Navigating the Academic Minefield Armored With a TRY-Consciousness

Lannie M. Milon[1]

[1] College of Education and Health Development, Lamar University, Beaumont, USA

Correspondence: Lannie M. Milon, Assistant Professor, College of Education and Health Development, Lamar University, 4400 MLK Parkway, Beaumont, TX 77705, USA.

Abstract

This article examines how existing legislative pressures, particularly anti-DEI mandates reshape doctoral education in rural United States. Using an autoethnography of an African American assistant professor at a public university in rural southeast Texas, the article explores the dynamic consciousness an academic scholar must possess to withstand the cognitive social, physical and behavioral challenges permeating in an environment absent of fundamental protections. The article incorporates ideals of academic freedom, equity-mindedness, and structural-functionalism frameworks while drawing parallels to historical racial struggles and evolving identity constructs. The narrative highlights how underrepresented faculty remain in a constant state of innovation despite normalized constraints, calling for altruistic policy reforms and institutional courage in doctoral programs and tenure track service mandates.

Keywords: anti-DEI, academic freedom, equity mindedness, dual consciousness, curriculum censorship, dual positionality, structural functionalism, political weaponization, policy complaint rhetoric, institutional courage, fundamental protections and dynamic consciousness, try consciousness

1. Introduction

In the current social and political environment in the United States, doctoral education faces unprecedented overt legislative scrutiny. From anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) mandates to tenure restrictions and curriculum censorship, university faculty, administrators, and doctoral students alike must now navigate the unpredictable regulatory landscape without legislative protections. Recent policy changes in states such as Florida and Texas reflect the political weaponization of higher education (The Guardian, 2025). These efforts, ranging from defunding DEI initiatives to banning certain historical and racial discourse in the classroom, directly threaten the core values of academic freedom and inclusive scholarship (Washington Post, 2025). The implications for faculty, particularly those on the tenure track and from underrepresented backgrounds, are substantial.

Following SB 17's passage, faculty councils at UT Austin formally condemned mass layoffs of DEI staff and closure of diversity offices. Actions carried out without faculty consultation, violating shared governance norms (McGee, 2024). These behaviors directly mirror the experiences marginalized faculty whisper of when they allude to being excluded from shared governance and of having DEI-aligned initiatives dismissed under policy compliance rhetoric. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how universities cultivate an unfair, and unequal employment climate when they fail to respond to the federal due process of standard needs for marginalized faculty.

In Texas specifically, institutional policies tied to performance-based funding, narrow definitions of academic productivity, and growing political tensions around diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives create additional roadblocks for faculty of color. Programs such as the Texas Strategic Plan for Higher Education (60x30TX) emphasize student outcomes and workforce readiness, but often overlook the institutional investments needed to support diverse faculty leadership. Additionally, recent legislation targeting DEI programs, academic freedom, and critical race pedagogy has had a dreadful effect on scholars who emphasize or allude to race, identity, and equity in their research and teaching. This perspective is crucial because it allows for the analysis of how the absence of DEI policies creates a climate of professional and personal vulnerability for marginalized faculty, often imposing reliance on alternative armored structures of resilience.

A recent survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), reported by The Texas Tribune, revealed 35% of faculty tone down their writing and 27% self-censor due to fear of institutional repercussion (McGee, 2024). This excessively affects faculty of color working on race-conscious scholarship. Another statewide faculty

survey conducted by AAUP-TX found 60% of Texas faculty would not recommend Texas to out-of-state peers and nearly half planned to leave due to political pressures and disconcerting academic environments (Melhado, 2023). These findings center the professor's lived decision to suppress pedagogical innovations and pivot his teaching strategies to accepted norms, while navigating the hurdles of community programming. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how universities cultivate a culture of silence when they fail to respond to the needs of marginalized faculty in the areas of widespread self-censorship, thus suppressing such faculty into ambiguous pedagogical expectations.

A study led by University of Houston scholars reported Black and Hispanic junior faculty had 44% lower odds of receiving unanimous tenure recommendations and received 7% more negative votes, even when scholarly metrics were equivalent (Masters-Waage et al., 2024). This institutional disparity aligns with the professor in this study highlight of the sidelined committee assignments despite strong credentials and high student evaluations. This reinforces how faculty of color must outperform in evaluative metrics and continuously face systemic bias. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how universities cultivate a culture of attrition when they fail to respond to the compelling tenure promotion inequities of marginalized faculty.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

This paper uses an auto-ethnographic approach to document, analyze, and reflect on the experiences of an African American male serving as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at a public university in southeast rural Texas. Moreover, this paper contributes to the special issue on the implications of legislative landmines on doctoral programs, inclusive of faculty and their multi-faceted experiences navigating them, adding valuable insights to these intersecting bodies of literature.

2. Literature Review

To situate the current article, the body of literature on the current legislative landscape and experiences of faculty of color are reviewed.

2.1 Legislative Landscape

Legislative interference in higher education is becoming increasingly common in the United States, most notably in conservative led states such as Texas and Florida. Texas Senate Bill 17 (2023), for example, bans diversity offices and DEI hiring criteria at public institutions, reflecting a broader ideological campaign against inclusive pedagogy and racial equity in academia (American Council on Education, 2024; Flaherty, 2023). Florida's HB 999 aims to dissolve entire departments focused on race or gender studies, restricting curricular content and reshaping institutional culture in the process (Brown & Bell, 2023; Jaschik, 2024).

These developments reflect a broader national backlash where academics frame it as part of an "anti-woke" agenda targeting public education (Baker-Bell et al., 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2022). These legislative moves promote a culture of self-censorship where faculty, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, are pressured to conform or risk professional marginalization (Kezar et al., 2023; Thelin, 2023). In Texas, public universities face budgetary and reputational pressures to comply with these regulations, resulting in widespread chilling effects for professors researching or teaching race, gender, or social justice (Taylor, 2023)

2.2 Experiences of Faculty of Color

These constraints echo historical efforts to silence Black intellectuals during the McCarthy era and civil rights period (Gilyard, 2021). Faculty of color are often caught in the crossfire, experiencing disproportionate levels of scrutiny and professional marginalization (Quinn, 2024). Educational leadership literature increasingly addresses how Black and Brown faculty must navigate hostile legislative environments while fulfilling service commitments and mentoring underrepresented students (Brown et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2019).

The landscape of educational leadership is increasingly shaped by the critical need to understand, include, and support faculty of color. Within the context of higher education, particularly in educational leadership and administration programs, scholars have long acknowledged systemic challenges inhibiting the full participation and advancement of faculty of color (Quezada & Louque, 2004). This perspective is crucial in analyzing the structural and institutional barriers faced by the professor, and within the broader context of academic systems, state policy, and identity-based professional navigation.

Guillaume (2021) offered a critical lens into the role of emotional and social intelligence in the promotion and tenure journeys of faculty of color in educational leadership. The study revealed the ability to emotionally regulate, maintain composure, and strategically navigate institutional cultures, and when doing so it will often determine success more than academic output alone. This perspective is crucial because it resonates strongly with the narrative of the professor,

who, while working with the assigned graduate students, had to skillfully manage institutional resistance and its covert political dynamics.

Similarly, Martinez and Welton (2017) explored the duality faced by pre-tenured faculty of color who must straddle the tensions between institutional expectations and cultural identities. Martinez and Welton's findings support the idea systemic expectations often fail to account for the unique strengths and culturally responsive approaches faculty of color bring to the academy. The perspective is crucial in analyzing how the professor had to continually justify the legitimacy of his research, pedagogy, and community engagement strategies while navigating the incongruity between his values and traditional academic norms.

Gray-Nicolas et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of peer accountability and support networks particularly among Black women faculty in navigating academia. Though centered on Black women, their framework of "Other sistering" parallels a critical success factor in the professor's trajectory of relational networks and community-based support structures. The perspective is crucial in analyzing how the professor's collaborations with church leaders, local government officials, and non-profits functioned as his version of peer sistering, anchoring his professional work in community, identity, and collective responsibility.

Ferguson, Berry, and Collins (2021) questioned the marginal spaces provided to Black women faculty within the academic tower, particularly in teaching roles. Their findings underscored the emotional labor and identity negotiations faculty of color must perform when teaching courses centering equity, policy critique, and social justice. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how the professor navigated challenges when he integrated culturally responsive pedagogy and policy critiques within a principal preparation program, and in his assigned academic courses.

Further complexity was added by the experiences of foreign-born faculty in educational leadership, as described by Khrabrova and Sanzo (2013). Their research demonstrated where faculty who differ from dominant U.S. cultural norms whether by ethnicity, nationality, or epistemology often experienced professional isolation. While this professor is not foreign-born, his entrepreneurial leadership style, grounded in community-based innovation, situated him outside dominant epistemic cultures in higher education and created conditions for this similar exclusion. This perspective is crucial in analyzing the commonalities of disparities among various sub-groups within the marginalized faculty.

2.3 Conceptual Framework: Navigating the Minefield From Dual to Try-Consciousness

This conceptual framework visually illustrates the theoretical and practical dimensions of an assistant professor's journey through legislative, institutional, and pedagogical constraints on a doctoral education program. This study is grounded in three main frameworks: academic freedom as defined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Bensimon's (2022) theory of equity-mindedness in higher education, and Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness, expanded here as 'try-consciousness' to reflect the heightened racial, professional, and institutional awareness needed to navigate oppressive academic systems in a world absent of DEI legislation.

Academic freedom, as defined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2022), encompasses the right to freely teach, research, and publish without fear of institutional censorship or retaliation. This freedom is foundational to the integrity of doctoral education and the mentoring of future scholars (Tierney & Lechuga, 2005). However, recent policy shifts are eroding these protections, particularly for faculty in politically volatile contexts (Quinn, 2024). This perspective is critical in synthesizing the array of discrepancies marginalized faculty encounter while attempting to experience the same privileges as their non-marginalized counter parts. Absent of such protections, universities systemically handicap marginalized faculty in their tenure track performance review. Subsequentially, these actions negatively impact the retention of marginalized faculty and significantly decrease the percentage of marginalized faculty achieving the rank of tenure.

Equity-mindedness, articulated by (Bensimon, 2022), calls for a proactive stance in identifying and correcting institutional inequities. Equity-mindedness positions institutions to intentionally recognize and challenge systemic inequities limiting success for marginalized faculty and students. It requires moving beyond surface-level diversity commitments to engage in transformative practices altering policies, curricula, and support structures. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how universities respond or fail to respond to the needs of marginalized faculty.

This paper extends Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, described as the psychological dissonance of African Americans navigating a world which simultaneously denies and demands their visibility. Within academia, this manifests as a need for hypervigilance, performative excellence, and code-switching, all while confronting institutional microaggressions and systemic exclusion (Smith et al., 2006). Try-consciousness reframes the lived cognitive dissonance experienced by scholars of color in predominantly white institutions, invoking Harlem

Renaissance legacies of intellectual resistance. It is meant to capture the compounded awareness required of Black faculty operating at the intersection of racialized identity, professional precarity, and legislative antagonism. Try-consciousness articulates the pressure to "try" harder, try to be more strategic, try to assimilate without being noticed, try to be apologetic, and continuously try to be self-censored, yielding primarily to the feedback of organizational culture gatekeepers. It draws from Harlem Renaissance intellectual resistance (Taylor et al., 2019) and the more recent works on academic survival by faculty of color (Griffin, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study adopts an autoethnographic methodology, a qualitative research approach to situate the researcher's personal experiences as primary data to interrogate broader cultural, institutional, and political systems (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography allows academics to critically reflect on their lived experiences to offer insights into covert societal structures and masked power dynamics, particularly those incomprehensible in traditional empirical research. Autoethnography has gained traction among scholars in marginalized positions within higher education, offering a critical lens to examine institutional exclusion and systemic inequities. Tight (2024) argues autoethnography is particularly valuable for those whose voices are often sidelined in traditional research paradigms, and collaborative autoethnography may offer a promising path forward for collective resistance and knowledge production. Autoethnography is commonly used for exploring issues of race, academic censorship, and marginalization within higher education, as it allows for the deep contextualization of institutional dynamics often invisible in traditional methodologies (Chang, 2008). It orchestrates voices often reduced or excluded from academic discourse and offers a methodologically demanding yet cultivated lens through which to evaluate systemic dysfunction and resilience.

Hernandez (2022) uses autoethnography to explore the lived experiences of Black women faculty in predominantly White academic spaces. Her work demonstrates how autoethnographic inquiry can provoke perspective-taking and action, challenging dominant narratives and inviting institutional transformation through relational and reflective storytelling. Bhattacharya and Atay (2017) emphasize the role of transnational autoethnography in capturing the experiences of scholars navigating multiple cultural and institutional identities. This approach helps illuminate the borderlands of academic belonging, especially for immigrant and international faculty negotiating disciplinary voice and institutional power. As both a participant and a researcher, I occupy dual positionality. I am the subject of this narrative, and I am its analyst. This positionality is fundamental to autoethnographic inquiry and provides a lens through which these systemic patterns, especially those related to race, academic freedom, and policy marginalization can be unveiled.

3.1 Data Sources

The data for this autoethnography are reflective journals and personal memorandums kept during the academic year. The data gathering extended itself to include university grant submissions and reviews, formal institutional communications such as emails, faculty meeting notes, policy memorandums, and formative and summative student course evaluations and feedback. The data points were referenced regularly and used to connect key themes of marginalization, resistance, and innovation.

3.2 Analytic Approach

The analysis is informed by narrative inquiry and critical autoethnography. Narrative inquiry allows for the construction of meaning through storytelling, while critical autoethnography contextualizes personal experience within systems of power, race, and policy (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). I coded the experiences thematically, looking for common recurring patterns across the data.

To support the trustworthiness of the findings reported in this manuscript, a colleague performed peer level member checking, which entailed engaging with the data sources and themes presented to search for agreement. In so doing, the peer reviewer at times challenged the author's interpretation of his experiences, providing an independent assessment of the extent to which the themes present are congruent with his experiences. Stahl and King (2020) describe this technique as expanding the article's credibility and dependability.

3.3 Positionality

The marginalized faculty began his tenure-track appointment September 1, 2024 at this Southeast Texas University with optimism and purpose, believing his experience as an educator, administrator, and academic would contribute to the institution and transform the communities it serves by modeling resiliency. He relocated from a respected academic trajectory, having taught at institutions like Teachers College, Columbia University and the University of St. Thomas, and completed a doctorate at Pennsylvania State University, where he was trained in both higher education leadership and the theories underpinning social justice and systems change. Prior to his faculty appointment, he held roles as a

k-12 secondary teacher, assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, associate principal curriculum and instruction, middle school principal, alternative education school principal, executive director of pre k-12, district administrator in human resources, clinical professor, recruitment specialist graduate school, adjunct professor and entrepreneur.

4. Personal Narrative: Experiences of One African American Professor

This is not just my story. It is a story many Black academics, particularly those in the rural south and in conservative legislative environments, know intimately. This autoethnography offers the story as data, rich with the complications, contradictions, and courage required to navigate, survive and serve within today's doctoral education landscape absent of DEI legislation governance. And maybe, just maybe, this personal narrative will serve as reflection, and as a roadmap for what comes next. Below, the four themes emerging from this analysis are presented.

4.1 Marginalizing Experiences

Across the data sources, the faculty experienced numerous marginalizing experiences hindering his ability to fairly meet several critical areas in the year and a half juncture of the tenure track performance review criteria, causing him to feel confounded. For example, within the first few months of his appointment, he was ushered into an unspoken culture of marginalization and silent resistance, one which did not explicitly say "you are not welcome," but repeatedly demonstrated it through omission, surveillance, and restriction. During the beginning of the year school-wide in service, where commonly the entire new faculty is formally introduced, this marginalized faculty, and several others were not. In ensuing monthly faculty meetings, select faculty are consulted with and presented with the opportunity to extend training and or feedback for future and existing training. Of the eight monthly meetings, this professor was never presented with such an opportunity amongst his colleagues, while select faculty presented multiple times.

There were several faculty meetings where non-marginalized faculty were slated to be on the agenda and they were no-shows and there were several other instances where non-marginalized faculty attended the meetings but were ill-prepared to deliver on the listed agenda items. There were times during these meetings when marginalized faculty would make a comment and non-marginalized faculty would respond by mispronouncing the names of those contributing faculty. During those offensive awkward moments, the attention of the entire audience would be on the marginalized faculty's reaction to the name mispronunciations as opposed to the content of the comments.

The non-marginalized faculty was never corrected during, and the agenda moved on as if the marginalized faculty were addressed properly. These microaggressions did not feel micro in a closed room with colleagues, but instead felt like a laboratory where the establishment of cultural symbolic anti DEI norms were being cultivated. I then consciously awakened to the notion of being in a policy minefield.

As professor, I was assigned to instruct doctoral level courses during the fall, spring and summer. This is crucial to the synthesis of the narrative because there are stipend differences for master level and doctoral level faculty. Master level faculty receive stipends during the academic year for course loads greater than 25 students. Doctoral level faculty receive a summer stipend equivalent to a third of the salary. The marginalized faculty learned at the start of the summer, doctoral faculty summer stipend is incumbent on being assigned to chair doctoral committees and not simply being a faculty of doctoral courses. The marginalized faculty was then informed by the chair, he misunderstood the criteria. This is crucial because the marginalized faculty was misinformed when assigned to course loads and this was not a case of misunderstanding.

Puzzled and slightly alarmed, the professor learned from the first semester he had to order his own course textbooks, so he inquired about which courses he would be assigned prior to the end of fall and much prior to the start of summer, so he could have the textbooks in his possession for review prior to the start of the courses. During the spring semester, the professor was informed by the department chair of the assigned doctoral courses, and the idea of being assigned committees to chair. At the end of the spring semester, but prior to the start of the summer semester, the marginalized faculty was informed he would not be assigned to chair any doctoral committees, and he would also need to teach an academic writing course instead of the previously assigned higher education administration course.

The marginalized faculty was told there were fewer than usual numbers of doctoral students in explanation for not being assigned any committees to chair. The statement of "have you chaired any committees prior" was immediately stated in a follow-up reply as a justification for the actions. The marginalized faculty was also informed he was not suited to teach a higher education administrator course. These were baseless explanations because the marginalized faculty was newly hired tenured track, and held verifiable higher education administrator experiences on his curriculum vitae. In the span of the same time, it was discovered during a doctoral student summer orientation, non-marginalized faculty, some who taught at the master's course level were instead assigned doctoral students, having

the advantage of receiving the masters stipend during the academic year and the summer stipend of a third of the salary for chairing doctoral committees.

This act illuminates how anti-DEI governance can perpetuate compensation discrepancies and how marginalized faculty can encounter systemic evaluation hurdles resulting in being punitive and inhibitors for such faculty effectively meeting tenure requirements. This is crucial in the analysis of the narrative because it highlights the ambiguity and compensation disadvantages often encountered with marginalized faculty.

4.2 Reduced Academic Freedom

To meet tenured track expectations, the initial navigation strategy focused primarily on teaching and service. In the asynchronous environment with high student enrollment, multiple professors are assigned to instruct, typically a minimum of five professors per course. The course syllabus, modules, activities and rubrics are provided, leaving no options for deviation. There is generally a lead instructor, typically a non- marginalized faculty who proudly designed the course in the distant past, creating a territorial working environment where new faculty must reserve refinement suggestions or risk being miscategorized as a disruptor. As a departmental practice there are optional weekly scheduled synchronous sessions which result in staggering student attendance.

Routinely, the lead instructors facilitate the sessions, and issue general correspondence without an established co-teaching model or agenda. Inherently, the lead instructors are the previously mentioned professors who mispronounce the names of marginalized faculty, or are unprepared for professional development during faculty meetings, or are the professors who are frequently absent from the monthly faculty meetings. The course assignment structure insists on a hierarchical system where the lead is the executive leader and others are categorized by their social relationship with the lead instructor, which systemically undermines the merit and competency of all others. The teaching autonomy in this environment is limited to the coaching and feedback extended to students via graded assignments. This is crucial in the synthesis of the narrative because there is minimal to no legislation in place to ensure inclusivity of all faculty.

Cautiously, the professor demonstrated his merit and competency during his andragogical approach in his correspondence and grading with his students of record. This alarmed the non-marginalized lead instructors and resulted in one lead instructor informally interviewing the marginalized faculty's students and their graded records. This is crucial because the non-marginalized faculty introduced this unethical practice to doctoral students and assumed a supervisory role over the marginalized faculty. This behavior violates student privacy policy and weakens the fragile working relationship of the doctoral faculty. This is also crucial because it highlights a doctoral faculty problem of practice which could be remedied where DEI legislation is governing.

Intriguingly, when reviewing doctoral students course evaluations, the data is overwhelmingly positive in support of the marginalized faculty praxis. The high volume of consistent comments are, the marginalized professor provides timely, individualized prescriptive and applicable feedback helping students in academic work and professional practice. The doctoral students share unsolicited notes of gratitude in the chat box and on recordings during synchronous class sessions, continuously request letters of recommendation for employment, and submit speaking and site visits requests for the marginalized faculty.

4.3 Agency

In the quest to become more familiar with the findings, implications and recommendations for the problems of practice highlighted in the archived dissertations of recent graduates and review of report cards of local districts, it was noted the rural k-12 students were facing learning challenges due to a lack of access to supplemental instruction, mentorship, and community-based academic support. These challenges were especially pronounced in lower-income communities and geographically isolated areas, where parental support and academic resources were often stretched thin. Many students in the education leadership doctoral program were residents and employees of rural communities and aspired to critically investigate strategies to address these contemporary work-related challenges. The marginalized professor connected this recognition with the university tenure track 'service' criteria and begin exploring how to leverage employment requirements, merit and competency to reach a promising solution.

One immediate approach was to identify and apply for grants. In October of 2024, the professor applied for and was denied an institutional $50,000 community resiliency grant to pay university students to tutor k–12 students in failing local rural school districts. Deflated but not broken, the professor pivoted and pursued the next strategy. The strategy would involve him engaging cross departmentally and collaborating with local politics and external influencers.

Diplomatically, the professor engaged with local superintendents who were in some way affiliates of the university. He discussed his interest in addressing persistent academic disparities in the rural school districts surrounding the

university. The responders were consistently concerned with funding and staffing shortages. The professor requested for the university to approve an off-campus work-study program, designed to address the funding and staffing concerns by ultimately providing local rural school districts with free paid student tutors and expanding rural school districts teaching pipelines with potential alternative certified teachers. This is crucial to the analysis of the narrative because it illuminates how the marginalized faculty demonstrated resolve for others who were encountering effects of inequities while navigating an anti DEI minefield in the scope of his professional occupation.

The professor demonstrated the competencies of effective external communication and mobilizing stakeholders around the university's community resiliency shared vision and mission. Service in the tenure track evaluation criteria does not specify the depth of service, but it does encourage school wide and university wide service. The professor met with non-marginalized university administration of federal aid and human resources to align off campus work study policy with the tutoring duties and responsibilities. This is critical in the analysis because it demonstrates how the marginalized faculty is effective at inclusivity when collaboration is centered on explicit equitable policy and procedures.

4.4 Resistance

Conducting these sorts of strategic and results oriented actions without requesting permission, disrupted the status quo and alarmed external anti DEI gatekeepers. When the professor began a tutoring partnership with the local Family Resource Center, using his designation as a U.S. Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship Provider, the governing body alarmingly resorted to questioning the professor's credentialling and competency. The local workforce solutions board, filed a formal grievance with their governing agency, raising concerns about the marginalized professor's held credentials, ultimately interrogating his selection and retention process of the apprentices. In their tirade, they accused the selected apprentices of being "incapable of becoming teachers" and stated the identified apprentices would not pass certification exams. They went a step further and maliciously informed the employer of their willingness to withdraw other funding contributions if the apprenticeship continued. This is important to the analysis of the narrative because the example highlights how impressionable external stakeholders are and how important it is to have governing legislature to streamline support for the marginalized among all stakeholders.

5. Discussion and Implications

This study has accentuated the evolving challenges of doctoral education amid politicized interference, with a particular focus on how these dynamics impact academic freedom, institutional equity, and the professional trajectory of one African American faculty. This autoethnography exemplifies the compounded pressures of navigating policy suppression, institutional marginalization, and constrained community engagement. His experiences, rooted in expertise, commitment to doctoral student success, and a desire to create equitable partnerships, were repeatedly devalued or obstructed by politically motivated decision-making.

The concept of "try-consciousness" extends Du Bois's original framing of double consciousness by recognizing the additional mental and professional calculus scholars of color must employ within contemporary higher education systems shaped by racialized policies. This heightened awareness is defensive and innovative, and it fuels resilience and new forms of pedagogical, administrative, and civic leadership.

5.1 Key Implications for Policy and Practice

Regarding the protection of academic freedom, universities must reaffirm their commitment to AAUP principles by safeguarding faculty from punitive measures tied to political ideology or curricular content. Regarding equity-minded governance, leadership must adopt multi-pronged entrenched equity-minded frameworks in hiring, mentorship, and promotion processes, evidencing merit-based efforts as the sole lever for decision making. Regarding strengthening mentorship structures, regulatory practice must be intentional, formalized, and incentive-based, creating mentorship opportunities for minoritized faculty to mitigate institutional isolation and support leadership development.

As an essential element of the local viability of all universities, modeling desired behaviors within and for the community is paramount and can be leveraged via community-based innovation. In so doing, policymakers and universities must reduce bureaucratic barriers to public service and federal grant-based programming, especially for faculty who design initiatives to address regional educational disparities. Further, the workforce commission policies can be streamlined with the common good to eliminate barriers. As it stands, strict local interpretations of WIOA funds are used inequitably to disqualify low-income or recredentialing citizens. Such discretionary practices can run counter to the very intent of federal workforce legislation and universities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021; Carnevale et al., 2022). Community-based solutions led by faculty of color are thereby institutionally undermined at multiple levels: university, state, and workforce agencies. In sum, Texas policies, both in education and labor, promote exclusion

through a complex web of compliance culture and colorblind bureaucracy. Understanding how faculty navigate these interconnected barriers is essential to restoring academic integrity and equity in leadership preparation.

5.2 Cross-Sector Partnership Models

States and universities should study peer models like the California College Corps and Dana Center (2017) to understand how sustainable, equity-driven partnerships thrive under supportive policy conditions.

6. Conclusion

Limitations of this study are, the college of the professor has undergone a transition of new leadership: The state has proposed legislation to change tenure policy: The enrollment numbers for the doctoral program show significant increase, thus creating potentially positive opportunities to assign marginalized faculty to chair committees: The year and half tenure review does not formally factor into the tenure consideration for faculty. Future research could take on the direction of implementation of science resolution. Such research could be, but not limited to transitional governance planning, with clear steps of actions when universities experience the changing of leadership: What organizational penalties exist following acts of marginalization, such as, assigning of fees and reprimand to organizations and or individuals found adopting marginalization practices with the issuance of severe monetary penalties and or immediate elimination of violators from their role as gatekeepers: Amend policy to include explicit language allowing for situational support and innovative solutions. Simply stated, universities must be explicit in their protections for all faculty. Ultimately, future researchers should seek to explore inquiries pertaining to personifying professional ethics, and how the penalty of denying access should be logical in punitive consequence to the offending affiliate. Logical in the sense, suitors should be stripped of the very access they deny from others.

In conclusion, "Each morning, the professor awakens with three voices whispering different truths in his ear. One demands survival, urging silence and submission. Another calls for advocacy, telling him to confront each hurdle with fierce critique. And the last, the quietest, asks: 'What if you build anyway?'

The professor calls this his try-consciousness: the unrelenting pursuit of teaching, leading, and creating in institutions lacking traditional organizational structure for him. It's the internal negotiation between pedagogy and andragogy, between tradition and transformation. The professor draws from the lineage of Du Bois, of Baldwin, of the Harlem Renaissance thinkers who fought with pens sharper than policy. He recognizes, while the academy may not always be hospitable, it remains potentially fertile ground for unorthodox growth. He stays because students need to see an example of a strategic resilience blueprint designed by an architect who looks like them. And he perseveres, for those coming behind him, in hope they might walk into a room and forego wondering if they belong.

Ultimately, doctoral education must be protected as a space of intellectual freedom and social progress. As states continue to reshape higher education through ideological legislation, it is imperative for institutions to resist reductive policies and affirm their public mission. This autoethnography calls for renewed attention to how academic governance can either exacerbate or resist systemic inequities, and challenges all stakeholders to act with integrity, urgency, and vision. This case exemplifies the personal and institutional toll of legislative interference in doctoral education. By examining the lived experiences of one African American assistant professor, this article uncovers how academic freedom, mentorship, innovation, and equity are challenged, but not extinguished, by regressive state policies.

Authors' contributions

Lannie M. Milon, PhD., was solely responsible for the study design, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. He drafted the full manuscript and completed all revisions in its entirety. No special agreements concerning authorship were necessary, as all aspects of the study and manuscript preparation were conducted exclusively by Lannie M. Milon, PhD.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of Sciedu Press.

The journal and publisher adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

References

American Association of University Professors (AAUP). (2022). *Academic Freedom and Tenure*. Retrieved from https://www.aaup.org

American Council on Education. (2024). *State Legislative Round-Up: Education Policy Trends*. Retrieved from https://www.acenet.edu

Baker-Bell, A., Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2020). *This Ain't Another Statement! This Is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice*. National Council of Teachers of English.

Bensimon, E. M. (2022). Equity as Institutional Responsibility. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *54*(2), 6-15.

Bhattacharya, K., & Atay, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Transnational autoethnography in higher education: The (im)possibility of finding home in academia.* Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/pbassets/cmscontent/QIX/QI_SpecialIssueCFP_Sept2017.pdf

Boylorn, R. M., & Orbe, M. P. (Eds.). (2014). *Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life*. Routledge.

Brown, A. L., & Bell, D. (2023). *Legislating Curriculum: Race, Power, and Resistance*. Policy Press.

Brown, A. L., Fasching-Varner, K. J., & Reynolds, R. (2016). *Mentoring Faculty of Color*. Stylus Publishing.

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2022). *The Merit Myth: How Our Colleges Favor the Rich and Divide America*. The New Press.

Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as Method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Dana Center. (2017). Charles A. Dana Center programs. University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from https://www.utdanacenter.org

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1).

Ferguson, R., Berry, T. R., & Collins, K. M. (2021). Still the 'mule of the world': The dual pandemics and the continued plight of Black women in the academy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 34*(10), 841-857.

Flaherty, C. (2023). Florida bill aims to dismantle DEI in higher education. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com

Florida House. (2023). House Bill 999: Postsecondary Education Bill Text.

Gilyard, K. (2021). *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*. Routledge.

Gray-Nicolas, N., Masingila, J., Bynum, Y. P., Williams, K. L., Hughes, H. A., & Sealy-Ruiz, Y. (2022). Other' sistering: A framework for support and accountability for Black women in the academy. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 21*(1), 52-73.

Griffin, K. A. (2020). Institutional barriers, strategies, and the push for equity. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *13*(3), 153-165.

Guillaume, R. O. (2021). Promotion and tenure: Faculty of color's use of emotional and social intelligence to navigate academia. *Educational Leadership Review, 22*(1), 44-57.

Hernandez, K. C. (2022). Bearing a Black woman's burden: Autoethnography for provoking perspective-taking and action in predominantly White academic spaces. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009064668.013

Jaschik, S. (2024). Censorship in the Classroom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Kezar, A., Holcombe, E., Harper, J., & Ueda, N. (2023, Jan/Feb.). Culture change requires personal and organizational changes: Lessons from the shared equity leadership model. *Change, 55*(1), 39-46. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2023.2151806

Khrabrova, A., & Sanzo, K. L. (2013). Exploring the experiences of foreign-born faculty in educational leadership. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *8*(1), 68-85.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2019). "Yes, But How Do We Do It?" Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Martinez, M. A., & Welton, A. D. (2017). Straddling cultures, identities, and inconsistencies: Voices of pre-tenure faculty of color in educational leadership. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 12*(2), 122-142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775115606177

Masters-Waage, T., Smith, J., & Rodriguez, L. (2024). *Tenure and equity in faculty evaluations: Evidence from a multi-institutional study*. University of Houston Center for Faculty Equity Research. Retrieved from https://www.uh.edu/faculty-equity-research/tenure-study-2024

McGee, K. (2024, December 12). Texas professors self-censor for fear of retaliation, survey found. *The Texas Tribune*. Retrieved from https://www.texastribune.org/2024/12/12/texas-university-survey-self-censor/

Melhado, W. (2023, September 7). Texas' political environment driving faculty to leave, survey finds. *The Texas Tribune*. Retrieved from https://www.texastribune.org/2023/09/07/texas-higher-education-faculty-dei-tenure/

Quezada, R. L., & Louque, A. (2004). *Creating a new vision of leadership: A lens for equity.* Caddo Gap Press.

Quinn, R. (2024, August 5). The growing trend of attacks on tenure. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/tenure/2024/08/05/growing-trend-attacks-tenure

Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2022). *Academic Capitalism in the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Smith, D. G., Turner, C. S., Osei-Kofi, N., & Richards, S. (2006). Interrupting the usual. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *75*(2), 133-160. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2004.11778900

Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of developmental education*, *44*(1), 26-28.

Taylor, K. Y., Watson, T. N., & Thomas, D. (2019). *The future of academic freedom*. Beacon Press.

Taylor, M. (2023). The Texas Turn: DEI and the Shifting Terrain of Academic Freedom. *Texas Education Review, 11*(1), 45-60.

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2022). 60x30TX Progress Report 2022. Retrieved from https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/agency-publication/miscellaneous/60x30tx-progress-report-2022/

Texas House. (2023). Senate Bill 17: Postsecondary Education Bill Text.

The Guardian. (2025). Texas and Florida's education crackdown is reshaping higher ed. *The Guardian*.

Thelin, J. R. (2023). *A History of American Higher Education* (3rd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Tierney, W. G., & Lechuga, V. M. (2005). Academic freedom and tenure. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *76*(2), 160-189.

Tight, M. (2024). Autoethnography in higher education research: A marginal methodology for the marginalized?. In J. Huisman, & M. Tight (Eds.), *Theory and method in higher education research* (Vol. 10, pp. 131-145). Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2056-375220240000010008

U.S. Department of Labor. (2021). *Federal Work-Study (FWS) Program Fact Sheet*. Washington, D.C.

Washington Post. (2025). Attacks on higher ed: Censorship laws and the push against DEI. *The Washington Post*.