Institutional and Faculty Sensemaking: Exploring Responses to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws

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Acknowledgements

My academic journey has always been inspired by my mom and dad. My mom is the epitome of perseverance. She set an example for me at an early age about the ways in which we sacrifice to become a better person. I could recount numerous occasions where she gently demonstrated that sentiment, but I would end up writing another dissertation. I will note one moment where her sacrifice to become better will always stay with me. My mom went back to school to pursue a degree in education while I was in middle school. I remember feeling proud and excited for her journey. She was choosing a path that aligned with her values—committed to providing a better life for her family, devoted to helping others thrive in the classroom and in life, and seeking opportunities to explore her curiosities and become a better person. I did not know it at the time, but I would eventually work full time while pursuing two of my degrees. I am thankful for my mother's early example. My dad's imprint on my life—and on this dissertation is related, but different. I have watched my dad refine his craft and develop his business acumen for over 30 years. His dedication and growth mindset have created beautiful spaces across Pennsylvania and allowed him to create a life that I am sure he once dreamed. I am grateful and thankful for the ways both of my parents have shown up for me and the lessons that they have modeled for me. Those moments have led me to this point and allowed me to complete this dissertation. Thank you, Mom and Dad.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Tennessee's divisive concepts laws influence public institutions of higher education, faculty disposition, and faculty sensemaking and instructional practice within dual enrollment contexts. Using a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, the study integrates three articles to provide a multi-level analysis of policy implementation across institutional, individual, and classroom settings.

The first article analyzes institutional responses and finds that colleges and universities communicated the laws in fragmented yet structurally similar ways, primarily through legally oriented guidance that emphasized compliance and reaffirmed academic freedom without offering clear interpretive direction. These uneven and largely descriptive communications resulted in inconsistent policy signals across institutions. The second article investigates faculty disposition through the construct of academic optimism and finds that dual enrollment faculty reported moderate to high levels of self-efficacy and academic press, but a slightly lower overall academic optimism score than the norm reference group. Notably, no statistically significant differences were found across demographic variables, suggesting that variation in faculty disposition is shaped more by organizational and contextual factors than by individual characteristics. The third article explores faculty sensemaking and instructional response, revealing wide variation in policy awareness and interpretation. Faculty largely maintained curriculum and pedagogy, demonstrating a commitment to rigor, while engaging in reflective adjustments such as reconsidering course materials and framing of classroom discussions.

Integrated findings show that policy does not operate as a uniform directive but functions as an interpretive signal filtered through institutional communication, faculty networks, and

individual beliefs. This study affirms and refines policy implementation theory by demonstrating how filtering occurs across multiple levels and how uneven access to policy information shapes variation in response. Additionally, the findings suggest that academic optimism may serve as a stabilizing resource that supports instructional continuity under conditions of policy ambiguity. The dissertation contributes to research on education policy by illustrating that the effects of policy depend less on its design and more on how it is interpreted and enacted within local contexts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Dual enrollment (DE) courses are classes high school students take that count for college credit (An, 2012; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Greenburg, 1988). The students are considered dually enrolled in both the high school and the college where they are receiving credit for the course (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Greenburg, 1988). The course can be offered through different modalities including in-person at a high school or college campus, online, or a hybrid of both (Alsup & Depenhart, 2023; Johnson & Brophy, 2006; Smith, 2007). DE courses can be taught by either faculty from the partner postsecondary institution or high school instructors who meet the requirements of the postsecondary institution to teach college-level courses (Hughes & Edwards, 2012). DE courses have grown to be an integral part of the high school experience.

In 2017-18 school year, 82% of American public schools that serve grades 9-12 offered DE opportunities to students (NCES, 2020). Many high school students (34%) take at least one dual enrollment course across the United States (NCES, 2019). In Tennessee, 47,509 high school students took DE courses in 2022-23 (Fink, 2024). However, this growth in DE across the United States has not been equitable. Schools in urban communities offered fewer dual enrollment opportunities than schools in suburban, town, and rural settings (NCES, 2020). Students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher participate in dual enrollment at a rate of 43% whereas their peers whose parents have no postsecondary degree participate at a rate of 33% (NCES, 2019). The inequities persist at the student group level. At Tennessee's community colleges, 13,146 White students took at least one DE course whereas only 2,657 Black students took at least one DE course in the fall of 2023 (TBR, 2024). Remarkably, this equity gap in the fall of 2023 has persisted even after the number of Black students taking DE courses has risen

8% since 2015 (TBR, 2024). Access and participation are just part of the DE story. DE courses are related to positive student outcomes.

DE courses offer many benefits to high school students. High school students who take DE seamlessly enroll in postsecondary institutions at higher rates than non-participants (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Moreno et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2015). Students who take DE have been shown to have higher rates of retention from the first to the second year of college (D'Amico et al., 2013; Kremer, 2020). Studies have shown that all students regardless of socioeconomic status who take DE courses have higher levels of degree attainment across different types of postsecondary institutions (An 2013; An & Taylor 2015; Blankenberger et al., 2017; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Grubb et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015). In addition to higher completion rates, students who take DE have been shown to accelerate their time to postsecondary degree completion (Allen & Dadgar, 2012). The benefit of taking DE extends past persistence and completion metrics.

DE participation has been associated with increases in grade point average (GPA) (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2012; An, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). DE has been shown to decrease the need for remedial coursework once a student is enrolled full time at college (An, 2012; Burns & Lewis, 2000; Grubb et al., 2017; Kremer, 2020). Taking DE math courses has been associated with taking higher level math courses like Advanced Placement calculus indicating that there may be benefits to students who take DE while they are in high school (Hemelt et al., 2020). Program evaluations of DE have also revealed decreases in the achievement gap between Hispanic first-generation college students who have taken DE courses and their affluent peers

(Latino et al., 2019). The benefits of DE course taking extends past quantitative metrics to more qualitative measures.

Participation in DE courses have shown a positive association with helping students understand how to be a successful college student and the role of college in terms of linking their degree with career advancement (An & Taylor, 2015; McGowan-Bucci & Simpson, 2022; Mechur-Karp, 2012; Lile et al., 2018). DE participation is associated with increasing student readiness defined by noncognitive measures like study skills and skills associated with the transition to college and career (An & Taylor, 2015). DE coursework may combat a loss of motivation and increase student engagement when compared to non-participants (An, 2012). This buffer against student motivation loss may be because students are motivated by the rigorous coursework and the ability to accumulate credits (An, 2012). However, not all students experience the benefits of DE equally and some high school students have had negative experiences associated with their DE coursework.

Kanny (2015) documented some high school students had negative interactions with their professors and with full-time college students. Some students felt isolated and that they had a lack of support (Kanny, 2015). The students in Kanny's (2015) study articulated that they had limited access to postsecondary resources. Taylor (2015) uncovered unequal benefits for high school students who took DE courses that depended on socioeconomic status and race. The benefits of DE coursework as measured by college access and completion metrics showed that students from low-income backgrounds and students of color benefitted less than their more affluent and White peers (An, 2013; Moreno et al., 2021; Taylor, 2015). Taylor (2015) found that high school students felt they had inadequate advising for course selection. Additionally, Cowan

and Goldhaber (2015) found that students in one state were more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to enroll in 4-year colleges and universities. Ferguson et al. (2015) uncovered that while students may be academically ready for DE courses, they may not have the emotional maturity for college coursework. Despite these findings, DE is largely viewed as beneficial for students across a diverse group of stakeholders including superintendents, principals, higher education administrators, and faculty (Hanson et al., 2015; Hornbeck & Malin, 2019; Howley et al., 2013). Access to DE courses in Tennessee has enjoyed political and policy favor in the past few years most notably with the changes to expand access and funding via T.C.A. §49-4-930. This unfettered support began to waiver in 2020. Education became the focal point for political attacks as state legislatures began passing resolutions and legislation aimed at restricting a suite of concepts related to race, sex, and gender that could be taught in schools, colleges, and university classrooms colloquially known as Critical Race Theory (CRT) laws (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022). DE courses have not been immune to these new laws.

Statement of the Problem

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged within legal scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s as scholars sought to explain the persistence of racial inequities despite the formal legal gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Building upon the work of legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda, CRT challenged the notion that racism exists solely as individual prejudice and instead examined how laws, policies, and institutions may perpetuate racial inequities even when they appear race-neutral (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Crenshaw's (1989) development of

intersectionality further expanded the framework by demonstrating how overlapping social identities shape experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Importantly, CRT originated as a specialized legal and academic framework rather than a K–12 curriculum, pedagogical model, or broad diversity initiative.

Beginning in 2020, CRT became the subject of significant political debate in the United States. Conservative activists, media figures, and elected officials increasingly used the term as a broad label encompassing a wide range of discussions related to race, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice (Wallace-Wells, 2021). Scholars have argued that this political reframing often departed from CRT's original scholarly meaning and instead functioned as a symbolic category through which broader cultural concerns about race, history, and identity were debated (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023; Heggart et al., 2023). This shift transformed CRT from a relatively specialized academic framework into a highly visible political issue and contributed to the emergence of state legislation aimed at restricting the teaching of concepts associated with race, sex, and gender in educational settings.

Since September of 2020, 203 local, state, and federal government entities have introduced 619 official statements, orders, and legislation designed to combat anti-racist and anti-sexist movements (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). These measures have spread with remarkable speed over the last three years. Every state has introduced anti-critical race theory bills or executive orders except for California, Vermont, and Massachusetts (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). The entire Southeast, Midwest, and Western United States have introduced measures at the state or local level (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). Over half (57%) of

the legislative and policy action related to critical race theory stems from President Trump's Executive Order 13950 signed during his first term (Alexander et al., 2023). California ranked highest for the most school board-level anti-critical race theory policy (Alexander et al., 2023). The Missouri Legislature has introduced 25 bills to restrict critical race theory in education pedagogy (Alexander, et al., 2023). Former Governor Kristy Noem has taken the most gubernatorial action in the United States and cities in New Mexico have taken the most local level action against critical race theory (Alexander et al., 2023). CRT restrictions have penetrated every level of government and public institution.

These anti-critical race theory legislative and policy actions have targeted education in both K-12 and higher education contexts (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022). Over 93% of the anti-critical race theory actions have targeted education (Alexander et al., 2022). Of these, 77% focus on dictating pedagogy around race and sex in K-12 settings (Alexander et al., 2022), while 80% of the legislative and policy actions specifically target teaching (Alexander et al., 2022). Critical race theory actions (n=117) across the United States include enforcement mechanisms that withhold funding or issue fines to teachers, schools, and/or school districts (Alexander et al., 2023). The political and policy flurry of action has not stopped. New anti-critical race theory measures (n=110) have been introduced in the first half of 2023 as many states' legislative bodies have convened for new sessions (Alexander et al., 2023). Enacted legislative and policy actions have risen by 23% (Alexander et al., 2023). Just over half of the measures introduced at the state or local level have continued to target education (Alexander et al., 2023). Tennessee has used two legislative vehicles to pass CRT laws and subsequent amendments. One is geared toward K-12 and the other toward higher education.

The Tennessee K-12 version of the law is listed under T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and the higher education version of the law is listed under T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Both laws define the same set of 14 divisive concepts that are prohibited from being included or promoted as a component of instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program:

(1) One (1) race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;

(2) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously;

(3) An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual's race or sex;

(4) An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex;

(5) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;

(6) An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex;

(7) A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex;

(8) This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist;

(9) Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government;

(10) Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people;

(11) Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex;

(12) The rule of law does not exist, but instead is a series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups;

(13) All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; or

(14) Governments should deny to any person within the government's jurisdiction the equal protection of the law (T.C.A. §49-6-1019, 2021 & T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., 2023).

The higher education version of the law includes two additional divisive concepts which are race or sex stereotyping and race or sex scapegoating. The higher education version is more expansive including the areas of training and orientation, employment and compensation, tenure and promotion, fees, dues, and travel to organizations or conferences that related to one or more of the 16 divisive concepts outlined in the public chapter of law. Additionally, the higher education CRT law was expanded in 2023 to require a reporting mechanism, defines how diversity, equity, and inclusion officers and associated staff members must work, restricts the use of state funds that can be used to pay for fees to an external organization if that organization requires the promotion or endorsement of a divisive concept, restricts institutions from requiring student and faculty applicants from affirming a diversity statement, updates how events related to divisive concepts can be held on campus, and creates non-mandatory training about the law §49-7-1901 et seq., 2023). The K-12 version includes an enforcement section.

The enforcement section of the K-12 version of the law was developed by the Tennessee State Board of Education (TSBE), the state's policy and rule-making body for K-12 education. TSBE developed Chapter 0520-12-04 Prohibited Concepts in Instruction that details how LEAs,

public charter schools, and the state shall develop reporting processes, investigative bodies, and sanctions for T.C.A. §49-6-1019. TSBE's Chapter 0520-12-04 outlines the reporting structure for filing complaints of instruction on prohibited concepts, the timeline for reviewing and acting on complaints, and actions that LEAs and public charter schools can take if a claim is substantiated (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2023). Disciplinary action can include requiring teachers to amend instruction or take individual disciplinary or licensure action against a teacher (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2023). TSBE created early resolution pathways that circumvent the formal review process to encourage teachers to work in concert with families to identify a solution to the concern (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2023). Additionally, there is a formal appeal process to the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) that empowers TDOE to review cases from LEAs and public charter schools and, if a violation is found, a tiered fine process from state funding ranging from $1 million or 2% to $5 million or 10%, whichever is less, can be applied (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2023). The current fine structure is included below in Table 1.1. There is a large caveat at the end of each law. In T.C.A. §49-6-1019, the law affirms the ability of K-12 educators the ability to have impartial discussions on controversial topics related to race and sex and allows these concepts to be taught if they are rooted in historical context. In T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., the law explicitly states that no part of the code should be construed to infringe on First Amendment rights, academic

Table 1

Tennessee Department of Education Fine Structure for Violations of T.C.A. §49-6-1019

Violation Number	Fine
First determination of a knowing violation during the school year.	2% of annual state funds scheduled to be granted to the LEA or $1 million, whichever is less

Table 1 Continued

Second determination of a knowing violation during the school year.	4% of annual state funds scheduled to be granted to the LEA or $2 million, whichever is less
Third determination of a knowing violation during the school year.	6% of annual state funds scheduled to be granted to the LEA or $3 million, whichever is less
Fourth determination of a knowing violation during the school year.	8% of annual state funds scheduled to be granted to the LEA or $4 million, whichever is less
Fifth determination of a knowing violation during the school year.	10% of annual state funds scheduled to be granted to the LEA or $5 million, whichever is less

freedom of faculty, force noncompliance with any accreditation standard, or violate any state or federal law, rule, or regulation. However, these broad exceptions are competing against narratives driven by the media that may cause confusion around the parameters of the laws and the practical implications for teaching and learning. In fact, journalists have begun reporting on the confusion and chilling effect these laws are eliciting from educators (Meckler & Natanson, 2022; Waxman, 2022). Additionally, faculty from multiple institutions including Ohio State University, Penn State University, the University of Alabama, and the University of Texas at Austin have passed resolutions pushing back against CRT laws passed in their states to protect First Amendment rights and academic freedom (Anderson & Svrluga, 2022). Tennessee's two CRT laws—one geared at higher education and one toward K-12—may add an additional layer of complexity that DE faculty must navigate because DE courses taught to high school students can earn college credit when they successfully pass the course. No research or legislative clarity has provided a tool to cut through the complexity and confusion caused as the nation and Tennessee wrestles with CRT. Diehl and Golann (2023) have called for education research to focus on how schools and universities are responding to their external environments. They

specifically call for research to focus on how local adaptation occurs when critical race theory or transgender prohibition laws are passed by state and local legislative bodies (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Therefore, this study will seek to understand how faculty are navigating the complexities of CRT and how the laws may be informing their pedagogical practices in DE classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

This study will quantify the sense of academic optimism DE faculty in the current climate influenced by Tennessee's CRT laws and their resulting interpretation by external and internal stakeholders. Additionally, this study will explore the sensemaking of DE faculty as they interpret and respond to the various elements of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. and its influence on their pedagogical practices in DE settings. This study, hopefully, will uncover how Tennessee's CRT laws are shaping institutional responses and, in turn, DE faculty actions as it relates to pedagogy. This study will examine how laws can shape policy and pedagogy in DE contexts by using Diehl and Golann's Theoretical Framework for Heterogeneous Responses to Institutional Pressures.

Research Questions

1) Has the passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws) influenced college faculty's sense of academic optimism when teaching dual enrollment classes?
2) How are organizations responding to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws (TCA & TCA)?
    a. How are institutions responding to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.?

b. How are dual enrollment faculty responding to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.?

Significance of the Study

A robust body of literature exists describing the benefits of DE to high school students as previously described, including increased college GPA (Allen & Dadgar, 2015; An, 2012; An, 2015), persistence (D'Amico et al., 2013; Kremer, 2020; Wang et al., 2015), and degree completion (An, 2013; Blankenberger et al., 2017; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Grubb et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015). While these benefits for students exist, research has indicated that DE instructors must navigate complex environments with varying expectations set by different administrators to offer these courses to high school students (Duncheon & Relles, 2020). Tennessee's two CRT laws were created to restrict pedagogy related to 12-14 divisive concepts in K-12 and higher education, respectively. These laws have varying enforcement mechanisms and leave interpretation and implementation to the local level. Research has shown that local level actors influence policy interpretation and implementation through their personal values, their workplace conditions, and external factors, e.g., political and social actors (Spillane et al., 2002; Cuban, 2013). Factors that influence local actors can create heterogenous responses to state-level policy (Spillane et al., 2002; Cuban, 2013). Cuban (2013) found that these heterogenous responses can stem from educators' resistance to change their pedagogical practices. This resistance to change was due to a misalignment in values between the educator and policy, the greater length of time and effort to implement policy changes in the classroom, and a lack of educator input in the creation of the policy (Cuban, 2013). This heterogenous response and the resistance to policy may be playing out in Tennessee's DE classrooms. The

literature on the anti-CRT movement that began in 2020 has been limited to descriptive analysis of where these laws are passing and what they contain (Alexander et al., 2023; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). The literature has also focused on the legal merits of anti-CRT laws, and the recourse educators and policymakers may have through the legal system (Bissell, 2023; Krebs, 2022). However, there is limited research studying the effect of these CRT laws on institutions, educators, and classrooms that support DE courses. Diehl and Golann (2023) call for education research to focus on how schools and universities filter and respond to various institutional pressures. Specifically, their call is for a more concerted effort to identify and understand how routines, sensemaking, and social networks work independently and collectively to filter and adapt institutional pressures like COVID-19 regulations and critical race theory legislation (Diehl & Golann, 2023).

The significance of this study lies in its potential contributions to understanding how CRT laws are being interpreted at the local level and their subsequent influence on DE pedagogy. This study will add to the literature on policy implementation by clarifying how local actors navigate personal values, organizational cultures, and external forces during the policy implementation process (Spillane et al., 2002). Additionally, this study will contribute to how effectively policy can penetrate the "black box" of pedagogy in the classroom (Cuban, 2013, 159). This study will contribute to the understanding of how educators are responding to CRT laws across the nation as 80% of CRT legislation, policy, and executive orders have targeted pedagogy (Alexander et al., 2022). These findings may spur downstream effects that encourage legislative bodies to clarify their intent and pass amendments to the initial law. These findings may help federal policymakers align their advocacy efforts to the impacts of this type of

legislation on faculty and their instructional practice in DE settings. This study will also contribute to organizational theory literature through the application of Diehl and Golann's Framework. This study holds significance for practitioners at the local level as well—namely, K-12 and higher education administrators and educators.

This study will contribute to practitioners' understanding of policy implementation by uncovering heterogenous responses to the two CRT laws (Diehl & Golann, 2023). These responses to the CRT laws could be compared and allow practitioners to make changes to their own local governance and policy. Cuban (2013) and Spillane et al. (2002) demonstrated the ways in which local actors like administrators and educators interpret and implement policy. This study will further their line of research by exploring how administrators and educators across the education pipeline are responding to Tennessee's CRT laws.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that will undergird this study is Diehl and Golann's Integrated Framework that presents a model for studying how individuals and organizations respond to their environments. This section will describe their theoretical model, its application to this study, and how the model may illuminate the tools DE instructors are using to respond to environmental pressures catalyzed by the CRT laws in Tennessee as well as how schools may be impacting the tools used by DE instructors in response to Tennessee's CRT laws.

Diehl and Golann's framework is rooted in developments in organizational theory that they argue would benefit the field of education research. The framework responds to evolutions in organizational theory by embracing recent research in the field of organizational theory. Diehl and Golann (2023) stated that the field is shifting to focus on why and how institutions and

individuals are responding in heterogenous ways due to external pressure or logics from various sources like the government, social movements, and consumer groups. Therefore, their framework seeks to understand how similar organizations and individuals can have varied responses to the same external stimuli or logics (Diehl & Golann, 2023).

The framework proposes that institutions and individuals respond to multiple logics through two pathways: filtering and local adaptation (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Filtering describes which logics or which pieces of logics such as policy changes or cultural influences are used to inform local responses to the external environment (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Filtering can occur at the organizational level or at the individual level to shape responses (Diehl & Golann, 2023). The responses are shaped through processes driven at the individual level. These individual responses include sensemaking, routines, and social networks. Together, these three responses are considered the local adaptation aspect of the framework. See Figure 1 for a visualization of Diehl and Golann's framework.

Diehl and Golann (2023) argued that their theoretical framework has important applications to education research because of the framework's ability to guide researchers to consider the interrelatedness of routines, sensemaking, and social networks. They argue that considering the interrelatedness of these three mechanisms of local adaptation allows us to study and understand institutional heterogeneity by identifying how individuals and institutions maintain routines, sensemaking, and social networks and how those two groups change their routines, sensemaking, and social networks in response to multiple external logics (Diehl & Golann, 2023).

Several studies were identified by Diehl and Golann as early adopters of research exploring aspects of their framework including work to understand how teachers maintain and change their routines because of their sensemaking of policy. Additionally, the authors referenced work to understand how principals implemented a new policy on teacher evaluation and found that it was influenced by their sense of the role of principal, their peer networks, and existing school routines. Diehl and Golann's framework will underpin my study to understand how institutions and DE instructors are responding to Tennessee's CRT laws. The framework will allow me to identify the multiple logics such as state government, cultural influences, parents, and other community groups. Additionally, the framework's tools of local adaptation will provide structure to my qualitative interviews allowing me to uncover how DE instructors are filtering multiple logics and applying the three mechanisms of local adaptation to maintain or change their pedagogical practices.

Three-Article Format & Rationale

This study includes three articles centered on multiple logics or stimuli catalyzed by Tennessee's CRT laws and their influence on institutional and individual responses e.g., sensemaking, routines, and social networks. The three-article format allowed for an in-depth exploration of the external stimuli or logics driven by T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., Tennessee's CRT laws, how DE faculty and the institutions they work within—both high school and college settings—respond to those logics, and the impact on DE pedagogy. Taken

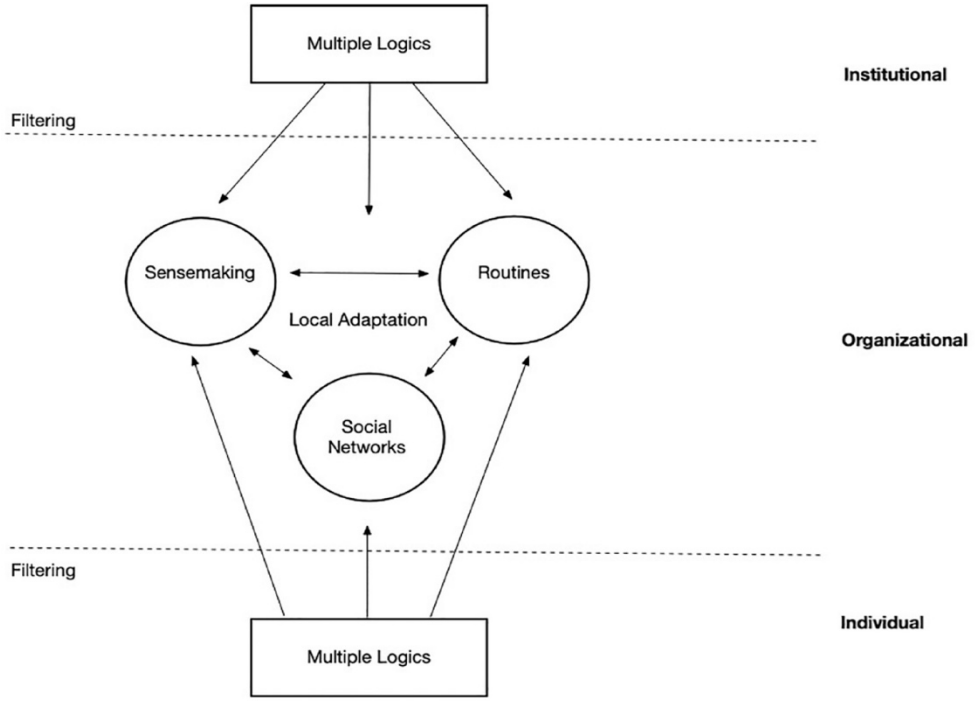


Figure 1

Diehl and Golann's Model of Heterogeneous Responses to Institutional Pressures

together, these papers will provide a comprehensive review of how educational organizations and the members that make them up are responding to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Article 1: A Document Analysis of Institutional Responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

This paper will compare institutional responses to the passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. through a document analysis. The selected institutions include those that are most impacted by the legislation: public higher education. A document analysis of formal responses will include legal memos and institutional policy developed in response to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. This paper will be crucial to understanding

how universities and colleges are filtering external logics and their local adaptation of those external logics e.g., T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Possible journal submissions include Education Evaluation & Policy Analysis, American Education Research Journal, and the Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management.

Article 2: Exploring DE Faculty Members' Sense of Academic Optimism After the Passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

This paper will explore DE faculty members' sense of academic optimism since the passage of Tennessee's two CRT laws. Academic optimism is a validated measure including three dimensions: self-efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic rigor. The measure and its components will be compared against a normative reference developed in studies conducted by Hoy et al. (2006) and Beard et al. (2010). Higher levels of academic optimism have been correlated to higher levels of student achievement (Hoy et al. 2006). Other researchers have found that faculty sense of trust—a core component of academic optimism—impacts student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Chapter 6). Understanding the academic optimism of DE faculty may provide early indications to how T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. may impact student success.

Possible journal submissions include the American Education Research Journal, AERA Open, and the Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management

Article 3: Exploring Faculty Adaptation and Filtering of External Logics Related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. and the Subsequent Impact on Dual Enrollment Pedagogy

This paper will utilize qualitative interviews to understand how faculty are responding to external stimuli driven by the passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Understanding how these external stimuli and faculty responses are impacting DE pedagogy is important because the laws seek to restrict pedagogy across an array of concepts related to race and sex. Additionally, Tennessee has based two versions of the law that vary in the restrictions, guidance, and caveats provided to inform pedagogy. Two laws create opportunity for varied interpretation and influence. This paper will explore how faculty evaluate and filter these external logics and the subsequent impact on pedagogy in DE spaces.

Possible journal submissions include the American Education Research Journal, AERA Open, and the Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies.

Chapter 2: Article 1 - Analyzing Institutional Reponses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Introduction

The benefits of dual enrollment (DE) have been well documented including higher postsecondary enrollment rates (Cowen & Goldhaber, 2015; Moreno et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2015), retention rates (D'Amico et al., 2013; Kremer, 2020), and college completion rates, regardless of socioeconomic status (An 2013; An & Taylor 2015; Blankenberger et al., 2017; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Grubb et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2015). States like Tennessee have continued to invest in programs that expand access to DE coursework. The benefits of DE have translated into support for greater funding and access to DE coursework as indicated by the increases in state funding allocated to the Dual Enrollment Grant (DEG) as well as legislative changes to pay for more DE courses through the DEG.

Tennessee established the DEG from proceeds of the state's lottery (T.C.A. §49-4-901). Students can take DE courses at the tuition rate set by the College System of Tennessee with a 5% DE fee (T.C.A. §49-4-930). Eligible high school students can take up to 10 DE courses at eligible 2 and 4-year public and private colleges and universities (T.C.A. §49-4-930). Eligible students can take up to 1296 clock hours, representing the length of the longest technical college program, using the DEG (TCA § 49-4-930). These eligibility requirements made in 2021 represented an increased investment in the DEG and greater access to the grant. Before 2021, high school students could only take DE courses in grades 11 and 12 (THEC, 2023). Tennessee's increased investment over time in DE is seen in the number of students served and the amount of lottery proceeds required to fund the DEG. Tennessee's DEG served 20,594 students

representing an $11,823,314 investment from lottery proceeds in the 2013-14 academic year (THEC, 2019). In 2022-23, 41,709 Tennessee students leveraged the DEG to take DE courses free of charge at eligible postsecondary institutions (THEC, 2023). This enrollment represented a $48,423,844 investment from the state's lottery proceeds to fund the grant program for high school students to take DE courses (THEC, 2023). The number of high school students who took advantage of the DE grant has more than doubled in less than 10 years (THEC, 2023). The number of high school students who are dually enrolled is becoming an increasingly significant portion of the student population at colleges and universities across the state.

The College System of Tennessee is the state's largest college system serving 100,000 students and is made up of 13 community colleges and 24 technical colleges. The College System of Tennessee has offered roughly 79% of all DE courses to high school students across the state over the past 5 years (TBR, 2023). By comparison, University of Tennessee institutions—primarily at the University of Tennessee, Martin—offered just over 2% of DE courses over the past 5 years, locally governed universities offered about 14% of DE courses over the last 5 years (TBR, 2023). The remaining 5% of DE course offerings over the last 5 years were at private institutions (TBR, 2023). In the fall of 2013, only 13.5% of the community college student body was made up of dually enrolled high school students (TBR, 2024a). In the fall of 2022, the percentage of high school students in DE courses at Tennessee's community colleges swelled to 23.9% (TBR, 2024a). The portion of DE students ranged from 18.2% at Northeast State Community College to 35.1% at Cleveland State Community College (TBR, 2024a). Technical college DE has tripled since 2015 (TBR, 2024b). DE students numbered 2,544 in the fall of 2015 at technical colleges (TBR, 2024b). Enrollment at technical colleges grew to

9,298 at the end of the fall term in 2022 (TBR, 2024b). This enrollment growth represented a 265% increase in technical college dually enrolled high school students (TBR, 2024b). Tennessee's rapid expansion and growth in DE serves as the backdrop for the emergence of the national, state, and local politicking around how divisive concepts should be addressed in classrooms across the nation—specifically concepts related to race, sex, and gender.

Context for the Study

Federal, state, and local responses to critical race theory have swept the nation. Presidential executive orders, legislation, gubernatorial decrees, and a litany of local action from school boards to mayors have sought to ban critical race theory (CRT) from classrooms. In 2020, conservative pundits and political leaders began to attack CRT and conflate it with the divisive issues they sought to ban. The dangers of critical race theory trumpeted by Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist, captured conservative audiences in the summer of 2020 (Meckler & Dawsey, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021). Set against the backdrop of racial upheaval in communities across the United States, Rufo argued that critical race theory had infiltrated the federal government and any effort to discuss it amounted to indoctrination (Meckler & Dawsey, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo described his objective as one to freeze "their brand—'critical race theory'—into the public conversation and steadily driving up negative perceptions" (Rufo, 2021, Tweet). He described his long-term objective to "eventually turn it [critical race theory] toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category" (Rufo, 2021, Tweet).

Rufo's campaign to conflate critical race theory with indoctrination worked. During President Trump's first term he directed his Office of Management and Budget to order a review

of all required trainings and end trainings that promote the notion that "White people contribute to racism" or that federal employees "benefit from racism" as well as audit and use all legal means possible to divert funding or cancel contracts that were put in place to offer CRT trainings (Vought, 2020, p. 1). The memo called critical race theory a "demeaning propaganda…contrary to all we stand for as Americans and should have no place in the Federal government" (Vought, 2020, p. 2). During his first term, President Trump issued Executive Order 13,950 (2020), where he formally outlined his attack against critical race theory and ushered in a new cultural wedge issue for the conservative movement. This narrative trumpeted first by Rufo, and subsequently by President Trump during his first term, led to a wave of state and local action to pass laws restricting concepts related to race, sex, and gender by conservative governors, legislators, and local leaders e.g., mayors and county officials.

Tracking Anti-Critical Race Theory Executive and Legislative Action

Research to understand how colleges and universities are responding to divisive concepts legislation, gubernatorial decrees, and other forms of local action is limited. There are several main lines of inquiry tracking this current cultural phenomenon including descriptive analyses of anti-CRT legislative and executive action, several legal analyses of how anti-CRT legislation interacts with the contours of First Amendment rights, and there are several studies in international contexts that study conservative anti-woke movements and how they shape policy. The publications from the American context are primarily descriptive in nature.

Several groups including at least one university are publicly tracking state and local action against these divisive concepts in America. Poets Essayist and Novelist of America (PEN America) is a nonprofit that works to ensure free expression in the United States. PEN America

has documented legislative action targeting topics related to race, sex, and gender since 2021.Their work has documented how state legislatures have attempted to pass or have effectively passed legislation the group broadly categorizes as educational gag orders (PEN America, 2023). Another project, CRT Forward, originated from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law has expanded and complimented PEN America's work by documenting federal, state, and local level actions targeted to ban certain topics related to race, sex, and gender (Alexander et al., 2023). Filimon and Ivănescu (2023) conducted a document analysis of critical race theory initiatives enacted across the United States between 2021 and 2022. They argued that anti-CRT rhetoric is a contemporary form of "dog whistle politics" situated within a worldview that claims the United States is no longer inflicted with systematic racial discrimination (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023, p. 2). Anti-CRT proponents believed that anything contrary to a post-racial society is a form of reverse discrimination against White Americans (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). Filimon and Ivănescu (2023) tracked how this anti-CRT belief has informed legislative action through their document analysis. The study found that legislative action sought to influence how concepts related to race, sex, and gender were addressed in classrooms through 3 broad mechanisms (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). These mechanisms included a defined set of divisive or prohibited concepts, establishing mechanisms to report violations of any bill passed into law, and a procedure for penalties related to those confirmed violations (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). The literature has developed a line of inquiry around how anti-CRT laws interact with precedent and understanding of First Amendment rights.

Legal Literature on Anti-Critical Race Theory Laws

Krebs (2022) pointed out the complicated court precedent around educators' First Amendment rights where tests have been developed to determine when those rights apply. These tests elucidated specific cases for First Amendment protections but did not provide cart blanche protections to K-12 educators (Krebs, 2022). The mixed messaging that has been sent by the Supreme Court created confusion for K-12 educators who want to facilitate discussions related to race and gender (Krebs, 2022). She ended with a call for the courts to clarify K-12 teacher academic freedom to preserve public schools' historical and critical functions as "nurseries of democracy" (Krebs, 2022, p. 1955). Bissell (2023) acknowledged the same lack of clarity that K-12 educators have when it comes to academic freedom. Education law and policy has historically allowed states to define what is taught and has given educators the purview over how concepts are taught (Bissell, 2023). However, Bissell (2023) argued that anti-CRT laws represent a departure from this historical delineation by lawmakers and policymakers. This departure gives courts the ability step in and strengthen K-12 educator academic freedom. She called for courts to remedy this confusion by striking down anti-CRT laws for First Amendment violations and affirming the clear, historic distinction between what educators teach and how they deliver instruction (Bissell, 2023). Finally, the literature has focused on CRT and CRT-related concepts in international contexts.

Anti-Critical Race Theory Sentiments in International Contexts

Heggart et al. (2023) studied how political actors borrowed ideologies and weaponized social media to influence curriculum around Australian history and civics and citizenship education. Specifically, they found that Australian politicians co-opted anti-CRT ideologies from

America to influence changes to the Australian national curriculum (Heggart et al., 2023). Heggart et al. (2023) applied a knowledge games framework that identified three mechanisms that politicians employed to influence Australian curriculum policy. These three mechanisms included ideology borrowing which is the notion that ideologies diffuse across contexts when they are specifically chosen by politicians and other actors to support their political agenda (Heggart et al., 2023). The second mechanism is ideology laundering which is a form of political framing that socializes an idea, e.g., that CRT is a problem, for the general public (Heggart et a., 2023). Finally, the third mechanism identified by Heggart et al. 2023 is ideological acquisition. Ideological acquisition is the process by which political actors frame their political agenda, e.g., that CRT is a problem, in some larger, usually ludicrous idea like CRT is a threat to democracy (Heggart et al. 2023). Davies and MacRae (2023) explored how British right-wing actors waged an ideological campaign against woke political and cultural life and connect this campaign to the evolution of Right-wing ideological movements throughout history that have been co-opted by British conservative ideologues.

The term ‘woke’ has evolved to describe a cultural and political movement that focuses on marginalized communities (Davies & MacRae, 2023). Davies and MacRae (2023) pointed out how a community of right-wing actors has rallied to combat woke ideologies that they see have infiltrated British society including schools and universities. Right wing actors have sought to frame woke ideologies that elevate and explain the plight of historic inequities as dangerous and violent attacks on democracy (Davies & MacRae, 2023). However, the anti-woke movement is not a new cultural phenomenon; it was developed in America as a theory called Cultural Marxism which was rooted in antisemitism (Davies & MacRae, 2023). Cultural Marxism

theorized that Jewish academics who fled the Nazis were infiltrating American culture through Hollywood to popularize their left-wing hegemony (Davies & MacRae, 2023). Davies and MacRae (2023) argued that CRT, also developed in America, is the modern form of the historical Cultural Marxism and has influenced British right-wing attacks on education in popular media like Daily Mail and social media platforms like X, formerly known as Twitter.

While there are descriptive studies and other analyses of the spread of critical race theory legislation as well as studies exploring critical race theory as it relates to radical conservative movements in international contexts, there are limited studies in the American context. Additionally, the literature has fewer representative studies that explore how colleges and universities are responding to divisive concepts legislation and the political pressure that comes from the efforts of gubernatorial, legislative, and local-level leaders to control how divisive concepts related to race, sex, and gender are taught in classrooms.

Document Analysis as a Form of Qualitative Methods

Document analysis is a methodological approach for searching, selecting, and evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Documents are artifacts that contain both words and images organized without the intervention of the researcher (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Documents take a variety of forms including meeting minutes, manuals, diaries, letters, institutional reports, or public records (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Documents undergo examination and interpretation to make meaning and synthesize empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). This analytical procedure organizes data such as excerpts and quotations into themes, categories, and case examples (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Documents have multiple functions including the context surrounding the participants of research as well as the

historical influences of the phenomena in question (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Document analysis can inform other parts of the study such as follow up questions that need to be asked of participants (Bowen, 2009). The data from document analysis can supplement data from other sources in a study (Bowen, 2009). In some cases, documents can be used to track changes over time by analyzing drafts or different iterations of an artifact (Bowen, 2009). Finally, documents can serve to corroborate or contradict data from other sources in a study (Bowen, 2009). This process of corroboration or contradiction can validate other data or spur the study in a different direction (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis has several advantages for research.

Document analysis is an efficient research method as it employs data selection rather than collection (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents are usually readily available for researchers especially documents in the public domain and online (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, this form of analysis is cost effective (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents are not affected by the research process in ways that other forms of qualitative methods are. Documents do not behave differently when being observed and are stable in terms of allowing for multiple reviews without concern that the artifact will change over time (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents benefit the research process because they are exact in nature containing specific dates and facts to be analyzed (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Conversely, documents can provide a macro view of a setting such as a broad swath of time, events, or across an entire institution (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents and their analysis do present several limitations to the research process.

Documents can provide limited detail that only partially answer a research question (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents are not made with research in mind and, therefore, cannot always answer a research question as the sole artifact analyzed (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Sometimes, documents cannot be easily accessed which can hinder the research process (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Documents selected for the research process represent a particular situation or are written for a particular organization. This representation means that they may include situational or organizational bias that paint an incomplete or skewed picture if not considered with other artifacts (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

People make sense of the world with words (Prior, 2008). The organization of culture or institutions within that culture are rooted in writing just as much as they are rooted in physical space (Prior, 2008). Thus, documents allow us to know how cultures think because the organization of the documents in question is a physical representation of thinking or how culture understands a particular topic (Prior, 2008). A simple illustration of this is how we use taxonomic structures in biology to organize the natural world into categories and make associations between and within those categories. Documents not only allow us to understand how a cultural sensemaking occurs during a moment in time but also make phenomena visible to those interacting with them (Prior, 2008).

Document analysis can be an effective tool because of its ability to shed light on specific phenomena (Prior, 2008). Phenomena can be enigmas at first glance because there is not supporting documentation to categorize, describe, or understand the mechanisms of the phenomena (Prior, 2008). Prior (2003) illustrates this through a medical example. Dementia-

related disorders like Alzheimer's disease can be baffling without proper data to understand how the disease works to alter and influence organ systems. Doctors and researchers understand how dementia-related diseases like Alzheimer's disease work by studying data provide by documents such as MRI scans and other outputs. These documents allow us to see the physiological impacts of the disease on the brain and other organ systems. Pathological reports provide different pieces of data that allow doctors and researchers to understand the phenomenon of Alzheimer's disease. The pathological understanding would be a mystery without the clarity that documents provide. While understanding how cultures uncover phenomena, create meaning and process information is important, so too is how that meaning making with documents drives practice (Prior, 2008; Rapley & Flick, 2011).

Documents can influence peoples' actions and interactions (Rapley & Flick, 2011). Broadly, document analysis can explore how documents are created, utilized, and interpreted in various settings (Prior, 2008; Rapley & Flick, 2011). Documents are artifacts that we engage with in specific and contextual ways (Prior, 2008; Rapley & Flick, 2011). Therefore, document analysis should consider the environment, the individuals or institutions, and the context that converge to create meaning and drive behavior (Prior, 2008; Rapley & Flick, 2011). Document analysis not only provides insight into localized contexts but also can shed light on historical and political dynamics that shape the current culture that individuals and institutions are situated within (Rapley & Flick, 2011). The organization of documents provide and how they make things visible can be analyzed as well (Prior, 2008).

A Document Analysis of Institutional Responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

How objects or cultural signals are interpreted into documents can be dependent on the person or institution (Prior, 2008). Thus, this document analysis will consider the ways in which all of Tennessee's public institutions of higher education have responded to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. This analysis will exclude private colleges and universities in Tennessee as they are not required to adhere to the restrictions and guidelines for the divisive concepts listed in the two pieces of legislation (T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.). While TBR colleges offer the majority of dual enrollment across the state, each public university including the six locally governed institutions and the University of Tennessee system institutions offer some DE coursework, so they will all be included in this document analysis (TBR, 2023).

Saldaña (2021) described the coding process for any qualitative study as cyclical and, thus, proposes multiple rounds of coding to develop a rich meaning from the texts under review. This study is theoretically grounded in Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework developed to understand how and why organizations respond in heterogenous ways to institutional pressures. Diehl and Golann (2023) identify three internal responses to external forces that they call logics. These internal responses include routines, sensemaking, and social networks that work individually and collectively to drive how organizations respond to external forces (Diehl & Golann, 2023). This framework and its components will serve as the a priori codes for this first round of coding. Saldaña (2021) calls this type of a priori coding provisional coding.

Provisional codes are a provisional list of codes that are can be developed from several sources including literature reviews, the study's framework, the researcher's field work, the researcher's hypotheses, or even the research questions themselves (Saldaña, 2021). While these codes are developed before coding begins, they can be adapted, merged, or deleted as the data analysis process unfolds (Saldaña, 2021). The evolution of codes to align tightly with the phenomenon in question is the part of the coding process where the study can be considered both deductive and inductive in nature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis becomes both deductive and inductive because each new piece of data may confirm the existing set of codes or necessitate an evolution of the codes to be tailored to the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this document analysis will begin with a set of a priori codes (see Table 2.1) but will move from deductive and inductive coding to ensure a rich analysis of how Tennessee's public institutions of higher education responded to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Table 2

A Priori Coding from Diehl & Golann's Framework

A Priori Code	Definition
Multiple Logics	"policies, regulations, and broader discourses and norms" related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Diehl & Golann, p. 298).
Sensemaking	"the process by which individuals notice, interpret, and act on messages or events that are 'novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations'" related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Diehl & Golann, p. 299).
Social Networks	"the structural patterns of formal and informal relationships of people in and between organizations" related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Diehl & Golann, p. 300).

Table 2 Continued

Routines	"repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent action stretched across multiple people" related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95).

Public colleges and universities have had to produce guidance for faculty regarding T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. A document analysis of the websites and corresponding resources developed in response to this legislation was conducted to understand how university and college leadership at Tennessee's public institutions are responding to this legislation. Institutional responses were collected from the University of Tennessee System and its affiliated universities, the locally governed universities, and the College System of Tennessee. The University of Tennessee at Martin did not have a public institutional response and protocol for reporting potential compliance issues with T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. publicly available on their website like other institutions. The University only had a response and reporting protocol for an older state law passed in 2017 that enshrined freedom of speech for faculty and students known as The Campus Free Speech Protection Act of 2017. Private college and university responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. were not included as these institutions are not impacted by the legislation. Additionally, the community and technical colleges, which are governed by the Tennessee Board of Regents, did not have individual campus policies. The College System of Tennessee institutions have opted to have one centralized response and reporting system for T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. through the Tennessee Board of Regents. These sources generated 21 policy documents and other official university responses e.g., letters from university presidents or website landing

pages describing institutional responses. Unofficial responses from the universities and colleges, e.g., emails, were excluded as were unofficial responses from faculty, administrators, and staff, e.g., newspaper opinion articles.

Tennessee's public institutions of higher education are responding to multiple logics that are influencing local adaptation responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. including existing federal and state law, guidance from accreditation bodies, existing institutional policies, and other outside entities. Diehl and Golann (2023) remind us that multiple logics are the principles that guide how institutions respond and react to external stimuli like T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. External logics can be derived from the laws that govern society, professional standards, and community values like those dictated in institutional mission statements (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Multiple logics reinforce the concept that institutions and the people that make them up are responding to various external stimuli at any given time all of which, when taken together, help us understand how an institution collectively responds to environmental factors like new state laws (Diehl & Golann, 2023). The first round of coding uncovered that institutions were specifically naming the external logics that were shaping their responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Institutions referenced various external logics, e.g., accreditation policies, constitutional rights, and related laws were mentioned across the 21 documents that were analyzed to understand institutional responses. These 49 logics were interwoven into various places in the public-facing documents to frame or justify the institution's response. For instance, TBR's Divisive Concepts Notice included a clause after reviewing the contours of the law that stated:

> Nothing in this notice or the Act shall be interpreted to 1. Infringe on freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution…infringe on the rights of academic freedom of faculty and other instructors…or require an employee to violate any federal or state law, rule, or regulation…or fail to comply with applicable academic accreditation standards. (TBR, 2023, p. 2)

This statement included at the end of TBR's notice signals the external logics that should guide how the institutions governed by TBR should respond. Considering when and how to restrict a divisive concept or shape how a difficult conversation is taught should be driven by these external logics, e.g., the United States Constitution or academic accreditation standards.

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) took a similar approach to TBR. At the end of a section detailing the contours of the law and how MTSU would be responding it included a similar bulleted section of external logics including protecting academic freedom, freedom of speech, following applicable state and federal laws and regulations, and limiting the institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion work (MTSU, 2023). Inclusion of external logics throughout their response seemed to help the university frame their response or acted as guardrails for their response.

Study Findings

The first round of coding illuminated those institutions were responding in ways that leaned heavily on the act of sensemaking, identified by Diehl and Golann (2023). Local adaptation to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. involves sensemaking which encompasses how institutions interpret the laws, social networks referring to how relationships inform institutional responses to the laws, and routines or patterns of responses across people

within the organization (Diehl & Golann, 2024). Local adaptation to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. was driven by sensemaking appearing in 168 instances indicating that providing a clear understanding of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. across the universities and colleges drove institutional responses. Sensemaking codes led institutional responses followed by routine codes appearing 68 times and social network codes appearing only 29 times. Sensemaking allowed institutions to communicate the plain language of the law. All institutions took time to define divisive concepts as they are defined in T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Most institutions referenced their desire to continue to promote the values of the university and protect the freedoms of all faculty and students as a form of sensemaking designed to provide a north star for institutional responses. For instance, The University of Tennessee System started their overview of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. by reviewing the core principles driving their response:

> We will protect our faculty's academic freedom…all faculty…have the right to teach, research, create, and perform about their knowledge and understanding in their discipline...A true university education is one in which students hear, study, and discuss ideas that challenge their thinking and encourage them to consider points of view different from their own. (UT System, 2023, Our Principles section)

Other institutions referenced their values as a compass designed to guide interpretation of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. in similar ways to the University of Tennessee System. Austin Peay State University stated that:

> The foundation for APSU's efforts in this area [complying with T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.] has always been the role the work plays in fulfilling APSU's

> mission—to welcome and inspire an inclusive community of learners to make a positive impact regionally and globally. (APSU, 2023, Original Statement section)

Social network codes formed the minority of institutional sensemaking in this analysis. Social networking as a form of local adaptation primarily relied on institutions leaning on existing structures to enforce the provisions of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. e.g., the Office of Student Conduct or the UT Compliance Hotline. Other institutions used social networking to create new networks by establishing committees to evaluate complaints or establishing new reporting protocols specifically for divisive concept violations. TBR, Austin Peay State University, Tennessee State University, Tennessee Technical University all created nearly identical reporting forms for filing a complaint related to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

A second round of inductive coding was conducted to create a richer understanding of how Tennessee's public institutions responded to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Process coding was selected for the final round of coding. Process coding is a form of coding that utilizes gerunds to understand the conceptual and real actions of the phenomenon being studied (Saldaña, 2021). Process coding helps the researcher tune into the actors driving the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021). Process coding focuses on action and therefore will be a helpful form of coding for understanding institutional responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Process coding helped elucidate the mechanisms behind local adaptation of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

The process coding uncovered several specific external logics that were influencing local adaptation of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Specifically, accreditation

policies, constitutional rights, federal laws, institutional policies, other state laws, and outside entities e.g., other university resources were the external logics used by Tennessee's higher education institutions to filter and adapt to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Other state laws were the highest cited external logic informing how institutions responded. Tennessee passed the Campus Free Speech Protection Act in 2017 that gave broad protections to faculty and students. Institutions referenced this law as a justification that institutional responses to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. could not infringe on academic freedom and free speech of faculty and students. MTSU and TBR quoted the law directly:

> An institution shall be committed to maintaining a campus as a marketplace of ideas for all students and all faculty in which the free exchange of ideas is not to be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the institution's community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, indecent, disagreeable, conservative, liberal, traditional, radical, or wrongheaded. (T.C.A. §49-7-2, 2017, p. 2)

Institutional policies regarding free speech and academic freedom were the second most cited external logic informing how institutions filtered and adapted T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. with 21 citations across the 21 documents analyzed. These references to institutional policies were usually coupled with other state laws. For instance, the University of Tennessee System adopted a policy on free speech for faculty and students in response to the Campus Free Speech Act of 2017. Federal and state constitutional rights to free speech were cited as external logics 13 times by 8 different institutions underscoring the important role constitutional rights played in local adaptation to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Institutions adapted to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. by adjusting, maintaining, or creating new routines. The most common new routine was a reporting system for potential violations of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Establishing new reporting routines was seen across all institutions except for the University of Tennessee Health Science Center and University of Tennessee Southern. Institutions adjusted some existing routines like creating new syllabi statement resources designed to help faculty and their student understand T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Maintaining routines largely occurred through statements regarding upholding university values and ensuring faculty can "lead the dissemination of knowledge in the classroom" (MTSU, 2023, para. 3).

Discussion

This analysis uncovered that institutions are largely employing sensemaking actions to understand what T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. are and what the laws are not as it relates to divisive concepts and academic freedom. Sensemaking is "the process by which individuals notice, interpret, and act on messages or events that are 'novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (Diehl & Golann, 2023, p. 299). Four types of sensemaking were identified across the documents analyzed, including complying, defining, protecting and supporting. Defining was the most frequently utilized code indicating that institutions are seeking to clearly define what the law does or does not for their communities. Sensemaking statements of support were the second most frequent code as institutions sought to signal their support for faculty and students particularly in the areas of academic freedom and free speech. Sensemaking statements related to protecting were the third most used code across the documents. Institutions included statements of protection for both

faculty and student rights as well as the values of the higher education community. Sensemaking statements where compliance language was used was the action gerund least used by institutions. Institutions tried to minimize their use of the gerund complying even though their responses are viewed as coming into compliance with T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Finally, this analysis made it clear that T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. are restructuring existing social networks within each institution and modifying and creating new routines as dictated by T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. and university and college policy. Most routine local adaptation codes were clustered around utilizing existing social networks to field complaints or possible violations with T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. For instance, East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and APSU referred all questions to their general counsel's office. University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) referred all questions and concerns to their academic affairs unit. Other institutions did create new routines around reporting structures for compliance concerns with T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. Tennessee State University, UT System, TBR, TTU, and APSU all created new reporting forms and protocols for T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

Conclusion

Tennessee public institutions of higher education have responded to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. in consistent ways across the state. Institutions referenced a similar set of external logics to help filter and adapt to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. including accreditation policies, constitutional rights, federal laws, institutional policies, other state laws, and outside entities. Institutional local adaptation centering around routines, sensemaking, and social networks showed similarities across the state as well.

Sensemaking forms of local adaptation were the most utilized mechanism and included institutions complying and defining the laws and protecting and supporting their faculty, students, and university values. Establishing new and modifying existing social networks happened in consistent ways across all state institutions. All new established routines centered around reporting structures for T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. specifically. Modifying existing social networks occurred through leveraging existing offices on campus like legal or academic affairs to implement compliance networks for T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.

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Chapter 3: Article 2 - Understanding Dual Enrollment Faculty Members' Academic Optimism

Context for the Study

Tennessee has passed multiple iterations of legislation aimed at restricting the teaching of certain concepts related to race, sex, and gender in both K12 and higher education settings since 2021. The first and most prominent of these was the Divisive Concepts Act of 2021, which outlined a list of prohibited ideas and topics that educators were not permitted to teach in public K12 schools. Following the passage of the K12 statute, Tennessee expanded its legal and regulatory reach through additional legislative actions geared toward higher education, university and college system guidance, and administrative rules that sought to regulate classroom speech in colleges and universities. The K12 and higher education versions of the laws define the same set of 14 divisive concepts that are prohibited from being included or promoted as a component of instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program including:

(1) One (1) race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;

(2) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously;

(3) An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual's race or sex;

(4) An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex;

(5) An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;

(6) An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex;

(7) A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex;

(8) This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist;

(9) Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government;

(10) Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people;

(11) Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex;

(12) The rule of law does not exist, but instead is a series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups;

(13) All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; or

(14) Governments should deny to any person within the government's jurisdiction the equal protection of the law (T.C.A. §49-6-1019, 2021 & T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., 2023).

The higher education version of the law includes two additional divisive concepts: race or sex stereotyping and race or sex scapegoating. The higher education version is more expansive, including the areas of training and orientation, employment and compensation, tenure and promotion, fees, dues, and travel to organizations or conferences that related to one or more of the 16 divisive concepts outlined in the public chapter of law. Additionally, the higher education

divisive concepts law was expanded in 2023 to require a reporting mechanism, define how diversity, equity, and inclusion officers and associated staff members must work, restrict the use of state funds that can be used to pay for fees to an external organization if that organization requires the promotion or endorsement of a divisive concept, restricts institutions from requiring student and faculty applicants from affirming a diversity statement, update how events related to divisive concepts can be held on campus, and create non-mandatory training about the law (T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., 2023). The K-12 version includes an enforcement section.

The enforcement section of the K-12 version of the law was developed by the Tennessee State Board of Education (TSBE) after the passage of the law, which is typical for this executive branch authority. TSBE developed Chapter 0520-12-04 Prohibited Concepts in Instruction that details how local education agencies (LEAs), public charter schools, and the state shall develop reporting processes, investigative bodies, and sanctions for T.C.A. §49-6-1019. TSBE's Chapter 0520-12-04 outlines the reporting structure for filing complaints of instruction on prohibited concepts, the timeline for reviewing and acting on complaints, and actions that LEAs and public charter schools can take if a claim is substantiated (TSBE, 2023). Disciplinary action can include requiring teachers to amend instruction or take individual disciplinary or licensure action against a teacher (TSBE, 2023). TSBE created early resolution pathways that circumvent the formal review process to encourage teachers to work in concert with families to identify a solution to the concern (TSBE, 2023). Additionally, there is a formal appeal process to the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) that empowers TDOE to review cases from LEAs and public charter schools and, if a violation is found, a tiered fine process from state funding ranging from $1 million or 2% to $5 million or 10%, whichever is less, can be applied (TSBE, 2023).

There is a carve out at the end of each law protecting First Amendment rights and academic freedom as well as a call out for impartial discussions or lessons routed in historical fact around divisive concepts. In T.C.A. §49-6-1019, the law affirms the ability of K-12 educators the ability to have impartial discussions on controversial topics related to race and sex and allows these concepts to be taught if they are rooted in historical context. In T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq., the law explicitly states that no part of the code should be construed to infringe on First Amendment rights, academic freedom of faculty, force noncompliance with any accreditation standard, or violate any state or federal law, rule, or regulation. However, these broad exceptions are competing against narratives driven by the media that may cause confusion around the parameters of the laws and the practical implications for teaching and learning. In fact, a 2022 study found educators are experiencing confusion and are more conservative in their approach to pedagogical decisions (Parcerisa et al., 2022). This uncertainty and confusion is especially pronounced when teaching content related to race, gender, history, or social issues (Parcerisa et al., 2022). Further, research has pointed to trends in pedagogy that indicate educators are less creative and take less risk in their curriculum when public policy is seeking to constrain instruction and increase surveillance (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Gill, 2025).

Tracking Anti Critical Race Theory and Divisive Concepts Prohibitions

Several academic research centers and nonprofit organizations focused on First Amendment rights have been tracking these developments. PEN America, a national organization advocating for freedom of expression, has systematically identified and cataloged what it terms “educational gag orders”—government bills or policies that restrict discussions of race, gender, sexuality, or systemic inequality in educational contexts. Since 2021, PEN America

has identified 57 enacted or proposed restrictions affecting higher education institutions across the United States. In 2024 alone, state governments enacted 8 new policies that PEN America (2024) argues directly constrain educational speech in college and university classrooms. Their analysis highlights three primary tactics used in these state laws: censorship in disguise, indirect censorship, and informal censorship (PEN America, 2024). These tactics range from vague statutory definitions that chill faculty speech, to indirect financial threats, to informal pressure from state officials or politically appointed boards (PEN America, 2024). PEN America (2024) argues that collectively, these actions constitute an escalating restriction on academic freedom.

Tennessee has a history with attempts to limit or confine academic freedom. Perhaps the most historic example is the State of Tennessee v. Scopes case. The Tennessee General Assembly passed the Butler Act of 1925 that banned teaching evolution across all public institutions in Tennessee including K12 and higher education. The case was a flash point in American history—covered by more than 100 newspapers daily and the first trial to be broadcasted live on the radio—that saw a young science teacher, John Scopes, convicted by a district court and later reversed by the state Supreme Court (American Civil Liberties Union, 1925). More recently, Matthew Hawn, a social studies teacher in rural Tennessee, was fired for unprofessional conduct and insubordination for his lessons on racism and white privilege (Education Week, 2021). Like Scopes, Hawn has had his record cleared by the judicial system (Dennis, 2024). Higher education faculty have raised concerns as well. University of Tennessee at Knoxville's (UTK) faculty senate passed a resolution defending their commitment to academic freedom in research and teaching pursuits related to the divisive concepts (UTK Faculty Senate, 2022). UTK faculty joined their peers across the United States who passed resolutions affirming

academic freedom and condemning anti-critical race theory orders and laws including University of Texas at Austin, University of Michigan, and Jackson State University (Flaherty, 2022; Jackson State University Faculty Senate, 2022; University of Michigan Faculty Senate, 2022).

The Genesis of Academic Optimism

Academic optimism is a quantitative measure that seeks to explain school-level and teacher-level factors that are attributed to academic student achievement outside of conventional characteristics like socioeconomic status (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Academic optimism is comprised of 3 subscales including academic emphasis, trust, and efficacy. It is a measure that has been applied to both schools and individual faculty. Academic emphasis at the school level is a measure of the school's prioritization of student achievement or sense of academic rigor and a measure of the instructor's sense of academic rigor at the individual level (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Trust refers to the sense of trust in both parents and students to be participants in and supportive of learning at the school level and at the individual level (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Efficacy is a measure of how strongly faculty feel that they can impact student learning at the school level and self-efficacy at the individual level (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006).

The measure was first conceptualized and tested to understand collective school-level variables outside of socioeconomic status of schools that have an impact on student achievement (Hoy et al., 2006). The 2006 study confirmed that academic optimism is an important measurement related to student achievement when controlling for socioeconomic status and prior achievement in high schools through structural equation modeling and a confirmatory factor analysis (Hoy et al., 2006). Later, it was conceptualized and tested as an individual educator

attribute in elementary and secondary school teachers (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Across all three studies academic optimism was found to be positively correlated with student achievement (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Teachers who reported higher levels of academic optimism were more likely to hold a positive view of their students, classrooms, and the communities in which they taught (Hoy et al., 2008). Beard et al. (2010) confirmed that academic optimism was demonstrated through higher levels of self-efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic rigor. Fahy et al. (2010) linked higher levels of academic optimism to rigorous instructional practices and the mental fortitude of faculty. Taken together, these five studies established a robust theoretical understanding and provided empirical evidence for academic optimism. Other researchers have continued to validate academic optimism as an important indicator of student achievement in both the United States and internationally. However, limited studies on academic optimism in postsecondary settings including dual enrollment coursework can be found in the literature.

Exploring Academic Optimism and Student Achievement

Researchers have confirmed that academic optimism is an important construct that influences student achievement in certain groups of teachers. Lu (2021) found that English as a Foreign Language teachers who had higher levels of academic optimism not only improved student achievement but supports the resilience of both teachers and students in an international context. This resilience finding is an early understanding of the mechanism behind how academic optimism works to improve outcomes for international students (Lu, 2021). Vaidya (2014) found that academic optimism is a key factor in student success in high need, urban high schools. Her findings reinforce the ways that high levels of academic optimism support positive

classroom and school culture and mitigate the negative effects of lower socioeconomic status on achievement (Vaidya, 2014). Adams et al. (2025) further elucidated the mechanisms that could explain how higher levels of academic optimism leads to higher levels of student success. Higher levels of academic optimism were found to be associated with higher levels of collaboration among teachers, parents, and administrators which supported the principal's goal to create a more inclusive educational experience (Adams et al., 2025). Kasapoğlu Tankutay and Colak (2025) have furthered the connection between academic optimism and principal leadership to help understand the mechanisms of academic optimism that lead to student success. Their study of teachers in Turkey found that principals that adopted an empowering leadership style had teaching staff with higher levels of academic optimism which led to more effective teaching and higher rates of student success (Kasapoğlu Tankutay & Colak, 2025). Finally, Ates and Unal (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 13 studies and consistently found that academic optimism is positively related to student success across varying contexts. Again, these studies on the connection between academic optimism and student achievement are mostly limited to the secondary space.

Linking Academic Optimism and Policy Implementation

Connections between how policy is interpreted and implemented at the local level has been well studied. Lipsky's (1980) seminal work in policy implementation coined the term "street level bureaucrats" (p. 3) to understand how policy and local level actors influence one another. Street level bureaucracies provide public services like education and these entities have wide latitude over how their functions are performed (Lipsky, 1980). He argued that implementation becomes policy as local level actors e.g., educators' actions add up to policy e.g.,

divisive concepts policy (Lipsky, 1980). Attitudes can play a large role in policy implementation. Street level bureaucrats (SLBs), like educators, have an ideal understanding of their work, e.g., helping all students. Policy can constrain these ideals and lead to psychological dispositions that ease dissonance between ideal identities and the policy in question (Lipsky, 1980). SLBs develop new dispositions to cope in the short and long term with policy changes (Lipsky, 1980). SLBs may modify their definition of success or rationalize offering a limited menu of services (Lipsky, 1980). Policy implementation pressures can lead to how SLBs understand their professional role (Lipsky, 1980).

Hupe and Hill (2007) further Lipsky's (1980) work by exploring how accountability relationships, such as those between SLBs and legislators, managers, professional norms, legal frameworks, and their clients, influence policy implementation. SLBs operate within and among these accountability-focused relationships as they implement policy (Hupe & Hill, 2007). These relationships may create synergy or tension and impact policy implementation (Hupe & Hill, 2007). SLBs do not operate in a vacuum when they operationalize policy. SLB actions to effectuate policy reflects institutional priorities, political compromise, and administrative translation (Hupe & Hill, 2007).

Lipsky's (1980) and Hupe and Hill's (2007) conceptual works have been extended to understand the connection between policy and attitudinal responses. Tummers et al. (2009) sought to understand how SLBs make attitudinal shifts in response to policy. They conceptualized policy alienation as a psychological disconnect between public professionals' experience and the policy they are required to implement. Policy alienation occurs when SLBs feel powerless and meaningless (Tummers et al., 2009). Powerlessness is when SLBs have little

influence over the policy (Tummers et al., 2009). Meaninglessness occurs when SLBs feel the policy lacks meaning in relationship to their professional goals (Tummers et al., 2009). Powerlessness is associated with lower job satisfaction, lower affective commitment, and a lower willingness to implement policy (Tummers et al., 2009). Meaninglessness is associated with emotional detachment, reduced policy support, and reduced intrinsic motivation (Tummers et al., 2009). Tummers et al. (2009) found that higher levels of implementation autonomy and stronger alignment between professional values and policy values decreases powerlessness and meaninglessness (Tummers et al., 2009). SLBs willingness to implement policy and motivation increases as policy alienation decreases (Tummers et al., 2009). They also found that leadership support and participatory decision making reduces alienation (Tummers et al., 2009).

Academic optimism consists of collective efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis (Hoy et al., 2006; Hoy et al., 2008). Lipsky (1980) provided a theoretical framework to explore how these attitudinal subscales that collectively measure academic optimism may be influenced by policy changes like Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws. Hupe and Hill (2007) extended the theoretical framework introduced by Lipsky (1980) by including accountability systems as potential interaction effects on how SLBs implement policy. Tummers et al. (2009) provided some empirical alignment to explore academic optimism in relation to policy implementation. Reduced discretion or increased conflict between policy and SLBs' values during policy implementation has been associated with increased policy alienation affecting SLBs' motivation and willingness to carry out the policy's directives (Tummers et al., 2009). Faculty trust may be impacted if educators adopt more guarded or defensive orientations under policy pressure. Efficacy may be impacted if faculty redefine their role to fit the type of educator that follows the

mandate of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws. Finally, academic emphasis may be influenced if compliance with the laws differs than their ideal understanding of academic emphasis.

Statement of the Problem

Research validating the constructs of academic optimism are well studied in the secondary space (Fahy et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Academic optimism has also been linked to student achievement (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). Additionally, the literature has demonstrated that external influences outside of demographics play a larger role influencing academic optimism including leadership and organizational support and professional standards (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Lelieur et al., 2024). Across each of these lines of inquiry samples focused on higher education faculty and, dual enrollment faculty specifically, are limited. Collectively, these studies call for additional research on academic optimism across a variety of organizational contexts beyond K12 settings (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Lelieur et al., 2024). This study attempted to fill this gap in the literature by addressing the over-arching question of this study: Has the passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws) influenced college faculty's sense of academic optimism when teaching dual enrollment classes?

Methods

Data Collection

Data were collected on individual academic optimism among community college faculty who teach dual enrollment courses in Tennessee. The instrument was Fahy et. al's (2010) validated Academic Optimism survey, administered in Qualtrics. Eligibility required faculty at Tennessee community colleges who had taught at least one dual enrollment course since the

passage of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts laws in 2021. Recruitment proceeded by emailing the Chief Academic Officers at each of the 13 community colleges with a study description and instructions to forward the Qualtrics link to eligible faculty. A total of 44 faculty completed the survey, and all responses were retained for analysis. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 29.

Measures

Demographics

Demographic items included sex assigned at birth, race/ethnicity, academic discipline, and years teaching dual enrollment courses. Sex assigned at birth was assessed with the options male, female, non-binary/third gender, and prefer not to say. Because no participants selected the latter two categories, the variable was analyzed as a two-level factor (male, female). Race was assessed with categories American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Middle Eastern or North African, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and White. Due to small cell sizes, the variable was dichotomized as White versus Non-White (White, Non-White). Academic discipline included response options Arts, Business, Education, Health Sciences, Humanities, Science/Technology/Engineering/Math (STEM), Social Sciences, and Other. To ensure adequate cell sizes and protect anonymity, disciplines were collapsed to three categories for analysis: STEM, Social Sciences, and Humanities. Years teaching dual enrollment was measured with response options 0–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, and Other. For analysis, categories were collapsed to 0–5, 6–10, and 11+ years (combining 11–15 and 16–20) to ensure adequate cell sizes. "Other" was recoded as missing the response text could not be easily decipherable.

Academic Optimism

Academic optimism provides a framework for explaining student academic achievement and teacher optimism (Fahy et al., 2010). Academic optimism was operationalized as three components: teacher trust in parents and students; teacher sense of self-efficacy; and teacher academic emphasis following Fahy et al., (2010). Each component was measured with three items on a five-point Likert scale. For teacher trust and academic emphasis, options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For teacher self-efficacy, options ranged from 1 = nothing to 5 = a great deal. Teacher trust in parents and students (three items): "Most of my students are honest," "My students' parents are reliable," and "I trust my students." Teacher sense of self-efficacy (three items): "I can motivate my students who show low interest in schoolwork," "I can get students to believe that they can do well in school," and "I can get students to follow classroom rules." Teacher academic emphasis (three items): "I press my students to achieve academically," "I give my students challenging work," and "I set high but attainable goals for my students."

Scoring and Standardization (Hoy Method)

Hoy created a scoring and interpretation method for academic optimism of secondary teachers. For each component, an average score was computed by summing its three items and dividing by three. Each component average was then standardized using Hoy's transformation:

Standard Score= [100*(Avg. Subscale Score-Scale Mean)/Standard Deviation] +500

where the Scale Mean and Standard Deviation refer to the reference values reported by Fahy et al. (2010). The overall standardized academic optimism score was computed as the mean of the three standardized component scores:

Academic Optimism=(SSSE+SST+SSAE)/3

Interpretation follows the scale's standardized metric (mean = 500). For context, example benchmarks are:

Table 3

Standardized Scores of Academic Optimism for Interpretation

Standardized Score	Interpretation
200	Lower than 99% of schools
300	Lower than 97% of schools
400	Lower than 84% of schools
500	Average
600	Higher than 84% of schools
700	Higher than 97% of schools
800	Higher than 99% of schools

Analysis

Analyses began with demographics and proceeded to descriptive and inferential statistics. For categorical variables, counts and percentages were reported; for continuous variables (each academic optimism component and the composite), mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum were presented. Internal consistency was assessed for each three-item subscale using Cronbach's alpha. Group differences in academic optimism across demographic categories was examined using independent-samples t tests for two-level factors and one-way ANOVA for three-level factors, with assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance evaluated prior to inference. Finally, academic optimism was calculated and interpreted using the Hoy standardization described above, with comparisons to the Fahy et al. (2010) reference distribution.

Results

Demographics

Descriptive statistics for the demographic variables are presented in Table 4. The average respondent was White (77.3%) and assigned female at birth (56.8%). Faculty were most commonly from the humanities (47.7%) and, on average, reported 0–5 years of experience teaching dual enrollment courses (43.2%).

Table 4

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	*n*	%
Sex at birth		
Male	11	57.9%
Female	8	42.1%
Race		
White	34	77.3%
Non-White	10	22.7%
Academic discipline		
STEM	11	25.0%
Social Sciences	12	27.3%
Humanities	21	47.7%
Years of teaching experience		
0–5 years	19	43.2%
6–10 years	13	29.5%
11 + years	11	25.0%

Note. $N = 44$

Academic Optimism

Reliability

Academic optimism was measured as a composite of three validated subscales: teacher trust; teacher sense of self-efficacy; and teacher academic emphasis each assessed with three items (nine items total). Internal consistency was acceptable to good across subscales: teacher trust, Cronbach's alpha = .802, teacher sense of self-efficacy, Cronbach's alpha = .709, and

teacher academic emphasis Cronbach's alpha = .699, values that are reasonable given the small sample and prior validation of the instrument (Fahy et al., 2010).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 5 includes comprehensive descriptive statistics for academic optimism and subscales. Dual enrollment teachers reported a mean trust of 3.6 on a 5-point scale, a mean self-efficacy of 6.7 on a 9-point scale, and a mean academic emphasis of 4.5 on a 5-point scale. A standardized score for academic optimism and the subscales were calculated using Hoy's formula above. The overall dual enrollment faculty's standardized academic optimism score was 499. This academic optimism scaled score indicates that dual enrollment faculty in the study assessed their level of academic optimism to be lower than 84% of schools. It is noteworthy that a scaled score of 500 would have been average, so these dual enrollment faculty fell just below the average range.

Table 5

Academic Optimism Descriptive Statistics

Score	*M(SD)*	Median	Min/Max
Teacher trust	3.56(0.64)	X	2.00/5.00
Teacher sense of self-efficacy	6.73(1.49)	X	3.00/9.00
Teacher academic emphasis	4.54(0.51)	X	2.67/5.00
Standardized academic optimism	499.97(73.82)	496.31	338.13/655.34

Note. $N = 44$

Independent Samples t-Test

Gender

An independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences in standardized academic optimism scores between male ($n = 18$) and female ($n = 25$) teachers. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Academic optimism

scores for each level of race were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test (p = .782), and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p = .310). Male faculty members had an average standardized academic optimism score of M = 500.47 (SD = 64.93), while female faculty members had an average standardized academic optimism score of M = 504.94 (SD = 77.53). This difference was not statistically significant, $t(41) = –0.20$, p = .843.

Race

An independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences in standardized academic optimism scores between White and Non-White teachers. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Academic optimism scores for each level of race were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test (p =.782), and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances (p = .174). White faculty had a mean standardized academic optimism score of M = 496.00 (SD = 75.64), and non-White faculty had M = 513.00 (SD = 69.26). The difference was not statistically significant, $t(42) = 0.65$, p = .517.

One Way Analysis of Variance

Academic Discipline

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if standardized academic optimism scores differed by academic disciplines: STEM (n = 11), Social Sciences (n = 12), and Humanities (n = 21). There were no outliers, as assessed by boxplot; data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk test (p = .782); and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test of homogeneity of variances (p = .310).

Standardized academic optimism scores did not significantly differ between academic disciplines, STEM (M=480.94, SD=98.87), Social Sciences (M=512.01, SD=46.45), and Humanities (M=503.06, SD=73.13), $F(2,41)= 0.532$, p=.592.

Years of Experience Teaching

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if the standardized academic optimism scores differed by years of teaching experience grouped into three categories: 0-5 years (n = 19), 6-10 years (n = 13), and 11-plus years (n = 11). There were no outliers, as assessed by boxplot; data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk test (p = .782); and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test of homogeneity of variances (p = .310). Standardized academic optimism scores did not significantly differ between the years of teaching experience groups, 0-5 years (M=494.44, SD=68.81), 6-10 years (M=520.44, SD=83.83), and 11-plus years (M=492.28, SD=72.31), $F(2,40) = 0.590$, p=.559.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this article was to understand Tennessee community college faculty member's sense of academic optimism since the state legislature passed its divisive concepts laws. The literature provides examples of how academic optimism influences student and school-level achievement metrics. Academic optimism captures faculty belief in their ability to influence achievement through the combined effects of their sense of trust in parents and students, their sense of self-efficacy, and their sense of the rigorous nature of their course. The individual academic optimism score for this study was standardized using Hoy's method and averaged 499. This score indicates faculty in the sample scored just below the national average

of 500 and had a lower academic optimism score than 84% of reference schools. There were no statistically significant differences in standardized academic optimism scores across a host of variables including sex, race, academic discipline, and years of teaching dual enrollment courses. These findings suggest that faculty hold similar beliefs about their work through the lens of academic optimism and that other structural or environmental factors may exert more influence on academic optimism than individual demographic factors.

Academic Optimism Findings

A standardization of faculty scores using Fahy et al.'s (2010) method indicated that aggregate academic optimism in this sample was lower than 84% of schools in the reference study (M = 499). Additionally, no statistically significant differences emerged across demographic variables. While faculty reported moderate to high levels across each subscale, these findings suggest that factors beyond individual characteristics may be shaping academic optimism among dual enrollment faculty in Tennessee's community colleges. This pattern aligns with prior research indicating that organizational and contextual factors such as administrative support, role clarity, and instructional autonomy often exert a stronger influence on academic optimism than demographic characteristics (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Lelieur et al., 2024). In this study, the absence of demographic effects reinforces the interpretation that academic optimism is more strongly shaped by the instructional environment and policy context in which faculty operate.

One potential contextual influence is the broader policy environment governing dual enrollment and secondary–postsecondary partnerships. Drawing on Michael Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy (1980), faculty can be understood as policy actors who interpret and

implement policy within constrained and often ambiguous environments. Extensions of this framework suggest that accountability systems and policy signals can create tension or alignment that shapes how educators experience and enact their roles (Hill & Hupe, 2007; Tummers et al., 2009). From this perspective, academic optimism may be partially influenced by how faculty perceive and navigate these policy conditions. Consistent with this interpretation, prior research has shown that educators' instructional confidence and willingness to take pedagogical risks can be affected by policy environments characterized by constraint or heightened scrutiny (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Supovitz et al., 2016). Recent studies examining responses to divisive concepts legislation further illustrate how educators adapt their instructional practices in response to policy pressures, often modifying pedagogy while attempting to maintain instructional goals (Orr & Chong, 2024). These findings provide a useful lens for interpreting how external policy conditions may indirectly shape components of academic optimism, particularly efficacy and academic emphasis.

At the subscale level, faculty in this study reported moderate levels of trust alongside moderate to high levels of efficacy and academic emphasis. Lower levels of trust in students and parents are consistent with dual enrollment literature, which documents faculty concerns regarding student maturity, parental involvement, and differences in high school expectations (Karp, 2012). Prior research suggests that faculty in dual enrollment contexts often seek to maintain academic rigor while adapting instructional practices to meet the needs of high school students (Hughes, 2010; Fink et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest that the dual enrollment context may differentially shape the components of academic optimism reinforcing academic emphasis and efficacy while constraining trust. This pattern highlights the importance

of considering how institutional arrangements and policy environments influence not only instructional practice, but also the underlying beliefs that support academic optimism.

Implications

This article places academic optimism into the dual enrollment instructional environment. While there is overlap with existing academic optimism research and its focus on K12 parents and students, this study's sample includes instructors who teach college courses to high school students. The literature has indicated that academic optimism is influenced by instructor perceptions of organizational support, leadership, and collective professional norms (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Lelieur et al., 2024). The findings of this study support that line of inquiry because there were no statistically significant results across the demographic variables tested. Policy literature more broadly has provided theoretical models that allow researchers to explore other dimensions that may elucidate the connections between academic optimism and policy implementation. Lipsky (1980) and Hupe and Hill (2007) lay out theoretical avenues for policy interpretation and its impact on implementation. Lipsky (1980) and Hupe and Hill's (2007) work provides an invitation for studies that explore values, attitudes, and agency impact policy implementation. This invitation could allow for further study of how dual enrollment faculty are making sense of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws in their classrooms.

The findings of this study provide several implications for higher education. The high academic rigor and self-efficacy subscale scores of faculty members in this study may demonstrate faculty commitment to student achievement. Policymakers and administrators can enhance the impact of this commitment by making it easier for faculty to navigate between the

two worlds of secondary and higher education when teaching dual enrollment courses and create mechanisms to reinforce academic freedom. These two policy recommendations may be applied broadly across dual enrollment faculty as there were no statistically significant differences on academic optimism across demographic variables e.g., years of teaching dual enrollment or academic discipline.

Limitations

The study was limited by its relatively small sample size (n=44). Generalizability is limited to Tennessee community colleges and may not represent dual enrollment faculty experiences in other states and at other types of institutions e.g., universities that offer dual enrollment courses. Additionally, the academic optimism construct was developed in K12 contexts. The construct may not fully capture the differences of teaching dual enrollment courses to high school students and regular college instructional work.

Conclusion

This study extends the analysis of academic optimism to community college faculty who teach dual enrollment courses. Faculty reported moderate to strong perceptions across the subscales of academic optimism (trust, efficacy, and academic rigor), but the standardized aggregate score for academic optimism was slightly below the average national norm; this lower composite score represented an academic optimism value lower than 84% of schools in the reference study. Literature on academic optimism underscores the role external factors like leadership, culture, and role clarity has on instructor beliefs across the subscales of trust, self-efficacy, and rigor (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Lelieur et al., 2024). This study highlights the need for faculty supports that maintain academic freedom,

reduce role ambiguity, and foster strong relationships between community colleges and their high school partners. Understanding how faculty beliefs are influenced by organizational and policy contexts is important for maintaining high-quality dual enrollment programs and student success.

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Chapter 4: Article 3 - Exploring Dual Enrollment Faculty Adaptation to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws

Introduction and Context for the Study

This study is designed to further understand how faculty are responding to the passage of Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) §49-6-1019 and §49-7-1901 et seq. colloquially known as Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. T.C.A. §49-6-1019 is the K12 version of the law and prohibits public schools and charter schools from using or highlighting divisive concepts. The law applies to all classroom instructions, curriculum, and training programs. The law defines these divisive concepts across a broad umbrella of terms related to race, sex, and gender. It specifically seeks to restrict instruction that causes students to feel "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress" due to race or sex (T.C.A. §49-6-1019). The law established a complaint and investigative process through the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). It requires TDOE to withhold state funds from local education agencies that are found to have violated the law. Tennessee passed a higher education version of the law T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. that prohibits mandatory trainings, instruction, and/or programs that fall under the same umbrella of divisive concepts related to race, sex, and gender. T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. explicitly protects academic freedom in classroom instruction but prohibits public colleges and universities from requiring students or employees to endorse or affirm viewpoints. Like the K12 version of the law, it requires enforcement mechanisms to be set up, primarily through the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, a coordinating body that is responsible for the funding model for higher education.

Dual enrollment (DE) faculty straddle both worlds teaching college courses to high school students. These courses are sometimes taught in the high school space. At times, dual enrollment faculty are high school teachers who are eligible to teach college level coursework due to their academic credentials. The K12 version of the law applies broadly to classroom instruction and curriculum whereas the higher education version of the law is more focused on mandatory trainings and programming. The K12 version of the law has fewer explicit protections for academic freedom which is a core feature of the higher education version of the law. These laws may be adding to the complexity of dual enrollment instruction.

Literature has demonstrated the complexity dual enrollment faculty must navigate when teaching high school students in college courses. The literature on teaching DE courses hint at the tension faculty feel teaching DE courses from various sources and the intentionality required to support rigorous learning in these unique classes. Duncheon and Relles (2020) interviewed faculty and found that they often feel caught between competing interests of the high school, the district, and the postsecondary institution. The DE faculty felt beholden to the administration and policies of the high school and the community college (Duncheon & Relles, 2020). Faculty articulated that they had to navigate differing pedagogical expectations and that they had to resolve these differences on their own (Duncheon & Relles, 2020; Mollet et al., 2020). Mollet et al. (2020) found faculty hold their professional identity as a college professor much more highly than equitable access to the DE course. DE faculty struggled to navigate the differences in institutional norms between the K12 setting and the higher education setting including expectations for the responsibilities of instructors (Mollett et al. 2020). Ferguson et al. (2015) found that faculty who teach DE courses are concerned with the rigor of the courses and the

potential impact on a high school student's preparedness for college coursework once enrolled as a full-time student. However, with the right supports, pedagogy in DE spaces can uphold rigorous standards, and scaffold supports for high school students (Hughes & Edwards, 2012; Staats & Laster, 2018).

Ferguson et al. (2015) found that there were differences in pedagogical approaches between DE courses and those courses that were taught to traditional college students, but the rigor was consistent. White et al. (2014) found that high school students mastered content in an introductory chemistry course at the same levels as their college peers as measured by a standardized assessment and locally developed midterms. Additionally, the high school students in the DE chemistry course had higher course completion rates than their college peers indicating their academic readiness (White et al., 2014). These studies signal the complexity DE faculty face as they navigate leadership, policies, institutional norms, and pedagogical expectations from both the K12 and higher education spaces. Tennessee has created an environment with two different overlapping statutory requirements for instructional content which raises questions about how DE faculty interpret and respond to policy created by their institutions.

Conceptual Framing

Policy Implementation as an Interpretive Process

Policy implementation literature provides a robust understanding of how policy moves from statutory language into practice. Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) study was a catalyst for this line of inquiry. The article reviewed several federal government programs with clear goals aimed at economic development. The United States Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration funded a job creation initiative in Oakland, California. The

program experienced delay and fragmentation due to multiple state and local level actors engaged in implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) found policy goals encounter fragmentation, negotiation, and delay during the implementation process. In response, policymaking shifted from a focus on the design of the policy to a focus on the processes leveraged at the local level to operationalize the law or policy. Researchers built on this novel finding to elucidate the mechanisms behind policy implementation.

Matland (1995) developed the ambiguity-conflict model to describe the machinations of policy implementation. The model provided a framework for policy implementation based on the level of ambiguity and the level of conflict. Low conflict, low ambiguity settings involve policy that has clear goals, broad agreement, and implementation is based on local capacity and resources (Matland, 1995). Low ambiguity in policy within high conflict settings tends to lead to implementation that is political; the policy implementation is driven by power and influence (Matland, 1995). High ambiguity policy in low conflict settings allows for friendly experimentation with more diverse policy outcomes based on professional judgment and institutional characteristics whereas highly ambiguous policy in high conflict settings tends to lead to symbolic implementation with unpredictable outcomes due to negotiations that are influenced by the particular climate of the institution (Matland 1995).

Researchers have focused on how educators specifically interpret and implement policy. Spillane et. al. (2002) conducted a review of empirical studies focused on standards-based reforms to further the understanding of how interpretation shapes policy implementation. Educators take standard reforms that are designed, as their name implies, to standardize curriculum by dictating the scope of content in terms of both breadth and depth and interpret

them with remarkable diversity (Spillane et al., 2002). The diverse array of implementation strategies is driven by individual educator's prior experience and conceptual understanding of what it means to be a teacher (Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane et al. (2002) observed that educators adapt their implementation strategy as they collaborate and make meaning of the standards with their peers. Policy implementation is driven by social networks which leads to differences in implementation based on institutional climate and individual relationships (Spillane et al., 2002).

Faculty as Street-Level Policy Actors

Policy implementation research could be argued as grounded in Lipsky's (1980) development of the street-level bureaucrat (SLB). SLBs are implementors of public policy. These actors have discretion over how policy is implemented and the extent of their influence over policy and the level of constraint placed on them is largely dependent on local circumstances (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky's (1980) findings were affirmed in 2011 by Brodkin. She studied how street-level organizations interpreted carrot and stick policy reforms. The first decade of the 21st century saw public policy dominated by performance indicators tied to incentives to spur specific actions at the local level. Brodkin (2011) studied welfare reforms to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in a first-class city in the Midwest. Metrics were tied to efficiently moving clients into employment opportunities. Managers were more interested in basic metrics like attendance and job placement over more complex goals of TANF (Brodkin, 2011). Employees developed routines to balance these managerial demands with their understanding of their professional role which is supporting vulnerable clients regardless of effort (Brodkin, 2011). Employees focused their efforts on easy to place cases and avoided cases

that required higher levels of effort (Brodkin, 2011). Employees interpreted the rules around policy metrics to inflate their performance around job placement. Local compliance seemed to be out of alignment with the reforms of TANF (Brodkin, 2011). Policy implementation was driven by local organizations and actors rather than how federal and state policymakers intended policy to be implemented. DE faculty have been shown to navigate policy and local contexts in similar ways to what Lipsky (1980) and Brodkin (2011) articulated. DE faculty navigate multiple institutional contexts and managers as noted above (Duncheon & Relles, 2020; Mollet et al., 2020). Therefore, the factors highlighted by Lipsky (1980) and Brodkin (2011), like professional identity, autonomy, and organizational culture may be influencing how DE faculty interpret laws as it relates to their curriculum and pedagogy.

Institutional Context and Policy Meaning Making: Diehl and Golann's Framework

Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework consider how both institutions and individuals interact to interpret policy. Their framework affirms prior work that institutions influence how local actors interpret and enact policy but integrates policy adoption literature into one framework for a more holistic approach to studying policy implementation. These institutional influencers are external and include governing bodies, enforcement authorities, or funding models (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Diehl and Golann (2023) refer to these external influencers as multiple logics. These logics interact at the both the organizational and individual level to influence policy implementation (Diehl & Golann, 2023). They identify a process for which select external logics influence local adoption and call it filtering (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Organizations and individuals filter select external policy signals or logics, build, modify, or reinforce professional routines, and interpret, modify, or create new social networks as they

interpret and enact the policy (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Tennessee's divisive concepts laws layer multiple logics like enforcement penalties from state agencies, governing and coordinating boards and political and cultural commentary that make Diehl and Golann's framework particularly useful for studying how DE faculty and the organizations they move between (high schools and colleges) are filtering and adapting these laws.

Academic Optimism as a Dispositional Lens

Policy implementation research has documented how organizations and individuals interpret policy. The literature speaks to individual filtering and adaptation but does not account for professional disposition. Academic optimism attempts to understand how educators' sense of academic optimism may impact how policy is implemented as it has shown to influence other dimensions of learning. Academic optimism is composed of efficacy, faculty trust, and academic press which drives faculty disposition toward their efforts as an educator. The literature has documented the impact academic optimism has on educator practice and student outcomes (Beard et al., 2010; Fahy, et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). The dimensions of academic optimism and the collective metric may be influencing policy implementation as it relates to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The policy implementation and academic optimism research provide conceptual grounding for this study. Specifically, Diehl and Golann's framework will provide the primary lens for this qualitative study exploring DE faculty responses to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws.

Research Design

This study builds upon previous document analysis, which sought to understand how institutions were responding to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws as well as an examination of

academic optimism of DE faculty. This study is an effort to explore how DE faculty are filtering and adapting in response to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The literature is rife with examples studies that use qualitative methods to understand the mechanisms behind policy implementation. Coburn (2004) studied how schools responded to No Child Left Behind reforms and the emphasis on curriculum standards to drive education improvement. Case studies explored various schools adopting new reading reforms specifically looking at principal leadership, teacher collaboration, and the resulting pedagogical changes. The case studies illuminated how external pressures from both the federal and state level did not produce uniform action at the school and classroom level (Coburn, 2004). The reading reforms were shaped by school culture and professional beliefs that varied across the schools studied. Coburn's (2004) study reinforced the ways in which policy reform is mediated by organizational culture and educator professional beliefs. In an earlier study on reading reforms, Coburn (2001) found that teacher professional networks as a collective worked to interpret policy which led to diverse implementation compliance. The case studies triangulated interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and professional development observations. Coburn (2001) described how teacher networks and professional dialogue can act as a mechanism in the policy implementation process.

Honig (2006) performed a meta-analysis of education policy implementation studies which further reinforced the findings of the two Coburn (2001, 2004) studies. The analysis was limited to both qualitative and mixed methods studies. Through its meta-analysis, the study contended that policy is filtered through multiple levels which influences interpretation and eventual implementation (Honig, 2006). Sensemaking between actors demonstrates that policy is

not just impacted through a trickle-down pattern. Administrators and educators and the social networks they form can influence policy implementation within an organizational context just as policymakers and administrators and the social networks they form can influence policy implementation between institutional levels (Honig, 2006).

Tennessee's divisive concepts laws introduced new requirements for higher education governing and coordinating boards, the state education agency, local education agencies, community colleges, administrators, and educators. The layered institutional interactions, that is, from the state education agency to the local education agency coupled with professional network sensemaking between dual enrollment faculty may be influencing policy implementation is similar ways described by Coburn (2001, 2004) and Honig (2006). The qualitative research design may be an effective framework for understanding the mechanisms behind interpretation and implementation of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws.

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is used to understand the mechanisms behind phenomena (Denzin & Lincon, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). The methodology is particularly adept at uncovering how individuals interpret events and construct meaning that drive observed phenomena (Denzin & Lincon, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that education research should collect data that generates rich descriptions from participants and orients those individual perspectives within the larger context of the study. Interviews provide the space for participants to provide that rich experiential data that allows researchers to understand the mechanisms of phenomena that may not be visible by quantitative data alone (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview research is considered a more common

methodological approach to qualitative research because it allows the researcher direct access to participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This direct access allows researchers the ability to probe and collect nuanced understandings of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2013) describes the benefits of semi-structured interviews because of their ability to allow researchers to clarify and explore emerging ideas. This approach to interviewing allows researchers to understand complex mechanisms and a deeper exploration of participant perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design

This article is situated within a larger sequential explanatory mixed methods design. Generally, mixed methods combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods (Greene, 2007). The quantitative analysis allows for a broader understanding by uncovering patterns in a population whereas the qualitative analysis allows for a deeper understanding by exploring how individuals from the population make sense of their experiences in a specific setting (Greene, 2007). Sequential explanatory designs collect quantitative data first and followed up with qualitative methods to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative phase of the research design is not independent but structured to understand the mechanisms behind a phenomenon by exploring patterns, relationships, and outlier findings uncovered in the statistical analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative findings may provide opportunities to integrate data if they are used to clarify, connect, or contextualize quantitative findings (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). Education research typically demand a mixed methods approach and, more specifically, sequential explanatory designs as the quantitative results can require deeper interpretation (Creswell &

Plano Clark, 2018). Sequential explanatory designs allow researchers to measure patterns and contextualize the results with individual perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Sequential explanatory design will allow me to consider the patterns uncovered in my survey results and explore them further with interviews of DE faculty. The interviews may illuminate how faculty are making sense of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws individually, collectively among their peers, and within the institutions they navigate e.g., the college, high school, or culture more broadly.

Participants

Participants in this study came from DE faculty who completed the survey on academic optimism. These faculty opted into the survey that was distributed to them by academic affairs leadership at Tennessee community colleges. The survey ended with a question asking if they would like to opt into a semi-structured interview and to provide their email if they wanted to be interviewed. These faculty represent a sample of DE faculty from across the Tennessee Board of Regents system. This public college system represents community college faculty. Eleven DE faculty were interviewed. These faculty have experience teaching DE courses following the passage and implementation of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws.

Sampling Strategy

Qualitative research can rely on purposeful sampling as it ensures that the participants have direct, relevant experience with the phenomenon being explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling is driven by the ability to collect rich descriptions that help answer the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Samples are often taken from larger quantitative populations in mixed methods designs (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark,

2018). Participants who opt in to a follow up interview have already demonstrated their relevancy and understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Conducting interviews with a smaller sample from the quantitative study allows for meaningful integration between the quantitative results and the qualitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The broader population is represented in the results of the qualitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative sample sizes are generally smaller to allow for an appropriate level of depth in the findings that explain the phenomenon based on the experiences of each participant (Creswell, 2013). The goal of smaller sample sizes is to explore patterns among the participants rather than the contours of quantitative findings (Creswell, 2013). This study recruited participants from the larger pool of DE faculty who took the academic optimism study and indicated a desire to participate in a follow up qualitative study. This approach to sampling aligns with sequential explanatory methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participant Characteristics

Eleven DE faculty participated in interviews after their completion of the academic optimism survey. The sample represented a strong cross section of academic discipline ranging from science to the humanities. Table 1 below documents key characteristics of the eleven faculty members including their discipline and the context of their DE course. Faculty were all given pseudonyms to protect their identity; those pseudonyms are included in the participant table.

Interview Protocol Development

A semi-structured interview protocol was created to explore DE faculty experiences after the adoption of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The protocol was designed

Table 6

Dual Enrollment Faculty Participant Characteristics

Faculty	Discipline	Institution Type
Professor A	Theatre	Community College
Professor B	Humanities/Composition	Community College
Professor C	Political Science	Community College
Professor D	Science	Community College
Professor E	Communication	Community College
Professor F	Biology	DE at High School
Professor G	History	Community College
Professor H	English/Literature	DE at High School
Professor I	English	Community College
Professor J	Humanities	Community College
Professor K	Social Science/Anthropology	Community College

to answer the study's qualitative research questions relating to how faculty and public institutions of higher education are responding to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The interview guide was structured to surface aspects of policy implementation including faculty perceptions, instructional practices, and institutional responses. Additionally, the questions and the semi-structured design allowed for the exploration of faculty sensemaking processes as it relates to external policy pressures on their unique organizational contexts. The semi-structured interview guide included ten open-ended questions. Open ended questions provided space for faculty participants to elaborate on their experiences and gave flexibility for follow-up questions to tease out additional detail, if needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first several questions explored how faculty perceived the interaction between their role as DE faculty and Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The interview guide transitioned into questions that explored curriculum and pedagogy in DE courses since the divisive concepts laws was passed. Faculty were asked to describe the institutional support including guidance and professional development since the laws' enactment. Several questions focused on relationships

and networks within schools including with students and collaboration between schools and colleges. The semi-structured interview ended with a question designed to help faculty reflect on the broader policy environment post enactment of the divisive concepts laws.

Interview Procedures

All interviews were conducted via Zoom which allowed for asynchronous conversations with the eleven faculty across the community college system. Online interviews are frequently used in qualitative research when participants are dispersed across a larger geographic area (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes long following a semi-structured interview protocol detailed above. Each interview was recorded with participant consent. Consent was provided in written form before the interview as well as verbally before the interview began. Zoom's transcription tool was utilized for the initial transcription of each interview. The transcripts were reviewed and cleaned for accuracy prior to any data analysis. The secondary review was important to ensure the credibility of the qualitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcripts were cleaned of any identifiable information including the DE faculty member's name as well as any references to the schools and colleges in which they offered DE courses. This phase of review and data cleaning aligns with best practices to protect participant confidentiality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The finalized transcripts were coded through multiple rounds detailed below. The interview procedure outlined above created a systematic approach to analysis enabling an exploration of DE faculty experiences and responses to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws.

Data Analysis

Coding Process

The coding process included three rounds of analysis. The first round of coding was descriptive and process focused. Saldaña (2016) stated that first round coding should focus on descriptions or actions as well as process focused. This type of coding allows for the identification of key ideas, experiences, and actions related to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. Descriptive or action-oriented coding allows for the development of broader categories of codes (Saldaña, 2016). The interviews were transcribed during the Zoom conversations and transcribed using the platform's artificial intelligence tool. The interviews were reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy to the video of each interview. Each interview was coded line by line to identify how faculty described their sensemaking of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The initial codes were both deductive relying on Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework and inductive stemming from faculty experience. Diehl and Golann (2023) posit that schools respond to policy through filtering and local adaptation. Filtering is how faculty interpret the external policy and local adaptation is how faculty respond and adjust their curriculum and pedagogy (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Local adaptation of policy is driven by sensemaking, routines, and social networks (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Each educational organization's culture is both shaped by and shapes sensemaking, routines, and social networks leading to heterogeneity in policy implementation (Diehl & Golann, 2023).

The second round of coding focused on identifying patterns in the action-oriented descriptions from the first round of coding (Saldaña, 2016). These patterns helped to generate broader themes across all eleven interviews. The pattern identification process groups round one

codes into explanatory categories that tease out similarities and differences between and among faculty responses to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws (Saldaña, 2016). The pattern identification process focused faculty understanding of the laws, their perceived risk or ambiguity associated with the laws, and alterations to curriculum or pedagogy. Pattern coding is helpful in mixed methods explanatory designs as it can allow for the development of explanations of the quantitative results. (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

The third and final round of coding focused on the creation of themes that illuminated how faculty responded to policy pressure derived from Tennessee's divisive concepts laws in DE contexts. Thematic coding focuses on synthesizing patterns into themes that explain the phenomenon in the study (Saldaña, 2016). This final round involved comparing themes across faculty participants, identifying variation by variables like discipline, and aligning themes back to Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework. Faculty-centered explanatory analysis is driven by the development of initial codes, synthesizing these codes into categories, and then the creation of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Several procedures were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Consistent with recommendations from Creswell and Poth (2018), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Saldaña (2021), data analysis occurred through multiple rounds of coding and theme development. Initial codes were informed by the study's conceptual framework and subsequently refined through iterative engagement with the interview data. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document emerging insights, coding decisions, and the evolution of thematic categories. A detailed codebook was developed and maintained throughout

the analysis process and is included in Appendix F to enhance dependability and transparency. The codebook provided operational definitions, inclusion criteria, and representative examples for each code, creating a systematic framework for analysis. The iterative coding process, combined with documentation of coding decisions and the inclusion of the code map and codebook, provides an audit trail that allows readers to evaluate the connection between participant responses, codes, themes, and findings.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data resulted in the development of three primary themes related to faculty awareness and interpretation of the law, the role of organizational networks in sensemaking, and instructional responses to the policy environment. These themes emerged through a multi-stage coding process (see Appendix D for a detailed overview of code development and mapping).

Policy Meaning Constructed Through Uneven Awareness and Interpretation

DE faculty have made sense of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws with varied awareness and understanding of the laws and their impacts on classrooms. Some participants reported almost no awareness of the laws indicating that the laws and their resulting policy impacts had not penetrated their professional networks or their classrooms. Professor A stated, "I am new to Tennessee, so I didn't know about it [divisive concepts laws] when I started teaching…I don't remember all of the specifics, but I don't think it affected the way I taught. Probably because I wasn't aware of it." Professor D was more direct. "I did not know anything about those laws…I don't know one thing about it." However, other faculty articulated a more nuanced understanding of the laws describing how the laws emerged and the ways in which faculty

reacted to those laws since their introduction and enactment. Those faculty members also shared their concerns to academic freedom. “I may not know House and Senate bills exactly, but I do remember the timeline. I know it started in 2021 in K through 12 and then that was pretty scary for us because we were like this seems incremental. This is gonna make it to higher education. And then the next year it did.” detailed Professor I. The level of awareness and subsequent tracking of laws was driven in part by historical or ideological perspectives.

Faculty interpretation was driven by ideological beliefs, academic disciplinary culture, and professional perspectives. Where a faculty member landed with their interpretation influenced whether they felt the laws were an attack on academic freedom or innocuous in nature. The divisive concepts laws were filtered through faculty reflection and interpretation resulting in a diverse set of conclusions of the laws’ impact on curriculum and pedagogy in DE courses. Some DE faculty described the laws as politically motivated censorship. For instance, Professor G shared that they “…feel like the divisive concepts law is alt-right censorship, just the way, you know, communist censorship existed previously. It’s just from the right’s perspective rather than the radical left’s perspective and arguably just as dangerous, if not more so.” Other faculty expressed concern, but it was markedly less pointed and focused on a concern for student learning and development. Professor H shared “I have worried a little bit about it [divisive concepts laws]. I want to give students readings that allow them to experience a reality difference from their own.” Still, other faculty members were more agnostic toward the laws and thought they were unlikely to impact their DE curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom culture. “It’s [the law] kind of a way to say you can’t indoctrinate people…I don’t have a problem with it myself” posited Professor B. Faculty seemed to be interpreting the laws through professional filters such

as their discipline area. Faculty perceptions of risk appeared to be rooted in academic discipline. Faculty in the humanities felt threatened by the laws and their impact on academic freedom. Professor G continued "History and English are most in danger…" Professor H reinforced this perception of risk "Especially within in the English department…I've worried about it." Professor I stated explicitly how she evaluated the risk by sharing "I think the initial fear for the people that I work with was: 'How could this be used against me in the most trivial ways?' I have to now be very careful about the authors that I choose to use." Professor I continued "Do I tell my students Walt Whitman is gay?" However, faculty in disciplines like math and science were the least concerned with the laws impact on academic freedom. Professor D exclaimed "In science we're just intent on teaching our subject."

Faculty Relied on Localized Networks Rather Than Institutional Guidance

Across the interviews, faculty deemphasized the institutional guidance or administrative support as it related to the interpretation of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws and guiding any potential impacts on the classroom. Faculty shared that communication about the divisive concepts laws was inconsistent and, when there were attempts to provide system-level guidance, it felt episodic at best. Professor K shared that there was almost no communication from her administration. "They [the administration] mentioned it at a support staff meeting in June or July when faculty is [sic] not even, you know, on contract." Faculty noted limited guidance from legal counsel. The guidance was described as descriptive providing an overview of the law rather than how to handle the divisive concepts in the classroom. Professor C shared "The training…just covers the contours of the law, and they don't really tell you how to handle it within your class. Faculty relied on localized networks of support to interpret policy ambiguity in the absence of

clear institutional guidance. These localized networks led to varying and, at times, conflicting understandings of the law.

Instead, faculty described local interpretation of the laws through informal and formal discussions in departmental or divisional settings, in faculty senate, or in informal cross-disciplinary private peer conversations. Faculty seemed to need more time to grapple with the implications of the divisive concepts laws. The administrative structures only provided limited opportunities or were sent via email. Professor G highlighted how some faculty did get support from department-level leadership. “Our department has been very supportive of keeping us telling the truth [in our instruction] and being honest and direct while still not violating the law.” Faculty needed the space created by their department to explore the contours of the laws and grapple with how these laws would be translated to practice. The informal and formal localized networks functioned as opportunities for collective sensemaking where faculty members could express concerns, discuss implications, and identify instructional strategies.

Organizational filtering of the divisive concepts laws and policy happened in discrete settings like departments rather than a top-down approach from the college’s administrative structure. Professor I shared “Those conversations were happening within our division and faculty senate.” Finally, faculty described informal peer networks as places of sensemaking.

Faculty Maintained Instruction While Becoming More Deliberate in Practice

The final thematic finding of the study related to how faculty maintained their instructional autonomy even while remaining acutely aware of the ways in which the divisive concepts laws were attempting to shape the policy environment. Most faculty in the study shared that the laws had limited if any impact on their DE curriculum and pedagogy. Faculty repeatedly

expressed a maintenance of rigor within their courses. Professor B explained "No not at all. This [divisive concepts law] hasn't changed the way I do anything really." Professor H reinforced this sentiment by commenting "It [divisive concepts laws] doesn't really affect it [curriculum or pedagogy] …there are certain concepts that I want them to know regardless." However, several faculty members described reflecting on their course material and pedagogy decisions e.g., classroom discussions through the lens of the divisive concepts laws. Some faculty reviewed their syllabus to assess the diversity of authors in their course readings selections. Professor H showed a commitment to diverse perspectives when sharing "I want to give students readings that allow them to experience a reality different from their own". Primary source inclusion seemed to be viewed as a buffer against the perception that faculty were promoting certain viewpoints. Faculty were not making drastic changes to their curriculum, but they seemed to have a heightened awareness of the policy environment shaped by Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. "My response is to use a lot of primary sources…maybe they won't trust it in my voice, but maybe they'll trust is in their voice." There was not a pattern of drastic curriculum or pedagogy shifts, but rather subtle changes to cope with policy ambiguity.

Discussion

This study examined how DE faculty made sense of and responded to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. The findings suggest that policy implementation in this context did not function as a uniform or directive force shaping classroom practice. Faculty responses were mediated through uneven awareness, localized sensemaking processes, and professional judgment, resulting in varied interpretations but relatively stable instructional practice. These findings align with Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework, which conceptualizes responses to

external pressures as a process of organizational filtering shaped by local context and social interaction. The findings further specify how uneven access to policy information and variation in institutional communication shape the conditions under which this filtering process occurs. A key contribution of this study is the identification of policy meaning as constructed rather than transmitted. Consistent with Diehl and Golann (2023), faculty did not respond to the law as a clearly understood mandate. Awareness ranged from complete unfamiliarity to active engagement with the policy's origins and implications. This uneven awareness shaped how faculty interpreted both the intent and perceived risk of the law. For some faculty members, the law represented a form of political constraint or potential threat to academic freedom, while for others it was perceived as benign or aligned with existing instructional norms. These findings affirm the framework's emphasis on local interpretation while specifying that variation in exposure to policy signals not just interpretation plays a critical role in shaping responses.

The findings also highlight the limited role of formal institutional guidance in shaping faculty responses. Faculty consistently described administrative communication as episodic, unclear, or poorly timed, reducing its influence on instructional decision-making. Faculty instead relied on localized networks, including departments, divisions, faculty senate, and informal peer interactions, as primary sites of sensemaking which is in line with Diehl and Golann's (2023) emphasis on organizational processes. These findings affirm the importance of social interaction in the filtering process and further suggest that, in the absence of clear institutional direction, interpretive authority shifts toward decentralized and informal professional networks.

Faculty demonstrated a strong pattern of instructional continuity despite variation in awareness and interpretation. Most participants reported maintaining their curriculum and pedagogy, even

when expressing concern about the law. However, this stability should not be interpreted as an absence of policy influence. Faculty described becoming more deliberate and reflective in their instructional decisions, including increased attention to course materials, framing of discussions, and the use of primary sources. This pattern refines Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework by illustrating how responses to external pressure may manifest not as overt change, but as subtle, practice-level adaptations that preserve core professional commitments while responding to perceived constraints. These findings suggest that policy influence operates through filtering processes that shape perception, interpretation, and reflection rather than direct compliance. The divisive concepts laws did not produce widespread curricular change, but they did alter the conditions under which faculty make instructional decisions. This distinction is critical. It suggests that policy effects may be indirect and cumulative, influencing how educators think about their work even when observable practices remain stable.

These findings carry several implications for policy, institutional leadership, and research. The results suggest that external pressures such as legislation are mediated through organizational filtering processes, as described by Diehl and Golann (2023), rather than implemented uniformly. Policies designed to shape instruction may instead function as ambiguous signals that are unevenly received and variably enacted across institutional contexts. The findings highlight for institutional leaders the importance of how policy is translated within organizations. Faculty rely on localized networks to interpret policy when communication is limited or unclear which can produce fragmentation in understanding and response. Institutions seeking more consistent implementation should consider how guidance reaches the professional communities where sensemaking occurs. The findings suggest that professional norms and

commitments to academic rigor function as stabilizing forces within the filtering process. Faculty maintained instructional practices while engaging in reflective adjustments, indicating that policy pressures are negotiated rather than simply adopted or resisted. This study reinforces the value of examining policy implementation as a multi-level, socially embedded process which is consistent with Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework. Future research should explore how these filtering processes evolve over time and across policy contexts.

This study demonstrates that policy does not operate as a direct mechanism for shaping classroom practice. Policy is filtered, interpreted, and enacted through institutional structures, social networks, and individual professional judgment. In the case of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws, DE faculty maintained instructional stability while engaging in localized sensemaking and increased reflective practice. Aligned with Diehl and Golann's (2023) framework, the findings underscore that the effects of policy depend less on its formal design and more on how it is experienced within local contexts. Understanding policy implementation requires attention not only to policy content, but to the organizational and social processes that shape how it is interpreted and enacted in practice.

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Chapter 5: Integrated Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how Tennessee's divisive concepts laws influence public institutions of higher education, faculty disposition, and faculty sensemaking and practice. The study employed a sequential mixed methods design. Broadly, this structure identified patterns in faculty disposition through the quantitative design and qualitative findings that provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind those patterns. Taken together the three articles provided a robust tiered view of policy implementation. Article one focused on the institutional level policy response, article two focused on the individual/faculty level policy response, and article three focused on the classroom level policy response. The three studies revealed that policy implementation is informed by each tier. Institutions interpret and signal policy, faculty filter those signals, and their instructional decisions reflect those interpretations of policy.

Overview of Findings Across the Three Studies

Institutional Responses

Tennessee's public universities and colleges were examined to understand their responses to the divisive concepts laws. These responses were fragmented and uneven. Some institutions provided formal guidance and compliance-oriented communication. Other institutions provided minimal or indirect guidance. These communications were largely put out by Offices of the General Counsel which were descriptive in nature rather than interpretive. These memos did reaffirm academic freedom and/or free speech. Institutional responses were driven by varying interpretations of the law as well as differing levels of perceived legal or reputational risk. The

aforementioned variation created diverse policy environments for faculty across the public higher education landscape in Tennessee. The tone of general counsel memos was influenced by the perceived legal or reputational risk. This finding connects and affirms Honig (2006) who described policy as an organization response to complexity. The institutions did not act as uniform transmitters of policy. Instead, each institution filtered and framed the laws in different ways. Institutional responses were not just uneven. The ways in which institutions responded were also remarkably similar in form and content. Many communications to faculty were sent through general counsel. These guidance memos emphasized legal summaries, compliance language, and reaffirmations of academic optimism. These memos served as descriptions rather than interpretative guidance. The descriptive nature meant that the institutions were not translating policy into instructional guidance. Several institutions included supplementary guidance from either the president or academic affairs division. These documents focused on similar messages sent from the general counsel but did appear to me more values based in the ways they affirmed the legacy of the institution as one rooted in academic freedom and free speech. Faculty responded to this limited guidance. New or intensified social networks emerged within institutions including the use of existing formal spaces like faculty senate and departmental meetings, but also in new informal networks like peer groups that were both discipline specific and interdisciplinary.

Academic Optimism

DE faculty reported moderate to high levels across the subscales of academic optimism which include self-efficacy, academic rigor, and trust in parents and students. However, the aggregate standardized score (M=499) was slightly below the national norm. This lower

aggregate standardized score means that the DE faculty had lower levels of academic optimism than 84% of schools in the reference study. This article found that there were no statistically significant differences in academic optimism across race, sex, discipline, or years of experience. These findings suggest that DE faculty share similar perceptions of their role as DE instructors. Additionally, demographic factors do not explain the variation. When you look at the subscales of academic optimism specifically, DE faculty did report lower levels of trust in parents and students. This lower level of trust may reflect uncertainty about students and the DE context. Faculty did report higher levels of self-efficacy and academic press related to their DE courses. These higher scores may reflect a resolve to the rigor of the course and confidence in their ability to teach DE courses. While the findings did not indicate demographic differences that influence academic optimism, it could point to other variables like institutional and policy contexts as drivers for a slightly lower aggregate academic optimism score.

Faculty Sensemaking and Instruction

Across the interviews varied awareness of the divisive concepts laws emerged as a key finding. The spectrum of awareness is best encapsulated by two different faculty responses. When asked about the laws, one faculty member shared they had no awareness: “I don’t know anything about those laws” while another described multiple professional networks where sensemaking was taking place e.g., departmental meetings, informal peer networks, and faculty senate. Perceptions of the intent and consequences of the laws varied as well. Some faculty expressed the laws were irrelevant or symbolic while others shared perspectives of the laws seemed to be restrictive. Faculty expressed that institutional guidance was limited which led faculty to more localized networks for sensemaking. Curriculum and pedagogy remained largely

unchanged. Faculty reported that they did not waiver on the rigor of their coursework nor the removal or adaptation of their curriculum. However, faculty were more deliberate and reflective after the enactment of the laws. Faculty spent time reviewing syllabi, considering author diversity, and grounding curriculum in primary sources.

Integrated Findings Across Studies

Policy Functions as an Interpretive Signal Rather Than a Uniform Directive

One of the key findings that emerged from across these three studies was that the divisive concepts laws did not function as a clear mandate at the institutional, classroom, and individual level. Article one uncovered the varied responses at the institutional level. Some institutions responded by providing formal compliance driven guidance and others provided minimal or indirect support. The faculty interviews revealed that awareness of the laws ranged from a complete lack of knowledge to faculty who were actively monitoring the law across multiple years. This finding is supported by existing policy literature. Spillane et al. (2002) contends that policy is not enacted but rather interpreted through individual reflection and collective sensemaking processes. Faculty of DE courses constructed meaning of the divisive concepts laws through personal beliefs, academic norms, and collective sensemaking processes at their institutions. At the same time, this study highlights how variation in institutional responses and uneven access to policy information can shape how it is interpreted and enacted. These findings are consistent with Matland's (1995) work creating the ambiguity-conflict model as a tool to understand policy implementation. Matland (1995) describes variation in policy implementation as a function of a high-ambiguity policy environment. This ambiguity is not accidental; sometimes it is often politically constructed (Matland, 1995).

Organizational Context Mediates Policy Meaning Through Social Networks

The document analysis revealed that institutional responses were inconsistent. While general counsels' offices across institutions shared similar messages, they were focused on re-articulating the laws and re-affirming commitments to academic freedom and/or free speech. These institutional memos appeared to focus on the black and white letter of the laws. Faculty seemed to sense more gray areas as it related to policy implementation. Faculty senates discussed the implications of the laws. Faculty described their peers landing on all sides of the issue from believing the laws were symbolic to articulating deep concern for the implications for academic freedom. These discussions continued in divisional and departmental meetings as faculty sought to interpret the laws. Faculty were left to fill in the gaps with how to navigate curriculum decisions in the midst of varying faculty perspectives, driven by personal beliefs and professional identity, on the extent to which the laws were restrictive or largely symbolic. Faculty were craving nuance and turned to peer networks and departmental discussions. Therefore, the policy understanding emerged through localized conversations rather than centralized communication from the administration of the college or university. These findings underscore and extend Coburn's (2001) work by illustrating how, in the absence of clear institutional guidance, interpretive authority shifts more heavily to informal and formal professional spaces.

Faculty Maintain Instructional Stability Despite Policy Ambiguity

Article two uncovered that faculty rated their efficacy as professors as well as their academic rigor high. Article three found that faculty largely made minimal instructional change and emphasized their preservation of existing pedagogy strategies and curriculum. These findings were framed by policy discussions that were ambiguous. How the policy should be

interpreted or if future amendments to the law would continue to put pressure on faculty were open questions. Faculty noted engaging in deep reflection across their syllabi to consider implications of the laws on author selection, primary source inclusion, classroom discussions, and student deliverables. Largely, faculty demonstrated instructional resilience through the maintenance of rigor and course structure. Faculty adjustments to curriculum and pedagogy were limited, subtle; their refinements were not structural in response to the divisive concepts laws. Largely, faculty affirmed the importance of exposing students to diverse viewpoints as a responsibility they had as educators. Several faculty members reported anchoring their classroom discussions on potentially sensitive topics with primary sources. Instructional stability should not be interpreted to occur as a result of an absence of policy pressure. The instructional maintenance exhibited by faculty seems to reflect a managed tension between policy pressure and academic freedom, rigor, and professional identity.

Variation is Driven by Interpretation and Context, Not Demographics

The second study found that academic optimism was not statistically different across a range of demographic variables including race, sex, gender, years of experience, and academic discipline. However, the study did find that academic optimism was lower than the norm reference indicating that other institutional or organizational variables may be at play. Article three uncovered several findings that may begin to explain the variation in policy interpretation. First, policy responses were driven by awareness of the laws. Several faculty members reported in interviews that they largely were unaware with the laws. This lack of awareness drove their nonresponse to the laws. Other faculty members articulated an acute awareness of the laws even indicating that they were tracking their development across years and/or state lines. Faculty

members who had a lack of awareness seemed to operate as they always had in terms of their pedagogy and curriculum decisions. Faculty who were tracking the laws more closely were more likely to engage with institutional and local levels of sensemaking e.g., reviewing legal analyses, attending institutional presentations, or engaging their faculty senate or peer networks. Personal and professional ideology seemed to drive policy interpretation as well. While in the minority, several faculty members reported that either their peers were overreacting or the laws had some utility to ensure that indoctrination was not taking place in the classroom. Faculty who were concerned about academic freedom and free speech were more likely to engage in reflective practices as it relates to their curriculum. The variation in faculty response is better explained by differences in interpretation and organizational context than by individual demographic details. Uneven institutional signals driven by legal memos that focus on description and compliance or communication that does not reach the correct faculty audiences drives uneven awareness. Faculty are left to interpret policy locally among formal and informal peer networks. This localized interpretive work leads to different responses to the laws.

Contribution to Theory

Affirming and Specifying Deihl & Golann's Framework

Deihl and Golann (2023) conceptualize an expanded policy implementation framework that describes policy implementation as a process of organizational filtering of external logics e.g., divisive concepts laws or cultural reactions to topics like racial or gender inequality and, ultimately, how institutions and individuals respond. Their framework underscores that external logics like laws do not directly shape practice. These external logics are filtered through organizational structures, interpreted by individual and collective understandings of professional

norms as well as informal and formal social networks. This localized interpretation process is what leads to a lack of uniform response to external policies.

The findings of these three studies affirm Deihl and Golann's (2023) notion of policy filtering that drives policy responses. The document analysis of article one affirmed that institutions interpret and communicated the divisive concepts laws differently, which led to uneven or ineffective policy signals. Legal or academic guidance from administrators was interpreted as insufficient or did not penetrate to all the spaces where faculty were making sense of these laws. At the individual level, policy responses were driven by awareness and shaped by personal and professional beliefs, academic discipline context, as well as exposure to sensemaking discussions e.g., in faculty senate or in a departmental meeting. Finally, the findings affirm Deihl and Golann's framework (2023) by elucidating the localized nature of policy interpretation. Faculty members made meaning of the laws through departments, faculty senates, and/or peer discussions. This study affirms that policy is not transmitted uniformly from external pressures. Policy is interpreted and reconstructed locally, and those processes drive faculty responses in their curricular and pedagogical decisions. Additionally, this study refines Deihl and Golann's framework by underscoring that policy responses varied due to uneven exposure to policy signals. This study specifies that timing of policy exposure also matters. Faculty responses varied not only in content, but in when and how they encountered policy signals. Finally, this study may specify that policy pressure does not lead to direct responses, but rather reflection, stability in core actions e.g., maintaining rigor, with modest adjustments e.g., the use of primary source documentation when discussing sensitive topics.

Academic Optimism as a Stabilizing Resource

Academic optimism may function as a stabilizing resource that allows faculty to maintain instructional practices in the face of policy ambiguity. Faculty reported moderate to high self-efficacy as it relates to their role as an educator, strong levels of academic press, and slightly lower levels of trust in parents and students. There were no demographic variables that influenced academic optimism in a statistically significant way. These findings suggest that faculty share common instructional beliefs and a commitment to rigor. Article three reinforces and extends these findings by showing that faculty maintained instructional practices, did not alter curriculum, and continued to emphasize rigor. Faculty did describe periods of reflection that informed their framing for sensitive topics in class or the inclusion of primary sources to guide student exploration around a particular topic. The high levels of academic efficacy and press demonstrate that they are capable and the minimal changes to curriculum and pedagogy may demonstrate those prior beliefs in action. Academic optimism as a dimension of faculty belief may be connected to the stability seen in their curriculum and pedagogy decisions. Hoy et al. (2006) demonstrates the positive association between academic optimism and student success. Academic optimism positions efficacy and press as drivers of sustained instructional focus (Hoy et al., 2006). Coburn (2001) and Spillane et al. (2002) have demonstrated that external policy pressures can alter practice at the local level. These findings suggest that internal faculty dispositions as measured by academic optimism may act as a stabilizing resource as faculty navigate external policy pressure like divisive concepts laws.

Dual Enrollment Faculty as Boundary-Level Policy Actors

DE faculty operate and navigate between both K12 environments and higher education environments. This structural reality creates tension and, sometimes, confusion among faculty (Duncheon & Relles, 2020). Tennessee's divisive concepts laws apply differently across these systems, with stronger restrictions in K12 settings and explicit protections for academic freedom in the higher education version of the law. In their interviews, faculty describe navigating different expectations and uncertainty about which standards related to the divisive concepts laws they should apply. Faculty members articulated a concern about the perception of the content but continued their commitment to college-level rigor. At the institutional level, the document analysis showed that institutions did not clearly resolve the questions raised by faculty that were just described in their attempt to provide uniform guidance. This meant that faculty were left to interpret which system (K12 or higher education) governs their instructional practice. Additionally, faculty were left to their localized networks and internal reflection to reconcile expectations in the DE space. This pattern reinforces Lipsky's (1980) theory that street-level bureaucrats have large discretionary jurisdiction as frontline actors of policy. However, this finding refines Lipsky's (1980) metaphor by highlighting how policy implementation can take place in overlapping environments like K12 settings and higher education settings in the case of DE courses. Finally, this study extends Duncheon & Relles (2020) work by showing how policy ambiguity intensifies the tension they document faculty teaching DE feel as they navigate higher education and K12 spaces.

Implications

This study presents implications that may be important across a variety of contexts including implications for policymakers, institutions, faculty members, and dual enrollment. The interviews from article three uncovered that faculty having varying levels of awareness and are receiving varying institutional messages to help them interpret policy. This reality implies that policy may not achieve intended outcomes due to uneven awareness and inconsistent institutional communication. Policymakers should consider how external logics like policy signals are filtered and interpreted across institutional levels. Policymakers should consider how ambiguity in policy language may lead to variation in interpretation and implementation across institutions. This study points to the important role that institutions play in shaping policy meaning through filtering mechanisms. Articles one and three highlighted how inconsistent and/or ineffective communication shapes policy sensemaking and practice. Institutions should work to supply clearer, timely, and repeated guidance to faculty to reduce ambiguity and support faculty interpretation. Guidance must reach the spaces where faculty are wrestling with new policies. Article two and three demonstrated faculty members' commitment to academic rigor and the ways in which they were maintaining it. Article three also showed how faculty were reflecting on their curriculum and pedagogy choices to strategically adapt in the face of policy pressures from the divisive concepts laws. Faculty demonstrated a strong commitment to academic rigor, suggesting that professional identity plays a critical role in mediating policy influence. It will be important for institutions and academic leaders to support faculty as they navigate the ambiguity that comes with new policy while preserving academic freedom and instructional integrity. Finally, DE faculty face unique challenges as they move between K12 and

higher education settings causing them to wrestle with competing policy expectations. Policy must explicitly account for DE contexts to reduce ambiguity and conflicting expectations.

Limitations

The study findings are limited by several factors. The academic optimism survey was taken by 44 faculty members and 11 of those faculty members opted to participate in follow-up interviews to explore their sensemaking of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws. These smaller sample sizes are appropriate for exploratory mixed methods research. However, it limits the generalizability of the findings. The interviews may not capture the full range of perspectives and nuance across all faculty teaching DE in Tennessee. However, the qualitative interviews were designed to provide a deeper understanding of faculty sensemaking around the divisive concepts laws rather than broad generalizability. This approach is consistent with the goals of a sequential explanatory mixed methods design.

The study was conducted in Tennessee. Centering the studies in Tennessee was an important case as the state represents an early adopter of the divisive concepts laws and continued to refine the laws in subsequent years. However, the findings may not be transferable to other states with their own set of unique political actors, policy structures, and higher education systems. The policy conversation around divisive concepts laws continues to evolve with amendments made to the laws across several years and cultural conversations around divisive concepts morphing into more ambiguous terms like anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion furthering intrenching the policy area as a political wedge issue. The evolving nature of this policy topic makes it harder to make universal conclusions. However, this study represents an

important snapshot in time of institutional filtering, faculty sensemaking and curriculum and pedagogy shifts.

The survey and interviews are self-reported perceptions. Faculty perception data is important for uncovering how faculty responded to Tennessee's divisive concepts laws as well as considering they ways in which their responses aligned with existing research on policy implementation. However, faculty may have been influenced by recall bias or social desirability. For instance, faculty may underreport the influence the laws have had on their instructional practices or frame their responses in ways that reflect favorably on their academic discipline or even professional norms related to academic freedom. The sequential explanatory design introduces self-selection bias. Faculty who opted into the survey may have differed in meaningful ways from their peers who took the survey but did not participate in the interview. Finally, the study did not include classroom observations which may have been a valuable mitigation strategy against recall bias or social desirability.

Future Research

Future research should build directly on the studies' findings and explore areas raised by the limitations of the research design in this set of studies. Since 2020, many states have passed divisive concepts laws with varying scopes and enforcement mechanisms. Cross-state comparisons of divisive concepts laws could accomplish several goals. These comparisons could illuminate how policy design influences local-level actions including institutional responses, faculty awareness, and instructional practice. Cross state comparisons could evaluate how state legislatures responded to the political wedge issue of divisive concepts that begin in 2020. Longitudinal studies that track faculty responses may provide a more comprehensive

understanding of how this group responds to policy designed to influence their curriculum and pedagogy. This study provided data on initial faculty responses to the divisive concepts laws revealing a maintenance of rigor and instructional practice. However, it is less clear how durable these responses would be over time. Future research could explore how institutional leaders approached their decision-making around faculty support. This study focused on the end result of administrative deliberations on how to filter the policy and support policy. This proposed line of inquiry may further our understanding of the filtering process that takes place as policy is adopted and how the leaders of the institution translate it into actionable guidance and support for faculty. Future work exploring the unique position of faculty who teach DE is important. DE faculty navigate two complex worlds and continued focus on their experiences could be important for our understanding of how overlapping policy environments influence DE faculty decisions around instruction and even professional identity.

Conclusion

This dissertation demonstrates that policy does not directly shape classroom practice. Instead, policy is interpreted, filtered, and enacted through specific institutional contexts, faculty dynamics, and localized sensemaking processes. The integration of findings across three studies provides a multi-level understanding of how divisive concepts are experienced in DE settings. The first article focused on institutional responses to the divisive concepts laws and found variation in how they communicated and framed the policy. Institutions focused on legal explanations that did not meet the moment to provide clear guidance to faculty. In some cases, the institutional support was limited and did not reach the most effective spaces to support faculty sensemaking. As a result, faculty turned to localized sensemaking through formal and

informal networks including peer groups, departmental discussions, and faculty senate. Article two quantified faculty disposition through academic optimism. Notably, this study found that faculty have a slightly lower sense of academic optimism than the norm referenced study. Faculty in this study had a lower sense of academic optimism than 84% of participants in the reference study. Additionally, academic optimism was not impacted by demographic variables like race, gender, years of teaching, or discipline. This statistical finding seems to indicate that other organizational factors may be influencing the lower overall sense of academic optimism. The final article sought to explore how faculty curricular and pedagogy practice was influenced by the laws. Faculty articulated a maintenance of their curriculum and pedagogy and a commitment to rigor. However, faculty did engage in reflective practices to evaluate their curriculum and pedagogy after the laws were enacted. These studies show that policy implementation is not a linear process from legislation to the classroom. Policy is instead filtered through institutions, and iterations of sensemaking occur in localized settings that inform practice. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how policy is experienced across institutional, individual, and classrooms. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the broader literature on policy implementation. It shows the impact of filtering and sensemaking processes on how policy drives practice. These findings suggest that effective policy requires attention to both the policy context as well as how the policy is filtered, understood, and enacted. The efficacy of education policy relies on more than just its design; it is dependent on complex organizational and individual sensemaking. While the study focuses on Tennessee's divisive concepts laws, the findings have broader relevance for understanding how higher education institutions response to politically salient policy issues. The relevancy of these findings may

extend beyond Tennessee in the context of increasing policy attention to higher education curriculum and instruction. Especially as institutions and faculty are navigating questions and perhaps an evolving expectation related to teaching and academic freedom.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Permission to Reproduce Graphic

From: **Golann, Joanne W** j.golann@vanderbilt.edu
Subject: Re: permission to reproduce graphic
Date: December 10, 2023 at 9:31 PM
To: Adams, Zachary zadams6@vols.utk.edu, Diehl, David Kalim david.diehl@vanderbilt.edu

JG

Hi Zachary,

Lovely to hear from you and to hear that you are working on your dissertation! I hope things are going well. It sounds like a very important topic and I'll be interested to hear what you learn.

You are welcome to reproduce the figure. I'm glad you've found it helpful!

Best,
Joanne

From: Adams, Zachary <zadams6@vols.utk.edu>
Date: Saturday, December 9, 2023 at 3:48 PM
To: Diehl, David Kalim <david.diehl@vanderbilt.edu>, Golann, Joanne W <j.golann@vanderbilt.edu>
Subject: permission to reproduce graphic

> You don't often get email from zadams6@vols.utk.edu. Learn why this is important

Good afternoon, Dr. Diehl and Dr. Golann--

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Dr. Golann--I also took your advanced qualitative methods course as an MPP student a few years ago!

I will be using your recently released Integrated Framework for Studying How Schools Respond to External Pressures for my dissertation. My dissertation seeks to understand how Tennessee's public colleges and universities and faculty are responding to the state's divisive concepts laws which are colloquially known as anti critical race theory laws.

I would like to reproduce your Figure 1 included in your article below in one of my dissertation chapters as I describe how your integrated framework will inform my studies and analyses.

Would you please consider granting me permission to do so?

Thank you,

Zachary

Appendix B

Permission to Modify Survey

Gmail **Zachary Adams <zachary.adams77@gmail.com>**

trust omnibus scale modification request

Wayne Hoy <whoy@mac.com> Mon, Mar 13, 2023 at 12:01 PM
To: Zachary Adams <zachary.adams77@gmail.com>

Hi Zachary,

You have my permission to use the omnibus trust scale in your research. Yes, you may make changes you suggest, but you also should check the reliability of the scale with you sample.

Best wishes.

> On Mar 11, 2023, at 10:40 AM, Zachary Adams <zachary.adams77@gmail.com> wrote:
>
> Good morning, Dr. Hoy--
>
> I am a PhD student at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and work full time as an assistant vice chancellor for academic affairs at the College System of Tennessee.
>
> My dissertation is going to explore the impact of divisive concepts legislation (commonly referred to as critical race theory laws) on dual enrollment courses in Tennessee. Your academic optimism survey aligns very well with the unique nature of dual enrollment courses where college faculty either come to the high school or students travel to the college to take a class that counts both for high school credit and college credit.
>
> I was hoping to use your trust omnibus scale for secondary settings as well, but some of the items may be hard for college faculty to answer because they may not identify with the word teacher or principal used in the survey items.
>
> I am writing to request to modify the trust omnibus scale to essentially swap out the word teacher with faculty and principal with administrator. Please see my tracked proposed modifications to your survey. Please let me know if this is acceptable. I will only move forward with your permission.
>
> Thank you for your time--and I hope you are well and in good health.
>
> Very respectfully,
>
> Zachary Adams
> <Academic Optimism and Trust Survey Questions.docx>

Wayne

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Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Questions

3) Has the passage of T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq. (Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws) influenced college faculty's sense of academic optimism when teaching dual enrollment classes?
4) How are organizations responding to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws (TCA & TCA)?
    a. How are institutions responding to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.?
    b. How are dual enrollment faculty responding to T.C.A. §49-6-1019 and T.C.A. §49-7-1901 et seq.?

Interview Protocol

1. How have Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws impacted your role as a dual enrollment faculty member?

2. What challenges, if any, have you encountered while implementing the provisions of these laws in your dual enrollment courses?

3. In what ways have these laws influenced the curriculum, instructional strategies, or assessments you use in your dual enrollment courses?

4. How has student engagement or performance changed, if at all, since the implementation of these laws?

5. Can you describe any professional development or institutional support you have received to comply with these regulations?
6. How have these laws affected collaboration between high schools and colleges in your experience?
7. What strategies have you used to ensure compliance with the legislative requirements while maintaining academic rigor in your dual enrollment courses?
8. How do you perceive the overall impact of these laws on access to and equity within dual enrollment programs?
9. Have these mandates influenced your perceptions of dual enrollment as a whole? If so, in what ways?
10. What recommendations would you offer to policymakers, administrators, or other faculty regarding the implementation and impact of these laws?

Appendix D

Informed Consent for Interview

Tennessee's Community College Faculty Experiences in Dual Enrollment Settings

INVITATION AND PURPOSE
You are invited to participate in a research study because you are a faculty member at one of Tennessee's community colleges who has taught dual enrollment courses between 2022 and 2025. The purpose of this study is to understand how dual enrollment faculty are responding to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws.

PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY
Study Procedures: I will conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews with approximately 20-30 faculty. Questions will focus on the participant's sensemaking of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws as it relates to your instruction in dual enrollment classes. All interviews will be audio-recorded over Zoom at the participant's location of choice and transcribed verbatim. Participants are encouraged to keep their video off. Each participant will have the choice to review their transcript for accuracy. The interviews will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Participants may be contacted for a 30 minute follow up interview for clarification, if needed, and/or an initial review of the findings for participants to provide feedback on if the emerging themes align with their perceptions.

RISKS
All research carries risk. Participation in this study will incur minimal risk which is found in everyday life. Anything more than minimal risk or discomfort is not anticipated; however, if you do not wish to answer or feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you have the right to decline to answer any question and/or to end the interview. Minimal risks associated with participating in a survey for research generally involve discomfort, stress, or embarrassment.

ALTERNATIVES
The alternative procedure is to not participate in this study.

BENEFITS
It is unlikely that you will benefit directly by participating in this study. However, a direct benefit may include a better understanding of your experience teaching dual enrollment classes after the passage of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws. The research results could benefit the field of higher education by contributing to the emerging body of literature on how institutions and faculty are responding to anti-critical race theory laws. In addition, the results could inform future policies and procedures related to these laws.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. Audio files and all transcripts will be kept on a secure file hosting site to which only the investigators have access. No reference, including names or other identifying information, will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting findings.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Zachary Adams, at 615-707-2520 or zadams6@vols.utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact: Institutional Review Board, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 865-974-7697.

PARTICIPATION RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Identifiers may be removed from any identifiable private information about you, and, after such remove, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I confirm that procedures, risks, benefits, and privacy of my data have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I willingly agree to participate in this study. I authorize the content of my interviews, any observations, and findings found during this study to be used for education, publication, and/or presentation.

Signature of Participant

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Date

Appendix E

Informed Consent for Survey

Tennessee's Community College Faculty Experiences in Dual Enrollment Settings

INVITATION AND PURPOSE
You are invited to participate in a research study because you are a faculty member at one of Tennessee's community colleges who has taught dual enrollment courses between 2022 and 2025. The purpose of this study is to understand how dual enrollment faculty are responding to Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws.

PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Study Procedures: The survey will be made available to all community college faculty who have taught dual enrollment courses between 2022 and 2025. The survey was developed and validated by Wayne K. Hoy at the Ohio State University to measure an individual's academic optimism. Academic optimism is a multifactorial construct that includes sense of efficacy, trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis. The survey can be completed in 10-15 minutes.

RISKS
All research carries risk. Participation in this study will incur minimal risk which is found in everyday life. Anything more than minimal risk or discomfort is not anticipated; however, if you do not wish to answer or feel uncomfortable at any time during the survey, you have the right to decline to answer any question and/or to end the survey. Minimal risks associated with participating in a survey for research generally involve discomfort, stress, or embarrassment.

ALTERNATIVES
The alternative procedure is to not participate in this study.

BENEFITS
It is unlikely that you will benefit directly by participating in this study. However, a direct benefit may include a better understanding of your experience teaching dual enrollment classes after the passage of Tennessee's Divisive Concepts Laws. The research results could benefit the field of higher education by contributing to the emerging body of literature on how institutions and faculty are responding to anti-critical race theory laws. In addition, the results could inform future policies and procedures related to these laws.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. All survey data will be kept on a secure file hosting site to which only the investigators have access. No

reference, including names or other identifying information, will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting findings.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Zachary Adams, at 615-707-2520 or zadams6@vols.utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact: Institutional Review Board, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 865-974-7697.

PARTICIPATION RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Identifiers may be removed from any identifiable private information about you, and, after such remove, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I confirm that procedures, risks, benefits, and privacy of my data have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I willingly agree to participate in this study. I authorize the content of my survey results, any observations, and findings found during this study to be used for education, publication, and/or presentation.

Signature of Participant

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Date

_____

Appendix F

Chapter 4 Code Map

Appendix F1: First Round – Initial Coding

Initial Code	Description	Representative Participant Focus
Limited awareness of the law	Faculty described little or no prior knowledge of Tennessee's divisive concepts laws.	Professors A, D
High awareness through professional networks	Faculty described learning about the laws through divisions, faculty senate, or disciplinary conversations.	Professors I, G
Ideological interpretation of the law	Faculty interpreted the laws through political or ideological lenses.	Professors B, G
Perceived ambiguity and uncertainty	Faculty described confusion regarding implementation and legal expectations.	Professors K, I
Lack of institutional guidance	Faculty described administrative communication as episodic, unclear, or insufficient.	Professors K, D
Reliance on peer and departmental networks	Faculty relied on colleagues, departments, and informal conversations to interpret the laws.	Professors I, G
Maintenance of curriculum and pedagogy	Faculty reported maintaining instructional rigor and existing classroom practices.	Professors B, H
Reflective adaptation of instructional practice	Faculty reflected more carefully on course materials, framing, and discussion practices.	Professors G, H
Concern regarding future implications	Faculty expressed concern about future political or institutional consequences.	Professors G, H

Appendix F2: Round 2 - Pattern Coding

Pattern Code	Related First Round Codes	Analytic Focus
Variation in policy awareness and interpretation	Limited awareness; High awareness through professional networks; Ideological interpretation	How faculty understood and interpreted the laws differently
Institutional ambiguity and decentralized sensemaking	Perceived ambiguity; Lack of institutional guidance; Reliance on peer and departmental networks	How faculty made meaning of the laws through localized networks
Instructional continuity amid policy ambiguity	Maintenance of curriculum and pedagogy; Reflective adaptation of instructional practice	How faculty balanced continuity with reflective adjustment
Perceived professional and political risk	Concern regarding future implications; Ideological interpretation	How concern and perceived risk shaped faculty reflection

Appendix F3: Round 3 - Theme Development

Final Theme	Second Round Pattern Codes	Central Finding	Representative Participants
Policy Meaning Was Constructed Through Uneven Awareness and Interpretation	Variation in policy awareness and interpretation	Faculty responses varied significantly based on awareness, disciplinary context, and ideological interpretation.	A, B, D, G, I
Faculty Relied on Localized Networks Rather Than Institutional Guidance	Institutional ambiguity and decentralized sensemaking	Faculty primarily relied on departments, faculty senate, and peer conversations to interpret policy ambiguity.	G, I, K
Faculty Maintained Instruction While Becoming More Deliberate in Practice	Instructional continuity amid policy ambiguity; Perceived professional and political risk	Faculty largely maintained curriculum and pedagogy while engaging in reflective	B, G, H

	instructional adaptation.

Vita

Zachary L. Adams was born in Lancaster, PA and grew up in Wellsboro, PA. He earned a Bachelor of Arts from Houghton University, followed by a Master of Public Policy from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. He completed his Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a concentration in Leadership Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Adams has held senior leadership roles across state government, higher education systems, and legislative research. He currently serves as Executive Director of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, where he leads applied research initiatives designed to inform policymaking on issues affecting rural communities. Prior to this role, he served as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Workforce Alignment at the Tennessee Board of Regents, where he oversaw statewide partnerships across K–12, postsecondary institutions, and industry. His work included launching a systemwide apprenticeship initiative, securing more than $6 million in federal, state, and philanthropic funding, expanding articulation pathways across institutions, and developing industry-aligned training programs in collaboration with national and regional partners. Earlier in his career, he held leadership roles within the Tennessee Department of Education, where he led early postsecondary and career pathways initiatives, including the expansion of dual enrollment and Advanced Placement access statewide. He began his professional career as a secondary science teacher and Teach for America corps member.

His scholarly interests focus on policy implementation and local level sensemaking within constrained policy environments. His dissertation employed a sequential explanatory mixed

methods design to examine how dual enrollment faculty interpret and respond to Tennessee's "Divisive Concepts" legislation. This work integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interview findings to explore the role of academic optimism, institutional context, and professional autonomy in shaping instructional decision-making.

Adams is particularly interested in how policy ambiguity and organizational conditions influence practitioner behavior and educational outcomes.