

EQUITY IN ACTION

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When the Pendulum Swings Back: *Rethinking DEI in a New Policy Climate*

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The Equity in Action Research and Strategy Brief Series aims to explore and feature key issues, plans for action, and practices that advance and inclusion within P-20 education. These briefs seek to address persistent disparities in student opportunities and outcomes. By synthesizing current research, examining policy implications, and highlighting successful interventions, the series intends to provide educators, policymakers, and stakeholders with actionable insights to create more equitable learning environments. This series is designed to provide insights and guidance on developing, enhancing, and sustaining pathways that support students' transitions across educational tiers. Strengthen partnerships among schools, colleges, employers, and community organizations to create cohesive, culturally responsive pathways for students.

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Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)¹ is under attack by a coordinated misinformation campaign led by federal and state actors, most prominently the Trump Administration. Many state departments of higher education and other types of governing boards have followed their lead despite challenges to the legality of executive orders. This issue is particularly alarming for institutions of higher education (IHEs) already facing financial instability, such as community colleges, which predominantly serve marginalized communities (McCamblay et al., 2023). Racialized organizations are especially susceptible to harm

when federal and state policymakers threaten educational funding streams. These institutions not only operate under heightened vulnerability but also play a vital role in advancing equity by supporting and empowering students of Color. Undermining their financial stability jeopardizes crucial infrastructure within institutions like community colleges that are created to support inclusive and transformative education. Campus leaders and educators aiming to avoid premature or excessive compliance with anti-DEI executive orders must learn to effectively counter misinformation about DEI. They also need to be prepared to defend the broad and diverse areas of work that have been misrepresented and targeted by the anti-DEI movement.

In this research brief, we uplift resistance efforts to conservative backlash to the

¹ We use the acronym DEI throughout this brief as it is the term utilized in Executive Order 14151, which was the motivation for this piece. However, we use this term to encompass a multitude of terms utilized in equity work including, but not limited to, DEIA (Conway et al., 2025), DEIB (Greenbaum, 2024), and IDEA (CultureAlly, n.d.).



expansion of who higher education, and systems in the U.S serve, and call campus educators and leaders to reflect on the purpose of DEI in the United States, avoid overcompliance with executive orders still under judicial review, and combat ahistorical and bigoted views.

The first step in this process is to ensure that campus leaders, educators, and stakeholders have a clear understanding of what DEI is and what it is not, as the anti-DEI movement aims to spread serious misinformation on what DEI means in higher education contexts. The sections that follow will discuss the history of DEI in postsecondary education, the current anti-DEI political climate, and recommendations for IHEs to consider as they navigate the current climate toward diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education: What DEI Is

Broadly, DEI efforts are designed to actualize promises of the U.S., such as economic and educational participation,

unalienable human rights, and liberty for all (McGowan et al., 2025). Specifically, they counter “enshrined systems of enslavement and racial, ethnic, gender, and economic subjugation” and advance principles of freedom and equality that historically benefited only a privileged few (McGowan et al., 2025, p. 3). DEI programs and services directly support marginalized individuals by expanding access to rights celebrated as American ideals. Within postsecondary education, the terms diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and accessibility are used to describe efforts that increase access to and completion of college for students, staff, and faculty with marginalized identities - including people of Color, people with disabilities, women, LGBTQ+ people, and nontraditional students. Although DEI strategies vary across IHEs, they share the goal of creating equitable campus environments by addressing the needs of groups historically denied access (Cumming et al., 2023).



DEI initiatives at the federal, state, and institutional levels are not new. These policies played crucial roles in expanding access to higher education beyond elite religious white men, who comprised the entirety of the college-going population until the late 1800s (Thelin, 2011). The Morrill-Land Grant Act of 1862 initiated a federal commitment to publicly funded agricultural and mechanical education - dramatically expanding access to working-class, rural students who were predominantly white (Geiger, 2014; Thelin, 2011). The over 10 million acres of land appropriated through the Morrill-Land Grant Act were acquired through the dispossession of Indigenous people through broken or coerced treaties, and violence (National Archives, n.d.). The seized lands were either sold or used to construct land grant colleges, like the University of Wisconsin, Iowa State University, the State University of New Jersey (now Rutgers), and the University of Missouri (U.S. Senate, n.d.). This process embedded expansionist settler colonial logics into the expansion of access to U.S higher education. While the Morrill-Land Grant Act marked a pivotal moment in expanding access, albeit through deeply problematic means, it was not the only federal effort to reshape who higher education serves. Building on this legacy, later federal policies continued to broaden access, particularly for historically marginalized communities.

Another notable federal effort to expand access occurred with the 1965 Higher Education Act, which Congress first

enacted and has since reauthorized multiple times to broaden access to higher education - through Pell Grants; funding for HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs); the establishment of the federal work-study program; and the development of TRIO initiatives supporting low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities (Brown, 2016). The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 came after the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1964, demonstrating the importance of addressing systemic racial and economic inequities not only within social, political, and economic systems, but also within educational systems.

At the state level, PA enacted Act 16 of 2019, establishing the Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver program. This program mandates all public and private postsecondary institutions in the state to waive tuition and mandatory fees for students who are or were in foster care (Commonwealth of PA, 2019). Similarly, NJ implemented the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) to provide tuition-free education at its 18 county colleges (Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, 2025). At the institutional level, several institutions have implemented policies to increase access and affordability of higher education. Allegheny College offers the Commitment to Access Program, covering 100% of tuition for low-income PA and OH students, while Carnegie Mellon University provides the

CMU Pathway Program, ensuring tuition-free education for low-income students as well (Beverford, 2025). Similarly, in a consistently conservative state like Texas, the University of Texas System has introduced the Texas Advance Commitment, which covers tuition for low-income families in Texas.

Although these federal, state, and institutional programs may not explicitly label themselves as “DEI” initiatives, they aim to support students from marginalized backgrounds who aspire to attend postsecondary institutions. Improving educational and economic mobility for marginalized and minoritized students continues to be a hard-fought battle in a system that was created to educate a white, religious elite. Creating an equitable experience for all students is essential for cultivating the wealth of knowledge and potential of the U.S. population.

What DEI Is Not: Combatting White Supremacy and Misinformation on DEI

When defining DEI programs and services, it is essential to clarify what they are not. As emphasized by CRT scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2022), college leaders are urged to actively combat misinformation that slander programs essential to the success of the nation. In this section, we offer information for advocates who want to battle misinformation campaigns among constituents who may be questioning equity work because of the current rhetoric around DEI.

DEI initiatives are not “illegal and immoral discrimination programs” (White House, 2025). While DEI programs and services benefit student retention, graduation rates, faculty, and staff retention (Cumming et al., 2023; Dudu, 2023), diversity has been widely understood as advantageous in government, business, and educational settings, through increasing economic gains (Franklin, 2013; Hubbard-Jackson, 2021). Furthermore, DEI programs and policies are essential to enhancing educational experiences, broadening individual perspectives, preparing students to enter a diverse workforce and society, and enriching the teaching and research environment of college communities (American Council on Education Board of Directors, 2012; Constanzo Carleton, 2021; Fine & Handelsman, 2010; Gasman, 2024). In fact, while DEI initiatives are often framed as primarily benefiting people of Color, research shows that white women have also experienced substantial gains—particularly in sectors like education and leadership. For instance, as of 2025, white women comprise 76% of chief DEI officer roles (Ellis, 2025). Despite this fact, right-wing political actors have constructed DEI programs and policy as a “radical ideology” that is harmful to American society and have outlined a plan - Project 2025 - that attacks DEI initiatives that would not only harm people of Color in education but also whites (Mader et al., 20214).

In relation to higher education, Project 2025 targets “reforms” towards research funding, federal aid, critical race theory in schools, and accreditation. In their coded language, anti-DEI arguments position DEI as problematic and “harmful” to white Americans. This ahistorical opinion seeks to erase years of systemic discrimination against people of Color to maintain white supremacy (NASEM, 2025). Anti-DEI rhetoric appears in one of the Trump administration’s executive orders, framing DEI as “taking away” opportunities and jobs from “hard-working” Americans, and that these programs and ideologies work against current civil rights laws (White House, 2025). The Supreme Court has ruled that most of the activities described as “DEI” are consistent with current constitutional standards, so long as institutions do not limit opportunities to students from a particular racial group or apply different standards to individual students (U.S.C., 2024; Troutt & Griffith, 2025). In contrast, the threats in Executive Order No. 14151 extend protection far beyond current civil rights legislation, offering “protection from discrimination” to groups already privileged by the U.S. educational system, including white, Asian, and Jewish people (Troutt & Griffith, 2025). This betrays the white supremacist mindset behind attacks on DEI, who are threatened by even marginal improvements in access for people of Color.


Current Attacks on DEI

While DEI initiatives in education have always been contested (e.g., desegregating schools, affirmative action in enrollment and hiring processes, and the Higher Education Act), we are amidst a pendulum swing between two starkly different administrations and their support (or lack thereof) towards DEI initiatives.

The Biden/Harris administration (which served from 2020-2024) was publicly in support of DEI policies and programs in higher education and provided over \$7 billion to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and increased Pell grants for all, including incarcerated individuals, further supporting diverse and equitable pathways towards higher education. Additionally, they signed Executive Order No. 13985 that included advancing educational equity, excellence, and economic opportunity for Black, Hispanic, and Native students (White House, 2020). In contrast, the current Trump administration’s Executive Order No. 14151 called for the termination of all projects related to DEI and threatened to revoke federal funding from IHEs should they not comply (White House, 2025). The influence of Executive Order No. 14151 and the Department of Education’s February 14 Dear Colleague letter (Trainor, 2025) on state and institutional levels has already been devastating. In tandem, state policies have begun to dismantle DEI initiatives and structures, with 135 bills filed as of June 2025, like Texas Senate Bill 17 and Ohio Senate Bill 1, which bans DEI offices on college campuses that accept

state funding (Chronicle Staff, 2025). According to sources, between 1,500 and 3,500 workers at the federal level have lost their jobs due to office closures; recent policies that prohibit the use of state funds on DEI efforts (Alabama Legislature, 2024; Fla. Stat. § 1004.06, 2024; Texas Legislature, 2025; Wyoming Legislature, 2025); and loss of funding due to grant terminations (Blake, 2025; U.S. National Science Foundation, 2025).

Despite the executive orders being under judicial review and state-level DEI bans failing to pass in many state legislatures, preemptive overcompliance has swept higher education institutions in the form of audits of DEI-related spending, closure or rebranding of DEI offices, firing of



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student affairs staff, and blocking DEI or equity-oriented faculty research projects (Dorning et al., 2025; Federal Judicial Center, n.d). Notable examples include the University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Virginia Community College system (Butterworth, 2025; Cline, 2025; Gretzinger et al., 2025; Weissman, 2025).

Attacks on DEI in education have been extended beyond initial attacks on elite institutions to dismantle alternative educational pathways, which are vital supports for low-income and otherwise marginalized students. The administration's attacks on DEI in higher education have already had a detrimental impact on institutions like community colleges and federally funded trade schools. There have been sweeping cuts to federally funded trade school programs, like Job Corps, which offers career training, housing, and career assistance. The termination of Job Corps programs will affect over 25,000 young people (Cavazos, 2025). Community colleges, such as the Community College of Aurora, have suffered financial losses, which have resulted in the discontinuation of resources crucial to the livelihood of the communities they serve (Weissman, 2025).

Community colleges continue to be viewed as the most accessible pathway to higher education, especially for minoritized students, yet are severely under-resourced (McCamby et al., 2023).

Therefore, threats to multiple federal funding streams, such as the Department of Education, Department of Labor, and the funds provided by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), could mean that already under-resourced institutions are at an even higher risk of losing even more funding. This loss of funding would then push racially minoritized students further away from an equitable pathway to higher education.

Impact of Attacks on DEI

Students are losing critical resources, and people are losing their jobs. Across the country, colleges and universities are shutting down DEI offices and laying off staff doing vital work, supporting students of Color (Chronicle Staff, 2025). These offices have provided essential services—like multicultural centers, identity-based housing and graduation ceremonies, DEI training, funding for student organizations, and programs that help marginalized students transition into college life. They have also been responsible for upholding nondiscrimination policies (Smith & Gasman, 2025). These are not merely symbolic efforts; this proven support helps students succeed; deeming these programs and services as discriminatory and unlawful will negatively impact outcomes such as belonging, persistence, and feelings of support for students. The threat to these outcomes may strike minoritized students the hardest, particularly as the student bodies of community colleges continue to become more diverse (Hubbard-Jackson, 2021).

While the scale of the anti-DEI backlash is reaching new heights, there are several key examples that illustrate the potential backlash that previous attempts to remove hard-fought-for access and support for marginalized groups historically underrepresented in higher education. We include this information to highlight the damage that Executive Order No. 14151 can create and the urgency of maintaining support for marginalized communities in higher education.

Legal Precedent: SFFA V. Harvard

The impact of the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* case illustrates the potential negative effects of anti-DEI legislation. The lawsuit against Harvard was filed by Students for Fair Admissions, a conservative group headed by Edward Blum, a longtime challenger of civil rights legislation and backed by conservative lobbyists invested in protecting white supremacy in higher education by removing civil rights era protections (ACLU, 2023). While the case was framed as an interrogation of race-conscious admissions, the movement has been tinged with white entitlement, and the feelings that race-conscious admissions challenge the privileges that white control over higher education has guaranteed to wealthy whites. Even the impact of the original lawsuit, which only legally applied to undergraduate admissions, has been misrepresented and used in ways that distort its actual meaning and scope. This was coupled with scare tactics, when

Blum mailed a letter about the verdict to the presidents, deans of admissions, and general counsels of an undisclosed list of public universities and private schools (Amponsah, 2023). This has created a much broader chilling effect on equity measures.

This is called 'over compliance.' The case made no changes to the legality of recruitment efforts, financial aid programs, or race-neutral admissions metrics based on all the other factors beyond the scope of the law (Sotomayor, 2023). And yet, the effects of over-compliance and over-interpretation of the affirmative action case include the admission and enrollment of fewer Black and Brown students, especially at top colleges (AFJ, 2023), halting of DEI programs for faculty and staff (Babb, 2024), and major impacts on the campus climate for students of Color.

Similarly, when California eliminated affirmative action through Proposition 209, there was a marked effect on racial diversity within student demographics (Mickey-Pabello, 2020). Studies measuring the impact of Proposition 209 on underrepresented minority (URM) students found that URM degree attainment at both the undergraduate and graduate level declined overall (Bleemer, 2020); probability of URM admission at at least one University of California (UC) campus declined (Antonovics & Backes, 2013); and URM students reported feeling less respected at the UC than at peer institutions (Kidder, 2021). Community

colleges were particularly impacted by Proposition 209, as they were forced to dismantle race and cultural efforts meant to increase retention, improve transfer pathways, and degree completion (Felix et al, 2020). "Inclusion" of Black and Brown students has always been conditional, but as the federal law changes, these protections continue to shrink, which demonstrates that in times of political pressure the U.S. government and institutions of higher education often abandon policies created to provide equitable access to higher education (Christanto, 2025; Tsosie, 2022). With these examples in mind, we have recommendations for institutional actors looking to mitigate the effects of the crackdown on DEI.

Recommendations for Approaching DEI

Advocacy and Resistance Work

Campus leaders and educators may feel powerless as executive orders have halted much of the work they are deeply invested in. However, in this section, we provide reflection points to allow leaders to consider what they collectively value and want to protect for their students, what the legal restrictions are around these values, and how to organize to withstand illegal federal or state pressures to curb academic freedoms, freedom of speech, and educational best practices. While our list is not exhaustive, as our socio-political environment is constantly evolving, it serves as a starting point for learning, collaboration, and action.

In the current climate of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI) bans, personal responsibility, competency, and knowledge in DEI are more critical than



ever for individuals across all roles in higher education. As the next generation of critical higher education scholars, we provide four recommendations for institutional actors who are invested in countering the dismantling of DEI: stay alert and informed on attacks on DEI, seek and engage in critical DEI learning and training, divest from white supremacy culture, and develop plans for the future of DEI.

1. Stay alert and informed on attacks on DEI.

Since 2023, The Chronicle of Higher Education has been tracking the national evolution of colleges' DEI offerings in response to political and legislative pressures through its [Dismantling of DEI](#) tool (Gretzinger et al., 2025). As of June 2025, it encompasses actions from over 350 institutions, including DEI office rebrandings and closures, position

terminations, and institutional policy changes. In tandem with the DEI Legislation Tracker discussed below, this resource can be helpful in identifying partner institutions to discuss innovative ways to maintain equity commitments despite opposition and pressures.

The Chronicle's [DEI Legislation Tracker](#), a sister tool to The Chronicle's Dismantling of DEI Tracker, provides a real-time overview and updates on state bills that aim to prohibit DEI initiatives and efforts (Chronicle Staff, 2025). This legislation includes those that ban DEI offices, staff, mandatory training, diversity statements, and identity-related considerations in admissions and employment. This can be a useful tool for identifying states that may be facing similar challenges in the DEI space as potential partners and collaborators.

2. Seek and Engage in Critical DEI Learning and Training

While mandatory DEI training is under attack, it is imperative to seek out training and learning opportunities on DEI. A great free training is the [CASCaDE Change Agent Empowerment Toolkit from the NCID](#). Training is a great way to develop critical consciousness, which involves recognizing how individual identities and experiences influence our perception of institutional contexts (Bussey et al., 2024). By enhancing awareness of how individuals with



different identities experience academia, identifying the need for collective action to create more equitable learning environments becomes attainable. This approach encourages all members of the higher education community to reflect on their roles in advancing DEI, considering not only individual dispositions towards equity-centered change but also understanding equity as a fundamental responsibility.

DEI has been limited in its practical ability to support or advance access, belonging, and equity for marginalized communities within racialized institutions, as it is often among the first programs cut when budget constraints arise. So now, more than ever, is the time to reimagine what policies and practices could support marginalized groups. The administration's attacks on higher education and DEI will have a lasting impact for the years to come, so it is imperative for IHEs to take a stand (Rodriguez, 2025). As a field, this is an opportunity to counter misinformation on DEI, stay grounded in our values (Spitfire Strategies, 2025), continue to grow through learning and training, and reimagine rather than be complicit.

3. **Divest from White Supremacy Culture.**

Learning about and divesting from white supremacy culture is a lifelong journey for people of Color and white

folks alike. We recommend checking out [\(divorcing\) WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE Coming Home to Who We Really Are](#) by Tema Okun. White Supremacy Culture describes the mental paradigm that has been taught to most of us by organizational systems that were set up to serve only white interests. This creates many unspoken cultural norms that are actively harmful, like individualism, which insists on being seen as an individual, rather than acknowledging systemic privileges afforded to your group (sometimes referred to as meritocracy) and valuing competition over cooperation. Especially in an anti-DEI political climate, working together is essential.

4. **Developing plans for the future of DEI.**

The attack on DEI represents a strategic attack from conservatives. To rise to the challenge of reimagining and reimplementing DEI, a reckoning with the fact that DEI efforts in higher education have often been sabotaged by racialized organizational systems that attempt to maintain white supremacy in higher education through inadequate funding, understaffing, and administrative burdens (Ferguson, 2012; Gandara et al., 2024) is paramount. This moment provides an opportunity as a field to consider what the true purpose of DEI is, and the resources needed to create a more equitable version of higher education. Rather than

investing in diversity programs aimed at changing people's hearts, it is crucial to remember that no ideal diversity program exists (Dixon Hall, 2018; Hubbard-Jackson, 2022). Instead, our equity-minded efforts in the "new DEI era" could focus on improving campus cultures, understanding the influence of intersectionality, and developing cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence can be thought of as how well a person functions in situations in which there is cultural diversity (Ang et al., 2007). It is cultivated through interpersonal dialogue and authentic connection, which could be facilitated through training delivered to students, faculty, and staff alike (Dixon Hall, 2018; Hubbard-Jackson, 2022). A focus on cultural intelligence represents just one possibility for the future of DEI work; we encourage leaders to brainstorm and explore further domains of importance and modalities to utilize that can support future DEI efforts.

decline significantly over the ensuing years. Furthermore, the quality of their educational experiences is likely to decline as they lack the necessary support to navigate their college experiences. At the same time, we must not bring back DEI as it was but rather put forward DEI work that seeks to be transformative and liberatory in the educational landscape (Christanto, 2025). While DEI has been both highly politicized and politically co-opted (Gasman, 2024), we have the opportunity to be creative in how we reframe and reintroduce DEI efforts to truly fulfill the promises community colleges and higher education as a whole make to their students, faculty, staff, and communities. The information and strategies provided in our recommendations can represent the beginning of that process.

Implications and Conclusion

While current attacks on DEI present what might feel like insurmountable challenges, we call on institutional change agents to resist the erasure of DEI work in higher education. We stand at a critical juncture, where hard-fought support will cease to exist if the necessary measures are not taken. Without offices, programs, and structures that support Black, Brown, and other students at the margins, the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of these students may

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