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Dismantling DEI in Higher Education:
An Analysis of How Diversity Professionals View Political Bans

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1. Background and Purpose

1.1 History of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

The origins of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) stem back to the mid-1960s, as these initiatives were taking root in societal movements and legal issues happening in the corporate sector around the workforce. While these things were happening in the corporate sector, DEI efforts were also heightened on college campuses in the 1960s after student protests, activism, multiculturalism, and in response to Civil Rights Movements (Altbach, 2018). Student protests, primarily through sit-ins where students were voicing their concerns with a lack of diversity within colleges and universities as a means to end racial discrimination (e.g., University of Michigan 1970s and San Francisco State College 1960s), leading to African American and LGBT studies, departments, and programs, to be instituted later leading to multicultural efforts in the 1980s (Gieg & Miller, 2016). Additionally, in the 1970s, Title IX legislation enhanced gender equity, aiming to eliminate gender-based discrimination in education, directly influencing women's sports. Moreover, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, profoundly impacted DEI in higher education, especially in how university admissions diversified their student bodies and considered race a factor for admitting students (Long, 2003).

Due to engaging in DEI initiatives and programs, there have been several positive outcomes related to DEI, such as student development, learning, and retention (Patton et al., 2019). One example is how DEI workshops, training, and dialogue help build racial and cultural understanding and have been known to influence positive learning and development for students (Abrica & Andrew, 2024). Another example of how DEI, explicitly diversity workshops, have aided students' growth and civic engagement, making students more likely to have post-college positive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward others based on race/ethnicity and gender (Bowman et al., 2016). Faculty have also appreciated DEI standards associated with faculty hiring, tenure and promotion, and other college-wide initiatives and programs to assist with alleviating concerns surrounding racism and sexism (Griffin, 2019).

1.2 Current Attacks and Political Resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Political interference in higher education has heightened since the Trump administration's executive order on divisive concepts in 2020, especially for those teaching Critical Race Theory and race-based concepts (Briscoe & Jones, 2024a; Briscoe, 2024b). Now, these legislations further challenge faculty's ability to teach and viewpoints surrounding diversity and academic freedom; these attacks weaken faculty rights. However, these legislations have expanded to DEI bans that not only harm curricular spaces but have also now moved to target co-curricular spaces.

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Since 2023, conservative legislators, primarily under Republican-led politicians, have launched attacks on public colleges and institutions' use of DEI efforts (Bauer-Wolf, 2023; Lu, 2023). Christopher Rufo and others from the Manhattan and Goldwater Institute wrote model state legislations that aimed to abolish DEI bureaucracies by falsely stating what DEI is, how it causes students to feel less welcomed, and threatens academic freedom and integrity (Rufo et al., 2023). These legislators have painted DEI principles as divisive, counter-productive to education, and politically radical (Greene, 2023; Jones, 2023). Furthermore, legislators are painting DEI in states as being a violation of free speech, anti-discriminatory, and an overall misuse of state and publicly funded money (Greene, 2023), despite decades of research that dispels these logics and myths (Harper et al., 2024).

As of May 2024, 85 anti-DEI bans across 28 states have been introduced, with 14 states passing through legislation or executive orders (Lu et al., 2024). The anti-DEI legislation and current attacks on DEI have four main aims for legislation:

1. prohibit colleges from having diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and staff
2. ban mandatory diversity training
3. prohibit institutions from including diversity statements in hiring and promotion
4. prohibit colleges from using race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions or employment.

States are responding differently to the attacks on DEI. For example, administrators across Texas, especially at public institutions, have complied with Texas Senate Bill 17, closing their DEI, multicultural, women's and gender, and LGBTQ+ centers at the University of Houston, University of North Texas, and Texas State University (Ketterer, 2023). Notably, UT-Austin's response to terminate over 60 former DEI professionals and faculty after reclassifying their roles has left shockwaves within Texas and higher education (Miller, 2024). States like Wisconsin have blocked pay raises for University of Wisconsin employees to cut DEI (Gretzinger, 2023). Within Florida, Governor DeSantis is threatening to take away accreditation from colleges with DEI initiatives and programs (Jones, 2023). More recently, North Carolina university system administrators have created their anti-DEI policy to address these issues before legislation (Seminera, 2024). While the anti-DEI movement may have begun in Texas and Florida, we have now seen national calls to eliminate DEI funding, resources, and employees in states such as Oklahoma, Arkansas, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Kansas (Bauer-Wolf, 2023; Lu, 2023; McGee, 2023).

These anti-DEI legislations have caused diversity professionals to be displaced, reclassified, dismissed, and or moved from their positions at public institutions in efforts to comply with anti-DEI bans (McGee, 2023). The commitments to DEI have doubled down as many administrators are responding with fear and de-commitment to DEI efforts, such as removing DEI principles from university missions, strategic plans, and university websites to erase the mere existence of these concepts. As a result of anti-DEI legislation, many diversity professionals are retiring, and others are leaving higher education

altogether (Knox, 2023), which leaves many faculty, staff, and students questioning the state of DEI in the field of higher education. These legislative attacks have severely harmed DEI efforts in colleges and universities, causing hostile political climates, especially for those working in diversity-related roles, such as diversity professionals.

1.3 Diversity Professionals' Roles in Higher Education

Diversity professionals' roles emerged in the aftermath of the United States higher education institutions and colleges creating minority affairs offices and roles to support historical trends of DEI and advocate for minoritized students, especially Black students, after their increased enrollment in the 1970s (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Moreover, the United States Supreme Court case *Grutter v. Bollinger* and the University of Michigan's affirmative action admission policy led to historic changes in the landscape and diversity within college (Harper et al., 2009), advancing supporting racially minoritized groups from one person in multicultural or affirmative action offices (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2006). Additionally, diversity professionals were hired to address campus protests and racial unrest to meet the needs of Students of Color (Wright, 1987).

Diversity professionals' roles have evolved as they advise senior leadership, coordinate campus diversity initiatives, develop policies, and recruit faculty, staff, and students (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Worthington, 2012). The work of diversity professionals spans internationally and externally, as they work with faculty, staff, and students while navigating constituents such as trustees, legislators, and alumni (Harvey, 2014; Worthington et al., 2014). Indeed, diversity professionals are often diversity fixers as they resolve acts of racism, discrimination, unwelcoming campus climate, and harassment, as others on campus have minimal understanding of DEI practices and policies (Worthington et al., 2014). Diversity professionals' roles are becoming increasingly popular on college campuses because of their coordination of institutionalized DEI efforts, guidance to racialized incidents, and student activism (Griffin et al., 2020).

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Most colleges and universities have chief diversity officers (CDOs) and executive-level diversity administrators who work alongside presidents, provosts, and other administrators to manage campus-wide diversity efforts (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Moreover, scholars have described CDOs as "a senior administrator who guides, coordinates, leads, enhances, and at times supervises the formal diversity capabilities of the institution in an effort to build sustainable capacity to achieve an environment that is inclusive and excellent for all" (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 8). At their institutions, CDOs often have the power of "elevating visibility and credibility of campus diversity function, leading strategic diversity planning efforts, building new institutional diversity infrastructure, enhancing structural diversity success, informing the search process, and building new academics diversity courses and initiatives" (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 9). CDO roles are critical to organizational change, determining progress toward diversity plans, and addressing structural inequities within higher education (Leon, 2014; Stanley et al., 2019). CDOs have tremendous responsibilities as they have to navigate campus communities that are often unwilling to comply with policies and initiatives that seek to strengthen DEI issues (Wilson, 2013). Finally, CDOs often have to manage understaffed and resourced offices while working collaboratively with leadership despite their efforts rarely being incorporated into university missions and strategic plans (Williams, 2013; NADOHE, 2023; Stanley et al., 2019). For the sake of this project, I borrow Griffin et al.'s (2020) definition of diversity professionals, as my work examines those who work in diversity or multiculturalism, such as diversity officers, directors of multicultural affairs, and other student affairs professionals who work with marginalized communities to address race-related issues on college campuses.

2. Project Methods

I used a narrative inquiry approach for this project method to understand how diversity professionals perceive working in states with proposed and implemented anti-DEI bans. Participants in this study served as narrators, providing retrospective meaning-making about their stories and experiences. These collective stories provide details about marginalized people's stories that are often untold but disclose powerful accounts of the realities, consequences, and events orchestrated over time.

As the principal investigator of this study, I received Institutional Review Board approval for this study at the University of Oklahoma; I engaged in a purposeful and snowballing recruitment sampling strategy. Participants were intentionally selected based on the following criteria: (1) A diversity professional working in a multicultural center or office or a student affairs professional working with marginalized populations; (2) Work in a state with a proposed or implemented DEI ban. Participants were solicited on Twitter and Facebook using a graphic. Additionally, I reviewed publicly available websites for DEI offices, multicultural centers, and student affairs offices across the 28 states with the proposed or implemented anti-DEI bans. I also shared recruitment emails and graphics with higher education faculty who worked in states with anti-DEI bans to solicit additional participation.

I sent recruitment emails to all interested participants, which included a Qualtrics demographic survey and consent form. Participants were asked for demographic information such as state of residence, current institution, age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, pronouns, and job title. Participants were also asked how long they had been employed at their institution and worked in DEI. Participants ranged from entry-level positions such as coordinators, specialists, and advisors to mid-level positions such as assistant directors and directors, including several chief diversity officers. Participants worked in women's, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ centers, student affairs, cultural centers, TRIOs/student success, and inclusive excellence. For the safety and protection of my participants, I do not disclose institutional information but rather share that those participants worked at institutions in the following states: Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming.

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Over 60 diversity professionals were interested in this study (all participants did not meet the criteria or follow-up after completing the Qualtrics survey), with 31 participants participating in 2-60-90-minute narrative interviews. Participants were also asked to review DEI legislation and bans for their state before interviews. I also collected 85 bills across 28 states and the U.S. Congress from publicly available information and referenced these bans throughout the interviews. I outline several questions that were asked during participant interviews: Describe what it is like doing DEI work and being a diversity professional in this current political climate; Share your explicit thoughts and language used in the proposed or implemented DEI ban in your state; What has been administrators' interpretation and responses to the anti-DEI bans in your state; Describe what protections are in place for diversity professionals and how universities should protect you during this current political climate.

Participants received a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their time. Confidentiality was critical for this project; therefore, I saved all files (audio and transcripts) using their pseudonym only (each interview). I used REV.com to transcribe the data. I saved all files from this study in Dropbox with a password-protected code and security for safety.

3. Relevant Themes

I present four relevant themes, including participant quotes that detail the severity of diversity professionals in the current political living in states with proposed or implemented anti-DEI bans:

- Diversity professionals account for the misinformation and misrepresentation of DEI principles within anti-DEI legislation.
- Most participants noted how administrators (e.g., university presidents, provosts, vice presidents of student affairs, and chief diversity officers) are downplaying the severity of anti-DEI legislation, including the lack of communication and transparency being provided to them and campus constituents. There are some contrasting examples, explicitly several CDOs that shared models and how they led their campuses and responded to this moment with care.
- Almost all participants shared how, in response to anti-DEI legislation, their positions were renamed and reclassified, with the majority having to redefine their roles completely outside of traditional DEI work.
- Participants described overt and covert ways that administrators and legislators are over-complying with anti-DEI legislation, which has caused strife and uproar on college campuses.

3.1 Misinformation and misrepresentation of DEI principles

Participants described how anti-DEI legislation and some conservative legislators misrepresented DEI. Diversity professionals explicitly noted how legislators, in their construction of the rhetoric and language in bans and through national conversation, used misinformation as tools of fear. These strategies were effective in inaccurately depicting DEI principles nationally and on college campuses.

Frankie, a diversity professional in Iowa shared how he felt many conservative legislators were out of touch and misguided by their lack of understanding what DEI is:

> To me, it makes me seem like they [legislators] are out of touch and that it is not really an issue as they are painting it to be, but more of something that is just a talking point. You see in all of the nation, there is these DEI bans going up left or right. We saw the whole thing with, what is it called? Sex education evolutionary curriculum. It is just a rebrand of the same tactic that we have seen used before. To me it is scary, but also at the same time, I see it as the system trying to redo what the system has done before except this time with DEI. I do hate it though because I have been seeing it come up that DEI has been called "Didn't Earn It", and that really pisses me off just as a person in general because it plays into that ideological thing that DEI is just to help certain people in certain places, but it is not. It is not like we are given $500 left and right. I always tell people when they say that stuff like, "Okay, you go ask my office for a $500 raise and tell me what they say because I had love to hear back." To me, it is just the idea that we are these highly politicized indoctrination centers is antithetical, I think, to a public servant because one, education itself is a public good, and as a public institution.

Lee, a diversity professional in Georgia, shared how she believed misrepresentation and fearmongering is driving the current attacks on DEI. These strategies demonstrate narratives of misinformation ruining intentional conversations surrounding DEI. She stated:

> I think for politics it is the misrepresentation of history, the weaponizing of words and ideas, and then also I think it is fearmongering. An additional piece to it is saying, "Well, if you support this, then you yourself are going to end up where they are," which says a whole lot about anti-Blackness, them understanding exactly what they are doing, but not naming it. Because if you are so fearful of DEI, it is because you feel that you are going to be in the place of which people are saying that they are currently in, because of these systems that are at play. But, nobody wants to talk about that. I think politics really use fearmongering, the misrepresentation of history, and then truly the weaponization of language to derail the conversation. They do it so well. Misinformation itself is one of the largest leaders in a lot of these uprisings of separation that have truly been happening on this specific topic.

Another participant, Eloise, who is in the state of Oklahoma, shared a common misrepresentation of DEI as the corporation of these concepts. She described an example of this as she believed administrators on college campuses only understood DEI through a compositional lens:

> There is this really corporate way that higher education can define DEI. And I think that that's what happens at perhaps executive level DEI spaces. When our executive levels of institutions are talking about DEI, I think they are fundamentally counting. They are like, we have this many marginalized humans. Because counting feels like the easiest way for them. Counting feels like the easiest way for them to be like, no, see, look, we are doing diversity work or this place is inclusive because otherwise these numbers … It is really dehumanizing.

Eloise's example is one that many participants shared as legislators and administrators like to benefit from having compositionally diverse populations at their institutions. Many administrators vocalize how diverse their campuses are as recruitment and retention tools but are unwilling in these political times to support these efforts by pushing back on external pressures, having proper staff to aid in these endeavors, and having adequate funding in DEI spaces.

3.2 Administrators downplay the severity of anti-DEI legislations

One of the most overwhelmingly communicated points shared by diversity professionals was how administrators (e.g., presidents, provosts, and vice presidents) are downplaying the severity of anti-DEI legislation. Downplaying in the eyes of diversity professionals, especially in states with proposed and implemented anti-DEI legislations, speaks to how administrators think so minimally about DEI work and the staff members who do these roles on college campuses. This includes how many administrators need to prioritize DEI initiatives, programs, and staff organizationally and institutionally. Additionally, participants shared how administrators demonstrated a need for more transparency by not communicating how they planned to respond and support diversity professionals during the political attacks.

Daniel, a diversity professional in Oklahoma described a significance difference between administrators' initial response and how they acted once pressure was put on them in the aftermath of their Governor Executive Order:

> There's been the initial response and then what I have interpreted as some changing of terminology and the different ways they have talked to us about it [DEI]. At our university, the initial response from our upper administration was that we are compliant. They post it on social media. Everything we do is compliant. And us in DEI, we are like, "Yes, we know that, but no one's going to fault… The way this is written, this does impact us." And so our administration it was weeks after, ours was very delayed in whatever strategy behind that. So initial response in reaction was that we were compliant, and that was from upper administration. And then within our division, our administration at the beginning was similar, but it was just kind of like a, "We are fine." They said that so many times, "We're fine, we're fine, we're fine." And that was the first division meeting post the executive order. And to me, that was just so odd and it just said, "We're fine" so many times. And so that was the initial response. And then as we have gone through more division meetings, it's been interesting to hear just the tone. And so now, it's a lot more, just keep doing what you are doing and I will tell you when something changes. So it's been a long time since I have heard that we're fine again. I think that if we were truly fine that message would have continued on. And so I think now it is more of they as an administration are probably putting out fires and dealing with things. And again, they just want us to keep rolling. And then once something, if a fire gets out of hand and something blows up, then we will know. I think the way it's been handled here, I think has been initially they're like, "Oh, we're good. We're good," to more now, "We're putting out fires. Everyone keep their head down, do their job, we'll let you know if something changes." So it's kind of been just a weird change; I just feel like very hushed, very not transparent kind of handling of it now.

Daniel's example is one in which many participants noted the lack of transparency from administrators (e.g., university presidents, provosts, vice presidents of student affairs, and chief diversity officers) about anti-DEI bans. Similarly, Linda, a diversity professional in Georgia, also heard narratives about being "fine" and questioned what that meant for her and others doing this work within the state of Georgia.

Linda offered several suggestions that she believed would be helpful for administrators to do in this moment:

> I think that I feel like with everything going on, what I would like to see just from upper administration is maybe having meetings or conversations with people this would directly impact. At my office or anybody else that is doing this type of work, just at some reassurance, I don't feel like I should have to ask, "Hey, you see what's going on in the news?, what does this mean for us?" And yes, I am getting the answers of, "Oh, well. We're fine right now." But I just feel like seeing what's going on and knowing how the state of Georgia is just in general, I think it would be nice to just even, maybe not even an email, but just someone call a meeting and be like, "Hey, we see what is going on in legislation, in politics. And we just wanted to offer you all some comfort, or support, or tell you what our plans… As a president, I plan to do X, Y, and Z to make sure these jobs are protected because I value diversity, equity, inclusion." And so with them not doing that, I feel like they do not value diversity, equity, and inclusion. Unfortunately, there continues to be an overall lack of discussions within states with proposed or implemented DEI bans. The lack of conversations does not help diversity professionals be prepared for their roles and or does not effectively communicate the severity of the heighten political climate.

Almost all diversity professionals noted a lack of response, preparation, and effective communication about administrators' responses to legislation. Additionally, many participants shared how the lack of administrators' responses further demonstrated a lack of care, support, and means of protecting both their roles and overall DEI aims, as reflected in Linda's narrative.

Finally, Claudia, a diversity professional in Ohio, stated,

> I feel like I am talking like I am up against a wall that I just cannot seem to get. I feel like white administrators in higher level positions almost want to downplay what is happening in politics, as though it does not, and I know why it does not affect them, it does not impact them. They are still going to be able to learn Eurocentric history and so would their children. So there is no immediate sense of urgency. I think that folks are underestimating just how dangerous these laws are, because it allows for an entire generation to not be exposed to other people's history. But I think for white folks, "Oh, it's not that bad. It's just another day at work. It is just another law that got passed, and now we got to figure out policy and procedures. We have got to change names of positions." It is just business as usual for them, because we live in a white supremacist culture that benefits them and will always benefit them, until they are willing to do the hard work and say, "Hey, this is fucked up. We should be standing up against these laws.

Claudia, like many of the diversity professionals in this study, also noted how white administrators were more likely to downplay the anti-DEI legislation and were less likely to shed light on the severity of the current political climate and its effect, especially on People of Color. Unfortunately, many diversity professionals felt like white administrators could not fully see the ramifications of these laws because, in some ways, they felt that the lack of DEI would be less likely to affect the dominant group and alter services for white majority students.

It is essential to note the variation in views on transparency and administrators' responses to anti-DEI legislation between diversity professionals at entry-level and mid-level versus CDOs. Several CDOs within this study especially shared detailed ways to inform their staff about anti-DEI bans. CDOs were brought into conversations with campus leaders such as university presidents, provosts, and deans. While these examples help illustrate how there have been models for how those working in DEI offices communicate and support each other and how administrators can respond in a cohesive, actionable manner during these political attacks, it is evident that there still needs to be coordinated efforts on a state and national level that fully educate diversity professionals on how to navigate this political turmoil.

3.3 Renaming, redefining, and reclassifying diversity professionals' roles

To address the current political climate and anti-DEI legislation, colleges and universities have moved to rename, redefine, and reclassify diversity professionals' roles. These processes, in some regards, are sought out through legislative attacks but are also efforts administrators are using to aid with continuing to serve minoritized and marginalized populations on campus. However, these responses in some capacities have hindered DEI work, and the efforts of diversity professionals to ensure campuses are equitable and inclusive spaces. They have also disrupted diversity professionals' day-to-day roles and confused faculty, staff, and students who depend on their expertise and care.

Marley, a diversity professional in Texas, stated that many institutions were moving to use race-neutral terms for DEI work that was less invasive and that these changes have caused strife and confusion on campus. She described an interaction she had with administrators trying to comply with their anti-DEI legislations,

> So what are we going to call this? Because we have to be able to comply with the law, but still do the things that our college has set out to do. So all this to say, I went through this whole community engaged process to rename things to "opportunity" "belonging", because that's what it felt like we were really able to continue to do in the college, is create opportunities and then provide spaces of belonging. And then we roll into the new semester, and I think my role becomes SB 17 compliance officer. So I am not a DEI professional. I mean, I am, and people come to me for those things. And then on top of that, I am secondhand person to the dean on all things. Is this compliant with SB 17 or not? And I am not supposed to be doing any legal interpretation, but our legal team is a hot mess and they do not have bandwidth to deal with everybody's questions, and the people that send them questions, they do not answer. There was one other name change because I was told "Opportunity" and "Belonging", it is not going to work. So, it was a mess. I basically find out that the whole thing is dissolved [office].

Unfortunately, Marley's narrative exemplifies how even changing the name and duties in some states and institutions was insufficient to comply with legislation. Additionally, she stated, like many other participants, because of the bill's vagueness, they became "compliant officers," often being asked to expound on the interpretations of the bans with little to no assistance from general counsel. While institutions discouraged diversity professionals from serving in this capacity, general counsel and government liaisons were also unwilling to answer faculty, staff, and students' questions regarding how to interpret and comply with anti-DEI legislation.

While some participants had issues with changing DEI's name, several others cared more about their ability to continue to do their work and advocate for faculty, staff, and students. Jazz, a diversity professional in Florida shared,

> The state administration asked us or required us to change the name before February 2023. So, it started off under DEI, and the changes were all as a result of legislation. I am seen as an advocate for diversity. You can call it whatever you want to call it, a dog on the roof, it is still diversity. You can name it "belonging" "engagement", it is still, so why do I have to leave? I do not. But at some point, I may have to choose my survival. And some people are not built to stay. I am going to just tell you that right now. Those conversations have not been, the people that I have been talking to have been people that cannot leave. They just cannot leave. And all others are just like, and at some point, I asked my people, I was like, hey, you good? What you need? I had an administrator at the [institution] to say, do you have people that need to get out of Florida? Let us know and we will help them, literally.

Similarly to Jazz's remarks, many diversity professionals were unbothered by the mandates to change the name of offices and positions if they could still serve and assist faculty, staff, and students. However, there were more considerations from diversity professionals whose roles completely shifted, or they were asked to work in different offices and positions that differed from their roles as diversity professionals. Additionally, several diversity professionals were wrongly terminated without cause to appease legislators, demonstrating a disregard for staff, many of which plan to sue the institution and state.

Dr. Minverva Martin, another diversity professional from Texas, shared an explicit example of how things shifted at her institution after the Governor mandated the anti-DEI ban and how this affected several offices and diversity professional roles. She also noted the complete disregard from leadership to protect diversity professionals and communicate with them how the law would affect them. Dr. Minverva Martin shared,

> When everything was finally passed and signed in Texas, it was a done deal after it passed out of committee, so it was looming. We knew it was happening. But then our institution was still not saying anything to us at all, and it was like, "Surely, after it's passed they will say something. Surely after it's signed." There was this radio silence from all of the administration to all of our division for a month or something. I think it was the end of June. I can look up exactly. Before we got called into the meeting it was like, "Here is this meeting tomorrow with the president. Okay." They met with our department and a couple of the people in the central office staff, who had reported to the vice president, and they let us all know, "Well, we met earlier with all the other people in division will continue as of tomorrow or next week." It was a couple days from now. "They are reporting to a different vice president. We have to keep them [Equal Opportunity and Title IX]. They're federally mandated. They are gone, out of the division, right now." Our division, which focused on staff and faculty diversity efforts was dissolved. And they were like, "And y'all all are Reduction force. Your positions are effective two months from now, or whatever, you are gone. Your department is gone… Because you can't have diversity training." One of the main things we did was stuff that you are not allowed to do. They had the Pride and the Multicultural Center, which were student-facing organizations moved to student affairs. They were like, "They are reporting in two weeks, starting in two weeks, to Student Affairs and all their positions are going to be restructured and they are not going to actually be allowed to do the work that they care about." And, as it turns out now, that many of them are being pushed out of the university because they are not getting on board. That was happening.

Unfortunately, diversity professionals in states implementing DEI bans have witnessed how administrators can abruptly move them, lay them off, repurpose them, and disregard them in higher education because of these legislative attacks. Morale for diversity professionals is down, including many leaving the field altogether, which begs the question of who will look out for and protect faculty, staff, and students at universities addressing all the facets of DEI aims. Moreover, the push to rename belonging, access, engagement, opportunity, and inclusive excellence, stripping away agendas around "race," "gender," and "sexuality" without accounting for how these elements are all interconnected, is a disservice to higher education institutions.

3.4 Overcompliance by administrators and legislators

Participants noted how administrators and legislators were based on over-compliance, often asking diversity professionals and other campus constituents to over-comply as a resistant mechanism to DEI bans. Engaging in over-compliance with regulatory practices not only harmed the institutions

but demonstrated an element of control and power that they had over DEI work and diversity professionals' roles on college campuses. Diversity professionals voiced their concerns with the targeted nature of these attacks, including the potential consequences of over-complying with proposed bans that had yet to be put into effect and those that are implemented in states but administrators and legislators doing so when they are not written in that manner.

Devon Moore, a diversity professional in South Carolina, shared her confusion and questioning as to why administrators were responding to a proposed ban, especially asking to change the name of the office and not use the word "diversity", when no mandate had been approved. She recalled,

> I think the law, even though it's been in the House, and I think it will pass and it will go to the Senate and pass because we are a predominantly white legislature in South Carolina. And I don't think there are enough democratically involved and interested folks to make it not happen. It will happen. And on our campus, I can tell you there has been a scramble to change the name of offices to say, do not say diversity in programming. Our office has been changed. I think the name has been changed twice: leaning towards more access and opportunity work. Just everything has shifted. And I was disturbed by that. I talked to our government liaison and I said, "Why are we doing that? Why are we fighting to say, no, this is right, we should have this and this is, why? Why are we scrambling to change?" We should say what we are doing and be proud of it and be firm in that. But that has not been the move.

Most participants noted how institutions and administrators across the states that have proposed and implemented anti-DEI bans must stand up for DEI. In these moments, they are not proud of the work that has been done; they are merely cowering to what legislators require them and doing so in ways that exceed what is written in the laws.

Several participants described their labor to comply with initial orders and legislation. Moreover, they explained how these changes were not listed in legislation and/or required by legislators. In some instances, legislators, especially in states like Texas, Florida, Wyoming, and Oklahoma, where administrators were pushed to fire, lay off, and/or completely close offices to further comply with legislators' requests, which is outside the scope of the Executive Orders and bans, were pushed to make these changes.

Sasha, a diversity professional in Texas, described how traumatic it was to spend months complying with SB17 and speaking with legal and other administrators. Only to later be told, by legislators, that these plans did not meet the standard of the law and be laid off and have the office she worked in completely dissolved.

> There was not that second thought of, okay, how can we protect them or how can we support them? Rather, he was just like, "I see this on paper and what y'all do. It is not enough. We got to let you go." The politics happening in higher ed and how it is affecting different administrations is, like I said, it is quite scary, honestly, knowing that that is the potential aftermath or that is the aftermath of what people are choosing to do. There is no thinking beyond what is in front of you and trying to think about how you can put us in the future, but rather this is the immediate answer. You have got to go. It is unsettling and it is harmful. I do not think that was intentionally thought about in this process and it shows. It definitely shows. The strategy was they let us go that morning and then had an email that was going to go out in the afternoon. In the email they sent out to the university, they basically said we have to dissolve the divisions because of SB 17. But within that email, and come to find out from other people, people did not understand that staff were let go. They did not understand, oh, the division is let go and the staff. They did not roll that out in the email, per se. So that is when we found out this is why this happened. I think in that meeting that we all have with HR, they said our positions were being let go. It came as a shock because we went through all the effort and the energy to make sure that we were in compliance.

Hayden, a diversity professional in Wyoming, shared the following details:

> The DEI Office is closed, I don't know what will happen with Multicultural Affairs, which is primarily the student programming arm. They are certainly going to have to go through some reorganization, but there was no mandate or expectation for them to amend. I think that is really interesting. And I think even in our board of trustees meetings on public record, our trustees were going back and forth of, "Well, I think this is what they meant by this, and we need to crack down on these issues," meaning the events and this programming and more public facing organized things. And other trustees would chime in, "We should not be hypothesizing about the intent of the legislature, we should be just looking at the letter of what they passed." I think watching that play out publicly, even among our trustees, they couldn't get on the same page and figure out what it was we are doing I think just encapsulates how it feels, at least from my perspective being in DEI or coming from it in Wyoming and watching this change. Because I think the DEI conversation is just the tip of the iceberg, and I think it is going to continue to be a moving goalpost with the legislature if we cannot figure out what it is they are upset about or what it is they want to see changed other than forcing them to say the quiet part out loud, they want to restore patriarchy and white supremacy.

Hayden's example is one that many diversity professionals were actively trying to understand: these legislations' true nature and intent. Moreover, just as many legislators are trying to understand the implementation of these DEI bans, administrators are as well on campuses as the language and intent of the bans, including how the responses played out in real-time, did not seem to correlate with what was written. Overcompliance ultimately speaks to an unruly attempt by legislators and administrators to silence DEI work on college campuses, which causes strife for diversity professionals.

4. Recommendations and Considerations for Higher Education

As higher education grapples with chilling political climates, diversity professionals, especially those in states with proposed and implemented anti-DEI legislation, are among the most vulnerable populations. I offer several recommendations grounded in the narratives of my participants to help guide us in this moment. These recommendations are not just suggestive next steps but rather should be used in actionable ways to move us forward with advocating for diversity professionals on college campuses.

First, we should lean on diversity professionals as content experts rather than isolate and push them away. For example, CDOs and other diversity professional staff can be invited to meetings with presidents, provosts, trustees, and general counsel to craft responses to legislators and external constituents. When we ask diversity professionals for guidance on responding in this political climate, we should compensate them for their time and talent. Second, at this moment, we are looking to university presidents and chancellors to have meaningful, transparent conversations about the state of DEI, politics, and what is happening at a national level around DEI issues. Diversity professionals gave detailed examples of how many administrators are ignoring, downplaying, and making light of these legislations.

Further, calling for diversity professionals to spend time and labor renaming, redefining, and reclassifying their role is unruly, especially if legislators and administrators are going to overcomply and eventually lay them off. Doing these practices is not a good use/steward of resources and time, especially when there have been open calls and research debunking the myths and misrepresentations around DEI. Having diversity professionals comply with these changes further adds stress, affecting their mental health, as diversity professionals are worried about how others will support faculty, staff, and students in this current political climate. Diversity professionals are also nervous about their livelihood if their roles are eliminated on campus.

We also need campus constituents and external stakeholders, such as governing board members, alums, and legislators, to become educated on DEI principles. The continued misinformation being spread nationally about DEI warrants our assessment of the First Amendment, freedom of speech, and democracy, as it is evident that legislators and policymakers not only do not understand what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean but also how these anti-DEI legislation bans have disrupted higher education ability to support marginalized populations. Education should include taking courses that correctly articulate DEI, which would help decrease misinformation and misrepresentation campaigns. We need more allies and advocates to remind the general public, legislators, and higher education institutions why DEI matters.

Next, the field of higher education and administrators should not treat diversity professionals as if they are disposable staff, and their roles and responsibilities are not necessary to the very fabric of institutional missions. Diversity professional's roles are rooted in decades of highly regarded best practices and research. Diversity professional's work matters! More importantly, our campuses cannot function without diversity professionals who support, uplift, protect, and educate faculty, staff, students, alums, and administrators about DEI practices. My scholarship and continued work will be a preview of what's to come on college campuses, especially those that choose not to push back on these anti-DEI legislations. Many participants within this study have openly noted how, as a result of these bans, faculty, staff, and student recruitment and retention efforts have overwhelmingly declined. We will continue to see people fleeing from Texas and Florida, which will cause a decrease in enrollment and recruitment efforts of talented faculty and staff. In addition, we are now seeing trends nationally, as demonstrated in my forthcoming research of how the other 26 states with legislative bans are seeing the residual effects of these legislations as they are also calling for the dismantlement of offices (e.g., multicultural centers, DEI offices, women and LGBTQ centers, etc.). While several services have been protected and rerouted to other offices in some states with anti-DEI legislation, the fear of doing this work covertly or overtly has shifted diversity professionals, even in non-targeted offices, from wanting to do these roles, ultimately resulting in the majority leaving higher education.

Finally, there are some examples of CDOs doing good, impactful work and pushing campus leaders to value DEI. They are working tirelessly to protect their staff members. They have worked with general counsel, human resources, and government liaisons to see what protections administrators can implement to support diversity professionals. We also see how many DEI offices have moved towards removing diversity professionals' office information from web pages to protect them from unsafe environments and individuals who may try to harm them because of their jobs. We also see calculated efforts by diversity professionals to connect DEI work to academic affairs. Whether these efforts are with faculty members through considerable funding efforts and over-assessing key academic leaders such as the dean, faculty senate, or tenured faculty to advocate for their work in these moments, academic affairs and partnerships with DEI divisions and offices are necessary. While I commend administrators engaging in these practices, my work seeks to challenge others to vocalize the necessity of DEI in higher education.

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