

Transforming Higher Education for Equity, Success, & Inclusion of all Stakeholders (THESIS)



A Model For Change Agent Empowerment

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CASCade

Change Agents Shaping Campus Diversity & Equity
Phillip J. Bowman Center for Scholarship to Practice
The University of Michigan



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About

CASCaDE The THESIS Model is the organizing framework of CASCaDE (Change Agents Shaping Campus Diversity and Equity), an initiative for enabling equity-minded transformation in higher education. CASCaDE is part of the Phillip J. Bowman Center for Scholarship to Practice (formerly the NCID) at the University of Michigan and funded through a grant from the *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*. The project aims to empower change agents to enact transformational change through knowledge, tools, research, and convening centered on building equity-minded leadership skills for both formal and informal leaders in higher education.

This material is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Bowman Center The Bowman Center aims to connect, catalyze, and elevate diversity scholars and scholarship by building communities for information sharing and collaboration, mobilizing scholars for social transformation, and disseminating and promoting the application of this scholarship to address pressing societal issues.

Higher Endeavor *Higher Endeavor* is a consortium of organizations supported through the *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's* Postsecondary Success Strategy. Higher Endeavor aims to improve student outcomes for Black, Latino, & Indigenous students, & students from low-income backgrounds, ensuring that race, ethnicity, and income are not predictors of postsecondary success.

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Contents

Context	4
Equity-Based Change Agents	6
Empowerment Domains	8
» Critical Consciousness	10
» Navigation Skills	12
» Use Scholarship & Resources	14
Moving Forward	16
References	17



Context

Systemic discrimination continues to permeate American higher education through the inequitable access of opportunity, allocation of resources, and campus climate. To fight injustice and principles of exclusion that were foundational to most colleges and universities, American higher education needs stakeholders to lead and equitably transform institutions.

Organizational structures, values, and incentives must evolve away from the systemically inequitable orientations under which they were originally created, and respond to drastically changing demographics,

political landscapes, and stakeholder needs. In particular, racially diverse student populations must have equitable opportunities to access and succeed in higher education.

This requires that stakeholders (e.g.,

leaders, policymakers, practitioners, scholars, faculty, staff, and students) be equipped with the appropriate knowledge, tools, and experiences to transform higher education organizations.

Organizational transformation involves deeper work than simply accumulating additional programs or resources; rather, transformation requires changing the foundational operation and function of higher education to create fair and equitable opportunities for all stakeholders.

Transformation requires approaching the foundational operation and function of higher education



Without a reorientation and transformation, higher education can continue to exacerbate social inequities and stratify outcomes

Higher education institutions are some of our oldest social structures and transformational change has not been, and will not be, easy. Transforming complex, decentralized, historically-entrenched organizations requires equitable and strategic effort from committed individuals. Yet, without a reorientation and transformation, higher education can continue to exacerbate social inequities and stratify outcomes. Scholarship on organizational change has often centered leaders in formal positions to initiate and sustain change initiatives. **We propose a model of equity-based leadership development for change agents with various formal and informal leader roles who want to create organizational change.**



Equity-Based Change Agents

Change Agents All stakeholders, especially those with informal influence and less formal leadership responsibility, can be change agents in their varying spheres of influence. Change agents could be formal leaders, like an associate dean that wants to institutionalize equitable hiring efforts for faculty. Or, they might be informal leaders, such as a faculty member who wants to create more structures for disabled faculty to get appropriate teaching accommodations, an administrative assistant who seeks to create more equitable flex working policies for parents, or an academic advisor who wants to initiate assessment of marginalized student advising experiences.

Equity-based Leadership In order to create transformational change in higher education, change agents must lead with an orientation towards equity by owning the responsibility to ensure higher education institutions are just. In order to create fair and just transformation in higher education, change agents must have an equity-minded orientation that is conscious of history, identity, and systems of oppression, while utilizing research to advance institutional action (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2015; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Change agents recognize that change cannot happen in a vacuum.

Shared Equity Leadership Equity-minded change agents create change through collective and shared leadership. Change agents recognize that transformation cannot happen in a vacuum; instead, they transform organizations by creating teams, partnerships, collaborations, and an ecosystem of support to utilize diverse experiences, identities, skills, talents, and networks. A shared equity leadership approach is also critical to engage partners with varied areas of expertise and investment, who can collaborate to share the responsibility and outcomes of change (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). A shared equity leadership approach requires leaders and change agents to undergo a personal journey toward critical consciousness. In addition, shared equity leaders hold common team values and enact practices that allow them to create equitable conditions on their campuses for all stakeholders.

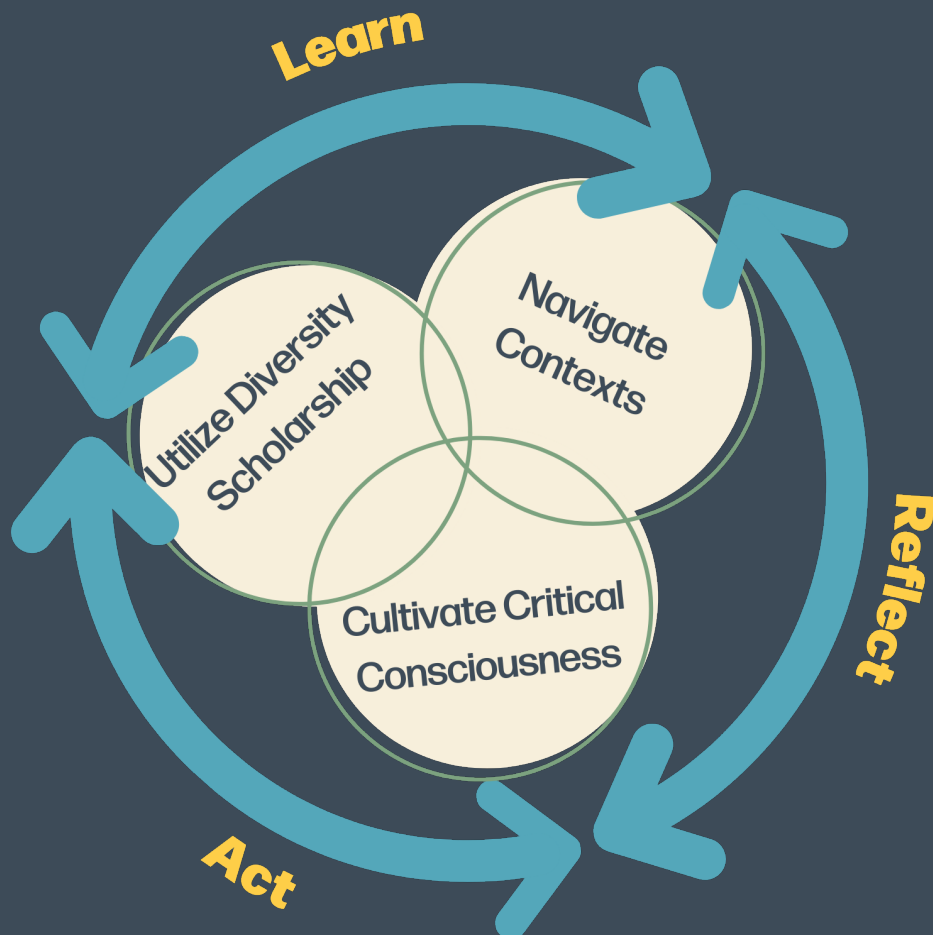
Empowerment Domains

The Transforming Higher Education for Success and Inclusion of all Stakeholders (THESIS) model of change agent empowerment is built upon prior scholarship of equity-based leadership (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2015) and shared equity leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017), along with the need to empower change agents who are both formal and informal leaders.

Transformational organizational change can happen when change agents learn, reflect, and enact equity-based leadership. We offer this model as a developmental empowerment framework that guides change agents to initiate and sustain the ongoing nature of organizational transformation through the following interconnected developmental domains:

- 1. Continuously Cultivate a Critical Consciousness***
- 2. Develop Social & Political Navigation Skills***
- 3. Utilize Diversity Scholarship to Make Evidence-Based Decisions***

Change Agent Empowerment



The THESIS Model of Change Agent Empowerment centers three key components necessary for enacting transformational change, as represented by the three overlapping circles in the diagram's center. Around these, we have shown the continuous and iterative process through which these skills develop, and empowerment occurs: change agents learn, reflect, and act across each of these areas. Notably, the bidirectional arrows reflect the continuous nature of this process, and that learning, reflection, and action do not necessarily occur in a specific order. Rather, change agents may begin their journey to empowerment with any of these steps.

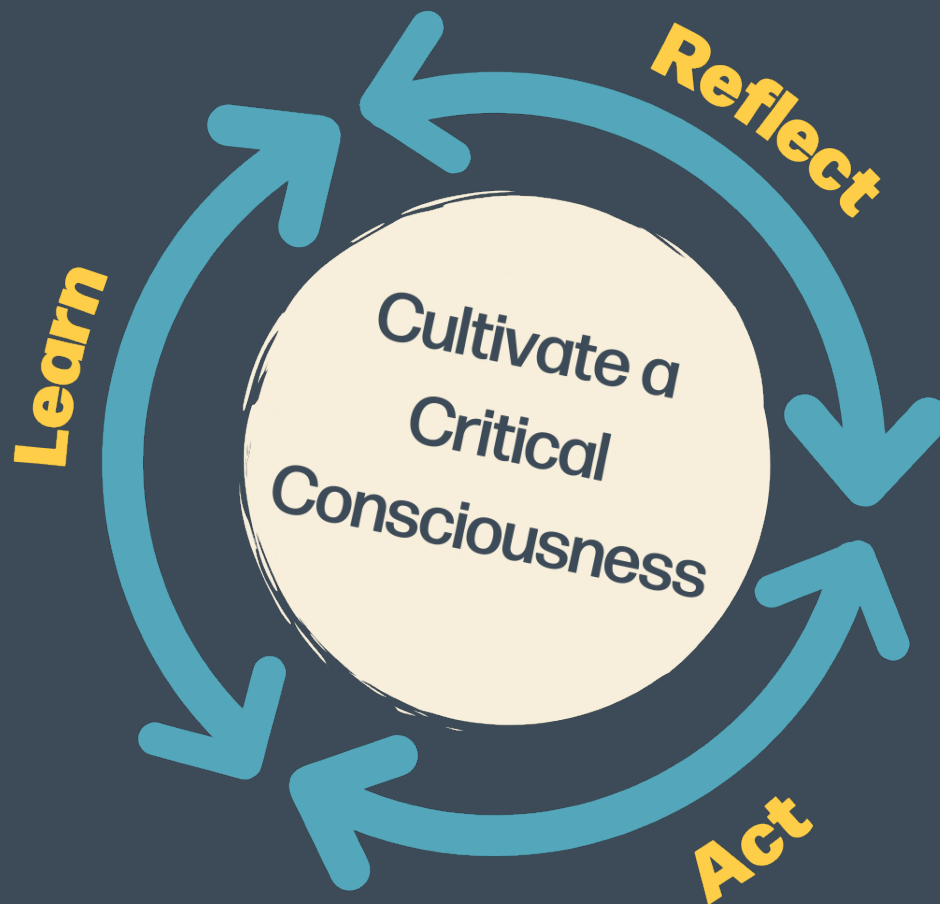


Continuously Cultivate a Critical Consciousness

Higher education leaders must understand how their individual identities, experiences, histories, and actions are intertwined within a social system(s) of privilege and oppression. Introduced by Freire (1973), critical consciousness is the ability to develop a complex understanding of power and privilege in the social world to advocate for transformational change. In order to cultivate a critical consciousness, leaders must learn: 1) to critically reflect upon systemic inequalities and their place in those systems, 2) individual political efficacy, and 3) behavioral tools for social action (Watts et al., 2011).

Cultivating a critical consciousness

is especially important for higher education change agents. As Kezar et al. (2021) and Museus et al. (2017) highlight, change agents must recognize how their cultural strengths and positionality within different social contexts impact individual and collective relationship building and action. Diverse stakeholder coalitions are necessary to transform higher education, but will only be successful when change agents continuously cultivate a critical consciousness about their own identities, experiences, and leadership skills.



Learning Outcomes

To cultivate a critical consciousness, change agents must be able to:

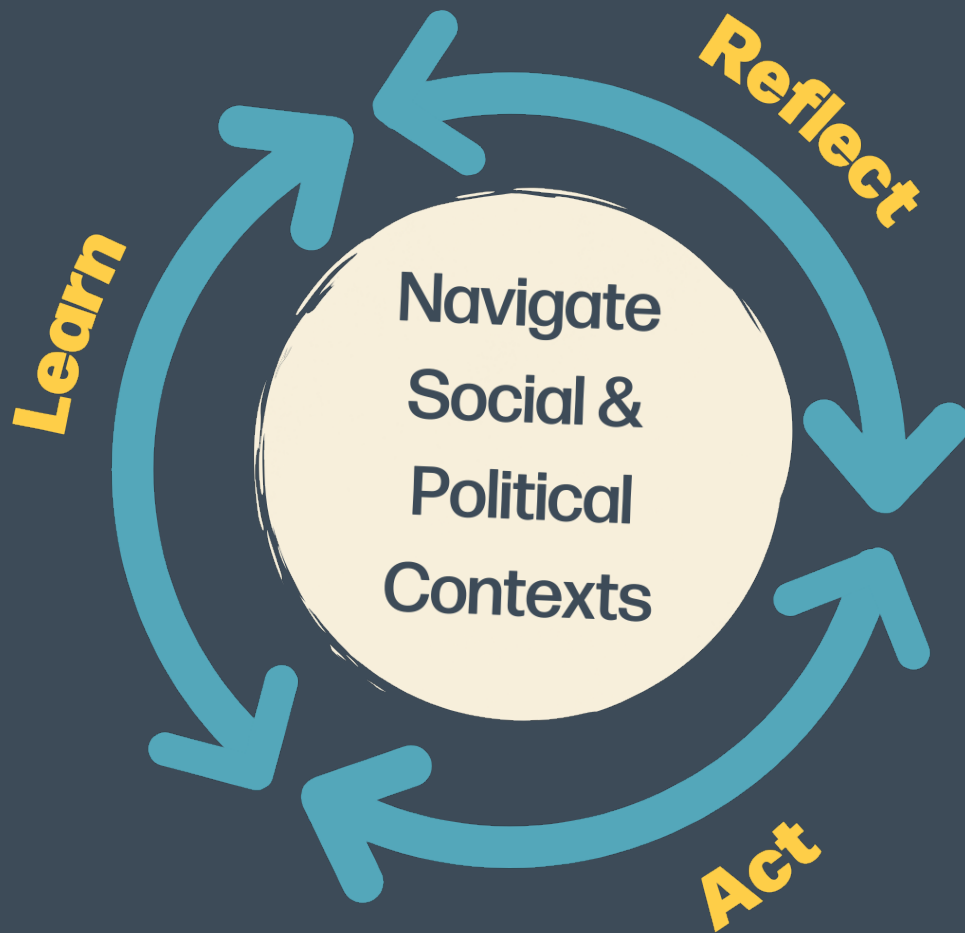
- » Critically reflect on systemically privileged and oppressed intersectional identities and experiences as they relate to teams and organizational transformation
- » Understand the connection between localized institutional contexts and systemic injustice

Develop Social & Political Navigation Skills

Organizational change is only as successful as the capabilities and capacities of those who lead. It is imperative that higher education change agents are prepared to navigate rapidly-evolving social and political contexts. There are constant political attacks on fundamental values and mechanisms of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, so change agents must be perceptive to potential futures, knowledgeable of current policy, and able to effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders to create coalitions and build capacity for transformation.

Navigating social contexts as a change agent requires specific skills and knowledge. First, in order to transform organizations, change agents must know how to navigate them to create and implement change through

multiple structural, political, interpersonal perspectives. In particular, change agents must be able to foresee and respond to various forms of resistance at multiple organizational levels and build communities of support. Second, organizational transformation is taxing, so change agents must be able to create conditions and boundaries to preserve and sustain psychological energy. Lastly, because identity and position in an organization shape the opportunities and barriers that present themselves, change agents must be aware of, and have access to, tools to navigate different social and organizational contexts.



Learning Outcomes

To navigate social and political contexts, change agents must be able to:

- » Understand international, federal, state, local, and institutional political initiatives, movements, and policies to capitalize on opportunities for change
- » Utilize effective and inclusive tools to create community mobilization, sustainable social movements, and reciprocal coalition-building
- » Identify multiple forms of resistance and accompanying solution plans
- » Create a plan to maintain wellness and preserve the psychological energy needed to sustain leadership and advocacy

Utilize Diversity Scholarship & Resources

Diversity research and scholarship illuminates the systems of power and privilege that exist through everyday interactions and organizational activities, and highlights the experiences and strengths of members of systemically marginalized groups and communities. To make equitable evidence-based decisions, change agents must use different forms of data, evidence, and research that include various methods, disciplines, and forms of scholarship. Utilizing diversity research and scholarship is especially important as change agents must critically consume and/or create knowledge that recognizes historical contexts and addresses local organizational issues. As critical creators and consumers of research, change agents must contextualize

scholarship within a broader social and political context that doesn't center and prioritize Western, white methods and communication. In particular, change agents must foreground the assets, resources, and cultural strengths of systematically marginalized stakeholders and communities to ensure change is empowering and transformative.



Learning Outcomes

To utilize diversity scholarship and make evidence-based decisions change agents must:

- » Utilize a variety of perspectives, epistemologies, and sources of diversity scholarship as evidence on which to base decisions
- » Translate diversity scholarship to local social and organizational contexts
- » Along with other types of scholarship, utilize non-dominant ways of knowing that may not be easily accessible or valued

Moving Forward

Higher education organizations must transform into more equitable cultures and contexts for the success of all stakeholders and there is no shortage of opportunities to enact equity-minded change. In order to tackle such large and sustained challenges, change agents in both formal and informal leadership roles must be equipped with the tools, skills, and experiences to create policies and practices that can push organizations to be more equitable and inclusive.

The Transforming Higher Education for Success and Inclusion of all Stakeholders (THESIS) model adopts a critical individual and organizational approach to transformational change. This model highlights a collective orientation to support, equip, and mobilize equity-minded change agents at all levels of the organization with formal responsibility or informal influence to initiate and sustain organizational transformation in higher education.

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