

Performative Equity and Institutional Hypocrisy in Higher Education: A Critique of Leadership Narratives and Policy Contradictions

Viktor Wang

California State University, San Bernardino, USA

Email: Viktor.Wang@csusb.edu

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Abstract

This article critically examines the widening gap between rhetorical commitments to equity, inclusion, and innovation in higher education and the lived realities of institutional leadership and policy enforcement. Drawing on the author's direct experience within a U.S. university setting—juxtaposed with global parallels—the paper explores how performative leadership practices mask deeper systems of exclusion, silencing, and ideological gatekeeping. Through the lens of critical policy analysis, the article reveals how institutional narratives often valorize diversity while simultaneously marginalizing dissenting voices, critical scholarship (Mountz et al., 2020), and global perspectives that challenge neoliberal or bureaucratic orthodoxy. The paper further explores the international dimensions of this hypocrisy, comparing policy contradictions in the United States with similar patterns of institutional posturing and suppression observed in higher education systems in Europe, Asia, and Africa. In doing so, it argues that the performance of equity—uncoupled from structural change—undermines the moral legitimacy of higher education institutions and erodes public trust. The article concludes with a call for policy reform grounded in authentic leadership, intellectual freedom, and justice-driven governance.

Keywords

Institutional Hypocrisy, Performative Equity, Higher Education Leadership, Critical Policy Analysis, Academic Freedom, Global Higher Education

1. Introduction

Across institutions of higher education, proclamations of equity, diversity, and

inclusion have become ubiquitous. Mission statements, presidential addresses, strategic plans, and recruitment brochures often elevate these values as cornerstones of institutional identity. Yet, behind these public affirmations lies a far more complicated reality—one where the performance of equity often masks entrenched patterns of exclusion, silencing, and power consolidation. This article critically interrogates the disconnect between institutional rhetoric and actual policy practices (Ball & Junemann, 2019), examining the ways in which higher education leadership, particularly in Western democracies, engages in what can be described as performative equity—the symbolic adoption of inclusive values without corresponding structural transformation.

The concept of institutional hypocrisy is not new. It has been documented in corporate governance, political systems, and nonprofit organizations. In higher education, however, it takes on a particularly insidious form: universities (Nicholson, 2021) publicly commit to progressive ideals while quietly maintaining bureaucratic and ideological structures that marginalize dissenting voices, restrict intellectual freedom, and resist meaningful change. This gap between message and method erodes trust within academic communities and diminishes the legitimacy of educational institutions as engines of social transformation.

This article emerges from both scholarly observation and lived experience. The author previously held a senior academic position at a U.S. public university widely known for its stated commitment to diversity and innovation. However, the internal dynamics of that institution sharply contradicted its public image. Despite numerous equity-themed initiatives and workshops, those who challenged leadership decisions or brought critical, globally-informed perspectives into the classroom were often marginalized, monitored, or strategically excluded. What was most striking was not any one incident, but the institution's persistent inability, or unwillingness, to reconcile its public-facing commitments to justice with internal policies of silence and compliance. While the institution remains unnamed in this article, its practices echo across many corners of global academia.

This is not an isolated case. From the United Kingdom to South Africa, from China to Canada, similar patterns emerge. Institutions embrace inclusive language to enhance rankings, attract international students, or secure federal funding, while resisting the kinds of reforms that would redistribute power, decolonize curriculum, or protect faculty whose scholarship (Henderson & Watermeyer, 2020) challenges dominant narratives (Brennan & Naidoo, 2019). In many countries, academic freedom is paradoxically celebrated and suppressed within the same institution—depending on who is speaking and what is being said.

This article seeks to illuminate and critique this pattern by examining how performative equity and institutional hypocrisy manifest in leadership narratives and policy decisions (Bhopal, 2021) within higher education (Zembylas, 2021). Drawing on international case examples and theoretical frameworks from critical policy analysis, it explores the structural and ideological conditions that allow such contradictions to flourish.

Two key research questions guide this inquiry:

How do higher education institutions maintain a public narrative of equity and inclusion while simultaneously enacting policies that marginalize dissenting or critical perspectives?

What are the broader global implications of institutional hypocrisy in higher education, particularly in relation to academic freedom, leadership credibility, and policy reform?

To address these questions, the article situates performative equity as both a cultural practice and a governance strategy. It examines how symbolic actions—such as appointing diversity officers, launching equity-themed marketing campaigns, or hosting workshops—can create the illusion of progress while reinforcing hierarchical and often exclusionary administrative structures. These performative gestures are not inherently negative; rather, they become problematic when they are used to deflect accountability, silence critique, or obscure deeper issues of structural inequality (Blackmore, 2022).

The article also explores how policy contradictions reveal themselves in everyday academic life: in hiring and promotion practices, in faculty governance structures, in curriculum design, and in disciplinary norms. For example, policies intended to “protect institutional reputation” are frequently invoked to discipline faculty who engage in activism or research perceived as controversial. Meanwhile, those with privilege or proximity to power are often insulated from such scrutiny. These double standards are rarely documented in official policy but are deeply felt by those navigating institutional terrain from the margins.

Importantly, this critique is not limited to American institutions. While the U.S. context provides a salient case study, the article draws comparative insights from institutions in China, the United Kingdom, Australia, and post-colonial regions, where the push for global competitiveness has led to the adoption of equity discourses alongside intensified surveillance and bureaucratic control. The global expansion of neoliberalism in higher education (Biesta, 2021)—framed by market logics, audit cultures, and reputation management, has provided fertile ground for performative equity practices to flourish across diverse political contexts.

Ultimately, this article calls for a reimagining of leadership in higher education (Marginson, 2022): one grounded not in rhetoric or performance, but in authenticity, intellectual honesty, and structural transformation. It invites institutional leaders, faculty, and policymakers to move beyond symbolic gestures and toward a deeper engagement with the values they claim to uphold.

2. Literature Review: The Performance of Equity in Higher Education

In recent years, the concept of performative equity has emerged in the higher education literature to describe the troubling disjunction between institutional rhetoric and actual structural change. Scholars such as Ahmed (2022) and Patton (2022) have illuminated how universities adopt the language of equity and inclusion to cultivate a progressive public image, even as they maintain the very sys-

tems that marginalize, exclude, and silence. In this framing, equity is often less about transformative justice and more about symbolic compliance—a branding exercise designed to appeal to donors, accreditation bodies, and ranking systems rather than to address root causes of inequality within the institution.

Ahmed (Ahmed, 2022)'s foundational work *On Being Included* offers a particularly sharp critique of the ways institutions manage diversity. She describes diversity work as a form of “non-performativity” where policies and statements are celebrated precisely because they allow institutions to perform inclusion without having to change. In many cases, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) offices, task forces, and “equity dashboards” become part of this performance. While these initiatives may employ dedicated staff and host high-profile events, they rarely possess the authority or institutional leverage to reshape hiring practices, curriculum decisions, or budget allocations. As Ahmed points out, diversity work often gets absorbed by the very structures it seeks to change.

Lori Patton (Patton, 2022) extends this critique by examining the ways in which diversity efforts are co-opted by institutions to reinforce whiteness and hegemonic power. Patton (Patton, 2022) argues that in many cases, minoritized scholars and staff are asked to do the labor of diversity without real institutional support or influence. Their presence is welcomed for optics, but their perspectives may be marginalized or dismissed when they question dominant narratives. In this context, equity becomes less about outcomes and more about appearances. It becomes a shield against critique rather than a call to transformation.

This trend is embedded within the broader corporatization of higher education. As Slaughter and Rhoades (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2021) have documented in *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, the rise of neoliberal logic in universities has shifted priorities toward market-oriented goals: student recruitment, brand reputation, faculty productivity metrics, and return on investment. In this environment, equity is often instrumentalized as a marketing tool. Universities tout their diversity statistics in promotional materials and view equity as a competitive advantage, rather than a moral imperative. Equity becomes an asset to be leveraged—not a commitment to be enacted.

Neoliberalism's influence has also shaped how institutions respond to critique. As Giroux (2021) argues in *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, universities increasingly operate as spaces of managerial control where dissent is discouraged and conformity is rewarded. Academic freedom is upheld in principle but suppressed in practice (Hesse-Biber, 2021) when faculty challenge institutional narratives. Critical scholars—especially those working in race (Crenshaw, 2020), gender, and decolonial studies—often find themselves marginalized through bureaucratic procedures such as vague evaluations, limited resources, and exclusion from leadership pathways. These mechanisms function to maintain institutional comfort, even as public messaging promotes inclusivity.

The policy contradictions in this environment are glaring. A university may celebrate freedom of thought while issuing gag orders on public critique. It may

claim to promote inclusive hiring while repeatedly overlooking qualified candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. It may invest in anti-racism trainings while denying tenure to outspoken scholars of color. These contradictions are not anomalies; they are systemic. As [Edelman \(2021\)](#) notes, rights-based language can be weaponized to justify the denial of those very rights—institutions claim to be “already equitable” and thus dismiss calls for further change.

Performative equity also distorts institutional culture. Faculty and staff are often caught in a double bind—expected to support equity work while being denied the time, funding, or security to do so meaningfully. DEI efforts become overburdened, under-resourced, and politically precarious. Those who critique these dynamics may be labeled as “uncollegial” “divisive” or “difficult” even when their critiques are grounded in evidence and motivated by a desire for justice. In this way, performative equity can contribute to a hostile environment for the very people it claims to support.

Importantly, the problem is not that institutions are failing to live up to their ideals—it is that, in many cases, the ideals themselves have been reduced to performance. When equity is used to signal virtue rather than guide action, it becomes disconnected from structural change. The result is a form of institutional gaslighting in which those who experience exclusion are told that inclusion ([Freeman & Gasman, 2019](#)) is already happening.

This article draws upon this body of scholarship to argue that performative equity is not merely a failure of leadership, but a structural feature of institutions that prioritize perception over principle. The pressure to maintain public legitimacy in a competitive academic marketplace incentivizes surface-level reform over deep change. As long as institutional success is measured in rankings, brand visibility, and donor satisfaction, symbolic equity will continue to take precedence over structural justice ([Apple, 2022](#)).

Ultimately, addressing performative equity requires more than updated mission statements or new administrative positions. It demands a fundamental rethinking of how universities define leadership, measure progress, and respond to critique. Equity must be integrated into every level of institutional life—from hiring and curriculum to budgeting and governance—not because it looks good, but because it is right. Until then, equity will remain an institutional performance—artfully staged, broadly applauded, and fundamentally hollow.

3. Conceptual Framework: Critical Policy Analysis and Institutional Contradiction

This article employs a Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) lens to interrogate how institutional policies, particularly in higher education, often contradict the values they publicly espouse. Unlike traditional policy analysis, which assumes that policies are neutral instruments aimed at solving identifiable problems, CPA recognizes that policies are inherently shaped by power, ideology, and historical context ([Diem & Young, 2020](#)). In this sense, policy is not merely a set of rules or proce-

dures, but a discursive and political tool—one that both reflects and reproduces institutional priorities and power relations.

In the context of higher education, CPA is particularly useful for examining the phenomenon of performative equity. When institutions adopt the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these values are often translated into policy documents, mission statements, strategic plans, and accountability frameworks. However, as CPA scholars argue, these policies do not automatically guarantee structural change. On the contrary, equity-oriented policies can be crafted and deployed in ways that preserve the status quo under the guise of progress (Ball, 2020; Levinson et al., 2019; Sutton & Levinson, 2022). This is especially evident when institutions publicly commit to anti-racism or inclusive excellence while enacting internal practices that marginalize or punish those who challenge existing hierarchies.

A central insight of CPA is that policy is performative—it does not merely describe institutional commitments but actively shapes institutional reality. By defining the boundaries of what is discussable, permissible, and fundable, policy constructs the rules of engagement within an academic institution. This is particularly important when considering DEI-related policy, which is often celebrated for its symbolic value but rarely evaluated for its implementation and impact. CPA encourages scholars to ask: Whose interests are protected by these policies? Who is rendered visible, and who remains invisible? What forms of knowledge and action are privileged or penalized through policy enactment?

In addition to CPA, this article also draws from institutional theory, particularly the work of Meyer & Rowan (1977), who argue that organizations adopt symbolic reforms to maintain legitimacy without altering their core structures or practices. According to this theory, institutions respond to external pressures—such as accreditation standards, public scrutiny, or social movements—by implementing highly visible but decoupled policies. These policies serve to project an image of responsiveness and modernity, while operational routines remain largely unchanged. This dynamic is readily observable in universities that embrace equity language in their marketing materials but fail to address pay inequity, systemic bias in faculty hiring and promotion, or the absence of marginalized perspectives in curricula and governance.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical nature of performative equity in higher education, emphasizing how institutions move from rhetorical commitments to policies that codify symbolic values without altering power dynamics. Leadership practices such as ethical filtering reinforce control over faculty voice and participation, often leading to marginalization of those who challenge dominant narratives. This marginalization is then obscured through administrative procedures, further perpetuating systemic contradictions and maintaining institutional legitimacy without meaningful reform. The diagram captures how policy, leadership, and rhetoric work in tandem to punish critical voices while presenting a facade of inclusivity and justice.

**Performative Equity in Higher Education:
A Cycle of Rhetoric, Control, and Marginalization**

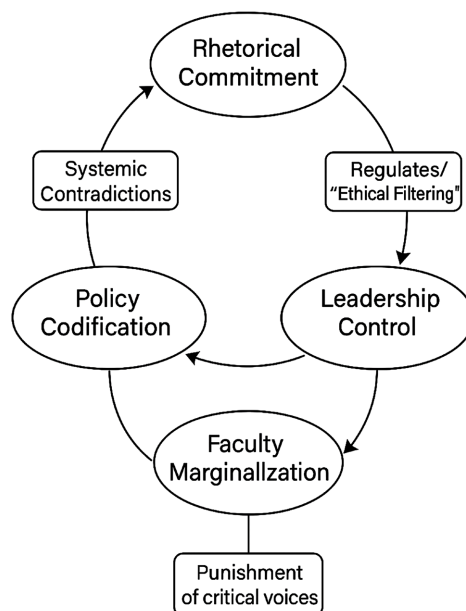


Figure 1. Performative equity in higher education.

Viewed through this dual lens of critical (Gillborn, 2020) policy analysis (Kier, Khalil, & Ellington, 2022) and institutional theory, performative equity is not simply a leadership failure or a temporary oversight. Rather, it is a systemic feature of institutional life—a strategic and patterned contradiction that enables universities to sustain their reputations while resisting substantive redistribution of power. DEI policies, in this light, become part of an institutional repertoire for managing dissent and containing calls for transformation.

This framework also invites a rethinking of accountability in higher education policy (Bastedo, 2022). Traditional models of accountability emphasize compliance, reporting, and metrics. However, CPA urges us to consider accountability not just in terms of data, but in terms of ethical responsibility—to the communities universities serve, to the knowledge they produce, and to the individuals whose lives are affected by institutional decisions. Policies that claim to promote inclusion but result in exclusion must be critically examined, not merely for their stated intentions but for their material effects.

Finally, CPA highlights the discursive nature of power in policy-making. Policies operate not only through formal authority but through the control of narrative. When equity is framed as something already achieved, critiques are delegitimized as ungrateful or disruptive. When leadership policies frame dissent as incivility, critical faculty are labeled as problematic rather than principled. In such cases, policy becomes a mechanism for silencing critique, not fostering reflection.

In sum, this article uses critical policy (Taylor, 2021) analysis to uncover how higher education institutions enact performative equity through policies that symbolically affirm inclusion while structurally maintaining exclusion. By interrogat-

ing the ideological functions of policy and drawing on institutional theory to understand symbolic reform, this framework enables a deeper examination of how contradictions between rhetoric and practice are not anomalies, but expected outcomes in institutions governed by market logics and legitimacy maintenance. This analysis lays the groundwork for examining real-world cases, such as the Research II university discussed later in this article, and for reimagining higher education policy grounded in justice, transparency, and structural integrity.

4. Global Context: Leadership Contradictions Across Borders

The tension between equity rhetoric and exclusionary practice is not unique to the United States. Around the world, universities operate within an increasingly complex matrix of expectations: to internationalize, to expand access, to appear inclusive and progressive, and to maintain or improve global rankings. At the same time, they are subject to heightened economic pressures, political surveillance, and bureaucratic constraints. The result is a global landscape where the performance of equity often serves as a strategic posture rather than a genuine commitment to transformation.

In the United Kingdom, universities have been at the forefront of “widening participation” campaigns—seeking to attract more students from underrepresented and working-class backgrounds. Yet this rhetoric often coexists with escalating tuition fees, increased privatization, and deepened class stratification. Institutions promote inclusive branding while implementing financial and academic barriers that disproportionately affect those same students they claim to support (Burke, 2019). The result is a paradox: higher education becomes simultaneously more accessible in appearance and more exclusionary in practice.

Australia presents another telling example. While Aboriginal reconciliation policies are central to the national narrative, Indigenous scholars remain severely underrepresented in academia—especially in senior leadership and tenure-track roles. Government frameworks for “closing the gap” in educational equity often rely on technocratic solutions and performance indicators, rather than confronting systemic racism and epistemic injustice. The result, again, is a form of policy double-speak: reconciliation is publicly celebrated while institutional hierarchies remain firmly intact (Moreton-Robinson, 2020).

In China, Marxist instruction is mandatory in universities, reflecting the state’s ideological commitment to socialist values. On paper, this seems to signal a resistance to neoliberal trends and an embrace of collective, equity-centered education. However, in practice, academic dissent and critical scholarship are heavily censored. Faculty who critique government policies or advocate for academic freedom risk surveillance, disciplinary action, or job loss. Here, the contradiction takes a different form: ideological conformity is enforced under the guise of national progress, and while equity is espoused through Marxist principles, political control remains the dominant force (Brady, 2019).

South Africa offers a particularly rich case for analyzing institutional hypocrisy.

Following the end of apartheid, education was positioned as a cornerstone of national transformation. Universities embraced the language of decolonization, access, and redress, especially in public discourse. Yet the persistence of Eurocentric curricula, colonial power structures, and exclusionary gatekeeping mechanisms has drawn widespread criticism—especially from student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall. Despite progressive policy frameworks, meaningful structural change has been slow, and many scholars argue that the neoliberalization of South African universities has undercut their commitment to equity (Jansen, 2021).

These global examples differ in cultural, historical, and political context, but they share an important structural pattern: the symbolic performance of equity masks enduring systems of power and exclusion. Institutions are praised for their public commitments while remaining resistant to deep transformation. Policy contradictions proliferate under the pressure to appear both globally competitive and locally responsible, both inclusive and elite, both democratic and hierarchical.

This paradox—of being pulled in opposite directions—is not incidental. It reflects the fundamental contradictions of modern higher education (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2020), particularly within the global knowledge economy. Institutions are increasingly expected to function as both public service providers and corporate enterprises. As Slaughter & Rhoades (2021) argue, academic capitalism has reshaped the university into a site of commodified knowledge production. Within this model, equity becomes a brand, a reputation-enhancing asset rather than a mission-driving force.

By situating the U.S. case within this global field, this article shows how performative equity (Stewart, 2021) is a symptom of deeper structural contradictions. Universities are expected to be everything at once: open and selective, accountable and autonomous, transformative and conservative. This impossibility gives rise to symbolic compliance—equity gestures without equity commitments.

Moreover, institutional hypocrisy has material and ethical consequences. It breeds cynicism among students, burnout among faculty, and a general erosion of trust in higher education as a moral and intellectual force. International collaborations become complicated by uneven values and practices. Minoritized scholars are often asked to participate in equity initiatives while being excluded from decision-making spaces. In this context, the gap between what institutions say and what they do becomes not just a policy failure, but a moral crisis.

Recognizing this global pattern is not an exercise in despair but a call to action. If universities are to remain sites of possibility, they must move beyond performance and engage in courageous self-examination, redistribution of power, and policy reform. Only then can they fulfill the equity promises they so frequently make—not just to governments and donors, but to the communities they were meant to serve.

Table 1 highlights global patterns of institutional hypocrisy where public commitments to equity are undermined by contradictory internal practices. Despite

differences in cultural and political contexts, universities across these countries employ similar strategies—adopting equity language to enhance legitimacy while resisting deep structural change. This pattern reveals how equity is often instrumentalized as a symbolic gesture, rather than a transformational goal, reinforcing rather than challenging institutional power dynamics.

Table 1. Institutional equity rhetoric vs. practice in global contexts.

Country	Equity Rhetoric	Contradictory Practice
United Kingdom	Widening participation and social mobility	Rising tuition fees, limited access for working-class students
Australia	Aboriginal reconciliation and inclusive policies	Persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous faculty
China	Marxist education as a tool for equality	Suppression of academic dissent and ideological conformity
South Africa	Decolonization and post-apartheid transformation	Eurocentric curricula and elite gatekeeping
United States	Commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion	Retaliation against critical scholars and performative DEI initiatives

5. Case Study: A Research II University on the Southeastern U.S. Coast

This case study focuses on a Research II university located along the southeastern coast of the United States, where the contradiction between institutional rhetoric and internal practice became sharply visible through the unjust treatment of a tenured full professor. Despite the university’s public commitment to equity, academic excellence, and inclusive leadership—clearly articulated in its strategic plan—the experience of this faculty member reveals a troubling pattern of institutional hypocrisy, administrative coercion, and systemic retaliation.

The professor in question held national and international recognition, with a long-standing record of excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service. Endorsed by globally respected educators such as Stephen Brookfield (Brookfield, 2019), Patricia Cranton, and John A. Henschke, he had earned the highest academic awards from multiple institutions, including the Presidential Award from the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE). Yet within his own department, he became the target of an orchestrated effort to remove him—led by the program director and department chair.

The alleged basis for this campaign was a string of emails, sent from an anonymous account located in Indonesia, which accused the department of academic violations—specifically, the admission of doctoral candidates with math GRE scores as low as 200. Despite the professor having no connection to Indonesia or to the sender, the administration accused him of authoring the emails, arguing that the writing style was “similar” to his. This subjective and unsubstantiated rationale was used to initiate formal proceedings against him, with no evidence be-

yond speculative linguistics.

Further accusations followed. The program director used archived emails—previously sent by the professor to her in good faith and within collegial boundaries—as grounds to claim that he had discriminated against faculty based on their sexual orientation. There was no investigation, mediation, or opportunity for open dialogue. Instead, the department chair imposed a punitive order: the professor would be required to attend behavioral training workshops or face immediate separation from the university. These actions were taken without due process and in clear violation of institutional commitments to fairness and shared governance.

Adding to the contradictions, the program director had initially approved the professor's innovative use of a hybrid teaching model—tailored to accommodate the needs of adult learners and consistent with the university's own emphasis on flexible, student-centered pedagogy. However, during legal proceedings, she reversed her position entirely. In court documentation, she claimed the professor had “neglected his teaching duties”, denying that permission had ever been granted. This reversal placed blame solely on the professor, undermining both the pedagogical principles she had once championed and the integrity of faculty support systems.

Initially, the presiding judge, a white male, appeared sympathetic to the professor's case. However, at the summary judgment stage, the tone shifted dramatically. Despite widespread public support, including critical coverage by three local newspapers and a widely circulated student editorial defending the professor and condemning the university's treatment, the judge ultimately rubber-stamped the university's narrative. The 39-page ruling, laden with fabricated justifications and inconsistent logic, appeared to have been written by a recent law school graduate and lacked any meaningful engagement with the extensive evidence presented. The judge's decision disregarded the professor's decades of service, national honors, and global endorsements, prioritizing institutional protection over justice.

Institutional contradictions deepened when the university removed a dynamic and visionary female president—widely admired for her inclusive leadership, and installed a male successor with a markedly different approach to governance. In an especially telling moment, a blind student mentored by the professor formally requested the dismissal of the department chair for documented misconduct. The president responded dismissively, stating: “I have fired too many people...”—a statement revealing an entrenched culture of administrative protectionism and an unwillingness to pursue accountability.

Taken together, these events expose how performative equity (Posselt, 2020) operates as a calculated façade. The university publicly pledges to “recruit and retain the most talented faculty”, yet it systematically dismantled the career of a scholar whose influence, innovation, and popularity transcended institutional politics. His offense was not failure—but success, visibility, and courage. This case underscores the structural nature of academic retaliation: when faculty question

authority, challenge mediocrity, or elevate the university's mission in ways that unsettle entrenched leadership, they become targets. The consequences are not only reputational damage and personal trauma—they strike at the moral foundation of higher education itself, revealing a system more invested in image than in integrity.

6. Discussion: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Leadership

The implications of institutional hypocrisy extend well beyond isolated faculty experiences. While individual cases may bring such contradictions into sharp relief, the broader consequences are far-reaching and systemic. When equity becomes a performance rather than a practice, symbolically championed but structurally ignored—it not only harms those who are directly excluded; it also erodes the very foundation of trust upon which institutions of higher learning depend. As universities continue to assert their roles as engines of social mobility, innovation, and moral leadership, the credibility of these claims is severely compromised by persistent gaps between values and actions.

At the heart of this erosion is confusion and contradiction. Faculty members are often left uncertain about which values are truly rewarded. Institutions may issue statements celebrating critical thinking and courageous scholarship while simultaneously disciplining or silencing those who challenge leadership or institutional orthodoxy. As a result, faculty may begin to self-censor—not out of intellectual humility, but out of fear. This creates an environment in which critical inquiry is not nurtured, but policed. The same ambiguity affects students. When students witness inconsistencies between institutional rhetoric and practice—such as a celebrated professor being dismissed without cause, or diversity initiatives failing to produce diverse leadership—they begin to question the authenticity of the educational experience being offered. The long-term result is disengagement, skepticism, and alienation.

For minoritized scholars, the impact is even more severe. They are often positioned at the frontlines of equity work—expected to serve on diversity committees, mentor marginalized students, and bring “inclusive perspectives” into the classroom—while receiving little structural support, institutional protection, or access to decision-making power. Performative equity in this context becomes a form of labor exploitation: institutions extract cultural capital and symbolic value from their presence while failing to support their professional development, tenure advancement, or intellectual freedom. The psychological toll of such environments has been well-documented in literature on racial battle fatigue, epistemic injustice, and academic burnout (Smith et al., 2019; Fricker, 2020).

Internationally, institutional hypocrisy damages cross-border collaborations, where mutual respect and shared academic values are foundational. A university that claims to uphold academic freedom but actively suppresses critical internal voices sends mixed signals to its global partners. This contradiction can jeopardize international partnerships, research consortia, and student exchange programs,

particularly when global collaborators become aware of internal governance issues or ethical controversies. In the competitive global marketplace of higher education (McNay, 2021), reputation is currency. Institutions that do not align their internal practices with their external narratives risk both reputational damage and diminished influence in shaping global academic discourse (Gonzales & Griffin, 2021).

From a policy standpoint, surface-level equity reforms are no longer sufficient. Institutions must design and implement frameworks that not only name their values but institutionalize them through transparent accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms should include protections for faculty dissent, whistleblower safeguards, independent oversight bodies, and formal channels for reporting retaliation or ethical violations. Equity should not be left to discretionary interpretation by mid-level administrators; it must be embedded in institutional policy, practice, and culture at every level.

Moreover, leadership itself must evolve. In the current climate, too many university leaders are trained in image management rather than moral stewardship. They focus on public relations, brand positioning, and legal defensibility—often at the expense of academic integrity and community trust. What is needed is a shift to values-driven governance: leadership rooted in courage, humility, and a willingness to be held accountable. Leaders must listen without defensiveness, respond with transparency, and act with consistency.

Policies should no longer serve as institutional shields—tools for dismissing criticism or deflecting responsibility. Instead, policies must become instruments of reflection, responsiveness, and reform. Equity policies should facilitate, not stifle—dialogue. They should support, not punish—those who raise legitimate concerns. Only then can institutions begin to bridge the widening gap between what they say and what they do.

Without this shift, the consequences will continue to deepen. Talented faculty will leave or disengage. Students will become disillusioned. Marginalized voices will be further pushed to the margins. And universities will forfeit the very legitimacy they claim to uphold. The cost of performative equity is not just internal instability—it is the long-term disintegration of the moral contract between higher education and society.

7. Call for Future Research

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of performative equity practices on faculty retention, student trust, and institutional legitimacy. Quantitative studies could analyze the relationship between equity-related branding and faculty outcomes across institutions. Comparative case studies are also needed to explore how different national contexts shape the practice and consequences of performative equity. Further exploration of the psychological toll on faculty who resist institutional hypocrisy would deepen understanding of the costs associated with structural injustice in higher education.

8. Conclusion: Toward Authentic Equity in Higher Education

Performative equity and institutional hypocrisy are not merely rhetorical shortcomings—they signal a profound crisis in the mission and values of contemporary higher education (Ellington, 2022). As universities increasingly prioritize branding strategies, global rankings, and symbolic commitments to diversity (Harper, 2022), they risk displacing their fundamental responsibilities: to cultivate critical inquiry, foster intellectual honesty, and serve the public good. This article has demonstrated that when equity becomes a performance—something enacted for appearance rather than for impact—it not only marginalizes critical voices but fosters a culture of silence, fear, and disillusionment.

The case study presented here illustrates how even the most accomplished scholars—those widely recognized for their contributions to teaching, research, and mentorship, can be targeted by institutions that claim to uphold inclusive excellence. When faculty members challenge mediocrity, raise ethical concerns, or innovate beyond traditional structures, they often become perceived threats rather than valued assets. This contradiction is not isolated, nor is it accidental. It reflects systemic issues replicated across borders, disciplines, and institutional types.

To chart a path forward, higher education must move beyond symbolic declarations and embrace a deeper, more uncomfortable commitment to justice. This means reforming policies not as reactive instruments, but as proactive tools for equity and accountability. It requires leadership that is willing to confront internal contradictions with transparency, humility, and moral clarity. Institutions must center their actions not on performative optics, but on measurable change—on protecting academic freedom, amplifying marginalized voices, and redistributing power.

Only by doing so can universities begin to restore credibility, rebuild community trust, and reclaim their role as spaces of transformative learning. Authentic equity is not easy, but it is necessary. It is not fashionable, but it is urgent. And it must begin with truth.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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