Why do EDI policies fail?
An inhabited institutions perspective

Roger Pizarro Milian
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, and
Rochelle Wijesingha
Spark: A Centre for Social Research Innovation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

Abstract
Purpose – Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies have proliferated in recent decades, but studies have repeatedly noted their inefficacy and adverse effects. To understand the potential root causes of the inefficiency of EDI policies, this study examines how they are inhabited by individuals at the ground level.

Design/methodology/approach – This study draws on data gathered through 23 in-depth interviews with instructors at Progressive U, a large research-intensive Canadian university.

Findings – The data gathered/analyzed suggest that the implementation of EDI policies at Progressive U is hindered by the absence of coercive enforcement mechanisms, skepticism about their authenticity, the over-regulation of work and unresponsive bureaucratic structures.

Originality/value – This study examines the implementation of EDI policies through the prism of the inhabited institutions perspective in organizational sociology, producing insights that help to explain why EDI policies typically fail. In doing so, it produces insights relevant to both academic researchers and practitioners in the field.

Keywords Inhabited institutions, Diversity, Inclusion, Higher education

Introduction
In recent decades, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies have propagated across the non- and for-profit sectors, adopted by organizations in response to an array of normative and coercive pressures within their environments (Dobbin et al., 2011; Herring, 2009; Skaggs, 2009). Through such policies, organizations have sought to not only improve the representation of traditionally marginalized groups, but to also promote inclusion – a process through which individuals are made to feel that they belong and are valued (Chavez and Weisinger, 2008; Pless and Maak, 2004; Sabharwal, 2014). The field of higher education (HE) has proven to be a most fertile ground for EDI initiatives, spurred on by politically progressive activists and internal stakeholders (Binder and Wood, 2014; Gross, 2013; Gross and Fosse, 2012). This unique ecology has facilitated the emergence of an array of “safe spaces,” EDI offices and other mechanisms designed to render campuses more welcoming for students and faculty members (Bender, 2016). Several authors argue that the institution of these progressive reforms now serves as a vehicle through which universities – and organizations more broadly – acquire legitimacy or reputational capital (Bujaki et al., 2018; Davis, 2018; Tayar, 2017). This duplicity has raised legitimate concerns about the prospective hijacking of EDI within higher education for marketing purposes (Ahmed, 2007, 2012; Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; Thomas, 2018), given the only superficial effects that these policies appear to have on organizational culture and pedagogy (Ahmed, 2021; Morley, 1999; Vertovec, 2012).
Despite these charges, few scholars have ventured to examine how EDI policies are enacted by individuals at the ground level—a particularly important topic given widely acknowledged inefficacy of EDI policies and programs within the literature (e.g., Dobbin and Kalev, 2022; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Kalev et al., 2006). How are EDI policies perceived and implemented by individuals? This is a question that Williams et al. (2014) explored within the oil and gas industry, finding that while female professionals enjoyed EDI training programs (e.g., cultural sensitivity workshops), they did not find mentoring programs useful and resented the idea of being included in work teams simply due to their sex. Sharp et al.’s (2012) study of managers in engineering firms similarly found that they often felt they were “fitting square pegs in round holes,” given the inconsistencies between firm demands (e.g., long hours) and women’s familial responsibilities (p. 555). Studies like these have been instrumental to understanding the barriers to the implementation of EDI policies, especially in industrial sectors with a reputation for being inhospitable to women and racialized minorities. However, few comparable studies of the implementation of EDI policies have focused on fields like HE (for exceptions, see Bhopal, 2023; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020), where the ethos of EDI has achieved a relatively stronger foothold [1]. There has been little focus on how EDI policies are perceived and implemented by actors with relatively progressive political worldviews [2]. In this context, the “sensemaking” processes (Weick, 1995) around EDI policies are bound to differ from those observed within more traditionalist corporate sectors due to differing field norms, traditions and world views.

Our study augments existing research by providing an empirical analysis of how policies designed to foster EDI are perceived and implemented by a sample of instructors [3] within Progressive U—a large Canadian public university. Through 23 in-depth interviews, we observed that instructors typically had only a superficial understanding of EDI policies—something they generally attributed to the absence of coercive accountability mechanisms. Several additional institutional processes were also found to reinforce this situation. First, there was widespread skepticism among instructors about the authenticity of EDI efforts at Progressive U. Indeed, inconsistencies between the ethos of EDI policies and the actions of various divisions of the university prompted some to cynically perceive EDI policies as mere “window dressing” (Marques, 2010). Second, instructors expressed frustration about the over-regulation of their work, something which led them to adopt efficiency-minded strategies that focused their attention on abiding by organizational policies that were strongly enforced, while ignoring weakly enforced EDI mandates. Third, for those who did try to engage in EDI building efforts, difficulties in acquiring support from unresponsive bureaucratic structures prompted irritation and further cynicism, at times even leading them to abort such enterprises. As such, at Progressive U we observed a set of overlapping institutional processes that actively worked against the success of EDI policies. Our empirical findings thus add nuance to ongoing discussions of EDI-building strategies across a variety of fields, posing a number of pertinent theoretical and practical questions of interest to ongoing discussions in organizational sociology, management and adjacent disciplines.

The inhabited institutions perspective
We theorize instructors’ perceptions and implementation of EDI policies through the “inhabited institutions” (II) perspective within organizational sociology (see Binder, 2007; Hallett, 2010; Hallett and Meanwell, 2016; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006; Hallett et al., 2009). This framework emerged in the late 1990s in response to earlier New Institutionalist (NI) theorizing (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) that depicted institutions as “ready to wear” scripts that individuals passively accepted and enacted in everyday life (Brown, 1978, p. 375; Creed et al., 2002). Some scholars (e.g., Campbell, 1998) charged that NI depicted individuals as “dopes” caught in an “iron cage” of rules, noting that “socially
provided and constituted scripts rarely prescribe action in a way that unambiguously establishes correct behavior” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 22). In contrast to NI, II acknowledges that the enactment of institutions – be they organizational policies, laws or regulations – is done by “agentic, creative people, who have background knowledge and interests of different types” (Binder, 2007, p. 549; Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997). And, that the faithful enactment of institutions is far from guaranteed in organizations rife with internal conflict, vested interests and institutional complexity (e.g. Gouldner, 1954; Jackall, 1988). As such, II assumes that the enactment of policies requires a degree of non-deterministic “sensemaking” (Weick, 1993, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) on the part of individuals.

Empirical research finds that this sensemaking is shaped by various contextual factors. First, Coburn (2001, 2004, 2005, 2006) has convincingly argued that pre-existing worldviews serve as filters through which individuals rationalize their reactions to impinging pressures, such as organizational or government policies. Coburn’s (2004) work has found that K-12 teachers only embraced prescribed pedagogical practices that were congruent with their own existing views, routinely sidestepping more radical directives. Everitt (2012) similarly found that teachers developed an “arsenal” of pedagogical practices throughout their careers, which then shaped how they responded to state mandates. In both of these cases, individuals’ worldviews served as a lens through which to develop responses to external demands. And, perhaps more importantly, these and other studies emphasize that worldviews are themselves products of individuals’ lived experiences within local ecologies (Binder, 2007; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). The social “embeddedness” (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman, 1988) of experiences shapes not only how individuals perform technical tasks, like teaching, but also “prime” them to perceive other developments within their environment (Everitt, 2013, p. 179–180). Thus, for example, through Hallett (2010) ethnographic analysis of an elementary school, we learn that new strict accountability mechanisms were imbued with meaning and perceived as tyrannical by teachers, via comparisons with previous lax arrangements (see p. 63–64). This explication of the role of local embeddedness within inhabited institutionalism is consistent with Weick et al.’s (2005) assertion that sensemaking is a retrospective process, with actors developing narratives that explain novel occurrences by relating them to past experiences. It brings to light the multiple dimensions of embeddedness, both spatially – within the context of current norms in a community – as well as temporally – within the context of local histories.

Through the lens of the inhabited institutions framework, we inquire: how do instructors make sense of EDI policies within Progressive U? How do their worldviews and lived experiences shape their perceptions of EDI policies and, in turn, how they enact them? Through this investigation, like other authors before us (Bhopal, 2023; Sharp et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2014), we seek to identify factors which hamper the successful implementation and efficacy of EDI policies in organizations.

Context of the study
The site of our case study, Progressive U (pseudonym), is a research-intensive university situated within a major Canadian urban center. It is regularly ranked among the “top” 200 universities in global rankings – such as those produced by Times Higher Education or QS – and also ranks near the top of domestic rank tables produced by Maclean’s magazine. With respect to the promotion of EDI, we perceive Progressive U to be generally unremarkable within the Canadian context, as it possesses many of the same types of policies as its peers (see Figure 1). It has a “blanket” EDI policy [4], which covers all areas and activities across the organization. Through such policy, the university affirms its general commitment to creating a culture that is respectful of differences across social groups and inclusive of all communities. Beyond this general policy, Progressive U has also formed a special task force that engages in ongoing consultation with equity-seeking communities, with a view towards

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unearthing additional ways that its policies and programs can be amended to better meet the needs of students and employees. As such, this blanket EDI policy is an “evergreen” document, one that is routinely scrutinized and updated to reflect the needs of different groups within the community, along with emerging best EDI practices across the field.

Under the umbrella of this EDI policy are clusters of sub-policies that aim to regulate specific activities in different branches of the university, such as the hiring of employees by the human resources department or the content of the promotional materials produced by its marketing department. Finally, most pertinent to this study, several policies regulate instructor behavior in relation to students, both inside and outside of the classroom. *Progressive U*, for example, has an extensive academic accommodation policy for students with disabilities that strives to ensure an equitable learning environment. It does so through ensuring the provision of resources devised to remove barriers that inhibit students’ full participation in the classroom. This includes guaranteed access to course materials in a diverse array of formats (e.g. audio, braille or enlarged-font), extensions on assignments and tests, as well as permission to use aids like memory notecards during exams. *Progressive U* also has a policy mandating that accommodations be granted for a wide array of culturally significant or religious reasons. This prevents, for example, students from being penalized for not attending classes while observing a religious holiday. It also provides alternative examination dates when regularly scheduled exams or assignment due dates conflict with religious rituals. Whenever an activity or circumstance is not directly covered by one of these sub-policies, the “blanket” policy nonetheless compels instructors to behave in a manner which does not discriminate against students on any protected grounds. In turn, an official mechanism exists for students to file complaints when they believe they have been denied access to appropriate accommodations by instructors, though it is unclear how often this instrument is used, given the confidential nature of these processes. Beyond such mechanism, we did not discover any other mechanisms designed specifically to hold instructors/professors accountable for neglecting to faithfully implement existing EDI policies [5].

**Data and methods**

To examine how EDI policies were perceived and interpreted at *Progressive U*, we conducted 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with instructors in the spring of 2016. These interviews typically lasted between 40 and 60 min and covered an array of topics associated with EDI. *Progressive U* was perceived as a suitable site for our research given that it was unremarkable in its adoption of EDI policies relative to others where we had previously studied and worked. As such, we believed that dynamics observed within it could be more interesting to scholars and practitioners than those from a highly atypical case. Further, we chose to focus specifically on instructors within its Faculty of Social Sciences for strategic reasons. The social sciences, though constituting a diverse group of disciplines, each have their own subpolicies, including academic accommodations, human resources, and communications & marketing.

**Figure 1.** Diversity and inclusion policy framework at *Progressive U*.

**Note(s):** This is a non-exhaustive graphical representation of EDI policies at the research site. Further detail is omitted to protect the identity of the university.
branches which study forms of social inequality. Labor economists study gender wage gaps; organizational sociologists study racial discrimination in the workplace; political scientists examine disparities in access to government institutions. We theorized that familiarity with these issues could render social scientists relatively more sensitive to the ethos of EDI than corporate sector employees, a group studied through existing research on EDI policies (e.g. Williams et al., 2014; Sharp et al., 2012), as well as those situated in other wings (e.g. hard sciences) who do not directly study forms of inequality. This assertion is one that has empirical support dating back to the 1970s (Faia, 1974; Ladd and Lipsett, 1976), with studies repeatedly finding that social scientists are far more “liberal” than their counterparts across engineering, science and business departments (for a review of this literature, see Gross and Simmons, 2007). We thus surmise that the social sciences will – on average – provide the strongest contrasts to the groups most commonly studied within the existing literature.

Participants were recruited via email over a four-month period, utilizing comprehensive contact information available through Progressive U’s public personnel directory. Recruitment occurred to the point of theoretical “saturation” (Bowen, 2008) – when the two lead researchers agreed that additional interviews were not producing any novel insights. Participants were offered a modest gift certificate as compensation for their time. We refrained from more convenient “snow-ball” sampling techniques given that we wished to ensure that the identity of our participants remained confidential. For this reason, we blinded both the name of the university and individuals, masking identifying details present in quotations and altering the demographic characteristics of certain individuals (e.g. gender, professor rank) to prevent stories from being linked back to them. Confidentiality was a salient issue throughout the course of recruitment, with numerous instructors expressing concerns about having their more cynical views about EDI policies revealed to colleagues. As such, engaging in the abovementioned tactics to protect the identity of participants was vital not only for ethical reasons, but also, for recruitment purposes.

Our recruitment efforts netted us a sample of 15 females and 8 males from across 6 different departments in Progressive U’s Faculty of Social Sciences. Roughly a quarter of this sample was racialized. It also included 5 individuals at the rank of tenured (associate/full) professor, 5 tenure-track (assistant/unt enured) professors and 13 non-tenure track instructors. Diversity in this regard is a particular strength of this sample, given that it affords us access to individuals with widely varying employment conditions. Individuals’ age also ranged from those in their late 20s to late 60s. In turn, the specific amount of teaching experience at Progressive U ranged considerably, from only a few months to over 30 years. This diverse sample afforded us the opportunity to study perceptions and enactments of EDI policies by individuals with unique life experiences and contrasting social positions. We make no claims as to the representativeness of this sample, given that statistical representativeness or generalization are not the primary objective of qualitative inquiry (Small, 2009). We also eschew more systematic quantification of trends in our data across participant demographics, as this is a meaningless exercise with small samples (Maxwell, 2010). Rather, we focused on analyzing each respondent’s accounts with a view towards identifying theoretically meaningful patterns in how they perceived and enacted EDI policies.

The majority (20) of our interviews were conducted face-to-face. In exceptional cases (3), we used Skype or telephone interviews to overcome scheduling difficulties. Whenever possible, however, we opted for face-to-face interviews as they are ideal for discussing sensitive issues, allowing for the development of mutual trust between the researchers and the respondents (Shuy, 2003). Face-to-face interviews also allow researchers to better observe body language, facial expressions and other gestures which facilitate non-verbal communication (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 290; also see Irvine et al., 2013). Both researchers were present for 20 interviews, simultaneously participating as “lead” and “trailer” interviewers. This method is optimal given that it allows investigators to focus their attention on different elements of the interview and to subsequently
triangulate their observations (Arrowsmith and Marginson, 2006; Burnard, 2004). While one researcher (the “lead”) asked questions in the interview guide, the second (the “trailer”) observed the participant, writing notes about their responses and demeanor. The second interviewer was then allowed to ask follow-up questions once the interview protocol was exhausted. We alternated roles to prevent any systematic bias produced by one researcher’s interviewing style.

Our interview guide included 15 questions that provided an elementary structure for our interactions with the individuals in our sample. A first cluster of questions queried respondents about their familiarity with EDI policies at the university (e.g. “Are you aware of any policies that Progressive U has on diversity or inclusivity?”), including whether they had read them and whether they were able to directly identify any specific policies (e.g. “Have you ever read them? Do you know the names of any of these policies?”). We also directly asked respondents whether they believed that their colleagues were familiar with these policies. A second cluster of questions revolved around the institutional resources or supports that instructors/professors leveraged to enact EDI policies at the university, as well as their utility. We also directly inquired about gaps in the availability of supports, and what else the university could do to facilitate their EDI-related work. The last cluster of questions revolved around the actual strategies that professors used to establish an inclusive and equitable environment within their classroom, as well as their motivations for engaging in this type of work (e.g. “What motivates you to promote an inclusive environment in the classroom?”). Though providing a general structure for our interactions, our questioning often exceeded our interview guide via follow-up questions that probed further into the responses provided by our interviewees. We also concluded our interview by allowing instructors/interviewees to steer the discussion into any area we had not probed (e.g. “Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you would like to add?).

Each interview was recorded with the permission of our respondents and subsequently transcribed by a research assistant. The resulting text was inputted into QSR NVivo for manual coding and analysis. As is conventional within qualitative research (see Small, 2009), a series of themes were identified through a comparison of the data gathered across participants. The themes reported through this manuscript generally mirrored the structure of our line of questioning. A first set of nodes captured basic variation (yes, no, somewhat) in respondents’ familiarity with EDI policies, as well as any factors associated with such expressed levels of familiarity (e.g. amount of time at Progressive U). A second set of nodes captured a diverse set of challenges that hindered the faithful implementation of EDI policies, including both perceptions of these policies as well as difficulties experienced by instructors/professors in accessing institutional supports. We entered the coding phase of our research already possessing a rough outline of the themes that we compiled during the interviewing process, via debriefing meetings held after each interview was completed. During these debriefings, we identified and took notes of key emerging trends and contrasted our observations with those made in previous interviews. We consulted these notes during the coding of transcripts, while simultaneously remaining open to undetected trends within the data. The systematic coding of transcripts proved useful in breaking down themes into more refined categories and making sense of subtleties in respondents’ accounts. It also allowed for an in-depth comparison of interviewee responses which was simply not possible in real time, or via simple recollection.

Findings
Limited knowledge of EDI policies
Most instructors admitted that – despite uniformly agreeing with the ethos of EDI – they possessed only a cursory understanding of the policies regulating their work in the classroom. Only a handful could recall the actual names of any specific EDI policies, and nearly all admitted to having only lightly “skimmed” these documents. A lack of awareness of
EDI policies was most pronounced among non-tenure track instructors, who are typically hired within the Canadian context on a short-term contract basis to teach specific courses each term. These individuals within our sample were simultaneously employed at multiple universities, each of which had their own unique EDI policies:

I’m teaching at the moment on three different campuses . . . They (EDI policies) could be different everywhere . . . there are undoubtedly specific requirements in specific campuses. I don’t know what they are. I certainly haven’t had anyone complain about them, and so I just tend to carry-on with what I’m doing <laughs> until someone says otherwise. (Sessional Instructor)

However, a lack of knowledge about EDI policies was not reducible to employment arrangement, given that this unfamiliarity was also observed among tenured professors who had spent over two decades at Progressive U. One associate professor attributed his lack of awareness of EDI policies to the absence of coercive mechanisms to ensure that instructors studied their content:

. . . we (instructors/professors) have a vague understanding (of EDI policies), but there certainly hasn’t been, to my knowledge of them, though my memory fades, I don’t remember one particular workshop where all the faculty come and are, you know, educated on what the accessibility policies are, what the equity policies are. We get emails, we get things like that, but it is not the same thing. (Associate Professor, emphasis added) [6]

When we queried participants about the actual content of EDI policies, through questions about what specific sorts of behavior they prescribed, many became visibly anxious, breaking eye contact, looking down at their hands or tripping over their own words as they tried to account for their lack of knowledge. In one extreme case, a junior female professor apologized repeatedly, expressing that she did not know she would be “quizzed,” and communicating embarrassment. At that point, it was clear to us that our probing had caused her to momentarily lose face. While organizations typically operate under a “logic of confidence,” assuming that members are competent rule followers (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976), our questioning unintentionally violated this taken-for-granted arrangement.

For the most part, however, professors proved skillful in developing accounts to justify their inadequate knowledge of EDI policies. The most common discursive tactic entailed the suggestion that EDI policies were reviewed at an earlier point, but that knowledge of such policies had since faded. As one female assistant professor noted:

This (EDI policy) is something I would have read the first sort of “go around”, before I came here (Progressive U), and if those policies have changed in any way, quite honestly, unless there was a big announcement, I probably wouldn’t know about it at this point.

A tenured male professor that had worked at the university for decades similarly suggested: “I’ve probably forgotten them now, but I was pretty good at one point” (emphasis added). Such utterances effectively shielded these individuals from further scrutiny. But, at the same time, they provide evidence that working knowledge of said policies was not a functional requirement and that there was no mechanism within the institution to ensure that faculty maintained a minimum level of familiarity with EDI policies. Five exceptions to the abovementioned pattern within our sample came from three instructors that had served on committees involved in the development of EDI policies, and two younger instructors actively engaged in campus activism. These individuals possessed in-depth knowledge of EDI policies that sharply contrasted with the obliviousness of the their colleagues in our sample.

Beyond addressing our participants’ individual familiarity with EDI policies, we also queried them about how acquainted they perceived their colleagues to be with such policies. Through such questioning, we hoped to draw on their lived experiences interacting with peers in this organization on matters related to EDI. The picture that emerged from this exercise
evidenced that we were not observing a batch of outliers through our small sample, but rather, the perceived status quo within Progressive U. One sessional instructor candidly admitted:

I’ve been here for < number blinded > years, and I know they exist, but don’t know what they are . . . I think that goes even above and beyond just instructors or sessionals, I think it goes for (permanent) faculty too. Even on stuff they have to do, the chances of them reading these policies or being forced to read these policies are probably nonexistent. (Emphasis added)

This narrative was consistent with claims made by a more senior tenured professor, who suggested it was only through a haphazard process of “trial and error,” and being potentially reprimanded by administration, that fellow instructors began to study pertinent regulations:

I don’t think faculty members know about those policies . . . many of the faculty members who bump up against that policy (accommodations for students with disabilities) are not aware of it, do not know it exists until they bump up against it, and that’s a problem . . . (Associate Professor)

Such accounts provided by instructors for dynamics occurring within their surrounding environments are highly consistent with existing organizational theorizing. As Oliver (1991) has argued, when coercive measures are used to promote the adoption of a practice, and where the cost of nonconformity are substantial, actors are more likely to acquiesce to mandates (p. 168–169). In other scenarios – like Progressive U – where strict accountability mechanisms are not in place, the likelihood of a policy being faithfully enacted dramatically decreases. In the latter scenario, the organization engages in routine messaging that gives the impression that something is being done about EDI, but actors at the ground level are not forced or heavily incentivized to comply with organizational edicts. This is a textbook example of loose coupling between formal structures and individual behavior.

**Factors affecting perceptions and implementation of EDI policies**

Beyond the absence of a strict enforcement mechanism, the disconnect between EDI policies and instructor behavior was aided by three other institutional processes: the perceived inauthenticity of EDI-building efforts, the over-regulation of instructor behavior and unresponsive bureaucratic structures.

**Inauthenticity.** There was a notable degree of skepticism about the authenticity of EDI policies among study participants, even among the more ardent advocates of social justice. Scholars have defined authenticity as implying “some measure of self-consistency or continuity across time and situations” (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010, p. 140), whereby an actor lives up to the “moral standards that he or she endorses” (Roberts et al, 2009, p. 151). When an action is inconsistent with the organization’s true values, it can be deemed as an inauthentic, opportunistic “marketing ploy” (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009, p. 271). This can produce “resentment” and “backlash” among stakeholders who may feel manipulated or deceived (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009, p. 274; also see Kovács et al., 2014).

Interviewees routinely evaluated the authenticity of EDI policies at Progressive U through cross-referencing their ethos with the actions of different “arms” of Progressive U. One male assistant professor explained this logic in detail, with regards to a recent hire made by Progressive U for a senior administrative leadership position:

In December . . . the university sent out a statement, that we don’t tolerate discrimination, our position on this should be well-known, it should be absolute . . . But then, literally a week later, there’s a post on the <Progressive U student newspaper> that said “Progressive U is hiring < name blinded > . . .” a guy who’s internationally known for promoting a racist practice . . . and defending him. That’s a week after the President saying these things, right? So, there’s kind of like a mixed bag . . . Yea, we have a president that says these things, but then we do things that are a direct contradiction of that . . . (Assistant Professor, emphasis added)
A senior female professor identified a similar disconnect between the ethos of EDI policies designed for students and Progressive U’s treatment of instructors/professors. She explained that while students at Progressive U were accommodated for “everything,” the same degree of accommodation was not extended to instructors. Instructors were, for example, not allowed to reschedule classes, or block off time slots in their schedule, to allow them to drop off or pick up their children from school. Indeed, the university appeared entirely unconcerned with providing accommodation for instructors/professor’s familial responsibilities.

The type of disconnects cited above instigated much skepticism and provide useful context for instructors/professors’ decision to not invest the energy required to familiarize themselves with EDI policies and to faithfully “inhabit” them. It opened the door for instructors to feel comfortable ignoring EDI policies and simply rely on their own moral compass within the classroom. In this regard, and as hypothesized by Weick et al. (2005), we see that our interviewees sensemaking was conditioned by the local context created through the incoherence between the EDI policies they were asked to follow and Progressive U’s actions in other domains of organizational life.

Over-regulation of teaching. Beyond concerns with authenticity, a segment of our interviewees lumped EDI policies together with other bureaucratic regulations that encroached on their professional autonomy. Such regulations overwhelmed many instructors who expressed that they did not have the time to digest all the rules pertinent to their work. Facing policy overload, many responded through efficiency-minded strategies that prioritized digesting policies related to issues they were presently dealing with, often as the product of student complaints. As one female assistant professor explained:

> When I go in to teach, the idea that I read a 100-page rule book about how to do every little thing, with inclusivity only getting 20 out of the 80 (sic) – I wouldn’t do it. I don’t do it until I start to bump into something that’s not quite right. Then, I start to do some consultation, and find out what the rules are . . . when you have rules for everything you effectively have rules for nothing because nobody reads them, it’s just too much to do . . . (Assistant Professor – emphasis added)

This individual thus engaged in a unique form of “bracketing” (Weick et al., 2005) in response to information overload, deeming those policies that directly impinged on her as “important” and entirely ignoring others until they became relevant to a given situation she was facing. This type of behaviour is not unprecedented. When available information exceeds human cognitive capacity, individuals have long been known to engage in strategies to identify important information to make “satisficing” rather than optimal decisions (Simon, 2000; Weick, 1970).

An associate professor with more seniority admitted that the over-regulation of instructor behaviour not only triggered the efficiency-minded strategies discussed above, but also generated overt resistance toward EDI policies. Over-regulation pushed even those who agreed with the ethos of EDI to feel “aggravated” by the university’s encroachment on their autonomy. In this respect, sensemaking with regards to EDI was embedded within pre-existing professional-bureaucratic friction within Progressive U:

> . . . I think the over-bureaucratization of the undergraduate classroom in general, creates a lot of cynicism and resistance, when you layer it on top of all the regulations over, like, when we can do our exams, how soon we have to have our final exams to the (administrative office) to get it copied, how the (program governing missed exams) works . . . When you layer on top of that a bunch of other policies, well-intentioned, about diversity and inclusiveness, you’ve already got a bunch of faculty members who are like, “you guys have boxed me in, I can’t do anything innovative or good for my students, and now you’re adding another layer?” So, it creates a resistance or rejection to well-intentioned policies . . . it’s so bureaucratized that you give me any additional thing, even if I like, philosophically think it’s the right thing to do, I’m going to resist and be aggravated . . . (Associate Professor, emphasis added)
As noted in the passage above, there was a “tipping point” at which instructors became aggravated by, and began to ignore, any additional demands placed on them, even when they agreed in principle with the content of the directives.

This backlash to EDI policies is not unprecedented. Indeed, Dobbin et al. (2015) have noted that EDI initiatives that aim to control worker’s behavior can be expected to “spark managerial rebellion” (p. 1015). Such hypothesis being rooted in now classical work which finds that workers routinely resist and circumvent bureaucratic controls (Gouldner, 1954; Morrill, 1995).

Abandoned supports and unresponsive institutions. Beyond the inauthenticity of EDI policies, and the over-regulation of their classrooms, a third source of frustration emerged when attempting to access university supports for EDI-building efforts. One case, described by an assistant professor who wanted the university to host workshops on strategies to render classrooms inclusive to students with mental health issues, usefully illustrates the types of challenges that instructors faced when attempting to access supports. In recent years, this professor made repeated efforts to find an office within the university that would help him to organize said workshops. As he reflected, however:

> It’s been very difficult to access and draw upon the appropriate area of the university … So, I’ve made initiatives in the last year to try to get < student health services office> … to go down to them and say, “You know, can we put on a workshop for interested faculty members and for TA’s on mental health?” Because, we’re the frontline staff, we’re there with the students. There are mental health issues, but we’re not really trained to identify them or necessarily treat them. But, it’s a question of finding a part of the institution which will take ownership for that. So, you know, one part of the institution I go to says, “Well it’s not our responsibility.” Well, whose responsibility is it? (emphasis in original).

Another associate professor explained a similar ambiguity about where to obtain supports for EDI issues in her classrooms:

> Two, three times things have happened in my classroom, and <pauses> I had no idea where to phone even, O.K.? <laughs> So, then it took a while … we phone and they go: “No, no, no, this is the wrong office.” Then you phone somewhere else, then you phone somewhere else …

Events such as these reinforced existing frustrations with Progressive U, given that instructors did not feel their efforts were supported by the administration. Coincidentally, the issue raised by the professor quoted above is one that we experienced when trying to become acquainted with existing EDI policies and resources during the early stages of this research. In an effort to develop background knowledge of EDI initiatives associated specifically with instructors/professors, we contacted and were referred from one office to three others within the university. Each of these offices perceived the other to be playing a more central role in promoting EDI within the classroom, but a clear sense of responsibility for this function was entirely absent. This jurisdictional ambiguity heightens the “search costs” incurred by instructors attempting to access supports and made faithfully inhabiting EDI policies onerous for instructors already encumbered with other mandates. Nearly all participants agreed that there was a need for the creation of a “road map” for instructors, to facilitate the acquisition of EDI resources across the university.

Our findings here complement recent work by Bhopal (2023), focusing on EDI staff working at universities in England. Their work concludes that such staff lack the power and resources to promote real change. Our work, on the other hand, finds that – from an instructor’s point of view – such staff appear to be generally missing in action at Progressive U.

Discussion
The modern university is often depicted within popular discourse as a “champion” of EDI, given its progressive policies and well-advertised commitments to social justice (Henry et al., 2017).
However, our study found no evidence that EDI policies are faithfully inhabited at *Progressive U*. Instructors have little familiarity with EDI policies, tend to perceive them as inauthentic and view them as a yet another bureaucratic infringement on their autonomy. The observed dynamics at *Progressive U.* generally correspond with previous research on the enactment of EDI policies and initiatives (e.g., Sharp *et al.*, 2012; Williams *et al.*, 2014), finding that the implementation of EDI-building efforts is often characterized by inefficiencies and unintended consequences. Actors at the ground level often do not respond as expected and this can undermine the ethos of the policies designed by well-intentioned leaders. Through identifying these dynamics, our research also provides insight into why quantitative research (e.g., Dobbin and Kalev, 2022) has repeatedly found that EDI policies prove ineffective, if not counterproductive. Lastly, our work produces yet another case which aligns with the predictions of the II perspective (Hallett, 2010; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006), which emphasizes that policies are made “sense” of and enacted by locally embedded actors who filter them through the prism of their pre-existing world views and within the context of local histories.

In light of these findings, we posit that administrators can take several basic steps to ensure that EDI policies are more effective. First, and perhaps most obvious, universities need to engage in more concerted and empirical efforts to map how stakeholders not only perceive their EDI policies, but also experience these policies. It would also be worthwhile to understand the extent to which stakeholders are familiar with the policies. Such concepts should serve as key performance indicators within an EDI plan and be tracked across time to inform strategy. From there, identified problems should be met with thoughtful and well-resourced efforts to address identified problems. In our case, given that instructors/professors already express that they are overwhelmed by the demands on their time and energy, and perceive EDI policies as an infringement on their autonomy, organizational efforts would need to be strategically designed to address their concerns. One useful approach would be for universities to divert a proportion of the funds allocated to improving research intensiveness to EDI-building efforts. For example, course releases and additional administrative supports could be provided to faculty members interested in piloting new initiatives that aim to improve EDI within the classroom. Course releases could also be assigned to faculty wishing to engage in the evaluation of EDI policies within their programs, departments, or faculties. In the absence of strategic and better-resourced efforts to educate instructors on said policies, we fear that the EDI efforts will remain mere “window dressing” (Marques, 2010) or “smokescreens” (Bhopal, 2023). At the same time, universities need to engage in concerted efforts to “walk the walk” (Bhopal, 2023) as it pertains to EDI-building efforts, to ensure that the ethos of EDI is not only reflected in official policies pertinent to teaching, but also, in the actions of its various arms. In the absence of a holistic, organization-wide commitment to EDI, these policies will continue to be perceived by instructors/professors as inauthentic, thus diminishing buy-in from instructors which may be crucial in propelling EDI efforts forward. Furthermore, streamlining the provision of supports for instructors wishing to engage in innovative efforts to boost EDI would be helpful. Empowering these driven individuals may prove a powerful strategy for promoting EDI within bureaucratic environments.

Another important outcome of this research is that it further cements the utility of the inhabited institutions (II) perspective for understanding the inefficacy of organizational policies. For nearly two decades, quantitative studies have observed that EDI-building efforts typically fail to achieve their intended results. However, our understanding of the factors prompting this inefficacy has lagged, thus hampering efforts to engineer frameworks through which our organizations can effectively construct more equitable, diverse and inclusive environments. This study provides a template through which the II perspective can be harnessed as an evaluative tool alongside other conventional evaluation methods. At the same time, our findings serve as a testament to the versatility of the II perspective and its
ability to help us understand how social phenomena like inauthenticity, emotional responses to bureaucratic overreach, and various other organizational dynamics mediate the faithful implementation of policies. We hope that our work serves as an endorsement for the broader adoption of this theoretical framework.

Though making valuable contributions, it is important to identify the limitations of this study, with a view towards outlining fruitful directions for future research. First, broader efforts need to be made to examine EDI policy implementation across different university faculties. While social scientists may be primed to have a generally positive disposition toward EDI-building policies via disciplinary socialization and readily acknowledge the inherent value of these efforts, instructors/professors in other areas of the university may be less familiar with discourses of EDI. In those spaces, it would be reasonable to expect that instructors/professors will filter EDI mandates through a different disciplinary lens, and thus, display greater skepticism and resistance towards them. As such, promoting EDI within these spaces will require alternative implementation strategies. Future research should look outside of the social sciences, with a view towards understanding how EDI policies are inhabited within those spaces. Second, future research should employ an ethnographic lens to examine how EDI policies are enacted within situations. As several qualitative scholars have outlined, talk can be “cheap,” failing to align with action at the ground level (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014a, b). Especially as it relates to EDI, there may be normative pressures which drive instructors to exaggerate their commitment and efforts to promote these principles. As such, it is important to use alternative methods to more directly observe the implementation of EDI policies.

Notes

1. This statement should not be misconstrued as an assertion that higher education is devoid of discrimination, but rather, that relative to other fields, there is a broader familiarity with discourses about equity, diversity and inclusion.
2. See Gross and Simmons (2007) on the political views of professors.
3. Throughout the article we refer to our sample as instructors for efficiency purposes however, it should be noted that the sample included professors (assistant, associate, full) and sessional instructors.
4. We refrain from direct citation of this policy, and others, in order to blind the identity of the university.
5. We fathom that repeated or extreme infractions of EDI policies could result in formal sanctioning via the human resources department, as we have seen occur in several high-profile cases within American universities. However, we are not aware of any such occurrences in recent memory within Progressive U, nor did any references to this emerge during our interviews.
6. Through the passage above we also see a first useful distinction being made between organizational messaging via emails and “things like that”, and more compulsory efforts to educate instructors on existing policies and how to implement them at the classroom level. The explicit distinction being drawn by the interviewees is that these two actions on the part of the organization are not equivalent in the outcomes that they produce. This is a theme that we discuss in greater depth later.

References


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Why do EDI policies fail?


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Corresponding author
Roger Pizarro Milian can be contacted at: rogerpizarro.milian@utoronto.ca

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