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THE WORKFORCE BEFORE WORK: PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION IN THE LIMINAL SPACE BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY AND STRATEGIC DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Abstract

This conceptual paper frames the college-to-workforce transition as a strategic diversity management (SDM) site and introduces the Upstream Strategic Diversity Management (USDm) framework to explain how educational diversity is, or is not, converted into workforce diversity. The framework extends SDM upstream from the applicant pool to the prehire systems that determine which graduates access professional socialization, career capital, and employer pipelines. Integrating the SDM, educational diversity, and professional socialization literatures, USDm operates at three levels: a macro dual-chokepoint structure governing access and signal legibility; a meso-level typology of institutional career capital capacity, defined by employer network breadth and career-readiness embeddedness; and a micro-level professional socialization process comprising anticipatory exposure and identity bridging. The framework distinguishes between a career-capital access deficit, in which students lack equitable opportunities to accumulate professionally relevant capital, and a career-capital recognition deficit, in which comparable amounts of accumulated capital yield unequal returns during employer evaluation. It yields six testable propositions and an applied diagnostic tool, the USDm Conversion Audit. The audit is a joint institution-employer procedure that identifies the first stage at which groups diverge, prescribes a targeted response, and returns results to the partnership for adaptation in subsequent cohorts. USDm does not supplant internships, mentoring, career services, employer partnerships, or diversity hiring practices; rather, it provides a framework for evaluating how these mechanisms collectively facilitate or hinder equitable workforce entry.

Keywords: strategic diversity management, professional socialization, career capital, workforce diversity, underrepresented graduates, school-to-work transition

Author Information

David Phillips, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Business at Odessa College and an Adjunct Professor of Business at the University of the Cumberlands. He specializes in strategic management and conducts research on diversity management, organizational behavior, human resources management, business ethics, corporate governance, and social responsibility. His work explores how organizations turn human differences and equitable opportunities into meaningful participation, collective excellence, and shared prosperity. Before academia, Dr. Phillips gained extensive experience in business development, regional management, and organizational leadership. He is committed to advancing knowledge and social value through teaching, research, and service.

ORCID: 0009-0009-6785-0257

Introduction

Workforce diversity originates before the job offer, within the unequal systems that determine which graduates gain access to professional socialization, paid internships, career networks, mentoring, and employer pipelines. Although American higher education now produces a more demographically varied population of graduates than ever before, and employers across sectors identify diverse talent as a strategic priority, workforce diversity outcomes continue to reflect the unequal distribution of prehire preparation.

While degree credentials have become more accessible, the professional socialization systems that translate these credentials into labor-market access have not experienced similar democratization. Substantial evidence documents this divergence. Earnings gaps associated with family background persist among bachelor's degree holders, even after controlling for institutional selectivity, field of study, and academic performance (Witteveen & Attewell,

2017b). Racial earnings gaps also remain significant among college graduates, and undergraduate institutional prestige continues to influence earnings, even for those who later obtain advanced degrees from elite institutions (Hersch, 2019; Witteveen & Attewell, 2020; Zhou & Pan, 2023). Recent administrative-data studies attribute a considerable share of these disparities to the transition itself, with the quality of the first postcollege job match mediating most of the otherwise unexplained socioeconomic earnings gap 5 years after graduation, and these gaps persist among graduates matched on institution, program, and academic performance (Kim et al., 2024; Scott-Clayton et al., 2025). The transition from education to employment is thus a critical site where workforce inequality is produced and subsequently embedded in early-career trajectories.

This paper contends that strategic diversity management (SDM) should be extended upstream to address prehire determinants. Processes such as professional socialization, career capital formation, and workforce-entry preparation occur prior to the hiring decision and influence which candidates reach this stage, their level of preparedness, and their professional connections. Workforce diversity is thus enabled or constrained by these systems, which remain unevenly accessible to underrepresented graduates. Consequently, any account of workforce diversity that begins with the applicant pool overlooks the decisive sorting that has already taken place.

Two bodies of literature address this conversion problem, each from a distinct perspective and with its own limitations. The SDM literature focuses on employer-controlled mechanisms implemented after candidates have entered or approached the applicant pool, such as recruitment, selection, retention, mentoring, and accountability practices (Roberson, 2019; Yang & Konrad, 2011). This post-application perspective treats the applicant pool as a fixed input rather than as a product of preceding systems, leaving the field without adequate terminology to address the recurring employer assertion that diverse talent is difficult to locate (Rynes & Barber, 1990). Critical scholarship has demonstrated that diversity management framed in this manner can perpetuate the very inequalities it seeks to address and may rely on essentialist categories established after the fact. Furthermore, talent-management approaches based on selective, high-potential identification can inadvertently restrict access (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Sheehan & Anderson, 2015; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Nkomo et al. (2019) described the field as being at a critical juncture, with prevailing social-psychological and instrumental frameworks poorly aligned with the macro-structural conditions that generate inequality. Extending SDM upstream directly addresses this diagnosis.

Correspondingly, the educational diversity literature examines the conversion problem from the perspective of higher education and typically concludes its analysis at graduation. Institutions assess their performance using completion metrics such as enrollment, retention, persistence, and degree attainment, which represent educational diversity as an institutional output (Byrd, 2022). However, these metrics and the workforce readiness sought by employers are governed by different logics, and the divergence between them constitutes an institutional condition rather than a mere measurement artifact (Halabieh et al., 2022; Marginson, 2019; Morley, 2001). Graduates may meet all institutional performance indicators yet still lack the professional socialization, employer connections, and career capital necessary for competitive entry into the workforce. While the degree is a necessary condition for entry, the additional requirements are distributed unequally among students and institutions. As a result, diverse degree attainment alone does not guarantee workforce participation for underrepresented groups.

In this context, the term underrepresented refers to a structural and field-relative position rather than a fixed demographic category. It identifies graduates from groups whose representation in a specific professional field is lower than their proportion among degree recipients. In the United States, this typically includes Black and Latino graduates, first-generation college students, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and women in fields where they remain underrepresented (Seron et al., 2016). Defining underrepresentation in terms of structural position aligns with the mechanisms underpinning the conceptual model developed in this study, as chokepoints are triggered by unequal access to professional socialization and the devaluation of accumulated capital. These conditions arise from structural position rather than group identity alone. This study synthesizes evidence across multiple dimensions. Race is considered in studies of credential and network evaluation, socioeconomic and first-generation status are addressed in research on the education-to-work transition, and gender is analyzed in relation to professional identity formation.

Extensive sociological and vocational research, much of it comparative across national systems, has examined the school-to-work transition as a stratified process. This literature demonstrates that occupational stratification is established prior to labor-market entry through educational sorting, that careers serve as structural links between labor market organization and individual attainment, and that the strength of school-to-work linkages influences the returns to credentials across the United States and continental Europe (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Bol et al., 2019; DiPrete et al., 2017; Spilerman, 1977). European scholarship has characterized this transition as a dynamic,

resource-dependent process with lasting effects (Blokker et al., 2023; Mocca et al., 2019). The framework developed and presented in this paper builds upon those foundations but differs in both framing and purpose. While the school-to-work literature identifies the transition as a site of stratification, it is primarily situated within sociology and vocational psychology, rather than within SDM, and has not been linked to organizational diversity strategy as a shared responsibility of employers and educational institutions. Accordingly, the contribution advanced here theorizes the conversion zone as an SDM site, encompassing the strategic and institutional responsibilities implied by this study's framing.

This paper introduces the Upstream Strategic Diversity Management (USDm) framework, a three-level conceptual model that explains how educational diversity is converted into workforce participation, or fails to be converted, during the transition from degree completion to entry into United States bachelor's-level professional labor markets. USDm does not replace internships, mentoring, career services, employer partnerships, pipelines, or diversity hiring practices. Instead, it serves as a cross-sector explanatory and diagnostic architecture for identifying how these mechanisms interact, where their combined pathway first fails to advance students or graduates, and which actor is positioned to intervene. The framework distinguishes between two forms of conversion failure. A career-capital access deficit occurs when students lack equitable opportunities to enter professional socialization and accumulate professionally relevant relational, informational, and dispositional resources.

A career-capital recognition deficit occurs when graduates with comparable accumulated capital receive unequal evaluation or returns during employer-controlled stages. These two deficits are conceptualized as chokepoints, defined as stage-specific conversion failures generated by deeper institutional, organizational, structural, and evaluative mechanisms. USDm integrates three levels of analysis. At the macro level, it identifies the two chokepoints that constrain access to and recognition of career capital. At the meso level, it explains how institutional career-capital capacity and institution-employer partner alignment shape the pathways available to students. At the micro level, it specifies professional socialization as the process through which career capital is accumulated, including anticipatory exposure and identity bridging. The analysis focuses on the United States context because internship-mediated hiring and institutional recruiting footprints make these conversion systems particularly consequential. Application in other national systems would require adaptation rather than direct transfer. The framework is organized around three central questions:

1. How do prehire professional socialization systems influence workforce-entry competitiveness for underrepresented graduates?
2. Under which macro, meso, and micro conditions is educational diversity most and least likely to be converted into workforce diversity participation?
3. What strategic implications arise for employers and higher education institutions?

By shifting the analytic starting point from the hiring decision to the preceding systems, the USDm provides SDM theory with a vocabulary to address a problem the field has documented but not yet fully theorized. The USDm has practical utility. It facilitates a cross-sector conversion audit that enables shared partnership between institutions and employers to identify where educational diversity does not translate into workforce participation and to evaluate targeted interventions at that stage.

Literature Review

Background of the Limits to Employer-Side SDM

SDM encompasses organizational and systemic initiatives to build, sustain, and leverage workforce diversity as a strategic resource. This approach is grounded in the resource-based tradition of strategic human resource management, which regards a firm's personnel and their deployment capabilities as sources of competitive advantage that are difficult for rivals to replicate (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Yang & Konrad, 2011). Strategic talent management applies this perspective by directing differentiated investments toward roles and individuals deemed pivotal to organizational performance (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Huselid & Becker, 2011).

SDM similarly adopts the strategic-resource premise but designates workforce diversity itself as the resource to be cultivated and maintained. While both literatures share a common lineage, they diverge in focus: strategic talent management examines how organizations identify and invest in high-potential talent, whereas SDM investigates how organizations develop and capitalize on the value of a demographically diverse workforce. This shared foundation also introduces a significant tension: the exclusive, high-potential focus central to strategic talent

management may inadvertently restrict access by certain demographics. Individuals responsible for identifying talent often mirror the characteristics of dominant groups, and the creation of a select pool can perpetuate existing advantages (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Sheehan & Anderson, 2015).

The prevailing conceptualization of SDM has a well-documented intellectual lineage. Cox and Blake (1991) articulated the business case for diversity by connecting the management of cultural differences to competitive outcomes in areas such as cost, resource acquisition, marketing, creativity, problem-solving, and organizational flexibility. This framework subsequently became the foundational logic for diversity as a strategic imperative (Blake-Beard et al., 2008). Subsequent research has focused on the internal organizational dynamics of diversity, examining how demographic and other differences influence group processes, satisfaction, turnover, and performance, as well as how organizations can manage these dynamics through recruitment, selection, retention, mentoring, training, and accountability mechanisms (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Roberson, 2019). These efforts primarily target talent that has already entered the organization or is present in its applicant pool.

The post-application perspective described above presents a structural limitation that functions as a theoretical assertion rather than a mere coverage gap. This perspective treats the applicant pool as a fixed input, a group that arrives at the organization's threshold to be assessed and managed. In reality, the applicant pool is shaped by systems that operate prior to organizational contact. Factors such as who applies, their level of preparedness, and their network connections are influenced by attraction strategies, sourcing relationships, and preceding educational and social processes (Rynes & Barber, 1990). Organizations construct their applicant pools through pipeline and portfolio decisions made before any individual hiring occurs, and these decisions can facilitate exclusion as easily as access (Brymer et al., 2019). When employers claim that diverse talent is difficult to find, the post-application framing lacks the conceptual tools to address the root cause because it overlooks the systems that determine the composition of the initial pool (Stewart, 2016). Both the recurring complaint and the framing that generates it originate from an analytic boundary established at the point of application.

Establishing the analytic boundary at the point of application has two significant implications for both theory and practice. First, it renders the conversion problem deceptively manageable by reframing a cross-sector sorting process as an internal organizational optimization. Yang and Konrad (2011) demonstrated that this reframing often fails to deliver substantive results. Organizations frequently implement formal diversity-management practices in response to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures that confer legitimacy; however, legitimacy-driven adoption often results in symbolic actions that do not consistently yield diversity outcomes. The determinants of those outcomes lie largely outside the adopted practices, in the prehire systems that shape who reaches the applicant pool, so an approach bounded at the organization cannot reach them. Treating the problem as an internal optimization, therefore mistakes a cross-sector process for one that the firm can solve on its own.

Second, the cross-sector sorting process reproduces the very inequalities it aimed to reduce by treating categories of difference as fixed inputs rather than as outcomes shaped by upstream processes. Critical scholarship has documented both aspects of this issue. Diversity management, when limited to the point of application, relies on categories considered as given upon candidates' arrival, rather than analyzing them as products of broader systemic forces (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Consequently, management practices framed in this manner may then perpetuate the inequalities they are intended to address (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000).

This analysis is consistent with the field's current theoretical self-assessment. Nkomo et al. (2019) documented the shift from a civil-rights and equal-opportunity paradigm to a diversity-management paradigm centered on the business case. Nkomo et al. (2019) contended that the theoretical development within the field has emphasized social-psychological and instrumental perspectives, often overlooking macro-structural factors that sustain inequality. To demonstrate the persistence of this issue, they referenced Quillian et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of 28 U.S. field experiments, which included 55,842 applications to 26,326 positions. Quillian et al. (2017) reported no reduction in hiring discrimination against Black applicants over the 25-year period examined, although there was modest evidence of decreased discrimination against Latino applicants. These findings challenge the assumption that the diversity-management era alone has eliminated racialized barriers to hiring. Consequently, a framework focused solely on employer-side practices is insufficient to account for these outcomes, especially when mechanisms that influence inequality may operate before candidates enter formal hiring processes.

Higher Education as a Workforce-Preparation System

Among its various functions, higher education serves as a workforce-preparation system and evaluates its effectiveness in this capacity through completion metrics. Indicators such as enrollment, retention, persistence,

graduation, and degree attainment are used by institutions to demonstrate accountability to states, accreditors, and the public. These metrics also serve as the basis for recording educational diversity as an institutional output (Byrd, 2022). Within this framework, the progression of a demographically diverse entering class to an equally diverse graduating class is considered a measure of success. However, while these metrics document admission and completion, they provide limited insight into the skills or competencies graduates bring to the labor market beyond the credential itself. Furthermore, they conceptualize inclusive enrollment and completion as terminal outcomes, with workforce participation situated outside the institution's evaluative scope (L. I. Brown, 2004).

The gap between institutional metrics and employer requirements should be recognized as an institutional issue rather than mere background context. While institutions focus on optimizing completion rates, employers prioritize graduates who are prepared for professional roles, reflecting fundamentally different definitions of success. This distinction arises from a structural division of labor: higher education is responsible for credentialing, whereas employers are responsible for selection. The process that connects these domains, the transformation of a completed credential into competitive labor-market access, is not fully owned by either party and consequently remains underdefined and underfunded. Human capital theory previously bridged this gap by treating the degree as a direct proxy for productivity and labor-market value; however, this assumption has proven inadequate. The relationship between education and employment is partial, nonlinear, and contingent, rather than the seamless continuum posited by the theory (Marginson, 2019). When this bridging assumption fails, responsibility for the conversion process does not shift to either institution but instead occupies an ambiguous space between them.

As a result, possessing a degree has become a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving competitive entry into the workforce. In this context, competitiveness is defined by observable labor-market outcomes at entry, such as the rate of callbacks and job offers, the time required to secure initial employment, and the alignment between the position obtained and the graduate's field of study. The factors facilitating the transition from credential to competitive entry include professional socialization, access to employer networks, internship experience, mentoring, and the development of a stable professional identity. These resources are distributed unevenly among students and institutions. Variations in the quality of the first post-college job match explain most of the previously unexplained socioeconomic earnings gap five years after graduation, and these earnings disparities persist even among graduates from the same institution, program, and academic performance level (Kim et al., 2024; Scott-Clayton et al., 2025). The persistence of gaps within matched groups is analytically significant because it rules out sorting by college, field, or performance as the primary explanation and instead identifies the disparity in post-graduation experiences among equivalently credentialed individuals. These findings indicate that diverse degree attainment alone does not ensure participation in a diverse workforce.

The structural nature of the conditions required to gain competitive entry into the workforce is often obscured by completion metrics. Career readiness functions as a form of cultural capital produced and distributed by institutions through their curricula, employer partnerships, and the design of advising and co-curricular programs (Bourdieu, 1973/2018). Consequently, a graduate's readiness is shaped as much by institutional resources as by individual effort (Mayorga, 2019). Experiential learning exemplifies this dynamic. Opportunities such as internships, undergraduate research, and practicum experiences are stratified resources, readily available at some institutions and to certain students, but limited at others. Access is determined by institutional investment and by students' ability to manage the financial and logistical demands of participation (Halabieh et al., 2022; Mayorga, 2019). Although experiential learning is widely promoted as essential preparation, its actual distribution is among the most unequally allocated forms of pre-employment capital.

The labor-market returns to career capital are themselves structurally conditioned (Witteveen & Attewell, 2017a). The employability debate in the United Kingdom's higher education has developed this point furthest. Employability varies with structural position as the same competencies carry different exchange value depending on the position of the graduate who holds them, and employability metrics that locate readiness in the individual direct a one-way gaze at student capital while leaving employer practice unexamined (Morley, 2001). Institutional prestige compounds this conditioning. Prestige operates as a signaling system that conveys information about the institution and shapes labor-market returns on terms that are independent of any individual graduate's demonstrated quality, a dynamic consistent with credentialism's account of degrees as markers of status-group membership alongside their role as indices of productivity (D. K. Brown, 2001). The earnings premium attached to selective institutions persists across graduates and over time, and undergraduate prestige continues to shape earnings even for graduates who later obtain advanced degrees from elite institutions (Hersch, 2019; Mayorga, 2019). A graduate's labor-market position therefore encodes the prestige of the institution attended, alongside, and at times in place of, the graduate's own preparation.

Taken collectively, these patterns demonstrate why the conversion gap endures as a structural phenomenon rather than diminishing through individual effort or merit. The process that translates educational diversity into workforce diversity is situated between two institutional logics, each prioritizing outcomes other than full cultural conversion. The forms of capital necessary for successful conversion are produced, distributed, and rewarded unequally throughout the educational and employment pathways. Attributing the gap to individual preparation or motivation misidentifies its origin, as divergences among equivalently credentialed graduates arise specifically where institutional resources and structural conditions differ.

The USDM Framework

Structural Barriers as Macro-Level Constraints

The macro-level concerns structural barriers to the education-to-work transition. The central argument of this study is that these barriers cluster at two analytically distinct chokepoints along the conversion path, rather than being distributed evenly. Such stratification emerges prior to labor-market entry, shaped by the institutions and arrangements that regulate access to preparation and employers' evaluation of its outcomes (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). Within the conversion path, these two chokepoints are positioned on either side of the professional socialization process.

Chokepoint 1 concerns access to professional socialization. Structural conditions systematically exclude underrepresented students from the socialization pipeline before career and social capital can begin to form. Internships, which serve as the primary means for students to gain anticipatory professional experience, are often unpaid or low-paid. This financial barrier places internships beyond the reach of students who cannot forgo earnings or absorb the costs of unpaid work, and access remains unequally distributed even among those who can afford to participate (Hora et al., 2021; Shandra, 2022). Employer recruitment is concentrated at selective institutions, granting students at these institutions greater exposure to professional pipelines, while broad-access, minority-serving, and regional public institutions receive less employer engagement. Additionally, expectations of geographic mobility in professional hiring disadvantage students with family or financial obligations that limit their ability to relocate (Damaske, 2009; Means et al., 2016). Each of these conditions operates at the entry point to the pipeline, and their combined effect is categorical: students excluded at this stage are entirely prevented from accumulating career capital. Thus, exclusion at the first chokepoint equates to exclusion from capital formation itself.

Chokepoint 2 concerns signal legibility, the extent to which a graduate's accumulated career capital is recognized and valued by evaluators. Barriers at this stage arise after capital has been accumulated, resulting in the career capital of underrepresented graduates being discounted even when qualifications are equivalent. Audit studies provide direct evidence of this mechanism. For example, in a field experiment that manipulated applicant race and institutional selectivity, Black graduates of elite institutions received employer callbacks at rates comparable to those of White graduates of less-selective institutions, indicating that elite credentials do not equalize degree returns across racial groups (Gaddis, 2015).

Similarly, network-based job searches reveal that Black and White job seekers utilize personal networks at similar rates, yet Black job seekers receive fewer offers from equivalent network activity, demonstrating unequal returns to social capital (Pedulla & Pager, 2019). Evaluators also respond to signals of social class, with candidates from lower-income and first-generation backgrounds assessed through a deficit lens, even when preparation is equivalent (Belmi et al., 2024). Prestige signaling further amplifies these disparities, granting labor-market advantages to graduates of elite institutions regardless of demonstrated performance. Although accumulated capital is present in each scenario, whether evaluators recognize and credit it is a process structurally conditioned by race, class, and institutional origin.

The chokepoints indicate where conversion failure becomes observable, rather than identifying a single causal mechanism. At the first chokepoint, exclusion may result from compensation design, recruitment concentration, geographic constraints, uneven institutional resources, or the opt-in structure of career preparation. At the second chokepoint, unequal returns may arise from status signals, network-return asymmetries, evaluator stereotypes, or unstructured assessment practices. This distinction is significant both analytically and practically. It prevents the framework from treating access and signal legibility as universal explanations and enables stakeholders to examine the specific institutional or evaluative conditions that produce group disparities at particular transitions.

Because these chokepoints are analytically distinct, operating at different stages and through different mechanisms, interventions targeting only one will leave the other unaddressed. In other words, expanding access to paid

internships and broadening employer recruitment at the first chokepoint increases the number of people able to accumulate career capital, but does not address evaluation processes that may later discount that capital. Conversely, auditing and correcting bias in hiring and network referrals target the second chokepoint, improving returns on accumulated capital, but do not reach students who never entered the pipeline and therefore lack capital for evaluation. Neither intervention can substitute for the other.

Efforts focused solely on one chokepoint will leave a significant portion of the overall conversion gap intact, as the untreated chokepoint continues to affect either the admitted population or the capital produced. A comprehensive account of the conversion problem, and any effective strategy, must address both chokepoints simultaneously. Positioning the two chokepoints on either side of professional socialization clarifies the continuity between the macro- and micro-level barriers. The macro level defines the structural field that influences graduates primarily by establishing the conditions under which the micro-level socialization process occurs.

Institutional Intermediation as a Meso-Level Mechanism

Colleges and universities operate at the meso level of the USDM framework, acting as intermediaries between students and the workforce. Situated between macro-level structures that regulate access and conditional returns and micro-level processes through which individual graduates accumulate career capital, these institutions translate broader structural forces into the conditions that shape individual outcomes. The central theoretical question at this level concerns the circumstances under which institutions effectively fulfill the career-preparation function and the specific student populations they serve. Institutional variation in these areas is systematic rather than random. The typology that follows captures variation along two dimensions and uses it to predict which students benefit from institutional support and which remain underserved.

Dimension 1 is employer network breadth, defined as the range and prestige of employers who actively recruit graduates from a given institution. This breadth reflects employer recruiting strategies, alumni engagement, geographic proximity to employment centers, and institutional investment in employer partnerships, extending beyond institutional prestige alone. For instance, moderately prestigious institutions may attain extensive network breadth by cultivating strong regional employer connections, facilitating active alumni placement, and maintaining sustained partnership investment, whereas highly prestigious institutions may exhibit comparatively limited network breadth in disciplines beyond their established recruiting relationships (Brymer et al., 2019). Network breadth determines the level of employer access available to graduates upon entering the labor market. Thus, network breadth aligns with macro-level chokepoints: graduates from low-breadth institutions face limited employer presence as the first chokepoint and a prestige discount as the second, due to their non-elite institutional background (D. K. Brown, 2001; Hersch, 2019).

Dimension 2 is career readiness embeddedness, which refers to the extent to which career preparation is integrated across the curriculum, co-curricular activities, and advising structures. At one extreme, career preparation is systematically embedded throughout the student experience, making it a structural component of the enrollment process. At the other extreme, preparation is limited to optional career-services offices that require students to seek them out independently (Mayorga, 2019). This distinction is particularly significant for students least likely to utilize optional services. First-generation and underrepresented students often lack prior awareness of available career services or the networks that facilitate their use; thus, embedded readiness effectively reaches these students, whereas siloed readiness does not (Museus & Neville, 2012).

Within a single institution, this dynamic leads to divergence among students with equivalent credentials, mirroring persistent socioeconomic gaps even after controlling for program and performance (Kim et al., 2024). In contexts of low embeddedness, some students compensate by engaging in student organizations and peer networks, but this compensation relies on individual initiative and is itself unequally distributed (Luedke et al., 2019). Because breadth and embeddedness vary independently, they produce a two-by-two typology of institutional career capital capacity (see Table 1).

Table 1*Typology of Institutional Career Capital Capacity*

Career readiness embeddedness	High employer network breadth	Low employer network breadth
High	Quadrant 1: Graduates receive both professional socialization and employer access; most favorable conditions for conversion.	Quadrant 3: Graduates are well prepared but largely invisible to employers; they clear Chokepoint 1 but encounter Chokepoint 2 as a visibility and legibility problem. Exemplified by smaller teaching-focused institutions and HBCUs.
Low	Quadrant 2: Graduates have employer access, but socialization is distributed unequally because career preparation is left to optional or siloed services rather than embedded across the student experience.	Quadrant 4: The disadvantage is greatest in this quadrant. Neither socialization nor employer access is a systematic feature of enrollment; conversion is least supported. Most common at under-resourced broad-access institutions.

Note. Employer network breadth is the range and prestige of employers who actively recruit an institution's graduates. Career readiness embeddedness is the extent to which career preparation is integrated across curriculum, co-curricular activities, and advising. Underrepresented students enroll disproportionately in Quadrants 3 and 4.

As Table 1 illustrates that institutions high on breadth but low on embeddedness offer employer access while distributing socialization unequally, because career preparation is left to optional services that students must seek out independently (Mayorga, 2019). Among community college graduates, Kim et al. (2024) suggested that lower-SES students' weaker early-career outcomes may reflect more limited access to professional networks and career advising. This configuration may be common at large research universities, where employer recruiting is dense, but career preparation is often optional. Correspondingly, institutions low on breadth but high on embeddedness prepare their graduates well but leave them largely invisible to employers, a pattern common at smaller teaching-focused institutions and exemplified by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which combine strong socialization, mentoring, and professional validation with limited access to elite employer recruiting (Johnson & Jackson, 2024).

The above typology predicts that these graduates clear the first chokepoint on preparation but encounter the second as a visibility and legibility problem. Institutions low on both dimensions provide neither socialization nor employer access as a systematic feature of enrollment, a pattern most common at under-resourced broad-access institutions, where the conversion function is least supported and the failure to embed network actors around the point of graduation compounds the gap (De Schepper et al., 2024). The dimension that transforms this typology from description to prediction is the distribution of students across its cells.

For example, underrepresented students enroll disproportionately at low-breadth and low-embeddedness institutions, the third and fourth quadrants, where the institutional layer provides the least support for conversion (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Byrd, 2022). As a result, the meso level amplifies the individual-level access deficits described at the macro level rather than compensating for them. Institutional capacity correlates with the demographic composition of the student body, so the institutional layer multiplies individual disadvantage rather than averaging it across the population, concentrating low capacity among students who arrive with the least independent access to career capital. This composition logic extends to the field level because the conversion outcomes of individual graduates aggregate into the workforce diversity of an occupation or sector. Since institutional sorting aligns low capacity with underrepresented enrollment, individual and institutional disadvantages compound rather than offset one another.

Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that this pattern reinforces a common employer practice. Diversity strategies that concentrate recruiting at first-quadrant institutions reach only the share of diverse talent that has already navigated the institutional filter, while the larger share enrolled at third- and fourth-quadrant institutions remains outside the employer's field of view. Employers who draw diverse candidates exclusively from high-capacity institutions access graduates whose conversion the institutional layer already supported and interpret the resulting pool as evidence of the scarcity of merit elsewhere.

Institutional career-capital capacity is necessary but not always sufficient for successful conversion. Its effectiveness is contingent upon institution-employer partner alignment, defined as the degree to which institutional preparation and employer opportunities are coordinated with respect to target roles and competencies; the timing and sequencing of preparation and recruitment; paid-placement design and accessibility; shared equity outcomes; and the exchange of stage-specific feedback. Even when an institution possesses extensive employer networks and embedded career readiness, and an employer demonstrates substantial recruiting capacity, conversion may still falter if partners recruit for roles misaligned with student preparation, engage students after critical preparation milestones, or apply incompatible definitions of readiness. Thus, partner alignment serves as an interface condition that moderates the extent to which existing capacity translates into accessible opportunity pathways. It does not constitute a third chokepoint; rather, misalignment exacerbates either of the two existing chokepoints. The primary contribution of the USDM is to specify where such coordination should be assessed within the conversion pathway.

Professional Socialization as the Micro-Level Mechanism

The process of professional socialization enables individuals to acquire the norms, behaviors, expectations, identity, and informal rules characteristic of professional work environments (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). It also facilitates the accumulation of career capital by graduates. Socialization refers to the activity, while career capital denotes the resource it generates. Career capital comprises relational, informational, and dispositional employability assets that graduates bring to the labor market and that are essential for competitive entry, and it draws on the employability-capital tradition developed largely in the United Kingdom and European scholarship (Donald et al., 2024; Peeters et al., 2019). Notably, the relational component of social capital connects the USDM framework to the way network access translates educational attainment into labor-market outcomes (Mishra, 2020; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Socialization is a continuous process, not confined to the period of enrollment. As a result, graduates enter the hiring process with varying levels of career capital, differences that are not captured by formal credentials (Donald et al., 2024). Thus, this section theorizes professional socialization through two sequential sub-processes, each operating via distinct mechanisms, producing specific deficits, and necessitating targeted interventions.

The first sub-process, anticipatory exposure, involves learning professional norms and expectations prior to formal entry into professional environments (Seron et al., 2016). Students gain this knowledge through prior family exposure to professional-class work, paid internships, employer site visits, and alumni networking, which transmit the cultural capital and cultivate the habitus that together produce familiarity with how professional organizations operate (Bourdieu, 1973/2018). This knowledge is primarily tacit, encompassing the informal curriculum of professional life as unwritten expectations regarding communication, self-presentation, initiative, and interpretation of organizational cues that are rewarded but not explicitly stated and subsequently converted into institutional advantage, often perceived as natural aptitude. This constitutes habitus and cultural capital formation as defined by Bourdieu (1973/2018).

Internships and early professional experiences help provide this familiarity to students whose families did not supply it, serving as anticipatory socialization into professional culture (Seron et al., 2016; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Students entering the hiring process without such exposure possess less familiarity with the informal curriculum, resulting in a readiness asymmetry that is not reflected in credential signals and remains invisible to employers who rely on those signals. This asymmetry exists within the candidate but is not evident on the résumé.

The second sub-process, identity bridging, entails developing a stable and credible self-concept as a professional in environments where an individual's background diverges from the dominant professional norm (Roberts, 2005). This process is analytically distinct from anticipatory exposure. Even if and when a student fully learns professional norms, a persistent gap may still remain between their personal identity and the environment's implicit expectations; identity bridging addresses this gap. This involves constructing and maintaining a professional image when one's social identity does not align with the presumed professional self (Roberts, 2005). For underrepresented students entering workplaces shaped by the ethnic majority's professional-class cultural norms, identity bridging demands ongoing cognitive and social effort, which majority-group peers experience to a lesser extent or not at all, as the presumed professional self already aligns with their identity (Roberts, 2005). The underlying mechanism is habitus mismatch, as the environment rewards dispositions that some students possess naturally, while others must consciously develop.

Because these two sub-processes operate through distinct mechanisms, they generate different deficits and require tailored interventions. Deficits in anticipatory exposure are deficits of access, which institutional programs such as paid internships, structured employer events, and professional mentoring are designed to address (Boat et al., 2022; Mishra, 2020). In contrast, deficits in identity bridging are deficits of fit, best addressed through changes in the

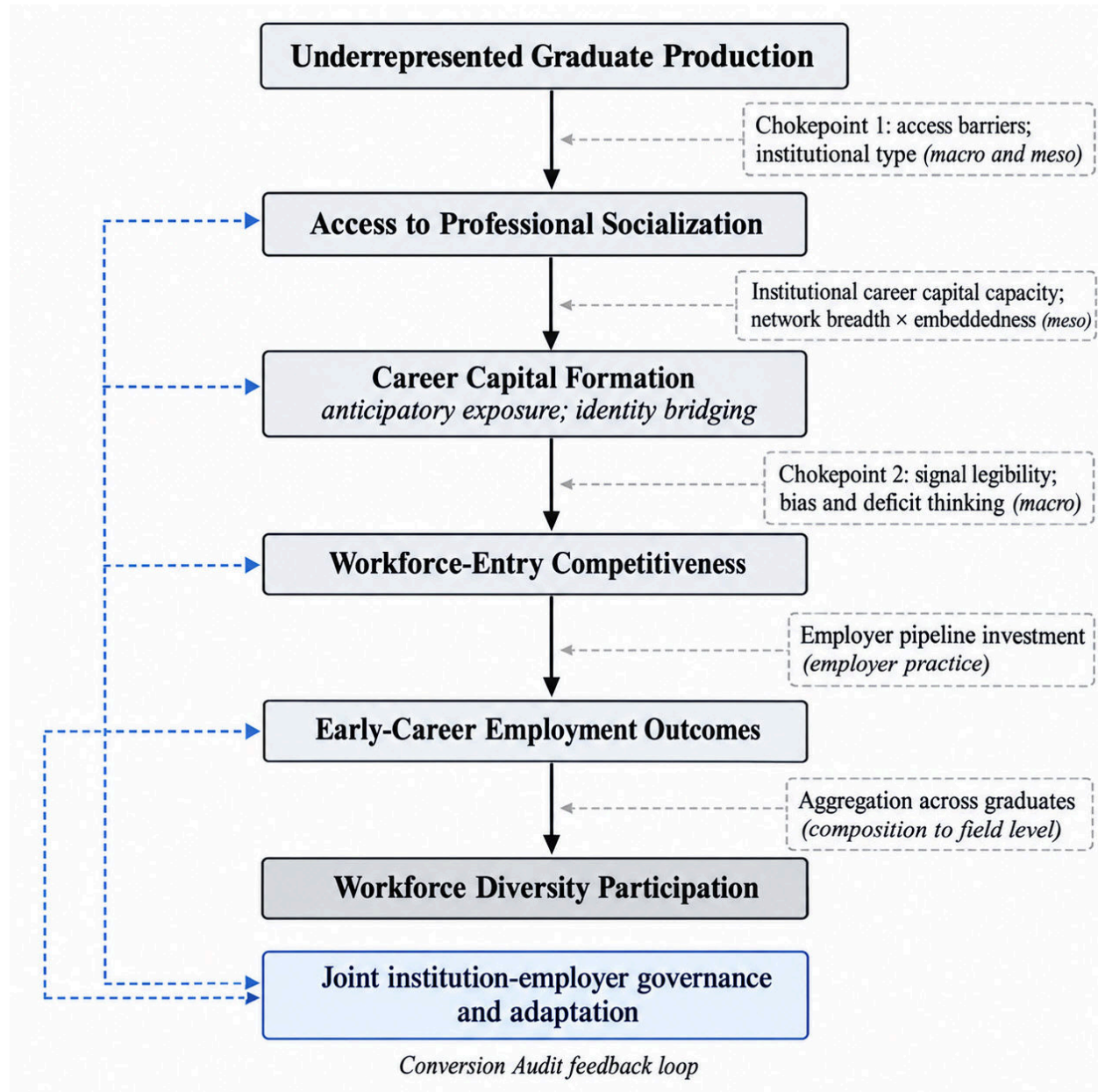
professional environment and through representation in mentoring relationships, where mentors who have navigated similar gaps can serve as effective role models. These deficits persist even when workplace norms are fully communicated, as the gap exists between identity and environment rather than between the student and a body of knowledge (Belmi et al., 2024; Roberts, 2005). Collectively, these two sub-processes elucidate how professional socialization either facilitates or impedes the transformation of educational diversity into the career capital necessary for individual students' competitive entry.

Integration and USDM Framework Logic

The preceding sections delineate analytically distinct levels, and the USDM conceptualizes them as a linked conversion system rather than as parallel lists of influences. Macro-level structures determine the distribution of institutional capacity and employer opportunity. At the meso level, institutional network breadth, readiness embeddedness, and partner alignment influence whether students can access and progress through an opportunity pathway. At the micro level, participation in this pathway shapes anticipatory exposure, identity bridging, and the career capital that graduates present for employer evaluation. The first chokepoint restricts access to the capital-forming process, while the second affects the returns to capital after accumulation. Early-career outcomes provide evidence regarding the pathway's effectiveness. The Conversion Audit returns these stage-specific results to a joint institution-employer governance process, which subsequently revises preparation, placement design, recruiting timing, and evaluation practices for future cohorts, while maintaining the framework's primary downstream causal path. Figure 1 illustrates this pathway, with each moderator positioned at the link it influences.

The USDM's moderators are positioned at specific points along this pathway. Institutional prestige, employer recruiting footprint, availability of paid internships, and the embeddedness of career readiness influence the initial stages of the transition from graduate production to career capital formation. Labor-market bias and deficit thinking affect the transition from career capital to competitiveness, functioning as the second chokepoint. Employer prehire pipeline investment shapes the final transition to employment. This arrangement demonstrates that interventions targeting one link do not eliminate the influence of moderators at other points, thereby extending the non-substitution logic established for the chokepoints to the entire pathway.

Figure 1
The USDM Framework



Note. Solid arrows indicate the main downstream conversion path from educational diversity to workforce participation. Dashed callouts represent moderators. A dashed feedback path conveys stage-specific Conversion Audit results to joint institution-employer governance, which subsequently adapts preparation, partnership design, and evaluation practices for future cohorts. Original figure by the author, restyled using ChatGPT Classic (OpenAI, 2026). Figure content was not altered.

Propositions

The logic of the USDM produces six propositions that make it empirically tractable. Each proposition formalizes a specific link or moderation within the framework and presents it in a testable form. The derivations are explicitly connected to the underlying logic. The subsequent section operationalizes these propositions and specifies how the strongest of them can be tested through a cross-sector conversion audit.

Proposition 1 (P1): Underrepresented graduates who have access to paid internships, professional mentoring, and employer-sponsored pipelines will exhibit greater workforce-entry competitiveness than those lacking such access, regardless of academic credential equivalence. P1 tests anticipatory exposure and Chokepoint 1 moderation. This proposition isolates the socialization effect by holding credentials constant, so that any observed difference in competitiveness reflects access to prehire experiences that facilitate anticipatory exposure (Hora et al., 2021; Seron et al., 2016; Shandra, 2022).

Proposition 2 (P2): The relationship between degree completion and early-career workforce participation is mediated by prehire career capital, specifically internship participation, professional network quality, and professional identity strength. P2 tests the full causal path through the socialization mechanism. This proposition articulates the framework's core path as a mediation, positing that degree completion leads to workforce participation primarily through the accumulation of career capital. The three specified mediators represent measurable components of this capital (Donald et al., 2024). Research on workforce transitions, which identifies the first job match as a critical point of the workforce gap, supports this mediation by situating the operative mechanism between completion and participation (Scott-Clayton et al., 2025).

Proposition 3 (P3): Career-readiness embeddedness is hypothesized to exhibit a stronger positive indirect association with workforce-entry outcomes, mediated by professional social capital, for first-generation and low-income graduates than for continuing-generation and higher-income graduates. Professional social capital, defined as the relational dimension of career capital, including network quality and employer relationships, serves as the mechanism by which institutional capacity influences individual outcomes. Since continuing-generation and higher-income graduates frequently possess professionally relevant networks through family and social connections, institutional support is most impactful where such networks are limited. P3 tests meso-level conditions through micro-level capital accumulation, moderated by student background. Therefore, the indirect effect of career-readiness embeddedness through social capital is anticipated to be greater for first-generation and low-income graduates (De Schepper et al., 2024; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Proposition 4 (P4): Signal legibility barriers, including prestige-based hiring signals, network return asymmetries, and deficit framing in evaluation, moderate the relationship between career capital and workforce outcomes, such that equivalent levels of capital yield weaker outcomes for underrepresented graduates. P4 tests Chokepoint 2: the claim that returns to career capital are structurally conditioned. This proposition identifies a barrier that operates after career capital has been accumulated, rather than solely at the point of access. The central claim is that identical amounts of career capital can yield different outcomes depending on evaluators' perceptions of the graduate, a moderation supported by audit and field-experimental evidence on credential evaluation, network returns, and class-based assessment (Belmi et al., 2024; Gaddis, 2015; Pedulla & Pager, 2019).

Proposition 5 (P5): Employer network breadth and career-readiness embeddedness interact such that a high level in one dimension does not fully compensate for a low level in the other. The highest conversion rates for underrepresented graduates are anticipated when both dimensions are high, especially when institution-employer partner alignment is also strong. P5 examines the institutional typology as an interaction and identifies alignment as the condition under which institutional and employer capacity connect to form a usable opportunity pathway. Breadth determines whether graduates can access employers, while embeddedness ensures that preparation is integrated into the standard enrollment experience rather than offered as an optional resource. Alignment ensures that these capacities are coordinated with actual roles, timelines, and evaluative expectations. Graduates from high-embeddedness, low-breadth institutions may be well prepared but lack visibility, whereas graduates from high-breadth, low-embeddedness institutions may have access to employers but receive inconsistent preparation. Even high-capacity partners may experience weak conversion if their opportunity structures are not well coordinated. The proposition is not supported if either the capacity dimension alone or capacity without alignment produces end-to-end conversion rates comparable to those achieved when all three conditions are present (De Schepper et al., 2024; Johnson & Jackson, 2024).

Proposition 6 (P6): In comparable institution-employer partnerships, the joint implementation of a paid-access intervention and a structured capital-recognition intervention is predicted to reduce end-to-end conversion gaps more effectively than either intervention alone. P6 articulates the framework's principal extension of SDM and represents its most robust applied prediction. The paid-access intervention addresses the initial chokepoint by broadening access to career capital accumulation, while the structured capital-recognition intervention targets the subsequent chokepoint by determining whether accumulated capital is acknowledged during evaluation. Since these chokepoints occur at distinct stages, addressing only one leaves the other unaltered, which accounts for the frequent

ineffectiveness of diversity-management practices limited to the hiring stage (Yang & Konrad, 2011). Accordingly, the framework predicts that the two interventions are complementary, and it is falsified if either intervention alone closes the end-to-end conversion gap to the same extent as their combined implementation (Brymer et al., 2019; Nkomo et al., 2019).

The USDM Conversion Audit and Dual-Chokepoint Intervention Test

The USDM framework enables higher education institutions and employers to pinpoint where the conversion of educational diversity into workforce participation fails and to test targeted interventions at those points. The framework is operationalized through the USDM Conversion Audit, a collaborative, cohort-based diagnostic conducted by an institution in collaboration with one or more employer partners. This audit conceptualizes the college-to-workforce transition as a series of interconnected conversion stages, rather than a single employment outcome. This methodology builds on career-capital research, which demonstrates that career preparedness can be integrated into curricula, coaching, and mentoring, and emphasizes employer access and recognition (Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Prior to tracking a cohort, partners are advised to establish an alignment baseline. This baseline documents the target occupations and competencies, recruitment calendar, placement eligibility and compensation rules, geographic and scheduling constraints, evaluation criteria, intended equity outcomes, data-sharing permissions, and the designated responsibilities of each partner. This process does not evaluate the partnership as effective or ineffective. Instead, it determines whether students are being prepared for, recruited into, and assessed in accordance with a consistent opportunity pathway. Any subsequent group disparities can then be analyzed in relation to both the identified chokepoints and the alignment conditions that may exacerbate them.

The audit commences with a defined cohort of graduating or internship-eligible student candidates and tracks participants through five downstream conversion stages of degree or program completion: exposure to structured professional socialization; access to paid, field-relevant experiential opportunities; formation of professionally relevant connections, such as mentors, sponsors, or employer contacts; progression through application, interview, and offer stages; and entry into a degree-relevant role with retention measured at six or twelve months. The audit does not rank institutions or students. Instead, it identifies the initial stage at which otherwise comparable groups diverge and determines whether the constraint involves access to capital formation or the recognition of capital already accumulated.

At each stage, partners calculate a conditional conversion rate, defined as the proportion of students or graduates who advance to the next stage among those who completed the previous stage. These rates should be analyzed by program, graduation cohort, and relevant structural positions, including first-generation status, Pell eligibility or other socioeconomic indicators, race and ethnicity where lawful and appropriate, gender in underrepresented fields, and intersectional combinations where privacy-preserving cell sizes allow. The primary comparison is whether a group has a lower probability of progressing at a specific transition after reaching the prior stage, rather than simply exhibiting a lower overall employment rate. This approach aligns with the USDM's assertion that inequality can emerge both before and after professional capital is formed, since equivalent credentials do not always elicit equivalent employer responses across racial groups (Gaddis, 2015).

Diagnosing the Binding Chokepoint Constraints

The first chokepoint is identified when a group gap appears between exposure to professional socialization and access to paid experiential opportunities, or between paid experience and the formation of professionally relevant relationships. Such patterns necessitate access interventions, including compensated internships, flexible scheduling or transportation support, structured mentoring, early employer engagement, and recruitment partnerships that extend beyond an employer's typical institutional reach. Internships serve as a credible focal point because they facilitate career knowledge and skill development, create professional opportunities, and address employers' recruitment and training needs. Additionally, employers' selection of target institutions and recruitment practices significantly influences access to these pathways.

The second chokepoint occurs when comparable graduates have obtained paid experience, mentoring, and documented career capital, yet diverge at the stages of employer screening, interview, offer, or placement. This scenario requires recognition interventions rather than additional generic preparation. Such interventions include structured, job-relevant evaluation rubrics, pre-specified criteria for résumé and interview review, interviewer calibration, and systematic review of internship-to-offer conversion using stage-specific logic.

Evidence from résumé audits demonstrated the necessity of separate tests for access and recognition. For example, Gaddis (2015) found that elite-university credentials did not eliminate racial disparities in employer responses, and Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) observed that class and gender signals produced varying effects even when résumés were held constant. These findings justify testing signal legibility, rather than serving as evidence of bias by any specific partner employer. The audit framework identifies where further analysis is needed and prevents partners from attributing recognition problems solely to students. Table 1 (see next page) presents the audit as a series of practitioner decision rules, linking each conversion stage to its observable indicator, the interpretation of group gaps at that stage, the recommended action, and the evidence required before scaling.

Testing the Nonsubstitution Claim

The USDM's central applied prediction is that interventions at the two chokepoints are complementary; action at one does not substitute for inaction at the other. This hypothesis can be tested through a partnership pilot comprising two components. The first is an access intervention, such as a paid experiential-learning guarantee or a targeted bridge package that includes paid placement, transportation, or relocation support where applicable, and structured pre-internship mentoring. The second is a recognition intervention, in which participating employers implement a standardized, job-relevant screening and interview rubric, train reviewers in its application, and report stage-specific conversion rates from internship or application to interview and offer. Neither component necessitates a reduction in existing services, and both can be phased in across programs, employer sites, or cohorts, enabling all eligible participants eventual access and facilitating credible longitudinal comparisons.

Both dimensions of intervention design should pre-register a limited set of outcomes prior to implementation: paid-placement uptake, formation of professional ties, application-to-interview conversion, interview-to-offer conversion, degree-relevant placement, and early retention. The primary equity estimate is the change in the conditional conversion gap for the focal group relative to the comparison group, before and after implementation. When staggered rollout is feasible, a phased implementation design can compare early-starting and later-starting units while controlling for cohort and program differences. Where possible, randomization should occur at the program, site, or reviewer level, rather than by withholding established services from individual students.

This research design subjects the framework to empirical validation. If the access intervention increases paid-placement participation but the group disparity remains at the interview or offer stage, this outcome would support the framework's assertion that expanding access alone may be insufficient when employer-controlled evaluation continues to yield unequal returns to comparable accumulated capital. Gaddis's (2015) matched résumé audit provides a relevant precedent in the context of educational credentials, demonstrating that elite university attendance improved employer responses for both Black and White racial groups but did not eliminate the racial gap in those responses. The proposed design does not replicate that study; rather, it applies the same logic to paid placement and other forms of career capital.

Conversely, if the recognition intervention enhances interview-to-offer conversion among applicants without increasing the number of students reaching employers, this finding supports the complementary claim that improved recognition cannot compensate for exclusion from the capital-building pipeline. The USDM's strongest prediction is that the combined intervention will yield greater improvements in end-to-end conversion than either component alone, particularly for students whose entry into professional settings relies on institutional rather than familial or informal networks.

Table 2*USDM Conversion Audit Guide*

Conversion Stage	Minimum Observable Indicator	Interpretation of a Group Gap Stage	Primary Action Implied by USDM	Evidence Needed Before Scaling
Professional socialization exposure	Share of cohort completing structured mentoring, employer engagement, or required career preparation	Preparation is not reaching the intended population	Embed the activity in required coursework or advising; remove opt-in information barriers	Participation records and a brief student-experience survey
Paid experiential access	Share of exposed students obtaining a paid, field-relevant internship, practicum, research placement, or work-based experience	Checkpoint 1: financial, scheduling, geographic, or recruiting access restricts capital formation	Fund placements and related costs; redesign the recruiting footprint; offer flexible pathways	Compensation, hours, location, program, and selection data
Professional-tie formation	Share of participants reporting at least one field-relevant mentor, sponsor, or employer contact	Experience is not becoming relational career capital	Create structured sponsor matching and employer follow-up requirements	Network survey; mentor-contact logs
Employer evaluation	Interview-to-offer conversion among applicants with comparable documented experience	Checkpoint 2: Capital may be receiving unequal recognition	Use structured, job-relevant rubrics; calibrate evaluators; examine screening rules	Standardized application and evaluation data; qualitative review of criteria
Entry and early job quality	Degree-relevant placement and six- or twelve-month retention	Earlier gains may not persist into a quality transition	Review job match, onboarding, and post-placement support with partners	Graduate-outcomes data linked to prior-stage exposure

Note. The audit reads from top to bottom, and the binding chokepoint constraints are the first stage at which otherwise comparable groups diverge. A gap that emerges at paid experiential access or professional-tie formation indicates the first chokepoint and calls for access interventions. A gap that emerges during employer evaluation among applicants with comparable documented experience indicates the second chokepoint and calls for recognition interventions.

Measurement and Ethical Safeguards

The audit should employ existing validated measures where appropriate and develop new measures only when the framework introduces constructs not captured by current instruments. The Graduate Capital Scale offers a useful foundation for assessing self-reported social networking, perceived labor-market fit, engagement with extracurricular activities, and related aspects of career preparedness. Although it has undergone psychometric evaluation, its initial validation occurred in a single, relatively advantaged institutional context; therefore, it should be adapted for a United States equity context rather than used as a comprehensive measure of the USDM's constructs (Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Two constructs within the USDM require intentional development. Institutional career capital capacity should initially be operationalized as a transparent dashboard that reflects employer network breadth and the degree of embedded career readiness, rather than as an unvalidated composite score. Signal legibility should be evaluated using documented assessment criteria and group-disaggregated stage transitions. A controlled vignette study employing de-identified candidate profiles can determine whether identical career-capital evidence is interpreted differently under varying institutional or social signals. While live correspondence audits can provide valuable insights, they also present legal, ethical, and employer-burden considerations and should be regarded as one option rather than the default practitioner test. The audit framework retains its utility even in the absence of such experiments.

Data governance should be embedded within the application process rather than addressed as a secondary administrative concern. Stakeholders must clearly define permissible uses of student data, limit the collection of sensitive information, report only privacy-protected aggregate data, separate research evaluation from individual employment decisions, and seek institutional review when appropriate. The audit process also requires a designated convening function, typically fulfilled by institutional research in collaboration with career services, as these units are well positioned to manage cohort data. Governance, intervention selection, and accountability are shared responsibilities among academic programs, employer recruiting leaders, and student representatives. After each cohort, this group examines the initial stage at which comparable groups diverge, determines whether the issue pertains to access, recognition, or alignment, and selects a single targeted change for the subsequent cycle. Adjustments may include revisions to placement compensation, preparation timing, mentoring structure, recruiting schedules, assessment criteria, or partner obligations. This feedback mechanism transforms downstream outcomes into actionable evidence for upstream improvements, without attributing an individual graduate's employment outcome to their prior capital formation.

Practical Contribution

The USDM Conversion Audit enables practitioners to address more specific issues than the general challenges of career readiness or diversity hiring. It poses three stage-specific questions:

- Who is prevented from accumulating career capital?
- Whose comparable capital receives unequal recognition? and
- Are the institutional preparation and employer opportunities sufficiently aligned for either form of capital to convert?

The responses to these questions will guide stakeholders toward targeted interventions, data requirements, and clearly defined responsibilities. USDM thus functions as more than a career-services assessment or an employer diversity dashboard. It serves as an interorganizational learning system that integrates existing practices, identifies the primary conversion constraint, implements a proportionate response, and applies findings to enhance the pathways of subsequent cohorts.

Discussion

The USDM framework shifts focus from merely recognizing diverse talent to examining the conversion system that renders talent visible, competitive, and connected to opportunities. Rather than replacing existing initiatives such as internships, mentoring, career services, employer partnerships, recruitment reform, or diversity hiring practices, the framework offers an organizing structure for evaluating how these practices interact across the boundary between higher education and employment. This approach extends beyond traditional institutional diversity measures, which focus on enrollment, persistence, and degree completion, by assessing whether educational diversity leads to equitable workforce participation (Byrd, 2022).

It identifies where pathways break down and determines which stakeholders possess leverage at those critical points. Employers influence access through recruiting footprints, paid internships, talent pipelines, and subsequent evaluations, while institutions shape the distribution of preparation, socialization, and employer connections (Stewart, 2016). The effectiveness of their shared conversion outcome further depends on the alignment of these capacities along the same opportunity pathway. The Conversion Audit operationalizes this shared responsibility by identifying stage-specific divergences, assigning targeted interventions, and utilizing subsequent outcomes to refine the system for future cohorts.

Employers hold responsibility at both critical chokepoints. At the initial stage, employer actions influence access to socialization, thereby broadening the pool of individuals entering the capital-building pipeline. In the subsequent stage, the employer evaluation determines whether graduates' accumulated capital is recognized. Since these chokepoints occur at distinct stages, addressing one does not offset inaction at the other; therefore, employer strategies must address both access and evaluation concurrently. The previous section detailed the USDM Conversion Audit, which specifies these measures and outlines the corresponding evaluation design.

For higher education institutions, the two-by-two typology identifies the specific deficit each institution should address. For example, an institution with strong embeddedness but limited employer breadth faces different constraints than one with broad employer access but siloed preparation. Minority-serving institutions and HBCUs

exemplify the low-breadth, high-embeddedness category, where employer engagement is the primary lever for improvement because student preparation is already robust (Johnson & Jackson, 2024). The USDM Conversion Audit introduces the institutional diagnostic tool that enables colleges to determine their position and identify weaknesses in their conversion processes.

The primary theoretical implication of the framework is a redefinition of the unit of analysis for SDM. Traditionally, SDM has focused on practices within individual organizations, specifically those applied to talent at and after entry. The USDM framework broadens this perspective to a cross-sector model, positing that workforce diversity emerges from the combined efforts of educational institutions and employers throughout the entire trajectory from education to workforce participation.

This reconceptualization suggests three avenues for SDM scholarship: developing frameworks that trace the complete pathway rather than beginning at the applicant pool, theorizing shared institutional responsibility by delineating each party's control and interdependence, and relocating measurement to all prehire stages so that diversity is assessed at the point of production rather than solely at the point of record (Cox & Blake, 1991; Nkomo et al., 2019). Collectively, these directions enable SDM to address persistent challenges by identifying mechanisms that operate upstream of conventional practices.

Limitations

The USDM framework is designed for a specific context of entry into the United States bachelor's-level professional labor markets. In these settings, internship-mediated hiring and institutional recruiting footprints render the described conversion systems particularly consequential. The framework conceptualizes underrepresentation as a structural and field-relative position encompassing race, first-generation status, socioeconomic background, and gender, particularly in fields where women remain underrepresented. The identified chokepoints and institutional conditions may operate differently across nondegree and vocational pathways, and in graduate- and professional-degree entry. Because the framework's mechanisms are drawn from the United Kingdom, European, and United States scholarship, they extend in principle to other national systems that separate the credentialing and selection functions and labor-market structures. Application to these other settings requires adaptation rather than direct transfer, and the framework does not assert applicability without modification.

The USDM is conceptual, and its propositions require empirical validation. While individual links in the proposed pathway are supported by existing evidence, the combined effects of the two chokepoints, the interaction between institutional breadth and embeddedness, and the aggregation from individual outcomes to field-level workforce diversity remain theoretical claims that require further investigation. The propositions outlined in this paper establish this research agenda and identify the constructs necessary for empirical testing.

The previous section presented candidate indicators, an institutional dashboard, and illustrative testing designs, without asserting that the USDM Conversion Audit or its component measures have been validated. Construct validation and measurement development are necessary prior to comprehensive empirical testing, particularly regarding signal legibility, institutional career-capital capacity, identity bridging, and institution-employer partner alignment. The alignment construct is presented as a theoretically specified interface condition rather than a finalized scale or an additional chokepoint. Similarly, the proposed feedback process serves as a governance design intended to facilitate learning across cohorts; its feasibility and effects require empirical assessment rather than assumption. These delineations maintain the study's status as a conceptual contribution and clarify the subsequent empirical tasks.

Conclusion

The college-to-workforce transition represents a critical site of SDM, yet it has not been adequately theorized within strategic diversity management as a cross-sector process jointly shaped by employers and educational institutions. This transition determines whether educational diversity translates into workforce diversity, but it has been overlooked by two academic fields, each of which ceases analysis at the transition's boundary rather than investigating its internal dynamics. The USDM framework offers three primary contributions. First, it broadens the temporal scope of SDM to include the prehire transition zone, where access is restricted, and capital is developed. Second, it delineates the mechanisms by which educational diversity does not convert into workforce diversity, replacing the general concept of pipeline leakage with specific, structurally conditioned processes such as professional socialization, capital formation, and signal legibility. Third, it clarifies the shared and distinct responsibilities of employers and higher education institutions through the dual-chokepoint structure and

institutional typology, which together define the conditions each party controls and the interdependencies of their actions.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the framework provides an applied diagnostic tool, the USDM Conversion Audit, which enables institutions and employers to collaboratively identify points of conversion failure and assess whether interventions at the two chokepoints operate synergistically. Therefore, the implications for the field are clear. While diverse talent is abundant and an increasing number of diverse graduates enter the labor market, equitable access to systems that make this talent visible, prepared, and connected to opportunities remains limited. Research that examines workforce diversity without investigating the processes that generate such diversity prior to hiring addresses outcomes without considering underlying mechanisms. This paper identifies and analyzes those mechanisms.

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