



## **Staying Resolute in a World Without DEI: A Call for National, Cross-Role, and Institutional Solidarity in the Wake of a DEI Backlash**

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For a couple of years now, I've been forced to conceptualize a world without DEI, a reality where "Diversity Equity Inclusion" (DEI) just doesn't exist. In doing so, my mind starts rewinding through history, some of which I lived through and others of which I've read or studied. I think of a time around 15 years ago, in 2008, when we had to reconcile the conversation on DEI with a dehumanizing pre-marriage equality public discourse on the value of gay people and a dehumanizing pre-Black Lives Matter and pre-"me too" discourse that blamed Black people and women for their own societal injuries. 15 years before that, in the 90s, we at least had a prominent discussion of "Diversity" and affirmative action in employment law, but we had the regressive movement of Don't Ask Don't Tell and the growing foothold of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2012). Before that, many root our modern-day DEI initiatives (if called by other names) in employment law from the 1960s and the Civil Rights and Women's movements. Of course, before the 1960s' legislation and activism was a time of Jim Crow and limited rights for many marginalized groups, yet these progressive forces were still burgeoning, with women's suffrage, anti-colonial struggles, slave revolts, etc. (Táíwò, 2022). As I try to pinpoint one historical reference point without DEI, I notice we have always had progressive and regressive forces regarding gender, racial, socioeconomic, and sexual equality. Those who seek progress have seen an unequal status quo, organized with each other, attached words for what we sought in organizing, experienced backlash, learned important lessons, changed up the words, organized more and smarter, and experienced more backlash.

I've been thinking about this history, because I've been thinking about the world without DEI that's being enacted in Florida, where recent legislation and other state actions have banned diversity offices and programs, limited teaching on histories of inequality, and generated a host of performative and exclusionary policies regarding trans and LGBTQ people (Moody, 2024; Epstein, 2024). While trying to make sense of these realities, the closest parallel to a world without DEI that I could conjure was to something decades in the past.



I've also been thinking about this history because, frankly, I'm tired. As someone who has lived through and organized within a handful of these struggles, I attach a good part of my identity to what we have generally called DEI work (Secules et al., 2021, p. 9). I'm tired because DEI work was already hard, battling for resources and recognition within conservative systems, steering clear of hypocrisy and performativity, absorbing the pain of each other and ourselves. On a good day, DEI work can feel like something fragile and Sisyphean. On a bad day, apparently, it becomes illegal.

I'm writing this piece because writing has always been a form of processing for me, because I think others should know more about the reality going on in Florida that is already being copied and spread across the country (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024), because it is my understanding that my free speech as faculty in Florida is still protected, and because I hope to provide some collective resolution regarding the challenges we face. This resolution would be a form of catharsis for myself, as I have been in an intermittent state of paralysis lately regarding my work in this context. And I would like that resolution for all of us, I would like us to become more resolute in resisting a world without DEI.

### **A VIEW FROM INSIDE THE CHILLY CLIMATE**

In the prior year, a slew of legislation in Florida (SB 958/HB931, HB999/SB266, HB599/SB1382, as summarized by The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024) has effectively banned diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and DEI training programs. In some cases entire diversity office staff have been directly let go (Mangan, 2024) and in other cases the staff offices get renamed and rebranded. When these rebrands and reallocations coincide with staff departures and budget cuts they make university commitments to diversity unclear and plausibly deniable. To say that this has created a world without DEI is both hyperbole and reality. As of now, the work of supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion continues to exist and continues to be the daily work of many people, yet official state-funded programmatic support has been ended. In response, I have personally leaned more into my externally-funded DEI work as other initiatives close and rebrand with purposes further removed from my own. There is a dystopian and fascist sense of knowing that these realities exist but needing to call them by a different name, to be hidden, or to be banned. And, there is a general sense of fear and impending prohibitions that seems to stop people in their tracks before the word DEI is even uttered.

I reference the concept of chilly climate from the diversity literature (e.g., Hughes, 2012), typically used to indicate the myriad ways that a STEM institution or workplace comes to feel unwelcoming to women or historically excluded racial groups. There is often no single official moment where someone speaks that chilly climate into de jure exclusionary action; there are typically a thousand



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small incremental moments where exclusion is conjured de facto by a collective. Similarly, in our political climate, there are a myriad of ways that the fear of DEI pervades the consciousness of the university. It matters that I work at a public university in Florida, and it is consequential that the policies in place are nebulous, that officials struggle to define the very terms that they seek to ban, such as “critical race theory,” “intersectionality,” and “woke.” The fear leads to significant self-censorship even without clear guidelines or consequences for upholding the law.

The sense of fear underlies my writing now. Will this writing see the light of day? And is that wise or foolish? Will its lack of attention protect me, or will the act of speaking up make me or those I care about a target? It has been a mental struggle to determine the extent to which I should let these policies influence my actions, as I'm sure it is for others. Some take a more conservative approach than me, backing away from participation in DEI-associated programs and telling me to “tread cautiously” when planning for events that highlight DEI topics. Others take a more bold approach, telling me that all of my faculty work is my free speech and I will be able to fight in court if it comes to it. Still, others mimic the vagueness of the broader regime, speaking internally about how crucial DEI is to our university but in public acquiescing to a logic that would dismantle it.

I have been wondering about why this chilly climate for DEI is impacting me so heavily. I think it has to do with my prior life history, specifically the moment when I put stock in a professional identity as someone who works towards equity (Secules et al., 2021, p. 9). This was the impetus and vision that led me to quit my prior engineering job and has motivated me through the other turns and setbacks of an academic pathway. To have equity work, DEI, become vaguely taboo or specifically banned has been disorienting. I would liken it to investing your life in mathematics, only to have someone, the state, tell you one day that  $2 + 2$  is actually 5 and it is potentially illegal to investigate the topic of  $2 + 2$  further. While you might still believe in the mathematics you're doing, part of what you were doing was investigating math to be useful to others, explaining or teaching math to others, and hoping that others recognize the importance (and reality) of that mathematical work as you do. To find the value system that you have worked towards officially upended is disorienting and isolating.

### BECOMING RESOLUTE

A few things I have realized have helped me come to terms with this world that is murkily becoming a world without DEI. I suggest them as possible modes of action for others reading this and invested in the same struggles:

**Clarity:** As a qualitative researcher, I think words have specific meaning and power, and being honest about events and contexts is crucial to our work together. I am making it a point to keep



using terms such as diversity, equity, and inclusion for as long as and until I am specifically told I can't. This signals to others feeling less power and security in the system, particularly students and staff, that they too can speak the truth. I also think it's important for those of us who are seeing what's happening in local contexts across the country regarding a DEI backlash to be honest and clear about it. It doesn't serve our collective progress to be in denial or unaware of the struggle.

**Bravery:** In considering whether to pursue or publicize that I pursue DEI work, I have asked for wisdom from various parties. But when told to "tread carefully" by some, I realized that generally, self-censorship did not make sense. Since this is the only part of academic work I would want to do, I will keep doing it until it is shut down. The situation requires some bravery. And yet there is some freedom in attaching that much meaning to one's work, remembering those values and trusting in a local and national community that shares those values has brought me both clarity and bravery in situations of fear.

**Purpose:** I have realized that part of my deep disorientation over the past couple of years has come from a lack of alignment with external validation. Being in a system that demonizes the work I do is disorienting. Nevertheless, I've reminded myself that internal (my personal purpose) and community (seeing the value of my work for peers and those I support) validation is actually a more robust way to organize a life than a focus on external validation by the system. I can still get down when thinking about the systems of academic and state external validation, when I have already felt that DEI work is hard or unrecognized, and now it is slipping backwards to the point of being banned. But reminding myself of the internal validation of my sense of purpose, and the validation that can come from supporting my peers and students in a worthy struggle, is another source of resistance.

**Solidarity:** Finally, we all need to help each other. We need support across institutional roles: faculty like me need to use our free speech to make an explicit defense of DEI, while staff members in DEI offices carrying out crucial work for our students are more vulnerable. If student organizing and faculty organizing work together, we can pushback on the narrative that "liberal faculty are indoctrinating students" or "faculty are only worried about tenure because they want lifetime job security without doing any work" or "woke students are young and naïve."

Further, I think people, including faculty, staff, students, DEI officers, administrators, and industry professionals, in states that support DEI and particularly those with some sort of platform or leadership position, need to speak out in support of those in states enacting DEI bans. I will note that a problem "only in Florida" still affects 6% of the US population, and if something happens in both Texas and Florida that's 15%. These are not fringe issues, and they are being copied nationally. I do not know the one right way to approach solidarity. I have seen discussion of national funding boycotts; personally, I think that approach would not be effective and would only harm DEI researchers



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like myself attempting to do the work. I anticipate needing to collaborate with those on the front lines within the state to strategize the ways to have effective impact.

My call in this piece is for us to recognize that DEI is becoming a radical act and to collectively talk about, strategize, and act bravely to keep supporting our students and committing towards a more equitable world. I look forward to joining with colleagues around the country to continue doing that work.

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