



Understanding and Countering Anti-DEI Narratives in Higher Education

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Legislation seeking to end a variety of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) activities in higher education swept states throughout the United States in 2023–2024. Lawmakers often filed bills mirroring model legislation advanced by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a right-wing think tank. As a result of this legislation, many public universities have reduced or eliminated activities including diversity-related curriculum as well as student and faculty recruitment, scholarship, mentorship, and training programs. For instance, the **University of North Florida eliminated diversity and inclusion offices** including the interfaith, intercultural, LGBTQ, and women’s centers.

Little analysis exists about the arguments used to advance and oppose this legislation. Higher education stakeholders need to understand the narratives crafted and transmitted (particularly in news media) about anti-DEI legislation in order to appropriately respond to these legislative changes and help reshape these narratives on diversity in higher education.

Understanding the Arguments Behind Anti-DEI Legislation

Our **research** examining anti-DEI legislation and media coverage in Alabama, Florida, and Nebraska reveals a clear pattern in how these policies are framed. Proponents of anti-DEI legislation positioned DEI as divisive, not grounded in evidence, and not supported by the majority of citizens. Language about the legislation framed diversity as threatening. Opponents argued banning DEI amounted to backtracking on civil rights progress and shortchanging students who would benefit from diversity, equity, and inclusion activities that support their access to higher education and journeys to degree completion.

Anti-DEI legislation follows a national template. Legislation, and the arguments used for and against legislation, are remarkably similar in terms of their language and messaging across state contexts (e.g., referring to diversity programs as “divisive”), showing the effectiveness of right-wing think tank efforts to mobilize legislators around this issue.

Whose Voices Are Missing in Debates Over Anti-DEI Legislation?

Many student-facing diversity programs and curricula are at risk under anti-DEI legislation. However, students are not often at the table when anti-diversity legislation is introduced or considered in institutional responses. Staff members have often been most directly impacted by legislation as their positions are less protected; yet, their voices are generally absent from media coverage. Staff may fear retribution for speaking out.

Higher education leaders have often been publicly silent in response to legislation, leaving limited counter-narratives in the public sphere. New responses to anti-DEI narratives and new coalitions among leaders are necessary. As legislation targets public institutions, all taxpayers have a stake in the legislation. Information in news media may be false or misleading, or construct diversity in higher education as negative.

While much attention on anti-diversity efforts has shifted to the federal level since the start of 2025, states continue to introduce and pass laws banning various diversity, equity, and inclusion activities on campus. For diversity proponents, understanding these arguments can help inform efforts to change the narrative about diversity in higher education.

How Should University Leaders Respond to Anti-DEI Legislation?

- **Act collectively with other university leaders to defend higher education against attacks on diversity activities.** Develop coordinated communication strategies, engaging members of the campus community, to take ownership of the stories of why diversity activities are needed and how they support campus communities through multiple modes including press releases, op-eds, social media, and other outreach campaigns.
- **Correct misinformation that diversity activities are not scholarly, rigorous, or evidence-based.** Provide real world examples of how initiatives support students and society more broadly. Ground messaging in historical truths regarding the history of higher education and how inequities developed within these spaces and society as well as providing transparency around current demographics and equity gaps.

As anti-DEI legislation spreads, the public conversation about diversity in higher education is increasingly shaped by coordinated political messaging. University leaders have a critical role to play in ensuring that discussions about diversity are grounded in evidence, historical context, and the needs of students and campus communities.