

CHANGE, COURAGE, AND COMMUNITY: HOW A BIPOC COLLEGE STUDENT GROUP  
DISCOVERED MEANING IN THE OUTDOORS

by

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of

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this three-manuscript dissertation to my amazing parents and my inspiring younger sister, who is my partner in the outdoors (and life), for their unwavering love and support during my life journey and this PhD journey. Thank you for giving me the courage and audacity to pursue all my crazy dreams. Thank you for never doubting me and instead always helping me create pathways to actualize them. I love and appreciate you all so very much. None of this would have been possible without you. I also dedicate this dissertation to anyone pursuing their own crazy dreams. Do it and keep going.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION .....                                                                                               | 1  |
| Positionality Statement .....                                                                                       | 2  |
| Statement of Problem.....                                                                                           | 4  |
| Significance of Problem.....                                                                                        | 5  |
| The Unifying Theme of the Three Manuscripts.....                                                                    | 7  |
| Limitations & Delimitations .....                                                                                   | 11 |
| Limitations of Manuscript 1 .....                                                                                   | 11 |
| Delimitations of Manuscript 1 .....                                                                                 | 12 |
| Limitations of Manuscript 2 & Manuscript 3 .....                                                                    | 12 |
| Delimitations of Manuscript 2 & Manuscript 3 .....                                                                  | 13 |
| Definition of Terms .....                                                                                           | 15 |
| Organization of the Three Manuscript Dissertation.....                                                              | 16 |
| REFERENCES CITED.....                                                                                               | 18 |
| 2. MAPPING DEI RETRENCHMENT ACROSS R1 UNIVERSITIES:<br>INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PATTERNS OF<br>CHANGE..... | 20 |
| Contribution of Author and Co-Authors .....                                                                         | 20 |
| Manuscript Information .....                                                                                        | 21 |
| Introduction.....                                                                                                   | 22 |
| Problem Statement.....                                                                                              | 23 |
| Purpose of Study.....                                                                                               | 23 |
| Research Questions.....                                                                                             | 24 |
| Significance of Study .....                                                                                         | 24 |
| Literature Review.....                                                                                              | 25 |
| Institutionalizing DEI.....                                                                                         | 25 |
| DEI's Inherent Vulnerabilities .....                                                                                | 28 |
| Theoretical Framework.....                                                                                          | 31 |
| Institutional Theory.....                                                                                           | 32 |
| Racialized Organizational Theory .....                                                                              | 33 |
| Institutional Racial Paralysis.....                                                                                 | 35 |
| Methods.....                                                                                                        | 37 |
| Data Source & Sample.....                                                                                           | 37 |
| Variables.....                                                                                                      | 38 |
| Changes to Some Levels of Categorical Variables .....                                                               | 38 |
| Measures of DEI Retrenchment Actions.....                                                                           | 38 |
| Measures of Institutional Characteristics.....                                                                      | 39 |
| Measures of Political Influence and Funding Characteristics.....                                                    | 40 |
| Data Analysis .....                                                                                                 | 40 |
| Descriptive Statistics.....                                                                                         | 40 |

|                                                                                                                                                                    |        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Associative Analyses .....                                                                                                                                         | 40     |
| Results .....                                                                                                                                                      | 41     |
| Limitations .....                                                                                                                                                  | 42     |
| Discussion .....                                                                                                                                                   | 44     |
| REFERENCES CITED .....                                                                                                                                             | 46     |
| <br>3. THE POTENTIAL FOR A COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH<br>PROJECT TO CREATE EMPOWERING SPACES IN OUTDOOR<br>RECREATION FOR A BIPOC STUDENT COMMUNITY .....    | <br>49 |
| Introduction .....                                                                                                                                                 | 49     |
| Literature Review: BIPOC Communities & Outdoor Spaces .....                                                                                                        | 52     |
| Outdoor Spaces & Outdoor Recreation as Unsafe Spaces .....                                                                                                         | 52     |
| Outdoor Spaces as Third Spaces .....                                                                                                                               | 53     |
| Outdoor Spaces as Safe Spaces .....                                                                                                                                | 54     |
| Outdoor Spaces as Brave Spaces .....                                                                                                                               | 56     |
| Considerations to Make Outdoor Recreation More Accessible for<br>BIPOC College Students .....                                                                      | 58     |
| Theoretical Framework .....                                                                                                                                        | 59     |
| Methods .....                                                                                                                                                      | 61     |
| CBPR .....                                                                                                                                                         | 61     |
| Background of Research Team .....                                                                                                                                  | 63     |
| Co-Researchers and Student Participants .....                                                                                                                      | 64     |
| Data .....                                                                                                                                                         | 64     |
| Analysis .....                                                                                                                                                     | 65     |
| Preparation for Outdoor Recreational Events .....                                                                                                                  | 65     |
| Lived Experiences from the Six-Week Ski Lesson Program .....                                                                                                       | 66     |
| Rigor and Trustworthiness .....                                                                                                                                    | 68     |
| Findings & Discussion .....                                                                                                                                        | 68     |
| CBPR .....                                                                                                                                                         | 69     |
| Third Space .....                                                                                                                                                  | 69     |
| Safe Space .....                                                                                                                                                   | 70     |
| Brave Space .....                                                                                                                                                  | 72     |
| Conclusion .....                                                                                                                                                   | 73     |
| REFERENCES CITED .....                                                                                                                                             | 76     |
| <br>4. COMMUNITY INFORMED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS<br>FROM A CBPR PROJECT FOCUSED ON A BIPOC COLLEGE<br>STUDENT COMMUNITY ENGAGING IN OUTDOOR RECREATION ..... | <br>80 |
| Contribution of Author and Co-Authors .....                                                                                                                        | 80     |
| Manuscript Information .....                                                                                                                                       | 82     |
| Introduction .....                                                                                                                                                 | 83     |
| Positionality Statement .....                                                                                                                                      | 85     |
| Rationale for the Study .....                                                                                                                                      | 85     |

|                                                                                                 |         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Significance of Study .....                                                                     | 86      |
| Literature Review.....                                                                          | 87      |
| History of Outdoor Recreation for BIPOC Communities.....                                        | 87      |
| Barriers for BIPOC College Students and Outdoor Recreation.....                                 | 89      |
| Research Already Conducted on BIPOC College Students and<br>Outdoor Recreation .....            | 89      |
| Community Based Participatory Research as a Framework for<br>Equity in Outdoor Recreation ..... | 91      |
| Methods.....                                                                                    | 92      |
| Research Design.....                                                                            | 92      |
| Research Setting & Events.....                                                                  | 92      |
| Participants.....                                                                               | 93      |
| Data .....                                                                                      | 93      |
| Data Analysis .....                                                                             | 93      |
| Trustworthiness.....                                                                            | 94      |
| Findings.....                                                                                   | 95      |
| Community .....                                                                                 | 95      |
| Foundation .....                                                                                | 97      |
| Feelings .....                                                                                  | 98      |
| Access .....                                                                                    | 100     |
| Discussion .....                                                                                | 101     |
| Community .....                                                                                 | 101     |
| Foundation .....                                                                                | 102     |
| Feelings .....                                                                                  | 103     |
| Access .....                                                                                    | 103     |
| Applications to Practice .....                                                                  | 104     |
| REFERENCES CITED.....                                                                           | 107     |
| <br>5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE WORK .....                                              | <br>110 |
| Introduction.....                                                                               | 110     |
| Overview of the Three-Manuscript Dissertation .....                                             | 110     |
| Findings and Discussions Across the Three Manuscripts .....                                     | 113     |
| Theoretical Implications .....                                                                  | 115     |
| Methodological Implications .....                                                               | 117     |
| Practical Implications.....                                                                     | 119     |
| Future Research .....                                                                           | 121     |
| Concluding Remarks.....                                                                         | 122     |
| REFERENCES CITED.....                                                                           | 123     |
| <br>APPENDICES .....                                                                            | <br>124 |
| TABLE 1 .....                                                                                   | 125     |
| TABLE 2 .....                                                                                   | 128     |

|               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| TABLE 3 ..... | 130 |
| TABLE 4 ..... | 133 |
| TABLE 5 ..... | 136 |
| TABLE 6 ..... | 139 |
| TABLE 7 ..... | 142 |

## LIST OF TABLES

| Table                                                                           | Page |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 1. Table 2.1. Data from Meeting with Campus Partners & Community Partners ..... | 66   |
| 2. Table 2.2. Data After Second, Fourth, and Sixth Ski Lessons .....            | 67   |

## LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure                                                                            | Page |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 1. Figure 1.1. A Visual Representation of the Three-Manuscript Dissertation ..... | 10   |
| 2. Figure 2.1. The Evolution of DEI in Higher Education Timeline .....            | 31   |
| 3. Figure 2.2. Theoretical Framework.....                                         | 32   |
| 4. Figure 3.1. Theoretical Framework.....                                         | 60   |

## ABSTRACT

This three-manuscript dissertation sought to understand how Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students could create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation research and in outdoor recreation to build community, increase sense of belonging, and reclaim their place in outdoor spaces during this current climate. This dissertation combined three research studies to operationalize a model of conceptual change to: (1) understand the current socio-political climate in higher education and its effects on diversity, equity, and inclusion, (2) investigate how empowering spaces in research and outdoor recreation for BIPOC college students were formed, and (3) to examine key findings from the research project informed by the student co-researchers' data analysis and data interpretation. A community based participatory research (CBPR) framework was utilized for the second and third manuscripts to center and prioritize the student co-researchers' voices and lived experiences.

The first manuscript set the stage for the current socio-political climate in higher education. Using *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI trackers as the primary data source, we investigated how DEI retrenchment is affecting institutionally marginalized student populations across R1 institutions.

The second manuscript examined how BIPOC college students co-created *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* as student co-researchers during the current DEI retrenchment era in higher education. Thematic analysis and a theoretical framework lens combining third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory for outdoor recreation were used to analyze how empowering spaces surfaced in both the research process and during the students' lived experiences.

The third manuscript was a co-written journal article with student co-researchers to address gaps in the current outdoor recreation literature of the lived experiences of BIPOC students engaging in outdoor recreation. Through inductive thematic analysis, the student co-researchers situated themselves as experts of their own lived experiences without relying on a theoretical framework.

Three significant conclusions were: (1) DEI infrastructure has always been vulnerable and directly impacts institutional support for BIPOC students, (2) we need empowering spaces for BIPOC students in this current socio-political climate, and (3) it takes a whole community to provide access and support for BIPOC students to engage in outdoor recreation.

## INTRODUCTION

“My highlight has been the opportunity to engage in an activity I’ve always wanted to try but have not had the means to do so. It’s been especially enjoyable to learn as a group and recognize that everyone has different learning paces. Initially, I was worried about the social environment I was walking into but after two lessons I feel confident enough to explore Bridger on my own.”

-Student co-researcher

This is the lived experience of one of my Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student co-researchers after their second time ever skiing during our six-week ski lesson program at our local mountain. This quote was chosen because it highlights key elements that will be explored in this dissertation. These elements include barriers to engagement in outdoor recreation for BIPOC college students, importance of building community in unfamiliar environments, and the potential to feel empowered in spaces that initially feels unsafe but under the right conditions can be a place of enjoyment.

This dissertation seeks to accomplish two goals. First, to evaluate how community based participatory research can be used to center and prioritize BIPOC student co-researchers’ and student participants’ lived experiences to better understand their engagement in outdoor recreation at Montana State University (MSU). Centering and prioritizing their lived experiences allowed us to directly use these experiences to answer our research questions and not rely on pre-conceived notions and outdated ethnic recreation theories that do not effectively address why BIPOC college students engage in outdoor recreation at disproportionately lower rates than their White peers. My second goal is to conceptualize how BIPOC college students, as student co-researchers, can utilize outdoor recreation to (1) create empowered spaces in outdoor recreation

research and in unfamiliar outdoor spaces, (2) build community and sense of belonging with their peers in unfamiliar outdoor spaces, (3) experience the physical and mental wellbeing benefits of outdoor recreation, (4) reclaim their connection and place in outdoor spaces.

### Positionality Statement

My motivation to focus on outdoor recreation research centered on students of color is significantly informed by my positionality. I am a Black female who loves the outdoors and engages in a wide range of outdoor recreational activities. I am also a PhD student in Adult and Higher Education who has discovered a meaningful way to marry my life passions of education, outdoor recreation, and building community for institutionally marginalized populations. I want people of color, especially students of color, to be able to experience the same joy and empowerment that I experience in the outdoors.

I rarely see people of color in the predominantly White outdoor spaces that I recreate in. My belief is that students of color, regardless of their background and identities, should have accessibility to outdoor recreation. They should be able determine if they enjoy outdoor activities through lived experiences and not by basing their decisions solely on lack of experience and not feeling safe and/or lack of sense of belonging in outdoor spaces.

Growing up as a proud daughter of two military veterans, we moved around often during my childhood. This allowed me to see how people throughout the world lived and the endless possibilities outside of a limited Americanized view as a person of color. Moving constantly also forced me to continuously adapt and find my own place in new and unfamiliar environments. This particular lived experience gives me a unique perspective and confidence to enter predominantly White outdoor spaces. Thankfully, I usually do not have to enter these outdoor

spaces alone. Having a sister who loves the outdoors as much as I do and is my constant companion in these spaces empowers me to show up as my authentic self and bring others along who may feel as they do not belong.

Through my research, I have found there is a lack of outdoor recreation researchers who truly center students' of color lived experiences in research and also center them as co-researchers. Choosing the community based participatory research framework (CBPR) was also influenced by my positionality. I believe there is significant value of using a CBPR research framework in outdoor recreation research that primarily investigates the experiences of people engaging in outdoor recreation, especially for marginalized communities whose voices and lived experiences are generally not amplified. As a person of color, I realize the importance of ensuring that academic researchers who want to utilize CBPR take the time to explore and understand their own positionality in relation to their research and the communities that they include as co-researchers. There are inherent challenges to creating research equity among academic and community partners due to the power and privilege that academic researchers possess based on their class, education, and other identity positions (Muhammad et al., 2014). When academic researchers position themselves within their research it helps increase accountability, build trust, and decolonize research (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Also, the shared BIPOC narrative with my student co-researchers provides me an insider-researcher positionality but my older age and my current graduate school experience provide an outsider-researcher positionality as well.

### Statement of Problem

Minoritized populations, especially racially minoritized populations, in the United States have been excluded from outdoor spaces both historically and currently. This exclusion can be attributed to two key aspects of our troubled American history. First, is the history of White people's ability to attack and murder people of color with impunity through a long period of American history in outdoor spaces that has inflicted a "collective trauma" on BIPOC communities (Kahrl & Cammeron, 2022). This "collective trauma" is also generational trauma that has been passed down and continues to greatly influence how racially minoritized communities engage in outdoor spaces and outdoor recreation. Secondly, there is the existence of institutionalized legislation that segregated people of color away from public lands or deliberately banned them from accessing those spaces until the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Humphrey, 2020). These components of American history have created a long-standing environment and culture where outdoor spaces and outdoor recreation is generally considered unsafe and/or unwelcoming for many BIPOC communities, including BIPOC college students.

BIPOC college students participate in campus outdoor recreation at significantly lower rates than their White peers. By not participating in outdoor recreation, BIPOC students miss out on many documented benefits. These positive benefits include overall physical and mental wellbeing, increased sense of belonging, increased academic success, and a higher chance to persist to graduation. Outdoor recreational programming on college campuses is designed to enhance student well-being and academic success. However, there is a critical gap in understanding how these programs serve BIPOC students and why BIPOC college students engage in outdoor recreation at significantly lower rates than their White peers. Despite the

proven benefits of outdoor recreational programming for college students, there is a notable lack of research on understanding BIPOC student participation and how BIPOC students can utilize outdoor recreation as an empowering space on college campuses.

The promise of providing any measure of campus support for BIPOC students is being greatly challenged by the current administration. Colleges and universities are responding to the 2025 Trump Administration's rollback and elimination of DEI through Executive Order 14151, Executive Order 14173, and the February 2025 Department of Education's Dear Colleague Letter in unprecedented ways resulting in significant changes to campus support for BIPOC students. The responses have ranged from renaming campus support units to eliminating campus support units that have any ties to DEI efforts. With the current socio-political climate compounded with the presidential and legislative actions of DEI erasure, creating an action plan for BIPOC students to engage in unfamiliar and intimidating outdoor recreation as an empowering space presents significant challenges. Considerations must be made about what will be permissible on college campuses, as well as what will be financially supported by colleges and universities.

### Significance of Problem

Even though DEI has all but been erased by the current administration, we do not need DEI to prove the significant lack of engagement in outdoor recreation by BIPOC communities. We can use indisputable quantitative data to prove this fact. The Outdoor Foundation/Outdoor Industry Association's (2024) *2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report* found that the White/Non-Hispanic U.S. population is over-represented in outdoor recreation participation (69.7%) when compared to their representation in the overall U.S. population (58.9%), while all

other racial/ethnic groups make up the remaining 41.1% of the overall U.S. population but only 30.3% of the outdoor recreation participant base.

The lack of engagement in outdoor recreation for MSU's BIPOC student populations was even more pronounced. I conducted a descriptive study in one of my PhD courses to analyze the current and historical enrollment trends of MSU students in outdoor-focused activity courses based on race/ethnicity. The research question I wanted to answer was whether MSU students have equitable access to outdoor recreational opportunities offered by MSU using these enrollment trends. MSU's outdoor-focused activity courses included: skiing, snowboarding, avalanche training, fly fishing, bouldering, ice climbing, introduction to backpacking, kayaking, rock climbing, soccer, tennis, wilderness first response, wildlife survival, and whitewater rafting. Between Spring 2013 and Spring 2024, 4,906 total MSU students participated in MSU's outdoor-focused activity courses. Of the total students that participated, 4065 students (82.86%) were White, 226 students (4.61%) were Hispanic, 14 students (0.29%) were Black/African American, 33 students (0.67%) were American Indian/Alaska Native, 4 students (0.082%) were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 63 students (1.28%) were Asian, and 194 students (3.95%) were Two or More Races. We can compare these statistics to MSU's overall student demographic makeup from 2013 to 2023: 83.61% were White, 4.27% were Hispanic, 0.52% were Black, 1.48% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.10% were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.00% were Asian, 4.34% were Two or More Races. We can conclude that overall non-White students' enrollment in outdoor-focused activity courses was much lower than the White students' enrollment, which was almost equal to their overall representation of the MSU student population (Montana State University, 2025). The significant gap in student representation on

MSU's campus, shown by the statistics of the overall MSU student demographic makeup, suggests that non-White students' experiences on campus can be isolating and present challenges for them to develop sense of belonging and community. Similar or more disproportionate statistics in outdoor recreation engagement at MSU also suggests that this feeling of lack of belonging and challenge of building community are also extended to outdoor recreation and outdoor spaces for BIPOC students.

While underrepresentation and missed positive benefits are important factors of the overall problem, the lack of outdoor recreation research that is focused on the BIPOC student community further compounds this problem. There is little quantitative and qualitative research that focuses on BIPOC college student and outdoor recreation. And even less qualitative research that utilizes CBPR as a collaborative and equitable research partnership between researchers and community to strive for equal share of power, decision-making, and responsibility of the research being done (Marquez et al., 2022).

### The Unifying Theme of the Three Manuscripts

The unifying theme of this dissertation is understanding how BIPOC students can create and use empowering spaces in outdoor recreation research and in outdoor recreation to build community, increase sense of belonging on college campuses, and reclaim their place in outdoor spaces during these current times. My dissertation brings together three research studies to operationalize a model of conceptual change to: (1) understand the political and social environment in which higher education is currently operating in, (2) investigate how empowering spaces in both outdoor recreation research and in outdoor recreation for BIPOC college students were formed, and (3) to examine the key findings from the research project

informed by the student co-researchers' data analysis and data interpretation. Figure 1 below illustrates how the three manuscripts exist under the unifying theme of the dissertation.

The first manuscript sets the stage for the current socio-political climate that higher education is currently operating within, particularly how DEI retrenchment is affecting the institutionally marginalized student populations across R1 institutions. This manuscript was co-authored with Kim Feig, a fellow PhD candidate in the Adult and Higher Education program at MSU. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* created trackers that collect the changes public and private colleges have taken since January 2023 in response to legislation, orders, or other state/institution level actions restricting DEI efforts. A sample of 176 R1 institutions were examined based on a list of institutional characteristics and the DEI retrenchment actions identified on these trackers. These DEI retrenchment actions were gathered and categorized using thematic analysis and through a theoretical framework lens that combines aspects of racialized organizational theory (ROT), institutional theory (IT), and institutional racial paralysis theory (IRP). Descriptive statistical analysis allowed us to provide an overall view of the institutional characteristics, political influence characteristics, and funding characteristics of R1 institutions in our sample. By separating our sample into two groups, institutions that appeared and did not appear on the tracker, we can assess similarities and differences among the groups. Associative statistical analysis was employed to determine if any statistically significant associations existed between the institutions' characteristics and the DEI retrenchment actions taken by the 108 R1 institutions from our sample who appeared on the tracker. By investigating the effects of the executive orders and actions taken by this current administration, the first

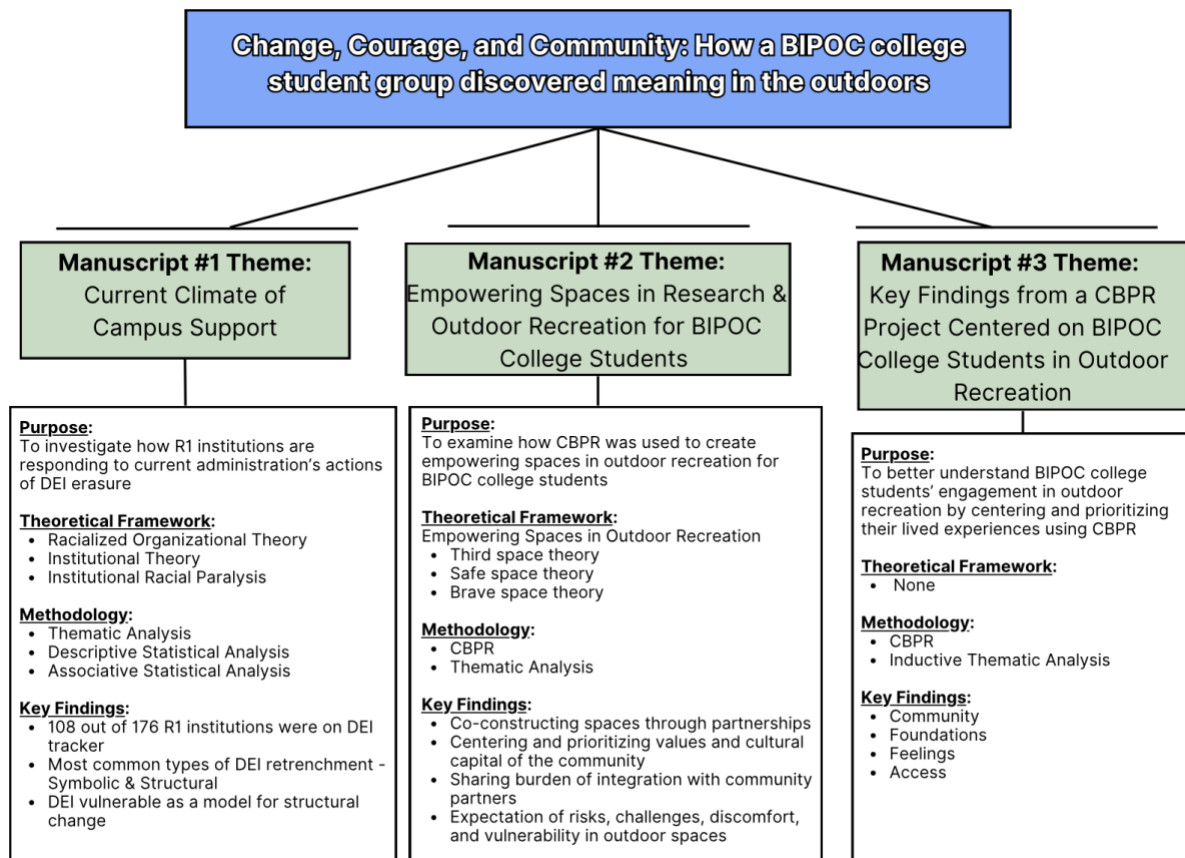
manuscript provides an initial understanding of how to support BIPOC college students in co-creating empowering spaces during these current times of DEI erasure.

The second manuscript examines how BIPOC college students co-create *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* as student co-researchers during these current times of DEI retrenchment in higher education. Thematic analysis and a theoretical framework lens combining third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory for outdoor recreation were used to analyze and interpret how empowering spaces surfaced in both the research process and during their lived experiences participating in outdoor recreation. This overall research project utilized CBPR methodology to center and prioritize the student co-researchers' voice and lived experiences. The findings from this manuscript have implications of how future outdoor recreation research can effectively be done using CBPR and how empowering spaces can be created by institutionally marginalized student communities.

The third manuscript is a co-written journal article, with three of my student co-researchers, that addresses the gaps in the current outdoor recreation literature centering on the lived experiences of students of color as they engage in outdoor recreation. This manuscript was co-authored with three student co-researchers: Aydemar Guerrero, Alma Montoya and Mey Palomino who are BIPOC college students at MSU. An additional co-author, Dr. Mayra del Carmen, also contributed to this manuscript. Again, with the CBPR framework being the overall research approach for this research project, it centers and prioritizes the student co-researchers as experts of their lived experiences with the capacity, skills, and insights to significantly contribute to the research findings (Liebenberg et al., 2020). Inductive thematic analysis (ITA) was utilized for this research study because of its "bottom-up" approach where codes emerge from the data

and reflect the unique contexts and experiences of the participants without being restrained by a theoretical lens (Thomas, 2006). The research findings reveal themes to better understand the students' barriers to engagement in outdoor recreation and how campus partners and community partners can collaborate with BIPOC student communities to improve access, belonging, and participation in outdoor recreation.

Figure 1.1. A Visual Representation of the Three-Manuscript Dissertation



### Limitations & Delimitations

Limitations are listed below for the three manuscripts. These limitations are framed as inherent limits from the research methodology and research design. A brief discussion of how internal and external validity may be restricted for each limitation is also included.

Delimitations for the three manuscripts are also listed below. These delimitations explain the scope and boundaries of the research studies. Also included for each delimitation is a brief explanation of how it may prevent the generalizability of the research studies.

#### Limitations of Manuscript 1

1. A methodological limitation of this research study is the possible confounding factor of a correlation existing between the number and types of DEI retrenchment actions an institution engages to the scale of their pre-existing DEI infrastructure. Since the baseline commitment to DEI cannot be ascertained, analyzing the degree of engagement in DEI retrenchment from a common baseline of pre-existing DEI infrastructure is not possible.
2. Treating DEI retrenchment as aggregated “DEI actions” is a limitation because DEI is conceptually three distinct areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is difficult to discern if there is a particular area that is getting targeted more than the others when DEI retrenchment is aggregated in this manner. We have chosen not to disentangle these terms because there is not a sound methodological way to do so.

### Delimitations of Manuscript 1

1. The research study was delimited by the sample selection. Because this research study only considered R1 institutions, we recognized that generalizability and transferability to other sectors of higher education can be difficult.
2. The second delimitation of the study was that only *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI trackers were used to identify DEI retrenchment actions. This introduces selection bias and recognizes that overrepresentation of certain types of institutions and underrepresentation of other types of institutions is possible. Also, the way that the tracker captures the nuances of DEI retrenchment activity across R1 institutions may affect the selection process or how actions are categorized on the tracker.

### Limitations of Manuscript 2 & Manuscript 3

At the macro level, Manuscript 2 and Manuscript 3 are both centered on the overall research project centered on engagement of BIPOC college student in outdoor recreation. The manuscripts only delineate from each other by the particular area they focus on. So, we can assume that they both share the same limitations and delimitations.

1. One limitation is the sampling method used in the research study. Sampling method refers to both how the student co-researchers were chosen and how the student co-researchers chose their own student community/participants. Purposive sampling was used to select the student co-researchers based on their BIPOC identity and pre-existing relationships with one of the academic researchers. The student co-researchers then chose who became part of their outdoor student community based on pre-existing relationships and shared identities. While this sampling technique makes

- it difficult to generalize, it does provide the opportunity to create well-intentioned communities with common identities, goals, and interests.
2. The second limitation is the grant funding that this research project received. Grant funding removed the concern and reality of financial barriers that BIPOC college students typically face when engaging in outdoor recreation. We were able to entirely pay for all the outdoor activities and pay the student co-researchers for their time while working on the research project. This may be a barrier for other outdoor research projects that want to replicate this research but do not have access to funding.
  3. The final limitation is the current socio-political climate and significant DEI retrenchment occurring in higher education currently. BIPOC college students are experiencing campus climates and a socio-political climate that has greatly reduced support and resources they previously had access to. This can have important effects on the lived experiences of our students and academic researchers, interactions with campus partners and community partners, how data is analyzed and interpreted, among other implications.

#### Delimitations of Manuscript 2 & Manuscript 3

1. The research project was delimited to the Montana State University (MSU) campus, a predominantly White, rural, R1 institution and its surrounding outdoor environment located in the northern Rocky Mountain region. Also, the outdoor recreational activities that the students engaged in are also bounded by which activities are accessible to this

area. This may restrict the generalizability to other college campus contexts and/or geographic regions.

2. The research project was delimited to the BIPOC student population at MSU as the community of interest. Because of the unique demographic makeup of MSU's student population, this may again restrict the generalizability to other college campuses with differing student demographics.
3. The research project was delimited to the timing of data collection (during 2024-2025 academic year) and the timing of data analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of findings (during the 2025-2025 academic year). The current socio-political climate and significant DEI retrenchment occurring in higher education can have important effects on the lived experiences of our students and academic researchers, interactions with campus partners and community partners, how data is analyzed and interpreted, among other implications.
4. The research project was delimited to the specific outdoor recreation campus partners and community partners who worked with the research team. These partners were chosen based on pre-existing relationships with one of the academic researchers. This made relationships somewhat easier but did limit opportunities to engage with other campus partners and community partners. Outdoor recreation partners for other research projects may differ based on the types of outdoor recreational activities available and relationships already established.

### Definition of Terms

Terminology that you will see across the manuscripts are listed below. These terms were chosen to make sure that the reader understands how these terms are used for this particular dissertation. I also want to acknowledge that the way language is used in our society, especially higher education, changes all the time due to many factors and influences. The current socio-political climate and the higher education landscape we exist in now are examples of these factors and influences shaping our current language. The ultimate goal was to write about my research in a just and truthful manner, so word choice was not sacrificed just to make sure every reader was comfortable. As you will see later in my dissertation, safety and comfort cannot be reasonable expectations when doing this type of outdoor recreation research.

*Academic researchers:* Members of the research team who are Montana State University faculty members and researchers.

*Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC):* A descriptor used to identify a certain student population that identify as Black/African American, Indigenous, or a person of color. Typically used to describe non-White populations.

*Community advisory board (CAB):* This one of the terms used for the six student co-researchers who collaborated on the research project.

*Community based participatory research (CBPR):* A research framework utilized for this research project. This framework strives to center and prioritize the lived experiences of the community of interest and situate them as co-researchers and equitable partners in all phases of the research process.

*Institutionally marginalized:* Groups of people who have historically and currently been excluded from certain institutions. The institutions that this term refers to are higher education and the many different parts that make up the overall institution of outdoor recreation.

*Outdoor recreation:* Activities generally conducted outdoors in natural settings. Usually for the purposes of physical activity and enjoyment. The outdoor recreation/outdoor-focused activities that the students engaged in were hiking, indoor rock climbing, indoor cycle class, and skiing. Indoor rock climbing and indoor cycling provided an opportunity to engage in these activities that can be experienced outside but in a more accessible way.

*Outdoor spaces:* The locations where the student engaged in outdoor recreation or outdoor-focused activities. Specifically, these outdoor spaces included: hiking trails, local ski resorts, indoor climbing gym on campus, local indoor cycle studio, and Yellowstone National Park.

*Student community:* The community of BIPOC students who the CAB/student co-researchers personally invited to participate in outdoor recreation with them. The CAB/student co-researchers were also members of the student community.

*Student co-researchers:* A group of six BIPOC students who attend Montana State University and collaborated on this research project.

*Students of color:* A descriptor for non-White students.

### Organization of the Three Manuscript Dissertation

The remaining four chapters of this dissertation includes the three manuscripts that were discussed above. Each of these manuscripts are situated as stand-alone chapters, Chapters 2 through Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains the summary of the three manuscripts, key findings and

conclusions from the three manuscripts, overall implications of the three research studies, recommendations, and discussion of future research and work.

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CHAPTER TWO

MAPPING DEI RETRENCMENT ACROSS R1 UNIVERSITIES:  
INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PATTERNS OF  
CHANGE

Contribution of Author and Co-Authors

Manuscript in Chapter Two

Author: Desiree Margie Taylor

Contributions: Equal co-author. Co-developed the research design, conducted data analysis collaboratively, and co-wrote and revised all sections of the manuscript. Led manuscript integration and preparation for inclusion in the dissertation.

Co-Author: Kimberly Bo Feig

Contributions: Equal co-author. Co-developed the research design, conducted data analysis collaboratively, and co-wrote and revised all sections of the manuscript. Contributed equally to the intellectual framing and final manuscript.

Manuscript Information

Desiree Margie Taylor

Status of Manuscript:

- ☒ Prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Officially submitted to a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Accepted by a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Published in a peer-reviewed journal

## Introduction

R1 universities now sit at the center of the national struggle over Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as the White House undertakes unprecedented efforts to dismantle related programs, policies, and commitments through a series of executive orders (Ostrager et al., 2025). This paper explores how R1 universities in the United States are responding to federal and state diversity, equity, and inclusion retrenchment initiatives that have intensified since 2023. Our research maps the range of institutional responses and examines how those responses vary according to institutional characteristics. We define DEI retrenchment initiatives as coordinated state and federal efforts aimed at eroding and/or dismantling DEI infrastructure in higher education (Kamola, 2024; Holleran et al., 2023). This includes policies, administrative positions, funding streams, and programmatic commitments.

Higher education (HE) has undergone rapid change since the racial justice uprisings of 2020, a period marked by mass student mobilization against systemic racism alongside a growing partisan divide over whether and how universities should respond. Universities responded to the uprisings with actions ranging from symbolic gestures to structural reforms, including issuing diversity statements, pledging to improve campus climate, establishing dedicated DEI roles and departments, revising curricula, and investing in equity-focused research (Watson, 2024). As institutions scaled up their DEI efforts, conservative backlash simultaneously grew louder. Holleran et al. (2023) argue that 2021 marked a significant shift in these efforts, as conservative think tanks began to coordinate a more strategic and expansive legislative campaign to undermine DEI, replacing the ad hoc opposition of previous years. Thus, for the past five

years universities have been targeted and critiqued for their support of DEI but we know far less about how they are systematically responding.

### Problem Statement

A coordinated campaign of DEI retrenchment has unfolded across federal and state levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This rollback is driven by executive orders and policy directives that restrict federal funding and pressure universities to comply, justified by claims that DEI is “radical,” “wasteful,” and contrary to neutrality and merit (The White House, 2025). Despite a growing body of public commentary, our systematic literature review shows little empirical research on how R1 universities have responded to the mounting backlash against DEI.

Given this rapidly developing issue, existing discourse is either speculative, media-driven, or focused on isolated case studies. Missing from the scholarship is a standardized and comprehensive examination of institutional responses and how these responses vary by institutional characteristics. R1s are central to this study because of their size, reliance on federal and state funding, prestige, and outsized influence on the broader HE landscape. As the most visible and well-resourced institutions, they are influential and vulnerable, setting the tone for practices and policies that shape the sector as a whole. Thus, understanding how they respond to DEI retrenchment allows us to better understand the state of racial equity in HE and the pressures reshaping it.

### Purpose of Study

This study systematically documents and categorizes R1 institutional responses to DEI retrenchment and identifies institutional characteristics associated with those responses. We situate these actions within the broader institutional adaptations to external pressures. Our

analysis is guided by the conceptual frameworks of Institutional Theory (IT), Racialized Organizational Theory (ROT), and Institutional Racial Paralysis (IRP). As shown in Figure 2, these frameworks highlight that institutions are not neutral but racialized structures, and that DEI efforts are inseparable from race, even as these efforts work to expand representation for historically marginalized groups across multiple axes of domination (Ray, 2019). For this project, race and racial equity are our primary analytic focus.

### Research Questions

This paper is guided by two central research questions:

1. Since 2023, what types of DEI retrenchment actions have R1 universities taken in response to state and federal pressures?
2. How do these actions vary across internal institutional characteristics and external influence?

### Significance of Study

This study illuminates how R1 universities respond to the racialized political pressures shaping contemporary DEI retrenchment. By linking institutional responses to racialized organizational logics and risk-averse decision-making, our findings show that DEI commitments were structurally fragile, rooted more in compliance, legitimacy, and resource acquisition than in transformative equity work. Retrenchment thus exposes enduring patterns of racialized institutional behavior rather than anomalous deviations. This analysis offers an empirical basis for understanding how universities respond to racialized crises and supports future research on institutional reactions to racialized pressures.

### Literature Review

A systematic literature review of scholarship and grey literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education was conducted between February 2025 and June 2025. We searched Google Scholar, Google Gemini, and ProQuest using keywords such as *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*, *retrenchment*, *affirmative action*, *backlash*, and *higher education*. The search yielded approximately 100 abstracts published over the past ten years. After screening, we excluded works that focused on K–12 contexts, international higher education, or general organizational diversity management outside of HE. Both peer-reviewed publications and grey literature (e.g., policy briefs, advocacy reports, AAUP publications) were included when they provided empirical evidence or theoretical framing relevant to institutional DEI responses. In total, 42 articles and reports met the inclusion criteria and were retained for review. The literature review is organized into two parts: the institutionalization of DEI and its inherent vulnerabilities.

#### Institutionalizing DEI

The modern framework for diversity in HE emerged from the Civil Rights Movement's goal to "correct historical discrimination" (Baker, 2019, p. 1861) through affirmative action policies. This reparations approach was the dominant paradigm for over a decade in HE until the Supreme Court's 1978 decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. The Supreme Court's decision was a major turning point that shifted the reparations model toward the diversity model we see today; additionally, it marks a significant retrenchment action. The Court ruled that rigid racial quotas for admissions were unconstitutional while simultaneously recognizing that a diverse student body was in the best interest of the institution, the student body, and ultimately, society. Therefore, race-conscious admissions policies could be justified in the eyes of the Court

(Baker, 2019; Rajasekar et al., 2025). Many scholars argue that this ruling not only marks the origins of the diversity paradigm that we see today but also demonstrates that this paradigm, from its origins, obscures structural racism and the politics of equity in service of institutional interest (Ahmed, 2012; Felix & Trinidad, 2020; Iverson, 2012).

Race-conscious admissions policies provoked immediate conservative backlash. Yet these policies did not encounter substantive legal restrictions until the 1996 passing of California's Proposition 209 (Baker, 2019; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). In the 1980s, the conservative resistance began to take shape, and the discourse around "reverse discrimination" gained traction in popular culture (Omi & Winant, 2015). This period also marked a broader political shift toward conservatism and saw a wave of unsuccessful lawsuits challenging university admissions policies. These developments ultimately laid the groundwork for the first state level ban on the use of race as a factor for university admissions with the passing of California's Proposition 209 (1996). Between 1996 and 2012, other states followed California (Washington, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, Arizona, New Hampshire, Oklahoma), implementing their own state level bans, setting early stages for the types of DEI retrenchment that we see today (Baker, 2019). These political and legal setbacks did not end diversity initiatives in HE, but they weakened the dominance of affirmative action logics. Universities moved away from rights-based rationales rooted in corrective justice and embraced utilitarian claims that framed diversity as essential for student learning, workforce readiness, and institutional prestige (Berrey, 2011; Lipson, 2008). This shift positioned DEI as a universal good that shielded universities from legal and political challenges while promoting cultural pluralism at the expense of structural redress.

The diversity paradigm in HE began to normalize more broadly in the early 2000s. By the 2010s, the concept had evolved into what is now widely recognized as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), a tangible and institutionalized set of norms with a measurable presence across HE, both in language and practice. Rajasekar et al.'s (2025) study reveals that a comprehensive analysis of diversity professionals' job titles from 2004 to 2022 shows a marked shift from the generalized term "diversity" to the more codified DEI framework (Rajasekar et al., 2025). The authors documented that "the proportion of schools using the conjoined language of diversity, equity, and inclusion in job titles was minimal in earlier years but increased in the mid-2010s, steadily climbing from about 1.61% of IHEs in 2015 to 14.21% in 2022" (Rajasekar et al., p. 12). Rajasekar et al., argue that this linguistic shift is meaningful because it demonstrates how institutions began engaging in institutional isomorphism around an increasingly legitimized and widely accepted project. DEI became institutionalized, named, and formalized providing a more assertive and specific framework for equity work.

This growing formalization of DEI was not limited to titles or roles; it also became operationalized within university policies and systems. In an audit of nearly 1,000 academic job postings in 2020, Paul and Maranto (2023) found that mandatory diversity statements from faculty candidates had become a common practice, a trend led by the nation's "most influential" universities. Paul and Maranto (2023) state, "selective universities are significantly more likely to require DEI statements than non-selective universities" (p. 314), signaling that DEI commitments were becoming a marker of institutional prestige as well as a mechanism for shaping faculty lines.

As DEI became embedded within HE, it also emerged as a dominant model for advancing equity across both public and private sectors (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Rajasekar et al., 2025). Its language and logics were embraced across corporate, nonprofit, and governmental areas, where they became central to diversity compliance, branding, and workforce strategy. DEI's prominence as a high-profile sociopolitical movement was also crystallized by the racial uprisings of 2020, in which the public placed intense pressure on universities, and institutions at large, to respond visibly and materially to demands for racial justice (Kamola, 2024; Watson, 2024). Institutions responded rapidly and in varied ways, ranging from symbolic gestures to structural reforms. Visible institutional responses included issuing diversity statements, pledging to improve campus climate, establishing DEI offices and leadership roles, revising curricula, and funding equity-focused research (Watson, 2024). Additionally, some institutions promised to reassess curricula to include the histories of racism and slavery, prioritize inclusive hiring practices, expand implicit bias training, and, in some cases, launch antiracist or social justice centers and academic programs (Kamola, 2024).

### DEI's Inherent Vulnerabilities

As DEI became a more visible and institutionalized fixture of Higher Education, many scholars were simultaneously identifying the model's theoretical and structural vulnerabilities. Scholars argued that DEI efforts were often reduced to performative gestures, absorbed into market logics, constrained in their ability to redistribute power or resources, and ultimately unable to confront the racial hierarchies embedded in university structures (Ahmed, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Ray, 2019; Scauso, 2024). Ahmed (2012) argues that universities engage in "non-performance acts" that use the language of DEI to mark themselves as progressive and

committed to equity while resisting substantive structural change. She explains that diversity work is more often the responsibility of minoritized individuals who are siloed within the institution. These individuals are then cast as “disruptive” when pushing for change deemed too radical or just simply outside the narrow confines of their institutional roles, reinforcing the “brick walls” of racialized power (Ahmed, 2012).

Iverson (2007) and Scauso (2024) use similar logics as Ahmed, arguing that the transformative imperatives available within some frameworks of DEI were jettisoned in favor of more constrained, depoliticized approaches. These authors argue that the redistribution of power and resources necessary for a just restructuring of HE is routinely sidestepped, resulting in the co-optation of DEI as a market commodity rather than a mechanism for systemic transformation. Iverson (2007) argues that in the early 2000s, higher education institutions leveraged DEI to enhance their reputation within the "marketplace discourse." Their perceived progressiveness and commitment to diversity and equity not only increased their reputation, improved institutional rankings, and attracted particular types of funding, thus offering a competitive advantage without addressing underlying structural power imbalances (Iverson, 2007). Scauso (2024), by contrast, argues that as a commodity within higher education, DEI allows institutions to welcome difference so long as it can conform to the hegemonic structures of the academy. Difference is tolerated only when maintaining institutional logics. Those who bring alternative epistemologies, cultural practices, or systemic critiques are often contained, disciplined, or excluded, underscoring DEI's function as a commodity rather than a catalyst for transformation (Scauso, 2024). In the end, Iverson highlights how DEI bolsters institutional prestige, while Scauso

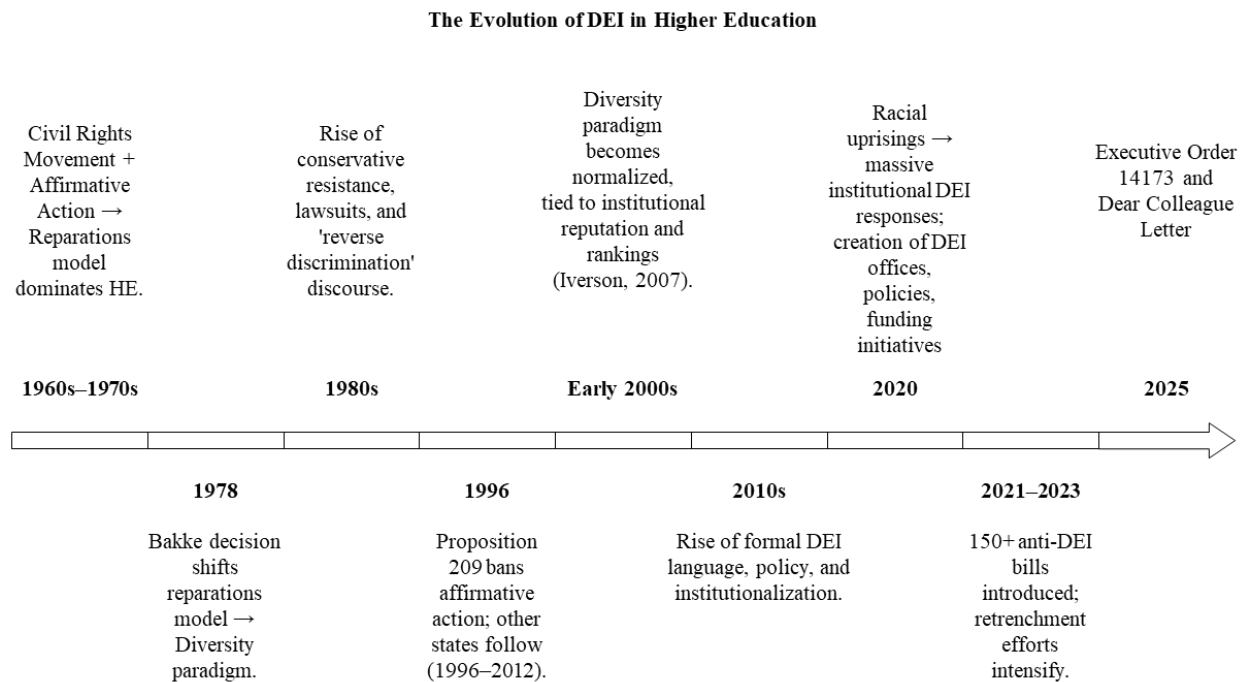
highlights how that same commodification polices the boundaries of acceptable knowledge and identity. Together these two authors reveal the limits of DEI's transformative potential.

As DEI's value became increasingly tied to institutional branding throughout the 2000s (Iverson, 2007, 2012; Scauso, 2024), and with its frequent, if not pervasive, non-performativity (Ahmed, 2012) it became especially vulnerable to political weaponization, as evidenced in the post-2020 era. DEI's radical promises were severed from its commodified form, making it more palatable. As a result, institutions could readily abandon DEI when it became politically inconvenient (Scauso, 2024). Kamola (2024) demonstrates how the 2020 racial uprisings created an opening for more transformative, justice-oriented DEI efforts to gain traction in HE. In that moment, public demands for racial equity pushed institutions to temporarily loosen their grip on co-opted DEI frameworks and make space, however limited, for initiatives that gestured toward structural change. At that same time, with heightened visibility, DEI became increasingly politically charged and the primary target for a concerted conservative backlash. Kamola (2024) details how right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and American Legislative Exchange Council, along with figures like Christopher Rufo and Ron Desantis, reframed DEI as radical and divisive, collapsing it into a broader culture war narrative and transforming its marketability into a liability.

The orchestrated effort resulted in a legislative backlash between 2021–2023 with over 150 bills introduced across the U.S to defund DEI programs, restrict curricula, and weaken academic governance (Kamola, 2024). These attacks draw on a familiar set of arguments that see DEI as too administratively costly, burdensome, illegal, and/or inefficient, as well as a leftist ideological project that threatens neutrality, meritocracy, and free speech (“wokeness”) (Kamola,

2024; Stokas, 2023; Paul & Maranto, 2023). Kamola (2024) argues that current retrenchment efforts reveal that DEI's institutional value was never grounded in its capacity for social justice, making it expendable during times of political backlash or uncertainty.

Figure 2.1. The Evolution of DEI in Higher Education Timeline

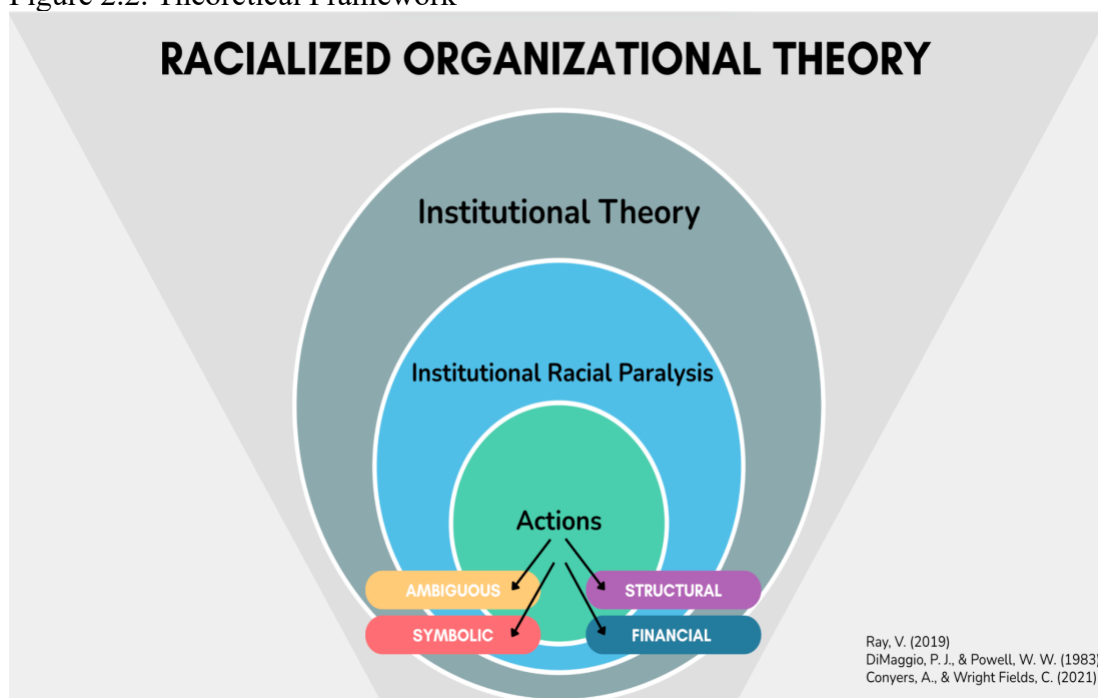


### Theoretical Framework

This study identifies and categorizes the types of DEI retrenchment enacted by R1 universities in the post-2023 political climate and explores which institutional characteristics are associated with different types of response. Drawing on *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI Legislation Tracker, we coded nine discrete types of retrenchment and grouped them into four broader categories: *symbolic*, *structural*, *financial*, and *ambiguous*. These serve as the variables of our analysis. We employ a multi-layered theoretical framework as our conceptual

lens that integrates macro-level political analysis, meso-level institutional theory, and micro-level critiques of institutional behavior. This framework posits that DEI retrenchment is the product of the intersection of external political backlash and the model's own pre-existing vulnerabilities, leading universities (as racialized institutions) to respond with a mix of institutional paralysis and strategic adaptation.

Figure 2.2. Theoretical Framework



### Institutional Theory

Institutional theory (IT) argues institutions are constantly working to maintain legitimacy as they are regularly navigating various external political, social, and regulatory pressures (Manning, 2017). Universities, as institutions, are not stand-alone actors but exist within a structure with established norms and expectations that they abide by in an effort to maintain legitimacy (accreditation, public perception, funding). IT provides a framework for

understanding how universities preserve credibility in the face of external conditions. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three types of actions that institutions enact in order to sustain legitimacy: normative isomorphism (adopting standards through professional norms and credentialing), mimetic isomorphism (imitating like institutions in times of uncertainty), and coercive isomorphism (complying with external mandates).

Mimetic, normative, and coercive isomorphism help explain how DEI became institutionalized across higher education, as well as how it is now being strategically dismantled. The institutionalization of DEI in the early 2000s can be explained by mimetic isomorphism as universities began adopting the DEI roles, policies, and branding strategies of elite institutions to remain competitive and appear legitimate in an evolving cultural climate increasingly supportive of diversity (Paul & Maranto, 2023). Normative isomorphism played a central role in the professionalization of DEI work and the establishment of shared standards and credentials across HE (Rajasekar et al., 2025). In the current political moment, coercive isomorphism helps explain the significant DEI retrenchment across R1 institutions as they respond to executive orders, legislative mandates, and conservative public pressures (Kamola, 2024). However, institutions may also be engaging in mimetic isomorphism even in the absence of legislative mandates. For instance, Baker (2019) notes in his analysis of affirmative action that many institutions ended race-conscious admissions policies even in the absence of state bans, mirroring the actions of peer institutions in neighboring states.

### Racialized Organizational Theory

IT explains why institutions conform to environmental pressures, but it also assumes that institutions are inherently neutral entities. Victor Ray (2019) debunks this assumption by drawing

on the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), arguing that institutions are intrinsically “racialized structures” that work to maintain their own logics, norms, and values that work to (re)produce racial inequality. Through the lens of ROT, DEI can never function as a truly transformative model because the university’s very own ontological structure is rooted in, and incapable of, dismantling its own racialized structures. Ray (2019) calls this paradox “racialized decoupling,” a process which institutions signal a commitment to DEI, whether through strategic planning, policy, programs, curriculum, admissions, etc., without dismantling its own core logics, such as reallocate resources in order to enact an anti-racist framework. Similar to Ahmed’s (2012) concept of non-performativity, Ray (2019) describes racialized decoupling as the incommensurability between symbolic commitments to DEI and the material transformations necessary to dismantle racialized institutional structures. As a result, DEI is relegated as a branding strategy for institutional legitimacy (Iverson, 2007, 2012; Scauso, 2024), always already constrained by the university’s racialized architecture, structurally incapable of enacting deep transformation, and easily discarded when it becomes politically inconvenient.

This political inconvenience is evident in the shifting role of funding. During periods of perceived racial progress, resources flowed to DEI initiatives because they aligned with institutional self-interest, offering reputational capital and compliance with public expectations. This reflects the logic of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980), in which racial equity is supported only when it benefits dominant power structures. However, as the political economy shifted, DEI became a contested paradigm and funding mechanisms were weaponized by the federal government and a growing number of state legislatures as tools of discipline. Executive Order

14173 (2025) threatened to strip federal funding from institutions engaging in DEI, transforming it from a marketable commodity into a political liability (Kamola, 2024).

Universities do not simply abandon DEI in response to abstract political pressure; they recalibrate in order to preserve funding. On the one hand, elite institutions like Harvard, with their immense financial privilege, large endowments, prestige, and legal infrastructure, can resist such threats and perhaps even enhance their reputations by doing so (Piper-Vallillo, 2025). On the other hand, most universities find such resistance materially unfeasible. For many of these R1 universities, federal research funding is a foundational pillar of their budget, often constituting hundreds of millions or even over a billion dollars annually, making its withdrawal a direct threat to the institution's financial stability. For them, the political pressure puts the inherent vulnerabilities of DEI on display, revealing it to be predictably expendable precisely because an anti-racist restructuring of institutional power was never to be, or could never, be realized.

### Institutional Racial Paralysis

ROT argues that institutions are inherently racialized structures that (re)produce inequality through their everyday operations. To analyze how those patterns of behavior unfold in practice, we also draw on Conyers and Wright Fields' (2021) theory of Institutional Racial Paralysis (IRP) as a micro-level theory also rooted in CRT. IRP argues that institutions behave in predictable, risk-averse ways that avoid direct confrontation with race. They write, IRP is "the propensity for an organization to not act when race is a salient factor in a situation" (2021, p. 487). Conyers and Wright Fields' (2021) describe four types of IRP behaviors: Idleness (doing nothing), Concealment (offering vague or symbolic statements), Evolving Modus Operandi

(renaming, reorganizing, or reframing DEI), and Pervasiveness (normalizing anti-DEI moves as standard practice).

This study uses IRP to interpret the types of retrenchment that R1 universities have enacted since *The Chronicle* began tracking this data in 2023. Using IRP, we coded actions not just as policy changes, but as theoretically predictable institutional strategies for crisis management. Our categories include: symbolic retrenchment (e.g., vague public statements), structural retrenchment (e.g., office closures and reorganizations), financial retrenchment (e.g., budget reallocation or cuts), and ambiguous retrenchment (e.g., disqualification of student groups or offloading DEI labor into unofficial domains). The ambiguous retrenchment category captures actions that constrain DEI work through discreet or less visible channels. These include removing DEI websites without explanation, ending participation in public events like Pride parades, and displacing equity-related labor into the private sphere, requiring it to occur off campus or on personal time. In coding these cases, we often found the institutional ownership of the retrenchment difficult to locate, which itself illuminates the broader diffusion and marginalization of DEI work within university structures. Rather than overt reversals, these actions represent bureaucratic withdrawals that allow institutions to reduce their visible commitment to DEI while minimizing direct accountability.

Together, IT, ROT, and IRP offer a multi-level lens for understanding not only why retrenchment occurs, but also how it is enacted through patterned, racialized, institutional behavior. This framework grounds our typology and guides the hypotheses and coding strategies detailed in the methods section that follows. In addition, these theories provide a coherent analytical foundation for examining DEI entrenchment.

## Methods

### Data Source & Sample

The primary sources for the data we use in our study are: *The Chronicle of Higher Education's DEI State Legislation Tracker*, a site that monitors changes that U.S. colleges have made in response to anti-DEI legislation and political pressure, the *National Center for Educational Statistics' (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*, 2023 *National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics' (NCSES) Higher Education Research and Development Survey (HERD)*, *Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHC)*, and the *Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)*. These data sources are used to gather institutional and funding characteristics about our sample institutions, measures of political influence on institutions based on their state location, and the type of DEI retrenchment actions our sample institutions have engaged in through June 1, 2025.

We constructed the final sample of 176 Research Activity Designation Tier 1 (R1) institutions by starting with all 187 R1 universities and removing ten medical/health-science centers and one professions-focused institution identified in the CCIHC, as their student bodies and academic missions differ from the broader R1 landscape. The sample was then divided into two groups, one group of institutions that appeared on *The Chronicle's* tracker (OT) and those that did not, allowing us to compare descriptive statistics across groups and conduct associative analyses on the OT subset.

## Variables

The appendix contains a full list of the variables and their respective coding. The variables for this study fall under four main areas that include: categories of DEI retrenchment actions, measures of institutional characteristics, measures of political influence, and measures of funding characteristics. Categories of DEI retrenchment actions only pertain to the OT group.

Changes to Some Levels of Categorical Variables Due to the small frequencies in some of the levels of the categorical variables, some adjustments were made to analyze the associations between DEI retrenchment actions and institutional characteristics. For institution size, we combined the small and medium categories because only one R1 institution fell into the small category. Additionally, because many Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) subcategories (e.g., Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)) had very low frequencies, we collapsed them into a single binary indicator denoting whether an institution was an MSI or non-MSI.

Measures of DEI Retrenchment Actions We conducted a thematic analysis in data deduction that aligns with our theoretical framework to create the categories of DEI retrenchment actions. We categorized the unique DEI retrenchment actions reported on the tracker by first organizing each unique action into nine themes (academic, neutrality, reallocation/redirecting, closing of campus entities, changing names of campus entities, erasure of DEI-related language, policing/surveillance, funding, and ambiguous). We then organized the nine themes into four main categories: structural retrenchment (e.g., office closures and reorganizations), symbolic retrenchment (e.g., vague public statements), funding retrenchment (e.g., budget reallocation or cuts), and ambiguous retrenchment (e.g., offloading DEI labor into

unofficial domains) which are informed by our theoretical framework, specifically IRP. Given the tracker's limitations in documenting all actions, an institution's absence from the tracker should not be interpreted as evidence of non-retrenchment. Rather, it reflects the limits of available data, which may underrepresent the full scope of institutional responses.

Measures of Institutional Characteristics We include several institutional characteristics that are common key identifiers for R1 institutions. These characteristics are both categorical and quantitative variables used in the study. For the categories of institution size, CCIHC was used to categorize institutions by student population size. MSIs are institutions of higher education that serve high concentrations of students who, historically, have been underrepresented in higher education and funding is provided to these institutions through numerous federal agencies (Congress, 2025). While the U.S. Department of Education defines seven types of minority institutions; only two distinct types (Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI)) are represented in our OT sample with an additional category that represents institutions defined as both. Again, because of very low frequencies of MSIs in our sample we created a binary (MSI vs. non-MSI) overall MSI variable to consolidate these institutions. Land-grant status is an institutional characteristic that is designated by its state legislature or Congress to receive benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, or the Equity in Educational Land Grant Status Act of 1994 (APLU, 2025). While the original mission of land-grant institutions has evolved, overall it remains to “provide a broad segment of the population with a practical education that has direct relevance to their daily lives” (APLU, 2025).

Measures of Political Influence and Funding Characteristics Two measures of political influence were used in our study that include: governor party affiliation and anti-DEI state legislation (no legislation introduced, legislation introduced but not passed, legislation introduced and passed). Four measures of funding were used in our study that include: amount of federal funding for research and development, amount of state/local funding for research and development, and average net price for Title IV institutions funding, and amount the institution spends yearly on student services. The amounts for federal and state/local funding for research and development were acquired from the 2023 HERD survey. Average net price for Title IV institutions and yearly amounts that institutions spend on student services were acquired from NCES and IPEDS.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics Descriptive statistics were performed to provide an overall view of the characteristics of the 176 R1 institutions included in the overall sample as well as to compare statistics between the overall sample and the OT group. The descriptive statistics included frequency distributions, measures of central tendency (mean), and measures of dispersion (standard deviation). Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for both the overall sample and the OT group for all categorical variables. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for both the overall sample and the OT group for all quantitative variables.

Associative Analyses Only the OT group was used for our associative analyses between the DEI retrenchment actions and the other variables since this is the only group that engaged in DEI retrenchment actions. To determine association between the different DEI retrenchment action categorical variables and the categorical variables (institutional measures, funding

measures, political influence measures), chi-square test for independence was used for association analysis because of the categorical nature of both variables being analyzed. Because funding retrenchment actions and ambiguous retrenchment actions did not meet the minimum required expected frequency value of 5 for all chi-square tests, no statistically significant associations were considered. These results are presented in Table 6 and Table 7, located in the appendix.

To determine associations between the different DEI retrenchment categorical variables and the continuous, quantitative variables (funding, 2023 graduation rates (non-White), 2023 Fall enrollment rates (non-White)), the Kruskal-Wallis H Test was chosen because of the non-normal distributions of the continuous variables used in the study. This test assessed possible statistically significant differences between the two groups of each DEI retrenchment action variable (did not engage in action vs. did engage in action) on each continuous, quantitative variable. With significant outlier(s) that exist for each of the continuous variables, Kruskal-Wallis H Test is robust enough not to be sensitive to outliers (Schmidt, 2010). A p-value of 0.10 was used for both the chi-square test and Kruskal-Wallis H test due to the exploratory nature of our research, small sample size, and effect modification (Thiese et al., 2016).

## Results

For Research Question 1, the 108 R1 universities in the OT group have engaged in all four categories of DEI retrenchment actions to varying degrees. The top two types of DEI retrenchment actions taken were symbolic retrenchment (72.2%) and structural retrenchment (56.5%). Since *The Chronicle* tracks these anti-DEI retrenchment actions through their own survey, media reports, and tips from readers; it is likely that symbolic and structural retrenchment

actions are represented more frequently because they are the most visible types of actions being reported. Funding and ambiguous retrenchment may be harder to detect because only senior administrators typically have access to this information, and these actions are often concealed from the campus community and the public.

Research Question 2 was answered using the chi-square test for independence results presented in Table 3 and Table 4, as well as the Kruskal-Wallis H test results presented in Table 5. Certain results listed in Table 3 were labeled as not meeting the required expected frequency count of 5 for the chi-square test and were eliminated from consideration for possible associations. Overall, structural retrenchment actions had the most statistically significant associations (6) with institutional, political influence, and funding measures that include: governor's party affiliation, institution size, control (public vs. private), state legislation, land grant status, and yearly expenditures on student services. Symbolic retrenchment actions were the only other type of DEI retrenchment action that resulted in statistically significant associations (5). This includes statistically associations with governor's party affiliation, overall MSI institution status, state legislation, 2023 graduation rates for non-White students, and 2023 fall enrollment rates for non-White students.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, given that our sample only includes R1 universities the findings are not generalizable to other sectors of higher education which have different internal and external pressures. We excluded eleven large standalone R1 medical schools because their structures and cultures are significantly different from traditional R1 institutions. Further, our reliance on *The Chronicle's* DEI Legislation Tracker

as our only source for identifying retrenchment actions introduces selection bias issues. For instance, institutions with high public visibility may be overrepresented, while those enacting retrenchment more discreetly, without public disclosure, and/or are un-verifiable by the editors of the tracker may be underrepresented. Additionally, the tracker may not have captured the nuances of retrenchment activity across R1 institutions and/or ignored actions due to their own selection process.

A further methodological limitation is that the number and types of actions an institution engaged in may be correlated with the scale of its pre-existing DEI infrastructure rather than indicative of its culture or leadership. For example, universities that had more expansive DEI infrastructures prior to 2023 may have engaged in more retrenchment actions between 2023 and 2025, while institutions with fewer DEI efforts may have engaged in little or no retrenchment simply because there was less to roll back. As such, we cannot account for an institution's baseline commitment to DEI. Finally, the study employs a cross-sectional design, treating retrenchment activity between early 2023 and mid-2025 as a single temporal snapshot, which limits causal inference and constrains our ability to assess trends over time.

Lastly, the DEI tracker reports institutional changes as aggregated "DEI actions" although DEI is conceptually a framework with three distinct parts: diversity, equity and inclusion. Our coding treats DEI as one treatment of institutional activity. This is a necessary methodological limitation, as we do not disentangle whether any given retrenchment action primarily targets diversity (e.g., student or faculty recruitment), the distribution of opportunities and resources (e.g., programmatic funding or equity-related support structures), or the conditions of participation and belonging (e.g., inclusion-oriented practices or climate initiatives).

### Discussion

The clustering of retrenchment in states with Republican governors and enacted anti-DEI legislation is illustrative of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutions work to preserve economic and reputational stability in the face of political and financial threats. Retrenchment in states without formal anti-DEI laws suggests mimetic isomorphism, as universities emulate peer institutions in an effort to appear compliant with the changing socio-political landscape (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, from an IT standpoint, DEI retrenchment is not random nor exceptional, but an ordered institutional response set forth during a racially politicized national moment. Baker's (2019) analysis of affirmative action bans in higher education illustrates the empirical continuity of these dynamics. Her study demonstrates that gubernatorial ideology, legislative design, and fiscal scarcity predicted whether states dismantled race-conscious admissions policies, showing how political and economic conditions shape the racial policy landscape of higher education. These same findings are evident in our work as R1 universities navigate coercive pressures that are political and economic and always racialized. Institutions are therefore not acting from an ideological standpoint that treats DEI as a structural imperative of the university, but from the pragmatic need to remain open, accredited, and fiscally solvent within a hostile policy environment.

These legitimacy-preserving behaviors carry racialized implications. Symbolic retrenchment operates as a colorblind ideological move that privileges meritocracy and neutrality, reaffirming the racialized institutional logics and institutional whiteness that underpin the university itself (Ray, 2019). In an environment where federal and state actors threaten to withhold funds and sanction institutions for maintaining and supporting DEI programs and

initiatives, retrenchment operates as a racialized survival strategy (Kamola, 2024, Ostrager et al., 2025, U.S. Department of Education, 2025). DEI thus remains vulnerable as a model for structural change as it was institutionalized less for its transformative potential than for its instrumental utility, as a compliance mechanism, reputational safeguard, and source of access to state and federal resources (Ahmed, 2012, Iverson, 2007, Ray, 2019, Stokas, 2023). DEI retrenchment, then, could be seen as a foreseeable outcome.

This study provides an initial overall landscape of DEI retrenchment actions using available information through June 1, 2025. Our work establishes a baseline point for future research that can dive deeper into this new racialized era in higher education. Longitudinal studies may better track DEI retrenchment over time as more information and data becomes available. Qualitative research studies can provide information on how internal decision-making is occurring at R1 institutions and inform scholars on how these decisions impact minoritized student communities. It is critical that further research into this new DEI retrenchment era occurs to better inform and equip stakeholders as funding is weaponized to undermine decades of work toward racial and social equity in higher education.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE POTENTIAL FOR A COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY  
RESEARCH PROJECT TO CREATE EMPOWERING SPACES  
IN OUTDOOR RECREATION FOR A BIPOC STUDENT  
COMMUNITY

Introduction

Overall engagement in outdoor recreation is unequally distributed and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) college student communities are currently and historically excluded from outdoor spaces due to structural, cultural, economic, and historical barriers. The history of BIPOC communities in outdoor spaces is beyond the scope of this article, nevertheless, it is important to note that institutionalized legislation segregated people of color away from public lands, like national parks and forests, or deliberately banned them from accessing those spaces. It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that legislation granted permission for institutionally marginalized communities to enter these outdoor spaces (Humphrey, 2020). Humphrey (2020) further explains that barriers to engagement in outdoor spaces include economic inequality, legalized segregation, and other forms of historical and current racial violence that has perpetuated a diversity gap in the outdoors.

Beyond the longstanding effects of past institutionalized legislation barring people of color from many outdoor spaces, statistics prove that even now outdoor recreation is still highly dominated by specific groups of people. The Outdoor Foundation/Outdoor Industry Association's (2024) *2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report* stated that the White/Non-Hispanic U.S. population represents 58.9% of the total U.S. population, but 69.7% of the 2023

outdoor participant base; the African American/Black U.S. population represents 12.6% of the total U.S. population, but 10.3% of the 2023 outdoor participant base; the Hispanic U.S. population represents 19.1% of the total U.S. population, but 13.4% of the 2023 outdoor participant base; and the Asian/Pacific-Islander U.S. population represent 6.1% of the total population, but 5.3% of outdoor participant base. These statistics point out several key aspects of the representation in outdoor recreation participation. First, White/Non-Hispanic communities are over-represented in outdoor recreation when comparing their U.S. population percentage (58.9%) and their 2023 outdoor participant base percentage (69.7%). Secondly, all other racial/ethnic groups are disproportionately underrepresented in outdoor recreation when compared to the percentage they represent in the total U.S. population. Even summing the percentages that non-White participants made up of the 2023 outdoor participant base only amounts to 29%.

When researching the participation trends for college students by race/ethnicity, the information was harder to find. The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), who identifies themselves as the “Leaders in Collegiate Recreation”, last funded and published college student recreation participation rates in 2019. Their study “Benefits of Campus Recreation: Results of the 2011-2016 Recreation & Wellness Benchmark” included a large sample size (64,483 students) and recorded demographics of the sample by race/ethnicity. Unfortunately, the reported findings about student participation in campus recreation activities did not include race/ethnicity. NIRSA stated in their recommendations for future research section that there is a need to examine specific populations, especially student populations that are known to have lower participation rates (Vasold, Deere & Pivarnik, 2019). This lack of research

prevents quantitative understanding of the low participation rates of institutionally marginalized college student populations in outdoor recreation.

Qualitatively, little research exists that captures the lived experiences of institutionally marginalized college students in outdoor recreation. If outdoor recreation at its core focuses on experiences in the outdoors, then it seems logical to center participants' lived experiences in outdoor recreation research. By doing so, we have the opportunity to better understand how and why various communities engage in outdoor recreation differently. Especially for BIPOC students who often are required to engage in predominantly White outdoor spaces with which they are unfamiliar, enter spaces that lack representation of their identities, overcome financial barriers, and then be empowered to occupy unsafe spaces where current systemic racism still exists today. Community based participatory research (CBPR) offers a framework to equitably and effectively examine how BIPOC college students overcome these obstacles and how they co-create their own *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation*.

The purpose of this article is to describe how institutionally marginalized college students co-created *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* as student co-researchers in a CBPR project. They collected their data of their lived experiences and then analyzed and interpreted this data. By doing so, the research team was able to determine how the tenets of "empowering spaces" showed up in the planning/preparation of outdoor activities and in the reflections based on the participants' lived experiences.

### Literature Review: BIPOC Communities & Outdoor Spaces

There are complex conditions that make BIPOC students unsafe in outdoor recreation. In addition to overviewing these conditions, this literature review examines “outdoor space” as a “third space,” “safe space,” and “brave space” for BIPOC students.

#### Outdoor Spaces & Outdoor Recreation as Unsafe Spaces

People of color in the United States (U.S.) have been excluded from outdoor spaces both historically and contemporarily. Institutionalized legislation acted as a policy barrier for people of color to access outdoor spaces. Long periods of American history permitted White people to enact violence on people of color with impunity in outdoor spaces which inflicted a “collective trauma” on people of color that persists to this day (Kahrl & Cammeron, 2022). It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 when legislation was passed that allowed people of color to enter public outdoor spaces (Humphrey, 2020).

Institutions of higher education also excluded students of color from outdoor recreation. The origins of outdoor recreation in higher education were in the form of Outing Clubs at higher education institutions in the 1860s, during a time when people of color could not access higher education (Webb, 2001). When students of color began accessing higher education at a critical mass, a group of twenty intramural directors from eleven Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) created their own organization in 1950, the National Intramural Association (NIA). The focus of NIA was to improve outdoor recreation at higher education institutions for institutionally marginalized students. Unfortunately, NIA was taken over by a group of white males who changed the organization into the National Intramural & Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) for their own purposes (Popke, 2024). This involved excluding

people of color and women before they changed course in 1971 to include women again in NIRSA. Then, in 2011, the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Commission was formed to address and create a more inclusive association and campus recreation environment for diverse student populations (Lucia & Lopez-Herrera, 2023). The longstanding systems of outdoor recreation in higher education have been largely influenced by White males until the early 2000s when diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) became a higher priority on college campuses and for the NIRSA organization. Unfortunately, current widespread DEI retrenchment in higher education proves that DEI remains vulnerable as a model for structural change thus threatening campus support for BIPOC college students. This could be due to DEI initiatives being institutionalized less for their transformative potential than for their instrumental utility, as a compliance mechanism, reputational safeguard, and source of access to state and federal resources (Ahmed, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Ray, 2019; Stokas, 2023).

### Outdoor Spaces as Third Spaces

Grounded in Homi Bhabha's (1994) work, third space theory refers to examination of the "in-between" space where cultural differences interact and transform experience (Bhandari, 2020). Third spaces strive to be restorative places that are outside of work and home where individuals can find comfort, retreat, and community (Banning et al., 2010). Third space can also be viewed beyond the physical location and as a proving ground that examines the idea of the formation of human subjectivity (Bhandari, 2020). Anzaldua (1987) further proposes that multiple factors influence the formation of individual self and human subjectivity, emphasizing that identity is constructed across difference within third spaces. There is a plurality of self that

forms from a subjectivity structured by multiple determinants i.e. gender, class, sexuality in competing cultures and racial identities and is a constantly shifting process (Bhandari, 2020).

In 2008, Celia Whitchurch introduced the concept of third space to the field of higher education, grounded in Bhabha's view that defined third space as the space positioned between academic and professional domains (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024). Hawley et al. (2019) add that students' and educators' ways of being in third spaces are different from what is expected from classroom settings or other gathering places on campus because third spaces demand that the values and cultural capital of the student community be centered and prioritized. This requires a negotiation and flattening of hierarchies and the validation and acknowledgement of the importance of different forms of knowledge (Potter & McDougall, 2017). When this is actively pursued/achieved, co-production and exchange of "porous" ideas of expertise can occur amongst the student community and educators (Hawley et al, 2019).

There is limited research overall about third space in higher education and in particular campus outdoor recreation. After conducting a scoping review, Thorpe and Partridge (2024) concluded that the third space is still an "emerging area of study which, while valuable, is yet to influence policy and practice at the institutional or national level" and that it is "a fertile space for more analytical and empirical investigations that go beyond descriptive case studies."

### Outdoor Spaces as Safe Spaces

Within education contexts—especially those at the postsecondary level—the words "safe space" have gained both positive and negative attention in recent years, although the concept has a much longer history. A clear starting point for safe spaces has not been determined, but many agree that campus activism among students of color during the 1960s and 1970s influenced

universities to create campus centers (safe spaces) devoted to certain marginalized student groups, women, and LGBTQ+ students. Harpalani (2018) describes the primary purpose of safe spaces is to “serve as support mechanisms for minority students, by mitigating feelings of isolation among these students and helping them adjust to life on predominantly White campuses.” Ali (2017) adds to safe space theory by stating its purpose of increasing the safety and visibility of marginalized or oppressed community members.

However, over the past decade, the intended purpose of safe spaces has become misunderstood or even misappropriated. The nuanced landscape of safe space in higher education was best explained by Stanfill and Zwilling (2023):

...popular conversation about safe space in the classroom tended to mock marginalized students seeking protection... [but] nearly a decade later, the discourse has become protectionist toward majority students allegedly discriminated against by being informed that they benefit from racism, sexism, and heterosexism (p. 85)

Safe space is generally politicized to benefit the needs of either side of the debate. This debate was played out between the University of Chicago Dean of Students, John Ellison, and the president of Northwestern University, Morton Schapiro. Ellison condemned safe spaces as places where “individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own” (Grieve, 2016). His statement is in line with critics who claim that safe spaces cause balkanization by students grouping themselves racially on campus, thus undermining the educational benefits of diversity (Harpalani, 2018). Schapiro confirmed the value of safe spaces backed by experts by stating, “I’m an economist, not a sociologist or psychologist, but those experts tell me that students don’t fully embrace uncomfortable learning unless they are themselves comfortable.

Safe spaces provide that comfort” (Grieve, 2016). Proponents of safe space counter critics by emphasizing that safe spaces provide important support for the social and cultural adjustment, not balkanization, of marginalized students, thus helping higher education actualize the educational benefits of diversity (Harpalani, 2018).

It has been found that many safe spaces are generally open and welcoming to outgroup students. But even with this openness to outgroup students, limited research shows that White student participation in safe spaces is generally low (Harpalani, 2018). The burden of integration in predominantly White spaces is often placed on marginalized students who must adapt to majority group norms; while White students usually do not bear this burden and there is no expectation for them to seek out marginalized students in safe spaces or other spaces where they do not feel a sense of control (Harpalani, 2018). Unfortunately, safe spaces alone do not alter cultural climates; rather safe spaces provide one aspect of the intentional programming needed to promote inclusivity (Ali, 2017).

### Outdoor Spaces as Brave Spaces

Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) have been deemed the architects of “brave space” after their critique and research of safe spaces. After critiquing a training that centered on power and privilege, it led them to “closely examine the conventional wisdom of safety as a prerequisite for effective social justice education and question to what degree the goal of safety was realistic, compatible, or even appropriate for such learning” (Arao & Clemens, 2013). The product of this research led them to new framework for spaces that “shift away from the concept of safety and emphasizing the importance of bravery instead, to help students understand – and rise to – the

challenges of genuine dialogue on diversity and social justice issues” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 136).

Brave space theory challenges the degree to which safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation as social justice facilitators and students engage in honest dialogue and work toward social justice initiatives for their communities. Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that true learning and action about social justice often requires “the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety.” They further argue that “the language of safety may actually encourage entrenchment in privilege, which may be able to curtail more effectively by building conditions in which the agent group members understand and expect from the outset that challenge is forthcoming” (p. 140). Arao and Clemens (2013) uses a Tim Wise essay, “No Such Place is Safe”, to critique White people’s requirement of safety to engage in cross-racial dialogue about racism:

...[White people] attempting to define for others – and especially people of color – how they wish to be confronted about issues of race and racism. People of color are then expected to constrain their participation and interactions to conform to White expectations of safety – itself an act of racism and White resistance and denial (p. 140)

After their extensive research, Arao and Clemens (2013) revised the brave space framework to emphasize the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety. Importantly, they emphasize a brave space requires the participants to make their own meaning of brave space and create their own ground rules, leading to rich learning and action in alignment with social justice objectives. The ground rules allow for methodological flexibility, but common ground rules that Arao and

Clemens (2013) found through their research are: (1) agree to disagree, (2) don't take things personally, (3) challenge by choice, (4) respect, and (5) no attacks.

Those who implement brave space theory can expect some level of discomfort for participants; however, students rate brave classroom space as having a high impact on their overall quality of learning experience (Brazill & Ruff, 2022). This feeling of high impact of brave spaces can also translate to the informal classroom spaces such as a CBPR research project. Furthermore, students who attended learning environments that operated as brave spaces found that they were able to excel both in terms of academics and in terms of personal growth and self-awareness (Ali, 2017). Brave spaces provide the “transformative learning and disorientation” (Stanlick, 2015, p.117) needed for students to excel in brave spaces through critical reflection activities within unfamiliar contexts.

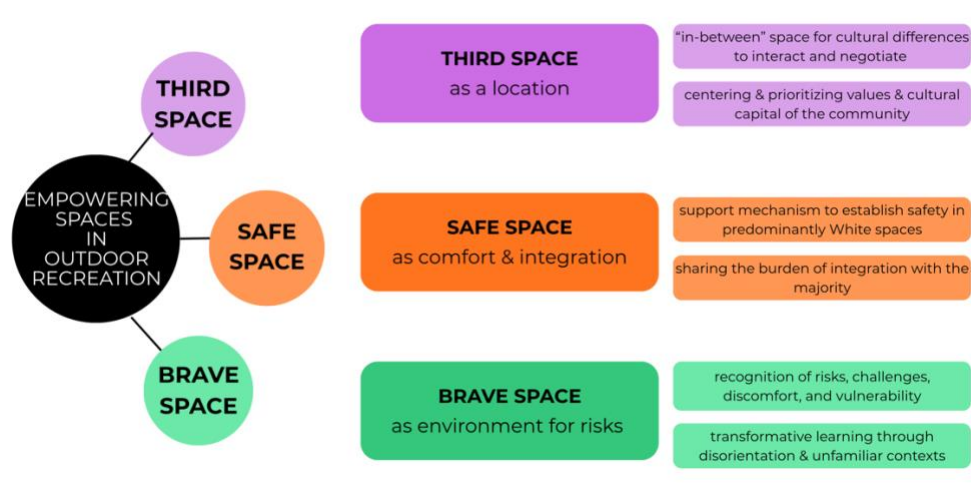
#### Considerations to Make Outdoor Recreation More Accessible for BIPOC College Students

While there is a gap in the literature that explicitly examines third space theory, safe theory, and brave space theory as it relates to outdoor recreation, there has been research focusing on engagement in outdoor recreation for BIPOC students and how to diversify outdoor recreation. It is important to recognize how BIPOC students' identities show up in different spaces. BIPOC students generally enter spaces with multiple cultural identities that are always active and operating in overlapping systems of oppression (Carbodo et al., 2013; Collective, 1983). This is coupled with areas of oppression tied to socio-economic status also. Thomas and Thomas (2022) also discuss the importance of meeting BIPOC students where they are when it comes to their comfortability to engage in outdoor recreation and to try to include outdoor recreation professionals that reflect the cultural backgrounds of the community.

### Theoretical Framework

The premise of this theoretical framework is that outdoor spaces are generally unsafe spaces, to varying degrees, for marginalized student communities. As mentioned above, these spaces are unsafe for a variety of reasons that include a history of exclusion through institutionalized legislation and violence/aggression targeted at institutionally marginalized communities that continue to this day. Because outdoor spaces are unsafe for institutionally marginalized student communities, it is necessary that institutionally marginalized students can co-create *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* that allows them to: center their voices and lived experiences, co-create community to feel empowered to take on risks and challenges, collaborate with campus and community partners to inform others about their needs in these spaces, and share their findings with their communities and other campus communities. This framework postulates that to research and create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation for marginalized students, it is necessary to combine certain tenets found in the theories of third space, safe space, and brave space.

Figure 3.1. Theoretical Framework



This new theoretical framework combines the strengths (tenets) of the third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory for the particular context of outdoor recreation/spaces for BIPOC college students. Outdoor space is the actual third space or “in-between” space where the students recreate. Existing outside of their conventional academic and work spaces, the students can shed their traditional “student” role and assume a role of active participant and co-researcher in outdoor spaces. They interact and negotiate how they show up and what they need to engage in these new environments by centering their own knowledge and lived experiences.

After further research and development of the third space concept by Whitchurch (2015), she recognized that the lack of clear boundaries and the opportunity to be creative in third spaces could present risky, threatening or dysfunctional environments. Safe space theory provides two important parameters to allow BIPOC students to interact in these outdoor (third) spaces. First, safe space theory recognizes that support mechanisms to help establish safety in unfamiliar, predominantly White outdoor spaces are necessary. Secondly, safe space theory recognizes the burden of integration into unfamiliar, predominantly White outdoor spaces cannot only lie on the BIPOC students themselves which is typical for marginalized communities to solely assume this

burden. Campus partners and community partners can share this burden by directly collaborating with the students to help them understand these new outdoor spaces better, actively listen to the students when they communicate their needs for engagement and translate their conversations into effective action that addresses their needs and concerns.

While support mechanisms for safety and sharing the burden of integration are important, it is still essential to recognize what the true nature of their experiences during this process will be. Brave space theory allows for a more realistic expectation of the experience that BIPOC students should expect in these unfamiliar outdoor spaces while doing new outdoor recreational activities. This theory is truthful about the recognition of risks, challenges, discomfort and vulnerability that the students will experience. But by coupling abovementioned strengths of third space theory and safe space theory with the expected disorientation they will feel, it has potential for transformative learning and creating *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation*. The feeling of empowerment for these students does not come from external sources but from engaging in these experiences as a community of peers. This is why CBPR framework has significant potential to conduct this particular type of outdoor recreation research equitably and effectively.

## Methods

### CBPR

This study was part of a larger CBPR research project focused on understanding barriers to engagement in outdoor recreation and co-creating community in outdoor recreation for a BIPOC student community at a R1 institution in the northern Rocky Mountain region. Academic researchers often assume the role of the “lone ethnographer” as they take on the responsibility to

represent their research participants' worlds and deal with biases embedded in their theoretical and actual lenses (Ruby, 2000). During the 1980s and 1990s, challenges were made to the view of academic researchers asserting anthropological authority of writing and interpreting communities' lived experiences leading to a shift towards participatory approaches in academic research (Denzin et al., 2008; Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) describes participatory research (PR) as a "research-to-action approach" emphasizing direct engagement of local priorities and perspectives. PR is considered an umbrella term for research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied for the purpose of action or change (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Jagosh et al. (2012) discusses the goal of PR is to prioritize co-constructing research through partnerships between researchers and community members, or others with insider knowledge and lived expertise.

CBPR exists under this PR umbrella and is defined as a "collaborative and equitable approach to research that is carried out in partnership between researchers and the community... the researchers and the community have an equal share of power, decision-making, and responsibility of the research being done" (Marquez et al., 2022). Community members and stakeholders may not be trained in research methods but belong to the communities of interest in the research and collaborate as valued contributors to the research process (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). After an extensive, critical review of a wide range of research papers that employed PR frameworks, Jagosh et al. (2012) were able to provide a significant link between process and outcomes of the evaluated PR partnerships. They concluded that PR, when done effectively, can (1) ensure culturally and logistically appropriate research, (2) enhance recruitment capacity, (3)

generate professional capacity and competence in stakeholder groups, (4) result in productive conflicts followed by useful negotiation, (5) increase the quality of outputs and outcomes over time, (6) increase the sustainability of project goals beyond funded time frames and during gaps in external funding, and (7) create system changes and new unanticipated project and activities (Jagosh et al., 2012). In addition, including the community as co-researchers allows the community to collect, analyze and interpret their own data. This is very impactful because it helps ensure the community's voice remains central to the findings and they are able to disseminate their findings from their direct interpretations of the data (Liebenberg et al., 2020).

#### Background of Research Team

The research team consisted of six BIPOC student co-researchers and two women of color who are academic researchers. While this was the first research project that the research team conducted in the outdoor recreation space, the academic researchers had expertise that included CBPR methodology, experience working with college students as educators and mentors, strong pre-existing relationships with institution's student organizations, and pre-existing relationships with the institution's outdoor recreation program and external outdoor recreation partners. All members had varying levels of previous engagement in outdoor recreation, ranging from outdoor enthusiasts to limited participation in outdoor recreation. The research team was able to bring authentic perspectives to this outdoor recreation research by centering and prioritizing their lived experiences and employing critical self-reflections of their lived experiences. By not including researchers with outsider perspectives in this research project, the student co-researchers' perspectives directly influenced the direction of the research project and how the data was collected and interpreted.

The team met bi-monthly to plan events, meet with campus and external community partners to gather information about the outdoor recreational events that they planned, reflect on their past outdoor recreational experiences, and initiate changes for their future outdoor recreational events based on their lived experiences and reflections. The team also collaborated to collect and analyze data related to their activity planning and implementation.

#### Co-Researchers and Student Participants

The six student co-researchers and student participants included American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students. These student population subgroups make up most of the institution's underrepresented students. During the 2024-2025 academic year, student demographics from unduplicated headcount data for White students and these different subgroups were: 1.6% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.6% identified as Black/African American, 6.4% identified as Hispanic/Latino, and 81.8% identified as White (Montana State University, 2025).

#### Data

During the bi-monthly meetings, the student co-researchers completed written reflections based on prompts centered on their lived experiences throughout the research project as student co-researchers and as student participants. The written reflections were grouped into two categories, (1) reflections on the planning and preparation part of the research project (when the research team met with outdoor recreation campus partners and external community partners) and (2) reflections of the student co-researchers' lived experiences as they participated in a six-week long ski lesson program. The set of six different written reflections formed the data used for this research study.

### Analysis

Three of the six student co-researchers were able to continue with the research project during the second year and engaged in the data analysis and data interpretation. The research team employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach to analyze the data. This qualitative data analysis method allowed the student co-researchers to identify and interpret patterns of their own data in a structured yet flexible approach. During the data analysis phase, the three student co-researchers employed three rounds of thematic analysis for the six sets of written reflections. Each round of the thematic analysis was broken up into an individual thematic analysis followed by a group thematic analysis until final themes were agreed upon, during the third round, by the three student co-researchers. Table 1 and Table 2 includes the reflection questions and corresponding codes that were analyzed and interpreted by the three student co-researchers.

Preparation for Outdoor Recreational Events The table below represents the reflection questions with corresponding codes that were determined by the three student co-researchers. The data was derived from written reflections of meetings with all six student co-researchers and variety of outdoor recreation campus partners and community partners. One meeting involved two campus outdoor recreation partners as the research team planned an outdoor hiking event that included a bear safety clinic and a set of indoor climbing events at the campus recreation center. Another meeting included a group of community partners who were ski instructors and a manager/cycle instructor. All community partners for this meeting were people of color. This group was brought in to discuss their lived experiences as people of color in these spaces and answer any questions or concerns student co-researchers had before engaging in their ski lesson program and cycle class. The third meeting was with a group from the local ski mountain where

the students participated in a six-week ski lesson program. This group was brought in to discuss logistics of the ski lesson program, answer any questions or concerns from the student co-researchers, and to hear about their needs before they started the ski lesson program.

Table 2.1. Data from Meeting with Campus Partners & Community Partners

| Reflection Questions                                                                                                                    | Codes                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What are your takeaways from the meeting?                                                                                               | comfort, safety, welcoming, belonging, collaborative growth, disable bad interactions, support, welcoming environment/space                 |
| How do you feel about the future events (hiking/safety clinic, climbing, & skiing) after having met with the campus/community partners? | excitement, good anticipation, out of comfort zone, sense of community, growth (as it relates to emotions), individuals with mixed feelings |
| Was the meeting useful, why or why not?                                                                                                 | connection (staff & each other), planning, community that fosters empowerment, preparation/planning, aware of expectations                  |
| What is needed in that space for you to participate?                                                                                    | preparation, needs (physical, material, personal), open-mindedness, structure, support needs (physical, material, personal, psychological)  |
| Anything else you want to share?                                                                                                        | Clarification, excitement, grateful, appreciation                                                                                           |

Lived Experiences from the Six-Week Ski Lesson Program The table below represents the reflection questions with corresponding codes that were determined by the three student co-researchers. The data were the written reflections about the students' lived experiences after their second, fourth, and sixth (final) ski lessons.

Table 2.2. Data After Second, Fourth, and Sixth Ski Lessons

| Reflection Questions                                                                                                          | Codes                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Give one or more highlights of your ski lesson experience so far. (what have you enjoyed, proud of, made you happy...)        | collective growth, positive environment, individual and group accomplishments, resilience, pride    |
| Give one or more lowlights of your ski lesson experience so far. (what have you struggled with, worried you, concerns you...) | navigating individual and group needs, dynamic experiences and environment, discomfort, obligations |
| Give one or more spotlights of your ski lesson experience so far. (who do you want to give a shout out to for being awesome)  | collective progress and support, progress, pride, adaptative and collective support                 |
| Is there anything that you would like to have relayed back to your ski instructors that they are doing well?                  | encouraging and adaptive instructors who cultivate a safe environment                               |
| Is there anything that you would like to have relayed back to your ski instructors that could be improved upon?               | nuance                                                                                              |
| Is there anything that could have made this experience better for you? (explain)                                              | logistics and pace                                                                                  |
| Is there anything that could have made this experience better for the group? (explain)                                        | unity and structure                                                                                 |
| Do you want to continue to ski after this experience? Why or why not?                                                         | enjoyment and access to resources                                                                   |
| Is there anything else that you want to discuss about this experience?                                                        | grateful                                                                                            |
| Are there any barriers that would keep you from continuing to ski?                                                            | financial barrier                                                                                   |

### Rigor and Trustworthiness

Rigor and trustworthiness of this research study was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework that includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured by using a CBPR framework that allowed the student participants, as co-researchers, to collect and interpret their data. By using the same meeting structures and reflections questions for written reflections throughout the data collection phase, we can ensure the dependability of the research study. Confirmability was ensured by utilizing an audit trail, employing reflexive self-reflection journaling, and member checking during the data analysis and data interpretation phases of the project. Due to the student co-researchers coming to the research project with their own identities and lived experiences, it is reasonable to conclude that their exact findings would be unique compared to another research project with a different research team and context. By contextualizing the research and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research project, it can be determined if this particular research project can be applied to other contexts.

### Findings & Discussion

After analyzing the codes through the *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* theoretical framework lens and CBPR framework, five themes were revealed. Quotes from the student co-researchers are included below to provide more enriching context for the themes found during the data analysis.

The goal of this study in the larger context of the research project was to determine how the student co-researchers co-created *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation*. Using the lens of the CBPR framework and the theoretical framework, the student co-researchers/participants led

the data analysis and data interpretation phases of the research to determine how *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* showed up in their lived experiences. The revelations from their data analysis and data interpretation are also included below.

### CBPR

#### *Theme 1: Importance of co-constructing spaces through partnerships and relationships*

The student co-researchers expressed feelings of usefulness for the information that the community members shared. Also, meeting and forming connections with the community partners before the start of the outdoor activities was important for the students. One student co-researcher explained, “The meeting was useful because of the amount of information that is provided. The staff was kind and reassuring, which I believe is a key aspect to a positive environment.” Student co-researchers found significant value in developing relationships with the campus and external partners to gather important information about the unfamiliar outdoor spaces and outdoor recreation activities they would be participating in. Through building relationships with community partners, the students experienced increased sense of safety, belonging and comfort in the unfamiliar outdoor spaces. The student co-researchers’ overall outlook on engaging in new outdoor spaces and outdoor recreation seemed to increase after meeting with each community partner. All of this was achieved through utilizing the CBPR framework as the research methodology.

### Third Space

#### *Theme 2: Centering and prioritizing values and cultural capital of community*

During the meeting with the people of color in snow sports and cycling, feelings of “empowerment” and “ease” were used to describe how the student co-researchers felt hearing

about the lived experiences of the people of color in outdoor spaces. A student co-researcher shared, “The meeting was empowering. I feel less nervous about skiing after hearing our presenters speak on their experiences being skiers and teaching beginners.” Another quote from a student co-researcher provides more detail about preparation and empowerment is listed below.

I think the meeting was very useful because it also gave us insight from adults who have more experience facing micro-aggressions and their input on how to handle it. They also shared valuable information about future events and what to expect, which put me at ease and made me excited for those events.

The meeting between the student co-researchers and the community partners who are outdoor recreation leaders of color was found to be valuable for the student co-researchers. By building relationships with people of color in outdoor recreation, this community’s values and cultural capital were centered and prioritized which is one of the tenets of third space theory. Lived experiences were shared from the outdoor recreation leaders of color, so that the students could anticipate what their own lived experiences may be like before engaging in these new, unfamiliar outdoor spaces. Also, the student co-researchers were able to see real representation of their identities in outdoor spaces in addition to receiving mentorship. The research meetings where the BIPOC student co-researchers gathered and met with community partners provided the necessary “in-between” space for honest conversations with their community.

### Safe Space

#### *Theme 3: Sharing burden of integration with community partners*

Community partners listened to and implemented feedback from the student co-researchers and the student co-researchers acknowledged the effort and adaptability of the

community partners to better integrate the students into the outdoor spaces. The quotes below were in reference to the students' lived experiences during their ski lesson program.

I would like for them to know that their kind and positive energy is greatly appreciated and truly goes a long way with the confidence of everyone, including myself, during the lessons.

-A student co-researcher

They are doing an awesome job at finding our needs. No one has to say a word and they know how to help us mentally and physically.

-A student co-researcher

This week I think they did a lot better with splitting up the groups by skill and continuing their lesson that way. They seemed to have a much better game plan going into the lesson which made everything a lot more efficient.

-A student co-researcher

Evaluating this data (quotes) through the lens of the theoretical framework, one of the tenets of safe space theory was identified in various lived experiences of the students. This data reveals how the students believed that community partners shared the burden of integration into this new ski environment. Community partners and student co-researchers worked together to ensure that the needs of the student community were listened to resulting in action taken so that the students could navigate these unfamiliar outdoor spaces safely and more effectively. The BIPOC student community did not feel as if it was their sole responsibility to find ways to integrate into the unfamiliar outdoor spaces.

### Brave Space

*Theme 4: Risks, challenges, discomfort and vulnerability exist in these outdoor spaces*

Feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and discomfort with the pace of learning was expressed by the student co-researchers during their experiences. These feelings were coupled with excitement with upcoming challenges. Speaking directly to brave space theory, these feelings are clear recognition of the risk and vulnerability that the students expect to feel in these unfamiliar environments.

I am very excited about the spin class, especially with [instructor]. I'm still nervous about skiing but I am less nervous now that we've met with multiple instructors, and I'll be skiing with a group. I'm anticipating that my confidence will build as the lessons go on.

-A student co-researcher

Throughout all the reflections, students recognized that risks, challenges, discomfort and vulnerability would show up in the outdoor spaces in which they engaged. This acknowledgement gave the student co-researchers the ability to have honest dialogue amongst each other and the community partners. Also, it allowed the student co-researchers to be more conscientious when they are reflecting on their experiences and communicating their evolving needs in these outdoor spaces. A really encouraging finding from this data is that even with the recognition of risks, challenges, discomfort and vulnerability in these outdoor spaces, the students were always willing to move forward and participate. This willingness and feeling of empowerment of the BIPOC student community was possible because of the relationship-building that occurred between the student community and community partners.

*Theme 5: Transformative learning through disorientation and unfamiliar contexts*

Students experienced disorientation and challenges during their ski lessons in an unfamiliar environment. Despite the disorientation and challenges, after each lesson they expressed pride and a strong sense of accomplishment for themselves and the group. This sense of accomplishment pride after challenges and disorientation confirms how this brave space theory tenets were revealed in the students' lived experiences.

My highlight has been the opportunity to engage in an activity I've always wanted to try but have not had the means to do so. It's been especially enjoyable to learn as a group and recognize that everyone has different learning paces. Initially, I was worried about the social environment I was walking into but after two lessons I feel confident enough to explore [our local ski mountain] on my own.

-A student co-researcher

Student co-researchers were continually put in disorienting and unfamiliar outdoor spaces throughout the research project. As the research project progressed and the student co-researchers and their student community continued to engage in these spaces, they expressed life-changing experiences such as learning a new skill, learning to navigate uncomfortable spaces, and building relationships with each other and the community partners. Because of these transformative learning experiences, students felt like they could enter these same spaces on their own and have the confidence to try new things they would not have done before.

### Conclusion

This research project revealed that giving institutionally marginalized students agency to co-create their own student communities and empowering spaces in outdoor recreation can have meaningful impact on how they engage and continue to engage in outdoor recreation. The

theoretical framework of empowering spaces in outdoor recreation combines essential parts of third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory. CBPR is the methodology (vehicle) that permits the student co-researchers to co-create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation and in their research process. Empowering spaces in outdoor recreation allowed BIPOC students to actualize the student community they needed through self-advocacy and collaborating directly with campus and community partners. Practical implications from this research project include: creating equity and access throughout the higher education space for marginalized students in outdoor recreation, providing a framework to co-create student communities for marginalized students who can then collaborate with their own campus and community partners to co-create their own empowered outdoor spaces, increasing diversity and representation in predominantly White outdoor spaces, and affecting generational impact of increasing diversity in outdoor recreation as these college students graduate and share their lived experiences and outdoor recreation expertise with their future communities and families.

Methodologically, this study demonstrated that CBPR can offer a transformative research framework in outdoor recreation to center and prioritize the voices and lived experiences of marginalized student communities. Two key features of this research project made it an innovative approach to outdoor recreation research. First, the research team actualized empowering spaces both in the research process by centering the student co-researchers throughout the research project and in the actual outdoor spaces as communicated in this article. Second, a unique feature of this research project compared to many outdoor research studies is that the student co-researchers and their student community were actively participating in outdoor recreation throughout the research project. They were not reflecting on lived experiences

from a long time ago, but on recent lived experiences to more accurately record them. The student co-researchers were then able to use their reflections and discussions during the research team meetings to collaborate with their campus and community partners on how to best improve their outdoor recreation experiences moving forward in real time. Further exploration into this overall research design could have new methodological implications for the field of outdoor recreation research, especially for institutionally marginalized college students.

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CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNITY INFORMED FINDINGS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A CBPR PROJECT FOCUSED  
ON A BIPOC COLLEGE STUDENT COMMUNITY  
ENGAGING IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

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### Introduction

Montana State University-Bozeman is an R1 university, a designation for institutions with the highest level of research activity in the United States, with the motto “Mountains and Minds.” While this framing may seem unusual for a research-intensive institution, it is not peculiar for MSU-Bozeman, which is surrounded by mountains and expansive natural landscapes. Outdoor recreation is a central draw to the campus for students, staff, and faculty alike. The university describes its hometown of Bozeman as “an adventurer’s paradise” where you can summit peaks, kayak the region’s many waterways, ski at a great local mountain, and explore the many trails and walking paths around town (Montana State University, 2026). Students can enroll in recreation courses ranging from downhill skiing to indoor spin classes, and the expectation to engage with the outdoors is embedded in campus culture.

The call to recreate and engage with nature is positioned as being for everyone. However, access to and participation in outdoor recreation are not experienced equally across campus. This misalignment between institutional branding and actual student engagement reflects broader patterns in outdoor recreation in the United States, where participation has historically been stratified along racial, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. The Outdoor Foundation/Outdoor Industry Association’s (2024) *2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report* stated that the White/Non-Hispanic U.S. population represents 58.9% of the total U.S. population, but 69.7% of the 2023 outdoor participant base; the African American/Black U.S. population represents 12.6% of the total U.S. population, but 10.3% of the 2023 outdoor participant base; the Hispanic U.S. population represents 19.1% of the total U.S. population, but 13.4% of the 2023 outdoor

participant base; and the Asian/Pacific-Islander U.S. population represent 6.1% of the total population, but 5.3% of outdoor participant base.

Across the United States and throughout its history, outdoor spaces have not been equally experienced by all groups. African American people were kidnapped and forced to toil in fields, with nature often representing danger, labor, or escape rather than leisure. Similarly, Native Nations, who once held deep and sustained relationships with land and water, were violently displaced and confined to specific territories. These histories, which cannot be fully captured in just a few sentences, continue to shape relationships with outdoor spaces and create enduring tension around land, nature, and recreation.

As a result, when students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and from across the globe arrive in Bozeman, their relationship to outdoor recreation is not uniform. Students from communities with histories of exclusion and violence tied to land and outdoor spaces often experience outdoor recreation differently. They are less likely to enroll in outdoor recreation courses and are underrepresented in recreational spaces such as campus recreation centers, ski resorts, climbing gyms, and hiking trails. Student organizations centered on underserved identities also rarely overlap with those focused on outdoor recreation, further reinforcing patterns of separation and exclusion.

This lack of engagement has important consequences. Students who are not involved in outdoor recreation also miss out on documented benefits associated with outdoor engagement, including positive impacts on mental health, opportunities to build social connections and belonging, and pathways that support academic success.

### Positionality Statement

The research team was comprised of six Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) undergraduate student co-researchers and two BIPOC academic researchers who are also MSU faculty members. The racial/ethnic identities of the student co-researchers and academic researchers included Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaska Native. These identities make up a majority of MSU's underrepresented students. Most of the students had little to no experience in outdoor recreation before the research project started. While many of the student co-researchers have wanted to engage in outdoor recreation before this research study, they expressed the lack of resources and accessibility as significant barriers.

### Rationale for the Study

The research team sought to capture the lived experiences of individuals who have been institutionally marginalized in outdoor recreation, specifically college-aged students of color attending a predominantly White institution. There is limited research that centers on these experiences, particularly within rural university contexts. Moreover, much of the existing work fails to engage students as active contributors to knowledge production.

To address these gaps, we intentionally partnered with students through the creation of a Community Advisory Board (CAB). The six students that made up CAB were both student co-researchers and participants who were involved at every stage of the research process, including designing the study, co-planning outdoor recreation experiences, and evaluating programming. This community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach allowed students to shape the

research in ways that reflected their needs, concerns, and expertise, while also challenging traditional power dynamics between researchers and participants.

### Significance of Study

At an interpersonal level, this research is critical because students who participated in the project developed positive relationships with outdoor recreation and expressed a desire to continue engaging in these activities. This suggests that when barriers are intentionally addressed, underserved students may benefit from and sustain involvement in outdoor spaces, both at MSU and potentially at universities across the country. Research shows that participation in collegiate recreation and outdoor engagement provides important health, wellness, and academic benefits for college students. These benefits extend beyond physical fitness and play a key role in student success and retention. Andre et al. (2017) found that students who engage in campus outdoor recreation experience improved mental and physical health, lower stress and anxiety, stronger social connections, and increased academic success. Their work also highlights broader developmental outcomes, including leadership skills, environmental connection, and transferable life skills.

At an institutional level, this project demonstrates how community-based participatory research can serve as an equity-focused tool within higher education outdoor recreation. By partnering with college-aged students as co-investigators, power dynamics are more intentionally leveled, shifting the research from being conducted on students to being conducted with them.

Finally, findings from this project have broader implications for campus recreation programs, student affairs professionals, and rural institutions seeking to improve access,

belonging, and engagement in outdoor spaces. The lessons learned through this work can inform the development of more inclusive outdoor recreation initiatives beyond MSU.

## Literature Review

### History of Outdoor Recreation for BIPOC Communities

Outdoor recreation in the United States has been shaped by systemic exclusion and unequal access for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). While interest within these communities is high, persistent structural and cultural barriers continue to limit participation.

Many modern sports, including lacrosse and long-distance running, originate from Indigenous traditions in which movement and play were inseparable from land stewardship, spirituality, and community resilience (Traditional Native American Games and Sports, 2025). Despite centuries of colonization and the forced suppression of ancestral practices, Native Nations have preserved these traditions through intergenerational transmission as a form of cultural survival.

Latino relationships to land and outdoor spaces have been shaped by migration and colonization long before the U.S. was founded. Spanish-speaking communities built missions, ranches, and agricultural systems across the Southwest, and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and the 1898 annexation of Puerto Rico, thousands of residents were absorbed into redrawn U.S. borders (U.S. National Park Service, n.d.). Latino communities have transformed the American outdoors through culture, identity, agriculture, and economy (National Education Association, 2024), yet contemporary participation patterns still reflect the impacts of border enforcement, racial profiling, and misrepresentation in public land management. Historically, the high financial costs of organized sports and the priority of labor over leisure

further limited Latino participation (American Latino Theme Study: Sports, U.S. National Park Service, n.d.).

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) connections to land were forged through migration, labor, and racial exclusion. Beginning in the 1800s, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Pacific Islander immigrants worked in agriculture, fishing, mining, and railroad construction under exploitative, segregated conditions, including discriminatory land-use laws and anti-Asian violence. U.S. expansion into the Pacific disrupted Indigenous relationships to land, and Executive Order 9066 incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II. Despite these barriers, AAPI communities built settlements that served as cultural refuges and centers of outdoor gathering (Telling All Americans' Stories: Introduction to Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage, U.S. National Park Service, n.d.).

Black Americans' relationship with nature has been shaped by slavery, segregation, and ongoing inequalities. During slavery, woods represented both danger and the possibility of freedom. After emancipation, Jim Crow segregation in parks, beaches, pools, and campgrounds restricted access, while the early conservation movement centered white men. New Deal-era funding expanded state parks, but National Park Service policies accommodated only white visitors. Civil rights activists challenged segregation in park systems, yet underuse persisted from the 1970s into the 1990s due to location, transportation, and unwelcoming treatment, reinforcing the idea of "white wildernesses." Black organizations and individuals continue to reclaim outdoor spaces and narrow diversity gaps (African Americans and the Great Outdoors, U.S. National Park Service, n.d.).

### Barriers for BIPOC Students and Outdoor Recreation

This contemporary participation gap is rooted in a "legacy of exclusion" (Davis, 2018). Jim Crow–era segregation prevented many families of color from developing multi-generational traditions of outdoor leisure, producing lasting disparities that Marginality Theory identifies as a primary driver of lower participation today (Schwartz & Corkery, 2011). The "Westernized" framing of the outdoors as "white wilderness" further alienates people of color whose cultural histories are absent from the landscape (Davis, 2018).

These inequities manifest as modern barriers: a "media disconnect" in which students of color do not see themselves in outdoor marketing (Davis, 2018; Schwartz & Corkery, 2011); perceived safety concerns in rural "sylvan" settings tied to historical trauma (Winter et al., 2020); a "skill gap" from limited early-childhood exposure that undermines technical confidence (Davis, 2018; Schwartz & Corkery, 2011; Winter et al., 2020); and persistent costs of gear and transportation even when program fees are waived (Davis, 2018; Schwartz & Corkery, 2011).

### Previous Research on BIPOC College Students and Outdoor Recreation

Previous research on college-aged students of color and outdoor recreation reveals the presence of disparities in participation, access, and belonging. Nonetheless, the research also highlights the potential benefits of engaging in outdoor activities. The literature serves the purpose of identifying structural barriers, examining health outcomes, and evaluating the role of higher education programs in fostering participation.

For example, a 2023 study conducted by the University of Montana revealed that 38% of Black Americans and 48% of Hispanic Americans engaged in outdoor recreation, compared to

55% of White Americans (Englert et al., 2023). Subsequently, this research identifies three barriers: financial, social, and educational. The three barriers proceed to limit access to students of color. First, financial restrictions directly limit access to equipment and transportation. Next, social barriers illustrate a lack of community support and express concern about discrimination or violence. Last, educational barriers stem from a lack of exposure and the perception of outdoor recreation as a predominantly “white” activity (Goodrid, 2018).

Furthermore, the literature considers the historical and cultural past as blocks that have built outdoor recreation as a space associated with whiteness. Structural racism extends into outdoor recreational spaces, affirming an exclusionary environment that impacts access and health outcomes. The research proceeds to suggest that BIPOC individuals may endure additional limitations when accessing recreational resources and related services (Englert et al., 2023).

Another research area focuses on the benefits of outdoor recreation for college students. A 2022 study that took place in Cornell University evaluated that engagement with natural environments was associated with reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. The study results indicated that 86% of college participants improved their mood after participating in outdoor programs (Rakow & Ibes, 2022). Another 2025 study conducted at the University of Utah suggests that outdoor recreational experiences positively contribute to better mental health and quality of life. Natural settings have the potential to offer greater stress-reduction alternatives compared to indoor spaces (Knudson, 2025)

Overall, the research illustrates that outdoor recreation programs in higher education institutions can increase long-term participation while fostering a sense of community. However,

despite the documented benefits, access remains uneven. The existing literature lacks deeper exploration of the experiences of college-aged students of color in outdoor recreation spaces, pointing to a gap in the subject area.

#### Community Based Participatory Research as a Framework for Equity in Outdoor Recreation

Community based participatory research (CBPR) is defined as a collaborative and equitable approach to research that is carried out in partnership between researchers and the community (Marquez et al., 2022). Community members and stakeholders may not be trained in research methods but belong to the communities of interest and collaborate as valued contributors to the research with equitable share of power and decision-making (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Marquez et al., 2022).

Jagosh et al. (2012) were able to provide a significant link between process and outcomes of evaluated participatory research (PR) partnerships. They concluded that PR, when done effectively, can (1) ensure culturally and logistically appropriate research, (2) enhance recruitment capacity, (3) generate professional capacity and competence in stakeholder groups, (4) result in productive conflicts followed by useful negotiation, (5) increase the quality of outputs and outcomes over time, (6) increase the sustainability of project goals beyond funded time frames and during gaps in external funding, and (7) create system changes and new unanticipated project and activities (Jagosh et al., 2012).

## Methods

### Research Design

A qualitative, community based participatory research (CBPR) study was conducted over the 2024-2025 academic year. The research team consisted of two academic researchers and six undergraduate student co-researchers. Throughout the academic year, the student co-researchers co-created their outdoor student community and met with campus and community partners to gather information about different outdoor recreation activities. After gathering information from campus and community partners, the student co-researchers planned outdoor events to meet their unique needs. Iterative cycles of planning, action, data collection, and analysis by the student co-researchers occurred throughout the research project. For the 2025-2026 academic year, three student co-researchers continued collaborating on the research project and focused on the data analysis, data interpretation, and dissemination of their research findings. Their work culminated with this co-written journal article and a conference workshop presentation at the 2026 National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) national conference.

### Research Setting & Events

The research project took place at Montana State University (MSU). MSU is situated in an ideal outdoor environment for access to a multitude of outdoor recreation activities including hiking, skiing, water sports, and other activities. MSU's proximity to these outdoor recreation areas presents minimal barriers for most students to physically access these spaces. MSU has a very strong outdoor recreational culture, and it is one of the significant reasons that many students choose to attend. Student co-researchers planned and executed several outdoor

recreation events that included an outdoor safety clinic and hike, three indoor climbing events, indoor cycling class, 6-week ski lesson program, two ski trips, and a national park overnight trip.

### Participants

The participants of the research study were divided into two groups, six student co-researchers and the approximately thirty MSU students who the student co-researchers invited to participate in the outdoor recreation events with them. All participants belonged to one or more marginalized student populations at MSU, mainly from Indigenous, African American, and Latino/e/a/x student communities. These groups collectively make up only 8.6% of the total MSU student population (Montana State University, 2025).

### Data

Data was collected throughout the academic 2024-2025 in a variety of forms – meeting transcriptions, pre and post surveys completed by participants of the outdoor recreation events, and student co-researchers' written reflections during bi-weekly meetings. There were six sets of student co-researchers' written reflections collected from six different meetings. These written reflections centered on their lived experiences through planning, executing, and experiencing a variety of outdoor recreation activities. The student co-researchers also analyzed how to improve their experiences and address their needs as they continued to engage in these outdoor recreation events. For this research paper, only the CAB written reflections were used for data analysis.

### Data Analysis

The research team employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach to analyze the data. This qualitative data analysis method allowed the student co-researchers to

identify and interpret patterns of their own data in a structured yet flexible approach. Braun & Clarke (2017) discusses the strength of TA's flexibility not only in terms of research question, sample size, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation; but also, the flexibility to identify patterns within and across data in relation to the participants' lived experience, views and perspectives. All six steps were employed by the research team starting with (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and finally (6) writing up the research findings based on the final themes determined.

The research team read through an entire set of written reflections once, independently, to familiarize themselves with the data and generate initial codes. Then, the research team met to discuss the initial codes each team member had determined individually. During this initial group discussion, the first set of themes was co-created by the research team. This process was repeated two additional times with final themes co-created by the student co-researchers after the third round. This overall thematic analysis process was repeated for all six sets of written reflections. Using the TA approach worked well with the CBPR framework because it provided a data analysis framework where the student co-researchers' lived experiences were centered and interpreted directly by them. The student co-researchers led all steps of the TA process from initial generation of codes to writing their own interpretation of their data analyses.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this qualitative CBPR project, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework was adopted that includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured by using a CBPR framework that

allowed a group of participants, as co-researchers, to collect and interpret their data. By using the same meeting structures and prompts for written reflections throughout the data collection phase, we can ensure the dependability of the research study. Confirmability was ensured by utilizing an audit trail, employing reflexive self-reflection journaling, and member checking during the data analysis and data interpretation phases of the project. The student co-researchers came to the research project with their own identities and lived experiences and from a particular context. It is reasonable to assume that their exact findings would be unique compared to another research project with a different research team. By contextualizing the research and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research project, it can be determined elements of this research project can be applied to other contexts.

### Findings

This research study explored the themes that emerged from the student co-researchers' written reflections on their lived experiences during the planning of their outdoor recreational activities and their participation in these activities. The four key themes found through inductive thematic analysis were: community, foundation, feelings, and access. Below are the findings of each theme supported by co-researchers' quotes. The quotes provide meaningful context for the themes found during the data analysis phase.

#### Community

**Community** was a central theme in this project, emerging from participants' interactions with peers and community partners. Participants describe how their involvement in creating a welcoming environment among each other contributed to a collective sense of inclusion.

Throughout the project, participants shared that having a common goal in mind was crucial to feeling like a community member.

**Bonding** was a subtheme within the community. Participants expressed their appreciation for the newly formed connections they were forming throughout the activities. These interactions fostered meaningful conversations that contributed to personal fulfillment and collective pride. Moreover, participants felt more comfortable exploring outdoor spaces in a group, which built group empowerment. A student emphasized how being in a team allowed them to “really see the whole group stand out, and it is like strength in numbers.”

A second subtheme associated with community was **support**. Participants emphasized that support from peers and community partners was an essential element in creating a fulfilling experience. One participant reflected on the encouragement provided by community partners. They described how they felt “less nervous about skiing after hearing our presenters speak about their experiences as skiers and teaching beginners.” Another student proceeded to express how “everyone gets excited when one person does a good job.” Both accounts value the act of receiving support from multiple sources within the community.

**Belonging** was the final subtheme for community. Participants felt happy to be a part of a group that shared similar experiences and values. Wearing matching gear was an example of an act of group identity that heightened participants’ sense of belonging. A student mentioned how “it always feels good to meet new people and feel like you belong in a place.” Feeling included in a group contributed to meaningful interactions among participants, such as “good conversations in the lift chair.”

### Foundation

Another central theme identified was **foundation**. Participants described the program's foundation as a solid base that contributed to their sense of comfort and preparedness throughout the experience.

One subtheme within foundation was **structure**. Participants valued being divided into smaller subgroups based on their skiing experience and confidence levels by the event organizers. As one participant noted, *"They all did a great job breaking our group into smaller subgroups that were adjusted for our confidence and skill level."* This highlights the importance of appropriate group structure in ensuring that participants felt supported and capable within the program.

Another subtheme was **logistics**. Participants expressed challenges related to balancing the program with other academic responsibilities. For example, one participant stated, *"I wish some days I had more time to ski rather than thinking that I have to come back to do homework and study for exams."* This suggests that logistical considerations, such as time constraints and competing commitments, influenced participants' overall experience.

**Needs** also emerged as a subtheme of foundation, with participants identifying both physical and material requirements as essential for successful participation. Physical needs included health, strength, and readiness to engage in the activity. For example, one participant emphasized the importance of recovery and physical ability, stating, "I need to get my knee stronger so I can go." Participants also highlighted material needs, such as access to appropriate snow gear, skis, and transportation. As one participant explained, "All the necessary snow gear and skis would be nice, and a form of transportation."

Finally, **growth** was identified as a subtheme of foundation. Participants described personal progress, increased confidence, and greater motivation to improve their well-being over the course of the experience. In particular, participation encouraged students to invest more in their physical health as they became more comfortable in new environments. One participant shared, *“Since I have joined, I have started to dedicate a little more time to my physical health by heading to the Student Wellness Center to work out a little and I feel more comfortable being in that space as a ‘newbie’”*. This highlights how building a strong foundation not only supported learning but also fostered confidence and motivated participants to engage more actively in their health and personal development.

### Feelings

**Feelings** surfaced as a prominent thread throughout, as participants described their dynamic and evolving emotions throughout the program. These emotions included both positive and negative experiences, reflecting how participants’ feelings shifted over time.

One key subtheme was **resilience**. Participants described becoming “A little less fearful of being on a pair of skis and that my skill is improving little by little. Last week, I got to finally learn how to stop on my own and also start to actually enjoy the sport in itself.” This reflection spotlights how resilience, collectiveness, and individuality played a massive role in outdoor learning. For many BIPOC students, resilience is an ongoing process; growth happens gradually, and each small step shows perseverance in navigating these spaces that have historically been underrepresented.

**Gratitude** also emerged as a subtheme. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity and supportive group environment. A participant said, “I am very grateful

for the instructors I have had; they have all been very patient and efficient at their jobs.” Another shared, “I am very proud of the progress I have made so far, I have learned a lot and overall, I have had a really great time.” From these two statements, positive emotions are expressed by the participants who overall had a positive experience. These statements support how instructor support and skill progression contributed to a positive learning environment.

Participants also expressed **pride** in overcoming fear and building confidence. One participant shared, “I am very proud of conquering my fear of skiing and learning to be comfortable on a ski hill. I improved my ski skills from the first lesson, which has improved my confidence engaging in this activity.” Another participant added, “Yes, I feel amazing about what I accomplished in the ski lessons!!! I would have never learned what I did and now feel so much braver and knowledgeable, and I don't feel like I have to be ashamed for not knowing how to ski.”

Furthermore, **negative emotions** were identified, particularly related to learning in a group setting. Participants expressed that group-based learning could be challenging when individuals progress at different speeds. One participant explained, “Sometimes group learning can be stressful as we're all progressing at different paces.” This emphasizes the importance of thoughtful group division to minimize stress to better support participants’ learning experiences. As participants previously noted, sharing the feeling of shame also emerged, revealing emotional response, such as self-consciousness, fear of judgment and discomfort with being less skilled than others. These emotions reflect certain emotions that stem from learning a new skill, while

also trying to feel comfortable in unfamiliar environments. The participant's environment plays a major role in having positive experience with the activities.

### Access

**Access** was the final theme. For the project, access prioritized attainability by recognizing which resources determine whether students would participate in the activities. Participants discussed circumstances that either propelled or limited their ability to join and engage with outdoor recreational experiences.

**Financial barriers** were a subtheme for access. The project recognizes that the monetary cost associated with skiing could limit active participation. A student acknowledged that they “don’t think there are any barriers besides the price of equipment that would keep me from skiing.” In addition, another participant stated that “the only thing for me would be the cost of the lift ticket.” Financial considerations significantly shaped participants' current access, or lack thereof, to the activities.

**Connections** were the second subtheme related to access. Participants continuously expressed gratitude towards the guidance of community partners. Students suggested that the presence of community partners enhanced their experiences because they facilitated student participation by adapting to individual and group needs as effectively as possible. A participant described the role of community partners as “staff that I can rely on” and why that would help them in going out of a “comfort zone to try new adventures and challenges among other peers that might be in a similar situation as mine.” Overall, access and subsequent meaningful connections with community partners were contributing factors to active participation.

## Discussion

Research suggests that a primary objective of outdoor education is to shape young people's perspectives and personal development through the acquisition of transferable life skills (Hattie et al., 1997). The four themes that emerged in the findings exhibit changes in the student community's perspectives, as well as personal and group development that occurred throughout the research project. Below are in-depth discussions of each of the four themes from the findings section.

### Community

Community is a significant theme because it evaluates outdoor recreation experiences on a group and individual level. Establishing a Community Advisory Board (CAB) was a crucial step in the research because there was continuous communication regarding how to create a welcoming environment for all students involved. Every board member agreed to prioritize the formation of a community, which was built on the principles of the identified subthemes: bonding, support, and belonging.

Shortly after, the emphasis that board members placed on community reflected across the hosted experiences. Written responses illustrate a space where participants felt comfortable engaging with the activities because they were members of a group actively going through similar experiences. Moreover, members expressed feeling mutually seen and heard among each other, which are behaviors that characterize meaningful interactions within a community.

Fostering an environment that encouraged student involvement was a principal goal of the research. Consistent efforts towards this collective aim led to the fulfilling experiences of

participants and reaffirmed the importance that a community holds while exposing students to a new endeavor.

### Foundation

Foundation emphasizes growth and skill development, which highlights the importance of providing conditions that enable students to fully engage in learning experiences. In this study, the theme of foundation reflects the underlying structures and supports that make such development possible by establishing a strong base that enables students to successfully participate in the program and benefit from the experience. Participants described the foundation as encompassing the structural, logistical, and personal conditions necessary for engagement, comfort, and sustained involvement.

This foundation was shaped by program organization and support, as well as by students' individual readiness and access to resources. Students emphasized that participation depended on meeting personal needs, including physical readiness and access to appropriate materials, which allowed them to fully engage in outdoor activities. At the same time, clear structure and logistical support helped students manage competing academic responsibilities and navigate the demands of their complex and often stressful student lives. These elements created an environment in which participants felt supported, prepared, and capable of participating.

Together, these conditions contributed to students' growth within the program. By providing stability and support, the foundation facilitated confidence, skill development, and personal progress, allowing students to apply what they learned to their everyday lives. Thus, foundation functioned not only as a prerequisite for participation but also as a key mechanism through which students experienced learning, development, and continued engagement.

### Feelings

Through examination of the feelings theme, emotional feeling had a significant effect on the participants' ability to participate in the activities. Participants described different emotions throughout the program. The main feelings that were highlighted were pride, gratitude, resilience, and discomfort.

The results demonstrate the conceptual understanding of how the participants' emotions affected how well they performed in the activity and their desire and willingness to continue the activity. Participants felt pride in their growth, improvement over time, and overcoming challenges. The most important findings of this study is to ensure participants are comfortable and safe in their learning environments for the participants to feel good with their emotions.

### Access

The research acknowledges that access to adequate resources that will support the participants was a factor that determined engagement in outdoor recreation activities. When students proceeded to reflect on the experiences, it became apparent that it was not a lack of willingness or motivation to attempt a new activity, particularly skiing. Instead, various forms of financial limitations were a leading barrier shared by students. Being unable to afford gear and paying required fees to participate were examples of barriers that are not perceived abilities but create a long-lasting impact on the individual.

Building relationships with community partners is another key strategy towards facilitating access. Student participants recognized different ways in which community partners contributed to their engagement in novel and outdoor recreational activities. Community

partners, who were mainly involved leaders and experts in their respective sports, established connections with the students by consistently being present, practicing communication, and guiding participants into familiarity with the activities. Developing connections between students and community partners encourages a psychological and physical sense of belonging. Participants' growing safety and confidence are reflective of active behaviors and actions towards furthering inclusivity within the outdoor recreation environment.

### Applications to Practice

This qualitative CBPR project highlights how universities can partner with BIPOC students to address structural barriers to outdoor recreation. By centering student leadership and fostering community, we demonstrated that inclusive programming could strengthen belonging, confidence, and long-term engagement in outdoor recreation. At the same time, these findings are context specific. As noted by Springett (2011), participatory research outcomes are not easily generalizable across different settings. Instead, broader insights can be developed by comparing multiple case studies while recognizing the uniqueness of each context. Based on our analysis, we propose the following recommendations.

- Establish a Community Advisory Board

Create a board composed of community members and stakeholders to guide program design, ensure cultural relevance, and strengthen community trust.

- Acknowledge Broader Social and Political Contexts

Engage in thoughtful discussions about the geopolitical climate, recognizing that

language, attitudes, and external factors can significantly influence participant experiences.

- Strengthen Community Partnerships

Proactively engage community partners and maintain these relationships through consistent communication to enhance participant experience and program sustainability.

- Prepare Community Partners and Facilitators

Provide thorough orientation and context to partners and facilitators, so they understand participant needs, group dynamics, and any sensitive considerations prior to engagement. Train and support instructors to create psychologically and physically safe environments, especially in activities that may involve risk or discomfort.

- Design Thoughtful Group Structures

Implement structured, skill-based programming by intentionally organizing groups to minimize stress, encourage collaboration, and enhance learning outcomes.

- Foster Active Presence and Listening

Encourage facilitators to be fully present and practice active listening to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all participants.

- Community Partners Incorporate Feedback

Ensure community-based feedback to further the student community's experiences.

Ensure there is feedback provided from an individual and community level, by incorporating and applying the responses received.

- Reduce Barriers to Participation

Improve accessibility by providing equipment, transportation, and flexible scheduling, particularly for marginalized or underserved populations.

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## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE WORK

### Introduction

Chapter Five explores how the manuscripts (in Chapters 2-4) of my three-manuscript dissertation provided a complete and more holistic picture of the research. While each of the manuscripts includes their own key findings separately, this chapter maps the findings together under a unifying theme. In addition, I will discuss how these findings provide unique contributions to the field of outdoor recreation research frameworks and the literature.

The motivation for my outdoor recreation research centered on BIPOC college students' engagement in outdoor recreation is greatly informed by positionality. As a Black, female, PhD student in Adult and Higher Education, and outdoor enthusiast, I can synthesize my passions in education, outdoor recreation, and building community for institutionally marginalized populations. My chosen research methodology of CBPR is also influenced by my positionality. Through my extensive dissertation research, I have found that research methodologies that center and prioritize the communities' lived experiences are significantly lacking in outdoor recreation research. I believe there is great value of not only centering and prioritizing the lived experiences of institutionally marginalized communities in outdoor recreation research, but also as through research partnership as co-researchers.

### Overview of the Three-Manuscript Dissertation

My unifying research theme was the examination of BIPOC college students' outdoor recreation engagement at predominantly White institutions situated in higher education's current overall campus climate and the current socio-political environment. Two key research areas

existed under my unifying research theme. First, I wanted to evaluate how CBPR could be used as an innovative research framework in outdoor recreation research to better understand BIPOC college students' engagement in outdoor recreation. Secondly, I wanted to conceptualize how BIPOC college students, as co-researchers, could co-create their own empowering spaces in outdoor recreation and in unfamiliar, predominantly White, outdoor spaces.

My first manuscript (Chapter 2) provided a better overall understanding of how institutionally marginalized students at R1 institutions are being, or will potentially be, affected by the widespread DEI erasure happening across the nation. This first step of the research study involved employing a multi-layered theoretical framework lens (combination of racialized organizational theory, institutional theory, and institutional racial paralysis theory) to categorize and analyze DEI retrenchment actions (symbolic, structural, funding, and ambiguous) that R1 institutions in our sample engaged in. These DEI retrenchment actions were gathered from *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI trackers. After the organization of the DEI retrenchments actions from the DEI trackers, descriptive statistical analyses were performed to better understand how institutional characteristics were related to which institutions appeared on the tracker or not. Associative statistical analyses were also performed to determine which institutional characteristics had strong associations with the different types of DEI retrenchment actions.

The second manuscript examined how BIPOC college students co-created empowering spaces in outdoor recreation as student co-researchers during a period of DEI retrenchment in higher education. Thematic analysis and a theoretical framework combining third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory for outdoor recreation were used to analyze and

interpret how empowering spaces surfaced both within the research process and in the students' lived experiences participating in outdoor recreation. The overall research project utilized a CBPR methodology to center and prioritize the voices and lived experiences of the student co-researchers. The findings from this manuscript had implications for how future outdoor recreation research could be conducted using CBPR and how empowering spaces might be created by institutionally marginalized student communities.

The final manuscript was a co-written journal article with three student co-researchers that addressed gaps in the current outdoor recreation literature by centering the lived experiences of students of color as they engaged in outdoor recreation. Consistent with the CBPR framework guiding the overall research project, the approach recognized and prioritized the student co-researchers as experts of their lived experiences, with the capacity, skills, and insights to contribute meaningfully to the research findings (Liebenberg et al., 2020). Inductive thematic analysis (ITA) was utilized for this research study because of its "bottom-up" approach, in which codes emerged from the data and reflected the unique contexts and experiences of participants without being constrained by a predetermined theoretical lens (Thomas, 2006). Because the student co-researchers were also participants in the research, their involvement in data analysis helped ensure that the findings more accurately reflected their realities, resulting in actions more likely to benefit their communities (Liebenberg et al., 2020). The findings revealed themes that provided a deeper understanding of students' barriers to engagement in outdoor recreation and highlighted how campus and community partners could collaborate with BIPOC student communities to improve access, belonging, and participation in outdoor recreation.

### Findings and Discussions Across the Three Manuscripts

Utilizing the three-manuscript dissertation format allowed more freedom to investigate three research studies with more depth and creativity. Deeper understanding of these research areas coupled with an underutilized, innovative research framework for outdoor recreation research, produced new and richer perspectives of the overall research findings.

From the findings in Manuscript 1, the two most prominent types of DEI retrenchment actions amongst RI institutions in our sample were structural retrenchment and symbolic retrenchment actions. This informs us that many institutions have primarily taken actions like closing DEI offices, removing DEI positions, relocating DEI personnel to non-DEI positions, or renaming DEI offices. Funding retrenchment actions were not as common, but it is possible that this type of action, tied to campus finances, may be easier to conceal. When evaluating association between institutional characteristics and type of DEI retrenchment action taken, structural retrenchment and symbolic retrenchment were the only DEI retrenchment types that had statistically significant associations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three types of actions that institutions enact to sustain legitimacy: normative isomorphism (adopting standards through professional norms and credentialing), mimetic isomorphism (imitating like institutions in times of uncertainty), and coercive isomorphism (complying with external mandates). This research study also investigated how different types of isomorphism could be occurring in higher education as institutions try to retain legitimacy and funding sources. The clustering of retrenchment in states with Republican governors which also enacted anti-DEI legislation suggest the occurrence of coercive isomorphism (complying with external mandates). Retrenchment actions that happening in states without formal anti-DEI laws or external pressures

to engage in DEI retrenchments illustrates mimetic isomorphism (imitating similar institutions in times of uncertainty). These initial findings can aid institutionally marginalized student communities, their allies, and campus outdoor recreation programs in understanding the campus landscape in which they are operating and make more informed decisions of how to operate so they can still serve the needs of these vulnerable student communities.

The insights gleaned from Manuscript 1 about the current higher education landscape during this DEI retrenchment phase, further emphasizes that DEI has been vulnerable as an agent of real structural change in higher education. This is evident with the ease and quickness that many institutions engaged in pervasive DEI retrenchment across the country. Manuscript 2 focuses on what is needed for BIPOC college to co-create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation. Having a greater understanding for the key findings from this research study provides a clearer path to actualizing these empowering spaces and how campus and community partners need to support BIPOC college students in this effort. Knowing the key tenets/requirements for BIPOC students to co-create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation is more important now than ever before because of the current higher education climate described in Manuscript 1. Five themes were revealed in the research findings. These include: (1) the importance of co-constructing empowering spaces in outdoor recreation through partnerships and relationships, (2) centering and prioritizing values and cultural capital of the community, (3) sharing the burden of integration with campus and community partners, (4) risks, challenges, discomfort and vulnerability exist in these outdoor spaces, and (5) transformative learning occurs through disorientation and unfamiliar contexts. From the research findings, we discovered that being community-centered, collaborating with campus and community partners, and building

relationships will empower BIPOC college students to face expected and unexpected risks and challenges when recreating in unfamiliar outdoor spaces and in the era of DEI retrenchment.

Finally, Manuscript 3 provides key findings and recommendations directly from the student co-researchers' data analysis and data interpretation. Because the student co-researchers are also participants in the research, their data analysis ensures that findings more accurately reflect their realities resulting in actions more likely to benefit their communities (Liebenberg et al., 2020). The student co-researchers discovered four themes through their data analysis. The four themes are community, foundation, feelings, and access. The theme of community emerged from participants' interactions with peers and community partners, where bonding, support, and belonging contributed to a collective sense of inclusion, meaningful conversations, and strength in numbers. Foundation reflected the structure, logistics, needs, and growth that contributed to participants' sense of comfort and preparedness while supporting personal progress, confidence, and participation. The student community expressed feelings of pride, gratitude, and resilience when describing some of their outdoor recreation experiences. Negative feelings emerged related to their ski lesson experiences, more specifically to how the initial progress pacing was managed by the ski instructors. A significant aspect related to access was the financial barriers that influenced students' responses to whether they could continue to participate in outdoor recreational activities. Collectively, all the research findings provide a comprehensive and community-informed understanding of the overall research problem.

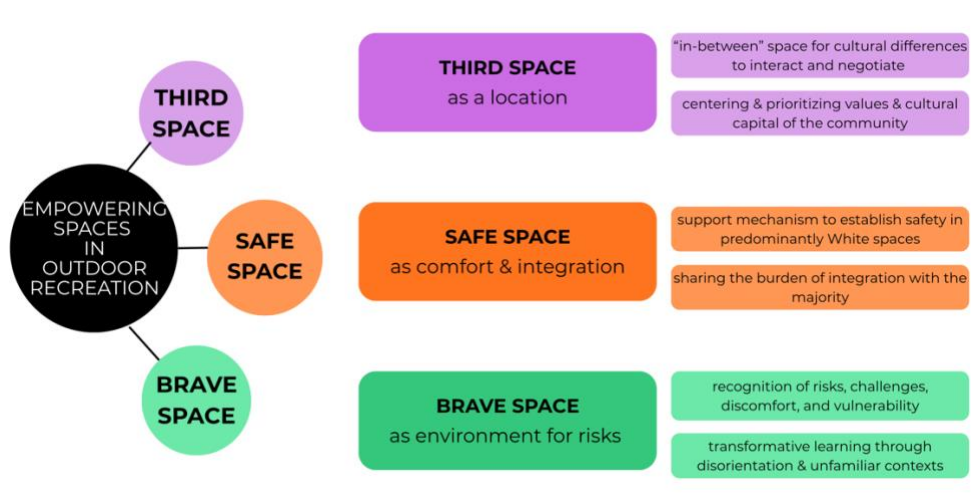
### Theoretical Implications

Ethnic recreation research dating back to the 1940s and through the 1990s tried to explain the reasoning of how and why certain racial groups engage in outdoor recreation. Several

different disciplines were used including sociology, psychology, and economics to relate research in these disciplines to ethnic recreation research. Unfortunately, these ethnic recreation research theories fail to address three key areas: the brutal American historical context that informs how racially marginalized groups recreate in the outdoors, the multi-dimensional perspective needed to fully investigate outdoor recreation participation of people of color, and how the relationship between race, racism and power applies to outdoor recreation. Lack of more integrative paradigms for ethnic recreation research limits the understanding of the real factors that limits engagement in outdoor recreation by racially marginalized communities (Johnson et al., 1997, p. 5). Community based participatory research has the potential develop new theories and theoretical frameworks that centers experiential knowledge of the community and provides language to discuss intersectionality, histories of institutionally marginalized communities, and their expertise of their lived experiences.

A new theoretical framework was developed specifically for the BIPOC student community and outdoor recreation. This framework is based on the premise that outdoor spaces are generally unsafe spaces, to varying degrees, for institutionally marginalized student communities. Lack of safety in outdoor spaces for people of color, including BIPOC college students, stems from a history of exclusion through institutionalized legislation and violence/aggression targeted at institutionally marginalized communities that continue to this day. Because of this unsafety for marginalized student communities, it is necessary that marginalized students can co-create *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* that allows them to: center their voices and lived experiences, co-create community to feel empowered to take on risks and challenges, collaborate with campus and community partners to inform others about

their needs in these spaces, and share their findings with their communities and other campus communities. This framework postulates that to research and create empowering spaces in outdoor recreation for marginalized students, it is necessary to combine certain tenets found in the theories of third space, safe space, and brave space. This new theoretical framework is copied below from Figure 1 in Chapter 3, and further research should be done to develop and improve upon this theoretical framework.



### Methodological Implications

Generalizability and transferability are common delimitation concerns for qualitative research studies coupled with participatory research methods. It is important to understand the differences in contextual conditions when comparing new research settings to the original research setting in which the knowledge was produced (Springett, 2011). Participatory research results usually cannot be generalized to other contexts (different types of schools, different groups, etc.). Springett (2011) offers a strategy to overcome the generalization problem by

conducting a broad analysis of a range of case studies with the goal of identifying general patterns and theories while recognizing that each context is unique.

A systematic literature review on outdoor recreation research and research methodologies was conducted in February 2026. With the assistance of a research services librarian, we did a thorough search of Google Scholar and ProQuest using the keywords of *outdoor recreation*, *outdoor education*, *community based participatory research*, *participatory research*, *marginalized students*, *college students*, and *BIPOC students*. The searches yielded no results for any of the combinations of these keywords. This leads us to believe that there is a gap in the literature of participatory research methods being utilized in outdoor recreation research and more specifically centered on BIPOC college students and other institutionally marginalized student communities.

While CBPR is a powerful research framework that is flexible and can be modified to fit a multitude of research contexts, a new research framework materialized during this outdoor recreation research project. *Community empowered praxis research* (CEPR) framework emerged after recognizing two key features that was unique to any pre-existing research frameworks. The ‘empowered’ part of CEPR is derived by how the community was situated within the research project and how they were able to engage in the actual planning and execution of the outdoor recreational activities. By situating the student community as co-researchers and lead contributors in the research project, they had the agency to lead in all phases of the research project and serve as experts of their lived experiences as they worked closely with campus and community partners. Also, the tenets that were described in the *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* theoretical framework from Chapter 3 were actualized during the research process and

was a key factor for the empowerment of the student co-researchers. Even though the student community were aware and faced risks and challenges while participating in unfamiliar outdoor spaces and learning new outdoor recreational activities, they were empowered to collaborate with campus and community partners to co-create their needed outdoor environments and share the burden of integration in these new outdoor spaces. The second unique feature of this research project compared to many outdoor research studies is that the student co-researchers/student participants and their student community were actively participating in outdoor recreation throughout the research project. They were not reflecting on lived experiences from a long time ago, but on recent lived experiences to more accurately record them. The student co-researchers were then able to use their reflections and discussions during the research team meetings to collaborate with their campus and community partners on how to best improve their outdoor recreation experiences moving forward in real time.

### Practical Implications

Higher education is viewed as “the great equalizer – a way of achieving the American Dream and social mobility,” so it is higher education’s duty to provide wide-ranging access to equitable and effective student support systems and campus programming to the entire campus community, not just the advantaged, White student population which institutions prioritize by default (Ajayi et al., 2021, p. 1). National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) recognizes how segregated many campuses still are, especially in campus and outdoor recreation, and how there is a real opportunity to engage with new ideas and challenge preconceived notions to create an environment in which students of color experience trust and safety (Popke, 2020). Much more outdoor recreation research like our outdoor recreation

research project needs to occur so we can better understand this research problem and develop actionable strategies to improve the experiences of BIPOC college students in outdoor recreation and increase their engagement in outdoor spaces.

While this research project was focused on BIPOC college students and their engagement in outdoor recreation, the strategies and processes chosen for this research project could extend to other research projects that have different contexts and focused on the lived experiences of institutionally marginalized college student communities. For scholars who want to pursue similar research projects that center institutionally marginalized communities' lived experiences, research teams can implement the following practices:

- Build intentional and meaningful relationships amongst the research team and with outside partners. To ensure and maintain equity and integrity during the research project, relationship-building is vital.
- Situate the student community not just as co-researchers but as lead contributors, who are experts of their own lived experiences, during the entire research project.
- Co-create data with the student co-researchers, not just co-collection of data, so that the student co-researchers can determine what data is important to collect and the best way to record the data.
- Co-analysis of the data, led by the student co-researchers, through inductive thematic analysis. This allows the student co-researchers to make meaning of their own data as a group and also to not be confined by theoretical frameworks to interpret their lived experiences.

- Co-authoring research findings and research articles with the student co-researchers to provide agency of how they would like their lived experiences disseminate to the public.

### Future Research

My future research plans include exploring the theoretical framework I created in Chapter 3, developing the new research methodology (CEPR) that I believe emerged from this research project, and expanding this research project to other college campuses and contexts. The *empowering spaces in outdoor recreation* theoretical framework explored the intersection of third space theory, safe space theory, and brave space theory as it pertains to BIPOC college students engaging in outdoor recreation. More work should be done on: (1) how BIPOC college students engage in third spaces generally, (2) how outside partners can and should share the burden of integration into unfamiliar outdoor spaces, (3) what safety mechanisms need to be in place for BIPOC college students to engage in outdoor recreation and how to implement these safety mechanisms, and (4) how to inform BIPOC college students of the risks, challenges and vulnerability they will experience in outdoor spaces while also framing their experiences as transformative learning opportunities. I plan to develop CEPR in collaboration with several colleagues that have expertise in community-based research practices, action research, and DEI research. Finally, I plan to collaborate with other college campuses with similar institutional characteristics such as Montana State University in Bozeman to determine how this similar research project can be implemented for other BIPOC college students. My hope is that through my research, I can help provide better frameworks, strategies, and knowledge to more easily engage in this type of research.

### Concluding Remarks

Outdoor recreation has the potential to be a great equity tool to increase sense of belonging and community for BIPOC college students on predominantly white campuses. Increasing BIPOC college students' engagement in outdoor recreation is possible when the student community and their campus and community partners have the knowledge and tools to co-create their empowering spaces in outdoor recreation. The community as co-researchers is essential when conducting outdoor recreation research equitably and effectively for institutionally marginalized student communities. In addition to community co-researchers, campus and community partners need to share the burden of integration when engaging in outdoor recreation utilizing CBPR methodologies and specifically *community empowered praxis research*.

While this is just one research study that utilized CBPR as a research methodology, this research project could serve as a flexible research model to guide further use of CBPR in outdoor recreation research and beyond. More BIPOC voices and lived experiences need to be included with our student co-researchers' voices to affect transformative change across multiple contexts on more college campuses. Even though research using CBPR is time-intensive, it is worth for the valuable outcomes that result from it. Long-term, this research can have a significant impact on increasing participation rates of BIPOC communities in outdoor recreation generationally. By intentionally engaging BIPOC college students in outdoor recreation throughout their college journey, they can then introduce outdoor recreation to their future communities and impactfully change the landscape of outdoor recreation and outdoor spaces.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

## TABLE 1

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Categorical Variables

|                                   | Overall Sample (%)<br>n = 176 | On Tracker<br>Sample (%)<br>n = 108 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Governor's Party Affiliation      |                               |                                     |
| Democratic                        | 46.0                          | 42.6                                |
| Republican                        | 54.0                          | 57.4                                |
| Accrediting Organization          |                               |                                     |
| HLC                               | 28.4                          | 31.5                                |
| MSCOHE                            | 16.5                          | 5.6                                 |
| NECOHE                            | 10.8                          | 7.4                                 |
| NWCCU                             | 6.8                           | 3.7                                 |
| SASCOC                            | 29.0                          | 39.8                                |
| WASC                              | 8.5                           | 12.0                                |
| Institution Size                  |                               |                                     |
| Small/Medium                      | 30.7                          | 18.5                                |
| Large                             | 46.0                          | 49.1                                |
| Very large                        | 23.3                          | 32.4                                |
| Control                           |                               |                                     |
| Public                            | 71.6                          | 85.2                                |
| Private                           | 28.4                          | 14.8                                |
| Minority-Serving                  |                               |                                     |
| Overall MSI                       | 25.6                          | 29.6                                |
| Non-MSI                           | 74.4                          | 70.4                                |
| Land Grant Status                 |                               |                                     |
| Land Grant                        | 31.8                          | 38.0                                |
| Non-Land Grant                    | 68.2                          | 62.0                                |
| State Legislation Passed          |                               |                                     |
| No legislation introduced         | 46.0                          | 33.3                                |
| Legislation introduced but failed | 18.8                          | 19.5                                |
| Legislation introduced and passed | 35.2                          | 47.2                                |
| Institutions On Tracker           |                               |                                     |
| Yes                               | 61.4                          |                                     |
| No                                | 38.6                          |                                     |
| DEI Retrenchment Actions          |                               |                                     |

|                         |      |
|-------------------------|------|
| Structural Retrenchment |      |
| Yes                     | 56.5 |
| No                      | 43.5 |
| Symbolic Retrenchment   |      |
| Yes                     | 72.2 |
| No                      | 27.8 |
| Funding Retrenchment    |      |
| Yes                     | 7.4  |
| No                      | 92.6 |
| Ambiguous Retrenchment  |      |
| Yes                     | 5.6  |
| No                      | 94.4 |

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APPENDIX B

## TABLE 2

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Quantitative Variables. Note. Values for all funding and total spent on student services are expressed in thousands.

| Variable                                  | Overall<br>Sample<br>n = 176 |           | On<br>Tracker<br>Sample<br>n = 108 |           |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------|
|                                           | M                            | SD        | M                                  | SD        |
| Federal Funding                           | 284,740.2                    | 361,783.3 | 292,044.1                          | 283,556.7 |
| State/Local Funding                       | 23,714.1                     | 35,329.8  | 31,527.8                           | 41,250.2  |
| Title IV Funding                          | 20,282.1                     | 8,262.4   | 18,021.9                           | 6,946.5   |
| Total Spent on Student Services           | 36,100.0                     | 25,700.0  | 38,100.0                           | 28,200.0  |
| 2023 Graduation Rates<br>(Non-White)      | 0.31                         | 0.19      | 0.32                               | 0.20      |
| 2023 Fall Enrollment Rates<br>(Non-White) | 0.37                         | 0.18      | 0.37                               | 0.20      |

APPENDIX C

## TABLE 3

Table 3. Chi Square Test Results for Structural Retrenchment Action  
Structural Retrenchment

|                              | Taken |      | Not Taken |      | $\chi^2$ | p-value  |
|------------------------------|-------|------|-----------|------|----------|----------|
|                              | n     | %    | n         | %    |          |          |
| Governor's Party Affiliation |       |      |           |      | 15.35    | 0.000    |
| Democratic                   | 16    | 26.2 | 30        | 63.8 |          |          |
| Republican                   | 45    | 73.8 | 17        | 36.2 |          |          |
| Accrediting Organization     |       |      |           |      | 36.56    | 0.000*** |
| HLC                          | 25    | 41.0 | 9         | 19.1 |          |          |
| MSCOHE                       | 1     | 1.6  | 5         | 10.6 |          |          |
| NECOHE                       | 0     | 0    | 8         | 17.0 |          |          |
| NWCCU                        | 2     | 3.3  | 2         | 4.4  |          |          |
| SASCOC                       | 32    | 52.5 | 11        | 23.4 |          |          |
| WASC                         | 1     | 1.6  | 12        | 25.5 |          |          |
| Institution Size             |       |      |           |      | 5.84     | 0.054    |
| Small/Medium                 | 7     | 11.5 | 13        | 27.7 |          |          |
| Large                        | 30    | 49.2 | 23        | 48.9 |          |          |
| Very large                   | 24    | 39.3 | 11        | 23.4 |          |          |
| Control                      |       |      |           |      | 4.86     | 0.027    |
| Public                       | 56    | 91.8 | 36        | 76.6 |          |          |
| Private                      | 5     | 8.2  | 11        | 23.4 |          |          |
| Minority-Serving             |       |      |           |      | 0.20     | 0.648    |
| Overall MSI                  | 17    | 27.9 | 15        | 31.9 |          |          |
| Non-MSI                      | 44    | 72.1 | 32        | 68.1 |          |          |
| Land Grant Status            |       |      |           |      | 2.76     | 0.096    |
| Land Grant                   | 19    | 31.1 | 22        | 46.8 |          |          |
| Non-Land Grant               | 42    | 68.9 | 25        | 53.2 |          |          |
| State Legislation Passed     |       |      |           |      | 23.29    | 0.000    |

|                                      |    |      |    |      |
|--------------------------------------|----|------|----|------|
| No legislation introduced            | 11 | 18.0 | 25 | 53.2 |
| Legislation introduced but<br>failed | 9  | 14.8 | 12 | 25.5 |
| Legislation introduced<br>and passed | 41 | 67.2 | 10 | 21.3 |

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Note: Findings with (\*\*\*) do not meet required expected frequencies of at least 5. Significant at the  $p < 0.10$  level.

APPENDIX D

TABLE 4

Table 4. Chi Square Test Results for Symbolic Retrenchment Action

|                              | Symbolic Retrenchment |      |           |      | $\chi^2$ | p-value  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|------|-----------|------|----------|----------|
|                              | Taken                 |      | Not Taken |      |          |          |
|                              | n                     | %    | n         | %    |          |          |
| Governor's Party Affiliation |                       |      |           |      | 8.67     | 0.003    |
| Democratic                   | 40                    | 51.3 | 6         | 20.0 |          |          |
| Republican                   | 38                    | 48.7 | 24        | 80.0 |          |          |
| Accrediting Organization     |                       |      |           |      | 8.09     | 0.151    |
| HLC                          | 22                    | 28.2 | 12        | 40.0 |          |          |
| MSCOHE                       | 4                     | 5.1  | 2         | 6.7  |          |          |
| NECOHE                       | 7                     | 9.0  | 1         | 3.3  |          |          |
| NWCCU                        | 2                     | 2.5  | 2         | 6.7  |          |          |
| SASCOC                       | 30                    | 38.5 | 13        | 43.3 |          |          |
| WASC                         | 13                    | 16.7 | 0         | 0    |          |          |
| Institution Size             |                       |      |           |      | 2.04     | 0.361    |
| Small/Medium                 | 16                    | 20.5 | 4         | 13.3 |          |          |
| Large                        | 35                    | 44.9 | 18        | 60.0 |          |          |
| Very large                   | 27                    | 34.6 | 8         | 26.7 |          |          |
| Control                      |                       |      |           |      | 2.19     | 0.139*** |
| Public                       | 64                    | 82.1 | 28        | 6.7  |          |          |
| Private                      | 14                    | 17.9 | 2         | 93.3 |          |          |
| Minority-Serving             |                       |      |           |      | 3.35     | 0.067    |
| Overall MSI                  | 27                    | 34.6 | 5         | 16.7 |          |          |
| Non-MSI                      | 51                    | 65.4 | 25        | 83.3 |          |          |
| Land Grant Status            |                       |      |           |      | 0.51     | 0.476    |

135

|                                   |    |      |    |      |      |       |
|-----------------------------------|----|------|----|------|------|-------|
| Land Grant                        | 28 | 35.9 | 13 | 43.3 |      |       |
| Non-Land Grant                    | 50 | 64.2 | 17 | 56.7 |      |       |
| State Legislation Passed          |    |      |    |      | 5.75 | 0.056 |
| No legislation introduced         | 31 | 39.7 | 5  | 16.7 |      |       |
| Legislation introduced but failed | 15 | 19.2 | 6  | 20   |      |       |
| Legislation introduced and passed | 32 | 41.1 | 19 | 63.3 |      |       |

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Note: Findings with (\*\*\*) do not meet required expected frequencies of at least 5. Significant at the  $p < 0.10$  level.

APPENDIX E

## TABLE 5

Table 5. Chi Square Test Results for Funding Retrenchment Action.  
Funding Retrenchment

|                              | Taken |       | Not Taken |      | $\chi^2$ | p-value  |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|------|----------|----------|
|                              | n     | %     | n         | %    |          |          |
| Governor's Party Affiliation |       |       |           |      | 1.09     | 0.296*** |
| Democratic                   | 2     | 75.0  | 44        | 44.0 |          |          |
| Republican                   | 6     | 25.0  | 56        | 56.0 |          |          |
| Accrediting Organization     |       |       |           |      | 5.82     | 0.324*** |
| HLC                          | 1     | 12.5  | 33        | 33.0 |          |          |
| MSCOHE                       | 0     | 0.0   | 6         | 6    |          |          |
| NECOHE                       | 1     | 12.5  | 7         | 7    |          |          |
| NWCCU                        | 0     | 0.0   | 4         | 4    |          |          |
| SASCOC                       | 6     | 75.0  | 37        | 37   |          |          |
| WASC                         | 0     | 0.0   | 13        | 13   |          |          |
| Institution Size             |       |       |           |      | 1.99     | 0.370*** |
| Small/Medium                 | 0     | 0.0   | 20        | 20   |          |          |
| Large                        | 5     | 62.5  | 48        | 48.0 |          |          |
| Very large                   | 3     | 37.5  | 32        | 32   |          |          |
| Control                      |       |       |           |      | 0.037    | 0.848*** |
| Public                       | 7     | 87.5  | 85        | 85   |          |          |
| Private                      | 1     | 12.5  | 15        | 15   |          |          |
| Minority-Serving             |       |       |           |      | 3.64     | 0.056*** |
| Overall MSI                  | 0     | 0.0   | 32        | 32   |          |          |
| Non-MSI                      | 8     | 100.0 | 68        | 68   |          |          |
| Land Grant Status            |       |       |           |      | 2.38     | 0.123*** |
| Land Grant                   | 1     | 12.5  | 40        | 40   |          |          |
| Non-Land Grant               | 7     | 87.5  | 60        | 60   |          |          |
| State Legislation Passed     |       |       |           |      | 5.77     | 0.056*** |

|                                      |   |      |    |    |
|--------------------------------------|---|------|----|----|
| No legislation<br>introduced         | 1 | 12.5 | 35 | 35 |
| Legislation introduced<br>but failed | 0 | 0.0  | 31 | 31 |
| Legislation introduced<br>and passed | 7 | 87.5 | 44 | 44 |

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Note: Findings with (\*\*\*) do not meet required expected frequencies of at least 5. Significant at the  $p < 0.10$  level.

APPENDIX F

## TABLE 6

Table 6. Chi Square Test Results for Ambiguous Retrenchment Action.  
Ambiguous Retrenchment

|                              | Taken |       | Not Taken |      | $\chi^2$ | p-value      |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|------|----------|--------------|
|                              | n     | %     | n         | %    |          |              |
| Governor's Party Affiliation |       |       |           |      | 4.71     | 0.030**<br>* |
| Democratic                   | 0     | 0.0   | 46        | 45.1 |          |              |
| Republican                   | 6     | 100.0 | 56        | 54.9 |          |              |
| Accrediting Organization     |       |       |           |      | 5.23     | 0.388**<br>* |
| HLC                          | 3     | 50.0  | 31        | 30.4 |          |              |
| MSCOHE                       | 0     | 0.0   | 6         | 5.9  |          |              |
| NECOHE                       | 0     | 0.0   | 8         | 7.8  |          |              |
| NWCCU                        | 1     | 16.7  | 3         | 2.9  |          |              |
| SASCOC                       | 2     | 33.3  | 41        | 40.2 |          |              |
| WASC                         | 0     | 0.0   | 13        | 12.8 |          |              |
| Institution Size             |       |       |           |      | 1.78     | 0.410**<br>* |
| Small/Medium                 | 0     | 0.0   | 20        | 19.6 |          |              |
| Large                        | 3     | 50.0  | 50        | 49.0 |          |              |
| Very large                   | 3     | 50.0  | 32        | 31.4 |          |              |
| Control                      |       |       |           |      | 1.10     | 0.293**<br>* |
| Public                       | 6     | 100.0 | 86        | 84.3 |          |              |
| Private                      | 0     | 0.0   | 16        | 15.7 |          |              |
| Minority-Serving             |       |       |           |      | 0.04     | 0.838**<br>* |
| Overall MSI                  | 2     | 33.3  | 30        | 29.4 |          |              |
| Non-MSI                      | 4     | 66.7  | 72        | 70.6 |          |              |

|                                   |   |       |    |      |      |              |
|-----------------------------------|---|-------|----|------|------|--------------|
| Land Grant Status                 |   |       |    |      | 0.06 | 0.810**<br>* |
| Land Grant                        | 2 | 33.3  | 39 | 38.2 |      |              |
| Non-Land Grant                    | 4 | 66.7  | 63 | 61.8 |      |              |
| State Legislation Passed          |   |       |    |      | 7.1  | 0.029**<br>* |
| No legislation introduced         | 0 | 0.0   | 36 | 35.3 |      |              |
| Legislation introduced but failed | 0 | 0.0   | 21 | 20.6 |      |              |
| Legislation introduced and passed | 6 | 100.0 | 45 | 44.1 |      |              |

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Note: Findings with (\*\*\*) do not meet required expected frequencies of at least 5. Significant at the  $p < 0.10$  level.

APPENDIX G

## TABLE 7

Table 7. Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results for DEI Retrenchment Actions.

|                                        | Structural   | Symbolic     | Funding      | Ambiguous    |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                        | Retrenchment | Retrenchment | Retrenchment | Retrenchment |
|                                        | n = 108      | n = 108      | n = 108      | n = 108      |
| Federal Funding                        | ns           | ns           | ns           | ns           |
| State/Local Funding                    | ns           | ns           | ns           | ns           |
| Title IV Funding                       | ns           | ns           | ns           | ns           |
| Total Spent on Student Services        | *            | ns           | ns           | ns           |
| 2023 Graduation Rates (Non-White)      | ns           | *            | ns           | ns           |
| 2023 Fall Enrollment Rates (Non-White) | ns           | *            | ns           | ns           |

Note: Associations not statistically significant (ns) if  $p > 0.10$ ; Associations are statistically significant (\*) if  $p < 0.10$