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Article

# How Diversity Fails: An Empirical Investigation of Organizational Status and Policy Implementation on Three Public Campuses

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**Abstract:** Although diversity has been a guiding preoccupation in higher education for several decades, organizational diversity *practice*, i.e., what happens when colleges and universities implement diversity plans, is rarely a subject of inquiry. As a result, there is relatively little empirical understanding of why diversity has failed to significantly advance racial equity on college campuses. In response, this ethnographic, collective case study draws on interviews with 54 respondents, archival and organizational documents, and campus observations to interrogate diversity practice on three campuses of different status in one public system in the U.S. This study employs Bourdieu's theory of practice, specifically *institutional habitus* as an analytic lens, to examine the influence of campus social status on diversity practice related to a statewide policy. Findings reveal that each campus has a unique institutional habitus—that is, a status-linked sense of campus identity, constraints, and opportunities—that prefigured and, on most campuses, derailed diversity practice in response to the policy. Only the middle-status campus made any substantive progress. By juxtaposing these findings, this analysis demonstrates that diversity practice does not exist within a campus vacuum; instead, it is inevitably influenced, constrained, or aided by the institutional habitus of the organizational environment. The paper concludes by arguing that organizational change efforts that recognize diversity work as a situated organizational practice that reflects broader power relations can better challenge inequities to spur transformative change across educational levels and contexts.

**Keywords:** institutional habitus; racial equity; higher education; case study; policy analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Racial equity in higher education requires a reckoning with diversity—not merely representational diversity but on-the-ground practical engagement with diversity. Although social science literature offers tools to investigate and critically analyze diversity as a concept employed in social and organizational life, it has devoted relatively little scrutiny to implementation practices and empirical pursuit of the concept [1]. That is, amid lingering and worsening racial inequities and stratification in higher education [2], scholars often discuss diversity but very rarely investigate what happens when institutions engage in diversity practice [3,4]. The practice-oriented literature that does exist documents a gap between diversity plans and practice alongside the absence of substantive positive change [5–9]. Thus, investigation of “the action of diversity-and-inclusion” is required to understand the effectiveness of this work, to communicate its value, and to attend directly to the pursuit of racial justice in higher education [10] (p. 8).

This lack of empirical attention to diversity work stands alongside the reality of enduring inequities faced by marginalized students, faculty, and staff, including those marginalized by race and ethnicity [11–14]. Race continues to significantly influence higher education experiences and outcomes both through its effect on lived experience on college campuses and through policy and practice meant to address race and racism [15]. Despite evidence that explicit attention to race is not only warranted but legally viable, scholars

have noted an organizational retreat toward diversity plans, practices, and framings that minimize or even avoid attention to race [16–20]. These scholars demonstrate that the lack of specificity regarding race and inattention to the specific pursuit of racial equity within diversity practice have serious implications for racial justice in higher education.

Thus, the urgency of advancing empirical understanding of why diversity has failed to significantly advance racial equity on college campuses cannot be overstated. In response, this ethnographic collective case study employs Bourdieu's [21] theory of practice to critically analyze diversity policy action. It draws on interviews with 54 campus faculty, staff, and administrators; archival and organizational documents; and observations to examine the interpretations, practices, and norms that shaped the implementation of *Excellence for All*, a statewide diversity policy, on three public college campuses of differing social status. Defining social status using characteristics like organizational rankings and reputation as a proxy for organizational power, I employed *institutional habitus* and Bourdieu's [21] broader framework to examine the connections among organizational social position; local norms, practices, and beliefs; and equity-oriented practice. This approach contextualizes the campuses' policy practice within the broader power relations in which each campus is embedded and thus repositions diversity work as a situated organizational practice that reflects local and broader power relations and is shaped by differences in social power at the organizational level. This analysis of the interaction between institutional habitus and diversity practice uncovers the influence of organizational social status on practice related to diversity and one of the organizational elements that can support or militate against the pursuit of racial equity in higher education.

## 2. Diversity Divorced from Practice and Power

The lack of empirical engagement with organizational diversity practice in higher education should not be confused with limited scholarly attention to diversity itself. However, what is relatively absent from this literature is a focus on diversity *work* at the organizational level. Targeted searches in leading scholarly databases (e.g., Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PAIS Index, Google Scholar) establish that—in addition to the voluminous scholarship focused on the complexities and educational benefits of diverse learning environments e.g., [22–24] and best practices for diversity strategic planning e.g., [25–29]—three broad areas of empirical research give insight into the organizational patterns and practices that accompany diversity efforts in higher education. Research in the first area investigates the *discourse of diversity*—that is, what is achieved and obfuscated by how diversity is articulated, defined, and discussed. This scholarship details the (un)intentional functions of diversity rhetoric e.g., [5,30,31] but also helps to explain the aforementioned gap between rhetoric and reality in diversity practice e.g., [7,19,32–34]. For example, Harris et al. [35] drew on Critical Race Theory to analyze how the rhetoric of inclusion in higher education—captured as diversity, social justice, and, most recently, inclusive excellence—has been interpreted and pursued in ways that constrain and even forestall its benefit to those from racially marginalized backgrounds. Ultimately, this scholarship demonstrates how “diversity” can function as a “concealing term” [36] (p. 1166) that hinders progress toward racial equity [32,35].

The second area, which I frame as *practicing diversity*, captures the satellite diversity activities, dispositions, interactions, and on-campus realities that shape diversity and its experience on college campuses. This includes “the daily, informal and interactional work of fostering and sustaining these [diverse] environments,” which gives insight into the ways that diversity is constructed and experienced on a day-to-day basis [37] (p. 128). The organization itself rarely becomes visible in this work; rather, we see dimensions of the diversity apparatus as they are activated on individual campuses—or not. The third area, a central concern of this manuscript, is *organizational diversity work*—that is, what happens when colleges and universities pursue diversity goals and plans at the organizational level. Patton et al. [6] uncovered the limited scholarly attention to these areas of inquiry. Their analyses revealed that less than 2% of 50 years of diversity scholarship ( $n = 2510$ )

investigated specific diversity initiatives. Further, among the 45 articles that focus on specific diversity activities, only 17% ( $n = 8$ ) addressed diversity work as *organizational* policy and practice. Thus, attention to the organizational aspect of diversity work is scarce within a body of literature that is itself already sparse. The organizational diversity practice literature that does exist, however, documents a gap between stated goals, plans, and practice as well as the absence of substantive positive change [5,9].

### 2.1. Diversity's Problems: Design, Implementation, and Struggle

There is evidence that the challenges faced by diversity work in higher education are rooted in the bad design of policies, plans, and goals [38], which often lack strategic vision, intentionality, and sufficient resources [3,8,39]. Although diversity efforts are aided by integration with organizational strategic priorities [40,41], such integration alone does not guarantee that the plans will be given sufficient resources to be carried out effectively or that the rhetorical assertions of these plans reflect organizational reality and on-the-ground commitments [8,42]. Felix and Trinidad [38] (p. 10), in their analysis of 25 years of policy documents related to California's Student Equity Policy, found the policy to be an unfunded mandate, for which the state asserted "additional resources were not required as the equity regulations did not impose 'any new state-mandated costs.'" Further, emerging in some cases as reactive responses to particular incidents [3,9], diversity statements and plans often lack intentionality and are not accompanied by well-articulated aims or explicit expectations for implementation responsibility [3,39].

Bad design is exacerbated by the framings adopted in diversity plans and policies that emphasize first-order changes focused on representation and campus composition rather than on second-order attention to structural barriers that interrupt equity on campus [37,39,43,44]. These first-order changes, as a result, do not fundamentally alter the lived experience for marginalized individuals on campus—even as the changes might increase their count—in part due to policies' emphasis on improvement rather than on specific equity outcomes [45]. Further, second-order change is difficult to achieve given plans' limited emphasis on equity, generally, and race and racial equity more specifically [38,39,46,47]. In place of equity, such diversity plans center on equality, which re-codes diversity not as an explicit attempt to redress historical social and educational exclusion but as an organizational effort focused on an expansive orientation toward "all students" [38,47,48]. Berrey [49] (p. 574) argues that this recoding is grounded in a "racial orthodoxy [that] treats race as one of many valued cultural identities . . . and as a resource that benefits everyone, not just minority groups." Garcia et al. [39] document the implications of such a broad approach. One of the institutions they studied designed a women's night event at their rec center following feedback that women felt uncomfortable and intimidated in this campus space. Following the overwhelming turnout for the event, a staff person described a follow-up event "where it was only a men's night type of thing . . . to make sure that we are offering similar experiences and opportunities for both male and female genders" even though men had not reported experiences of intimidation [39] (p. 146).

Diversity efforts are also stymied by the reality that various campus stakeholders hold different understandings of what diversity is and what it requires of them [5,39,48,50]. In fact, in his organizational ethnography of State University, Anderson [50] identified not only different definitions of diversity but three diversity ideologies that guided how faculty and staff engaged with diversity on campus. Of the three ideologies, only the *ideology of racial justice* reflected expectations for radical changes on behalf of marginalized faculty, students, and staff. Further, this ideology was most commonly employed by student activists rather than by staff, faculty, and administrators, who were guided by more innocuous ideologies that did not call for redistributive acts (i.e., ideology of care, ideology of equality) [50]. In the absence of organizational guidance, stakeholders determine individually and separately how their work should interact with diversity and, perhaps more detrimentally, how diversity is relevant to broader organizational priorities [39,40,50,51]. Varied definitions and underlying ideologies thus shape stakeholders' interpretation of and

response to campus diversity efforts [40,51,52]. Sundry framings of diversity underscore the concept's function as an "empty signifier" [50] (p. 350) with impermanent associations and meanings [5,7]. This leads not only to a lack of conceptual precision in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are easily conflated or ignored [39,46,53] but also to the concepts being strategically stretched as campus stakeholders attach the terms to other organizational activities [50]. These struggles coalesce into diversity's "implementation trap" [54] in which faulty practice leads diversity efforts to be disparaged and disregarded, making it even more unlikely that campuses will take essential, often-absent steps—institutional responsibility for equity, leadership engagement, campus-wide integration, and maintenance of accountability supports and monitoring [3,41,55,56].

Finally, these features of the design, interpretation, and implementation of diversity efforts leave campuses without a cohesive, unified approach to organizational change related to diversity. Although this may stem from colleges' decentralized pursuit of diversity goals [3,4,51,55], research reveals that the challenge of diversity exists not merely in technical missteps of design and implementation but in managing the reality of "how undoable diversity work can be" [30] (p. 99). That is, rather than being open fields ripe for equitable change, colleges and universities instead are torn between conservative and transformative forces, making diversity an inherent site of struggle in higher education [4,50,57]. While Anderson [50] centers the intersection, competition, and dissonance among various institutional projects (e.g., care, effectiveness, redress) that shape campus diversity work, Thomas [54] theorizes the existence of a campus diversity regime that by "institutionalizing a benign commitment to diversity," "obscures, entrenches, and even intensifies existing racial inequality by failing to make fundamental changes in how power, resources, and opportunities are distributed" [4] (p. 2). Instead, successful diversity practice requires the guidance and participation of stakeholders who possess agentic understandings of structural barriers to equity and who are prepared to take effective action, including through race-conscious, equity-minded practice across organizational levels [20,54,58–61].

As Ahmed [5] (p. 116) asserts that a "commitment does not necessarily commit the institution to anything or to do anything." Based on her research, Ahmed [5] positioned such commitments as "non-performatives" that are meant to *not* do—that is, to maintain rather than disrupt—the institutional habits of daily practice. For this reason, Hu-DeHart [62] (sec 1, para 1) asserted that "[i]nstitutions embrace diversity in theory, but they don't do much to implement it." For example, Brunner and Brown's [9] case study of one university's diversity work amidst institutional crises revealed a mismatch between operative and official goals, meaning that in times of crisis, the university pursued actions that conflicted with its diversity rhetoric. The authors conclude that the campus's attention to diversity functioned as a form of impression management that masked dysfunctional organizational practices. Thomas [4] similarly identified diversity-related impression management and argued that the tendency to attach a range of meanings to a decentralized approach to diversity work troubled progress on racial equity at the university he studied. In this way, researchers explain diversity's stalled progress by focusing on its rhetorical flexibility, decentralized approaches, and function as a "strategic middle road" [4,9]—that is, "the more moderate alternative to remedial racial justice" [49] (pp. 575, 580).

## 2.2. Connecting Diversity Practice to Social Power

In their lament over the absence of "vigorous" progress toward equity in higher education over the last several decades, Harper et al. [20] directly implicate educational policymaking and the scarcity of scrutiny to policy practices, impetus, and effects. Further, the "relative absence of power as a conceptual and theoretical tool" [63] (p. 61) within the design and pursuit of diversity initiatives helps explain higher education's inability to reckon with its exclusionary past and to make progress toward transformative and equitable practices [43,54,64]. Rather than challenging racist and settler colonial orientations, diversity initiatives, Patel [64] (p. 666) argues, are instead grounded in the desire to merely be free of charges of institutional racism, resulting in "diversity 'work' that is largely symbolic



but significantly limited in its reach.” Attention to power through a critical analysis of diversity practice can help unpack how diversity, including through purportedly race-neutral policies, can reinforce structural racism and other forms of exclusion and impede progressive possibilities [18,48].

Although some recent higher education scholarship investigates how power relations within and across higher education institutions shape decision-making and practice e.g., [65,66]—particularly in moments of system change—there is more work to be done. There is a need to understand how institutional power, as shaped by institutional social position, influences policy and practice on college campuses and how this helps explain the limited success of diversity in higher education. Rarely is the notion of power applied to the behaviors, opportunities, and values of educational institutions and—perhaps more importantly—to mapping the relationship between institutional status and racial equity in higher education. Power should not be an “endangered species” [67] (p. 339) in the study of diversity but an integral tool used to investigate diversity practice and its influence on equity in higher education [68].

Together, the extant diversity practice scholarship offers insight into the ongoing debate over diversity in higher education, including the “diversity fatigue” that has accompanied decades of concern and policy that have generated too few positive results [69]. However, given the limited inquiry focused on “real-time” [48] implementation diversity at the organizational level [70–72], educational researchers have the opportunity to critically analyze diversity practice, penetrate the “why” of how organizational diversity practice unfolds, interrogate the gaps between espoused beliefs and organizational action, and unpack its apparent mismatch with progress toward racial equity [73,74].

### 3. Theorizing Culture, Power, and Practice

This study draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose scholarship offers an integrated framework that analyzes how culture and power operate within and through educational organizations in ways that reinforce inequity. Bourdieu’s [21] theory of practice elucidates how the influence of social position on self-concept and behavior guides individuals to (re)produce their social world(s), including the social hierarchies in which they are positioned. Bourdieu’s theory is built upon three interrelated central concepts. Field is the hierarchically structured social space that sets the parameters in which action takes place. Capital is the valued resources accumulated and exchanged in struggles for status maintenance and enhancement. This paper focuses on habitus as a lens through which to investigate how social structures shape appraisals that reflect the internalization of one’s relative social position [75,76]. Bourdieu’s theory of practice reveals that differentially positioned social actors develop what the theorist, quoting Goffman, termed a “sense of one’s place” [77] (p. 113). This sense is informed by habitus, an internalized sense of history, values, dispositions, classifications, and practices that help actors perceive, differentiate, and behave, often choosing between oppositions—e.g., good for me, bad for me; valuable, valueless [78]. Habitus itself structures and is structured by internalization of objective and subjective assessments of opportunities and challenges—that is, one’s understanding of “the fundamental distributions which organize the social order” and one’s place in it [79] (p. 98). Based on this internalization, habitus establishes commonsense practices, offers a repertoire of responses for social encounters, and influences how social actors make sense of, engage with, and respond to their immediate environments, which in turn influences orientations toward future experiences and actions [21].

While Bourdieu’s scholarship focused largely on individuals and groups, it has successfully been employed to investigate organizational practice [80–82]. By attending to the self-interested logics of practice built into organizational operations—particularly within organizations that comprise the educational system—Bourdieu’s framework facilitates investigation of organizational action by attending to how and why organizations take up specific practices and to what effect [83]. Specifically, this article offers *institutional habitus* as a reconceptualization of organizational culture that can advance analysis of social

power and its reproduction in higher education spaces. It also acknowledges organizations' social context and the factors that support and inhibit transformational change toward equity. Attention to institutional habitus reveals that educational organizations are social actors engaged in their own power struggles, the results of which shape the experiences, opportunities, and possibilities available to the individuals they engage and serve—with particular implications for racial equity.

Specifically, this study employs institutional habitus to investigate the relationships between campus social position and diversity practice and is guided by two research questions: (1) How do three public campuses of different social positions implement *Excellence for All*, a statewide diversity policy? (2) How does organizational social position and its related interests, pressures, resources, and self-concept influence this diversity work? This work reveals that the implementation of *Excellence for All* is situated within the differential constraints and affordances of organizational social status as they shaped what was possible on each campus.

#### 4. Methodological Approach

This paper presents an ethnographic collective case study of diversity work on three differentially positioned campuses [84,85]. The case study focuses on how the campuses interpreted, developed, and implemented *Excellence for All*—the central diversity policy of the public higher education system to which the campuses belong—and what shaped this organizational practice on each campus. This research is part of a larger inquiry [86] designed to investigate the development of EFA and related diversity work at the three campuses in the U.S. The larger study was motivated by an interest in how colleges and universities—driven in part by their interests and status concerns—respond to the needs of marginalized college students in ways that may (re)produce racial (in)equity. The central purpose of this study was to explore how organizational culture and the power relations embedded therein, conceptualized as institutional habitus, may shape diversity policy (in)action.

Ultimately, I am interested in what the cases, when taken together, can tell us about organizations as social actors whose positions and position-taking affect their interests and behaviors [87]. Although fundamentally grounded in Bourdieu's framework through its emphasis on habitus and social position, this study's conceptual framework is also informed by critical policy sociology, which attends to how social power relations influence the definition of a policy problem, target population, solutions, and responses as well as the absences and presences in policy efforts, documents, and outcomes [88–91].

##### 4.1. Focal Policy: *Excellence for All*

In the late 2000s, the state Higher Education System Administration (“System”) introduced *Excellence for All* (EFA) as the latest iteration of its diversity strategic plan for the public higher campuses in the state. According to System Administration, this “change oriented planning process” relies on “systematic action” that will “[foster] greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability at every level of university life,” in part through the adoption of diversity and excellence as “interconnected and interdependent goals.” EFA has as its objective “individual and system-wide transformation” that recognizes diversity management not as an unwanted challenge but as an integral asset inherent to the contemporary college experience. EFA is framed by several keywords, namely diversity, inclusion, equity, and excellence, and is presented as an advancement of and improvement upon previous System diversity efforts given its shift away from emphasizing specific metrics and benchmarks to which campuses are held accountable. Instead, EFA focuses on “driving diversity deep into our everyday cultures, daily practices, and organizational patterns where it can take root and eventually blossom.” Though no official mandate accompanied its rollout, EFA was expected to surface at all campuses. As a planning process, EFA is not a discrete project but instead is a way of doing business that can be customized to each campus's “mission, culture, identity, and demographics.” The national organization that

developed EFA argues that the policy's intentionally flexible definition supports EFA's "chameleon-like ability to adjust to the social and cultural environment of an institution or a system of institutions." The customizable and potentially expansive nature of the policy also made it an ideal "site" for this study given that the form EFA took on each campus more likely reflects local campus imperatives rather than priorities imposed from on high.

#### 4.2. Research Sites

This study's Bourdieuan framework asserts that interests related to social position shape social action; therefore, the primary data for this study were collected over 13 months from a theoretically necessary stratified, purposeful sample of three campuses in one public higher education system in the U.S. [84,92]. The three focal campuses—dubbed Ashby University, Bradford University, and Clearfield College—were selected because they occupy low-, medium-, and high-status social positions as indicated by several criteria, including organizational classification and rankings, reputation, resources, and student body composition. (All potentially identifying information has been changed or withheld—including names of data sources (e.g., campus documents), policy, state, system, institutional, individuals—to protect the anonymity of participating campuses and campus respondents.) These campuses together (1) represent two primary, intersecting fields related to the implementation of EFA: the national field of (public) higher education and the state field of public higher education and (2) demonstrate organizational action across campuses that occupy dominant, dominated, and intermediate positions in these fields [65,87,93]. The contemporary context of each campus is described below (Table S1, *Summary Campus Data*, in online Supplementary Materials, provides an overview of each campus).

##### 4.2.1. Ashby University

As the flagship campus in the system, Ashby is the oldest campus in the state—founded in the mid-1800s—and is located in the state's second-largest city. The campus's mission emphasizes the importance of learning environments that allow for critical examination and knowledge transmission related to the complexity of the physical and cultural worlds that its students inhabit and suggests an inherent connection between the campus and this wider social context. Ashby has the largest budget and enrollment in the system. Nearly 30,000 undergraduates are enrolled in the campus, less than 10% of whom identify as students from racially marginalized backgrounds (i.e., Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Southeast Asian). Enrolled at the most selective public campus in the state, Ashby's student body has relatively high average ACT/SAT scores, and 90% of Ashby's students were in the top 25% of their graduating class. The average six-year graduation rate at Ashby is approximately 80% with a more than 15-percentage-point gap between this average and that of racially marginalized students. Although primarily an undergraduate campus, Ashby is classified by Carnegie as a doctoral-granting university with very high research productivity. Each year, Ashby's more than 150 graduate programs educate close to 10,000 graduate students, about a third of whom are international students. Ashby is the state's most well-resourced campus with an annual operating budget of more than USD 2.5 billion. Out-of-state tuition is more than USD 25,000 compared to approximately USD 10,000 for in-state. Ashby, a globally and nationally ranked undergraduate campus, has been recognized by national publications, including *U.S. News & World Report*, *Princeton Review*, *Forbes*, and *Washington Monthly*, as one of the top campuses in the country.

##### 4.2.2. Bradford University

Bradford University was founded in the later 1800s. Its mission is to provide an inclusive learning environment that helps students from the region and beyond navigate a global society. The campus prides itself on its teaching, local reputation, and faculty and graduates as well as on its achievements in sustainability and civic engagement. Bradford is recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* as a top regional campus. Primarily a residential campus, Bradford is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a master's university and



offers postbaccalaureate and graduate programs for less than 1500 students. The campus hosts 14 graduate programs, including one doctoral program in a science field. With a 22:1 student-faculty ratio, the campus enrolls roughly 12,000 undergraduates, approximately 10% of whom are from racially marginalized backgrounds. Bradford's average six-year graduation rate is approximately 50%, with a gap of 10 percentage points for students of color on campus. The average ACT score for incoming Bradford students is ~23, and about 40% of matriculants are in the top 25% of their graduating classes. Generally, Bradford admits almost 85% of applicants. Its annual operating budget exceeds USD 250 million, which is approximately USD 20,000 per undergraduate. Out-of-state tuition and fees (~USD 15,000) at Bradford are more than double the in-state rate.

#### 4.2.3. Clearfield College

Clearfield College, the youngest campus in the system, was founded in the mid-1900s. The diversity of its learning environment is a Clearfield College point of pride. In particular, campus artifacts (e.g., website, organizational documents) celebrate Clearfield's attention to a diverse range of perspectives and knowledge—achieved, in part, through community partnerships—that helps what the campus describes as traditional and nontraditional students contribute to a multicultural society. While Clearfield College is not ranked, it does appear on at least one list as a national liberal arts college with no ranking provided. Out-of-state tuition at Clearfield is nearly USD 15,000 compared to less than USD 10,000 for in-state. Clearfield enrolls close to 5000 undergraduates and has an operating budget of approximately USD 100 million. Nearly 25% of its undergraduate enrollment is students from racially marginalized backgrounds. Clearfield generally admits almost 80% of applicants. Its overall six-year average graduation rate is nearly 30% compared to 14% for Black students, 27% for Latino/Hispanic students, and less than 30% for SRMs as a group. Largely a baccalaureate college, Clearfield has a handful of graduate programs that serve less than 200 students annually.

#### 4.3. Data Sources

While the data sources (summarized in Table S2, *Data Collection and Generation Matrix*, in online Supplementary Materials) are presented below in a linear fashion, I engaged in different methods simultaneously and cycled through forms of data collection several times. Potential interview respondents were purposefully selected to include those involved directly with EFA and other diversity efforts as well as campus leadership, administrators, and staff in key positions (e.g., recruitment and admissions, student and academic affairs, multicultural student services). Table S3, *Study Recruitment by Generalized Campus Function and Position*, in online supplemental materials, provides an overview of the campus actors I recruited. Guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 54 respondents from Ashby (18), Bradford (19), and Clearfield College (17). Most respondents were interviewed once. The duration of interviews ranged from 30 min to more than 6 h; half (27) lasted between 60 and 90 min. I interviewed respondents face-to-face if they were (senior) leadership or directly involved with EFA and diversity. (See Table S4, *Study Respondents by Function and Position, by Campus*, in online Supplementary Materials for details.) I audio-recorded each interview (except one with an Ashby respondent who did not consent to audio recording). After each interview, I sent respondents a thank you email that included requests for documents we discussed and any follow-up questions.

Observations conducted at each campus over 39 days provided contextual information about the campuses, insight into the development of EFA, and helped me triangulate what I learned from other sources. Attending EFA and diversity-related programs allowed me to document how campus actors interacted, planned, and acted in relation to the policy; how they communicated goals, plans, success, and challenges; and how these were received. I also spent time in key campus spaces (e.g., campus grounds, social areas, student and/or multicultural students service offices, dining areas), which helped me develop a sense of

each campus, gain familiarity with people and places connected to EFA, and track how beliefs and practices related to the policy were represented in physical spaces. I employed an observation protocol for all observations and events and developed fieldnotes after each observation.

Finally, organizational documents and artifacts—both archival and contemporary—augmented understanding of each campus's diversity work, including the inclusion and support of marginalized college students and how this might have changed over time. I spent an average of 12 days (38 days total) in each campus's historical archive and the local historical society, as necessary. My search in each campus archive began with a set of keywords (e.g., diversity, race/racial, minority, inclusion) as well as files from key administrative roles (e.g., university president, diversity/equity committees) and those related to campus diversity plans. Finally, throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote expanded fieldnotes and analytic memos that acted as real-time artifacts and that were essential to the analytic process [94].

#### 4.4. Analytic Procedures

All research artifacts (i.e., interviews, fieldnotes, memos, observation notes, campus documents, and research journal entries) were prepared for formal analysis through verbatim transcription. For interview and observation transcription, the inclusion of respondents' actual words, missteps, corrections, pauses, emotional displays, etc., contributed to the creation of a more faithful transcript even if these were edited out later for clarity and simplicity based on their (ir)relevance to the analysis at hand [95]. All transcribed and printed documents were loaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program for analysis.

True to Saldaña's [96] axiom that "[d]ata are not coded—they're *recoded*," the findings presented here were arrived at through two rounds of a two-cycle analytic process [96] (p. 45, emphasis in original). In both rounds, raw data were first coded using a set of predetermined codes and then subjected to focused coding and thematic analysis based on emergent patterns [97]. In the first cycle of round one analysis, I constructed a set of structural codes to capture how the campuses interpreted, developed, and implemented EFA [96]. These codes were informed by the tenets of critical policy sociology to emphasize policy design, actors, activities, trajectory, resources, effects, beneficiaries, and implications. During the second cycle, I conducted focused coding to identify the most significant themes and categories—based, in part, on frequency across respondents [96,97]. In the second round of analysis, I re-coded all previously coded data with codes based on Bourdieu's theory with particular emphasis on those related to institutional habitus (e.g., campus norms, reputation, identity, challenges, mission, students, and faculty). Here, I shifted from an exclusive focus on the policy to how each campus's social position and related identity, resources, and concerns seemed to shape EFA. Shifting emphasis from the policy itself and drawing close to organizational identity and decision making, these analyses illuminated how each campus saw itself, its peers, its future and potential, how these varied by campus, and how this influenced campus practice related to EFA.

After deconstructing the data through the analytic methods detailed above, I reconstructed them by writing detailed analytic case memos [94]. The first memos—shaped around EFA interpretation, implementation, and influences at each campus—revealed, for example, the structuring effect of excellence, equity, and student success for EFA implementation at Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield, respectively. Second, to present the cross-case analysis, I developed an organizational matrix that captured the sense of self embodied on each campus, shared pressures and related responses, and the unique pressures faced by each campus [98]. Based on this, I was able to illustrate the significance of institutional habitus—that is, a relationship between organizational self-identity and local common sense and how these conspired to shape local priorities, decision making, and behavior broadly—and, inevitably, in relation to EFA. Below, I present the results of these analyses in two parts. In Part I, I introduce findings from the cross-case analysis, in which I used the

lens of institutional habitus to uncover differences in the campuses' self-concept, resources, reputational concerns, and practices. Part II presents case summaries of EFA progress and challenges on each campus, which reveal differences across the three campuses—and thus by organizational social position—in EFA implementation.

### 5. Diversity Work as Situated Organizational Practice

By juxtaposing the findings below, I uncovered that diversity practice does not exist within a campus vacuum but is inevitably influenced, constrained, or aided by the institutional habitus of the organizational environment. Thus, one cannot read campus diversity practice without simultaneously reading the controlling influence of social status, enacted through institutional habitus, on that practice. In the concluding discussion, I draw on these findings to argue for what can be learned about organizational practice and educational inequity, particularly as it relates to racial justice, from studying diversity policy and practice across organizational status.

#### 5.1. Part I: Institutional Habitus across Organizational Status

My analyses revealed that rather than simply individual campuses responding to a similar policy stimulus (i.e., EFA), Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield are campuses with different institutional habitus—that is, three differentially situated but related organizations that act through varied sets of identity, interests, constraints, and opportunities. I first present the different senses of self that were evident on each campus and how these aligned with local priorities. Then, I demonstrate that these differentially situated campuses had varied responses to shared external pressures and, finally, faced unique sets of external pressures. (There is a longstanding debate in organizational studies over whether organizations should be conceived of as collectives that merely aggregate the actions, attitudes, and dispositions of the individuals therein or if organizations are unique entities that are informed by their constituent members but are nonetheless more than only this [99,100]. This analysis, given its application of institutional habitus, follows the latter orientation and recognizes the existence of group- and organization-level orientations and behaviors that are more than the accumulation of individual psychologies and that inform these psychologies [101]. Thus, I refer to each campus as a collective, which acknowledges the possibility of organization-level awareness, concerns, and identity).

Ultimately, I do not aim to assess the interpretations of campus identity and concerns that respondents offered. Although some of these interpretations are verifiable assessments, the veracity of the claims is not at issue here. Rather, the analytic concern is that the claims are shared and believed—believed to shape opportunities and obstacles—and thus used to guide behavior, a relationship that corroborates Bourdieu's assertion that power inflected social understandings are the basis of sensemaking and action within a hierarchically organized social world shaped by struggle and competition.

##### 5.1.1. "Sense of One's Place"

Primary to interpreting the actions of these differentially situated campuses is understanding how each campus construed the entity that was acting—that is, the sense of self prevalent on each campus.

#### Ashby University: Maintaining Excellence

Ashby generally regards itself as an eminent campus. "Excellent" was used to describe the reputation of many of the visible aspects of campus. As Trent Cabrera, a member of Ashby's diversity plan committee, captured it, "I think when we talk about excellence at Ashby, we talk about excellence in terms of our research, our faculty productivity, the placement of our students." In addition, the campus is considered to be successful by most student success metrics (e.g., graduation, retention), which sets it apart from other colleges, including some peer campuses. For example, Daphne Sanger, a senior staff member within academic affairs, shared the understanding that the campus does good work with an

already good product, “Our students are quite successful to begin with . . . So, we have an 85% graduation rate . . . We have a 95% freshman–sophomore retention rate, which is hugely high. So, by most metrics, we’re pretty successful.” The campus also stands out on “typical indicators of success,” such as the number of applications, the standardized tests scores of matriculants, and the number of students sent to competitive post-graduate opportunities. Although a point of pride, belief in Ashby’s “good quality product” also troubled organizational change. Harkening back to Ashby’s professed long history of excellence, Shaun Jackson, the campus’s diversity administrator observed,

When you’re at an institution where we’re steeped in tradition, and we pride ourselves on our academic rigor and our [research one] status and all the accolades that go with being like the Ivy League of [the region]...no one wants to futz with the recipe.

Given the campus’s history, it was assumed that Ashby had found its best recipe and that it was better to build on that than to deviate from it.

Further, part of Ashby’s excellence was its independence, which influenced its internal operations and its relationship with the system, from which the campus saw itself as separate. Beyond an explanation offered facetiously—“we’re a special flower and we have special and different needs”—the more common belief is that Ashby operates independently simply because it can. One senior administrator, Agatha Bottoms, framed it thus:

We are a large enough campus with enough resources and skills among our [staff and faculty] that I think—how to say this?—I think we need less outside assistance. And I will also say, we’re sometimes a little bit resistant to outside assistance because, you know, we have a pretty strong internal culture going here with a really good group of people. And some of the smaller campuses, which have fewer internal resources, I think have probably used some of the...system [administration] direction a little bit more, and it’s probably been more helpful to them. Right?

Ashby could and did figure things out on its own, drawing on a wide range of internal resources and deeper expertise than even System possessed in some areas. Other system campuses, conversely, surely benefitted from the assistance of central administration. Further, beyond merely a campus habit, Agatha positioned this self-reliance as a valuable cultural attribute.

#### Bradford University: Making Improvements

Bradford generally sees itself as a campus on the rise. Its intention to be a *better* community—for students, in particular—is guided by a belief in and willingness to accept collective responsibility for students’ experiences and outcomes. There is a “pervasive attitude” that admission to the university is an acknowledgment of the institution’s responsibility to see students through to success. This is meaningful because the campus “is a powerhouse in this region. Not because it is so academically strong. It’s not an Ashby. It’s not even in the shadow of an Ashby,” Erlinda Bassett, a member of the EFA committee, shared, but because it is the campus through which so many local students attend college and began careers in the region. In addition to unearthing information that might aid improvements in student outcomes, Bradford’s orientation is also grounded in its possession of the confidence and courage to acknowledge problems that are uncovered, ask challenging questions, and then pursue answers. Stacy Krummp, an administrator in academic affairs, captured this willingness when she shared the campus community’s response to the practice of disaggregating student data:

They started to ask more questions. We opened up something to them, stuff that has been not shared . . . We started putting stuff out there. And it all wasn’t pretty either. But we put it out there and made ourselves accountable. But it’s healthier for an institution to be in that constant state of “Let’s fix it. Let’s change this”

than to be satisfied or to hide. Both of those are equally damaging to the quest for student success.

Rather than leaning into the status quo or shying away realities that “weren’t pretty,” the campus held itself accountable for changing these realities.

Enhancing this orientation is the palpable energy around what was described repeatedly as Bradford’s uncommon orientation toward collaboration though the source was not clear. Laurie Batiste puzzled over this campus disposition despite challenging circumstances:

You have a university in a university system that is paying you less and less and giving you less and less support, but everybody seems really excited to do change. Like why is that? And that collaboration was something that was really, really important here. And I don’t know why that it is.

Bradford is a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of campus intent on, simply, doing a good job. Even as it recognizes it has much more work to do, Bradford believes it is moving in the right direction: “We ain’t where we were, but we ain’t where we want to be,” as one respondent captured it. Marveling that other campuses do not seem to take the same opportunities, Marsha Botham, a member of Bradford’s EFA committee, shared, “We just really do it right,” as she related how a system-wide mandate to report on-campus gender inequity resulted in a Bradford task force that exists to this day while other “campuses just weren’t doing much.”

#### Clearfield College: Struggling for Success

In addition to its identity as a diverse college, Clearfield sees itself as youthful. The campus is regularly in conversation with its history, including the circumstances and implications of its founding. Tim Downer, of Clearfield’s EFA committee, even offered that “one of the things that might be interesting for *you* is to look at Clearfield’s history and to understand how that history is still relevant today. ‘Cause we’re still kind of a young university” (emphasis theirs). Founded after the mid-1900s, Clearfield is absolutely “young,” but it is also relatively so as the most recently established college in the system. Clearfield’s age, consciously younger than 60 years old, sets it apart from other campuses in the state because “in higher ed, that’s like a high school student. They’re just—trying to figure out who we are, what are we gonna do?” A second salient element of Clearfield’s history is its original designation as an outpost of Ashby—that is, as a research university. In fact, Clearfield was founded, in part, by faculty recruited from Ashby, lured by a low teaching load to accommodate their anticipated research productivity. Although the teaching load remained, the research status faded within a few years as Clearfield became a public regional college. Still, expectations associated with the original campus plan linger. “It’s taken us a long time to get over that historical feeling of who we are and recognizing that we are a university that serves the population we serve,” one respondent shared, indicating that this history has influenced contemporary beliefs about student success.

Finally, Clearfield simultaneously prides itself on being diverse and sees itself as struggling with what that diversity requires. The mantra respondents repeated about Clearfield—“on a percentage basis, we’re the most diverse campus in the system”—distinguishes Clearfield from larger campuses that have more students who count as “diverse.” One of the campus’s core values—inclusion—is thought to inhere in its student population; the campus is inclusive simply because it is diverse, which presents limited impetus for change. As Kurt Jakowski, an EFA committee member, admitted, “we rest a little bit too much on our laurels,” pointing to numbers instead of action on campus. Although the limited attention to race and racial difference at Clearfield is read by some as a lack of commitment to diversity, others point instead to the realities of student outcomes on campus. “Nobody’s doing that great,” Tim Downer explained. However, rather than an intrinsic concern about student outcomes, which motivates some at Clearfield, the campus’s “motivational—energy *now* is really brought out by *crisis*” according to Thomas Appleblatt, a Clearfield admissions



manager (emphasis theirs). Guided by a belief that no group deserves special attention, Clearfield pursues “a kind of lift all boats thing” in which improvements for the general student body will presumably generate improvements for racially marginalized students and shrink Clearfield’s achievement gaps.

#### 5.1.2. Shared Pressures, Different Responses

Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield see themselves as different kinds of campuses: Ashby as a “special flower” whose qualities set it apart; Bradford as a hard-working campus trying to do the right thing; and Clearfield as an under-resourced “teenager” still figuring itself out while working to improve graduation outcomes. Nevertheless, as colleges in the same public system, they share a set of challenges—resource constraints, budget cuts, and political climate—that reflect the context for public higher education in the state. Primary among these are resource constraints—tight budgets, tuition freezes, regular state cuts—that affect them all; yet, there was an increasing reference to resource constraints moving from the high(er)- to the low(er)-status campus, with more than double the references at Clearfield compared to Ashby and Bradford, where the numbers were more similar. This preponderance suggests a deeper prevalence of concern at Clearfield.

In the face of these constraints, Ashby began to “tighten the belt strap” while “trying to do more with less”—fewer teaching assistantships, less conference money, no raises. Still, programming would continue and, in some cases, even expand. This was possible, in part, because Ashby intended to “be really savvy” with its financial resources, in part, by emphasizing assessment and data. As Tonya Dunn, an institutional researcher shared:

If we don’t fix this problem, this now has *money* attached to it. Where before it had some sad student stories attached to it, but money wasn’t part of it. And that has bad and good. It ups the urgency of fixing some intractable long-term problems, but it also leads to some short-sighted solutions for the political or expedient solution. (emphasis theirs)

Things were getting serious, but Ashby still had room to maneuver, including by “robbing Peter to pay Paul,” Marcus Bedford, a student affairs administrator shared. This included, for example, selective tuition increases that raised an estimated \$220 million—with an additional \$40 million projected annually—for need-based aid, expanded student services, and added faculty positions.

Though Ashby and Bradford demonstrated similarly palpable dis-ease about resource constraints, closer examination revealed deeper concern at Bradford. Contrary to Ashby’s relatively new imperative to be resource-aware, Bradford’s finances had been “squeezed” for years, with the time when “you do without” not far away. Bradford’s largely low-income student body already required scholarships and financial aid, so tuition increases—even if approved—would only make the campus more unaffordable, while adding out-of-state revenue was unlikely. A senior administrator compared Bradford to Ashby in this regard:

I’ve heard Ashby’s president say that they wouldn’t mind a tuition freeze so much because they could make it up with out-of-staters. All they need to do is turn this spigot on a little more with out-of-staters. Ashby could *fill* its campus with out-of-state students if it wanted to. (emphasis theirs)

Conversely, Bradford’s out-of-state numbers were so small that increasing tuition would likely shrink this population.

Bradford’s primary alternative was to generate tuition revenue by (re)growing the student population, primarily through marketing campaigns to entice local undergraduates and graduate students with Bradford’s twin emphasis on teaching and research, and relatively affordable and static sticker price. Still, limited resources inhibited Bradford’s capacity to provide the full range of services students needed, which meant that the campus’s ability to sustain programs would not necessarily reflect its commitments. “We’re serious,” Erlinda said, “We’re absolutely serious. But we might not get the money.”

Clearfield, like Bradford, has well-established financial concerns. One respondent put it simply: “We haven’t had money for a long time.” However, unlike Bradford and very different from Ashby, the days of doing without had already come. Clearfield was dependent on tuition revenue and state coffers. Thus, after years of tuition freezes, declining state support and enrollments, and slimmed budgets, the campus faced an imperative to “do more than more with less than less,” as Ramona Jackson, an academic affairs staff person, stated. While chronically understaffed, Clearfield serves students who are widely recognized as not college-ready and hampered with a host of challenges that make persistence, and especially graduation within four or six years, unlikely. Approximately 30% and 50% of Clearfield students require remediation in English and math, respectively, metrics that were closer to—but still far exceeded—remediation rates in the state’s two-year colleges let alone those of other local four-year regional campuses.

Clearfield’s response was to spend less and generate more. The campus sought ways to decrease its expenses, including by increasing faculty workload, which had long hovered between that of the research and other regional campuses. Further, given that fundraising seemed unlikely, one viable option remained: increasing enrollment. In response to its “enrollment crisis,” Clearfield looked to the “*untapped* market” of adults, veterans, and other online learners (emphasis theirs). Although respondents acknowledged financial difficulties across the state, there was a sense that Clearfield is worse off than most four-year campuses because having the second smallest enrollment in the state translates into the second-lowest tuition revenue.

### 5.1.3. Individualized Pressures

Other pressures differed across the campuses and reflected, to some extent, the campuses’ varied social positions. National problems facing higher education were local problems for Ashby. Bradford was concerned about the academic success of its Black students who originated from one under-resourced school district. Clearfield was pressed to improve student outcomes. I highlight these because although distinctly focused, they all center on organizational reputation—not just public perception of the campus but also how public pressures and perception differentially burden the campuses. Examining these burdens illustrates that the campuses’ focus on EFA, while it did differ by organizational status, also advanced according to the policy’s match with unique, ongoing campus concerns and pressures.

#### Ashby

Ashby is subject to critiques that indicate the scrutiny it faces as one of the most sought-after colleges in the state. Even as critics can call the campus to task, they are largely unable to enforce their will; yet, this indirect authority—to charge and to question—is powerful enough to capture Ashby’s attention and influence its response even as the campus often seemed frustratingly unable to wrest power back from its critics. Scrutiny came from a range of publics—System’s governing board, parents, business leaders, legislators, and, via freedom of information requests, the public at large. Tonya Dunn, the institutional researcher, shared that addressing this scrutiny is “where data and politics mix,” an assertion she explained using the campus’s struggle against a particular narrative:

No matter how you look at it, we are serving the entire state, based proportionally on where people live. We’re overserving a few areas, but in general, we are not underserving any area . . . It’s something people don’t want to believe. “Ashby’s evil. They’re elitist, snobby people that...you know, faculty that don’t do any work. And you know the students are just...unconnected to anything and floating around on their own while their professors work in research labs” . . . And it’s just not true. But it’s not that it’s a secret, it’s no matter how many times you try to tell people that or show data that shows this, people believe what they want to believe.

Here, Ashby is a powerful campus on the defensive, willing to throw its weight around when it saw fit, but simultaneously ineffective in key confrontations to the dismay of some on campus.

One such confrontation related to scrutiny Ashby faced about its admissions policies and programming for racially marginalized students, the value and necessity of which were questioned. Several years after System introduced EFA, a frequent campus critic charged that Ashby's interest in the chronic underperformance among even high-achieving racially marginalized students was evidence of intent to employ a racial quota system for grading, which Ashby refuted. Analysis of inequitable outcomes is central to EFA, but Ashby's response distanced itself from System's plan, which, Ashby clarified, it had not adopted: "This approach [EFA] is not reflected by Ashby's plan." Focused on a technicality, the response did not mention the racialized disparities or the internal study in which the disparities were documented. Shaun Jackson, the diversity administrator, discussed navigating this critique:

If you hear "representational equity," right, you can make a logical assumption that "Oh, they about to start giving out grades based on race." And people ran with it. That's the thing that surprised me. People ran with it. I was like, "What?! Are you serious? You don't know the faculty at this institution." I mean, please. So, we had to put a statement out: "This is flat out impossible." . . . But the fact that that caught traction and people were like, "Ah-ha! That's why that population is doing so much better."

Despite real equity concerns, Ashby was caught, unable to justify its actions. Ultimately, Ashby failed to control this narrative, and respondents cited this incident as yet another reason for the limited visibility of EFA at Ashby.

#### Bradford

Bradford's special burden was the need to be seen as a campus that offers a solid academic experience, which required changing perception of the campus and of the city that surrounded it. One concern was violence near campus. During my data collection, several students were attacked on and off campus—including stabbings and robberies—by non-students; two took place during preview days. In addition to the effects on victims of the attacks, the incidents were an additional blot on the campus's reputation. Bradford was also known for a troubling racial climate on- and off-campus for faculty, staff, and students alike. As one respondent shared,

The climate is just not really cool. We're a very old town, an old [factory] town and—although the city is changing . . . there's ignorance there, but there is also some blatant bias there as well. So, I think that part of EFA is to work not only with the university community but to have some impact on the city's community as well. That's a tough one. That's a hard one . . . I don't think [our students] are appreciated, put it that way, as much in the community, certainly, as much as we would like it to be.

The racism of the broader community, in particular, is also seen as a significant potential impediment to the acclimation of new faculty from racially marginalized backgrounds.

As concerned as Bradford was about its students' experiences, another motivation for this focus was the campus's interest in enhancing its reputation. Historical stereotypes were tough to shake, including an unseemly nickname, the "Empties," based on the excessive drinking known to happen on and around campus in the past. Other campuses had similar reputations, but it was different for Bradford. As one administrator reflected, "Ashby can get away with it. It's got a lot of other things going on." Bradford had fewer avenues to repair its reputation relative to some other campuses. Bradford aimed to challenge both of these reputational deficits by focusing on student outcomes and demonstrating that Bradford could be successful as measured by key metrics: retention and graduation. One respondent asked, "If you're not graduating students who's gonna wanna come here? And

what's your reputation gonna be? And so, it's about preserving your institution and your reputation and keeping students coming." Still, it was not just about outcomes; it was also how those outcomes could lead to future enrollments with all of Bradford's students motivated to recommend the campus based on their good experiences there.

### Clearfield

A primary concern at Clearfield was external pressure to focus on student success, based on measures that do not reflect organizational realities or Clearfield's student body. This pressure is a kind of surveillance with external stakeholders focused on campus outcomes in ways that pushed Clearfield to remake organizational priorities and practices. The stakeholders are wide-ranging—parents, System, state and federal governments, accreditors—and include some who also hold a watchful eye over Ashby's activities. But rather than merely asking questions and awaiting answers—as with Ashby's scrutiny—these stakeholders expect action or at least create incentives that encourage Clearfield to act in certain ways. Most of the incentives are financial, affecting Clearfield's bottom line. State funding calculations take student success into account, creating a financial inducement to focus on outcomes. In addition, student success generates revenue for the campus. As one respondent stated bluntly, "Clearfield needs more bodies," and improving retention rates would keep student bodies and their tuition and aid dollars on campus.

Further, Clearfield's outcomes are not assessed in isolation. Instead, they are compared to other local public campuses despite differences in their student body. In its mind, Clearfield is not necessarily unsuccessful because of what actually happens on campus but because of how external bodies make sense of and track what happens on campus, the assessment of which consistently positions Clearfield as a relative underdog. The collective weight of this attention encourages Clearfield to focus on success metrics that it does not see as wholly relevant to its student population or campus context. For example, after noting a range of Clearfield's students' invisible successes (e.g., completing courses for skill and/or job advancement or as prerequisites for degree programs elsewhere), one respondent explained how measuring success by a four-to-six-year graduation rate was "imposed from the outside":

[It]'s really important to parents and legislators and members of the [system] board...who sort of measure how well we do...So it's an important one for us to focus on and try to improve. But there are all sorts of things that we do for students that don't show up in a 4-to-6-year graduation rate . . . We serve a non-traditional population of working people and parents and people with all kinds of responsibilities that just can't make being a college student their number one priority and then take a long time to graduate, so that makes our graduation rate look not very good . . . But I think there are all sorts of things that we do for students. Just in terms of helping them become better citizens and better people and sort their own lives out and figure out what they want to do . . . That's success as well. And so, I think we need to have a broad definition and just accept the fact that we can't always measure all those things.

Clearfield prioritizes graduation because stakeholders do, but it reads its low rates as a failure of recognition rather than as a failure of accomplishment. Yet, it was unlikely to pursue alternate recognition as long as it struggled under perceived shortcomings according to traditional measures of student success.

By drawing the lens back and looking across campuses of varying social positions, we see that Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield faced a mutual set of constraints. However, as differentially situated campuses, they—despite a common context—saw themselves as different types of campuses. Thus, the extent to which they were concerned about and the ways they responded to shared constraints varied by campus and existed alongside individualized priorities, opportunities, and obstacles that reflect, in part, each campus's social position.

## 5.2. Part II: Differing Diversity Practice across Institutional Habitus

Below, I describe how each campus pursued EFA. The campuses' institutional habitus, outlined above, become visible almost immediately. Thus, beyond merely capturing *if* and how each campus responded to EFA, these findings also attend to *why*. That is, they demonstrate how institutional habitus—this situated sense of self and its influence on organizational decision making—prefigured each campus's policy practice.

### 5.2.1. Maintaining the Brand: The Rhetoric of Diversity and Excellence on a Top-Tier Campus

Ashby issued a press release in late 2009, stating that EFA would be the “bedrock” of a diversity plan it would develop the following year. The then-senior diversity officer asserted, “The system and indeed our president have challenged us to create a campus-wide movement that makes issues of diversity a part of everything that we do.” Yet, despite its much-touted history of commitment to diversity and diversity practice, Ashby, the largest, most well-respected, and well-resourced campus in the state, did not take up EFA. Instead, its emphasis on excellence and autonomy alongside concerns about the perception of campus diversity efforts led it into an elongated input process through which the campus weighed in on a new diversity plan, which had yet to bear much fruit during my data collection. Three central features characterize Ashby's EFA case summary: (1) the general invisibility of EFA on campus, (2) rhetorical preoccupation that aimed to redraw the imagined relationship between diversity and excellence, and (3) an independent approach to diversity planning that reflects a widely held though not universal belief that Ashby did not need EFA because it was already a local and national leader in diversity.

Ashby was the only system campus not to embrace EFA; as a result, the policy had little visibility on campus. For some, EFA was a thing of the past, from “maybe two or three years ago,” according to Daphne Sanger, a staff member in academic affairs where Ashby housed EFA. Linked to a previous diversity administrator, EFA was presumed to have departed when he did, leaving “not necessarily anything that was put into place that I can say, ‘This is the driver for EFA,’” another respondent shared. Amid limited familiarity with EFA, it was difficult to discern how EFA influenced Ashby on the ground. Occasional, non-specific reference to curricular changes, priorities of campus leadership, and activities in isolated campus units suggested there was little to EFA at the campus level beyond its use in the emergent Ashby Diversity Plan (ADP). For example, when asked about EFA on campus, even one ADP committee member noted only the presence of EFA in the curriculum of “some faculty in some of the schools.”

Similarly, Priya Singer, an academic affairs staff person who specializes in equity and inclusion, shared that “lots of large units are thinking about how to bring life into EFA” This included the administrator of a large non-academic unit who produced a toolkit to accompany an inclusion initiative he had launched. In the toolkit, the administrator advocated attending to “people diversity” across all human difference and levels to increase the unit's employee engagement and ability to “capitalize on the strengths and talents of all staff.” In apparent corroboration of Priya's assertion, this administrator's commitment to EFA was mentioned by several respondents; however, the toolkit exclusively attends to the educational and business cases for diversity and makes no mention of EFA. Still more common than such examples was grasping for connections absent concrete details. John Weber, an administrator whose own child was an Ashby student, offered, “In terms of a formal project . . . called EFA and its goals, I'm not aware of that specifically . . . I'm sure it is here, but I don't know it by name.” Finally, even during Ashby's long-running, annual, multi-day Diversity Symposium, the keynote session of which was entitled, “The Business Case for Diversity,” there was no explicit reference to EFA among the several keynotes, featured panels, and host of breakout sessions. Rather than engaging more complex campus-based and national racial inequities, the symposium epitomized a campus orientation in which conversations about race typically centered on diversity, individual uniqueness, and similarity despite difference.



Although few respondents could tell me where to find EFA, plenty were able to tell me what it meant. Ashby's approach to EFA, they shared, required a reconceptualization of keywords integral to campus legitimacy: diversity and excellence. First, a broad definition of "diversity" included the full range of human difference, primarily "areas of individual difference in personality; learning styles; life experiences; and group or social differences." Some saw this as pragmatic; it could draw a wider range of supporters because "diversity isn't something we are doing for 'those' people, it's something we're doing for us. For all of us." Still, several respondents saw an evasion in this framing, which decentered marginalized populations. Anastasia Aduba, a staff person in one of Ashby's cultural centers, captured this skepticism, asking, "Are we watering down our efforts to speak directly to specific issues that might need to be prioritized?" Second, EFA at Ashby challenged the campus to see diversity and organizational excellence as cooperative rather than competing processes. According to Tress LaFontaine, from student affairs, such an inherent link was new for a campus that typically believed "you do diversity over here and then educational excellence and quality is over here and there's a zero-sum kind of framing."

Perceived primarily as a system priority, EFA largely fell from view soon after it was introduced. Instead, four years later—under new diversity leadership—Ashby embarked on a two-and-a-half-year process to create its own plan. After four years of what one respondent called a "holding pattern" with no forward movement and another two and a half years of public comment and planning, Ashby eventually enacted its diversity process. However, as my data collection concluded, its timeline trailed other campuses by more than five years, with any activity beyond planning yet to take place. Finally, on a campus largely devoid of explicit commitment to EFA at the campus level, one might be surprised that EFA appeared in the title of Ashby's alternative diversity plan. Rather than a commitment to the policy, this use of EFA reflected a preoccupation with excellence. The mien of EFA was important at Ashby because EFA was "held up as the pinnacle of what institutions should be doing . . . *the* national model for doing this [diversity work] and doing it well" (emphasis theirs).

#### 5.2.2. Magic in the Middle: Collaboration toward Equity in a Middle-Tier University

Just after Ashby issued its "bedrock" press release, members of Bradford's Diversity Committee discussed feedback from a recent EFA site visit conducted by System, noting "Bradford is in an advanced state in comparison to other system campuses. However, we [are] still challenged with the support of historically marginalized students across diverse groups and across climate issues." Even before my data collection began, Bradford had made significant strides with its EFA efforts, establishing itself as a campus with an appetite and unique capacity for collaborative change. Already engaged in a plethora of EFA activities, the campus had begun to see improved student outcomes even amid concerns about the pace of change. For example, Bradford revamped its general education program—moving from conceptualization to implementation—in less time than it took Ashby to develop its diversity planning process.

Bradford's case summary is shaped by four defining characteristics: a commitment to racially marginalized students, concrete steps buoyed by the campus's orientation toward collaboration, a university-wide learning focus, and aspirations for campus-wide integration. First, Bradford's EFA work was guided by a commitment to marginalized students. Although many embraced a broad notion of EFA that centered all forms of difference, most EFA efforts at Bradford focused on racially and ethnically marginalized students whose college outcomes were seen as a "crisis of equity" given their historical and contemporary educational experiences and campus-level data about longstanding disparities at Bradford. Marsha Botham, a faculty member on the EFA leadership team, justified this focus, stating, "There are many who are not succeeding, but we have data about race," an assertion echoed by other respondents. The EFA administrator, Angela Nettles, put it most bluntly, "The work that I do demonstrates that it's about everyone.

But I make no apologies of helping the African American students, in particular, because they're doing the worst here."

Second, Bradford's policy response highlights the campus's unique orientation toward collaborative action, which facilitated concrete, successful responses to the policy. One project guided almost exclusively by EFA principles, Bradford's Summer Transition Program (STP), epitomized this orientation. STP was a research-based reimagining of a program whose original focus on marginalized students had been usurped to further serve students who were merely looking to get a head start on college. The EFA chair related how program designers gently brought colleagues invested in the extant program into a new vision for STP:

We said very overtly, "We don't know what will come out of this, but let's negotiate. Let's see what we might do together . . . We have these things happening with students of color." And we talked about it very explicitly . . . So I think taking the blame out and...that it was no judgment on them, but this is the program we wanted.

Further, everyone's willingness to chip in was indicative of a cultural element at Bradford—an inclination toward broad-based collaboration. Noting that nearly 50 people across the campus were involved in STP in one way or another, the EFA committee chair reflected this, saying, "That's where we're successful, is when we bring a lot of people together." The new STP was a four-credit, six-week residential program paid for with pooled resources, pro-bono services, and a revenue model in which tuition dollars from the new admits generated by the program covered its steep program costs. Ten of the fifteen students in the first cohort matriculated at Bradford, and the team looked forward to twenty-five new participants the following summer.

Third, rather than focusing exclusively on students, EFA was framed as a learning opportunity for the campus community. Bradford attended to EFA capacity building at the organizational, departmental, and individual levels through leadership structures, community programming, and staff and faculty development, including assessment procedures meant to monitor personal development related to EFA. Tonya Millstone, who interacted with EFA as a campus participant, reported "no shortage of opportunities to go and learn more" through an expanding array of EFA-focused brown bags, workshops, and seminars. A major thrust of these efforts was to create conversation across difference. For example, approximately 200 members of Bradford's on- and off-campus communities attended a campus forum after a grand jury in Ferguson, MO, acquitted the white police officer who killed Michael Brown, a black teenager. The invite read:

This forum is an opportunity for everyone in the campus community to speak out about the shooting of Michael Brown and the grand jury's decision. It is an opportunity to frame a campus response to racial inequities and social injustice. Join us to discuss how activism and allies together can build a socially just world.

Angela Nettles paraphrased James Baldwin—"You can't fix what you can't face"—to explain the importance of such "difficult conversations."

Beyond programming, EFA was incorporated into departmental and unit planning, staff development, and recruitment because EFA was seen as essential even for those not involved in the university's academic project, whether "you're a custodian or an administrative assistant . . . if you're [a director]," Aleksandra Petrov, a member of the EFA leadership team shared. There was a broad range of faculty development opportunities related to inclusive instructional strategies, including pedagogical approaches, classroom environment, content delivery, and course materials because, as Stacy Krummp, an administrator in academic affairs, framed it, one measure of EFA's success is whether it "reach[es] the instructor's desk. Meaning, when they plan their lessons . . . does it get in the syllabus? Does it get in the classroom?"

Finally, Bradford intended to use EFA to spur campus-wide integration of equity-focused practice such that, for one EFA leader, success meant, "[my] whole department

shouldn't even matter . . . I've got to work my way out of a job because that to me is the epitome of this school having leaned into ensuring that everybody matters, that EFA's operationalized." Aimed at "infusing" EFA throughout campus, respondents shared the long-term goal that EFA become "part and parcel of our culture." EFA principles would be "so integrated that it is a way of being . . . So rather than calling special attention—'Oh, over here! Don't forget!'—it becomes natural...It gets woven in and it would be missed if it wasn't there," Stacy Krump prophesied. Positioning EFA as a campus-wide "expectation" and priority means it would be "integrated into everything" as a guiding philosophy and shared responsibility for all members of the community. Infusing EFA "just makes it everybody's work," Joy Smithington, EFA committee chair, told me, instead of "the work of certain people . . . whatever office on campus that was set up to work with students of color . . . [Diversity] had been in a marginalized place and only one office was often in charge of that." Instead, each person on campus should see their work as part of what "we do in . . . a system that impact[s] all kinds of students," which "expands people's responsibility for students of color and all of our students," according to Aleksandra Petrov.

### 5.2.3. Struggling to Act: Still Doing Diversity on a Diverse, Resource-Strapped Campus

After hearing about my research interest in student success, one administrator said that Clearfield was a great place to study because they had been "pressured" into focusing on retention. He corrected himself, saying that it was also the right thing to do but that with fewer students graduating from high school, Clearfield's focus on success was "a little more self-centered" because enrollment generates revenue through tuition dollars. Given that student success dominated attention, Clearfield—the smallest and most resource-strapped campus with the most constrained outcomes in the state—could not leverage organizational, political, economic, and cultural power to support EFA. Although many at Clearfield were motivated to create change, more than 7 years after EFA launched in the state, EFA was not a high priority, with respondents reporting that Clearfield had not made the shift to EFA. Thus, EFA had little impact at Clearfield, whose EFA case summary is characterized by inconsistent diversity leadership, a narrow understanding of EFA, and floundering multicultural activities.

First, instability in Clearfield's diversity work was both independent from and reflective of a larger organizational instability connected to increasingly disruptive cutbacks. Any EFA efforts interacted with a significant campus challenge—volatility that trickled down to diversity leadership on campus. First, there were frequent changes in the administrative structure for diversity work that moved staff in that area further from campus leadership. As Ramona Jackson, a staff person in student affairs, haltingly indicated, rather than diversity being the responsibility of a precious few, it seemed to belong to no one:

When I first started . . . in 2009 (pause) . . . there was someone (pause) in charge of diversity issues and initiatives as it relates to students as well as to faculty and staff. And then that position was kind of dissolved. And then we had a new position of a diversity officer. But he was only here for about a year. Senior diversity officer. So, he's a senior-level administrator. And he left last year. And so, we don't have anyone else in place of that.

A vice president of diversity and standing member of the President's Council "was disappeared" after a short tenure, as Kurt Jakowski joked, leaving one staff member with diversity in his title. This diversity "officer," who had a direct line to the president, was replaced by Marie Altsoba, a "manager." Although her office was in a suite with members of the President's Council, she was not one and was not an interim diversity officer—as, she said, some hastened to tell her. Amid this leadership vacuum, the former Diversity Committee was not very visible and was characterized even by its own members as often engaging in "more talking than doing." The group's perceived ineffectiveness was seen as a primary hindrance to EFA implementation.

Second, EFA had arrived, but the campus was still largely doing diversity, many believed. Some assumed that campus engagement with EFA demonstrated, as Antonio

Cardoba, a student affairs staff person, described it: “that a lot of people supported this concept of EFA even though . . . sometimes they don’t necessarily know the whole philosophy behind it.” EFA and diversity were still used “interchangeably,” and most EFA work continued the diversity activity that predated the policy. Even members of the EFA committee found little to suggest that the policy brought anything new to the campus. As “basically sort of a diversity group,” as one member disclosed, the admittedly newly invigorated EFA committee pursued activities that would have been apt if “it was [still] titled ‘Diversity Committee’”—specifically, multicultural student success programs, intercultural communication activities, defining diversity and its goals, and raising the visibility of diversity efforts on campus.

Finally, even as Clearfield centered a multicultural orientation, it did not do so to resounding results. Despite the consuming attention of student success efforts, members of the EFA committee were re-energized, having “decided, let’s *do*. Let’s just figure something out, and let’s *do*. And let’s see if we can have an impact,” Theresa Shannon, a committee member, reported after reluctantly deciding to give the committee another chance (emphasis theirs). The committee launched several new activities—a mentoring program, a diversity retreat, the Clearfield Respecting Difference Project, and diversity recognition programming—all of which, for reasons related to the larger campus context, floundered. The Respecting Difference Project was the only one launched by the time of my data collection. Marie Altsoba reported that the project was meant to demonstrate solidarity and “heighten awareness and to create dialogue” about diversity-related incidents on campus with people wearing branded shirts on designated days. However, she reported, people appeared to wear the shirts “willy nilly,” and the project was put on hold after a short pilot. Still, members of the new EFA Committee reluctantly stayed involved, hoping that a round of energy from new committee leadership would kick the group into action and that such languishing activities would be a thing of the past.

Ultimately, Ashby and Clearfield each paid little formal attention to EFA; yet, the path each followed to that inattention differed. Conversely, EFA at Bradford had taken hold and the campus was becoming a policy model for others in the state. The first step toward these outcomes was interpretation. At Ashby and Clearfield, EFA interpretation was overshadowed by more salient campus concerns, such as maintaining autonomy and managing organizational crisis related to student outcomes at Ashby and Clearfield, respectively. A smattering of EFA activity emerged on the two campuses though, in some cases, only nominally so. Moreover, on each campus, the notion of equity—racial or otherwise—was largely absent from EFA implementation. Bradford, on the other hand, squarely centered racial justice in its EFA work despite a desire among some to frame the policy more broadly. Although frustrated by limited coordination, through collaboration, EFA activities appeared across campus and had begun to improve student outcomes and how campus members, particularly those involved in EFA implementation, experienced the campus.

## 6. Discussion

This study uncovered how three public college campuses of varying social status implemented a system-wide diversity policy. There were clear differences. Ashby University, with its self-made diversity process, did not build a campus-wide scaffold to address inequities faced by marginalized students. Bradford University successfully leveraged its focus on educational disparities and momentum from previous change efforts to develop an equity infrastructure that was evident across campus. Finally, Clearfield College, pursuing *Excellence for All* (EFA) largely in name only given its nearly exclusive focus on student success, did not make great strides in the name of equity. These findings offer insights for the understudied area of organizational diversity practice and for the complexities of differentiation and autonomy across organizational status.

### 6.1. Organizational Diversity Practice

EFA implementation at Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield echoed previous findings in the scholarship on diversity practice in higher education. First, EFA reflected two key elements of Thomas's framing of a diversity regime [4,54], which he argues institutionalizes a "benign commitment" [4] (p. 6) to diversity. Building on Acker's [102] theorization of inequality regimes, Thomas [4] describes a diversity regime as having three components: condensation (definitional work that separates diversity from race consciousness), decentralization as an indication of the lack of official oversight, and staging difference through the strategic use of bodies that provide diversity [5]. Condensation shaped the design of the original EFA policy circulated by System, which pointed generally to a central concern with "diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability." In essence, EFA was designed to be race-neutral. Although race was available, it was not required, a position evident in the different framings ultimately adopted on each campus. Ashby's diversity-as-difference approach has been identified as one that "neutraliz[es] the power and privilege of whiteness" [103] (p. 603) because it affords attention to social difference while it minimizes engagement with social inequity, thus aiming to equalize identities that are afforded differential opportunity and access on Ashby's campus. Although Clearfield offered some programming grounded in a multicultural orientation, the campus offered its own "all-students" approach concerned with the flailing success of a majority of its student body. These campuses offer two examples of the dilution of attention to race within a policy framework in which it was wholly possible [38]. Bradford was the only campus whose efforts reflected an ideology of racial justice [50], in which EFA interpretations and activities reflected deep commitment to changing the structural realities that lead to constrained outcomes and experiences for students of color, generally, and Black students in particular.

Despite having been initiated at the state higher education level, EFA exhibited the decentralization that Thomas [4] argues limits oversight and coordination of diversity practice and constrains the potential for campus-wide integration and transformation. Although EFA lacked primary design elements—strategic vision, intentionality, and resources [3,38,39]—EFA was not without vision. It imagined a future in which diversity would be a deep part of "everyday cultures, daily practices, and organizational patterns" on all campuses in the system. Further, EFA offered maximum flexibility due to its "chameleon-like ability" to be customized to individual campus cultures. It also offered little guidance for how campuses should achieve this customization. Thus, rather than the happenstance unintentionality documented in the literature [3,104], EFA's lack of intentionality was quite intentional. Some welcomed this flexibility like this respondent who, analogizing state diversity plans as fences that provide structure to campus diversity efforts, described EFA as:

a fence but it's a loose fence and it goes for miles and miles and miles. So, you've got . . . more flexibility, more leeway to really kind of do what you need to do in your backyard. And it becomes your backyard rather than System's backyard.

Although many staff, faculty, and administrators at Bradford took advantage of this flexibility to guide integration of EFA into major campus divisions and into multiple aspects of everyday practice, my study revealed that rather than the influence of the policy itself, Bradford's success instead reflected the collective impact of individuals prepared to work collaboratively on campus, guided by a largely race-conscious framework. Liera [61] and White-Lewis [42], in their studies of hiring for faculty diversity, similarly identified the impact that equity-minded, race-conscious stakeholders can have when they engage diversity work as a site of power in which they have influence.

Again, despite the diffuse expectation of statewide adoption of EFA, its designers notified campuses that because EFA was not a discrete project, it required no additional resources. Instead, it was suggested, campuses should fund related efforts through reallocation of existing financial and human assets. This serves as another indication of EFA's limited potential impact by design. Such an approach focuses on distribution or the



movement of people and other resources divorced from intentional allocative decisions that recognize and aim to interrupt “the social structures, processes, and institutional contexts that produce these distributions in the first place” [43] (p. 268). Resource allocation is not a power-neutral endeavor on college campuses, and moving resources without attention to underlying equity goals is akin to diversity efforts that focus exclusively on diversity of representation and composition on campus—first-order counts absent second-order accounting [37,39,44].

In many ways, Bradford serves as the counterexample to Thomas’s [4] Diversity University (DU). At DU, condensation had a neutering effect on diversity practice through a proliferation of diversity meanings, none of which emphasized race-conscious engagement. Thomas [4] (p. 147) argues that as “multiple signifiers of diversity are brought into meaningful relationship with one another” and condense under diversity, the ubiquitous and empty signifier “is made to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.” The resultant “‘inclusive’ yet ‘watered-down’” [105] (p. 4) definition of diversity is an ineffective tool through which to pursue racial equity. At Bradford, however, race was then normative social marker attached to diversity. Concern for the redress of the historical and contemporary exclusion experienced by racially marginalized students was the touchstone of campus diversity efforts. Even as the campus pursued inclusion for other groups, it was guided by equity rather than equivalence, adopting targeted efforts to ensure that groups of students had access to, engaged in, and benefitted from campus opportunities. Such a focus could be maintained and communicated so effectively because of the core leadership offered by the campus’s EFA committee—a contrast to the decentralization Thomas highlighted at DU. Bradford faced the challenge of disconnected activities as EFA expanded across campus, but it also conquered the foe of decentralization by grounding EFA in the campus’s academic and student services divisions and further tasking administrators and staff within these units with further dispersal of EFA goals and implementation. This approach generated productive flexibility while ensuring that EFA had a designated core of stakeholders who provided critical oversight and a central hub for EFA implementation and who took responsibility for the success of the policy. The clarity of this through-line was reflected in the consistency and collaboration that were hallmarks of EFA at Bradford. Administrators are often highlighted as being central to the success of organizational efforts [40,46,51], a reality also evident at Bradford, but the work of the campus’s EFA committee highlights the critical role of “diversity champions,” whose bottom-up leadership can facilitate institutional transformation [40,50,56,69].

Finally, although Thomas’s [4] staging of difference was less prevalent across the campuses in this study, the theory captures the overall thrust of EFA on two of the campuses: Ashby and Clearfield (with its inverse reflected at Bradford, as I describe above). I posit a fourth component, *multiculturalization*, as relevant to the diversity regimes on these two campuses. Contrary to condensation, which emphasizes the lack of race-consciousness in the pursuit of diversity practice, multiculturalization marks differences by race and ethnicity and other elements of social differentiation while nevertheless encompassing them within an all-students orientation that disappears the social implications of these distinctions. At Ashby, this uncritical multiculturalism equalized differences across all manner of inoculated distinctions with its expanded definition of diversity—which according to the Ashby Diversity Plan (ADP)—sought to:

recognize that *individual* differences should be considered foundational to our strength as a community, and at the core of our ability to be an innovative, creative, and adaptable institution . . . As such, [the ADP] acknowledges areas of individual difference in personality; learning styles; life experiences; and group or social differences that may manifest through personality, learning styles, life experiences, and group or social differences. (emphasis added)

Framed, according to respondents, to de-emphasize race and to help white students see themselves in campus diversity work, Ashby’s multiculturalization presented a “highly individualistic, disposable, and inherently positive diversity that enables students an easy

authentic experience of celebrating humanity” [106]. Clearfield’s multiculturalization features little of such happy diversity talk [5]; instead, crisis unites its uncritical multicultural efforts—both in terms of targeting EFA efforts to people of color, broadly, rather than to Black or Latinx students, for example, and identifying all of its students as “at-risk” given the attributes and constraints they bring to college. At both Ashby and Clearfield, multiculturalization meets the requirements of Thomas’s diversity regime for its inability to address social and educational inequity and for its “hollow forms of race consciousness” [54] (p. 81) that shield campuses from the demands of transformative, equitable responsibility and action. Although there is scholarly advocacy for so-called all-inclusive multiculturalism [107,108], race-conscious approaches are linked to the equity potential of higher education policy [18,58].

## 6.2. Differentiation across Organizational Status

This work reveals the complicated and enduring relevance of status in educational contexts. One way to interpret the relative policy attainments across Ashby, Bradford, and Clearfield is as individual campus accomplishments or shortcomings. On some level, such absolute assessments are justified. However, given this study’s interest in how social structure shapes organizational culture, decision making, and action through institutional habitus, I leveraged Bourdieu’s theory of practice to uncover wide differences in organizational identity, resources, interpretation, and response to varied social, educational, and political pressures, which shaped organizational practice related to EFA, with particular implications for racial equity. Although this research identified compelling differences across the campuses and therefore by social position, my goal is not to suggest that differences in social status caused the variations in EFA enactment. Conversely, I aimed to demonstrate what becomes visible when organizational status and the distinctions it engenders across colleges of different social positions are subjected to investigation.

Differences across organizational type and status in higher education have been identified elsewhere [109–112], which offers a useful counterpoint to scholarship that links isomorphism to elite status [113] such that lower-status campuses would be assumed to follow the lead of higher-status campuses (though there are examples of problematic emulation [114,115]). The current study responds to recent empirical and theoretical explorations of isomorphism that employ field-level analyses to identify mechanisms that can generate convergence or divergence across organizations e.g., [116,117]. In addition, this study corroborates scholarship that employs institutional habitus to explore differentiation and struggle across education contexts [80,118–120]. In particular, this research links institutional habitus to organizational identity, decision making, practice, and realities [66,81], including differences in these across institutional habitus [121,122]. Holland and Ford [122] found that despite the greater representational diversity of less selective campuses, the relatively selective campuses in their sample ( $n = 278$ ) were more likely to deploy campus diversity in marketing materials, with particular emphasis on students and faculty from ethnically and racially marginalized backgrounds. Relatedly, Cipollone and Stich [119] explored the social implications of differentiation across institutional habitus, specifically the differential ability of dominant and non-dominant schools to transmit productive capital to their students. Such research using institutional habitus reframes the “trickle down” [122] (p. 1) theory of social status by revealing different institutional habitus across organizational social position or the ineffectiveness of isomorphic efforts as well as the implications of these for social opportunity. This study reflects the critical reimagining of organizational theory, which—rather than taking the elements of organizational culture as given—interrogates the sources of and power arrangements embedded in what is commonly conceived of as institutional culture [123]. Further, this study offers a unique contribution in the field of diversity studies given the identified need not only for organization-level analysis but for relational analyses that investigate how diversity practice is produced, collectively, across organizational contexts [3,50,56].

### 6.3. Organizational Status and Autonomy

Prior investigations of organizational status and change in higher education e.g., [65,66,124] established a relatively clear relationship between status and autonomy. Naidoo's [65] relational analysis of organizational transformation in post-Apartheid South Africa's higher education system found that varying levels of autonomy influenced how two colleges—one historically Black and one historically White—re-translated sociopolitical pressure to develop new admissions policies in accord with social forces that demanded inclusive access to education. She linked differences in organizational autonomy to the colleges' disparate organizational statuses and field positions. Coldron et al. [124], similarly focused on organizational status in the context of broader transition, studied headteachers of relatively elite schools as they responded to a policy aimed at creating independent public schools separate from local education authorities. The authors argued that awareness of their schools' social position—as well as the need for their schools so-positioned to possess and acquire valued capital—predisposed these headteachers to become early and active policy adopters to not only garner the best positions for their schools but also to influence the changing shape of the field in which their schools existed. In both cases, the autonomy that accompanied higher social status afforded freedoms that influenced the colleges' participation in equity-oriented change efforts. Thus, I had anticipated that Ashby would be the least likely to engage EFA. Relatedly, I assumed that Clearfield's less elite status coupled with its diverse student population would push the campus toward more robust policy implementation because it would be more beholden to the system and because EFA would be seen as a benefit to its student body. While status did shape the campuses' policy responses, the study revealed a more complex relationship between status and practice than outlined in previous investigations.

First, status is not fully liberating. An elite campus may have relatively more control over its agenda-setting, but it does so under scrutiny that lower-status campuses do not face. As one of the most sought-after local campuses, Ashby is part of the state's public imagination—representing, many believe, the highest-quality public education available locally—and that regard comes at a price. In a nearly post-affirmative action environment, Ashby was on the defensive, explaining that EFA means not racial quotas but a response to racial inequities. Once Ashby lost control of this message, it was easier and served other organizational purposes to start a new process rather than to redefine the old one, revealing Ashby's position as a campus of *scrutinized exceptionalism*, an institutional habitus imbued with the anxiety of being able to go its own way but not without looking over its shoulder.

Second, Bradford reveals what I call the protective status of the middle tier, in which a solid enough academic base supports its image as a valuable public campus while its limited, regional draw insulates it from excessive public attention. Together, these make possible organizational activities and transformations not demonstrated on other campuses. For example, in the public forum in response to the Ferguson uprisings, the EFA committee challenged students to accept their role as White allies in the movement for racial justice. A sponsored event of this tenor would likely not happen at Ashby, where public forums typically centered individual responsibility with limited attention to racialized organizational and social structures. Finally, Bradford's student outcomes make it competitive for external funding to support equity and academically focused innovations. These attributes position Bradford as a campus of *pragmatic progressivism*, an institutional habitus in which efforts to enhance its reputation aligned with responses to racialized realities on campus and in its wider community.

Finally, the restrictions of low status are profoundly constraining. As the least well-resourced campus with the highest need students in terms of college supports and success, Clearfield faced a deep set of unique challenges as an educational organization whose student outcomes were watched closely by external bodies. This accountability, however, is not accompanied by attention to the organizational needs that drive those outcomes. Clearfield is also unlikely to be competitive for significant external funding, some of which awards points to previous recipients, stacking the deck against campuses such as Clearfield.

Thus, Clearfield is positioned as a campus of *surveilled subsistence*, an institutional habitus shaped by spare coffers, organizational instability, and a perpetual shorthandedness that leaves faculty, staff, and administrators overworked and overstretched.

## 7. Implications

This study documents the necessity of attending to campus social position in the pursuit of equity in higher education. It underscores the need to more deeply understand organizational decision-making in higher education and beyond as shaped by the relationships among institutional habitus and organizational practice. This work has several implications related to social power, institutional habitus, and equity-focused change. First, the findings are a call to policymakers and practitioners to recognize college campuses as socially situated educational organizations. Kezar and Eckel [125] (p. 457) urged change agents to become “cultural outsiders” in their organizations by reading organizational habits and patterns and responding with strategies that are “culturally coherent.” This study suggests that, beyond being cultural outsiders, change agents must become “power brokers” who recognize the structural influences on organizational culture and thus craft change efforts that can navigate the affordances and constraints inherent in this relationship. My research can inform the work of such power brokers who will be better positioned to engage in status-aware organizational change compared to those who treat the campus as an apolitical blank slate.

Second, this practical work could be aided by additional research that examines how and why colleges make decisions about diversity and inclusion efforts and how these are shaped by social position. I operationalized Bourdieu’s theory to demonstrate how institutional habitus creates a “bounded reality” that shapes organizational decision-making, specifically as related to equity efforts [120] (p. 10). Although bounded reality emphasizes cognitive constraints, institutional habitus uncovers the affective, cultural, and status antecedents to organizational cognition (i.e., decision making). Insights from this work point to opportunities for empirical and theoretical development by scholars of organizational theory, policy sociology, and/or diversity practice, to name a few. For example, scholars could ask if similar patterns of social status and practice as found here hold across states. Do campuses of similar social status in different areas have similar institutional habitus? Do campuses with similar institutional habitus approach diversity and inclusion work in similar ways? Bradford begs inquiry into whether middle-tier campuses are ideal social locations for equity practice. If so, for the reasons identified here or others? Researchers could also apply these questions to private contexts.

Third, the Clearfield case engenders questions about equitable orientations toward campuses themselves, including related to funding formulas. Although grant dollars are available for minority-serving campuses, eligibility is reserved for those in which one underrepresented racial/ethnic group comprises 25% or racially marginalized students as a group comprise 50% of the student body [126]. This excludes places such as Clearfield, with its relatively diverse but not diverse enough population. Need-based funding, from state or federal sources, that accounts for the populations that Clearfield-type institutions are charged with serving would help alleviate the need for such colleges to choose between their own existence and attention to the unique and varied needs of students generally underserved in higher education.

The study’s findings also raise questions about equity-minded organizations. Future research should investigate not only how individuals become more equity-minded—as Bensimon and colleagues have studied [58,127,128]—but also contexts in which these equity-minded professionals hold sway. The Bradford case may be instructive. There were individuals committed to racial equity on each campus, but it was only at Bradford that those individuals reflected an organizational milieu that fostered a practical and philosophical match between campus and policy priorities. Is it a coincidence that so many faculty and staff committed to racial equity and also willing to work collaboratively toward it are gathered on the same campus? Is there something broader and more fundamental

to its institutional habitus that makes Bradford a site where equity-mindedness could take root?

Finally, this study underscores the critical need not only for empirical engagement with diversity efforts in higher education but also, specifically, critical empirical engagement that centers race and power. Limited empirical attention to organizational diversity practice stands alongside the reality of enduring inequities faced by marginalized students, faculty, and staff, including those marginalized by race and ethnicity. As Renner [129] (p. 41) argues, “we must abandon our script of self-deception, of pretending that progress [on racial equity] was being made when we know, or should have known, that was not so.” We know that race continues to significantly influence college experiences and outcomes. Yet, despite evidence that explicit attention to race is not only warranted but legally viable, there has been a retreat toward diversity plans and framings that minimize or even avoid race [19]. Such lack of specificity regarding race and inattention to racial equity militate against racial justice. Further, the absence of power as a conceptual intervention in investigations of [63] organizational diversity initiatives helps explain higher education’s inability to reckon with its exclusionary past and to make progress toward transformative and equitable practices [64]. Rather than challenging racist foundations and orientations, diversity initiatives can be manipulated in ways that decenter race and serve to reinforce and privilege whiteness in higher education [18,104,130]. Instead, diversity must engage race beyond rhetoric and discourse to interrupt the inequity it might otherwise reproduce.

## 8. Conclusions

This ethnographic collective case study makes several scholarly contributions. First, it expands awareness of the organizational opportunities and hurdles along the path to increased equity for marginalized populations. It does so by attending to a ubiquitous but under-investigated social reality: the influence of social status on organizational behavior and how, in particular, it facilitates the promulgation of both diversity and equity plans *and* racial inequity [18,131]. Second, this work enhances scholarship on diversity in higher education by responding to the relative absence of scholarly attention to diversity work [70–72]. It supplements organizational theory with a critical examination of how organizational contexts influence the extent to which organizational change efforts as well as organizational policy and practice challenge racial inequity. In doing so, it moves beyond a narrow focus on discourse to investigate the practice beneath the rhetoric.

Third, this study makes a theoretical contribution by operationalizing institutional habitus, as situated within Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, to explain documented gaps among diversity rhetoric, plans, and outcomes. I demonstrate that campus diversity work is shaped by context-dependent factors that are linked to campus social status and that structure progress toward racial equity—an intervention that responds to the paucity of empirical investigations of how organizational diversity policy and practice challenge and/or reinforce existing power arrangements. I thus expand on Bourdieu’s contributions to organizational analysis [87] and join the handful of scholars who employ Bourdieu’s theoretical work to investigate policy [132,133]. Interrogating how social status shapes organizational practice—particularly as it relates to marginalized populations—offers a more nuanced understanding of organizational policy and practice, organizational change, and racial justice.

Fourth, although focused on diversity policy, the present study models an approach to probing the relationship between institutional habitus and organizational decision-making that can be applied to any organizational process. This concrete yet theoretically engaged project offers methodological guidance for examining the invisible operation of social power in ways that constrain campus responses to the needs of marginalized students. It describes an integrated, critical framework for studying the situated action of organizations, generally including the affordances and constraints of organizational status, and refocuses empirical attention on the structural forces that influence organizational behavior. I centered this investigation on diversity practice as one arena in which to



document this influence, but I also make a broader argument that institutional habitus shapes organizational behavior, generally, and that analysis of this situated action can help scholars and practitioners better understand organizational opportunities to challenge inequities and spur truly transformative organizational change.

The interaction between organizational social position and diversity policy practice positions diversity work as a situated organizational practice that reflects organizational and broader power relations. Thus, I heed Patton et al.'s [6] (p. 192) recommendation that scholarly attention to diversity work "be situated in critical frameworks and paradigms in which researchers grapple with the challenging dynamics that make some institutions resistant to the possibility of real change." Decades of (mandated) attention to diversity absent significant structural and ideological change contribute to a dismissal of the material, psychological, and social realities that diversity should ameliorate and of the organizational responsibility for such amelioration [134]. In this context, policy analysis can be a counter-hegemonic practice that destabilizes accepted truths, reveals the political consequences of purportedly apolitical policy, and agitates for ways of policy mattering [135] that position racial inequity as an organizational ill that must be named to be redressed.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/educsci12030211/s1>, Table S1: Summary Campus Data; Table S2: Data Collection and Generation Matrix; Table S3: Study Recruitment by Generalized Campus Function and Position; Table S4: Study Respondents by Function and Position, by Campus.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Submission ID number: 2014-0650-CP001), and the Institutional Review Board of each campus.

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