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How Colleges Can Pivot to Keep DEI Alive

Colleges can still achieve DEI-related goals through a deliberate integration strategy, Melissa Segal writes.

By Melissa Segal

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S eemingly every week, I read about new proposed or enacted legislation aimed at curbing DEI hiring, trainings and programs in higher education—and now an avowed opponent of DEI education, programs and policies is returning to the White House. While I am deeply discouraged about the dismantling of initiatives aimed at improving the daily experience of often-marginalized students and peers, I have started to move to problem-solving mode. Given our current landscape, how do we move forward?

I argue we need to acknowledge the challenges of some existing DEI efforts even as we recognize that the deeper goals of diversity, equity and inclusion remain vital. Ultimately, we need to pivot to fully embed what has been called DEI throughout our work, our teaching and our institutions.

Some background: My work has generally centered on overall culture and well-being both in academic and health-care positions and as a consultant, and I've consistently advocated for DEI to be integrated into our daily work, skill-building and curricula. My experience is that when we separate DEI from larger culture work, we often witness myriad challenges:

1. When DEI programs and trainings are voluntary, only the "choir" attends;

2. When DEI programs and trainings are mandatory, faculty and students who would not otherwise attend don't seem to engage;

3. Some entities schedule trainings and programs to check the box and don't seem interested in pursuing true change;

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4. People from frequently marginalized groups seem to shoulder the bulk of DEI work, which should not be solely their responsibility and often leads to exhaustion and burnout;

5. Leaders and team members without "DEI" in their titles may more easily conclude that they are not responsible for the work;

6. People from some identity groups hesitate or decline to participate when they feel that the programs don't include or pertain to them; and

7. Discrete and nonembedded initiatives generally don't succeed in helping people incorporate the experience and the learning into their daily lives to change their behavior outside of a specific setting.

The goal of DEI in higher education is to create learning, scholarship and workspaces that foster success for all. That goal encompasses valuing and celebrating each individual, ensuring that all voices are heard and included, avoiding language and actions that harm others, guaranteeing that each person has equal access, fixing structures that benefit some people over others, and creating a sense of belonging.

Even in the current legislative environment, I'm confident that we can continue to pursue these goals through a deliberate integration strategy. Pursuing these objectives should not be the purview only of DEI offices; instead, we need to ensure they are the purview of each entity, department, leader and team member.

How do we do so? Let's tackle a few specific areas of DEI that have been restricted or banned.

Candidate Selection

A number of states have required colleges and universities to institute policies that prohibit or limit the use of diversity statements in hiring. As someone who has read a

number of diversity statements and who has provided feedback to faculty writing them, I believe that even in their absence we can continue to assess how potential hires will achieve the goal of fostering success for all. In applications, we can ask for a statement on how candidates promote a positive classroom culture, successful mentoring relationships and effective collaborations with colleagues and trainees.

How do they engage all students? What types of service interest and drive them? What specific actions or steps have they taken to build psychological safety, raise up all voices and create an environment that guarantees equal access? Then, during the interview and recruitment process, we can explore candidates' experiences, personal goals and accomplishments in relation to these questions.

Training

As a result of recent legislation, many institutions have either eliminated mandatory DEI training or banned such training entirely. Again, within these constraints, we can still work toward our goal.

Research shows mixed results of some DEI-specific training, such as implicit bias training. Instead of only addressing thoughts (e.g., bias), effective training needs to focus on behavior change and on skill building, such as actionable steps to manage one's bias. In addition, experts suggest that in order to truly change the culture, training needs to be part of a larger institutional commitment and a structure of change.

Let's ensure that we embed the goal of fostering success for all into our trainings and within a larger institutional commitment. Let's focus our trainings on true, positive behavior change and integrate skill-building components. For example, when we provide training on how to engage in challenging conversations (which is not inherently "DEI"), we can practice how to navigate issues related to assumptions and stereotypes, potential harmful language and power dynamics. When we teach

upstander training, we can discuss how to avoid behaviors that cause harm to other individuals (again, not singular to a DEI context)—and how to promote a culture of respectful dialogue and feedback. When teaching about developing effective teams, we can address building psychological safety, cultivating well-being and empowering team members. As we create and implement leadership development and training programs, let's focus on improving our overall culture and embed skill building throughout.

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Programs

State legislation has resulted in the dismantling of many DEI programs, including those aimed at creating spaces for and/or offering scholarships to members of specific identity groups. In some cases, names of DEI programs or offices are being changed to feature words like "engagement" or "community," and many opportunities are now open to all students.

Given the unique benefit these programs offered, we need to work even harder to build a welcoming and inclusive culture in these spaces. We need to ensure that the new programs are led by staff or faculty members trained in how to create welcoming spaces for all, how to raise up all voices and how to ensure inclusion of everyone. Even with a broader focus, we can continue to celebrate holidays, customs and people. We can continue to offer opportunities to learn about each other—and to connect on a human level.

As an example, restorative circles provide opportunities for participants to be in a space together and to build community, both within and across identity groups. I've seen many student and employee identity groups open participation to allies with great success; attendees share their experiences, ask each other questions, celebrate together and learn how to better support each other. In these spaces, especially in our current climate, we need to be intentional about our program goals, engagement activities and expectations of participants (e.g., behavioral norms).

Personnel

As another result of state-based legislation, many DEI positions have been eliminated and personnel have been laid off or reassigned.

Who will create programs, offer training and lead equity and inclusion initiatives? This area is perhaps the most challenging, as we have not yet embedded DEI into our daily work. To achieve our goals, we must now pursue full integration through a number of initiatives, including hiring faculty and professional staff committed to these goals (see above for how to assess that during recruitment); training our leaders in participatory decision making and in building psychological safety, among other skills; tasking our human resources departments with ensuring equal pay for equal work and experience; and ensuring consistency and objectivity in our recruitment and promotion processes.

We are clearly facing an environment in which DEI is under legislative attack. Especially in our current context, we need to strengthen our commitment to creating an environment that fosters success for all people. We need to hire and train professional staff and faculty who can help integrate culture-building work throughout our universities and academic health centers—and who will share responsibility for this challenging work. We are at a pivotal moment. While I hope that one day we can reverse this legislative trend, let's take this moment to strengthen our commitment, expand our objectives and embed this important work across our institutions.

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