

**Post Print**

**Ring the Alarm: Project 2025's anti-DEI Threat to Higher Education**

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*MAGA allies say they can finally admit Project 2025 'is the agenda' for Trump's Second term.* Lubin (2024)

After serving as the 45<sup>th</sup> president and losing his first re-election bid in 2020, Donald J. Trump was elected as the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (U.S.) on November 5, 2024. Prior to the election, Democrats frequently warned voters that the conservative policy document known as Project 2025 would serve as a cornerstone of Trump's second-term policy agenda; though Trump regularly denied being involved with it or knowing anything about Project 2025 (Chang & Pereira, 2024). Two days after his election, the headline above appeared in the online *Independent* newspaper (Lubin, 2024). Indeed, Steve Bannon and other close allies of President Trump declared that *Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership—The Conservative Promise* (Dans & Groves, 2023) is the agenda. Many of the executive orders issued by President Trump since he assumed office confirm the central place of Project 2025 in his administration. Specifically, many of the 2025 executive orders detail policies and implementation steps to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the federal government while also pressuring private and non-profit organizations to do likewise. The administration's stance on DEI has already led to the loss of jobs for DEI practitioners in government, universities, and private corporations (Alfonseca & Zahn, 2023). They also reveal the ideological and political reasons for the demolition of DEI. Certainly, resistance to DEI and efforts to eradicate inequality are not new (e.g., Nkomo, 2020; Thomas, 2020). However, the velocity and magnitude of the current pushback indicate that our society is facing an existential threat that could erode the legitimacy and pursuit of DEI and hamstring interventions to build more representative, equitable, and inclusive workplaces and communities.

Project 2025 was never hidden. Indeed, the 922-page manifesto for how the United States federal government should be transformed to “save our country from the brink of disaster” is readily available online (Roberts, 2023:3). The Project 2025 manifesto is complete with detailed footnotes and references. This volume was produced through the collaboration of former members and allies of President Trump’s first term, conservative legal and political institutions—including the Heritage Foundation and the Hudson Institute—as well as an array of religious and identity-based groups that include Christian Nationalists, anti-abortion activists, opponents of LGBTQIA+ rights, vote suppressors, and anti-DEI activists (Montgomery, 2024). The volume lists 34 authors, 2 editors, 276 contributors, and 53 institutional advisory board members. To date, at least 31 people affiliated with Project 2025 have been nominated or appointed to prominent positions in the Trump administration (e.g., Russell Vought, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Brendan Carr, Federal Communications Commission Chair, John Ratcliffe, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Peter Navarro, Counselor to the President, Tom Homan, Border Czar, and Karoline Leavitt, White House Press Secretary, etc.) (Plummer, 2025; Wandell, 2025).

Project 2025 is not the first mandate proffered by conservatives. In 1980, the newly established Heritage Foundation shared a document entitled *Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration* with President-elect Ronald Reagan (Phillips-Fein, 2024). Subsequently, President Reagan shared the “Mandate” with his Cabinet, many of whom were its authors (Phillips-Fein, 2024). The release of such “Mandates” has become a Heritage Foundation practice with every new presidential administration, regardless of party affiliation. However, analysts believe Project 2025 is a more potent mandate because of its stronger institutional infrastructure, detailed policy strategy, and the numerous elected officials’ commitment to the agenda (Phillips-Fein, 2024). While the dominant theme of the

1980 Mandate was to refocus the country on national security, Project 2025 sets its goal as ending the ‘Great Awakening’ or in the words of Kevin Roberts (2023:1): “This book, this agenda, the entire Project 2025 is a plan to unite the conservative movement and the American people against elite rule and woke culture warriors.” Roberts (2023:4-5) further states:

This starts with deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity (‘SOGI’), diversity, equity, and inclusion (‘DEI’), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze how Project 2025 and Trump’s executive orders have spurred DEI backlash and examine their subsequent threats and implications for higher education. To analyze aspects of Project 2025 that are pertinent to our goal, we used artificial intelligence software like ChatGPT and other indexing tools to search for content relevant to DEI. Our search focused on DEI related terms: diversity, equity, equality, equal opportunity, inclusion, discrimination, affirmative action, class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, national origin, religion, disability, sexual identity, LGBTQIA+, racial identity, and work and family. After gathering data, we did a close reading of the chapters most relevant to DEI (i.e. Department of Labor and Related Agencies, Department of Justice, Department of Commerce, Department of Education, Department of Health & Human Services, and the Central Personnel Agencies: Managing the Bureaucracy) and the newly issued executive orders relevant to DEI (see Appendix 1)<sup>1</sup>. We acknowledge that our analysis is not exhaustive, but rather representative, as Project 2025 remains an ongoing threat as new executive orders, memos, legal decisions, deals, etc. are constantly being released. To provide

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<sup>1</sup> We want to note that we opted to use AI tools as a starting point to help us gather and organize the necessary data from the Project 25 document that is relevant to DEI. We did not use AI in any aspect of writing this article. We provide a more detailed account of our method using AI to collate the data in Appendix 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Project 2025 Plans for DEI and Presidential Executive Orders*

Plans	Executive Orders Issued
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remove all terms related to DEI: sexual orientation and gender identity, DEI, gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitivity, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, social justice, justice and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation and piece of legislation that exists.</li> <li>• Eliminate Chief Diversity Officers and DEI Advisors as well as advisory committees where they exist in government departments.</li> <li>• Issue executive orders to require accounting for how federal programs/grants spread DEI/CRT/gender ideology.</li> <li>• Remove any training materials and initiatives designed to single out any race, ethnicity, or sex for special treatment.</li> <li>• Treat the participation in any critical race theory or DEI initiative, without objecting on constitutional or moral grounds, as <i>per se</i> grounds for termination of employment.</li> <li>• Cap indirect costs to universities in government grants to prevent funds being used for DEI efforts.</li> <li>• Establish an ESG/DEI collusion task force to investigate firms, particularly in private equity—to learn if they are using the practice as a means to meet targets, fix prices, or reduce output.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DEI</b></p> <p><b>Executive Order 14151: Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing</b></p> <p>The Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), assisted by the Attorney General and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), shall coordinate the termination of all discriminatory programs, including illegal DEI and “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” (DEIA) mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government, under whatever name they appear. Federal employment practices, including Federal employee performance reviews, shall reward individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work and shall not under any circumstances consider DEI or DEIA factors, goals, policies, mandates, or requirements.</p> <p>Each agency, department, or commission head, in consultation with the Attorney General, the Director of OMB, and the Director of OPM, as appropriate, shall take the following actions within sixty days of this order: (i) terminate, to the maximum extent allowed by law, all DEI, DEIA, and “environmental justice” offices and positions (including but not limited to “Chief Diversity Officer” positions); all “equity action plans,” “equity” actions, initiatives, or programs, “equity-related” grants or contracts; and all DEI or DEIA performance requirements for employees, contractors, or grantees.</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14170: Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service</b></p> <p>Federal hiring should not be based on impermissible factors, such as one’s commitment to illegal racial discrimination under the guise of “equity,” or one’s commitment to the invented concept of “gender identity” over sex. Inserting such factors into the hiring process subverts the will of the People, puts critical government functions at risk, and risks losing the best-qualified candidates</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14185 Restoring America’s Fighting Force</b></p> <p>The Secretary of Defence and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall abolish every DEI office within the Department of Defence and the Department of Homeland Security with regard to the USCG, respectively.</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14173: Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity</b></p> <p>(a) The heads of all agencies, with the assistance of the Attorney General, shall take all appropriate action with respect to the operations of their agencies to advance in the private sector the policy of individual initiative, excellence, and hard work identified in section 2 of this order.</p>

	<p>(b) To further inform and advise me so that my Administration may formulate appropriate and effective civil-rights policy, the Attorney General, within 120 days of this order, in consultation with the heads of relevant agencies and in coordination with the Director of OMB, shall submit a report to the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy containing recommendations for enforcing Federal civil-rights laws and taking other appropriate measures to encourage the private sector to end illegal discrimination and preferences, including DEI. The report shall contain a proposed strategic enforcement plan identifying:</p> <p>(i) Key sectors of concern within each agency’s jurisdiction; (ii) The most egregious and discriminatory DEI practitioners in each sector of concern; (iii) A plan of specific steps or measures to deter DEI programs or principles (whether specifically denominated “DEI” or otherwise) that constitute illegal discrimination or preferences. As a part of this plan, each agency shall identify up to nine potential civil compliance investigations of publicly traded corporations, large non-profit corporations or associations, foundations with assets of 500 million dollars or more, State and local bar and medical associations, and institutions of higher education with endowments over 1 billion dollars.</p>
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**Class**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prohibit the use of a BA requirement in job descriptions, except where a BA from a particular type of institution or in a particular field is a bona fide requirement of the position.</li> <li>• Stop facilitating the availability of cheap foreign labor in order to support American workers (particularly poor and middle-class American workers).</li> <li>• Adopt the civil service’s skills-based hiring standards for federal contractors and issue waivers from degree-based staffing requirements in existing contracts.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Order 14165: Securing Our Borders</b></p> <p>It is the policy of the United States to take all appropriate action to secure the borders of our Nation through the following means.</p> <p>Detain to the maximum extent authorized by law, aliens apprehended on suspicion of violating Federal or State law, until such time as they are removed from the United States;</p> <p>Cooperate fully with State and local law enforcement officials in enacting Federal-State partnerships to enforce Federal immigration priorities.</p>
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**Gender**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redefine gender to refer only to biological sex in all government policies and regulations.</li> <li>• Refocus gender equality on women, children and families.</li> <li>• Expel members of the military with gender dysphoria.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Order EO 14168</b>  <b>Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government</b></p> <p>It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality.</p> <p>(a) “Sex” shall refer to an individual’s immutable biological classification as either male or female. “Sex” is not a synonym for and does not include the concept of “gender identity.”</p> <p>(b) “Women” or “woman” and “girls” or “girl” shall mean adult and juvenile human females, respectively.</p> <p>(c) “Men” or “man” and “boys” or “boy” shall mean adult and juvenile human males, respectively.</p> <p>(d) “Female” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the large reproductive cell.</p> <p>(e) “Male” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the small reproductive cell.</p> <p>(f) “Gender ideology” replaces the biological category of sex with an ever-shifting concept of self-assessed gender identity, permitting the false claim that males can identify as and thus become women and vice versa, and requiring all institutions of society to regard this false claim as true.</p>
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	<p>Gender ideology includes the idea that there is a vast spectrum of genders that are disconnected from one’s sex. Gender ideology is internally inconsistent, in that it diminishes sex as an identifiable or useful category but nevertheless maintains that it is possible for a person to be born in the wrong sexed body. (g) “Gender identity” reflects a fully internal and subjective sense of self, disconnected from biological reality and sex and existing on an infinite continuum, that does not provide a meaningful basis for identification and cannot be recognized as a replacement for sex.</p> <p>Each agency and all Federal employees shall enforce laws governing sex-based rights, protections, opportunities, and accommodations to protect men and women as biologically distinct sexes. Federal funds shall not be used to promote gender ideology. Each agency shall assess grant conditions and grantee preferences and ensure grant funds do not promote gender ideology. The Attorney General shall issue guidance to ensure the freedom to express the binary nature of sex and the right to single-sex spaces in workplaces and federally funded entities covered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14183 Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness</b></p> <p>It is the policy of the United States Government to establish high standards for troop readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity. This policy is inconsistent with the medical, surgical, and mental health constraints on individuals with gender dysphoria. It is the policy of the United States Government to establish high standards for troop readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity. This policy is inconsistent with the medical, surgical, and mental health constraints on individuals with gender dysphoria.</p>
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**Discrimination**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abolish policies and regulations that require appointments on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation.</li> <li>• Ensure that equal protection of the law, equal opportunity, and individual merit govern regulatory decisions.</li> <li>• Eliminate disparate impact liability.</li> <li>• Ensure the federal government’s commitment to non-discrimination rather than affirmative discrimination under the guise of ‘equity.’</li> <li>• Investigate and prosecute all state and local governments, institutions of higher education, corporations and any other private employers who engage in discrimination in violation of constitutional and legal requirements.</li> <li>• Restrict sexual orientation and transgender status from the protections defined in <i>Bostock v. Clayton County</i> (Supreme Court Case 2020) in the context of hiring and firing.</li> <li>• Rescind regulations prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, transgender status, sex characteristics, etc.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Order 14173 Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity</b></p> <p>(a) Federal hiring should not be based on impermissible factors, such as one’s commitment to illegal racial discrimination under the guise of “equity,” or one’s commitment to the invented concept of “gender identity” over sex.</p> <p>(b) It is the policy of the United States to protect the civil rights of all Americans and to promote individual initiative, excellence, and hard work. I therefore order all executive departments and agencies (agencies) to terminate all discriminatory and illegal preferences, mandates, policies, programs, activities, guidance, regulations, enforcement actions, consent orders, and requirements. I further order all agencies to enforce our longstanding civil-rights laws and to combat illegal private-sector DEI preferences, mandates, policies, programs, and activities.</p> <p>The following executive actions are hereby revoked: (i) Executive Order 12898 of February 11, 1994 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations); (ii) Executive Order 13583 of August 18, 2011 (Establishing a Coordinated Government-wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce); (iii) Executive Order 13672 of July 21, 2014 (Further Amendments to Executive Order 11478, Equal Employment Opportunity in the Federal Government, and Executive Order 11246, Equal Employment Opportunity); and (iv) The Presidential Memorandum of October 5, 2016 (Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus reinforcement of sex discrimination laws on the biological binary meaning of sex (i.e. biological male and biological female).</li> </ul>	National Security Workforce); Executive Order 11246 of September 24, 1965 (Equal Employment Opportunity); Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs within the Department of Labor.
<b>EEOC</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclaim EEOC regulatory pretensions.</li> <li>• Affirm EEOC decision making via majority vote of Commissioners rather than unilateral Chair action.</li> <li>• Deny the power of EEOC to enter into consent decrees.</li> <li>• Close OFFCP.</li> <li>• Reorient enforcement priorities towards failure to accommodate disability, religion and pregnancy (but not abortion).</li> <li>• Appoint new EEOC and NLRB general counsels on Day One.</li> </ul>	<b>See Executive Order 14173</b>
<b>Immigrants/Immigration</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassert control of employment authorization, which is subject to rampant regulatory abuse, and limit it to certain categories of legal immigrants and non-immigrants.</li> <li>• Permanently authorize E-Verify and make it mandatory.</li> <li>• Institute more robust investigations for suspected visa fraud and speedier debarments for those found guilty to protect the American workforce.</li> <li>• Require at least 70 percent of the federal contractor employees to be U.S. citizens, with the percentage increasing to at least 95 percent over a 10-year period.</li> <li>• Amend the law so that employers can again have the freedom to make hiring Americans a priority.</li> <li>• Cap and phase down the H-2A visa program for foreign temporary agricultural workers.</li> </ul>	<b>See Executive Order 14165: Securing Our Borders</b>
<b>Language</b>	
	<b>Executive Order 14224 Designating English as the Official Language of the United States</b>  To promote unity, cultivate a shared American culture for all citizens, ensure consistency in government operations, and create a pathway to civic engagement, it is in America’s best interest for the Federal Government to designate one—and only one—official language. Establishing English as the official language will not only streamline communication but also reinforce shared national values and create a more cohesive and efficient society. Accordingly, this order designates English as the official language of the United States
<b>LGBTQIA+</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeal policies that focus on LGBTQ+ equity, subsidizing single motherhood, disincentivizing work, and penalizing marriage and replace them with policies to support the formation</li> </ul>	

<p>of stable, married, nuclear families—a married mother, father and their children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readdress the national strategy to support family caregivers from a focus on racial and LGBTQ+ equity to support caregivers and their families.</li> <li>• Issue a national coverage determination that Medicare should not cover gender reassignment surgery.</li> </ul>	
<b>Race</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issue a ban and pass a law banning prohibiting the federal government from using taxpayer dollars to fund, all critical race theory training (CRT).</li> <li>• Prohibit racial classifications and quotas, including human-resources classifications and DEI trainings that promote critical race theory.</li> <li>• Eliminate EEO-1 data collection on employment statistics based on race/ ethnicity, which data can then be used to support a charge of discrimination under disparate impact.</li> <li>• Amend Title VII to prohibit the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from collecting EEO-1 data and any other racial classifications in employment for both private and public workplaces.</li> <li>• Eliminate disparate impact as a valid theory of discrimination for race and other bases under Title VII and other laws.</li> <li>• Redirect the Minority Business Advisory Council as a tool to be leveraged in the fight to deliver economic opportunity to all Americans and to produce an economy centered on equal opportunity, free markets, innovation, and growth instead of focusing on minority advancement</li> </ul>	<p><b>See Executive Order 14151 re DEI</b></p>
<b>Religion</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide robust protections for religious (i.e. faith based) employers.</li> <li>• Issue an executive order that religious employers are free to run their businesses according to their religious beliefs, general non-discrimination laws notwithstanding.</li> <li>• Clarify Title VII’s religious exemptions that allow religious employers to make employment decisions on the basis of religion.</li> <li>• Support participation of religious employees and employers in federal contractors and federal activities and programs.</li> <li>• Enact policies with robust respect for religious exercise and accommodation in the workplace.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Order 14202 Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias</b></p> <p>There is hereby established within the Department of Justice the Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias (Task Force).</p> <p>The Task Force shall meet as required by the Chair and shall take appropriate action to: (i) review the activities of all executive departments and agencies (agencies), including the Department of State, the Department of Justice, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, over the previous Administration and identify any unlawful anti-Christian policies, practices, or conduct by an agency contrary to the purpose and policy of this order.</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14188 Additional Measures To Combat Anti-Semitism</b></p>

	<p>It shall be the policy of the United States to combat anti-Semitism vigorously, using all available and appropriate legal tools, to prosecute, remove, or otherwise hold to account the perpetrators of unlawful anti-Semitic harassment and violence.</p> <p><b>Executive Order 14205 Establishment of the White House Faith Office</b></p> <p>Establishment of the White House Faith Office within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) the White House Faith Office (Office). The Office shall have lead responsibility in the executive Presidential Documents branch to empower faith-based entities, community organizations, and houses of worship to serve families and communities.</p>
<p><b>Work and Family</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote stable and flourishing married nuclear families.</li> <li>• Pass a law requiring equal (or greater) employee benefits for pro-life support for mothers and clarifying abortion exclusions.</li> <li>• Keep anti-life ‘benefits’ out of workplace benefit plans.</li> <li>• Refocus labor legislation on the good of the family.</li> <li>• Allow workers to accumulate paid time off.</li> <li>• Enact the Working families flexibility act allowing choice between receiving overtime pay or paid time off.</li> <li>• Incentivize on-site childcare.</li> <li>• Amend the FLSA Act to clarify that an employer’s expenses for on-site childcare are not part of an employee’s regular pay.</li> <li>• Commit to the honest study of the challenges for women in the workplace rather than a politicized agenda.</li> <li>• Rededicate the budget of the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor towards open inquiry on the true causes of participation and earnings gaps between women and men.</li> <li>• Equalize retirement savings access and tax-free retirement savings cross married households.</li> <li>• Establish an Assistant Commissioner for Family Statistics with the Bureau of Labor Statistics.</li> <li>• Allocate funds to publish monthly estimates of the American family’s well-being.</li> <li>• Streamline requirements for recording employee telework.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Executive Order 14182 Enforcing the Hyde Amendment</b></p> <p>It is the policy of the United States, consistent with the Hyde Amendment, to end the forced use of Federal taxpayer dollars to fund or promote elective abortion.</p>

*Note.* Source: <https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders><https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders> accessed April 5, 2025; Project 2025

a succinct categorization of our analysis, we outline Project 2025's anti-DEI plans and how Trump's executive orders to date align with those goals in Table 1.

### **Project 2025's DEI Backlash**

Hambrick and Chen (2008) argue that the contours and evolution of an academic field are greatly influenced by external and internal socio-political forces. Ultimately, these forces affect the status and legitimacy of an academic field. A major external force in higher education is a growing multi-front DEI backlash (Prasad & Śilwa, 2024; Ng et al., 2025).

While many people may have believed the graphic murder of George Floyd by a White police officer on May 25, 2020, ignited an epochal awareness and commitment to accelerate the pursuit of racial justice and DEI across the U.S., that pursuit was short-lived. Instead, DEI backlash has grown further into a well-funded ideological, political, scholarly, and legal attack, with some characterizing it as a movement (Mohiuddin, 2025). These attacks on DEI are threatening public and private organizations. Self-appointed anti-woke warriors in the U.S. are pressuring the corporate sector to abandon DEI initiatives (e.g. Cherkasky & Cherkasky, 2024; Soukup, 2023). Although some corporate leaders expressed commitment to maintaining or increasing their DEI efforts (e.g., Costco, Microsoft, Apple, Delta Airlines), many have scaled back their DEI efforts by reducing DEI staff and dismantling DEI departments and initiatives (e.g., Meta, Amazon, Walmart, Target, McDonald's) (Francis & Cutter, 2024). More frightening, some law firms (e.g., Paul Weiss LLP, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, Latham & Watkins LLP, Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP, and Milbank LLP) have made deals with the Trump administration to end some DEI-based hiring and promotion practices and provide between \$40 to \$125 million of pro bono legal work on Trump-aligned administration causes (Tucker, 2025).

There are also several political and legislative efforts to remove the legal bases of DEI, including the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decision to overturn

decades of legal precedent by declaring it unconstitutional in most instances to use race as a factor in college or university admissions in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard*. While the case was performatively presented as having originated from the advocacy of Asian students, it was litigated and funded through the efforts of Edward Blum. Blum is a legal activist and founder of Students for Fair Admissions who has labored for decades to remove race-conscious policies from American life (Garcia-Navarro, 2023). Additionally, an anti-DEI culture war is being waged through the banning of books (e.g. McWhorter, 2021; Rufo, 2023) that seeks to make the pursuit of DEI and social justice illegal (Cammaerts, 2022; Johansen, 2024). According to the Pen America, legislatures in 43 states in the U.S. thus far have banned books with characters of color, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, or books that include any references to racism and discrimination ( Pen America, 2024).

While the USA has been the epicentre of the anti-DEI movement, there is also a worrying shift towards right-wing populism across the globe (Nkomo, et al., 2019). After years of being on the fringes of government, conservative and far-right parties have gained enough power to participate actively in government or lead their countries, even in countries (e.g., Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, etc.) long considered to be bulwarks of liberal democracy (Brown, Mondon & Winter, 2023). Some European countries (e.g., Poland, Germany, Italy, etc.) are rolling back DEI programs under pressure from the U.S. government (Murray & Bohannon, 2025), with migrants and transgender people being the main targets of anti-DEI efforts in European countries (e.g., Indelicato et al., 2024; McLean, 2021).

Within the management discipline, critiques of DEI have emerged that threaten the science and practice of developing evidence-based approaches to improving fairness and diversity in organizations(e.g., Waldman & Sparr, 2022; Wright, 2022). Certainly, critiques are a necessary part of all scientific disciplines. However, some respected management journal outlets have published anti-DEI critiques that lack the expected rigor by authors who

are not experts in DEI (DiTomaso, 2024; Roberson, et al., 2024; Opoku-Dakwa & Rice, 2024; Thomason et al., 2023).

Though DEI work has a long tradition and will never cease, our analysis suggests the attack on DEI is a clear and present danger to the survival of DEI as a discipline and to those who continue to experience discrimination, inequity, and exclusion because of their historically-oppressed identities. The danger is not just about the expulsion of DEI from the federal government but rather its more ambitious agenda. The ultimate goal of Project 2025 is to create and institutionalize a permanent conservative nation by expanding the power of the Executive branch of the U.S. government and reshaping governmental departments and agencies into ideologically driven administrative instruments for radical conservative change. The spillover of these actions is nationwide and potentially global. The foreword of Project 2025 sums up its radical aim: “Through Project 2025, the conservative movement promises to: (1) Restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children; (2) Dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people; (3) Defend our nation’s sovereignty, borders, and bounty against global threats; and (4) Secure our God-given individual rights to live freely—what our Constitution calls “the Blessings of Liberty” (Roberts, 2023:14). However, the conservative policy changes, laws, executive orders and judicial rulings issued thus far suggest a distorted and narrow view of what they view as family, protection, self-governance, and liberty.

The strong push of conservative practices, as outlined by Project 2025, means that DEI is facing an existential threat. For management scholars, this threat has the potential to impede core aspects of what we study and seek to redress regarding reducing inequality in classrooms and organizations. This threat requires a collective resistance strategy to ensure not just the survival of the discipline but also ways to accelerate scholarship and practice for achieving workplace equality and inclusion. Management scholars must join the fight to stop

the epistemic erasure of the DEI field and the continuing discrimination and marginalization experienced by those designated as the ‘other’. We argue that it is important to persevere and continue producing DEI scholarship and practice to achieve workplace equality and social justice.

In the next section of this essay, we discuss the alignment of the executive orders with the plans detailed in Project 2025. Table 1 contains a summary of DEI-related plans from Project 2025 and the corresponding executive orders issued to date. It also includes Project 2025 plans that may become the subject of future executive orders. We then discuss the implications of the executive orders issued for the DEI discipline and higher education in general. We conclude with suggestions for the strategies DEI scholars and allies might use to resist the threats imposed by the implementation of Project 2025 and a growing national anti-DEI movement.

### **The Impact of Project 2025 and Executive Orders on the DEI Discipline and Higher Education**

In concert with Project 2025’s goal to “remove DEI out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation,” three of the Executive Orders issued in the first days of the new administration do this by targeting the relevance and legitimacy of the DEI field. This may sound alarmist, but the justifications of Executive Orders 14151 and 14173 reveal this goal. Executive Order 14151 (p. 8339) refers to “illegal DEI” and orders the termination of “all discriminatory programs, including illegal DEI and “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility” (DEIA) mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government, under whatever name they appear.” The order includes all the concepts related to DEI—Chief Diversity Officer, equity action plans, equity programs, and equity interventions. As an example of the administration’s alignment with Project 2025, the manifesto states:

The next conservative Administration should dismantle USAID’s DEI apparatus by eliminating the Chief Diversity Officer position along with the DEI advisers and committees; cancel the DEI scorecard and dashboard; remove DEI requirements from contract and grant tenders and awards; issue a directive to cease promotion of the DEI agenda.... It should eliminate funding for partners that promote discriminatory DEI practices and consider debarment in egregious cases” (Primorac, 2023: 258).

Of note is the administration’s use of the terms “illegal” or “discriminatory” DEI. Though no legitimate investigations have occurred to review the legality or discriminatory actions of any specific DEI policies or practices, the administration’s wanton framing of DEI as “illegal” or “discriminatory” serves to curtail any organization’s adoption of DEI policies, practices, or initiatives. Ironically, as part of deals with the Trump administration to restore some federal funding, Columbia and Brown Universities agreed to release student GPA and standardized test data by race of all of their applicants, a request that the administration will likely require of other colleges and universities (Otterman & Hartocollis, 2025). As quoted in the *New York Times* article, Yale Law School professor, Justin Driver, stated, “The Trump administration’s ambition here is to send a chill through admissions offices all over the country. They are trying to get universities to depress Black and brown enrollment” (Otterman & Hartocollis, 2025). Despite what the Supreme Court wrote and legal analysts' interpretations of the *SFFA v. Harvard* ruling about the permissible use of race in college admissions, the Trump administration’s U.S. Attorney General, Pam Bondi, has released several guidance memos that does not comport with SCOTUS’ ruling proclaiming race can never be used in any aspect of university life (Otterman & Hartocollis, 2025). More recently, the administration issued a memorandum that requires universities to collect admissions data to prove they are not engaged in efforts to shape their student bodies along racial lines (White House, 2025).

In Executive Order 14173 (p. 8662), DEI is recast as violating civil rights rather than protecting them. As noted in Table 1, this order calls for the elimination of federal hiring based on previously protected identities such as race. This executive order also weakens the

power of the EEOC and closes the Office of Federal Contract Compliance, which for the past 64 years had ensured federal contractors and subcontractors comply with non-discrimination and affirmative action laws and regulations. Its closure and the shifting of the EEOC to focus on White victims of discrimination as highlighted on its website compromises 60 years of civil rights protections for historically disadvantaged groups (Hannah-Jones, 2025).

A further rationale for Executive Order 14173 is that “illegal” DEI policies (p. 8633) “undermine our national unity, as they deny, discredit, and undermine the traditional American values of hard work, excellence, and individual achievement in favor of an unlawful, corrosive, and pernicious identity-based spoils system.” The reference to identity-based spoils system is reminiscent of the Reagan era phenomenon of reverse discrimination, implying White men have been victims of DEI (Schiff, 1985). Yet, the reality is that Black Americans continue to experience employment discrimination at a rate that has not declined significantly since the 1980s (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009, 2012). Further, the persistent 2-to-1 disparity in unemployment between Black and White workers is pointed to as one of the most durable features of the U.S. labor market (Wilson & Darity, 2022).

Executive Order 14168 (p. 8615) attempts to remove gender as a valid concept by declaring that binary sex is the only legitimate way to refer to men and women or boys and girls (see Table 1). The order goes on to dissect gender, gender ideology, and gender identity as non-existent, ignoring a large body of research that explicates the social and biological complexities of sex and gender across the gender spectrum (Cruz et al., 2025; Holmes, 2019b; Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Monro, 2005). The justification for the executive order is to protect women from men who may self-identify as women in order to harm women born as female. The justification of women’s safety is often used to denounce gender identity despite the lack of empirical evidence to suggest that recognizing gender beyond the male-female binary is harmful to ciswomen or anyone (Sharpe, 2020). Indeed, one study that compared

reports of safety and privacy violations in public restrooms, locker rooms, and dressing rooms across locations with ordinances protecting gender identity-inclusive public accommodations to those without such accommodations found no significant differences in reports based on gender identity-inclusive accommodations (Hasenbush et al., 2019). Furthermore, Executive Orders 14179 (Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence) and 14319 (Preventing Woke AI in the Federal Government), require companies that want to do business with the federal government to not insert debiasing code into their AI/large language models (LLM) to correct for the known bias that is present in AI/LLMs. Executive Order 14319 claims:

One of the most pervasive and destructive of these ideologies is so-called “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI). In the AI context, DEI includes the suppression or distortion of factual information about race or sex; manipulation of racial or sexual representation in model outputs; incorporation of concepts like critical race theory, transgenderism, unconscious bias, intersectionality, and systemic racism; and discrimination on the basis of race or sex. DEI displaces the commitment to truth in favor of preferred outcomes and, as recent history illustrates, poses an existential threat to reliable AI.

Considering AI/LLMs are being integrated in nearly every aspect of our personal and professional lives, the fact that some models will not be corrected when corrections are known and warranted will not only decrease their utility but also could cause real harm to people in certain contexts (e.g., transportation, medical, education, etc.).

If Project 2025 supporters prevail, the scope and specificity of these and similar executive orders make epistemic erasure a real possibility with several potential negative effects on DEI research and practice. The potential effects on the research we conduct are obvious, given the DEI concepts targeted. Fewer scholars may pursue DEI-related research out of fear of being stigmatized as being in a field that is no longer legitimate. Securing funding for DEI-related research is already becoming more difficult, which may slow the progress of research for those who continue doing this work. Federal data about the status of different demographic groups in the workplace may become non-existent. As a result of

Executive Orders 14151, 14168, 14170, and 14173, federal agencies such as the Department of Defense, the Internal Revenue Service, the Department of Education, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention removed thousands of pages from their websites that housed demographic data and DEI-related content. Such data is used by scholars and practitioners to understand where disparities and inequities exist and why they develop. Without access to such data, inequality and inequity may continue to expand without evolving evidence to understand the best mechanisms to reduce them. Beyond research, the inclusion of DEI in management education curricula may decrease, resulting in a negative impact on the employment of DEI scholars in the field and the preparation of our business school graduates. Ultimately, the negative effects on research, teaching, and practice may have real consequences for addressing the discrimination and exclusion experienced by people in our society.

Trump's executive orders have focused a lot of attention on the implementation of Project 2025 at the federal level. However, it is important to note that Project 2025, which was publicly released in April 2023, had begun to be implemented by Republicans at the state level and within judicial rulings prior to Trump's second election. Much of the implementation has had direct consequences for higher education. For instance, under Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida became the first state to pass this wave of anti-DEI laws. Florida's law banned DEI offices, diversity statements, spending state or federal funds on DEI unless required by federal law or accreditation, and identity-based preferences in hiring at public colleges on May 15, 2023. Several other states (e.g., Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Texas) introduced or passed varying versions of their own anti-DEI laws that same year resulting in several closures of DEI offices and staff layoffs or reassignments. Some of the state-level anti-DEI laws, such as Florida's Senate Bill 266, interfere directly with university curricula, eliminating or restricting DEI-related majors, courses, and general

education requirements. In response to these attacks, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has issued several condemnations defending academic freedom and the right to free speech. Despite these prominent condemnations and universities' past ardent support of academic freedom and free speech, some universities have discarded these sacred principles and acquiesced to the administration by removing some "DEI-related majors, DEI courses, and Columbia University even conceded to place its Center for Middle Eastern Studies department in academic receivership among other concessions (Singh, 2025). According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI tracker, as of August 2025, 136 anti-DEI bills have been introduced in 29 states and the U.S. Congress since 2023, 28 of them becoming law and 99 of them failing to pass or have been tabled or vetoed.

Despite the actual anti-DEI laws and rulings being narrow and often vague at both the federal and state levels, DEI opponents are weaponizing the laws and rulings unscrupulously claiming they prohibit any activities related to DEI. For example, after anti-DEI activist Christopher Rufo alleged on social media that Texas universities' participation in The PhD Project conference violated the state's anti-DEI law, Texas Governor Abbott threatened to fire Texas A&M University's president if they participated in The PhD Project conference (Quinn, 2025). The PhD Project is a non-profit that was started in 1994 to increase racial and ethnic diversity in Corporate America by increasing (U.S.) underrepresented faculty racial and ethnic diversity. When it was founded, there were only 294 tenured or tenure-track Black, Hispanic, and Native American business faculty (out of approximately 30,000) in the U.S. As of 2023, The PhD Project has helped to sextuple this number to 1,764, with nearly 300 more doctoral student members in the pipeline by providing awareness of business school doctoral education as a pathway and providing guidance on what is needed to apply to and successfully matriculate through doctoral programs. The PhD Project also provides a

community for doctoral students who are often underrepresented in their own graduate programs.

As reported by *NPR*, the U.S. Department of Education is investigating 45 universities, alleging that they violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and use “racial preferences and stereotypes in education programs and activities” simply by partnering with The PhD Project (Kim, 2025). Universities that partner with The PhD Project use this source as one of many recruiting strategies, and student participation in The PhD Project is not a preferential criterion for selection by universities. As such, universities are not violating the letter or spirit of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 simply through this partnership. However, the investigation has had a stifling effect on The PhD Project, with at least eight University of Texas system universities that had participated in The PhD Project withdrawing their membership following the launch of the investigation (Quinn, 2025). After directives from their Boards, the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa have also withdrawn their membership from The PhD Project (Perez, 2025). The PhD Project announced that several more universities withdrew their membership, and some universities are further restricting their professors’ and students’ attendance to or mentioning their university affiliation at the annual PhD Project conference. At the same time, some business schools have left the Consortium for Graduate Study of Management founded 59 years ago to enhance the representation of underrepresented groups in business schools and corporate America (e.g. University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business, University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business, University of Texas’s McCombs School of Business, and the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business). Thus far, a majority of its members remain (Bleizerffer, 2025); however, continued threats to DEI in higher education may continue to put pressure on these universities to withdraw support. Continued threats to The PhD Project will thwart the demographic progress that has been made in business

academe by decreasing the number of Black, Hispanic, and Native American Ph.D. students who apply to and matriculate through Ph.D. programs and who become and remain business faculty members.

Considering the anti-DEI laws and PhD Project restrictions universities have placed on faculty, staff, and students, one could imagine that anti-DEI advocates will attempt to restrict DEI-related professional memberships and participation, such as membership in the DEI Division of the Academy of Management and DEI committee memberships in American Psychological Association (APA) Divisions such as the Society of Industrial/Organizational Psychologists (SIOP). Indeed, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the world's premiere business accrediting organization, replaced diversity and inclusion from its guiding principles with "community and connectedness" citing the current legal and political environment drawing criticism from their pro-DEI domestic and international members (Knox, 2025). Such threats have the potential to make professional organizations less inclusive as focus is withdrawn on factors that contribute to members of underrepresented groups feeling isolated.

In addition to the demographic shift threat, the anti-DEI laws and executive orders are affecting the types of research that scholars explore and the programs they operate, with the explicit intent to decrease the DEI research output and DEI program support of all scholars. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education's "Dear Colleague" letter released February 14, 2025 and Trump's executive orders disrupted National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) grant-funded research and programs as the agencies issued stop work orders on awarded grants and paused awarding new grants that might be DEI-related to adhere to the administration's anti-DEI demands (Palmer, 2025). Further, via an NIH-issued supplemental guidance policy statement, the administration attempted to cap

facilities and administrative (indirect) cost rates of NIH grants at 15% in an effort to further intimidate and punish universities (Palmer, 2025).

Trump prompted additional layoffs with an executive order directing the closure of the Department of Education. Though legal experts contend that only Congress has the authority to do this, he is effectively achieving this by instructing his Education Secretary Linda McMahon to layoff thousands of Department of Education staff, which will make it impossible for the remaining staff to fulfill all the critical functions the Department of Education performs (Saric, 2025). Furthermore, the Trump administration demanded concessions and froze or threatened to freeze federal funding from several universities (e.g., \$400 million, Columbia University; \$175 million, University of Pennsylvania; \$210 million, Princeton University; \$255 million, Harvard University) under the guise of punishing them for supporting antisemitism and transgender athletes (Stahl, 2025). The Trump administration also demanded that U.S. public schools, private and publicly-traded U.S. organizations, and European businesses comply with their anti-DEI edicts, with some European countries and New York public schools refusing, while some powerful law firms remarkably made some concessions (Butler & Lahiri, 2025; Reily & Hurley, 2025; Timotija, 2025).

Despite the administration rescinding some of their memos and federal judges issuing nationwide preliminary injunctions that temporarily blocks the administration from issuing some research grant contract revocations and payment withholdings, significant damage has already been done to affected scholars' research programs, including the availability of retrieving and archiving certain types of data (Palmer, 2025). Furthermore, the revocation of and uncertainty around federal funding has prompted several universities to lay off researchers and staff, shut down some programs, and issue hiring freezes to manage the budget devastation (Bush, 2025). The largest to date, Johns Hopkins University announced that it was laying off over 2,000 people after the Trump administration terminated \$800

million in federal grant funding (Bush, 2025). The continuation of these grant terminations and employment layoffs may have an adverse impact on organizational DEI climate, program offerings, scientific inquiry and advancements, and diversity in academic institutions. Continued attacks on DEI programs and research may also negatively affect the organizational DEI climate across institutions (Holmes et al., 2021).

Overall, the implementation of Project 2025's anti-DEI agenda is levying unprecedented threats on every aspect of American life, particularly public and higher education. Several analysts are warning that if leaders do not resist and counterattack these existential threats, the United States of America will cease to be a democracy (e.g. Langfitt, 2025; Levitsky & Way, 2025; Friedman, 2025; Gamboa, 2025).

### **What Should We Do**

At this moment of precarity, how do we as DEI scholars resist the efforts to dismiss and devalue the more than 50 years of knowledge built to eradicate discrimination and build inclusive workplaces? Most importantly, we must temper our assumption that the end of DEI is a foregone conclusion. In addition to the legal challenges mounted against some of the executive orders and acts of resistance by individuals and organizations to continue DEI work, we must remember that many of the anti-DEI actions are not law. Congress has the power to overturn an executive order through legislation or can refuse to provide funding for its implementation. A change in the composition of Congress and the Executive Branch can also bring about change. Further, as already evident, courts have the power to declare government conduct unconstitutional. Thus, it is important that we do not engage in pre-emptive voluntary compliance or what some are now referring to as anticipatory obedience—acting to comply in advance of any legitimate law to do so or direct targeting. Nor should we sit by passively. In the next few paragraphs, we make recommendations for the strategies we can engage in to fortify DEI efforts in the face of Project 2025's anti-DEI attacks.

The proposal around DEI within Project 2025 poses a threat to representation and sense of people's belonging within academic institutions and organizations. Despite its suggested neutralization of opportunities, Project 2025 compromises fairness within processes and outcomes by removing procedures put in place to ensure biases that most often disadvantage people from marginalized backgrounds are reduced (e.g., identity-conscious programming). It is important to remember the myriad of benefits to society that are reaped when DEI is encouraged and intentionally sought. As DEI scholars, practitioners, and allies of the work, it is important to think about ways to continue to foster the important values of DEI initiatives, even if such initiatives are formally transformed or removed from institutions. This starts by ensuring organizational and individual values are aligned with fairness for all.

As scholars, one of our most powerful tools is our scholarship. Academics who have expertise in the science and practice of DEI have the opportunity to combat non-scientific information that is being touted in Project 2025 with evidence on the applicability and efficacy of DEI practices. Academic organizations can assist with these efforts by publicizing DEI scholarship and initiating their own DEI-related efforts. For example, the DEI Division of the Academy of Management launched a "Get the Facts" initiative to debunk DEI myths and combat DEI misinformation. Though we recognize the current risks, we encourage scholars who have directly studied and/or embedded DEI topics into their research and teaching to continue to do this work, and for new scholars to join. Academic scholarship provides an important blueprint for understanding the science behind the benefits of DEI (as opposed to homogeneity, inequity, and exclusion) practices and the consequences of failing to cultivate DEI in organizations (Avery & McKay, 2010; Holmes et al., 2021; Roberson et al., 2017). Now, more than ever, our work is needed to illustrate the value of DEI efforts for organizational productivity, team effectiveness, and employee well-being, as well as to communicate the reasons why some people oppose DEI efforts. As attacks continued to be

levied questioning the value of DEI, greater research is needed to provide a common understanding of the goals and outcomes of DEI efforts. A historical perspective on DEI practices dating back to the 1960s shows that laws were passed to a) prohibit overt discrimination based on social identity characteristics, namely race and gender and b) increase equal workplace opportunities (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Over time, research on and practice of DEI practices shifted from a clear connection between diversity practice and civil rights law to examining how organizations and managers implement DEI practices (Portocarrero & Carter, 2022). Throughout history, DEI research and practice have continuously evolved in rhetoric, implementation, and effectiveness. The time is ripe for scholars to take stock of what has been shown to be effective and ineffective in DEI (for comprehensive reviews see Dover et al., 2020; Leslie, 2019; Leslie et al., 2024; Portocarrero & Carter, 2022) and use this work as a springboard to build new scholarship in this area. One area ripe for research is providing greater clarity around DEI, the practice of DEI, what practices provide the greatest effectiveness for employees and organizations, and what practices overcome DEI resistance.

Another area where future research is needed is on ways to reduce opposition to DEI initiatives. Research shows several factors that lead to DEI opposition from members of advantaged groups, including prejudice and beliefs in hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies (Folberg et al., 2023), perceived threat to one's in-group (Plaut et al., 2020), and perceived bias toward their in-group (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2022). For example, a series of seven experiments showed that for White participants, the presence of organizational diversity initiatives led to higher perceptions that the organization had less value and respect for White employees, and ultimately was likely to discriminate against White employees (Kaiser et al., 2022). These perceptions persisted even when presented with evidence that merit-based processes showed that a rejected White applicant was less qualified. Likewise, other research

has uncovered that above and beyond ideological viewpoints, advantaged group members often misperceive DEI as being harmful to their group even when the DEI practice objectively benefits their group (Brown et al., 2022; Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2022). These findings align with those published in Heather McGhee's book, *The Sum of Us*, where she explicates that many White Americans embrace a zero-sum mindset and willingly adopt policies and practices that harm their communities to avoid providing benefits to minority communities (McGhee, 2021). Beyond individual differences, the framing of DEI initiatives can lead to greater (or less) resistance to such policies. For instance, framing initiatives as exclusive to a particular group versus all-inclusive has been shown to be related to concerns about a lack of fairness and potential mistreatment for individuals in advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Cundiff et al., 2018). We echo calls by Gündemir and colleagues (2024) for future research that considers the development of perceived threat from and opposition to DEI initiatives over time. Likewise, we continue to see an evolution in reactions to the framing of DEI policies and language more broadly over time. For instance, what is now frequently referred to as DEI initiatives once fit under the umbrella of affirmative action. We recommend research that seeks to understand the triggers or tipping points that lead to swells in opposition to DEI initiative framings at certain points in time. As we contend that DEI is not the problem, we encourage scholars to empirically examine the efficacy of reframing the DEI backlash narrative to focus on anti-DEI sentiments and laws as the problem instead of DEI itself (Holmes & Kratz, 2024).

The architects of Project 2025 and other anti-DEI initiatives are strategically using tactics such as extortion, fear, and misinformation to convince people that diversity practices are a threat to members of the dominant group (e.g., White men). This strategy of resistance to diversity is not new (c.f., Plaut et al., 2020); however, it does not have to be a fatal blow to DEI. Research shows that illustrating the connection between individuals' self-interest and

DEI policies is related to positive attitudes toward such policies (Harrison et al., 2006). Likewise, emphasizing the role of DEI policies in upholding merit-based standards is also positively related to increased support for such policies (Iyer, 2022). Although DEI goals are often pitted against those of meritocracy, these goals have never been incompatible. Conceptual and empirical findings have shown ways to balance these goals by integrating values of both honoring individual differences and seeking qualified talent (Gündemir et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021). Other research shows that DEI goals and meritocracy can present challenges when meritocracy is not well-defined; however, bias can be reduced and meritocracy achieved when deliberate transparency and accountability for decision-making are put in place (Castilla, 2016). Future research should examine additional ways to frame DEI policies such that they reduce advantaged group members' opposition to DEI, zero-sum mindsets, and opportunity hoarding. This research should also consider when framing is more or less influential and to whom. That is, some communication about DEI initiatives is received negatively by groups these policies are intended to help (Cundiff et al., 2018). Greater evidence on ways to accurately signal the intentions of DEI initiatives in ways that will be received positively by different stakeholders will be useful.

The withdrawal of federal and state funding and pre-emptive rollbacks of funding for DEI research have led to slowdowns in the progress of research requiring funding. Moreover, these research funding rollbacks also impact non-DEI-related research. For example, some scholars who had grants to study climate change, the environment, cancer treatments, vaccination, and national security have had their grants suspended (Johnson, 2025; Muyl & Lydgate, 2025). Some affected universities are rightfully litigating these research funding suspensions, but in the meantime, researchers should begin seeking funding from foundations or private organizations that are not bound by the same scrutiny and constraints that are currently being imposed on federal funding agencies. We admit this is easier said than done,

particularly for scholars seeking funding for DEI-related research, though we offer it as a legitimate suggestion to encourage scholars to seek alternative sources for funding.

Additionally, scholars should seek to build or strengthen relationships with organizations where they may be able to gain access to data. Such partnerships can be mutually beneficial as scholars can provide evidence-based guidance or work with the organization to develop practices that are high in generalizability. Further, we may have to employ data collection strategies that directly reach participants without relying on organizational access. Bell and Nkomo (2001) used this strategy effectively in their pioneering work when some corporations were worried about giving access to the women they employed.

The push to remove DEI in discussions and practice also has negative implications for students and how we, as educators, serve them. The removal of resources such as DEI offices that provide tangible and emotional support to historically excluded students places an undue burden on these students by removing access to information and opportunities to level the playing field. Additionally, anti-DEI policies within higher education threaten the cultural competency of the next generation if they are attending campuses that are less inclusive and do not offer diversity-related information in the curriculum. Faculty can combat some of the negative consequences of anti-DEI policies by teaching students accurate information about concepts such as inequality, fairness, and inclusive practices (Cocchiara & Bell, 2025). We should remember that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is still law, and Title VII remains relevant to course content in human resource management and other related subjects. Ironically, it provides a base for discussing the 2025 executive orders as well as other anti-DEI efforts. Embedding DEI-related topics into our business curriculum is essential as these topics reflect the realities of the labor force and society. Indeed, as noted by Amis et al. (2020, p. 217), “The absence of any discussion of inequality within our pedagogical texts constitutes a gross misrepresentation of reality.” We recommend that faculty think about ways to incorporate

relevant DEI-related information across the curriculum, not just in specialized DEI courses. For instance, courses on human resource management and organizational behavior should include information on biases that occur in recruitment, selection, and decision-making, and how to reduce them. Another proactive step faculty can take is expanding examples of role models (e.g., guest speakers) and thought leaders (e.g., researchers) to include greater representation of speakers who are normally invited to campuses (Amis et al., 2020; Ruggs et al., 2023). Increasing diversity in content, as well as examples of successful business people, helps broaden students' thinking of who is qualified for certain roles and can reduce reliance on stereotypes such as 'think manager, think male' (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

We anticipate that anti-DEI proponents will continue to push for the removal of DEI courses in the curriculum. Academics should be prepared for this, and like organizations, consider the ways that framing the conversation around DEI-related topics may need to evolve if laws are passed. At the same time, we encourage faculty to be accurate in discussing DEI-related topics and advocate for their proper inclusion. For instance, students should understand what workplace discrimination is, how it manifests, and ways to prevent it. We also encourage academics to refrain from engaging in pre-emptive compliance around communicating about DEI in the absence of direct laws prohibiting it. Again, we want to acknowledge the difficult position that academics are in with respect to doing their jobs in the face of anti-DEI legislation and grant funding suspensions. We hope our support and penchant for civil disobedience give them strength and courage despite the real personal and professional risks.

Beyond continuing research and teaching around DEI, we recommend that scholars stay up-to-date with the evolving changes to DEI policies and the rights you have regarding DEI-related actions. Some institutions and individuals have started to engage in pre-emptive compliance around anti-DEI policies. This may be tempting for some, as information around

what is enforceable policy and what is unenforceable rhetoric is often ambiguous. As already evidenced in the case of Columbia University, capitulation does not guarantee safety. Instead, encourage academics to resist. The anti-DEI legislation is not based on scientific evidence and is largely unconstitutional based on our current laws (Kirmani et al., 2025). Now is the time when it is more important than ever to stand up for science, which includes DEI science. Knowing our rights is critically important during a time when there is immense pressure to comply with anti-DEI rhetoric. One way to stay abreast of the rights we have as academics is to join groups such as the American Association of University Professors, a non-profit organization whose mission is to uphold and advance academic freedom and support other organizations like the ACLU, NAACP, and the American Immigration Council that are filing legal suits against these anti-DEI attacks to protect our democracy and constitutional rights.

Finally, we recommend that academics who care about protecting DEI research and practice organize systems of collective action. The battle to preserve the pursuit of DEI scholarship cannot be won by individual efforts alone. To effectively resist the anti-DEI movement, people will have to engage in “good trouble” through activism, acts of civil disobedience (Holmes, 2019, Obenauer, 2024). History shows that fights of this magnitude are not won by the diffusion of effort among individuals, but rather they are won through strategic and persistent efforts of many working together toward the same goal. We need solidarity across the academy that allows for support and protection of the people on the front line standing up for DEI scholarship, teaching, and practice. DEI scholars can play a leading role in articulating how the attack on DEI is a potential threat to the erosion of the academic freedom to all disciplines.

## **Conclusion**

Project 2025 and the Trump administration’s emphasis on removing DEI efforts in organizations and higher education pose an incredible threat to democracy in the U.S. Within

the discipline of management, anti-DEI practices threaten to upend DEI scholarship and teaching and reduce the presence of historically excluded scholars and students in the academy. We agree with former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s assessment that, “The only hope for higher education is total and unrelenting resistance to Trump. Every college in America and every stakeholder must join together and pursue every possible strategy—legal or otherwise—to stop him. ...In this fight, silence is assent” (Duncan, 2025). As scholars and practitioners, we must resist these efforts and continue to push for work that improves equity, inclusion, and representation in the field and society. We call on scholars to fortify our efforts to fight through this iteration of the anti-DEI movement in ways that help uphold our values and encourage a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive future.

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## Appendix 1

### **AI Transparency in Methods**

As previously mentioned, Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership* is a 922-page manifesto. It has 35 chapters across five sections (1: Taking the Reins of Government; 2: The Common Defense; 3: The General Welfare; 4: The Economy; 5: Independent Regulatory Agencies). Though we did not use AI to write any of this manuscript, we did use AI, specifically, ChatGPT 4o, to assist us in analyzing Project 2025 for relevant content on DEI. Mainly, we used ChatGPT 4o for its indexing, searching, and summarizing capabilities. After uploading the document into ChatGPT 4o, representative prompts we entered were: 1) How many times do the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion appear in the Project 2025 document? 2) In which chapters do the terms appear? 3) Are the terms absent from any chapters? 4) What does Project 2025 say about DEI? ChatGPT 4o results indicate that diversity appears 127 times, equity appears 44 times, and inclusion appears 31 times. Fifteen chapters explicitly reference DEI: 1) Department of Education, 2) Department of Defense, 3) Department of Health and Human Services, 4) Department of Homeland Security, 5) Department of Labor, 6) Department of State, 7) Department of the Treasury, 8) Department of Veterans Affairs, 9) Environmental Protection Agency, 10) Office of Personnel Management, 11) Executive Office of the President, 12) Civil Rights and Justice sections, 13) Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 14) National Institutes of Health, 15) U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It gave page numbers and short summaries of how DEI is referenced. (e.g., Page 49-Department of Education: Critiques how diversity initiatives in schools and universities promote ideological conformity). With this information as a starting point, we did a close reading of the Foreword, the Onward, and all of the chapters that referenced DEI, including doing our own independent DEI keyword searches within the Project 2025 document. We note that ChatGPT is a powerful and useful

tool, though there are occasional inaccuracies in its output. For example, for the chapter inclusion of the DEI terms, some of what they list as “chapters” are just subheadings within chapters (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission).

Our close reading of the relevant sections of Project 2025 was necessary because we knew that each reference to diversity, equity, or inclusion was not necessarily relevant to our analysis. For example, diversity is referenced on page 308 in this sentence, “The USDA Forest Service’s mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.” Equity is referenced on page 510 in this sentence, “Moving the Home Equity Conversion Mortgages (HECM) program once again to its own special risk insurance fund.” Inclusion is referenced on page 40 in this sentence, “The President may additionally determine the inclusion of OVP staff in White House meetings, including Policy Coordinating Committee, Deputies Committee, and Principals Committee discussions as has been done in various recent Administrations.” In fact, on an independent count, we found inclusion mentioned 39 times in Project 2025, eight more times than ChatGPT 4o credited. Additionally, some of the terms appeared in references. As such, readers should understand this point regarding the Chat GPT 4o DEI term output. We also used the “Find” tool within Adobe Acrobat within the Project 2025 document to search for various DEI-related terms such as: equal opportunity, inclusion, discrimination, affirmative action, class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, national origin, religion, disability, sexual identity, LGBTQIA+, racial identity, and work and family.

We did not use Google Gemini in the preparation of the manuscript. Nonetheless, to compare how its AI system output compares to ChatGPT, we entered the same ChatGPT 4o prompts into Google Gemini 2.5 Pro. Gemini results indicate that diversity appears over 20 times, equity appears over 30 times, and inclusion appears over 15 times. Fourteen chapters explicitly reference DEI: 1) Foreword, 2) Section 2 Introduction: The Common Defense, 3)

Department of Defense, 4) Agency for International Development, 5) Department of Agriculture, 6) Department of Education, 7) Department of Energy and Related Commissions, 8) Department of Health and Human Services, 9) Environmental Protection Agency, 10) Federal Trade Commission, 11) Department of Housing and Urban Development, 12) Department of Labor and Related Agencies, 13) Department of Commerce, 14) Department of the Treasury. It did not give page numbers, but it did give short summaries of how DEI is referenced. (e.g., The document argues that DEI initiatives corrupt the mission of federal agencies). Like ChatGPT, Google Gemini provides useful information but has occasional inaccuracies. Our analysis and summary came from our reading of the relevant content within the Project 2025 document.