

Evidence-Based Responses To

Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses

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Opening Statement

By Dr. Shaun Harper

On March 7, 2024, the United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce hosted a hearing titled, “Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses.” The two-hour hearing overflowed with misinformation, misunderstandings, and reckless mischaracterizations. Despite being nails-on-chalkboard excruciating, I made myself watch it three times, plus I read written testimonies the four witnesses submitted and a full transcript of the hearing. Ultimately, I am glad I spent so much time engaging with this mostly erroneous politicized attack on DEI in higher education, as doing so inspired me to organize this important collection of responses.

This particular congressional hearing was a waste of taxpayers’ dollars. More alarming is how emblematic it is of what’s occurring in K-12 school districts and on some college campuses; on conservative cable news stations, podcasts, and social media platforms; and in state legislatures and governors’ offices across America. Lies about DEI initiatives are being told and hurtful generalizations are being made about the professionals who lead them.

Those of us who know better have too long deemed ridiculous, unsubstantiated claims that DEI obstructionists make unworthy of response. We have dismissed hearings like the one that occurred on Capitol Hill last week as political theatre. Meanwhile, the campaign to dismantle DEI is very much succeeding, as evidenced by the well-coordinated avalanche of more than 100 legislative bills in 44 states across the country over the past three years. So far, 18 states have banned the spending of public funds on DEI-related activities in K-12 schools; eight states have inflicted the same harm on higher education institutions. And then there are the chilling effects and self-imposed local bans on DEI, both of which are incalculable at this point.

Thankfully, I am not the only person who knows better. I have friends who are not only impressively smart and accomplished, but many of them are also courageous. Like me, they care enough about our democracy to do something good with what they know. Thankfully, 11 of them generously agreed to contribute to this written response to the March 7 hearing. Ours is not merely a collection of responses to last week’s hearing. We also embrace our larger responsibility as citizens and as scholars to set the record straight about what is and isn’t happening in the name of DEI on college and university campuses. Our individual research, as well as our appreciation for rigorous studies that other smart colleagues have published over the past few decades, poised us to offer evidence-based responses not only to the congressional hearing, but to the larger political campaign against DEI. We value evidence over anecdotes. We value democracy over divisiveness.

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Expert Response

Dr. Mitchell J. Chang

Important issues concerning higher education were raised in the March 7 congressional hearing. Research that informed the consideration of race-conscious admissions in higher education can shed light on many of those challenges because several of those studies addressed similar concerns. I know this because my own research findings were cited to inform admissions policies and practices, including most recently for the U.S. Supreme Court deliberations concerning both Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this response, I draw from peer-reviewed research findings to illuminate three issues raised in the hearings. Those issues concern the state of the empirical research, the work regarding civil rights compliance, and the consideration of group membership in practice.

One of the most puzzling testimonies for me came from Dr. Jay Greene who testified that, “We’ve heard claims that DEI is meant to make students feel included, improve retention and graduation, but we haven’t heard any evidence of that. There’s a reason for it: I don’t believe that evidence exists.” Not only does the evidence exist, I furnished some of it in a peer-reviewed journal article 25 years ago.¹ Multiple meta-analyses have since been published. Nida Denson published the first meta-analysis on the impact of diversity-related activities on college students 15 years ago.²

As the research grew, one well-established pattern that emerged is that the impact of undergraduate education is appreciably enhanced by diversity-related efforts on colleges and universities, including those with the goal of increasing access for underrepresented students. I summarized some of this literature in my expert testimony submitted for the UNC Chapel Hill case.³ But, a simple Google search will yield websites that host some key publications, such as the University of Colorado’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Resource Hub.⁴ The issue for those who are serious about examining the evidence is not that there are too few empirical studies, but rather that sorting through the evidence can be both daunting and overwhelming given the large number of relevant peer-reviewed publications.

This leads to another comment by Dr. Greene that can benefit from a more thorough review of empirical evidence. He claimed that, “Compliance with the civil rights obligations of universities can be done without gigantic DEI bureaucracies.” To appreciate the work needed for campuses to remain compliant, it is important to understand their obligations. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, for example, universities must protect their students’ freedom to learn without discrimination.

If a student files allegations of discrimination or harassment, campuses must respond to those allegations by taking swift and effective actions to assess them for harm and to provide a safe space to learn. If corrective actions are needed, addressing the specific complaint is just the beginning and not the end. Campuses are also obligated to take prompt and effective steps to prevent discrimination and harassment from reoccurring. In other words, Title VI obligations require institutions to address both the reported harm and the educational context by taking corrective action to prevent future harm. Each one of those obligations under just Title VI alone is a demanding undertaking, so too are requirements for compliance with Title IX and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Similarly, realizing the educational benefits associated with having a diverse student population is a major undertaking, which requires a multifaceted approach that considers both the student composition and the educational context. As such, research informing the conditions that either maximize or hinder those benefits can be instructive in considering how campuses fulfill their civil rights obligations. One well-

established pattern from this body of research is that encounters with people of different backgrounds contribute to undergraduate learning.

The research also shows that the benefits associated with those encounters are moderated by both the quality of the interactions and the quality of the educational context that shapes them.⁵ Therefore, if campuses seek to maximize related educational benefits, studies suggest that they must address their educational contexts in ways that improve both the quantity and quality of those encounters. In short, addressing enrollment alone is necessary, but insufficient. The potential for learning associated with diversity depends on the quality of the educational contexts for supporting those student experiences that lead to benefits.

Given those findings, one would also expect campuses to do more than just respond to complaints, but also to address the quality of the educational context if the overarching interest is to prevent harm and to protect students' freedom to learn without discrimination. In thinking about addressing quality, decades of research concerning how college affects students have conclusively shown that the relationship between students and the college environment is both reciprocal and dynamic.⁶ In other words, there are tight interconnections between individual change, institutional change, and social change. Subsequently, campuses must simultaneously account for many different, but interrelated moving parts in order to effectively address the quality of an educational setting.

Approaching quality in this way is not just a conceptual advantage; it is also expected by the Office of Civil Rights. When campuses undergo a Title VI investigation, for example, they are asked not just to document how they process and address complaints, but also to provide an inventory of corrective actions that prevent future harm, which will most certainly include efforts housed in the DEI office. If there are findings of a Title VI violation, I suspect that campuses will be asked to do more rather than less to protect and support vulnerable populations, which again will most certainly involve the DEI office. Even if DEI offices are not responsible for handling civil rights compliance, they play a major role in fulfilling an institution's duty to address the quality of the educational context. In fulfilling this duty, the research concerning diversity shows that by employing a more comprehensive and coordinated approach, campuses increase their overall organizational cohesiveness and capacity to improve the quality of the educational context.

The work of DEI offices is to reduce harm and improve success for vulnerable populations. However, it is mischaracterized by some as being too obsessed with group membership, which Dr. Erec Smith claimed in the hearing, "skirts individuality and is all about group consciousness...everybody is a group member and not an individual." Likewise, Dr. Stanley Goldfarb testified that, "once you start thinking about people as members of groups... one of the natural consequences of it is divisiveness and antagonism between groups." I very much appreciate being treated as an individual and for me, I take offense to being treated based on Asian stereotypes. At the same time, if we are serious about addressing the harms experienced by students, which are rooted in historical injustice, we have to also consider an individual student's risk of experiencing this harm based on her or his identity group.

To illustrate the importance of and nuances associated with group membership, consider the research concerning "Stereotype Threat." I highlight Stereotype Threat here because most of what we know about it emerged from studies that utilized experimental design, which provides the strongest methodology for testing causation. According to Claude Steele, negative racial stereotypes concerning the intellectual ability of disadvantaged groups (e.g., racial minorities, women in male-dominated fields) can undermine the academic performance of members of those groups under certain conditions.⁷ The hindered

performance can be explained partly by heightened anxiety associated with the fear that one's own actions will confirm negative stereotypes about one's own group's intellectual capacity. While most students experience some anxiety over being negatively evaluated, Steele argues that students who belong to groups often targeted with negative intellectual stereotypes not only risk embarrassment and failure but also risk confirming those negative perceptions of the group. This threat of being reduced to negative stereotypes in various situational contexts can lead to increased anxiety, which then depresses performance.

There are two especially consequential individual attributes associated with the intensity of stereotype threat. According to Steele, only members of a group who identify with schooling (or its various domains) may be threatened by societal stereotypes that explicitly link to intellectual competence.⁸ In other words, a negative stereotype must first involve a domain that is relevant to an individual's self-identity if that stereotype will become threatening to that individual. If the student does not identify with the domain, Steele claims that stereotype threat will have very little, if any, effect on that individual. Additionally, according to Aronson et al., the degree to which a person is exposed to stereotypes about his or her group enhances "stigma-consciousness," and those who are more conscious of their group's negative stigma are also more vulnerable to stereotype threat.⁹

Consistent with those expectations, my colleagues and I found that highly domain-identified underrepresented racial minority students who also reported having higher frequencies of negative racial experiences were considerably more likely to transfer out of their initial science majors compared to their similarly domain-identified minority counterparts who reported having fewer of the same negative racial experiences.¹⁰ While not an experimental study, our findings confirm that Stereotype Threat operates at the group level but is a situational and not an internal problem because the risk of experiencing threat varies for individuals of the same group across different situations. Still, if a student of a group that is at risk of experiencing stereotype threat is not placed in a situation where the stereotype is salient, she or he will not likely experience any related anxiety.

Unfortunately, this threat is especially salient within a higher education context, where deeply embedded societal stereotypes regarding intellectual competence are especially relevant.¹¹ Given the high risk of this harm for some groups in academic settings, it seems quite appropriate, if not necessary, to pay close attention to an individual student's group membership when attempting to correct for harm. At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that the risk of harm is the same for all members of the same group. So, reducing harm in practice requires attention to a combination of attributes, including but not limited to group membership. The comments by some witnesses in the hearing, however, would lead us to believe that thinking of people as groups necessarily robs students of individuality. That, however, is simply not how it works in employing evidence-based practice.

While I take issue with several claims made in the hearing, I share with the witnesses the belief that colleges and universities play a key role in our society. One of their overarching purposes is to offer a vibrant intellectual space to seek truth by engaging with and building upon the existing knowledge base, and then sharing that knowledge. I believe that we do this best when we bring together people who hold different viewpoints and perspectives shaped by different experiences and backgrounds. Such a diverse setting increases the chances that we will look and think beyond our limited sphere of association and be exposed to and challenged by the most thought-provoking ideas, pressing problems, and strongest evidence. This kind of exposure not only expands and sharpens our own individual thinking but also helps us better recognize shared interests, which leads us to forge deeper bonds across difference to offer new discoveries and innovative solutions to address real-world problems. The possibility of achieving those

interests improves significantly when campuses are intentional and do not leave the educational process to chance, hence the importance of DEI professionals.

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Expert Response

Dr. Eddie R. Cole

I am not writing to defend diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses. Without doubt, there are fair critiques of *some* DEI offices, initiatives, and programs. DEI professionals, like any other group of campus officials, are not above critique or assessment. As an educational historian, however, I am writing to defend the dismissal of American history. I am concerned by how recent debates over DEI *intentionally* ignore the past.

Dominant arguments for and against DEI are too often narrowly framed as new problems. But that is rarely true. Most issues that people complain about today have long existed. This prevalence of mistruths and manipulated arguments were evident during the March 7 congressional hearing. “Ineffective” and “excessive” (which appeared in its title) are appropriate terms to describe the two-hour hearing. Many problems were discussed, few solutions were offered. Here, I highlight three comments made by members of Congress and expert witnesses and offer some historical framing to rethink said comments toward solutions.

First, committee chairperson Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT) opened the hearing by saying:

“The impact of DEI is seen in the indoctrination of students as they undergo mandatory racial bias education. Based on their race, each student is deemed an irredeemable oppressor, or a member of the hapless, hopeless, and weak oppressed. And my Jewish friends, if you’re wondering about the surprising outgrowth of antisemitism now raging on our college campuses, this is the genesis. DEI teaches that at the very top of the oppressor pyramid is the Jewish race.”

It is disingenuous to blame DEI as the cause of the most recent instances of antisemitism in higher education. Unfortunately, antisemitism has been prevalent on college campuses long before DEI was established. We can start 100 years ago.

In the 1920s, many of America’s most notable campuses— like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale — discriminated against Jewish applicants. Academic leaders in New England weighed a proposal made by Brown University dean Otis Everett Randall, who suggested the “limitation in the enrollment of Jews and Negroes.” Those campus officials’ distaste toward Jewish applicants resulted in many campuses adopting formal quotas to limit the number Jewish students. New applicant requirements were implemented to make the quotas effective. Prospective students needed to include photographs with applications, answer questions about their religion, and participate in interviews. The results were clear. At Harvard, for instance, the percentage of Jewish students plummeted from around 25% at the start of the 1920s to as low as 10% by the Class of 1930. This approach was their solution to the so-called “Jewish problem.” Historian Marcia G. Synnott has written extensively about these early instances of Jewish discrimination.

But Americans should not dismiss academic leaders’ anti-Jewish decisions in the 1920s as simply a symptom of an era marked by the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924. Yes, there was dominant political and social desire to block immigration; however, quotas did not only exist on college campuses during the 1920s or 1930s. As late as 1950, Sarah Lawrence College maintained its Jewish quotas, upholding the decades-long anti-Jewish sentiment held by many academic leaders.

History also demonstrates that Jewish quotas were eventually rescinded, but antisemitism did not stop once Jewish students were more widely admitted to more institutions. The antisemitic policies and

practices gave way to other forms of discrimination and violence on campuses. In 1989, three Jewish students at Brooklyn College were attacked after leaving a party at Hillel House. Two were hospitalized. That incident, and the headlines that followed, speak for themselves:

- In 1989, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article under the headline: “Anti-Jewish Bias Grows on Campus.”
- By 1993, *The Jewish Post* published an article under the headline: “U.S. Jewish Students Face Growing Antisemitism.”
- In 1998, another headline: “With College Anti-Semitism on the Rise, Student Editors touring Israel and Poland get Quick Holocaust Education.”
- Three years later, “Report Finds Anti-Semitic Bias at Minnesota College” read another.
- And by 2005, the headline “Hearing Held on Campus Anti-Semitism” appeared.

The point is well illustrated. The past century is filled with dozens (perhaps even hundreds) of headlines about rising antisemitism on college campuses. One could simply redact the date, and the headlines and news articles sadly could be from 1974 or 2024.

Therefore, Rep. Owens’ claim that DEI is “the genesis” of contemporary campus antisemitism could not be more historically inaccurate. The reality is many college campuses, and American higher education writ large, have long histories of antisemitism. The anti-Jewish sentiment was well-documented by scholars and journalists alike for decades before DEI offices, initiatives, and programs existed. But more productive, solution-oriented questions should be: Why does antisemitism exist across much of American higher education despite DEI offices? And how can history better inform elected officials’ decisions regarding this century-old problem?

Second, Stanley Goldfarb, a retired University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine professor, expressed his desire for medical education to focus only on science. Goldfarb feels future doctors are not trained enough in medicine compared to seminars and courses that emphasize ending racism in medical practices. When asked by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) how can doctors identify and address the disproportionate numbers of Black mothers’ deaths during childbirth “without involving discussion about race,” part of Goldfarb’s response included:

“There are a lot of social issues involved here, but the issue that I have focused on, it’s not because women are being mistreated when they show up to have their babies. I think, it’s Black women now are quite terrified to deliver their babies in hospitals because they’ve been told that this kind of bias is going on, and it’s just not correct.”

Here is another instance where history provides more context for a present-day problem. History is especially helpful to discussing science, and doctors should agree. Doctors often frame their diagnoses by evaluating an individual patient’s medical history. Therefore, as much as Goldfarb stressed the desire to have medical schools only focus on the science of medicine, his final comment during the hearing admitted that: “There are a lot of social issues involved here.”

That was an insightful statement for Goldfarb who opposes DEI and sees little-to-no use for prospective physicians (and presumably students in science, technology, engineering and math courses) to learn about social issues. But doctors are also human, and science has been riddled with bias. For example, eugenics – the scientific belief there could be better-quality humans through breeding certain races – was widely popular during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Now nearly universally dismissed by researchers, the past reminds Americans that many scientists subscribed to those beliefs, and they crafted distinguished careers built around those racist fallacies.

I suspect Goldfarb and others who oppose DEI would also frown upon the eugenics era. I also suspect they would say society, and scholarship for that matter, is more sophisticated today. Those beliefs are in the past and behind us, I think they would argue. But the issue is, at one point, those old ideas shaped medical practice and social policy, and the effects of those practices and policies were felt by real people. Therefore, no different than families can pass on positive family histories, families can also relay histories of trauma, fear, and concern – even those at the hands of medical professionals. The past is too powerful for doctors to dismiss patients’ concerns as “just not correct,” and a solution-centered response could have focused on why Black mothers believe in medical bias and what can be done to help address their beliefs.

In closing, I highlight comments from Jay Greene, one of the expert witnesses and a Heritage Foundation Research Fellow, who said this during the March 7 hearing:

“At a minimum, we need to starve universities of the funds they use to build DEI bureaucracies.”

If DEI funding were halted, I would challenge DEI opponents to support a robust teaching of history, to increase the number of tenure-track faculty members, and to bolster the commitment to academic freedom as an alternative use of the millions of dollars currently used across American higher education toward DEI.

The unfortunate issue of antisemitism is not a new problem. Elected officials, students, campus administrators, and others need more historical depth to understand and solve it. The sad reality that Black mothers, regardless of income or education level, have higher rates of maternity mortality than women of other races and, thus, fear hospitals is also an old problem. Those concerns resonated with Black families before medical schools established DEI offices. The history of this problem is important for doctors to know. And there are numerous other issues on college campuses that have histories that extend before the existence of DEI offices and the professionals who lead them. Those histories are ripe for the present.

Regrettably, when listening to the congressional hearing, I was not confident that DEI opponents want complex teachings of history to grapple with our contemporary challenges. Many aspects of history are being banned from classrooms in numerous states. As a result, the debates involve people who do not care about the long history of hate and bias on college campuses. Instead, they ignore the past and frame today’s issues as new in an effort to disband and discredit DEI.

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Expert Response

Dr. Lori Patton Davis

Several points expressed during the March 7 congressional hearing were problematic and completely wrong. DEI opponents referenced it as a racist ideology and a bureaucracy designed to prohibit individualism and promote a divisive worldview. They asserted that DEI professionals are overcompensated and likened their employment to a “jobs program.” Too much funding is being funneled into these presumably ineffective efforts that are infantilizing to Black people and discriminatory toward Jewish students, multiple people argued throughout the hearing.

Much of what was shared regarding the so-called ineffectiveness of DEI focused on medical education. One witness argued that DEI was inconsequential and a waste of time because it prevented students from learning the clinical skills needed to serve patients. Further, an argument was made that DEI was not relevant to addressing existing health disparities. As a result of current DEI initiatives, a speaker indicated medical students were being trained as social workers, rather than as doctors and medical professionals. Most egregious among the troubling commentary was the idea that DEI is not just pervasive, but a cancerous threat to college campuses.

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. The conversation should instead underscore the task of appreciating, understanding, and improving their function on college campuses. In response to the recent hearing, below are five ways to address the conversation in more intelligible ways.

DEI Initiatives Are Dynamic, Not Singular

One issue undergirding political attacks is the construction of DEI as singular. However, DEI initiatives are robust and differ across institutional contexts based upon the needs of particular campus communities. DEI initiatives are not all the same; positioning them as such allows for a wholesale erasure of any one effort that might promote equality of opportunity. Those most opposed to DEI initiatives engage in language maneuvering to (mis)treat them as a single entity, rather than multiple entities designed to address real issues on campuses including racism, gender bias, hate crimes, physical violence, student isolation, and affordability, to name a few. DEI initiatives must be acknowledged for the multiple ways they address campus climate and culture to ensure student, faculty, and staff success and opportunities.

DEI is Neither Racist Nor Solely Race-Based

DEI opponents often make diversity synonymous with race and race synonymous with Black people. This is a problem because diversity is much broader than racial diversity and Black people do not represent the only racial groups in this country. Narrow comparisons like these make DEI monolithic in nature and associated with a static narrative in which Black students, faculty, and staff are the primary beneficiaries of DEI initiatives. This line of thinking limits the variety of ways we can expand and collectively think about diversity.

Some DEI initiatives may be designed to address racism and bias incidents on campus, while others may focus more on women students and increasing their representation in STEM fields. Campuses may establish first-generation support mechanisms to help students navigate their journeys. Similarly,

residential learning communities and associated courses may be designed to promote students' personal development and understanding of their histories and cultures.

Clubs and organizations allow for students with shared interests and backgrounds to convene, engage in affirming and culturally-inclusive programming, and provide peer support. Campuswide initiatives may represent a strategy to engage the entire community on a pressing global issue and to promote broad dialogue across difference. While some initiatives may be designed to address the needs of specific populations that have been largely underrepresented, disenfranchised, or prevented from experiencing the fullness of college environments, DEI initiatives, at their core, emphasize belongingness, critical thinking and community engagement, cultural recognition and celebration, and institutional accountability for needed cultural transformation on campus.

DEI Does Not Exist in Opposition to Merit

DEI initiatives do not oppose merit. Instead, they complement each other and ensure institutions promote equitable participation in merit-based opportunities. However, that DEI and merit are at odds is rooted in the flawed assumption that participation occurs on a level playing field and those who sit at the margins of society are there because they did not try hard enough. They did not pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The reality is that most people believe in the importance of merit and doing what it takes to achieve, such as earning admission to college, applying for scholarships, and pursuing other critical resources needed to get to, through and out of college. However, merit alone is insufficient to account for the many ways that people who do not benefit equally from presumed "equality of opportunity."

In other words, what sense does it make to pull myself up by my bootstraps if I do not have access to boots, or I have access to the wrong boots, or the boots that best fit me are banned, or if I am subjected to policies and processes that only recognize certain types of boots? The conversation regarding merit is moot if the playing field is unlevel from the beginning. There are historical truths regarding the unlevel playing field that permeates our society and its higher education institutions.¹ Like DEI initiatives, access to books and other resources that tell the accurate history of our country's unlevel playing field are also banned or under attack.

DEI is Not Perfect

DEI initiatives are imperfect, yet, they represent a huge improvement over what previously existed on college campuses. These initiatives can be important facilitators for addressing a host of issues in higher education. Still, we need more research and empirical investigation into which initiatives work well and which need to be revamped. We certainly know DEI initiatives exist to provide access, undergird policies that promote equity, increase sense of belonging, and facilitate welcoming campus environments for all students, faculty and staff. However, we need more data to increase and enhance the public's general understanding of why they are critical to college campuses, the workforce, and society broadly. In other words, we do not need to dismantle campus DEI initiatives. Instead, we need to study them and learn more about them to challenge the sweeping attacks to which they are being subjected.

A study that three colleagues and I conducted found that between 1968 and 2018, only 45 articles had been published focusing on the study of specific DEI initiatives.² The DEI initiatives included student support services, curriculum, administration and leadership, and institutional policy. The studies focused on cross-cultural engagement, benefits of such engagement to white students, and the importance of

dialoguing across difference. These are important benefits, but are not substantive enough for providing a more robust understanding of which DEI initiatives are successful and why.

DEI is Not a Cancer

Efforts to obliterate DEI equate these initiatives with cancer. However, this comparison is wildly inaccurate. For argument's sake, what if DEI initiatives were cancerous? Would we expect our elected officials to legislate the word "cancer" from our lexicon? No. How, then, does erasure of the words "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion" address concerns regarding DEI initiatives? In his book, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, Allan Johnson states, "If we dispense with the words we make it impossible to talk about what's really going on and what it has to do with us. And if we can't do that, then we can't see what the problems are or how we might make ourselves part of the solution to them."³ Similarly, if we dispense with the words guiding DEI initiatives, we allow no space at all to actually address how DEI initiatives are implemented and the extent to which they serve people on campuses.

If DEI initiatives were cancerous (as troubling as that sounds), would there not be millions of dollars funneled toward research to understand the circumstances at the root of why DEI initiatives exist in the first place? Would we not work to explore how the issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence penetrate college campuses, making specific initiatives wholly necessary? What if the American DEI Society, National DEI Institute, the DEI Research Foundation, and the American Association for DEI Research existed, just as similar organizations exist to fight cancer and its underlying causes? Might the extension of resources in this way bring us closer to understanding and addressing the root causes driving the need for DEI initiatives? If DEI initiatives are the cancerous scourge House Republicans claim it to be, then why not pour the necessary resources into researching and assessing the conditions that precipitate creation of DEI initiatives, rather than attempting the wholesale dismantling of them?

I strongly urge the Republicans on The House Committee on Education and The Workforce to look no further than the composition of the 118th Congress, which is the most diverse in history across race, gender, LGBTQ status, age, and immigrant status.⁴ The increase in representational diversity is no small feat and does not happen without diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at the forefront and a range of voices, backgrounds, and perspectives at the table. There is more remaining work in terms of making Congress reflective of the diverse composition of our country. Similarly, much more work can and should be done to ensure higher education encourages and reflects diverse peoples, cultures, voices, backgrounds, needs, and perspectives. We need DEI initiatives to help ensure our institutions are accountable and reflective of the diversity, equity and inclusion ideals they espouse.

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Expert Response

Dr. Liliana M. Garces

At the heart of the debate about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives is the question of how institutions of higher education facilitate mutual understanding and ensure fairness in the context of a society that has been historically divided by racially discriminatory policies and practices. In essence, it is a question about how postsecondary institutions provide a high-quality education for all students to thrive in a multiracial democracy.

On one side of the debate are those who argue that DEI policies, or any educational considerations that take race into account, are tantamount to racial discrimination. On the other side, are those who believe that DEI initiatives and other race-attentive policies are necessary to overcome racial discrimination, promote individual dignity and respect, and address racial inequalities.

As an education and law scholar with over 13 years of research expertise on DEI in higher education, lessons from my research and my teaching place me in the latter camp. Programming and structures that advance DEI are foundational to ensuring a high-quality education for all students and for furthering the educational mission of institutions of higher education. They are needed because they help educators attend to how race shapes opportunity to ultimately keep race from mattering. Reversing course would only entrench racial divisions and exacerbate racial inequities in our society.

DEI Initiatives Ensure A High-Quality Education for Students

I have learned from my 13 years as a professor that all students in my classes – white students and students of color, alike – greatly benefit from being in racially and ethnically diverse learning environments. In my classroom, I have witnessed time and again how engaging across different lived experiences and perspectives helps students develop critical thinking skills, gain skills that are necessary to be effective leaders in our multiracial democracy, and overcome racial biases and prejudices.

Decades of diversity- and inclusion-related research consistently shows that DEI supports are essential for realizing the many educational benefits of diverse learning environments. Learning from and through diversity requires interactions across racial differences that are meaningful. Ensuring that cross-racial interactions are meaningful requires skill and support. That is precisely what DEI efforts provide.

For example, DEI programming equips faculty and administrators with tools and skills to promote lively discussion, challenge stereotypes, and promote innovation and an expanded range of perspectives and solutions. They help campus administrators and faculty members to facilitate interactions across race and to implement tools in their classrooms that can help students learn from each other. DEI programming helps faculty members become better equipped to address the impediments for productive interactions in their classrooms, such as when there is only one or a few students of color. They empower educators to engage in practices that help students feel affirmed and able to engage in the discomfort that is necessary for transformative learning.

In other words, DEI programming equips faculty and administrators to create the conditions for what Uma Jayakumar and I call “dynamic diversity.”¹ Dynamic diversity refers to the interactions and educational environments that promote mutual understanding across racial differences and equip students to become effective leaders in our society.

I would not be able to provide the same high-quality educational experience that I give students without DEI programming and structures in place that help equip me and my colleagues with the tools and skills necessary to promote “dynamic diversity” within and outside the classroom.

DEI Initiatives Promote Mutual Understanding and Individual Dignity

Not having DEI structures in place can have a range of negative outcomes for students. When educators do not have the skills to support cross-racial interactions or to understand the racial dynamics that can impede students from participating in the classroom, they inhibit classroom interactions and even inadvertently contribute to negative cross-racial interactions. Such negative interactions are associated with unfavorable outcomes, such as reductions in civic engagement, self-confidence, and moral reasoning skills.

Students are also harmed when they are not able to engage across racial differences. White students in particular are prevented from understanding the experiences of fellow students with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research has consistently shown that the benefits of interactions across race are greater for white students as these interactions help them to become more socially aware and develop the capacity to be more effective leaders in our multiracial democracy.

Even the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), which limited race-conscious policies in postsecondary admissions, endorses the importance of practices on college campuses that promote diversity, equity and inclusion. As Chief Justice John Roberts expressly noted in the opinion: “nothing in [the] opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise.” That clarification, and the Court’s rationale in the majority opinion, endorses an approach to educational policy that seeks to ensure students are treated fairly and with dignity.

By attending to how race shapes students’ experiences, DEI policies help institutions of higher education to create the conditions on college campuses that allow all students to be treated with dignity and respect. To achieve this, it is critical for colleges to provide learning environments that help students overcome racial biases. Growing up in a society that has been historically divided across racial lines means that students are not immune from holding racial stereotypes. The way to overcome these biases is by learning across our differences.

When racial biases are not addressed or confronted, educators, whether they intend to or not, can perpetuate racial discrimination. This phenomenon has been documented in the K-12 context, in which race-based beliefs play out in white teachers’ lower expectations for students of color or in a disproportionate number of disciplinary actions and special education referrals for African American boys. These beliefs help to reinforce inequities because race-based expectations have real implications for how students perform in schools.

Reversing Course Entrenches Racial Inequities

As I have summarized elsewhere, not having DEI policies would greatly exacerbate racial and ethnic inequities in society more broadly.² In my work as a scholar examining the implications of educational policies for student access and success, I have found that banning race-attentive educational policies, such as race-conscious admissions processes, leads to substantial declines in the representation of students of

color, not only at selective colleges and universities, but across graduate fields of study,³ and in schools of medicine.⁴

A decline in racial and ethnic diversity across these educational sectors reduces the variety of perspectives available to foster innovation,⁵ tackle complex research problems, and advance scientific inquiry, particularly in fields such as engineering and the natural sciences. Given the already minimal representation of students of color in graduate education, these declines have significant consequences for the educational experiences of all students in the programs and long-term effects on faculty diversity across all of these fields as graduates enter the academic job market. Moreover, because elite and graduate institutions remain an important part of the trajectory to positions of power and influence in the United States, these consequences are devastating.

And the consequences are most acute in health care, where racial and ethnic health disparities remain and where a racially diverse medical workforce improves quality of care and health outcomes for all. A diverse medical force is critical for addressing the crisis in the health and healthcare of minoritized racial and ethnic populations. A racially and ethnically diverse medical workforce provides more positive interactions between patients and healthcare professionals, and greater access to healthcare for diverse and underserved populations. Studies show, for example, that patients of color are more likely to seek care from practitioners with whom they share a common race, ethnicity, or language.

Racial and ethnic diversity in medical education enhances cross-cultural learning and competencies all practitioners need to treat a diverse patient population. And close examination of medical school graduates indicates that professionals of color are more likely than their non-minoritized peers to practice in minoritized and medically underserved communities. In sum, without DEI initiatives in medical schools, communities of color are likely to suffer not just from the quality of health care they receive but also from its very availability, as fewer professionals of color are available to serve them.

Without race-attentive policies like DEI initiatives on college campuses, we all suffer.

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Expert Response

Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles

After calling the March 7 hearing to order, the Higher Education and Workforce Development Subcommittee Chair Burgess Owens (R-UT) likened DEI to cancer. I agree with Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR) that making such a comparison is offensive (and I will add excessive) to people who have experienced and died from cancer. Several expert witnesses and committee members shared other outrageous remarks about DEI on college campuses during the two-hour hearing. As I listened, I was shocked, but not surprised by the misunderstandings, exaggerations, reckless use of terminology, and incomplete and inaccurate information shared by expert witnesses and several committee members.

After the unjust murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many other Black and Brown Americans, many organizations, including higher education institutions, committed to doing more to help America live up to its promise of life, liberty, and justice for all humans by trying to address injustices and promote the value of diversity and diverse perspectives.

I had the pleasure of serving as Senior Advisor for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the College of Education at my institution. All efforts during my 2.5-year experience in the role were devoted to engaging in courageous conversations, bringing people together to learn about historical and present-day examples of exclusion, helping people in our college heal from prior trauma they had experienced, and increasing knowledge and awareness about issues still facing minoritized and underrepresented people in this country. In doing this work, I aimed to center love, compassion, and critical hope to help guide us to knowing and doing better to improve the culture and climate in the college for everyone. Nothing about our work was divisive, excessive, or ineffective. Instead, it brought our college community together, helped people on the margins feel seen and heard, and enabled us to articulate and name individualistic, unhealthy, and toxic behaviors that ultimately erode workplace culture. Thus, hearing such false narratives about the purposes, functions, and outcomes of DEI efforts during the March 7 hearing caused me to think about the real agenda behind attacks on DEI.

Gaslighting is a commonly-used abusive tool to manipulate and control people. Psychologists define it as one person's efforts to undermine another person's confidence and stability using psychological manipulation, causing the target to question and doubt their sanity, senses, beliefs, and/or experiences.¹ A key characteristic of gaslighting is the use of manipulation to gain control, usually to achieve a hidden agenda. While gaslighting has been studied mostly in relationships between people, scholars have expanded the discussion to consider how this tactic is used in other domains, including politics. In this case, conservative leaders are using their privilege and power to undermine efforts to diversify and increase a sense of belonging for underrepresented students and employees on college campuses using rhetoric that is filled with misunderstandings, incomplete and inaccurate information, and lies to convince our country to doubt, question, and discredit the importance of DEI efforts.

Another key characteristic of gaslighting is using master narratives as a diversion tactic. Master narratives involve stories riddled with inaccurate, half-truths about a phenomenon that, in the case of political agendas, are repeated until they are normalized as truth. Several master narratives were used in the March 7 hearing to obscure documented systemic oppression and structural barriers that create disparities for people. Another characteristic of master narratives is that instead of acknowledging structural barriers and systemic patterns of discrimination, underrepresented groups are blamed for their circumstances.

A clear example of this in the hearing was when Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) posed the question about the disproportionate cases of maternal deaths for Black women and how that crisis could be addressed in earnest without considering race. Instead of acknowledging the structural barriers in medicine and the lack of attention given to how medical issues uniquely affect Black women, Dr. Stanley Goldfarb, one of the expert witnesses, dismissed and ignored the root of the problem. In essence, by not recognizing the structural and systemic inequities that Black women face, as has been proven by research, it seemed he was blaming Black women for their maternal mortality. Master narratives, including those presented in the March 7 hearing, are powerful. Given that reality is socially constructed, master narratives shape how people perceive the world and where they fit and do not fit within it.

A second master narrative repeated in the hearing is the notion that DEI is divisive because it represents a worldview that all white people are racist. Scholars who study race challenge the tendency to narrowly define racism as individual acts of bias and discrimination of one person towards another. Defining racism in this way limits our ability to dismantle it. It is harder to see and account for how people behave towards each other compared to documenting and analyzing discriminatory patterns over time. Thus, by defining racism at the institutional level, rather than at the individual level, one can clearly see systematic advantages afforded to people based on the dominance of their social identities, not limited to race. Such systematic advantages are afforded to people based on gender, social class, disability status, religion, sexual orientation, and age. Because such advantages and disadvantages exist structurally, the argument for meritocracy quickly turns into a myth.

Another master narrative that repeatedly emerged during the hearing suggests that DEI is the root reason for identity politics because it divides people into groups and fosters divisiveness. The origins of grouping people based on social identities, such as race, did not start with DEI. This practice has been in place since the founding of this country for economic and sociopolitical purposes. In her book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, award-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson provides an insightful account of the unspoken caste system in the United States that has existed since its founding.² People in this country have historically been ranked for the purposes of power and control.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's groundbreaking book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, is a classic text that provides a useful framework for understanding racial categories and how and why they change.³ The authors conclude that racial formation is a process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed for political purposes. Efforts to dismantle DEI fit within this framework, as race is not biological. Instead, it is socially constructed for sociopolitical purposes. We have experienced this throughout the history of the United States with the one-drop rule for determining who is Black in America and the three-fifths compromise between southern and northern states (which counted three out of every five enslaved people as human for economic and political control).

The final master narrative that I will highlight here, although there were many more communicated during the hearing, is the use of free speech to uphold dominant ideologies and strike down DEI. In a rational world, one would think you cannot have it both ways. However, free speech is commonly used to demoralize, discredit, and condemn diversity, equity, and justice. In fact, many people who exercise their free speech in this way have been violent, causing harm to people in the process, and are not held accountable for their inappropriate actions by colleges and universities. The purpose of higher education is to promote the free exchange of ideas and perspectives through engaging critical thinking skills to solve complex problems. Yet, DEI efforts and initiatives are not considered under free speech. It begs the question: free speech for whom and for what purposes? Free speech is upheld to protect dominant narratives, but when diverse perspectives backed by evidence and thoughtful analysis are entered into

the discourse, speech is restricted and banned. This was evident in Dr. Erec Smith's (an expert witness in the March 7 hearing) recommendation to audit faculty who discuss DEI issues in classrooms, which is a direct infringement on academic freedom and free speech.

In closing, Americans must be careful about and aware of tactics of mass distraction, such as false narratives used to push political agendas and maintain white dominance. It is irresponsible for politicians and leaders to create political and racial spectacles out of consequential social problems faced by people on the margins of our society. This point was underscored in Rep. Bonamici's opening remarks, recognizing the value of DEI efforts in expanding access to underserved populations and providing support to increase belonging and inclusion as underserved students remain few in number on predominantly white campuses. Rep. Bonamici further pointed out that the committee should engage in a more productive conversation about critical issues of concern, such as student mental health and food insecurity, instead of attacking DEI programs on college campuses. Unfortunately, political and racial spectacles run rampant in politics.⁴ Naming and increasing public awareness about how politics of misinformation function through false claims, master narratives, and political and racial spectacles to captivate the public's imagination and reinforce sociopolitical dominance is imperative.

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Expert Response

Dr. Shaun Harper

More than two decades of experiences as a tenured faculty member at three major research universities, founder and executive director of an interdisciplinary research center, speaker and consultant to hundreds of postsecondary institutions and other organizations, and public intellectual uniquely poise me to discredit the bevy of lies, misinformation, disinformation, and misunderstandings conveyed in the March 7 congressional hearing.

Having previously testified twice to the U.S. House of Representatives, I recall taking the responsibility so seriously – being thoughtful, thorough, meticulous, and above all, truthful was so important to me. As is the case in all my professional capacities, perspectives I articulated in those hearings were grounded mostly in evidence, less so in my own personal opinions, and not at all in unsubstantiated hearsay. Disappointingly, many congresspersons and witnesses did not hold themselves to the same high standard of rigor and honesty in the hearing that recklessly aimed to convince the American people that DEI is “divisive, excessive, and ineffective.” This infuriated me. It was shameful. Our democracy deserves better.

Below, I write from my standpoints as a researcher, practitioner and public intellectual, and professor who teaches DEI-focused courses. I juxtapose what I know to be true with several myths shared during the hearing. Examples from numerous contexts, as opposed to anecdotes from only a small few, are what I have chosen to present herein.

Research Evidence

I have authored more than 100 peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, and other academic publications, plus an additional 125 newspaper and magazine articles. My research has been cited in more than 23,000 published studies spanning a vast array of academic fields and disciplines, as well as in multiple amicus briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court. “Nine Themes in Campus Racial Climates and Implications for Institutional Transformation,” a book chapter I co-wrote with UCLA Professor Sylvia Hurtado in 2007, is my most-cited paper.¹ In it, we synthesized 15 years of published research on campus racial climates, including, but not limited to our own studies.

That body of scholarship has since multiplied and the results continue to overwhelmingly show that too many U.S. colleges and universities struggle with racial conflict, fail to provide culturally-relevant curricula and culturally-responsive classrooms to students of color, and reproduce racialized outcomes gaps that are partly attributable to encounters with racism and racial stress on campuses. None of those studies show that DEI offices and the people who lead them play any role in manufacturing, maintaining, or exacerbating these problems.

Like me, Dr. Hurtado is a past president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education; and we both have been inducted into the National Academy of Education, which means we are serious and highly-respected scholars. In addition to the 15-year research synthesis, our chapter includes a presentation of these nine themes that emerged from qualitative campus climate assessments I had recently conducted at five large, predominantly white universities in three different geographic regions of the country:

1. Cross-Race Consensus Regarding Institutional Negligence
2. Race as a Four-Letter Word and an Avoidable Topic
3. Self-Reports of Racial Segregation

4. Gaps in Social Satisfaction by Race
5. Reputational Legacies for Racism
6. White Student Overestimation of Minority Student Satisfaction
7. The Pervasiveness of Whiteness in Space, Curricula, and Activities
8. The Consciousness-Powerlessness Paradox Among Racial/Ethnic Minority Staff
9. Unexplored Qualitative Realities of Race in Institutional Assessment

Professor Hurtado and I published these themes 17 years ago. Sadly, every one of them endures across hundreds (perhaps thousands) of higher education institutions today. Chief diversity officers and other DEI professionals dividing and indoctrinating students has never emerged as a theme because it is, at most, an incalculably rare occurrence on campuses.

Beyond the first five highlighted in the chapter I co-authored with Sylvia, I conducted dozens more qualitative campus racial climate studies on my own in the early years of my faculty career. In 2011, I founded the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania (now known as the USC Race and Equity Center). Conducting campus racial climate studies was a flagship activity of the center. Our work typically entailed sending a team of researchers to a campus for 3-4 days to conduct racially homogeneous focus group interviews with people of color and their white counterparts. While some of our climate assessments focused exclusively on employees, the overwhelming majority included only student participants.

Altogether, before and after the center's founding, research team members and I have conducted qualitative climate assessments at more than 60 colleges and universities. Over and over again, the nine themes that Dr. Hurtado and I documented in 2007 emerged in subsequent qualitative climate assessments. But there are a few noteworthy additions to the list. First, on all but one campus, at least one Black student (sometimes several) had been called a nigger by a white person – mostly by white peers, occasionally by white faculty and staff members. Second, students did not talk much about explicit encounters with racism at the five universities highlighted in my and Sylvia's chapter. They did on subsequent campuses.

White sorority members putting on blackface and 'acting ghetto' is one example. White fraternity members dressing up as Mexican border crossers and ICE agents for deportation theme parties is another. Finding nooses hanging on campus statues of Martin Luther King, the first Black graduates, and other influential people of color is another. Racial epithets spraypainted on the doors of ethnic culture centers, white supremacist group recruitment flyers stapled to trees and bulletin boards throughout campus, racist and threatening emails sent only to students of color, and death threats to student leaders of color is just a handful of additional examples students have offered in our interviews with them. Participants often expressed frustration and disappointment with the inadequacy of most institutional leaders' responses to incidents like these. Categorically, there was one exception to this: almost always, it was culture center staff, ethnic student organization advisors, multicultural affairs directors, and chief diversity officers whom students of color said supported them most during such devastating times. Those are among the professionals whom congresspersons and witnesses dismissively and ignorantly referred to as DEI officers during the March 7 hearing.

In 2019, my center launched the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (NACCC), a peer-reviewed quantitative survey that is based largely on our many years of findings from qualitative studies. The first version of the NACCC is for students; we created staff and faculty versions in 2022 and 2023, respectively. More than 160 colleges and universities have participated. These are population surveys –

meaning, every student on campus receives the student survey, as opposed to only a subsample; the same with staff and faculty. Findings from this trio of surveys are too voluminous to present here. But based on the combination of quantitative results from the NACCC surveys and findings from all our qualitative campus racial climate assessments, here is one thing I can confidently declare: significantly more, not fewer DEI professionals are needed to help fix racial problems at U.S. colleges and universities.

Fieldwork Evidence

The United States Air Force, Nike, Google, Microsoft, T-Mobile, Mattel, NBCUniversal, Abbott, Zoom, Anheuser-Busch, Sempra Energy, National Football League, Major League Baseball, New York City Department of Education, Los Angeles Unified School District, Harvard University, Princeton University, and Stanford University are among the more than 400 businesses, government agencies, organizations, and institutions with which I have done DEI-focused strategy advising, research and assessment, speaking and professional learning, and leadership coaching. Also, through my center, I created racial equity leadership alliances for 68 community colleges throughout California, 71 liberal arts colleges across the U.S., and nine California State University campuses. Center colleagues and I have also done DEI work with hundreds of additional postsecondary institutions spanning every geographic region of the country.

Working with so many organizations and institutions affords me deep insights into the realities of DEI. I know for sure that it is not what most critics, including those who spoke during the March 7 hearing, say about it. They are wrong. Over the years, I have not met a DEI professional whose aim it was to divide people. Undoubtedly, some have inadvertently done so; maybe a very small number did so intentionally. Excluding unvetted self-proclaimed consultants whom campus leaders sometimes haphazardly find on LinkedIn, I conservatively estimate that no more than 2% of full-time DEI professionals in higher education and other industries do their work in divisive ways. I am obviously most familiar with what we do at the USC Race and Equity Center. Neither my colleagues nor I divide or harm people who pay us to perform various DEI activities for their employees and students.

That DEI offices are bloated and excessively financed is among the many particularly absurd assertions made during the March 7 hearing. Almost all organizations with which I work have inappropriately tiny DEI budgets relative to their size and the magnitude of their DEI-related challenges and opportunities. Chief diversity officers in most higher education, corporate, and governmental contexts are understaffed; they are expected to do too much with too few human and fiscal resources.

The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) surveyed 261 CDOs in 2023. Forty-four percent had between zero and two full-time employees and 71.6% had annual operating budgets below \$300,000. Nearly a third (32.2%) had annual operating budgets of \$39,000 or less, NADOHE reports.² These survey results are consistent with what I see and hear in my fieldwork. Given their global footprint and the number of people they employ, it is often shocking to me how small the DEI budgets are at many large corporations. I am similarly dismayed by the DEI officer to student, faculty, and staff ratios at most higher education institutions. Such underinvestment makes colleges and universities extremely susceptible to mission breach, perpetual homogeneity, stratification, sustained and exacerbated inequities, cross-cultural conflict, hate crimes, and lawsuits.

A portion of my fieldwork entails translating for public audiences what I learn from my research and from DEI work I do with institutions and organizations. I have done this through interviews on CNN, MSNBC, ESPN, PBS, NPR, and the Dr. Phil Show. My nine-episode “Race in the Workplace” video series is publicly available on the *TIME* magazine website. More than 3 million people have read DEI-focused articles I have

published in the *Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Ebony*, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. I offer all this as evidence to counter the ridiculous generalizations that obstructionists make about DEI work. None of what I listed here inflicted harm or aimed to divide millions of people – my engagement as a public intellectual does the exact opposite, in fact. Honestly, I do not know enough about Marxism to teach it. Critical Race Theory is too sophisticated and academically too complex to include in campus and corporate workshops or in various forms of media that I leverage to educate everyday Americans about DEI.

I have been in many audiences where Lori Patton Davis expertly spoke about intersectionality, the educational experiences of Black girls and women, and culture centers on college campuses. I have heard Liliana Garces offer incredibly useful guidance to practitioners and policymakers on Affirmative Action. On numerous occasions, I have benefited from presentations by Victor Sáenz on Latino male collegians, Toby Jenkins on cultural affirmation and appreciation, Walter Kimbrough on DEI at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Lisa Wolf-Wendel on working mothers and gender equity, and Joy Gaston Gayles on Black student-athletes. Eddie Cole's professional learning sessions on teaching truths about America's racial history have taught me much. I seriously doubt that those who seek to destroy DEI have been in rooms where these scholars and others like them use their brilliance and research to improve colleges and universities. If they had, there is no way they would make such erroneously universal claims about the evilness of DEI work. It is therefore obvious to me that they are condemning something that they have experienced either too infrequently or perhaps not at all.

Classroom Evidence

Over the past 21 years, I have been a professor at the University of Southern California, Penn State University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Before that, I developed and taught courses for undergraduates during my three years as a Ph.D. student at Indiana University. Every class I have taught has had a heavy DEI emphasis, including those on research methods and intercollegiate athletics. No student has ever accused me of indoctrination. The course I have taught the longest is on Critical Race Theory in Education. Graduate students almost unanimously say two things about it: (1) it is their first introduction to CRT, they were not exposed to it in their K-12 or undergraduate schooling experiences; and (2) it should be a required course for all students in the graduate school of education. MBA students say the same things about the DEI in Business course I teach at USC.

I am the only person who has been to every one of my classes over the past 24 years. I am the only person who has read every one of my syllabi and course evaluations. DEI opponents, including the Republican congresspersons and witnesses who spoke at the March 7 hearing, therefore ought not make sweeping generalizations about what occurs in my or other professors' DEI courses. Surely, I am just one of many, many, many faculty members who teach DEI in rigorous, responsible ways. Treating wild anecdotes about DEI classroom catastrophes as universal examples is offensive to those of us who work extra hard to teach potentially divisive concepts in inclusive, yet honest ways.

DEI opponents' unverified claims should not be taken seriously in the absence of rigorous, systematic analyses of several thousand syllabi from colleges and universities across the nation; thousands of hours of classroom observations on hundreds of campuses; interviews with hundreds of faculty members who teach DEI courses to better understand our aims and methods; quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with millions of collegians to more deeply understand their appraisals of the appropriateness and impact of DEI-related content they are being taught; and data about students' experiences in DEI-specific courses, disaggregated by gender, race, socioeconomic background, disability status, sexual

orientation, religion, major, class year, other demographic variables, and institution type. Elected officials at local, state, and federal levels most certainly should not continue to make policies that ban or defund DEI initiatives in the absence of this caliber of evidence. Doing so is harmful to our democracy.

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Expert Response

Dr. Toby S. Jenkins

I have worked in higher education for more than two decades. Prior to becoming a professor and academic administrator, I spent 10 years working in a range of diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership roles at the University of Maryland and Penn State University. I also teach, publish books and articles, organize events and creative experiences, and conduct research on an array of DEI-related topics. The blend of my scholarly and practitioner experiences therefore uniquely qualifies me to respond to four myths articulated in the March 7 congressional hearing.

Myth 1: DEI Places the Jewish Community at the Top of the White Supremacy Structure.

Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Safe-House Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN) have been instrumental in raising awareness about the various forms and repercussions of hateful, biased, and extremist attitudes, beliefs, and actions. The ADL created the *Pyramid of Hate*,¹ while SPAN developed the *Pyramid of White Supremacy*.² These visual aids were discussed during the hearing as examples of DEI resources, illustrating how members of the Jewish community are positioned atop the structure of white supremacy. Neither pyramid singles out any specific group as the sole instigator or perpetuator of hate or extremism. Instead, they focus on attitudes, beliefs, and actions and highlight that such behaviors and attitudes can be held by anyone.

These DEI resources emphasize that racially-motivated hate can manifest in various forms, from overt acts of violence to subtler expressions such as comments or personal beliefs. The pyramids organize these behaviors in a progressive manner, demonstrating how attitudes and actions escalate in complexity and severity. At the apex of the white supremacy pyramid lie acts of genocide, not attributed to a particular group, culture, or race.

Salaam Shalom, an organization comprised of Jewish and Muslim women committed to fostering dialogue and understanding,³ epitomizes the essence of genuine DEI efforts. Their aim is to bridge divides and combat religious-based hate by facilitating learning and interaction between communities. Co-founded by Sheryl Olitzky, a Jewish woman, Salaam Shalom utilizes the Pyramid of White Supremacy as a vital educational tool to combat antisemitism. The documentary *Stranger/Sister* chronicles the journey of Salaam Shalom's founders, highlighting their belief in the power of unity and education to combat various forms of hate, including anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiments, and racism.⁴ This documentary showcases the compassionate and respectful dialogue that underpins DEI, offering a more authentic portrayal compared to the clip presented during the March 7 hearing.

Myth 2: DEI Professionals Do Not Have Standards of Practice. This Leads to Programs that Exclude, Target, and Vilify Others.

According to the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), diversity encompasses factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, national geographic origin, language use, first-generation status, socioeconomic status, and military/veteran status. In higher education, DEI administrative work is guided by 16 standards of professional practice, five of which directly address the misconception that DEI efforts are exclusionary. The standards presented below are directly quoted from the second edition of the NADOHE Standards of Professional Practice for Chief Diversity Officers document.⁵

DEI standards require professionals to be inclusive of a broad range of identities, populations, and dimensions of the human experience. DEI initiatives do not serve one group, they exist to serve all groups.

- **Standard One:** Chief diversity officers have ethical, legal, and practical obligations to frame their work from comprehensive definitions of equity, diversity, and inclusion – definitions that are inclusive with respect to a wide range of identities, differentiated in terms of how they address unique identity issues and complex in terms of intersectionality and context.

DEI standards require professionals to help remove unfair barriers and exclusionary practices. DEI initiatives do not create exclusion, they exist to promote inclusion.

- **Standard Four:** Chief diversity officers work with senior campus administrators and, when appropriate, governing bodies (e.g., trustees or regents) to revise or remove the embedded institutional policies, procedures, and norms that create differential structural barriers to the access and success of students, faculty, and staff who belong to marginalized and oppressed groups.

DEI standards emphasize the importance of basing decisions and practices on evidence and data. Rather than promoting personal opinions or overarching philosophies, DEI efforts prioritize factual information and researched evidence to guide educational experiences, institutional policies, and professional practices.

- **Standard Seven:** Chief diversity officers are committed to drawing from existing scholarship and using evidence-based practices to provide intellectual leadership in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion.

DEI standards mandate regular campus climate assessments to verify the effectiveness of current initiatives and pinpoint areas for improvement. DEI efforts cannot simply operate on college campuses without any form of accountability or reporting of outcomes.

- **Standard Eleven:** Chief diversity officers work to ensure that institutions conduct periodic campus climate assessments to illuminate strengths, challenges, and gaps in the development and advancement of an equitable, inclusive climate for diversity.

NADOHE standards necessitate that DEI administrators establish clear and accessible protocols and resources to handle hate-bias incidents. From online reporting platforms like the ones provided at Indiana University⁶ and Penn State University⁷ to physical diversity ombudspersons like those available at Clemson University⁸ and the University of Mary Washington,¹⁰ resources are provided to students seeking to report such incidents. Ensuring student protection from harm is a core principle of DEI practice.

- **Standard Thirteen:** Chief diversity officers work with senior administrators and campus professionals to develop, facilitate, respond to, and assess campus protocols that address hate-bias incidents, including efforts related to prevention, education, and intervention.

Myth 3: DEI is not Connected to Civil Rights and Aligns with Marxism

As per the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Civil Rights encompass the personal rights guaranteed to all United States citizens by the U.S. Constitution and legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the American Disabilities Act of 1990. These laws safeguard individuals from unlawful discrimination based on race, color, national origin, disability, age, religion, and sex.

The NADOHE Standards of Professional Practice mandate that diversity officers develop a comprehensive array of services, policies, and initiatives directly addressing an institution's responsibility to adhere to federal equal opportunity and nondiscriminatory laws (see standard fifteen below). DEI offices serve as foundational resources utilized by institutions to ensure compliance with civil rights regulations. DEI is inherently linked to civil rights, as one of its primary objectives is to prevent discrimination.

- **Standard Fifteen:** Chief diversity officers work closely with senior administrators to ensure full implementation of and compliance with the legal and regulatory requirements for the institution.

Marxism diverges from specific professional practices, services, or initiatives. Rather, it comprises philosophical ideas concerning economics and power dynamics. It serves as a theoretical lens for interpreting history and contemporary societal structures. The concept of diversity encompasses a broad range of social identities, races, cultures, and experiences. Marxism is not concerned with diversity. It instead focuses primarily on societal class divisions such as labor/worker versus capital/corporation. DEI efforts, in contrast, prioritize access and equal opportunity in education and the workforce, opposing Marxist principles that advocate for withdrawal from capitalist labor systems. While Marxism aims for an exit from capitalist structures, DEI initiatives aim to enlarge and diversify the U.S. workforce, thus educational and professional equity and inclusion are not central concerns within Marxism.

Myth 4: DEI Jeopardizes the Focus and Quality of Medical Education

DEI is vital to the medical field in numerous ways, including the following:

- **Discovery and Innovation:** Variety in perspectives is indispensable for fostering innovation. When team members bring diverse viewpoints, knowledge, and life experiences to the table, they can approach problems and solutions from various angles. This cognitive diversity is instrumental in generating creative and efficient resolutions to intricate scientific issues and healthcare challenges.
- **Growth of the STEM Workforce:** Representation is crucial. By incorporating racially diverse educators into medical fields, we broaden the spectrum of students who can identify with these disciplines. This diverse representation has the potential to ignite greater interest among students in pursuing medical careers. Achieving a more diverse racial composition among medical educators necessitates having faculty and educational administrators who are capable of conducting inclusive and impartial employment searches.
- **Racial Disparities in Healthcare:** In the realm of medical care provided to patients, the issue of inadequate healthcare for Black women extends beyond maternal health.¹⁰ A recent study funded by the National Institutes of Health revealed that healthcare providers were less apt to recognize pain in the facial expressions of Black individuals compared to those of non-Black individuals.¹¹ This disparity led to a diminished likelihood of believing that a Black patient was experiencing severe discomfort or acute pain. The study participants reported

experiencing high levels of perceived discrimination, with a majority of women encountering discrimination within medical settings. Qualitative data provided context to these findings, illustrating their impact on patient-provider relationships and the development of medical mistrust.

- **Ethics in Medical Research:** In the realm of medical education and research, DEI learning plays a crucial role in preventing the recurrence of racially unethical research practices prevalent in U.S. medical history. For instance, notable cases such as Henrietta Lacks' story have underscored the necessity of informed consent in research.¹² Additionally, the longstanding history of medical violence against Black women committed by figures like gynecologist James Marion Sims highlights the importance of addressing racial bias in medical research.¹³ Education on racial bias is integral to equipping physicians and medical researchers with the capacity to recognize how certain attitudes, beliefs, and actions can compromise professional ethics. By fostering an educational environment that addresses both contemporary and historical challenges and that highlights instances of racial harm and exclusion, we contribute to the cultivation of a workforce that is intellectually robust and ethically sound.

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Expert Response

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough

The March 7 congressional hearing had an obvious partisan focus, starting with its negative title, “Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses.” In his opening remarks, Representative Burgess Owens (R-UT) suggested, without evidence, that DEI steers young Americans away from values, stifles free speech, and instead of valuing merit and intellectual competition, it prioritizes skin color. This is just one of several examples from the hearing where information was presented out of context to frame a narrative, which I explain below.

Medical Schools and DEI

Witness Stanley Goldfarb, a former professor at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, declared that DEI is dangerous in medical schools. This statement completely ignores America’s history with discrimination in medicine and well-documented contemporary health disparities by race. Ensuring there is diversity in the medical profession, as well as equipping future healthcare providers with cultural competencies, is essential for our nation’s health.

The COVID-19 years provide a recent example of the impact of health disparities. The presidents of two historically Black colleges, Dillard University and Xavier University of Louisiana, penned a joint letter encouraging their campus communities to consider participating in COVID-19 vaccine trials.¹ The Xavier president is an immunologist with the requisite scientific background to support the initiative. Unfortunately, many people were upset and even outraged that the presidents of two HBCUs would make such a request.² The main reason was that people worried that this was another Tuskegee experiment. Risks increased, instead of decreased, for Black men in rural Alabama who participated in the U.S. Public Health Service’s study of untreated syphilis between 1932 and 1972.³

Numerous articles and reports during the COVID-19 pandemic noted the disparity in illness and death by race due to the coronavirus. In the early stages, people of color were impacted the hardest, having roughly twice the mortality of whites. After Black churches and grassroots organizations were convinced by Black healthcare professionals that the vaccines were safe, the impact shifted and eventually the white mortality rate was higher, with political party becoming a significant determinant.⁴

A large body of research confirms the health benefits of diverse medical professionals. For example, one study found that Black and Latino patients were more likely to positively rate a physician of the same race as them.⁵ In addition, Black patients were more likely to receive preventative and more comprehensive medical care from same-race doctors. A later study arrived at the same conclusion, noting that “efforts to improve physician workforce diversity are imperative. Delivery of health care in a culturally mindful manner between racially/ethnically discordant patient-physician dyads is also essential.”⁶ In his testimony, Goldfarb denied this research exists.

Finally, Goldfarb lamented scholarship programs targeted toward Black students to help diversify the pipeline while conveniently ignoring several realities. First, parental education is a strong predictor of medical school acceptance. With 28% of Black adults holding a bachelor’s degree versus 42% of whites, the gap begins to appear. It widens dramatically based on socioeconomic status, as a quarter of medical school students come from the richest 5%, but less than 2% of Black families come from that income bracket.⁷

By leaving out these facts and not allowing testimony to provide this perspective, the hearing provided inadequate substance for a robust conversation grounded in truths.

Differing Worldviews

In the hearing, Representative Glen Grothman (R-WI) and witness Dr. Erec Smith pondered the importance of worldview. The premise of Rep. Grothman's concern was that people should not want someone with a lower MCAT score treating them as their doctor. MCAT scores are only for entrance into medical school. To become a physician, one must complete medical school and pass board examinations. The exchange between these two men during the hearing indicated a lack of understanding of how one becomes a doctor.

Rep. Grothman later said to Smith, "If some guy's got a grandmother who was born in Norway and somebody else has a grandmother that was born in Honduras, that that colors their worldview or they'll be different better or worse or bring something different to the engineering firm or whatnot. What do you think about this idea that the way you think is determined by ancestors who you may never have met? Maybe the grandmother died before he was born, but still these DEI professionals want to break you out and say you're different." Smith, a Black man and professor, replied, "DEI undergirded by critical social justice skirts individuality, it's all about group consciousness. Group consciousness is necessary for this ideology because if we have individuals then we have individual people with their own individual lives and histories that cannot be predetermined based on their skin color."

The simple irony is that this hearing took place in the U.S. House of Representatives, where no matter what the issue is, people have completely different worldviews even with objective realities before them. Put differently, many perspectives are predetermined based on political party. Some members of Congress believe the 2020 election was stolen despite dozens of lawsuits and investigations that proved otherwise. Group consciousness also varies as congresspersons bring different memories of what happened on January 6, 2021 to the House floor. Conservative lawmakers in the hearing attacked DEI and argued for merit, but were silent when the former president selected his son-in-law to lead particular foreign affairs despite not qualifying for a security clearance. Group consciousness is also evident when some members of Congress call for rule of law, yet collectively support a candidate with numerous indictments and adjudications against him. These are just a few strikingly paradoxical examples of how membership in a group shapes one's worldviews and behaviors.

DEI Bloat

Witness Jay Greene based much of his testimony on his 2021 report, *Diversity University: DEI Bloat in the Academy*, published by the Heritage Foundation.⁸ In his testimony, Greene focused on the number of DEI professionals at Power 5 athletic conferences. The schools averaged about 45 DEI professionals, with the University of Michigan having the most. In fact, Rep. Owens cited a *College Fix* report in his opening statement, indicating the University spent \$30 million annually on DEI staff and programs.⁹

For perspective, the fiscal year 2024 budget for the University of Michigan is \$13.4 billion.¹⁰ If the \$30 million is accurate that would make DEI spending 0.2% of the entire university budget. For further perspective, according to the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics database, in fiscal year 2022 the University of Michigan incurred \$195 million of expenses on athletics while generating only \$210 million in revenue.¹¹ The major revenue-generating sports, football and basketball, rely heavily on unpaid Black athletes who in most cases would not qualify for admission under the regular standards of the institution.

This helps explain why, according to a 2019 news story, 80% of Michigan football players were general studies majors.¹²

In his testimony, Greene stated that the campus climate is worse at places with more DEI staff, it enflames intergroup tension, and that there is nothing to show for the efforts of these DEI offices. In the Heritage Foundation report, Greene and his co-author compared institutions' campus climate surveys without noting that they used different instruments and methodologies, making it impossible to generalize that a school with fewer DEI professionals had a better climate because of fewer staff. It also ignores schools that have fewer DEI professionals and worse campus climates.

Greene does not try to prove that campus climates have gotten worse even with more DEI professionals. He could have looked at the University of Michigan's 2021 student campus climate report.¹³ This document acknowledges the changes in the samples surveyed (with 2021 more diverse than 2016), and that the decrease in overall satisfaction comes after a year of unrest in 2020. In looking at the full context of the study, they write:

“Although they reported being less satisfied with the overall climate at U-M than the 2016 sample, in general, students in the 2021 sample reported positive assessments of the impact that DEI 1.0 has had at U-M. Specifically, 57% of the students rate the current DEI climate as being somewhat or much better than the DEI climate at the start of the DEI strategic plan in 2016. Only 6% rated the DEI climate as being somewhat or much worse. In addition, 40% of the students were satisfied or very satisfied with the progress that was made via the DEI plan since its implementation compared to 11% who reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the progress.” (p. 3)

Greene's testimony, like that of the other Republican witnesses, completely lacked context as he compared apples and oranges to make a point. Kevin Cokley, University Diversity and Social Transformation Professor of Psychology and Associate Chair for Diversity Initiatives in the largest academic school at the University of Michigan, pointed out the cherrypicking of statistics, citing a university spokesperson who noted, “there is no specific budget set aside for DEI and that the figures compiled by Perry [a retired University of Michigan-Flint economics professor] include employees whose primary responsibilities extend beyond DEI-related activities.”¹⁴

The lone witness allowed by the Democrats, James Murphy, Director of Career Pathways and Postsecondary Policy at Education Reform Now, succinctly pushed back on the redefinition of DEI as it relates to equity, noting that equity does not mean pursuing equality of outcomes, but rather it is about equality of opportunity and fairness. Murphy concluded his opening remarks by insisting, “the current wave of attacks on DEI offices should be understood for what they are: excessive, divisive ideological assaults on some of the basic principles of our democracy and of academic freedom.”

Clearly, the purpose of the March 7 hearing was to further the attacks on DEI, yet most of the testimony provided only further revealed that the assaults on DEI are purely ideological. Future hearings should explore present-day realities in America and consider how DEI can play a role in building a more perfect union.

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Expert Response

Dr. Julie J. Park

A number of troubling, misleading, and spurious claims were made during the March 7 hearing. As a researcher studying issues related to race, religion, and socioeconomic status in higher education, below are some of my thoughts on various points that congresspersons and expert witnesses raised.

One claim made during the hearing is that no empirical evidence exists that DEI work can improve inclusion, retention, and graduation in higher education. On the contrary, various studies document the relationship between work supported by student-facing DEI offices (e.g., fostering positive intergroup relations, diversity-related programming or coursework, and involvement in student organizations) and numerous outcomes relevant to inclusion, retention, and graduation. For example, as related to inclusion, in a meta-analysis of studies on curricular and co-curricular efforts reflecting engagement with diversity (including the type of efforts often sponsored by DEI-related offices), Nida Denson found that such engagement was consistently linked with reductions in racial bias, a key component of promoting a healthy and positive climate.¹ Also, Lochs et al. found that positive interactions with peers from racially diverse backgrounds – a practice that DEI offices with student-facing programming often seek to promote – was linked with a greater sense of belonging and inclusion for students across campus.²

Regarding retention and graduation, a number of studies point to a positive relationship between engagement in diversity-related programming, coursework, or positive intergroup relations and academic-related outcomes. Analyzing data from the Student Experience in the Research University Study, Eugene Parker found that for Black students, more positive perceptions of campus climate (which diversity, equity, and inclusion-related offices seek to support) were linked with higher GPA, greater academic engagement, and satisfaction with academic and social experiences during college.³ Further, frequent interactions across race/ethnicity, which DEI offices often facilitate, has been linked with greater intellectual engagement during the first year of college, an outcome beneficial for retention and graduation.⁴

Taking diversity-related coursework has been linked with higher GPAs in the first year of college.⁵ Such courses are also linked with greater gains in interest in ideas and more effortful thinking for students of all backgrounds,⁶ which are both pivotal to supporting a positive academic experience. Openness to diversity, which DEI offices often seek to support, was linked with higher first-year GPAs and first-to-second year retention.⁷ Involvement in cultural awareness workshops during college, the type of event often sponsored by student-facing DEI offices, has been linked with greater involvement in volunteer work and engagement in leadership six years of college,⁸ showing how involvement in diversity-related programming during the college years may spur benefits important to society and civic engagement.

Oddly, during the March 7 congressional hearing, the claim was made that campus climate is worse at universities with larger numbers of staff positions allocated to supporting goals related to DEI. As stated during the hearing: “For example, students at the University of Michigan with 163 DEI staff report being less satisfied with campus climate than those in Mississippi State with only 12 DEI staff.” However, correlation is not causation. The larger number of staff supporting DEI goals employed at the University of Michigan is likely a byproduct of its Ann Arbor campus being a substantially larger institution (both as pertaining to students, faculty, and staff) as well as the complexity of its infrastructure (e.g., hosting a medical school, hospital, law school, and other entities that do not exist at Mississippi State). At the same time, discontent with the campus climate at a particular institution is not necessarily a byproduct of having a larger infrastructure to support DEI, as claimed during the hearing.

Students at the University of Michigan may be more dissatisfied with the campus climate for a variety of reasons that are unrelated to the number of DEI staff positions. Quite justifiably, they may be frustrated at the low Black student enrollment, which has suffered since the state passed Proposition 2 that banned race-conscious admissions in 2006. Higher levels of demographic diversity has been linked with greater satisfaction with student body diversity.⁹ Thus, a lack of satisfaction with diversity may be in part a byproduct of issues that go beyond the number of staff with roles dedicated to supporting DEI at the institution. Numerous other issues may make them express dissatisfaction, such as the low enrollment of low-income students, the drop in enrollment of Native American students, and other issues.¹⁰

Additionally, while 163 may seem like a large number, it is worth considering that overall (including the hospital), the University of Michigan employed 38,580 regular-status (i.e., full-time) staff in 2023.¹¹ Even without hospital employees, the University employed 18,422 staff, meaning that employees who support DEI goals are a relative “drop in the bucket” out of the much larger number of staff it takes to lead a complex and large institution.

One of the most troubling claims made during the hearing was that diversity in research labs is irrelevant to scientific discovery and advancement. On the contrary, expanding participation in STEM and research among historically underrepresented populations (e.g., Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals) is crucial for innovation, discovery, and competitiveness in a global economy. The work of Scott Page has highlighted how diverse teams are more likely to come up with innovative solutions, likely because such groups often avoid the “groupthink” that can steer organizations away from taking risks or identifying unconventional solutions to problems.¹²

Supporting diversity in research labs is not only critical among racially minoritized populations, it is also vital to supporting the full participation of women in STEM.¹³ Unfortunately, numerous studies document that both racial/ethnic and gender bias is pervasive in STEM classrooms, labs, and group project work outside of class,¹⁴ pushing out talented individuals and making it more difficult to harness the full potential of talent development. Thus, advancing DEI within STEM is crucial for recruiting and retaining talent, which in turn is vital to innovation and scientific discovery.

Another claim made was that DEI work lumps people into monolithic groups, categorizing them as oppressor or oppressed on the basis of group membership. On the contrary, DEI work, if done well, can challenge and deepen individuals’ understandings of identities and different communities. Through such work, students can be challenged to think about the diversity that exists within communities, showing that there often is not a neat and tidy bifurcation between “oppressed” and “oppressor.” The claim made during the hearing seems to be more a caricature or overblown perception of what diversity programming and education seeks to foster.

Similarly, during the hearing, the claim was made that diversity and inclusion efforts will deem a group as an “oppressor” if they are numerically overrepresented in certain sectors of higher education. Once again, this claim appears to be a misunderstanding or deliberate mischaracterization of what diversity education seeks to do. Diversity educators often are highly sensitive to the diversity and complexity that exists within a single group, and will seek to highlight how individuals’ experiences may differ depending on factors like socioeconomic status, gender, and others.

To simply say that diversity educators would automatically label a group as an “oppressor” due to numerical representation seems once again to be an overly simplistic portrayal of diversity education. For

example, Asian Americans are a group that has high numerical representation at many selective or elite institutions. At the same time, educators at these same institutions often highlight through curriculum and programming that Asian Americans represent a wide range of backgrounds and experiences related to socioeconomic status, immigration history, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories.

Diversity-related offices and multicultural centers (including those that specifically seek to serve Asian American students, for example, the Pan Asian American Community House at the University of Pennsylvania) are critical partners in helping students understand the complexity that exists within the Asian American community, which includes individuals and groups who may simultaneously experience both privilege and disadvantage and/or racism depending on the context, as well as the numerous structural barriers related to race and/or economic status that many Asian Americans experience in society. Overall, DEI efforts support students, faculty, and staff alike by providing relevant and thought-provoking programming, spurring intellectual engagement, and fostering a supportive environment.

As a researcher who is deeply familiar with the scholarship on diversity and equity in higher education, it appears that a number of the claims made during the hearing were exaggerations of worst-case scenarios of diversity-related work or programming, and not the norm on college campuses. It is true that institutions must continuously strive for improvement. At the same time, policy decisions related to DEI efforts should not be driven by simplistic portrayals or overblown overgeneralizations of diversity and equity work, which remains vital in helping colleges and universities serve students, faculty, and staff.

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Expert Responses

Dr. Victor B. Sáenz

For over 20 years, I have been immersed in research on diversity in higher education, contributing to a growing empirical record that explores the educational benefits and student success outcomes that can be derived from diverse learning environments. As a social scientist who values evidence, I am compelled to address the current legislative efforts to undo DEI efforts on college campuses, particularly in response to the March 7 congressional hearing.

The growing political movement to scale back DEI efforts on college campuses has been accompanied by many misconceptions and misrepresentations, including Representative Burgess Owens' (R-UT) narrow interpretation of DEI. At their core, DEI efforts are an extension of the academic and student success missions of higher education institutions, and only recently have they become imbued by a political debate not of their own making. It is imperative to set the record straight based on empirical evidence and to dispel the myths surrounding DEI initiatives, efforts that are grounded in institutions' own commitments to advancing the success of all students.

This essay focuses on the recent growth of DEI initiatives on college campuses as well as how they are deeply connected to our student success goals. It also examines how some criticisms of DEI efforts are not based on sound empirical evidence. I conclude with a synthesis of research on the impact of DEI initiatives on retention and degree attainment.

DEI and Student Success Outcomes

At their core, DEI initiatives encompass a broad spectrum of strategies and programs aimed at cultivating nurturing environments on college campuses where all individuals feel valued, respected, and included. These initiatives are often rooted in the historical context of the institution and they can vary in scope and size, reflecting the diverse needs and priorities of different communities of stakeholders. The growth of DEI efforts in recent years has emerged in conjunction with the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of college student populations, as well as an acknowledgment of the many intersecting identities that students can hold (LGBTQIA+, veteran status, first-generation status, undocumented status, etc.). As our campuses become increasingly diverse, many colleges and universities have thoughtfully pivoted their student engagement strategies, utilizing DEI efforts to ensure they are responsive to the unique needs of their changing student bodies.

As a seasoned researcher in the field of higher education, the relationship between diversity initiatives and student success outcomes has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry for me over the last two decades. The essence of this relationship is grounded in the understanding that when properly harnessed, diversity in its myriad forms enriches the educational experience, promotes personal and professional growth, and prepares students to thrive within a pluralistic society, thereby enhancing their academic, social, and career success.¹

Recent research has continued to substantiate this important set of findings, highlighting the multifaceted benefits of college diversity initiatives. For instance, Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, and Arellano underscore the significance of creating inclusive campus climates that support the academic and social success of students from historically underrepresented groups.² These environments not only foster a sense of belonging but also promote intellectual engagement and persistence towards graduation. Similarly, Scott Page provides evidence that diversity enhances creativity and problem-solving by bringing

together teams of individuals with varied perspectives and strengths.³ This cognitive diversity, facilitated through the interaction of increasingly diverse students, can contribute significantly to academic innovation and student achievement. Moreover, a synthesis of research by Nicholas Bowman delineates the positive outcomes of diversity experiences on critical thinking skills and cognitive development. These findings are echoed in recent literature, which emphasizes the role of diversity in preparing students for the complexities of the global workforce.⁵ In this context, faculty diversity has emerged as a critical factor for student success, as all students benefit from having professors who not only resemble them but can also serve as role models, thereby improving their academic outcomes and retention rates.⁶

Additionally, recent research has consistently shown that diversity-related curricular and co-curricular initiatives positively affect students' cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and moral reasoning, as well as their social-cognitive development, including racial understanding and empathy.⁷ These educational outcomes are not only crucial for personal development but are also highly valued in today's interconnected workforce.

In sum, much of the research on college student success espouses the continued implementation and thoughtful expansion of DEI initiatives in higher education. The social science evidence demonstrates that such initiatives are not only beneficial for enhancing student success outcomes but are also imperative for preparing college graduates to thrive in a diverse and global society. In light of this robust body of literature, critics continue to distort and misrepresent the true effects of DEI initiatives in higher education, focusing on false narratives and inconclusive science.

Free Speech, Academic Freedom, and DEI Bureaucracies

Without credible evidence, critics assert that DEI programs universally stifle free speech or exert undue pressure on university administrators and promote indoctrination through curriculum. Far from silencing discourse, DEI initiatives often encourage open dialogue and the exchange of diverse perspectives, enriching the academic environment for all members of the university community. They do so by inviting unique voices and perspectives to our campuses or by fostering environments where individuals from varied backgrounds feel empowered to express their viewpoints. Many DEI initiatives contribute to the robust exchange of ideas fundamental to our notions of academic freedom and a pluralistic democracy. Research has consistently shown that diverse teams and environments lead to more innovative and effective outcomes.⁸ As our college campuses become increasingly diverse across many dimensions, we should build support for these efforts instead of scaling them back.

Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence that DEI is a threat to academic freedom within our institutions. Scholars who critique the value of DEI initiatives are not being systematically silenced or pushed out of academia. However, we need to distinguish between legitimate academic critique and research that lacks empirical rigor or is based on flawed assumptions.⁹ For example, studies focused on unreliable social media posts¹⁰ or weak research that overgeneralizes what constitutes a "DEI bureaucrat" should not be used to inform policy decisions or public discourse without careful vetting and transparency in how they operationalize their key variables.

In truth, staff and offices that engage in DEI work have existed on college campuses for some time, often within under-resourced and under-staffed units that are an extension of the academic enterprise.¹¹ Claims by some that DEI bureaucracies are out of control or that campus racial climates worsen as a result of large DEI programs are not sufficiently supported by evidence. As for the growth of "DEI bureaucracies" on college campuses, this is a legitimate area for further study, one that necessitates that we carefully

catalogue employees who focus on student success initiatives as distinct from colleagues who exclusively do DEI work – critics often conflate them, which is both inaccurate and dishonest. Many staff might have DEI-adjacent responsibilities as part of their primary duties that are otherwise focused on coordinating student success initiatives.¹² Therein lies the true complexity and ambiguity of disentangling DEI work from other professional responsibilities, which are often embedded within student success or academic support units on college campuses.

DEI Efforts and Racist Agendas

The narrative that everything related to DEI on a college campus is demeaning or racist is false. To suggest that all these initiatives are inherently racist or discriminatory is to not fully understand why these programs exist. DEI initiatives often aim to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote equity of opportunity for all members of a college community.¹³ These efforts are not intended to single out or dehumanize individuals based on race or ethnicity, but rather to facilitate opportunities for those who have been historically and recently marginalized. The claim that all DEI initiatives have Marxist or discriminatory origins is a gross over-generalization. Further, DEI efforts are not zero-sum games in which we highlight or support one group of students at the expense of others. Many programs are critically-grounded in theories of change that aim to support all students, regardless of their background or group status.

Claims that DEI programs mandate racial bias education or promote unequal treatment of individuals are unfounded and ignore many of the core principles of DEI, which are addressing systemic barriers to equity and ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to succeed. These efforts are not intended to promote division or favoritism, but rather, are focused on leveling the playing field for everyone. Furthermore, DEI programs at universities do not mandate loyalty oaths from faculty or staff, as such practices would be illegal under current federal law. Rather, DEI initiatives seek to build bridges across differences and promote a culture of respect and inclusivity, and oftentimes these efforts are located within federal compliance offices related to existing federal statutes.

DEI and College Student Retention and Degree Attainment

Rather than contributing to poor retention rates, as some critics erroneously claim, many DEI initiatives are anchored in theories that center student success for all. They focus on student outcomes around retention and sense of belonging, as well as mitigating challenges related to campus climate. Moreover, DEI programs often empower students through supportive programming that is culturally inclusive and culturally responsive, especially for student groups that are overlooked within institutions. Studies linking DEI efforts to poor college student retention rates fail to establish causal relationships and do not consider the complex nature of student retention. Student retention is influenced by a multitude of factors, including academic preparedness, financial aid, and campus climate.

While DEI initiatives may not provide a singular solution to student retention challenges, they play a vital role in creating supportive and inclusive learning environments that contribute to student success for all.¹⁴ Similarly, suggestions that DEI programs promote learned helplessness or infantilize students are baseless and fail to recognize the empowering and supportive nature of DEI initiatives, especially for those who are already feeling marginalized or minoritized on college campuses. DEI programs aim to empower individuals to advocate for themselves by providing greater awareness of existing campus resources and support structures that are readily available to all students.

Research provides compelling evidence of the positive outcomes associated with DEI initiatives on college student retention outcomes. Milem, Chang, and Antonio laid foundational work highlighting the critical role DEI efforts can play in creating an inclusive academic environment that supports all students' learning and development.¹⁵ Their research underscores that diversity initiatives contribute significantly to enhanced educational outcomes for students from various backgrounds. Subsequent studies build on these insights, revealing nuanced ways in which diversity and inclusion efforts directly correlate with student retention and success. For instance, Bowman found that interactions with diverse peers enhance critical thinking and civic engagement, fostering an environment where students are more likely to persist and succeed.¹⁶

More recent work by Denson and Chang further validated these findings, presenting robust evidence that diversity-related initiatives significantly impact students' academic outcomes, including retention and degree completion rates.¹⁷ Hurtado et al. also confirm that inclusive climates and diverse learning environments contribute significantly to student retention and graduation rates.¹⁸ These studies collectively underscore the indelible link between well-crafted DEI initiatives and enhanced retention and degree attainment, providing a solid foundation for continued investment in these critical areas. Drawing upon a range of studies, it is clear that diversity efforts are strategic enhancers of institutional success and achievement for all students.

Conclusion

After reviewing several decades of social science evidence, we can conclude that DEI efforts and strategies are indispensable to achieving more inclusive learning environments and advancing the academic success of all students. DEI efforts on college campuses are vital to promoting more equitable opportunities, values that are deeply connected to the academic missions of all institutions. Despite the misinformed criticisms and challenges, DEI initiatives play a crucial role in creating such environments where all individuals have the opportunity to succeed. It is essential for policymakers, administrators, and stakeholders to continue supporting and investing in DEI initiatives to ensure that higher education remains accessible and equitable for all. Rep. Owens and others should reconsider their policy positions based on a more thorough understanding of the empirical evidence that highlights the many benefits of DEI efforts on college campuses. Rather than abandon or scale them back, Congress and state legislators should consider how best to augment existing efforts to ensure that their many educational benefits can be more broadly shared by all students.

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Expert Response

Dr. Shawm M. Smith

I have been a physician for two decades. In addition to providing patient care and teaching medical students, I also read about scientific advancements in medicine, including high-quality research on health equity. I value evidence, hence my response to three myths articulated in the March 7 congressional hearing.

Myth 1: DEI is most dangerous in medical education. Future doctors are being taught to discriminate by race and not treat patients equally.

Despite having some of the most advanced medical treatments and technologies in the world, our U.S. healthcare system has struggled to deliver equitable healthcare outcomes for all Americans. Across the physical differences that we can see, Americans have much more in common with each other. Racism is intertwined into the fabric of our society, leaving some communities torn and vulnerable, while empowering others with tensile resiliency and vibrancy. While we would like to believe that healthcare is immune to discrimination by race, the facts over many decades speak for themselves.

Taking action to achieve health equity is imperative and there is a role within medical education to make a difference. A 2016 study analyzed the role of racial bias amongst medical students and resident physicians in the assessment and treatment of pain.¹ Additionally, the study evaluated the presence of contemporary false beliefs about biological differences between Black and white patients and found the following:

- 29% of first-year medical students believed the blood of Black patients coagulates faster than whites.
- 42% of second year medical students believed that Black skin was thicker than white skin, and 25% of resident physicians shared the same belief.
- 28% of second year medical students believed that Black people age slower than white people.
- 14% of second year medical students believe that Black people's nerve endings are less sensitive than white nerve endings.

An additional finding was that medical students and residents who endorsed the myth that Black patients experienced less pain were also less likely to recommend sufficient treatment of pain for Black patients. Appropriate treatment of pain is an important part of clinical care. Many researchers have evaluated the treatment of pain in the emergency department (ED) with attention to racial disparities. A study published in 2023 reviewed over 200,000 pain-related ED visits to a national sample of U.S. hospitals over a 22-year period and found that white patients were 1.26 times more likely to be prescribed opioid pain medications than Black patients, who were in turn 1.25 times more likely to be prescribed non-opioid pain medication than white patients.² These results underscore the pernicious and challenging prevalence of unequal care.

When evaluating care provided to 14 million pediatric patients between 2016 and 2019 at 44 pediatric hospitals across the U.S., researchers found that race and ethnicity may be independently associated with the decision to order imaging in the ED; Black and Hispanic children were less likely to receive diagnostic

imaging during ED visits when compared to white children.³ These results are a stark reminder that racial inequality in healthcare also affects children. Physicians are primarily responsible for ordering pain medications and diagnostic tests in the clinical setting; consequently, undergraduate (medical students) and graduate (residents and fellows) medical education represent important opportunities to educate future physicians on existing inequalities in healthcare and how to achieve fairness in healthcare for the future.

Myth 2: Future doctors are being trained to be activists. Patients don't need activists when they are sick. It is a corruption of medical education to use classroom or clinical time on social issues that doctors cannot change.

Physicians have a vital role in supporting good health for individuals and communities. Since 70-80% of the determinants or influencers of health operate outside of walls of a hospital or clinic, doctors must be competent in recognizing and addressing social issues which lead to illness and suffering. In most communities, physicians are respected voices of influence. Whether advising on the importance of access to healthy foods in the battle against obesity and diabetes, or the cancer and respiratory illness risks posed by pollution in fence line communities, physicians can play an outsized role leveraging their credibility and expertise to relieve illness and suffering.

In the book *The Political Determinants of Health*, the author identifies voting, government, and policy as the three major pillars of the political determinants of health (PDOH), which represent the driver of all other determinants.⁴ In other words, it is often very difficult to change social determinants of health without understanding and acting upon these PDOH. Take the story of Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician and medical educator at Michigan State University. Upon learning of elevated levels of lead in the drinking water in Flint, Michigan, she led research and advocacy efforts which were pivotal in forcing public officials to acknowledge and address the problem. There is no safe amount of lead for humans to consume, and it is more harmful to the developing brains of children. Changing the water supply and replacing lead leaching pipes were not within the prescribing authority of a physician; yet, Dr. Hanna-Attisha's efforts ultimately drove government action to support community members harmed by the contaminated water and changes in the source of the local water supply in Flint. Her effectiveness at the local, state, and national levels provides an example of the importance of physician competency in addressing social and political issues which impact the health of patients.

Myth 3: The concept of racial concordance between patient and physician is not a solution to the problem of disparities.

It is uncommon for patients from minoritized communities to receive care from a physician who shares their cultural, racial, and linguistic background. Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) 2023 data on the U.S. physician workforce underscores the significant underrepresentation of these communities, where Black physicians represent only 5% of U.S. physicians; Hispanic physicians make up 6%; multiracial physicians only 1%; and American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander physicians less than 0.5%.⁵ Although the representation of women in the physician workforce has improved to 37.6% in 2023 from 28% in 2007, women remain underrepresented. Diverse peer groups in physicians training environments can help physicians acquire the competencies necessary to deliver high-quality, cross-cultural care. It is important to note that patients bring their lived experiences and bias to the physician-patient encounter as well. This may include distrust and may affect the information they disclose to their physician and adherence to treatment recommendations. It is important to have a physician workforce that can meet patients where they are.

A meta-analysis of 40 articles highlights the importance of training physicians and patients to engage in higher quality communication with Black and racially discordant patients by focusing on improving patient-centeredness, information-giving, partnership building, and patient engagement in communication processes.⁶ Prior research from the National Center for Health Statistics indicates Black patients consistently receive lower quality of care than their white counterparts.⁷ The Institute of Medicine (IOM), now National Academy of Medicine (NAM), published a report which included a comprehensive analysis on disparities in clinical encounters; it found that physicians' own actions towards Black patients may contribute to these healthcare disparities.⁸

A 2023 cohort study titled, "Black Representation in the Primary Care Physician Workforce and Its Association With Population Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates in the U.S.," suggests that greater Black primary care physician (PCP) workforce representation is associated with better population health measures for Black individuals. Investments to build a more representative PCP workforce nationally may be important for improving population health.⁹

A 2020 study assessed the potential for patient–physician racial concordance to ameliorate the disparities experienced by a particularly vulnerable group: Black newborns.¹⁰ The findings showed the following:

- Black newborns treated by Black physicians had 58% lower mortality penalty than Black infants treated by white physicians.
- Black newborn deaths/100k, 430 more than white newborns (White physician).
- Black newborn deaths/100k, 173 more than white newborns (Black physician).
- This inequity widened with sicker Black infants (those with higher co-morbidities).
- Persisted amongst board-certified pediatricians and neonatologists.
- The underperformance is more pronounced/worse at hospitals that deliver higher number of Black infants.
- Little benefit of racial concordance for white infants' mortality and for Black maternal mortality

The authors recommend that hospitals and healthcare organizations elevate awareness amongst healthcare providers and administrators regarding the prevalence of racial and ethnic disparities as a key step in reducing disparities in newborn mortality. Additionally, investments should include a focus on implicit bias and its relationship with institutional racism. Further diversification of the physician workforce is needed to address the inequitable clinical outcomes experienced by minoritized communities.

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Expert Response

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To understand the debates about DEI in higher education, it is helpful to know that there is great diversity among postsecondary institutions in the United States. Our country has more than 5,000 colleges and universities.¹ Each has a different mission, focus, student body, and organizational structure with different names for each type of institution – community colleges, liberal arts colleges, land-grant institutions, research universities, and regional comprehensive universities, to name a few). Some are state-supported, some are private, and some are for-profit. Some have selective admissions, but most are open access. Some are residential, though many are commuter campuses.

Some institutions offer two-year degrees, some four-year degrees, and some offer graduate degrees. Some serve special populations of students (i.e., Historically Black Colleges, Tribal Colleges, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Women’s Colleges), while others serve a wider array of students. Some are secular and some have strong religious orientations. Some educate recent high school graduates, and some focus on non-traditional students who are older, work, and have family responsibilities. In addition, some focus on research and teaching, while others are solely teaching institutions. Some are national or international in scope and others are regionally focused. Some have billion-dollar endowments, and some have no endowments at all. Some enroll over 100,000 students and some have fewer than 100. Thus, there is no typical postsecondary institution in the U.S.

The common element among these institutions is that they educate students – but how they do that, who their students are, who their faculty are, what their missions are, and how they organize DEI is as diverse as the institutions themselves.² Blanket statements about how DEI is handled at a college or university belies the important differences across the sector. Indeed, the diversity of higher education in the U.S. is what makes the system the best in the world. But that same diversity also means that asserting generalizations about what happens at one place as being true at all institutions sets up a false narrative.

Only a few institutions get the attention of the American public, media, and politicians. Indeed, when one thinks about U.S. colleges, they often envision places like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, or the University of Michigan, to name a few. The overwhelming majority of institutions, though, go about their work of educating students with comparative obscurity. The college campus that many envision is a selective, resource rich institution that educates full-time, residential, traditional-aged students in a bucolic campus setting. This, however, is not the norm – most institutions of higher education are open access, meaning that they admit almost anyone who applies and, as such, discussions about “lowering standards” to improve access is not a relevant topic at most places. As a system, higher education in the U.S. is recognized as a world leader due to its support of students achieving their academic and professional goals.³ It deserves respect and support, not condemnation.

History of Exclusion Repeating Itself

For the first 150 years of higher education in the U.S., the population of college students stayed relatively constant: young white men from wealthy families.⁴ Inclusion of other groups was slow to happen and was the focus of continual consternation. For example, the arguments against the education of women in the 1800s focused on the potential negative health effects of women being educated. Education, it was believed, would make women infertile.⁵ Similarly, people argued that admitting women to colleges and universities would mean that “deserving men” would not have access, that women were incapable of

being successful, and that the quality of higher education would decline as women were admitted.⁶ These arguments against women's access to higher education continued long after they were disproven.

In the early 20th century, similar arguments were levied against the inclusion of Jewish students in higher education, with concerns that admitting too many Jewish students would lead to declines in academic quality and negatively affect access to "more deserving" students. These beliefs led to long-standing quotas for Jews established at many institutions of higher education and a movement away from test scores towards more "objective" criteria that allowed for continued discrimination.⁷

There is a commonality in the concerns expressed by those who wished to exclude women and Jews and other groups who have historically been kept out of higher education. Indeed, Harold S. Wechsler, a higher education historian, noted that while some colleges were initially willing to let in women, Blacks, and Jews, most balked when they saw the numbers increasing too quickly and potentially negatively affecting admission of white men, at which point they actively worked to exclude them.⁸

While women now represent the majority of college students and quotas against Jewish students are no longer allowed, arguments being raised today about the diversification of the student body at U.S. institutions of higher education echo these earlier concerns. As many campuses work to become more welcoming to historically disenfranchised groups (i.e., students of color, low-income students, and first generation college students), critics claim reverse discrimination, the loss of meritocracy, and concerns about quality. It is important to see these claims as they are: political fodder being used to sow dissent rather than being based on facts.

Unfortunately, politicians are focused more on painting a false picture of "take overs" and "wokeism" rather than focusing on a narrative of inclusion and equity. History illustrates patterns of exclusion that ought not to be repeated, as the goal should be wider rather than more narrow access to education. Indeed, research clearly shows that society benefits from having a more educated populace in terms of economic productivity, decreased incarceration, and a more educated citizenry to name a few benefits (Mayhew et al., 2016; Schofer et al., 2021).⁹

Organizational Implications of Diversity

Turning attention to what DEI offices do, why they do it, and the impact of their actions, it is helpful to define what is meant by diversity. Higher education scholar Daryl G. Smith explains that there are four components to diversity in higher education: representation, campus climate, curriculum, and institutional organization.¹⁰ Each frames the work of DEI offices across the diversity of college and university campuses in the U.S.

Representation. Representation is what most people think of when they think about diversifying higher education. This includes examining the characteristics of who attends, who graduates from, who works at, and who leads institutions. Representation is akin to the notion of "access." When discussing initiatives to diversify an organization, one typically looks at the basic demographics of who is represented (or underrepresented). One might, for example, look at representation by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, veteran status, disability status – the federally recognized categories of those who have been historically excluded from higher education.

Higher education has expanded its access to a wider array of students over time. The number and percentage of students of color, for example, has increased. Unfortunately, students with disabilities,

students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college students continue to lag behind their peers in access to and graduation from college. Further, looking across the sector, there are still significant inequalities in terms of who has access to the most selective and prestigious types of colleges. Students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students are overrepresented at community colleges and less-selective institutions, but remain underrepresented at more selective institutions. Women are also underrepresented in some fields and disciplines. Underrepresentation of certain groups also exists among the faculty and leaders of colleges and universities. While there has been some progress in diversifying higher education, there is still considerable room for improvement.

DEI offices on many campuses focus their attention on expanding student access to higher education. DEI offices might work with federally funded TRIO programs, for example, to improve outreach to K-12 students to get them to think about higher education as a possibility. They might work with prospective students and their parents to help them navigate financial aid systems. The goal for many in these offices is to address inequities in K-12 resources by making sure that potential students have the information they need to attend college if they choose. For open-access institutions, improving access is about providing education about postsecondary possibilities. The focus is not about exclusion, as most institutions seem to have the capacity to expand to meet the needs of those who wish to attend. For the handful of selective institutions in the system, improving access might mean relying on wholistic admissions, deemphasizing tests scores, and providing ample financial aid to make college access even an option. At these elite institutions, access is limited and not everyone can attend – the question to be answered is how best to determine who should be admitted from a pool overflowing with talent. Engaging in this outreach and participating in these discussions is part of DEI work on many college and university campuses.

Campus Climate. In this domain, the concern is about making sure that those who enroll and work at institutions of higher education feel like they matter and belong. Research shows that retention and graduation are related to students' feelings of engagement and belonging on campus.¹¹ A focus on campus climate is key for all students' success. Given the history of exclusion in U.S. higher education, however, many campuses need to work extra hard to make students from historically disenfranchised backgrounds feel welcome.

DEI staff on many college campuses focus on helping students be successful by providing them with the necessary support they may need to navigate the educational environment. This support may consist of academic tutoring, writing centers, disability services, as well as social opportunities. This may include creating affinity group spaces where students who share similar backgrounds might meet to support one another. These services are not only for historically disenfranchised students – but are for all students, regardless of background. Indeed, research shows that White students benefit the most when engaging in diversity-related programming on campuses.¹²

Concerns about antisemitism recently raised in the Congressional hearing are the type of issue that a DEI staff member might address by providing support to those affected and education to perpetrators of harm. This is the domain of campus DEI offices, with the goal not to sow division but to help people navigate individual differences in a way that protects everyone, builds a larger sense of community, and creates a positive learning environment. Rising antisemitism on today's campuses calls for more DEI work, not less.

Importantly, college is one of the first places that students get to live with, take classes with, and interact with people from different backgrounds. U.S. citizens often come from segregated communities, but a

college campus offers an opportunity for people to get to know others who have had vastly different upbringings. As such, one role of DEI staff is to help facilitate intergroup interactions. DEI staff may help provide educational opportunities for people to learn across differences, learn how to respect others who are different, and learn how best to support one another. The skills taught in this domain translate to the skills wanted by many employers who will eventually hire graduates.¹³

Curriculum. The third dimension of diversity in higher education is focused on what is taught and how it is taught. The curriculum, which varies across institutions, is at the heart of the academic enterprise. DEI staff may provide professional development to faculty to assist in providing either content or pedagogical support to better educate all students. The formal curriculum, required courses and majors, however, is largely the domain of faculty, not DEI staff.

Most faculty members value academic freedom, long considered the cornerstone of American higher education.¹⁴ Faculty, as experts in their various fields, would likely agree that the formal curriculum is supposed to be a “marketplace of ideas” where students are exposed to new ways of thinking and new perspectives. The goal of higher education is to give students the opportunity to engage with material to help them expand their knowledge base and to reinforce their critical thinking and communication skills – skills that will help them be successful once they graduate.¹⁵

Across the curriculum, college students will likely be exposed to ideas with which they disagree or are unfamiliar. In any one course, for example, they might be asked to do a number of assignments, including but not limited to, reading a biblical or Marxist text, critiquing Critical Race Theory, writing a poem in non-standard English, or analyzing Fox or MSNBC for accuracy. The goal is to expose students to new ideas and sources of information to assist them in moving from “black and white” thinking to understanding that there are multiple answers to most complex problems.¹⁶ Learning comes from discomfort – and it is only when students are exposed to new ideas that they push themselves to learn about others, about themselves, and about the human experience. In this vein, Clark Kerr, noted economist and academic administrator, argued that “the purpose of the university is to make students safe for ideas, not ideas safe for students.”¹⁷

Political attempts to interfere with the curriculum by banning the teaching of “divisive content” goes against the very nature of postsecondary education and its cornerstone of academic freedom. Such attempts will negatively impact faculty and students from all political spectrums and backgrounds. Further, such attempts to legislate what is acceptable to learn is predicted to have a chilling effect on the academy,¹⁸ and will leave students unable to get out of college what they most deserve: a well-rounded education, critical thinking, and other professional skills.

While the formal curriculum is the domain of the faculty, it is not atypical for DEI offices to focus on the co-curriculum, meaning what happens outside of class. By some estimates, 80% of what a traditional-aged college student learns occurs outside the classroom.¹⁹ Within the co-curriculum, DEI offices may assist in providing education that supports students’ academic goals through speakers series, workshops, service learning, study abroad, and other “high impact practices.”²⁰ Each of these opportunities provides additional educational outreach to assist students in applying their learning to new settings as well as stretching the educational boundaries into new domains. Research shows that these high impact practices can be among the most impactful experiences for college students and are likely to positively influence both academic as well as personal outcomes.²¹ Diversity-related co-curricular experiences are shown to have a positive impact on all students, regardless of their background characteristics.²²

Organizational Leadership. The final domain of diversity in higher education has to do with the way institutions are organized and the ways that decisions are made. In this domain, several DEI offices play a role in handling compliance issues – providing institutional support to meet the mandates of Title IX, Title VI, or the Americans with Disability Act, to name a few. This compliance role is made necessary by federal mandates to ensure non-discrimination of campus constituents and to ensure equal opportunity under the law.

DEI offices, particularly chief diversity officers, may also play an important role in keeping the institution focused on the needs of all constituents, with attention on historically marginalized groups. DEI staff may help to point out institutional structures that marginalize, exclude, and disadvantage certain groups over others and offer alternative policies and supports.²³ Similarly, by having a “seat at the table,” they may assist other institutional leaders and offices in being mindful of the needs of constituents who have historically been excluded. As noted earlier, how this is done and who does it may vary across institutional types.

Institutions of higher education, as different as they may be from one another, share a common history of exclusion. As a sector, higher education has made progress in providing greater access and supports to constituents who have historically been excluded, but still has a way to go to achieve the goals of equity, diversity and inclusion. DEI offices play a fundamental role in improving access, addressing campus climate needs, shaping the curriculum and co-curriculum, and transforming organizations. They are an important part of what makes the U.S. system of higher education the best at providing a world-class education.

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