



CHAPTER 5

Incorporating Gender into Institutional Crisis Response: The Case of Advance in 2020–2021

*Jessica R. Gold, Allison Deese, Laura K. Nelson,
and Kathrin Zippel*

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2020s, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States (US) faced multiple unprecedented challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide racial unrest in response to racialised police violence, and a deeply polarising presidential election and insurrection. While universities aimed to sustain core operations during these crises, their institutional response efforts often unintentionally worsened existing gendered and racial inequalities within the professoriate. Using the concept of crises as socially constructed processes (Gigliotti 2020)

J. R. Gold (✉) · A. Deese
Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA
e-mail: j.gold@northeastern.edu

discussed in this volume (Wroblewski and Barnard), this chapter explores how teams managing gender equity programmes at US universities interacted with, shaped, and dealt with their institutions as they responded to these crises in unprecedented times.

At the start of the pandemic, many equity advocates worried that such programmes would be among the first to be cut, echoing similar reductions that occurred during the 2008–2009 economic crisis (Ellis 2020; Esparza et al. 2024). However, universities responded to COVID-19 with varying levels of attention to gender equity. We argue that, in the US, these institutional responses were shaped by specific geopolitical contexts and the extent to which gender equity programmes were already integrated into university structures.

We use the National Science Foundation's (NSF) ADVANCE programme on gender equity as a case study to explore how ADVANCE teams on university campuses navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and overlapping political and social upheavals in 2020 and 2021. Since 2001, ADVANCE¹ has funded over 390 awards tasked with designing and implementing organisational change projects to advance women in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professoriate in US HEIs. The ADVANCE programme has provided resources and legitimacy to interdisciplinary teams of advocates for change, often bringing together women faculty and senior university administrators on the same ADVANCE team.

Drawing on 46 qualitative interviews conducted in 2022 with members of ADVANCE teams, we identify three key themes in the relationship

A. Deese

e-mail: deese.a@northeastern.edu

L. K. Nelson

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

e-mail: laura.k.nelson@ubc.ca

K. Zippel

Department of Sociology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

e-mail: gender-soz@fu-berlin.de

¹ As of January 2025, the ADVANCE program has been archived. We use present tense in this chapter because, at the time of our data collection and writing, the ADVANCE program was still active.

between institutional responses to the crises and the work of these teams. First, campuses where the ADVANCE programme was well-established and had ongoing data on faculty experiences were more likely to consider gender equity in their pandemic responses. Second, for many teams, the pandemic offered a strategic opportunity to advance policies they had long been advocating for. With issues of race, equity, and inclusion gaining national attention, some ADVANCE teams were able to push forward gender and racial equity initiatives that had been in development for years. Lastly, institutional responses differed based on the political climate of the institution's location in the US geopolitical landscape. University management in more liberal states was generally open, or even eager, to include ADVANCE teams and equity programming in their institutional response plans. In contrast, those in conservative states faced increased backlash. In some cases, supportive administrators were removed, and teams felt their work carried increased personal and professional risk.

While the multiple crises in 2020–21 highlighted existing racial and gendered inequities among faculty, especially those with care responsibilities, institutional responses varied in their approaches to these deepening inequities. Some ADVANCE teams were able to significantly impact their institutional management's responses in a way that considered and addressed equity issues, while other teams struggled to continue their equity work with increased perceived animosity from university administration and the broader public. We conclude that, depending on political and institutional contexts, crises can have silver linings and at least the potential for change in progressive directions when equity interests align with the university leadership. These interviews took place in early 2022, when many of the consequences of the crises were still unfolding. We offer insights into how the institutional responses of ADVANCE programmes can guide equity advocates in ensuring that gender and racial equity remain central in future crises within higher education.

BACKGROUND

Grounded in the crisis framework used in this volume, where a crisis is a socially constructed process that creates a situation that requires significant adaptation of existing structures to continue organisational operation (Gigliotti 2020; Kulich et al. 2021), the overlapping crises in 2020 and 2021 created multiple crisis scenarios that HEIs needed to

respond to, and which all had gendered effects on the professoriate. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the daily functions of HEIs, impacting teaching and research activities. These disruptions also exacerbated existing gender and intersectional inequalities among faculty in both these realms, as well as creating new forms of inequalities (Blell et al. 2023; Frize 2013; King and Frederickson 2021; Kossek et al. 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2020).

This was especially the case for faculty researchers whose labs closed, faculty with high teaching responsibilities that suddenly shifted online, caregivers with young children or other family members at home, and those with pre-existing health issues. Research has shown that pandemic-related impacts were disproportionately borne by junior faculty, women faculty, faculty of colour, and particularly those at the intersections of those categories (Davis et al. 2022). In this vein, institutional response teams should have included a gendered and racialised lens in considering how to address faculty concerns in the face of pandemic-related operational changes.

In addition to the COVID-19 crisis in HEIs during 2020 and 2021, many US HEIs were also impacted by considerable racial unrest, sparked by the murder of George Floyd and a polarising presidential election in late 2020, in addition to subsequent threats to democracy with the January 6, 2021 storming of the US capital and election result deniers. All of these crises had intersectional impacts on HEIs, especially as the Republican side of the polarising political atmosphere was increasingly hostile toward gender and racial equity efforts in education. State guidance and workplace protection policies are limited in the US, and public and private HEIs are accountable to both governing bodies on different sides of the political spectrum and public opinion.

For over 20 years, the NSF ADVANCE programme has been addressing gender equity in HEIs in the US, and in 2016, added intersectionality as a core focus of the programme in recognition that gender equity work is inseparable from other forms of equity work, and in particular, racial equity. The flagship award of the ADVANCE programme, the Institutional Transformation (IT) award, typically spans an implementation period of 5 years and averages \$3.3 million for teams at awarded institutions to implement innovative systemic change strategies to promote gender equity for STEM faculty at US HEIs (nsf.gov). Distinctively, ADVANCE requires IT teams to include a “range of expertise”, including STEM faculty, high-level university administrators, and

equity and systematic change experts (generally social or behavioural scientists) (nsf.gov). Through this, NSF aims for ADVANCE teams to operate across multiple levels of an awarded institution, including having buy-in from university leadership teams so that after the five-year funding period ends, the ADVANCE team's work can be sustained through institutionalised offices or programmes long-term. Thus, while not explicitly aimed toward the continued operation of ADVANCE programming in times of crisis, this programmatic design feature may indicate that institutions with ADVANCE teams could be well-positioned to include a gendered (and racialised) lens to crisis response during such times.

Across two decades of ADVANCE, these teams have no doubt faced many crises, some at a global level (like the 2008 financial crisis), national level (like the rise of political polarisation in the US following the election of the country's first black president), or at a local level (like localised natural disasters or social changes). For example, the 2008 economic recession led to a budget crisis that affected the first cohorts of ADVANCE IT awards. During the resulting hiring freeze, planned initiatives to work with search committees were less impactful, and programmes pivoted to focus on retention and other aspects. As Kim et al. (2021, p. 308) showed, "financial uncertainty led to a reversal in progress on faculty diversity", indicating that the broader crisis in the US had a direct effect on both HEIs in general and gender equity work specifically. During COVID, advocates for faculty equity had similar concerns for not only diversity in faculty hiring, but also unequal consequences for faculty productivity, well-being, and career paths overall.

This chapter focuses on several overlapping but related crises in 2020 and 2021. These years marked the 20th anniversary of ADVANCE, at which point there were ongoing awards, and there had been over 70 IT awards (and nearly 200 smaller, non-IT awards) across almost 200² US HEIs (Gold et al. 2022). This broad range of programmatic integration into the US HEI system means that our data can illuminate how ADVANCE teams influenced (or not) institutional responses to the 2020–21 crises across institutions with between one and twenty years of ADVANCE programming.

² While there are over 4,000 HEIs in the US, only 433 are classified by the Carnegie Classification system as being R1-R3 institutions (high to moderate research output), which generally corresponds to those nationally known. Most of the ADVANCE-awarded institutions fall into this category.

DATA AND METHODS

We interviewed 46 individuals from 46 institutions/organisations across a broad range of engagement with the ADVANCE programme. They differed (1) in time active in the ADVANCE programme; (2) in institution types (e.g., research-intensive PhD-granting universities (R1), non-R1 colleges and universities, Minority Serving Institutions, etc.); (3) in individual characteristics such as disciplinary background, race/ethnicity, and academic career stage; (4) in the stage of their ADVANCE award, ranging from those that were involved on awards that were already institutionalised, were ongoing through 2020–21, and/or began during 2020–21 (see Table 5.1). While we did not consider the spread of geopolitical location when contacting interviewees for this study, we interviewed 23 people from states that voted majority Democrat in the 2020 presidential election, 15 people from states that voted majority Republican, and 8 people from states where the voting margin was less than a point away from voting 50/50.

Table 5.1 Characteristics of interviewees and award sites

<i>Award Type</i>		<i>Awardee First Year in ADVANCE</i>		<i>Institution's State Presidential Voting</i>	
IT	35	2001–07	12	Majority Dem	23
non-IT	20	2008–14	16	Majority Rep	15
		2015–21	18	~50/50	8
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		<i>Institution Type</i>		<i>Awardee Job</i>	
White	36	R1	33	Faculty	22
Black	1	non-R1	6	Leadership Admin	11
Latinx	3	MSI	11	Post-doc	1
AAPI	5	non-University	7	Staff	5
Native American	1			non-University	7

Note Institution Type and award types are not mutually exclusive categories and do not sum to 46 interviewees like the other characteristics. For Awardee Job categories, Leadership Admin refers to top university administrator positions (such as presidential-, provost-, or dean-levels). For Institution Type, R1 refers to the US Carnegie Classification system of universities, where R1 means “very high research activity” and refers to institutions that grant doctoral degrees and have the highest research expenditures. Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are designated by the US government as institutions that serve minority undergraduate student populations

Source Authors

We conducted interviews in 2022, primarily via Zoom.³ The interviews lasted, on average, 40 minutes, and each interview was recorded, auto-transcribed using Otter.ai, and hand-checked by a professional transcriptionist. In the interviews, we asked questions about individuals' experiences with the ADVANCE community and ADVANCE-related work as part of previously or currently funded ADVANCE awards, and we specifically asked how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ADVANCE-related work. We did not specifically ask about the other overlapping crises we discuss in this paper, but enough interviewees brought these up in response to the COVID questions that we include them as one of the foci of our findings. Two researchers collaborated on analysing the interview data.

Throughout the data collection process, we kept notes on emerging themes, similarities, and differences across interviews and discussed these weekly within the research team (Misra et al. 2024). We used Atlas.ti to organise the data and identify themes generally following the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012): familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, refining and naming themes, and producing a report.

Initial themes were generated using five transcripts from interviewees at different points in their ADVANCE careers (current awardees and past awardees), in different positions at their institutions (faculty, administrators, outside consultants), and from different demographic backgrounds (by gender and race). Each researcher independently and inductively identified themes in the five transcripts related to how the interviewee's ADVANCE work changed due to the pandemic and how they interacted with their institutional management during that time. The two researchers then met and went through all emergent themes, discussed similarities and differences in what they had identified, and created new thematic categories to integrate common findings. We then each coded half of the remaining transcripts, meeting regularly to discuss when new themes emerged that did not fit our initial categories, variations, and sub-themes. We each reviewed each other's thematic coding and then continued categorising the major themes into the three areas of findings presented below.

³ Interviewees received and reviewed an informed consent form upon first contact that was approved by the Northeastern University IRB board.

FINDINGS

From these interviews, we identified three main themes regarding how ADVANCE teams could influence institutional crisis response in a way that considered the gendered and racialised impacts of both the crises *and* the responses. First, the effectiveness of institutional responses to COVID in HEIs was influenced by the level of institutionalisation and trust of ADVANCE teams, particularly those with recent and relevant data on faculty. Second, in such cases, the crises were an opportune moment for many teams to advance existing equity policies. Finally, geopolitical factors further influenced responses, with institutions in left-leaning states being more receptive to incorporating equity programming into their institutional responses. In contrast, institutions from right-leaning states often posed challenges, including administrative and public backlash toward ADVANCE goals. We present our findings in three sections, according to these themes.

Trust and Visibility of ADVANCE Programming

While the scope of the ADVANCE programme is far-reaching in the US HEI system (Gold et al. 2022), the programme is still relatively selective and as of 2020, less than 100 institutions had received the flagship IT award. Yet at those institutions, both those with current awards in 2020–21 and those with institutionalised programmes, the collaborations between faculty, gender experts, and high-level administrators could be a sign that during a crisis, ADVANCE institutions are more likely and more willing to consider a gendered lens to their institutional response strategies. In our interviews, we found that not all ADVANCE change leaders were involved in institutional responses to COVID, but those that were had several common features. Most notably, teams from current and past awards with recent and/or ongoing data collection in 2020–21 were seen as a reliable source for information on faculty well-being. Many on such teams described a sense of trust from both faculty and administrators, and these teams felt well-poised to inform institutional responses with an eye toward gender equity using evidence-based approaches. As one faculty Principal Investigator (PI) on an ongoing award explained:

Because we had all this interview data... we were in a position to inform the university. So as COVID hit, we became the go-to group that the

provost and the president were coming to, to say, ‘What do you think is going to happen if we do this? What happens if we stop the tenure clock? What happens if we...?’ So actually we were in a position to provide evidence-based information, and we got a lot of street cred for that. (Interviewee 03)

Other change leaders described similar experiences with “street cred” on campuses through their data collection and policy experience. In one case, a PI on an ongoing award said that they were able to quickly change their biennial faculty survey after the pandemic shutdowns to include COVID impact questions at the request of their university leadership. That same PI continued to say:

We were well-established and viewed as very credible, both in terms of, certainly not all faculty, but many faculty trusting us with information. The leadership was listening to us, and we were trusted to present things confidentially. You know, ‘This is what we’re hearing from faculty; we need this now.’ (Interviewee 37)

These ADVANCE teams, already several years into working toward gender equity and institutional transformation, were uniquely positioned to ensure equity was a key part of institutional responses when crises hit. Interviewees highlighted this “institutional” aspect of ADVANCE, as this system-level thinking they were already engaged with was particularly valuable during the pandemic. A change leader from a past award, but at a campus with a well-institutionalised ADVANCE programme, emphasised this when saying:

I think we’re making our best effort to be really helping guide institutions. I think the fact that we had institutional change models, like all of us have these notions of how change occurs... And people who were in ADVANCE offices that formerly had ADVANCE grants, I think that depending on how much they had researchers out in the field, [their institutions] were more or less responsive to ‘okay, this is a gendered and racialised issue that we need to be addressing.’ (Interviewee 01)

A key aspect of the ADVANCE programme is the bringing together of STEM faculty, social science experts in gender, race, and institutional change, and high-level university administrators. While, with any sort

of team effort, these collaborations vary in efficacy, many administrators we interviewed accentuated their experiences on ADVANCE as a key aspect to how they approached institutional responses to COVID. One high-level administrator at a large state university said:

So to be honest with you, had we not had the ADVANCE grant, we would not be able to provide the support... [Before COVID] we didn't focus on the holistic evaluations... When COVID hit and those women and those minority faculty came up, we had the tools to better evaluate and report. We revised our tenure promotion. So everybody was equipped, actually, from the faculty level to the chairs level to the dean's level. I think ADVANCE really made a big difference, and if we didn't have ADVANCE, then of course we would react in a very different way. (Interviewee 19)

Particularly striking was that many of the administrators we spoke with also emphasised the importance of using intersectionality as a lens to think about equity in institutional responses. Many of them did not have a social science background, yet said things like:

I think we were better prepared to think about the importance of implementing practices that are going to help faculty who are dealing with these extra stresses... But the fact that there are huge potential gender differences, disciplinary differences, and culture differences. Intersectionalities that influence how COVID impacts were promulgated and occurred throughout our society – that more nuanced view and understanding of all those differences was very important for us to put things into context.... So there are lots of nuances that we were able to be more thoughtful about in integrating into our evaluations... I tell you what, ADVANCE was very valuable when we went into COVID. Very valuable. (Interviewee 13)

Beyond working with administrators, ADVANCE teams also affected institutional responses by being go-to sources for up-to-date information during the COVID shutdowns. This included using their ADVANCE websites, blogs, and newsletters to disseminate information to the entire campus, as well as being included in regular meetings, townhalls, and support groups with administrators, faculty, and staff. As one PI explained, this was in part due to a pivot of their previous ADVANCE work, and in part due to taking on new responsibilities during COVID:

By the time COVID hit, we were already in a position where things like these trainings we could do online. It was actually convenient to gather the deans or gather the chairs. In some ways we were at a point where what we needed to do could be more efficient... Before the pandemic, every week or so we would send out, 'Hey, these are the upcoming workshops and events' type things. During the pandemic, this has become a weekly email from me, which is about support, COVID updates, workshops, activities. It started out just going to women STEM faculty, and it now goes to something like 280 women faculty across campus, because people say, 'Hey, I heard about your emails, can I get it?' And that includes the president! And the male provost said, 'Could I get them?' And he does. Those have turned out to be really important in terms of making people feel connected and providing support. One of the big pivots we made is, we have a 'COVID Policies and Processes for Faculty' page... That became the go-to point for a lot of faculty. (Interviewee 03)

No matter the outlet, the ability of ADVANCE teams, currently funded or already institutionalised, to pivot their ongoing equity efforts to apply to COVID response was key for them to be included in institutional response efforts. A PI on a currently funded award said:

We developed several things in response to the struggles that women and other marginalised identity faculty were facing as a result of COVID. We did that pretty rapidly after the pandemic caused shutdowns. And we wrote mock COVID impact statements for each college to go with the CV. (Interviewee 26)

This PI described their institutional management as having early buy-in to include gender equity in their pandemic response plan. The team's active award was able to quickly shift their focus to providing pandemic resources like examples for how faculty could write COVID impact statements to include in their tenure and promotion review materials. This team was also a source of information for other ADVANCE teams trying to get the attention of their institutional management teams, and they gave (virtual) talks across the US and published resources on their ADVANCE website and in HEI news outlets targeted toward HEI administrators.

While our data do not allow for a counterfactual (i.e. institutional responses including a gender equity lens on campuses without current or past ADVANCE awards), it is clear that some change leaders felt

that having an ADVANCE programme greatly impacted their institution's responses to COVID. These teams often had built several years (sometimes a decade) of trust with the faculty and administrators on their campus before the pandemic, and teams with recent or ongoing data on faculty issues were particularly well-poised to be heavily relied on during COVID. As one PI summed up:

We have been, I would say, the major actor on campus supplying information to people about university policies about the pandemic, and then making sure and working with the Provost's office to extend everybody's tenure clock,⁴ socialise chairs, and about how to adjust their expectations. Then keeping the faculty – especially the faculty who are probationary, either pre-tenure or pre-promotion to full – keeping them connected and up to date on the changes in the resources. (Interviewee 02)

And as an unintended outcome of the pandemic, that same PI expressed that, unexpectedly, "the pandemic probably enhanced the importance of ADVANCE". Especially on campuses with ongoing or recent data collection related to gender equity, interviewees expressed that ADVANCE teams were a trusted go-to source of information for both campus administrators and faculty and staff during these crises.

Overlapping Crises and Unexpected Opportunities

In the same vein that the pandemic may have enhanced the importance of ADVANCE teams on some campuses, the nature of the overlapping crises in 2020–21 also provided opportunities for some teams to progress gender and racial equity work they already had in the pipeline before 2020. Most universities shut down normal in-person operations in March of 2020 due to the pandemic, and in June of 2020, the murder of George Floyd sparked national protests against racial injustice. The murder was significant in the US as a powerful symbol of racial injustice, police brutality, and systemic racism. This was not an isolated event but became a tipping point for movements like Black Lives Matter to draw attention to long-standing issues of race, power, and justice. This attention created a racial reckoning in many major US institutions, including HEIs. At a

⁴ Tenure is a permanent job status for professors and "tenure clock" refers to probationary period before the university reviews the candidates typically in the 6th year.

time where HEIs were already facing significant reorganisation due to the pandemic, many advocates for racial justice saw 2020 as a time for organisations to move that reorganisation toward social justice as well. An ADVANCE change leader described how this event also impacted ADVANCE:

I would also say that because of the increased visibility and desire to engage in other social movements during this time, like Black Lives Matter, we framed the conversation so that it wasn't as if the pandemic was happening in isolation from these other things, but how the two impact one another. (Interviewee 38)

This framing of the racial justice movements and COVID was used to highlight the intersectional impacts of these “twin pandemics” on academics. A change leader who has been involved with ADVANCE for nearly all of its 20-year history said:

We were aware of the impact this was having on women, particularly women of colour. All of those things were like a national highlight that if you've been steeped in this for a long time, you realise that campuses have traditionally – whether good or bad – leveraged racially charged incidents or gender-related incidents as a way of getting a quick response, people move faster in these spaces. And it becomes more obvious that yes, there is a need at a broader level. And people get motivated to do something about it. (Interviewee 16)

The same change leader elaborated further, saying that this motivation visibly translated to ADVANCE in many cases:

People that are poised on the sidelines with the ADVANCE stuff could move really quickly to get buy-in and capitalise. I know that sounds terrible at some level. But at another level, it's like, ‘thank you for making the awareness of all this stuff become more evident to a broader base of people, and not just the people who have been doing this for a long time.’ (Interviewee 16)

Indeed, active awardees quickly revamped their existing ADVANCE work to respond to these overlapping crises, sometimes only on their own campus and sometimes in collaboration with other ADVANCE campuses. For example, one current awardee said:

We pretty quickly realised that the pandemic was presenting – I don't know if 'opportunity' is the right word because it was horrible – but it was a time to shift our priorities... communities of colour were being hit hard by the pandemic, the early headlines that were coming out was like, 'Okay, we need to really be thinking about how to be supporting women, and especially women of colour right now'. A lot of these turned into just listening to faculty and hearing from them what types of supports they needed. From those kinds of conversations, we developed this idea of the pandemic impact statements and collaborated on campus and also with folks in the ADVANCE network outside of [our campus], on developing these tools. (Interviewee 34)

In fact, multiple interviewees mentioned the importance and unexpected benefits of reaching out beyond their own campus' ADVANCE team, and even beyond ADVANCE. Although virtual means of communication existed before 2020, when Zoom meetings and virtual communication became the primary medium for work in HEIs, many ADVANCE awardees seized the opportunity to communicate more regularly with others in the ADVANCE network beyond their own institutions. A PI on a currently funded award said that this expansion of contacts was an unexpected silver lining from the pandemic, saying:

I think what the pandemic did was it probably grew our networks... I think that that meant that a lot of institutions that don't think of themselves as ADVANCE campuses, or weren't ADVANCE campuses, saw us and really wanted to engage with us. So I get a lot of emails. I hear from a lot of campuses pretty regularly that were not part of our ADVANCE networks [before]. (Interviewee 01)

Additionally, high-level administrators on ADVANCE teams also expressed that this increased networking beyond their campus was crucial and beneficial to their institutional response. One such administrator said:

We started looking at other institutions and compiling and seeing what was going on in the conversation across the country. We developed some guidelines and our own conversations that we had with our peers... What ADVANCE did, through our connections with other leaders at other institutions, is it broadened the mind of leadership among the faculty who were engaged in this, and that flowed up into how we managed. It flowed through the provost's office to change our processes and procedures. (Interviewee 09)

On their own campuses, many ADVANCE teams realised that by being a part of COVID institutional response teams, they could encourage their institutions to take more flexible approaches to hiring and promotion of faculty that particularly benefited women and women of colour professors. Some change leaders saw this as positive and lasting, saying that “there is no more *normal*”. Specifically, one change leader said:

[The pandemic] broke the mold of how we had traditionally done work. Before the pandemic, ... I was trying to advocate for hiring people virtually... Yet, that wasn't going over well at that time. And then COVID hit. And it was like we are now living examples of this actually working, and it's like, ‘It's not ideal, I understand. We all as communities want to see each other’. But this just opens up a new way of doing and being. And I don't think it'll ever go back to the way it was before. And I actually celebrate that, because I think there was created a very quick turnaround window that created a new way of doing and being. So that has been a positive thing that has emerged from this. (Interviewee 16)

Other change leaders recognised the positive outcomes in the moment but had a less optimistic outlook for the lasting impact of some initiatives. Another long-time ADVANCE change leader described this concern about the sustainability of changes achieved, saying:

I think in some ways it's created an opportunity, and it's created new ways of thinking about things that we hadn't before. That, of course, is great, but I'm also not naive enough to think that anything, people will not want to return to – I don't even think ‘return’ is the right word – that people won't take those lessons for value about how to create change, instead of them just exacerbating disparities that exist. (Interviewee 08)

Yet that same change leader expressed deeper (self-aware) cynicism toward the lasting power of many pandemic-related silver linings in gender equity work. Speaking about a specific intervention on their campus, they said:

It really doesn't take an Act of God to stop a tenure clock, right? It's not that big a deal. Somebody writes it down, they're like, OK. That's maybe a small example, but for years and years and years, people spent so much time trying to say ‘nah nah nah nah.’ ... I think the ultimate example is remote teaching. Like, within two weeks, every university across the country had some form of Zoom teaching, which is crazy. So there are different ways of doing things from how we've done them, dramatically different, and some

of them we haven't thought of, and they *can* be done. It just takes the will to do it. But I don't think it makes them any more willing to do it. Maybe it just shows, it highlights, the ways that people are willing to do it. Like the circumstances it takes for people to be willing to do it. And equity and justice are not the things, that's the cynical side of it. (Interviewee 08)

While many in the ADVANCE programme are hopeful that these silver linings last past the pandemic, they are also well-versed in the constant struggle of institutional transformation and social change. However, there is a body of, mostly theoretical, work in sociology about changes in broader social organisation in response to major disruptive events (Bourdieu 2013; Fowler 2020; Swidler 1986). This work suggests that during unsettled times or periods of crisis, groups may form new ideologies of strategies of action (Swidler 1986) especially those already engaged in changing the status quo. Such actors may do better at breaking down mythologies of power by "wreaking havoc with everyday visions and divisions of the social world" during times of upheaval (Bourdieu 2013; Fowler 2020, p. 450). The experience of ADVANCE change leaders in 2020–21 suggests that these equity workers were able to capitalise on the disruptiveness of the pandemic and overlapping social crises to institutionalise changes to the status quo they had been working on for, sometimes, years.

Overlapping Crises and Geopolitical Differences

Although some ADVANCE teams experienced positive opportunities in their gender equity work when collaborating with administrators on institutional responses to the pandemic, those teams were largely at institutions in states where the majority of the population voted for the Democratic candidate in the 2020 election. Along with COVID and the racial unrest in the summer of 2020, the US experienced a polarising presidential election in the fall of 2020 and an attack on the national capital in early 2021 connected to anti-democratic election denial. In states with more left-leaning populations and voting behaviours, universities were open to or even eager to include ADVANCE teams and equity programming in their institutional responses to COVID. In states with more right-leaning populations and voters, ADVANCE teams saw supportive administrators fired and faced aggressive backlash from their local communities about their equity work.

A change leader at an institution in a primarily liberal state saw the overlapping crises and subsequent institutional responses as having:

... a broader sense of the need for diversity and equity work... It feels like a very topical conversation to be having, which means that people are looking for opportunities like [our ADVANCE program] provides to engage in the conversation, to leverage resources, to learn from one another. (Interviewee 32)

However, we found quite the opposite in institutions in largely conservative states. These interviewees, instead of seeing new opportunities and silver linings from the overlapping crises, described increased roadblocks to their ADVANCE work, hostile interactions with university administrators, and sometimes, fear for their personal and professional selves.

In some cases, the change leaders received pushback from the campus and public community for what they had considered routine ADVANCE work, even before the pandemic. As one faculty PI at an institution in a conservative state described:

One of the other things that our advisory boards had recommended we do is to increase visibility in what we were doing. There's a daily news publication [on campus]. So once a week, we put in an article... we archive them all on our blog... But we ended up with pushback in a couple of cases associated with that. I almost expected to have personal attacks that came toward me, and it never materialised. (Interviewee 14)

This fear of personal attacks due to ADVANCE work sometimes extended to change leaders fearing for their professional careers. That same change leader said that due to the pushback about their previous (pre-2020) newsletters:

... the university got really scared. They were worried that they were going to get sued from one direction or another. So at that time, I was dean of [a STEM college], and my supervisor was the provost, and the provost did basically tell me 'you keep your mouth shut or you'll be removed from your position.'... So personally, the biggest pushback I got was from upper administration. (Interviewee 14)

Such antagonistic relationships between ADVANCE teams and administrators were present on other campuses in politically right-leaning states. The overlapping crises led to administrative churn on many campuses, with particular consequences in conservative states against administrators seen supporting equity initiatives. One faculty PI described this situation:

It's not just the pandemic, it's all these things happened at once. We had the pandemic; we had the racial unrest on campus... And all of that, those two things at our institution, led to [a very high-level administrator] being fired. He is and was a big supporter of this project, and a champion of change in significant ways... It was 100 % because we have a very conservative Board of Trustees that's appointed by a very conservative governor. Many of them are also members of our state legislature. So it has become more obvious to me. I knew this going in, but it's become a lot more obvious to me doing the work, how influential those bodies can be on the work of the institution. (Interviewee 08)

Many change leaders in conservative states described additional barriers to their ADVANCE work, especially concerning the 2020 presidential election. One PI described how a [Donald] Trump parade on their campus, which included trucks with Confederate flags and racist images, "rocked our community". After the event, the university "passed a resolution of diversity, equity and inclusion, and that sparked... it's a long story. It sparked on both sides. If you want to see polarisation, it came out".

The presidential election also created a general sense of apprehension and unease for many ADVANCE teams in conservative states. This unease was not just due to broad political polarisation and unrest, but that the Republican presidential candidate and many state and national political candidates actively campaigned against diversity, equity, and inclusion programmes in HEIs. In a particularly conservative state, one PI described this unease by saying:

We're constantly watching. We watched the presidential election because the way the language of certain executive orders was in the prior administration, ADVANCE could have gone away, because it intentionally focuses on gender. And our [ADVANCE project] intentionally focuses on the intersection of gender and race... Then when the election results turned out the way they did, it was like, 'OK'. But then we're in [a very conservative state]. We're watching, we have to watch. It hasn't trickled down to us yet. So we're just doing our work, not necessarily quietly either. We

just do our work until hopefully nobody will tell us not to. But we're still doing our work. (Interviewee 25)

This marked difference from how ADVANCE teams in primarily Democratic-voting states (see previous section and silver linings) carried out their ADVANCE work in 2020–21 highlights the importance of geopolitical location in integrating gender equity programmes and institutional responses. Although generally not explicitly acknowledged in HEI management pandemic response plans, the overlapping crises in 2020/21 (and the increasingly politicised nature of the pandemic) certainly affected considerations of gender and equity depending on the geopolitical context of the university.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis for HEIs worldwide, both in scope and magnitude, it is not unprecedented for HEIs to face disruptive events that have gendered and racialised consequences. The magnitude and frequency of disruptive events have increased in recent decades (Mizutori and Guha-Sapir 2020) due to climate disasters, health emergencies, political unrest, and anti-science efforts by political actors. HEIs are not only impacted by these events but sometimes inextricably involved (e.g., recent challenges to diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, free speech, and US congressional hearings involving university presidents). For the overlapping crises in 2020–21, we found that US HEIs with current or past ADVANCE awards varied in the extent to which they included gender and intersectional equity issues in their institutional responses to these crises. While the ADVANCE programme is specific to the US, other countries have related gender equity programmes focused on HEI institutional change, such as the UK's Athena SWAN programme, the German Programme for Women Professors, and the European Commission's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation that focused on structural change.

In the US, ADVANCE teams that were well-integrated with the upper administration and that had ongoing data collection on campus felt that they successfully made gender and intersectional equity a key part of their institution's COVID response plan. At institutions located in states that voted primarily Democratic in the 2020 presidential election, ADVANCE teams observed unexpected positive outcomes. Existing equity initiatives

that had already been in the works but were largely seen as not possible or desirable before the pandemic (like changing tenure and promotion policies to accommodate caregiving or health issues, such as extending tenure clocks or allowing more flexible teaching arrangements) were readily implemented. Even with these silver linings, many change leaders remain sceptical about whether these changes will be sustainable. Yet, these positive outcomes highlight that certain crises (in certain geopolitical locations) can be a boon for social change. However, when crises and geopolitical locations do not align positively, equity workers may face even greater backlash to their work than in non-crisis times. For many ADVANCE teams at institutions in politically conservative states, the overlapping crises in 2020–21 created additional obstacles to their equity work, both inside their institutions and from local communities.

As HEIs face potential local, national, and/or global crises, gender equity change leaders should actively consider how well their programmes are integrated with university leadership and how up-to-date their institutional data collection is. These two elements were key factors to ADVANCE teams that were able to integrate gender equity issues into their campus institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both elements are ways of creating campus-wide buy-in and trust, in a way that particularly integrates upper administration and faculty. While the geopolitical context of an institution is not an element change leaders can control (and one that may be ever-changing), they should consider the nature of new crises in their particular context as to whether they might be able to find unexpected positives or increased backlash towards integrating gendered lenses to institutional response.

Indeed, while we found that the geopolitical context of an institution in the US (between Republican- and Democratic-voting states in the 2020 presidential election) affected institutional responses in the case of the crises in 2020–2021, recent events in 2023–2024 such as the Israel/Hamas conflict have shown how division within those binary categories further complicates institutional responses. In order to keep gender and equity efforts as part of institutional responses to (increasingly) politicised crises, outside actors and programmes such as ADVANCE may play an ever more prominent role. Ensuring the retention of diverse faculty is critical in these moments. Diverse perspectives are essential to fostering resilient, inclusive responses that not only address immediate crises but also uphold long-term commitments to equity and justice in higher education.

Our findings underscore that HEIs, as critical sites of knowledge production and dissemination, must proactively incorporate gender and intersectional equity into their crisis response frameworks. Disruptive events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, do not occur in isolation; they overlap with ongoing social crises rooted in systemic oppression based on race, gender, class, and other factors. These inequalities not only shape the impacts of such events but are often exacerbated by them. As our case study shows, the socio-political context plays a critical role in determining how institutions respond, and these contexts are dynamic. Institutional leadership must recognise that blanket approaches to crisis preparedness and response will not always work. Instead, responses must be tailored to the specific socio-political environments where they operate, ensuring that equity and inclusion remain integral to the institution's educational and research missions.

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