

The DEI Pendulum: Despite Backlash, the Work Must Continue

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If a pendulum sways gently to the ticking of time, we would be hard pressed to describe the current zeitgeist around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as anything but gentle. The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that it is hard to believe just 4 years ago, in 2020, we had most organizations affirming their commitment to the principles of DEI.

The impetus for this article came from the work of a subgroup of the CSE DEIA (A is for accessibility) committee charged with reviewing materials posted on the CSE DEIA resource page,¹ which was previously described in *Science Editor*. The page review, a common practice for web-based resources, yielded a discomfiting observation—some of the links either did not exist any longer, or were replaced with a general webpage that no longer referenced DEI. One major academic publisher had previously posted a statement entitled “Committed to Inclusion and Equity, We Stand in Solidarity with Black Communities – Because Black Lives Matter,” but now that link lands on a general main page.

The question of why organizations and decision makers would make such an about-face on advancing the cause of DEI is a multidimensional one at best, with no easy answers. Because organizations exist within a system of rule of law, they follow the direction of legislation around what is possible with DEI efforts. And organizations in scholarly publishing are no different. Prior to the U.S. Supreme Court decision against affirmative action in June 2023, many states had begun either drafting or enacting their own bills legislating DEI. Many of the state laws have impacted the publishing industry.

We have recently been privy to conversations on book banning in schools and school systems in the K-12 sector.² This was followed by louder rhetoric that impacted DEI efforts in higher education (where one of us currently works). To keep track and keep the conversation front and center, the Chronicle of Higher Education maintains a DEI legislation tracker covering the contiguous United States.³ The tracker shows states where anti-DEI legislation has been passed and codified into law, and for others the status of any bills making their way through the various legislative chambers.

The scholarly publishing industry is an important part of any democracy-leaning society, and it is important for us to take a broad view of the state of DEI and the impact of anti-DEI rhetoric on the work we do, which is foundationally to promote and communicate peer reviewed research, particularly in the sciences. Therefore, the impact of anti-DEI legislation is not just words on paper. Professions and livelihoods are being impacted. University of Florida and The University of Texas at Austin recently laid off dozens of employees and shuttered offices to comply with the laws.⁴ Although these are public institutions that are completely subject to the rule of law, some of these employees have ancillary ties to publishing. Some were authors, reviewers, journal editors, or associate editors of publications in their chosen fields. Their job losses are a secondary loss to the business of publishing.

Not only professions and livelihoods are impacted by anti-DEI efforts, but also childhood and young adult education, community and patient health outcomes, and international relations from immigration to scientific research. It can be argued that DEI, or lack thereof, reaches into every aspect of our lives. How did the pendulum swing so quickly, from 2020 to 2024? Strong change can expectedly receive strong backlash. A study on attitudes of a representative sample of U.S. residents showed that only 46% of U.S. people who believe racial problems are rare were in support of DEI training.⁵ Results like this provide some data-based insight into assertions that anti-DEI efforts are rooted, partly, in racism.⁵ (Consider also the onslaught of legislation in the

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past few years that is anti-trans and anti-women's health access.)

So, what happens now? Action. Difficult conversations, accountability, and action. These tenets are the deeply rooted tree that pro-DEI advocates can cling to in the current storm of backlash.⁶ Anti-DEI efforts across industries have effectively chilled conversation and action around DEI initiatives. As Toni Morrison has said, the function of racism is distraction.⁷ These efforts against DEI create colossal distraction, purposely, to diminish our strength and separate us from one another so that we cannot achieve our goal of equity. This inevitably makes it harder for us to have other difficult conversations, for instance around antisemitism, or lack of diversity in authorship, or how scientific research is designed and conducted, or the impacts of tenure and impact factors on the quality of scientific research. These conversations are crucial to the future of scholarly publishing, especially with the rapid influence of artificial intelligence, and thus our diligence in DEI is needed now more than ever.

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