

**Lisa:** Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez.

**Lizzy:** And I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich.

**Lisa:** And we are your hosts for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Every other week, we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers, without jargon. And after a long break, only a month, but No Jargon is back. And we are excited for what 2026 has in store for us.

But before we get into today's conversation, we want to set the stage. Right now, federal policy is reshaping higher education in a very big way and not so quietly.

**Lizzy:** That is right, I mean, there's so many things to say here about how federal policy is reshaping higher ed, in ways that we haven't seen before. But we're gonna focus mostly today on what's happening with diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Colleges and universities are being forced to rethink, in many cases shut down altogether and drop them, how we actually run these programs that are about making sure that our campuses are accessible to anyone who wants to pursue a higher education. Some campuses are quietly changing their words around. Some are putting programs on hold, others are really just kind of sweeping the board clear.

We're really unsure what's going to trigger a lawsuit. What will trigger a funding cut? What will trigger alumni outrage in multiple directions? And all of this, unsurprisingly, has created real uncertainty. The programs most likely to disappear, of course, we know that when Americans hear the word diversity, they think race first. Studies seem to show that, but diversity is diverse. So these are programs that are often helping first generation students.

That's people who don't have anyone else in their family who's gone to college yet. Students from immigrant families, students who are veterans, or non-traditional students. So that's people who aren't going to college right after high school. And of course, the students with disabilities are also covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. But, you know, inclusion was simply a big part of making sure that everyone has what they need to go to school.

**Lisa:** Yeah, absolutely. And all of this is wrapped in the arguments about what is fair, what is neutral, can you be neutral? What is justice? There are a lot of critics and supporters of all of these changes, and I was really glad that I got to talk about the conversations surrounding these issues with Professor Anthony Hernandez.

Professor Hernandez spent the summer traveling and talking with students, families, and educators across the country. His message is pretty clear: Dismantling DEI doesn't make systems fair. It protects existing advantages and locks inequality in place. He's a teaching faculty member in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, and he's currently writing a book on critical transformational leadership in higher education.

Here's our conversation.

**Lisa:** Welcome to No Jargon, Professor Hernandez.

**Anthony:** Oh, thank you for having me. And thanks to everyone listening for spending some time with us today. I really appreciate the invitation from No Jargon and the thoughtfulness you bring to these conversations, Lisa.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. We're really excited to have you, and I mean, I might be biased, but I'm just excited to have another Hernandez in the room. My last name is also Hernandez, so this could be a friendly, familiar conversation or maybe a confrontation to see who gets to keep our last name.

**Anthony:** I'm looking forward to it. Thank you so much.

**Lisa:** I want us to get started with the conversation here, because you have been a prolific opinion writer this year. Many of the pieces that you have written are rooted in conversations in interviews with students, families, and educators in New Mexico, California, Texas, and Wisconsin. So what I wanna hear about is what inspired you to highlight these different states and what you're hoping to understand or capture through the many conversations you have had?

**Anthony:** Well, thank you so much and I'm really looking forward to this conversation, but I just want to preface my comments by saying that I want to be transparent about my positionality. So what I'm sharing today reflects my own views shaped by my scholarship and my lived experience. So I'm speaking as an individual scholar, not as a spokesman for the university where I teach, and I'm not claiming to represent any institutional position.

When I think about this work, I think it's important for people to know that I spend my time studying institutions that most Americans depend on, but they rarely talk about directly, like community colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, often called HSIs. And these are colleges and universities that serve populations of Latinx students at 25%. And public universities that also serve first-generation low-income immigrant working-class students. These types of institutions are interesting to me because these are places where aspiration meets reality every day. Where students are making decisions, not just about classes, but about whether they can afford gas, whether their family needs them to help out at home, whether staying enrolled is even safe.

I'm trained as a higher education policy and leadership scholar, but I write publicly because policy debates lose something essential when we strip away the human stakes. Now numbers, they can tell you trends. But they can't tell you what fear sounds like in a school hallway. They cannot tell you what hope sounds like. When a student sits in an advising office and asks If I stop out for a semester, can I come back? And this conversation isn't really about one lawsuit or one state or even one institution for me. It's about whether this country still believes that forward movement should be possible for people who weren't born close to power.

I didn't set out to write op-eds actually, and I think last year I wrote a dozen. But originally, what pushed me was watching policy decisions move faster than public understanding, while the consequences were already landing on students and families I know personally. And in my view, there was a growing gap between how abstract these debates sounded in politics and how they felt on the ground. In policy spaces, matters like immigration, DEI, and higher education funding are often framed as separate issues. On college campuses, however, they collapse into the same question. Can students realistically keep going?

And I kept having the same conversation in different places, leaders would say: We are doing more with less. Staff would say we're holding things together, but barely. And students would say, I don't know if I can keep going. And at a certain point, silence started to feel like complicity. I wasn't trying to win an argument; I was trying to make visible what was already happening. Because when policies line up in ways that quietly narrow opportunity, the danger isn't just moral failure. It's that we undermine the economic and democratic foundations we all depend on. And so that's what brought me to this summer listening tour, kind of the intellectual underpinnings.

And I just wanna be clear about this before we really jump in, is that this wasn't a research project for me. I guess I would describe it as a journey. I'm fortunate to have some flexibility in the summers. I chose to use that time to better understand what was happening on the front lines of education, not through reports or data sets, but by actually showing up. By listening, by sitting across tables from people trying to keep schools open, students enrolled, and communities intact during what feels like a deeply unsettled moment. So I didn't travel as an investigator collecting evidence. I was traveling as a learner, and we know that much of academic life happens inside classrooms, libraries, and seminar rooms, where theories, book and readings do really important work. But I wanted to step outside of the confines of the university to understand how policy actually lands in real places with real people under real constraints.

I wasn't writing with that op-ed in mind. I was writing to make sense of what I was seeing, what people were telling me, what was unfolding on the ground. The public writing came later, the understanding came first, and that's how I came to think of the summer. Not as a study, but as a listening tour. And in that tour, I spoke with principals, superintendents, college presidents, institutional researchers, and local elected officials across several states. And what surprised me was not how different these places were, it was how familiar the story felt everywhere I went.

**Lisa:** You mentioned multiple states. Was there a particular reason why you chose the states that you went to? What was the reasoning for the locations that you chose?

**Anthony:** So I recognize that at that moment there were educational crises happening in several states. The one that caught my attention first was what was happening in New Mexico in terms of the drawback of funding for Hispanic-serving institutions and for support for Native students. And so the first place that I landed was in Northern New Mexico. And that story brought me to a small community school serving a Tiwa Pueblo. There was native artwork that covered the walls. I remember seeing worn workbooks filling the shelves. And as I described in my writing, it occurred to me immediately that this was a place where learning and heritage were living side by side.

And to me, at that moment, sitting there with that leader in that school, in that very special place, it felt both ordinary and sacred at the same time. And the leaders there talked about language preservation, about cultural survival, about teaching children who they are and where they come from. And almost without pausing, they talked about whether they would be able to keep the doors open for another year. Federal funding was the school's lifeline. Announcements early last year about program eliminations had cast real doubt on whether that community school could survive. I remember talking with the director and there was no drama in how the director said it. Just a very sober reality. And I remember he said, we have no choice but to wait and see. What struck me in that moment was the cultural survival and financial precarity weren't separate conversations. They were the same conversation.

And before I left, the director shared a story about fossilized footprints discovered nearby, thousands of years old, an adult and a child walking side by side. Until the children's steps disappeared and the adult carried that child forward across shifting ground, and he said, that's what we're doing here. We are carrying them until they can walk on their own. That image really stuck with me. It captured something that I heard again and again across the states and different institutions. When we talk about policy budgets and funding cuts, we're really talking about whether we're still willing to carry one another forward when the ground shifts beneath us, and hearing that, I felt in that moment both humbled and in awe. Of the quiet, enduring work happening in that school, educators carrying responsibility, culture, and children forward with far fewer resources than they deserve.

**Lisa:** Right. And other than that funding issue that you've brought up here as well, I know that there are other things that Hispanic-serving institutions are facing. And you mentioned a little bit, and I wanna dive a little bit deeper into it, the lawsuit. So, let's put a name to the lawsuit. There's currently a lawsuit, the State of Tennessee and Students for Fair Admissions versus the US Department of Education, arguing that the Hispanic-Serving Institution program is unconstitutional and discriminatory. Could you break down what this lawsuit is really about and where it stands right now?

**Anthony:** Yeah, so it has not been resolved. It's currently in the court cases. So what I would say, the context, the backdrop is that the state of Tennessee and the group Students for Fair Admissions sued the federal government, the Department of Education, arguing that HIS's criteria, Hispanic Serving Institutions, are currently defined as unconstitutional and discriminatory against other ethnic groups. So the lawsuit aims to dismantle HIS's program and again, the case is ongoing and unresolved.

I think what I would want to do is I would wanna take kind of a critical look at what's happening in this case. I wouldn't say that it's just one thing, but I think that when I look at these, at these things that are happening in education, these different crises, I think the challenge is to make critical connections and to understand how they converge together. So when we're thinking about experiencing these crises, they're not separate. For some people, they see a glimpse of an immigration issue here, a budget problem there, and a lawsuit over DEI somewhere else.

But to me, on this journey, that explanation stopped making sense very quickly. So I'm getting to the Tennessee lawsuit, but I just wanna point out the connections that I'm seeing around this convergence. What I started to see was a convergence of different issues, thinking about legal pressure, political rhetoric, funding decisions, and cultural narratives all colliding at the same institutions and landing on the same students. Now, what happened in New Mexico is connected. In New Mexico, underfunding wasn't just about dollars. It's layered onto historical neglect of indigenous education, onto language erasure, and onto rural isolation.

In Anaheim, immigration enforcement didn't stop at the school door. So fear reduced attendance, lower attendance reduces funding, reduced funding erases programs. And at Compton College, a Hispanic-serving community college, housing security wasn't a side issue. It shaped academic policy in real time. Food insecurity wasn't an individual failure. It was an individual strain made visible.

And what changed for me was realizing these weren't parallel stories. They are all part of the same story told through different points. So when we think about immigration enforcement, DEI rollbacks, legal challenges to HSIs, and public disinvestment, they don't just coexist, they reinforce one another. So each one chips away at the scaffolding that makes upward mobility possible. And together they amount to a retreat from mobility, even if no one ever names it that way. And when mobility erodes, the consequences do not stay contained. They ripple outward into the economy, into civic life, and into who feels they belong in this country.

I think that Hispanic-serving institutions are often misunderstood. They're not created to exclude anyone, as may be suggested here in this case. They're designated because of who they already serve. An institution becomes an HSI when at least 25% of its undergraduate students are Latinx. Most of those students are low-income and first-generation. These institutions did not change their message. Demographics changed faster than the funding structures did. These are open-access institutions doing the hardest work with the fewest resources.

Today, most Latinx college students attend HSIs. 64% of all Latinx undergraduates are earning degrees in the nation at 602 Hispanic-serving institutions. Importantly, at these same institutions, they educate more Black students than all the historically Black colleges and universities combined and more Native American students than all the tribal colleges combined. They are quite literally institutions of mobility.

So you can't claim to care about economic growth or democratic stability while weakening the institutions educating the future workforce. So when we talk about Hispanic-serving institutions, we're not talking about a niche category or a special carve-out. We're talking about the backbone of access and American higher education, open-access institutions doing the hardest work with the fewest resources, educating the future workforce, whether policymakers acknowledge it or

not. And that's exactly why--and remember, we're making critical connections here--that's exactly why the next part of this conversation matters. Because once you understand what HSIs actually are and what they are not, it becomes clear that the current legal and political challenges facing them aren't abstract or technical. They're not just debates about language or thresholds or definitions. They are contests over whether we're willing to name structural inequality at all. That is what is at risk in the Tennessee lawsuit.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. And you know, within the people that are involved in the lawsuit, there are also students and there are folks who are working in these higher institutions. I'd love for you to maybe share some stories that you've heard from students about how the campus climate has shifted, especially as DEI efforts are being rolled back.

**Anthony:** There are quite a few; there's institutional stories, and very often we focus narrowly on the stories of the students themselves, but institutions have their own lives, and leaders leading these institutions can very much shape the story of these institutions. I've seen Hispanic-serving institutions where leaders have extended themselves to think about not only an academic rigorous experience for students, but also to challenge themselves in a courageous way to say how can we better meet the students where they have needs, which means that we want to think about critical transformational leadership. And by that we mean we're thinking through an equity lens to try to better understand the holistic needs of our students, not only in the classroom, but beyond the classroom. And when we think about what, what we're calling the DEI rollbacks or what we're thinking about as DEI attacks, one of the big misconceptions is that they're reactive. That they're simply responses to public backlash or political pressure, but it's complicated. And what I see is sequencing, legal challenges move first, political rhetoric follows, then budget decisions reinforce the shift and each step kind of creates cover for the next, so no single action looks catastrophic. But together they reshape the terrain.

So when we think about reshaping the terrain, we think that there's an opportunity to kind of mediate this change in a positive way. How is it that we can provide those supports for students? And how we don't view students through deficit

lenses, but start to ask what are the deficits of institutions and the leaders who are leading those institutions and failing to meet the students where they're at?

So one of the things we really have to interrogate is kind of this framing of neutrality. What gets framed as neutrality often locks existing inequalities in place. So this isn't really about eliminating diversity statements or renaming offices. It's about redefining what institutions are allowed to acknowledge. And if inequality can't be named, it can't be addressed. And if it can't be addressed, responsibility quietly shifts back onto individuals. Students, again, in this deficit way of thinking, are told to be resilient. Institutions are told to be neutral. Systems are treated as inevitable. That framing doesn't just change language, it changes outcomes. Once again, what looks like a culture war is actually a struggle over whether mobility remains a public responsibility or becomes a private burden.

**Lisa:** And you mentioned, having to have some movement, or especially like when you're naming a problem, you also have to take some action towards fixing the problem. And things like legislation that is very clearly meant to be attacking certain communities or maybe just claim discrimination when really the discrimination is being anti these communities. I guess, what recommendations do you have based on your research? Proactive actions that institutions can take in order to protect their students?

**Anthony:** That's a good question. Thank you so much. I think that it's really important to understand the complexity when we think about these types of institutions and the communities that are being served very often in the public. We're talking about cuts. Cutting budgets, cutting funding. It's important for us to think deeply about what cuts do. When we think about cuts using that language, we often imagine trimming excess, but in most public institutions, especially Hispanic-serving institutions and community colleges, there is no excess left and cuts don't remove politics. They support it. What cuts look like is fewer advisors carrying larger caseloads, mental health services becoming appointment-only or disappearing entirely. Transfer pathways that work in theory, but actually collapse in practice.

Mobility isn't symbolic, it's structural, and when the structure weakens, belief alone can't compensate. Cheerleading is not going to get us there without the capital resources and support. So when programs are cut, the work doesn't disappear. It just gets redistributed. Staff have to absorb it until they burn out. Students absorb it until they stop out, and families absorb it until the strain becomes too much to bear.

And this is how mobility narrows within a single policy announcement. Not because people stopped believing in education, but because the infrastructure that made belief viable was quietly dismantled. So we have to take a critical way of looking at this problem and again, making critical connections because it's not events in isolation. They are reinforcing each other, and one of the most persistent and hurtful myths in educational policy is that students are independent actors. Most of the students I study are anchors in their families. They translate documents, they send money home, they care for siblings. They navigate institutions on behalf of their parents. So when colleges pull back, families feel it immediately. A delayed graduation isn't just a personal setback. It affects household income, healthcare access, and housing stability.

When access narrows, the consequences don't stop at campus boundaries, they actually spread outward. An elected official I spoke with in the southwest United States put it plainly when funding for HSIs gets withdrawn. He said, it's not just fewer scholarships or fewer programs on campus. It's an entire ecosystem losing momentum. Feeder high schools feel it. Workforce programs feel it. Even local businesses feel it because students aren't just learners. They're workers, they're caregivers, and they're contributors to the local economy. Educational policy is family policy and family policy is economic policy.

When mobility stalls for one student, the ripple effects move through entire communities. That's why these debates matter even to people who've never set foot on a community college campus. And this is where the language of neutrality matters in the conversation. When the effects of these decisions ripple through families and communities, they're rarely described as choices. They're framed as inevitability, as technical adjustments, as neutral acts taken in the name of fairness or efficiency.

But neutrality isn't passive. It's doing work here, and understanding how that language functions helps explain why so much harm can unfold quietly without ever being named as harm. Now the neutrality sounds appealing, but neutrality in unequal systems, and this is really important, neutrality in unequal systems doesn't produce fairness. It preserves advantage, and I often use a simple analogy. If one runner starts a mile behind, removing assistance doesn't create fairness. It locks inequality in place, and that's why appeals to neutrality often feel reasonable on the surface, but actually operate very differently in practice. They freeze existing hierarchies while claiming the moral high ground. Every major expansion of access in American education has been framed as unfair at the time. Public schooling, land grant, universities, the GI Bill, community colleges, each one was criticized for helping the wrong people, each one expanded democracy anyway. I think it's tempting to see these issues as affecting only certain communities, like immigrants, students of color, or low-income families. But mobility doesn't shrink neatly when access narrows. Democracy narrows with it when fewer people can realistically move forward. Trust erodes. Civic participation declines, economic instability grows and resentment fills the gap opportunity once occupied. And this is why mobility can't be treated as a niche concern or a symbolic commitment, it is foundational. What we're really deciding is whether education remains a shared public good or becomes a gated privilege. The choice doesn't just shape campuses. It shapes the kind of country that we're becoming.

And the risk here isn't collapse. It's erosion. Slow enough to normalize, quiet enough to deny, but what gives me hope is that people on the ground haven't given up. Educators, like the people I spoke to, keep showing up. Students keep pushing forward and communities keep defending public institutions. I think every generation decides whether public education functions as a ladder or is a gate. My sense is that the future is not predetermined. Mobility is a choice, and so is belonging.

**Lisa:** Absolutely. And I think you make such wonderful points about how issues are not isolated and maybe solutions aren't isolated as well, right? Because we're talking about how these higher education issues are also tied to immigration, are also tied to issues that people of color are facing, to economic issues, to rural communities as well. I would love for you to wrap this conversation up with just

maybe a story that you've heard from any student that has given you hope or that has sort of motivated you in the work that you continue to do.

**Anthony:** So I'm in awe of the burdens that some of these folks are carrying that I've spoken to and in the genuine hard work and sacrifices that I've seen leaders commit to in these environments. And there are many stories. When I was out at Compton College, I was there visiting Keith Curry, who's the president. He's an African American president who grew up in a traditionally African American community of Compton, which has changed dramatically because of the demographics, and now largely enrolls Latinx students.

When I was walking the campus with him, there was a young man who came up to him, gave him a big hug. It was clear to me that they were both familiar and the young man told the president of the college that he wanted to share some good news, that he was accepted into a competitive nursing program. He was really excited about getting the opportunity to move ahead, to move down his professional pathway. The president invited him to come back and teach at the community college once he got his credentials. He said, we'd love to have you come back to teach, but also to share your own story.

The president told me that when that young man was a student at the community college, he first arrived sleeping in a car. He didn't have a place to clean up. He didn't have regular access to food, and a lot of the work that the president had done on campus was not just to address academic success in the classroom, but also to take care of the material needs of the students, to really care for the whole person. That student coming back to see him affirmed his belief in this idea that people can be lifted and that communities, educational institutions can show up for people. And that it can have benefits not only for the student or for the institution, but for the betterment of society.

That's a story that really stuck with me because when I saw the two of them embrace, I could see that there was a real affection there, and there was a quiet acknowledgement of the work that both of them had done to help each other.

**Lisa:** Well, that's really wonderful to hear and thank you so much for sharing that. And I definitely feel fortunate to hear about these stories from you and hopefully we can all continue to lift each other up even when things seem challenging at the moment. So thank you so much, Professor Hernandez for talking with No Jargon today.

**Anthony:** Well, thank you for having me, and thanks to everyone listening for spending this time with us. I'm grateful for the chance to share these ideas with you.

**Lisa:** Thanks for listening. For more on Professor Hernandez's work, check out our show notes at [scholars.org/no-jargon](https://scholars.org/no-jargon). No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholar Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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