

## ABSTRACT

### Competing Discourses of Diversity and Inclusion: Institutional Rhetoric and Graduate Student Narratives at Two Minority Serving Institutions

by

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Within neoliberal models of U.S. higher education, diversity is a prominent selling point in education discourse, but diversity practices often fail to meet the needs or expectations of the structurally marginalized students they purportedly benefit. Research in education and critical university studies has interrogated the concept of diversity and analyzed the experiences of people of color at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) in ways that bring this issue to light. However, the experiences of graduate students of color and the experiences of students at Minority Serving Institutions have not been adequately represented in this research. Additionally, institutional practices, student experiences, and discourses about diversity are intimately connected, but there is limited research that centers the relationship between them. In this sociocultural linguistic study, I analyze the structure and function of institutional diversity discourse from eight varied colleges and universities and narrative discourse from graduate students of color at two Minority Serving Institutions: an HWI in California that was recently designated a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and a Historically Black University (HBCU) in the Southeast. Specifically, I examine ideologies

about diversity that circulated in institutional discourse, how that discourse shaped institutional practice and students' perceptions of their institutions, and how graduate students of color narrated their experiences in ways that challenged institutional rhetoric.

I conducted a multimodal analysis of website text and images, including focus group interviews with graduate students, and identified discourse features that appeared on the websites of all eight institutions, ones that appeared on only the websites of HWIs, and ones that appeared on only the websites of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Institutions of all types used language that reflected neoliberal justifications of diversity as a benefit to institutions, along with discursive strategies to minimize institutional responsibility for diversity work and strategic textual and visual framings that maximized the appearance of diversity and the institution's commitment to it. HWIs used broad definitions of diversity and "inclusive excellence" frameworks, among other discourse features, to make dominant ideologies fit institutional realities. Discourse on MSIs' websites, in contrast, used language that centered students and institutional equity rather than the idea of diversity. Focus group participants' critiques of institutional websites demonstrated that students can recognize websites as strategic marketing content intended to construct a positive public image, and that awareness makes them wary of the content on those sites.

Through observant-participation methods and ethnographic interviews, I investigated how diversity was operationalized at the two universities, how graduate students conceptualized the definitions and functions of diversity, and how these were all tied to institutional history, mission, and resources. At the HWI-HSI, graduate students of color narrated experiences of marginalization and discrimination that directly contradicted the university's stated commitment to diversity and emphasis on its MSI status. This

contradiction between lived experience and institutional discourse was the basis for much of their criticism, which highlighted the personal and professional toll of “lip service” approaches to diversity. Through stancetaking and other discursive moves, interviewees distanced themselves from the institution as they undermined the claims in its diversity discourse. In contrast, Black graduate students at the HBCU discursively positioned themselves as part of their institution, which they praised for its commitment to the HBCU mission of serving Black students and communities. While graduate students had criticisms of institutional structures and practices, few had to do with institutional diversity because students recognized the heterogeneity of Black identities represented at the institution and saw themselves as the beneficiaries of the ethnoracial diversity that was present there. Through their perspectives as HBCU students, they challenged the idea that racial diversity—as it is constructed in dominant diversity discourse—needs to be an institutional goal. The findings of this study demonstrate how diversity discourse and practice are shaped by institution-specific and hegemonic influences, how diversity discourse impacts the experiences of students of color, and how taken-for-granted ideas about diversity—which continue to fail students of color in the white supremacist institution of U.S. higher education—can be improved when new institutional perspectives are engaged. Recommendations for structural change based on these findings conclude the study.

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