

# **Organizational and Personal Implications of Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts in the United States**

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# Today

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- Acknowledgements, Disclaimers & Definitions
- Context of DEI and Anti-DEI Policy and Action in the U.S.
- Overview of Studies
- Implications and Call to Action

# Acknowledgements

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- National Center for Institutional Diversity -> Philip J. Bowman for Scholarship to Practice @ The University of Michigan
- Dr. Eric Aguinaldo, Jada Crocker, Dr. Raul Gamez, Arissa Koines
- National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education
- Participants

# Disclaimers

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- The data come from late 2023 – mid 2024 before the Trump’s second election (state focus)
- Context, legal interpretation, actual law, institutional action, and political bullying changes daily
- The study is cross-sectional so what was “successful” at the time of interview may not be just a few days later
- This presentation is not a prescription of what institutions and DEI leaders “should do”
- There are real consequences to doing and studying DEI work
- This is a U.S. centric study, but U.S. exports far-right policies with no tariffs

# Definitions: “DEI Work”

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- Leadership/Organizational Change  
(e.g., strategic planning, advise leadership, critical communications)
- Programming  
(e.g., cultural events, climate surveys, award ceremonies)
- Faculty & Staff Engagement  
(e.g., curricular changes, pedagogical training, recruitment/retention)
- Student Support  
(e.g., outreach, advise student groups, student success, response to activism)

*(Grim et al., 2019)*

# What is a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO)?

(Diversity & Inclusion Managers)

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- Institutional leaders responsible for coordinating & leading:
  - Strategic Planning
  - Coalition-building
  - Accountability
- Position and titles vary across institutions  
(e.g., Associate Vice President of DEI, Executive Director of Equity, Dean of Inclusion)
- Backgrounds:
  - Staff/Administrator
  - Faculty
  - External

# Who are CDOs?

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CDOs navigate complex institutional structures & the sociopolitical contexts that impact higher education.

- Work is often intertwined with ancestral histories, personal experiences, and social identities
- 62.9% of CDOs were the first to hold a CDO position at their institution (Swartout, 2023)
- Only 40% of CDOs report directly to the President or Chancellor (Aguila & Bauer, 2017)
- Often operate with limited resources and authority (NADOHE, 2024)

# Higher Education Governance in the U.S.

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## Federal Government

- Student Financial Aid
- Research Funding
- Legal Investigations
- Accreditation Oversight

## State Government

- Authorizes Higher Education Institutions
- Direct Appropriations
- Appoints Board Members (typically)

## Governing Board & Executive Leaders

- Fiduciary Responsibility
- Set Institutional Priorities & Policies
- Operational Management





# Anti-DEI Context

## (Brief History)

# History of DEI work

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- 1964: Civil Rights Act that prohibits discrimination
- 1960s – 70s: Affirmative Action era to create equal opportunity through equitable intervention; Intellectual movements to create identity studies academic disciplines/fields
- 1980s-2000s: Pushback on affirmative action practices and a desire to see policies, practices, and experiences as race and identity-neutral
- 2000-2020: Diversity is “good for business”
- 2014-2021: Social movements: Organizational accountability (Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Rhodes Must Fall, Fees Must Fall)

# History of Anti-DEI State Policy Movements

- 2021–2023: Anti-Critical Race Theory, Anti-“divisive concepts” in curriculum
- November 2021: Glenn Youngkin wins the Virginia governorship
- 2022-2025: Anti-DEI state policy proposed, passed, and enacted
- May 2023: Florida and Texas pass laws banning higher education from DEI programming or resources expenditures
- June 2023: U.S. Supreme Court rules that all of higher education (except military academies) cannot use race a part of holistic admissions

## How Critical Race Theory is Dividing America

Oct 26, 2020 7:00 AM

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

## HOW A CONSERVATIVE ACTIVIST INVENTED THE CONFLICT OVER CRITICAL RACE THEORY

*To Christopher Rufo, a term for a school of legal scholarship looked like the perfect weapon.*

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

June 18, 2021

# About Face on DEI from Santa Ono

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July 2023

“At U-M, as all of you know, we are convinced that **racial diversity is one of the important components of a broadly diverse student body** and an intellectually and culturally rich campus community.”

“...recruitment of 30 new tenure-track faculty members to the Ann Arbor campus with a demonstrated **commitment to equity and inclusion.**”

May 2025

“But over time, I saw how **DEI became something else—more about ideology, division and bureaucracy**, not student success. That’s why, as president of the University of Michigan, I made the decision to eliminate centralized DEI offices and redirect resources toward academic support and **merit-based achievement.**”



# Research Questions

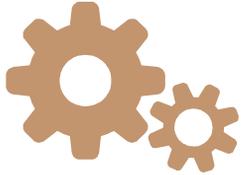
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1. How are higher education organizations navigating the current anti-DEI sociopolitical policies and actions?
2. What are the personal consequences of anti-DEI policies and actions on CDOs?

# Sources of Anti-DEI Pressures

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## Internal



Governing Board  
President  
Faculty  
Staff  
Students

## External



Policy makers  
(State executives &  
Legislations)  
Alumni  
Donors

November 2024: 86 bills introduced; 14 become law  
February 2026: 149 bills introduced; 29 became law  
(Chronicle of Higher Education DEI Legislation Tracker)

# Data Collection

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## Identification

Anti-DEI action states identified using the Chronicle of Higher Education's DEI Legislation Tracker & Ed Trust's Map of Anti-DEI Efforts. States grouped as: (1) **Passed Anti-DEI Legislation**, (2) **Anti-DEI Executive Action**, or (3) **Anti-DEI Proposed Legislation**



## Selection

List of potential participants gathered from publicly available information on four-year university websites & through association membership information



## Interviews

40 approximately one-hour long interviews conducted via Zoom

# Demographics & Confidentiality

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## States

|          |             |                |              |
|----------|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| Arkansas | Florida     | Idaho          | Indiana      |
| Iowa     | Mississippi | North Carolina | North Dakota |
| Ohio     | Oklahoma    | South Dakota   | Tennessee    |
| Texas    | Utah        | Wisconsin      | Virginia     |

**National Institutes of Health  
Certificate of Confidentiality**

# Methods

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Critical social constructionist epistemological stance (Kincheloe, 2005)

## **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory analysis is an analytical process that involves the social construction of meaning-making (Charmaz, 2014)

## **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their everyday life experiences within social context.  
(Smith et al., 2022)

# Data Analysis

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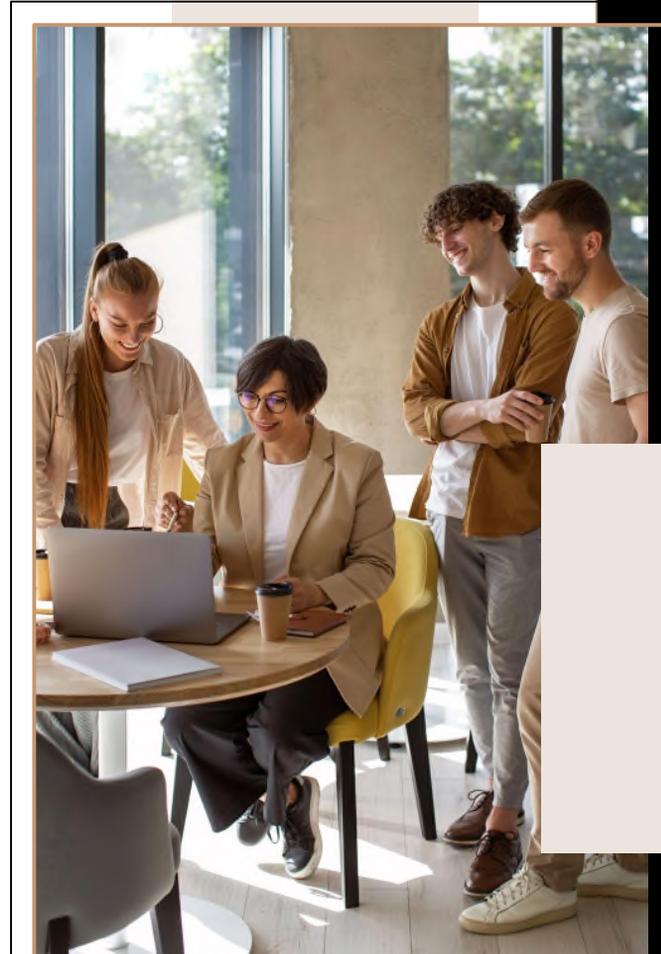
- Inductive / open coding introductory process
- Codebook creation
- Deductive analytical process
- Dialogic reconciliation
- Theme-building and conceptual mapping

# Results (1)

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## Organizational Responses

*Inaction, Proaction, & Reaction*



# Theoretical Framing

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## **Repressive Legalism**

(Garces et al., 2021)

Describes how institutional actors' interpretation and enactment of law and/or legal precedent is greatly shaped by sociopolitical influence shaped by external actors to repress specific organizational policies and actions

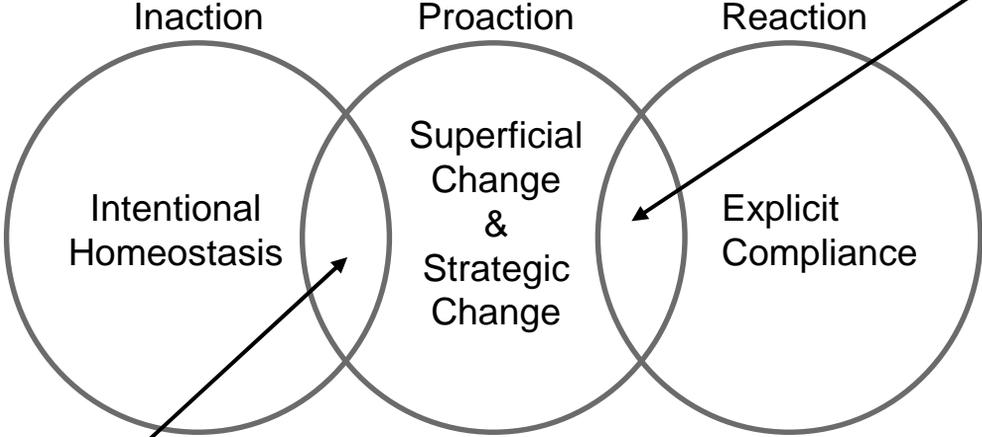
External Pressures

State Policy Makers  
Alumni & Donors

Strategic  
Communication

External Pressure  
Engagement

(Coalition Building)



Internal Pressures

Governing Board  
President & Executive Team

Comparison to  
in-state & similar  
state contexts

# Inaction

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CDOs engaged in **Inaction:** intentional action of organizational homeostasis and not proactively complying.

**“I’m not considering shifting until I have to... I’ve been doing this long enough to not be shaken by things I shouldn’t be shaken by.”**

# Proaction

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CDOs engaged in **Proaction:** engaged in tactics to ward off impending anti-DEI action through both superficial and strategic change

- Renaming & reorganizing DEI offices
- Limiting DEI programming

**“We tried to remove things that might serve as hot buttons, that would draw their attention, and mainly went through some of our mission statements & removed a few words.”**

# Reaction

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**Reaction** actions were in response to legislative action and anti-DEI policies:

- Organizational change
- Removal of DEI programmatic efforts (e.g., training, grants, student services)
- Personnel changes

**“...there is no strategic plan for DEI. So, all of those that existed before have now been taken down from websites. This is not something we can legally do anymore. Also, when it comes to hiring, we cannot legally do any diversity, equity, inclusion trainings anymore.”**

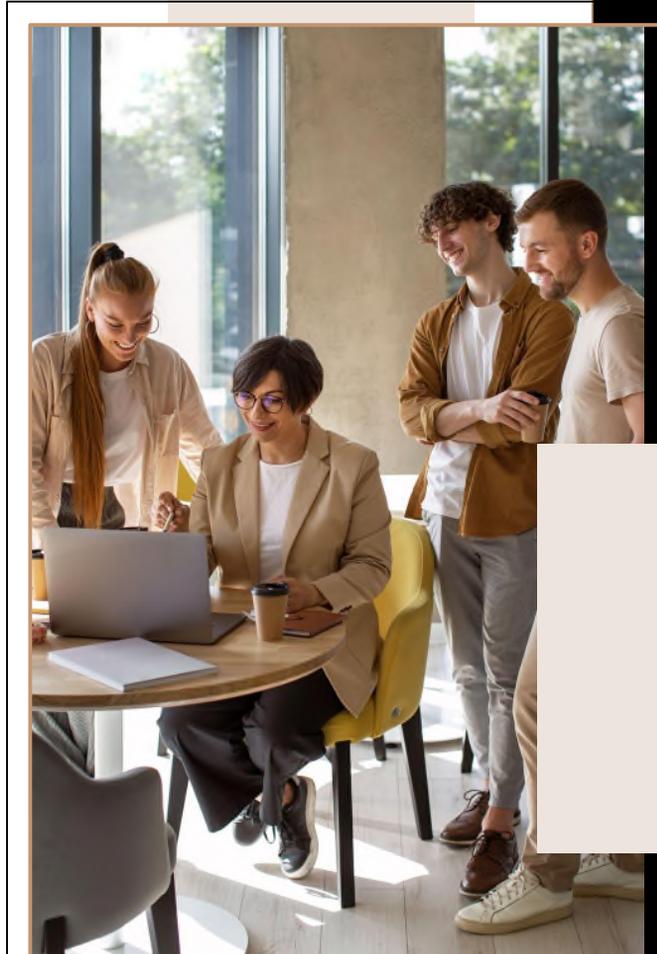
**“...when it comes to the university officially sponsoring these groups, you cannot do any type of convening or organization that directly targets the needs of one group.”**

# Results (2)

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## Personal Consequences

*Mental and Physical Health Outcomes of  
Anti-DEI Policy*



# Analytical Framing

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## Precarious Work

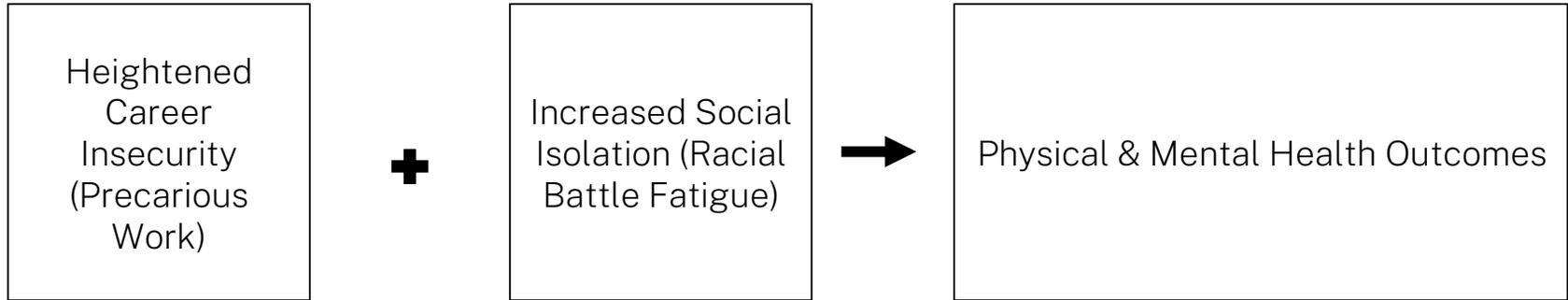
Precarious work describes how employment contexts, shaped by a myriad of social, economic, and political factors, contribute to the creation of **working conditions that are unstable and detrimental to workers** and used as a form of labor exploitation **and compliance** (Allan et al., 2021).

## Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue examines how **systemic racism, institutional barriers**, and daily microaggressions contribute to the **mental, emotional, and physical toll** experienced by people of color (Smith 2004).

# Results

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# Heightened Career Uncertainty

(Precarious Work)

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“There of course were days over the past couple of years where I thought **‘Oh I’m not going to have a job next week’**”

“I don’t know if this position or this work or this industry is one in which **the costs are becoming too great for me** to continue down the same path – and **maybe a different path is needed.**”

# Increased Social Isolation

(Racial Battle Fatigue)

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“It’s been not very fun to come to work because **I’m kryptonite**. Nobody wants to collaborate with me and it’s almost like ***if we’re seen talking to you on the sidewalk, something might happen.***”

# Mental and Physical Health Outcomes

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“Coming into this role, it was just ... I had **panic attacks and anxiety that I never experienced before.**”

“Two years ago, I was diagnosed with [potentially terminal illness]. **I wholeheartedly believe it was the result of this work and the stress of not taking care of yourself.**”



# Implications

# Implications for Future Research

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- Continue to document the evolving nature of the anti-DEI policy and action:
  - Student Access (Widening Participation) and Success
  - Student Employability
  - Academic Freedom and & Inhibited Speech
  - University as a Work Environment (Recruitment/Retention, Climate, etc.)
- Continue to connect macro policies, meso organizational contexts, to micro relationships
- Longitudinal and case study research captures causal impact
- Better understand motives and thoughts of anti-DEI actors that are naive or ignorant of DEI

# Implications for Resisters

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- Do not allow chilling effects and ideological legal interpretation guide heuristics and action
- Create truthful narratives that communicates the importance of equity work
- Continue advocating with data and reason, even if futile
- Engage CDOs and other equity-oriented staff and offer support
- Be in community and build coalitions with multiple stakeholders, especially with students, policymakers, and external actors
- Continue to capture the moment through storytelling, social media, media, and *research*
- Please do not think “this couldn’t happen here” because it likely has started

# Coming to a country near you...

(especially with a far right media presence)

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“...I think we started to **ignore it a little bit**; those dog whistles. Certainly, a lot of people termed it as the **lunatic fringe**: They're never going to be mainstream, so we're going to be okay.

And very quickly, those voices became more mainstream: those viewpoints and opinions. And then we were just off to the races. And so really, this is a continuation of what happened before.”

**Questions/comments/collaborations:**

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