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Article abstract

Neoliberal capitalism has undoubtedly impacted every sphere of public education in the United States. With an increased push towards identity-neutral modalities of instruction, students who identify as transgender, non-binary, or other expansive gender identities (trans) are forced to reckon with implicit and explicit power dynamics in classrooms that prioritize white, cisheteropatriarchal modes of knowledge production in nuanced ways. This qualitative study explores the ways neoliberal capitalism impacts the curricular experiences of trans students by centering the power dynamics they encounter through interactions with their professors and their peers. Findings underscore the pernicious nature of the neoliberalization of higher education in advancing trans exclusion from collegiate classrooms as a hindrance towards equity in public postsecondary education. Implications for transforming curricular instruction and policy to subvert the tensions of neoliberalism are also provided.

Critical Education

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# *"I Need This Person's Support to Have a Career"*

## *The Material and Emotional Impacts of Neoliberalism on Trans Collegians' Classroom Experiences at a Public University*

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**Abstract**

*Neoliberal capitalism has undoubtedly impacted every sphere of public education in the United States. As faculty are pushed towards identity-neutral modalities of instruction, students who identify as transgender, non-binary, or other expansive gender identities (trans) are forced to reckon with implicit and explicit power dynamics in classrooms that prioritize White, cisheteropatriarchal modes of knowledge production in nuanced ways. This qualitative study explores the ways neoliberal capitalism impacts the curricular experiences of trans students by centering the power dynamics they encounter through interactions with their professors and their peers. Findings underscore the pernicious nature of the neoliberalization of higher education in advancing trans exclusion from collegiate classrooms as a hindrance towards equity in public postsecondary education. Implications for transforming curricular instruction and policy to subvert the tensions of neoliberalism are also provided.*

As an economic theory, neoliberal capitalism has had a multiple decades-long chokehold on the sociopolitical structuring of the United States. Those who adopt a Marxist understanding of neoliberalism note its overemphasis on individual and inter/national economic productivity, particularly in attempting to divorce identity from economic progress. These logics force individual consumers within capitalist market economies to strive for "objective" capital gains while foregoing "subjective" matters, such as diversity, inclusivity, and equity on identity lines (Le & Matias, 2019; Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011). When capital and identity are treated as mutually exclusive, identity neutrality is used as an ideal of neoliberalism to preserve White cisheteronormative patriarchal power, ultimately silencing minoritized racial and ethnic (Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011), gender and sexuality (Friedensen et al., 2021), and other identity communities in the name of neutrality disguised as "equity."

This is not to say that identity and capital are always mutually exclusive under neoliberal capitalism: at times, minoritized social identities are coopted by economic strategies to preserve capital (Melamed, 2011; Rainer, 2023). Companies often commoditize queer and trans identities to maximize profit margins by selling the image of queer inclusivity, often referred to as rainbow capitalism. Rainer (2023) argues that such neoliberal coopting of queer identities is an example of "the developments of de-politicization, individualization, and the hegemonic normalization of selected sexual identities as entangled and mutually constitutive," (p. 1004) in that identity is constructed as never related to capital until it can be involved to preserve the supremacy of the White cisheterogenderist patriarchy. This understanding has been meaningfully applied to neoliberal multiculturalism, a process used by entities in positions of power to "protect those who are valuable to capital … [and] render vulnerable those who are not valuable within circuits of capital" (Melamed, 2011, p. xxi). On either side of the neoliberal coin, moves towards and away from multiculturalism are only made to preserve power, and never to equalize or redistribute it. These tensions of neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal multiculturalism extend throughout many sectors of the public domain, notably including public education systems at the K-12 and postsecondary levels in the United States (Mintz, 2021) and can be seen, paradoxically, in both the push for identity-neutral education and in the creation of diversity, equity, and inclusion apparati.

The pernicious nature of neoliberalism means that its reach extends far beyond concerns of purely economic prowess. As individuals are told in a neoliberal society to invest in and prioritize the resources that will make them contributors to the national economy, public higher education emerges as a beacon of economic and social mobility that is subsequently also imbued with ideals of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2002). Governmental initiatives including the Obama-era College Completion Agenda (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015), the increased representation of corporate sponsorships at institutions of higher education (Giroux, 2002), and the international push towards initiatives in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education (Friedensen et al., 2021) all point to ways governmental and popular understandings of the "value" of postsecondary education have adapted to fit into neoliberal schemas. The neoliberalization of colleges and universities impacts much of how the stakeholders these institutions serve interact with the university: professors are oftentimes expected to teach and research in ways that advance "objective," identity-absent knowledge, while students are taught to treat degree programs as means to greater economic ends (Saunders, 2010). Neoliberal multiculturalism helps us recognize that even positions that seem to engage with identity are similarly fraught: for example, professors have been expressly encouraged to bring their own identities into their work with the wave of diversity, equity, and inclusion-related positions in the late 2010s, only to have such positions be stripped of funding and power, and in some states, rendered unlawful (Goldberg, 2024).

Uniquely impacted under a neoliberal socioeconomic structure are transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and individuals holding other expansive gender identities (herein referred to as trans). The aforementioned dualities of neoliberal ideologies are felt across institutions and sectors of the public domain for trans people: for example, Quinan (2017) describes how technologies of governmental surveillance such as body scanners, identity documents, and facial recognition software that were introduced in response to gendered, racist, and other identity-based national security fears are but one way that the policing of trans individuals has spiked in a neoliberal society. As aforementioned, the neoliberal logics and ideologies that are imbued within public postsecondary education also uniquely impact queer and trans stakeholders at colleges and universities. For queer and trans students, this neoliberal shift and separation of identity from capital has often resulted in the creation of classroom spaces that devalue students' individual identities (Gutzwa, 2021), pedagogically silence queer and trans identities (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017), and force students to choose between authentically embodying their identities and having a promising future career (Friedensen et al., 2021).

Said differently, one destructive outcome of the neoliberalization of public higher education has been the advancement of trans-exclusionary, racist, and otherwise oppressive approaches to pedagogy. In order to cultivate equitable public education systems, it is important to critique and disrupt the systems of power which reproduce inequity for systemically minoritized communities. As neoliberalism is one such arbiter of minoritization in postsecondary education (Squire et al., 2018), it is vital to implicate its role in the structuring of postsecondary education against trans college students. As collegiate classrooms have been drastically transformed by neoliberal structures that entrench power differentials and efface student identities (Saunders, 2010), interrogating the ways neoliberalism perpetuates White supremacy and transphobia to subjugate trans collegians, particularly trans Students of Color, can aid institutions in reckoning with the racism, cisgenderism, and other intersecting modalities of domination they are fundamentally built on.

This study offers insight into how the power differentials between faculty and their trans students structure the relationships students build and harms they experience within the public collegiate classroom in the hopes that attending to such power differentials can lead to their disruption. Using social justice-based critiques of neoliberalism as a theoretical lens, we draw on qualitative interviews with 1 graduate and 6 undergraduate trans students at a public university in the United States to understand the ways neoliberal logics shape the power dynamics that students experience in classrooms. The overarching research questions guiding this work are:

1. How do trans students make sense of the power dynamics between themselves and their professors in the classroom?

2. How do trans students' descriptions of their educational trajectories reflect the impacts of neoliberalism?

## Review of Literature and Guiding Theoretical Perspectives

This work is theoretically guided by critiques of neoliberalism as offered by critical race (e.g., Le & Matias, 2019; Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011) and critical queer (e.g., Friedensen et al., 2021) scholars. We begin by exploring the ways neoliberalism has permeated public higher education, particularly in collegiate classrooms. In doing so, we offer a definition of neoliberalism

as an economic theory, and also explore the ways neoliberalism's emphasis on identity neutrality as an ideal has helped form the myriad gendered, racial, and other modes of domination that subjugate trans lives. We then read extant literature on the classroom experiences of trans collegians through the lens of neoliberalism, highlighting the ways discussions of power require further interrogation.

## *Neoliberalism in the postsecondary classroom*

As an economic theory, neoliberalism promotes a system where "intellectual ambitions are often reduced to an instrument of the entrepreneurial self and social visions are dismissed as hopelessly out of date" (Giroux, 2002, p. 428). By striving towards a model of individual consumerism, knowledge is prioritized as a form of capital that individuals can and should invest in to further their contributions to the economy (Giroux, 2002). The pursuit (and completion) of postsecondary education has been one of many institutions named by neoliberal capitalism as a mode of both individual social mobility and, more perniciously, advancement of the United States economic output (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). While this framing of higher education as an economic investment is in opposition with the traditional moral and democratic ideals of both education and knowledge production (Gutmann, 1999), such a posturing has impacted higher education in several ways. Neoliberal economic movements have shifted how institutions of higher education look, feel, and operate; for example, the influx of multinational corporations such as fast-food chains and retailers partnering with colleges is one demonstration of how higher education has been subsumed into neoliberal economies (Giroux, 2002). Additionally, scholars have argued that neoliberalism impacts how students choose to attend (Saunders, 2007) and complete (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015) college due to the overwhelming emphasis placed on the potential fiscal value to students when "investing" in postsecondary education.

One of the many principles endemic within the politics of neoliberal capitalism is identity neutrality, especially when one's identity cannot be leveraged for economic gain. By urging individuals to prioritize their productivity to market-based economies when making decisions about fiscal investments (including education; Giroux, 2002), neoliberal logics advance purported scientific reason and rational thought as "ideals." Such idealization serves to either silence conversations on diversity, equity, and identity as being unrelated to the functioning of market economies (Le & Matias, 2019; Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011) or only invoke discussions of inclusion when they benefit existing powers and contribute to the continued governance and concentration of power (Melamed, 2011). Despite claiming to separate identity from economics, neoliberal logics instead "establish hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality in order to uphold privilege for those in power, most often those who are White, middle class, male, and heterosexual" (Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011, p. 51). Additionally, when identity is deployed within neoliberal logics, it is often done under the vague banner of diversity and is only used as a means to further cultivate capital rather than to push for restructuring or reimagining power (Duggan, 2012). Indeed, such neoliberal diversity and inclusion attempts–as seen across college campuses–often serve to reinforce boundaries on which identities are permissible and welcome, thereby increasing the neoliberal capitalist stranglehold on education (Bourossa, 2021). Importantly, with the recent rise of such diversity and inclusion attempts, we have seen efforts to 'include' minoritized and marginalized individuals into the preexisting neoliberal capitalist framework that continues to be White, cisheteronormative, and patriarchal, rather than a push to topple such frameworks to create a truly equitable university (Bourossa, 2021). Individuals within

such initiatives may be working to form an environment that is truly affirming, but they are rarely–if ever–afforded the power to actually make necessary changes (Puar, 2007).

As a project of neoliberalism, this apolitical ethos of identity neutrality within the classroom and powerless diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts outside the classroom has long been adopted by institutions of higher education in order to exert power over faculty and students. For one, neoliberal capitalism shapes how institutions of higher education adopt policies that subjugate trans communities. Under neoliberal governing structures, trans communities are scrutinized, policed, and ultimately pushed to the margins societally (Elia & Yep, 2012; Quinan, 2017) and in higher education (Nicolazzo, 2016a; 2016b). One example of the way that neoliberalism operates in the oppression of trans students in higher education is the logics surrounding often-mandated segregation of campus facilities, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, along the cisgender binary (Dirks, 2016; Stachowiak & Gano, 2020). Although these spaces may have been segregated in the years before neoliberalism's overwhelming impact, the current arguments for continued segregation draw upon neoliberal logics. Dirks' (2016) policy discourse analysis of task force reports on campus climate issues for LGBTQ+ students at four public universities showed that institutions enforced sex segregation of campus facilities under the guise of protecting trans students from potential harm, as if these students are a commodity to be protected. Despite directly breaking Title IX protections for students of all gender identities and presentations, institutional policies upholding sex segregated spaces enabled institutions to appear "concerned for the privacy of trans people without … addressing the larger issue of why gendered spaces … are dangerous places for a transgender person" (Dirks, 2016, p. 382). Moreover, this continued sex segregation, which contradicts Title IX protections, operates as a means of control over trans bodies, determining the boundaries of their permissibility. Sex segregation is but one mode of neoliberal control over trans people (Spade, 2015); policies at institutions of higher education often perpetuate neoliberal harm against trans communities in multiple ways (Stachowiak & Gano, 2020).

The research and teaching activities of faculty, regardless of gender, are also heavily shaped by neoliberal ideals of success and productivity. Normative pushes towards identity neutrality shape faculty promotion and tenure processes that can discourage faculty from engaging in social justice-based scholarship or teaching identity-based material in their classes out of fear of being "less competitive" in the academic job market (Wagner & Yee, 2011). The phenomenon of departmental retrenchment has origins in neoliberalism, shaping how universities de/fund academic departments (and, by proxy, the faculty who work in them) based on prioritizing departments with high enrollment—often those seen as identity-neutral, marketable, and most likely to prepare students to be active contributors to market economies (Giroux, 2022; Slaughter, 1993). By and large, faculty's pedagogical practices are expected to be in line with anti-identarian logics (Danvers, 2019), as faculty can be punished for teaching courses with low-enrollment (Hudd et al., 2009). This shift demonstrates the ways that faculty's role has changed over time within the public university: once viewed as having the power to actualize education's emancipatory potential, faculty have overtime been reimagined through neoliberalism as "neutral disseminators of ideological content" who are wholly apolitical (Saunders, 2010, p. 61). Faculty are now incentivized to teach students as if they were customers (Mintz, 2021) and are encouraged to be entrepreneurial in their pursuit of tenure, seeing themselves as generators of money rather than knowledge (Cannella & Koro-Ljunberg, 2017). As universities become increasingly focused on optimizing for their consumers, those faculty who resist these neoliberal pushes may be punished or coerced into compliance with market demands (Bunds & Giardina, 2017).

These simultaneously distinct yet intertwining neoliberal structures of power converge in the collegiate classroom. Neoliberal tensions in the public, postsecondary classroom shape which modes of knowledge production are deemed value-adding to a student's potential for career success (Danvers, 2019). The epistemologies and ways of knowing of trans communities are frequently devalued academically (Gutzwa, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017) in part as a result of neoliberal ideologies which view issues of (trans) identity as too "political" to be included in curricula. Neoliberalism thrives on categorization as a means of commodification, and trans-ness often inherently defies such neat categorization. Identity is only valued under neoliberal capitalism when it can be commodified as a profitable product (Elia & Yep, 2012); this understanding that "one's very identity is imbued with the potential to be traded, sold, or purchased like any other good or service" contributes to the expectation that trans students shoulder the burden of educating faculty and peers about gender (Nicolazzo, 2016b, p. 549). Further, while neoliberalism might mean that faculty lose power in their relations with the university, neoliberalism also strengthens the power imbalances that exist between instructors and students. Across educational sectors, politics of classroom management are rooted in racialized, gendered, and other intersecting modes of domination. Domination subsequently constructs pedagogical spaces that "attempt to separate curriculum from human interaction" (Casey et al., 2013, p. 50). As such, higher education's push towards neoliberalism creates classrooms that perpetuate the subjugation of trans students through such means as curricular policing and the enforcement of transphobic power dynamics. This subjugation is part and parcel of neoliberal logics which incentivize faculty and students alike to silence and hide aspects of identity that cannot be leveraged for capital gain.

## *Trans student experiences in the (neoliberal) postsecondary classroom*

In recent years, scholars have increasingly centered the collegiate experiences of trans students in their work (Lange et al., 2019). Most often, this scholarship tends to focus on trans collegians' lived experiences, paying close attention to how students navigate residential life, campus identity-based resource centers, student groups, and social relationships (e.g., Bilodeau, 2012; Catalano, 2014; 2015; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Garvey, et al., eds., 2018; Martinez & Jackson, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; Simms et al., 2021). A smaller group of scholars has paid closer attention to how trans collegians experience collegiate academic spaces, including classrooms (e.g., Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Friedensen et al., 2021; González, 2024; Gutzwa, 2021; 2024; Linley et al., 2016; Pryor, 2015).

Scholars often view the classroom experiences of trans students through the lens of how students navigate relationships with faculty members, who are largely described as ill-equipped to work with trans students based on their lack of trans-inclusive pedagogical practices (Pryor, 2015). Oppressive realities, including the expectation placed on trans students to educate their faculty on trans identities (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020), faculty members' employment of discourses rooted in the gender binary (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016b), and the active devaluation of trans students' ways of knowing by faculty during class discussions (Gutzwa, 2021), create hostile classroom environments that discourage trans students from participating in, or even attending, classes. Excluding trans realities from course syllabi and silencing trans students through course pedagogy (whether explicit or implicit) ultimately reinforce the deficit-based understandings of trans identities that public (neoliberal) higher education is in part built on (Gutzwa, 2021; 2024). Indeed, these pedagogical choices are rooted in the notion that trans identities are inherently less important than other identities, especially as these identities often cannot be commodified to

cultivate capital. Faculty have also been critiqued by trans students for displaying signals of inclusivity in their offices, such as stickers or certificates demonstrating their completion of LGBTQ+ allyship trainings, yet not embodying principles of queer and trans inclusivity in their instruction, mentorship, and interactions with students (González, 2024); these discrepancies between perception and action negatively impact trans students' relationships with faculty. On the other hand, positive interactions with faculty who create spaces that holistically value students' identities through trans-informed pedagogical praxis and curricular engagement of trans identities can improve trans collegians' classroom experiences (Gutzwa, 2021; Linley et al., 2016). Particularly, taking classes or engaging in research with faculty that share trans students' identities contributes to students feeling affirmation for their identities in the classroom (Linley et al., 2016).

There remains much to be explored about the classroom experiences of trans collegians (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Gutzwa, 2021). While many have discussed the importance of trans students' relationships with faculty, how power dynamics between professors and students shape these relationships has not always been explicitly centered in scholarship. Though scholars have explored the impact of interactions with professors on the academic experiences of trans students (Linley et al., 2016; Pryor, 2015) and the importance of course syllabi that intentionally include trans-related content, anti-discriminatory language, and professors' pronouns (Gutzwa, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2017a; Pryor, 2015), these discussions often do not fully attend to the power dynamics between trans students and faculty. Without examining the role that power plays in the public university classroom, scholars and educators are unable to truly reach the promise of public education (Nelson et al., 2022) and will instead be pursuing short-term fixes to longer-term issues. As neoliberalism shapes much of how faculty members gain and exert power over students in the classroom, we must interrogate the impact of neoliberalism on power relations between trans students and their faculty in order to transform classrooms into spaces that are trans-liberatory. By understanding that pedagogy enforces neoliberal control of trans students, we recognize that the public postsecondary classroom is one of many places where power dynamics can perpetuate violence against trans students.

## Research Design

The present study aims to contribute to the knowledge base surrounding public postsecondary classroom experiences, especially for trans and gender expansive students. We draw on qualitative interviews with undergraduate and graduate students who are trans and gender expansive to better understand their experiences within the classroom, paying special attention to the ways in which neoliberal logics structure power and relationships. Data from this study were collected in the context of an institutional effort to explore the broader academic experiences of LGBTQ+ college students at one particular institution, a large, public, minority-serving institution on the west coast of the United States. This manuscript presents a secondary analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with participants who identified as transgender, nonbinary, non-conforming, and other gender expansive identities.

As it aims to explore students' experiences within the public postsecondary classroom, this study employs phenomenological methods aimed at achieving an in-depth description of students' experiences (Giorgi et al., 2017). Moreover, this study focuses on understanding students' specific meaning-making and sense of a particular phenomenon. Therefore, the study employs interpretative phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), two distinct but highly related methodological lenses which intend to unearth practical knowledge that

participants in social situations are conscious of but may not have expressed (Gill, 2014). IPA requires researchers to both attend to participants' voice and reflection and to contextualize these voices within psychological theory (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

## *Participant Recruitment*

In order to recruit participants, one author circulated an email asking eligible participants to sign up for an interview, using mailing lists available through their public university. Eligible participants were current postsecondary students who self-identified as trans and/or gender expansive. These criteria were included in recruitment materials, as well as in the consent notice that all potential participants received. In addition to receiving an electronic version of the consent notice, this author read the consent notice to potential participants before each interview to ensure that participants understood their rights. Participants received a $35 gift card in exchange for their time. All procedures were approved by the second author's university IRB. The original study invited students who broadly identify as queer and/or trans to participate. Of the total population of participants, seven students who identified as trans were interviewed; it is from these students' narratives that the present manuscript is based. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants by pseudonym, gender, racial, and ethnic identities, and educational status at their institution.

**Table 1**
Participant Identities

| Name | Pronouns | Gender | Race/ethnicity | Education status | Other Identities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ari | They/them | Nonbinary; gender queer; agender | Asian (Taiwanese) | Undergraduate (2nd year) | Queer, Asexual, Demiromantic, Autistic |
| Ellie | They/them | Nonbinary | "Person of Color" | Undergraduate (2nd year) | Queer |
| Mia | They/them | Genderfluid | Chicanx | Undergraduate (4th year) | Bisexual, transfer student, student athlete |
| Riley | They/them | Agender | Black; Asian (Cambodian) | Undergraduate (4th year) | Lesbian, transfer student, lives with mental illness |
| Sprinkles | They/them | Agender | White | Undergraduate (4th year) | Asexual, aromantic |
| Teddy | They/them; he/him | Transgender; nonbinary; genderfluid; demiboy | Asian (Vietnamese) | Undergraduate (2nd year) | Queer, middle class |
| Wren | They/them | Nonbinary | White | Graduate (Master's) | Queer, lives with mental illness |

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

Respondents completed semi-structured interviews that ranged from 45-90 minutes using video conferencing technology. These interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Respondents were asked for their age, year in school, gender identity, pronouns, and race/ethnicity. They were then asked about their experiences in the classroom, with specific focus around their more supportive and less supportive classes.

Once collected, these transcripts were analyzed by both authors, who engaged in open coding (Saldaña, 2015) to develop a codebook around the themes of classroom experiences. The authors each individually read each interview, highlighted phrases of interest, and met to discuss the salient themes. These themes were then solidified into an iterative, fluid codebook which was used to guide a second round of thematic coding (Saldaña, 2015). Each interview was reviewed multiple times to ensure that any new codes were applied appropriately to previous interviews, resulting in each interview being coded at least three times. Both authors reviewed each transcript for illustrative quotations that best typified each theme.

To ensure analytic rigor and ensure the validity of the findings, researchers engaged in best practices for qualitative research. The semi-structured interviews—conducted by a gender-expansive researcher who was unknown to participants and therefore had very limited power over respondents—allowed for participants to be agents in determining their narrative. The interviews provided the space for participants to authentically represent their own voice and story. As participants shared their experiences, the semi-structured interviews allowed them to express their multiple, and sometimes contradictory, explanations, with the interviewer attempting to probe them to further explore their own feelings, rather than providing words for them. Researchers took detailed field notes, collected copious data in the form of interviews, interviewed a broad swath of students, and engaged in careful reflection (Tracy, 2010).

## *Positionality and Trustworthiness*

As is the case in all research, we acknowledge that our unique experiences, identities, and positions in society combine to shape how we approach this work. Robert is a White, queer, gender-expansive professor at a large, minority-serving public university on the west coast. For the majority of their life, they were socialized as a cisgender man and began to question their gender in the last four years. Their teaching and research have relied on close relationships with the queer, trans, and gender expansive community, and they have served as a mentor, confidant, and advisor to many students. Justin is a White, queer, trans, nonbinary, disabled scholar-practitioner who was socialized through much of their schooling and professional life as a cisgender man. Through most of their work on this manuscript, Justin was a graduate student at a large, historically White public university on the west coast, and they now serve as a professor at a large, historically White public university in the American midwest.

We each bring different research and professional experiences to this work. While we both center queer, trans, and gender expansive communities in our scholarship, we each approach these communities through different contexts: Robert's work primarily explores queer and trans youth experiences in K-12 schools, while Justin's is predominantly mobilized through higher education. Notably, neither of us with trans or gender expansive identities during our undergraduate careers. Justin's journey coming into their nonbinary and trans identities occurred during the tail end of their experiences in graduate school, after having completed their program's required coursework.

As such, while each of us have experienced the classroom as an instructor holding expansive gender identities, neither experienced the classroom as a trans student. Both of our socializations as White, cisgender men frames some of how we each make sense of the experiences shared by participants, namely those holding intersecting minoritized racial and gender identities.

As two researchers and educators dedicated to disrupting oppressive logics (particularly those facilitated by neoliberalism) in our teaching, research, and praxis, we share the modalities of power that we bring to writing this manuscript for several reasons. First, thoughtful interrogation of positionality at all stages of data collection, analysis, and writing is a necessary step in conducting scholarship that does not reproduce harm against the systemically minoritized communities one's work hopes to engage (Parson, 2019). The varied perspectives and identities we bring to this work informed the ways we not only engaged the narratives shared by the participants of this study, but also those shared by one another during data analysis and writing. In addition to seeking as unmediated and authentic participant voice as possible, the researchers followed best practices in the conduct, coding, and analysis of the transcripts. Moreover, researchers intentionally explored disconfirming examples and participant responses that did not correspond to existing themes or that contradicted narratives we had constructed (Saldaña, 2015). The researchers involved in data collection took on the role of 'critical friend,' aiming to provide alternate explanations and potential challenges to horizons, codes, and themes that the other put forth.

## Findings

Interviews with trans students documented the ways in which the neoliberal classroom shaped both their interactions with their professors and their own self-conceptions within the classroom. Importantly, although the semi-structured interview protocol did not explicitly address neoliberalism in university classrooms and instead allowed participants to narrate their own experiences in response to broad questions, every respondent made some reference to the way that power structured or shaped their experiences in class, always through the lens of their trans identity. Many students explicitly noted the power differentials between students and faculty, highlighting the control professors had in shaping their spaces. Other students pointed out more subtle ways in which neoliberalism impacted the classroom, referencing relationships with professors or feelings about their own role in the classroom that indicated a shift towards a neoliberal form of education. Finally, some students offered brief moments of disruption, sharing ways that faculty members subvert and interrupt the neoliberal power dynamics that would otherwise shape the academic experience.

### *Student-Professor Relationships*

Central to the neoliberal university is the shift in faculty's role. No longer are professors guides to knowledge that help students grow as well-rounded members of society; instead, they are impartial dispensers of wisdom that help students be better capitalist subjects. Many respondents commented on their interactions and relationships with professors under this newer university structure, either explicitly naming the power at play or describing situations which illuminate the way that the neoliberal college classroom has shaped trans and nonbinary students' experiences.

One key theme that emerged from interviews was the lack of relationships between students and professors, chiefly because professors were seen as being too busy, uncaring, or preoccupied with aspects of education that were unrelated to knowing students' identities. As Ellie, a nonbinary undergraduate Student of Color, noted, "professors, in my experience, don't give much thought to who the student is entirely. They just think like, 'Are they passing? Are they failing?' So I don't find too big of an importance in identifying myself to a professor." Ellie observed that their professors focus solely on students' grades and therefore would not want to understand their students' identities. Importantly, Ellie referenced 'identifying' themselves within a broader context of professors knowing their gender identity, indicating Ellie feels that knowing their gender identity would not be of interest to their professors. Riley, a multiracial Black and Asian agender undergraduate student, similarly noted:

> Sometimes I feel like the professors don't really care enough because they have plenty of students that they need to focus on, especially since I'm only gonna be with them for one semester, which is about, what, four or five months or so? Once that class is over, they won't talk to me anymore, so it's like getting to know me on that level kind of doesn't matter sometimes.

Riley's feeling that professors are too busy to understand or care about students' gender identities, especially as they have 'plenty of students they need to focus on,' underscores the ways in which students make sense of professors' roles within the neoliberal university. Because Riley views that they will be spending only a brief time with a professor who is overworked and uncommitted to Riley's holistic growth, they do not share their identity with professors. Riley went on to share that they had developed a closer relationship with one professor and eventually did discuss their gender identity, but when Riley "went to see her the following semester, she had completely forgotten everything that I had told her about me, so it's like, you know, why bother? I'm repeatedly coming out of the closet, and I don't wanna do that." This interaction ultimately confirmed Riley's impression that their professors collectively would not care about their gender identity. Read through a lens of neoliberalism, the shifting expectations of the labor professors provide their university might have contributed to why Riley's professor was not expected to, and ultimately did not, retain information about Riley as a person. This may reflect the increased teaching load of many faculty members, as well as the continued adjunctification of higher education that results in a teaching force that is stretched ever further in order to maximize capital (Hudd et al., 2009), both of which are the result of neoliberalism's focus on capital and efficiency above all else.

In Ellie's and Riley's comments about their interactions with professors, they note the way that the college environment has commodified the relationship between professor and student, as professors focus only on students' grades without care or concern for student identity or development. Moreover, as trans and nonbinary students, Ellie and Riley shared their reluctance to, as Riley puts it, "repeatedly come out of the closet" and, as Ellie frames it, "identifying [themselves]." Participants understood that their professors did not see the importance of building connections with their students, but rather were driven by indications of future market success. This accounts for their professors' prioritizing their students' immediate academic performance above all else, rendering them unconcerned with facets of their students' lives that they may perceive to be trivial, political, or unrelated to their performance in the classroom. Although there may be additional explanations for the treatment Ellie and Riley offer (e.g., faculty's ignorance of or discomfort around trans students, often for fear of making a mistake), they themselves note that they perceive the hallmarks of neoliberal forces at work: a focus on de-identified, apolitical

students-as-customers and faculty-as-service-providers, focused primarily on preparing students to accumulate capital.

Respondents also explicitly named the way that power works in their relationships with their professors, especially in terms of gender in the classroom. Wren, a White nonbinary graduate student, noted:

> I'm always conscious of the power dynamic, and that's part of why the interactions are so different. Realistically, I can approach any one of my classmates on equal footing and be like, 'hey...like, this wasn't okay, I didn't appreciate that. And I prefer if you do this,' and you know, whether or not they follow that, that is up to them, but I know I can just say that. But in the case of many of my professors, they're all in positions to really control my future, and I have great reservations about speaking up. I have multiple times, but I have not reported anything or done anything like that, just because there's really no way that I could guarantee I would not be retaliated against.

Wren is attuned to the power imbalances that exist between their professors and themself that ultimately make it difficult to confront professors about gendered microaggressions in class, paying special attention to the ways in which their professors "control [their] future" and their fears of being "retaliated against." As a graduate student, Wren may be more directly aware of the power their professors have over their future. Wren explicitly contrasted their relationships with peers—people with whom they are on "equal footing"— with their relationships with their professors—people whom they view as wielding control over their future. When interacting with peers, Wren felt they could express their needs and interrupt mistreatment, whereas with their professors, they could not. Wren later reiterated that "there is this very large power difference because the people I'm talking to are not just my professors, but the head of my program, the head of my job. I need this person's support to have a future career." Here, Wren explicitly names the importance their professors will play in their future career moves, noting an understanding of how neoliberalism has shaped the meaning of education and the importance of fitting into a capitalist structure upon graduation. This fear of retaliation and consideration of professors' control over students' futures may be one impact of the neoliberalization of the university, through which education is seen as solely focused on preparing students for the market. Professors' control over grades therefore becomes a proxy for their power to shape students' post-graduate experiences.

Ari, an Asian, nonbinary, genderqueer, and agender undergraduate student, explained why they are often reluctant to disclose their gender identity with their professors:

> I usually leave my pronouns out of my email signature if it's someone who I think will be generally more unaccepting. I don't wanna create any conflict that might affect how the professor treats me, which technically is against school policy, but affect my grades just because of how they perceive me.

Here, Ari notes the power differential as an unaccepting professor could impact their grades, even as such behavior would be against school policy. Sprinkles, a White agender undergraduate student, shares similar concerns, noting "we can't really necessarily say anything [to our professors about gendered microaggressions in class] because they have the power over it, and if they hate us, they will give us a C-. I've had that happen." Sprinkles fears that professors might "hate" them after they speak up in class about mistreatment received as a nonbinary student, echoing Wren's fears of being "retaliated against" for speaking up when they are misgendered in the classroom. It

is important to note that the consequence Sprinkles notes (receiving a C-) may have a material impact on their future by potentially endangering their job prospects and, ultimately, their post-graduate career. This weight may be acutely felt in the neoliberal classroom, in which grades serve as a proxy for future success as a member of the workforce, seeing as Sprinkles views giving a low grade as a potentially natural outcome of hate.

Participants explicitly named the control that their professors hold over them as students and express concern about retaliation, their grades, and their futures. These students demonstrate an understanding of the neoliberal power structure that shapes a college classroom as focusing only on outputs and rigidly placing all power in the hands of professors, who may wield it to punish students that challenge their authority. Importantly, participants noted how both power differentials and grade-based learning in their classes shape their experiences as trans students; the commonly shared understanding that they may be retaliated against or given a lower grade was developed in response to participants' either lived experiences interrupting instances of gendered oppression or their perceptions of how acts of self-advocacy might be received.

### *Difficulty in Actualizing Self-Advocacy*

Keeping this fear of retaliation in mind, it is important to underscore the difficulty many students expressed in speaking up for and asserting their rights. In the neoliberal classroom, as participants shared, self-advocacy transforms from a potential source of empowerment to a potential liability, as it may invoke professors' hatred, retaliation, and destruction of students' futures. Some commented specifically on their lack of ability to advocate for themselves within the classroom. As Teddy, an Asian, nonbinary, genderfluid, demiboy undergraduate student, put it, "I don't feel able to advocate for my pronouns or name. Sometimes it's really hard because some people don't understand, even though these big resource centers [like campus LGBTQ+ centers] exist, it doesn't necessarily reflect into the classroom." Unlike Wren and Sprinkles, Teddy situates their lack of advocacy within the context of their professors' lack of information. They explain that although education around the importance of using trans students' correct names and pronouns in the classroom may exist within the university, the university's current power structures do not ensure that this knowledge circulates to professors. Here, Teddy points out a weakness of their professors' outsourcing of LGBTQ+ and other identity-based education to campus resource centers. Such outsourcing is innately neoliberal: Teddy's reflections on their faculty being unwilling to engage in identity-based pedagogical training available on their campus or directing students towards identity centers and away from the faculty member's office is reflective of how many faculty feel that participating in identity-serving labor presents little fiscal benefit to their careers as it falls outside of their job responsibilities of teaching, researching, and performing institutional service (Griffin, 2020; White-Lewis et al., 2021). Even when such centers exist and perform the labor of offering identity-based trainings, the flow of information from these spaces is limited such that professors, who are ostensibly one of the main targets for professional development around inclusive teaching, may not know such trainings exist, or may not view them as being necessary.

Wren also shared their frustration with feeling the burden of self-advocacy and educating their professors about the importance of affirming students' names and pronouns. They note that misgendering "really weakens any trust I have with [professors]" because professors are "consistently doing something that you know is not what's best for you." As they put it, "I can bring out the studies if I have to, proving that gendering people correctly is good for their mental

health, their long-term outcomes, but I feel like I shouldn't have to prove that anymore." Like Teddy, Wren points out the failure of the university to stress the importance of affirming students' names and pronouns and to provide the necessary information to ensure that professors understand. These moves towards identity-neutrality by enforcing measures that silence trans students' abilities to live and embody their identities authentically in and out of the classroom are reflective of how institutions of higher education (and subsequently many actors within them) are increasingly adopting neoliberal governing logics that prioritize the institution's ability to be competitive in a rapidly evolving economic field over the needs and concerns of minoritized students. Interestingly, Teddy situated the responsibility for this education within the university power structure which they see as failing. Wren seems to respond to this failing and the resultant burden it places on trans students, pushing back on the notion that it is their responsibility to educate professors about their identities.

When negotiating the ways they might embody their trans identities in the neoliberal university classroom, participants recognized how power shaped their interactions with their professors. The neoliberal university positions personal identity as outside the purview of education, as something to be secreted away so that students can become ideal capitalistic subjects. Moreover, the university situates power firmly with the professor by giving them sole control over students' grades and, as participants ultimately understood it, their future. Within this asymmetrical power dynamic, the burden for interrupting anti-trans behavior and treatment sits squarely on the trans students who are impacted by said violence, who must then negotiate whether they should advocate for themselves and how to navigate a potentially fraught situation. Participants' responses thus speak to the nefarious ways that the neoliberalization of higher education moderates trans students' interactions and relationships with their professors.

### *Students' Reflection of Deficit Mentalities*

Deficit mentalities of minoritized identity communities are shaped by colonial constructions of race and gender (Menchaca, 1997; Smith, 2015), particularly for trans communities (Gutzwa, 2021). As the neoliberalization of higher education pushes faculty to forestall discussion of identity in the classroom and focus on 'identity-neutral' education that prioritizes students-as-consumers (Mintz, 2021; Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011), much of the design of collegiate classrooms is not only rooted in these deficit-based understandings of minoritized identities, but also perpetuates such understandings for students through curriculum and pedagogy (Gutzwa, 2021). Therefore, it is important to note the ways that some participants use deficit-based language themselves when they discuss their decision to not disclose their identities with professors. This may indicate that their engagement with the neoliberal university led them to adopt elements of this deficit framework that posits that their trans identities placed them at an educational disadvantage.

Some participants directly used the verbiage of transness being perceived as a "deficit" during their interviews. For example, Mia, a Chicanx genderfluid undergraduate student, expressed being hesitant to come out to their professors because "I don't wanna be a burden, or [for faculty members] to think that I'm at a disadvantage because of who I am." Here, Mia does not explicitly name the power differences or the neoliberal university structure that shapes their experiences with faculty members; instead, their words reflect a deficit-based understanding of transness that is embedded within the neoliberal university. Their concern of being a "burden" on faculty members with whom they might share their gender identity reflects this deficit view: Mia assumes--and

likely has experienced--that some faculty members will view their identities as a "disadvantage." This deficit viewpoint is a product of the neoliberal university structure that views any personal identification as a barrier towards the creation of capitalist subjects.

Riley shared a similar thought process when considering whether to share their agender identity with professors, explaining that "If I go to their office hours simply to have that conversation, I would be wasting their time because they have plenty of other stuff to do, and they have other students to see." Like Mia, Riley also does not explicitly implicate power imbalances in their relationships with professors as instrumental in their decision-making process. Rather, their narrative reflects that they may have learned that sharing their gender identity would be perceived as a "waste of time" by faculty members who have "other students to see." Riley gives voice to the notion that their gender identity has no place in the classroom and that bringing it in would be useless and might even distract from other students and their more legitimate concerns. This perception that professors must triage to deal with their students' most pressing needs and that gender identity is not worthy of their time reflects that trans students report deficit-based understandings of transness–and, therefore, internalized transphobia driven by this deficit-based view–by encountering logics of neoliberalism within their universities.

Mia and Riley also described how their minoritized racial and sexual identities intersected with their transness in the classroom. Both named instances where professors exposed their deficit-based mentalities of racially minoritized communities that in turn shaped their lack of willingness to disclose their gender identities with faculty. Mia, for example, connected their fear of how they might be perceived by faculty for disclosing their gender identity to their other intersecting social identities, including race and sexuality. Speaking to how they make sense of their classroom experiences as a multiply minoritized trans Student of Color, Mia described feeling unsafe disclosing their gender in classes, most of which are taught by White faculty:

> Being a student of color and of different sexual orientations, and just the way I expressed my gender, it's just very different all together. So I don't really like to use personal information or tell them how I identify as. I see it as not really professional [...] A lot of our faculty members in the English department are straight White women, so a lot of them are older and they're very traditional. I think I just have reservations because I don't really know how they will react to my identity, so I just kinda leave it out.

In further discussing the level of unsafety they feel with White faculty, Mia was particularly observant of the ways some White professors have racially microaggressed other Students of Color in their classes. In one instance, Mia described a professor who "was trying to act all hip and urban just because the student was Black and he answered the question right in class," saying that "it's just those little things I pick up on" that make them feel unsafe in the classroom. Notable is that the racial microaggressions Mia referenced came from White faculty members when responding– potentially with surprise– to instances when other Students of Color performed "well" in the classroom. Seeing microaggressions that stemmed from deficit-based understandings of Students of Color, particularly of Black students, in turn made Mia feel unsafe discussing gender with White faculty as a genderfluid Chicanx student. These deficit-based understandings are rooted in neoliberal logics of who can successfully accumulate capital following university and whose identities may hold them back from such 'productive' future work.

While Mia's lack of safety in part sparked because of how other Students of Color were treated in the classroom, Riley's experiences with racism in the classroom were sadly more direct. Describing why they felt unsafe talking with professors about gender, Riley named one biology professor who explicitly shut them and another Black student out of conversations:

> Whenever we had questions, he was very short with us, and just did not wanna seem to help us out at all. I did not feel comfortable asking him anything. As a matter of fact, I failed that class, because I didn't feel like I could go to him. He had no problem answering the questions of White and Asian students. It was really frustrating. It wasn't even about skin color directly, because there were darker-skinned Asians, and again, he had no problem talking to them. But me and the one other Black person in the class, it was like, 'I don't wanna talk to you, why are you talking to me? Talk to another student before you ask me a question.' There's not a ton of different ways to interpret that.

Like Mia, Riley felt uncomfortable going to their professor for any type of support in response to the first-hand racism they experienced. Seeing as Riley identifies as both Black and Cambodian, the ways their professor racially prescribed their deficit-based understandings of Blackness onto Riley illustrates how the nuances in both their racial and gender identities were silenced and threatened by overt anti-Black racism. Riley's experiences with anti-Black racism thus demonstrate how professors' deficit-based mentalities do not even need to be about a students' transness for them to silence trans students in the classroom: the racist, anti-Black actions of their professor directly shut off Riley from feeling comfortable discussing any facet of their identity (or even anything related to course content all together) with that professor. These racist comments are an outgrowth of neoliberal logics that emphasize personal responsibility and the promotion of competition and exclusion, as they make clear that the professor has determined who is 'worth' their time. Almost more troubling, however, was how Riley also described feeling uncomfortable going to other resources, including department leadership and their campus's racial and LGBTQ+ identity centers, for support in this situation: "I'm uncomfortable in the [LGBT] center based on my race, but I'm uncomfortable with the [Black student] center based on my sexuality and gender. […] Being at this school as a Black queer person really sucks." In the end, avoidance was the only strategy Riley felt safe implementing when faced with racism as a multiracial Black and Cambodian student in the classroom.

The frustrations Mia and Riley each shared are particularly troubling as they demonstrate the ways that students might reflect and give voice to faculty's perceptions of collegians' transness. Though Mia, for example, did not directly say that they viewed their own transness as being a deficit, they operated with the perception that their professors unilaterally hold a deficit-based understanding of transness. This is one way that Mia's words reflect the identity-neutral politics of the neoliberal university. Mia and Riley both seem to view their gender identities as undeserving of time or consideration, as burdens, and as less important than other concerns students might have, demonstrating how neoliberalism reproduces deficit-minded thinking in the collegiate classroom. This potentially illuminates that some trans students might come to see their transness through the same deficit mentalities perpetuated by their professors – or, at least, that they might adopt some deficit-based language in discussing how their trans identities might be at odds with their perceptions of how faculty structure power dynamics in their curricular environments.

Neoliberal power structures ultimately rely on this effacement and degradation of individuals' trans identities, working to convert students into uniform, docile capitalist subjects.

These findings corroborate many of the ways scholars in and out of higher education have discussed perceptions of transness in educational and professional environments. Friedensen and colleagues' (2021) articulation that STEM students internalized their queerness and transness as being antithetical with professionalism, Iskander's (2021) demonstration of how nonbinary teachers experience internal and external tensions when embodying gender non-conformity in K-12 schools that perpetuate "gender normalcy" as an ideal of professionalism, and Davies and Neustifter's (2023) exploration of how norms of heteroprofessionalism in higher education constrain the agency of queer and trans faculty within their institutions all demonstrate the ways that normative identity neutrality is enforced as a neoliberal norm in schools and universities that uniquely disadvantages trans individuals. Further, both Mia and Riley also spoke to how other intersecting modes of domination, such as racism, shaped their experiences as trans Students of Color in the classroom. Their narratives show how trans Students of Color can interpret the deficit-mentalities professors held of the Students of Color, namely Black students, in their classes as signals that it is unsafe to discuss their transness. Seeing that neoliberalism reinforces minoritizing identity dichotomies in its attempt to promote normative identity neutrality (Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011), Mia and Riley's stories ultimately expose how trans students might internalize or acknowledge deficit-mentalities, microaggressions, and racism that are reinforced by the neoliberalization of college classrooms.

### *Professors' Attempts at Inclusion*

While most participants recounted negative experiences with or perceptions of professors, several highlighted professors who made attempts at creating trans-inclusive classroom environments. Many of these professors maintained traditional neoliberal power imbalances in their approaches to pedagogy, but they ultimately used their power to affirm trans realities, demonstrating how active attempts towards trans-inclusion can disrupt neoliberalism in the classroom. For example, Ari described how some of their professors worked to protect trans and nonbinary students in laying out their classroom policies: "I had one or two professors who openly said, 'no hate speech,' but they were very specific, so no sexism, no homophobia, no transphobia." These professors used the traditional professor-student power dynamic to explicitly name how acts of gendered oppression would not be tolerated in their classroom, using this power to protect their trans students. It is important to note, however, that the professors Ari referenced did not interrogate the role of power in the classroom or turn over power to students, instead choosing to leverage this power imbalance to inclusive ends.

In thinking about how change may happen, one respondent explicitly talked about the way that the university structures power. Teddy noted that faculty can leverage the power afforded to them within a neoliberal structure in order to create more inclusive environments. They argue that the best way to create change is to have "leadership model by example" in "including pronouns and being open to that conversation, and I think that starts with the deans...how do you model that behavior how do you model it down in practice." Teddy's aspirations for change nevertheless rely on power dynamics as they currently exist within neoliberal understandings of the university to effect change, as opposed to reimagining the traditional governing structures of higher education. In particular, they recognize that deans have power over professors, who in turn have power over students. Teddy acknowledged this power can be used to create inclusive spaces and generate conversations around affirming trans and nonbinary students. It is important to note, though, that this model for inclusion does not subvert or disrupt the existing power structures within the

neoliberal university; instead, it attempts to leverage that extant system for the benefit of students. Even in their imaginings, participants did not offer suggestions that would radically redistribute power or change the structures within the university, instead relying on benevolent actors within that structure to reform themselves.

One potential way to restructure the power dynamics within the classroom is allowing students to control the material, bringing their own identities into the classroom and the curriculum. One participant did share an experience of such a shift in power: Teddy highlighted a professor who used their power to create flexibility and inclusion, saying "my English professor [made] the curriculum inclusive" offering students the freedom to "write about anything [they want], having that flexibility." In relinquishing some control over course material and assignments, this professor has redistributed some power within the classroom and may begin to push back on neoliberal structures. Teddy did not share how this freedom impacted the grading within the classroom or other more traditional indications of power imbalance between students and professors, but they did share this moment as a clear example of having the freedom to bring their identity into the classroom without penalty or repercussion.

Other respondents, though, shared important counterpoints to Teddy's positive example of restructuring the classroom to allow for student identity. Mia, for example, shared several encounters they had with professors who disagreed with their interpretations of readings, especially when the interpretations incorporated a queer perspective:

> We have to read things and [professors] don't acknowledge [the context] where we're just like, 'Oh, this person probably had a romantic feeling towards this person' and they're just like, 'No, that's not what happened.' And it's as if the interpretations that we've had aren't valid interpretations, which is kind of impossible, 'cause they're interpretations. But [it leaves me] feeling unheard. […] One time I put [a queer interpretation] in the reading response, I got an email back from the professor, and she told me it was wrong, that I had misinterpreted it.

Mia's experience was much more common across participants' narratives, however, than Teddy's: many indicated that when they brought their identities into the classroom and expressed their queer sensibilities, they were rebuffed and told they were incorrect. Mia points out the ridiculousness of such an assertion in articulating how interpretations cannot be wholly invalid, but they nonetheless understand that when they resist the heteronormative current within the classroom, they are punished and silenced.

Here, then, we see that some professors leverage their institutional power within the neoliberal context to create a more inclusive environment for trans students in their classrooms. These efforts often do not dramatically redistribute power or restructure the classroom, but rather represent professors using their power in order to affirm their students. Additionally, respondents offered one potential way forward in which professors pushed back against the dominant distribution of power within the neoliberal university and allowed students to reclaim their power and bring their identities into the classroom. As a counterpoint, though, many respondents shared that any inclusion of a queer, trans, or gender expansive perspective often resulted in punishment.

## Discussion

In all, the nuanced ways participants experienced neoliberal tensions in the collegiate classroom illuminate some of the ways trans students make sense of their learning environments.

Participants almost unilaterally demonstrated how intensely attuned they are to the neoliberalization of higher education, be it consciously or subconsciously. One way this manifested was through how neoliberal ideologies permeated the ways participants described their perceptions of the role faculty play in their educational journeys. In discussing their hesitance to disclose their gender identity with professors or to correct professors when they are misgendered, many described professors as people whose function lies in assigning grades (e.g., sentiments that correcting professors might result in grade-based punishment; feelings that professors control students' potential careers and professional futures), only helping students in navigating concerns of academic performance (e.g., understandings that professors are too busy helping other students with course-related concerns and thus do not have the time to field students' identity-based concerns). These views of what types of labor professors perform and the nature of the power that professors hold over students demonstrate that neoliberal ideologies are (re)ingrained in students through the interactions they both do and do not have with their instructors. These data give voice to the concerns many have theorized regarding the neoliberalization of higher education (Friedensen et al., 2021; Giroux, 2002) by illustrating how students see the function of not just higher education broadly, but also of their faculty specifically, as career-based. Further, as demonstrated by Teddy's understanding that professors might not know or care about gender-inclusive professional development opportunities on their campus because of their many other responsibilities (which they might view as more valuable or worthy of their time), findings demonstrate that students are not only aware of *how* professors adopt identity neutral approaches to teaching, but also *why* they might do so. It is important to note that although students may not have accurate or complete perceptions of faculty work and responsibilities, their experiences and understandings of that work is still vital to understanding neoliberalism's impact on collegians' experiences. How students make sense of the role professors play in their lives, in the structure and functioning of the universities they attend, and most importantly in the classrooms that they learn in invariably shape the way trans students navigate power differentials between themselves and their faculty. It is our contention that the neoliberalization of higher education mediates much of trans students' sensemaking and navigation processes when confronted by adverse power dynamics with the faculty they engage.

Scholars who have explored trans student's academic realities (e.g., Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Friedensen et al., 2021) have often discussed the role individual academic disciplines can play in how trans students experience cisheteronormativity and oppression in the classroom. For many trans students, certain disciplines (e.g., STEM) are seen as spaces where identity is less valued than others (e.g., gender studies), shaping their understanding that certain classes are more likely to be inclusive than others upon entry. Friedensen and colleagues' (2021) exploration of queer and trans STEM students' navigation of identity in neoliberal academic disciplines particularly comes to mind when sitting with the findings presented in this manuscript. Their findings highlighted how normative identity neutrality, as a neoliberal expectation of STEM fields, constrains how queer and trans students embody their identities in their academic and professional lives. Identity neutrality similarly impacted how participants in the present study approached their own identities in the context of the classroom and interactions with their professors, but interestingly, they did not implicate their disciplines as barriers for identity disclosure. Rather, participants used other realities of neoliberal thought, such as the imbalanced power relations they have with professors, to describe how their transness might potentially conflict with their professional aspirations. As such, the present findings nuance understandings of how trans students internalize and make sense of neoliberalism as it relates to their academic careers.

Because neoliberalism as an economic theory re/structures racialized, gendered, and other identity-based hierarchies societally (Le & Matias, 2019; Salazar Perez & Canella, 2011), it is clear that the neoliberalization of higher education perpetuates White supremacist and cisheteronormative logics of minoritziation within the classroom. Scholars have often framed these conversations in how the exclusion of transness, race, other minoritized identities, and their intersections from course curricula impact trans students, especially those who are multiply minoritized (e.g., Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Gutzwa, 2024; Nicolazzo, 2016c), with some also implicating such erasure within a broader cycle of perpetuating and reinforcing deficit-narratives of minoritized communities (e.g., Gutzwa, 2021). Reading the narratives of participants in the present study through the lens of neoliberalism corroborates extant scholarship and further exposes the deeper impacts of how cisheteronormativity and racism manifest within the classroom to subjugate trans students. Participants directly linked their professors' potential deficit-based understandings of transness to their perceptions of professors' neoliberal roles within the university by describing discussing identity as "unprofessional" or a "waste of time." Mia and Riley's narratives expose that even when trans students might not view their own transness through a deficit lens, systems of neoliberalism have forced them to acknowledge that others likely *do* operate with deficit-based understandings of transness, which actively silences their trans identities in collegiate classrooms. Further, just as Duran and Nicolazzo (2017) argue that students do not stop being Black or trans when they enter their classrooms, Mia's observations of professors using anti-Black microaggressions and Riley's direct experiences with anti-Black racism in the classroom demonstrate that professor's monolithic approach to working with students can often be shaped first and foremost by racism in ways that normalize other modalities of trans oppression through pedagogy.

One final way participants demonstrated their attunement with the neoliberalization of higher education is in how they discussed potential avenues for curricular transformation at their institution. While many of the recommendations for trans inclusivity in the collegiate classroom offered by participants echo the recommendations of other trans students and scholars exploring their experiences (e.g., González, 2024; Gutzwa, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2016b), several participants envisioned such reform taking place acknowledged and operated within the existing, neoliberal power structures of higher education. Teddy's assertions that pedagogical reform might best start at the dean-level as opposed to with individual professors, for example, shows an awareness not only of how professors might be most receptive to directives to change their pedagogical strategies, but also some of the ways that neoliberal tensions within education shape the day-to-day work of collegiate faculty. These nuances in how participants made sense of the neoliberal politics of their university's myriad contexts expand extant understandings of how tensions of neoliberalism are understood by students as institutional stakeholders. Students are not just sponges that absorb neoliberal pressures to declare "marketable" majors or pursue lucrative professional trajectories, as others have suggested (e.g., Giroux, 2002; Saunders, 2007). Rather, their imaginations for a trans-liberatory future for higher education are expressed through the constraints of neoliberal logics, demonstrating an understanding (whether it be passive or active) that neoliberalism impacts *everyone* within the structure of the university (themselves included) and they envision approaches to institutional reform within their knowledge of that neoliberal framework.

## Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice

As previously described in our research design, the nature of the present inquiry is localized to the experiences of a small subset of trans students at one university in the United States. In particular, as the nature of the original study was to explore broadly the experiences of queer and trans students at this university to contribute to institutional efforts for curricular, pedagogical, and structural reform, the study as originally designed was constrained by the institutional resources through which it was funded and commissioned. We offer this background to first contextualize the methodological decision to only conduct one interview with each participant, as equitably compensating participants for their time meant that only one interview could be conducted per participant. Findings from this study should therefore be read as coming from a pilot inquiry into the experiences of this population.

This context also shapes our understanding as researchers that there are limitations in the depth to which we could fully analyze participants' narratives and place them in conversation. Taking a semi-structured approach in conducting interviews was in part able to compensate for the potential depth limitations that only having one conversation with each participant might have constructed, as doing so allowed the interviewer to tap into the most salient portions of each participant's narrative to further explore how certain identities, structures of power, and experiences shaped their engagement with their classrooms. Nevertheless, there is still only so much ground which can be covered in a conversation that is approximately one hour long; these structural limitations of the research design ultimately meant that our analysis could only, in certain places, scratch the surface of topics where more intricacy and nuance likely exist. For example, while combining the narrative of one graduate student with those of six undergraduate students can demonstrate how transphobia and other neoliberal modalities of difference manifest across multiple levels of postsecondary education (and aligns with other cross-sector inquiry about queer and trans student experiences in higher education; see Ortiz, 2024), doing so does not accurately reflect how the nuanced power dynamics Wren describes with their professors as a graduate student are fundamentally distinct from those between undergraduate collegians and their instructors. Similarly, while the semi-structured interview format was able to explore how the intersection of race and transness were salient for both Mia and Riley's lived experiences, the fact that other trans Participants of Color did not concretely discuss how they understand their trans, racial, and other minoritized identities as intersecting in the classroom does not mean that they did not also uniquely experience racism and cisheteronormativity in their classes. Additional interactions with each participant in the research setting would thus likely have provided the space to untangle the nuances of each student's experience more delicately and intentionally during both the data collection and analysis phases.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study offer several concrete directions for future scholarship and praxis hoping to actualize trans liberatory postsecondary education. Exploring our participants' narratives through a social justice critique of neoliberalism exposed a multitude of ways that neoliberalism shapes the realities of *all* stakeholders within higher education–not just those of trans students. Better understanding, for example, how trans students make sense of the labor and role of their professors exposes further and deeper impacts of neoliberalism on the job responsibilities of faculty. We are far from the first scholars to explore transness, higher education, and power through their relation to neoliberalism; we are also not the first to suggest that neoliberalism uniquely impacts faculty in their decision-making processes, both in and out of their classrooms. Nevertheless, given the ways findings speak to the nuanced,

multilayered, and pernicious ways neoliberal ideologies prevent the actualization of trans inclusion within higher education, we advocate for the future scholarship on student and faculty experiences to implicate higher education's neoliberalization as one prominent force driving institutions' perpetuations of racist, cisheternormative, oppressive practices.

To this note, scholars engaging trans curriculum studies should continue expanding the scope of their inquiry. More research, for example, should explore faculty pedagogical practices from the perspectives of both cisgender and transgender faculty to gain better insight into the ways they value affirming trans identities and developing radically inclusive pedagogical practices as actors in a neoliberal university. Further, because neoliberalism simultaneously is imbued with and advances ideologies of racism, cisgenderism, and coloniality, findings from this manuscript contribute to the long-standing concerns of many trans studies of education scholars that discussions of trans students' collegiate experiences are often race-neutral (e.g., Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; González, 2024; Gutzwa, 2024; Jackson et al., 2021; Lange et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2024). To this note, neoliberal approaches to research must also be deconstructed: future research, especially qualitative research, engaging transness in higher education must draw from theoretical and methodological bases that center trans communities' embodied ways of knowing, including jotería work (Orozco et al., 2021) and funds of identity approaches (Gutzwa, 2021). These asset-based, culturally contextual approaches to both teaching and research are examples of frameworks that push against the normative identity neutrality and the racist, gendered, deficit-based understandings of minoritized communities that are perpetuated by a neoliberal understanding of education.

While it would be easy to reiterate the words of the many scholars who have argued the importance of including trans narratives in course syllabi (no matter the discipline), providing all students the space to disclose their pronouns safely, and taking seriously the nuanced ways students perform, embody, and engage their multiple, intersecting social identities in the classroom as ways to create trans inclusive academic spaces, the findings from this study also demonstrate that pedagogical reform does not only happen within individual courses. Put differently, it is not enough to change an individual practice without also transforming the thought processes that give rise to those practices. Despite near decades of scholarship stressing that the onus of advocating for systemic, anti-oppressive, trans-inclusive transformation should not fall squarely on the shoulders of a university's trans stakeholders, trans students are still expected to educate their peers, instructors, and administrators about how to better address trans oppression, and the queer and trans staff and faculty of universities are still almost exclusively expected to perform the emotional and logistical labor of supporting trans students without recognition or compensation (Garvey & Rankin, 2018). As such, we argue that the conversation on inclusive pedagogical reform must go beyond assessing individual professor-student interactions to also include a broader interrogation of neoliberalism as higher education's driving philosophy. Findings presented in this manuscript demonstrate that one perceived barrier to trans inclusivity in the classroom held by trans students is their understanding that professors do not value identity-based concerns because they are superfluous, time-intensive, and burdensome. In order to create a culture where faculty are able to value and invest in their continued development, resources that advance their development must be offered at departmental and institutional levels and rewarded in promotion and tenure procedures. In making such changes, institutions can not only center the needs of their trans students, but can also contribute to a broader, systemic rejection of neoliberalism as the guiding philosophy of higher education.

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