
Editorial: Voices from the academy: a response to President Donald Trump's anti-DEI policies

Equality, Diversity
and Inclusion: An
International
Journal

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Our research underscores the importance of improving, not eliminating, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs. While DEI initiatives are well intended, they sometimes lead to unintended consequences such as backlash, stigma and perceptions of unfairness. So, rather than eliminating DEI efforts, organizations should focus on improving them by expanding inclusive hiring practices, establishing clear accountability measures, integrating DEI into workplace strategy and culture and implementing a comprehensive evaluation system. Strengthening these programs ensures they effectively promote fairness, reduce bias and create truly inclusive environments – ultimately benefiting employees, businesses and society. In short: *mend it, don't end it.*

Herman Aguinis

*Avram Tucker Distinguished Scholar and Professor of Management
The George Washington University*

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Aggrieved manhood is back with a vengeance and flooding all fronts. Trump is but one distracting vessel, best starved of the attention he craves. Tune out the blitz to focus on the fact that the agenda he serves spells death. Behind cries to “end DEI” and “drill baby drill” is a fragile ego-in-common willing to kill us all for another hit of supremacy. Not even straight white cis men can survive the coming wreckage of earth and soul. May all who seek to shed ego for the joy of sustaining life join hands. Let's face it: DEI as we knew it was made for a dying world. We can mourn this *and* (re)make it better, together.

Karen Lee Ashcraft,

*Professor of Communication
University of Colorado, Boulder*

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The systematic opposition and backlash against DEI are daunting. We will not accept the simplistic framing of DEI as going too far. We know that DEI calls out and counters widespread systemic discrimination, racism and sexism. In these difficult times, we need cool heads, warm hearts and strong hopes that we can organize in solidarity, keeping our eyes on the ball of justice. No anticipatory self-disciplining to discard DEI, but taking the words of feminist Kathy Ferguson and continuing to develop radically different ways of knowing that trouble power relations, imagine better worlds and work to achieve them.

Yvonne Benschop

*Professor of Strategic Human Resource Management
Radboud Universiteit*

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The recent executive orders targeting DEI signed by the president have the potential to reverse decades of progress in fostering inclusion and promoting a just society. While these orders claim to restore meritocracy, DEI scholars and practitioners recognize the underlying implications. This shift could lead to increased inequality, discrimination and a lack of equity. Meritocracy, as it is often idealized, does not exist in many organizations. Well-designed and effectively implemented DEI strategies are essential for addressing systemic inequalities and biases.



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An
International Journal
Vol. 44 No. 2, 2025
pp. 151-157
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2040-7157
p-ISSN: 2040-7149
DOI 10.1108/EDI-03-2025-550

Furthermore, there is significant concern regarding research with a DEI component, such as studies on health disparities across all communities. It is imperative that we continue to strive for equity. ¡Adelante!

Donna Maria Blancero
Bentley University

Before you react to Trump's first week back in office attacks on DEI, take time to understand the long game his coalition of libertarians and white Christian nationalists is playing. First, its questionable if the USA was even set up as a democracy, for it has structural barriers to ensure minority rule – which this past week has become more visible – read Levitsky and Ziblatt's "*Tyranny of the Minority*" and their earlier "*How Democracies Die*." Also read Stanley's "*How Fascism Works*." But even before these scholars read Mayer's "*Dark Money*" to understand the libertarian plan and how they are buying a pro-business revolution to make capitalism safe from democracy. Also read MacLean's "*Democracy in Chains*." For how this plays out in higher education, read Wilson and Kamola's "*Free Speech and Koch Money*." To understand the long game of how libertarians captured SCOTUS and overturned *Roe v. Wade* and enacted the dark money of Citizens United, the podcast "*We Don't Talk About Leonard*" is excellent. Libertarians are highly unpopular and aligned with the boots on the ground of the white Christian nationalists who want to turn the USA into a theocracy – this webinar helps one under the New Apostolic Reformation [1]. Hochschild's "*Stolen Pride*" tells us how Trump has tapped into the shame of WCNs and used it for his benefit. If you want to be successful, you have to understand and counter long-game and the structural flaws in American democracy.

Cliff Cheng
Bard Center for the Study of Hate
Bard College

In critical moments, those in power often seek to impose their worldviews, driven by personal experiences or a desire to maintain privilege, which can exploit economically vulnerable individuals. Social media and generative AI further threaten those committed to dignity and social justice. Despite the challenging years ahead, I remain hopeful. Resistance to fairness and social justice is a longstanding struggle. Alarming proclamations from the USA Government and corporations have raised concerns among advocates for DEI, but I believe this anti-DEI sentiment will ultimately falter. Historically, social justice efforts are embedded in frameworks like the UN, which promotes "peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet." Inspiring figures in the DEI realm include Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, alongside less familiar names like economist Martin Wolf and the late Professor Hans Rosling. Their insights on examining the past and envisioning the future with evidence remain invaluable in guiding our path forward.

Nelarine Cornelius
Professor of Organization Studies
Queen Mary University of London

President Trump's anti-DEI executive orders undermine rigorous research, evidence-based leadership practice and our capacity to create fair workplaces and communities. Thriving organizations depend on diverse perspectives, yet these orders suppress inquiry into how to design systems that foster inclusion, fairness and collective wisdom. Progress in management science and leadership practice depends on understanding how diverse experiences drive innovation, resilience and performance. Silencing this work weakens our ability to build institutions that serve all people and limits the meritocracy the EOs claim to pursue. Scholars and practitioners must push back. We must continue to advance the knowledge that builds stronger organizations and a fairer society.

Opponents of DEI policies and programs interpret them as encouraging a system of race-based or other-based discrimination rather than “merit.” DEI and merit are not mutually exclusive. DEI benefits everyone. As Rev. Jesse Jackson used to say, “[. . .] a rising tide lifts ALL ships.” The political backlash against (DEI) policies and practices requires a forceful response from all of us who value such programs. So, like Michelle Obama says, “It’s time to DO SOMETHING!” Be creative, protest, wage legal battles, March, etc. Don’t just sit on the sidelines and wait. Be proactive instead of reactive.

David L. Ford, Jr.
University of Texas at Dallas
Professor Emeritus of Organizations, Strategy, and International Management

We urge the president, all politicians, organizational leaders, and all people to read the science and scholarship that support DEI practices. The ultimate goal of DEI practices (like the *stated goal* of President Trump) is to create a meritocracy – one in which wealth, nepotism and bias do not outweigh the job skills and capabilities of applicants and employees. Effective DEI initiatives, like cuts in sidewalk curbs and captions on Zoom calls, are designed to benefit everyone. Nobody has to lose. We must ensure that the future of the American workforce is vibrant, healthy and competitive; DEI practices help, not hurt, that objective.

Mikki Hebl and Eden King,
Martha and Henry Malcolm Lovett Professor of Psychological Sciences,
Lynnette S. Autrey Professor of Psychological Sciences
Rice University

Great strides have been made in the past century with regards to equal rights and anti-discrimination. The efforts and pains to reach these advances seem to be wiped away as Trump prepares for another four years of social ravage. While these are dark times for humanity, I hope we learn from these terrible mistakes as we examine its outcomes and show the absolute need for legislation and inclusive practices. The setback the world will face with Trump’s anti-DEI rhetoric is scary, will aggravate inequality and will normalize hate towards certain communities. We can only hope this will be a short-lived episode in history.

Sophie Hennekam,
Professor in Organizational Behavior
Audencia Business School

The flurry of Republican-led anti-DEI laws and Trump’s anti-DEI executive orders represent a monumental abuse of power, exertion of prejudicial attitudes and threat to our democracy. Republican leaders’ attempts to take the United States of America back to an era where discrimination, exclusion and opportunity hoarding for specific groups were legal should cause massive coalition-building efforts among national and grassroots civil rights organizations to use every tool and resource to beat back all these attempts vigorously. Conducting high-quality DEI research is monumentally important, and scholars should not abandon their work. However, this moment of DEI resistance is a testament that DEI research is never enough to rid our society of powerful, oppressive forces. To meet this moment, we

need brave activists to engage in civil disobedience to turn the tide back towards freedom and justice.

Oscar Holmes IV, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP
Associate Professor of Management
Rutgers School of Business-Camden

Meritocracy requires diversity. Innate human talent is distributed equally among all identity groups. To think differently is to embrace fascist values. Assuming equality of talent across all human groups means that meritocracy requires diversity. When historically advantaged groups receive more than their share of organizational resources and rewards, results are unlikely to be meritocratic and the integrity of the distribution process becomes questionable. Only when organizations distribute resources and rewards to both advantaged and marginalized groups can decision-makers demonstrate their ability to embrace excellence regardless of how talent is embodied. Therefore, diversity strengthens meritocracy by rewarding the top of every human talent pool.

Alison M. Konrad
Ivey Business School, Western University

Pursuant to federal and state laws, Executive Orders 14,173 & J21 suppress free speech, threaten lawsuits, and withhold funding for organizations with DEI initiatives. Actions to dismantle DEI misappropriate creative destruction principles [2], creating false economic and innovation narratives pronouncing DEI initiatives as inefficient, obsolete and not merit-based in employment, education and society. While DEI and merit are undefined in the EOs, the USA laws codifying the democratic principles of equal opportunity, justice and anti-discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, religion, disability and age are not. Positive interventions are essential to legitimize the societal and economic value of educating, employing and fully engaging a diverse workforce.

Ellen Ernst Kossek
Visiting Scholar, Queen Mary University of London
Distinguished Professor of Management, Purdue University

Trump's anti-DEI executive orders exemplify the broader responsabilization of inequality – shifting systemic failures onto individuals while dismantling institutional mechanisms of justice. My research on EDI leadership, alt-right movements and gendered organizations demonstrates that such attacks embolden exclusionary practices and legitimize *strategic ignorance* as an unearned privilege – allowing dominant groups to deny discrimination while deepening systemic inequities. These orders erode workplace protections, delegitimize inclusion efforts and silence critical scholarship. As DEI scholars and practitioners, we must counter this erosion through empirical evidence, institutional advocacy and transnational solidarity. DEI is not an ideology – it is a foundation for equitable economies and sustainable democracies.

Mustafa Özbilgin
Professor of Organizational Behavior
Brunel University of London

Donald Trump has expressed opposition to DEI initiatives, framing them in ways that some perceive as disadvantageous to white men. This perspective sometimes leads to criticism of individuals from diverse backgrounds who advocate for different policies. At a DEI Division plenary session at the AOM Meeting in 2023, I warned that our ongoing challenge was to

establish and maintain our legitimacy as a field externally. At the time, it was already under attack; now, it's worse. We do good and needed research as DEI scholars, and we need to keep doing it. And we should not let our field and our vulnerable colleagues be victims of Trump-induced DEI hysteria and remain silent.

Gary N. Powell

Professor Emeritus of Management

University of Connecticut

Former Chair of the Women in Management Division (now Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Division) of the Academy of Management

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Attacks against DEI are attacks against democracy's core principles of pluralism, respect for difference and tolerance. The brutish masculinity with which DEI is being dismantled, erased and belittled engenders violence to everyone – even those responsible for its execution. This violence is enacted by a fragile masculinity that prizes aggression, individualism, greed, misogyny, racism and transphobia. Resistance to this fragile assault is imperative and calls every institution that upholds democratic values to action, especially universities. Political action for acceptance, care and a shared humanity is a priority. Protecting those who are attacked most directly is immediately essential.

Alison Pullen

Professor of Gender, Work and Organization

Macquarie University

These are perilous times for all who advance diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. Among the most vulnerable are thought leaders and practitioners who do not center, validate and uplift the dominance of cisgender, heterosexual, white, Christian and USA-born men. Scholars, institutional leaders and grassroots activists have always put their livelihood on the line by documenting and advocating against bias and inequity. But the latest wave of legislative violence aims for this work – and those who lead it or endorse it – to be publicly persecuted, censored and banished. Labeling DEI as “radical,” “wasteful” and “shameful discrimination” places undue and excessive risk upon all who seek to learn about differences and level the playing field for the betterment of society. Rescinding these hard-fought, evidence-based, emancipatory programs and policies will remove workforce protections for everyone impacted by the USA economy. If they are not reinstated, humankind will suffer the extraordinary cost of this ideological suppression and programmatic oppression.

Laura Morgan Roberts, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Business Administration

University of Virginia Darden School of Business

The backlash against DEI initiatives in the USA, rooted in ideological opposition, marks a troubling regression in public discourse. It not only disproportionately fixates on race and/or ethnicity and falsely frames equity as antithetical to merit but also seeks to dismantle programs without assessing their effectiveness. This anti-DEI rhetoric disregards decades of research demonstrating DEI's positive impact on innovation, performance and competitiveness, undermining both meaningful progress and the integrity of organizational sciences by prioritizing politics over evidence. Accordingly, researchers and practitioners must reaffirm DEI's essential role in building inclusive, high-performing institutions that reflect the realities of an ever-changing workforce and society.

Quinetta Roberson

John A. Hannah Professor of Management and Psychology

Michigan State University

Every day, malevolent leaders make disparaging remarks about DEI and claim it means hiring those who are inferior. I believe these arguments are a subterfuge to conceal their racism, and some white males slander DEI to maintain dominance and control. Diversity benefits society, and diverse members have made many dramatic contributions. For example, Navajo codetalkers used their language to help marines communicate in WWII and win the war. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and others helped pass civil rights laws. Famous LGBTQ persons, Leonardo da Vinci, Alan Turing and Isaac Newton, changed our world, and people with disabilities like Stephen Hawking, Helen Keller and Franklin Roosevelt made a lasting impact on our lives. We need to counter slanderous comments about DEI with these contributions.

Diana L. Stone
Research Professor
University of New Mexico

The recent attacks on DEI by the USA administration are unsurprising, given that many DEI activists and most DEI academics, editors and journals remained silent on the genocide in Gaza carried out by the USA-backed Zionist regime of Israel. This silence reflects the haunting truth of the phrase: “Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.” The way forward requires an honest acknowledgment and atonement for this silence, along with a commitment to solidarity with all individuals and communities facing discrimination, violence and persecution.

Jawad Syed
Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior
Lahore University of Management Sciences

The silver lining of Trump’s anti-DEI efforts is that now the best way to avoid legal risk is also the best way to make year-over-year progress towards DEI goals. Trump can’t prohibit companies from using evidence-based measures to pursue their business goals; our bias interrupters [3] do just that. In 22 experiments inside companies we’ve tested both our bias training and our tools to eliminate bias in hiring, access to opportunities, performance evaluations and meetings and found sharp decreases in bias and increases in diversity. The key is to use metrics that measure whether and where bias is arising, along with evidence-based strategies that combine insights I/O and social psychology. All described in an ongoing series of posts on my LinkedIn!

Joan C. Williams
Sullivan Professor of Law
University of California, College of Law, San Francisco

To have sustainable success, an organization must attract, develop and retain an effective workforce. At the same time, demographic shifts mean that our workforce has never been more diverse. Thus, leaders must decide how they reconcile these two facts. Will they create an environment that champions homogeneity to achieve a sense of comfort associated with the past or will they create environments that allow a diverse set of skills, experiences and perspectives to create new opportunities? Decades of research tell us that it is the latter choice that will make our future brighter than our past.

Professor Ian O. Williamson
Paul Merage School of Business
University of California, Irvine

Trump’s EOs represent the forceful backlash of ultra-conservative politics against the marriage of capital and progressive liberal politics embodied by DEI. They are a major

political setback for subordinate groups, as they will likely erase many achievements of the last decades. Nonetheless, they could also constitute a political opportunity. On the one hand, they could become a catalyst for progressive forces to recompose against a common enemy. On the other hand, they might reveal the contradiction between ultra-conservative politics and capital's need to acquire more easily exploitable labor, including women, migrants and workers in the global south [...] to valorize itself. The global intersectional labor class should take on the challenge and mobilize for a more radical transnational equality agenda, grounded in the political tradition of the emancipatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Professor Patrizia Zanoni
School of Social Sciences
Hasselt University, Belgium

**Herman Aguinis, Karen Ashcraft, Yvonne Benschop, Donna Maria Blancero,
Cliff Cheng, Nelarine Cornelius, Martin Davidson, David Ford, Mikki Hebl, Eden King,
Dianna Stone, Sophie Hennekam, Oscar Holmes IV, Alison M. Konrad,
Ellen Ernst Kossek, Mustafa Ozbilgin, Gary N. Powell, Alison Pullen,
Laura Morgan Morgan Roberts, Quinetta Roberson, Diana Stone, Jawad Syed,
Joan Williams and Ian O. Williamson**

Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4lrmoaL3Kw>
2. Schumpeter, J.A. (1950). The Process of Creative Destruction. In: *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd Edition, London: Allen and Unwin.
3. <https://biasinterrupters.org/>