

SOLIDARITY AS RESISTANCE: FEMINIST ADMINISTRATORS IN U.S.

ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how feminist academic administrators engender solidarity and practice feminist principles as leaders in United States higher education institutions. We draw from qualitative interview data with 27 self-identified feminist academic leaders about how they carry out this work, what obstacles they face, and the ways that their work disrupts—and is disrupted by—the intensifying neoliberal, managerial tendencies in higher education. Respondents shared experiences of promoting solidarity through their leadership and strove to create inclusive and equitable environments to benefit students, staff, and faculty, and especially minoritized individuals within these groups. Our analysis reveals how these feminist administrators applied a feminist ethic, engendered solidarity in their work and were often keenly aware of—and willing to contest—the neoliberal context of their institutions and higher education more broadly. Our findings contribute to the sociological and cross-disciplinary literature on feminist leaders in academic institutions and the resistance against neoliberalism and managerialism practices from within academia.

Keywords: feminism, solidarity, leadership, university administrators, neoliberal academy

Women leaders in academia are typically shown to lead with greater emphasis on collaboration and democratic processes than men in similar positions (Eagly 2007; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Garner 2019; Katuna 2019). In this article, we propose a shift of focus from *women* leaders to *feminist* leaders in academic organizations, which more clearly reveals the ethico-political nature of leadership, and especially the nature of *feminist* leadership. Studies of feminist academic leaders' strategic efforts to forge solidarity and equity in academic institutions have been largely absent from the gender and leadership literature. The omission is particularly glaring at this time of growing corporatization and instilling of business practices into higher education where people-centered practices are often overwhelmed by performance measures and efficiency concerns (Milley and Dulude 2021). Our study addresses this paucity and contributes to the literature by showcasing how feminist administrators' leadership advances more equitable academic environments. We explore the question of what forms of feminist solidarity and resistance are necessary in the context of the increasingly neoliberal practices and policies in United States' academia? The neoliberal turn¹ in academia involves both a range of policies and practices as well as cultures that are imbued with logics of efficiency, scarcity and competition. These are, in part, a result of the past 30 years of gradual but definitive public divestment from higher education in the U.S. (Acker and Wagner 2017; Milley and Delude 2021; Nelson and Zippel 2021, Spitzer-Hantz 2015). Lacking public support, traditional universities have adopted a corporate model of governance that views education as a consumer product and students as

¹ We use several terms, including neoliberalism, managerialism, corporatization, commercialization, and marketization interchangeably to refer to these related developments that are taking place in the United States and globally.

consumers (Lucal 2015). This managerial university favors centralized decision-making over shared governance (Milley and Delude 2021), promotes profit-making departments that generate majors, and underfunds programs that focus on critical work and social justice (Maldonado and Guenther 2019). For university faculty, these changes have weakened job security, eroded academic freedom and professional autonomy, and hastened academic adjunctification (Lucal 2015).

Against this backdrop, we explore solidarity as a form of feminist organizing that strives toward shared responsibility for the lives of others, working with care and intimacy, resistance against socio-economic inequalities and patriarchal power, and the possibility of social transformations through “democratic engagement” (Segal 2017:228). We focus here specifically on administrators’ actions that promote solidarity across diverse constituents on campus, including faculty, students, staff, and other administrators, and their awareness of the neoliberal context in which they work. We aim to provide a snapshot of the types of feminist solidarity that effect progressive change in these increasingly precarious contexts. Although feminist administrators in this study were keenly aware of the managerialist elements in their work environment, few set out to directly challenge those influences. Instead, working with a feminist ethic helped them recognize the need to forge solidarities and serve underrepresented groups on campus. By investigating how they put their self-defined feminist principles into practice, this paper illuminates the ways in which feminist ideals can shape administrative work and promote solidarity.

FEMINIST SOLIDARITY AND LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIA

The critical role of feminism in organizational life and its potential to resist neoliberal regimes is, by now, well documented (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019; Bartlett 2017; Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, and Tienari 2019; Bendl and Schmidt 2012; Christou and Janta 2019; Cole, Hassel, and Schell 2017; Vachhani and Pullen 2019). Much of this literature draws upon notions of feminist praxis as a set of behaviors, affects, motivations, and values that are rooted in the development of feminist consciousness, not solely in identity or affiliation based on gender or other social categories. Therefore, we distinguish between *women* leaders, who might perform solidarity on the basis of gender, and *feminist* leaders who desire and work for institutional transformation (e.g., Hemmings 2012; see also Laube 2021). We place feminist praxis at the center of analysis and demonstrate its potential for resisting neoliberal practices—individualization, competition, and market-orientation—and highlight its commitment to work toward greater inclusion, diversity, and equitable opportunities within institutions of higher education. We propose that feminist-identified administrators can expand feminist and social justice values in academia through an ethic of care that exists in contrast to neoliberal values and top-down decision making—a “power with” instead of a “power over” approach (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019). They also promote an “ethic of solidarity” (Fraser 1986:428) that goes beyond care and nurturing, and is instead “attuned also to collective struggles” as a “political ethic.” As Vachhani and Pullen (2019:28) claim, solidarity “guards women from neoliberalism’s attempt to individuate and isolate us.”

Previous research on feminist leaders in academia has identified consistent areas of feminist concerns. Feminist leaders work to cultivate academia as a space in which

historically marginalized individuals and groups experience inclusion, belonging, equitable treatment, and equal opportunities. They promote intersectional inclusivity, an ethic of care, work/life balance, and mentoring to empower others across the organizational hierarchy, thereby challenging various neoliberal practices in academe (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019; Barton 2006; Deem and Ozga 2000; Hughes 2000; Mauthner and Edwards 2010; Strachan 1999).

Traditionally, women's (or, more accurately, feminine) leadership has been described as collegial, relational, collaborative, and emotionally intelligent, all attributes that emphasize the style of leadership in terms of "soft skills" (Gallant 2014; Hinck et al. 2017). Assuming that the differing leadership approaches are reducible to gender (or sex) runs the risk of essentializing women's ways of leading. Therefore, the focus on style can be a double-edged sword for feminist leaders whose values are not always defined through their leadership style but through their goals. The question is, then, how can feminist leaders, specifically those who identify as women, enact feminist/social justice goals in practice without evoking the stereotype of the female/feminine nurturer? This conundrum has driven research in the field of women in management and also emerges in the higher education literature (Gallant 2014). We propose that feminist leadership can present an antidote to the problematic aspects of the competitive, individualistic cultures of neoliberal academia. Therefore it is critical to separate feminine and feminist leadership, which may or may not coincide in practice. It is also important to avoid essentializing and reductive logics: that women are inherently more caring of others and more emotionally oriented; that unity under a mutual purpose must result from shared lived experiences; and that differences must be effaced in order to have shared goals. As

we show here, our respondents were dedicated to act toward institutional transformation because of their commitment to *feminist ideals*, not because of their *gender*. Thus, our focus is on their actions that advance greater equity and justice for those historically marginalized within the academy.

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP AS SOLIDARITY

Solidarity as a theoretical concept captures the notion of “we-thinking” across both macro (societal, large scale) and micro (emotive, behavioral) applications (Laitinen and Pessi 2015:10). Feminist theorists have grappled with how solidarity can be rooted in identity categories that produce both shared and different experiences and that also transcend those identities to forge meaningful alliances across difference (e.g., hooks 1986; Mohanty 2003). For example, the concept of *affective solidarity* “draws on a broader range of affects – rage, frustration and the desire for connection – as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation, but does not root these in identities of group characteristics” (Hemming 2012:148). The affect resulting from experiences of discrimination, inequity, or marginalization is an important point of departure, but does not equal solidarity. Moreover, “feminist solidarity should not be forged on the basis of ‘shared victimhood’” (Stearns 2007:237), nor should it be rooted solely in empathy because those who have social privilege can leverage empathy to perpetuate axes of oppression (Pedwell 2012b). In fact, Pedwell (2012a:283) explains that “when subjects assume that they can feel what another feels in ways that fail to take account of differences in history, power, and experience” their empathy reproduces and reifies those very differences. Instead, solidarity emerges from the “desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort” (Hemmings 2012:158) created by the experiences of one’s

own or others' injustice. In other words, affective solidarity, like other forms of solidarity, is rooted in social transformation, in the desire for justice (not solely the shared experience of injustice), and in resistance to hegemonic regimes.

We employ the concept of solidarity as a useful framework for examining actions of feminist administrators, in whose daily work neoliberalism and managerialism manifest themselves in both institutional cultures and concrete initiatives. In the context of increasing individuation and competition in academia, using a “solidarity” lens demonstrates how feminist leaders’ “we-thinking” can challenge organizational divisions and promote inclusion. We aim to contribute to the literature on feminist leadership in higher education by bringing into sharper focus the internal workings of institutional change and feminist resistance to neoliberalism.

FEMINISM AS RESISTANCE AGAINST ACADEMIC MANAGERIALISM

Although managerialism shapes the work of all university faculty, students, and staff, its gendered effects on women faculty are well documented. It creates a time-intensive culture of work and makes it difficult for those with family care obligations, most notably women (and those assigned female at birth), to succeed in senior positions (e.g., Christou 2016). Scholars have argued that the ‘long-hours culture’ of neoliberal management, the increased expectations of productivity, the intensification of management control and accountability have intensified work-family conflict and stress and eroded solidarity among faculty (Grummel, Devine, and Lynch 2009; Thomas and Davies 2002). Others have pointed out that managerialism deepens the gender division of labor in the university as women are “ghettoized” into “peripheral” academic roles—teaching, service, and nurturing students—while male colleagues focus on research

output (Thomas and Davies 2002). In a competitive, performance-oriented culture, values of collaboration and solidarity can fade into the background or be actively suppressed. What results then is a gloomy image of the “new academia” that “demands a ruthless, single-minded approach to work” (Thomas and Davies 2002:387). Feminist-minded leaders can occupy a critical role against the rise of managerialism that has also eroded the position of faculty in shared governance. For example, Cole et al. (2017:15) propose that feminist leaders can steer faculty governing bodies toward greater inclusivity and protection of faculty against university administrators and suggest that “applying the feminist label to the space of shared governance operates in the context of opening access, including diverse voices, building relationships, sharing knowledge, and achieving goals collectively.”

Previous scholarship has recognized the potential of feminist praxis to confront and resist the neoliberal and managerial practices in universities (e.g., Allen 2015; Asher 2010; De Welde and Stepnick 2015; Christou 2016; Christou and Janta 2019; Cole et al. 2017; Spitzer-Hanks 2016). Studies have identified feminist administrators’ varied practices to transform higher education from the inside, more often through incremental changes in policy and practice than radical disruptions (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019; Barton 2006; Deem and Ozga 2000; Hughes 2000; Mauthner and Edwards 2010; Strachan 1999). Furthermore, because academic administrators who work towards greater gender equity and social justice must manage their efforts within the confines of a corporate-minded academia (Christou 2016; Parson and Priola 2013), effective feminist leadership rests on a deep knowledge of rules and the ability to play the game (Acker and Wagner 2019). In daily practice, feminist administrators report that

feminism provides them with a framework for detecting gendered micro-politics and observing how power relations operate through daily interactions (Barton 2006; Deem and Ozga 2000). They often rely on their “feminist lens” to deconstruct interactional situations, detect power relations, and identify issues of inequality and oppression (Barton 2006:6). In effect, the feminist lens helps them see the connections between the macro policies and the micro situations to foster social justice initiatives (Deem and Ozga 2000). Feminist leaders who are minoritized by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and nationality also can draw from their own experiences of being marginalized in higher education to create a unique perspective on how the academy works. That allows them to create spaces where they can practice feminist principles (De Welde and Stepnick 2015; Deem and Ozga 2000). These “feminist spaces” promote opportunities for students, increase staff involvement, and develop new ways of teaching and research (Deem and Ozga 2000:163).

We explore feminist administrators’ practices through three specific themes that illustrate how solidarity manifests in their approach to academic leadership; how they cultivate feminist solidarity to work across group and individual differences at their institutions; and how they carefully navigate neoliberal environments to foster more just and equitable educational institutions. Thus, this paper focuses primarily on the “success” stories they shared with us, rather than instances of resistance or compromises made, topics we address in other work (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019).

METHODS

Our own investments in this project were generated by our experiences of feminist praxis as administrators at our respective institutions. Two authors, both white-

identifying cis-women, served as department chairs during the time of study, while a third, a Latina cis-woman, served as associate dean of university-wide programs and faculty engagement. Over several years prior to the study, we had collaboratively organized workshops at our professional organizational meetings to explore “feminist leadership” and affordances/limitations of practicing feminism in academia. As scholars of inequitable processes and practices in higher education and how those impact minoritized individuals (e.g., parental leave, tenure and promotion), we applied our expertise to creating spaces for colleagues to dialogue, learn from each other, and be exposed to relevant scholarship. The formal sessions and informal conversations we had with like-minded colleagues helped to shape the conceptualization of our project as well as the interview protocol. As such, there was immediate excitement and interest in our project from colleagues within our professional networks.

The data for this paper are from this larger project exploring the experiences of feminist leaders in higher education. For this paper, we draw from semi-structured interviews with 27 self-identified feminists, all of whom identified as women.² We recruited participants through calls on professional listservs, at professional meetings, and through snowball sampling, in which participants suggested new contacts for our study. Snowball sampling is an effective strategy for reaching participants not previously known to researchers, but can result in homogeneity of participants (e.g., Carr et al. 2018). As a result, our sample is limited in race, ethnicity, and gender representation.

² We inquired about our respondents’ sex and race/ethnicity but did not view sexuality or gender identity as relevant for our research question.

We endeavored to recruit a multi-racial-ethnic sample, but our sample for this paper is predominantly white women: 19 of our respondents identified as white, four identified as African American, two identified as Latina, and one as Asian American. Therefore, we cannot contribute meaningfully to extending understandings about the experiences of administrators from minoritized groups. However, the differences among our participants are relevant in contextualizing the variations in resistance, hostility, neutrality or hospitable reactions to their feminist approaches.

As we conducted these interviews, we intentionally reached beyond our networks by asking respondents to suggest other possible respondents and also who were not sociologists. Our sample includes scholars from different disciplines such as biochemistry, sociology, English, art history, foreign languages, and history, which is important to understanding the relevance of feminist administrating that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Our sample also reflects different types of institutions across the U.S., including public, private, regional comprehensive, large, small, mid-sized, and research-intensive universities as well as one community college. Representation from such diverse institution types affords us a view of variability in what can be accomplished across differing geographic, political, and organizational contexts.

Finally, though limited across intersecting identities (in part due to the limitations of snowball sampling), our respondents held a considerable range of formal positions, allowing us to explore feminist administrating from a wide range of institutional positionalities. The study participants currently or previously worked at institutions ranging from community college to research intensive universities in the U.S. Their

administrative positions included presidents, vice-presidents, deans, associate deans, provosts, associate provosts, directors, and department chairpersons or heads.

Following feminist qualitative methodologies (Esterberg 2004), we invited each contact to participate if they self-identified as feminist and encouraged each to define feminist leadership in their own way. Thus, we hoped to capture a range of initiatives and actions that reflect feminist goals as defined by our respondents. Each author interviewed participants in-person, by phone, or via Skype. Topics covered in the recorded interviews included career paths, mentoring experiences, characteristics of feminist leadership, areas in which feminist leadership is enacted, and obstacles to feminist leadership. Individual interviews lasted approximately an hour and a transcriptionist transcribed the interviews verbatim. All participants' names are pseudonyms. Also adhering to feminist methodologies, we honor the voices and the lived experiences of our respondents by taking their stories at face value, not seeking to verify their claims with others.

Analysis

In processes of open coding and line by line coding, each author inductively analyzed each transcript independently, focusing on themes relating to solidarity. We continuously discussed our insights from coding, and re-coded interviews based on our discussions. We shared coded data to broaden our understanding of each theme. Finally, we grouped our shared codes into larger themes that illustrated the various ways in which administrators' practices and experiences both employ and exemplify feminist solidarity in the academy. We conceptualize solidarity as "we-thinking" and as a form of resistance that creates the possibility of organizational transformation and categorize these actions accordingly in the following themes "solidarity through leadership," "solidarity across

difference,” and “solidarity that resists neoliberal trends in higher education.” Our aim is to examine how feminist leaders narrate their leadership through their self-defined feminist lenses and how feminist leadership contributes to solidarity and inclusion in higher education.

FINDINGS

Solidarity through leadership

Our analysis reveals how feminist administrators can use the power and influence of their positions to promote solidarity. They described leveraging their positions to share resources, opportunities, access, and in some cases power itself with others in their communities who may not have shared their same social identities. Areas in which feminist leaders offered examples of an ethic of solidarity included influencing tenure and promotion processes, helping women and minoritized individuals move into leadership roles, and developing collaborative initiatives and decision making.

Ensuring that faculty were treated fairly and equitably during tenure and promotion reviews was paramount to respondents who engaged with these processes. Almost all the feminist academic leaders in our study described examples of tenure and promotion (T&P) cases that required a feminist lens so that the faculty member under review was not sabotaged by others. For example, Associate Dean Kristin Jacobs confronted a “bully” (man) faculty member who was trying to derail the appeal for an early tenure review for a deserving, early career faculty member (woman) based on misinformation and deception. She explained that, for her, feminist leadership was about “working with, facilitating, [and] clearing obstacles.” Because of her advocacy, the faculty member received an early tenure review. Advocating on behalf of early-career

faculty in T&P deliberations often meant helping contextualize “gaps” in their publication records, such as a stopped tenure clock (likely to occur with those who have or adopt children), or inherent bias in teaching evaluations for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) faculty. Moreover, many of our respondents explained that they worked on making tenure and promotion policies transparent and equitably applied. By ensuring a fair review process, they enacted solidarity throughout the tenure hierarchy.

Although more women have moved into administrative roles across colleges and universities, there remain considerable gender disparities and pay inequities at all senior administrative levels (e.g., Pritchard et al. 2019). Feminist leadership aims to remedy such inequalities directly and also by offering solidarity and uplift to more women who aspire to administrative posts. Following this feminist praxis, our participants narrated accounts in which they encouraged others—colleagues and those they supervised—to seek leadership roles and provided them with mentorship in the process. They saw this as a key way of sharing power and creating more inclusive institutions. For example, Tamara Jensen, an associate provost who worked on faculty development, explained:

I really pay attention to women, developing women leaders. So, how do we help identify them, how do we encourage them, what kind of skills can we give them and then how can we use our positions, how can I use my position to help bring some of those women up? Give them opportunities.

Tamara’s example demonstrates an understanding of how feminist leaders contribute to diversifying academic leadership. We claim that this approach reveals an awareness of working within the system to effect change and paving the way for others in the future. She continued,

For those of us who have come after [the “first” women in departments], who sort of took feminism as part of our core, we don’t have to be as in your face, we can act in feminist ways and we can use feminism to move things within the system now. We’re within the system and not coming from outside the system.

Examined through a solidarity framework, this resistance represents a direct opposition to meritocratic hegemony that presumes leadership positions are earned through merit alone.

We interpret actions, such as working from within the institution and using power, authority or influence to effect change, as feminist leaders’ attempts to foster solidarity through mentoring other women, students, as well as historically marginalized faculty. As Debbie Byers (dean) described: “I have tried with my senior staff to say, ‘okay, what [or] where do you want to be?’ I’m gonna be here for three more years or I’m gonna be here for five more years . . . where do you want to be when I leave, and what can I do to help you get there?”

Another arena in which participants described enacting solidarity through power sharing was in collaboration on initiatives and in decision-making. Bringing multiple and diverse voices to discussions and including others in making decisions at all levels challenged the expected hierarchical and opaque managerial version of academe. One associate dean described this contrast clearly: “A core principle in feminist leadership is participation, really, and ensuring that all people have a voice at the table. So, how you lead in a less hierarchical fashion but in a more participatory way, which really enlists the ideas and support of all members of a team” (Eve Montgomery). We contend that this approach to leadership has reverberating effects that can make additional non-hierarchical collaborations possible. Feminist leaders avoided the typical approach of building one’s “kingdom,” as Dean Heather Crowder labeled it, and instead built connections and

bridges for increased collaboration. Furthermore, some interviewees said they cultivated partnerships in the context of increasingly scarce resources that resulted from decreased funding for public education:

One of the realities of virtually every public institution is there are never enough resources to do what you'd really love to do. So, part of it is also about making sure that the right values drive the right decisions about allocating those resources. That can often mean trying to encourage collaborations among parties that might not effectively collaborate [otherwise]. [It's] about making things happen by bringing parties together that might not be able to do them separately (Holly Jenkins, dean).

Holly described the “right values” as ones informed by feminist leadership, which ensure that those “who have not been heard, those who have been marginalized, have more of a place in the institution [through opportunities] . . . that may not seem to be there.” This kind of administrative leadership—ensuring access to equitable tenure and promotion processes, promoting opportunities for leadership, and nurturing collaborative and generative partnerships across areas within an institution—questions market-driven values of competition, resists hierarchy, and challenges the inequitable allocation of resources. Thus, feminist leadership stands diametrically opposed to cornerstone neoliberal values in academia.

Our respondents shared how following feminist principles and making feminist-informed decisions entailed a level of risk. Advocating for feminist goals involved a level of vulnerability and precariousness even for those who felt secure in their careers. We noted an example of this kind of risk-taking when Associate Dean Kristen Jacobs said she used her position and tenured status for others' benefit: “at the end of the day, I have a job and so if I'm not gonna stick my neck out, there's something wrong with that . . . I almost feel it's my responsibility to engage, even when, and maybe especially when, it

doesn't feel necessarily safe." Despite perceived (or actual) risks, these feminist leaders expressed a commitment to protecting early-career faculty, mentoring a new generation of feminist leaders, power-sharing, and collaborative decision making.

Intentional inclusivity

Actions toward inclusivity should transcend identity politics and contend with difference or they risk replicating the false homogeneity of a collective identity (for example, "women"). As Steans (2007:730) notes, "differences among women do not necessarily preclude the possibility of solidarity. On the contrary, respect for difference is a necessary condition for forging solidarity." Thus, difference can be seen as a "source of strength" (743) for feminist change and as a challenge against so-called meritocratic approaches that can result in perpetuation of injustice and exclusivity. Our participants articulated ideals of intentional and intersectional inclusivity by describing how they built collaborative ties with diverse groups and individuals on campus in order to improve access to higher education and educate others about social justice issues.

Ideals of intersectional feminist solidarity manifested through examples of inclusivity in leadership practices. As individuals who benefit from considerable privilege by way of race (in most cases), level of education, social class, and other categories, the administrators we interviewed expressed awareness of their own intersecting identities and attempted to use their privilege to achieve goals of equity and inclusion. Our interviewees, most of whom were white, had concerns about BIPOC students and faculty at their institutions (many of them Predominantly White Institutions [PWIs]) and were involved in efforts to increase inclusivity. Similarly, they shared concerns about broad-based LGBTQ+ issues on their campuses irrespective of their own

gender or sexual identities. Although some more advanced women administrators began their careers with a focus on “women’s issues,” over time they said they developed a more intersectional feminist consciousness that transcended their own identities. An example is Amy Morton, former department head, who shared:

I remember, much to my shame and embarrassment, when my friends and I were arguing about whether or not we should make issues around sexual orientation as important as feminist issues for women’s rights. . . I took the position that it would take us away from, we pay too big a price and women overall would pay too big a price and that lesbians would actually get on better if all women had more opportunities. And I remember a male feminist friend of mine looked at me and said, Amy, ‘isn’t none of us free till we’re all free?’ And I remember thinking, ‘holy shit, he’s right’.

In addition to fostering solidarity across differences, our participants described striving to promote access to higher education for historically marginalized groups. In the words of Dean Holly Jenkins: “feminist leadership has to be about some combination of ensuring that those who have not been heard and those who have been marginalized have more of a place in the institution.” Participants also described alliances with a variety of groups as examples of intersectional feminism. For instance, when a search committee presented only white male candidates for a campus visit, one department chair said she insisted they return to the applicant pool for more diversity. Additionally, a president worked to safeguard affordability, sense of belonging, and Title IX equity (particularly in cases of sexual assault) for BIPOC students. She recounted,

We’re now working on trying to set up structures to support students of color who are here because, frankly, the community that we’re in is not very diverse and the college is the most diverse institution in the area. So, trying to support our students so that they feel comfortable and can access the things that they want (Helen Daniels, president).

Another inclusive goal was to improve access and affordability of higher education for first generation and low-income students. Olivia Thompson, a former associate provost, related this experience:

...[T]he ultimate purpose that we're here is for students, and particularly for the students who maybe are not reflected in the majority, so you know working class, first generation students, students of color. So, one of the things that we now have on our campus that we didn't have, that I was in charge of designing – and so I do take credit for some of that – was our University College [which meets the needs of provisionally accepted students, and also connects them to multicultural services and advising].

Others echoed concern for low-income students on campus. Describing students in her 2-year institution who often were unable to graduate, Assistant Dean Hailey Armstrong noted:

I'm tired of students not being able to finish class because they don't have a place to live and I've got students who are living in their cars. I've got students who are couch surfing, not just as a stop gap, just permanently couch surfing. It's hard for them to stay in school in those situations.

She described working with local food and beverage organizations to hire students in exchange for tuition waivers to remedy these situations. She explained:

You want staff? Give them a tuition waiver. If they work with you for six months, then pay for them to come to school. You'll get someone for four years who will work for you and be devoted to you and be on time.

These examples offer evidence of solidarity with others in the pursuit of equitable institutional transformation. They also provide evidence of the ethics, rationale, and values that guide feminist leaders' work:

I think about administrative work [as] about supporting, about making institutions better for the people: students, faculty, staff who are in them. It's about the individual and the nexus between the institution and the individual. So, I've thought a lot about that and then kind of infusing that with broader social justice recognition of intersectionality and you know a commitment to being as inclusive as possible. I think I've been able to make a difference in hiring someone who maybe a search committee might not have otherwise hired or helping tenure and

promotion committees see that negative course evaluations are negative because this person teaches race, class, and gender issues on a mostly white campus, things like that. Educating along the way and making positive change, that's been really important to me (Regina Boswell, president).

...the willingness to believe someone when they're experiencing something in the workplace. Faculty who will come and say, you know, 'I'm getting slammed on my teaching evaluations, what's going on?' . . . Being able to point to people and say 'yeah, I hear you, and here's a body of research on that,' and to help them advocate on their own behalf and get information out where it belongs (Kristin Jacobs, associate dean).

In another example of practicing intentional inclusivity, Sahira Murthy, director of a campus center, said she educated the provost and the provost's cabinet about gender and racial inequalities across their campus. She described drawing attention to the fact that only men were recipients of the most prestigious teaching award that year. She also shared that she pointed out the absence of women of color on a committee tasked with assessing bias in teaching evaluations, even though BIPOC women experience these biases disproportionately (e.g., American Sociological Association 2019). Our respondents offered examples of mindful strategies for inclusion that addressed the need for greater diversity and inclusion at various levels of their institutions.

Threats in the neoliberal university

When asked what broader changes in higher education concerned them, many feminist administrators focused on threats against the foundations of a liberal education with varying interpretations of what these threats meant for academia, society, and democracy. They saw these threats as intertwining with the neoliberal ideology in academia which demands a myopic focus on job outcomes, reliance on external funding, hyper-use of data, budget cuts, and competition (see Spitzer-Hanks 2016). Several respondents, such as Farah Needham (department chair) recognized these changes as

implicitly anti-feminist: “[there is the potential for] a complete collapse of the humanities, which is itself an anti-feminist attack, right? It’s an attack on the spaces where there is more gender equity and more women professors and more women students.” She saw the copious resourcing of applied disciplines as driving the elimination of traditional majors. Others saw the expansion of professional programs at the expense of a liberal education as a sign of neoliberal trends:

[T]he emphasis on professional skills, on employability and many incorrect assumptions about both the humanities and social sciences being less important for professional training and future careers. ... If you just look at empirical data, the employability of those with social science degrees 10 years out is actually a little bit higher than those with STEM degrees, and salaries are a little bit higher. So, it’s things that are just wrong but have affected the kind of national narrative about the importance of higher education in very profound ways (Holly Jenkins, dean).

Respondents were both aware of and engaged in efforts to mitigate the effects of neoliberal trends that they saw slowly eroding liberal education. They recounted multiple examples of how they resisted, compromised, and worked within existing systems to fulfill goals of equity and inclusion, or what we have framed as solidarity in this paper. Dean, Holly Jenkins explained how she aimed for more equitable allocation of resources across fields at her institution. When multiple disciplinary student writing centers that supported underprepared students were closed, she used her own budget to establish an interdisciplinary writing center. Her form of resistance was to work within the system’s constraints and use her authority to preserve a resource that would have been eliminated.

Neoliberal values perversely drive the hyper-use of data to undermine student and faculty success. Helena Mendoza, an associate dean, expressed a concern about increasingly popular data projects coming from the university’s top leadership that, for example, predict students’ success in certain disciplines based on test scores or previous

coursework. She shared that these data were used to discourage or even block their choice of major:

[Technology] plays such a role, now, in student success, and modeling admissions projections, and just in ways that I find really interesting . . . I also am taken aback sometimes at how big brotherish it can feel . . . I believe it's being used for well intentioned and well-meaning reasons and, other times, I just feel like this is a bit much, that we're plotting someone's destiny on whether or not they'll be successful in this major based on the variables that you put into a computer program, right?

As a solidary response with students, Helena, a social scientist by training, described confronting this logic by forcefully challenging faculty colleagues who believed certain students, particularly BIPOC women, could not be successful in their classes: "I get into [these] really ugly issues without flinching because . . . this is what we were trained to do, talk about race or class issues. This polite conversation is not gonna get us anywhere."

Interviewees also mentioned the increased reliance on technology to evaluate faculty:

There's this whole thing with impact factors, finding new computerized ways of placing faculty on a graph, using those programs and software, requiring all these indexes in order to be tenured or in order to be promoted 'early.' I think all of that is part of this package of the neoliberal agenda . . . This again comes back to this very private-oriented agenda, the private, corporate kind of agenda of how to evaluate employees (Sahira Murthy, director of a campus center).

In fact, Sahira said she made sure that her dean understood that "this just does not work," because the measures are imperfect: faculty conduct research in diverse ways and the impact is not always captured by metrics. She attempted to stem the tide against the use of software programs in part because of the detrimental effect they have on feminist and interdisciplinary research, which are less often published in the higher-ranking journals of many disciplines.

Concerns about liberal education and more equitable practices associated with higher education were linked to broader worries about the impact on democratic values.

In response to these concerns, one president said that among her goals was to uphold the integrity of a liberal arts education as equal to the imposed value of employment post-graduation:

I also value providing an education to students so that when they leave, they can successfully go on and be good members of their community. So that civic part, I think, is important for students to understand. I value the liberal arts aspect of an undergraduate degree and think that the job part will come if you have a good education. So, I haven't really bought into the whole 'train for the job' idea (Helen Daniels).

One respondent lamented that university leaders can be oblivious to the history of higher education, which then perpetuates a singular focus on employability:

Part of the whole idea was not only for the transmission of knowledge, which of course is the number one thing...[is] to incorporate the values of the society and the system in which the education was happening . . . so when you are not doing that or when you have put that completely aside, then it removes any responsibility from people to care or be concerned about people who are in less fortunate situations, who don't have the ability to participate in post-secondary education . . . then what happens to the generation of people who are allegedly educated, who are supposed to be caring about the people? What happens then is you have a greater division between the haves and the have-nots. And that only leads to really bad things (Mary Hamilton, student affairs administrator)?

Another significant trend across public higher education in the U.S. is the persistent decline in funding (Bound et al. 2019), which has resulted in a cascade of outcomes threatening the existence and the very purpose of public higher education. The pressures to seek funding through philanthropy or external grants has magnified considerably (Metcalf and Slaughter 2011). This creates advantages for disciplines that have access to funding agencies or corporate sponsors (i.e., STEM fields, business, finance, and professional studies) and disadvantages fields where external funding is scarcer (i.e., humanities and creative arts). As Sahira Murthy explained: "I think this whole thing about funding, and funding not only through sponsored funding but also, you

know, industry funding, foundation funding, and really pressure to produce funding. This [is a] very neoliberal agenda, thinking about higher education and institutions in terms of money or funding.”

Pressures on budgets experienced by many public institutions result in the ballooning of non-tenure-track faculty. According to Dean Debbie Byers, this pattern furthers gender inequality: “[T]he majority of [the non-tenure track faculty] are women and they are women who have taught for a long time and they are really underpaid.” Her example of resistance to this trend was to develop a plan for a living wage for non-tenure-track faculty, fully aware that there would not be sufficient money for the increases. In her mind, the resistance itself was worthwhile, as she recounted:

I’ve got the plan and I’m sending it in and we’ll get something. It will be in incremental steps and people in those positions will not be happy because it won’t be enough money. And they will say ‘look the university has tons of money, all they have to do is put their money . . . say we’re a priority.’ And I get that, but I also know the limits of what I can do . . . [But] I’ve pushed it and I’ve pushed it and pushed it and pushed it until I’ve gotten the provost to a point to acknowledge it and to say that she would do something about it.

Although Debbie knew the plan had little promise of full funding, she recognized it as an important social justice issue to address. Her strategy exposes how feminist administrators use their positions and influence to act in solidarity with others. In this case, Debbie had access to the provost and knew how to frame the issue to get traction on it. On several occasions, our respondents described creative strategies they used to navigate decreased funding. In a unique example of an alternative funding strategy, a social science chair described organizing craft sales to circumvent institutional protocols. She framed this as an example of “feminist” fundraising. Although reduced budgets for

her department could not be mitigated by such modest fundraising efforts, they provided an innovative approach to generate discretionary funding to support students.

As evidenced in this section, our respondents were profoundly aware of how the neoliberal and managerial context constrained feminist institution building. They experienced academic capitalism's (Metcalf and Slaughter 2008; 2011) tendencies to squeeze out not just disciplines, tenure-track lines, leadership opportunities for faculty, and access to postsecondary education, but also the very possibility of equity and justice within and beyond academia. In response, these feminist leaders reached out to others in solidarity to engage in collaborative work, make compromises when necessary, work within the system, and resist where they deemed they could be effective.

CONCLUSION

Our data reveal ways in which feminist administrators experience putting feminist ideals to work in creating equitable and inclusive academic environments. Our respondents described how they used their positions to broaden the range of voices in university operations and decision making, engendered justice-minded practices, and persisted in these goals, often against institutional priorities grounded in neoliberal values. What is evident is that varied forms of feminist solidarity are necessary for sustained institutional transformation that resists neoliberal trends. And, varied forms of feminist solidarity can impact institutions and individual lives. The strategies shared with us in this project may constitute but a few of administrators' continuous efforts to lead with feminist and social justice principles.

The solidarity explored in this manuscript is based on a variety of factors, including shared experiences, collective identities and positionalities, common interests,

emotive responses to injustice, empathy, desire for equity, and active resistance to managerialism. As an ethic—a set of values that guides behaviors—feminist solidarity can be seen as resistance to neoliberal agendas pervading higher education. As Christou and Janta (2019:238) argue, “. . . knowledge structures remain complicit with other intersectional forms of domination and hence both academia as a workplace and the university (since it is a modern/colonial institution) as a learning space requires coalition building politics that incorporate intersectional praxis.” The feminist administrators we interviewed provided examples of how they strategically enacted these “coalition building” and intersectional politics.

Because our sample is limited in its representation of diverse social identities, most notably race and ethnicity, we cannot speculate beyond what women of color in our sample shared with us about how their identities and their feminist praxis intersect and produce distinctly different experiences than those who are not minoritized at their institutions. However, existing literature documents the unique forms of resistance and hostility that people of color and queer-identified individuals experience when pressing for change at their institutions (Ahmed 2017; Alcalde and Subramaniam 2023; De Welde and Stepnick 2015; Reyes 2022). And while this paper does not offer analysis by institution type or formal positions held by respondents, these are important factors shaping what people do (and can do) and how such work is received.

Limitations to the framework we use include the reality that solidarity work does not always result in organizational or institutional change. Respondents regularly described their strategies and approaches as limited or partially successful. Many accommodated existing structures of power rather than fundamentally transforming them,

making compromises given the existing power structures at their university. Respondents shared that, at times, their efforts were ineffectual or ignored. We address these topics in our prior work (De Welde, Ollilainen, and Solomon 2019). And yet, respondents were strategic and pragmatic in their efforts; for example, proposing strategies to create more equitable access to tenure and to associated rewards. Collectively, these feminist administrators imagine a more just academia, a system that paves the way for increased opportunities, a stronger democracy, and more collaborative communities. They envision themselves as leveraging their influence for a collective good.

Because our interviews focused specifically on how feminist goals informed and influenced administrators' day-to-day work, their particular leadership style was less significant than how they enacted change. In other words, although the administrators in this paper are all *women* leaders, their strategies were not necessarily reducible to gendered leadership approaches, but instead fostered solidarity for effecting institutional as well as broader social change. We therefore conclude that, while it may be women leaders who typically engage in efforts to foster diversity, inclusion, and equity on campus, anyone who embraces feminist and social justice goals can work to resist neoliberal trends in their institutions that inherently undermine goals of inclusivity. We call for more research on these processes and the extent to which the efforts of feminists and their allies have succeeded in transforming the academy.

Another factor to consider in our analysis includes the reality that administrators who do not espouse feminist values or who do not self-identify as feminist may indeed promote similar policies and engage in related actions. In other words, the actions taken and described to us by our respondents are not exclusively the domain of feminist

leaders. However, a major contribution of this paper is that by applying a solidarity framework to our respondents' self-proclaimed feminist actions allows us to imagine what a more feminist university might look like.

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