

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## The Current Landscape for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

PAULETTE GRANBERRY RUSSELL

*Dear Higher Education,*

I have the great privilege of being the President and CEO of NADOHE—the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. We describe ourselves as the preeminent voice for chief diversity officers, leading the national and global conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion in postsecondary education. We have more than 2,200 members of senior diversity officers, diversity professionals, scholars, researchers, students, for whom we work to provide resources to be successful in their roles and to navigate the shifts in the legal landscape.

Last year, I spoke to an organization, Getting to We, whose goal is “envisioning a society where us and them become we.” What a beautiful goal and image for our future. Unfortunately, we are experiencing a time of deep division. It is very much “us,” those who understand the value, impact, and necessity of pursuing inclusive excellence in our society, versus “them,” organizations that have provided a model that has been adopted by elected leaders who have embarked upon a calculated and organized attempt to discredit and diminish equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts in higher education and beyond.

These efforts have taken hold of legislatures in more than 20 states and I do not anticipate that the attempts to dismantle progress will subside. Some of these states describe controversial topics as “divisive concepts.” I do not regard the work of creating a more diverse, equitable, inclusive higher education as divisive or controversial. What is divisive is the purposeful misrepresentation of these efforts, that target particular identities based on race, gender, and sexuality and that demonize the lived experiences of individuals based on their social identities.

On June 29, 2023, the Supreme Court overturned decades of precedent that has affirmed the legality and value of race-conscious admissions practices.

I am deeply concerned by what is in front of us today and into the future.

As we look out into the landscape, what we are seeing, hearing, and experiencing in our political and societal climate is a direct assault on what many of us consider to be our life’s work. It has certainly been my life’s work, and I know that to be true of our members who are now having their careers and jobs eliminated, offices reorganized, work rendered invisible, and incremental progress stalled. Legislatures and Supreme Court justices are rebuilding barriers for students seeking equitable access to the opportunities that a college degree offers, such as higher earnings and lower rates of unemployment. These legislative outcomes and the decision of the Supreme Court will make it more difficult for all students to benefit from the educational excellence that results from diverse learning environments.

A recent Lumina Foundation-Gallup poll illustrates why it is essential to move to “we” and become better humans, especially as we consider when policymakers block evidence-based strategies that advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. In Florida, where lawmakers stripped funding from diversity programs at public colleges,

barely one-third of Black Floridians, and just about 39% of Hispanic Floridians, between the ages of 25 and 64 have completed formal education after high school. That's compared to roughly half of white Floridians.

We see strikingly similar racial gaps in Texas, which faces an outright ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion offices at state colleges and universities. Both states lag the nation in overall attainment of post-high-school education. These patterns should sound alarm bells as more states take up this type of legislation.

Mistrust and fear create conflict. Many of our elected leaders are actively working to cause confusion, spread misinformation about what this work is, and to seed division. And, in some cases, it's working. The pressure simply becomes too much. The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville dissolved its diversity, equity, and inclusion office despite any ban being enacted in the state. In Florida, 28 college system presidents issued a joint statement in support of the governor's anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies.

But, despite these attempts to demean and diminish, "*we*" persist. There is still a "*them*," but there is also a large, organized, passionate "*we*," joining together and issuing strong statements against political interference in higher education, and in support of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The Ohio State University Board of Trustees, in their opposition to Senate Bill 83, stated that the bill undermines the role of faculty in "shared governance," "weakens academic rigor," and imposes "extensive and expensive new reporting mandates." For now, the legislation has not passed.

We at NADOHE released our inaugural State of the CDO Survey report during the summer 2023. We had 261 Chief Diversity Officers share what it's like to lead equity and belonging efforts on campuses in 2023. You may have heard some news outlets and legislators say CDOs are not well-educated. Well, we found nearly 65% held a Ph.D. or professional doctorate. You may have heard that CDOs are overpaid and their offices over-funded. Nearly a third of respondents let us know they have annual operating budgets of \$39,000 or less, and 44% have between zero and two full-time-equivalent employees who report to them. And among those who responded to our survey, 52% were Black or African American; nearly 12% were Hispanic/Latina/o/e/x; 7% Asian/Asian American; 1.5% Native American/Alaska Native; almost 9% White, and 63% identified as women.

This is how we fight back. While CDOs individually do not have the time or resources to respond to every inquiry about data or to constantly draft statements fighting misinformation about who they are and what they do, organizations like NADOHE can work to gather the data and share the truth about the value, impact, and necessity of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education and beyond.

The research makes it clear — education after high school leads to better health, more civic engagement, and jobs suited to individual talents and interests. A Harvard Business Review report from February 2023 found clear evidence that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on campuses help universities recruit, retain, and teach a more racially diverse pool of talented students and faculty.

We must implore "*them*" to understand that attacking this work is an attack on all of us. And so, I want to share a few imperatives identified by NADOHE with you that I hope each of you can share within your own circles of influence, as we seek to broaden our collective "*we*."

Our students and other young adults care about activism, equity, and inclusion. And many accrediting bodies still care about equity, diversity, and inclusion. Campuses throughout higher education provide academic and social support for our students to engage effectively across cultures within and outside of higher education. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts throughout higher education address the following imperatives that were recently shared in a Communication Guide developed by NADOHE to better inform campus leaders, legislatures, and the broader public.

First, our society is increasingly diverse—that is happening regardless of what anyone wants to think or attempt to disavow. We know that diverse teams perform better and innovate better. We know that employers demand globally proficient candidates who can demonstrate cultural knowledge, humility, and a broad worldview to maintain a competitive advantage. The dismantling of equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts will impact all students and trainees who will be less prepared without the necessary skills to succeed in a diverse economy.

Second, we need more students in STEM and technology, particularly in Artificial Intelligence. Equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts are critical to building our capacity in these areas that are essential for all industries, including national security. Without broad recruitment and retention efforts, the U.S. is leaving enormous amounts of talent behind.

Finally, many research funding agencies require diversity impact statements or plans as part of grant submissions and contracting work. Research is a critical function for all institutions of higher education and for advancement in all fields. To secure funding, researchers are often expected to explain how they aim to build inclusive teams and identify or develop diverse talent.

I admit, what lies ahead of us is daunting. I have had many sleepless nights and moments overcome with anger. Yet, I refuse to quit. I refuse to quit on our young adults, who deserve equitable access to opportunities and experiences. I refuse to quit on our diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners, who have dedicated their lives to helping minoritized individuals overcome obstacles and lead our society toward inclusive excellence.

We are in the middle of an incredibly difficult fight, but we must draw upon our collective power and reach out to our allies for support. *Higher Education*, I am reaching out for your support.

I am honored and privileged to lead NADOHE. While CDOs across this country should and have been playing a galvanizing, leading role in this fight, we cannot do it alone. We need your help building a future in which everyone knows their authentic self is affirmed and supported. Where we consistently assess institutional policies, programs, and practices, and hold ourselves accountable in cultivating cultures that are equitable and inclusive of the diverse individuals represented throughout our communities.

*So, thank you.  
Paulette Granberry Russell, JD*

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### **About the author**

Paulette Granberry Russell, J.D., president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education since March 2020, is a leading national voice and sought-after presenter on issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in higher education and beyond. Granberry Russell retired in August 2020 from Michigan State University as senior advisor to the president for diversity, emerita, after more than 20 years advising on diversity and inclusion efforts at the institution.