

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## The View from the Aftermath of the Attack on DEI

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*Dear Higher Education,*

I am a first generation, African American female. I grew up in a small town in Mississippi that remained segregated after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. My parents were entrepreneurs who provided me with the opportunity to learn business as I spent my childhood working in our family business. I have spent the past 30 years as an accounting professor and administrator at a large public land grant, Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the south. My recent past role as the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity at that Institution, was eliminated by state legislative action. During my tenure in this cabinet level position, others often expressed their opinions about the difficulty of this role. Others who fill similar university level roles would agree that the difficulty does not lie in the work itself, but in the myriad of obstacles, political and otherwise, that stand in the way of the work that needs to be done. In hopes of saving this work in other regions, I share my experiences as a chief diversity officer with the goal of highlighting two crucial points:

First, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues are not well understood by those who have never experienced them. The issues that require resolution in higher education extend well beyond those related to race. DEI offices serve organizations through exploration and resolution of issues that arise when people with varying identities, backgrounds and ideologies attempt to work together. These issues are often correlated. Consequently, obstacles to resolving them will likely hamper progress in other areas. DEI offices improve outcomes at the individual and organizational levels by providing professionals who are dedicated to helping faculty, staff, and students navigate existing norms and barriers while identifying and eliminating institutional barriers to success.

Second, our nation's historical and systemic focus on race has created disparities that still need to be addressed. Failure to address these issues in the American higher education system threatens America's capabilities to adapt to the changing demands of the workforce. Eliminating diversity offices will not move us closer to resolution.

When I moved to Texas to pursue a Ph.D. in accounting, I did so with the intention of returning to my home state to teach at a Historically Black College (HBCU). Having experienced HBCU education both as a student and a professor, I had a unique perspective on how to engage with the HBCU student body. In the HBCU environment, my talents were nurtured. I had no shortage of mentors to guide me on my career path. The environment, the food, the music on the yard was comfortable and familiar and as an aside, there is nothing else quite like a HBCU homecoming. Most importantly, the HBCU environment allowed me the ease of matriculating free from the distractions that come with feeling othered and marginalized.

My experience at a Predominantly White University (PWI) would significantly broaden my perspective. Of course, the contrast in the level of resources available at a PWI compared to a HBCU is striking. However, the awakening occurred when I was asked to assist as advisor of the student chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants. While students of color at large PWIs are surrounded by better facilities and were exposed to more and different opportunities, like their counterparts at HBCU, they needed unique guidance and encouragement

to fully leverage the opportunities, resources, and services. Further, given the lack of representation at PWIs, it struck me that the role that I could play for these students rivaled my potential contribution at an HBCU. I could offer the underrepresented minority student a little piece of the comfort that I had enjoyed while nestled safely within the halls of my HBCU.

With this logic in mind, I joined the business school faculty at a large public land grant institution in Texas. For the first half of my career, I focused on research, teaching, and student mentoring. My mentees were not limited to students of color, but I was intentional in my outreach to underrepresented populations. It was important that these students be exposed to someone with more than a surface understanding of their identity because sometimes you don't know what you don't know until someone informs you that you need to know. When I walk the hallways between classes, I notice homogeneity among the groups of students that gather there. When I peek into the classrooms, I notice students of color gravitating towards the back of the large lecture halls. I notice that in my classes, when students are allowed to self-select into groups, they naturally gravitate towards the familiar and that it is often left to me as the professor to assign the few students of color to groups.

Student attrition in higher education is a widely studied topic (Quaye et al.; McCain and Perry). Studies have confirmed the existence of a significant positive relationship between faculty diversity and measures of student success including retention and graduation rates for URM students (Museus). A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* makes a point that I believe is relevant here. Despite the depth of reliance on academic research in making decisions about hiring practices, salary adjustments, and tenure decisions, there is little evidence that those in positions to make decisions that affect the path of higher education apply the research in operational decision making. I would go a step further. Although data analytic tools are widely used in industry to understand the nuances of organizational effectiveness and human behavior, its use to understand the differing needs across identities in higher education is often met with a level of resistance that is difficult to comprehend. People from diverse backgrounds and experiences may respond differently to stimuli and may need different tools to succeed.

The Office for Diversity at my university provided oversight for a faculty hiring program designed to attract faculty who demonstrated a commitment to promoting a climate for diversity, equity and inclusion as demonstrated through their scholarship. After all, academic research has demonstrated a clear association between student success and faculty representation, particularly for students from underserved communities. As a part of the application process, candidates were asked to provide a statement explaining how their commitment to diversity was demonstrated through their teaching, research, and university service. All hiring decisions were made at the department or college level. The program objectives were simply to generate a diverse pool for the small number of positions filled through the program and to build a community around the scholars who were employed through the program. The intention was that this community of scholars would help the university build a support structure equipped to meet the increasingly diverse needs of our student body. The University's Office of the general council reviewed the program guidelines and found them to be non-discriminatory. In addition, we worked closely with the Office of Human Resources, Faculty Affairs, and college level leadership to ensure that policies and procedures were being closely adhered to. The merit-based process resulted in the hiring of an esteemed community of scholars created from the process included junior faculty from all racial, ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. The University's Board of Regents was impressed enough by the outcomes to invest an additional \$5.25 million in support of the program. In addition, the Office for Diversity had recently helped to secure the university's federal designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution. The HSI designation would make the university eligible to compete for federal grants designed to achieve the goals of our office centering on the Hispanic student population. One of the key priorities for HSIs was also faculty diversity. For a brief moment, it appeared that we were moving in the right direction. At least until the wave of attacks on DEI commenced.

In May 2023, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 17 banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices in Texas public institutions of higher education. The definition of diversity included in the bill bears no similarity to the definition crafted by scholars in the field. Diversity as defined in Senate Bill 17 is simply discrimination- “programs that give preference on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin”. The bill allows for certain carve outs. For example, when applying for a grant, faculty are not prohibited from highlighting the University’s work in supporting first generation or low-income students or students from underserved populations. This carve out is a little confusing when you consider the correlation between race and membership in an underserved population. Exceptions were also made for academic course instruction, scholarly research, student recruitment and student organization activities.

Other than DEI activities required by law in support of the differently abled and veterans, the only activity that remains is faculty hiring. The Texas Law explicitly defines a diversity, equity, and inclusion office as “an office or division that engages in hiring or employment practices at the institution that give preferential treatment on the basis of race, sex, color, or ethnicity, other than through the use of non-discriminatory hiring processes in accordance with any applicable state and federal antidiscrimination laws.” Senate Bill 17 would also include a ban on the use of diversity statements.

Texas is one of the most diverse states in the nation with a population that is 40.2% Hispanic/Latino American, 39.8% non-Hispanic White, 13.4% African American, 5.7% Asian, and 1.1% American Indian (Census.gov, 2022). Texas Public Universities, particularly those that are land grant institutions operate under mission to serve all the constituents of the state, of which more than half are from underserved populations. There is a deep disconnect between the higher education goals proclaimed in the mission statements presented on websites and the actions of the higher education administrators charged with defending and promoting the work that institutions engage in to ensure the proper education of its constituents. While the research that forms the very foundation of many public institutions, points us in the direction of what students need to be successful, legislators in states across the south are spending hours to obstruct and eliminate the structures that help to provide these resources while higher education administrators remain mostly silent on this issue. I wish now that I could have back all the hours that I have spent in strategic planning meetings developing mission and vision statements. Eloquent words on a website will not get us where we need to be to meet the demands of the workforce.

DEI efforts were formalized at many universities because of institutional failures in meeting the federal government labor and enrollment requirements. I call upon higher education to take the time to understand the work of the DEI professional and scholar and to leverage them to the advantage of our institutions. Higher education leaders have accepted important responsibility for advancing higher education opportunities for all students. After all, the work that needs to be done to understand and eliminate the barriers to social mobility for all students will not simply disappear when the offices leading the charge are eliminated. It just becomes more difficult to maneuver.

*Closing signature,*

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### About the author

Dr. Annie L. McGowan has been named interim Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity at Texas A&M University effective Dec. 1, 2020. She brings to the Office for Diversity noteworthy leadership experience. Most recently, Dr. McGowan served as Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs at Mays Business School, where she holds the Bill and Gina Flores Professorship in Business. She also serves on the university’s Diversity Operations Committee.