

The Important Role of Leadership in Creating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plans in U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

This brief discusses the challenges and strategies involved in creating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) plans in U.S. higher education institutions. It highlights the importance and critical role of leadership in this process, particularly the need for courageous leadership to overcome the barriers posed by the pushback, political resistance, and structural narratives to DEI plans. This brief illustrates the complexities of creating DEI plans and offers strategies to foster inclusive environments. The discussion emphasizes the need for a long-term commitment and actionable DEI plans beyond performative or symbolic steps, instilling confidence in the potential for significant and enduring institutional evolution.

Keywords: DEI, leadership, DEI plans, courageous leadership, pushback, equity-minded

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Introduction

Higher education has evolved in recent years, with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) becoming pivotal across the United States as universities need to mirror the general populations of communities in the student body. However, amidst this push for inclusivity, there is often pushback against DEI plans. Many campuses recognize the value of a diverse student body, faculty, and staff, acknowledging that multiple perspectives enrich the academic experience. This trend reflects a commitment to social justice and a strategic response to prepare students for a globally interconnected world (Smith, 2018).

Despite the progress, universities face multiple challenges in developing and implementing DEI plans. One issue is that people of color are underrepresented, especially in faculty and leadership roles. Bridging these challenges requires a significant effort to eliminate barriers and create pathways for people from communities that have been marginalized to leadership roles (Williams, 2021).

DEI efforts are both external and internal. External challenges include legislative opposition and legal hurdles, as highlighted by Peralta (2024). Internal barriers within institutions, such as resistance to change, low levels of leadership commitment, and inadequate resources, impede the implementation of a successful DEI program. For instance, some faculty members may resist DEI plans due to concerns about changes in curriculum or teaching methods. In contrast, others may feel that their opportunities for advancement are threatened. As noted by Nwoga (2023), these internal barriers are often rooted in a lack of understanding or empathy for the experiences of marginalized groups.

Many university systems in the United States have demonstrated the need for other voices and accountability in pursuing DEI, as evidenced by their development and implementation of DEI plans. This requires a systematic focus over multiple years and the broader goal of a more equitable university community. Although work has been ongoing for decades, barriers must be addressed to move beyond conversation to action.

Embarking upon the development of an institutional DEI plan is critical. Engaging the campus community in data digging, assessment, and solution-oriented thinking encourages engagement in equity-minded work. A DEI plan is more than just a few goals that serve as performative practice. A DEI plan is a charted path to creating opportunities to close racial gaps and build an inclusive living, learning, and working environment. There are numerous benefits to a successful DEI plan. It can lead to a more diverse and vibrant academic community, enhance the learning experience for all students, and prepare them for a globalized workforce. In addition to cultivating buy-in for institutional community members, the planning process solidifies accountability and impels a culture shift. Long-term success hinges upon the understanding that a DEI plan is ongoing and leads everyone to a new way of approaching their work. For example, an academic department that sets enrollment and completion goals begins to understand that it will find new success if it uses an equity lens. As results are realized, so are new ways to approach equity-minded work.

Developing a DEI Plan

We explored the emergent themes from the literature review and our practices to illustrate standard approaches, focusing on leadership engagement, resistance to DEI initiatives, and the importance of courageous leadership.

Institutions discuss the desire for a demographically diverse employee and student group. However, the experiences of students and staff in historically underrepresented groups still show discrepancies in institutional positions of power and the inability to be included and heard in the planning and implementation of DEI change (Ovink & Murrell, 2022). Leadership that does not acknowledge the oppressive power of systems to maintain the status quo in higher education affects the ability of the institution to move beyond the surface rhetoric of DEI talk (Southern, 2024; Yi et al., 2022).

Leadership must intentionally set the tone of the university culture and induce change. Leaders must “walk the talk” by modeling inclusive behaviors, engaging in difficult conversations on equity and justice, and acknowledging their growth in DEI learning. This accountability sets an example, signaling that DEI is not only a professional commitment but a personal one for those in leadership positions. Leaders must understand how to reach equity goals to mobilize an institution (Ballard et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2023). Decision-making in moving DEI initiatives in the university system needs to be done more quickly. Leaders who are slow to make decisions may appear to impede progress and reverse the apparent avoidance or lack of commitment (MacKenzie et al., 2023).

Actionable outcomes for changing the institution's landscape require leadership to address and quantify results (Hinton & Lambert, 2022; Zheng, 2022). Committing to DEI means leadership must acknowledge the institution's need for improvement. Leaders who over-rely on metrics to track DEI discount how the institution's physical, social, and process environment, such as biases in hiring practices or procedures, influence the extent of change. An example is establishing measurable DEI goals that align with the university's mission and strategic plan. Include equity goals in student admissions and graduation rates, leadership representation, faculty and staff recruitment, campus climate improvement, and the enhancement of support services.

Leadership must robustly commit to DEI as essential to the institution and its mission to push actualized change (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Although the current financial landscape in many institutions is cost-reduction, DEI must be categorized as a non-negotiable requirement rather than a financial expenditure. Leadership must see DEI as part of the strategic vision for future students and employees to remain relevant in a global educational system (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

The Pushback

Opposition to DEI has occurred at different levels and has come from various constituencies. The best-known and much-publicized anti-DEI stance occurred at the national level with the rejection of Affirmative Action, a decision associated with a political and ideological undertone (Peralta, 2024). These efforts emerged in opposition to the systemic corrective measures embedded in Affirmative Action legislation to ensure minority population access to opportunities in various institutional settings, including higher education. This anti-DEI stance advanced charges of unfairness and even reverse discrimination, particularly in the recruitment for employment and educational opportunities opened for participants from minority backgrounds.

As firmly documented, the establishment of DEI programming has the characteristic of being transformative and requires the actions of effective leadership (Gayle-Brissett, 2019; Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). A practical institutional structural approach is required (MacKenzie

et al., 2023), and cultural symbolism is needed to support it (Yi et al., 2022). This means that DEI programming alone may not sufficiently assure the desired results for minority participation. Nwoga (2023) indicated that internal factors may work to create barriers in program implementation, and these involve the proposition of solutions before understanding the needs, detectable vulnerabilities in DEI planning, and flexibility in the organization's culture to absorb the changes. Similarly, MacKenzie et al. (2023) documented four forms of structural resistance to DEI programming: a) tactics to slow down planning implementation, b) pushback or questioning of planning methods, c) shutdown or halting of projects, and d) blowback tactics to stop the work.

Pushback to DEI initiatives should be expected to occur. Higher education institutions must run toward the challenge of embedding DEI work into the institution, regardless of pushback from internal and external constituents. When pushback occurs, the response must be data-driven and help those in opposition understand why an equity mindset is central to student success. Courageous leadership is the key to managing pushback to DEI initiatives. Leaders who are afraid of negative feedback will not successfully implement DEI strategies or any new change that transforms the institution's culture.

Courageous Leadership

Courageous leaders are authentic in their thinking and vulnerability. There is strength in being a humble leader and supporting the contribution of others whose lived experience or expertise can better address the more institutionally significant diversity needs. Leaders are vital in shifting institutional environments and prioritizing DEI in conducting all aspects of higher education (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). DEI strategies must include the surrounding community and the stakeholders of the environment and the culture to show the connection of initiatives that go beyond the institution's borders. For example, faculty can develop learning strategies that connect university curricula with local DEI challenges. Developing learning strategies that connect university curricula with local DEI challenges is imperative. For example, a public health course could collaborate with local health organizations to tackle health disparities in the community.

Leaders must be bold and courageous to move an entire institution with DEI-intentionality toward goals to change the institutional culture. Courage is required to address biases and enact change in small steps, one person at a time. Leadership requires demonstrating commitment to DEI and removing the power that stalls DEI change. Courageous leaders make their employees feel safe through active listening and showing their vulnerability. These leaders know who they are, and their presence motivates toward a shared purpose. Educational institutions must make employees and students feel safe and assured that the institution cares about them and their role in DEI.

A healthy higher educational institutional culture promotes DEI—leaders who recognize the value of differences as an asset foster inclusivity. Measurable goals must be flexible, and the leader must recognize that every division or department has its own DEI priorities. The DEI leader's flexibility is strengthened by being open to many paths to creating an inclusive environment.

Points of resistance will always be present. A courageous leader must address the points that resist moving DEI forward. It may be engaging with resisters and those who do not recognize they are resisting time, engagement, and listening to move forward collectively. It is the

humbleness and vision of the courageous leader to be able to take this on as a positive mechanism for the growth of DEI.

Actionable Recommendations for DEI Plans

To advance DEI planning on college campuses, we recommend: shift the culture, create an equity-minded ethos, engage leadership, abate resistance, and encourage courageous leadership.

Culture Shift

Moving toward equity actualization is a process that requires a culture shift. Exemplary institutions have been working toward this realization for many years. In 1998, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* featured a statement supported by more than 50 colleges and universities entitled “On the Importance of Diversity in Education.” A vital piece of this statement addresses why all require a conscious effort to implement diversity as a pillar of an equity-minded institution fully.

The diversity we seek and the nation's future do require that colleges and universities continue to be able to reach out and make a conscious effort to build healthy and diverse learning environments appropriate for their missions. The success of higher education and the strength of our democracy depends on it. (p. A48)

As the United States of America continues to diversify, it has become more critical for our higher education institutions to lead the way in diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is not just a moral imperative but a fiscal reality for the continued existence of institutions of higher learning. Political pressure from various constituent groups creates a delicate tug-of-war for college presidents. Highly evolved institutions will run toward discomfort. Senior administrators must be fearless and realize that healthy discord is essential to an engaged campus (Davis, 2002).

Courageous leadership is essential to the success of a successful diversity plan. In 2008, Adrianna Kezar wrote about the political landmines that presidents encounter as they work to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion. A president may feel the push from diverse affinity groups and, most often, from predominately White groups. Change connected to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion requires tenacity to push ahead and a willingness to embrace challenging discussions. Kezar emphasized that presidents must spearhead advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion by creating allies, assessing the political tides, and expecting pushback. Resistance to change should not only be expected but embraced. The antidote requires data, a steadfast commitment to the cause, marketing, and developing transparent communication strategies.

Equity-Minded Ethos

A diversity plan requires a mission-centered focus on equity as the mindset for programs, policies, and practices. Diversity, Equity, and inclusion must be a part of the institution's fabric. Just as a rubric defines a course's learning objectives and assignments, leaders must use an equity rubric for all work that shapes institutional operations. Policy inventories allow leadership to use an equity lens to uncover hidden barriers that impede students' success from marginalized communities. Finally, data must be disseminated to academic departments to

allow faculty to understand opportunities to retool curriculum and practice that will lead to tremendous student success.

Historically, programs and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion have been the responsibility of a diversity office. To truly move the dial on creating a community of inclusion, DEI work must be embedded in all facets of the institution. Institutionalized diversity work should include the following:

1. Curriculum reform that incorporates a multicultural lens in all subject matters
2. Disaggregated data review of policies and practices to ensure that all students have equitable access
3. DEI training that is occupational-specific and meets the needs of every constituent
4. DEI audit that examines the campus's physical plant for accessibility obstacles
5. Climate studies should be scheduled regularly to showcase the positive movement in inclusive culture initiatives and uncover potential areas for improvement.

Leadership Commitment/Structure

The institution's leadership must be committed to creating and advancing the diversity plan. This begins with presidential leadership and the cabinet team, and it must be role-modeled by all decision-makers at the institution. A diversity plan should embody an equity-minded approach to all programs, policies, and practices. For example, a university president leads diversity plans throughout the institution by promoting equity dialogues, allocating resources for equity actions, and establishing equity frameworks. This commitment inspires other institution leaders and establishes diversity central to the university's mission and vision. Also, these leaders ensure that the diversity plan is a guiding force in every aspect of institutional practice.

A DEI plan must have institutional buy-in, which requires leadership and an infrastructure to steer the work. In addition to including the DEI in the cabinet, a DEI advisory group should be in place to provide guidance and recommendations to the president. Each academic college and division should have a DEI leader responsible for leading and supporting the work at the divisional level. This divisional leader should also sit on the Institutional DEI advisory group.

Structure.

A well-structured diversity plan should have overarching institutional and stretch goals. These goals are guideposts for developing diversity plans created at the divisional and departmental levels. The plan must foster an inclusive environment that aligns with an institution's broader mission, challenges the status quo, and pushes the boundaries to advance equity. Additionally, the plan must create a framework allowing each division to develop specific actions responding to the needs of each division.

Accountability and Shared Engagement

To effectively inform DEI planning, it is imperative to begin with a comprehensive climate study that includes all members of the institutional community. Additionally, it is essential to conduct focus groups to ascertain practical examples of areas of improvement and success. Other foundational assessment forms may include leadership meeting audits, mission reviews, policy inventories, and data disbursement to departments. Leadership meeting audits provide an opportunity to gauge how often DEI is discussed. To illustrate, a well-established and highly

supported DEI plan and its implementation requires a participatory, transparent process representative of the general institutional sentiment.

University Priorities

All institutionalized DEI planning must be data-informed. Each division and individual department should collect and use disaggregated data to inform all planning and practices. Data-informed equity work is student success work that will positively impact all students.

Institutions that do not have a bias reporting system should make this a high priority in DEI planning. Quantitative and qualitative data from bias reporting are critical to developing an inclusive living, learning, and working environment for all.

Challenge and Celebration

A successful diversity plan must include an ongoing assessment that invites challenge and celebration. The plan must keep pace with the community's evolution. Celebrating success is imperative and must be widely shared.

Successful implementation of an equity mindset requires both incentives and consequences. Employees must understand that they will be evaluated based on how they apply an equity lens to their work. Similarly, providing incentives for new equity-based initiatives or excelling in diversity, equity, and inclusion work will encourage the institution's transformation.

Conclusion

By exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion in U.S. universities, we seek transformative trends that signal progress and persistent issues that demand attention. As higher education stands at the intersection of societal change, creating genuinely inclusive environments is not merely an aspiration but a commitment to shaping the future of learning and fostering leaders equipped to navigate a diverse and interconnected world.

Despite political pressure to continue the norm of a White-centric approach, institutions of higher learning must serve as role models for promoting belonging and inclusion. We will evolve as a society of actualized minds and people by fostering an equity mindset.

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