

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Weathering Yet Another Anti-DEI Storm

SHAWNTAL Z. BROWN, M.A. AND DR. FLORENCIO U. ARANDA III

*Dear Higher Education,*

We believe transformation is possible for DEI in Texas...with or without state legislative support.

We came together as leaders of DEI in Texas public higher education as we navigated the passage of Texas Senate Bill 17 this past year. In our organization, the Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (TADOHE), we witnessed the forthcoming impact of the anti-DEI legislation even before it passed. As a state chapter of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) and a 501c3 non-profit, we were intentional in maintaining our organization's operations.

Believing that a joint co-presidency would send a strong message to our membership, we made having two leaders co-lead this organization through uncertainty into a key goal of our changes in organizational structure. We also solidified new pillars of our organization to refocus TADOHE's strategic goals. Our pillars are cultivating legislative awareness and advocacy; fostering belonging and community; expanding student leadership, mentorship, and development; and promoting access to higher education. We believe that our shift to these pillars emphasizes the importance of community and coalition building during this difficult time, and of making knowledge accessible to our members.

The manifestation of these goals is our monthly TADOHE Talks with experts in higher education and legislative advocacy. Our shift in our priorities and outreach has demonstrated a critical need for knowledge to support the future of higher education. In this letter, as TADOHE Co-Presidents, we reflect and share our lived experiences navigating Texas Senate Bill 17 and our dedication to TADOHE and DEI work in higher education. And we make clear our responsibility to lead and aid our Association members in understanding, combating, and resisting the impacts they too are facing.

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### **Shawntal Z. Brown**

I am Shawntal Z. Brown, a DEI advocate in higher education, and I am tired. Navigating this new law, professionally and personally, has felt like climbing a mountain with no summit in sight. This past year has been challenging in higher education across the United States, especially in Texas. We have witnessed the demolition of equity as the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action, as well as the spread of anti-DEI legislation. In the spring of 2023, we learned that Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB 17) was being introduced in the 88th Texas Legislative Session. At the time, I was employed in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. My colleagues and I sat in our spring divisional meeting, seeking to understand the impact of this legislation, and not realizing that our division was about to be dismantled.

In April 2023, I found myself testifying against SB 17 during the bill's public hearing. It was a nerve-wracking experience, but, with the support of hundreds of others who opposed this bill, I wanted to demonstrate the importance of DEI programming and initiatives. The testimony of over 100 advocates kept us at the Capitol past

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midnight. Unfortunately, we spent all of this time advocating for the rights of DEI work in public higher education only to realize that SB 17 was part of a larger agenda originating from conservative think tanks like the Manhattan and Goldwater Institutes. These institutes provided boilerplate bill language for conservative state representatives to use in the hope of eliminating “discriminatory” DEI practices.

These conservative think tanks fail to understand the historical importance of equity work in higher education. Conservative leaders believe that DEI work encourages “preferential treatment” for minoritized students when, historically, public higher education was not even accessible to these populations.

SB 17 passed in June 2023 and was to be implemented by January 1, 2024. Our division, alongside other offices at UT Austin, worked tirelessly during the Fall 2023 semester to prepare for the significant rebranding process: eliminating programming that would not comply with the law; removing the words “diversity, equity, and inclusion” from our webpage, mission, and vision; and trying to address the uncertainty of how to support our campus communities while at the same time grieving the losses of resources.

Witnessing SB 17 passing through the Texas House and Senate was difficult. The dismantling of our division was foreshadowed by a conservative news outlet, Accuracy in Media, which secretly filmed former DEI practitioners who were complying with the law. Accuracy in Media journalists pretended to be DEI advocates to entice the practitioners into speaking about how they used the exemptions in the law to their advantage.

This video spread like wildfire, and I watched it alongside my colleagues in an emergency meeting, shocked and angered that this media outlet would violate the trust of these leaders. And unfortunately, this was not the final blow. After spending so much time during the Fall 2023 semester restructuring, discontinuing, and rebranding our offices, roles, and responsibilities, my colleagues and I learned that we were “being let go” due to “duplications” in programming and institutional restructuring. In six minutes, we were told that six months of planning and preparation during the fall semester was for naught.

We were shocked. Angered. Sadden. Confused. Hurt. The work we do as practitioners is personal to us. As a first-generation Black woman who comes from a working-poor family, I am a product of DEI work, and the stigmatization of this work stung.

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### **Dr. Florencio U. Aranda III**

Many see me as Dr. Florencio U. Aranda III, an educated and dedicated advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Similar, however, to what Shawntal has experienced, very few people truly know the life-changing struggles I have faced this past year.

A native of the Texas/Mexico border, influenced by two cultures, I have always made the Lone Star State my home. While growing up on the *frontera* came with its set of challenges, my goal was always to be a contributing member of the state of Texas, bringing my bilingualism, biculturalism, and bilaterality with me in every space I occupied.

While in college, as a low-income, first-generation, remedial, Pell-eligible, Latino male student with a disability, I relied heavily on the people, resources, services, events, programs, workshops, and initiatives that were tailored to provide me and others like me with an equitable chance to seek, persist in, and complete a college education. It is because of DEIB services and resources that I can proudly say I am a college graduate with five postsecondary degrees, now using my extensive education to ensure that other students who are in similar situations have the opportunity to pursue their educational, civic, and professional goals.

Throughout my life I've advocated for people from all walks of life, and have educated many people about the positive impacts of engaging with, learning from, and co-creating with individuals who love, pray, think, believe, vote, and dress differently, and who are in other ways different from them. My mission has always been to demonstrate how DEIB is of immense value and essential to our existence, innovation, and growth as a society. Some of the institutions of higher learning that I have been part of have seen the value, worth, and importance of this type of work. Others have not.

As a first-generation professional focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and someone who advocates openly for underrepresented, underserved, historically marginalized, and systematically oppressed students, faculty, and staff, I, unfortunately — but not surprisingly — have encountered variations of SB 17 (anti-DEIB) for most of my professional career as I worked for public institutions in Texas and South Dakota.

Because public institutions rely heavily on federal and state funding, the blatant and disrespectful attack on higher education and DEIB by state (and now federal) legislative bodies has forced these institutions to sacrifice, omit, silence, eradicate, diminish, and do away with personnel, services, and resources that provide access, support, and opportunity to people who are essential to our global prosperity.

Acting out of fear, former employers have attempted to diminish and devalue my worth and my professional work, in their sell-out approach to comply with these anti-DEIB laws.

To resist the paralysis of fear, to protect my mental health and well-being from toxicity and dehumanizing people, practices, and laws, and to be able to wake up every day knowing I am not compromising my morals, values, and beliefs, I decided to leave South Dakota, and most recently my beloved Texas, to seek employment where I could do this essential work at institutions that value, support, regard, and appreciate my expertise, my contributions, and my existence.

Moving away from Texas came with many personal and professional hardships, challenges, and sacrifices. I had to leave family, loved ones, chosen family, support networks, and professional associations that have aided me in becoming the cultural, educational, and political advocate-practitioner I am today. Yet I accepted these challenges because I chose myself, I chose this necessary line of work, and I reaffirmed my commitment to keep fighting for students and professionals who continue to be silenced, harassed, undervalued, overworked, negatively impacted, and forced to comply with these laws.

I chose to join forces with the Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education to act collectively and collaboratively rather than to cower away. I have testified in favor of DEIB, called federal and state elected officials, and both led and participated in lobbying efforts and peaceful demonstrations to stand up, defend, and advocate for what is right, just, and essential for our students.

I now reside and work in Colorado. I chose to transform my thought process and approach by relocating to a state and an institution that each take pride in and feel the responsibility of serving and advocating for all, and also by continuing to do DEIB work utilizing long-existing state and federal laws that counter recent anti-DEIB legislation. I do this because I know firsthand how a college education, supported by DEIB-focused resources, can transform lives. I also know that laws and their makers who are against diversity, equity, inclusion, access, community, and belonging will continue to make education, employment, and life very difficult for institutions that rely on these life-changing resources and services.

While DEIB work is extremely rewarding, it can also be very taxing, lonely, and weigh heavily on one's heart, spirit, and mind. But I remind myself daily, "If not me, then who? If not now, then when?" and I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and take myself back to the time when I was that student who needed, and benefited from, all the services and resources afforded to him while pursuing his schooling. *Mi lucha sigue* — my fight continues —

because I will not rest until others have an equitable chance of completing their education and utilizing it to transform their lives.

We are grateful that we can lead TADOHE and our membership during an unprecedented time by offering spaces for communing with other higher education organizations in Texas. We share the need to be creative and collaborative during this time. Our coalition with the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition, Texas American Association of University Professors, and Black-Brown Dialogues on Policy creates critical relationships as we work on building strategy, sharing communication, and organizing against the upcoming 89th Texas Legislative Session and the presidency of Donald Trump. These allies and advocates who support the values of higher education are key to helping support our organization's mission.

As leaders of TADOHE, we believe the conversations among organizational leadership should be shared with our membership. We know that the power of knowledge — gained through our TADOHE Talks, our annual summit, and our support from NADOHE — can help our members learn how to fight against harmful policies and practices infiltrating higher education. As TADOHE leaders, we will weather the storm to demonstrate the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education.

*Your servant leaders for equity and justice in Texas and beyond,*



*Shawntal Z. Brown, M.A.*



*Florencio U. Aranda III, M.A., M.S., M.L.S., Ph.D.*

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## About the authors

**Shawntal Z. Brown, M.A.** (She/Her/Hers) is a higher education professional with six years of experience advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion through research, service, and leadership. She fosters a welcoming campus climate by building strong connections with students, staff, and faculty, and employs a research-based approach to community building. By leveraging campus climate assessments, she develops resources and implements strategic outreach to support equitable environments in university settings. As the current president of the Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (TADOHE), she offers development opportunities

for administrators that align with TADOHE's vision of inclusive excellence. Her commitment to DEI has earned her the NASPA Region III DEI Mosaic Award, recognizing her advocacy and research.

As a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Leadership and Policy, Shawntal's research examines university presidents and their roles in advancing DEI initiatives. Her academic contributions include published work such as "Mapping Pleasure and Pain on Black Women's Bodies: Southern Black Feminist Geographic Interventions" in *Gender, Place, and Culture*, and co-authorship of "It'll be Like Biden and Harris": A Black Woman's Conundrum in Collegiate Student Government" in *ACPA Developments*. She actively bridges research and practice, presenting at national conferences like the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), the Texas Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUPSA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), and NASPA.

**Dr. Florencio U. Aranda III** (Él/He/Him), a *frontera* native of Presidio, Texas, and Ojinaga, Chihuahua, México, has dedicated his life to service, leadership, advocacy, and research. He serves as the inaugural Executive Equity Officer at Adams State University in Alamosa, Colorado.

His extensive education, volunteerism, leadership, and professional experience have allowed him to advocate for individuals from all walks of life while being called upon to share his life's narrative and academic research. He strives to be an agent of change for diverse communities, and has made it his mission to serve others and to lead by example in the educational, political, and cultural arenas he navigates.

His prior employment includes Director of Student Global and Community Connections at Tarleton State University, Assistant Director of Diversity & Inclusion Initiatives at Texas Christian University, Multicultural Latina/o/x Retention Advisor at South Dakota State University, and Assistant Director of Safety Interventions for the College of Education's East Lubbock Promise Neighborhood Grant at Texas Tech University.

Dr. Aranda obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Spanish), a Master of Arts (Romance Languages), a Master of Science (Interdisciplinary Studies), and a Doctor of Philosophy (Higher Education) from Texas Tech University. He also obtained a Master of Legal Studies from the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University.