What's in a Culture? Students' Perceptions of and Experiences With U.S. Higher Education Institutional Culture

Emily P. Schell
University of Colorado Boulder

Anne Colby
Stanford University

Through interviews with 54 undergraduates across 11 U.S. higher education institutions, this study examines how students perceive (1) their institutions' cultures; (2) their institutions' adherence to their avowed cultures; and (3) the cultures' influences on several aspects of students' experiences. Four cultures emerged across institutional types: social justice; supportive; openness; and do-it-all. Despite shared perceptions of institutional cultures, students' perceptions of their HEIs' adherence to these cultures differed, with students of color less likely than White students to perceive adherence. Nevertheless, most students said that their institutions' cultures positively impacted their experiences.

Keywords: institutional culture, campus climate, student support, leadership and administration

INTRODUCTION

When you think about the culture at your college, what comes to mind? Higher education institution (HEI) leaders and scholars (e.g., Tierney & Lanford, 2017) might hope and expect that students will answer by discussing the traditions, physical features, or institutional messages that represent that school's unique identity and values. Yet, our study suggests that students' perceptions of institutional culture in diverse institutional types and regions are more alike than distinctive. Understanding those widely shared cultures has important implications for students' development and educational experiences.

BACKGROUND: WHY STUDY INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE?

Institutional culture shapes the experiences of college students and their relationships to their institutions in many ways (Vianden, 2016). In addition to helping students feel a sense of connection to or belonging at their institutions (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008), institutional culture plays important roles in shaping students' values (Pope & LePeau, 2012), choices (Kremling & Brown, 2017), and intellectual and personal development (Carey, 2018). Cultures are multi-faceted, with different constituencies experiencing those cultures in different ways. For that reason, understanding students' experiences requires investigating students' own perceptions of the institutional cultures that affect them, rather than trying to characterize an objective culture that encompasses an entire HEI (Tierney & Lanford, 2017). Moreover, even if students agree on their perceptions of their institution's culture, they may not

evaluate or respond to that culture similarly. Therefore, scholars and practitioners in higher education must understand what diverse students across a range of HEIs perceive as the salient aspects of their institutions' cultures and how they respond to those perceived cultures. This qualitative study examines students' perceptions of their institutions' cultures and the influences interviewees claim those cultures have had on their development and college experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional culture in higher education has been notoriously difficult to define. Organizational theorists, such as Chaffee and Tierney (1988), emphasize the role of HEI leaders in fostering congruence in cultural practices and values across different constituencies; the overarching aim is to foster shared goals and coherent action towards those goals (Smerek, 2010). In contrast to this top-down emphasis on HEI leadership, social constructionists, such as Peterson and Spencer (1990), describe institutional culture as co-created by all members of the HEI and constantly shifting as individuals continue to shape the culture. More recent definitions of higher education institutional culture (Tierney & Lanford, 2016; 2017) stress the complexity of institutional culture as shaped by a dynamic interaction of internal factors (e.g., students, leaders) and external factors (e.g., larger social issues, industry). Our understanding of institutional culture partly draws on this latter framework, recognizing that multiple cultures coexist within any HEI, and students may perceive and participate in more than one of those cultures. The diverse theoretical frames scholars use to describe institutional culture all acknowledge that students are critical stakeholders who shape and are shaped by these cultures—underscoring the importance of looking directly at students' accounts of institutional culture.

A second body of scholarship on higher education institutional culture has sought to understand the distinctive cultures at particular HEIs. For example, in *The Distinctive College*, Clark (1992) studies the development of three liberal arts colleges to identify traditions, values, and spaces (i.e., their "organizational sagas") that perpetuate distinctive institutional elements able to withstand leadership changes and social shifts. A few works since Clark's seminal book have investigated institutional cultures in other settings, such as research universities (e.g., DeRosa & Dolby, 2014) and community colleges (e.g., Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021). By focusing exclusively on particular institutional types, these works do not illuminate similarities and differences across different HEIs. In addition, these studies focus predominantly on the perceptions of HEI leaders and student affairs administrators, rather than student perceptions, therefore missing perspectives from a critical institutional constituency.

Other literature directly addresses how institutional cultures affect students' development and experiences. For example, Pope and LePeau (2012) find that an institutional culture that values racial and ethnic diversity is positively linked to students' openness to cross-cultural dialogue. Kremling and Brown (2017) find that an institutional culture emphasizing research over teaching may contribute to college student disengagement from or resistance to their HEI. In contrast, Carey (2018) reports that an institutional culture that values civic engagement influences students' involvement in HEI governance and affairs. These findings demonstrate some of the ways that institutional cultures have important impacts on students' development and experiences. Our study seeks to add to this nascent body of literature to further understand the role of institutional culture in students' lives.

Following Tierney and Lanford (2017), we believe it is important to understand students' and others' perceptions of institutional culture in the context of larger sociocultural themes that may contribute to contemporary HEI cultures. Two issues facing U.S. higher education are particularly salient here. One is the pressure in recent years to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within higher education, which was prompted in part by the Black Lives Matter movement (Cohen, 2021) and the increasing diversification of U.S. undergraduate student bodies (Museus, 2007). Another notable contextual issue is the increasing need to address students' mental health concerns and broader calls for support, which grew in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Abrams, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Although the future of DEI on campus remains uncertain considering current pressures to dismantle DEI programs (e.g., Lange & Lee, 2024; Otterman et al., 2025), the concerns from increasingly diverse student bodies likely will persist. Our study provides a clear

snapshot of students' perceptions of institutional culture in this highly consequently post-pandemic, pre-Trump administration period.

THE PRESENT STUDY: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guide this study:

1. What are students' perceptions of their institutions' culture(s)? What are the commonalities and/or differences across institutions in what students describe?
2. To what degree do students perceive that their institutions adhere to the cultures they identify? What factors shape students' perceptions of institutional adherence?
3. How do students describe the ways that these perceived institutional cultures influence their choices or experiences in college?

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants and Study Sites

To address these questions, we drew on data collected for a larger study of purpose development during college. The dataset spans 11 HEIs from across the U.S. and represents different types of institutions (four public state universities, three private research universities, two liberal arts colleges, and two community colleges). From a larger pool of survey participants, the research team recruited 54 students to participate in interviews. Interviewees were purposefully sampled to represent the 11 study sites, be demographically diverse, and include participants with a range of scores on the survey's purpose measure (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Demographics

Regarding race and ethnicity, participants were asked to select their race/ethnicity from seven options: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Pacific Islander, White, or other. Participants could select more than one race/ethnicity, and those who did were coded as multiple races/ethnicities. For this study, we combined some of the categories to yield three, commonly referenced race/ethnicity groups: White (39%); Black/Latinx/multiracial (i.e., underrepresented minority (URM), 39%); and Asian or Asian/White (22%). This aggregation was done in light of our relatively small populations for certain groups and risk of re-identification if data were disaggregated.

Regarding gender, participants were asked to select their gender from three options: female, male, or gender non-binary. Sixty-one percent of interviewees identified as female; the rest identified as male.

Regarding socioeconomic status, the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000) was used to indicate participants' socioeconomic status (SES). Thirty-seven percent of interviewees identified as low SES.

Data Collection

Survey participants who agreed to be interviewed were emailed a consent form that included the statement: "By responding affirmatively to our request for an interview, you are affirming that you have read and agreed to this consent information, including the consent statement below." The hour-long interviews, conducted in 2021, began by reviewing the informed consent statement and affirming consent for audio recording. Each participant received a $20 gift card. Interviews were conducted using Zoom video with audio recording. Recordings were then transcribed and de-identified.

Interview questions were wide-ranging, asking about students' perceptions of their schools' institutional cultures and their coursework, co/extracurricular experiences, communities, values, and goals. Our dataset draws predominantly on students' responses to the following questions, in addition to other relevant material throughout the interviews:

1.1. Do you think your college has some values that it really stands for? If so, how did you become aware of those values?

1.2. What is distinctive about your college, either positive or negative from your point of view?
1.3. What is the cultural climate like here?
1.4. Does your college help you with accomplishing your life goals?

Coding and Analysis

Code development was primarily inductive, yielding five themes describing the cultures students perceived and seven codes representing the reported impacts of these perceived cultures on students. Four of the five culture themes were understood by interviewees to represent espoused institutional values and priorities in addition to being significant in the HEI's peer culture. Those four were social justice, supportive, openness, and public service cultures. The do-it-all culture was described more as a feature of the HEI's peer culture (which was also occasionally shared by faculty and staff), rather than values espoused by the institution. For interviews that identified any of the four cultures seen as espoused institutional values, we applied two codes (adhere vs non-adhere) to capture interviewees' beliefs about their institutions' adherence to the cultures they identified. Interviewees who said the institution did not adhere to its espoused culture in some ways were coded as "non-adhere," even if the interviewee also reported that the institution did adhere in other ways.

Reliability assessment for all codes involved two research team members independently coding 15 interviews. Percent agreement for the codes ranged from 83 to 100%, with 13 of the 15 codes showing greater than 90% agreement. For the coding as a whole, the Kappa coefficient was 85.3. After establishing coding reliability, the remaining 39 interviews were split between the same two researchers and individually coded. Coding decisions were documented through analytic memoranda throughout the process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

TABLE 1
INTERVIEW CODEBOOK

Code Name	Definition	Example
	Perceived Cultures	
Social Justice	Emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion and/or social change	● "It definitely feels very socially conscious, and during Black Lives Matter there was a lot going on in campus." ● "I feel like the university says a lot about how they care about all students, and we care about diversity."
Openness	Emphasizes openness and acceptance of others	● "Inclusion is the number one thing that I would center on … gender, race, ethnicity, age, weight, height, sex, we like to… recognize the differences."
Public Service	Emphasizes public service and civic engagement	● "I think [School] definitely makes an effort to be involved in the surrounding areas." ● "We have a lot of community service clubs."
Do-It-All	Emphasizes doing as much coursework and/or many activities as one can (either breadth or depth)	● "It's like, 'Oh, this person has the most extracurriculars and they also play a sport, and they also have a job, and I bet they're doing awesome at all of them.'"

Supportive	Emphasizes the institution supporting student well-being and success or students supporting one another, "not being cut throat"	• "People here … they try their best to help each other rather than push each other down to get ahead." • "It's like a larger sense of community where I feel that I can reach out to any person."
Distinctive Institutional Culture (IC)	Values, programs, etc. that the student perceives as unique to their HEI	• "[School] has this, a motto called [motto redacted] … everybody knows that [motto] is a thing that [School] advertises itself on."
Perceived Adherence to Cultures		
Adherence	HEI adheres to the IC	Adherence to social justice IC: • "I would say is that they are very supportive of LGBTQ+ students. … I feel like they are pretty strong with LGBTQ+ issues."
Non-adherence	HEI does not adhere or adheres only in part to the IC	Non-adherence to social justice IC: • "It's such a liberal campus … but administration doesn't always mirror that … it takes a lot of student pressure to … progress forward." • "I wouldn't say that [School] is as moral as they put on their pamphlet."
Perceived Effect of Cultures		
Positive Effect	Student perceives IC positively	• "I appreciate that that's part of our mission. A lot of people choose this place … for the inclusion and the atmosphere. • "They step foot on campus and just say, 'Wow, I feel like I belong here.'"
Negative Effect	Student perceives IC negatively	• "It's all very homogenous and I'm not a big fan. It's part of the reason why I didn't want to go back. … they're all left-leaning."
Relationship of Culture to Students' Choices and Experiences		
Values	Influence on students' values or aspirations	• "You learn to open your mind to a lot of different ideas and thoughts … I think college was really useful for showing me that this isn't the only way."
Peer Choices	Influence on students' choices of peer groups and communities	• "When I did [HEI program name] that's when I realized that … There's spaces where I felt more comfortable."
Course Choices	Influence on students' coursework	• "I don't know necessarily if it was [School] in general or the way that I chose my classes … [School] did offer a lot of opportunities for those things to shape me in that way."

Extracurricular Choices	Influence on students' choices of co- or extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs)	• "That's what we're taught freshman year, that community service is good here at [School], and we try to do that."
Weak or No Relationship	Student explicitly says that there is no relationship or the relationship is not discussed	• "[School] is in general just a show up, do your thing, keep your head down and go home. There's not much of a culture around it."

FINDINGS

Student Perceptions of Institutional Cultures

In response to questions about their own HEI's institutional culture and distinctiveness, most interviewees identified cultures that captured current values and aspirations of *many* HEIs, rather than unique aspects of their own institution (e.g., mottos, programs, origin stories). The predominant cultural types they described are: *social justice culture*; *supportive culture*; *openness culture*; and *do-it-all culture*. Although we included *public service* culture in our original codebook, it was present in only four interviews; accordingly, we did not include it as a major cultural type.

Social justice culture was described as intentional messaging or programming on diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as engagement across the HEI with those issues. It was the most common culture perceived, with 54% of interviewees observing it on their campuses. Supportive culture, which included references to the institution's efforts to support student success and to a campus community in which people are supportive of one another, was the second most common (46%). Openness culture was next in frequency, with 33% of interviewees citing it. Students described this culture as open and accepting of others' differences, but more politically neutral than social justice culture. Twenty-eight percent of interviewees cited a do-it-all culture, described as widespread attitudes in the institution that placed high value on intense engagement in academic and/or extracurricular activities.

Some examples from the interviews illustrate how students described these cultures and their significance. Nadia, who attends a state university, shared how she saw social justice culture at her school:

> I think a lot of things have come out within the last year. … After George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and all of those major murders, I think there's been a lot of push for people to … do something about race … but I don't know if it's just because we're such a large university, there's a lot of issues there … I feel like the university says a lot about how they care about all students and we care about diversity.

Sabrina, a student from a private research university, explained how supportive culture, particularly among peers (but also, as she noted later, among staff) manifested on her campus:

> I think that the people here … they try their best to help each other rather than push each other down to get ahead, which was … another thing that made me want to come here rather than go to any other school that was a little bit more competitive. It's like a larger sense of community where I feel that I can reach out to any person … like if I missed a class I can ask them, "Did I miss anything important?" They will tell me, rather than saying, "Oh, you should have attended class."

Karl described his perception of his liberal arts college's culture of openness and acceptance of difference:

> I think inclusion is the number one thing that I would center on, and that definitely is a broader term here than other places. Gender, race, ethnicity, age, weight, height, sex, forget

> about it, it's just like we like to have open conversations and recognize the differences. In terms of those differences really making divisions between people, I don't feel that happens here, or really less so than anywhere I've ever seen before. It's the furthest definition of inclusion.

As mentioned above, the perceived cultures of social justice and openness differ, even though both address identity-based differences. Indeed, both Nadia and Karl invoked language of diversity and inclusion in their statements. However, material coded as social justice culture typically referenced issues connected to systemic inequalities that impact society beyond campus as well (e.g., Black Lives Matter, anti-Asian sentiment). In contrast, the openness culture focused on ways that people ought to treat one another and emphasized acceptance of others in the HEI community.

Do-it-all culture was perceived in one of two ways: a positive version, which focused on campus community members' involvement in many activities in a rewarding, non-frenetic way, or a negative version, which one liberal arts student, Liam, termed "stress culture:"

> We also have one thing that I don't like so much, which we refer to as "stress culture." It means that if you're not stressed, are you really working? … it's like, "Oh, this person has the most extracurriculars and they also play a sport, and they also have a job, and I bet they're doing awesome at all of them." … likewise, when you aren't stressed, when you don't appear like you have too much on your plate … people would be like, "Whoa, what the heck's wrong with you, don't you have something to do?"

Most students across our 11 study sites perceived the same kinds of institutional cultures. For the most widely perceived culture—social justice—at least one interviewee from 10 of the 11 sites perceived this culture at their HEI. Interviewees across all 11 sites perceived a supportive culture. Interviewees from eight sites perceived an openness culture, and interviewees from nine sites perceived a do-it-all culture.

Interviewees at only one of the 11 participating HEIs referred to unique, specific elements of their school's culture. Sixty-seven percent of that HEI's interviewees consistently referenced their school's motto, which was ubiquitous in messaging, programming, and courses. For example, Sebastian shared the ways that this school's motto and ethos permeated both the broader campus experience and his own values:

> [School] has this motto called [service-related motto redacted] … it means taking your own talents and putting that into the world, so that's something that I've rooted myself in here. … right off the bat … during the college admissions process … everybody knows that [motto] is a thing that [School] advertises itself on … I think one of the essay questions was like, "How do you plan to show [motto]?" … We have quite a big community coming together [for] events for the betterment of humanity… [Name of event] is the big thing that happens on campus, all the student organizations come together for this one cause.

Student Perceptions of Institutional Adherence to These Cultures

The two most perceived institutional cultures—social justice and supportive culture—were also the cultures students found most difficult for their HEIs to achieve. In contrast, the majority (72%) of interviewees who perceived an openness culture at their HEIs felt that their institutions adhered well to it.

Almost half of interviewees (47%) felt that their HEI did not successfully adhere to its purported social justice culture. Despite the politically contentious nature of social justice rhetoric in recent years (discussed further below), disagreement over institutional adherence was not necessarily rooted in disagreements over the *value* of social justice culture. Of the 29 students who identified a social justice culture on campus, only three (10%) considered this culture a negative aspect of their HEI, reporting that this culture felt "oppressive." The remaining 26 students (90%) supported the social justice culture they perceived, even though many of them remained disheartened by their institution's struggles to advance this culture on campus.

Students' racial identity (but not gender or SES) was a major factor shaping their perceptions of their institution's adherence to social justice culture. As shown in Table 2 below, we found that White interviewees were slightly less likely than students of color to perceive social justice as a core element of their institution's culture, although a plurality of White students (48%) did perceive a social justice culture. Despite relative agreement among White students and their counterparts of color about the *presence* of a social justice culture, there was a notable divergence in students' perceptions of their institutions' *adherence* to that culture (i.e., "walking the walk, not just talking the talk"). Of the students who perceived a social justice culture, only one White student (10%) said that her college did not adhere to that culture, in contrast to 69% and 57%, respectively, of URM and Asian students.

TABLE 2
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE (SJ) INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL ADHERENCE

Codes	URM (N=21)	Asian (N=12)	White (N=21)
SJ Culture Perceived	13 (62%)	7 (58%)	10 (48%)
Institutional Adherence	**4 (31%)**	**3 (43%)**	**9 (90%)**

We draw on examples from two students at the same private research university to highlight the ways in which race and individual-level factors differentially shaped students' perceptions of institutional adherence. Willa, a White student who was very involved in equity-related educational work, perceived a social justice culture at her school and felt that her university hewed reasonably well to this culture:

> They've been trying to be anti-racist in the ways that they [can] … One thing I would say is that they are very supportive of LGBTQ+ students. I wouldn't say that they're necessarily as great with all marginalized populations, but I feel like they are pretty strong with LGBTQ+ issues.

Conversely, Alexis, a Black student organizer at the same university, perceived her school's culture very differently:

> [School] right now is trying to be an anti-racist institution, but yet they won't defund the police, it's just going back and forth … like they say they believe in these things, but they won't actually do anything. Like they're holding a "Protect Our Asian Community" town hall coming up, but they haven't actually put out policies to help protect our Asian community on campus, and also the different shootings of police brutality going on, they have been saying, "We stand in solidarity with the Black community," but we haven't seen any change either.

A slightly smaller percentage of interviewees (34%) felt that their institution had a supportive culture but did not adhere to it. These differences may also be explained in part by the interviewees' race. As shown in Table 3 below, 20% of White students who perceived a supportive culture felt that their institution did not adhere to that culture, as compared to 50% and 38% of URM and Asian students, respectively.

The Influence of Perceived Institutional Cultures on Student Development and Experiences

Even if certain institutional cultures appeared "performative" to some students, those cultures—particularly social justice culture—were still found to influence students' college experiences and development. Students noted four main impacts from institutional culture, with some students noting multiple impacts concurrently. Twenty interviewees reported institutional cultures' influence on their

extracurricular choices (e.g., choice of clubs, service activities, internships). Sixteen reported influences on their values (e.g., long-term aspirations, character traits). Thirteen interviewees said that the culture helped shape their course choices (e.g., service learning courses, electives). Additionally, 10 interviewees reported that institutional culture influenced their peer choices (e.g., friend groups, dorm selections). Only four of the 54 interviewees (7%) explicitly stated that the cultures they perceived at their HEI had no influence on them.

TABLE 3
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORTIVE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL ADHERENCE

Codes	URM (N=21)	Asian (N=12)	White (N=21)
Supportive Culture Perceived	10 (48%)	8 (67%)	10 (48%)
Institutional Adherence	**5 (50%)**	**5 (62%)**	**8 (80%)**

The majority of students (76%) described a positive influence of these cultures, even when they believed that their HEI did not adhere fully to them. However, not all students' experiences were positive, with 24% reporting negative effects of institutional culture on them. The following examples from two students who perceived a social justice culture highlights the potential positive and negative influences of institutional culture. Ben, a Black student from a state university, described the positive impact that his HEI's social justice culture had on him, even though he did not feel that his institution adhered to this culture:

> My college did help support some of my values. … at my school, we've definitely had some issues with racism and things like that … so it would upset me that certain things on campus would happen, and then the response from the faculty was so vague and generic and didn't really do much to change the culture … they would put out a statement and say, "Oh we're going to work on this" … But nothing came out of those; there's no action behind those words. And so that fueled my passion for social justice and actually working to create change, rather than just spitting out words without having any action behind it.

Conversely, Juniper, a self-described conservative White student at a liberal arts college, decried the negative effect that her institution's culture had on her experience:

> For a place that's supposed to be very academically challenging, I think they have a very streamlined version of narrative thinking. Especially the student body, the professors not so much, but a lot of the students just … It's all very homogenous and I'm not a big fan. It's part of the reason why I didn't want to go back. … they're all left-leaning, But amongst the youth … I think it's much more, "You're either with us or against us." … There's still people on campus that reach out to me and they're like, "Hey, you should come back next semester, we really miss you," and I'm like, "Well, I know the moment I open my mouth, you're going to shame me for any opinion I hold."

Unsurprisingly, students such as Juniper, who identified a social justice culture, but found it oppressive, were much less positive about the effect of the culture on their college lives.

DISCUSSION

This study identifies four institutional cultures that large shares of interviewees perceived across our 11 participating institutions: *social justice culture* (54%); *supportive culture* (46%); *openness culture* (33%); and *do-it-all culture* (28%). All these perceived cultures align with important elements of U.S. society and institutional messaging that have been highly visible in recent years (Abrams, 2022; Cohen, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). In this regard, our findings are consistent with Tierney and Lanford's (2017) framework for understanding institutional culture, in which sociopolitical trends outside higher education and messaging from constituencies within the HEI are both incorporated into institutional culture. However, an even more striking takeaway from our study is the degree to which the perceived institutional cultures were similar across different institutional types (e.g., large public research universities to small liberal arts colleges); these similarities may represent a departure from the unique cultural values and attributes that HEI leaders may have expected—or hoped to—cultivate in their students.

Perceptions of Institutional Culture

HEI leaders are often intentional in their efforts to shape their institution's culture(s) to support their institutions' values, commitments, and aspirations. As Brooks and Harrison (in press) have urged, HEI leaders wishing to support students' development in particular ways must take these questions seriously: "What are the values of the university? How are they embodied and sustained in practice? Do institutional structures, traditions, incentives, and social expectations support or undermine the cultivation of [those valued dimensions of growth]?" (pp. 17). Our study affirms students' awareness of this kind of intentional culture-building, particularly for three of the cultures we identified: social justice, supportive, and openness culture. With this awareness, students also form opinions about the authenticity of these cultural practices and can cite how these cultures affect their experiences and choices.

Our study also illuminates a cultural phenomenon that appears to have emerged from the students themselves, no doubt influenced by the larger cultural context and, in some cases, by institutional practices, such as selective admissions. We have called this do-it-all culture. Interviewees seldom described do-it-all culture as reflecting cultural messages from faculty or staff and never linked it to explicit messaging from HEI leaders. Even so, this cultural theme appears robust in contemporary undergraduate education. Students across most of the HEIs in our study used similar language to describe this culture and its power as well as their attitudes toward it. The salience of institutional cultures that arose both from intentional cultural messaging (i.e., social justice, supportive, openness) and within the student body (i.e., do-it-all) reinforce our view that one must investigate students' own perceptions of their institutions' cultures if the goal is to understand what those institutional cultures actually are and their effects on students.

Perceptions of Adherence

The culture that emerged as most challenging for institutions to achieve, at least in the view of students, was the social justice culture. In recent years, HEIs have been pushed by internal and external constituencies to address racism and improve inclusion on campus; many seem to have responded to those calls (Abrams, 2022). As Nadia's statement highlights, "there's been a lot of push for people … to do something about race." Even so, according to our interviewees and some scholarly commentators (e.g., Museus, 2007), the results of institutional efforts for inclusion have been mixed.

Notably, this cultural theme has been highly visible in U.S. society in the 2010s and early 2020s and is currently the subject of passionate controversy (e.g., Otterman et al., 2025). In these interviews, conducted in 2021, we saw little difference of opinion among our interviewees about the value of social justice culture, perhaps because of the generational homogeneity of the sample (i.e., predominantly "Generation Z") and the prevalence of liberal, justice-oriented ideals in higher education at that time (Cohen, 2021). In contrast with the majority, three students were vocal in their objections to social justice culture, saying that it felt "oppressive" to them or potentially in conflict with the values of accepting differences, including political differences. In a sample of 54 interviewees, this small number of dissenters is noteworthy, given the recent political contentiousness of this institutional culture in the nation more broadly (Cohen, 2021; Patterson et

al., 2021). Among our interviewees, differences of opinion regarding social justice were much more likely to center on whether their institution was living up to its aspirations in this area, rather than the legitimacy or value of the aspirations themselves. Many felt that their HEI's adherence left much to be desired.

The students in our study also expressed doubt about the extent to which their HEIs are succeeding in their efforts to support students' well-being and academic success, despite the widespread perception of a supportive culture. Our interviewees were uniform in their endorsements of those priorities and often expressed gratitude for the help they had received from faculty and staff, even if they believed that this help did not go far enough. This supportive culture at all 11 institutions in our study provides another illustration of the links between cultural themes inside and beyond HEIs. The supportive culture that students described resonates strongly with larger conversations about the importance of well-being in the U.S. and public perceptions, especially after COVID-19, that the mental health of many college students appears at risk (Wang et al., 2020).

Perceptions that HEIs are not doing enough to address social inequities or support their students were especially prominent among students of color. As with Nadia and Alexis, many students of color perceived their HEIs as trying, but failing, to adhere to their purported social justice aspirations. Students were also divided along racial lines regarding their institutions' adherence to supportive culture, although to a less marked degree. It is beyond the scope of this study to probe the roots of these racial differences in perceived adherence to social justice and supportive cultures (i.e., whether they reflect closer attention to, higher standards for, or more extensive experience with the actual operation of social justice or supportive culture in campus life). Taken together, however, these findings align with scholarship (e.g., Abrams, 2022; Museus & Chang, 2021) that suggests that the adequacy of institutional efforts to achieve more inclusivity and sufficient support is evaluated differently by more and less marginalized students.

Perceived Impact of Institutional Cultures

This study also highlights the ways that institutional cultures can shape many aspects of students' college experiences, adding to previous research on this issue (e.g., Carey, 2018; Kremling & Brown, 2017). Students described these institutional cultures affecting not only their attitudes toward their HEI and its leadership, but also their values and choices of coursework, extracurricular activities, and friendship groups. As noted above, most of our interviewees said that institutional cultures positively influenced their lives.

Even when students felt that their HEI did not adhere well to its purported cultures, the culture could still influence students' experiences and development in meaningful ways. For example, Ben was galvanized by his HEI's low adherence to its social justice messaging to "actually work to create change, rather than just spitting out words without having any action behind it." This finding is important because it highlights the essential role that HEIs, particularly institutional culture, can play in developing students' prosocial behavior (e.g., care and advocacy for others). It also underscores a critical need for HEIs to continue working toward consistency between their espoused and enacted values of inclusiveness, supportiveness, and openness as well as to listen well to students to determine whether they perceive that consistency.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, we have not attempted to fully describe the institutional cultures of the 11 HEIs from which our sample was drawn. Even a full account of student experiences in these institutional cultures is beyond the scope of this study. Such a study would require visits to each participating institution, observations, and interviews with representative samples of students from the full range of cultures that the institution encompasses.

Instead, we asked students at each HEI to talk about their perceptions of the cultural climate on their campus, the values for which their HEI stands, and what they see as distinctive about their HEI's culture. In response, they spoke with energy about their perceptions of and experiences with their institutions' cultures. Since the interview questions were open-ended, students' responses represent spontaneous reflections on what is most consequential in the institutional cultures that these students experienced.

Our analyses of these reflections yielded a striking—and surprising—degree of commonality within and across the participating institutions, despite the diversity of students, HEI types, and geographic locations. Interviewees across our 11 study sites pointed to the same key themes, with only one HEI generating multiple references to distinctive, unique aspects of the campus culture. Despite our study's methodological limitations, these cross-institutional consistencies lend confidence to our belief that we have captured a robust picture of institutional culture issues that concern contemporary U.S. college students.

Additional studies with larger, more representative samples of students and more extensive contextual data are needed not only to affirm or revise our conclusions, but also to explore questions beyond the scope of this study. For example, our findings on racial differences in perceptions of institutional adherence to various cultures raise important questions about the relationships between student experiences and HEI leaders' public statements, student affairs and faculty practices, and other programs in admissions and student support. Our study alone cannot shed light on the extent to which the participating HEIs actually prioritized diversity and inclusion, how success in achieving goals in these areas should be operationalized, or how such criteria would apply to the 11 HEIs in this study. Combining this type of institutional assessment with student perception and attitude data could provide richer insights into the areas of satisfaction and frustration that students in our study report.

Another important limitation of the current study is its focus on the kinds of institutions that most U.S. college students attend, rather than the full array of HEIs in the country. Based on previous research (e.g, Clark, 1992; Colby et al., 2003), it seems that the most culturally distinctive U.S. HEIs are those with specific missions, student bodies, and histories. Notable among these institutions are religiously affiliated colleges, military academies, Minority Serving Institutions, and single sex institutions. Studies that focus on these institutions might yield a different picture of commonality versus uniqueness than we have put forth here.

Perhaps even more urgent in the next several years will be efforts to replicate these findings with samples drawn after U.S. HEIs have responded to or resisted contemporary pressures to eliminate DEI programming in higher education (Otterman et al., 2025). Cohorts of students who enter college in the late 2020s may report quite different experiences than those sampled in this study. However, without this study's baseline data, a clear picture of stability and change in higher education cultures will only be speculative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Scholars (e.g., Tierney & Lanford, 2017) have clearly articulated the need for HEI leaders and student affairs administrators to understand how students perceive their institutions' cultures. Suppose institutional leaders' perceptions of their HEI's culture (or cultures) differ from students' perceptions. In that case, the cultures and attendant values that leaders are trying to impart are not being communicated to students as effectively as institutional leaders may believe. Indeed, one prevalent culture—do-it-all culture—did not even appear to originate from HEI leaders but nevertheless was experienced as a salient institutional culture in the eyes of students in our study. Leaders and student affairs administrators should seek to elicit students' perceptions of their HEI's cultures and institutional adherence to these cultures through additions to existing campus-wide surveys—to avoid increased survey fatigue (Standish & Umbach, 2019)—or more informal channels (e.g., advisors, residence hall staff). These data collection efforts should be conducted regularly; the institutional cultures that emerged in our study were in many ways a product of the times (e.g., social justice culture). As with any sociopolitical trend, times change, and institutional cultures students perceive will likely change with them.

Even if there is agreement among various constituencies (e.g., students, faculty, and staff) on the HEI's cultural values, agreement is not sufficient to make those values a reality. As evidenced by the multiple students who perceived a culture, but did not believe that their HEI adequately adhered to the culture's values, HEI leaders and student affairs administrators should engage in a consistent process of *critical reflection* (à la Brookfield, 2017) to ensure that their practices align with the rhetoric of their institution's cultures. Otherwise, the culture risks being perceived as "performative" or inauthentic, particularly to students from marginalized backgrounds.

It may therefore reassure campus leaders and staff that even if students were disappointed by their "words without … any action," institutional cultures that promote prosocial behavior (e.g., social justice, supportive, or openness culture) still managed to shape the development of students' prosocial values and choices. Accordingly, when endorsed throughout the campus community and put into practice, institutional culture can be a powerful tool to ensure that students have positive college experiences and develop prosocially.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank the Mellon Foundation for their support of this work.

REFERENCES

Abrams, Z. (2022). Student mental health is in crisis: Campuses are rethinking their approach. *Monitor on Psychology*, *53*(7). Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care

Adler, N.E., Epel, E.S., Castellazzo, G., & Ickovics, J.R. (2000). Relationship of subjective and objective social status with psychological and physiological functioning: Preliminary data in healthy, White women. *Health Psychology*, *19*(6), 586–592.

Brookfield, S.D. (2017). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. John Wiley & Sons.

Brooks, E. & Harrison, T. (In press.) Character development in higher education. In M.D. Matthews & R.M. Lerner (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Character Development, Vol. I: Conceptualizing and Defining Character*. Routledge.

Carey, P. (2018). The impact of institutional culture, policy and process on student engagement in university decision-making. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *22*(1), 11–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2016.1168754

Chaffee, E.E., & Tierney, W.G. (1988). *Collegiate Culture and Leadership Strategies*. Macmillan Publishing Company.

Clark, B.R. (1992). *The Distinctive College* (2nd edition). Routledge.

Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. John Wiley & Sons.

Cohen, I. (2021, January 26). Student organizing may never be the same again. *The Nation.* Retrieved from https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/students-covid/

DeRosa, E., & Dolby, N. (2014). "I don't think the university knows me": Institutional culture and lower-income, first-generation college students. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, *10*(2). https://doi.org/10.5070/D4102019237

Edenfield, C., & McBrayer, J.S. (2021). Institutional conditions that matter to community college students' success. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *45*(10), 718–734. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1785353

Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.* Retrieved from https://www.pellinstitute.org/resources/moving-beyond-access-college-success-for-low-income-first-generation-students/

Kremling, J., & Brown, E.D. (2017). The impact of institutional culture on student disengagement and resistance to learning. In A.O. Tolman, & J. Kremling (Eds.), *Why Students Resist Learning*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003448747

Lange, A.C., & Lee, J.A. (2024). Centering our humanity: Responding to anti-DEI efforts across higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, *65*(1), 113–116. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.2024.a919356

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Sage.

Museus, S.D. (2007). Using qualitative methods to assess diverse institutional cultures. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, (136), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.229

Museus, S.D., & Chang, T. (2021). The impact of campus environments on sense of belonging for first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 62*(3), 367–372. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0039

Otterman, S., Hartocollis, A., & Goldstein, D. (2025, February 13). Some schools act after Trump's D.E.I. orders. others say they'll resist. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/13/nyregion/trump-dei-executive-orders-schools.html

Patterson, K., Santiago, A.M., & Silverman, R.M. (2021). The enduring backlash against racial justice in the United States: Mobilizing strategies for institutional change. *Journal of Community Practice*, *29*(4), 334–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2021.1998875

Peterson, M.W., & Spencer, M.G. (1990). Understanding academic culture and climate. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, (68), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.37019906803

Pope, R.L., & LePeau, L.A. (2012). The influence of institutional context and culture. In V. Torres, J. Arminio, & R.L. Pope (Eds.), *Why Aren't We There Yet?* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003448730

Smerek, R.E. (2010). Cultural perspectives of academia: Toward a model of cultural complexity. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 381–423). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8598-6_10

Standish, T., & Umbach, P.D. (2019). Should we be concerned about nonresponse bias in college student surveys? Evidence of bias from a validation study. *Research in Higher Education*, *60*(3), 338–357. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/45180383

Tierney, W.G., & Lanford, M. (2016). Conceptualizing innovation in higher education. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 1–40). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-31

Tierney, W.G., & Lanford, M. (2017). Institutional culture in higher education. In P. Teixeira, & J.C. Shin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (pp. 1–9). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_544-1

Vianden, J. (2016). Ties that bind: Academic advisors as agents of student relationship management. *NACADA Journal*, *36*(1), 19–29. https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-15-026a

Wang, X., Hegde, S., Son, C., Keller, B., Smish, A., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Investigating mental health of US college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *22*(9). https://doi.org/10.2196/22817