

Interrogating Equity Discourse in Multicultural Education through Structural Racism, Data Practices, and Institutional Accountability

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Abstract

This critical review examines how equity, inclusion, and cultural identity are conceptualised, measured, and enacted within multicultural education and student affairs scholarship, with attention to how practitioners can connect theory with practice. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature in education policy, critical race theory, human rights, and student development, the review synthesises key empirical and theoretical contributions that have shaped contemporary understandings of students' experiences in educational institutions. Particular attention is given to how institutional practices, including data collection, accountability frameworks, and policy implementation, both reveal and obscure systemic inequities related to race and intersecting identities. The review identifies persistent gaps in the literature, including the depoliticisation of equity discourse, the under-theorisation of power and structural racism, and the limited integration of human rights frameworks in student affairs research. By critically evaluating methodological trends and dominant narratives, this article highlights how existing scholarship can inadvertently reproduce the inequities it seeks to address. The review concludes by proposing directions for future research and practice that foreground institutional responsibility, deepen critical engagement with data and policy, and support more transformative and inclusive approaches to student affairs and multicultural education.

Keywords multi-cultural education, student affairs, equity in education, institutional power, inclusive policy

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INTRODUCTION

Equity, inclusion, and cultural identity are central concerns in contemporary education and student affairs, yet they remain contested and unevenly operationalised across institutions. Students from historically marginalised backgrounds continue to face systemic barriers that limit access, engagement, and success, even as schools and universities adopt policies and programmes intended to promote diversity and inclusion. Understanding these persistent inequities requires not only documenting outcomes, but also critically examining the frameworks, practices, and policies that shape student experiences. Existing research on equity and inclusion in student affairs has emerged across several distinct but overlapping research contexts.

Within campus climate scholarship, foundational studies such as Hurtado and Carter (1997) examined how perceptions of racial climate shape Latino students' sense of belonging, establishing climate as a key proxy for inclusion. Recently, Begaye-Tewa et al. (2023) synthesised empirical

studies on Indigenous and Black student experiences, demonstrating that dominant climate frameworks often fail to incorporate culturally grounded epistemologies. Within critical diversity and equity research, scholars such as Harper and Hurtado (2007) and Patton et al. (2019) critically evaluated institutional diversity initiatives, highlighting how they frequently emphasise representation and perception-based outcomes while neglecting structural inequities. In research oriented towards structure and policy, Whitman and Jayakumar (2023) applied structural competency frameworks to student affairs, demonstrating how institutional policies, including admissions and financial aid, shape inequitable outcomes. Similarly, Metzl and Hansen (2014) provided a foundational theoretical model linking systemic structures to inequities, later adapted to educational contexts. Finally, scholarship informed by critical race theory (CRT), including Torres et al. (2009) and Ladson-Billings (1998), reframed student experience research by situating race and racism as systemic and deeply embedded within educational systems.

This critical review seeks to interrogate how equity and inclusion are conceptualised, measured, and enacted within multicultural education and student affairs scholarship. By synthesising interdisciplinary literature spanning education policy, critical race theory, human rights, and student development, the review highlights both the contributions and limitations of existing research. It pays particular attention to how institutional practices, such as data collection, accountability frameworks, and policy implementation, can simultaneously illuminate and obscure inequities, emphasising the importance of nuanced analysis for advancing the field.

Research and practice in student affairs have made important strides towards documenting climate and belonging, yet dominant approaches remain largely descriptive and under-theorised with respect to power and systemic inequities (Collins, 2000; Harper, 2012; Hurtado et al., 1998, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Building on recent critiques of the campus climate heuristic and calls for structural analysis, this review emphasises the ways in which policies shape the experiences of racially and socially marginalised students. It also proposes a pipeline linking data to decisions, connecting disaggregated indicators to concrete accountability measures, timelines, and transparent review processes. By centring analyses of institutional power, systemic levers, and the rights and dignity of all students, the article offers a practical framework for redesigning student affairs policies and assessment towards more equitable and transformative outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on equity, inclusion, and cultural identity in student affairs and related educational contexts reveals a complex field shaped by competing conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and institutional practices. At the heart of much of this work lies the campus climate construct, which has long served as a proxy for understanding how students experience belonging, safety, and opportunity within higher education environments. Research focusing on campus climate for historically marginalised populations, predominantly Indigenous and Black students, demonstrates persistent limitations in both theory and methodology. For example, Begaye-Tewa and colleagues' review of literature on campus climate emphasised that many studies rely on frameworks that are not rooted in Indigenous or Black ways of knowing and lack nuanced methodological designs to adequately address issues of power, identity, and belonging (Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023).

The dominance of campus climate research is notable, yet it reveals broader patterns in equity scholarship. Many studies prioritise descriptive accounts of racialised experience and sense of belonging while underplaying structural determinants of inequity. This observation echoes calls in education research to move beyond surface measures of inclusion and towards analyses that centre institutional history, power, and policy (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; as reviewed in Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023). Such critiques align with scholarship on structural competency, which advances the field by foregrounding how systemic inequities are embedded within policies, administrative norms, and higher education infrastructures. Whitman and Jayakumar (2023) argued that student affairs practitioners need structural competency to recognise and intervene in the upstream causes of racial marginalisation that manifest in campus contexts, such as admissions practices and inequitable financial aid systems.

This body of work also reveals theoretical tensions. Traditional multicultural and diversity paradigms often emphasise representation and cultural inclusion without necessarily engaging deeper questions of power, systemic racism, and institutional accountability. Studies emerging from CRT offer a counterpoint by framing inequity as a structural rather than merely relational phenomenon. CRT situates race and racism as foundational to educational structures and not incidental to individual experience, thereby reframing equity research towards questions of power, policy, and institutional transformation. Work applying CRT to student identity development and campus policy demonstrates how racialised experiences are shaped by broader sociopolitical discourses and institutional responses (Torres et al., 2009).

Despite its theoretical richness, existing literature lacks consensus on what constitutes effective equity and inclusion practices. Much of the existing research focuses on climate surveys and descriptive quantitative outcomes, but it often fails to examine how institutional policies and practices perpetuate inequities or how equity is applied across different areas within student affairs. For example, surveys conducted by student affairs offices typically capture perceptions of inclusiveness. However, they do not systematically consider the intersectionality of student identities or the dynamics of institutional power (Golubeva, 2025).

Emerging critiques highlight that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives themselves have become politically and institutionally contested. Pressure from external policy environments, such as legislative restrictions on equity-related programmes and funding, has significantly shaped how student affairs professionals frame and enact inclusion work (NASPA, 2022). These dynamics underscore the need for scholarship that not only describes inequities but critically analyses how institutional commitments to equity are negotiated within broader sociopolitical contexts, influencing both policy development and implementation. Recognising these challenges opens pathways for innovative research and practice that can lead to meaningful change in student affairs and multicultural education.

The literature is examined across three interrelated dimensions, namely how equity and inclusion are conceptualised, measured, and enacted within multicultural education and student affairs scholarship. Across the literature, these dimensions are reflected in distinct yet overlapping ways.

- Equity and inclusion are conceptualised in competing ways, either as representation and belonging within multicultural frameworks or as structural justice within CRT (Banks, 2019; Gurin et al., 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
- They are measured primarily through campus climate surveys and descriptive indicators, which capture perceptions but often fail to account for intersectionality or institutional power dynamics (Ahmed, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998).
- They are enacted through institutional policies and DEI initiatives that are frequently shaped by political, organisational, and resource constraints, limiting their transformative potential (Ahmed, 2012; Bensimon, 2018; Dei, 1996; Hooks, 1994).

This three-dimensional analysis reveals a critical disconnect, since equity is often framed as structural but operationalised in ways that remain largely descriptive and depoliticised. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing more accountable and transformative approaches in student affairs and multicultural education (Ahmed, 2012; Bensimon, 2018; Harper, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this review integrates three interrelated frameworks, namely critical race theory (CRT), primarily developed through the scholarship of Bell (1992), Crenshaw (1991), and Delgado and Stefancic (2017); structural competency, advanced by Metzl and Hansen (2014); and human rights frameworks grounded in international human rights principles articulated through UNESCO (2017) and subsequent educational and equity scholarship. Together, these lenses provide both explanatory power and practical guidance for understanding how institutional practices and policies reproduce or mitigate systemic inequities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT offers a foundational lens for interrogating how race and systemic racism shape educational structures, policies, and student outcomes. Unlike traditional diversity and inclusion frameworks, which often focus on representation or individual attitudes, CRT situates inequity within institutional structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This perspective allows scholars to examine how policies, curricular designs, and administrative practices reproduce racial hierarchies, often in subtle and unintentional ways. CRT also emphasises the importance of centring marginalised voices, validating lived experiences, and challenging dominant narratives that normalise inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the context of student affairs, CRT provides a critical lens for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives and understanding the persistent disparities in access, engagement, and success across student populations.

Structural Competency

Complementing CRT, structural competency foregrounds the influence of institutional, organisational, and systemic factors in shaping inequitable outcomes. Initially developed in health sciences, this framework has been adapted to education and student affairs to identify upstream drivers of inequity, including policies, governance structures, and resource allocation (Metzl & Hansen, 2014; Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023). Structural competency enables scholars and

practitioners to move beyond interventions aimed at individuals and towards structural interventions, such as redesigning student support services, implementing policy audits focused on equity, and integrating systemic accountability mechanisms. By emphasising the relational and systemic dimensions of inequity, structural competency bridges theory and practice, guiding more effective and sustainable interventions in student affairs.

Human Rights Framework

A human rights perspective extends CRT and structural competency by framing equity and inclusion not only as institutional imperatives but also as legal and ethical obligations. International and domestic human rights instruments, such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, provide normative standards for education that emphasise access, participation, and non-discrimination (UNESCO, 2017). Human rights frameworks compel educators and administrators to consider the broader social and moral dimensions of equity, ensuring that policies and practices do not merely appear inclusive but substantively uphold students' rights. Integrating human rights into student affairs research deepens accountability, encourages the examination of structural power, and connects local institutional practices to global equity norms.

Integration of Frameworks

This integrated theoretical framework informs the analysis throughout the review by shaping how equity, inclusion, and institutional accountability are examined across the literature. CRT is used to critically analyse how race, power, and systemic inequities are embedded within student affairs policies, campus climate initiatives, and multicultural education frameworks. Structural competency is applied to examine how institutional systems, organisational practices, and policy structures influence the production and maintenance of inequities beyond individual interactions or intentions. Human rights frameworks guide the evaluation of institutional responsibilities and accountability measures related to equitable access, inclusion, and student well-being. Together, these frameworks support a multidimensional analysis of how equity is conceptualised, measured, and enacted within higher education while also identifying gaps between institutional commitments and lived student experiences. This integrated approach further informs the review's critique of existing methodologies, highlights limitations in current scholarship, and supports the development of more transformative and accountable approaches to student affairs practice and policy.

The following table compares the three frameworks used in this study and emphasises that achieving equity is not simply a matter of diversity initiatives, but instead requires systemic, accountable, and ethically informed institutional transformation.

Table 1. *Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks*

Lens	Core Premise	Units of Analysis	Methods	What it explains	Limitations
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	Views racism as systemic, operating through	Policy regimes; institutional responses; racialized	Critical policy analysis: counter-narratives,	Links micro experiences to macro power; reveals how	Requires integration with implementation /accountability

<i>A framework that examines how race and racism are embedded in social structures and institutions, shaping inequities and outcomes</i>	policies, everyday practices and institutional norms rather than only individual actions	narratives - analyses how formal policies, institutional practices and dominant narratives produce and reinforce race-based disparities	qualitative/critical mixed methods - often uses qualitative or mixed methods to surface marginalized perspectives and challenge dominant assumptions.	neutral policies reproduce hierarchy - connects individual and lived experience to broader systems of power, showing how policies that appear neutral can still reproduce racial hierarchies	mechanisms to operationalize change - requires pairing with implementation strategies and accountability mechanisms to translate analysis into measurable institutional change
Structural Competency <i>A framework that focuses on how social, institutional and economic structures produce inequities and shape outcomes</i>	Inequities arise from foundational structures (e.g., admissions standards, aid formulas) - locates inequities in underlying institutional structures such as admissions criteria, financial aid formulas and other system-level processes	Examines how institutional systems, infrastructure, resource distribution and administrative practices contribute to inequitable conditions	Structural mapping; policy tracing; equity audits - uses structural mapping, policy tracing and equity audits to identify how institutional processes and decisions generate inequities	Identifies system-level levers for intervention within student affairs to address root causes of inequity	Not a race-first theory; must be paired with CRT to explicitly center how race and power shape inequities
Human Rights Framework <i>A framework grounded in legal obligations that define individuals as rights-holders and institutions as duty-bearers</i>	Human Rights are legal & ethical obligations that bind institutions to uphold access, participation, justice and anti-discrimination as enforceable standards	Positions institutions as <i>duty-bearers</i> responsible for upholding human rights, while students are understood as <i>rights-holders</i>	Rights-based indicators; compliance/benchmarking – access equity through measurable indicators tied to legal and ethical standards, focusing on whether institutions meet established benchmarks & compliance requirements	Anchors accountability and transparency by establishing clear obligations for institutions; connects local practices to global human rights standards, enabling cross-context comparability and normative benchmarks	Requires translation into higher-ed-specific metrics to avoid being purely normative. This requires assessment tools to move beyond abstract principles and ensure practical, measurable implementation within institutional contexts

METHODOLOGY

Themes were identified through a critical interpretive synthesis of interdisciplinary literature spanning student affairs, multicultural education, critical race theory, and education policy. Sources were selected based on relevance to equity, inclusion, and student experience. An iterative coding process was used to analyse the literature, focusing on three analytical dimensions, namely how equity is conceptualised, how equity is measured, and how it is enacted in institutional practice. Recurring patterns across studies, particularly those related to methodological limitations, theoretical framing, and institutional context, were grouped into thematic categories. These themes were refined through constant comparison across sources, ensuring that they reflect both convergences and tensions within the literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes were derived from recurring patterns across the literature, particularly studies by Begaye-Tewa et al. (2023), Whitman and Jayakumar (2023), Torres et al. (2009), Golubeva (2025), and NASPA (2022, 2023).

1. Campus climate limitations are evident in traditional climate research, which often fails to adequately address structural power and epistemologies rooted in marginalised student experiences (Abrica et al., 2023; Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). This limitation reflects a broader tendency within higher education research to prioritise institutional perceptions of inclusion over analyses of how power, race, and institutional norms shape student experiences. As a result, climate research may document inequities without sufficiently interrogating the systems and policies that produce them.
2. Structural competency has led scholars to argue for frameworks that connect macro-level oppression and policy to student outcomes and practices in student affairs (Metzl & Hansen, 2014; Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023). This perspective challenges individualised understandings of student success by emphasising that inequitable outcomes are often rooted in institutional structures rather than student deficits. The literature therefore positions structural competency as essential for shifting student affairs practice from reactive support models towards systemic institutional transformation.
3. Critical race theory integration shifts equity research towards interrogations of systemic racism, power, and policy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Torres et al., 2009). The integration of CRT is particularly significant because it reframes inequity as systemic rather than incidental. This challenges depoliticised approaches to diversity and inclusion that focus primarily on representation or belonging while leaving institutional power structures largely unexamined.
4. Methodological gaps persist because dominant research relies on surveys and descriptive analytics with limited attention to structural and intersectional analysis (Golubeva, 2025; Patton et al., 2019). This methodological reliance constrains the field's ability to capture the complexity of marginalised student experiences and often reduces equity to measurable

indicators rather than structural conditions. Consequently, dominant methodologies may unintentionally reinforce institutional narratives of progress while obscuring persistent inequities.

5. Political and institutional context also matters because external pressures and policy discourse shape equity initiatives within student affairs practice (NASPA, 2022, 2023). The literature demonstrates that equity initiatives are not implemented in politically neutral environments. Rather, institutional responses to diversity, equity, and inclusion are shaped by competing political agendas, funding priorities, and public discourse, which may limit the transformative potential of equity-oriented work.

Taken together, these themes illustrate how equity is conceptualised through competing theoretical frameworks, measured through limited and often descriptive methodologies, and enacted through institutional policies shaped by broader political and organisational contexts. The literature reveals a persistent disconnect between institutional commitments to equity and the structural changes required to meaningfully address systemic inequities within higher education.

Campus Climate Scholarship

Campus climate research remains a foundational lens for understanding student experiences in higher education and student affairs. This body of literature has explored how institutional environments, including their physical, social, and symbolic dimensions, affect students' sense of belonging, safety, and opportunity (Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023). Climate studies often focus on historically marginalised populations, such as Black and Indigenous students, highlighting disparities in access, engagement, and support. For example, Begaye-Tewa et al. (2023) found that many campus climate studies inadequately incorporate Indigenous and Black epistemologies, relying instead on dominant cultural frameworks that fail to capture the nuanced experiences of marginalised students. These findings underscore a persistent gap because, while climate research provides descriptive data on inclusion, it rarely interrogates the structural forces shaping inequities or the institutional practices that perpetuate them.

This suggests that campus climate scholarship often operates within institutional frameworks that privilege measurement and perception over structural accountability. Although surveys and climate assessments provide important insight into student experiences, they may oversimplify inequity by treating discrimination as isolated experiences rather than manifestations of systemic institutional dynamics. As a result, institutions may rely on climate data to demonstrate commitments to inclusion without addressing the underlying organisational cultures, policies, and power structures contributing to inequitable outcomes.

Structural Competency and Policy Frameworks

Recognising these limitations, scholars have increasingly called for frameworks that link institutional policies, structural inequities, and student outcomes. Structural competency emphasises understanding how macro-level systems, such as admissions policies, financial aid allocation, and organisational culture, shape racial and social inequities within educational institutions (Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023). Applying this lens, student affairs professionals can identify systemic barriers

that contribute to inequitable experiences and outcomes. Research demonstrates that structural competency frameworks are particularly effective in guiding interventions that go beyond individual student support towards institutional change (Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023).

The literature's emphasis on structural competency represents an important shift away from approaches that locate inequities within individual students. Instead, structural competency reframes inequity as a product of institutional arrangements, policy decisions, and organisational practices. However, the literature also suggests that many institutions continue to operationalise equity through individualised programming and support services rather than undertaking more challenging structural reforms. This tension highlights the difficulty of translating structural analyses into substantive institutional change within student affairs practice.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) Integration

Critical race theory provides a complementary lens by situating race and racism at the centre of educational analysis. CRT frames inequities not as incidental outcomes but as embedded in policy, practice, and organisational culture (Torres et al., 2009). Within student affairs scholarship, CRT-informed studies examine how institutional policies, curricular decisions, and administrative structures reproduce racial hierarchies. For example, Torres et al. (2009) illustrate how racialised student experiences in campus life are shaped by broader societal narratives, demonstrating the value of CRT for linking micro-level experiences with macro-level structural forces. Integrating CRT into student affairs research allows scholars to critically evaluate equity initiatives and challenge assumptions that inclusion alone is sufficient to address systemic inequities.

Importantly, CRT challenges the assumption that institutional diversity initiatives are inherently equitable or transformative. Instead, CRT exposes how policies framed as neutral may continue to reproduce racial hierarchies and institutional exclusion. This critical lens is particularly significant in student affairs because it shifts the focus from symbolic inclusion towards examining how institutional power operates through policy, governance, and organisational culture. At the same time, the literature indicates that CRT-informed approaches often face resistance within politically contested educational environments, reflecting broader tensions surrounding equity and anti-racist scholarship in higher education.

Political and Institutional Context

Finally, scholarship increasingly acknowledges that student affairs practice occurs within contested political and institutional landscapes. Legislative restrictions, external policy pressures, and national debates around equity and diversity shape the design and implementation of DEI programmes (NASPA, 2022). Research highlights that institutional commitments to inclusion are often negotiated and constrained by these external forces, emphasising the need for critical engagement with policy and organisational accountability (NASPA, 2022). Incorporating an understanding of the political and institutional context is therefore essential for both research and practice in student affairs.

This literature demonstrates that equity initiatives cannot be understood separately from broader political and institutional conditions. Institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion are often

influenced by shifting public discourse, funding pressures, governance structures, and legislative constraints. Consequently, equity work within student affairs may become symbolic, compliance-oriented, or politically constrained rather than transformative. This highlights the importance of examining not only whether institutions adopt equity initiatives, but also how political and organisational contexts shape the scope, implementation, and effectiveness of those initiatives.

Synthesis

Across these domains, the literature reveals five interrelated patterns.

1. Campus climate research provides valuable descriptive insights but often overlooks structural inequities (Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023).
2. Structural competency frameworks link macro-level systems to student outcomes and guide institutional interventions (Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023).
3. Critical race theory emphasizes the embeddedness of race in educational structures, highlighting the need for equity-focused policy and practice (Torres et al., 2009).
4. Methodological limitations persist, including reliance on surveys and descriptive analytics, which obscure the intersectionality of student experiences (Golubeva, 2025).
5. Political and institutional contexts shape the implementation of equity initiatives, underscoring the need for accountability and critical engagement with policy (NASPA, 2022).

The findings reveal that while scholarship in student affairs increasingly recognises equity as structural and systemic, institutional responses often remain descriptive, procedural, and constrained by organisational and political realities. The literature therefore points to an important unresolved tension between the language of equity and the transformative institutional change required to meaningfully address systemic inequities in higher education. These patterns also provide a foundation for articulating future research directions, which will be explored in subsequent sections of this article.

Table 2. *Synthesis of Themes in Literature*

Five Themes	Core Insight
Campus Climate Limitations	Dominant climate frameworks often lack Indigenous/Black epistemologies and under-theorize power; the “climate heuristic” itself can obscure race and sovereignty (Abrica et al., 2023; Begaye-Tewa et al., 2023; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).
Structural Competency	Move from individual attitudes to upstream policy structures (admissions, aid, governance) to intervene effectively (Metzl & Hansen, 2014; Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023).
CRT Integration	Centers race/power; reframes equity from representation to structural transformation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson Billings, 1998; Torres et al., 2009).
Methodological Gaps	Field overreliance on surveys/descriptive outcomes; limited longitudinal, intersectional, and structural metrics (Patton et al., 2019).
Political/Institutional Context	External legislative pressures shape DEI design/implementation and staff practice (NASPA, 2023).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The preceding literature review and theoretical framework underscore that scholarship on equity, inclusion, and cultural identity in student affairs is both robust and uneven. Campus climate studies, structural competency frameworks, and CRT-informed analyses collectively illuminate the mechanisms through which inequities are produced, experienced, and perpetuated. Yet persistent gaps remain, particularly regarding methodological rigour, the operationalisation of equity initiatives, and the integration of human rights principles. Synthesising these insights reveals three overarching implications for research, practice, and policy in student affairs.

Research Implications

First, there is an urgent need for studies that move beyond descriptive surveys and short-term outcomes towards longitudinal, intersectional, and mixed methods research designs. Existing scholarship often aggregates student experiences, overlooking the complex interplay of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identities (Golubeva, 2025). Future research should integrate CRT and structural competency frameworks to analyse systemic inequities at both macro and micro levels, connecting institutional policies to student outcomes. Additionally, embedding human rights perspectives within research can strengthen ethical accountability and ensure that findings extend beyond academic critique to actionable recommendations (UNESCO, 2017).

Practice Implications

For practitioners in student affairs, this synthesis highlights the importance of structurally informed interventions. Equity initiatives must not only promote inclusion at the surface level but also address the policies, norms, and practices that sustain inequities. Structural competency frameworks can guide administrators in auditing admissions processes, financial aid allocation, disciplinary policies, and support services to identify systemic barriers (Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023). Further, centring student voices, particularly from historically marginalised communities, ensures that programmes reflect lived experience rather than abstract institutional goals (Dang, 2024; Torres et al., 2009). Professional development that combines CRT, structural analysis, and human rights principles equips student affairs staff to implement more transformative practices.

Policy Implications

Finally, institutional and broader policy contexts shape the success or limitations of equity initiatives. Legislative restrictions, political discourse, and funding constraints increasingly influence how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are enacted (NASPA, 2022). This review highlights the need for policy-informed scholarship that evaluates not only programmatic outcomes but also structural accountability. Embedding human rights standards into institutional policy provides a normative benchmark for equity, guiding both internal decision-making and compliance with ethical and legal expectations. Policymakers and administrators should use research evidence to craft policies that reinforce structural equity and protect historically marginalised student populations.

Directions for Future Scholarship and Practice

Based on the synthesis of the existing literature, future scholarship and practice should prioritise more intersectional and longitudinal research that examines how multiple identities interact with institutional structures and inequities over time. Scholars should also continue integrating critical race theory, structural competency, and human rights frameworks as interconnected analytical lenses for evaluating student affairs policy, institutional culture, and equity initiatives. In addition, there is a need for stronger institutional accountability measures, including assessment tools and evaluation frameworks that measure systemic and organisational change rather than focusing solely on individual student outcomes. Future research should further adopt participatory and collaborative approaches that position students as co-researchers and active contributors in the development of equity initiatives, ensuring that institutional responses are grounded in lived experience and responsive to actual barriers. Finally, greater attention to global and comparative perspectives may provide valuable insights into how international policies and frameworks can inform more effective and contextually responsive student affairs practices. Collectively, these directions support a shift from descriptive analyses towards scholarship and practice oriented towards justice, ensuring that equity, inclusion, and cultural identity are operationalised in ways that meaningfully empower students and reshape institutional structures and cultures.

CONCLUSION

This review illustrated how equity is conceptualised, measured, and enacted in fragmented ways across student affairs and multicultural education scholarship, limiting the capacity of institutions to drive meaningful change. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, this article applied an integrated theoretical framework of critical race theory, structural competency, and human rights to examine how institutional practices, policies, data regimes, and research approaches shape student experiences. While the field has made progress in documenting disparities and advancing diversity initiatives, persistent gaps remain, including the depoliticisation of equity discourse, the under-theorisation of structural racism, and the limited incorporation of human rights principles into both research and practice.

This synthesis underscores the need to move beyond descriptive studies based on perception and towards structurally informed, ethically grounded, and intersectional scholarship. Central to this shift is greater attention to data practices and accountability mechanisms. The literature reveals persistent overreliance on campus climate surveys and descriptive indicators that capture perceptions of inclusion but fail to connect disaggregated data to institutional responsibility, timelines for action, or transparent decision-making processes. Strengthening the link between equity, data, policy evaluation, and enforceable accountability structures is essential for translating research findings into meaningful institutional change.

For student affairs practitioners, the findings emphasise the importance of adopting frameworks that explicitly account for institutional power, policy constraints, and structural levels of change. Equity initiatives must extend beyond symbolic inclusion efforts to address admissions policies, financial aid structures, disciplinary governance systems, and resource allocation. At the same time, equity work must be understood as occurring within contested political and institutional contexts. Legislative restrictions, external policy pressures, and shifting public discourse increasingly shape how equity initiatives are framed, implemented, and sustained, underscoring the need for scholarship and practice that critically engage these constraints.

Ultimately, this review positions equity not as a static endpoint, but as a dynamic, ongoing process that requires research-informed, ethically conscious, and systemically attentive action. Advancing this work also requires greater use of participatory approaches that centre students as co-creators of knowledge and the application of global and comparative human rights frameworks to local institutional contexts. Future scholarship and practice that foreground critical analyses of power, institutional responsibility, data accountability, and the rights and dignity of all learners can advance the field towards more inclusive, transparent, and transformative student affairs practices that meaningfully respond to the experiences of historically marginalised students.

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