"It's Still There, But It's Not the Same"

Understanding the Impact of Anti-DEI and Anti-CRT Legislation on Campus Civic Engagement for Black Student Leaders Navigating Expression

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1. Abstract

This study explores how Black student leaders (BSLs) at public historically white institutions (HWIs) in Florida and Georgia navigate racial battle fatigue (RBF) in the context of anti-DEI legislation. Amid rising political hostility toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, the research examines the lived experiences of 14 BSLs as they respond to racialized campus climates that are increasingly ambiguous and unsupportive. Using a critical qualitative approach, data were collected through two in-depth interviews per participant and analyzed using inductive and deductive coding. Four major findings emerged: (1) BSLs experience heightened psychological, physiological, and emotional stress linked to their identity and leadership roles; (2) anti-DEI policies contribute to institutional erasure and confusion; (3) students express emotional withdrawal, hypervigilance, and disillusionment with performative leadership; and (4) students employ culturally grounded coping strategies centered on self-care, spirituality, and community. The study underscores that BSLs are both empowered and burdened by their leadership, especially under politically restrictive conditions. Findings call for student affairs educators to prioritize engagement and belonging and offer identity-affirming support. Further, scholars with academic freedom are urged to continue documenting racialized student experiences. These insights are critical to protecting Black student leadership and equity-centered educational transformation.

Keywords: racial battle fatigue; black student leadership; anti-DEI legislation

2. Introduction

Following the confirmation of reelection, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis proclaimed a rallying cry of victory, "Florida is where woke goes to die" (Czachor, 2022), launching a shifting political landscape of state legislation and polices targeting the dismantling and removal of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in Florida education, specifically colleges and universities. For several conservative states like Florida, being "woke" or well-informed on racial or social justice issues has become fuel for state legislatures to fight progressive movements (i.e., Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ rights) and remove cultural education (i.e., African American history and DEI programs) (Thurlow, 2023). The legislative process in states such as Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Texas directly impacted higher education institutions with the introduction of bills intended to halt social justice and equity efforts on college campuses. Since 2022, over 30 bills have been introduced, such as Florida Senate Bill 299, restricting DEI on college campuses (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024). Legislation continues to expand with the installation of the 2025 Trump administration, which has introduced executive orders aimed at dissolving programs and curriculum related to DEI. Colleges and universities are microcosms of the larger sociopolitical context, often reflecting the hostility demonstrated toward Black people in recent national events, such as an increased need for racial justice brought on by systemic racism and brutality against Black bodies (Mwangi et al., 2018). In higher education, predicting how targeted initiatives will influence colleges and universities can be challenging. Diversity, equity, and inclusion encompass more than just race; however, the complexities of these concepts have highlighted race as a significant factor within legislative efforts (Harper et al., 2024).

American society has seen the influence of polarizing political landscapes on both the state and federal levels. While federal legislation and executive orders continue to shift the landscape of higher education, this research study explores Black student leaders' experiences across Florida and Georgia as they navigate the complexities of anti-DEI legislation enacted by states, focusing on their encounters with racial battle fatigue (RBF). Smith (2004) developed racial battle fatigue to elucidate the health consequences of enduring racial stress over prolonged periods. Black and non-Black students of color grapple with their identities as Persons of Color (POC) amidst racial/ethnic stereotypes and microaggressions in the college setting (Jones, 2020; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Ospina & Su, 2009). Highlighting institutional racism and structural violence endured by Black students, this study challenges the normalized perceptions of college as a race-neutral space (Hamer & Lang, 2015; Jones, 2020; Patel, 2015). Furthermore, this study underscores how Black students at public state universities in states that have passed anti-DEI legislation experience RBF and navigate racial trauma while attempting to reimagine their leadership efficacy and build their capacity toward leadership for liberation.

To provide contextual grounding, state-level demographic data is important to illustrate the representation—or lack thereof—of Black faculty, administrators, and students in public institutions across Florida and Georgia. As of 2022, Black undergraduate enrollment at Florida State University is approximately 8.4% of students, while Black faculty was lumped in with all faculty of color to comprise

about 17.95% of total faculty (Florida State University, 2022). At the University of Georgia, Black faculty make up roughly 14.1% of the faculty body, yet Black student representation is significantly lower, around 7.1% of the undergraduate population (College Factual, n.d.). Across flagship and other public research universities in both states, Black faculty typically range between 4–5% nationally, though student enrollment may rise as high as 8–20%, thus producing a pronounced disparity in power and visibility (Pew Research, 2019). While these universities are technically considered "historically white institutions" due to their origins and institutional legacies, today's demographics show persistent underrepresentation of Black people in comparison to state demographics among faculty and leadership, reinforcing structural whiteness as described by Bonilla-Silva & Peoples (2022) and Corces-Zimmerman et al. (2020). In such environments, the emotional fatigue and sense of invisibility expressed by student participants in this study may stem not only from anti-DEI legislation but also from enduring institutional power imbalances. Consequently, the despair and alienation described by students were not solely responses to recent legislation but were amplified by longstanding exclusionary dynamics that predate the current political moment and care captured at this time.

Black student leaders will vulnerably share their longing for a sense of "normalcy" in their student leadership experience, a privilege apparently enjoyed by their white counterparts (Beatty & Lima, 2021). The study suggests key implications for higher education administrators and faculty, emphasizing the need for continuous—and arguably more focused—efforts to address endemic racism ingrained in campus communities, structures, and cultures (Beatty & Lima, 2021; Jones, 2020). The research question guiding this study is: How do Black college students navigate racial battle fatigue as campus leaders in positional and non-positional roles at public universities in Florida and Georgia, two anti-DEI legislative states?

In this study, we explore the experiences of 14 Black students who are engaged in campus leadership capacities and enrolled at historically white institutions (HWIs) in Florida and Georgia, states that have enacted restrictive state anti-DEI legislation. HWIs, as defined in the U.S. context, refer to colleges and universities that were originally established to serve white populations, often through exclusionary practices and policies that denied access to students of color (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). These institutions are not racially neutral but are shaped by traditions, demographics, and curricula that have historically centered whiteness and continue to reflect systemic inequities in access, support, and belonging (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2020). Specifically, we aim to further understand these students' experiences with racial battle fatigue as they navigate racialized campus environments.

3. Relevant Literature

The livelihood and humanized experiences of Black people in today's socio-political climate is constantly questioned, targeted, and devalued due to the uncertainty and effects of anti-DEI legislation and policies. In addition to broader political challenges, higher education institutions are facing immense amounts of scrutiny because of higher education's ability to be a vehicle for societal change, often providing space to cultivate diverse thoughts and perspectives that positively contribute to collective change and the development of the next generation of leaders.

In this literature review, we present a detailed overview and analysis of research studies and literature related to Black student outcomes at historically white institutions. First, we examine the negative impacts caused by anti-DEI legislation in Florida and Georgia. Then, we explore the racialized experiences of Black students' leaders in higher education. The aforementioned areas engage in conversations regarding the heightened racialized stressors that are impacting Black student leaders and contributing to their encounters with racial battle fatigue on college campuses. Our research specifically highlights the ways leadership experiences and campus belonging can be experienced differently by Black student leaders in hostile anti-DEI states.

Student leadership in American higher education has long been framed as a developmental process rooted in identity formation, civic responsibility, and social change. Komives et al. (2006) offer a foundational model—the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model—which emphasizes that students progress through stages of awareness, exploration, and integration of leadership as part of their self-concept. This model conceptualizes leadership as a relational, values-based process that is collaborative rather than positional. Similarly, Dugan (2017) critiques dominant narratives of leadership development for their tendency to ignore the structural and cultural barriers faced by marginalized and minoritized student populations. He argues for an approach that centers equity, identity, and power, calling for student leadership education that is both reflective and critical.

Contributing to critical student leadership learning, Bertrand Jones et al. (2016) introduces culturally relevant leadership learning as an intentional practice that affirms the lived experiences of marginalized students. Culturally relevant leadership learning challenges traditional, race-neutral leadership paradigms by highlighting how systemic racism and institutional structures shape leadership opportunities and identity for students of color (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). This scholarship foregrounds the emotional labor, racial battle fatigue, and hypervisibility that Black student leaders often navigate within historically white institutions. By applying these theoretical perspectives, we better understand that leadership for Black students is not just about holding positions or participating in programs—it is a site of racialized negotiation, resistance, and resilience (Beatty & Lima, 2021). These frameworks collectively underscore the need to analyze how anti-DEI legislation and racial campus climates interrupt and reshape the leadership development of Black students in higher education.

3.1 Anti-DEI Legislation Negative Impacts

Anti-DEI legislation has exaggerated RBF experiences for Black and brown people of color, passing laws and regulations to halt social progression and equity. Before the 2024 presidential election, the emergence of legislation to restrict DEI efforts in higher education and public offices in states like Florida, Texas, and Utah led to an increase in development, (e.g., introduction or passing) of anti-DEI legislation bans in several states like Alabama, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Tennessee and more (Adams & Chiwaya, 2024). Additional legislative attacks are rooted in political uproar over a common, misrepresented, and misused term, such as DEI or critical race theory (CRT) (Briscoe & Jones, 2024). The attack on DEI and race consciousness has been a longstanding point of tension in the state of Florida guided by the "Stop WOKE" Act, enforcing new rules regarding learning about and discussing race and social justice issues in Florida public school classrooms, known as House Bill (HB) 7 in 2022 (Russell-Brown, 2024).

Anti-DEI legislation is undoing decades of equity-centered work in higher education, through the removal of academic majors and programs (see Florida Senate Bill 266 and House Bill 999), limiting DEI-focused awards and scholarships to prevent access and opportunity to higher education institutions (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024), banning and eliminating cultural and race-based campus rituals and celebrations (Haber-Curran et al., 2025), and defunding professional funding models for faculty and staff job roles and research efforts that fall under the DEI category (Dhanani et al., 2024). Anti-DEI legislation was proposed in Georgia through Senate Bill 261 and Senate Bill 120, focusing on limiting and restricting race-based and equity-based education, admissions, and tenure, and removing state funding from public institutions participating in diversity, equity, and inclusion practices on campus. While the legislation failed, Georgia institutions began proactively shifting campuses--removing offices and changing curriculum-- to align with proposed policy (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024). These shifts were also seen at Florida institutions, such as University of Florida, where in March 2024, DEI offices, faculty, and staff were abruptly removed and DEI spending was terminated on campus to comply with a memo from the Florida Board of Governors prohibiting universities from utilizing state funds for DEI initiatives (Valburn, 2024). The forced removal of DEI-focused initiatives directly impacts opportunities for students to engage in a rich, diverse learning environment is a deterrent to their development as students and future leaders, and it has a significant negative impact on their educational opportunities, resulting from anti-DEI legislation.

3.1.1 Racialized Experiences of Black Student Leaders

The heightened visibility of anti-Black racism in 2020, particularly following the murder of George Floyd, led to increased racial tensions on college campuses, reinforcing pre-existing bias, microaggressions, and racism in Black students' experiences on college campuses as a direct effect of whiteness and racialized incidents (Briscoe & Jones, 2022). U.S. political and racial tensions during 2020 to current context has prompted student activism and campus protests on college campuses, serving as an opportunity for Black student leaders (BSLs) to challenge their non-Black institution's administration, faculty, staff, and peers to stand with and for their Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators due to anti-Black racism (Jaggers, 2022). As a result of negative racial encounters, Black students share their increased encounters with racial battle fatigue as they navigated campus environments that did not support or acknowledge their experience of additional emotional labor and fatigue, leading to emotional, physical, and psychological distress (Domingue, 2015). The intersection of racialized experiences and campus racial climate norms impacts Black students' experience in student leadership development and opportunities. Mwangi and colleagues (2018) explored the experiences of Black students and their racialized experiences on college campuses, as well as broader societal racial tensions, to raise awareness about the experiences of Black students in higher education. Mwangi and team (2018) found four prominent themes regarding Black student experiences on college campuses concerning campus and societal racial tensions such as: a) perceptions of Blackness on campus, b) campus racial climate mirroring societal racial climate, c) experiencing and engaging in movements on campus, and d) impact of racial climate on future planning. Although Mwangi et al.'s (2018) study aligns with research focused on Black student experiences at historically white institutions and perceptions of Blackness on campus that impact Black student experiences, additional research is needed to explore the impact of RBF and anti-DEI legislation from a Black student leader perspective.

Another component of racialized experiences of Black student leaders is the impact of racial stereotyping and microaggressions and how it impacts Black student leaders' emotional well-being and their leadership experiences, which affect their ability to feel safe within campus environments (Jaggers, 2022; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007), similarly mirroring societal racial climate perceptions. While past research has focused on the need to support and advocate for faculty, staff, and students, this research specifically examines the experiences of Black student leaders. Often, Black student leaders who choose to commit to the work of social justice and inclusion do so despite encountering oppressive and systematic barriers. Current ongoing systematic challenges are supported by restrictive anti-DEI legislation that devalues the humanity and contributions of BSLs to campus culture and success. The negative experiences of RBF and the influx of anti-DEI legislation create additional barriers for Black students engaging in leadership learning experiences in higher education (Beatty & Lima, 2021). Black student leaders, along with other student leaders of color, are often the "first responders" dealing with issues of race and racism in higher education. This is based on their positions and experiences as leaders who actively reject oppressive practices that directly impact their community and communities with similar issues of racism and marginalization (Beatty & Lima, 2021; Jones, 2020).

Briscoe and Ford (2024) discuss the need for institutions to hold all members accountable for the racial climate within universities by ensuring that the students of color, in this case Black student leaders (BSLs), are not placed with the burden to mitigate racialized incidents but instead calling on non-Black administrators and campus leaders to address racialized incidents effectively. The emotional and physical toll that racialized incidents take on BSLs is a direct form of racial battle fatigue that can lead to significant challenges that prevent their ability to lead on their campuses. It is critical to examine the experience of BSLs coping with RBF on college campuses to provide better support as faculty, staff, and student affairs educators contribute to deconstructing the negative impacts of racial discrimination in higher education. Rejecting racial stereotypes and microaggressions is an act of resilience for BSLs, who often lean on their preexisting skills and cultural competence as tools for navigating hostile higher education institutions (Beatty & Lima, 2021; Yosso, 2005). The negative impacts of anti-DEI legislation and the racialized experiences of BSLs challenge current institutional practices and call for attention to BSLs' engagement and belonging on campus. At the same time, there is a need to address the ongoing complexities of racial battle fatigue that places a burden upon Black student leaders.

4. Theoretical Framework

To ground our understanding of student leadership, we draw on Komives et al. (2006), who define leadership as a relational, ethical, and inclusive process, often developed through co-curricular engagement. Dugan (2017) further emphasizes that student leadership is not just a role, but a learning process embedded within the higher education experience, where students gain the capacity to act with agency and social responsibility. These frameworks help situate the experiences of Black student leaders within broader developmental and institutional expectations, while also illuminating how systemic inequities, such as racial battle fatigue and anti-DEI legislation, disrupt and complicate these leadership trajectories.

The theoretical framework for this research study is grounded in the concept of RBF, a model utilizing components of critical race theory that encapsulates the specific types of racialized psychosocial stressors that Black people experience at increased levels (Smith, 2004, 2007; Smith et al., 2011, 2016) which manifest in three subsequent categories of stress responses: psychological stress, physiological stress, and emotional/behavioral stress responses. Psychological stress is exemplified by frustration, apathy, anger, worry, and resentment. Physiological stress is characterized by symptoms such as headaches, pounding heart, sleep disturbance, fatigue, insomnia, and frequent illness. Emotional/behavioral stress responses are demonstrated by prolonged, high-effort coping with difficult psychological stressors, increased commitment to spirituality, impatience, withdrawal or isolation from others, poor school or job performance, changes in close family relationships, and quickness to argue (Smith et al., 2011). Examining these physiological and psychological symptoms among Black student leaders may help support diagnoses of and correlation with internal and external factors associated with racial battle fatigue.

RBF has emerged as a salient theoretical concept in scholarship on the experiences of Black students in postsecondary education, engaging critical discourse on the consequences of institutional racism in higher education (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007). Smith and colleagues (2007) suggested that higher education administrators learn to better listen to and centralize the experiences of Black students tasked with navigating these environments as a first step toward addressing how institutions might better mitigate racially oppressive conditions. Thus, it is critical to examine the experience of Black students who are coping with RBF to provide better support and to pressure our educational institutions to embrace meaningful systemic changes.

Racial battle fatigue describes and outlines various stressors that impact people of color's (POC) psychological, physiological, and emotional/behavioral responses directly linked to racial incidents and experiences. As identified through the three subcategories of RBF, racialized stressors and trauma have deep roots in and out of higher education, as Black student leaders experience racism in all aspects of their daily lives (Briscoe & Ford, 2024; Franklin, 2019; Patton, 2016; Smith et al., 2007). Experiences can include occurrences of racial microaggressions, racism, discrimination, physical harm, and blatant dehumanization of minoritized populations, specifically due to their racial identity and proximity and distance to whiteness (Beatty & Lima, 2021; Patton, 2016).

5. Methodology

The study explored how 14 Black student leaders at historically white institutions (HWIs) experienced RBF across two states in the southeast impacted by anti-DEI legislation in higher education. Participants self-identified Black/African American, at least 18 years old, currently enrolled full-time as an undergraduate student at a historically white institution (HWI) in Florida or Georgia working towards degree completion. For the purposes of this study, students identifying as leaders were required to be involved in some student leadership capacity on campus such as executive board membership of an organization, membership of Greek life, resident advisor, etc. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure relevant participant insight to the current study (Creswell, 2007), with faculty and academic staff recommending students they identified as emergent leaders according to study criteria. Together, these recruitment methods allowed for relevant data saturation (Patton, 2002) and more insight into the RBF phenomenon.

Prior to the start of interviews, researchers reminded the participants of the study's purpose and gave them an opportunity to ask questions. Participants selected their own pseudonyms. Interviews were audio recorded, and interview transcripts are stored on a password protected external hard drive. Researcher memos and notes will be stored in the Dedoose project file. The study utilized a two-interview series approach with semi-structured question protocols. Interviews did not exceed 75 minutes. The first interview with each participant explored students' views on how their racial, familial, and socio-economic backgrounds are self-defined. Participants reflected on their institution choice, leadership views, and how they perceive their roles within institutional contexts and communities. The second interview explored student narratives of on-campus racist experiences at HWIs and their effects on them and allowed students to reflect on anti-DEI legislation and share their stories of perseverance, and how they maneuvered and overcame racism and microaggressions as leaders. To address potential data and analysis bias, participants were provided with their associated transcript materials to provide a sense of agency of their data and representation. Participant feedback and the resulting conversations helped develop trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007) and collaboration, which provided additional expansion of findings through participant recommendations.

Table 1. Participants. Black student leaders' demographics.

Pseudonym	Race	Gender Identity	Classification	Major	State
Angie	Black/African American	Woman	Senior	Criminology Human Rights & Social Justice	FL
Asake	Black/ African	Man	Sophomore	Management Information Systems & Marketing	GA
Atwood	Black/African American	Man	Sophomore	Political Science	FL
Destiny	Black	Woman	Senior	Sport Management & Media/ Communication Studies	FL
Jade	Black	Woman	Senior	Communication Science and Disorders	FL
Jean	Black	Man	Junior	Political Science	FL
Jeff	Black/African American	Man	Senior	Cyber Criminology	FL
Katherine	Black/Haitian American	Woman	Sophomore	Biomedical Engineering	GA
Melissa	Black/Haitian American	Woman	Senior	Public Health	GA
Natalie	Black	Woman	Senior	Human Development and Family Sciences	FL
Rose	Black/African American	Woman	Senior	Political Science	FL
Sarah	Black/Jamaican American	Woman	Senior	Political Science	FL
Shirley	Black/Haitian American	Woman	Junior	Communications	FL
Skylar	Black/African American	Woman	Sophomore	Computer Engineering	GA

5.1 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts underwent three rounds of coding. Initially, two researchers independently read the transcripts, coding them first individually and later collaboratively through a combined inductive and deductive approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the first round, open coding identified emergent patterns within participants' narratives, emphasizing their lived experiences of racial battle fatigue (RBF) as student leaders. This initial, inductive phase allowed the team to uncover nuanced insights into how students experience and describe their interactions with racialized stressors in campus leadership roles.

Next, the researchers employed axial coding to identify connections between the open codes, emphasizing relationships between themes of RBF, adaptive mechanisms, and coping strategies. These codes revealed complex interplays between participant behaviors, which shed light on students' resilience in the face of systemic challenges. Finally, a deductive approach refined these codes into theoretical categories, supporting further analysis of how coping mechanisms articulated responses to oppression and shaped students' leadership narratives. These codes were clustered by themes to articulate recurring patterns in participant stories relative to their responses to RBF (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Through this process, the research team synthesized data into key themes, identifying how Black student leaders were navigating anti-DEI legislation and feelings of RBF. This analysis provided a structured lens for exploring adaptive responses to oppression, enhancing understanding of how participants actively resist and transform their campus environments.

5.2 Positionality Statement

As Patel (2015) asserts, positionality statements should move beyond a listing of demographic information to sharing "ontological entry-points and impacts as researchers" (p. 57). In this spirit, we offer a reflection that intentionally responds to the questions: Why me? Why this study? Why now? Our engagement with this research is deeply personal, politically situated, and rooted in our lived realities within institutions impacted by anti-DEI legislation. We do not approach this study from a distance—we live within its implications, and that proximity compels our inquiry.

This study emerges from both personal urgency and professional responsibility. As researchers situated within institutions directly affected by anti-DEI legislation, we are not separate from the environments we study—we are shaped by them. Our collective engagement with this work stems from our ontological entry points, as Black scholars, including our identities, lived experiences, and enduring commitments to educational equity. We did not come to this research simply as observers, but as individuals affected by the very systems we interrogate.

The author is a tenured Black male professor at a research-intensive, predominantly and historically White institution in Florida. His scholarly focus on Black student leadership intersects with his daily navigation of predominantly white academic spaces—spaces where visibility often comes with burden. He conducts this research not only because he studies RBF, but also because he experiences it. This project is a direct response to his ongoing questioning of how Black students, particularly those in leadership roles, continue to lead, persist, and resist amid the rollback of institutional supports for equity. Why this study? Because his scholarship is not abstract—it is rooted in lived struggle, student mentorship, and a refusal to normalize racial exhaustion in higher education.

Why this study now is deeply personal. The current anti-DEI political climate is not theoretical—it is our context. We watch offices renamed, staff removed, and support systems quietly disappear. I have seen students' programs defunded, their identities policed, and their leadership dismissed as "activism." I chose this study because the urgency to document, uplift, and advocate has never felt greater. Our shared commitment is to center the narratives of Black student leaders and disrupt the policies and structures that continue to marginalize them. Our positionality does not simply inform the research—it demands it.

5.3 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

This study was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Florida State University [IRB study number: STUDY00005359]. All participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were also informed of potential risks and the confidentiality measures in place. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifying details were removed from interview transcripts and published data. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. These procedures align with standard ethical practices in qualitative research to ensure participant safety, autonomy, and confidentiality.

We determined that data saturation had been reached when no new themes, codes, or insights emerged during data analysis. By the ninth interview, key patterns—particularly those related to racial battle fatigue, coping strategies, campus leadership, and the effects of anti-DEI legislation—began to recur consistently across participant narratives. This justified concluding data collection after 14 participants, as additional interviews confirmed rather than expanded thematic findings. Including students from multiple institutions in two different states further enhanced the credibility and transferability of the data.

To enhance the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, we employed several strategies associated with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, where select participants were invited to review summaries of their transcripts to ensure accuracy and resonance. Transferability was addressed by providing the description of participant backgrounds and institutional contexts to help readers determine applicability to other settings. Dependability was established by maintaining an audit trail of research decisions, coding processes, and analytic memos throughout data collection and analysis. Finally, confirmability was supported through peer debriefing within the research team to reduce bias and promote reflexivity in interpretation. Together, these strategies ensure the rigor and integrity of the study's findings and interpretations.

6. Findings

This study sought to explore how Black student leaders navigate the emotional, psychological, and structural impacts of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation in Florida and Georgia, two states with increasingly restrictive policies targeting race-conscious programming and language in higher education. The study also aimed to explore how Black student leaders navigate racial battle fatigue. Data for this study were collected in Fall 2024, prior to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Since then, new executive orders proposed by the Trump administration have introduced further policy changes that fall outside the scope of this study but may significantly impact the ongoing experiences of student leaders in these environments. Despite this, the findings provide important insights into how Black students are currently navigating campus life under restrictive legislative and institutional conditions.

Findings from this study reveal that Black student leaders experience a complex interplay of racialized stress, institutional hostility, and community-rooted resilience. Across both states, participants described how anti-DEI policies have diminished campus resources, created ambiguity around support structures, and fostered climates of racial invisibility. The findings point to four major themes:

1. *Psychological, Physiological Stress and Identity Formation* highlights the emotional and cognitive labor required of Black student leaders to navigate expectations around racial identity, leadership, and performance under conditions of racial scrutiny and marginalization.
2. *Experiences with State Anti-DEI Legislation* details the direct and indirect effects of anti-DEI policies on students' campus environments, including language erasure, institutional silence, and confusion over compliance.
3. *Emotional and Behavioral Responses to RBF* explores how students respond to the psychological toll of systemic racism through withdrawal, hypervigilance, skepticism toward leadership, and self-containment.
4. *Coping Strategies and Community Building as Resistance to RBF* presents the ways students manage stress and sustain their leadership through intentional self-care, spiritual grounding, and building authentic community networks.

These themes illustrate how Black student leaders operate within and against systemic constraints—employing adaptive strategies that reflect both survival and resistance. Their narratives call attention to the need for higher education institutions to go beyond performative inclusion and develop sustainable, healing-centered infrastructures that support Black student leadership, even in the midst of anti-DEI legislation and practice.

6.1 Psychological Stress, Physiological Stress, and Identity Formation

Black student leaders at HWIs face layered psychological and physiological stressors as they navigate leadership roles that are deeply intertwined with racial identity, representation, and belonging. These stressors are compounded in the current climate of anti-DEI legislation, which further destabilizes support systems and intensifies the burden of visibility and representation.

6.1.1 Navigating Multiple Expectations of Blackness

Participants described the ongoing pressure of negotiating their identity within multiple—and often conflicting—definitions of Blackness. For some, this involved scrutiny not only from non-Black peers but also within the Black community. Sarah captured this tension, stating, "Black means too many things, and it has too many expectations from too many different people." She expressed feeling judged by her peers, adding, "In the Black community, I feel like certain peers will be discriminating against you…it's a very weird social expectation." To highlight the connection between RBF and the data analysis, we added references to psychological and emotional stress as defined by Smith et al. (2007) throughout participant reflections. For example, when Sarah stated, "Black means too many things," we interpreted this as a demonstration of psychological stress linked to racial battle fatigue where students experience pressure to navigate conflicting expectations of identity within and beyond their racial group.

Similarly, Katherine shared how intersecting identities added complexity to her experience: "I feel like I can't identify as Black, or I can't identify as Haitian… I'm kind of an in-between of all three." Her reflections speak to the cultural dissonance of belonging partially yet not wholly in various identity groups, highlighting both the resilience and emotional toll of this balancing act. Her experience resonates with Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, revealing how identity negotiation becomes both a coping strategy and a source of strain.

6.1.2 Leadership as Empowerment and Burden

While leadership roles provided opportunities for growth, they also became sites of racialized expectation and emotional labor. Atwood remarked, "I just always fell into what we call leadership roles," acknowledging how these roles were shaped by external perceptions rather than personal choice. This mirrors Harper's (2012) findings on the racialized positioning of Black student leaders—often cast as representatives or role models, regardless of their intent. Angie's narrative revealed the compounding effect of these pressures as she shared the need to "always put [her] best foot forward," despite receiving conflicting messages about how a Black woman should lead and succeed. Her experience illustrates the psychological strain of maintaining composure while under constant scrutiny from various audiences.

6.1.3 Exhaustion from High-Effort Coping

The cumulative effect of high-effort coping strategies led to physical and emotional exhaustion for many participants. Skylar acknowledged the weight of this work in non-welcoming spaces: "It was obviously much more challenging [in non-welcoming spaces]. But I don't regret it at all." Her comment reveals both her commitment and the hidden costs of persisting in leadership despite systemic barriers. Katherine echoed this sentiment, sharing, "I like being able to show people that I am Black, but I still have the same goals as you…you can tell there's that low expectation." This effort to defy stereotypes and counteract bias is constant, creating internal pressure to perform excellence as a counter-narrative to deficit perceptions.

Asake reflected on the hyper-visibility of his identity, saying, "I think I might be one of the only Black men my [non-white] peers interact with on a regular basis." His experience illustrates how leadership roles frequently come with the burden of representing an entire community, which intensifies internal and external pressures. Jude had similar representation experiences to Asake and the burden of constantly being the only, but he felt a sense of empowerment to be a positive representation of Black people: "…it kind of empowers me… or [helps me] stand out more." While this visibility can be motivating to some participants, it also perpetuates a cycle of hyper-performance and racial battle fatigue for other participants (Smith et al., 2007), where persistent microaggressions and social isolation result in chronic stress that manifests both emotionally and physically. This key finding illustrates how the intersecting pressures of racial identity, leadership expectations, and representation create both psychological strain and exhaustion for Black student leaders. Their stories reveal how identity formation is not only an internal journey but one shaped and strained by the politics of race, visibility, and resistance within higher education.

6.2 Experiences with State Anti-DEI Legislation

Across institutions in Georgia and Florida, Black student leaders in this study are navigating the immediate and deeply personal consequences of anti-DEI legislation, even when the policies themselves are ambiguously written. Rather than waiting for direct legal interpretation, institutions have often responded with over-compliance—limiting programming, renaming offices, and erasing language associated with equity and identity. Katherine, a student leader in Georgia, described how the Office of Minority Education and Development (OMED) on her campus had been renamed, and while the staff tried to maintain their mission, the shift in language left students uncertain. "They're not allowed to call themselves that anymore," she explained. "Now they say it's still there and they're working for us in different ways, but it's not the same." Her reflection conveys a sense of institutional dissonance—support may still exist in some form, but it is harder to locate and name, especially for those seeking identity-affirming spaces.

Skylar, another student participant, echoed this experience, highlighting how symbolic changes impact real engagement: "Even the director of OMED can't say what it stands for anymore. She just says, 'Oh no, it's just ED.'" This seemingly small example reveals a broader trend of institutional retreat. As Jones (2020) suggests, when colleges and universities begin to self-censor in response to political pressure, it creates a chilling effect on equity work—removing the visibility of DEI efforts and making them feel conditional or even clandestine. For Black student leaders, these shifts are not merely cosmetic; they signal a loss of affirmation, belonging, and transparency. Their narratives demonstrate that the erosion of DEI language corresponds with a diminished sense of institutional commitment, contributing to their racial battle fatigue and sense of abandonment. By connecting student testimony to policy impact, these findings reinforce how political contexts shape daily campus life, often in ways that compound racialized stress.

6.2.1 Ambiguity and Confusion of Long-term Impacts

Other participants expressed confusion and ambiguity regarding the direct implications of anti-DEI legislation on their campuses. While some students acknowledged the changes, they admitted to not fully understanding the policies driving them. For instance, Atwood, a student in Florida, stated, "I don't get into all that law… but I know it's having an effect." Destiny, another student in Florida, expanded on this uncertainty, sharing:

> I have a fear for those younger Black students coming up as this legislation's coming down the pike… what that means for their funding, for how they configure programming, for what their college experience looks like for the next four years.

Destiny's reflection highlights the long-term consequences of anti-DEI legislation, particularly its potential to restrict resources and reshape the educational experiences of future Black students. Her concern underscores a generational awareness of how policy shifts may undermine access, belonging, and support for marginalized communities in higher education.

6.2.2 Cultivating Resilience and Sustained Community with lack of Institutional Support

Students like Rose expressed limited engagement with institutional politics but still noted how such legislation has created environments where students seek communities in which they feel safe and represented. Rose reflected,

> I wouldn't say I'm one of the really politically active students on campus, but you definitely feel it—the way people talk, the way professors avoid certain topics, even the events we're allowed to have. So I just try to find people and spaces where I can breathe and be me.

Participants also described an increase in racially charged incidents and a lack of institutional accountability in response to them. Jade, a student in Florida, recalled a troubling example of a white student posting a video of Black students on social media with a caption referencing monkeys—an act widely condemned by student organizations but not formally acknowledged by the university. She explained,

> The [campus] NAACP and Black Student Union put out statements, and we all talked about how messed up it was. But [the university] didn't say anything. It just seemed like they didn't think it was that big of a deal, like they didn't want to 'stir the pot.' And that kind of silence feels like they're telling us our pain doesn't matter.

Shirley echoed this sentiment, describing the university's inaction as both disheartening and indicative of a deeper problem.

> Honestly, it was annoying, but not surprising. We've gotten so used to them not doing anything that when something racist happens, we just expect to have to handle it ourselves. That's why we lean on each other. Because we know we're the only ones who really have our backs.

These accounts demonstrate not just frustration but a deeper erosion of institutional trust and safety, amplifying students' reliance on peer support networks and culturally affirming communities.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated a strong sense of resilience and commitment to their communities through grassroots leadership. Many reported entering leadership positions to fill representational voids and to advocate for marginalized peers. Angie shared,

> It wasn't like I was trying to be a leader at first. People would come to me like, 'Hey, can you help me talk to this administrator?' or 'Can you be the one to bring this up in the meeting?' So I just started doing it—showing up for people because no one else was. That's how I ended up taking on all these roles.

Similarly, Destiny emphasized the role of mentorship in shaping her leadership identity, especially in the face of institutional barriers.

> I didn't really like [Florida institution] at first. I felt like I didn't belong. But then my mentors—people who looked like me, who had been through it—really pushed me. They told me, 'You've got a voice, and people need to hear it.' They challenged me to stay, to get involved, and that's when things started to shift.

These narratives reflect what Yosso (2005) describes as community cultural wealth—the knowledge, skills, and abilities developed within communities of color to survive and thrive in all environments. The students' grassroots responses—mentorship, peer accountability, advocacy—highlight how Black

student leaders continue to build collective agency in spaces where institutional support is either lacking or inconsistent.

Taken together, these experiences illustrate how anti-DEI policies are not merely abstract legislative changes but lived realities that reshape campus environments in tangible, deeply felt ways. Through language erasure, institutional silence, and policy ambiguity, Black student leaders face heightened visibility, increased labor, and diminished institutional support. Yet, in response, they cultivate resilience, enact peer-to-peer mentorship, and sustain affirming communities in ways that resist the erasure of their identities and leadership. Their responses offer critical insight into the enduring need for culturally responsive leadership, even amid legal and political constraints.

6.3 Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)

Black student leaders at HWIs experience a range of emotional and behavioral responses as they navigate racialized campus environments. These responses—frustration, vigilance, withdrawal, and resistance—reflect the weight of RBF and illuminate how leadership is both a site of empowerment and psychological toll, as mentioned earlier in the findings. These experiences are intensified by systemic inequities, microaggressions, and the institutional silence that often surrounds incidents of racial harm. As a result, leadership becomes not only an opportunity for visibility and influence but also a space where students must constantly negotiate their identity, safety, and well-being.

6.3.1 The Burden of Being the Educator

Students like Skylar expressed deep frustration at the unspoken expectation that they should always be the ones to educate others about Black history or racial equity. She explained, "It's just constantly having to remind myself that maybe I have to be the person that just tells them and educates them on this topic. But then sometimes that can also be exhausting or frustrating." Her reflection speaks to a common tension where students of color become default spokespeople for anti-racist education, which leads to emotional exhaustion over time. As she noted, "It should be in our history books. It should be on paper. It should be something that we are constantly talking about on a larger spectrum."

Destiny echoed this tension, sharing how exhausting it was to constantly perform for her peers and instructors: "I think I've fought to be seen in a lot of spaces, whether it be by professors, classmates... there's a kind of level of patronization and the assumptions that I get." These accounts align with Carter's (2007) framing of racial hypervigilance, where students are constantly on guard to protect themselves from racialized expectations.

6.3.2 Racial Hypervigilance and High-Effort Coping

Angie described needing to "always put [her] best foot forward," emphasizing the emotional labor involved in constantly managing how she is perceived in predominantly white spaces. As she navigated classrooms and leadership roles, she shared the burden of always needing to "present well"—a form of high-effort coping intended to challenge stereotypes and avoid scrutiny and connect to which we connect to a high-effort coping strategy aligned with emotional/behavioral responses to RBF (Smith et al., 2011). Shirley also reflected on this need for vigilance: "Sometimes I might feel like I'm the only person, or I will be the only person in a space, but I have to make myself comfortable and okay enough to stand strong."

Rose similarly described feeling pressure to represent the Black community positively, especially when she is one of few Black students in her political science classes. She recalled how in one course discussion on affirmative action, her white classmate dismissed race-based opportunities, saying people should "go there based on merit." Rose countered: "I just kept emphasizing… some people of other minority communities aren't given the same opportunities or are judged or discriminated against for literally their skin tone." Her account illustrates the ongoing fatigue of always needing to defend one's presence and merit in academic spaces.

6.3.3 Frustration with Performative Leadership and Allyship

Melissa shared her disillusionment with student leaders who she felt were not truly invested in equity work: "Certain people should not be leaders because… they are just doing it for resume fillers and I just don't like people like that." Her frustration stemmed from witnessing what she perceived as performative allyship, where leadership roles were used for personal gain rather than genuine commitment to advocacy. This dissonance deepened her feelings of isolation and mistrust within leadership spaces. Destiny also commented on the high expectations placed on Black students in leadership roles, noting that "we probably already come with a bajillion other positions behind our name… compared to our white counterparts." Her remarks highlighted the racialized labor and burden of proof often required of Black student leaders to be seen as legitimate.

6.3.4 Isolation and Emotional Withdrawal as Coping Strategies

Several students described withdrawing from certain campus environments as a way to protect their emotional well-being. Skylar shared that she often found herself "just sitting in the back" in predominantly white settings and had to "get comfortable with being uncomfortable." Which we connect to which illustrates prolonged exposure to racism and racially unwelcoming spaces and adaptive avoidance behavior—core symptoms of RBF (Smith et al., 2007; 2011). Jade noted the emotional impact of being tokenized in classrooms, particularly after racially insensitive incidents

went unacknowledged by the university: "It just seemed like [Florida institution] didn't think it was that big of a deal… but it definitely was to Black students here." Angie described how many students, including herself, stayed within racially and culturally specific organizations because they felt unwelcome elsewhere: "I don't really go outside of those spaces. I tend to stay in Black spaces because that's where I'm comfortable at." Angie, Jade, and Skylar's experiences illustrate how emotional withdrawal becomes a necessary coping strategy for Black students navigating unwelcoming and racially charged campus environments, where safety and affirmation are often found only in culturally specific spaces. This withdrawal aligns with what Smith et al. (2011) describe as an emotional and behavioral stress response within the RBF framework, wherein sustained exposure to racially unwelcoming conditions prompts students to protect their psychological well-being through isolation or retreat from predominantly white institutional spaces. The choice to disengage is not apathy, but a survival mechanism—an intentional response to avoid further racial stress, microaggressions, and emotional exhaustion. Within the context of RBF, such responses highlight the chronic nature of racialized trauma and the ways students navigate institutions that fail to provide affirming environments. Their reliance on culturally specific communities reflects a form of resistance and self-preservation, underscoring the critical role of identity-affirming spaces in mitigating the psychological harms imposed by systemic exclusion.

The emotional and behavioral responses to RBF expressed by Black student leaders reflect a complex interplay of resistance, survival, and exhaustion. From racial hypervigilance and high-effort coping to emotional withdrawal and skepticism toward performative leadership, these students navigate predominantly white institutions with intentionality and care. Their insights reveal the psychological labor required not only to lead but to simply be present—and challenge institutions to recognize, validate, and address the toll of RBF within leadership development and campus inclusion strategies.

6.4 Coping Strategies and Community Building as Resistance to Racial Battle Fatigue

Black student leaders employ a variety of coping strategies to manage the psychological and emotional toll of navigating HWIs. These coping mechanisms often center on self-care, spirituality, and community-building, which together form a critical foundation of resilience. These strategies are not only personal acts of preservation but also collective acts of resistance against institutional marginalization.

6.4.1 Intentional Self-Care and Mental Wellness

Participants emphasized the necessity of mental health and self-care practices in managing the demands of student leadership. Atwood captured this sentiment clearly, stating, "I feel like those

things are just important parts of your mental health. And I'm big on mental health and self-care." His approach reflects a proactive strategy, recognizing the value of meditation, journaling, rest, and boundary-setting to replenish energy in the face of racial stress. Similarly, Shirley noted, "Sometimes it can be kind of stressful or frustrating because it's work that we're not getting paid to do, but it is super important." Her reflection sheds light on the emotional weight of unpaid labor in leadership and the need to balance it with intentional wellness routines. Destiny added nuance by acknowledging the toll of striving to be seen across multiple spaces. "I've fought to be seen in a lot of spaces... there's a kind of level of patronization and the assumptions that I get." Her insight illustrates the emotional labor of high-effort coping, further emphasizing why self-care is not a luxury but a necessity for student leaders facing RBF.

6.4.2 Community as a Site of Healing and Empowerment

The presence of community emerged as a crucial buffer against isolation. Angie shared, "When I see [other students], it feels like we're in this together. I know they've got my back, and I've got theirs." For her, community acts as an emotional anchor, fostering collective support and validation. Similarly, Jade expressed, "I thought that if I joined different leadership roles, I would get closer to the people in those organizations," suggesting that leadership itself became a pathway to build meaningful relationships that reinforced her sense of belonging. Melissa highlighted a longing for deeper connection: "I know we have a community, but I feel like we need more community, like a genuine community, a reliable community." Melissa's words echo Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth, which describes how communal relationships serve as protective mechanisms for marginalized students. Rose's reflections supported this view as well: "It can be a little isolating sometimes, especially when some people don't really acknowledge that you're there." The formation of identity-affirming peer spaces offers critical reprieve in the absence of institutional care.

6.4.3 Spirituality and Faith as Grounding Forces

Spiritual beliefs also emerged as a central theme in helping students cope with RBF. Destiny spoke about being raised in a Southern Baptist household and shared how faith has shaped her leadership and grounded her sense of purpose, offering a moral compass and source of stability amid institutional hostility. Similarly, Jude explained, "It kind of empowers me... to represent harder when I'm in these spaces," indicating that his faith gives him strength to persist in environments where he is often one of the few Black male students. This reliance on spirituality reflects one of the emotional and behavioral responses to RBF described by Smith et al. (2007), wherein individuals draw from internal sources of strength to buffer against chronic racialized stress and alienation. Faith functions not only as a coping mechanism but also as a form of cultural wealth that fosters endurance and sustains leadership despite adversity.

We connect this coping mechanism to reflecting the emotional labor and agency emphasized by Komives et al. (2006) and Dugan (2017), showing leadership development under racialized stress. Their leadership in the face of systemic exclusion demonstrates the relational and values-based nature of student leadership, where self-awareness, purpose, and social responsibility are forged through adversity. Moreover, these spiritual practices align with the concept of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), which asserts that hope, rooted in struggle and belief in collective transformation, is essential for navigating injustice. In this context, Destiny and Jude's faith is not passive resilience—it is a catalyst for continued engagement and advocacy, enabling them to imagine and work toward more just campus conditions. Their stories illuminate how spiritual grounding serves as both a protective factor and a driver of ethical, action-oriented leadership in campus spaces.

Rose, too, mentioned how cultural values instilled by her parents played a vital role in maintaining a sense of pride and self-worth. "My parents never taught me that how I behaved was wrong… it was a culture shock coming to FSU and hearing all that [stereotyping]," she said. Her grounding in cultural affirmation allowed her to challenge deficit narratives and remain centered in her identity.

6.4.4 Navigating Unwelcoming Racial Environments

Participants described developing resilience within racially unwelcoming environments as both a burden and a necessity. Skylar recalled, "Sometimes it felt like, oh, I was just sitting in the back and I didn't have anyone to talk to… just trying to get comfortable with being uncomfortable was probably the best way to go about that." Her words reflect a painful adaptation to exclusion, where silence and invisibility become coping mechanisms. Despite these isolating conditions, Skylar chose to engage in less visible but deeply meaningful forms of leadership. Skylar shared,

> I joined committees. I did things that may not have seemed as effective or as showy… but it was still me putting in the work behind the person who did have the title. I was the one reading the policy documents, giving feedback, making sure we were thinking about all students.

She explained that this behind-the-scenes labor was not about recognition but about ensuring that Black student voices were not ignored. Her participation in institutional committees, where few other students of color were present, was a conscious effort to challenge dominant narratives and insert marginalized perspectives. This kind of engagement reflects a form of resistance—an intentional choice to disrupt systems from within, even when her influence was informal or unacknowledged.

Jude echoed the need to represent positively, saying, "I might be one of the only Black men my peers interact with on a regular basis… it kind of empowers me to want to do more or achieve more or stand out more in a positive way." This pressure to overperform as a means of countering stereotypes further illuminates the psychological labor required of Black student leaders. Shirley added that while she didn't feel overtly limited by her race, "a lot of times I'll be the only Black person in class… I've kind

of gotten used to it." Her comment underscores how racial isolation becomes normalized, even as it remains emotionally taxing.

Coping strategies among Black student leaders are dynamic and multidimensional, involving intentional self-care, culturally rooted community building, and spiritual grounding. These strategies are not only survival tools but also acts of resistance against institutional marginalization and the emotional strain associated with racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007). Participants described practices such as seeking mentorship, participating in culturally affirming organizations, and grounding themselves in faith traditions as mechanisms to combat isolation and racial stress. These strategies align with the tenets of RBF, which highlight the cumulative physiological and psychological toll of persistent racial microaggressions, tokenization, and structural exclusion in predominantly white institutions. Yet, in the face of these burdens, the participants' responses also reflect the principles of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009)—a refusal to succumb to despair and a commitment to justice-oriented transformation. By cultivating strength through community, spirituality, and identity-affirming practices, these student leaders offer a model for resilience that is deeply connected to collective care and racial consciousness. Their experiences call for higher education institutions to develop intentional support systems that not only acknowledge these burdens but actively alleviate them by fostering inclusive, validating, and healing-centered environments.

6.5 Summary of Key Findings

The findings from this study illuminate the layered and multifaceted experiences of Black student leaders navigating racial battle fatigue (RBF) within the context of an increase in anti-DEI legislation. Drawing from Smith et al. (2007), the stress responses—psychological, physiological, and emotional—described by participants reflect the chronic racialized stress that accumulates in unwelcoming and racially charged institutional climates. Across both Georgia and Florida campuses, participants reported heightened physiological stress, institutional invisibility, and the exhaustion of constantly negotiating their identities in leadership roles. These manifestations of RBF underscore how systemic racism in historically white institutions (HWIs) directly impacts students' well-being, leadership identity, and campus engagement.

Yet, within these constraints, students cultivated powerful coping strategies rooted in community, spirituality, and cultural pride. These strategies reflect not only behavioral responses to RBF but also expressions of Critical Hope—a theory that emphasizes maintaining agency and vision in the face of systemic oppression (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). The ability of participants to persist and lead despite institutional hostility illustrates the developmental process of leadership as theorized by Komives et al. (2006) and Dugan (2017)—as a values-based, relational process that grows through adversity.

Moreover, the reliance on peer mentorship, cultural organizations, and spiritual grounding illustrates Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth, showcasing how students access and sustain strength through social and navigational capital in resistant campus environments. These responses reveal that Black student leadership is not only a source of empowerment but also a contested space where racialized expectations and systemic inequities are actively challenged.

Collectively, these narratives call for higher education institutions to move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to meaningful structural change that affirms, protects, and invests in Black students' leadership development. Ultimately, this study reinforces the urgency of creating inclusive environments where Black student leaders are not only present, but fully seen, heard, and supported—ensuring their leadership can thrive in justice-centered and equity-affirming conditions.

7. Discussion

The implication of anti-DEI legislation compounds the embedded high-effort coping in Black student leaders experiencing significant RBF while navigating their educational careers at HWIs. As noted in Smith et al. (2007), the burden of coping with systemic racism often leads to exhaustion and frustration, both of which were prominent in participant accounts. Previous literature alludes to the idea of similar or additional aggravated experiences of current Black student leaders navigating new legislation. This legislation not only undermines DEI initiatives but also limits the support systems that Black students rely on, intensifying the psychosocial and emotional toll on student leaders (Briscoe & Ford, 2024; Russell-Brown, 2024). Despite the obstacles that have shaped our participants' lived experiences, their experiences highlight their resilience and ability to persist despite the lack of institutional support and compliance with anti-DEI legislation.

Moreover, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating the ways Black student leaders use adaptive mechanisms, such as normalcy and consciousness-raising, to counteract unwelcoming campus climates. Beatty and Lima (2021) found that coping strategies, like engaging in community building and practicing avoidance, help Black students navigate these spaces without sacrificing their well-being. In line with the work of Mwangi et al. (2018), participants often felt a heightened responsibility to advocate for racial justice on their campuses, but this responsibility came with high emotional costs, as they faced not only the hostility of peers and faculty but also structural resistance due to anti-DEI legislation. This reinforces Harper's (2015) assertion that Black students are disproportionately impacted by racialized pressures in leadership roles. As such, we understand racial battle fatigue not merely as a collection of stress responses, but as a framework that reveals the chronic nature of racism in academic settings and how it depletes students' emotional, cognitive, and physical resources (Smith et al., 2007). Furthermore, student leadership should be understood as a developmental and identity-informed process, as described in the Leadership Identity Development model (Komives et al., 2006), where students develop leadership capacity through relational, inclusive, and socially responsible experiences. However, in racially unwelcoming environments, these leadership pathways become distorted, often marked by racialized expectations and tokenization rather than developmental support (Beatty & Lima, 2021; Dugan, 2017).

Additionally, the themes of identity formation and resilience were critical to understanding how these students maintained their leadership roles under extreme stress. Identity formation, influenced by RBF, involved navigating complex expectations regarding "Blackness" at HWIs, where participants described feeling pressured to represent their race while also facing criticism about their authenticity (Smith et al., 2011). In particular, these students' use of community support, mentorship, and spirituality as resilience strategies highlights Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, which emphasizes the importance of social networks and cultural resources for students of color in unwelcoming environments. These support mechanisms help to counterbalance the isolation and exhaustion resulting from their leadership roles, enabling them to continue advocating for inclusion in restrictive institutional contexts.

Nevertheless, these findings illustrate the compounded nature of RBF within environments subject to anti-DEI legislation, highlighting the pressing need for institutional change to mitigate these burdens on Black student leaders. As Russell-Brown (2024) argues, DEI initiatives are essential to fostering a supportive and inclusive campus climate, and their erosion through legislation can lead to increased attrition and disengagement among students of color. While participants in this study were able to comment on state-level anti-DEI legislation, the 2025 executive orders have introduced federal implications, sparking legal battles over their vague provisions and broader ramifications (Epstein Becker & Green, 2025). As HWIs begin or continue to adhere to these regulations, the research team suggests that future research should consider how these institutions are accommodating Black student leaders at HWIs, in addition to gathering their perspectives on these changes. This study affirms that without systemic support for diversity and equity, Black student leaders will continue to shoulder undue burdens, with long-term implications for their mental health, academic success, and engagement in leadership roles.

Higher education institutions continue to maintain and support toxic and harmful systems despite the growing number, representation, and success of students, faculty, and staff of color (Luedke, 2017; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007). Black people in higher education who navigate majority white spaces and institutions face heightened racial stressors and fatigue, while also experiencing emotional labor as they challenge and hold systems accountable (Quaye et al., 2020). As the effects of emotional labor intersect with issues related to racial battle fatigue, Black people are socialized to minimize or ignore their emotions in order to persist and exist within historically and predominately white spaces (Quaye et al., 2020). Masking one's emotions contributes to significant stressors and negative health impacts as a direct impact of experiencing RBF. Emotional distress creates challenges and barriers limiting Black people's ability to overcome racist and unwelcoming practices and policies. Emotional labor is not a positive benefit of Black people's lived experiences; rather, it normalizes and caters to white fragility (DiAngelo, 2016; Quaye et al., 2020). The ongoing complex environments on college campuses support racist, anti-Black, discriminatory, and racially charged and aggressive behaviors (Mwangi et al., 2018). By placing the burden on Black students to educate their white peers or to navigate racially charged situations with composure, institutions implicitly prioritize the comfort of white students over the psychological safety and well-being of marginalized communities.

8. Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Research

The findings of this study offer timely and urgent implications for both higher education practice and research, particularly in light of the ongoing dismantling of DEI infrastructure across public institutions in states like Florida and Georgia. As Black student leaders navigate environments shaped by RBF, legislative hostility, and institutional ambiguity, higher education professionals must act with intentionality to support their well-being, development, and persistence. Practitioners must recognize that RBF manifests not only in emotional exhaustion but in strategic withdrawal, heightened vigilance, and the burden of constantly performing excellence to counter racialized assumptions. These realities demand a reimagining of support systems that go beyond performative inclusion and actively work to sustain identity-affirming leadership pathways.

8.1 Focusing on Engagement and Belonging as Critical Outcomes

Student engagement and belonging must be prioritized as essential outcomes of higher education—especially as anti-DEI legislation seeks to disrupt the very structures that have historically supported marginalized students. Student affairs educators are uniquely positioned to address this challenge. By fostering co-curricular programs, identity-affirming spaces, and restorative practices, they help maintain the fabric of connection and affirmation that Black student leaders need to thrive. Engagement cannot be decoupled from equity. In times of political constraint, student affairs professionals serve as cultural architects who build environments where students feel seen, safe, and supported—despite policy-level attempts to marginalize their identities.

8.2 Embedding Culturally Responsive and Identity-Affirming Support

In practice, higher education educators should embed culturally responsive support into student leadership programs and advising structures, even when constrained by anti-DEI legislation. Rather than relying on politicized language, institutions can preserve the function of DEI by situating identity-affirming efforts within wellness, retention, or student success frameworks. Professionals should proactively acknowledge and validate the psychological toll of RBF and avoid placing the burden of diversity education on students themselves. Instead, they can foster collective responsibility for equity work by offering training, reflection spaces, and community dialogues that distribute this labor more equitably.

8.3 Building Community and Strengthening Peer Networks

Black student leaders emphasized the necessity of a "genuine, reliable community" as both a coping mechanism and source of strength. As such, advisors and student affairs staff should cultivate opportunities for Black students to build peer networks across organizations—spaces where they can process, recharge, and lead from a place of authenticity and support. Community-building should be recognized as essential to student leadership development, not as an optional or extracurricular benefit.

8.4 Investing in Mentorship and Centering Student Voice

Mentorship also remains critical. Institutions must invest in culturally relevant advising and faculty development that equips professionals to mentor Black students with care, nuance, and awareness of systemic barriers. Amplifying student voices in policy interpretation and institutional response is equally important. When policies shift—particularly those that impact campus climate or student identity—Black student leaders must be consulted, not just as stakeholders, but as knowledge holders and co-creators of institutional culture. Their perspectives should be embedded into decision-making processes through advisory boards, focus groups, or consultative partnerships.

8.5 A Call to Action for Researchers and Scholars

For researchers, particularly those with the protections of tenure and academic freedom, the implications of this study are equally significant. As political pressure mounts to suppress race-conscious inquiry, scholars have a responsibility to continue collecting data on the racialized experiences of students in higher education. This is especially true in states where legislation threatens to erase the historical and ongoing realities of systemic racism. Research must not only document harm but also uplift the strategies of resistance and resilience cultivated by Black students. Future studies should explore the long-term psychological, academic, and leadership outcomes of navigating campus life amid anti-DEI restrictions, using asset-based and participatory approaches that center student voice and agency.

8.6 Preserving Institutional Memory and Advancing Equity Scholarship

In addition, scholars can play a vital role in preserving institutional memory by archiving the evolution, effectiveness, and dismantling of DEI programs. As institutions undergo quiet rebranding and restructuring to comply with restrictive policies, documenting what is being lost—and how students respond—ensures that future generations understand the full context of equity work in higher education. Ultimately, this moment calls on educators and scholars alike to act boldly and responsibly, using their positions to protect, affirm, and elevate the leadership of Black students in the face of systemic resistance. Through research, practice, and solidarity, we must continue to build the inclusive campuses our students deserve—even when policy tells us not to.

9. Conclusions

This study explored the experiences of Black student leaders (BSLs) attending institutions of higher education in two states—Florida and Georgia—actively impacted by anti-DEI legislation. Navigating these increasingly unwelcoming environments, BSLs are often compelled to engage in high-effort coping strategies as they contend with racial battle fatigue and the layered complexities of their lived experiences. The findings reaffirm the psychological and physiological stressors documented in prior literature while also presenting a new and urgent challenge for student affairs educators in the wake of dismantled DEI frameworks. As anti-DEI legislation continues to gain traction, it demands that the scholarly community and practitioners advocate fiercely on behalf of Black students whose engagement, safety, and sense of belonging are at risk. Student affairs professionals, in particular, must critically assess how the ambiguity surrounding DEI and anti-DEI policies shapes the student experience and limits progress toward meaningful educational transformation. As policies evolve, the responsibility is not only to preserve what once existed but to reimagine and rebuild practices that ensure Black student leaders are genuinely seen, supported, and empowered. The phrase "It's still there, but it's not the same" must be understood as both a warning and a call to action—to resist the erosion of equity work and to center student engagement and belonging as non-negotiable outcomes in higher education.

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