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Mindful innovation for the ethical disruption of racial inequities: a case study of student affairs practice stimulating organizational change

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This article brings together two distinct fields of scholarship—disruptive innovation and equity-minded student success—to analyze a case study of student affairs practice stimulating organizational change. Utilizing examples from the authors' asset-based peer tutoring initiative in a rural Hispanic Serving Institution in the Southeast United States, the article argues that a new conceptualization of "disruption" is necessary for organizational change that supports students from racially and ethnically minoritized groups. As a starting point, the article outlines Clayton Christensen's influential business-oriented theory of disruptive innovation first proposed in 1997. The article then critically analyzes current rhetoric on disruption in higher education by private consulting firms and leaders who wish to portray "executive disruptions" to higher education institutions as an existential necessity. An analysis reveals that this rhetoric is a cynical appropriation of Christensen that leverages the rhetorical power of disruption as a justification for undermining public higher education through ideologically driven program cuts and attenuated student access. As a corrective, this article therefore proposes a reframing of disruption that builds on equity-minded organizational change literature by Estela Bensimon and Adrianna Kezar, Lori Patton's argument for disrupting higher education through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, Victor Ray's theory of racialized organizations, and Lanford and Tierney's identification of the environmental factors and dimensions which support mindful innovation in higher education. Inspired by this literature, the article proposes a conceptualization of ethical disruption which is considered through six frames: philosophy, discourse, agents, instruments, leadership, and organizational impact. The final section of the article depicts a praxis-oriented institutional case study of ethical disruption by identifying three barriers to organizational equity—and the methods used to disrupt them for the benefit of student success.

KEYWORDS

Critical Race Theory, disruption, equity, innovation, organizational change, peer tutoring, racialized organizations, student success

1 Background

Higher education institutions in the United States (U.S.) are becoming increasingly diverse as students from minoritized groups enroll in greater numbers (Kim et al., 2024). Nevertheless, minoritized students continue to be disenfranchised from the opportunities that could be facilitated by higher education (Wofford, 2022). Many of the factors instigating the systemic marginalization of minoritized students include the troubling persistence of White, Eurocentric norms in institutional environments (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018); university curricula which inculcate and inscribe disingenuous cultural and historical narratives for the purposes of political gain and hereditary privilege (Darling-Hammond, 2017); the adverse impact of deficit thinking among education policymakers, administrators, and professors (Patton and Museus, 2019; Tichavakunda and Kolluri, 2025; Valencia, 1997); and burgeoning resource disparities among U.S. colleges and universities (Orphan et al., 2021). These resource disparities, in particular, have a pernicious effect on educational equity, as they bestow significant, hegemonic advantages on a perceived "elite" group of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). For example, many "elite" PWIs already benefit from sustained capital accumulation through legacies of racialized exploitation (Cantwell, 2016; Stein, 2022), private philanthropy which is stimulated through social closure (Maclean et al., 2021; McClure et al., 2017), and state performance funding systems that reward some institutions for leveraging their financial advantages and selective admissions practices while penalizing other institutions for maintaining broad student access through policies which promote austerity (Fisher and Lanford, 2025; Ortagus et al., 2020).

The result of these collective phenomena is structural oppression for students and communities of color (Lincoln and Stanley, 2021; Stewart, 2020). Rather than assisting students from marginalized backgrounds in earning valuable credentials and building social connections that could potentially promote upward mobility and counter social stratification, colleges and universities function as tools for White, middle- and upper-class families to accumulate and maintain dominant political, social, and cultural power (Kolluri and Tichavakunda, 2022; Rendón, 2020).

These detrimental resource disparities, institutional norms privileging Whiteness, and deficit framings have been challenging to disrupt, particularly when they are tacitly or (at times) explicitly supported by federal and state policies (Salmi and D'Addio, 2021), higher education governing bodies and leadership (Rall et al., 2022), and a professoriate that remains predominantly White, identifies as male, and hails from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds (Morgan et al., 2022; White-Lewis, 2020). Part of the difficulty in achieving meaningful reform is that organizational initiatives are frequently the result of top-down processes that fail to center educational equity and solicit input from knowledgeable staff and faculty (Felix and Nienhusser, 2023). In turn, the important work of student activists, student affairs practitioners and faculty in affirming student identities, building student relationships, and transforming unjust systems—all in service of measurable student success is minimized or eliminated (Lerma et al., 2020).

Hence the *raison d'être* for this article. Congruent with the theme of this special issue, we propose that student affairs professionals and faculty are in a unique position to catalyze disruptive organizational change which promotes greater racial equity in their institutions. For the future of students from racially and ethnically minoritized groups in higher education, student affairs professionals and faculty must exercise ethical and meaningful praxis to develop meaningful innovations that will have a significant impact in the lives of historically marginalized student populations. The question is how?

This article brings together two distinct fields of scholarship—organizational innovation and minoritized student success—to analyze a case study in which student affairs practice drives disruptive organizational change. Although we use empirical case data in this article to illustrate one method for achieving disruptive organizational change, our primary contribution is intended to be conceptual. Using examples from the authors' asset-based peer tutoring initiative at an emerging rural Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the Southeast United States, we argue that a new conceptualization of "disruption" is necessary for organizational change in institutional environments that, for ideological and/or political reasons, are disinclined to recognize and support students from racially and ethnically minoritized groups. Empirical data is faithfully reproduced in this article, but we are transparent about our advocacy for minoritized students and our belief that public higher education should center educational access and equity as its primary missions. In addition, our writing is intentionally critical of actors who we believe are undermining these goals.

As a starting point, we outline Clayton Christensen's (1997) influential business-oriented theory of disruptive innovation first proposed in 1997. While Christensen's theory has been useful for identifying emergent external threats to certain teaching and learning aspects of higher education, we contend that it is of limited utility for institutions that serve multiple missions (e.g., teaching, service, and research) and have an avowed commitment to supporting underserved student populations (Cooper, 2023; Tierney and Lanford, 2016).

We then critically analyze current rhetoric on disruption in higher education. As part of this analysis, we introduce the concept of "executive disruption" to depict the actions of private consulting firms and institutional leaders who wish to portray disruption to higher education institutions as an existential necessity. We argue that this rhetoric is not simply an innocent departure from Christensen's conceptualization of disruptive innovations; it is a cynical appropriation that attempts to leverage the rhetorical power of disruption as a justification for undermining public higher education through ideologically driven program cuts and attenuated student access. The narrative of these executive disruptors also pushes higher education toward a business-oriented, New Public Management framework that ultimately disadvantages Students of Color.

As a corrective, we propose a reframing of disruption that builds on equity-minded organizational change literature by Estela Bensimon and Adrianna Kezar, Lori Patton's (2016) argument for disrupting higher education through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, and Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. To nurture an organizational culture of "mindful

innovation" (Lanford and Tierney, 2022), we also identify four environmental factors and three key dimensions which require nuanced engagement for innovations that can support equitable and inclusive student experiences. Inspired by this literature, we propose a conceptualization of ethical disruption which is considered through six frames: philosophy, discourse, agents, instruments, leadership, and organizational impact. The final section of the article depicts a praxis-oriented case study of how a peer tutoring program endeavored to ethically disrupt resource inequities, institutional norms privileging Whiteness, and deficit framings of minoritized students at a rural HSI in the Southeast U.S. where ideological and political forces prevent the presence of diversity offices, multicultural centers, and other forms of student support. Data related to the peer tutoring program case study are presented and analyzed through two research questions:

1) What are the organizational barriers to implementing initiatives, such as a peer tutoring program, that potentially foster a greater sense of student belonging and persistence?
2) How might these organizational barriers, along with values and beliefs which privilege Whiteness, be ethically disrupted to support innovation?

2 An analysis of contemporary rhetoric concerning disruption in higher education

2.1 The origins of disruptive innovation theory

Acclaimed Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen (1997) first proposed his theory of "disruptive innovation" in a 1997 book entitled *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*. As implied by the subtitle, Christensen's text offered a cautionary tale to dominant businesses that were reliant on legacy products for revenue. Through an examination of multiple case studies, Christensen proposed that companies which developed "disruptive innovations" frequently supplanted dominant businesses within the same sector that were focused on "sustainable innovations" to maintain their market presence. According to Christensen, a disruptive innovation included four features: simplicity, affordability, convenience, and accessibility. The latter feature of accessibility was especially important for disruption, as it extended opportunity to individuals who might not have been able to afford or develop the skills necessary to enjoy an incumbent, dominant product.

One key element in Christensen's theory is time. Usually, when a disruptive innovation is introduced to the general public, it is inferior and/or more expensive than the product from its dominant competitor. A classic example of a disruptive innovation is the personal desktop computer. When Commodore, Apple, and Tandy released personal computers to the general public in 1977, they were much more expensive and difficult to operate than incumbent typewriters. Over time, however, the accessibility of personal computers improved, their ability to perform multiple tasks exponentially increased, and they became much cheaper (Tierney and Lanford, 2015).

Disruptive innovation is a brilliant theory that distills complex processes into a convincing and logical package. Its impact on business literature and practices has been comprehensive, as executives in numerous sectors have attempted to identify the next "disruptive innovation" in an attempt to either profit from its development or prepare for its disruptive potential. Many observers of higher education used Christensen's theory to claim that for-profit colleges and massive open online courses (MOOCs) were disruptive innovations that might compel mass closures of regional colleges and universities. Christensen himself infamously predicted multiple times from 2013 to 2017 that 50% of U.S. colleges and universities would close within 10 to 15 years (Lederman, 2017). In this context, the application of disruptive innovation theory was quite provocative, yet appropriate, given the potential of for-profits and MOOCs to offer an accessible, low-cost, and convenient alternative to incumbent institutions largely focused on teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it was primarily the for-profit sector that witnessed substantial closures due to fraudulent business practices that targeted minoritized students, produced poor student retention and job placement rates, and relied almost exclusively on federal student aid for revenue (Hall, 2021). Meanwhile, the euphoria around MOOCs waned due to a growing recognition of their limitations in fostering student success, as they were primarily successful in conveying knowledge to autodidacts who could thrive in passive learning environments (Christensen et al., 2013). U.S. higher education, even through the manifold challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, was not nearly disrupted to the extent predicted by Christensen and his acolytes.

2.2 How the "executive disruption" discourse and new public management principles undermine educational equity

And yet the rhetoric of disruption has only intensified. We propose in this article that an "executive disruption" discourse is being deployed by some institutional leaders and private consulting firms to have a comprehensive, and in our opinion, dangerous effect on U.S. higher education. Our argument in this section is threefold.

First, we contend that this executive disruption discourse intentionally traffics in selective, superficial renderings of Christensen's theory for enhanced credibility with influential stakeholders, such as advisory boards and policymakers. An example of this discourse was provided in August 2023 by E. Gordon Gee, president of West Virginia University (WVU), during a contentious meeting in which he faced a "no confidence" vote from his own Faculty Senate (Corrigan, 2023):

> I want to be very clear that the university is not dismantling higher education. We are disrupting it. And many of you know I am a firm believer in disruption (Pettit, 2023).

Gee's language is reflective of a popular doctrine among higher education leadership that they must act as executive change agents,

intentionally stimulating the conditions for disruption essential for institutional survival.

Second, we assert that the goal of this discourse is not to make good faith arguments about legitimate political or market-oriented disruptions to higher education (e.g., Grawe, 2018). Rather, its goal is to justify ideologically-driven disruptions to public colleges and universities which (1) are enacted through comprehensive cuts to programs and departments that focus on equity, humanistic inquiry, and social justice and (2) cultivate an institutional climate of suppression by threatening financial and legal repercussions for any practitioners who question the necessity and/or legality of the proposed disruptions (Garces et al., 2025). For example, in the case of West Virginia University, the private consulting firm rpk Group was paid exorbitant sums of money (from a supposedly cash-strapped public institution) to take on the role of objective observer, conveying the inevitability of external disruption while amplifying feelings of crisis within the university community (Bader, 2023). Klein (2007) memorably defined the use of similar tactics (i.e., the exploitation of emergencies to slash public goods and services) as "disaster capitalism." In the case of West Virginia University, rpk Group leveraged disaster capitalism to financially benefit from cuts to 28 academic programs and 143 faculty members, as well as extensive reductions to campus support programs (McElhinny, 2025).

As Mazzucato and Collington (2023) have persuasively argued, private consulting firms are rarely objective in their analyses, their data and methods are often shrouded in secrecy, their potential conflicts of interest are not always transparent, and their analyses of complex public systems, like higher education, are often limited in scope. Therefore, one could reasonably argue that the primary purpose of external consulting firms like rpk Group is to provide cover for politicians and administrators like E. Gordon Gee desirous of radical changes to public higher education. In a December 2023 interview with Michael Powell of *The Atlantic*, Gee emphasized his belief that "people have lost faith in higher ed. It's an existential moment." Then, Powell (2023) related the following:

> When I asked Gee about the risk of irreparable damage to his university, he did not sound regretful. This moment, he suggested, called for daring, and he relished that. "I'm audacious," he told me jauntily. He portrayed WVU as his laboratory and its current troubles as a test of his power.

Notice how, in Gee's telling, meaningful engagement with impacted stakeholders is perceived as unnecessary, given the need for quick reforms to combat a perceived tidal wave of disruptive forces. A noticeable degree of hubris is apparent in such statements, given the complexity of higher education institutions, their distinctive missions, and their current challenges. This level of hubris is reminiscent of the irresponsible and destructive attacks imposed on the U.S. federal government by Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency during the first few months of 2025. In both cases, impetuous, data-deficient decision-making processes are justified by deceptive, yet rhetorically attractive, arguments about the need for rapid innovation and a charismatic leader willing to upend organizational norms (Zelinsky, 2024).

Third, we argue that the impacts of such executive disruptions could eviscerate access to affordable higher education, prioritize the transmission of limited vocational skills over holistic student development, undermine institutional shared governance, and exacerbate the nation's legacy of racialized marginalization and societal inequities detailed at the beginning of this article. Both consultants and administrators frequently advocate for the implementation of New Public Management principles in higher education administration to "disrupt" higher education. Through New Public Management, the targets of executive disruption are identified through a prism of circumscribed quantitative metrics that encourage the managerial elimination of any institutional program which shows little promise of exponentially generating revenue, directly responding to short-term labor market needs, and/or pleasing the desires of politically connected stakeholders (Lorenz, 2012). Institutional funds amassed through staff and faculty cuts are either earmarked for expensive private sector products which purport to counter declines in student enrollment or, as illustrated by the presidential scandals by Ben Sasse at the University of Florida, diverted to political appointees and consultants under opaque contracts (Shanley, 2024). At the same time, diverse perspectives, scholarly expertise, and nuanced institutional analyses that might envision higher education's potential to foster greater social equity, develop multidisciplinary innovations that can stimulate regional growth, encourage informed democratic participation, and serve the public good are either discouraged or silenced (McClure et al., 2024).

To be clear, we believe that higher education indeed faces many challenges in the years ahead, particularly given the recent willingness of state and federal governments to attack DEI initiatives, regional accreditation agencies, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, shared governance practices, and tenure (Lanford and Tierney, 2023; Shireman, 2025). However, we do not believe that disaster capitalism tactics which result in top-down management and the decimation of accessible public higher education institutions will have a positive impact. They will have a decidedly negative impact on fundamental goals of higher education related to racial equity, student access, and minoritized student success. It is our stance that executive disruptors of higher education like E. Gordon Gee and rpk Group merely evoke the idea of "disruption" as an ideological mechanism to instill fear, obscure decision-making processes, compel efficiencies and/or cuts to predetermined programs, and circumscribe access to publicly funded institutions.

3 Conceptualizing ethical disruption

3.1 Disrupting racialized organizations with equity-minded organizational change

If higher education is likely to be subjected to the rhetoric of disruption, we propose that a substantial reframing of the term is in order. As a starting point, our reframing considers the applicability of Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation and its four core features: simplicity, affordability, convenience, and accessibility. Much effort has been made to *simplify* advising, financial aid, and

student support services in higher education (e.g., Jaggars et al., 2014; Parnell et al., 2019; Rosinger, 2019). Certainly, those who advocate for educational equity would love for higher education to be more *convenient* and *affordable*. While significant strides have been made toward convenience, affordability has been constrained by state funding cuts which have passed the costs of higher education onto students and their families (Mitchell et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a useful implicit notion embedded in Christensen's theory concerns the roles of the inventor and the customer. The inventor of a disruptive innovation sees opportunity by first identifying a "customer" that is underserved by current products. Hence, the *accessibility* of a new invention to that customer is central to innovative development.

As demonstrated in the introduction to this article, however, higher education remains an *inaccessible*, as well as alienating, environment for far too many minoritized students. The incentives for achieving accessibility are not always clear in higher education, as a commitment to accessibility, as well as success, for underserved student populations requires more than simple economic motives. Such a commitment necessitates a philosophical belief in the importance of accessibility and success for educational equity and societal development. Therefore, one useful reframing of disruption could focus on the ethical development of an inclusive and innovative institutional environment to disrupt higher education's history of racial exclusion. The work of Estela Bensimon and Adrianna Kezar has illustrated how an environment of equity-minded organizational change can be cultivated in higher education. For at least two decades, Bensimon has contended that equity mindedness should be a guiding consciousness for institutional reform, asserting that colleges and universities, rather than students, should be accountable for the mitigation of racialized outcome gaps (e.g., Bensimon, 2005a,b). Such an approach serves as a crucial counter-narrative to statements issued by policymakers, politicians, and even some scholars which attempt to attribute educational inequality to perceived student deficiencies. In practice, Bensimon's conceptualization of equity mindedness first asks educators to interrogate how institutional policies, practices, norms, and relationships impact individuals based on their racial identities (Bensimon and Bishop, 2012). Bensimon then advocates for the importance of collecting, analyzing, and acting upon data disaggregated by race and ethnicity in order to better understand organizational patterns which result in unequal outcomes for underrepresented and minoritized students (Bensimon, 2005a; Bensimon et al., 2016). A key sensemaking component of Bensimon's framing of equity-mindedness is that the insider knowledge of practitioners is vital for lasting educational change (Bensimon, 2007; Weick, 1995). Additionally, all institutional actors—including staff, faculty, and administrators—should remain "color-conscious" of how histories of exclusion and discrimination impact student outcomes, be mindful that expectations and practices can be unintentionally racialized and result in negative outcomes for minoritized students, accept responsibility for changing the conditions that sustain inequities, and provide authentic, proactive care (Bensimon et al., 2007; Liera and Desir, 2023). This process encourages the aforementioned institutional actors to act as reflexive change agents and integrate equity considerations into their daily work. By embedding practitioner inquiry into routine operations, durable institutional cultures of inclusion and shared responsibility can be cultivated, making equity-focused innovation a permanent feature of organizational learning, rather than a temporary project (Witham and Bensimon, 2012).

Kezar's organizational framework of shared equity leadership complements Bensimon's practitioner-focused praxis. Institutions of higher education can become capable of adopting and sustaining change when they foster inquiry and evidence-based reflection across different organizational levels (e.g., Kezar, 2018; Kezar and Holcombe, 2017; Kezar et al., 2021). Therefore, shared equity leadership can transform colleges into learning organizations by replacing hierarchical decision–making with inclusive, cross–level collaboration that fuels ongoing adaptation and innovation (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). This process requires breaking down silos and creating mechanisms for collective learning in which educators collaboratively analyze data, evaluate outcomes, and learn from each another's experiences (Kezar et al., 2024). To achieve this, Kezar's scholarship on organizational change asserts the power of inclusive, grassroots leadership to disrupt entrenched racialized structures in higher education. Rather than relying on top-down mandates, Kezar and Lester (2011), for example, have shown how "bottom-up" leaders among faculty and staff leverage insider knowledge and networks to challenge status-quo practices and advance equity goals. Similar to Bensimon, a shared equity leadership model asserts that organizational improvements to achieve equitable outcomes are the responsibility of everyone.

Along with the work of Bensimon and Kezar, our conceptualization of ethical disruption is inspired by the writings of Lori Davis Patton and Victor Ray. Patton (2016) has suggested that CRT can disrupt systematic racism and White supremacy through (1) an interrogation of the racial representation of administrators, faculty, and staff; (2) how institutions are classified through racial signifiers and resources; (3) who owns intellectual and physical property within academe; and (4) how policies and programs disenfranchise People of Color. Patton also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging how racism thwarts equitable college access, as well as the significance of counternarratives in disrupting racist master narratives promulgated in higher education. Ray (2019) recently drew inspiration from CRT to propose a theory of racialized organizations that critically identifies organizational practices which (1) diminish the agency of specific racial groups; (2) legitimate the unequal distribution of organizational resources; (3) privilege Whiteness as a credential; (4) and decouple formal rules from organizational practice. These complementary theoretical prisms, applied to the experiences of minoritized students, offer a path to not only making higher education credentials more accessible, but also to identifying institutional problems and generating comprehensive organizational change.

3.2 Mindful innovation in service of educational equity

Although many policymakers, administrators, and practitioners preach the necessity for innovation in higher

education, the factors which support organizational innovation are unfortunately not often recognized, much less supported (Lanford et al., 2019). Innovation rarely transpires when individuals work in isolation or make executive decisions in cloistered echo chambers. Instead, innovation is an inherently social process, improved through collaboration, strong communication channels, and bonds of trust which facilitate constructive critique. Hence, Lanford and Tierney (2022) have proposed a *framework of mindful innovation* which identifies four environmental factors—diversity, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and creative conflict—critical to supporting innovative development. Decades of research show that the most innovative companies and organizations embrace individuals from *diverse* backgrounds and experiences. Those individuals, in turn, benefit from an environment which supports their *intrinsic motivation* to leverage expertise and knowledge in specialty fields. Individuals must also have the *autonomy* to develop and test new ideas, without burdensome and frequent assessments. Finally, innovative organizations encourage feedback and critique through *creative conflict* so that potential innovations improve over time. Lanford and Tierney's framework of mindful innovation also highlights three key dimensions—time, efficiency, and trust—which are required to support this creative conflict so that "empowering innovations" (Janeway, 2012), rather than efficiency innovations, can have a positive impact on society.

From Lanford and Tierney's (2022) perspective, truly impactful innovations are not likely to be introduced by external disruptors who stand to profit from the exploitation of higher education institutions or executive disruptors who embrace New Public Management. Instead, innovations which support student success must be developed by diverse groups of individuals who understand the varied contextual environments and limited resources of higher education institutions, as well as the increasingly diverse groups of students who merit access. This is where we believe student affairs practitioners and faculty can step in.

Organizations become more adept at innovation when leadership is flattened and information flows across hierarchical boundaries. Thus, higher education institutions must foster cultures of inquiry, trust, and knowledge-sharing if they are to generate mindful innovation aimed at advancing equity. An organization that learns and evolves—especially by engaging practitioners and faculty in diagnosing problems and testing solutions—can identify and dismantle policies or practices that reproduce racial inequities. This continuous learning orientation is central to our articulation of the ethical disruption of systemic inequalities, which we propose as a counterbalance to the executive discourse of disruption presented earlier in this paper.

Here, we integrate ideas from Bensimon and Kezar's equity-minded literature on organizational change, Patton's (2016) and Ray's (2019) critical lenses, and the concepts of mindful innovation. The combination of these ideas informs a conceptualization of ethical disruption that is focused on equity; grounded in critical, yet empirical, scholarship on student support, organizational change, and innovation; and intended for institutional practice, yet contextually sensitive to different environmental conditions. We use the term "disruption," rather than "transformation," because some organizations, such as the case study institution detailed later in this article, are enveloped in ideological and political environments which are deeply hostile to equity-minded practice and unlikely to accommodate comprehensive change. We also recognize that some change may need to quickly and disruptively take root in relatively small initiatives, such as peer tutoring programs, that are initially under the political radar. These initiatives may have an incremental, broader disruptive impact on organizational and system levels.

Our conceptualization of ethical disruption is considered through six frames: philosophy, discourse, agents, instruments, leadership, and organizational impact:

1. The *philosophical* goal of educational equity is centered as a project for innovative activity.
2. The *discursive* justifications for ethical disruption are grounded in peer-reviewed empirical scholarship, theoretical scholarship, and stakeholder experiences, rather than cherry-picked data or dubious assertions amplified by consultants and/or administrators.
3. The *agents* for ethical disruption are practitioners and faculty who work with students as part of their daily praxis, not individuals removed from the daily needs of students
4. The *instruments* of ethical disruption—whether they are technology or practice-oriented—are chosen by experts through shared governance to supplement effective pedagogical and student support practices.
5. *Leadership* for ethical disruption is diffuse and flattened to facilitate communication and trust. "Informal" and "formal" leaders are recognized throughout the institution as holding information significant for impactful organizational change.
6. The *organizational impact* of ethical disruption should focus on the empowerment of institutional actors for institutional improvement, rather than the suppression of expertise.

In the forthcoming methodology section, we will demonstrate how literature on organizational change, CRT, and the theory of racialized organizations compelled a critical examination of our case study site—"Rural Mountain College" (RMC)—and informed the development of an ethically disruptive peer tutoring program for Latin* students.

4 Methodology for a case study praxis of theory and disruptive practice

4.1 Assessing the environment for Latin* students at rural mountain college

The authors of this paper aimed to contribute to both scholarly knowledge and practical application by engaging in reflective practice concerning the establishment of an asset-based peer tutoring program at "Rural Mountain College." RMC is a public, 4-year college, and the sole public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in its state. As an open-access institution, RMC enrolls around 5,000 students annually and offers a variety of academic programs, including roughly 30 bachelors and 20 associate degree programs. It is located in a relatively remote mountainous town with a population of less than 50,000 residents.

While the focus of this study is not specifically on MSIs, or HSIs in particular, the demographics, institutional norms, and political environment of RMC offer a glimpse into the future of U.S. public higher education in much of the Southeast and Midwest. Since 1990, Latin* student enrollment at RMC has climbed from 0.2% of the total student population to 2.5% in 2000, approximately 12% in 2010, and almost 32% in 2020. Although Rural Mountain College boasts a significant Latin* student population, the representation of Latin* faculty at the institution is only 2%. Additionally, nearly half of the student body at RMC consists of first-generation students, and approximately 16% fall under the classification of "adult learners," aged 25 or older. Due to fiscal austerity and state politics, the college lacks a Chief Diversity Officer, and support for Latin* students is severely limited. RMC is therefore similar to other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) across the U.S. in that it (1) lacks institutional resources to support cultural diversity and is (2) located in an education desert as the only public, broadly accessible college in its region. As a result, Rural Mountain College faces retention challenges, with a six-year bachelor's degree graduation rate of approximately 30%. Viewed through Patton's (2016) description of how CRT can disrupt systematic racism and White supremacy, the racial representation of administrators, faculty, and staff is not reflective of the student population or the broader community, the institution embraces the racial signifier of HSI yet fails to leverage limited resources in support of the Latin* community, and the state has recently prevented the enactment of policies or programs which might support People of Color.

In our estimation, RMC was a candidate for disruptive practice due to a variety of ideological and political issues which negatively impacted Latin* students. First, the agency of Latin* students is diminished through their lack of representation in both leadership and faculty ranks. Second, RMC's resources are not only unequally distributed throughout the institution as most discretionary funding is focused on the development of business and health programs in service of "marketable skills," but RMC is itself representative of the state's unequal distribution of resources toward flagship institutions and away from access institutions. Third, Latin* students are reminded daily of how Whiteness is privileged as a credential when they see the disproportionate percentage of faculty, staff, and leadership who are White. Fourth, while the values statement of RMC states that the institution "(embraces) inclusion and cultural diversity among faculty, staff, and students," the lack of institutional departments, resources, and activities which support diversity and inclusion decouples values from practice. Fifth, in 2023, RMC's state banned DEI statements in hiring and training processes in its public higher education system, and system leaders have made it clear through internal memos that public institutions should not publicly espouse DEI related terms, such as Critical Race Theory, on institutional websites.

To counter geographic, economic, and racialized inequities, rural MSIs like RMC must implement practices that draw upon student strengths and produce culturally relevant learning experiences. Accordingly, RMC is a compelling institutional case study site for investigating how peer-to-peer support involving Latin* tutors and tutees might facilitate greater retention and graduation in a rural HSI with constrained resources. The principles of the peer tutoring program were inspired by best practices in emerging literature on equity-minded mentorship (e.g., Griffin, 2019; Liera and Ortega, 2025; Lunsford et al., 2017; Wofford, 2022). Indeed, in other publications, we have demonstrated how the sociocultural exchanges facilitated by peer tutoring dismantled organizational barriers for minoritized students; supported student leadership development; and promoted a greater awareness among administrators, faculty, and staff of the value of community cultural wealth (e.g., Herrera and Lanford, 2024, 2025).

4.2 Data collection

We utilized a qualitative, institutional case study approach guided by a social constructivist paradigm which asserts that knowledge can be ascertained through individual interpretations of experiences and environments (Bingham et al., 2023). We inductively developed patterns of meaning by collecting data from 7 Latin* student tutors and 6 Latin* student tutees through 32 semi-structured interviews and 123 h of observations from tutoring sessions. At the beginning of the study, the 7 tutors represented the entirety of the tutoring workforce in the center, although other tutors were later hired who were not part of this study. Data from these sources will be published in forthcoming articles pertaining to student leadership development, the role of peer empowerment agents, and forms of community cultural wealth over the next couple of years. Our repeated interactions in a bounded institutional system resulted in data that prioritizes depth and context, contributing to the enhancement of scholarly theory and institutional practice.

Participants, identified through purposeful and convenience sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), included Latin* tutors and tutees who were paired for consistent weekly appointments. Since participants already self-selected to participate in tutoring, we sent a recruitment email to students already enrolled in tutoring and posted recruitment flyers in the tutoring center. We also held meetings with tutees in the tutoring center that provided information about the research through institutionally-approved consent forms. All emails, recruitment flyers, and consent forms were available in both English and Spanish. Tutors and tutees were required to identify as a Latin* student to participate, which was also clearly noted in recruitment materials.

Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility needed for follow-up questions that aligned with information disclosed by participants. Interviews were conducted both in-person and virtually, according to participants' preferences, and they lasted between 45 and 75 min. Observations occurred in-person only during regularly scheduled tutoring sessions in the group tutoring space or a tutoring room. Fieldnotes were written as soon as possible to ensure details were accurate, while reflecting on the following aspects of data collection: (a) personal descriptions and thoughts; (b) ideas, hunches, and impressions; (c) unanswered questions that arose during observations that required further research; and (d) unclear statements that required clarification.

4.3 Data analysis

We analyzed interview and observational data through the constant comparative method, utilizing a sequential application of three coding methods—open-coding, axial-coding, and focused coding—to create codes, identify relationships among codes, and derive thematic findings (Saldaña, 2011). Although some data were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of peer tutoring, this article's analyses highlight inductively-derived themes related to the development of the peer tutoring program, such as "funding for student tutors," "funding for student outreach," and "funding for the tutoring center environment." Each of these themes inform our first finding, "Disrupting Inequitable State Funding Models for Public Higher Education." The other themes and findings presented in this article were developed in a similar, inductive fashion.

The limitations of this study are common to qualitative research, as the findings from this study should not be viewed as generalizable, analyses may be prone to bias, and data is not reviewable by a third party due to Institutional Review Board stipulations concerning participant confidentiality. Therefore, the trustworthiness of this study was assessed based on three criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants and the triangulation of several data collection methods. Both researchers maintained reflective journals to acknowledge and address potential biases, values, and their positionality to the research, contributing to the confirmability of the study. Dependability was established through the process of member checking with research participants. The potential transferability of this article's findings can be considered through the aforementioned theoretical lenses which stimulated program development and research. Through this methodology, three barriers pertinent to the implementation of a Latin* peer tutoring initiative were recognized, and ethical organizational disruptions to facilitate greater Latin* student engagement at RMC were identified. These barriers and disruptions will be discussed in the following sections.

4.4 Positionality

The first author of this study, who identifies as a White, cisgender male, has worked with minoritized students for over two decades. His perspective on this topic is informed by experiences working as a writing tutor in rural areas of Florida and North Carolina, as a summer bridge program coordinator in south-central Los Angeles, and as a researcher on innovation. The second author of this study, who identifies as a White, cisgender female, was primarily responsible for the development of RMC's peer tutoring program, as well as data collection. A graduate of Rural Mountain College who has been married to a Latin* spouse for nearly fifteen years, she has a strong affinity for the college community and has endeavored to build relationships with Latin* students over multiple years as a student affairs practitioner. Both authors recognize their privileged racial and socioeconomic status and viewed praxis through peer tutoring as a means to hopefully mitigate institutional legacies of exclusion. The third author, a cisgender Latino male and first-generation college graduate from a working-class background, contributed significantly to the intellectual development of this paper. His expertise in college access, racialized organizational dynamics, and equity in higher education was essential in refining the paper's theoretical framing, strengthening its core arguments, and deepening its analysis of the barriers faced by minoritized student populations.

5 Disrupting barriers to organizational change

5.1 Disrupting inequitable state funding models for public higher education

As noted in the introduction, one of the persistent issues for broadly accessible higher education institutions in the U.S. is a lack of state commitment to equitable and sustainable funding. Minority Serving Institutions like Rural Mountain College are often placed at a considerable financial disadvantage to Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) that are often classified as the "flagship institutions" or "research institutions" for their respective states. For example, in the case of RMC, the funding inequities are embedded in state policy that allocates nearly four times as much revenue per graduate student as for undergraduate students. This state policy, unchanged since the 1980s, ensures that the various departments and programs in PWIs, which already benefit from the largesse of endowment funding, enjoy significant fiscal advantages due to the mere presence of doctoral and masters level programs. As noted by Patton and Ray, such a policy legitimates the unequal distribution of state resources and disenfranchises People of Color who are predominantly served by institutions that do not have large graduate enrollments. Therefore, in the absence of unprecedented state political change, we recognized that any program to support Latin* students at RMC would need to be exceptionally efficient.

For this reason, a peer tutoring program was discussed among the authors as a viable innovative initiative due to its reputation as a cost-effective learning support model. If peer tutoring could be shown to improve retention, it could even be viewed as a "revenue producing" program due to state funding criteria. Nevertheless, at least three barriers related to equity and funding needed to be addressed.

First, we recognized that peer tutors are far too often asked to provide services in a volunteer capacity—or are paid minimum wage. In such instances, the tutors might not be socioeconomically reflective of the students seeking help, as any potential peer tutor who might need substantive income would be unfairly excluded from participation. Potentially even worse, the tutors' generosity and enthusiasm for helping other Latin* students could be unintentionally exploited. For example, one of the most popular tutors, Jeanette, explained how familial influences impacted her tutoring philosophy: "Being part of a supportive and close family contributes to who I am. If I can do one thing for one person, I mean, I'm glad to. You never know the impact it has for that person." Jeanette also described how her affinity for "togetherness," particularly in relation to her family, shaped her decision on where to attend college: "We're very together. If we do carne asada or even

go to the store, everyone is invited. That's probably why I really like a school with the same community feelings." Hence, Jeanette frequently and freely shared information and encouragement about higher education opportunities with community members who had scarce access to networks possessing relevant information:

> A lot of people I know are immigrants, and they come here for money and a good life. That's why they are always working, but I also think that they feel like school is only for people who know really good English. I tell people at my mom's plant and when we sell stuff at the pulga (flea market) that I'm doing school, and I can help them look into it.

Nevertheless, Jeanette's exceptional willingness to help others in her community, as well as her understanding of higher education, could easily be exploited by an institution that values her expertise, but does not adequately compensate her for it. Only after multiple interviews did Jeanette reveal that her decision to attend RMC was as much about her family's socioeconomic status as her desire for community: "Stuff just costs a lot with the jobs (my parents) can get." After offering multiple examples of how her parents continually prioritize her needs, as well as those of her siblings, Jeanette shared that she would overhear them discussing financial concerns: "They would never tell us because we would feel bad… I don't want my parents to worry later, so I am thinking ahead of how I can help when I graduate because they will probably live longer if they don't have that worry too."

As a result, external, reliable grant funding from federal and private sources was secured to ensure that tutors would be fairly compensated for their work. For example, a relatively small percentage of funds earmarked for supplemental instruction from a federal Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (DSHI) Program grant, authorized under Title V of the 1965 Higher Education Act, helped peer tutors earn a living wage. Furthermore, a Region III research grant from NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) supported the transcription of interviews and observations, as well as conference travel so practitioners and researchers could learn more about the peer tutoring program and the importance of professional tutor compensation.

Second, we recognized that funding for student outreach would be crucial in encouraging participation from minoritized students. Students often lack networks to connect with academic support resources, and many students are apprehensive to ask for information or pursue support on their own. Therefore, we paid peer tutors for activities beyond tutoring sessions, including classroom resource presentations and work-study job fairs. Anthony, a tutee, recalled how his first interaction with a peer tutor occurred during one of these off-site events: "My friends grabbed me after class and said let's just go to this event and get some free (food)." Anthony also described his decision to schedule a tutoring appointment: "I would have never started tutoring if I hadn't went for (food) and ended up talking to a tutor about all sorts of stuff, not just school." Anthony further admitted, "I don't know if it makes sense, but talking about stuff other than school made it feel okay to tell them that you're not doing that great in class." Through such outreach, students were able to interact with potential tutors, thereby establishing a relationship with a peer who could develop a meaningful extracurricular bond and later facilitate their tutoring sessions.

Third, due to informal feedback from Latin* students, we recognized that the environment of the peer tutoring center, previously designed for a Predominantly White student population, would need to be disrupted. Peer tutors, in particular, needed substantial autonomy to construct the tutoring environment in a way that would best support Students of Color. This autonomy required a rethinking of how agency was enabled within the broader institution, as institutional norms did not generally offer students opportunities to inform college policies or refashion physical spaces. Consequently, we resisted institutional efforts to "train" or "professional develop" students who were involved in redesigning their tutoring spaces. The student-led efforts also required a fiscal commitment for collaborative seating and décor representative of the student population to cultivate a sense of community and support. As we detail in our discussion of the next barrier, Latin* students not only needed agency and financial resources, they needed the opportunity to assume leadership roles so they could create a more inclusive environment.

5.2 Disrupting the lack of Latin* representation among RMC administrators, faculty, and staff

Once a peer tutoring program was identified as a possible initiative that could support student success, we critically examined the overwhelmingly White representation of RMC administrators, faculty, and staff. As Maria, a tutor, explained, "I don't think I've ever seen a Hispanic professor." It was immediately apparent that the peer tutoring program needed to cultivate a space where RMC's growing Latin* student population could feel welcome and receive culturally relevant support through a shared sense of community. To create this space and ensure an environment of communication and critical feedback, disruption needed to occur at multiple levels of the institution.

To cite one example, we prioritized the creation of a peer-led academic support advisory board consisting of Latin* student representatives, Latin* faculty, and Latin* community members. This board was created with the recognition that higher education institutions often move forward with significant plans regarding "student needs" without ensuring that students and their *familia* have agency to offer their expertise, ideas, and feedback. In our view, the advisory board was a catalyst for centering student knowledge, amplifying disenfranchised voices, and encouraging community influence in tutorial program development. The students who served as board members established tutoring practices that were specifically designed for the RMC student population, rather than simply adopting a set of foreign "best practices" that might have been developed in remarkably different institutional environments.

For instance, Latin* tutors at RMC advocated for disrupting a "transmission of knowledge mindset" in the tutoring center. They instead decided on promoting six critical strategies that would foster a more relational approach to tutoring. The first strategy involved understanding tutees' personal backgrounds as resources for success. Camila, a tutor, explained that she seeks to continually

learn more about each tutee so when she "(prepares) for the person and not the subject." The second strategy concerned avoiding assumptions about what tutees should know about college. As described by Oscar, a tutor, "I feel like a lot of professors assume, and students don't get it. I start out by figuring out what the tutees know so we have a foundation to build on together." The third strategy was recognizing the importance of explaining institutional processes, such as office hours and various institutional offices, and identifying institutional resources which could be helpful for tutees. Maria, a tutor, detailed how she noticed that a tutee was no longer bringing her laptop to tutoring sessions and was trying to use her phone for notetaking. Due to their close relationship, Maria was able to learn that the tutee's laptop stopped functioning and was able to "(explain) the library laptop lending (program). She didn't know about it, so it felt really nice to walk her over to get one."

The fourth strategy encouraged tutors to be transparent about past and present academic challenges in order to humanize the learning process. One tutee shared that their "tutor was so comfortable to talk to. He understood my pain because the first day I met him, he said 'this material is actually very hard,' but he 'knew I would do it.' I was so relieved because it actually was hard when others acted like it wasn't. I had started thinking maybe I shouldn't be here to begin with." The fifth strategy involved deciphering instructor expectations in conversation with tutees. Camila shared how she "(saw) a lot of tutees struggle because they are trying to study the same way for every class… all the professors are different and expect different things. It's sometimes like putting together a puzzle." The sixth strategy concerned fostering a sense of self-reliance by posing questions to tutees so they could develop their own answers. Miguel, a Latin* third-year mathematics major in his mid-20s, explained, "They always see that they know more than they think they do. That way, they walk away with confidence that they can do it."

Through these strategies, Latin* tutors reshaped training to embrace culturally relevant, asset-based practices that encouraged tutors to develop their own authentic tutoring style and center their goals on promoting individual student strengths. The advisory board worked with existing White staff to shape future directions for the evolving tutor program.

As evidence of further impact, several of the Latin* students who served on the peer-led academic support advisory board later successfully transitioned into roles as student representatives on campus-wide committees, thereby diversifying campus representation in critical leadership settings. In those roles, they advocated for a variety of productive changes to institutional practices. For instance, Miguel successfully advocated for important changes to RMC's student employment policies. Miguel shared with staff and faculty that he had many friends who would be superb tutors, yet their family and outside employment obligations prevented them from committing to RMC's required minimum of 15 h per week. In a similar vein, RMC also required students to be enrolled full-time if they wanted to be a candidate for leadership positions. Miguel pointed out how this policy disenfranchised Students of Color who could only afford to attend RMC part-time. Ergo, Miguel was influential in not only disrupting unnecessary employment policies, but also unfair leadership policies, for greater inclusion.

5.3 Disrupting inscribed institutional beliefs and practices

Perhaps the most difficult barriers to disrupt—and those which remain an ongoing process—concern existing institutional beliefs and practices at RMC, many of which are grounded in assumptions about Whiteness. One of the persistent barriers pertaining to beliefs was campus-wide skepticism about the effectiveness of "peer-led academic support." Some faculty, in particular, held on to their beliefs that tutoring should be primarily a transmission of expertise activity in which a tutor conveys their depth of knowledge to a tutee. To disabuse some faculty of this belief, we invited faculty volunteers to participate in "office hours" alongside peer tutors so they could witness, firsthand, the effectiveness of the Latin* tutors' relational approach. Another effective method of encouraging conversation about tutoring pedagogy has been targeted campus outreach which highlights Latin* tutor accomplishments, assessment results, and the empirical scholarship and theory which informs tutoring center practices. Nevertheless, instilled beliefs, often grounded in disciplinary training, can be difficult to disrupt.

Other barriers pertained to beliefs *and* practices which subtly trafficked in racial signifiers and privilege Whiteness. For example, before the initiation of the peer tutoring program, tutees did not feel that their linguistic capital was respected or validated at RMC, stating that "You are expected to know Spanish, but then you are expected to forget about it at school." This issue has been frequently noted in the literature, as academia often associates the English language, without "othered" dialects, with Americanization and/or scholarly capacity (Dunstan and Jaeger, 2016). To support their peers, tutors often leveraged their linguistic capital by conducting sessions in Spanish and translating important academic and non-academic concepts. Maria, a tutor, explained how she helped in this way:

> Sometimes, I do feel like I can't express things in English as well as I can in Spanish, so I am able to notice when my tutees feel the same way. I know when to ask them if I can explain something in Spanish for them.

Like other higher education institutions, RMC has an equal employment opportunity statement, as well as an acknowledgment of its "diverse student population" in its institutional mission. However, we found that RMC's hiring and recruitment practices are often decoupled from these statements, as they fail to recognize the individual traits and skills necessary to develop an equitable, asset-based peer tutoring program. During the initial tutor hiring process at RMC, some interviewers praised applicants for being "articulate," illustrating a "clarity of speech," holding a "recommendation by an influential stakeholder," and for being "polite." While such comments were rarely ill intentioned, they were suggestive of pre-existing beliefs about what a tutor should look like, how they should talk, who they should know, and how they should defer to authority. Invariably, these beliefs could result in hiring practices that would produce inequitable outcomes.

Accordingly, we recognized that institutional hiring practices needed disruption to identify unintentional bias and discriminatory

language. Assessments were reconfigured to focus on the diverse skillsets that tutors could offer, tutors' innate understanding of student challenges at RMC, tutors' relational skills, and tutors' willingness to question existing practices and try new tutoring methods. These practices were intended to redefine "who a tutor is" for RMC and eventually produce a more diverse tutoring team that could support a more diverse student population. With each successive group of peer tutors, we have found that help-seeking behaviors from diverse students have increased, especially since students perceive that their tutors share similar lived experiences. For instance, one tutee shared that their selection of a tutor was based on the level of Spanish-speaking proficiency noted on their tutor's profile: "I just thought I may have more in common with them, and I was sort of on the fence about even getting a tutor until I saw that."

Counter-storytelling through the peer tutoring program has also been crucial to disrupting Whiteness in institutional beliefs and practices. Camila stated that "people in in your environment say all sorts of negative things, so I have had to create habits that show them a different outcome. I mean, I stay humble, but I don't hesitate to speak up when I have a success." As a result, Camila does not hesitate to recognize her own flourishing and "prove people wrong" as a defense to counter deficit thinking. Jeanette similarly shared that her experiences as a peer tutor have inspired her to less shy and "first [tell] people what [she] has accomplished":

> So they just see the accomplishment the same as anyone else's. I don't want people to think I did a good job to be an immigrant girl. I can tell them the other stuff later, like that I haven't known English all that long. Those things are still important so people know about the challenges for students, but they also need to see our accomplishments the same way they see other people's.

Despite these successes, the disruption of inscribed institutional beliefs and practices remains an ongoing project that will likely require much more than the presence of a peer tutoring program to fully counteract. As counseled by Bensimon, equity-minded change requires continuous data collection and the re-evaluation of existing programs and services as an enduring organizational responsibility. RMC still is deeply overrepresented by White faculty and administration; while the peer tutoring program has started to instigate progress in terms of inclusive experiences, true educational equity that is represented in quantitative data, as well as qualitative experiences, remains an aspirational goal.

6 Discussion

In summary, we believe that organizational change may need to be disruptive in order to be innovative and serve the goal of racial equity. However, for innovation grounded in racial equity to occur, ethical disruption in postsecondary education must push colleges and universities to rethink and reimagine policies and practices in ways that center the needs of Students of Color, rather than hinder their success.

As illustrated by our case study of RMC's Latin* peer tutoring initiative, ethical disruption should have a laser focus on social impact by countering systemic and persistent inequities which continue to prevent minoritized students from achieving greater success in higher education. For example, many higher education institutions remain alienating environments for military veterans and adult learners due to their age, multiplex identities, and service (e.g., Hunt et al., 2022; Lanford, 2021). A growing body of literature indicates that embedded, structural biases in doctoral science programs inhibit gender, ethnic, and racial diversity among future faculty (e.g., Posselt, 2020). While a race-oriented lens was chosen for the peer tutoring program detailed in this article, ethical disruption could be focused on innumerable systemic inequities and aspects of students' experiences which inhibit individual growth and achievement.

To achieve lasting and ethical disruption that is disruptive, rather than performative (Ahmed, 2012), we maintain that a *philosophical* goal, such as educational equity, needs to be first identified and centered as an organizational objective. As illustrated by our case study, *discursive* justifications for any program need to be grounded in scholarship and stakeholder experiences for amplified organizational legitimacy. The *agents* who understand these stakeholder (e.g., student) experiences must be connected to them through educational praxis so that effective *instruments* can be implemented and tested for effectiveness. As exemplified by Miguel, *leadership* must be recognized across the institution so that information crucial to organizational change is presented and acted upon. Finally, the *organizational impact* (in this example, empowerment) should remain a primary focus of philosophies, discourse, agents, instruments, and leadership so that a variety of actors have the capacity to inform practices and policies representative of the institution's diversity. This final goal is potentially the most difficult to achieve, as autocratic leadership practices and democratic recessions continue to subvert institutional empowerment and lasting change toward social equity, particularly in state higher education systems (Ignatieff, 2024; Tierney, 2022).

Throughout the peer tutoring program, we have affirmed Bensimon's (2005a,b, 2007) arguments that equity mindedness should be a guiding consciousness for institutional reform and new ideas must be rooted in the experiences of minoritized students and educators while ensuring those innovations are critically evaluated and refined through inclusive dialogue. Moreover, the justifications for such disruptions need to eschew mere political rhetoric in favor of evidence-based, equity-focused practitioner work aligned with institutional missions and student needs. We have also found Kezar's framework of shared equity leadership and vision of inclusive, cross–level collaboration with a variety of institutional actors critical for understanding diverse student needs, developing counter-deficit initiatives, and working toward greater educational equity (e.g., Kezar and Holcombe, 2017; Kezar et al., 2021). A focus on mindful innovation, in turn, ensures that all students, staff, and faculty have the opportunity to work in an environment that incentivizes intrinsic motivation and progress over scare tactics; fosters creativity through diversity; cherishes autonomy and the expertise of diverse groups; and thoughtfully considers the dimensions of efficiency, trust, and time (Lanford and Tierney, 2022). These latter two elements of trust and time

have been key to the tutoring program's success, as there have naturally been painful realizations, ongoing learning experiences, and continuous feedback from tutors and tutees to understand and contemplate. We have been lucky that RMC has trusted this Latin* peer tutoring program and given it considerable time to evolve and grow.

Nevertheless, higher education is at a crossroads. Some politicians are endeavoring to reshape colleges and universities according to their own beliefs, particularly in states where diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are under attack and anti-CRT fear-mongering is being leveraged to preserve White supremacy (Miller et al., 2023). Some governing boards and administrators feel that shared governance, tenure, and academic freedom need to be curtailed, if not eliminated (Sachs and Friedman, 2025). The way forward often seems unclear.

A primary takeaway of this article is that two faculty members (the first and third authors) and a student affairs practitioner (the second author) needed each other's help and expertise to support students at Rural Mountain College. Through the protections of academic freedom and tenure, the first and third authors have been able to push back against misinformed critiques of the peer tutoring program and similar initiatives that center the needs of vulnerable student populations in higher education. Through her position at RMC, the second author has been able to enact policies and programs that imbue real meaning to the first and third authors' previous scholarship on racial equity and innovation. In other states where DEI is under attack, we recommend that student affairs leaders and practitioners need to similarly forge and cultivate relationships with like-minded faculty, business leaders, journalists, and politicians so that individuals within coalitions, not individuals working in isolation, are able to leverage their strengths in support of minoritized students. Such coalitions can agitate for much needed accountability and transparency, particularly in environments of shared equity leadership, when institutional executives operate in the shadows (Harper et al., 2025).

In conclusion, we should be clear about the contemporary politics of disruption if we are to achieve equity-minded organizational change. While acknowledging the challenges that higher education faces, we should be critical and persistent when executive disruptors claim to understand student needs better than the student affairs practitioners who cultivate relationships with students every day. We should vigorously ask for data-driven evidence that is not cherry-picked or produced by a hand-selected consulting firm. We should advocate for student voices in the decision-making processes so that our campus communities are reflective of their communities. We should ensure that opportunities for innovation are relevant to our specific student populations, in our unique and diverse environments. The future of racial equity in higher education depends on these forms of ethical praxis and activism.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the University of North Georgia Institutional Review Board requires that human participant data remain confidential.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of North Georgia IRB. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

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