Promoting Equity, Diversity and Social Justice Through Faculty-Led Transformative Projects

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Abstract

We present a transformative professional development project with a focus on equity, diversity and social justice (EDSJ) to raise cultural awareness among faculty, increase agency, and promote positive change through transformative projects. Twenty-three faculty members from nine different colleges located at a Research I university were provided with critical cultural awareness workshops and then supported to develop transformative projects related to EDSJ. Based on focus group interviews and pre-post surveys, we identified four themes and five categories: two outcome-related (*Building Community* and *Transformative Actions*) and two operational themes (*Barriers* and *Facilitators*). We conclude that faculty-centered and transformative professional development projects could significantly benefit all those interested in establishing a culturally inclusive, positive and responsive climate. Our study also contributes to the emerging research on scholar activism and provides a practical model for implementation.

Keywords Scholar activism · Sociotransformative constructivism · Faculty development

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Introduction

The confluence of a global pandemic and the on-going protests against the (re) current violence inflicted on Blacks and other peoples of color has revealed once again the deep roots of systemic racism and its insidious impact on marginalized communities. These events have also stirred higher education faculty to become more conscious about systemic racism and their responsibility in sustaining social injustice. One only needs to look at the numerous invitations for on and off-campus webinars, keynotes, book clubs, and talks available through social media. These opportunities are valuable and might compel faculty to not only hear, but to really listen to the urgency of dismantling systemic racism. But, what happens next after attending those consciousness raising events? How do we enact a new sense of cultural awareness and advocate for social justice in meaningfully and transformative ways? Unfortunately, most professional development opportunities on cultural awareness (e.g., webinars) involve passively listening with limited engagement. Furthermore, these events usually do not include supported professional development follow-up. This lack of engagement expects participants to translate what they hear into self-reflection and transformative practice that is often challenging.

To help address this gap, we developed a longitudinal, professional development study with faculty from nine colleges at a R-1 institution. A unique aspect of this project is its emphasis on instigating transformative action; therefore, our study is guided by sociotransformative constructivism (Rodriguez, 2011/1998). This theoretical framework enabled us to openly engage in critical dialogues with participants around social justice issues in their working contexts. Our focus group interviews and pre-post surveys revealed that faculty welcome opportunities to build collaborative spaces where positive change can be envisioned and enacted. Furthermore, when provided with support, faculty can indeed develop and enact various kinds of creative and impactful transformative projects. This study adds to the emerging literature on scholar activism (Quaye et al., 2017); that is, activism driven by faculty individually or collectively with the purpose of meeting social justice goals.

In the next section, we briefly review key studies on scholar activism and explain how we used insights from these studies to inform ours. We then explicate how a transformational methodology approach enabled us to build *relational responsibility* with the participants. That is, a respectful space where the traditional roles of *researcher* and *researched* are fluid and transformed into a collaborative, responsive and responsible community of practice with shared social justice goals (Tolbert et al., 2018). Our findings show a meaningful impact on the participants who completed all aspects of the project. Finally, we offer recommendations for promoting responsive and social justice centered faculty professional development with a focus on faculty-led transformative projects.

Theoretical Framework

The last two decades have produced a significant body of research on the impact that racial climates, microaggressions, and discrimination have on students of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and on women and faculty of color in higher education and in industry (Hewlett et al., 2008; Nixon, 2017; NSF, 2019; Young et al., 2015). Most of these studies argue for the need to offer faculty multiple professional development opportunities to enhance their cultural competence and awareness. However, few studies investigate the actual and meaningful impact of such interventions on participants' teaching, curriculum and/or everyday interactions with colleagues and students.

To gather a better understanding of what *meaningful impact* may look like, recently some scholars have sought to shine light on faculty's teaching practices. For example, using Crenshaw's (1988) critical race framework, Haynes (2017) found that White¹ faculty members who held an *expansive view* of social justice (i.e., focused on addressing/eradicating the root causes of systemic racism), enacted behaviors in their classroom congruent with a heightened level of understanding of social justice tied to excellence and their personal roles as agents of change. Whereas White faculty members who held a *restrictive view* (i.e., focused on processes or specific outcomes), enacted behaviors more congruent with actions that would primarily serve their self-interests. This study is very significant as it illuminates the complexity of enacting social justice practices even by White faculty members who are already interested in equity, diversity and social justice (EDSJ) issues.

In contrast, Quaye et al. (2017), using a dual ethnography approach, document "the complexities and risks" (p. 381) Black faculty members encounter when seeking to transform their anger, pain and frustration into activism. They make a case for scholar activism as "a unique form of activism that can offer additional insights to consider in fostering social change" (p. 381). Their study contributes significantly to the limited literature on scholar activism with its rich qualitative analysis of how emotionally and intellectually draining this process is for Black faculty. The authors argue that creating a safe and supportive space to freely express this anger and frustration with the status quo is an essential first step to envision alternatives and agency.

While Quaye et al. (2017) offer insights into a grass-roots form of scholar activism, Goltz and Sotirin (2014) describe the challenges of enacting *unexpected* scholar activism. That is, as they sought to implement a university-wide initiative to promote gender bias awareness, they unexpectedly found themselves mitigating various types of resistance from participants. Their study illustrates that even with the support of the central administration, funding, and relevant expertise, an equity and diversity effort can be "plagued by a minefield of complex sociopolitical dynamics" (p. 195). They also elucidate that, in addition to resistance to engage in the ideological and

¹ We prefer to use terms that honor individuals' ethnic roots, such as Anglo-European, Latino/a, First Nations, etc. (Rodríguez, 2004). However, for clarity, we kept the same ethnic terms used by the authors we cite in this manuscript.

emotional work necessary to effect social change, they also encountered *epistemic resistance*. That is, the “the dominance of an empirical-analytic mind set valuing cause–effect, problem–solution, and quantifiable evidence was a major force of resistance” (p. 199).

Drawing insights from this literature, we sought to conduct a unique form of scholar activism guided by *sociotransformative constructivism* (sTc)—a theoretical framework that promotes social justice through critical cultural awareness, agency, and transformative action (Rodriguez, 2011/1998). Critical cultural awareness involves gazing inward to explore how one’s multiple positionalities (e.g., ethnicity, sex, etc.) may obstruct and/or facilitate the advancement of social justice efforts. However, it is not enough to be willing to engage in this form of on-going reflexivity, or to have a heightened sense of racial consciousness. sTc also compels individuals to take transformative action and bring about social change at the individual or community level. Rodriguez (2015) and Rodriguez and Morrison (2019) has employed this framework in multiple projects with teachers and their students, including undergraduate and graduate students. For this study, we focus on the agentic and transformational tenets of sTc to purposely instigate faculty to effect change where it matters most to them. In other words, in addition to providing participants with multiple opportunities for enhancing their racial consciousness through interactive workshops, we encouraged and supported them to enact a transformative project of their choice in their working contexts.

Methods

We used a critical ethnographic approach for our study design and analysis (Anderson, 1989; Moje, 2000) that is congruent with sTc (Rodriguez, 2011/1998). With this approach, we were able to provide meaningful and responsive feedback through *dialogic conversations*; that is, open and relational dialogues through which we empathically listen, freely share our experiences, and focus on collaborative solutions (Rodriguez, 2015). This critical approach enables us to unapologetically play the role of *provocateurs*. That is, unlike traditional efforts, we did not seek to only raise cultural awareness, we purposely sought to instigate reflection and transformative action (Sweetman et al., 2010; Tolbert et al., 2018). To this end, our approach was never directive but instead, we were “interested in investigating the enactment of participants’ choices and their sense of agency, as well as how present structures bent, remained unyielding or became porous in response” (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 451). Therefore, the core of a critical and transformative research methodology consists of providing various opportunities for praxis (reflection + action) (Freire, 1970).

Study Design

Interested participants were required to attend three distinct interactive workshops of 90 min each. The workshop series aimed to increase cultural awareness and reflection, foster a supportive community, and promote participants’ sense of agency (i.e.,

ability to effect positive change) through transformative projects. The first workshop focused on engaging with reflective activities on identity development, privilege and marginalization, cultural awareness and strategies for effecting change. During this workshop, participants were also encouraged to begin working on a *transformative project* proposal. That is, participants had the choice to work individually or in groups to develop and implement a small project focused on a specific issue aimed at improving EDSJ in their working contexts (e.g., enhance faculty climate; integrate culturally inclusive instruction; increase cultural awareness and competence; review strategies for increasing the recruitment and retention of women and scholars of color). Each participant was also provided with \$500 stipend to cover costs associated with their projects. Specific examples of these projects are discussed later. However, a unique aspect of our study is that the participants were invited to seek on-going support outside the workshops from the research team that is culturally diverse (i.e., four self-identify as female and two self-identify as male; two self-identify as Anglo-European, one Latino, one Southeast Asian and two Middle-Eastern; and in terms of rank, three are full professors, one associate professor and two doctoral students; from disciplines including science education, counseling psychology, aeronautics and astronautics, and mechanical engineering).

The second workshop was offered two weeks after the first one for participants to share their project ideas and receive feedback from cohort members and the research team. We also held a candid discussion about the perceived and probable obstacles participants might encounter as they sought to implement their projects and brainstormed strategies for navigating through and/or addressing those obstacles.

We conducted the last workshop about two months later for participants to share findings from their projects or progress updates and/or receive suggestions for navigating new or persistent obstacles. After another month, we had an optional follow-up meeting for participants to share their projects in person and held a focus group-interview to gather more details about the participants' experiences throughout the study. This on-going support and self-reflection are also consistent with authentic assessment, which is defined as measurement that is meaningful and applicable to real tasks. Cox and Richlin (2004) stated three principles of authentic assessment when applied to faculty learning communities: 1. active engagement of all faculty members in the assessment process with critical thinking and self-directed learning; 2. conceptualization of assessment both as an individual and social process; and, 3. mixed methods assessment at different times of the learning process. Throughout our project, we enacted all three of these aspects of authentic assessments.

Participants

We offered our workshop series to three cohorts in three different semesters (See Table 1). We recruited faculty through individual invitations sent to all 74 department heads at Purdue University. We requested each department head to share our invitation with their faculty members. In addition, we marketed the workshops widely on campus through fliers, emails and networking. In the recruitment email, we included a link to our project with a list of events and registration information.

Table 1 Participant demographics

Ethnicity ^a	Completed pre-survey across the three cohorts (N = 36)		Completed all aspects of the study across the three cohorts (N = 23)	
	Gender ^a	Rank	Gender ^a	Rank
African American/Black	3 Women	2 Assoc. Prof 1 Sr. Lecturer	2 Women	1 Assoc. Prof 1 Sr. Lecturer
Asian American/Asian	3 Women	1 Full Prof 2 Asst. Prof	1 Woman	1 Asst. Prof
Latino/a/x	2 Men	2 Asst. Prof	1 Man	1 Asst. Prof
	3 Women	2 Full Prof 1 Asst. Prof	3 Women	2 Full Prof 1 Asst. Prof
	1 Man	1 Full Prof	1 Man	1 Full Prof
European American/White	14 Women	2 Full Prof 2 Assoc. Prof 9 Asst. Prof 1 Lecturer	8 Women	1 Full Prof 1 Assoc. Prof 5 Asst. Prof 1 Lecturer
	8 Men	3 Full Prof 3 Assoc. Prof 2 Asst. Prof	5 Men	2 Full Prof 2 Assoc. Prof 1 Asst. Prof
European and Native American	1 Woman	1 Assoc Prof		
Middle Eastern American	2 Women	2 Asst. Prof	2 Women	2 Asst. Prof

Asst. Prof. Assistant Professor; *Assoc. Prof* Associate Professor, *Full Prof.* Full Professor, *Sr.* Senior

^a Preferred identity terms chosen by the participant

We also acknowledged that our study was funded by the Provost's Office. All participants signed an informed consent prior to first workshop which included information about confidentiality. Even though our study is part of a larger project supported by the Provost's Office, it was conducted independently from any university administration oversight.

A total of 36 faculty enrolled in the project; however, several individuals withdrew at various stages for a variety of reasons (e.g., illness, changes in workload). Cohort III participants' projects were also affected by the sudden changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we focused our analysis on 23 faculty who completed all aspects of the project, we included responses from participants' who withdrew at various stages. For example, we administered post-workshop evaluations, so even if a participant dropped out of the study after Workshop I or II, we included their responses to assess the workshops' overall impact.

Data Sources

a. Pre- and Post-Surveys: The pre-survey included a general demographic questionnaire, school/department/college affiliation, academic rank and role, and years of service at the university. Participants also completed both open- and closed-ended questions to assess their prior experiences with diversity initia-

tives. For example, participants were asked how many diversity and inclusion workshops or similar opportunities they had previously attended and their ratings of prior workshops' effectiveness on a 5-point Likert-like scale. Participants were also asked to provide open-ended responses to three items addressing one's knowledge, attitudes, and opinions about diversity and inclusion at our university. These included: "How do you define diversity, equity, and social justice? What do each of these three concepts mean to you? There are no right or wrong answers, we're interested in your perspective;" "what aspects of diversity, equity, and social justice in your department/school or at our university are you interested in?" and "from your perspective, what is one of the most pressing issues that needs to be addressed to improve the climate in your department/school and/or at our university?"

Using a longitudinal design, some items were also included in the post-survey at the end of third workshop to assess for faculty members' change in attitudes, behaviors, and learning of material over time. The post-survey incorporated four questions on participants' experiences in the workshop series. These included: "Overall, what was your experience like participating in this three-part workshop series?" "What was one of the most positive experiences about participating in this three-part workshop series?" "Overall, how did this three-part workshop series map onto your learning of new material and skills?" and "Please describe one or two things you learned during your participation in these workshops."

b. Post Workshop Evaluations. At the end of workshops I and II, participants were asked to anonymously complete an evaluation form. Participants selected how much they agreed or disagreed with each of nine statements on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Sample items include: "I was well informed about the objective of this workshop;" "The workshop activities stimulated my learning;" and "The workshop facilitator(s) were well prepared" (all evaluation prompts are listed in Table 2). Participants were also asked to respond to four open-ended items including: "Which parts of the workshop did you enjoy the most? Please explain." "Which parts of the workshop did you find the least useful? Please explain." "Please describe one or two things you learned" and "If applicable, please provide one practical suggestion for how we could improve this workshop." We reviewed the responses at the end of each workshop and made improvements for the upcoming workshops.

d. Focus Group Interviews. Participants were invited to participate in focus group discussions after attending all three workshops to share their overall experiences, including their perceived benefits and suggestions for improvement. We also asked participants to describe their transformative diversity projects, barriers, challenges, and any other issues they encountered, as well as any ways we could continue to support their efforts. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

e. Transformative Projects. To learn about participants' specific experiences working on their transformative projects, the post-survey included four open-ended items focused on projects description and goals; any challenges or unexpected cir-

Table 2 Types of completed or in-progress transformative projects and their target outcomes

Project Title and Description	Type of Transformative Action/Target Outcome
A. Review of faculty awards to examine gender equity [Completed] Presentation and report shared with college administration and faculty	IDA/Gender Equity
B. Diversity and inclusion resources for syllabus-making [Completed] Web resource made publicly available to campus community	IDA /Curriculum & Pedagogy
C. Development of educational tools to enhance the cultural awareness of summer camp instructors to work with international and culturally diverse students [Completed] A series of short videos to enhance the cultural awareness of summer camp instructors were developed and now implemented	IDA / Curriculum & Pedagogy
D. Enhancing the success of professors of practice, clinical and non-tenured faculty [Completed] A report with specific recommendations was shared with faculty and administration	IDA / Policy
E. Establishing an inclusive and respectful code of conduct for computer lab users (who are mostly males) [Completed] Changes were made in physical lab space and development of code of conduct is finalized and approved for implementation	IDA /Gender Equity
F. Luncheon series with Latinx faculty of color—retention, success and community building [In-progress] A series of gatherings with self-identifying Latinx faculty in order to prepare a list of suggestions and strategies for improving success and retention	IDA/Inclusion and Retention Latino/a Faculty
G. Dialog Circles with faculty of color from two different colleges (a full report is shared with college and university administration) [Completed] A full report was prepared (ensuring participant anonymity) and shared with the administration	GDA/ Inclusion and Retention of Faculty of Color
H. Enhancing the cultural competency of undergraduate students [Completed] As a pilot project, senior undergraduate students participated in a summer camp program with immersive experiences in a culturally diverse setting. Insights from this project were used to propose a required immersive experience for all students in the participant's program	GDA / Immersive Experiences for Undergraduate Students Diversity Training
I. Development of a climate survey to identify and address climate issues to enhance faculty retention and success in a large department [In-progress] Three participants from the same program are developing a climate survey and a series of “lunch and learn” meetings to address concerns revealed through the survey	GDA /Improve Faculty Climate

Table 2 (continued)

Project Title and Description	Type of Transformative Action/Target Outcome
J. Development of an assessment tool for understanding two different departments' cultures to enhance and raise awareness about diversity and inclusion [In-progress] Participants will use survey results to raise awareness about diversity and inclusion issues in their respective departments	GDA /Improve faculty climate
K. Promoting cultural competency through curriculum mapping, revision and interventions [In-progress] Five participants from the same school invited other colleagues to work on mapping and revising the curriculum content of their program to promote cultural competency across courses	GDA/Assess undergraduate students' cultural competency

IDA Individually Driven Action, *GDA* Group Driven Action

cumstances participants encountered and their learning about other faculty members' transformative projects.

Analysis

Using a qualitative approach to data analysis, all interview transcripts, surveys, short answers, and field notes were read independently by members of the research team (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following a constant comparison method (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), emerging categories were coded, and the strength of each category was further evaluated using information from all other data sources. In the next phase of analysis, axial coding was conducted to investigate any relationships amongst the emerging themes and categories. Finally, in the selective coding stage, major themes were identified and sub-categories collapsed as needed. Figure 1 shows the relevant final themes and categories, which are explained in the next section.

Since we employed multiple data sources over an extended period of time across three different cohorts of participants, we were able to triangulate the strength of our findings. Furthermore, since the same research team led the development and implemented all workshop activities, the fidelity of implementation, as well as the reliability and validity of findings are strong across the three cohorts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Similarly, this study was informed by a critical ethnographic and transformational approach that enables researchers to also assess the impact of a study in terms of its *catalytic validity* (Lather, 1991). This implies that "...researchers should engage in research not only to produce knowledge but also to make positive change in the lives of those who participate in research, change that the participants desire and articulate for themselves" (Moje, 2000, p. 25). Considering the rich

Fig. 1 Interaction of identified themes and categories with the facilitators and barriers to professional development

variety of transformative projects selected by the participants and how their voices are represented in the next section, we believe that the catalytic validity of this study is evident.

Findings

Our analysis revealed four major themes: two outcome-related themes (*building community* and *transformative action*) and two operational themes (*Barriers* and *Facilitators*). Outcome-related themes describe the participants' experiences and how they benefited from their participation in this project; where operational themes represent the operationalizing factors that either aided (*facilitators*) or obstructed (*barriers*) the participants' professional development (see Fig. 1). The various components described in Fig. 1 are dynamic and influenced one another.

Outcome-Related Theme 1: Building Community

A strong theme found across the three cohorts was the participants' sense of belonging to a supportive community of practice with three categories embodying this theme: *affirmation*, *sharing resources*, *awareness and knowledge*.

Affirmation

The most helpful for me was actually being in a group where everybody really was on the same page; everybody wanting to make some kind of change . . . hearing everybody else's ideas and struggles and then getting feedback on what we were thinking and what we were doing was really helpful (focus group, Cohort II, p. 13).

Scholars (Quaye et al., 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018) have consistently articulated the power of knowing that one's beliefs, experiences, concerns and interests are acknowledged and respected. To this end, we sought to establish an inclusive environment where all participants felt safe and valued. Even though some participants have had different kinds of experience with prior workshops addressing issues of equity and diversity, several of them commented on the sense of community and trust we established in our study.

Sharing Resources

This category is connected to the participants' questions and interests after each activity we conducted. For example, after the activity designed to assist participants examine their own positionalities and privileges, a participant in Cohort II shared how she uses a similar activity with her undergraduate students (who are mostly Anglo, middle-class women). This led to a discussion of other activities and pedagogical strategies that could be used to raise students' and/or colleagues' cultural awareness. One Cohort II participant commented in the post-survey, "I loved the exercise on privilege. Very eye opening. I hope we can do a version of that in [our department] as part of our project."

Similarly, in Cohort II, one of the male participants expressed that he had not heard the term 'white privilege' before, so this opened up another opportunity for workshop facilitators and participants to share their understandings of key concepts. In all of these instances, we also responded by providing additional reading resources. This more responsive and interactive approach to professional development is also congruent with the sTc framework (Author, 2015, 2019).

Awareness and Knowledge

One of our primary objectives was to raise awareness and interest in actively addressing issues of equity, diversity and social justice relevant to each participant's working contexts. We consistently observed across all three cohorts that this objective was achieved. For example, one participant elaborates,

I learned (or rather, was compelled to remember) my own privilege as a tenured academic, whatever my ethnic or class identifications. And it was good for me to hear and learn about a broad range of inequities that colleagues

experience related to gender, academic position, and so on. (post-survey, Cohort I).

Some participants found it very revealing that many of the issues they were experiencing in terms of inequities, lack of diversity and/or efforts to address them were very similar across the university. “I learned about the general climate on campus and that problems are systemic at [our university]” (post-survey, Cohort II). Others specifically named increased awareness about specific concepts, “I have an increased understanding of white fragility and of intersectionality” (post-survey, Cohort II).

We know that faculty may often feel overwhelmed by the challenges they encounter (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Sometimes hearing from other colleagues who are experiencing similar issues may provoke feelings of paralysis as deeply embedded systemic inequalities are revealed and seem insurmountable (Sue et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2015; Rodriguez & Morrison 2019). To address this concern, we engaged participants in the construction of a concept map about perceived and known challenges they were likely to encounter as they sought to complete their transformative projects. This was followed by a brainstorming discussion of potential strategies to counter or navigate these perceived (and/or real) obstacles (Sue et al., 2019).

Outcome-Related Theme 2: Transformative Action

As mentioned earlier, participants were encouraged to select any equity issue within their working contexts they wished to address for their transformative projects. Table 2 lists all of the projects that were fully completed or are in-progress. This represents seventy-eight percent of the participants who also completed all aspects of the study (i.e., workshops I and II evaluations, pre-post surveys and focus group interviews). Overall, we identified two types of projects based on the number participants working on them: *individually driven action* and *group driven action* projects.

Individually-Driven Action

These projects involved only one of the participants taking the lead, with some projects engaging additional individuals, but this did not necessarily mean that only one person carried out the entire project. For example, Project D (listed on Table 2), *enhancing the success of professors of practice, clinical and non-tenured faculty*, the participant took the lead in inviting adjunct, clinical and non-tenured faculty to participate in a series of working lunch discussions aimed at producing a set of recommendations for promoting the success of this important, but often taken for granted, group of faculty members. In this case, the participant used the \$500 stipend to offer lunch and refreshments as incentive for others to join in. In contrast, for Project A, *gender equity in faculty awards*, the participant worked on her own to review all the faculty awards given by her college in order to determine whether there was a gender bias. As it was the case in most of these types of transformative projects, the end result was a report that was shared with the pertinent administrators to instigate positive change. Some of the individually driven projects had different deliverables than recommendation reports.

For example, Project B, *diversity and inclusion resources for syllabus-making*, produced a wonderful resource that all participants (and university community) could use. We found that Cohort II and III participants appreciated hearing about the various projects completed by previous cohorts. As one participant aptly surmised: “seeing is believing; sharing is inspiring” (post-survey, Cohort II). It seemed that having these examples motivated and inspire them to embrace one of this study’s primary goals that transformative change is possible and it can take many forms.

Group-Driven Action

These projects were driven by two or more participants, and again, sometimes engaging additional individuals. Some of the participants sought to involve others within and/or across program areas, departments or colleges in their transformative projects. Furthermore, some participants took advantage of the wide representation of disciplinary expertise among this study’s leaders and invited some of us to join their projects as collaborators. For example, one participant invited the first author to join her and the Diversity Officer from her college (who was not a participant of the study) to conduct a series of dialog circle conversations (a form of intimate, confidential and honest conversations with faculty of color about their experiences) [see Project G, Table 2]. The recommendations based on the analysis and findings from these dialog circles were shared with the deans of the respective colleges, the University Provost and the Vice Provost for Diversity.

An important aspect to highlight with these projects is that one of our study’s goals was to establish a supportive community. As one participant observed that one of the most positive experience for her was “connecting with other scholars on campus who are concerned about diversity and inclusion. I met new people and allies” (post-survey, Cohort I). The rich variety of transformative projects, approaches, target outcomes, and dedication demonstrated by the participants surpassed the team’s expectations. In other words, given that we could only offer a small amount of funding support; given that our workshops were occurring during the regular semester; and given the busy and complicated lives of faculty, we encouraged participants to select projects that would not be too onerous and time-consuming. However, several participants opted to carry out projects that required them to take on significant leadership roles and that had the potential to create long-lasting and significant impact that went beyond their program areas and departments (see Table 2). In the next section, we discuss the operational-related themes, *facilitators* and *barriers*.

Operational Theme 1: Facilitators

We sought to understand the factors that facilitated the participants’ success and organized their responses into three categories: *interactive activities*, *personal approach* and *support from the team* (see Fig. 1).

Interactive Activities

Since we were interested in assessing the impact of our workshops on participants' perspectives and sense of agency (or ability to take action), we conducted a survey after workshop I and II and encourage participants to write additional comments. The median scores demonstrate that most participants found the workshops useful in all categories. That is, we received a median score of 4 or 5 on almost all items using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 Strongly disagree; 2 Disagree; 3 Neutral; 4 Agree; and 5 Strongly Agree). For example, almost 79% of Cohort I and almost 87% of Cohort II participants chose a score 4 or 5 for the statement, "I will be able to use what I learned in the workshop moving forward". Interestingly, our consistently lowest scores for both cohorts (65.7% Cohort I and 62.9% Cohort II participants who chose a 4 or 5) were for the item, "the activities in this workshop gave me sufficient practice." It seems that some participants wanted to spend more time deconstructing our interactive activities and actually wanted more of these types of activities. For example, one of the activities participants found very useful to explore the concept of privilege involved receiving a plastic gold coin for each positive respond to a set of 33 privilege prompts we read during the workshop (e.g., "I have never been called names because of my race, class, identity, sexual orientation, gender, or ability"). This activity stimulated a rich discussion at two levels that we were not expecting. First, some participants were amazed at the large number of coins some of them accumulated compared to other participants in the room. This provoked a meaningful discussion about various privileges we all have according to our positionalities; what we take for granted; and ways that we could use our privilege(s) to make equity and social justice a reality for everyone. The other level of the discussion was pedagogical in nature. In other words, some participants wanted to discuss pedagogical strategies for using the same activities in their courses. We did not anticipate having these rich discussions about pedagogy and curriculum right away during workshops I and II, and our time was limited to 90 min. This finding indicates that faculty may be interested in participating in more and longer workshops during the semester if they are finding the activities interactive and relevant to their needs.

Personal Approach

Closely related with the above category, most participants mentioned that they valued the personal approach we used to build a sense of community. In other words, instead of using traditional methods that essentially involved participants passively listening to invited speakers talk about EDSJ issues with limited time for questions and follow up, we sought to openly share our personal experiences. To this end, all members of the research team participated in the workshops in small and large group discussions. Unlike traditional workshops, we particularly paid attention to not taking an "expert" role and co-participating with faculty to establish trust and a sense of community. This may explain why the highest scores we received for the post-workshop evaluations from Cohorts I and II were consistently the highest for being well prepared and effective facilitators (with almost 90% to 96% of participants selecting a score of 4 or 5 for these items). One participant exemplifies

a common response, “I enjoyed what y’all did with us at the workshop...not just somebody standing there lecturing facts but to have some interactions” (focus group, Cohort II).

Support from the Team

Another unique aspect of our project was our effort to establish a sense of community that was safe and open. We co-established group norms and explicitly shared and modeled them. One participant added, “I also appreciated the opportunity to give, receive and act on critique when we shared our ideas with one another and received feedback and suggestions from the other participants and facilitators” (post-survey, Cohort II).

In addition, several research team members met with some participants and their teams for consultation or collaboration as needed. One participant indicated,

I think the breadth of knowledge across the group members was big for me. Being able to connect with other faculty and staff working on the same issues made them seem less intimidating (post-survey, Cohort II).

We were also very intentional to communicate that the participants were in control. In other words, they were not told what project to work on, how to do them, nor to complete them by a deadline. They were simply encouraged to act on their sense of agency and work on a topic or issue they care about; to ask questions; to seek support; and to tell us how we could help them see their projects through. Many of them took advantage of the latter, and we responded in kind. We believe that we need to provide multiple opportunities for engagement and support for faculty to pursue equity and diversity projects that best address their perceived needs and interests.

Operational Theme 2: Barriers

What were the barriers that obstructed the success of developing and implementing this study? Even though we experienced a great deal of success, our participants encountered many barriers (see Fig. 1). While not all of them had to manage the same barriers, we grouped the most salient ones into five categories: institutional barriers, hostile climate/feeling safe, learning new skills, time, and apathy.

Institutional Barriers

Some participants had to deal with frustrating policies that unnecessarily delayed their projects and/or added extra steps. For example, for Project E (see Table 2), the participant explained,

Apparently trying to get a computer screen installed involves at least three different departments at [the university]. I am flabbergasted by how complex this

is, the unwillingness of people to help, and the complete lack of responsiveness from the facilities [department] (post-survey, Cohort I).

Hostile Climate/Feeling Safe

Other participants commented that they were worried about being labelled as a “trouble maker” because there were so few scholars of color in their department or college, so they were hesitant about carrying out their projects as planned. For instance, one participant wanted to explore whether there were pay equity issues regarding summer employment, so she wanted to send a confidential survey to faculty and graduate students who usually work during the summer. She opted not to carry out that project because, “if there is only one person doing it, and someone gets the e-mail and forward it to somebody else...(laugh)...you’re gonna get a mark on your back as far as someone finds out that you’re trying to stir up trouble” (focus group, Cohort I).

Learning New Skills

Some participants became aware that they needed to acquire new skills in order to complete their projects effectively; especially, when they sought to carry out a project at a larger scale than our study was promoting. For instance, the team working on Project I, which included developing a climate survey, explained, “even though we thought it was like really simple and straight forward, I think [our project] is bigger than we thought it was...[and] the IRB complicates the whole thing” (Cohort I, focus group). This team with a strong background in STEM, felt that they needed to learn new skills in the social sciences for creating and validating an effective survey, as well as for completing corresponding, social sciences-related IRB requirements. Two of the team members provided some guidance to this team as mentioned earlier; however, we argue that this is the kind of “barrier” that universities could turn into opportunities for professional development and cross-department/college collaboration.

Time

A common concern, and one that is not surprising, considering the busy lives of faculty was having sufficient time to complete their transformative projects. We noticed that some faculty took different roles with new responsibilities while involved in the project. For example, one of the participants who submitted a proposal, completed all surveys, workshop evaluations, and focus group discussions, was not able to fully complete his transformative project as planned. He explained, “so far, the biggest challenge has been devoting time to this project, as I’m currently serving in an administrative role and I’m occupied with tasks related to that job” (post-survey, Cohort I).

Apathy

We haven't reach out to the people who are probably not as interested and don't care as much, and so as think that's going to be the biggest problem—or biggest growth that we have is dealing with people who do not care as much (Focus group, Cohort II).

For several participants expected or actual apathy was a discouraging factor. One participant working on an ambitious project to enhance cultural competency across their program (Project K, Table 2) explained,

the biggest challenge was getting people to send us their syllabus or share what it is they are actually covering and then trying to find time to match up with people and get them to understand that we're not really trying to dig into your course or anything. We're just trying to map [aspects of cultural competency] across the curriculum (Focus group, Cohort II).

In spite of the barriers, some participants individually or in their teams managed to navigate through the barriers they encountered. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, some participants were not able to complete their projects and/or withdrew from the study after the first or second workshop. Since we asked them to write a draft of their proposed projects after the first workshop, we were able to at least document the intended topics they wished to explore. These projects represented a rich diversity of topics and target outcomes about issues that truly matter to these individuals. It is unfortunate that these faculty members were not able to complete these projects, and in a future study with more resources, it would be ideal to conduct exit interviews and better understand the barriers that cause individuals to withdraw from this equity focused study. Similarly, with more resources, it would be essential to conduct a longitudinal study that could enable us to assess the individual impact of each project on its target population, as well as to investigate what aspects facilitated (or obstructed) their success. One suggestion that was proposed by participants to better assist their efforts was to secure in advance the support of department chairs and deans. They felt that administrators could entice faculty to get involved (e.g., joining their transformative projects; completing surveys; sharing materials). They also felt that administrators could provide additional funds and assistance navigating obstructive policies.

Conclusion and Implications

We began this manuscript by drawing attention to how the current world-wide pandemic and (re)current violence against Blacks and other peoples of color have once again forced us to confront systemic racism. This social illness is deeply rooted in the historical, social and ideological fabric of the United States as a former imperial colony, and sadly—even as an advanced nation—our country is still afflicted by systemic racism.

Unfortunately, institutions of higher education, in spite of their qualifying moniker, are not exempt from systemic racism either. In fact, it is well documented that institutions of higher education often serve to propagate this social disease by allowing oppressive climates and policies that discriminate against women, peoples of color and members of other marginalized groups from fully participating in the production and advancement of knowledge. It is quite evident that to tackle centuries of oppressive practices, reconceptualizing our understanding of equity, diversity and social justice is going to take a great deal more than occasional professional development workshops, talks, webinars, book clubs, or other cultural awareness events (Allen et al., 2020; Rodriguez & Morrison, 2019). While these are no doubt useful and needed, in this paper we have provided evidence that some faculty welcome opportunities to do much more and engage more actively. In fact, most of the participants in our project were able to complete transformative social justice projects of their own choosing (Table 2). We argue that by using a sociotransformative constructivism as a conceptual framework (Rodriguez, 2011/1998), our team developed and implemented a series of workshops that had ideological and conceptual clarity focused on social change. Thus, our project contributes to the emerging research on scholar activism (Quaye et al., 2017). That is, research led by faculty with the aim of instigating participants to enact their own voices and sense of agency, and to be contributing authors of the very social change they wish to see.

Similarly, by using a critical and transformative methodological approach, we were able to establish meaningful relationships with the participants, create a space where their (our) concerns, anxieties, and goals were freely shared (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tolbert et al., 2018). Furthermore, without being directive, this methodological approach enabled us to not only instigate participants to pursue transformative projects of their choice, but to provide support and encouragement throughout.

Even though we found significant success as illustrated in the outcome related themes, *building community* and *transformative action*, as well as in the operational related theme, *facilitators* (Fig. 1), participants also encountered significant barriers. In addition to delaying, frustrating, and sometimes preventing faculty from completing their transformative projects, these *barriers* (Fig. 1) may have also contributed to some participants leaving the project. We cannot help but wonder about the impact that those efforts could have had on those faculty members' working contexts. In that light, we offer four additional recommendations for further research and for reducing/eliminating the barriers that can impede this type of faculty-led and sociotransformative professional development efforts:

Multi-Part Workshop and On-Going Support for Transformative Projects

We were originally concerned about making it a requirement that participants committed to attending all three 90-min workshops in order to be included in the project. However, it turned out that many participants wanted more time to discuss emerging issues and ideas. We were pleased to see that some of our workshop activities also

triggered curriculum and pedagogical discussions. Thus, we suggest that additional and optional workshops be made available to participants who may wish to expand on topics brought up during the three-parts workshop.

Secure Support from Deans and Department Chairs

A consistent suggestion provided by participants was the need to have deans and department chairs/heads on board and fully supporting the project. Participants felt that their administrators could help navigate existing policies (or lack thereof), as well as encouraged other faculty members to get involved in their chosen transformative projects (e.g., answering climate surveys, curriculum enhancements, recruitment efforts, etc.).

Provide Multiple Incentives and Recognition of their Efforts

Many participants mentioned that more faculty might get involved in this type of social justice-centered professional development efforts, or in their own chosen transformative projects, if the university administration provided more substantial incentives. For example, we offered participants a certificate of completion, and they felt that their certificate should have a greater weight for tenure and promotion purposes given that the transformative projects were impactful at multiple levels. Similarly, others felt that departments/colleges should provide additional funds to either expand their transformative projects or/and sustain new approaches. For example, conducting dialog circles with faculty of color once a month to not only hear concerns, but to collaborative draw plans to effect change and for ongoing support.

Create Faculty Learning Communities (FLC)

Our workshops reflected some of the features of topic-based faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004; Cox & Richlin, 2004). These authors suggest that topic-based faculty learning communities (FLC) should have about eight to twelve members who come together to focus on a special topic or issue. We found that faculty appreciated the freedom of working on their transformative projects in small groups of their choice or individually while being supported by the larger learning community. In a summary of lessons learned from FLC projects focused on diversity, Petrone (2004) suggests that FLC should “operate at both the emotional and intellectual levels” (p. 116); should seek to unpack faculty’s “professional privilege;” and promote respectful and inclusive interactions. Our project’s design and outcomes also support these approaches, and we believe that in addition the faculty-chosen transformative projects provided the anchor that kept participants focused and working productively on something that truly matter to them.

In closing, we cannot ignore the unmeasurable trauma caused by systemic racism in institutions of higher education (Quaye et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2019). Similarly, we cannot ignore the significant amount of money and resources university administrations sometimes end up spending to address issues of climate,

microaggressions and other forms of discrimination when these issues are left unattended for far too long (Allen et al., 2020; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). We argue that an additional approach to avoid these negative outcomes is by promoting EDSJ through faculty-led transformative projects as shown herein. While more research is needed, our findings indicate that when faculty members are provided with opportunities to establish a supportive community, they are quite engaged and creative in their efforts to develop and implement transformative projects designed to address issues that most matter to them in their working contexts.

Limitations

We acknowledge a number of limitations in this study. First, it is possible to have a self-selection bias since we recruited faculty members based on their interest and willingness to invest their time. Second, as researchers, committed to EDSJ, we recognize the possible limitation that comes with this self-investment; however, it is also possible that our motivation and time investment energized the workshop participants. Finally, we did not engage administrators (i.e., department heads, associate deans, or deans) in similar workshops. We believe that administrators should also be involved in especially designed transformative workshops for them in order to ensure the sustainability of this kind of equity and diversity professional development projects. It would be ideal to replicate this project in other institutions to address these limitations.

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