

The Rapid Suppression of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in United States Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to document and discuss key initiatives currently (re)shaping the American system of higher education. Because many of the recent changes to the system are politically motivated attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), we focus particular attention on the most recent efforts to eliminate DEI on college campuses. In doing so, we highlight major consequences for individuals, institutions, and the U.S. system of higher education. To begin, we provide a brief introduction to larger political, economic, and social shifts that have generated subsequent changes in the public's perception of higher education before providing an overview of recent changes to institutional DEI policies, programs, and practices. We conclude with opportunities for moving forward.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, United States, Higher Education

Introduction

In 2024, Donald Trump was re-elected for his second term as the President of the United States (U.S.). Trump's re-election marked unprecedented moves toward a future that the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) wrote, "would have immense implications for the future of our democratic norms, institutions, and processes" (2025, para 1). These words were prompted by the ACLU's reaction to Project 2025, a "blueprint for a radical restructuring of the executive branch authored and published by former Trump administration officials in partnership with The Heritage Foundation, a longstanding conservative think tank that opposes abortion and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrants' rights, and racial equity" (2025, para. 3).

Wasting no time in following through on campaign promises, President Trump signed 89 executive orders in his first 52 days in office, far surpassing any president during their first 100 days in more than 40 years (Chiwaya et al., 2025; Federal Register, n.d.). Notably, all order aligned with the 900-page blueprint set out in Project 2025 and included revoking 78 actions and orders from the Biden administration, hiring freezes in the executive branch, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, abolishing birthright citizenship, limiting gender to binary classification,

the elimination of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs in the federal government, and the implementation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) (“Trump’s 2025 Executive Orders,” n.d.; Yourish et al., 2025). While many of these orders continue to be challenged in court, they fuel the fire of the present ideological war and threaten our democratic institutions. As a cornerstone of American democracy, the American higher education system quickly became a target of that war.

By February, colleges and universities were in forced flux following more than two dozen executive orders that promised to alter the landscape of higher education for years to come. Orders affecting higher education included directives for federal agencies to terminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, instruction for national funding agencies to cancel research grants that focus on or include language that is DEI-related and eliminating hundreds of positions at the Office for Civil Rights—those who oversee Title IX compliance within universities, which prohibits sex-based discrimination. Importantly, these orders fell in the wake of the 2023 Supreme Court ruling against affirmative action in college admissions decisions, thwarting a central effort toward increasing DEI on campuses across the country. Thus, as we write in this historical moment, American higher education change is characterized by significance and speed as institutions become increasingly unsettled under a second Trump administration. Although the U.S. was already projecting significant shifts across the landscape of higher education, given looming demographic cliffs (Bauman, 2024) and a decrease in public confidence in higher education—particularly along party lines (Parker, 2019)—the current administration has forced the system into immediate and undoubtedly, lasting change. Notably, significant, politically-charged changes to the U.S. higher education system are not new; however, the tools and tactics the current administration has used to force such rapid change are arguably unprecedented.

The purpose of this paper is to document key initiatives currently (re)shaping the American system of higher education. Because many of the recent changes to the system are politically motivated attacks on DEI, we focus particular attention on the most recent efforts to suppress and eliminate DEI on college campuses. In doing so, we highlight major consequences for individuals, institutions, and the U.S. system of higher education. To begin, we introduce the larger political, economic, and social shifts that have generated

subsequent changes in the public's perception of higher education before providing an overview of recent changes to institutional policies, programs, and practices that focus on DEI. Although the consequences of recent changes will no doubt be deep and lasting, our work is also rooted in hope, persistence, and the promise of opportunity. Thus, we conclude with emphasis on opportunities for renewal and recommendations for moving forward.

Finally, it is worth noting the challenges associated with producing scholarship during times of significant change—it is indeed difficult to process and make sense while bearing witness. Nevertheless, we have taken care to document and examine that change as it happens to us and around us..

Declining Public Perceptions of U.S. Higher Education in 2024 Amidst a Growing Political Divide

Although public discourse challenging the value and relevance of higher education is not unprecedented in the U.S., the past decade has revealed a precipitous drop in the public's confidence and trust in higher education. In 2024, discourse gained significant momentum across various media platforms and sparked national-level conversations about whether higher education is worth the investment, from news outlets (see, for example, Belkin, 2024), to higher education journalism (see, for instance, Stripling, 2024), to social media (see, for example, Campus Sonar, 2024). Several recent national surveys provide quantitative evidence of shifting perceptions. In their most recent findings from a national opinion survey on how Americans view success and the American dream, Populace (2024) reported that Americans now largely devalue a college degree. Similar research by the Gates Foundation, in collaboration with Edge Research and HCM Strategies (2024), indicated that 18- to 30-year-olds have less confidence in the value of a college degree than their peers 20 years ago. Although Gallup and the Lumina Foundation (2024) released a report that indicated most adults still believe there is value in some kind of postsecondary credential, a rising percentage of prospective students and their families are questioning whether college—and a four-year degree in particular—is worth the time and money.

There are several reasons for the growth in questioning and skepticism. In the 1970s, the

average tuition and fees across all colleges and universities was around 5,000 USD (NCES, 2023). The low net cost and promise of higher-paying jobs after graduation deemed college degrees as highly valuable. Since 1963, the cost of college has increased 197.4% after adjusting for inflation. In the last two decades alone, the cost of public, 4-year tuition has increased 36.7% (Hanson, 2024). Since the Great Recession of the 2000s, public investments in higher education have decreased, leaving students to shoulder the burden of the increasing cost of higher education (Rodriguez & Szabo-Kubitz, 2024). The majority of students picking up the bill defer this cost through student loans, leaving the average student with nearly \$30,000 of debt (Rodriguez & Szabo-Kubitz, 2024). Given the rise of college tuition and student debt in the U.S., there is a growing appeal among younger adults for pursuing alternatives to a four-year degree, including entering employment directly out of high school (Mowreader, 2023).

However, growing suspicion and skepticism surrounding higher education is not simply a matter of economic value. Concerns related to fairness in admissions practices and policies and the liberal indoctrination of students are increasingly linked to political affiliation. For example, a 2019 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found the “share of Americans saying colleges and universities have a negative effect has increased by 12 percentage points since 2012. The increase in negative views has come almost entirely from Republicans and independents who lean Republican” (para. 4). While Democrats are more likely to attribute their concerns to the rising costs of higher education, a 2018 Pew survey indicated that “eight in ten Republicans (79%) say professors bringing their political and social views into the classroom is a major reason why the higher education system is headed in the wrong direction (only 17% of Democrats say the same)” (Parker, 2019, para. 8). Other surveys and polls have reported similar trends (Gallup, 2017).

Institutional Roles and Capture

Higher education institutions, especially those in Republican states, have long been ideological battlegrounds. This is reflective of the deeper ideological divide within American political life writ large, as studies find that Americans are intensely politically divided (Pew, 2014; Pew, 2019). We also see ideological divide within the two main political parties, as Republicans move further right, and Democrats see greater division

within the party. A symptom of the American political divide is ongoing and intensifying disagreements around the role of higher education within society. While there have been times of broad consensus around the role and value of higher education, such as the utilization of higher education as a pathway for the US government to “win” the Space Race during the Cold War, those moments were often transitory. In fact, disagreement around the role of education is as old as the United States itself; the Constitution of the United States considers education to be a matter for the individual states. In the years after the adoption of the Constitution, there was a national debate about the role of the federal government in education, especially around the establishment of a national university (Nelson, 2013). Ultimately, influence from established colleges deterred Congress from supporting the idea. This history is complicated by the role of the federal Department of Education (DoEd) and the ability to restrict federal educational funding to states that do not abide by federal laws or guidelines. Described as a “perfect mess” (Labaree, 2017), the U.S. system of higher education allowed for a variety of divides and disagreements, complicating the work of education.

Labaree (2010) identified this divide in the competing goals of public education as developed within a liberal democracy, which presents stiff tensions between “the demands of democratic politics and the demands of capitalist markets” (p. 15). Specifically, Labaree identified three competing goals for education that developed in a liberal democracy: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. The democratic equality goal emphasizes the responsibility of schools to create a well-educated citizenry, the social efficiency goal emphasizes training workers, and the social mobility goal centers on training individuals to compete for social positions (Labaree, 2010). The first two goals position education as a public good, i.e., for the benefit of all of society, while the latter casts education as a private, individual good. These goals never exist individually or in a vacuum; they influence each other and exist concurrently. These goals are foregrounded as part of a response to complex political and social forces; any one (or two, or three) can come to the fore as the demands on education change. Relative to the American system of higher education, Labaree wrote: “In the absence of strong funding and central control, individual colleges had to learn how to survive and thrive in a highly competitive market, in which they needed to rely on student tuition and alumni donations and had to develop a mode of governance that would position them to pursue

any opportunity and cultivate any source of patronage” (p. 1). In other words, for Labaree (2017), the system of American higher education, not unlike the K-12 system, reflects a familiar clash between egalitarian principles and competitive excellence.

These goals are closely connected to the political divide within American society and reflect a deeper ideological divide within American political life, as studies continue to find that Americans are intensely politically divided (PEW, 2014, Churcher, 2025). Political parties are also broadly attached to ideologies that can be understood to have broad support or disapproval for certain issues. In the U.S., there has been a relationship (although not an exclusive one) between anti-intellectualism and hostility to education and Republican politics and politicians. As a historical trend, this brand of anti-intellectualism can be understood to have begun as early as the 1980s, when the relationship between state governments and educational institutions became more extractive in exchange for fewer state resources and support (Taylor, 2021). Anti-intellectualism has also been connected to an the increased democratization of higher education, whereby institutions were slowly integrated and white resentment grew with a perceived a loss of access and privilege as higher education became more diverse (Taylor, 2021; Mutz, 2018). At the same time, the Republican party has become more reliant on voters who are less likely to attend college (Kersting, 2023). This has worked to create a populist shift in the Republican base, which has been connected to a trend of anti-intellectualism broadly (Desantis, 2024). This combination of white backlash and rising anti-intellectualism has resulted in a political moment defined, in part, by the American Right’s hostility to higher education. Republicans have acted on this anger in state legislatures, federal funding shifts, and changes in both long-standing and recent federal guidelines. The early days of the second Trump presidency demonstrated this deep-seated hostility for higher education, enacted through anti-DEI proposals that have curbed institutions’ ability to mitigate inequality through campus-level policy and practice.

The Rapid Suppression of DEI in U.S. Higher Education

Since roughly 2020, institutions have confronted an intensified attack on DEI initiatives in U.S. higher education (Garces et al., 2025). This attack includes the recent Supreme Court ruling to end the use of affirmative action—race-conscious admissions practices—a policy that was intentionally designed to redress social wrongs that limited the

enrollment of students of color in American colleges (Johnson, 2020). Following decades of legal and societal challenges to affirmative action, *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* (2023) deemed the use of race in college admissions unconstitutional. Because the SFFA case is noted as the end of race-conscious admission in the United States (Hoover, 2023), leaders of American states and the federal government have utilized the case to justify a lack of support for broadly defined DEI-focused initiatives. Since then, the attack on DEI-focused programs and policies has been well underway across the country with more than 100 bills in 30 states passing some form of “anti-DEI” bill, many of which target or include higher education (Adams & Chiwiya, 2024). For example, in Texas, the Board of Regents of the University of Texas System has suspended the development and implementation of new policies promoting DEI (Moody, 2023). In Florida, as part of an atypical audit, leaders of public institutions were required to provide the Governor’s Office with details about DEI-focused expenditures (Diep & Pettit, 2023). Furthermore, in Florida, specific legislation has been passed (e.g., The Stop Woke Act) and proposed (e.g., HB 999), eroding the value and importance of DEI-focused policies, programs, and procedures. Following the example set by Florida, leaders in other states, such as South Carolina, have requested information regarding any spending, training, and activities with a DEI focus (Lu, 2023). A similar request for information has been initiated in Oklahoma, where leaders of public colleges have been instructed to account for every dollar of funds spent on DEI-focused programs within the past ten years (Brown, 2023).

In Florida (Supiano, 2024), Texas (Surovell, 2023), and Wisconsin (Gretzinger, 2023), state legislators have also utilized the law to influence curricula and salary payments at publicly funded institutions. In Texas, SB 17 prohibited any “DEI practices” at Texas’ public higher education institutions, and a 2025 executive order further banned DEI at all public agencies (Office of the Texas Governor, 2025). Commentary from the governor makes clear that this law is a result of white resentment around higher education. Greg Abbott claimed that inclusion policies “divide [Texans]” and must be “eliminat[ed], (Office of the Texas Governor, 2025).” These actions are reflective of political and social hostility among the American right towards education and equity, making higher education a perennial target.

Although the cases above demonstrate how specific states are responding to the anti-DEI movement, the most poignant example of the anti-DEI movement has manifested as part of the Trump Administration's official stance on the role of DEI in higher education. As part of a 2025 Dear Colleague Letter (See Trainor, 2025), leaders from the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights declared that all DEI-focused programs at all colleges and universities must come to a halt if the school is to continue participating in the federal student aid program which offers financial support to students through federally funded grants and loans (Hoover, 2025). Although the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has played a historic role in making higher education more accessible and inclusive, demanding an institutional response to "repressive laws" constitutes an overreach of the department's authority (Garces et al., 2025), and they create a dangerous precedent for the future of higher education. Across states, threats have caused many individual institutions to practice "anticipatory compliance" (Garces et al., 2025) or "anticipatory obedience," even going as far as removing keywords such as "woman" and "cultural" from institutional websites to avoid being targeted as non-compliant (Weissman, 2025). As a response, a joint subcommittee of the American Association of University Professors Committee on College and University Governance and Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure published a statement "Against Anticipatory Obedience" (2025). In their statement, the subcommittee encourages higher education leaders not to comply before there is pressure to do so.

The Numerous Risks

The risks associated with the rapid suppression of DEI initiatives in U.S. higher education abound. In the following, we focus on only a few of the many risks involved in the anti-DEI movement in higher education. At a fundamental level, the U.S. system of higher education risks losing decades of momentum toward greater educational access and equity. Recent changes propel institutions back to a history marred by deep racial disparities. For example, scholars have argued that anti-blackness is at the core of challenges to DEI, which, "in education functions much more as a critique of White supremacy and the limits of the hegemonic liberal multiculturalism...which guides policy, practice, and research in the field" (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). Many DEI initiatives were created to combat a history of discriminatory practices and garner greater

access to and success moving through higher education for racially minoritized populations. As Garces et al. (2025) argued,

Some of the prohibited programs and initiatives include pipeline programs and identity-based student support initiatives which were established to address the barriers that restricted access and opportunity for historically marginalized students (see, e.g., Bauman et al., 2005; Hurtado et al., 1999; Patton, 2023). More than 30 years of research has shown how these efforts have helped these students access and persist in a higher education system that was not originally designed to serve them (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Milem et al., 2005; Museus, 2011). (p. 5)

Research already shows the negative consequences of ending race-conscious admissions (Colin & Cook, 2023). It is reasonable to expect these consequences will be amplified and exacerbated by additional changes to remaining DEI initiatives.

Anti-DEI rhetoric continues to threaten academic freedom (Quinn, 2024), a concept that is fundamental to the academic profession and learning. As noted by Sun and Turner (2024),

Rather than simply restricting or eliminating DEI programming, as the name ‘anti-DEI’ suggests, these laws seek to strengthen the state’s power in controlling public university voices. For example, Florida’s Individual Freedom Act (IFA), section 1000.05(4), prohibits university professors from expressing certain viewpoints during classroom instruction. Similarly, in Texas, the initial version of SB 17 contained language, now deleted, that would have effectively created a blacklist of university faculty and staff who violated the bill’s anti-DEI programming provisions. Both examples contain echoes of the McCarthy era and present substantial threats to the protection of academic freedom. (p. 212)

Threats to academic freedom and bans on DEI-based content and language present significant risks to teaching and learning. Attention to teaching and learning (what is taught and how) is a primary dimension of diversity efforts on college campuses. As

Wolf-Wendel (2024) argued, "...attempts to legislate what is acceptable to learn is predicted to have a chilling effect on the academy and will leave students unable to get out of college what they most deserve: a well-rounded education, critical thinking, and other professional skills" (p. 55). Importantly, Wolf-Wendel also pointed out that DEI offices contribute to important co-curricular learning on campus. As institutions shut down or make DEI offices less visible, co-curricular learning opportunities are also put at risk.

The current anti-DEI movement also risks closing off U.S. higher education from the rest of the world, shrinking our nation and weakening our institutions. For example, anti-DEI rhetoric in higher education has triggered a maelstrom of xenophobia that has negatively impacted both currently enrolled and prospective international students. This xenophobia has significant implications for the landscape of higher education in the U.S. (Knox, 2025). First and foremost, the U.S. is classified as "a high international student source country dependency risk" (Pawar, 2025). The U.S. maintains this categorization due to its heavy reliance on a steady flow of international students coming from a select few countries, some of which include China and India. The risk associated with high international student source country dependency is exacerbated by events like tumultuous diplomatic relations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and terrorist attacks (Pawar, 2025). The risk also lies in the fact that many U.S. higher education institutions rely on international student enrollment as a source of revenue (Cantwell, 2015). As a result of this reliance, higher education is sensitive to changes in international student enrollment and many institutions will face financial consequences.

In a 2020 survey, the Association for International Educators (NAFSA) found that institutions that reported tightening visa requirements as a chief reason for international student enrollment declines jumped from 37% in 2016 to 87% in 2019. The second most reported reason for the decline was the social and political environment (NAFSA, 2020). International graduate student enrollment has also been affected by recent cuts to federal research dollars that fund DEI-related research.

We can see the effects of the Trump administration plainly; international students report feeling less safe and less welcome in the U.S. (NAFSA, 2020) as the current

administration's xenophobia is no longer couched in policies but espoused boldly for all to see. A post by the Official White House Instagram account on February 14, 2025, shared a Valentine's Day card that read: "Roses are red, violets are blue, come here illegally and we'll deport you." The U.S. higher education system stands to lose a lot should it stop being a prime destination for international students to obtain their postsecondary education. Not only will current students be at risk, thus endangering their likelihood for completion; but prospective international students might encounter significant barriers that prevent them from coming into the U.S. for an education or outright dissuade them from pursuing a degree here altogether. The U.S. is already witnessing the negative consequences of recent change as other nations become better positioned to retain their own talent and seize upon opportunities to recruit American scholars, scientists, and researchers.

Notable Opportunities

However, in times of significant threat, opportunities also abound. In recent work, Garces and colleagues (2025) argued for building proactive coalitions made up of diverse stakeholders that enable a strategic, evidence-based approach to resisting efforts to dismantle DEI on college campuses. The authors point to the power of coalition efforts made by professional, advocacy, and policy organizations to support institutions of higher education and "build the capacity of institutional leaders, faculty, and students to navigate the pressures of the legal environment and disrupt a climate of suppression" (p. 7). Collective efforts can also pull together resources that facilitate legal action. Notably, the American Association of University Presidents filed a lawsuit that effectively challenges recent anti-DEI executive orders.

In the face of significant threats to pull federal funding, institutional leaders with much to lose benefit from a much larger higher education community, which can provide added support to push back by choosing not to practice anticipatory compliance. This is an opportunity for universities and colleges to stand on the right side of history by resisting the backward movement toward greater inequality. Importantly though, as Lange and Lee (2024) have argued, we must respond to attacks by centering humanity. This translates directly to individual classrooms where educators are encouraged to "build from a place of radical imagination" (Lange & Lee, 2024). Faculty are in a position to remind students

of the potential for a new future while collaboratively envisioning that future. Administrators can practice radical imagination by “moving beyond being reactive to the pendulum swings of sociopolitical forces and instead working toward equity-embedded university spaces” (p. 115).

Finally, this moment provides higher education leaders, scholars, and practitioners with the opportunity to reassess and rethink how we “do” DEI in higher education. This includes how we communicate to policymakers and a general public that is increasingly questioning the value of higher education. Even at its best, higher education in the U.S. is, and has always been, worthy of strong critique. Currently, the critique is dominated by the political Right and includes several myths about the divisive, expensive, low-quality nature of DEI programs (Harper et al., 2024). Although many in the academy argue that the current administration gets the critique wrong, DEI initiatives, their implementation, and the ways we have communicated their importance can stand revision. In this moment, swift and immediate change has also forced us to confront the way we confront. Patton Davis (2024) argued, “If conversations regarding DEI initiatives are going to be productive, then the approach has to be one less centered on attacking and misappropriating the meanings of words and initiatives” (p. 14). Instead, she suggested that we focus on “appreciating, understanding, and improving their function on campus” (p. 14).

Concluding Thoughts

Although this may not prove to be “the critical juncture of higher education” (Thelin, p. viii), it is indeed a critical moment in the history of American higher education. Speaking of history raises a final point of opportunity for the U.S. higher education to be self-reflexive about where we are and how we got here. For those of us positioned within higher education, it seems especially critical to turn the mirror unto thyself and consider why we see such decline in trust and confidence in our colleges and universities. What role has higher education played in influencing and shaping negative public perception? How do we in higher education reproduce elitism and contribute to political polarization? It also seems especially important to raise uncomfortable questions about how the changes we are seeing are indeed a product of the larger democratic process, rather than simply the result of unprecedented government overreach. In other words, in 2024,

Americans voted in change. Though responding to these difficult questions is beyond the purpose of this manuscript, we believe it is important to raise these questions for the field of higher education, globally. Importantly, these critical questions, along with political ideology, also span geographic boundaries and we stand to learn a great deal from how the U.S. system responds to continued efforts to upend its democratic institutions.

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