

# Holding the line: the existential threat to DEI language and values

Equality, Diversity  
and Inclusion: An  
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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article critically analyses and critiques the operationalisation of the Trump administration's anti-DEI policies on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the United States of America and beyond. It specifically examines the attempt to silence DEI scholarship and practice, assessing the broader implications for social justice and global progress towards equity. The article also positions these attacks as an existential threat to DEI scholarship, scholars and practitioners, with the potential to reverse progress made since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The article serves as a call to action, urging the continued and even increased use of DEI language and the rigorous promulgation of its underlying values.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This viewpoint article offers a range of perspectives on the impact of the anti-DEI agenda of the Trump administration from DEI scholars who participated as panellists at a Divisions and Interest Groups Highlight session titled “Navigating the DEI Research Landscape: Critical Insights and Future Directions” at the 2025 Academy of Management Conference – Copenhagen. This critical approach draws from multiple sources to enrich and provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of the Trump administration's ongoing implementation of its anti-DEI policies.

**Findings** – The Trump administration's ongoing operationalisation of its anti-DEI agenda is having a strong and wide-ranging effect on DEI efforts worldwide. It is fostering a climate of fear, actively contributing to the widening of existing inequalities, causing the silencing of DEI scholarship and the migration of DEI scholars and practitioners to more enlightened countries outside of the United States. The practices of the Trump administration are having a wide-ranging effect, emboldening anti-DEI groups in many countries outside of the United States of America as well. This paper highlights the deliberate attack on DEI as an existential threat to the progress of humanity that undermines the principles embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also emphasises the undermining of the successes achieved by the American Civil Rights Movement, feminist movements across the globe and movements everywhere dedicated to furthering equity for diverse and underrepresented people.

**Research limitations/implications** – The article draws from primary and secondary sources (news articles, policy documents, existing research and discussions held with DEI scholars at a for-purpose Divisions and Interest Groups Highlight session titled “Navigating the DEI Research Landscape: Critical Insights and Future Directions” at the 2025 Academy of Management Conference – Copenhagen). The authors' scholarship on DEI and the Trump administration's operationalisation of anti-DEI policies might influence their perspectives and conclusions. While the paper critiques the enactment of the Trump administration's anti-DEI agenda, it may benefit from engagement with counterarguments or alternative perspectives to offer a more balanced perspective.

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**Practical implications** – The authors each offer a call to action for researchers and global citizens alike to resist attempts to silence the language of DEI and its underpinning values. This pragmatic approach moves beyond simple criticism and offers concrete steps for future action towards giving voice to the cause of DEI and opposition to the forces currently attacking its values. They suggest that the current anti-DEI practices of the Trump administration represent an existential threat to the DEI field that must be resisted to ensure long-term progress towards equity and inclusion and the betterment of humanity.

**Social implications** – The Trump administration's anti-DEI policies and practices have global implications, influencing attitudes and responses in the United States as well as in other countries. The Trump administration's operationalisation of anti-DEI policy continues to impact international conversations around fairness and equity.

**Originality/value** – The article provides a global call to resist attempts by the Trump administration to silence DEI language and values. This account will be a crucial resource for future researchers studying this period and its impact. This critical analysis also provides valuable insights for both scholars and activists working to advance DEI.

**Keywords** Anti-DEI agenda, Trump 2.0, DEI, Language, Values, Academic freedom, Government policy

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

On the 20th of January 2025, the first day of the Trump presidency, a long-promised war was unleashed on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and all that it stands for. This initially took the form of three executive orders: Executive Order 14,151: “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing”, Executive Order 14,173: “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity”, and Executive Order 14,168 “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” (See [Ng et al., 2025](#)).

Trump's executive orders build upon earlier US state governments' banning of DEI initiatives ([Diaz, 2023](#); [McGowan et al., 2025](#)). These state bans have been accompanied by government critiques of DEI, which broadly hold that DEI unfairly discriminates against the majority by privileging the minority, or a view of a minority, in such a way as to overcome considerations of merit ([McGowan et al., 2025](#); [Watson, 2023](#)). Given that many DEI initiatives openly question the traditional framing of merit, they often face pushback by those who have benefited, or are more likely to benefit, from how merit is currently defined ([Ray and Melaku, 2023](#)). [Nittrouer et al. \(2025\)](#) note that pushback can also be magnified due to misconceptions or an overly simplistic view of what DEI initiatives are intended to achieve. Often, challenges to merit will be most vehemently opposed by those who are in power and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo that brought them into that power ([Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990](#)). This is not to say that DEI initiatives are perfect, and certainly DEI still has a long way to go before achieving its aims. Like any discipline in the management field, there are many examples of where theories can be improved, and initiatives could be better implemented ([Nittrouer et al., 2025](#); [Ray and Melaku, 2023](#)). Nonetheless, there is a strong consensus across the literature that the organisational and broader societal benefits of DEI far outweigh its costs and, as [Nittrouer et al. \(2025, p. 188\)](#) caution, we must not “allow perfection to stand in the way of what is good”.

In the year since the issue of these executive orders, the Trump administration has acted quickly to replace those not openly willing to support its anti-DEI philosophy. The mobilisation of the apparatus of government to operationalise its anti-DEI agenda has likewise been rapid ([Blaine, 2025](#)). This strategy is part of a broader anti-intellectual project assailing the very fabric of enlightenment by attacking museums, such as the Smithsonian, that speak truth to power ([Bidgood and Pogrebin, 2025](#)). The Trump administration moved quickly to systematically dismantle the US Department of Education ([Liptak and Surfaty, 2025](#)). It has also coerced universities to capitulate on their values through lawsuits and the withholding of funding ([Kuper, 2025](#)). The list of “unprecedented” actions aimed at destroying academic freedom and the intellectual project of furthering humanity is shamefully long and will no doubt lengthen in the coming months and years.

Such was the backdrop to the 2025 Academy of Management (AoM) Conference held in Copenhagen in August 2025. A Divisions and Interest Groups Highlight session titled “Navigating the DEI Research Landscape: Critical Insights and Future Directions”, provided a

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for-purpose occasion for teachers, scholars, researchers and journal editors to voice their concerns about the attack on DEI.

*Background: impact of the trump administration's continued attacks on DEI*

The Divisions and Interest Groups Highlight session at AoM was standing room only, with delegates from across the world articulating a heightened level of fear and concern for the future of DEI. This reflects concerns in recent academic and practitioner literature that the Trump administration's stance on DEI is impacting industries and nations far beyond the shores of the United States (Klein, 2025; Starr, 2024). Of particular concern were delegate reports of attempts at erasing and silencing DEI, ranging from threats of physical violence and intimidation to institutional and governmental sanction and defunding. It would be an understatement to say that the delegates felt the DEI field is facing an existential crisis. This is a crisis that must be addressed urgently if the benefits of DEI scholarship, organisational practice and the hard-won gains of inclusion are not to be lost, perhaps for generations to come.

Trump's initial executive orders and his administration's ongoing war on DEI have created an environment of fear, anxiety and disruption not seen in academia since the McCarthy era, challenging the very foundations of academic freedom (Hutcheson, 2018; Petersen, 2025). The Trump administration's willingness to use all means, including the overt, almost casual, use of military force to put down legitimate protest or for "political theatre" in the Nation's capital has many asking what will come next (Garrison *et al.*, 2025). More particularly, what is the price of opposing the Trump administration? DEI scholars have legitimate fears about limitations being imposed upon academic freedoms and the deliberate attempts at silencing the language and values of DEI through funding cuts and changes to policy. Likewise, DEI scholars are concerned by the complicity of some universities and, potentially, academic journals editors and reviewers with the Trump administration's agenda, at least within the United States (Kuper, 2025).

However, the impact of the Trump administration's anti-DEI agenda is not limited to the United States. It is being felt in every corner of the globe, not only through direct attacks on DEI initiatives but also through the indirect effects of defunding international aid programs. For example, programs that support women's ability to enter, remain or progress in the workforce in some of the most gender unequal countries in the world (El Rhomri *et al.*, 2025). United States government departments and agencies are defunding academic research partnerships with links to DEI across universities outside of the United States, jeopardising, for example, international efforts to prevent pandemics and halt transmissible diseases (Duffy, 2025). Its policies are causing US subsidiaries and suppliers to US companies outside the United States to scale back DEI programs and initiatives (Murray and Bohannon, 2025). They are also emboldening those opposed to DEI everywhere to attack its principles (Kelsal, 2025).

Clearly, the Trump administration's anti-intellectualism and attempts to censor thought represent not just a crisis for the citizens of the United States but one that impacts, either directly or indirectly, every person on the planet.

In this viewpoint article, panellists and sponsors of the Divisions and Interest Groups Highlight session offer their collective perspectives about what is at stake and what can be done to hold the line against the silencing of DEI language and its values. The collection of short essays answers the question: What should the collective response of DEI scholars be?

The first essay by Fitzsimmons links the Trump administration's strategy of banning DEI words and defunding DEI research to the language oppression used by colonial and fascist powers in the past, to subvert the ideas and cultures of indigenous and conquered peoples. He asserts that only through the open, robust and continued use of existing DEI nomenclature can the associated meanings and purpose of DEI be preserved. This language must be maintained to continue to serve the countless millions who have been raised up by its scientific contributions. In the second essay, Martinez contends that where once DEI research and findings were held in high regard due to their empirical rigour, they have come to be vilified

and made suspect through politically driven censorship and right-wing ideological narratives. Martinez also argues that this censorship is designed to undermine academic freedom, narrowing the scientific endeavour. He notes that this mirrors historical attempts by authoritarian governments to entrench dogma at the expense of scientific enterprise and to compel organisations to ignore the clear benefits of DEI policies. The third essay by Bishop maintains that recent attempts to erase the language of DEI are focused on dismantling the progress made by diverse groups over the past seventy-five years. Using the example of the barriers faced by Black women, she unpacks the loaded concept of merit and the need for structural change, both of which necessitate a shared understanding of DEI nomenclature. Bishop makes the critical point that to yield on terminology is to yield the struggle for equity itself. In the fourth essay, Rice explores social conservatism, its attachment to the Republican Party and the resurgence of white supremacist and patriarchal philosophies. He argues that the backlash towards DEI is driven by a political ideology that has consistently been hostile towards inclusion and equity. He further argues that this group is emboldened now more than it has been in decades and is inspiring those with similar unpalatable views globally. Rice urges readers to understand that in this moment of crisis, moral courage is required to resist these politically motivated anti-DEI narratives. Finally, Villesèche questions who is being served by attempts aimed at softening DEI language or changing words in order to fly under the radar of DEI backlash. She argues that soothing discomfort should never come at the expense of justice and that the dangers of silence and erasure are not abstract but directly impact the lives of the most vulnerable and powerless in society. Villesèche holds that it is the job of DEI researchers to uphold the test of scholarly rigor while exposing blind spots in dominant epistemologies.

### **Holding the line: the war for DEI language and its values**

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*Academy of Management DEI Division Member.* The Trump administration's war on DEI resurrects the tried and tested tools of colonialism and fascism. It attempts to silence both the language and ideals of DEI while engaging in the deliberate reinforcement of barriers between the privileged and the disadvantaged (Conyers and Wright Fields, 2025). This is happening both inside the United States and wherever its funding or corporate/government agencies or subsidiaries reach (El Rhomri et al., 2025; Macheel, 2025; Roche, 2019). One of the subjugating weapons of colonialism is language oppression (see also Connelly, 2025, for 250+ words banned by US departments). Scholars of colonialism have defined language oppression as the "enforcement of language loss by physical, mental, social and spiritual coercion" to silence traditional culture and its transmission (Roche, 2019, p. 487). As many of our US academic colleagues now understand, the Trump administration's bureaucratic apparatus is operating to exclude funding to DEI research or researchers and to silence DEI language (Shivers and Zagger, 2025). Through the Trump administration's actions, the very future of DEI has been put at stake; its values, its principles and the very idea of justice, equity and inclusion. If DEI scholars and practitioners do not unite and actively fight against this tyranny, all of the hard work and progress of generations stand to be lost.

Language and words are foundational social tools that enable people to exchange complex and often nuanced ideas clearly and precisely. Ideas such as "gender", "bias", "justice", "equity" and "discrimination" rely on shared language and meaning for their expression. Words enable robust explanations and facilitate dialogue around these complex ideas (Reisch and Jani, 2025). It would be virtually impossible to articulate these ideas fully without a shared language (Korneeva et al., 2019). Hence, a common understanding derived from a shared language allows both interdisciplinary research and the reciprocal transfer of knowledge between academia, industry and government (Bracken and Oughton, 2006).

A shared understanding of the purpose and meaning of DEI, its language, its measures and evidence of its impact is all fundamental to its adoption and promulgation. These are understood through nomenclature that has been developed and widely adopted over the past

century by DEI scholars, practitioners and government agencies. While the DEI literature contains some definitional variances, the generally accepted purpose of DEI is to improve the life experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantage in society (Lesley, 2019). There is a particular emphasis on historically underrepresented groups relative to population demography or groups which are discriminated against. DEI programs serve to address inequities and systemic biases within society. The objective of DEI is to see a world where all people have an equal opportunity to succeed and thrive (Rossi *et al.*, 2022). However, the ability to comprehend the meaning of this definition requires a shared understanding of the words “disadvantage”, “underrepresented”, “discriminated”, “inequities”, “equal opportunity” and “bias”. Take away these words, and by extension, what they mean, and my ability to convey understanding to you is lost.

An operative example of language oppression replicated by other US government departments comes from the United States Department of Health and Human Services in relation to NIH Institutes/Centers regarding awards to potential grant recipients (Connelly, 2025; Shivers and Zagger, 2025). This is stated as follows:

Prior to issuing all awards, NIH Institutes/Centers are reviewing the specific aims/major goals of the project to assess whether the proposed project contains any research activities that are not consistent with current Executive Orders and NIH/HHS priorities. Examples of such language are delineated below:

- (1) Diverse, diversity
- (2) Gender identity, gender-affirming, transgender, nonbinary
- (3) Inclusion (except when used in reference to human subject’s requirements)
- (4) Equity, inequity, inequities
- (5) Bias (e.g. racial bias), interpersonal bias, implicit bias, explicit bias
- (6) Discrimination (including measures of perceived discrimination)
- (7) Racism
- (8) Structural racism
- (9) Minoritized, social disadvantage
- (10) Social justice
- (11) Climate change, environmental justice
- (12) Immigration status, undocumented

We should at least be thankful for the Trump administration’s detailing of the words and ideals it wishes to oppress. This defines the battleground of our time and, for enlightened people everywhere, defines the language we must continue to use. It represents the ideals we must fight for. To use substitute concepts or words, or to introduce new terms at this critical point in time, is tantamount to retreat and surrender. Now is not the time to “reimagine” or “redefine” DEI (McGowan *et al.*, 2025). It is never the time to succumb to brute, unjustified, ignorant force. This is because, at best, it encourages conservative activists to push their demands even further and, at worst, invites the repeat of atrocities already seen in many totalitarian administrations (Ray and Melaku, 2023).

A further tactic of the Trump administration is the Department of Justice seeking the names and other personal details of clinicians and patients giving or receiving gender affirming care, even in states where it is legal (Kalish, 2025). Likewise demanding from universities, the names of academics who sit on boards/committees who oversee the award of grants or scholarships to historically marginalised groups (PBS, 2025). Such demands are framed as acts to check on the adherence of individuals to the law. However, in reality,

this is deliberate intimidation, designed to instil fear among DEI scholars and advocates and to send a message to others not to resist the Trump administration's agenda. As Alex Sheldon, executive director of GLMA (as cited in [Kalish, 2025](#)), notes "This is definitely not an element of law enforcement. It's a targeted political retaliation". These acts can be characterised as fascist tactics, clearly reminiscent of the early years of Nazi rule in Germany and make no mistake, they are unambiguously aimed at you, the reader, and anyone who believes in social justice.

For the citizens of the United States, there is the very real question of the cost of opposing the Trump administration ([Association of American Universities, 2025](#); [Dhanani et al., 2024](#)). Like the choices faced by the intellectuals of Germany in the 1930s, many are choosing to leave the United States or to remain silent ([Witze, 2025](#)). Only a few institutions with exemplary courage, such as Fordham University and Georgetown Law, are choosing not to comply and publicly resisting ([Naison, 2025](#)). However, for those of us outside of the United States, we cannot succumb to silence or modify the language of DEI to appease the Trump administration without actively contributing to the deconstruction of our field and its core values. More importantly, to do so would erase the hard-won achievements that have served the countless millions who have been lifted by our work to date.

We must fight the Trump administration's narrative that the work of DEI is some kind of academic absurdity or a leftist plot. We must remember that DEI is securely founded upon the articles contained within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([United Nations, 1948](#)). Tragically, even that foundational document is now under attack by the Trump administration ([Bateman, 2025](#)). We cannot forget that the Declaration was adopted by the founders of the United Nations in response to the atrocities committed by the last powerful fascist administration, Nazi Germany and its Allies. This foundation has continued to be built upon by the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950 and 60s, the women's rights movements of the 1970s and through to the present day, in the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements ([McGowan et al., 2025](#); [Nittrouer et al., 2025](#)). This is our legacy, and it is our duty to protect it for future generations.

We must use every occasion, every platform, every means at our disposal to loudly and proudly use and encourage the use of the language of DEI, our language. We must venture forth from the ivory towers of academia to engage more broadly, to help people see themselves and those they love within the DEI story, making issues more tangible and relevant to them, and reaching out to "... the better angels of our nature." ([Lincoln, 1861](#)). We must also always arm ourselves with more knowledge and better tools to oppose pushback whenever and wherever we see it ([Champions of Change, 2018](#); [Ray and Melaku, 2023](#)).

As [Wiesel \(1986\)](#) in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech noted:

I swore to never be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim; silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

I make no apology for using the language of conflict and the need to fight back. We are in an existential struggle between entrenched privilege and resurgent hatreds of the past and the noble future envisioned by those peoples and nations who signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. We are their successors in the ongoing struggle for equity for diverse and underrepresented groups everywhere ([Nittrouer et al., 2025](#)). As DEI scholars and practitioners, we must continue to use our disciplines' language to unite in one voice, our voice. We must hold the line on DEI, its values, its beliefs and above all its promise of an equitable world. The price of failure is far more than just the silencing of an academic field or the loss of academic freedom, but the ongoing oppression of countless millions across the globe and of generations to come.

Finally, for those whom I have failed to convince that we are not in a struggle for the very existence of our field by forces that seek to destroy our way of life, I will conclude by citing

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Vice President [Vance \(2021\)](#) from his speech at the National Conservatism Conference in Orlando, Florida, titled “The Universities are the Enemy”:

I think if any of us want to do the things that we want to do for our country and for the people who live in it, we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country.

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### **The attack on diversity, equity and inclusion ideology is a harbinger of authoritarianism**

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*Academy of Management DEI Division Member.* Terms like “diversity”, “equity”, “inclusion”, “equal opportunity” and “social justice” once signalled rigorous, socially responsible science. They were routinely highlighted in research funding proposals as markers of high-quality work and prioritised by funding agencies ([Exec. Order No. 14091, 2023](#)). Today, those same terms are increasingly vilified in the United States ([Chin, 2025](#); [House, 2025](#)). Likewise, terms like “bias”, “discrimination”, “racism” and “sexism” have long been essential for naming systematic and unfair exclusion of certain types of people based on their identities, experiences and characteristics. In several federal, state and local agencies and organisations, these words are now formally restricted or banned ([Connelly, 2025](#)).

In this viewpoint contribution, I argue that current political attacks on “DEI ideology” are not merely semantic disagreements, but a form of politically-driven censorship that (1) undermines academic freedom and distorts the scientific record, (2) echoes historical moves towards authoritarian and fascist control of universities and (3) runs counter to contemporary research and business practices that demonstrates the value of DEI. Our field must maintain clear, consistent and rigorously evidence-based narratives related to DEI, particularly as the underlying rhetoric that targets DEI has begun spreading to a transnational “anti-woke” backlash ([Samaras, 2025](#)) [1].

First, the attack on DEI terminology is fundamentally an issue of academic freedom and freedom of speech, which in the United States is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Currently, federal research funding agencies (the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health) have paused reviewing and funding expenditures on grants that include terminology that has been deemed unacceptable by the current presidential administration, causing widespread chaos among academic institutions that are reliant upon such funding ([House, 2025](#)). As one example, the NSF’s ADVANCE program, which is dedicated to addressing the widespread underrepresentation of women and racial minorities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, has been completely deactivated through Executive Order with no indication that it will be reactivated ([Rosser, 2025](#)). Incidentally, proposals submitted to the ADVANCE program were required to address how the proposed research addressed the intersectional nature of multiple marginalised identities as part of the scoring criteria ([ADVANCE, 2020](#)). These actions are not neutral administrative decisions; they illustrate how political actors can weaponize language restrictions to control which questions are asked, which identities are named, and which findings are seen as legitimate.

Indeed, overwhelming scientific evidence suggests that women and racial minorities experience systemic disadvantages in their educational experiences (e.g. less positive reinforcement and more scrutiny; see [Farkas, 2003](#); [Lv, 2021](#)), starting as early as grade school (for a review, see [Bachman et al., 2009](#)). However, the systematic elimination of programs that support research that includes DEI terminology signals that these experiences are not based in reality. Even further, the current narratives related to “DEI hires” suggest that women and racial minority employees are inherently less qualified than their white, male counterparts and have achieved career success only by benefiting from “unfair” policies that favour women and racial minorities based simply on their identities ([ICLG News, 2025](#)). Current US law already protects against unfair gender and racial discrimination in work contexts, including against

those who are men and/or white. “Affirmative action” has long been misinterpreted as a mechanism for providing opportunities to less qualified women and racial minorities. However, in fact, affirmative action as related to ensuring representative applicant pools and strict legal mandates have only been used on rare occasions to correct blatant exclusionary practices within some organisations (Nitttrouer *et al.*, 2025). Together, these developments exemplify the concern that attacks on “DEI ideology” function as a form of political censorship that constrains academic freedom and narrows the scientific record.

Second, contemporary attacks on DEI-related language and initiatives mirror a familiar authoritarian playbook. Several federal and state legislative actions have banned the use of diversity statements in hiring and shuttered campus offices dedicated to racial or gender inclusion. They have instituted mechanisms for students to report professors who teach about racism, sexism or related topics in their classrooms, restricted campus protests, undermined faculty self-governance structures (i.e. faculty senates), and instituted government appointed “ombuds” to monitor compliance on campus (see Texas’ SB 17, 2023; Texas’ SB 37, 2025; Florida’s SB 266/HB 999; Kentucky’s HB 4 for a few examples).

Unfortunately, this censoring of what scientists and researchers can say or do is not new. The tenure system was instituted in response to similar draconian practices during the Cold War period, when professors were targeted as potential “communist threats” (Hutcheson, 2018). As such, tenure has been designed to protect faculty’s intellectual freedom to investigate scientific issues that could be disparaged based on political narratives. Currently, several US states are in the process of introducing legislation that would undermine the current tenure system and include mechanisms for removing tenured faculty based on DEI-related teaching or research activities (Quinn, 2024). These measures reveal a broader goal: to redefine which kinds of scholarship and speech are considered acceptable and to punish faculty whose work challenges dominant political narratives about race, gender and power.

Historical precedents make the stakes even clearer. Whereas German universities were once the height of intellectual curiosity, the Nazi administration instituted policies in which universities were restructured to serve state-based ideologies, and academic governance was subordinated to Nazi officials. Professors and students were encouraged to denounce faculty who espoused beliefs considered to be “anti-German”, terminology and ideas related to liberalism or Jewish intellectualism were banned, and such topics were purported to “corrupt” German youth and national unity and morality (Giles, 1978). These parallels do not necessarily mean that contemporary US politics are identical to 1930s Germany, but they do underscore the notion that efforts to vilify and ban DEI-related language echo the logic and tactics of authoritarianism and fascist control of universities. Similar “anti-woke” and “anti-DEI” narratives are increasingly visible in other democracies (Samaras, 2025). Conservative actors across Europe and the United Kingdom have adopted US-style rhetoric to attack anti-racism, gender equality and LGBTQ + rights, often framing them as “woke ideology” that threatens freedom of speech or national culture. In some cases, the US government has gone further by pressuring international partners and contractors to roll back DEI efforts, exporting domestic ideological battles into transnational policy and business arenas (Bateman, 2025).

Finally, and in sharp contrast to these politicised attacks on “DEI ideology,” contemporary organisational practices and market responses highlight the value, rather than the danger, of DEI. The most obvious example of this is Target’s rollback of DEI initiatives, which resulted in widespread boycotts, a 21% reduction in net income, a \$12.4 billion loss in market value, a class-action lawsuit among investors alleging misrepresentation of the risks of such actions, and the ousting of Target’s CEO (Melville, 2025). As relevant counterpoints, Costco, Apple and Levi’s have strengthened their DEI initiatives, with positive financial and stock market returns (Meyersohn, 2025). From a global perspective, multinational organisations are already being asked to reconcile US federal anti-DEI conditions with their own commitments to equality and inclusion (Bateman, 2025). These organisational decisions are not occurring in a vacuum; they are consistent with a large body of research demonstrating that diverse and inclusive organisations tend to outperform their less inclusive counterparts on a range of

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financial performance outcomes including return on assets, company market assets, corporate social performance, innovation and market performance (for a review, see [Rafaqat et al., 2022](#)). Together, this evidence suggests that DEI reflects empirically supported practices that benefit organisations, employees and broader society.

### **Holding the line: language, power and the black ceiling in executive leadership**

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*Academy of Management DEI Division Member and DEI PDW Chair 2025.* Efforts to erase the language of DEI are not simply rhetorical gestures; they are deliberate political strategies aimed at dismantling decades of progress towards equity. The ongoing backlash, most visibly manifested through attempts to ban DEI language in higher education, corporations, and public institutions, represents a coordinated effort to silence marginalised voices and delegitimise the frameworks that give name to systemic injustice ([Ng et al., 2025](#); [Rice et al., 2025](#)). This is particularly the case for Black women in leadership, where such silencing represents an existential threat. Language is not cosmetic; it is the architecture through which institutions conceptualise fairness, belonging and accountability. To concede that language is to concede the legitimacy of those who depend on it to name oppression. As [Knox \(2022\)](#) notes, DEI language operates as a connective bridge between dominant and subdominant cultures, providing the lexicon through which inequity can be identified, interpreted and addressed.

The suppression of DEI discourse coincides with the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in senior leadership. The benefit of the doubt (BoD) gap where white male leaders are presumed competent while Black women must continuously prove their worth remains a structural barrier to advancement ([Bishop, 2024](#)). This credibility deficit reinforces both the emotional and career costs of exclusion. Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign illustrates this inequity with striking clarity. Despite unmatched credentials, Harris was denied the BoD and subjected to disproportionate scrutiny, while her white male opponent, facing multiple criminal indictments was presumed viable. This asymmetry exemplifies how racialised gender bias and the language used to present this, distorts evaluations of leadership and competence ([Abrica and Oliver, 2024](#)). As [Folberg et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate, even "race-neutral" critiques of DEI or leadership capability often function as coded expressions of racial resistance, legitimising inequity under the guise of neutrality.

Black women have adapted by cultivating alternative networks or employee resource groups (ERGs), culturally grounded organisations, and political coalitions such as \*Win With Black Women\*. These networks provide affirmation and solidarity but rarely carry the institutional authority of traditional, white-male-dominated circles ([Bishop, 2024](#); [Bourdieu, 1986](#)). Social capital theory underscores that advancement depends not only on merit, and how merit is framed and described, but also on access to networks that confer opportunity to acquire merit ([Granovetter, 1973](#)). Yet systemic racism constrains these networks, forcing Black women to rely on alternative ecosystems that sustain them emotionally but lack structural power. Despite these challenges, a long tradition of DEI research and scholarship has been able to identify, classify and name these barriers alongside potential solutions to their resolution ([Nittrouer et al., 2025](#)).

Resilience among Black women leaders is often celebrated as proof of perseverance, but as [Merriam \(2024\)](#) argues, resilience alone cannot dismantle structural inequities. Overemphasising individual strength risks obscuring institutional responsibility. The "strong Black woman" narrative can simultaneously empower and exploit, casting resilience as both virtue and burden. True reform requires shifting the evaluative lens from individual resilience to systemic fairness, ensuring that organisations address the structures that demand resilience in the first place.

One pathway to structural change lies in re-evaluating performance metrics. Traditional systems claim neutrality but often reproduce bias by equating objectivity with whiteness. By contrast, BoD-informed methodologies developed by [Cherchye et al. \(2007\)](#) and extended by [Rogge \(2018\)](#) offer context-sensitive frameworks and language that acknowledge systemic barriers rather than obscure them. When applied to leadership evaluation, BoD approaches allow for fairer assessments that account for inequitable contexts. As [Abrica and Oliver \(2024\)](#) emphasise, performance evaluation systems are not value-neutral; they reflect the politics of recognition and belonging within organisations, relying upon DEI nomenclature to express the systemic barriers that need to be addressed.

The anti-DEI movement's efforts to sanitise language jeopardise the identification/description of these evaluative inequities. Substituting new terms such as "belonging" or "inclusive excellence" for equity may appear strategic, but such euphemisms dilute accountability and obscure power ([Knox, 2022](#); [Ng et al., 2025](#)). As [Abrica and Oliver \(2024\)](#) argue, the racial politics of DEI work hinge on controlling language because language determines what can be contested. Extending this logic, [Preston \(2025\)](#) demonstrates how moral framing functions as a double-edged sword, motivating some majority-group leaders to endorse DEI initiatives while simultaneously furnishing moral justification for resistance when inclusion threatens entrenched hierarchies. This moral rationalisation helps explain how "values-based" objections to DEI can disguise efforts to preserve institutional power, reinforcing the ideological sanitisation of equity discourse. Eliminating DEI terminology does not depoliticise inclusion; it re-centres dominant comfort at the expense of marginalised truth.

As [Rice et al. \(2025\)](#) caution, anti-DEI legislation represents a continuation of systemic anti-Black racism that they term "Jim Crow 2.0". The ideological export of anti-DEI rhetoric across institutions and international contexts threatens global progress towards equity. When organisations anywhere adopt sanitised or coded language to describe inclusion, they risk legitimising regressive policies under the guise of neutrality. Language, then, is not just a symbolic battleground but a material one, determining whose identities are affirmed, whose pain is named, and whose futures remain imaginable.

To hold the line on DEI is to safeguard more than vocabulary; it is to defend the legitimacy of marginalised voices, expose systemic barriers and preserve the possibility of equitable futures. Scholars must continue to speak plainly about racism, sexism, privilege and power despite political resistance. Organisations must pair that candour with action, embedding BoD-informed evaluations and expanding access to social capital networks ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Granovetter, 1973](#); [Rogge, 2018](#)). Changing the words will not change the structures.

To yield on terminology is to yield the struggle itself. For Black women in leadership, such concessions are untenable, and for DEI scholarship, they are indefensible. The mandate is clear: hold the line boldly, rigorously and without apology.

### Retreating from diversity, equity and inclusion is a win for white supremacy

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*Academy of Management DEI Division Member and DEI Program Chair 2025.* In the United States, politicians and their supporters, particularly, are increasingly subscribing to the political ideology of social conservatism. In 2023, polling data indicated that 38% of Americans (the highest in a decade) identified as either very conservative or conservative on social issues ([Jones, 2023](#)). Social conservatism refers to a socio-cultural value system that demands strict adherence to traditional norms, emphasises social exclusivity and includes values such as authoritarianism, religiousness and political conservatism ([Terrizzi et al., 2013](#)). In the United States, social conservatism is the dominant political ideology of the Republican party ([Espinoza, 2021](#); [Smith, 2021](#)) and white supremacy is reinforced politically by social conservatives ([Pei, 2017](#)). Specifically, white supremacy refers to a political, economic and social system in which white people as a group are viewed as superior to other racialised groups ([DiAngelo, 2012](#); [Mills, 2022](#)). This system categorises people into whites

and non-whites, advocates for white superiority (Krieger, 2000), and implements norms and policies that produce differential access to material and social resources (Mills, 2022).

Recently, it has become difficult to separate white supremacy from the resurgence of social conservative political figures, such as Donald J. Trump, businessperson and 45th/47th President of the United States. For example, well-known white supremacists, such as David Duke of the Ku Klux Klan, have endorsed his first presidential campaign (Long, 2023). This was not an anomaly. Trump's 2024 presidential campaign also borrowed the slogan "Reclaim America" from Patriot Front (Carless, 2024), which is a prominent US white supremacy group. Consequently, whether it is directly admitted or not, when organisations and organisational leaders capitulate to right-wing, authoritarian and socially conservative political pressure to abandon, mask and/or hide the terms of DEI, and its associated efforts and initiatives, they are upholding a white supremacist and patriarchal power structure. This is precisely why DEI scholars, researchers, practitioners and proponents should stand firm by the words "diversity", "equity" and "inclusion", the moniker of DEI, and its associated efforts and initiatives.

Notably, this backlash towards DEI is being driven by a political ideology that has consistently been hostile towards making the country more inclusive and equitable for its diverse citizenry. To this end, organisational DEI researchers have demonstrated that states that supported every Trump presidential campaign (i.e. 2016, 2020 and 2024) also enacted anti-DEI state laws (Rice *et al.*, 2025). Anti-DEI state laws primarily exist in states where the Republican party has a political trifecta. A political trifecta is when the state governor, state house and state senate are controlled by the same party (Steytler, 2022). Consequently, it is not rooted in science, research or scholarship. This is why DEI scholars and practitioners should not change terminology to appease politicians or other misinformed individuals who mischaracterise and weaponize DEI.

Although some people may believe this right-wing and authoritarian political assault on DEI is novel and is only tied to modern-day American politics, a more nuanced understanding can be gained if we recognise the conceptual and legal linkages of DEI to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To this end, management scholars have argued that DEI, more specifically, modern-day organisational DEI initiatives, can be traced back to the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 (Aikens *et al.*, 2013). Notably, management researchers have described this law as a significant legislative victory for African Americans and other individuals with marginalised identities, who challenged racial segregation, systemic oppression, institutionalised racism and the lack of legal protections against discrimination in various aspects of society and the workplace (Nitttrouer *et al.*, 2025). DEI initiatives refer to the array of policies and practices that organisations implement to make their workspaces more equitable and inclusive to a diverse group of individuals (Bush, 2025). Understanding that many DEI policies and practices have evolved from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 can provide key insights into the specific political opposition and demonisation of DEI.

Historically, the opposition and mischaracterisation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were primarily pushed by social conservative politicians. For example, Republican Barry Goldwater, United States Senator and presidential candidate of 1964, opposed and voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Farrington, 2020). Prior to Goldwater's opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, social conservatives were strong advocates of the enslavement of Black people in the United States (Tetlock *et al.*, 1994). Recently, organisational DEI scholars have examined the cross-generation transmission of systemic anti-Black racism (Rice *et al.*, 2025). Specifically, Rice and colleagues (2025) concluded that "in comparison to other American political ideologies, social conservatism is the most hostile towards African Americans" economic and social progress in the United States (p. 13). Correspondingly, in American society, a narrative has emerged that argues DEI is regarded as the new n-word (Habersham, 2025; Rahman, 2024). Subsequently, it has been concluded that social conservative politicians have historically and currently mischaracterised and weaponised

DEI to pass policies that harm marginalised communities and people while upholding white-centred power structures (Zavattaro and Bearfield, 2022).

Although we have examined the anti-DEI backlash in an American context, this backlash towards DEI, as well as the roles of white supremacy and social conservatism, is not unique to the United States. Whether it is happening in the United States or outside of the United States, DEI scholars and supporters must demonstrate moral courage. Moral courage is the ability to use inner principles to do what is good for others, regardless of potential threats, as a matter of practice (May *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, too many organisations and organisational leaders have taken the route that abandons being morally clear and courageous, which results in them upholding a White supremacist and patriarchal power structure. Nonetheless, unlike the cowardly and morally bankrupt leadership being demonstrated in many organisations, DEI scholars, researchers, practitioners and proponents must courageously defend DEI. Moral courage is needed to defend the promise and progress of DEI. As concluded by management scholars (Nittrouer *et al.*, 2025), the benefits of employing and institutionalising DEI and its initiatives result in better outcomes for everyone – not just those who have been historically and currently marginalised.

### More than words? The politics of “talking DEI”

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*Academy of Management DEI Division Member and DEI Division Chair 2025.* As I concluded my term as Chair of the Academy of Management’s DEI Division, I found myself reflecting on a paradoxical moment. On the one hand, DEI research has never been more visible in management and organisation studies and workplaces worldwide routinely engage with DEI in practice (Janssens and Steyaert, 2025; Meliou *et al.*, 2024; Nkomo *et al.*, 2019; Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). On the other hand, we are currently facing what can only be described as a “political turn” against DEI; one that not only seeks to undermine the substantive work being done by asking companies to halt their interventions in that domain, but also to silence it through language bans, intimidation and pressure to adopt softer, less “threatening” terminology in business settings. It is on the latter aspect that I focus this brief essay.

In my view, the push to rename DEI into concepts such as “wellness” or “belonging” warrants scrutiny. I understand it can appear wise and strategic to change the words in order to be able to continue the work under the radar. It is noteworthy that many companies and consulting firms do this pre-emptively, even in contexts such as the E.U., where many are not directly, or at least only peripherally affected by US politics [2]. I fear this strategy is, ultimately, self-defeating. Who are we making more comfortable when we stop naming marginalisation and oppression? Meeting others where they are, whether in our classrooms, organisations or journals, cannot mean capitulating to white fragility, male fear or privileged anger. Dialogue is not the same as consensus, and soothing discomfort should never come at the expense of justice. DEI work itself has been criticised for being adapted in order not to upset white men (Carrillo Arciniega, 2021), and such changes may bring further credit to such a perspective.

Moreover, in the E.U. context, it is unclear how wellness or togetherness could be measured and used as proxies to monitor progress on equity and inclusion, which is required under the new Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) rules. The renaming of DEI-related efforts may thus inadvertently stall the dismantling of structural inequalities and risk further obscuring them when we move away from politically meaningful vocabulary. We have been down this path before, softening “activist” terms such as anti-racism or feminism in the hope of lowering resistance to change in a business context. Importantly, the dropping and renaming also obscures the link to the now sizeable body of research on which DEI practice is founded (Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). Attempts to erase DEI through rebranding are thus not neutral, superficial gestures at the linguistic level, but rather moves with real consequences on how we make sense of the world and what we do in it.

The stakes are clear: research is political, and continuing to pursue DEI research and practice is itself a political act, and theory should not shy away from prescribing what we believe constitutes a more desirable future, why this future matters, and how it might be realised (Bridoux *et al.*, 2024). This is not pamphleteering; it is rigorous scholarship with normative clarity. DEI research expands and strengthens science by incorporating diverse standpoints, arguably more than other streams of scholarship. Such research must, of course, withstand the test of scholarly rigor while exposing blind spots in dominant epistemologies (Harding, 1991). Yet battles over epistemic injustice persist: whose voices are heard, what forms of knowledge are deemed legitimate, and who is excluded from the conversation (Fricker, 2007). These dangers of silence and erasure are not abstract, and the silencing of DEI scholarship cannot be viewed in isolation. It is part of a broader pattern of erasure, intimidation and control, of real lives and real people, and creates hierarchies about the value of such lives (Butler, 2004; Mbembe, 2020). Around the world, academic freedom is under siege. In Afghanistan, women have been excluded not only from education but from exercising their voice altogether. In Palestine, epistemicide and scholasticide accompany genocidal violence and displacement.

Finally, we must contend with the ambivalence of doing our work within the neoliberal university. Institutions like the Academy of Management provide a crucial platform for sustaining DEI scholarship while simultaneously reproducing pressures to conform, depoliticise, and perform academic productivity in ways that can blunt our critical edge. Walking the line between disruption and complicity is a constant negotiation. We must continue to name oppression, theorise justice and stand in solidarity with those silenced elsewhere. At the same time, we should also celebrate. The community of scholars, practitioners and students who sustain DEI work is vibrant, resilient and deeply committed. It is through this collective labour that we resist erasure, enrich science and continue to imagine better futures.

For all these reasons, we must hold the line on DEI; on its nomenclature, its scope and its ambitions. To hold the line is not simply to defend a label. It is to affirm the enduring necessity of DEI as scholarly commitments, but also as organisational, societal and political imperatives.

## Conclusion

The language of DEI allows both interdisciplinary research and the reciprocal transfer of knowledge between academia, industry and government. The Trump administration's active engagement in language oppression aims to do no less than silence and even destroy the credibility of the extensive body of research on which DEI theory and practice are founded. The government agencies enacting the Trump administration's attack on DEI have detailed the words and ideals it wishes to destroy. This, in and of itself, defines the language that DEI scholars must continue to use and represents the ideals we must continue to fight for. As DEI scholars and practitioners, we must seek out and use every public and private occasion, every electronic and print media platform, television, social media and radio outlet to loudly and proudly use the language of DEI, our language.

DEI scholars cannot succumb to the silencing or even the modification of our language to appease the Trump administration, or we ourselves risk joining the architects of the deconstruction of our field and its core values. By yielding our language, we yield our authority to define reality and in doing so, we lose the ability to name and confront oppression everywhere, not just in the United States.

Attempts to censor the language of DEI scholars and practitioners, as well as the work we undertake, are not new. The ongoing stream of anti-DEI political rhetoric and legislation, the withholding of funding, and even the placement of "informants" in universities in the United States, reflect actions that ushered in the total control of German universities by the Nazis. It also reflects previous attempts to do likewise in the United States during the McCarthy era of the Cold War. Silencing the language of DEI terminology is out of step with contemporary

research and business practices and only acts to facilitate the spread of fascist ideologies to businesses everywhere. The extensive body of DEI scholarship clearly shows the benefits of institutionalising DEI and its initiatives for all people, not just the historically and currently marginalised. As DEI scholars, we have a duty to continue to fight for the marginalised and oppressed and to speak truth to power and privilege, not just for this generation, but for all generations to come.

The attempt to eradicate DEI from the United States is being driven by a political ideology that has always been hostile to making society more inclusive and equitable for diverse citizens. The Trump administration's anti-DEI stance is not founded in science, research or scholarship, but rather, extremist right-wing dogma. It will not be appeased by simply changing DEI terminology or continuing DEI practices under different guises; it wants nothing less than their total eradication. Failure to steadfastly oppose such thinking and actions invites worse to come.

Like those such as Abraham Lincoln, Emmeline Pankhurst and Dr Martin Luther King Jr, we must find the moral courage to use our inner principles to fight for the common good, regardless of potential threats, in whatever ways we can. There is no doubt that the present threats to life and livelihood are real, so we each must consider when, where and how we will oppose these attacks on DEI. However, we can all seek out like minds, publish in supportive journals and identify publishers and broader media commentators who will stand with us. Likewise, some of us may need to seek out new universities or employers to escape the current oppression, but each must do what they can.

More than ever before, we need to have the courage to step out from our ivory towers and engage directly with people and organisations. We must speak candidly and help people see themselves and those they love as part of the DEI story, making issues more tangible and personally meaningful to them. We must continue to speak forthrightly about racism, sexism, privilege and power. We must continue to name oppression, theorise justice, and stand in solidarity with those whom the Trump administration seeks to silence.

We cannot allow this attack on DEI to distract us from undertaking research and analysis of systemic inequity. We cannot allow it to divert us from supporting structural evaluation and reform or stop us from equipping ourselves with the knowledge and tools to oppose this assault on DEI. We must have the courage to articulate what we believe to be a more desirable future for workplaces and societies. We must hold fast to our vision of the future and continue to shout about why it matters, and how it might be realised through rigorous, scientifically based, inclusive scholarship.

Finally, let us remember that there is also much to celebrate. The DEI community is strong and unified in purpose, perhaps more so than any other field. Its scholars, practitioners and students are animated, resilient and deeply committed. It will be through us holding the line that we will stand strong against silencing, continue to enrich science and bring about a better future for all humanity.

## Notes

1. To be clear, I am not arguing that DEI terminology is immutable or that all shifts in language are inherently harmful. Some euphemisms such as "inclusive excellence" or "belonging" have been deployed to maintain DEI principles in hostile environments. My concern here is with language changes that are imposed from above to delegitimize DEI-related efforts and to restrict the work itself, rather than with strategic evolution of terminology by those engaged in equity efforts.
2. EU headquartered multinational for whom the US is a major trade partner are more directly affected; yet others see this as an opportunity to save on non-essential spendings. Overall, this reveals which firms have a solid commitment to DEI vs the ones who were only addressing it due to isomorphic pressure. The EU countries have overall reaffirmed their commitment to tackling inequality, including in the workplace.

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