and Aguinis (2024), who argued that inclusive hiring must be intentional and evidence-based to avoid DEI backfire, a situation in which initiatives are perceived as performative or unfair.

Participant 5 highlighted the necessity of leaders who are genuinely committed to DEI, noting that a leadership mindset is critical for sustaining inclusive practices. This

perspective supports Ezell's (2023) critique of performative wokeness in higher education, where institutions often fail to progress beyond symbolic gestures. Ezell called for authentic, systemic change that focuses on racial equity and lived experiences.

Participant 6 discussed the importance of equity across different identity groups, pointing out that tensions can arise when certain forms of diversity are prioritized over others. Participant 6 advocated for realistic goal setting and trained facilitators to ensure that identity based groups (e.g., employee resource groups) are productive and inclusive, which highlights the need for balanced, intersectional approaches to implementing DEI. These practices are relevant considering Brint's (2024) analysis of the challenges facing U.S. higher education, where traditional credentialism is increasingly questioned. Brint noted that an overreliance on formal qualifications can perpetuate inequality, asserting that institutions must adapt to a more inclusive, skills- and values-based model. From a theoretical perspective, these strategies align with Ajzen's TPB, which posits that behavior is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. By shifting organizational norms, removing structural barriers, and empowering leaders and hiring managers, institutions can influence the intentions and behaviors of employees and decision makers toward more inclusive outcomes.

Theme 3: Training, Coaching and Professional Development

Training, coaching, and reflective professional development are essential strategies for fostering inclusive behaviors, empathy, and awareness at all levels of educational organizations. Insights from Participants 1, 2, 3, and 6 illustrate how these practices contribute to creating more equitable and effective workplaces. Participant 1

emphasized the importance of integrating DEI into leadership development programs. This ensures that leaders are equipped to model and implement inclusive practices, which helps embed DEI into the organization's culture and supports long-term change. Participant 2 described using coaching to assist teams in building persuasive DEI cases, communicating effectively with leadership and evaluating the impact of their initiatives. Coaching also helps develop the communication and advocacy skills necessary for advancing DEI goals. Participant 3 implemented a structured professional development model that included pre-, mid-, and post surveys; empathy interviews; and individualized coaching. These feedback mechanisms facilitated continuous improvement and ensured that DEI efforts were responsive to staff needs. Participant 6 highlighted the emotional and psychological aspects of DEI work, advocating for trauma-informed facilitation and self-care. Participants 2, 3, and 6 stressed the importance of preparing facilitators to guide sensitive conversations to effectively support identity-based groups.

Sustaining effective DEI practices in educational settings requires a multifaceted approach that integrates leadership commitment, reflective learning, and data driven evaluation. Hougham et al. found that reductions in DEI practices within environmental education organizations were often linked to a lack of sustained training and leadership engagement, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development. Similarly, Mendoza and Ou discovered that structured reflection through coaching or guided interviews enhanced self-awareness and inclusive practices in educational settings. Olmsted emphasized that valid and reliable data collection is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of educational interventions, including DEI training. Together, these

strategies promote the development of inclusive mindsets and behaviors by enhancing empathy and cultural awareness, equipping leaders and staff with practical tools for inclusion, creating safe spaces for reflection and growth, and ensuring accountability through data and feedback.

Theme 4: Feedback-Driven Strategy Design

Effective implementation of DEI requires more than just one-time training or static policies; it demands continuous feedback, reflection, and adaptation. Participants 3, 5, and 6 highlighted the importance of utilizing pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, empathy interviews, and ongoing check-ins to ensure that DEI strategies remain relevant, inclusive, and impactful.

Participant 3 described a structured feedback model that includes surveys and individual coaching sessions. These tools facilitate real time adjustments to professional development and ensure that the needs of staff are continuously addressed. This approach aligns with the findings of Woods et al. who discovered that inclusive leadership practices such as listening, adapting, and responding to feedback promote psychological safety and foster openness to diversity, both of which are essential for the success of DEI initiatives. Participant 5 emphasized the importance of aligning staff behavior and performance with the school's mission and values, using student outcomes and community feedback as key indicators. This aligns with the observations of Beer et al. who noted that faculty perceptions of DEI effectiveness are significantly influenced by the presence of feedback mechanisms and their capacity to lead visible change.

Participant 6 pointed out the value of using focus groups and facilitated discussions to process current events and identity based concerns. Participant 6 stressed the necessity of having trained facilitators who can productively guide these conversations. This supports Tucker's argument that feedback loops need to be structured and intentional to transition DEI efforts from mere aspiration to actual impact.

Integrating structured feedback mechanisms into DEI research and practice enhances both the credibility of findings and the effectiveness of organizational strategies. Sale and Carlin (2025) advocated for the use of conceptual frameworks and structured feedback tools in qualitative research, noting that reliable feedback mechanisms enhance the credibility and usefulness of DEI interventions. Similarly, Wadhwa and Aggarwal (2023) found that organizations incorporating feedback into their DEI strategies report higher levels of workplace effectiveness and employee engagement. Collectively, these insights underscore that feedback is not a onetime event but a continuous process. When embedded into the design of DEI strategies, it allows for real time responsiveness to the needs of staff and the community, fosters better alignment between DEI goals and organizational values, improves psychological safety and trust, and promotes more effective and inclusive leadership practices.

Theme 5: Psychological Safety, Belonging, and Emotional Support

Creating environments where employees feel safe, valued, and emotionally supported is essential for the success of DEI initiatives. Participants 2, 5, and 6 emphasized that psychological safety and belonging are not just abstract concepts; they are measurable, actionable, and directly linked to employee performance and retention.

Participant 2 highlighted the importance of recognizing and addressing employees' emotional and psychological needs, particularly concerning identity expression. Participant 2 implemented informal team-level practices to support individuals in navigating pronoun use and gender identity, stressing that leaders must balance organizational expectations with individuals' readiness. Both Participants 2 and 5 pointed out the role of self-reflection and empathy in addressing unconscious bias. They stressed the need for leaders to intentionally create environments where staff and students feel culturally understood and emotionally safe, especially in diverse educational settings. Participant 6 discussed the emotional toll of DEI work, particularly for people of color and other marginalized groups. Moreover, Participant 6 emphasized the necessity of trained facilitators and support systems, ensuring that identity-based groups (e.g., employee resource groups) are not only safe but also productive. Participant 6 also advocated for self-compassion and peer support as vital tools for sustaining DEI leadership.

Fostering a genuine sense of belonging in the workplace requires intentional leadership practices that prioritize psychological safety, empathy, and continuous feedback. Woods et al. (2024) found that inclusive leadership significantly enhances psychological safety and openness to diversity. Wood's et al. research indicates that when leaders model vulnerability, empathy, and responsiveness, employees are more likely to express themselves authentically and engage in DEI efforts. Camargo further supported this by emphasizing that belonging must be intentionally cultivated to avoid tokenism.

Strategies such as empathy interviews, pre/mid/post surveys, and continuous feedback loops help organizations assess whether employees feel seen, heard, and valued.

Creating inclusive and equitable organizational cultures requires a holistic approach that combines emotional engagement, shared responsibility, and intentional strategies for fostering belonging. Dalessandro and Lovell also highlighted the importance of support from leaders and coworkers in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors toward inclusion. Dalessandro and Lovell reinforce that psychological safety is a shared responsibility, not solely a leadership function. Ezell critiqued performative DEI efforts, calling for genuine emotional engagement and racial empathy in higher education, which echoes Participant 6's emphasis on healing and emotional readiness as prerequisites for effective DEI leadership. Fanton and Ditomaso both stressed that belonging is a critical driver of organizational equity and inclusion, and must be embedded into the culture, rather than being treated as an afterthought.

Embedding belonging in the organizational environment aligns closely with Ajzen's TPB, which posits that behavior is shaped by attitudes toward the behavior (e.g., valuing inclusion and empathy), subjective norms (e.g., organizational expectations for inclusive conduct), and perceived behavioral control (e.g., having the tools, support, and psychological safety to act inclusively). By fostering environments where employees feel safe to express themselves, supported by leadership, and empowered through feedback and reflection, organizations can increase the likelihood that inclusive behaviors will be adopted and sustained.

Theme 6: Cross-Organizational DEI Education: Building Shared Understanding Across Roles

Effective implementation of DEI requires more than just top down mandates; it demands organization wide learning that engages individuals at all levels. Participants 2 and 3 emphasized that DEI education should be inclusive, continuous, and reflective of the diverse experiences within an organization. Participant 2 advocated for a horizontal approach to DEI education, asserting that all employees must be equipped with the tools to understand and engage with diversity. Both Participant 2 and 3 highlighted the importance of empathy, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution training to prevent misunderstandings and promote inclusive team dynamics.

Participant 3 implemented a structured professional development model that included pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, empathy interviews, and individual coaching. These tools helped identify gaps in understanding and allowed for real-time adjustments to training content, ensuring that DEI education remained relevant and responsive to staff needs. This approach aligns with the findings of Feitosa et al. (2022) who argued that DEI education must be culturally adaptive and context specific, especially in diverse organizational settings. Feitosa et al. showed that inclusive training improves team performance and reduces cultural friction when it is integrated across all levels of an organization.

Achieving lasting and meaningful change requires institutions to move beyond symbolic DEI efforts and invest in sustained, inclusive education that is resilient to social political pressure, Brint highlighted the social political challenges facing U.S. higher

education, noting that institutions must move beyond symbolic gestures and invest in comprehensive DEI education to address systemic inequities and rebuild trust among faculty, staff, and students. Green and Hand revisited McKinsey's diversity research, emphasizing that diversity alone is insufficient. Organizations must also invest in inclusive practices and education to fully realize the benefits of diverse teams. Holton warned of the detrimental effects of political backlash against inclusive education, particularly in teaching Black history. This underscores the importance of institutional courage and consistency in delivering DEI education that is both meaningful and resilient. By promoting DEI learning across roles, organizations foster a shared language, mutual respect, and collective accountability, which are essential for reducing conflict and building inclusive cultures.

Theme 7: Representation and Cultural Relevance

To create inclusive and high performing educational environments, DEI education must reach all levels of an organization, not just leadership. Participants 5 and 6 highlighted that representation and cultural relevance are not merely outcomes to be achieved; they must be cultivated through intentional, organization wide learning.

Participant 5 emphasized the importance of hiring staff who reflect the cultural and racial backgrounds of the student population. When students see themselves represented among their educators, it fosters trust, comfort, and deeper engagement. This intentional alignment between staff and student demographics is supported by DEI education, which helps all employees understand the value of cultural connection and inclusive practices. Participant 6 reinforced this point by describing the implementation

of focus groups and identity based spaces to support employees from diverse backgrounds. Both Participants 5 and 6 stressed that DEI education must be inclusive of all identities and that facilitators should be trained to navigate conversations that are both culturally sensitive and emotionally safe. This ensures that representation is meaningful rather than tokenistic and is backed by a culture of belonging.

Embedding DEI into the fabric of academic and organizational culture requires intentional education, authentic representation, and shared accountability across all levels of the institution. Lafferty et al. argued that creating a culture of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in academia requires intentional, cross functional education and collaboration. Lafferty et al. underscored that representation must be supported by institutional learning that promotes cultural humility and shared responsibility. Backlund (2017) suggests that students' perspectives on institutional processes, such as doctoral studies, are influenced by how well they see themselves reflected in faculty and leadership. This reinforces the idea that representation enhances engagement and retention, especially when supported by inclusive educational practices.

Cross organizational DEI education also helps mitigate the risks of performative inclusion. By ensuring that all staff, not just leadership, understand the importance of cultural relevance, organizations can foster shared accountability and reduce interpersonal conflict. This approach guarantees that representation is embedded in everyday interactions and institutional values, rather than being merely symbolic.

Leaders in both educational and organizational settings employ various methods to assess the effectiveness of their DEI initiatives. These methods are tailored to meet their institutional goals, cultural contexts, and the specific outcomes they aim to achieve.

Participant 1 focused on key performance indicators (KPIs), such as increasing leadership diversity, particularly the number of women and people of color promoted to executive roles. Participant 2 measured success through employee engagement scores, participation in employee resource groups (ERGs), and the number of DEI related hires and contracts. Participant 3 utilized a structured feedback model comprising pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, empathy interviews, and coaching check-ins to track progress and adjust strategies in real time. Participant 4 relied on observation, documentation, and structured timelines to assess individual and team growth, tracking employees' development over time. Additionally, Participant 5 evaluated DEI success based on student outcomes and assessed how well staff actions aligned with the school's mission and vision, particularly in culturally responsive teaching and support, and Participant 6 recommended pre- and post-evaluations and gathered feedback from DEI councils and focus groups to assess cultural shifts and employee perceptions of inclusion.

These diverse approaches align with Braun and Clarke's advocacy for reflexive thematic analysis, which underscores the significance of contextual, iterative, and participant-informed evaluation in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke's work supports the use of empathy interviews and reflective feedback as valid tools for understanding the impact of DEI initiatives. Buys et al. (2022) further reinforced the value of semi-structured interviews and reflexive practices in academic settings, noting that such

methods allow for deeper exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions of institutional change. Together, these sources validate the use of multi-modal, feedback driven evaluation frameworks that combine quantitative metrics (e.g., hiring data, engagement scores, student outcomes), qualitative insights (e.g., interviews, coaching reflections, observational notes), as well as iterative feedback loops (e.g., surveys and check-ins).

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings from my research project enhance the understanding of how leaders can implement DEI strategies to improve organizational performance and create social impact. Leaders across various sectors have adopted a range of practices, including inclusive hiring, leadership development, feedback-driven coaching, cross organizational DEI education. Collectively, these practices have fostered psychological safety, cultural relevance, and employee engagement. These practices align with Ajzen's TPB, which suggests that behavior is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. By cultivating inclusive attitudes, modeling supportive norms, and equipping employees with the necessary tools and confidence, organizations can increase the likelihood of sustained inclusive behaviors.

From a professional practice perspective, I recommend integrating DEI into all levels of organizational strategy and culture. Amalia et al. suggested that TPB can serve as a framework for organizational transformation, ensuring that leadership behaviors are aligned with employee expectations and values. Bednar (2024) reinforced this by stating that DEI should be viewed as a business advantage rather than merely a compliance

obligation. Additionally, Beer et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of measuring DEI effectiveness through both qualitative and quantitative metrics such as engagement scores, cultural feedback, and representation data. A mixed methods approach ensures accountability and supports continuous improvement. Practitioners are encouraged to adopt a reflexive, data informed strategy that centers on lived experiences, fosters emotional intelligence, and cultivates shared responsibility for inclusion across all organizational roles.

Implications for Social Change

The collective experiences and strategies shared by the participants demonstrate how DEI initiatives can drive transformative social change among individuals and within organizations and communities. DEI efforts extend beyond internal policy adjustments; they also influence broader cultural norms, challenge systemic inequities, and promote inclusive leadership. Organizational leaders play a critical role in modeling inclusive values, removing barriers, and prioritizing representation. Recruitment strategies aimed at increasing the number of women in executive roles, along with intentional hiring of culturally representative staff, reflect a commitment to equity in leadership. These actions support social change by challenging traditional power structures and amplifying underrepresented voices in decision-making.

Inclusive hiring practices and a focus on lived experiences promote access and opportunities for marginalized groups, helping to dismantle systemic barriers and redefine merit in more inclusive and socially just ways. Moreover, creating safe spaces for individuals to express their identities and receive emotional support fosters inclusive

environments where everyone can thrive. Emphasizing trauma-informed facilitation and support for employee resource groups reflects a deeper understanding of intersectionality and healing as integral to social change.

Additionally, the use of pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, empathy interviews, and coaching check-ins ensures that DEI strategies are responsive and participatory. This approach empowers individuals to shape the systems they belong to, reinforcing democratic engagement and accountability. DEI education across all roles builds shared understanding, reduces conflict, and promotes cultural humility. Structured professional development models and an emphasis on emotional intelligence support collective transformation and community building.

The strategies identified by participants in my research project illustrate that DEI is not just an internal human resources initiative; it is a vehicle for systemic change. By elevating marginalized voices, redefining leadership and merit, fostering empathy and inclusion, and embedding accountability and feedback, organizational leaders can actively reshape their institutions and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future researchers should continue to investigate the evolving landscape of DEI in the education sector in the United States, particularly as it pertains to leadership effectiveness, organizational culture, and performance outcomes. Given the current socio-political climate, where DEI efforts face increasing scrutiny and politicization, scholars

and practitioners should remain committed to advancing this work through rigorous, evidence-based inquiry.

Subsequent researchers should focus on how educational leaders develop the skills, mindsets, and behaviors necessary to implement DEI programs that are not merely performative but are deeply integrated into institutional values and practices. Key areas for further exploration include the developmental pathways of inclusive leaders and how intentional training, coaching, and professional development shape their ability to lead with cultural competence and authenticity.

Additionally, researchers should examine the role of leadership capability and commitment in sustaining DEI initiatives, especially in environments where resistance or backlash may arise. The effects of eliminating systemic and interpersonal biases on organizational outcomes, including employee engagement, retention, and productivity, should also be investigated. Moreover, it is important to explore how leaders create psychologically safe and supportive environments that foster a genuine sense of belonging for all stakeholders. Ensuring emotional safety is not only a moral imperative but also a crucial driver of performance that enables innovation, collaboration, and resilience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore effective strategies that educational leaders use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. Grounded in Ajzen's TPB, I explored how leaders' attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms influence their

commitment to DEI initiatives that are not merely symbolic, but actionable and transformative.

I conducted semistructured interviews with educational leaders via Zoom, following a structured process to ensure consistency, validity, and reliability. To achieve data saturation, credibility, and triangulation of the findings, I referenced published articles and studies for the literature review process, paired with data collection from the interviews with participants. I employed secure data practices to maintain confidentiality for each participant by using alphanumeric identifiers and implementing cloud based storage with restricted access to store all data, transcripts, coding, and recordings. The data analysis process involved systematic data coding in Excel, which led to the identification of categories and emerging themes in the data. I enhanced the rigor of my research project through data triangulation, incorporating semistructured interviews, peer-reviewed literature, and scholarly journals as secondary data.

Through semistructured interviews with six educational leaders, seven key themes emerged that reflect the multifaceted nature of effective DEI implementation: (a) Leadership Commitment and Strategic Implementation; (b) Inclusive Hiring and Promotion Practices; (c) Training, Coaching, and Professional Development; (d) Feedback-Driven Strategy Design; (e) Psychological Safety, Belonging, and Emotional Support; (f) Cultural Exposure and Immersive Experiences: Building Shared Understanding Across Roles; and (g) Representation and Cultural Relevance. These themes collectively emphasize the importance of embedding DEI into the organizational

framework, not as a compliance exercise, but as a strategic imperative that drives both human and institutional flourishing.

The findings highlight that successful DEI leadership requires more than just policy; it demands organizational courage. In today's complex and often polarized societal landscape, leaders must demonstrate the fortitude to challenge the status quo, embrace cultural sensitivity, and elevate diverse lived experiences. This courage is reflected in the creation of emotionally safe environments where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued. Emotional safety emerged as a critical driver of productivity, innovation, and retention, reinforcing the connection between inclusive practices and organizational performance.

Furthermore, I revealed that authentic DEI programs are co-created with stakeholders, continuously refined through feedback, and aligned with measurable outcomes. Leaders who model inclusive behaviors, invest in professional development, and prioritize representation at all levels foster cultures of belonging that extend beyond performative actions. By integrating the TPB framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and behavioral mechanisms that underpin effective DEI leadership. The implications for positive social change are profound: when educational leaders commit to courageous, inclusive practices, they not only increase employee performance and profitability but more importantly, contribute to a more just and equitable society.

References

Aishath, S., & Maslawati, M. (2024). Application of interview protocol refinement framework in systematically developing and refining a semi-structured interview protocol. *SHS Web of Conferences*, *182*, Article 04006. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202418204006

Ajzen, I. (1985). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *50*(2), 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T

Ajzen, I., & Schmidt, P. (2020). Changing behavior using the theory of planned behavior. In M. S. Hagger, L. D. Cameron, K. Hamilton, N. Hankonen, & T. Lintunen (Eds.), *Cambridge University Press,* (pp. 17–31).

Alordiah, C. O., & Oji, J. (2024). Theoretical sampling strategies in qualitative interviews: Enhancing data richness and theoretical saturation. *NIU Journal of Social Sciences*, *10*(2), 181–191. https://doi.org/10.58709/niujss.v10i2.1882

Amalia, S., Prasetio, W. P., & Adsina, F. (2023). A strategy to increase employees' positive behaviour during implementation organizational transformation using theory of planned behaviour (TPB). *E3S Web of Conferences, 426,* Article 01004. https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202342601004

Backlund, F. (2017). A project perspective on doctoral studies - A student point of view. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *31*(7), 908–921. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-04-2016-0075

Bednar, J. (2024). Culture shift: DEI strategies in the workplace take many forms.

BusinessWest, *41*(4), 26–29. https://businesswest.com/blog/dei-strategies-in-the-workplace-take-many-forms/

Beer, F., Samuel, G., Rawls, K., & Sirotnik, B. (2022). Are we moving the needle? An empirical evaluation of business faculty members' perceptions of DEI efforts. *Journal of Education for Business*, *98*(5), 251–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2022.2144987

Bhat, N., & de los Monteros, P. E. (2024). A new ethic of accountability: Effective DEI strategies cannot work in isolation. *American Libraries*, *55*(1–2), 56. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2024/01/02/a-new-ethic-of-accountability/#:~:text=Effective%20DEI%20strategies%20cannot%20work%20in%20isolation.,faces%20in%20a%20marketing%20campaign

Blanche, A. (2022). *DEI in 2022: Key trends and findings*. Culture Amp. https://www.cultureamp.com/blog/dei-2022-trends

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brint, S. (2024). Prometheus bound? The social and political challenges to US higher education in the early 21st Century. *Annali Di Storia Delle Universita Italiane*, *27*(2), 55–82. https://doi.org/10.17396/115218

Burnett, L., & Aguinis, H. (2024). How to prevent and minimize DEI backfire. *Business Horizons*, *67*(2), 173–182. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2023.11.001

Buys, T., Casteleijn, D., Heyns, T., & Untiedt, H. (2022). A reflexive lens on preparing

and conducting semi-structured interviews with academic colleagues. *Qualitative Health Research*, *32*(13), 2030–2039. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221130832

Buttinger, L. (2023). Diversity, equity and inclusion: Strategies for success. *Journal of Securities Operations & Custody*, *15*(3), 205–217. https://doi.org/10.69554/gctb4825

Camargo, A. (2023). Developing strategies to improve the sense of belonging and mitigate tokenism. *Clinical Imaging*, *103*, N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinimag.2023.109987

Chicas-Mosier, A. M., Fogelman, K. J., & Peretz, T. H. (2023). Can higher education transition to serve diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion missions without sacrificing fiscal standing? *Higher Education Politics & Economics*, *9*(1), 2. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1378097

Dalessandro, C., & Lovell, A. (2024). Workplace inclusion initiatives across the globe: The importance of leader and coworker support for employees' attitudes, beliefs, and planned behaviors. *Societies*, *14*(11), 231. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14110231

de Souza, L., & White, T., Jr. (2024). Innovation from diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging research: An implementable model for equitable talent acquisition and retention. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 14*(1). https://doi.org/10.5590/jerap.2024.14.1.12

Ditomaso, N. (2024). Rethinking "woke" and "integrative" diversity strategies: Diversity,

equity, inclusion and inequality. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *38*(2), 225–244. https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2023.0013

Drisko, J. W. (2025). Transferability and generalization in qualitative research. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *35*(1), 102-110. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10497315241256560

Ezell, J. M. (2023). "Trickle-Down" racial empathy in American higher education: Moving beyond performative wokeness and academic panels to spark racial equity. *Journal of Education*, *203*(3), 718–725. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574211053586

Fanton, I. (2021). Organizational diversity, inclusion, and belonging: 2021 pulse report. *Harvard Business Publishing*. https://www.harvardbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HBP_CL_DIB_Pulse_Report_May2021.pdf

Feitosa, J., Hagenbuch, S., Patel, B., & Davis, A. (2022). Performing in diverse settings: A diversity, equity, and inclusion approach to culture. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, *22*(3), 433–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705958221136707

Green, J., & Hand, J. (2024). McKinsey's diversity matters/delivers/wins results revisited. *Econ Journal Watch*, *21*(1), 5-34. https://econjwatch.org/articles/mckinsey-s-diversity-matters-delivers-wins-results-revisited

Heilbroner, R. L., Ajzen, I., Fishbein, M., & Thurow, L. C. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior.* Prentice Hall.

Holton, W. (2024). Chilling affects: The far right takes aim at black history. *American Historical Review*, *129*(1), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhae005

Hougham, R., Burgess, S., & Bauer, J. (2024). Reported decreases in diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in environmental education organizations. *Journal of Experiential Education*, *47*(2), 238–243. https://doi.org/10.1177/10538259241232323

Imboden, M. T. (2024). Belonging: An essential human and organizational need. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, *38(*6), 883–897. https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171241255204

Kafka, A. M. (2023). Seeing through woke-washing: Effects of projected diversity values and leader racial diversity on equity in workplace outcomes. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, *75*(1), 94–118. https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000237

Kuhnt, J., Leininger, J., Kaplan, L., Garcia-Hernandez, A., & Steinert, J. I. (2025). Ethics and equity: Addressing violations of the Belmont Report principles for research staff. *World Development Perspectives*, *37*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2025.100662

Lafferty, D. J. R., McKenney, E. A., Hubbard, T., Trujillo, S., & Beasley, D. E. (2024). A path forward: Creating an academic culture of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America*, *105*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1002/bes2.2117

Lewis, M., & Muñiz, R. (2024). A call for research on the role of legal counsel in promoting (In)equitable educational policies in a hostile, anti-DEI sociopolitical

climate. *Educational Researcher, 53*(9), 526–530. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241289402

Melnkovic, B., & Wilding, M. (2022). Moving up the talent curve: historic US brand quickly shifts people culture. *Strategic HR Review*, *21*(6), 170–174. https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-07-2022-0033

Mendoza, A., & Ou, J. (2022). CACTI: Use of a survey instrument as a semistructured interview protocol to facilitate teacher retrospection on bi-multilingual practices in EMI. *System*, *109*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102887

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2024). Demystification and actualization of data saturation in qualitative research through thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241229777

Olmsted, J. (2024). Research reliability and validity: Why do they matter? *Journal of Dental Hygiene*, *98*(6), 53. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=edsgea&AN=edsgcl.828293248&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s6527200

Olusanya, E. O. E. (2023). Workplace diversity, equity, inclusion. *Journal of Business Diversity*, *23*(4), 14–23. https://doi.org/10.33423/jbd.v23i4.6615

Sale, J. E. M., & Carlin, L. (2025). The reliance on conceptual frameworks in qualitative research – a way forward. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *25*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-025-02461-0

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students*

(8th ed.). Pearson.

Segel, E. (2021). One year later: How companies have responded to George Floyd's murder. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/edwardsegal/2021/05/25/one-year-later-how-companies-have-responded-to-george-floyds-murder/?sh=5ff8c0d41e68

Stratton, S. J. (2024). Purposeful sampling: Advantages and pitfalls. *Prehospital & Disaster Medicine*, *39*(2), 121–122. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X24000281

Stille, G., & Simon, T. (2023). Make DEI part of your employee benefits DNA. *Benefits Quarterly, 39*(1), 47-51. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/make-dei-part-your-employee-benefits-dna/docview/2786243167/se-2

Torrez, B., Hollie, L., Richeson, J. A., & Kraus, M. W. (2024). The misperception of organizational racial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. *American Psychologist, 79*(4), 581–592. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001309

Tucker, E. (2023). Diversity, equity, and inclusion: From aspiration to impact. *Strategic HR Review, 22*(3), 92–97. https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-03-2023-0015

Unangst, L., Borg, N., Connors, I., & Barone, N. (2022). Diversities at US colleges and universities: Online diversity statements at institutions employing chief diversity officers. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies, 3*(3), 16–36. https://doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.3.16

Wadhwa, S., & Aggarwal, P. (2023). Impact of diversity and inclusion on workplace effectiveness. *Journal of Management & Public Policy*, *14*(2), 64–73. https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=23&sid=3dc26ad7-d769-4fb7-

afc621bdd0f48fd2%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPXNoaWImc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=164803033&db=bth

Woods, A., Zajac, S. A., Middleton, E. D., Cavanaugh, K. J., Hayes, W. C., Johnson, S. K., & Holladay, C. L. (2024). Doing the work: The role of inclusive leadership in promoting psychological safety and openness to diversity through diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. *Psychology of Leaders and Leadership*, *27*(1), 115–142. https://doi.org/10.1037/mgr0000158

Appendix: Interview Protocol

`	
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is Kecia Bailey. I am a Doctoral Candidate at Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore the strategies that leaders in the western region of the United States' education sector use to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability. I am going to ask you six questions to which I would like your responses. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	Interview Questions: 1. How would you describe your role in implementing DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability? 2. What effective strategies have you used to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability? 3. What challenges did you face in implementing these strategies? 4. What do you do to mitigate the impact of the challenges? 5. How did you measure the effectiveness of the strategies you implemented? 6. What additional information regarding strategies you used to implement DEI programs to increase employee performance and profitability that we have not already discussed would you like to share?
Wrap up the interview thanking participant.	Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.
Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.	I will contact you in a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.
Follow-up Member Checking Interview	
Introduce myself and purpose of the follow-up interview to set the stage.	Hello Interviewee, Thank you for taking this time to meet with me again to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses.

Share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual questions. Bring in probing questions related to other information that I found – note the information must be related so that you are I am probing and adhering to the IRB approval. Walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Is my interpretation correct? Did I miss anything? Or would you like to add anything?	I will read the questions one at a time and my interpretations of your responses to them and ask you if my interpretation is correct. 1. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed 2. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed 3. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed 4. Question and succinct synthesis of the interpretation—perhaps one paragraph or as needed