

WIP: Exploring Institutional Betrayal, Departmental Culture, and Career Outcomes in a Midwest Postdoctoral Scholar Program

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Dr. Wiggins' research examines how engineering faculty's positionalities and lived experiences shape their critical consciousness development. As both a scholar and advocate, she is committed to amplifying minoritized voices in engineering through research and mentorship. Beyond her academic work, Dr. Wiggins serves as an Upward Bound Advisor at Columbus State Community College, volunteers with See Brilliance, a Columbus-based STEM nonprofit, and enjoys spending time with her friends and family. She has been recognized by UMBC for advancing the vision of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program and by Ohio State's Department of Engineering Education for her scholarly contributions as a graduate researcher.

Dr. Wiggins strives to inspire future scholars and practitioners to lead with intention, consciousness, and care, while fostering meaningful change that bridges research and practice.

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Introduction

Despite decades of attention, academia struggles with the underrepresentation of historically marginalized groups in tenure-track engineering faculty roles (Rodriguez et al., 2024). In response, many institutions have developed postdoctoral pathway programs to expand faculty pipelines, provide structured mentoring, and support early-career scholars (Culpepper et al., 2021). These programs are often framed as institutional commitments to equity, positioning universities as sources of professional development, psychological safety, and advocacy.

Existing research has largely focused on program design, mentoring, and placement outcomes, with less attention to how scholars experience institutional support in practice, particularly during periods of change (Cobb et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2023). Administrative turnover, shifting diversity priorities, and external pressures can unevenly affect institutional commitments (McGowan et al., 2025), placing postdoctoral scholars, especially those from underrepresented groups, at heightened risk for uncertainty, eroded trust, and disrupted career trajectories (Liera et al., 2026).

This work-in-progress paper examines the inaugural cohort of a Midwest University's postdoctoral scholar program designed to address underrepresentation in engineering faculty. Guided by the research question, *how did the inaugural scholars experience localized institutional consistency or betrayal based on departmental culture and support systems?* As a work-in-progress, this paper presents initial themes and outlines directions for ongoing analysis, including future semi-structured interviews with the cohort to deepen understanding of how institutional betrayal manifests and affects early-career scholars in engineering.

Institutional Betrayal Theory (IBT)

Institutional Betrayal Theory (IBT) describes harms that arise when organizations fail to act in accordance with the trust placed in them by individuals who rely on institutional protection and support (Smith & Freyd, 2014). These betrayals may occur through direct actions or through institutional inaction, such as failing to prevent harm, normalizing harmful practices or cultures, maintaining inaccessible or ineffective reporting structures, providing inadequate or misleading responses, concealing wrongdoing, or retaliating against those who raise concerns (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Empirical research has shown that institutional betrayal can produce a range of negative consequences, including psychological distress, depressive and posttraumatic symptoms, and dissociation (Andresen et al., 2019; Christl et al., 2024; Hannan et al., 2021). While early work on betrayal trauma and institutional betrayal focused primarily on the exacerbating effects of sexual violence and institutional failures to respond appropriately to them (Smith et al., 2016; Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014), subsequent scholarship has extended the concept of institutional failure. This broader body of literature illustrates how institutions may betray their constituencies by failing to address systemic problems or by protecting more powerful actors, including in cases of gender harassment (Lind et al., 2020), systemic breakdowns in healthcare systems (Tamaian et al., 2017), and professional organizations' involvement in unethical practices (Gómez et al., 2016). Overall, institutional betrayal provides a framework for examining how mismatches between institutional promises and practices can shape experiences of harm and disillusionment.

In this study, we specifically use Smith and Freyd's (2014) two dimensions of institutional betrayal: (1) *institutional acts* (i.e., acts of omission, acts of commission) and (2) *initial apparent problem* (i.e., apparently isolated incidents, apparently systemic issues). Acts of omission refer to the institution's failure to take expected actions that prevent, protect, and/or respond to harm. Oftentimes, this type of betrayal can be difficult to recognize because of the ambiguity of what the institution should have done. While acts of omission involve institutional inaction, acts of commission occur when an institution

directly causes harm through its actions. These forms of betrayal are generally more visible and overt. Institutional betrayal can also appear as an isolated incident affecting an individual rather than reflecting a broader pattern, making it easy to dismiss. Finally, institutional betrayal can be systemic, embedded within institutional culture, or sustained through ongoing practices. Such betrayals may emerge over time, resist change, and affect many individuals rather than a single person. Through this theoretical lens, we will examine how elements of scholars' experience, prior literature, and institutional artifacts align with Smith and Freyd's (2014) dimensions of institutional betrayal.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach (Jones et al., 2022) to examine scholars' experiences of institutional support and potential institutional betrayal within their departments. The broader study draws on multiple data sources; however, the present paper reports only preliminary findings from secondary and documentary sources. Specifically, the analysis presented in this manuscript is based on previously collected scholar testimonies (Author et al., 2023, 2025)¹, relevant literature, and institutional artifacts related to the postdoctoral program at the Midwest University. The prior testimonies were collected with scholars' consent for research and programmatic improvement purposes. The literature included conference proceedings describing the program and journal articles addressing the experiences of scholars transitioning from postdoctoral to faculty roles. Institutional artifacts consisted of publicly available university documents, such as Human Resources website information, descriptions of institutional initiatives, and records of programmatic changes over time. These sources supported the preliminary analysis reported here and informed the development of the interview protocol for the next phase of the study.

Future phases of the project will extend this analysis through primary data collection, including semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom (Jones et al., 2022). A purposive sampling strategy (Jones et al., 2022) will be used to recruit participants from the inaugural cohort of the postdoctoral program, which consists of seven scholars, all of whom will be invited to participate. The interview protocol is designed to elicit participants' reflections on departmental culture, mentorship experiences, and career development across the two-year fellowship, with particular attention to how institutional commitments are experienced in practice. These forthcoming interviews will deepen and refine the preliminary findings reported in this paper and support a more comprehensive analysis of how departmental contexts shape scholars' perceptions of institutional consistency and betrayal.

Data Analysis

For the analysis presented in this manuscript, the research team used deductive qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021), guided by Smith and Freyd's (2014) conceptualization of institutional betrayal. Using this framework as an analytic lens, the research team engaged in repeated review of testimonies, literature, and institutional documents to identify evidence relevant to these dimensions. The team then compared patterns within and across data sources and developed preliminary analytic memos to capture emerging interpretations. These analytic memos informed the preliminary interpretations of how institutional commitments, inconsistencies, and potential forms of betrayal were represented across the available data.

Preliminary Findings

Through the lens of Institutional Betrayal Theory, the analysis revealed four themes aligned with the dimensions of institutional action (i.e., acts of omission and acts of commission) and the apparent problem (i.e., apparently isolated incidents and apparently systemic issues). Table 1 summarizes these themes.

¹ Full citations and additional contextual details about these prior studies are intentionally withheld to protect participant confidentiality and minimize the risk of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009).

		Initial Apparent Problem	
		Apparently Isolated Incidents	Apparently Systemic Issues
Type of Institutional Action	Acts of Omission	Increased Uncertainty and Mistrust in Departments	Lack of Acknowledgment of Wrongdoings
	Acts of Commission	Avoidant and Dismissive Behavior	Culture of Silence

Table 1 Summary of findings

Increased Uncertainty and Mistrust in Departments

During the scholars' fellowship period, Midwest University enacted a shift in faculty hiring policies that disrupted previously communicated expectations of internal faculty placement. Scholars had entered the program with an understanding that the institution would facilitate their transition into faculty roles; however, following the policy change in 2025, placement decisions were deferred to individual departments without clear guidance or accountability. Scholars described experiencing avoidant and dismissive responses from departmental leaders and faculty, which they interpreted as institutional withdrawal of support. These experiences exemplify institutional betrayal through acts of omission, as institutional and departmental actors failed to clarify expectations, advocate for scholars, or uphold earlier commitments. The lack of transparent communication and protective action undermined scholars' trust in the institution and intensified feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. Left without institutional intervention or clear pathways forward, scholars were forced to navigate their career decisions independently. Of the seven scholars in the cohort, only two ultimately transitioned into faculty positions at the university, highlighting how institutional inaction and localized discretion shaped both perceptions of betrayal and career outcomes.

Lack of Acknowledgment of Wrongdoings

Scholars and the program director reported that the institution's policy shift and the immediate withdrawal of support for faculty placements were not formally acknowledged by departments or university leadership. Initially, this act of omission appeared to affect only members of the postdoctoral program; over time, however, it became evident that similar patterns of institutional inaction were impacting others across the university. Institutional Betrayal Theory suggests that such systemic harm often first appears as isolated incidents, leaving individuals to experience their consequences alone, even as the broader institutional practices perpetuate ongoing harm. The program director noted that the university had few mechanisms for addressing institutional complaints, particularly those raised by marginalized scholars. Proposed solutions from leadership were also misaligned with the institution's stated commitments to restorative justice (Author et al., 2025), leaving affected individuals without meaningful support. This pattern illustrates how institutional betrayal can operate at both the systemic level, through ongoing, unaddressed harms embedded in university culture, and the individual level, disproportionately affecting scholars from underrepresented groups and underscoring the risks of a future in which Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commitments are not consistently upheld.

Avoidant and Dismissive Behavior

After the policy shift, several scholars reported experiencing avoidant and dismissive behaviors from both departmental and university leadership (Author et al., 2025). With departments no longer

accountable for the program's intended faculty placement outcomes, some mentors altered their behaviors, reducing guidance and engagement with scholars. These interactions, while not experienced uniformly across all scholars, represent acts of commission, as they were overt behaviors that directly undermined the scholars' professional support. In addition, when scholars did not transition directly into faculty positions, university leadership provided minimal assistance, leaving scholars uncertain about their next career steps. This lack of institutional intervention forced scholars to navigate alternative opportunities, both within and outside the university, and highlighted how overt institutional inaction and withdrawal of mentorship contributed to experiences of betrayal and eroded trust.

Culture of Silence

Ultimately, the actions of the university and departments reinforced a culture of silence, reflecting entrenched patterns in how institutional harm is managed or overlooked within the organization. Scholars' experiences of avoidance, lack of acknowledgement, and diminished trust illustrate recurring patterns consistent with a culture of betrayal, in which institutional norms enable harm to persist. Such behaviors are often first experienced in isolation, leaving individuals to navigate the consequences alone and making the systemic nature of the betrayal less visible or easily dismissed. From an Institutional Betrayal Theory perspective, these patterns demonstrate how organizational structures and cultural practices can perpetuate ongoing harm, erode trust, and normalize the dismissal of those affected, particularly for scholars who are dependent on institutional support for career advancement.

Support Structure

Although not identified as a primary theme through the lens of Institutional Betrayal Theory, the findings underscore the critical role of support structures for scholars experiencing institutional betrayal, particularly within the organization itself. Such structures can mitigate feelings of isolation and provide guidance during incidents of betrayal, offering both emotional support and practical strategies for navigating complex organizational cultures. In the context of a cohort-based postdoctoral program, peer networks helped scholars advocate for themselves, reduce isolation, and identify alternative career opportunities. Likewise, the program director, who possessed organizational expertise and leadership authority, served as an additional source of support, offering institutional sponsorship and acting as an advocate to communicate departmental and leadership failings to other university personnel. Together, these findings highlight the value of cohort models and DEI or identity-focused programming, which can help scholars navigate both individual challenges and systemic issues in higher education while buffering against the negative effects of institutional betrayal.

Conclusion

In sum, this work-in-progress highlights how institutional and departmental actions or inactions can produce experiences of betrayal for postdoctoral scholars, even within programs explicitly designed to support underrepresented individuals. Preliminary findings suggest that both structural policy shifts and localized behaviors contributed to eroded trust, uncertainty, and uneven career outcomes, underscoring the importance of institutional consistency and accountability. The study also demonstrates that institutional betrayal operates across multiple levels: it is embedded in formal policy, enacted through departmental behaviors, and reinforced by cultural norms that silence grievances. For scholars, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, this layered betrayal can undermine trust, diminish a sense of belonging, and shape career trajectories, emphasizing the need for institutions to actively recognize and address both overt and subtle forms of harm. These findings have implications for the design and management of diversity pathway programs, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication, proactive mentorship, and mechanisms to address grievances. Future work will build on this analysis through additional scholar interviews and examination of institutional artifacts to further explore the systemic and relational dynamics of institutional betrayal and to inform practices that support equitable faculty transitions.

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