# Leveraging Research and Demanding Proof In Response To Legislative Attacks on DEI in U.S. Higher Education

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*More than 50 years of research confirms the value that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, programs, and professional roles add to college and university campuses. Despite this, governors, state legislators, federal policymakers, and a U.S. President have signed executive orders, issued "Dear Colleague" letters, and enacted policies in recent years that have defunded or eliminated DEI initiatives. Many DEI professionals have lost their jobs; grants to scholars studying DEI-related topics have been paused and canceled. This article is a call for greater reliance on and appreciation for empirical evidence about the educational benefits of DEI in higher education. It also places the burden of proof on DEI opponents who make enormously consequential, unsubstantiated claims. Lastly, five common myths and exaggerations about DEI are juxtaposed with evidence from various trustworthy sources.*

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CULTURE centers and multicultural affairs offices, programs and activities, resources, and services that ensure access and opportunities for women, students of color, veterans, students with disabilities, low-income Americans, Jewish and Muslim students, LGBTQ+ collegians, and other citizens who make campuses diverse have been defunded and eliminated at many postsecondary institutions across the United States since January 2021. Dedicated, highly qualified, and law-abiding professionals who were hired to help colleges and universities enact espoused institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have lost their jobs. Presidents and governing board members have been placed in the tough position of choosing between federal funding on which their institutions rely for survival or protecting the diverse people, programs, and policies that enhance institutional excellence. Since January 2025, highly accomplished, law-abiding researchers who have dedicated their careers to eradicating inequities in education, health, housing, the economy, and other sectors of our society have had their grants abruptly canceled, which has led to massive layoffs in their labs, centers, and institutes. More alarming is that their important, in several instances lifesaving, work has been paused, which will ultimately result in the exacerbation of existing inequities and the manufacturing of new racial, gender, and socioeconomic disparities among Americans.

All of this destruction is the result of baseless lies, misinformation, disinformation, and exaggerations about DEI. Opponents are recklessly making generalizations and unsubstantiated claims about places they have never been. Their attacks are largely informed by anecdotes or small handfuls of reported wrongdoings on a relatively tiny number of campuses instead of on meticulously-derived confirmations about what is *actually* occurring at our nation's nearly 4,000 degree-granting postsecondary institutions. As a citizen and scholar, I highly value and insist on evidence. As a matter of justice, the burden of proof must be on those who make erroneous, highly consequential cases against DEI. I therefore call for greater reliance on rigorous studies about the educational benefits of DEI, as well as a stronger corpus of evidence from attackers who claim that DEI is divisive, discriminatory, overfunded, and otherwise harmful to our democracy. Proof, not political assaults on values that are fundamental to our nation and its educational institutions, is what students, tax-paying families, and employees on college campuses deserve from state and federal governments.

### Honoring Five Decades of Empirical Evidence

More than 50 years of research has consistently confirmed the educational benefits associated with DEI in U.S. higher education. Some of it was synthesized in a report produced in response to the March 7, 2024, congressional hearing titled "Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses" (S. Harper & Associates, 2024). The dozen essays and institutional

examples published therein were evidence-based. National Academy of Education inductees, past presidents of the American Educational Research Association and the Association for the Study of Higher Education, and renowned scholars who have conducted DEI-focused research for more than two decades were among the authors. The report was submitted and made part of the official record for the 2024 Congressional hearing. Beyond that one document, a more robust corpus of research is published in the *Review of Higher Education*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, and hundreds of other peer-reviewed academic journals, as well as in dozens of books released by well-respected university presses and other top academic publishers (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Chang et al., 2003; Gurin et al., 2004; S. R. Harper & Hurtado, 2011; Smith, 2024; Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2020). Additionally, the educational benefits of diversity for all students, including white male collegians, has been repeatedly documented in numerous amicus curae briefs submitted to the United States Supreme Court (2013, 2016, 2022).

With verifiable multiplication across each of the three editions published over a 25-year period, *How College Affects Students*, one of the most-cited books about higher education, presents solid evidence on the positive effects of sustained engagement in DEI-related activities on students' critical thinking skills and cognitive gains, prejudice reduction, and other educational outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Meta-analyses and extensive literature reviews of research about the educational benefits of DEI on campuses also have been published (e.g., Bowman, 2010, 2011; Gurin et al., 2002; S. R. Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2012; Milem, 2003). Because the research evidence is so strong and the findings are so consistent, scholars have spent very little time debating whether DEI strengthens American higher education. Many people with Ph.D. degrees from our nation's top universities have repeatedly confirmed that it has, does, and will.

**Placing Higher Education At Greater Risk of Violence**

In addition to the well-documented outcomes associated with diverse and inclusive learning environments for students, DEI programs, policies, and protocols also help reduce institutional susceptibility to racial crises, sexual harassment, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other acts of violence, discrimination, and abuse. No credible published evidence shows that violence, harassment, discrimination, and abuse has occurred on any college or university campus *because* of DEI initiatives. They are the antithesis of harm. In the absence of these policies and programs, I predict that people on campuses across the country will likely experience higher rates of violence, harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

Antisemitism is abhorrent. It also is a longstanding problem on college campuses. According to FBI data published in 2024, of the 950 religiously-motivated hate crimes that occurred at educational institutions between 2018 and 2022, 78.4% were targeted at Jewish people. During that same four-year timeframe, FBI data also show that of the 2,624 racially-motivated hate crimes on campuses, 64.4% were targeted at Black people (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024). By comparison, 9.3% of racially-motivated hate crime victims on campuses were white. Slightly more than one-third (35.2%) of these school-based hate crimes occurred at higher education institutions; the rest were in K–12 schools. These and other statistics strongly affirm that more attention must be placed on improving campus climates for Jewish and Black people. Researchers make clear that Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslim people in higher education also is persistent, pervasive, harmful, and at times, violent (Abu Khalaf et al., 2022; Ahmadi & Cole, 2020; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Cole et al., 2020; French, 2024; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Shaheen, 2024). That, too, must be more vigorously explored and seriously addressed by higher education leaders and policymakers, especially since research shows that Arab American and Muslim college students often fear reporting their experiences with discrimination on campus and consequently underreport (Shammas, 2017).

DEI professionals play pivotal roles in campus recovery efforts in the aftermath of hate crimes and other tragedies. "Jews will not replace us" was among the antisemitism that tiki torch-carrying white nationalists and far-right extremists chanted as they marched through the University of Virginia campus on August 11, 2017. It was mostly white men, not DEI professionals, who participated in the rally that night. It was DEI staff and administrators who swiftly responded by denouncing the antisemitism and racism that poisoned their campus community by engaging in restorative caretaking for Jewish students and students of color who were targeted and by bringing members of the UVA campus community together to heal from the devastation that had occurred there. In the absence of DEI professionals, it is unlikely that students, faculty, and staff on the Charlottesville campus would have received the necessary recovery resources.

White supremacists still lurk on and around college campuses. They employ a multitude of tactics to recruit new members, preying mostly on young white men. Southern Poverty Law Center data show 1,720 instances of hate groups posting flyers on college campuses across the country between 2018 and 2025 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025). In the absence of DEI professionals, policies, and protocols, who will help campuses recover when extremists do elsewhere what they did at UVA? Who will create the educational conditions that protect white undergraduate men from being recruited and radicalized? During and in the aftermath of racial crises and catastrophic attacks on diverse students (including, but not limited to Jews), who will be

held responsible for the absence of protective response resources that institutions lost when they were forced to comply with anti-DEI executive orders, "Dear Colleague" letters from the U.S. Department of Education, and various legislative mandates?

## Acknowledging Truths About Inequities

Beyond their being the most targeted victims of hate crimes, research has long documented other brands of experiential racism among students of color at predominantly white postsecondary institutions—being called racial epithets, being baselessly accused of plagiarism by white professors, being the lone persons from their racial groups in every course they take (sometimes in their entire academic majors), being forced to speak on behalf of all members of their racial/ethnic groups, being constantly confused for peers whom they look nothing alike, being caricatured at racist theme parties hosted by predominantly white fraternities, being discriminated against for membership in predominantly white sororities, being passed over by faculty members for mentoring and research opportunities, being disappointed by insufficient institutional responses to racist incidents, and being racially profiled by campus police officers, to name a few (Briscoe, 2024a, 2024b; Briscoe et al., 2022; Feagin et al., 1996; Garces et al., 2022; S. R. Harper, 2015; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2019; Yosso et al., 2009). Culture centers and multicultural affairs offices—the epicenters of DEI on many campuses—help students recover from the racism they experience inside and outside of classrooms.

Researchers have long documented racial inequities in college access and opportunity (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; S. R. Harper et al., 2009; Orfield et al., 2005). Within one year following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on Affirmative Action in June 2023, particular colleges and universities (most especially highly-selective institutions) enrolled fewer numbers of talented, highly deserving students of color (Bhatia et al., 2025). In addition to enrollment declines, campus cultures will be negatively affected in ways similar to what University of Maryland Professor Julie J. Park documented in her book *When Diversity Drops*, which is based on a study of a California university following the passage of a statewide ban on race-conscious admissions in 1996 (Park, 2013). Noteworthy is that white, Christian collegians were negatively affected by the decrease in students of color on the campus that Park studied. DEI professionals work tirelessly to engender sense of belonging for all students, especially those who are most underrepresented and underserved. This includes men, white collegians, and Jewish students.

Relative to community colleges and open access public universities, highly-selective postsecondary institutions usually have more well-funded student support resources, including DEI offices and programs. One common misconception is that students of color are only admitted to those elite colleges and universities because of their race. Another

is that those presumably unqualified students are incapable of succeeding academically. Baccalaureate degree attainment is one of the strongest indicators of success. Students of color graduate at rates that exceed, match, or just slightly lag behind those of their white peers at elite institutions. Four days after the Supreme Court struck down Affirmative Action in college admissions, *Forbes* published an article I wrote titled "Black Harvard And Princeton Students Graduate At Higher Rates Than Classmates Overall, Equally At Yale" (S. Harper, 2023). My declaration was based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). More recently available IPEDS data show similar patterns. As noted below in Table 1, across the eight Ivy League institutions, on average, 96% of students graduated within six years—it was 95% and 94% for Black and Latino collegians, respectively. At Princeton and Yale, the Black student percentages surpassed the overall average. Combined with these students' extraordinary academic talents, DEI initiatives bolster their success by making campus environments safer, more inclusive, and culturally responsive.

Although completion rates are fairly similar between students of color and their white peers at our nation's most competitive institutions, this is not the case throughout all of higher education. Recent research reports document these and other racial inequities (e.g., Campaign for College Opportunity, 2024; EdTrust-West, 2025; S. R. Harper & Simmons, 2019). Scholars have long acknowledged that college student retention and completion rates cannot be attributed to a single or even a narrow set of factors (Braxton et al., 2013). Student talent, effort, and readiness for the rigors of college-level academic work are indeed important variables. But affordability, safe and inclusive campus climates, engagement in enriching educational experiences, culturally-inclusive classrooms, relevant and culturally-responsive curricula, as well as the supportiveness of peers, professors, and staff members, also are powerful contributing factors. That latter set of variables is detachable from DEI policies, programs, and professionals.

## Juxtaposing Evidence with Unsubstantiated Claims About DEI

In this section, I juxtapose five unverified claims that opponents frequently make about DEI with what I know to be true from various trustworthy data sources and firsthand experiences.

### *Unverified Claim 1: White Male Students Are Routinely Discriminated Against*

Over the past 20 years, I have conducted qualitative research on campus racial climates at higher education institutions in every geographic region of the U.S. On each campus, dozens of white male students (including conservatives and liberals) participated in my interviews. White men have never

TABLE 1
*Six-Year Graduation Rates at Ivy League Institutions, 2024*

| Institution | Overall % | Black % | Latino % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brown University | 96 | 91 | 94 |
| Columbia University | 95 | 92 | 93 |
| Cornell University | 95 | 91 | 94 |
| Dartmouth College | 96 | 96 | 93 |
| Harvard University | 97 | 97 | 96 |
| University of Pennsylvania | 97 | 96 | 95 |
| Princeton University | 97 | 98 | 94 |
| Yale University | 96 | 97 | 95 |

told research team members and me that their racial group routinely experiences discrimination. Also, the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (NACCC), a suite of quantitative surveys that my research center at the University of Southern California launched in 2019, has been administered to more than 2.5 million students on hundreds of campuses. They are population surveys, meaning that they are sent to every enrolled student. NACCC data do not show high rates of white male respondents reporting routine experiences with racial discrimination and harassment. Surely, there are small numbers of white male individuals who occasionally experience what could be characterized as discrimination on some campuses. But there is not sufficient evidence from large quantitative surveys or from disaggregated analyses of formal discrimination complaint submissions to confirm that white men are being categorically mistreated in ways that DEI opponents exaggerate.

*Unverified Claim 2: White Applicants Are Routinely Passed Over For Campus Jobs*

U.S. Department of Education data show that during the 2023–24 academic school year, two-thirds of full-time assistant, associate, and full professors at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were white. Also, whites were 74% of full professors, meaning faculty members at the highest rank. Those same federal data show that three-fourths of professionals who held management positions on college and university campuses were white. According to a 2023 report from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 78% of senior and executive-level admissions officers were white (Fuesting, 2023). For nearly 30 years, the American Council on Education has administered a survey that captures the demographic composition of the college presidency—73% of presidents in the 2022 administration were white (Melidona et al., 2023). These verifiable demographics do not show white underrepresentation in coveted higher education jobs. Furthermore, large-scale disaggregated analyses of formal discrimination complaint submissions do not exist to confirm that white applicants for faculty, staff, and administrative leadership

roles are being disadvantaged to the extent that DEI opponents exaggerate.

*Unverified Claim 3: The Curriculum Has Become Too Woke*

I am executive producing an hour-long documentary about how the elimination of DEI programs, offices and culture centers, and professional positions are affecting people on college campuses. In spring 2025, I conducted on-camera interviews with nearly 150 undergraduates and graduate students (including conservatives), faculty members, DEI professionals (current and recently fired), alumni, and subject-matter experts at 20 postsecondary institutions across the country. In every student interview, I asked if wokeness pervaded the curriculum and classrooms on their campuses. Students, including conservatives, said no. This is consistent with what collegians report in related NACCC survey questions and what they have been telling me for two decades in qualitative interviews. Noteworthy is that the overwhelming majority of students whom I interviewed for the film (including whites) insisted that their courses, readings, and assignments focus far too little on DEI-related topics. DEI opponents have not published comprehensive analyses of syllabi from hundreds or even dozens of institutions to corroborate their claims of extreme wokeism in the curriculum. Moreover, they have not spent time in classrooms, certainly not the hours, weeks, and months that ethnographers and researchers who employ rigorous participant observation methods would deem sufficient to make such claims.

*Unverified Claim 4: Accreditors Have Become Too Woke*

I have served on an institutional review team for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Nothing about that experience or the metrics that the accreditation body asked us to use qualifies as wokeness. DEI opponents have not published enough results from large-scale quantitative surveys capturing the experiences and perspectives of significant numbers of accreditation team members, including conservatives. They also have not published enough qualitative data from individual interviews and focus groups with defensible sample sizes of people who were previously engaged in the task that I performed for WASC. Furthermore, opponents have not released reports or datasets that include rigorous analyses of complaints from thousands or even hundreds of college presidents, trustees, and other institutional actors who criticized the accreditation process for being unfairly or lopsidedly focused on DEI. Lastly, they have neither engaged in demographic stocktaking of people who have served on accreditation teams in recent years (disaggregated by race, gender, and political party affiliation) nor furnished enough proof of postsecondary institutions being unreasonably

punished for failing to fulfill their own self-determined DEI commitments.

### *Unverified Claim 5: DEI is Overfunded and Excessively Staffed*

In a October 2024 *New York Times Magazine* article, investigative journalist Nicholas Confessore noted the following: "Michigan has poured roughly a quarter of a billion dollars into D.E.I. since 2016." (Confessore, 2024). He went on to cite a report published by the Heritage Foundation that found "Michigan to have by far the largest D.E.I. bureaucracy of any large public university." If Confessore's analysis spanned the eight years between 2016 and the date his article was published, the $250 million that he approximated averaged $31.25 million per year. Confessore did not specify what that unverified total included. Was it all institutional dollars? Or were grants from the state of Michigan, federal government, and private foundations that funded research on assorted inequities, along with donations from philanthropists, also included? Even if the entire sum was from the institution, $31.25 million would have accounted for 0.2% of the University of Michigan's entire $13.4 billion operating budget for fiscal year 2024–25 (University of Michigan Office of Budget and Planning, 2024a). The Confessore article also claimed that the institution had 241 DEI employees at the time. Excluding student workers, the Ann Arbor campus had 49,355 total employees in 2023, according to statistics published by the University's Office of Budget and Planning (2024b). If, in fact, 241 were in DEI roles, that would have accounted for 0.5% of the institution's workforce. Noteworthy is that those DEI professionals would have been responsible for serving 52,065 students and 49,355 employees. Opponents who make claims of so-called DEI budget bloat and bureaucracy rarely put their numbers in context like this, which is terribly dishonest of them.

The University of Michigan is just one of many postsecondary institutions whose DEI numbers are routinely misrepresented by conservative opponents. I noted the following in the aforementioned report published in response to the 2024 House Subcommittee hearing on DEI:

> *Bob Good (R-VA) talked about the University of Virginia in the March 7 House Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearing. "The Vice President for DEI and Community Partnerships makes $340,000," he stated. "It's double the average of a university professor at UVA, which is about $175,000. Is there any way you could justify that or explain why we would pay the head of DEI double what we pay a college professor?"*
>
> *UVA has approximately 3,000 full-time faculty members, but just one chief diversity officer (CDO). At research universities, most tenure-track professors teach four courses annually. Even those who teach exceptionally large courses are typically responsible for fewer than 1,000 students in any given year (plus they have teaching assistants). The CDO is expected to serve the entire campus—every student, every employee. According to an open access salary database,167 UVA employees' annual salaries are higher than the*

> *CDO's—more than two dozen of them are professors. The head football coach, head men's basketball coach, head of athletics, several academic deans, and at least six other vice presidents earn more than the CDO.*
>
> *In the congressional hearing, Rep. Good said UVA employs 94 DEI officers. The number is actually 55, which accounts for 0.5% of the University's workforce. The $5.8 million it [reportedly] spends on DEI is just 0.1% of UVA's $5.4 billion budget.* (S. Harper & Associates, 2024, p. 10).

The burden of proof should be placed on policymakers and others who are determined to eliminate everything in the name of DEI on college and university campuses, as well as in our nation's military, K–12 schools, federal workplaces, and other sectors. So far, they have failed to supply compelling findings from multiple studies that reach even a minimal threshold of acceptability for widespread reliance, let alone the rigor that responsible policymaking deserves. DEI attackers have succeeded in placing the burden on millions of innocent educators, practitioners, higher education administrators, and researchers to prove that work in which they are engaged is not categorically discriminatory. This has made everyone who does DEI work presumably guilty without any version of investigation and due process, which is unconstitutional.

### Conclusion

Two decades ago, under the leadership of then-vice president Alma Clayton-Pedersen, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) introduced the term "Inclusive Excellence" (Brown, 2022; Clayton-Pedersen & Clayton-Pedersen, 2008). Inspired by a robust corpus of highly credible research studies and expert practice, AAC&U maintained that diversity, equity, and inclusion activities indeed strengthen postsecondary institutions, thereby making them more excellent. That remains as true today as it was when the term, its corresponding framework, and actualization tools were first unveiled. Moreover, truly excellent colleges and universities enhance our democracy by expanding, not restricting access for more talented Americans; by inviting international students and keeping immigrants safe; by teaching full truths about our nation's racial past and present; by stamping out Islamophobia, antisemitism, and other forms of hate and violence; and by ensuring that twenty-first century college graduates enter the workforce with skills that will enable them to maximize the benefits of our nation's diversity.

Any effort, legislative or otherwise, that aims to pursue excellence in U.S. higher education without DEI will ultimately fail because it is inconsistent with what 50 years of research shows and because it is incongruent with values that are fundamental to our multicultural democracy. Starting in 2021, state lawmakers began ramping up book bans, mandating the removal of topics related to race and LGBTQ+ people from the curriculum, and eliminating DEI programs

(S. Harper, 2025; Johnson & Harper, 2024). The anti-DEI movement extended from a couple dozen states to the entire country when Donald Trump return to the White House in 2025. Homogeneity is the opposite of diversity, inequity is the opposite of equity, and exclusion is the opposite of inclusion. It ought not to be the goal of our government to make colleges and universities more homogeneous, inequitable, and exclusive. Doing so undermines much of what makes our nation's entire system of higher education excellent.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

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