Concept Paper

Critical Sensemaking: A Framework for Interrogation, Reflection, and Coalition Building toward More Inclusive College Environments

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Abstract: Given the oppressive nature of higher education environments, educators must support students in making sense of their experiences—especially minoritized students. Although this kind of sensemaking often happens informally, college educators are primed to support students in understanding: (1) their experiences *within* and their interactions *with* higher education environments; (2) how those experiences and interactions reflect and are shaped by systemic issues; and (3) the implications of these experiences and interactions during college and beyond. Accordingly, we introduce critical sensemaking (CSM) as a pedagogical tool that educators can expose students to and create a more equitable college environment. CSM is a framework that encourages students to interrogate their collegiate environments and experiences, focusing on power and systems of oppression and how they *interpret* and *negotiate* their environments. Only by gaining this understanding can students press for institutional transformation in a manner that reflects various aspects of their experiences; hence, creating an institutional accountability structure. Moreover, educators supporting students' acquisitions of CSM skills provides opportunities to build trust and meaningful coalitions toward creating more inclusive college environments.

Keywords: sensemaking; leadership; activism; climate; equity

Higher education institutions can be incredibly complex and contentious environments for minoritized students to navigate. The contention is commonly illustrated through disparities in student outcomes and experiences. For example, although the national percentage of post-secondary credential holders increased from 38% to 51% since 2008, racial disparities in this outcome have endured when comparing Black, Latino/a/x, and indigenous students to White students [1–4]. For those minoritized students who thrive in higher education, their success is often accompanied by other challenges and concessions. For example, many Black women who successfully navigate higher education face challenging financial realities resulting from having the highest student loan debt and lower levels of income compared to their non-Black or/and male counterparts [5,6].

The legacy and recent examples of student activism also illustrate how higher education institutions can be sites and sources of social struggle and change as students mount resistance to the status quo on various issues [7]. Using a critical race theory lens, [8] explicated the persistent and endemic hegemony that exists within and is replicated by higher education institutions via her interrogation of the history, composition, and culture of higher education. Scholars have successfully argued that institutions, rather than students, should be responsible for addressing these issues, which stands in staunch opposition to decades of research and practice focused on the students' onus [9]. While we support this sentiment, issues persist and new challenges emerge as the pace and direction of change have been dictated by institutions, rather than students. Given the immediacy of the issues outlined by [8] and others and the persistent issues noted above, changes must happen alongside students in equitable and collaborative ways. This is not to say that

students have taken a wholly passive stance, as there is a rich history of student activism and student-led accountability in higher education contexts [10]. A challenge, however, is that student activism has been seen treated as a nuisance by senior leaders and institutional stakeholders, often leading to contention between students and institutional leaders and diminished student outcomes [11].

Rather than making changes alone, institutions and educators therein stand to work collaboratively with minoritized students to understand and inform campus climates. Accomplishing this requires educators to support students in understanding their experiences *within* these environments; their interactions *with* these environments; how those experiences and interactions reflect and are shaped by systemic issues; and the implications of these experiences and interactions for their lives during and beyond college. While students over time have gained these understandings on their own, from personal experiences or peer support, there is an opportunity for educators to support and empower students. By helping facilitate these critical understandings, practitioners and administrators can support students in pressing for institutional transformation by building meaningful coalitions with students toward creating more inclusive college environments.

Our objective for this paper is to introduce the critical sensemaking (CSM) framework as a resource to create more equitable college environments. Critical sensemaking is " . . . a complex process that occurs within, and is influenced by, a broader social environment" [12] (p. 188). Rather than relying on general, historical accounts of campus climate issues alone to inform change efforts, institutional leaders stand to collaborate with students who currently experience the climate. We posit that supporting and empowering minoritized students in higher education institutions to be *critical sensemakers*, with attention on the complex and nuanced ways that college environments are shaping their experience, can help to enrich and advance efforts to address campus climates. The foundational conceptions of sensemaking focus on the ways that institutional information is interpreted and enacted by individuals with particular attention on how identity and environment inform their meaning-making [13]. CSM builds on the foundational notions by considering the role of power—especially power as exerted by context, structure, and discourse [12]. As such, students engaging in CSM support stand to cultivate nuanced understandings of how their campus environment shapes and is shaped by their experiences, actions, behaviors, and identities. Adopting a critical sensemaking approach also has the potential to facilitate minoritized students' understanding, critique, and action related to campus climate issues. Such an approach, then, can contribute to students' developmental experiences as well as their agency. Below we discuss the literature related to students' development and leadership as these are the existing domains where CSM can be useful.

1. Existing Theoretical and Literature Landscapes

The existing landscape of theories and perspectives related to students' development is largely interdisciplinary, borrowing from social work, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines, with a focus on understanding and promoting the positive growth and development of adults [14]. In many ways, institutions' commitments to students' development have been predicated on historic doctrine in the field of student affairs, such as the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) [15]. This document, which is taught religiously in higher education student affairs programs across the country, challenges higher education to focus on holistic student development:

> This philosophy imposes upon educational institutions the obligation to consider the student as a whole—his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional makeup, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, and his aesthetic appreciations. In brief, it emphasizes the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone [15]. (p. 1)

It follows that student development—the processes they go through to move toward those positive outcomes—has become the desired outcome of students' time in college [16].

Although a full discussion of the debates concerning the appropriateness and utility of SPPV is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to highlight that the document has been contended and often interrogated for its continued relevance given shifting societal conditions [17]. In addition to students, as discussed in SPPV, being largely painted as passive vessels to be developed by life, faculty, or student personnel, there are lingering assumptions about or inattention to the context within which development and training happen. Below, we explore the literature related to formal studies of students' development and then introduce select student leadership and student activism literature as supplements that highlight students' agency.

1.1. Student Development Theories

The early landscape of student development theory was dominated by psychosocial theories of development, cognitive-structural theories, and integrative theories. Erikson's identity development theory strove to explain how identity was informed by the reconciliation of internal understandings of self with external forces [16]. Marcia's ego identity statuses and Josselson's theory of women's development sought to capture how young adults experienced and resolved identity crises [16]. These models focused on the content of people's development and the stages and statuses achieved along the developmental path.

Cognitive-structural theories attend to how people make meaning of their experiences and move through different stages of development through thinking and reasoning [18]. Theorists contributing to this body of work were attentive to the role of environments and social interactions within those environments, especially as they influenced intellectual development [16]. Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development has been particularly influential to other cognitive-structural theorists. The positions in Perry's model represent different modes of meaning-making but have been critiqued as a mere categorization of Western educational socialization [16].

Integrative approaches to student development theory reject the notion that development can be assessed solely in terms of psychological, cognitive, or interpersonal development. Particularly noteworthy is the concept of self-authorship and the work of Kegan [19] and Baxter Magolda [20] to establish and extend the theory. The theory of self-authorship, as articulated in Baxter Magolda [20], offers four phases of epistemological development that students navigate as they move toward self-authorship, each involving internal, cognitive, and interpersonal elements. The Learning Partnership Model that emerged from her work has been widely used to inform how practitioners construct learning environments [16].

Early theories of student development were rigid, based on homogeneous samples, and sometimes hard to study empirically [16]. Recognizing the limitations and implications of earlier theories that did not intentionally or explicitly acknowledge the complex experiences of students from various social identities and social locations, new theories and theorists emerged focused on the social identity development and developmental experiences of students with marginalized identities [21,22]. For example, Torres and Hernandez [23], acknowledging that navigating racism is in and of itself a developmental task, articulated the influence of ethnic identity on self-authorship. As student development theories continue to emerge and are refined, they have become progressively more diverse, more pragmatic, more agile, and more attentive to environments and the social phenomena that exist therein.

Recently, scholars have advanced more critically oriented invocations and applications of student development theories to attend to the oppression and hegemon endemic to higher education [21,22,24]. Using critical and post-structural theories as tools for interrogation and reconstruction, scholars have more explicitly attended to the ways systems of oppression shape students' development and suggested how those theories can be applied in identity and power-conscious ways [21,22,24]. For example, Denton [25] leveraged a constellation of critical and post-structural theories to attend to gender, race, and other identity considerations in the context of sexual identity formation. Similarly, Garvey [18] engaged

critical theories to more intentionally consider how power, privilege, and oppression shape students' epistemological and intellectual development.

1.2. Student Leadership and Activism

Leadership experiences continue to be sought after by students and are integral to students' development in various domains. Foundational work related to student involvement, although outside of the student development canon, positioned leadership experiences as integral to student learning and development [26]. Higher education institutions have used leadership experiences as a strategy for promoting desired student outcomes [27,28].

Leadership educators have increasingly prioritized social change as a necessary outcome for leadership learning [29], which has in turn reshaped the curriculum to support students to " . . . take action against the oppressive political elements of reality" [30] (p. 17). Leadership educators have sought to empower students by cultivating agency and the necessary competencies to depreciate, rather than reproduce, social inequities [31]. For example, Taylor and Brownell [32] advanced a five-dimension framework, predicated on critical social theories, that encourage students and educators to consider the individual, interpersonal, contextual, theoretical, and historical dimensions of leadership problems and solutions. This framing was especially attuned to diversifying the knowledges and experiences that students are directed to in shaping their leadership identities.

Less recognized, but no less important, are students engaging in leadership experiences beyond campus or outside of campus-sanctioned leadership experiences, such as community engagement and student activism [10]. There is a long history of student activism on US campuses. Examples in the literature go as far back as the 1930s immediately following the Great Depression, but perhaps the most iconic examples of student activism are those of the 1960's that focused on a range of issues including the ongoing civil rights movement, Vietnam protests in the US, and nuclear proliferation [33–35].

Over the decades, students have recognized their power for social change through student lead institutional accountability, which, in addition to shaping institutions' positions on local and global social issues, has led to curricular and policy changes at the institutional level. For example, the efforts of student-athletes of the University of Missouri in the 2015–2016 school year were integral in addressing racial climate issues related (but not specific) to the murder of Michael Brown [36–38]. Students engaging in university-sanctioned leadership experiences tend to be highly regarded and warmly received by the university community, particularly senior administrators; however, those engaged in activism, especially the kinds of activism institutions seek to distance themselves from, are rarely embraced [11,37].

It is clear that college environments, shaped by societal and institutional phenomena, are complex and difficult to navigate, especially for minoritized students [24]. Beyond the commonly discussed complexities related to student development, specifically development that is anticipated or acknowledged by institutions, students experience a wide range of other developmental opportunities while engaging in leadership within these environments. For example, Beatty and Lima [39] tease out the ways that student leaders of color navigate racism and its precipitates. While student leaders should not have to experience and be fatigued by racism, supporting them in preparing for and making sense of these experiences can contribute to students' leadership development and critical consciousness, as they trouble the social spheres of concern/consequence to them including higher education institutions [32]. Following this understanding, the field of leadership education has pivoted to think about the role of social justice in leadership learning [40] and the pedagogies necessary to cultivate critical conscious and justice-oriented agency amongst student leaders [41,42].

Although many administrators and staff at colleges and universities across the country are actively working to mitigate the difficulties students experience, in the longue durée of institutional change, the immediate support for the students who we recruit and seek to retain in these environments is often overlooked. As such, we offer CSM as a framework

that educators can use to support students in reflecting on and interrogating their collegiate environments and experiences, with a focus on power and systems of oppression and how students *interpret* and *negotiate* their environments. Rather than observing students as passive products of the personal and environmental factors they experience, the CSM framework positions students as agentic institutional actors in a mutually constitutive relationship between students and their environmental contexts.

2. Making Sensemaking Critical: Managing Dissonance between Expectations and Reality

Sensemaking is thought to occur when people's expectations are different from their actual experiences and there is no clear way to proceed or engage [43]. In essence, people faced with uncertainly pause and make sense of their situation or reflect on how their experiences diverge from their expectations. Although this is certainly normal for all students as they navigate new and unfamiliar experiences during college, minoritized students are especially prone to these kinds of moments, whether as a result of exploring and constructing new identities and experiences or encountering the discrimination and oppression endogenous to higher education institutions and US society.

Several scholars have offered nuanced conceptualizations of sensemaking, with varying applicability. Starbuck and Milliken [44] considered sensemaking as the process of inputting stimuli into frameworks to better inform understandings of situations and subsequent decision-making (as cited in Weick [45]). Louis [46] conceptualized sensemaking within the context of transitioning to new environments in her research on newcomer socialization. Considering sensemaking beyond the organization of stimuli, Thomas et al. [47] focused on how people within organizations engage in simultaneous information-seeking, meaning-making, and action. Feldman [48] troubled the notion of action in sensemaking, suggesting that responses may not always result in explicit, observable action. A persistent tension amongst users of sensemaking is whether it is an individual or group process. Gioia and Chittippedi [49] focused on the individual and collective nature of sensemaking and the cognitive maps that emerge. For example, imagine a Black student feeling rejected and isolated in a chemistry lab because of a lack of representation and toxic interactions with peers. Over dinner, that student may share their experience with other Black students and friends to make sense of this phenomenon, while also listening to the similar experiences of others. For minoritized students in collegiate contexts, sensemaking, although perhaps not named as such, happens in both individual and collective spaces.

Karl Weick's (2005) work on an approach to sensemaking has gained acclaim and is used widely. From his perspective, sensemaking is an ongoing, retrospective process where people make sense of themselves and their situations and develop plausible images of themselves and their situations that motivate/rationalize their actions [43]. Stated differently, people figure out how to move forward in situations by reflecting on who they are and what they have experienced. They then act based on what they think are possible and viable outcomes. In the case of the Black student mentioned above, their sensemaking was shaped by their interactions in the lab and subsequent reflections as well as their interactions with Black students over dinner.

Sensemaking happens and is understood through social interactions. However, a primary critique of sensemaking is the inattention to power. Specifically, there is little consideration of how institutional and societal cultures and structures influenced interpretation and enactment [12]. Broader understandings of power are necessary because individuals make sense of their experiences within the context of their broader social environments, navigating the power asymmetries that exist in interpersonal interactions, organizations, and society [12]. For the Black students above, they might identify how perceptions of their aptitude steeped in racist stereotypes might have motivated their classmate's behaviors. What may be less apparent to those students, are the ways that their instructors' inattention to these racialized phenomena contributed to their exclusion and as such is a function of

broader institutional negligence. In addressing the inattention to power in sensemaking, Helms Mills and associates [12] advanced critical sensemaking (CSM).

2.1. An Alternate Perspective to Promote Transformation

While sensemaking provides a general frame for students to interpret their experiences, CSM does so in a manner that considers the role of power and oppression—an important practice for minoritized students. Such an interrogation allows students to acquire the literacy necessary to resist oppressive forces and advocate for institutional transformation. Sensemaking and critical sensemaking both focus on the *organizational shocks* that people in organizations experience and how those situations influence their identity and actions, which we know many minoritized students experience as they transition into college environments [9]. CSM is attentive to the real, material experiences and social perceptions of people within an organization or environment. CSM is especially attentive to power asymmetries as well as broader environmental forces that influence and inform how people navigate their environments and situations therein [12,50]. In the context of students' experiences, CSM stands as a useful tool in guiding minoritized students' reflections on their experiences while in college (and beyond) in ways that can cultivate and direct their agency in navigating the collegiate environment.

CSM triangulates interpretive, post-structural, and critical theory approaches to " . . . provide different frames of reference that can simultaneously ground and problematize (what we call) critical sensemaking's knowledge claims" [12] (p. 188). In other words, given the unique situations and circumstances that students may experience, critical sensemaking is malleable, allowing for the truth in their experiences to be constructed differently based on their own cultural and epistemic standpoints. This addresses critiques of the epistemological certainty espoused in Weickian approaches to sensemaking. Additionally, CSM relies less on the specific social psychological properties of sensemaking, choosing to focus on its heuristic nature. Unlike sensemaking, CSM does not advance or establish a foundational set of standards, but rather, a consistent set of assumptions [12]. CSM is more explicitly attentive to the contextual, structural, and discursive nature of sensemaking in efforts to " . . . make sense of why some language, social practices, and experiences become meaningful for individuals, and others do not" [12] (p. 188).

CSM rejects the notion that all views of reality are equally good, in search of grounds for determining which views of the world are more useful than others and in what circumstances, especially as it pertains to the people engaged in sensemaking and various elements of their circumstances. An example in practice is the fact that each student in a university will construct a view of the university environment based on their unique experiences. If students have drastically different experiences in those environments, as was the case with the Black student in the chemistry lab, students with better experiences, comparatively, may view the environment more favorably than their peers—perhaps not noticing or caring about the experience of their Black classmate. When considering how to address problematic or hostile aspects of campus culture and climate, the views of students with favorable experiences might be less useful. Simultaneously, students with more negative views of their environment, especially if their perspectives are in the minority, may be easily dismissed.

2.2. Key Aspects

Weick [45] presented seven properties of sensemaking that distinguish this concept from other explanatory processes: grounded in identity construction; driven by plausibility rather than accuracy; ongoing; social; retrospective; focused on and by exacted cutes; and enactive of sensible environments. Helms Mills and Associates [12] revised these properties to reflect a critical lens. Below is a brief discussion of the key elements of CSM and amended and reconfigured key properties of sensemaking articulated by Weick [45].

2.2.1. Structure, Context, and Discourse

A critical approach to sensemaking amplifies the focus on structural, contextual, and discursive aspects of sensemaking, especially on how power performs within and across these spaces. There is also a focus on organizational rules and how they influence sensemaking. Informal and formal rules encourage, direct, or constrain the choices of institutional actors and their sensemaking. Attentiveness to organizational rules and routines encourages the consideration of what power individuals have to enact, negotiate, or resist rules, routines, and expectations [12]. The formative context, similar to organizational rules, is a vehicle for dominant social values and discourse to direct and constrain individual actions. Through the formative context, macro-level phenomena influence micro-level behaviors. Sensemaking, plausibility, and identity are influenced by local and societal discourses. For example, common deficit discourses related to the academic preparedness and performance of racially marginalized students may lead them to question their student identity (if they belong and how they got in), as well as the plausibility of their degree completion, especially in competitive academic programs.

2.2.2. Identity Construction and Plausibility

Helms Mills and Associates [12] identify identity construction and plausibility as the most important aspects of sensemaking, rejecting the Weickian notion that each of these stages is equally significant. People's perspectives of the world, and thus sensemaking, are influenced by their identities and the experiences that have shaped them. Critical sensemaking, then, " . . . shifts focus to how organizational power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others . . . " [12] (p. 188). Based on an individual's relationship to an organization, changes in the organization may lead them to question their identity. Additionally, if their affiliation with the organization is contentious, the persistence of the organization may induce tensions in individuals' identities or previous identities. Identity construction is particularly pervasive in the context of student development, as institutions are replete with intentional and unintentional messages about what it means to be a "good student".

For example, the identity of a "good employee" may be privileged within an organization through texts, language, rules, etc. that emphasize characteristics and identity. The construction of this identity may include rules about how employees should function within the organization. Employees may also be encouraged to draw upon cues from their work environment and reflect an identity privileged through other similar organizations or a broader social context [12] (pp. 188–189).

Similarly, students' contexts, the structures they interact with, and the discourse they consume convey specific characteristics of what it means to be a good student. There are rules—formal and informal expectations—of how good students perform and behave. Students are induced to conform to institutional notions of good student performance and when they are unable to perform in these ways, they are seen by others and themselves as bad students. This is an example of how power and hegemony lead to the differentiation and stratification of identities within local and societal contexts, and how meaning-making is influenced by students' social locations [12].

Weick [45] asserts that multiple selves exist and emerge during identity formation and that individuals associate or disassociate with threats to their identities. CSM perspectives interrogate the agency individuals have in (dis)association, questioning how certain selves are engaged, and others are suppressed in response to local contexts, institutional structures, and societal discourses.

According to Helms Mills et al. [12], " . . . plausibility essentially refers to a sense that one particular meaning or explanation is more meaningful than others or that something feels right within the range of possible explanations available to sensemakers in a given situation" (p. 189). While there is no specific measure of plausibility, Weick suggests a course of action becomes more plausible when there are no suitable alternatives [12]. Sensemaking, then, is about the reasonability of a particular course of action and the process

of interpretation and deliberation that leads an individual to determine reasonableness [45]. CSM can serve as a framework to map how plausibility is constructed and subsequently influences students' actions, beliefs, and identities [12].

2.2.3. Ongoing, Social, and Retrospective

Individuals are constantly engaged in sensemaking, always collecting and interpreting information. This constant stream of sensemaking is sometimes interrupted or coopted to focus on specific situations or moments, leading people to isolate details and cues related to those moments for more deliberate sensemaking [45]. Sensemaking is inherently discursive, often extrapolated from the analysis of talk, text, and interactions [13]. Sensemaking, particularly the Weikian approach, acknowledges the mutually constituted cognitive and social aspects of sensemaking [12]. Social aspects of sensemaking recognize how meaning-making is influenced by our experiences within our social world; direct and indirect interactions with others; our navigation of social spaces; and how we engage with social discourses [45]. In the context of students' development, their realities shape and are shaped by their interactions with others and with contexts and structures.

People draw upon past experiences to make sense of current experiences, making sensemaking inherently comparative and reflexive [12]. Through retrospection, past experiences are interpreted as discrete or ongoing, meaning that individuals are reflecting on their *experiences* in various situations. It is important to note that while retrospection may clarify the past, it will never be completely transparent [45]. Additionally, the retrospective nature of sensemaking is increasingly effective when the time between the past event and reflection on that event is short [45].

The experiences students draw from to make sense of their experiences in college influence how they make meaning of and navigate those experiences. First-year students likely draw from their experiences before college to navigate their transition into college. Seniors who have spent their entire college time at one institution have a host of experiences at their institution to offer contextually congruent insights into new situations and experiences. Transfer students may draw on collegiate experiences but have to consider the dissonance between previous and current contexts. Retrospection is useful to consider because the past experiences that students draw from influence how they make sense of their collegiate experiences.

2.2.4. Cues and Enactment

When a significant event occurs, individuals isolate experiences related to that event, privileging those cues over others [45]. The identification and interpretation of cues are largely influenced by previous experiences, representing the retrospective nature of sensemaking, as mentioned above. Focusing on certain cues results in overlooking others. Weick [45] identifies the power of determining which cues take precedence and, thus, what consequences result.

People simultaneously experience and influence their environments. As they make sense of their environments, they perform in ways that intentionally or unintentionally influence the environments themselves. Weick [45] offers a particularly agentic perspective on enactment but acknowledges observable actions are not the only example of enactment. Enactment might manifest in changed perspectives but not necessarily observable action or individuals may choose *not* to act. Community building comes when considering enactment in the context of student development. Some students that have negative experiences within their campus environment respond by working to change the campus climate as a whole or creating counterspaces [51], while others may cope in other ways.

3. CSM within Higher Education Contexts

As students grow and develop during their undergraduate experience, they are repeatedly engaged in sensemaking. This is especially true for students who have poignant and unexpected experiences during college and arguably truer for those who experience

these moments *as a result* of their collegiate experiences. We focus on students who have been historically marginalized in higher education or minoritized in society and how CSM can be used as a framework to more systematically identify, capture, and learn from the moments when they find themselves making sense of their experiences.

3.1. CSM as Catalyst for Minoritized Students' Growth and Development

Using CSM can direct educators' support of minoritized students by inviting them to recall and reflect on their experiences in service to other more specific developmental goals. Providing students with tools and strategies for pointed, power-conscious reflection also stands to empower those students to understand and explore how college environments (i.e., the social, political, cultural, and structural phenomena therein) shape their experiences and equip them to push for needed changes and institutional accountability. We underscore the importance of educators in helping to facilitate this process to foster trust with students and establish coalitions to create more inclusive collegiate environments.

This application of sensemaking concepts is not an attempt to theorize or predict students' developmental experiences or trajectories, but rather its heuristic nature may help in explicating specific contextual, structural, and discursive factors and their influences on students' identity development. Understanding how students construct goals and view the plausibility of their goals on micro-, meso-, and macro-levels will help administrators, faculty, and staff to support students in developing self-efficacy and cultivating ambitious and actionable goals. Micro-level goals may be related to personal experiences as well as personal and skill development; meso-level goals could be their overall academic performance, the pursuit of a particular major, and degree completion; and macro-level goals might be their career goals and desired social status, or their societal impact or contributions.

3.2. CSM as a Mechanism for Reflection, Accountability, and Coalition Building

As practitioners work to create more inclusive campuses, students must be equipped with the tools necessary to reflect on the various phenomena they experience on campus, the power dynamics undergirding those experiences, and hold various institutional actors responsible for making adequate progress toward creating equitable environments. We advocate the role of practitioners in helping minoritized students to cultivate these sensibilities as a platform for coalition building in the institutional transformation process. As students learn to better understand their environments, students and practitioners can better work together to change them, with students armed with the information necessary to hold institutions accountable.

A sensemaking approach is useful to consider for a more nuanced understanding of how students are making sense of well-researched phenomena such as campus climates, sense of belonging, and microaggressions. Explicating students' specific meaning-making experiences regarding these phenomena offers a more granular perspective on how students develop while navigating their experiences. Some studies have employed sensemaking approaches to this end. Harper and Newman [52] employed Louis' [46] interpretation of sensemaking in their study of the Black male, first-year students' transition to college. They recognized the utility of Louis' [46] approach to sensemaking, as it focused on the ways newcomers navigate and make sense of their transitions to new environments. Shenoy-Packer [53] leveraged CSM to study peoples' experiences with microaggressions in the workplace and was able to explicate the performance of power within communicative spaces that fostered discrimination. Additionally, some studies have referenced the sensemaking of college students, offering great insight into how students make meaning of their experiences. The application of CSM is an opportunity to more thoughtfully consider students' social locations in institutions and society while exploring how they are making sense of their collegiate experiences.

Considering how sensemaking occurs and its influence can inform institutional and individual approaches in supporting students. For example, when institutions name and encourage participation in specific high-impact practices they are imparting unspoken

rules that induce students to consider these specific practices as optimum and others as less ideal [54,55]. A CSM orientation would help students to critique such framing and thereby require practitioners to rethink how they positioned these practices concerning diverse groups on campus. For example, notwithstanding the potential benefits, studying abroad can be precarious for a student with minoritized racial identities, LGBTQ students, and those with low-SES backgrounds [54,56,57]. Some Black students who study abroad as a part of their academic experience at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have experienced similar and sometimes exaggerated feelings of isolation compared to their day-to-day experiences on campus, mitigating the proposed positive impact [58]. Thus, Black and other racially minoritized students will likely benefit from pointed reflection about their experiences studying abroad, especially as it pertains to racial or other identity-specific aspects of development. Additionally, given the cost, students who forego these experiences may benefit from pointed reflection on the ways that social class has shaped their collegiate experiences. Thereafter, these students may begin to make sense of their experience and the plausibility of their success based on whether or not they were able to engage in these activities. A CSM lens can help students to seek out appropriate development opportunities and critique how existing ones are often privileged within collegiate settings. Furthermore, a CSM lens would invite practitioners to explore the disparate impacts of highly lauded practices and to adopt practices to better impact all groups positively. Instead of assuming the anticipated outcomes from certain practices will be achieved, CSM can help students and educators understand how students can experience positive development despite these experiences.

Beyond reflections on specific education practices, students engaged in critical sensemaking are directed to consider how systemic oppression shapes their collegiate environments and experiences. Throughout history, college students have engaged in strategic social change through campus-based activism as well as participation in broader social movements [7]. Students engaged in these ways have likely developed a critical consciousness through their own experiences or the support of peers, educators, and community members. CSM can be a tool to empower students through activism, which has direct implications for their development across several dimensions, especially leadership development [32]. Overall, CSM can be a useful tool to hold institutions accountable for change via promoting and developing students' agency, especially for students with minoritized identities.

3.3. CSM and Implication for Future Research

The ongoing, social, and retrospective elements of CSM lend insight into how researchers could direct their efforts to track, capture and respond to students' sensemaking process. Since students are always making meaning of their experiences, more representative perspectives on student experiences might be gained through iterative, longitudinal approaches. For example, time-stamp journaling is an approach where students journal regularly throughout data collection, minimizing the lapse in time (and memory) between their experiences and accounts of those experiences [59]. This is thought to be more reliable than surveys that require students to recall the things they have experienced over a year in one sitting [59]. In addition, other qualitative methods that invite discourse-rich interactions can support the investigation of students' CSM. Along with common qualitative approaches such as interviewing and focus groups, ethnographic approaches such as participant observation and other social constructionist methods are ideal to generate rich discursive interactions from which to extrapolate students' sensemaking. Employing theories and methods from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) would also be useful to more systematically analyze the discursive elements involved in sensemaking as well as to create some empirical linkages between macro-level phenomena and micro-level behaviors, as alluded to in the discussion of the discursive practices in sensemaking and critical sensemaking [12,45].

4. Conclusions

Supporting students in developing and deploying CSM strategies helps them to identify oppressive structures, navigate those challenges, and advocate for improvements. Furthermore, partnering with students in acquiring these skills helps to create an embedded institutional accountability structure, trust, and fertile soil for coalition building as educators and students work collectively towards positive institutional changes. The insight gained from students' sensemaking can offer more nuanced detail about how students make meaning of their experiences and may help practitioners to better direct attention and support, by understanding what triggers, supports, or inhibits their sensemaking. This approach stands as an alternative to overly deterministic models and theories of student development, which often undermine the autonomy and agency of students by assuming that desired student outcomes result from structural fidelity—adherence to the planned and existing processes, trajectories, and structures offered by institutions. Following this logic, how students respond to their contexts frames their possibilities for action, influencing their subsequent persistence and development, and the potential transformation of institutions.

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