



**BIPOC DOCTORAL STUDENTS' INSIGHTS ABOUT  
COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: A COLLABORATIVE  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY STUDY OF AN  
ACADEMIC PROGRAM EVALUATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Aim/Purpose	This article addresses the lack of research on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) PhD students' experiences in collaborative learning processes. It aims to fill this gap by using collaborative autoethnography to analyze the experiences of four BIPOC doctoral students who participated as co-researchers in a year-long collaborative program evaluation self-study of their academic program.
Background	The authors discuss their experience in a student leadership role in the collaborative program evaluation process of their doctoral program as a form of collaborative learning, how their identities influenced the processes they participated in, and the themes of what they learned during the evaluation process. The article ends with recommendations to improve the experience and impact of BIPOC doctoral students' participation and better align the skills learned at the PhD level with the broader job market.

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## BIPOC Doctoral Students' Insights About Collaborative Learning

Methodology	The study uses the qualitative method of collaborative autoethnography to analyze the perspectives and experiences of four BIPOC doctoral students within a broader cultural context.
Contribution	This article provides insight on how to improve the experience of BIPOC doctoral students' participation in the collaborative process and better align the skills learned at the PhD level with the broader job market. It provides four recommendations: first, align student training with job market realities; second, dismantle systemic and structural barriers; third, respond to the effects of social location; and last, negotiate power through consensus building.
Findings	Five themes emerged from the reflections. First, consider how important planning and good communication are to the collaborative learning process in terms of preparation, group dynamics, and resource availability. Second, power disparities existed among faculty, student researchers, and committees. Third, consider how the researchers' identities affected their interpretations and interactions at the individual, group, and organizational levels. Fourth, the importance of negotiating between diverse perspectives and interests; and finally, what they gained from participating in the collaborative review process.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The authors provided four recommendations for improving the experience of BIPOC doctoral students' participation in the collaborative process and better aligning the skills learned at the PhD level with the broader job market. First, align student training with job market realities. Second, dismantle systemic and structural barriers. Third, respond to the effects of social location. Last, negotiating power through consensus building.
Recommendations for Researchers	Researchers should work toward creating an accepted framework for the collaborative program evaluation process to provide a road map of the journey instead of just providing the compass. Additionally, they should design and conduct a full-scale collaborative program evaluation to engage BIPOC students from the beginning. Finally, they should conduct a participatory-collaborative-inclusive academic program evaluation at different levels of higher education.
Impact on Society	This article provides insight on how to improve the experience of BIPOC doctoral students' participation in the collaborative process. It also demonstrates how collaborative learning assists in aligning the skills learned at the PhD level with the broader job market.
Future Research	Future research should work toward creating an accepted framework for the collaborative program evaluation process to provide a road map of the journey instead of just providing the compass. Additionally, it should design and conduct a full-scale collaborative program evaluation to engage BIPOC students from the beginning. Finally, future research could conduct a participatory-collaborative-inclusive academic program evaluation at different levels of higher education.
Keywords	collaborative learning, BIPOC doctoral students, collaborative program evaluation

## INTRODUCTION

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Doctoral studies can be isolating for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students since their presence is scarce in the traditionally White male-dominated higher educational context of the United States. Even a decade ago, men comprised 48% of the entire doctoral student population

compared to women; White students comprised 61% of the same population compared to BIPOC students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The current statistics note an increase in representation from marginalized populations, such as the categories of race/ethnicity, gender, religion, and disabilities, which is changing the student population enrolled in U.S. PhD programs. However, the number growth does not guarantee the traditionally marginalized students' experience with equal consideration, full acceptance, or shared power within the academic community during or after their doctoral studies.

The inclusion of collaborative learning in doctoral study programs may bridge these gaps in two ways. First, it elevates the voices and viewpoints of BIPOC students or other marginalized populations who are traditionally suppressed and lack access to resources and opportunities (Ramos & Yi, 2020). The term "BIPOC" is used deliberately to acknowledge and honor Black and Indigenous communities' unique histories of oppression and struggle, as well as the wider experiences of people of color. This emphasis goes beyond identifying diversity to deconstruct institutional barriers that have oppressed these groups in academia and beyond, creating a fairer and more inclusive educational environment (Deo, 2023; El-Mowafi et al., 2021). Critics like Deo (2023) say the word might confuse multiple identities and conceal individual and group needs. However, the rise of the term and the misinterpretation show the complexity and changing nature of race and identity conversations, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing communication and understanding (Clarke, 2020). By integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) principles and ensuring the active involvement of BIPOC students in evaluative processes, this study recognizes the program evaluation self-study (PESS) initiative as a critical endeavor toward cultivating an academic culture where inclusivity is celebrated and embedded in its core values. This initiative beckons doctoral programs to embark on a journey of self-reflection and reform, urging an educational evolution that genuinely respects and serves the diverse fabric of our global community (Clarke, 2020; Deo, 2023; El-Mowafi et al., 2021).

Second, collaborative learning requires researchers to acquire or refine character skills such as communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, which are sought after in the 21st century workplace. Incorporating collaborative learning into doctoral programs promotes a more flexible and dynamic approach to learning (Gravett, 2021). It prepares students to navigate the complexities of the changing academic landscape and equips them with the skills needed to thrive in their future careers. Even the challenges associated with cooperative learning – disproportionate workloads, power struggles between group members, communication issues, and the extended time it takes to complete the assignment – provide character-defining lessons that prepare the students for future situations.

The researchers, four BIPOC doctoral students, offer an example of how collaborative learning engaged and benefited BIPOC PhD students through their participation as co-researchers in a year-long collaborative program evaluation and self-study PESS project at their PhD program. To frame this autoethnographic discussion of collaborative learning, the study first explores the literature related to collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and BIPOC students in higher education and how the topics overlap and intersect. It then provides a brief overview of the PESS process and the roles of the researchers. Subsequently, the authors' insights on their involvement with the process, how their identities influenced the processes they participated in, and how and what they learned during the evaluation process are presented. Last, the article ends with recommendations to improve the experience and impact of BIPOC doctoral students' participation and better align the skills learned at the PhD level with the broader job market.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

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Three concepts form the nexus of this study: collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and BIPOC students in higher education. Where these concepts intersect provides a distinct lens to examine the participation of BIPOC doctoral students in a collaborative evaluation process,

specifically within the context of a PhD program in Organizational Leadership. The following section reviews the existing literature surrounding each of these domains. It ends with a look at the intersection of collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and BIPOC students in higher education and how it provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of inclusivity and empowerment in doctoral education.

### ***COLLABORATIVE LEARNING***

The first concept reviewed is collaborative learning – student-based learning in an engaged group setting. Based on social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), it focuses on the co-construction of knowledge through social interaction. This learning approach prepares students in doctoral education for the collaborative nature of academic and professional work. Dillenbourg (1999) defines collaborative learning as a situation where two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together, which underscores the active, social nature of learning that is crucial in doctoral education.

Collaborative learning can foster cognitive engagement, self-directed learning, beneficial cooperation, meaningful communication, information sharing, personal accountability, social skills, and collective thinking (Baanqud et al., 2020; Laal & Laal, 2012). It positively impacts students' learning performance (Qureshi et al., 2023) and encourages active participation, which leads to improved learning outcomes (Swanson et al., 2019).

The literature identified five benefits of collaborative learning. First, by advocating experimentation and the use of creative approaches and theoretical investigations, it can reinvent doctorate studies by breaking power hierarchies (Gravett, 2021). Second, Holbrook and Chen (2017) found that collaborative learning influenced students' perceptions of the practicality of the course content. Third, it encourages critical and creative thinking, which helps students to be more strategic and self-directed in their thinking and learning processes (Ramdani & Susilo, 2022). Fourth, it fosters BIPOC inclusion by developing learning communities and trust (Araujo Dawson et al., 2022). Fifth, it uses pedagogies relevant to BIPOC students' experiences (McKee et al., 2024).

Five challenges to collaborative learning were found in the literature. First, collaborative learning requires more time and effort than traditional methods (Qureshi et al., 2023). Second, it can be difficult for groups to navigate interpersonal dynamics (Swanson et al., 2019). Third, in collaborative learning, there is the potential for disengaged team members or work to be disproportionately divided. Fourth, managing feedback from many sources (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2023). Fifth, when there are discrepancies between the objectives and assessment design (Han & Ellis, 2021).

### ***COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION***

Collaborative program evaluation is the second concept this paper examines. Program evaluation allows an organization, entity, or community to determine whether, how, and in what circumstances their actions are having the desired impact (Weiss, 1972). Collaborative program evaluation combines collaborative learning with empowerment theory and researcher action research. Empowerment theory is the belief that individuals will have an increased sense of self-efficacy and empowerment by having the stakeholders involved in the decision-making and evaluation process (Sheperis & Bayles, 2022). Participant action research takes empowerment theory further by ensuring that the affected people are directly involved with the decision-making process, and that leads to change (Cornish et al., 2023). Collaborative program evaluation involves stakeholders throughout the process, giving voice to underrepresented populations (Torres-Cuello & Pinzon-Salcedo, 2022; Weaver, 2020).

There are four key aspects to collaborative program evaluation. First, it leads to a more inclusive and diverse action plan by including the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders (Guy, 2020). Second, collaborative program evaluation considers power dynamics and ensures that underrepresented populations are heard and considered in program development and improvement, which may result in power dynamics shifting and individuals in positions of authority changing (Torres-Cuello & Pinzon-

Salcedo, 2022). Third, it involves activities such as joint planning, sharing information, troubleshooting challenges, encouraging evaluation reflection and support, and co-writing journal articles (Bourgeois et al., 2023; Odera, 2021). Fourth, collaborative program evaluation develops a thorough, relevant, timely action plan (Guy, 2020).

Four challenges come with conducting a collaborative program evaluation. First, the greatest challenge is that the literature is scarce on the procedures for conducting a collaborative program evaluation besides the need to include stakeholders throughout the process (Fynn et al., 2020). Second, time constraints and communication issues weaken accurate and purposeful results (Guy, 2020). Third, there are organizational, political, and resource constraints (Odera, 2021). Fourth, evaluation limits are set by those in power, who typically fund the study (Johnstone et al., 2024).

### ***BIPOC STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION***

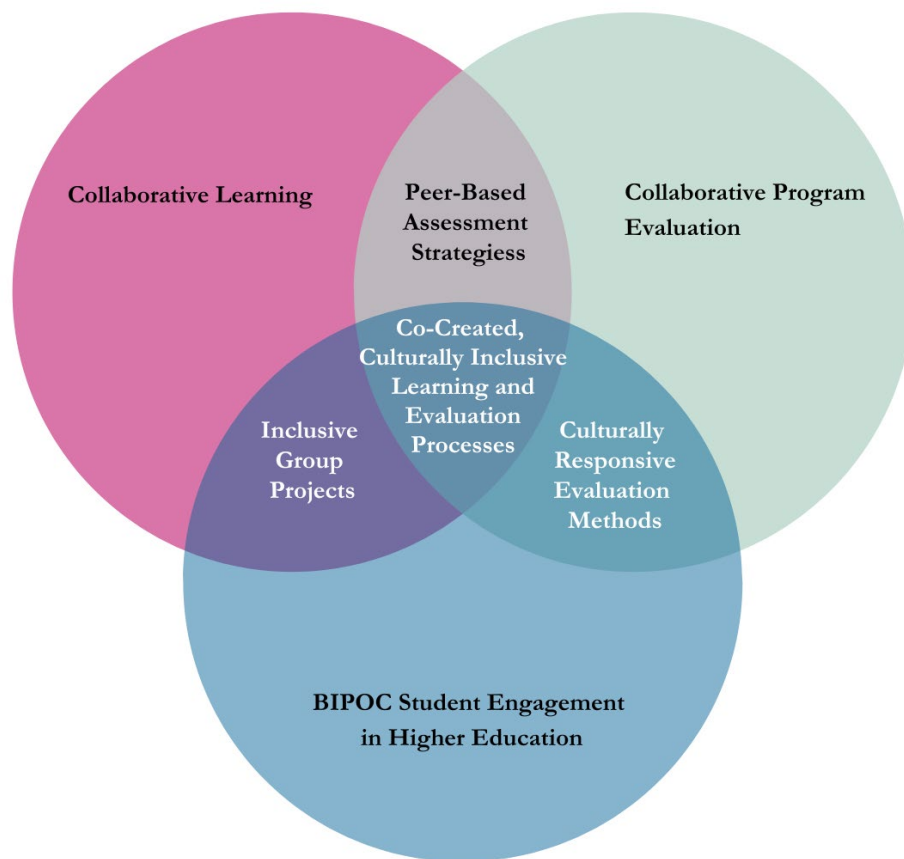
The final concept reviewed is BIPOC student engagement in higher education. The literature recounts the plight of BIPOC as PhD students and the recognized resources that help them overcome the obstacles. BIPOC individuals are motivated by personal and community-minded factors in doctoral programs. They strive to improve the quality of life and access to resources for marginalized populations (Ramos & Yi, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).

However, even though the population of enrolled PhD students is increasingly becoming more diverse, BIPOC individuals remain on the margins of the academy (Squire & McCann, 2018), leaving a lack of representation among peers, faculty, advisors, and administrators at higher education institutions (Henderson et al., 2023). As a result, BIPOC students are vulnerable to suffering from imposter syndrome, tokenism, pressure to assimilate, and oppression from racism, sexism, and ableism (Ramos & Yi, 2020; Squire & McCann, 2018).

To support students from underrepresented populations, higher education institutions and faculty must intentionally create spaces for these students to feel seen, heard, and safe (Breen & Newsome, 2022). It is through the support of personal and academic relationships that these students find the wherewithal to succeed (Henderson et al., 2023; Ramos & Yi, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021; Squire & McCann, 2018). By instituting cohort models or learning communities into a program, higher education helps students engage with one another through discussions, collaborations, and the shared journey (Henderson et al., 2023). Additionally, underrepresented students can build relationships and grow their competencies by being encouraged to participate in research teams (Squire & McCann, 2018). The role of faculty and advisors is vital to the success of BIPOC and other underrepresented students (Henderson et al., 2023). The faculty does not necessarily need to be representative of the students. Having cross-identity faculty develop relationships with underrepresented students confirms to the academic world that the student is relevant and should not be marginalized (Squire & McCann, 2018).

### ***THE INTERSECTION OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION, AND BIPOC STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION***

The intersections of collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and the experiences of BIPOC students in higher education show how the three concepts can foster educational equity and student success. Recognizing and harnessing these intersections allows educators to create supportive environments that support BIPOC students while providing practical experiences that hone their skills that are desirable in the workforce. The intersectionality of the concepts validates why it is the appropriate lens for this study. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the intersections of collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and the experiences of BIPOC students in higher education.



**Figure 1. The intersections of collaborative learning, collaborative program evaluation, and the experiences of BIPOC students in higher education**

There are three times where two of the concepts overlap. First is where collaborative learning overlaps with the experiences of BIPOC PhD students. By creating inclusive group projects, collaborative learning engages BIPOC students and alleviates their marginalization experience in higher education. Second, collaborative program evaluation is a practical application of collaborative learning principles. It provides a real-world situation where BIPOC PhD students may use their knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and contribute to institutional assessment. Third, collaborative program evaluation helps empower BIPOC students because, as Weaver (2020) notes, it provides underrepresented groups a voice.

At the three concepts point of intersection is co-created, culturally inclusive learning and assessment methods. It is where the experiences and perspectives of BIPOC students guide and improve group projects and evaluation processes. Advocates for the role of people of color evaluators in promoting social change, Reid et al. (2020) report that their engagement leads to more inclusive and thorough reviews. Furthermore, incorporating BIPOC students in these surgeries would allow them to develop academic self-efficacy and a sense of belonging – qualities that Leath et al. (2019) believe are critical for the success of students of color in higher education.

Additionally, this framework shows how having PhD students participate in collaborative program evaluation provides opportunities for students to gain the necessary skills for the 21st-century job market. Rios et al. (2020) found that the four most sought-after skills in the workforce were oral and written communication skills, collaboration, and problem-solving. Similarly, being a team player, self-

motivation, and being proactive were skills identified by McGunagle and Zizka (2020). Collaborating with peers, faculty, and other professionals enhances the doctorate learning experience and develops higher-level competencies such as critical thinking, leadership, communication, and project management skills than might emerge from learning done as an individual (Ludvik, 2023). Curtis et al. (2021) found that by participating in the collaborative program evaluation process, students gained skills related to verbal and written communication, collaboration, data analysis through specific software, problem-solving, and self-organization. Many doctoral programs are becoming more structured and collaborative to meet the demands of the knowledge economy and to have more efficient educational approaches (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2023).

This conceptual framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of BIPOC PhD students participating in the collaborative program evaluation. It guides our research, methodology, and findings. It highlights the importance of examining the process and how it affects BIPOC PhD students participating in collaborative program evaluation, as well as the outcomes. The next section describes the methodology used for the study.

## METHODOLOGY

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This study used a qualitative collaborative autoethnographic method to gain insight from a collaborative program evaluation process. Developed by academics such as Heewon Chang, who has helped to expand the methodological approach in educational research, autoethnography lets one combine cultural analysis with personal narrative (Chang, 2016). It challenges conventional research methodologies by highlighting the political and social aspects of research (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is viewed as both a process and a product to create accessible and engaging narratives that can reach a wide range of audiences. This method enabled the writers to collect their own opinions and experiences of BIPOC PhD students who actively participated in the evaluation process.

The autoethnographic study was conducted as part of a larger collaborative program evaluation for a PhD program in Organizational Leadership during the 23-24 school year. It is built on the work of Curtis et al. (2021), who advocate participatory program assessment methodologies that incorporate multiple underrepresented views by investigating the experiences and perspectives of BIPOC PhD students.

The study focuses on the deliberate participation of BIPOC students as leaders and evaluators in the collaborative program assessment process, as the chosen program evaluation design intentionally incorporates DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) concepts. The work of Clarke (2020) and El-Mowafi et al. (2021), who highlight the transforming potential of diversity in supporting academic performance and inclusivity, motivated this examination.

The collaborative nature of the study made it possible for both group analysis and personal introspection, therefore facilitating a rich investigation of the participants' experiences as both subjects and assessment process researchers (Chang et al., 2016). This dual function provided insights into the review process from an insider perspective, even if it presented challenges in terms of objectivity. Using autoethnography to examine the collaborative program evaluation process, this study investigated the experiences and insights of BIPOC doctoral students participating in the evaluation procedures, contributing to the broader understanding of inclusive practices in higher education evaluation.

Since autoethnography was used for this study, IRB approval was not needed. Each author who voluntarily contributed their insights gave indirect consent. Nevertheless, two steps were taken to ensure that ethical considerations were addressed. First, researchers maintained the ability to be anonymous to uphold a participant's right to privacy. Second, the data was stored in a password-protected cloud storage that only the researchers could access.

No software was used to develop the codes and identify the themes. The participants provided a written response to a series of questions. Each researcher then coded the collective responses separately before coming together to discuss the common themes found throughout the answers. Additional data was collected during the group session. The data was then reevaluated by the researchers and the themes with the highest inter-rater reliability were selected to discuss. Inter-rater reliability was achieved by having a 100% percentage agreement on the same category of data points. The next section sets the stage for this study by describing the PhD program evaluation self-study process and the roles of the researchers.

### ***THE CONTEXT OF THE PHD PROGRAM EVALUATION AND SELF-STUDY AND STUDENT CO-RESEARCHERS***

Within higher education, the PhD program in organizational leadership at a faith-based institution is a testament to progressive ideals, particularly spotlighting its commitment to DEIA. This section will first offer background information about the PhD in Organizational Leadership program, examine the PESS process, and conclude by describing the four doctoral students and their roles in the PESS initiative. By understanding the history of the PhD in Organizational Leadership program, one can see its continual evolution and how embarking on the PESS undertaking during the 2023-2024 academic year as a collaborative program evaluation process approach integrated with DEIA principles, such as strategically including BIPOC students as evaluators (Clarke, 2020), showcases the program's dedication to fostering a richly diverse academic environment. Clarke (2020) and Compton-Lilly et al. (2023) underscore the value of such inclusivity in elevating the evaluative process, ensuring it is both comprehensive and reflective of diverse perspectives.

This section ends with a look at how four BIPOC doctoral students, deeply involved in the PESS initiative, navigate and contribute to embedding DEIA principles within the program evaluation framework. Their engagement deepens the evaluative methodology and exemplifies diversity's transformative power in fostering academic excellence and inclusivity (El-Mowafi et al., 2021). Including BIPOC evaluators is not merely a tokenistic gesture but a strategic decision aimed at enriching the program's evaluative process with diverse insights and perspectives, thereby supporting the academic and professional trajectories of BIPOC students toward achieving a more equitable educational landscape.

#### **The PhD in Organizational Leadership program**

The PhD in Organizational Leadership program, the focus of this study, is specifically tailored for working professionals who bring at least three years of organizational leadership experience to their studies, thus enabling them to apply their leadership skills across many professional fields. This aspect of the program ensures that its students significantly impact various industries by leveraging their enhanced leadership capabilities. The academic journey within this program is structured into eight trimesters of coursework, during which students actively engage in collaborative learning with their cohort peers. Following this phase, each student embarks on their individual dissertation research under the guidance of a PhD faculty dissertation advisor. This transition marks a shift from peer collaboration during the coursework phase to a faculty-student partnership model during the dissertation phase, underscoring the program's commitment to providing personalized academic mentorship.

For nearly two decades, the program has maintained a dedicated team of eight full-time faculty members and three associate faculty members, who, although part-time, carry a substantial teaching load. This stable and diverse faculty has contributed significantly to the program since its inception. The diversity breakdown of the full faculty is as follows: male (5) and female (3); White (3) and people of color (5); tenured (5) and tenure-track (3). The student and alumni diversity are also notable according to the university data of 2024 as shown in Table 1. The table shows that cisgender females represent about 60% of the student and alumni population, and about 37% of the population identify as BIPOC.



**Table 1. PhD student and alumni diversity**

Category	Sex	Race/ethnicity	Age
Students	Cisgender/Transgender Male = 38 Cisgender/Transgender Female = 60 Unknown=1	White = 51 BIPOC = 37 Unknown = 12	25-29 = 2 30-34 = 5 35-39 =12 40-49 = 37 50-64 = 23 65+ = 1 Unknown = 19
Alumni	Cisgender/Transgender Male = 44 Cisgender/Transgender Female = 65	White = 66 BIPOC = 40 Unknown = 3	No data available

The state’s Department of Education officially recognized the program in 2005, marking it the first of its kind within the institution. In its formative years, the program underwent two evaluations aimed at self-learning and improvement: a preliminary assessment by a consulting agency in 2007 and a more extensive evaluation by external peer evaluators in 2009. More recently, in 2023, the program participated in self-studies for two accreditations: one by a regionally accrediting body and the other by a professional accrediting body. Students were not involved in the evaluation process previously.

### **The program evaluation self-study process**

The PESS for the 2023-2024 academic year marked a pivotal evolution from the program’s previous evaluation efforts. It was characterized by its initiation from within the program, comprehensive analysis, and collaborative nature. Launched directly by the program, this initiative underscored a commitment to proactive self-assessment and continuous improvement. The term PESS, an intentional blend of “program evaluation” and “self-study,” was chosen to reflect a dual aim: to identify strengths and areas for enhancement, all underpinned by a desire for self-improvement. The key findings of the PESS highlighted the program’s strong faculty-student engagement, robust research output, and the need for further enhancement in student support services.

Adopting a systems-thinking perspective, the PESS went beyond traditional evaluation methods by incorporating a wide array of data sources. This approach included internal programs, university data, student performance records and faculty feedback, and external benchmarks, such as national research rankings. The extensive data collection strategy encompassed a diverse range of qualitative and quantitative information, pre-existing documents such as course syllabi and program policies, statistical records like graduation rates and research funding, and newly gathered inputs through surveys of students and alums, interviews with faculty, staff, and key stakeholders, and a comparative analysis of peer programs across the United States. This meticulous approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the program’s performance and impact.

The PESS, a departure from earlier evaluations, was a uniquely participatory and collaborative process. It invited PhD faculty, students, alums, and staff to contribute as program beneficiaries and integral evaluators. This strategy fostered a rich learning environment that enhanced the practical understanding of program evaluation and strengthened the academic community by promoting engagement across diverse racial, cultural, gender, and professional backgrounds. Through this inclusive and systemic process, the PESS aimed to advance organizational learning and improvement, reiterating the program’s dedication to embracing diverse perspectives and ensuring that every voice is heard and respected.

The strategic recruitment of BIPOC student evaluators in the PESS process is an actionable commitment to diversity and inclusivity, acknowledging the unique challenges these students face within the academic sphere. This approach is rooted in the understanding that diverse evaluation teams enrich the quality and relevance of program assessments, as highlighted by Curtis et al. (2021), who advocate for participatory methods that leverage a variety of perspectives, including those from underrepresented groups. By integrating BIPOC students as evaluators, the PESS process benefits from their distinct insights. It supports their academic and professional development, addressing the systemic barriers they encounter and contributing to a more equitable educational environment. This initiative aligns with broader efforts to enhance support for underrepresented populations in higher education, reinforcing the importance of intentional spaces and relationships that empower these students to succeed.

### **Four BIPOC doctoral students**

In the landscape of higher education, particularly within the domain of Organizational Leadership, integrating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) into the fabric of program evaluation presents challenges and significant opportunities for growth. This article presents, in the foreground, the participatory experiences of four doctoral students, now in their second year, who actively engaged in the PESS process as co-researchers, along with the PhD faculty who framed and guided the entire process. This group includes three cisgender/transgender females and one male; one Latina and three African Americans; three in the age band of 40-64 and one in the age band of under 40. Given their varied backgrounds – encompassing different ages, genders, and ethnicities, and with two among them sharing a personal partnership – they recognize their positionality likely influenced study experiences and subsequent reflections. Yet, this diversity enriched our data collection and analysis, allowing them to approach the PESS comprehensively. Through their collaboration, they aimed to foster a learning environment that was inclusive and reflective of the complex, diverse world we navigate. Their narratives, set within this rigorous evaluative framework, shed light on the broader challenges of embedding DEIA into academic evaluations and underscore their commitment to fostering an educational environment that values every voice. Together, their experiences underscore the transformative potential of embracing diversity in pursuit of academic excellence and inclusivity. What follows are brief summaries explaining each researcher's professional experience with collaborative processes and program evaluation, as well as how being BIPOC influences their values and perspective. Gender-neutral pseudonyms are used for each student researcher.

**Kyle's story:** Blending the insights of a senior non-profit executive with the fresh perspective of a doctoral student, Kyle is a visionary in enhancing community and academic evaluation practices. Their role as Chief Impact Officer at a human service organization has cultivated an expertise in evidence-based methodologies, characterized by a deep-seated commitment to inclusivity and equity. This commitment manifests in their meticulous effort to integrate a wide range of voices into evaluation processes, ensuring methodologies are as nuanced and diverse as the communities and academic realms they aim to serve. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive view of program impacts, emphasizing the inclusion of underrepresented perspectives to cultivate an evaluation framework that challenges conventional boundaries. Kyle's ambition reflects a broader commitment to fostering equitable and accessible educational and community programs, highlighting the need for program evaluation methodologies to evolve, aligning more closely with the diverse experiences of their constituents, thereby redefining inclusivity and equity in program evaluation.

**Avery's story:** As a leader in the learning and development field, Avery navigates the complexities of academic programming with an unwavering dedication to learning through a DEIA lens. Their approach, enriched by professional and personal experiences, involves formulating nuanced learning experiences and implementing an insightful evaluation process that mirrors the diverse experiences within the PhD program. Avery's endeavor establishes a precedent for how academic programs can more effectively embrace and cater to the programs' varied populations by moving beyond mere acknowledgment of diversity to actively embedding diverse perspectives into their core operations.

Their commitment shines in the meticulous development of evaluation questions to gauge the program's support for diverse learners, ensuring programs that embrace inclusivity and representativeness in every inquiry. Avery's work illuminates the path for future advancements in higher education inclusivity, setting a new standard for integrating DEIA principles in academic program evaluations.

**Riley's story:** With a rich military service, religious leadership, and academic background, Riley brings a comprehensive understanding of DEIA to the forefront of the PESS process. Their journey, characterized by efforts to navigate social perceptions and advocate for inclusive and equitable evaluation practices, highlights the systemic challenges individuals from diverse backgrounds face in academic settings. Riley's dedication to creating environments that accommodate various needs without requiring individuals to conform underscores the importance of systemic reform for achieving true inclusivity and equity. Their reflections on navigating academic spaces draw attention to instances of bias and structural barriers and serve as a rallying cry for doctoral programs to critically assess and reform their practices.

**Taylor's story:** Taylor brings an intellectual and strategic lens to the program evaluation process. Over the past decade in higher education, they have used program evaluation and related tools to identify best practices and opportunities for growth with a focus on equity and student leadership development. Skilled in developing processes and procedures, Taylor advocates for strategic planning, framework development, and inclusive methodologies to guide the evaluation process to ensure that every voice is recognized and valued and that programs strive for continuous improvement. Their involvement in PESS integrates considerations of financial and professional development impacts within a DEIA framework to promote inclusivity and equity in higher education, challenging doctoral programs to adapt and evolve in ways that truly meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

### **PhD students as co-researchers and co-leaders**

The student co-researchers served in various leadership roles on the PESS project team. They served as student co-chairs of different working committees along with faculty chairs. The student co-chairs were responsible for leading the committees with regard to refining the focus of respective working committees and collecting and analyzing data about topics ranging from financial information to student and alumni's experiences with the PhD program. Except for Taylor, the researchers started on the project after the project strategy and planning were set. The three co-chairs participated in the three main phases of the project beyond designing, implementing, and planning: drafting interview questions, conducting interviews, and processing the data. Taylor assisted with analyzing, organizing, and summarizing the data. The culminating activity of the committees' work was highlights of the data analysis that would be used to compose the final report for the external committee. The PESS process intentionally moved away from the traditionally top-down and external expert-oriented model and methods of program evaluations. By actively engaging BIPOC students in leadership capacities for the evaluation, the program showed its dedication to diversity and communal progress by using a systems-thinking paradigm. This collaborative effort highlighted program strengths and weaknesses and empowered participants to actively shape the program. Drawn upon reflections provided by the BIPOC doctoral students who held leadership roles as co-researchers and student co-chairs in the year-long PESS process, the following section identifies five themes pertaining to doctoral students' collaborative and participatory leadership experiences.

### ***CONTEXT OF THE COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY STUDY***

Four researchers participated in the collaborative autoethnography study as part of a program evaluation course that was taught by the co-chairs of the PESS process, one of whom is also the department chairperson. The graded assignment was to write a journal article based on the PESS process. The researchers decided to conduct a collective autoethnographic study to find the themes that emerged from their collaborative learning experiences of the PhD in Organizational Leadership program evaluation.

We must acknowledge the power differential that exists between the faculty and the students. To balance the power dynamic, the grade of the paper was based on completing the necessary steps to complete the article and the paper's structure. The researchers' grades were not based on the study's findings nor on the content within the article, which, at times, was critical of the PESS process. Also, to minimize the power differential, the professors did not have access to the raw data from the reflections and did not determine the themes. However, they did contribute to the editing of the article. The subsequent section will review the data analysis of the reflections provided by the four BIPOC doctoral students who had leadership roles in the PESS process, identify the themes associated with the insights, and discuss the implications.

## BIPOC DOCTORAL STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

The four researchers provided written reflections on their experience with collaborative learning during the PESS process. There were two rounds of reflections containing questions about their identities and how their identity impacted the process, their role and actions, their overall experience, and what they learned from the evaluation process. Each researcher then read all the reflections separately and identified the themes they saw emerge. The group then discussed their findings and narrowed down the themes to five points of interest related to collaborative learning and the collaborative program evaluation process.

First, how essential planning and being transparent is to the collaborative learning process. Second, how their identities influenced the processes they participated in. Third, there are power differentials between designers, researchers, and researcher groups. Fourth, negotiation among differing perspectives and interests, and fifth, what they learned by participating in the collaborative evaluation process.

Table 2 shows the identified themes, definitions of the themes, and quotes from the reflections that related to the theme.

**Table 2. Identified themes**

Theme	Definition	Sample of researchers' quotes
The Importance of Planning, Clear Communication, and Transparency for Collaborative Program Evaluation	The importance of clear communication, preparation, and access to resources in the collaborative learning and evaluation process. This includes setting clear expectations, roles, and timelines from the outset.	<p>"Our committee was not aware there was an executive committee member whose role it was to help research our topic and any related questions we had ..." - Kyle.</p> <p>"It was difficult to schedule the interviews because they were conducted during the end of the fall semester and close to the holidays" - Kyle.</p> <p>"Despite the regular communications (emails and meetings), I often felt like I was missing pieces of the puzzle" - Avery.</p> <p>"The increasing number of meetings and responsibilities that were not accurately presented during the volunteer recruitment phase. I would not have volunteered for the PESS if I had known the work would expand beyond the initial description" - Riley.</p> <p>"After approximately one month, my committee and I had a semi-solid understanding of what was expected of us and began our evaluation work. However, this sense of calm was frequently interrupted by additions to the breadth and depth of our work" - Riley.</p> <p>"Many of the students that I spoke with who decided not to continue with their committee work cited disorganization, lack of role clarity, hurried deadlines, and an inability to match utility with demands as reasons for discontinuing their service" - Taylor.</p>

Theme	Definition	Sample of researchers' quotes
Identity Influences Interpretations and Interactions	How the researchers' personal and cultural identities impacted their interpretations, interactions, and contributions at individual, group, and organizational levels throughout the evaluation process.	<p>"I feel like my identity played a role in how I analyzed the data collected because it was important to me that we look not only at what the collective Ph.D. student body results were, but the subgroups said" – Kyle.</p> <p>"During the analysis, two insights arose. First, I made several assumptions about the data based on their state. To begin, I assumed that the data was complete and had been cleaned. Additionally, I assumed the program's participants were more diverse than they actually were. These two assumptions surfaced mistrust about how the data would be cleaned, interpreted, and presented" – Avery.</p> <p>"I have found myself only selectively making these types of inquiries to avoid cultural, organizational, or professional blowback from my breaking the implicit deal to not make people in power uncomfortable in exchange for professional success and a seat at the corner of the proverbial table" – Riley.</p> <p>"I think my identity helped me to consider the value proposition that the program provides differently ... Because I approach every interaction, personal and professional, from a framework of belonging, I believe that I may have been more inclined to consider how constructs like culture, power, and community might be impacting the data collection process, interview transcriptions, committee access to information, and other areas" – Taylor.</p>
The Power Differentials Between Faculty, Student Researchers, and Committees	The recognized differences in authority and influence between designers, student researchers, and faculty, and how these dynamics affected the evaluation process and outcomes.	<p>"Since I was not clear with the process and wanted to let those who in my mind knew more, meaning the faculty member and the alums, take the lead." – Kyle.</p> <p>"Our initial faculty co-chair felt like an equal member of our group. However, when they went on sabbatical, our new faculty co-chair was not as involved. Additionally, after January, the steering committee stopped meeting, which left the student co-chairs floundering on their own as they guided the committee to the finish line." – Kyle.</p> <p>"The committees received the data raw from the surveys and summarized from the interviews. It would have been helpful to have had it in reverse. Having access to the full interviews would have allowed us to determine what was important. Instead, the executive committee usurped that power from the committee." – Kyle.</p> <p>"It is possible that the interviewees were aware of the pressure, conflict, or the potential of failure of the project and saw the interviews as high risk, thus impacting their ability to be open and authentic when participating in the interviews.</p> <p>My challenges with the project revolve around one central question, 'How do you speak truth to power?' The question was complicated by the group setting and layers of administrative procedures and organizational politics." – Avery.</p> <p>"I devised a scheduling plan to help volunteers obtain critical dates and schedules approximately one month before the initial PESS team meeting. Several days before I was going to activate my plan, I was directed to stop" – Riley.</p> <p>"I participated in overall planning and strategy for the overall process. However, I was not brought in until after major decisions about goals, committee foci, and timelines were made" – Taylor.</p>

BIPOC Doctoral Students' Insights About Collaborative Learning

Theme	Definition	Sample of researchers' quotes
Negotiation Among Differing Perspectives and Interests	The process of balancing and integrating diverse viewpoints, experiences, and interests among team members to reach consensus and make decisions in the collaborative evaluation.	<p>“The committees worked as siloes instead of as a network. Outside of our committee, the collaborative program evaluation process seems clunky. All the groups together did not seem like a cohesive unit” – Kyle.</p> <p>“As such, this project, as a whole, was not entirely collaborative. For example, although I served as an evaluator and stakeholder, I was not privy to the decisions regarding the evaluation process” – Avery.</p> <p>“When analyzing data in group settings, I was more mindful of the viewpoints of others. For example, various accommodations have been a recurring theme during our committee discussion” – Riley.</p> <p>“They must have a shared understanding of the goals of the evaluation process, steps involved in that process, and the definitions and values used to guide the process. If there is a significant gap in understanding around any of these three areas, it is likely that the individual and collective experience will suffer” – Taylor.</p> <p>“Because the program we were evaluating was small and many of the intersectional identities of students are unique, I had real concerns about how people might be able to engage in anonymity. I also realized that the level of anonymity that participants might perceive is appropriate can vary based on social location, role in the program evaluation process, and their perception of intended outcomes” – Taylor.</p> <p>“Although I engaged in this, I found myself compromising my uncertainty for the sake of multiple groups/committees that I was a part of in an attempt to reduce interpersonal conflict and maintain cohesion. I think that this led to me experiencing significant levels of frustration throughout the process in each of the various capacities in which I served” – Taylor.</p>
Learning and Skills Development	The personal and professional growth experienced by participants, including enhanced critical thinking, communication, and evaluation skills, because of engaging in the collaborative program evaluation process.	<p>“None of us were flawless on the team, and I think the process benefited us by improving our communication with one another, acknowledging our own limitations, and gaining empathy and respect toward our teammates” – Kyle.</p> <p>“I was able to hone some key skills I had already acquired... I was able to employ systems-thinking and anticipatory and interpersonal skills during the project” – Avery.</p> <p>“Recognizing the importance of open communication and shared responsibility was a significant learning curve for me” – Riley.</p> <p>“I do not think I would recommend participating in this kind of process without requiring all of the participants to undergo some type of individual and shared values assessment. I think that a lot of the participants' individual and collective values were assumed rather than explored and discussed. I think that values activities would have allowed people to better understand and communicate effectively around goals, the facilitation of deliverables, and how ideational and role conflicts might be resolved” – Taylor.</p>

We will now look further into each theme and the insights collected by the researchers.

### ***THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING, CLEAR COMMUNICATION, AND TRANSPARENCY FOR COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION***

The first theme focuses on the importance of clear communication and transparency throughout the whole collaborative process. The PESS process was originally designed by the PhD faculty to be participatory, collaborative, and inclusive with the goal of completing a comprehensive program's evaluation self-study and seeking recommendations by external experts with a tight timeline of a year to base the program's strategic action plan. The PESS process fulfilled its intention of being participatory by engaging multiple stakeholders, recruiting from the operational group (e.g., administrators and faculty), the consumer group (e.g., students and alumni), and the expert group (e.g., external reviewers and program advisors). The process also intentionally included diverse stakeholders at all levels of committee leadership by gender, race/ethnicity, and program status (e.g., faculty, staff, coursework student, dissertation student, and alumni). Whereas the PESS project recruited diverse co-researchers and data sources through participation and inclusivity, its intentionality of collaboration was not fully achieved due to time constraints, the nature of the intended final product, and inconsistent, unclear communication and transparency throughout the process. This theme emphasizes the importance of clear and transparent communication in the collaborative process, particularly when it engages a wide range of diverse populations.

To begin, each researcher acknowledged the impact of planning, clear communication, and transparency in the collaborative program evaluation process. Despite not being part of the process of making major decisions about goals, committee focus, and timelines, each researcher had thoughts about how they would have approached the planning and implementation process differently if given an opportunity. These insights are broken down into three topics: preparation and communication, group dynamics, and resource access in a timely manner. First, with no official structure to the collaborative program process established by the literature (Fynn et al., 2020), the researchers would request details about project roles, responsibilities, expectations, and due dates earlier in the process. As a tangent, they thought that the offering of "guiding documents before the orientation meeting would have allowed volunteers to digest the information and thus ask more informed questions and seek clarifications during the initial meetings." Avery added that the committees worked in siloes from one another and were developing questions for surveys and interviews related to their focus without having knowledge of the overarching research questions being used to guide the program evaluation. Sharing the foundational information with all the committee members and clearly explaining the expectations would benefit the process, the engagement level of the committee members, and the data collected (Fynn et al., 2020; Guy, 2020). Second, the researchers thought that requiring the committee members to undergo some type of values and strength-based assessment would have allowed "people to better understand and communicate effectively around goals, the facilitation of deliverables, and how ideational and role conflicts might be resolved." Bruner et al. (2020) found that conducting assessments while team building leads to stronger role acceptance, leadership, and structure within the team. Finally, the researchers would have appreciated it if resources such as the previous evaluations were available in a timely manner. They thought it would be more effective if the data were cleaned before it was reviewed by volunteer committee members so they could have engaged with the data at the beginning of the data analysis phase. This would help the committee better plan for the work ahead and ensure that deadlines were met. The role of power is further explored in the next reflective theme.

### ***THE IRONY OF POWER DIFFERENTIALS IN THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS***

The second theme reveals the irony of inherent power differentials that existed in the collaborative process. Power differentials were noted among faculty, student researchers, and committee members. As Riley observed, "The influence of internal politics had a greater impact on evaluators than the learning and teaching outcomes of the collaborative process." It is typically understood that power differentials exist in all organizations and have an impact on leadership in both formal and informal

structures (Odera, 2021). When the role of authority in organizational dynamics is discussed, it is frequently portrayed negatively (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Haugen & Chouinard, 2019). However, several scholars drew attention to the need for more nuanced attention and deep insights into what power dynamics exist, how they came to be, how they are maintained or challenged, and what role they play in the program evaluation process (Askew et al., 2012; Cary et al., 2023; Haugen & Chouinard, 2019; Torres-Cuello & Pinzon-Salcedo, 2022). The researchers found that power ebbed and flowed throughout the collaborative process and was relative to the perception of the individual. As Taylor noted, the PESS process empowered student co-researchers and provided them an opportunity to include their voices in the process, which is an important aspect of collaborative learning, according to Torres-Cuello and Pinzon-Salcedo (2023). However, it is possible that variations between intracultural and intercultural researchers and groups were not well addressed.

The researchers involved in the program evaluation process were largely identified as learners based on their positionality within the program, allowing students to be viewed through their status and/or role in the PhD program. According to this approach, students functioning as research assistants appear to have had more influence over the research design, with no consideration given to whether other, more culturally diverse student voices could have dramatically affected the design and facilitation of the evaluation process. According to Askew et al. (2012), the latter reduced the effectiveness of collaborative assessment methodologies by reducing the design and process potential to be culturally responsive. Failure to explicitly address cultural considerations in power dynamics, such as race, class, and gender, is common in program evaluation, implying that the organization used in this case study did not intend to engage in this oversight (Askew et al., 2012; Cary et al., 2023). The student researchers found the professors guiding the program evaluation to be both intellectually and personally interested in and committed to DEIA work. As a result, the researchers saw a more nuanced engagement with power issues across cultures, which will be explained in further depth in the following paragraphs using the faculty supervisor-student interaction as a setting. The unique interaction between doctorate students and their faculty supervisors and committee members is often characterized by the above-mentioned collaborative learning concepts.

A distinct feature within the faculty supervisor-student relationship in the context of this case study is the use of multi-level meta-analysis throughout the program evaluation process. Faculty were essentially assessing how students appraised the curriculum, whereas students were assessing how faculty assessed the program and student learning results. According to Elliot and Kobayashi (2019), one of the challenges in these relationships is how and whether PhD faculty accurately assess, acknowledge, and negotiate the contextualized psychosocial identities held by themselves, their students, and their students in the contexts of student groups. This approach was consistent with the view of student researchers as important and valuable contributors to the facilitation and meta-analysis of the evaluation process. However, it appears to have had the unintended consequence of prioritizing student status considerations over connections related to social location or skill sets learned or developed outside of the PhD program (as previously noted), further highlighting the unique power dynamics that may be present. For the program evaluation of the PhD in Organizational Leadership program, such considerations were made, as indicated by the inclusion of DEIA in the initial program assessment plan and the emphasis on diversity in data collecting. However, the research design process may have benefited from a more formal assessment and acknowledgment of various power dynamics in addition to student roles within the program by implementing a multi-level power analysis during the initial research design stages and in subsequent structuring of individual and group conversations, such as committee meetings and qualitative interviews (Askew et al., 2012; Haugen & Chouinard, 2019; Rodríguez-Campos, 2018). While the intention was to shift the burden of decision-making and strategizing to students who were compensated for their role in the evaluation process, the evaluative process could have been improved by inviting students with no formal role or status but diverse social locations to participate in design activities. Insights on the influence of identity on the process, the role of group dynamics, and the impact of the program's context on the process are reviewed in the next section.



### ***THE INFLUENCE OF RESEARCHERS' IDENTITIES ON THE GROUP PROCESS***

The third theme points to the important and inevitable influences that student identities of co-researchers had on the group process. The reflections highlighted how their identity influenced their role in the evaluation process. For example, each noted that their insights and reflections were viewed through the lens of their experiences, demographics, expertise, and values (Drummond, 2020). This sense of diversity influenced how the researchers evaluated the PESS process and interpreted group and individual interactions. Moreover, the reflections highlighted insights at the individual, group, and organizational levels of the process. For instance, on the individual level, Taylor stated how the collaborative evaluation process “helped me gain new insights and appreciation for more diverse views.” This reflection affirmed Stewart et al.’s (2020) argument that having people of diverse identities and personalities on a team can help individuals consider points of view different from their own. Another example included personal insights around balance and boundaries within the context of the project, with Riley noting a change in how they “began and continue to seek a balance between pragmatically navigating a world that is often governed by the unholy social construct of race and claiming and expressing my full humanity regardless of how others feel.”

In terms of group-level insights, the researchers, each in their own way, echoed the tension between self and group, with Taylor noting:

Within the larger group context, I struggled with my natural inclination to be inquisitive. As a result, I found myself overcompensating with relationship-oriented tasks instead of honoring my more task-oriented nature. I suppose this struggle was rooted in my desire not to be seen as pushy or angry.

Taylor’s comment corroborates Hogg’s (2021) argument that when individuals are uncertain, they try to blend in with the group, even if it requires them to act contrary to their natural behavior. Kyle further noted that their identity made them intentionally include diversity when developing a list of individuals to interview, which aided at an organizational level (Drummond, 2020). They wrote:

We would only be interviewing a few people, so it was essential to ensure that we had a diverse group. In the end, we interviewed a White male, a White female who self-identified as neurodiverse, an African American woman, and an international student whose native language was Spanish. I think my identity helped me see the importance of having a diverse group of student interviews.

As these student co-researchers observed, their DEIA identities shaped what they considered important in their collaborative process so that they could authentically engage their own identities in their collaborative actions while honoring others’ perspectives and actions influenced by their claimed and implicit identities. The next section will look at a potential constraint to this advancement, specifically managing disparities in perspectives and interests.

### ***NEGOTIATION AMONG DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES AND INTERESTS***

In this section, considerations for negotiating the tension between addressing power dynamics through increased invitations for diverse stakeholders to engage in decision-making activities around research design will be explored. Within the PESS process, the executive committee and program chair were observed attempting to cultivate a sense of belonging, shared agency, and student-researcher importance through consensus-building as a strategic leadership method. Consensus-building activities within program evaluation within the literature appear to be an outcome of collaborative and participatory evaluation designs (Askew et al., 2012). The latter, coupled with the program faculty’s ethical and missional values, appear to have contributed to a simultaneous strength and constraint within the facilitation of the program evaluation activities. Consensus-building as an approach is reported to involve significant time investments revolving around the negotiation of strong and often varied opinions that are challenged more often within the context of a PhD program (McMullen

& Shepherd, 2006). When people who consider themselves experts, such as PhD students and faculty, engage in consensus building, they are more likely to challenge differing opinions than their peers (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Moreover, group opinions are shaped by changes in individual members of different statuses within and between groups (Hasani-Mavriqi et al., 2016). As a result, decisions about research activities and program evaluation activities within a collaborative and participatory framework appear to require even more time to facilitate when consensus is the goal. During the PESS, time constraints were further exacerbated by the aforementioned power dynamics, intergroup opinions represented by committees, and individual expertise because initial assessments of individual epistemic and social motives were not established from the outset of the program evaluation process (Liu et al., 2012). The latter was reflected in intra-group and intergroup forming, storming, and norming, which was described in the reflection section above. While cross-cultural differences do not automatically incite significant barriers to consensus, face-value assumptions about how people's social location, status, and social motives will impact the negotiation process limit and stall consensus-building (Liu et al., 2012).

### ***RESEARCHERS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH***

The final theme that was recognized by the researchers was the personal and professional growth they obtained as a benefit of participating in the PESS evaluation project. Two themes emerged from the reflections. The first insight was regarding the collaborative aspect of the program evaluation, and the second was about group and individual learning. Specifically, concerning individual learning, Taylor stated, "I loved witnessing and experiencing how other volunteers approached new contexts and solved problems" and how the process made them more "comfortable with challenging and critiquing" the program. Additionally, Kyle stated, "Our committee worked together well and were focused on accomplishing our tasks." Further, in terms of group learning, they noted that group formation and interactions were key to their collaborative learning process (Chen & Kuo, 2019; Herrera-Pavo, 2021). Avery noted, "I was privy to membership on teams that were intentionally designed to be diverse in terms of demographics and researcher type (evaluator and non-evaluator), resulting in teams that brought different aspects and perspectives to tasks, and where learning occurred informally through project participation and social interactions (Curtis et al., 2021). This was evident by the learning acquired individually and by the group during their interaction, which consisted of weekly brainstorming and progress meetings. Further, the researchers felt that once the team had "settled in," they were able to create an environment that fostered collaboration through a focus on relationships and tasks (Kim et al., 2020). From there, they could establish interdependence through the sharing of knowledge and working towards shared goals (Kim et al., 2020). Finally, the group had the opportunity to leverage their joint activities into a collaborative process that yielded gains for the researchers, individually and as a whole.

In this section, the researchers identified five themes from their experiences in the collaborative program evaluation process of the PESS. First, how essential planning and clear communication are to the collaborative learning process in the areas of preparation, group dynamics, and access to resources. Second, how the researchers' identities influenced their interpretations and interactions at an individual, group, and organizational level. Third, the power differentials that existed between faculty, student researchers, and committees. Fourth, the need for negotiation among differing perspectives and interests; and fifth, what they learned by participating in the collaborative evaluation process. The following section provides recommendations based on the literature and insight from the reflections on how to improve the experience and benefit of BIPOC doctoral students' participation in the collaborative process.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES FOR BIPOC DOCTORAL STUDENTS**

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Drawing from the literature and insight gathered from the reflections, the authors propose four recommendations to enhance the experience of BIPOC doctoral students' participation in the collaborative process and to better align the skills acquired during their PhD training with the demands of the broader job market. The four recommendations are: (a) align student training with job market realities; (b) provide clear communication and transparency in the process; (c) dismantle systemic and structural barriers; (d) respond to the effects of social location through reflective social mapping; and (e) negotiate power through consensus building.

### ***ALIGN STUDENT TRAINING WITH MARKET REALITIES AS A NEW PARADIGM FOR DOCTORAL EDUCATION***

The first recommendation acknowledges the importance of aligning the learning outcomes of PhD graduates and the needs of the broader job market. Programs must evolve to incorporate structures and methodologies that enable all students to develop and leverage program evaluation skills across diverse professional contexts beyond academia. Such an approach enriches the professional versatility of PhD holders, equipping them with a valuable skill set in a wide range of career paths (Parsa et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2021). This study showed that the use of collaborative learning helped students to hone the character skills that are sought after in the 21st-century workforce.

### ***DISMANTLE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS BEYOND INITIAL INCLUSION***

The second recommendation acknowledges that meaningful inclusion of BIPOC students in academic program evaluations requires more than their mere presence. It demands dismantling systemic and structural barriers that impede their full participation (Towner, 2024). True success in inclusion efforts involves creating an academic environment where all students can meaningfully engage and contribute, irrespective of their backgrounds. This requires a commitment from doctoral programs to critically assess and reform existing practices and norms that perpetuate disparities, ensuring that BIPOC students' contributions are fully recognized and valued within the academic community (Collier & Blanchard, 2024; Curtis et al., 2021).

### ***RESPOND TO THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL LOCATION THROUGH PROACTIVE POWER MAPPING***

The third recommendation acknowledges the necessity for institutional leaders to actively consider how social locations affect BIPOC students' participation in program evaluations. Acknowledging that BIPOC students bring valuable perspectives shaped by their cultural and historical experiences, programs can begin to challenge the norms that have historically marginalized these voices. By doing so, institutions can transform into spaces where BIPOC students do not have to choose between personal advancement and advocacy for inclusivity. This shift requires reevaluating organizational cultures and embracing diverse cultural understandings that BIPOC students bring to the academic sphere. Such an approach disrupts the inherent advantages often experienced by non-BIPOC members and acknowledges the richness that diverse perspectives add to the learning environment (Bano & O'Shea, 2023; Rasmussen & Leer, 2024).

### ***NEGOTIATING POWER DYNAMICS COLLABORATIVELY THROUGH CONSENSUS-BUILDING DESIGN***

The final recommendation is to utilize consensus building to negotiate power dynamics. Consensus-building is a collaborative process that may support more effective considerations of culture within the facilitation of program evaluation activities. However, consensus-building must be designed appropriately to support the timely completion of program evaluation tasks and equitable negotiations

of power dynamics within and between individual researchers and groups. Consequently, we recommend including consensus-building designing in the program planning activities at the outset of the process.

Decision-making around consensus-building methods can be adapted from and facilitated through a six-step process recommended by Cary et al. (2023). First, the executive committee of culturally responsive and collaborative program evaluations should “identify a diverse and inclusive team of research users who can meaningfully benefit from your consensus project” (Cary et al., 2023, p. 505). To maximize cultural responsiveness, Haugen and Chouinard (2019) suggested considering four types of power in this analysis of the research team: (1) relational, (2) political, (3) discursive, and (4) historical/temporal. These design considerations can be conducted simultaneously with assessments of individual researchers to further determine individual social motivations, positionality, status, and group cohesion. Second, the executive program evaluation team should consider their collaborative approach and establish a clear “partnership philosophy” that is reflective of the power analysis conducted (Cary et al., 2023, p. 505). Third, the leadership team should establish guidelines for how the census will be defined and measurements for achievement. In the fourth step, the leadership team should adjust the measurements for achievement that align the consensus-building process with program evaluation goal timelines, financial costs, and internal/external stakeholder outcomes. Fourth, the preliminary consensus-building framework should be paired with evidence-based consensus-building methods that are most closely aligned with the program evaluation goals and equitable negotiation of power dynamics. In this step, the proposed framework and methods should be shared with stakeholders before a final review is conducted by the leadership team. The final step in the consensus-building design process is to (1) discuss and create a reporting checklist that highlights the steps taken during each program evaluation activity and stage to establish consensus based on the framework and (2) establish a reporting process for when changes to or deviations from the checklist have occurred. This accountability step is important in sustaining ongoing considerations in thought and practice for how power dynamics are equitably negotiated.

## CONCLUSION

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The group dynamics aspect of collaborative learning develops important character traits, including effective communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution; it also motivates everyone's involvement. The PESS project designers for the PhD Organizational Leadership program purposely enlisted BIPOC students as evaluators to gain unique perspectives and experiences from them in the evaluation process. By elevating several points of view, thereby expressing the program's dedication to providing a fair learning environment, the deliberate effort aimed to increase the quality and relevance of program assessments.

The article's researchers discussed our shared PESS process contributions and experiences. The study found five themes having a significant impact on theory and practice. First, in collaborative learning, it is imperative to understand the value of effective communication and preparation. Regarding planning, it is essential to consider group dynamics and resource availability. Second, when considering the personal, social, and organizational levels, it is important to find out how the identities of the researchers affect their interactions and interpretations. Third, power also varied among committees, student researchers, and academic members. Fourth, it is crucial to underline the need to negotiate from several angles and with regard to several interests. Finally, it is important to assess the benefits people experience by engaging in the group review process. These results add to the increasing number of studies on inclusive practices in PhD education and program evaluation (Curtis et al., 2021; Sarrico, 2022).

The authors offer four suggestions to increase BIPOC doctoral students' involvement in the collaborative program evaluation process, which would also better align PhD-level abilities to the general employment scene. First, institutions should match student education to the present workplace needs

and job market realities. Second, eliminate the structural and institutional obstacles that hinder opportunities for BIPOC doctoral students. Third, consider the consequences of one's social level. Last, influence can be built by pushing cooperation and consensus. Implementing these ideas would completely overhaul program evaluation techniques and PhD training. They would inspire organizations to strive for real justice and empowerment rather than superficial inclusiveness.

Future research should work toward creating an accepted framework for the collaborative program evaluation process to provide a road map of the journey instead of just providing the compass. Researchers should also consider designing and conducting a full-scale collaborative program evaluation that engages BIPOC students from the start. Furthermore, researchers should investigate the long-term influence of collaborative evaluation experiences on BIPOC students' career choices. Another possibility is to investigate how engaging BIPOC students from the start of the collaborative program evaluation has a broader impact on higher education institutions. Moreover, it would be interesting to look at the scalability and application of these methods in several fields and institutional environments.

Finally, this paper highlights the need for educational institutions to use inclusive, fair, and collaborative approaches for program evaluation and PhD preparation. Using this approach will help us design educational settings that respect multiple points of view and equip every student to flourish in an ever more complex and varied global society.

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