

Transforming Education: Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging for Systemic Change

Brandon J. Cheeks

Introduction

Educational inequality is deeply entrenched in many education systems, particularly in the United States. Historically marginalized groups, especially students of color, experience persistent achievement gaps, suggesting systemic causes rather than individual shortcomings. This paper focuses on the potential of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives to lessen these disparities and create more inclusive, supportive educational environments. Dismantling of DEIB initiatives in higher education ignores the broader structural inequities that marginalize students, faculty, and staff from historically excluded groups. Narrow reforms or performative measures are insufficient without an institutional commitment to systemic equity and inclusion.

At a time when DEIB initiatives are being challenged or even dismantled by state legislatures, this framework offers a crucial path forward. Rather than viewing DEIB as an ideological agenda, policymakers can recognize “belonging through dignity” as a universal, nonpartisan principle rooted in the fundamental values of democracy and education. State legislatures should consider how public institutions can uphold dignity, build inclusive communities, and support student success without the use of polarizing language. Investing in training, programming, and leadership development that promotes dignity and belonging not only improves educational outcomes but also reinforces the mission of public universities to serve the common good.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that focusing narrowly on the achievement gap misrepresents the historical and systemic nature of inequality. Instead, she urges scholars and policymakers to address the broader education debt, a concept that encompasses the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions that have systematically disadvantaged marginalized communities. The erosion of DEIB programs only deepens this debt, as it undermines efforts to redress disparities in opportunity and access. Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that the education debt is most clearly seen in the historical inequities faced by African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos in the U.S. education system.

Education research must not remain silent or neutral in the face of DEIB rollbacks. Instead, it must confront and interrogate these policy shifts, examining their consequences for equity, justice, and the public mission of education. Addressing the education debt requires a sustained commitment to inclusive practices, critical inquiry, and structural transformation within educational institutions. DEIB, when integrated into educational policies and practices, can mitigate the effects of historical discrimination, promote cultural responsiveness, and foster a sense of belonging among all students. It is imperative that higher education institutions work to equip leadership, faculty, and staff with the structural tools needed to embed DEIB practices into the fabric of the institution. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), diversity in education is valuable and linked to positive outcomes for all students. DEIB should be infused into the teaching, policies, mission statements, and visions of all higher education institutions.

The U.S. Department of Education (2023) outlines evidence-based strategies to promote diversity through outreach, admissions, financial aid, and college completion efforts, underscoring the importance of diversity in fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Over the years, the political landscape surrounding DEIB initiatives in higher education has grown increasingly contentious. PBS News (2024) reports increasing political and social opposition to DEI programs in U.S. colleges, with many states introducing legislation to limit or ban these initiatives. Across the country, we are witnessing a pivotal shift in the landscape of higher education. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging programs that were once central to the mission of many colleges and universities have now been eliminated due to sweeping legislative and executive actions. State legislatures in Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, among others, followed suit by banning or restricting DEI offices, programming, and curriculum, often under the guise of combating Critical Race Theory (Murphy, 2024).

A 2025 Executive Order declared DEI initiatives to be radical and wasteful and labeled them illegal and immoral discrimination programs, calling instead for a government that serves every person with equal dignity and respect (Exec. Order No. 14151, 2025, para. 1). The polarization of DEI underscores the urgency for scholarship that centers the lived experiences of marginalized communities and offers actionable strategies for resilience and institutional transformation. These political actions reflect a broader cultural backlash against equity-focused efforts, with profound implications for faculty hiring, student services, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom. As DEI language is stripped from policy documents and programming is defunded, colleges and universities are faced with a complex challenge. If DEI efforts are being dismantled, how do colleges and universities ensure that all students, regardless of race, background, identity, or political belief feel a true sense of belonging on campus? This question is especially urgent given the deeply entrenched educational inequities that still define American higher education.

Historically, marginalized groups, particularly students of color, have faced achievement gaps and structural barriers to success—barriers that are rooted not in individual shortcomings, but in systemic inequality. Stanley (2023) explains that Black educators often navigate hostile school environments shaped by underlying beliefs that devalue Blackness and treat Black individuals as expendable. DEIB initiatives have long provided a pathway to address these disparities, offering culturally responsive practices, inclusive curricula, and community-building strategies that foster more equitable learning environments. This paper argues that even as formal DEI programs are rolled back, the responsibility to create inclusive, supportive, and fair educational spaces must remain central to the mission of higher education. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, this work explores how DEIB principles grounded in dignity, justice, and belonging can serve as a catalyst for systemic transformation. If we are to uphold the promise of higher education, institutions must reimagine their commitment to belonging beyond partisan divides and ensure that all students have the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual movement and framework that originated in the United States during the late 1970s and 1980s, primarily within legal studies, and has since expanded into other disciplines, including education. CRT challenges dominant cultural narratives and legal frameworks by positing that racism is not just an individual prejudice but a deeply embedded structural phenomenon that is perpetuated by systems, policies, and institutions. According to Zamudio et al. (2011), "Critical Race Theory provides us with an alternative theoretical lens and pedagogical orientation that we believe will help us to address the problems of schooling that students of color confront" (p. 161). CRT argues that racism is not incidental but rather is a permanent feature of American society. Scholars like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw have been foundational in using CRT to analyze how race and power intersect with law, politics, and education (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991).

Critical Race Theory provides a lens for understanding the structural and systemic nature of racism in education. Rooted in legal scholarship, CRT posits that racism is embedded within laws, policies, and institutions, rather than being merely an individual act of prejudice. This framework critiques the neutrality of traditional educational practices and encourages educators to examine how race intersects with other forms of inequality. By applying CRT to education, we can uncover how systemic biases and historical practices perpetuate inequities, particularly for students of color. CRT emphasizes the importance of counter-narratives and encourages educational reform by centering the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

A core tenet of CRT is that racism is not merely an individual act of prejudice but a system of power that is embedded in legal, social, and educational structures. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), Critical Race Theory challenges the core assumptions of the liberal order, including ideas such as equality under the law, objective legal reasoning, and race-neutral constitutional principles. It critiques the concept of colorblindness by arguing that ignoring race in the pursuit of equality overlooks the persistent influence of systemic racism and ultimately reinforces existing power structures.

One of the key components of CRT is the use of counter-narratives, which are personal stories and lived experiences of marginalized people that challenge the dominant narratives in society. Crenshaw (2018) introduced the concept of intersectionality, which is central to CRT. Intersectionality emphasizes that people's identities are shaped by race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors that interact in complex ways that cannot be fully understood by analyzing each category in isolation. Crenshaw (2018) emphasizes that intersectionality requires understanding how various forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism interact to shape social problems. Different types of oppression connect and affect people's lives.

In the context of education, CRT offers a powerful lens for examining how schools reproduce inequality. Ladson-Billings (1998) discusses how CRT can be applied to educational settings by challenging the idea that schools are neutral institutions. In fact, schools often serve to reinforce social hierarchies by upholding discriminatory practices, such as tracking students based on race and socioeconomic status or using curricula that largely exclude the histories and perspectives of marginalized communities. As Ladson-Billings (1998) discussed, CRT asserts that race and

racism are central to the discussion of inequality. Thus, CRT encourages educators to address the role of racism within educational systems and to reconsider what is being taught, who is teaching it, and who benefits from these practices. Another significant aspect of CRT in education is its focus on empowering marginalized voices. By emphasizing the importance of storytelling and lived experiences, CRT works to amplify the voices of students and communities who have historically been excluded from the dominant discourse. Bell (1992) emphasizes that personal and lived experiences are essential to understanding and shaping both knowledge and justice within the legal system. This highlights the importance of creating educational environments where students of color, particularly, can see their experiences reflected in the curriculum, and feel valued and understood.

In essence, Critical Race Theory encourages a shift in how we think about racism, not just as an individual problem, but as a systemic issue that requires institutional change. It asks us to acknowledge the ongoing impact of historical oppression and to use that understanding to advocate for justice and equity. Ladson-Billings (1998) highlights that Critical Race Theory aims to transform society, not just analyze it. This transformative aim is crucial, particularly in fields like education, where addressing the legacy of racial inequality can lead to meaningful reforms that benefit all students. By incorporating these insights, CRT offers a framework for understanding and challenging the systemic forces that shape education and society, urging educators, policymakers, and individuals to act towards dismantling structures of racial inequality.

The Role of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) in Transforming Educational Systems

DEIB is not just a set of values but a transformative framework for systemic change. By embedding these principles into educational policies, curricula, and professional development, schools can begin to dismantle the inequities that disproportionately affect students from marginalized communities. Diversity ensures representation from multiple identities, experiences, and perspectives. Equity involves addressing the specific challenges faced by historically marginalized groups, particularly students of color. Inclusion ensures that all students have access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. Belonging fosters an environment where every student feels valued and respected. When individuals feel they belong, they are more likely to engage fully, take risks, and contribute authentically, driving personal and collective growth (Lomotey, 2022; Singleton, 2015). Research indicates that when DEIB practices are implemented effectively, they lead to improved academic outcomes and a more supportive learning environment (Parker et al., 2021). Furthermore, DEIB principles encourage collaboration across disciplines and sectors, helping to create systemic changes that benefit all students. As scholars increasingly call for systemic change in education, Conway et al. (2024) emphasize that:

The insights gathered from the articles of this era (2013–2023) strongly advocate for a significant change in education, urging a departure from traditional methods toward a comprehensive approach centered on equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. The integration of multicultural literature and community-based education emerges as a

potent force, restructuring not only teacher preparation but also catalyzing advancements in social justice. (p. 24)

Integrating DEIB into educational policy and practice is essential for creating systemic change that benefits all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. While DEIB initiatives have gained traction in many schools, their full integration into educational systems remains inconsistent. To achieve lasting change, DEIB principles must be embedded at a structural level, influencing school policies, curriculum design, and teacher training. This approach requires a systemic, long-term commitment from all stakeholders, including school boards, administrators, teachers, professors, academic deans, and policymakers.

Higher Education's Response to the Elimination of DEI

Higher education institutions are navigating a period of heightened political and ideological conflict, where longstanding commitments to DEI are being systematically challenged. The elimination of affirmative action following the U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 ruling, *Students for Fair Admissions*, coupled with an escalating wave of legislation targeting DEI offices, statements, and trainings, have created a chilling effect across campuses nationwide. In many states, DEI programs have been defunded, restructured, or outright banned, signaling a fundamental shift in how equity work is understood and supported in higher education. These changes are not occurring in isolation. They coincide with intensified scrutiny of curriculum content related to race, gender, and sexuality, rising restrictions on academic freedom, and increasing political pressure on public institutions to align with partisan agendas. Faculty and staff who lead or support DEI efforts often face burnout, isolation, and in some cases, direct retaliation or professional risk, especially in states where DEI work is cast as ideologically extreme. Meanwhile, disinformation campaigns across social media and news outlets have fueled widespread skepticism and mistrust of DEI, reframing equity work as divisive rather than unifying. Freelon and Wells (2020) note that the field of political communication has become increasingly focused on issues such as misinformation, disinformation, fake news, media manipulation, and propaganda. They argue that this cluster of media phenomena has emerged as a central topic of contemporary political discourse, drawing significant public attention, scholarly research, and funding.

These mounting tensions reveal a profound disconnect between the mission-driven values of higher education, critical inquiry, inclusive excellence, and the preparation of ethical leaders and the policy realities that many institutions must now navigate. This disconnect threatens not only DEI-specific initiatives but also the broader educational mission to cultivate democratic citizenship, cultural competency, and global responsibility. In response to these challenges, institutions must reimagine their approach to equity, not by abandoning DEI, but by embedding it more deeply into the core functions of higher education. Resistance to the dismantling of equity infrastructure must be both strategic and values driven. This includes investing in race-conscious leadership development, even where DEI-specific offices are curtailed. Institutions should embed equity metrics into institutional research, accreditation processes, and strategic planning frameworks. They must build cross sector coalitions of faculty, students, alumni, and community partners to advocate for inclusive practices and hold institutions accountable. Protecting academic freedom and defending the right to teach and research topics related to race,

identity, power, and justice is essential. Expanding culturally responsive pedagogy across disciplines, particularly in educator and leadership preparation programs, is also critical.

Promising practices include conducting equity audits, implementing restorative justice frameworks to address harm and exclusion, and engaging in campus climate assessments that elevate the voices of historically marginalized groups. Where formal DEI structures are eliminated, these practices offer a way to sustain equity work under new names, embedded in broader institutional priorities such as student success, leadership development, or mission aligned innovation. Ultimately, higher education must reaffirm its moral and educational commitment to equity, not as a political stance, but as a foundational principle of academic excellence and social responsibility. The path forward requires courage, creativity, and coalition building to ensure that inclusion and justice remain central to the higher education experience, even in the face of escalating external pressures.

Persistent Racial Inequities and the Urgency of DEI in Higher Education

More than 900,000 Black undergraduates are enrolled in public colleges and universities across the United States, yet their experiences and outcomes remain disproportionately marginalized within these institutions (Harper & Simmons, 2019). In their 50-state analysis of public four-year institutions, Harper and Simmons document inequities across four key indicators: (a) representation equity, (b) gender equity, (c) completion equity, and (d) the Black student-to-Black faculty ratio (2016-2017). Representation equity is the percentage of Black students at a college compared to the percentage of Black young adults in the state (2016). Gender equity is how many Black men and Black women are enrolled measured against the overall gender balance in college enrollment (2016-2017). Completion equity is the difference between how many Black students graduate in six years compared to the average graduation rate for all students. The Black student-to-Black faculty ratio is the number of Black students for every one Black professor, showing how well students are represented and supported by faculty (Harper & Simmons, 2019).

For example, although Black individuals make up 14.6% of the national population of 18- to 24-year-olds, they account for only 9.8% of full-time, degree-seeking undergraduates at public colleges and universities. According to Harper and Simmons, over 75% of public colleges and universities enroll traditional-aged Black students at rates lower than their proportion within the state population. This underrepresentation highlights the need for intentional diversity recruitment and admissions strategies.

College graduation rates for Black students also lag behind their peers. According to Harper and Simmons (2019), the six-year graduation rates for Black undergraduates are consistently lower than those of students overall at most public universities. Additionally, the student-to-faculty ratio at many institutions reveals a stark underrepresentation of Black faculty, which affects mentorship opportunities and campus climate. These findings underscore the importance of DEI initiatives in higher education. DEI practices aim not only to address underrepresentation but to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder student access, persistence, and success.

Integrating DEIB into Higher Education

To transform education, we must dismantle policies, practices, and mindsets rooted in White supremacy and colonial ideology. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)—grounded in CRT and decolonial thought—is not merely a trend but a moral imperative. It requires intentionality, courage, and accountability. Decolonial thought is a framework that challenges the enduring effects of colonialism by rejecting Eurocentric perspectives and restoring marginalized knowledge systems. It aims to promote justice by reclaiming suppressed histories and centering Indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing. A focus should be on embedding equity into the fabric of higher education. This can be accomplished through curriculum, leadership, policy, and pedagogy. It is essential to adopt a more justice-centered approach to change the system. The approach needs to transcend individual states or systems and answer a global call for liberation through education.

Key Steps to Advance DEIB in Higher Education

In light of the growing political backlash and systemic efforts to dismantle diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives, it is imperative for higher education institutions to respond with intentional, strategic action. The removal of DEIB frameworks not only threatens institutional values but also undermines the academic and social success of historically marginalized communities. To ensure campuses remain spaces of inclusion and equity, colleges and universities must adopt key steps that reaffirm their commitment to DEIB.

Curricular Reform. Curricular reform is vital to ensure that students are exposed to diverse perspectives and narratives. Conway et al. (2024) emphasize the urgency of equity-centered reform, noting, “The examination of tracking systems through the lens of Critical Race Theory is calling for reforms that go beyond rhetoric and stress the immediate need for inclusivity and equal opportunities” (p. 24). This includes incorporating content that reflects a wide range of cultures, histories, and lived experiences. Howard (2019) advocates for the integration of culturally relevant and responsive curricula that value the histories, contributions, and experiences of marginalized groups. By doing so, students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum, which has been shown to improve academic outcomes and foster a sense of belonging. Ladson-Billings (1998) emphasizes that education should not merely teach content but also challenge students to critically engage with the world around them, particularly regarding issues of race and justice.

Professional Development Programs. Educators must be equipped with the skills to support diverse learners, which requires ongoing professional development focused on equity, bias, and culturally responsive teaching. According to Hammond (2020), teachers must develop cultural competence to effectively engage with students from various backgrounds and create environments where all students can thrive. This training should be an integral part of teacher preparation and continued professional learning. Programs that focus on addressing implicit biases, understanding the socio-cultural contexts of students, and adapting teaching strategies are crucial for creating more inclusive learning environments. Professional development should include a focus on students' identities and lived experiences.

Policy Changes. Addressing disparities in educational policy is essential for ensuring that DEIB principles extend beyond the classroom. This includes revising policies that disproportionately affect students of color, such as disparities in school funding, resources, and disciplinary practices. For example, Singleton (2015) discusses how biased disciplinary policies, such as zero-tolerance policies, often result in the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students of color, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. Similarly, addressing inequities in funding and access to high-quality resources can help close achievement gaps and create more equitable learning environments. Parker et al. (2021) argue that policies must prioritize equitable resource distribution and support systems for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A Paradigm Shift in Educational Models. DEIB integration requires a fundamental shift in educational practices. Moving away from traditional, one-size-fits-all models to more personalized and inclusive approaches is essential for meeting the unique needs of diverse student populations. This paradigm shift involves recognizing and accommodating the varied learning styles, strengths, and challenges that students bring to the classroom. Cobb (2017) notes that embracing diversity of thought, culture, and learning preferences not only benefits marginalized students but also enhances the learning experience for all. Lomotey (2022) reinforces this idea by arguing that schools must actively decolonize their structures and methodologies to better serve the evolving needs of a global and diverse student body.

The Impact of DEIB Practices in Education

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) practices can transform the educational landscape by confronting inequities and creating more inclusive environments for all students. These practices go beyond mere representation, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers, address achievement gaps, and foster a sense of belonging among diverse student populations. DEIB can play a pivotal role in shaping more equitable and supportive learning environments. However, despite the proven benefits of DEIB, political resistance and challenges to the widespread implementation of DEIB practices continue to pose significant obstacles. This section explores the profound impact of DEIB practices on education, highlighting how these practices address structural issues, improve student engagement, and support the professional growth of educators in creating a more inclusive educational system.

Dismantling Systemic Barriers. DEIB practices confront and challenge the systemic barriers that perpetuate educational inequities. For example, schools that implement restorative justice practices and culturally relevant teaching create environments where students feel seen and valued, leading to improved academic outcomes and reduced behavioral issues (Singleton, 2015).

Addressing Achievement Gaps. The persistent achievement gap between White students and students of color is a clear sign of systemic issues within educational systems. Research shows that when DEIB principles are integrated into teaching practices and curricula, students from marginalized groups experience increased engagement and success (Lomotey, 2022).

Fostering Belonging. A sense of belonging is crucial for student success. Strayhorn (2019) emphasized that students' sense of safety and belonging are critical factors that influence their

academic success and overall well-being in school environments. Students who feel valued in their educational environment are more likely to engage with their learning and persist through challenges. A culture of belonging, where students' cultural identities are affirmed, is essential for creating an inclusive educational environment.

Challenging Political Resistance. Despite strong evidence supporting the benefits of DEIB practices, political resistance has grown in recent years. “Diversity enriches the educational experience. We learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own...” (American Council on Education, 2012, p. 1). Efforts to limit the teaching of race and diversity in schools have created obstacles to DEIB implementation. Jackson (2025) discusses how anti-DEI legislation poses a threat to psychologically and culturally safe learning environments—critical components for student success and faculty engagement. Nevertheless, DEIB remains essential for creating an equitable educational system that serves all students.

Professional Development for DEIB. Effective professional development is critical for fostering DEIB practices in schools. Teachers and educational leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to address issues of race, equity, and cultural responsiveness in their classrooms. This involves engaging in ongoing conversations about race and creating an educational culture where diversity is celebrated.

From Inclusion to Belonging: Advancing Equity in Higher Education

While diversity and inclusion are critical, they are not sufficient. Moving toward a framework of belonging where students feel accepted, valued, and empowered is essential for equity. Strayhorn (2019) asserts, students feeling a sense of belonging is critical for their success in college. Belonging requires intentional structural changes across curriculum, pedagogy, faculty hiring, student support, and leadership practices. Cheeks (2025) explained that belonging goes beyond mere inclusion, equity surpasses basic fairness, and diversity by itself is insufficient (p. 10). Belonging-centered approaches help close equity gaps by affirming students' cultural identities, improving access to mentorship, and ensuring that campuses reflect the diversity of their student populations. For example, investing in the recruitment and retention of Black faculty not only improves representation but provides culturally relevant support for students. Addressing graduation disparities requires moving beyond numerical targets to create environments in which historically marginalized students can thrive.

Thus, DEIB efforts must be seen not as abstract ideals, but as essential strategies for repairing institutional harm and building inclusive, student-centered campuses. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) observe that educators often operate within a culture that values students not for their inherent worth, but primarily for their achievements. They note that “achievement takes priority over personhood, relationship, community and belonging” (p. 38). Although this observation originally applied to K–12 settings, it resonates profoundly within higher education. When universities prioritize grades, publications, and other measurable outcomes, both students and faculty may come to believe that their value is contingent on these metrics rather than on their fundamental dignity.

Embracing a belonging through dignity framework calls on institutions to place human dignity at the center of their mission, fostering environments where achievement naturally follows from a foundation of respect, inclusion, and authentic community. This is not a peripheral concern; it is a foundational shift that higher education institutions must critically examine and prioritize as they move forward. By re-centering education on dignity and belonging, colleges and universities can cultivate healthier, more equitable learning communities that serve both academic and human development.

Political and Legislative Challenges to DEIB. We are currently witnessing a national trend in which Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) efforts are increasingly framed as ideological impositions rather than equity-focused practices. Legislative actions at the state level have effectively narrowed the space for inclusive policy development and institutional autonomy, posing significant challenges to those seeking to foster equitable learning environments. States such as Florida, Kansas, Texas, Ohio, Utah, Alabama, and North Dakota have passed or proposed laws aimed at eliminating DEI offices, banning diversity training, and restricting curriculum that addresses systemic racism or identity-based equity (PBS News, 2024). Notably, Florida's Senate Bill 266 and Texas's Senate Bill 17 represent some of the most sweeping measures, eliminating funding for DEI initiatives and prohibiting mandatory DEI training and statements (PBS News, 2024). These policy shifts reflect a broader ideological backlash against perceived "wokeness" in higher education, often framed under the banner of promoting intellectual diversity.

However, these laws risk silencing historically marginalized voices, undermining faculty governance, and discouraging efforts to create inclusive campus climates. As institutions navigate this shifting legal landscape, it is critical that researchers, educators, and leaders continue to advocate for equity-informed frameworks that preserve the educational mission of higher education and support all learners.

The Importance of DEIB Frameworks in Addressing Educational Inequities. Dismantling educational inequalities requires a multi-faceted approach that challenges deeply embedded systems of power and privilege. DEIB principles provide a necessary framework for confronting these inequities and creating more inclusive, equitable educational environments. By integrating DEIB into school policies, curricula, and professional development, educational systems can better support marginalized students, particularly students of color. The work of achieving educational equity is ongoing, but by grounding these efforts in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and a commitment to systemic transformation, the educational landscape can be reshaped to offer equal opportunities for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Impact of the Supreme Court Ruling on Affirmative Action and DEI. The Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), which ended race-conscious admissions in higher education, has further impacted DEI work, and its effects on admissions processes will be felt for many years. In response, higher education institutions should seek alternatives to ensure race-conscious approaches remain part of the admissions process. Affirmative action bans risk further marginalizing historically underrepresented students and ignoring systemic inequities. Stanley (2023) emphasizes the importance of policymakers confronting the harmful consequences of previous policies and

reforms, advocating for changes that prioritize fostering a sense of belonging for all students. It is imperative for higher education institutions to recognize the impact of banning affirmative action and DEIB practices on students of color. Many DEIB initiatives have focused on fostering belonging among students. Although many universities embraced DEIB as beneficial for students and institutions, recent attacks on funding threaten this progress. Now is the time for higher education institutions to take a stand and focus on policies that support all students.

Reaffirming the Vision of Equity and Belonging in Education. Moving forward, stakeholders including educators, policymakers, and scholars must remain committed to fostering an education system that values diversity, promotes belonging, and ensures equitable opportunities for every student. Integrating DEIB into educational policy and practice requires concerted efforts to revise curricula, enhance professional development, and implement policy reforms that promote equity and inclusion. These efforts are critical to creating educational environments where students of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds can succeed and feel a genuine sense of belonging. Research has shown that belonging in higher education is a key determinant of psychological wellbeing and academic success (Allen et al., 2024). This article highlights how DEIB can serve as a transformative force for dismantling systemic inequities in education. Grounded in CRT, these efforts call for structural change to create an educational system where all students, especially students of color, have equal opportunities to succeed.

Reframing DEIB Amid Political and Legislative Backlash. In the face of legislative and political attacks on DEIB initiatives, higher education institutions must reframe equity and inclusion not as optional or partisan political stances, but as essential components of academic excellence, student success, and democratic engagement. Universities should emphasize the educational value of diverse perspectives in cultivating critical thinking, cultural competence, and workforce readiness. By embedding DEIB principles into mission statements, curriculum design, faculty development, and accreditation standards, institutions can resist reductive narratives that falsely portray equity work as ideological indoctrination.

Additionally, institutions must proactively educate internal and external stakeholders—including trustees, alumni, and policymakers—about the empirical evidence linking DEIB to improved educational outcomes and institutional performance. This reframing is essential for preserving academic freedom and reaffirming higher education's public mission.

Strategies for Resilience and Sustaining DEIB Values. Beyond reframing, colleges and universities should adopt resilience strategies to safeguard DEIB values amid hostile political climates. Such strategies include diversifying funding streams to reduce political leverage tied to state appropriations, legally vetting DEIB related policies to ensure compliance without capitulation, and empowering shared governance bodies to maintain institutional autonomy. Faculty, staff, and students can build advocacy coalitions with civil rights organizations, accrediting bodies, and professional associations to collectively resist harmful policies. Transparency and data-driven storytelling, such as publishing campus climate surveys or equity audits, can demonstrate ongoing institutional commitment while building public trust. Ultimately, higher education must respond to these pressures not with silence or symbolic gestures but through sustained leadership, legal literacy, and bold action that centers equity as foundational, not symbolic, to the academic mission.

Moral and Educational Imperatives for Equity and Belonging. The removal of formal DEIB programs may alter how colleges and universities pursue equity, but it does not remove the moral or educational imperative to foster belonging for all students. Transforming education requires dismantling policies, practices, and mindsets rooted in White supremacy and colonial ideology. DEIB, grounded in CRT and decolonial thought, is not merely a trend but a moral imperative demanding intentionality, courage, and accountability. Embedding equity into the fabric of higher education through curriculum, leadership, policy, and pedagogy is essential. We must move toward a social justice-oriented approach that transcends geography and centers liberation as a global goal (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Looking Ahead: Ensuring Belonging Beyond DEIB Programs

If DEIB policies end in higher education, the question remains: How do we ensure a “sense of belonging” for all students? Rather than allowing this moment to become a point of division, higher education institutions have an opportunity and responsibility to reimagine inclusion in ways that transcend political lines and focus on shared human dignity. Institutions must ask: What systems, values, and practices will replace DEI? How will students who have historically felt marginalized be supported? How can all students, regardless of political perspective, experience respect, safety, and the freedom to grow?

Across the country, we are witnessing a pivotal shift in higher education. DEI programs once central to many institutions’ missions are being dismantled or significantly reduced due to legislative and executive action. A 2025 Executive Order declared DEI initiatives to be “radical and wasteful” and labeled them “illegal and immoral discrimination programs,” advocating for a government that serves every person “with equal dignity and respect” (Exec. Order No. 14151, 2025, para. 1). State legislatures have echoed these sentiments by dismantling DEI offices and removing equity language from university policies.

Yet, amid this dismantling, one vital question persists: If DEIB efforts are no longer in place, how do we ensure that all students, regardless of background, identity, or political belief, feel a true sense of belonging on campus? “The notion of belonging in higher education is crucial for student success and wellbeing” (Allen et al., 2024, p. 4). Belonging is not a partisan goal; it is a foundational principle of higher education, democracy, and human development. In this new chapter, rather than arguing over whether students deserve to belong, efforts must focus on ensuring they do.

Given increasing restrictions and bans on DEI initiatives, it is more important than ever to find new ways to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Research shows belonging is robustly associated with key college outcomes such as persistence and mental health. Moreover, increases in students’ sense of belonging over time are linked to improvements in these outcomes (Brady & Gopalan, 2020).

Conclusion

The current political and legislative environment increasingly frames Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives in higher education as ideological rather than equity driven. Several states have passed laws restricting or eliminating DEIB programs, threatening institutional autonomy and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Despite these challenges, DEIB remains essential for addressing systemic inequities and fostering inclusive, equitable educational environments. The 2023 Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions* has further complicated DEI efforts by banning race-conscious admissions, highlighting the need for alternative, equity-focused policies. Scholars stress the importance of continuing DEIB work grounded in Critical Race Theory and decolonial thought to ensure belonging and equitable opportunities for all students. Higher education institutions must reframe DEIB as integral to academic excellence and democratic engagement and adopt resilience strategies to sustain these values amid political opposition. Ultimately, dismantling inequities requires courageous, systemic transformation centered on equity and social justice. Moving beyond formal policies, we must engage in honest, creative dialogue that centers the experiences of marginalized students and educators. With this commitment, review the *Questions for Higher Education*, an original poem intended to spark meaningful conversations and inspire continued efforts toward a more just and inclusive academic community despite the obstacles.

Questions for Higher Education: A Poem by Brandon J. Cheeks

If diversity, equity, and inclusion is too much in the melting pot,
How can we ensure that feeling of a sense of belonging when we enter your parking lot?
You represent people of all different backgrounds, religions, beliefs, and skin tones in this land.
The question is how can we all be included in this plan?
Many feel their identities stripped, their ideas dismissed, and even their silence song.
Do you understand that many have struggled in silence for too long?
They walk your halls, eat in your space, cheer at the game in every shade and name.
Do they wonder do you see us, or just play the game?
The fight is over struggle of year, centuries, and eras searching for justice.
When is the right time to address the issues of systemic issues in our system of injustice?
I understand that in our nation it has been issues in our land.
Where is the moral code and your part in addressing the plan?
The land of the free, home of the brave.
When is it time for you to not sit back and just wave?
Elimination of the identity, history, beliefs, and ideas of part of the race.
How do you address the feelings of many of the shades that walk down the halls in your space?
Everyone has a right to education, if I recall the purpose of the equal protection clause.
Will you take time to review all the issues of our nation and simply take a pause?
Entering your doors, everyone deserves to feel valued in your educational institution,
Where policies foster belonging and address these issues to ensure an education revolution.
Living in a country that every four years the policies impact our future.
Who will take a chance to address issues and make decisions that are like a harmonic suture?
We want every place that is entered to be intertwined as the stitches on American flag.
Are you willing to take the time to address the lag?

Let your policies foster more than rules and regulations.
Will you build spaces that spark an educational revolution and restoration?
Our country has come a long way from the plantation.
So, will you continue to move forward to help make progress in our nation?
Don't forget the faces on your campus every two to four years as the laws shift the scene.
Will you take time to dare dream of something just and clean?

References

- Allen, K. A., Slaten, C., Hong, S., Ma, L., Craig, H., May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twentyyear systematic review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(5), 1–55. <https://doi.org/10.53761/s2he6n66>
- American Council on Education. (2012, June). *On the importance of diversity in higher education: Statement of the ACE Board of Directors*. <https://www.acenet.edu/documents/boarddiversitystatement-june2012.pdf>
- Bell, D. A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Brady, S. T., & Gopalan, M. (2020). College students 'sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>
- Cheeks, R. (2025). *Cracking the code: Building inclusive culture and climate*. Lulu Press, Incorporated.
- Cobb, C. (2017). Critical Race Theory and education: Implications for practice and policy. *Educational Leadership Review*, 5(1), 27–41.
- Cobb, F., & Krownapple, J. (2019). *Belonging through a culture of dignity: The keys to successful equity implementation*. Mimi and Todd Press.
- Conway, T., Khamisani, N., Shahsavari, V., & Wiafe, E. (2024). 50 years of publication: A document analysis of social justice in the *Educational Considerations* corpus. *Educational Considerations*, 50(1). <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2397>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Crenshaw, K. (2018). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.
- Crenshaw, K. W., Ritchie, A. J., Anspach, R., Gilmer, R., & Harris, L. (2015, July). *Say her name: Resisting police brutality against Black women*. African American Policy Forum & Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/3226/
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). NYU Press.
- Exec. Order No. 14151. (2025, January 20). Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>
- Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). Disinformation as political communication. *Political Communication*, 37(2), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>
- Hammond, Z. (2020). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

- Harper, S. R., & Simmons, I. (2019). *Black students at public colleges and universities: A 50-state report card*. University of Southern California, Race and Equity Center.
- Howard, T. C. (2019). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Jackson, M. J. (2025). The impact of antiDEI legislation on higher education pedagogy. *Journal of College and Character*, 26(1), 61-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2024.2442717>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006, October). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is Critical Race Theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863>
- Lomotey, K. (2022). *The intersection of race, culture, and schooling*. University Press.
- Murphy, S. (2024, April 24). A conservative quest to limit diversity programs gains momentum in states. Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/597b65d8f06062cff60b2e185281870a>
- PBS News. (2024, February 15). *Why diversity initiatives at colleges and companies are facing political backlash*. PBS NewsHour. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-diversity-initiatives-at-colleges-and-companies-are-facing-political-backlash>
- Parker, L., Dey, D., & Williams, D. (2021). *Building diversity and inclusion in schools: Strategies and approaches*. Harvard Education Press.
- Senate Bill 266, Higher Education (Chapter 202382). (2023). <https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2023/html/3201>
- Singleton, G. (2015). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Stanley, D. A. (Ed.). (2023). *#BlackEducatorsMatter: The experiences of Black teachers in an anti-Black world*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Students For Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 600 U.S 33-36. (2023). www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf
- Texas Education Code § 51.3525: Responsibility of governing boards regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Senate Bill 17). (2023). <https://texas.public.law/statutes/tex. educ. code section 51.3525>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce*. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2023, October 31). *Strategies for increasing diversity and opportunity in higher education*. <https://archive.org/details/diversity-and-opportunity-in-higher-education/page/9/mode/2up>
- Zamudio, M., Russell, C., Rios, F., & Bridgeman, J. L. (2011). *Critical Race Theory matters: Education and ideology*. Routledge.

Brandon J. Cheeks (bjamaalc@ksu.edu) graduated with his Ed.D. in 2024, from the College of Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. He is a school administrator for Salina Public Schools and Campus Ministry Advisor for Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina, Kansas. Follow him on X or Instagram @bjcheeks1.