

What's Happening Here? A Literature Review and Autoethnography Exploring  
the Intersection Between US Higher Education Reform, Management Consulting Firms,  
and Racial Equity and Justice Through a Black Feminist Lens

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**Abstract**

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Public higher education institutions across the US interested in advancing equity on their campus are partnering with management consulting firms to implement institutional reform. Equity-focused scholars and practitioners across public higher education institutions are finding dynamic solutions to advancing equity in higher education. However, there is little research at the intersection of these realms. This paper explores the intersection between US public higher education, management consulting firms and racial equity and justice through a Black feminist lens by analyzing relevant literature and utilizing autoethnography as a method to relate my own experiences as a Black woman with professional experiences supporting education clients at a large management consulting firm and also, working as a contracted equity design consultant for a small design and strategy studio.

## Introduction

With the growing awareness and recognition of racial and social inequity embedded in our social systems, especially in education, higher education institutions are working to address issues of racial equity and justice. Simultaneously, higher education institutions are also hiring management consultants to alleviate other institutional issues related to controlling costs, maximizing productivity, and restructuring to “convey effectiveness and efficiency to constituents” (McClure, 2017, pp. 575–576). While higher education institutions are insisting on their commitment to improving racial equity and justice and have direct access to equity scholars and researchers, they continue to hire and seek expertise from management consulting (MC) firms that have predominantly worked in the private and corporate sectors. I believe there is a need for more understanding of the role and impact of corporate or management consulting (MC) firms working in higher education institutions as those same institutions claim to be working towards racial equity and justice. I am focusing on higher education because this sector within education is more likely to have the financial means to afford MC firms and more flexibility to pivot rapidly as opposed to K-12 schooling systems.

Throughout my professional experiences in management consulting, I have noticed MC firms are playing an increasing and unique role in higher education. MC firms primarily function as intermediaries between the private sector and public

education institutions who use private sector management techniques to address solutions in higher education (McClure, 2017). Management consulting can be defined as “[...] an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning, and implementing changes” (Kubr, 2003, p. 10).

However, we know little empirically to inform the relationship between MC firms and higher education institutions. Additionally, existing literature seems to fall short in unpacking how this relationship may influence the equity work occurring in US higher education institutions. This lack of information raises many questions about how MC firms may be involved in and possibly influencing equity-focused change, or the lack thereof, in US higher education. In the literature, scholars utilize varying implicit and/or explicit definitions of racial equity and justice. For transparency of my perspective throughout this paper, I define racial equity as “...a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color” and racial justice as “...a vision and transformation of society to eliminate racial hierarchies and advance collective liberation, where Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, in particular, have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive” (Race Forward, n.d.).

Drawing on a Black feminist lens, this thesis examines the research and literature at varying intersections of US higher education, racial equity and justice work, and management consulting. I also inform this literature review with my own experiences as a Black woman formerly employed by an MC firm who now works as a contracted equity design consultant in education. I hope these insights and perspectives will guide me in better understanding how private sector ideologies and practices may enable or hinder institutional change and working towards racial equity and justice in US higher education. Additionally, this thesis paper intends to begin a further inquiry into how stakeholders can develop solutions that increase the likelihood of lasting, equitable reform in US higher education.

Simultaneously and now more than ever, scholars and educators across the field of US higher education are advocating for racial equity, justice, and institutional reforms that advance equity for all students and communities. Advancing equity looks like but is not limited to, evaluating and changing hiring processes to increase overall staff and faculty representation, creating funding opportunities for students with historically excluded identities, redesigning admissions processes, launching offices dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and hiring administrators specifically dedicated to moving along DEI work at varying levels (Chun & Feagin, 2019).

As a Black woman who has worked in management consulting and currently works in equity consulting, my experiences raise questions about the practices and ideologies mobilized by management consulting firms engaging with US higher education institutions. Although I started this research as a seemingly simple critique of the economic and market-based approaches of MC firms in higher education while higher education institutions are working towards equity, I worked through this paradox in research and practice via a Black feminist lens that invited me to center my own lived experiences. I came to see that my own lived experiences also embody this tension. In the Implications section, I unpack this paradox more thoroughly as I reflect on my professional experiences as a Black woman in management and equity consulting, as well as my personal experiences as the US-born daughter of Ethiopian refugee immigrants, to offer implications for future policy, practice and research.

## **Research Questions**

With little empirical insights and research that unpacks the intersection of US higher education, racial equity, and justice work, and management consulting, I reviewed and analyzed the literature with these three guiding research questions in mind:

1. How are US higher education institutions working to address racial inequities and injustices through reform?
2. What role do MC firms have in equity-focused US higher education reform?

3. In conversation with my own experiences, what tensions, opportunities, or issues does the literature suggest at these intersections?

Reading across these bodies of research, I identified three findings that speak to the relationships between US higher education, MC firms, and work towards racial equity and justice as well as my own related lived experiences moving across management consulting and higher education contexts. In the Methods section, I describe how I used a Black feminist autoethnographic approach to consider my own experiences in relation to the relevant literature. Through this inquiry, I discovered a paradox between the growing influence of MC firms, historically concentrated in and reflective of the private sector and corporate world, in higher education and the simultaneously growing work and collective power of equity-minded and -focused scholars and practitioners in higher education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Through this review, I defined my Black feminist theoretical framework based on the four main dimensions defined by Patricia Hill Collins - 1) lived experiences as a source of true credibility, 2) the use of dialogue in assessing claims, 3) ethics of caring and 4) ethics of personal accountability (Collins, 2008, pp. 269-270).



Black feminist theory (BFT) is a critical social theory that affirms “Black women having a self-defined standpoint in their own oppression” rooted in the unique experiences of being Black and a woman, as well as developing a particular consciousness of the world because of those experiences (Collins, 1989, pp. 747–748). In my own words, it is the centering and legitimization of Black women’s realities and lived experiences that developed a theory, or set of theories, of seeing and interpreting the world through this distinctive lens. The Combahee River Collective, an organized group of Black lesbian feminist activists, provides critical perspectives on the beginnings of Black feminist activism, its core values, and Black feminist issues and practices. The Collective grounds their work in one of the core dimensions of BFT, lived experiences as a credible source of knowledge, and the understanding that the most radical, transformative politics come directly out of one’s own identities. They remind readers that there are no hierarchies in the varying systems of oppression Black women are forced to experience - in fact, they are all happening simultaneously and in relation to each other (The Combahee River Collective & Smith, 1986, PG#). Another Black feminist scholar, Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe the unique experiences faced by being both a person of color *and* a woman, with the main claim that “because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). While the above-mentioned Black feminists are who I primarily called on to guide me, a more in-depth BFT

framework would also include key scholars such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde, among others. It would also be valuable to incorporate more recently developed streams of BFT from scholars such as Jennifer Nash and Kihana Miraya Ross.

Scholars have used BFT to study education broadly and more specifically as well. In education broadly, BFT has been utilized as a method to understand the historical and social contexts of education and formal learning in order to critique and reimagine paths forward. More specifically in higher education, I believe BFT has not been used enough in interpreting and analyzing specifically how the US higher education system functions, rather than education or social institutions broadly. However, it does show up in two places - in the classroom and in academic research. Much of BFT's use in higher education has been by professors and faculty teaching BFT or adjacent theories and topics, or those who use BFT in their own research whether it be about higher education or not. In her essay, Dr. Gloria Joseph articulates how "Black feminist theory is a theory of change with Black feminist pedagogy being the change agent in and outside of the classroom - wherever education takes place" and provides three classroom examples across different higher education institutions of how BFT shows up in the classroom (Joseph, 1995, p. 468).

It is sensible to use BFT in this inquiry because this paper is looking to better understand the relationship between US higher education institutions and management consulting firms as it relates to racial equity and justice. If we are looking to explore justice and equity in a given context or relationship, I believe it is a disservice to use a

theoretical framework that does not center any historically excluded or minoritized identity. I used BFT in particular because of my intention to utilize my own experiences as data, in addition to a literature review, in this paper via autoethnography. My experiences as a Black woman in management consulting, higher education, and racial equity and justice work urged me to explore the literature at this intersection while also critically examining the ways my own experiences were similar or different from the literature. BFT tells us that lived experiences, along with scholarly research and data, count as credible sources of knowledge. Additionally, by pairing this theoretical framework and method, I am able to uncover how my lived experiences have provided me with a specific understanding and perspective of this context that the literature has not yet taken up, and especially through a Black feminist lens.

However, I would be remiss to assume or proclaim that because I am a Black woman, anything I say or think 1) must be true or objective in some sense and 2) is automatically reflective of a Black feminist lens. Although connected, my positionality is not the same as a theoretical lens - even as a Black woman, I am still able to perpetuate white patriarchal discourses and ideologies. As someone part of the African diaspora, I have found inexplicable insight and recognition in my reflection and application of BFT. Despite this connection, the Black women scholars and feminists whose work I call on are predominantly, if not all, descendants of African people forcibly held in slavery in the US and I am not. My parents immigrated from Sudan to the US as Ethiopian refugees in the 1980s and I was born in Seattle, Washington less

than 10 years after they arrived here. I also carry other identities that have shaped the experiences I am reflecting on in relationship with my positionality as a Black woman born and raised in the US. This multidimensionality includes but is not limited to being college-educated, a first-generation college and graduate student, cis-gendered and heterosexual, a US-born native English speaker, Christian, and growing up lower-middle class. These intersections ultimately provide insights but can potentially be limited in further exploration of this work.

To better grasp and apply my theoretical framework, I conducted a mini-literature review on Black feminist thought and theory, as well as how Black feminism has or has not been applied directly to the professional experiences of Black women in education. I gathered insights and expertise from some of our scholarly greats to sit with and take into consideration as I annotated the literature and reflected on my own experiences as a Black woman in this work. In my search, I used the following terms - “Black feminist thought”, “Black feminism”, “Black feminism education”, “Black educators in non-education spaces”, and “Black tokenization in the workplace”.

In addition to conducting a literature review, I applied autoethnography as a method of exploring my own experiences in management consulting, US higher education, and racial equity and justice work. By using an autoethnographic method, this inquiry encouraged me to view my lived experiences as one of many credible sources of data that can meaningfully contribute to this work. Chang presents the case

that “autoethnography should be ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation”(Chang, 2009, p. 3).

Through this powerful method, I am presented with an opportunity to understand my lived experiences as they relate to broader social and cultural contexts through a theoretical lens that fundamentally believes in lived experiences as a source of true credibility (Collins, 2008, pp. 269-270). I believe pairing BFT as a theoretical framework with autoethnography as a method to explore and question this intersection of stakeholders and perspectives reiterates the belief that lived experiences count as legitimate, insightful and vital sources of information when examining a path towards real equity and justice.

After reviewing the literature on autoethnography as a method and learning about studies that also applied this method in their research, I collected information that would support a thorough reflection of my experiences and secondary data to complement my reflection. In her book, Dr. Chang defines autoethnography as “utilizing ethnographic research methods and is concerned about the cultural connection between self and others representing society” - an ethnographic approach to understanding your own experiences in relation to the world around you (Chang, 2009, p. 2). What differentiates autoethnography from autobiographies and other similar writings is that autoethnography is rooted in ethnographic methods rather than primarily using personal experiences in making claims or writing literature. This

encourages the researcher to thoughtfully explore their lived experiences in comparison and contrast with the narratives and epistemologies expressed in scholarly work and community-led work.

## **Methods**

I collected data for this paper via two methods - an in-depth literature review and a reflective autoethnography. For the literature review, first, I entered keywords across two categories that all contribute to the intersection of MC firms, US higher education institutions, and racial equity and justice reform.

Below in Figure 1, you will find the two categories I created and the relevant literature I found in the research process of understanding this intersection. The first category was “The research and practices implemented by racial equity scholars and practitioners working in US higher education” and the second category was “Approaches and practices of Management Consulting (MC) firms and the relationship between MC firms and US higher education institutions”. For the first category, I searched the following terms - “racial equity higher education”, “equity higher education”, “race higher education”, “higher education response to inequity”, “inequity higher education”, “issues in higher education”. For the second category, I searched the following terms - “corporate consulting in education”, “corporate consulting logics”,

“management consulting in education”, “equity consulting”, “management consulting public sector”, “management consulting higher education”.

After finding at least four articles for each category, I read and annotated the most relevant articles for further analysis. I then conducted a second literature search to ensure I had substantial data to make claims in response to my research questions. I expanded my search to include adjacent and new topics I discovered in my initial search such as “chief diversity officers”, “higher education leadership”, “corporate vs neoliberal logics”, “corporate consulting success factors” and “equitable leadership higher education”.

<b>Table of Literature for Review</b>
<b>The research and practices implemented by racial equity scholars and practitioners working in US higher education</b>
Bensimon, E. M. (2018). Reclaiming Racial Justice in Equity. <i>Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning</i> , 50(3–4), 95–98. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1509623">https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1509623</a>
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Bensimon, E. M., Malcom, L., & Longanecker, D. (2012). <i>Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice (Illustrated ed.)</i> . Stylus Publishing.
Chun, E., & Feagin, J. (2019). <i>Rethinking Diversity Frameworks in Higher Education (New Critical Viewpoints on Society) (1st ed.)</i> [E-book]. Routledge.
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Report, 42(1), 1–112. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.20067">https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.20067</a>
Zimpher, N. L., Dunek, L. A., & Neidl, J. F. (2017). The Evolving Social Contract for Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Serving the Public Good While Incentivizing Economic Growth. In J. S. Antony, A. M. Cauce, & D. E. Shalala (Eds.), <i>Challenges in Higher Education Leadership: Practical and Scholarly Solutions</i> (1st ed., pp. 129–139). Routledge.
<b>Approaches and practices of Management Consulting (MC) firms, and the relationship between MC firms and US higher education institutions</b>
Bronnenmayer, M., Wirtz, B. W., & Göttel, V. (2016). Determinants of perceived success in management consulting. <i>Management Research Review</i> , 39(6), 706–738. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1108/mrr-06-2014-0145">https://doi.org/10.1108/mrr-06-2014-0145</a>
Gabriel, R., & Paulus, T. (2014). Committees and Controversy: Consultants in the Construction of Education Policy. <i>Educational Policy</i> , 29(7), 984–1011. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814531650">https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814531650</a>
Kubr, M. (2003). <i>Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession</i> (4th edition). International Labor Office.
McClure, K. R. (2017). Arbiters of effectiveness and efficiency: the frames and strategies of management consulting firms in US higher education reform. <i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i> , 39(5), 575–589. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2017.1354753">https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2017.1354753</a>

*Figure 1. - Categorized References*

In order to compare and contrast my lived experiences with the relevant literature about this intersection, I utilized autoethnography as a method to unpack and understand my experiences. As previously mentioned and defined, autoethnography is a method that, in short, “connect[s] the personal to the cultural” (Chang, 2009, p. 2). To begin my autoethnography, I selected two relevant and distinct professional experiences - 1) working at an international management consulting (MC) firm in their education practice and 2) providing equity consulting on education clients at a local design and strategy studio. Hereafter, I will refer to the MC firm as “ABC” firm and the design and strategy studio as “XYZ” studio. I selected these experiences because I believe that they each shed light on a particular tension at the intersection of US higher education reform, management consulting firms, and racial equity and justice work.



Because I was not intending to write this paper when I had these experiences, I was unable to fully “compose autoethnobiographical field texts” in the ways Chang introduces and contends with (Chang, 2009, p. 5). Instead, I thoroughly analyzed what was available to me. In composing field texts for my experience at ABC, I reviewed written work notes I have from my time of employment at least two years ago and conducted secondary data analysis of the firm’s public-facing marketing and research materials on their work in education broadly and higher education. To complement this secondary data with my written work notes, I developed six questions meant to extricate my understanding and perspective of the work being done in the education practice at this MC firm.

The questions I answered were:

- 1) What types of education client projects did I see being done at ABC?
- 2) What types of higher education organizations or institutions did I see as ABC’s clients or partners?
- 3) What kinds of solutions and approaches did I learn about in relation to education sector clients?
- 4) How did these solutions and approaches compare or contrast to private sector clients?
- 5) What language or perspective(s) did leadership use when talking about education client transformations?

- 6) Do I remember seeing racial equity and/or justice work show up in any part of the work/approach? If so, where and how?

The questions provided space to make connections and distinguish variance between my experiences at ABC and the secondary data I found to come to a more holistic understanding of how ABC engages (or does not) in racial equity and justice work with their education client projects. In my self-research, I learned my experience at ABC really showed me that the management consulting firms who lead cutting-edge changes in the private sector are applying those same techniques to the public sector, including education and not necessarily naming or centering equity in the process.

To research my recent experience working as a freelance equity consultant with XYZ, I reviewed my notes and client project materials to ground my reflection, as well as public-facing information and resources the studio has available. Similarly to ABC, I developed four questions to make sense of my experience as it relates to this intersection of US higher education reform, management consulting firms, and racial equity and justice work.

The four questions I reflected on were:

- 1) What types of education client projects did I see being done at XYZ?
- 2) What types of higher education organizations or institutions does XYZ work with as clients or partners?

- 3) What does XYZ mean by equity-centered design/research?
- 4) Do I see scholarly/practitioner-led approaches or methods being used? If so, how?

Upon reflecting on these questions, I was much more clearly able to assess where ABC and XYZ diverged in their approach to implementing large-scale change in the realm of US higher education. I learned that although in my experience at XYZ they seemed to have a greater awareness of (in)equity and justice, they were still opportunities for further developing the access to and recognition of the role scholarly work and approaches can play in solutions. Although I applied a Black feminist theoretical framework to literature and my experiences, my experiences are solely my own and not necessarily reflective of all Black women in this work. It is essential that we continue researching the variety of experiences Black women have in this intersection because it is the only way we can account for the unpredictability across our human experience.

In the following sections, I provide my findings of the varying intersections between US higher education reform, management consulting firms, and racial equity and justice work; a discussion of a systemic paradox I find at this intersection and a personal paradox I find myself in after conducting this research; limitations of this research, and implications for future research.

## Findings

### (1) Racial equity and justice work and US higher education

*Equity-focused scholars and practitioners in US higher education are engaging with and contributing to an existing body of literature that offers empirical insights about equity-focused organizational change in higher education, while also demonstrating impact with detailed case studies of how and where change happens.*

I believe that these four scholarly-backed approaches to equity in higher education highlight how scholars and practitioners are making strides in empirical and conceptual research to advance equity work in US higher education institutions. In reflecting and researching my own experiences related to equity in higher education, I see an opportunity for collaboration between organizations that influence higher education reform and equity-focused scholars and practitioners.

In recent years, educational research in racial equity and justice work in higher education has become more robust and includes case study research to show the real impact and influence of racial equity work. Scholars and practitioners are collaborating in numerous ways to cultivate racial equity and institutional change. My experiences as a contracted equity design consultant have given me opportunities to use scholarly equity-focused work to support XYZ studio in shifting to a more equity and justice-centered approach with their education clients. However, in my experience,

scholarly work on equity in US higher education has not been adequately present even in my contracted equity design consulting work with education clients.

In a project with our client, a global philanthropic organization dedicated to fighting inequity, we were tasked with researching and understanding the postsecondary education experiences of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students, and students experiencing poverty. The undeniable necessity and urgency of equity were threaded throughout the client's expectations and XYZ studio's approach. As a studio that claims to do "equity-first research" and "empathic design" contracting me as a "Cultural Moderator", it was quite clear that although this studio claimed these perspectives, they did not necessarily have the scholarly or personal knowledge to weave these perspectives into their work in a meaningful way (XYZ Inc., 2022). Through my academic, professional, and lived experiences, I can often call on literature and theory reflexively to validate and justify the feedback and insights I provided throughout this project. While a robust body of research on equity in higher education exists, it seemed as though they solely relied on my lived experience as a Black woman to confirm my expertise.

In my literature review, I did not find any scholarly work that made an explicit connection between 1) scholarly research on equity in higher education and educational organizations and 2) its application in non-academic spaces working with educational organizations. This absence of scholarly work tells me that these words are likely disconnected or not in collaboration with each other. My contracted consulting

work has allowed me to bring my insights based on my lived experiences, theory and scholarly research to the design and consulting space.

However, as previously mentioned, equity-focused scholars and practitioners in higher education are making significant headway in US higher education reform. Based on my research, I found four particular approaches to which this work can be applied and implemented in US higher education institutions, possibly in partnership with equity-centered design and strategy organizations like XYZ.

## The Equity Scorecard

The first approach is known as the Equity Scorecard. After seeing a lack of action-based and digestible research for practitioners in this body of work, Drs. Bensimon and Malcom-Piqueux conducted research on and offered a comprehensive organizational change strategy for unpacking and addressing issues of racial inequity in higher education institutions across the United States. In their book *Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice*, the authors offer this comprehensive organizational change strategy for unpacking and addressing issues of racial inequity in higher education through numerous case studies and reflections of varying higher education institutions across the United States. This strategy is intended to shift the focus of equity work on campuses from “What can the student do differently?” to “What can the institution do differently?” in hopes of

producing more equitable outcomes for “racially marginalized populations” (Bensimon et al., 2012, p. 2).

Made up of five presuppositions (or implicit assumptions), this scorecard is meant to be used by higher education professionals and other relevant stakeholders to better understand how their institution is doing in addressing racial equity and where they need to improve their structural practices and systems. The five presuppositions are 1) doing the good, 2) participatory process, 3) remediating practices, 4) inquiry as a change strategy and 5) racial inequity as a problem of practice (Bensimon et al., 2012, pp. 3–6). Throughout the text, the authors consistently reiterate the need for intentionality and collaboration to truly maximize the Equity Scorecard and implement real change in a particular institution. As they delve into each presupposition, they also emphasize how essential it is to be operating from a certain assumption or perspective in order to actually move toward equity.

For example, the second presupposition is “participatory process” - the assumption here is that all faculty, staff, and relevant stakeholders must be fully and authentically committed to developing a strategy that eliminates inequity in their institution. If an institution is not at this point, this Scorecard can highlight this area for improvement and creates an opportunity for staff and faculty to get on the same page in order to begin working towards real equity on campus. I believe one of the most empowering and impactful practices in this research is empowering faculty and administrators to become practitioner-researchers and equity advocates, where they

observe and analyze their own institutions to develop insights in order to become a more equitable institution. This is vital to ensuring that institutions are working towards equity in ways that are benefitting students and their communities rather than continuing or exacerbating harm that has already been done.

## Transformative Paradigm

A second strategy for addressing racial inequities in higher education, Hurtado's *transformative paradigm* provides an opportunity for researchers and scholars in higher education to advance real and sustained equity in US higher education institutions. Initially known as the "emancipatory paradigm", the transformative paradigm was developed due to the dissatisfaction of scholars from marginalized communities with the existing dominant research paradigms and practices, meant to prioritize liberation, agency, and recognition of power dynamics to achieve personal and social transformation, with a critical eye on the relationship of the researcher to and with the community/ies of focus (Hurtado, 2015b).

This paradigm reflects how scholars are thinking about the future of higher education and working towards equity - through a transformative research paradigm that is rooted in community engagement, empowerment, and action. This approach is about moving past theory and analysis toward action-oriented and implementable research findings. How does this work with or against the MC firms being hired by US higher education institutions? Can these two potentially contradictory sectors, equity



scholars and MC firms, coexist in a higher education institution that claims to be committed to advancing equity?

This research paradigm also requires a certain level of self-reflection and awareness on the researcher's part to ensure they are aware of their positionality in all aspects of the research process. The basic tenets of the transformative paradigm in research strongly align with the dimensions central to Black feminist theory - centering lived experiences of marginalized communities as critical insight (1) through intentional dialogue, community building, and engagement (2) with a focus on liberation and genuine care (3) and the necessary personal accountability on the part of the researcher (Collins, 2008, pp. 269–290).

### Racially Responsive Leadership

A third approach I have discovered is known as racially responsive leadership - researched and defined by Dr. Shaun Harper. In summary, Harper defines this form of leadership as one that acknowledges race rather than ignoring it, is more committed to correcting problems than providing symbolic solutions, and intends to enact authentic diversity, equity and inclusion processes and procedures across a postsecondary institution (Harper, 2017, pp. 118–119). This approach is distinct from the two former approaches in that it focuses primarily on where and how institutional leaders fall short in addressing racial inequity and injustices at their postsecondary institutions while also including reasoning for potentially indifferent leaders as to why this work is essential.

Along with his thorough definition, he provides five reasons he believes higher education institutions are unresponsive to the needs and experiences of BIPOC students, staff, and faculty. Although all five reasons are extremely significant to this work, the last reason “rooted in CRT, a lack of interest convergence between Black people on campuses and white leadership” is most relevant to this paper. Harper suggests that this is a way for minoritized communities, particularly the Black community, to get what we deserve in higher education - through showing predominantly white leadership how they also benefit from racially responsive leadership “in their own language”. The points of convergence he names are that being an “authentic, racially responsive leader” can provide 1) an international reputation for being one of the most authentic, racially responsive leaders in US higher education for those pursuing recognition, 2) an opportunity to counter the stereotype that all white people are racist and 3) millions of dollars in annual savings for institutions (Harper, 2017, pp. 124–125).

While an interesting take on achieving equity, I do not believe it addresses the fundamental structures that perpetuate white supremacy and institutional oppression in higher education. In validating this reason, we are still not encouraging white leadership to unlearn their skewed understanding and perception of the world but we are using interest convergence to get what we need and deserve. I strongly question the possibility for *authentic*, racially responsive leadership if a leader is pursuing this work based on converging interests. This reason asks us to consider how much faith we

really have in people changing for the better once they understand their conscious and unconscious biases, as well as, how many unearned privileges they are willing to “give up” to level the playing field.

However, this is also an explicit capitalization of interest convergence - the principle that Black people will only receive racial equality when it converges with white interests (Bell, 1980, p. 523). By letting white leadership “get away” with not understanding the history and implications of racial inequity in their work and beyond, I believe that BIPOC students, staff and faculty will continue to carry the exhaustive burden of knowing and experiencing how inequitable and unjust the world and institutions can be while white people, and specifically higher education leadership, collectively continue to live in ignorance.

Through a BFT lens, capitalizing on white interests to push forward racial equity and justice comes up against at least two of the four dimensions developed by Collins, (1) lived experiences as a true source of credibility and (4) an ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2008, pp. 269–270). This reemphasizes the notion that the lived experiences of individuals with historically minoritized and excluded identities will not be seen as legitimate, believable sources of information for white leadership to comprehend and include with scholarly research. Additionally, this reason of interest convergence removes most of not all, possibility for white leadership to be held accountable for their actions because they would not have a thorough understanding of the value of racially responsive leadership and how to lead authentically with this

approach. However, I believe that if leaders are not prioritizing interest convergence, then racially responsive leadership has potential to provide opportunities for impactful, large-scale change in US higher education institutions.

### Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs)

The fourth approach is the creation of the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) role, and similar diversity-focused administrators, in higher education institutions, whose main role is to provide guidance and leadership as it relates to campus diversity efforts. Hiring a CDO is one of the ways that institutions, in education and other sectors as well, can begin working towards equity in tangible ways. In a 2014 research study of three CDOs and 25 administrators at three different predominantly white public research institutions in the Midwest, Leon asks which strategies CDOs are currently using to do their work and if the current CDO configuration helps or hinders their intended work (Leon, 2014, p. 77). To ground our understanding of current CDO roles, he highlights the foundational work of Williams and Wade-Golden in defining three CDO archetypes - 1) Collaborative Officer CDO: likely has a small staff, no reporting structure, limited funding, and low-level position title; 2) Unit-Based CDO: likely has a more robust team, no reporting structures but supervises incoming DOs, collaborates with other departments; and lastly, 3) Portfolio Divisional CDO: likely has a well-resourced team, consistent funding, close collaboration with high-level positioned administrators and direct contact with reporting units (Williams and Wade-Golden,

2007, as cited in Leon, 2014, pp. 77-78). The study overlays these three archetypes with eight institutional change strategy categories (educational, communication, symbolic, research, accountability, entrepreneurial, recruitment, and diversity scholarship) to see what is or is not being implemented based on which archetype each CDO aligns with. Leon found four important components that impact whether these CDOs can fulfill their roles and responsibilities - position title/rank, support staff, reporting units, and resources to fund work (Leon, 2014, pp. 80-89).

Through a BFT lens, this study brings to light the lack of personal accountability on behalf of US higher education institutions in making sure CDOs are equipped and supported in pushing campus diversity efforts. Leon found that participants who fit into the 'Collaborative Officer CDO' archetype have significantly less reach and influence in implementing the aforementioned institutional change strategies (Leon, 2014, p. 82). Interestingly enough, the CDO who fit into this archetype also works at the institution with almost double the representation of both students and faculty of color compared to the other institutions in this study. I believe this could be the result of greater emphasis on diversity and less emphasis on equity and inclusion at the institutional level. BFT reminds us that it is vital to have definite positions and fully stand in the commitments you make. How is the institution being held accountable for creating this position yet not providing the resources for this leader to flourish and do the work they have been hired to do? Additionally, this study urges me to question the quality of experiences that students and faculty of color may be having at said institution if the

CDO has minimal support and/or influence in promoting and implementing campus diversity efforts. Although CDOs can be pivotal and influential in promoting equity in US higher education institutions, this study shows that CDOs need more than just a seat at the table to develop and implement institutional change.

## (2) MC firms and US higher education

*MC firms are playing an influential role in the reform of US higher education institutions but do not seem to incorporate the work of equity-focused higher education scholars in their efforts.*

In working with higher education institutions, MC firms are using approaches that emphasize the privatization of knowledge and standardization of processes and procedures. In my experience working in management consulting, I witnessed support for and commitment to leading private sector practices that fundamentally did not center or value equity, an increasingly central component to solutions for public sector clients - including higher education institutions.

During my time working at an MC firm, I primarily saw two types of projects that were completed with public and private higher education institutions across the US - they were either 1) updating or changing processes or systems, or 2) implementing new software or technology. After collecting secondary data, I discovered that these

two project types were indeed their bread and butter with education clients and they actually utilized specific tools in these projects as well (ABC LLP, 2022). In MC firm's own research studies, they believed to have found the most pressing issues and effective solutions but did not explicitly use scholarly research to validate their findings (ABC LLP, 2021).

Although not reflective of all managers and leadership, I often heard and saw claims of being grounded in human-centered research and "radical", innovative approaches to researching and addressing issues within higher education. However from my notes and reflections, it actually seemed as though MC leaders were repackaging implementation and transformation strategies of "successful" corporate clients with similarly framed, yet fundamentally different, issues for their US higher education institution clients. The language and tone in marketing and research materials portrayed a sense of urgency and emphasized the importance of outcomes and institutions differentiating themselves (ABC LLP, 2021).

Simultaneously, I saw a small but consistent push from predominantly junior consultants for local community and organization engagement in research and solutioning that included historically and currently minoritized communities. Unfortunately, it often did not go very far and many projects had good intentions but were simply private sector practices and methods applied to public sector clients. Although I did not have the research-backed knowledge to name what I was seeing, I

am now much more aware that I was seeing the process of privatizing educational institutions.

In the literature, we see that among US public and private higher education institutions, there has been a growing pivot towards encouraging the pursuit of higher education from knowledge expansion, exploration, and career opportunities to primarily increased job opportunities and greater economic growth (Zimpher et al., 2017, pp. 129–130). Management consulting firms are playing a significant role in preparing public US higher education institutions for this pivot through the implementation of private-sector practices and ideologies into varying components of higher education institutions.

In a study of four different US higher education institutions working with four different management consultancies (hereafter referred to as ‘MC firms’), McClure analyzes management consultants’ perspectives on higher education reform and their work with public institutions. The author claims that MC firms play two key roles in US higher education reform, 1) as intermediaries between the private sector and public higher education institutions and 2) as internal and external legitimizers of the crises at hand, all of which are, arguably management problems and can be solved by aligning with private sector management techniques (McClure, 2017, pp. 578–580). McClure’s application of academic capitalism and new institutionalism as conceptual frameworks highlights the ways that MC firms are influencing a shift in US public higher education practices to align more with private sector management practices and seek to



commodify knowledge. When understanding this work through a Black feminist lens, there seems to be a significant lack of ethics of care and personal accountability in the mindsets, methods, and approaches to equity-centered US higher education reform. The ethics of care and personal accountability as we understand them appear to be in direct contradiction with the guiding principles that MC firms utilize when working with US higher education institutions on institutional reform.

There is also a body of literature that unpacks how MC firms determine the perceived success of a project. However, it does not clearly distinguish any possible variation of success definition between each sector or industry an MC firm may engage. For example, there is no clear difference between how the definition of success may vary for a US public higher education institution client that may prioritize inclusivity of perspectives compared to a private corporate company client that may prioritize productivity. In 2016, this empirical study was done to understand the factors that are related to perceived determinants of success in management consulting projects. Founded in principal-agent theory and the resource-based view, the authors were able to derive three factors from each framework - *common vision, intensity of collaboration, and trust* from the former and *consultant experience, provided resources, and top management support* from the latter. These six factors led to four main dimensions that determine perceived MC success - compliance with budget and schedule, degree of target achievement, profitability, and expansion and extension (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016, pp. 711–714).

When we compare these dimensions with the nine characteristics of white supremacy culture, three of them are most clearly visible in these dimensions - “progress is more and quantity over quality”, “worship of written word” and “urgency” (Okun, n.d.). The characteristic of “progress is more and quantity over quality” can show up in all four dimensions - prioritizing timeliness and meeting pre-set goals over producing quality work, making the most money, and extending the work for as long as possible no matter what. The characteristic of “worship of written word” especially shows up in complying with predetermined guidelines being a determinant for perceived success, as if you can account for the unpredictability in the lives of both employees and clients. Lastly, the characteristic of “urgency” shows up in all four dimensions but primarily compliance with budget and schedule, once again not providing space to consider the unexpected that can possibly alter the schedule and profitability because this is often tied to scheduling and being able to do the most work with the smallest team and amount of resources possible to maximize profits.

Alternatively, when we compare these dimensions that determine perceived success in management consulting to the four dimensions of BFT, it is quite difficult to find connections or overlapping priorities. Where these dimensions imply a fixed, objective set of processes and procedures are necessary, even vital, to deem success of a management consulting project, BFT allows for fluidity, is subjective, and recognizes the possibility that multiple, contradictory realities can be equally valid (Collins, 2008, pp. 269–270). Additionally, the four dimensions of perceived MC

success do not claim to legitimize or affirm lived experiences, provide subjective or relational insights, develop space for empathy and care, or allow for any accountability measures facilitated by the client. Through my review, I do not believe these dimensions of perceived MC success create capacity or standards for success defined beyond these narrow terms. What would it look like to perceive management consulting success through a BFT framework rather than principal-agent theory and the resource-based view?

When we unpack this through a BFT lens, one of the most valuable findings is that while the authors hypothesized that *all six factors* would be positively related to perceived success their findings uncovered that *trust* actually has no statistical significance to perceived MC success (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016, pp. 725). Of course, the authors list a number of possible explanations as to why this factor may be more challenging to use in perceiving MC success. Yet, BFT reminds us that in fact, its seeing the lived experience as legitimate, having mutual respect for each other's differences, and *taking the time* to develop that trust and care for one another that is quite powerful in and of itself. In conclusion, my experiences in management consulting were in significant alignment with what the literature says about the role of management consulting and its practices in US higher education institution reform.

## Discussion and Implications

### (3) The Paradox

Whether we see the effects now or later, my experiences and review of relevant literature suggest a crucial contradiction emerging - critical racial equity and justice work in US higher education is being undermined by institutional reliance on management consulting firm services. This creates a paradox - on one hand, we have management consulting firms possibly perpetuating inequity through their application of private-sector methods and practices in US higher education reform, and on the other hand, we have equity scholars and practitioners resisting varying inequitable and racist approaches and processes in US higher education institutions through multifaceted, liberatory paradigms and research.

When looking at these dynamics from the perspective of US higher education institutions, I believe some implicit, and possibly simultaneously occurring, theories US higher education institutions may be taking up are 1) that MC firms offer the most ideal solutions to managing large-scale reform, 2) equity scholars are not actually producing outcomes that are appealing and 3) racial equity and justice work *might* take precedence when interest convergence occurs (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Based on my experiences though, when MC firms and US higher education institutions come together, the work does not often move in the direction of racial equity and justice

irregardless of interest convergence. That small possibility leads me to question what and how much evidence exists that shows when interest convergence occurs in this context, would MC firms and US higher education institutions actually take up racial equity and justice? Even in the most “ideal” environment of interest convergence, how can we be sure that racial equity and justice will occur? Based on historical and academic insights, what usually happens when interests converge? Who suffers the most when we wait for or rely on interest convergence? Bell critically poses the idea that maybe change in the name of social progress as sweeping as *Brown v. Board of Education* could have been facilitated by interest convergence and “...if [remedies are] granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites” rather than some moral or character judgement of social good (Bell, 1980, p. 523). In the context of Bell’s article referring to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the question we pose now is, was the Supreme Court decision to end state-mandated racial segregation in public schools intended to actually improve schooling for Black, and other historically minoritized and excluded students or was it because of an increased white interest in de jure desegregation? And why would that be different in US higher education institutions? Where else in education are we seeing the possibility of interest convergence moving the needle of reform?

In *The Evolving Social Contract for Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Serving the Public Good While Incentivizing Economic Growth*, the authors highlight how the social contract for higher education changed in the 20th century, and again in

the 21st century - from its purpose being 1) engaging human development, 2) advancing human knowledge, and 3) service to the public good down to serving one purpose of “service to the public good” but primarily through job attainment and research that affirms economic growth (Zimpher et al., 2017, pp. 129–130). They follow this by providing an example of an institution system, the State University of New York (SUNY) system, that has committed to this new singular purpose and implemented a variety of institutional changes. In conclusion, SUNY seems to be an example of this shift in purpose and commitment gone well - providing resources and structures to adequately support students even as the institution’s purpose evolves. This is an example of how the purpose of higher education is changing - learning and research for the sake of learning and research is no longer viable under this new social contract, it must make economic/financial sense in order to be valued.

With this evolving purpose towards a more job attainment-centered higher education, it makes sense that management consulting firms would assist public US higher education institutions in creating learning environments that prepare people to enter the private sector as employees. This approach significantly limits collective agency and the opportunity for knowledge advancement in higher education without the pressure of making economic sense.

While this systemic paradox unfolds in real-time, I am also navigating a paradox within my own lived experiences as a child of Ethiopian refugees. There is a common cultural understanding in my immigrant/refugee community that financial wealth is the

key to long-term success and happiness, particularly through education and higher education. With this understanding, the primary purpose of higher education is to receive a degree that will lead to a job that provides stable and consistent income to support the family and the larger community rather than knowledge expansion and critical thinking.

Although this perspective is likely due to collectivist, non-dominant, immigrant cultural norms and expectations and a generational fear of staying low-income or in poverty, it also happens to be in alignment with the growing pivot from higher education being mostly for knowledge expansion and career exploration to a greater focus on job attainment and economic growth (Zimpher et al., 2017, pp. 129–130). Regardless of where the perspective comes from, I believe there is a possibility for more harm than good being done to marginalized communities who navigate higher education with this market-based mindset. Before and during my undergraduate studies, I was of this mindset and pursued a degree that prioritized financial stability and job attainment. Within a year, I could already see the financial benefits to my family and community. However, I saw little benefit beyond that because I did not enjoy the work or see the long-term value in what I did for my community. After extensive reflection and hesitation, I decided to pursue graduate studies with the intention of knowledge expansion and critical thinking to support my family and community intellectually and relationally. Unfortunately, I now run the risk of being unable to

financially support and care for my family and community as quickly and certainly as I was before.

With financial stability already being more out of reach for Black and brown, and refugee/immigrant communities, it can be psychologically tumultuous to debate between supporting your community now with economic power or later with intellectual power, when there is no option to do both. Simultaneously, we must consider the role of racial capitalism in this paradox, which can be generally defined as the notion that racial subjugation and hyperexploitation is and always has been central to the functioning of capitalism (Harris, 2021). Additionally, Leong defines it as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” and goes on to call out how racial capitalism is rooted in the commodification of racial identity and reinforcement that race is to something to be bought and sold like a product (Leong, 2013, p. 2152). While we are intending to develop economic power for our communities through our own financial wealth, we risk being exploited for our labor and skills and perpetuating a system that devalues and dehumanizes our lived realities as nonwhite people in the United States. When we attempt to gain intellectual power, the risk of exploitation is embedded in tokenism and visible diversity, placing social value on racial identity, without equity and inclusion. I believe this unique paradox can be better understood by exploring the purpose of higher education and defining the role of white supremacy and capitalism in evolving connotations of higher education around the United States and across global contexts.



## Limitations

Though only a small amount of literature was reviewed for this paper, it is primarily because there is not enough research about the role of management consulting firms in higher education reform - the relationship itself, the implications, and the types of work that MC firms are doing in higher education institutions altogether. There is even less literature and research when we consider this relationship as it relates to equity-focused scholars and practitioners in higher education. What does it mean when MC firms and equity scholars are doing work on the same campuses? Can these two groups co-exist and be working towards the same goal? Or do they fundamentally dismantle the work of the other?

When reviewed through a Black feminist theoretical framework, the literature regarding MC firms in higher education does not carry an ethic of personal accountability or affirm lived experiences as a source of true credibility. This calls to question the extent to which these studies are examining the dynamics of race, gender, and other social identities that provide such valuable insight to the human experience. However, equity-focused scholars and practitioners are prioritizing lived experiences and personal accountability, whether through a Black feminist lens or not. In consideration of other theoretical frameworks, it would be valuable to explore this intersection through the many insightful lenses within Critical Race Theory (CRT) in developing understanding through other historically minoritized and excluded

standpoints, as well as Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth in grappling with the role of community expertise and collective capital in US higher education reform (Yosso, 2005).

In terms of research methods, one limitation is that in my autoethnographic research process, I was engaging with past experiences that occurred before I began this work and therefore did not track my experiences or materials as thoroughly as preferred. Writing analytical memos or even more detailed notes about the dynamics specific and adjacent to this intersection would have provided more data to review and complement the secondary data available. Additionally, I may have been able to collaborate on this research with other Black women in the field.

In future work, it is imperative to also consider how other historically minoritized and excluded communities and perspectives can analyze this intersection, as well as, gain a more thorough understanding of the intersection as it exists. What are MC firms doing at US higher education institutions? How successful are their projects when we look at their final deliverables through an equity lens? What would it look like for equity-focused scholars to collaborate with MC firms on their projects with higher education institutions? These are just a few of the questions that would be meaningful to explore in better defining the intersection between MC firms, US higher education reform, and racial equity and justice work. If we do not act now and understand this growing relationship, it is likely to continue in ways that may do more harm than good as we work towards equity and justice in US higher education.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing commitment to racial equity and justice across education is encouraging US higher education institutions to make a renowned effort to address systemic and institutional inequities. Many institutions rely on the expertise of MC firms to lead this work on their campuses. Simultaneously, these institutions are supporting and championing race and equity scholars and practitioners. However, there seems to be minimal research or inquiry into this intersection between MC firms, US higher education reform, and scholarly racial equity and justice work. By exploring this intersection and my own experiences in this work through a Black feminist lens, I have discovered two paradoxes - one within this intersection and another within my own experiences as a child of Ethiopian refugee immigrants who has navigated the US higher education system.

## **Implications**

Based on my research and findings, I believe that we are very quickly approaching a point of no return in US higher education reform unless we do something differently about how we understand and value higher education and its role in developing contributing members of society. The purpose of higher education in the

US is becoming more and more about skills and money and less and less knowledge expansion and critical thinking.

In moderation, that seems appropriate and reasonable but this shift to an economic focus within higher education is becoming all-encompassing for everyone who does not already have the resources and privilege to access learning for knowledge expansion and critical thinking. If we continue down this path, I believe our future will have significantly less thought leaders, innovators and researchers who are asking important questions and *also* looking for answers because it might not make economic sense to do so. I believe the most straightforward way that US higher education institutions can slow this shift is by partnering with the visionary equity-focused scholars and practitioners already at their institutions and working with local organizations who are committed to large-scale equity work to give them a chance to do what they do best. An alternative is continuing to hire management consulting firms, as they currently exist, that will advocate for implementing and bridging private sector practices into public institutions. While perhaps financially beneficial now, the future social repercussions may be irreversible and ultimately, not worth it.

Especially in relation to US higher education, I believe that MC firms are trying to encourage simple solutions to complex, multidimensional problems by standardizing the entire process from understanding the institutional issues at hand to implementing a solution to finding new opportunities to sell work and continue contracts with an

institution. If MC firms can see public US higher education institutions as distinctly different from their traditional private sector clients, they may consider providing different solutions that are rooted in perpetuating capitalism and economic growth. I would like to think that paired with the possibility of US higher education institutions partnering with their in-house equity-focused scholars and practitioners, MC firms could play a significant, and positive role in US higher education reform. However, based on my findings, it seems unlikely that collaboration or partnership between equity-focused scholars and US higher education institutions would occur since it really hasn't happened beyond research-specific instances and institutions continue to hire MC firms without this collaboration in mind. Given the research on MC firms and perspectives on success and solutions of US higher education reform, I find it even more difficult to believe that MC firms could play a significant and positive role in US higher education reform without including equity-focused scholars. In conclusion, I would be doing a disservice if I did not mention these implications with the dreary reminder that interest convergence has historically led the way for change, and even then, it is not always guaranteed.

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