

Organizational Implications of Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts in the United States

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

In the U.S. diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts have come under political scrutiny from various stakeholders, especially conservative policy makers. Over the past few years, hundreds of legislation (state and federal) have been introduced and/or passed limiting speech, curriculum, and programming efforts to create more inclusive and equitable collegiate environments. This presentation will describe the organizational implications of anti-DEI efforts (both legislative and otherwise). Data come from over 30 qualitative interviews of university Chief Diversity Officers and how they respond both organizationally and personally. The anti-DEI political movement has transcontinental foundations and implications of future research and practice will be of interest to U.K. and international audiences.

Full paper

Introduction

Especially over the past few years since the 2020 racial reckoning in the U.S., universities in the U.S. have increased efforts and organizational structures to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for faculty, staff, and students. An increasing number of institutions have utilized Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) as an organizational structure to coordinate DEI efforts (Worthington et al., 2020). CDOs play an important role in institutionalizing policies and strategic planning for DEI (NADOHE, 2023), but have come under significant political and social scrutiny due to conservative national political forces.

As of April 2024, there have been 84 anti-DEI bills introduced across 28 states (Chronicle, 2024). This increased political pressure has led to a range of organizational changes. (The Chronicle, 2024). CDOs are experiencing drastic changes to their roles, offices, and titles that only exacerbate existing challenges. While there has been news coverage on the effects of anti-DEI legislation, little empirical research exists on how CDOs are organizationally navigating anti-DEI actions (i.e., policy, rhetoric, and influence). Grounded in Ray's (2019) theory of racialized

organizations, this study seeks to understand how CDOs navigate the current sociopolitical moment.

Theoretical Framework

Using Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to understand CDOs' positions in higher education institutions better and their task of creating a more equitable and inclusive culture. First, racialized organizations legitimize the unequal distribution of resources by delineating and limiting access to organizational resources. He noted that "even diversity programs can reinforce and legitimize racial hierarchies they are purportedly designed to undermine" (p. 39). In addition, Whiteness as a credential "allows organizations to appear racially neutral in principle, while in practice institutionalizing the property interest in Whiteness" (p.41). Lastly, racialized decoupling "formal commitment to equity, access, and inclusion from policies and practices that reinforce or at least do not challenge existing racial hierarchies." (p.42).

Methods

This study is designed to understand what organizational navigational strategies CDOs are utilizing to respond to anti-DEI actions. We use methodological approaches from interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make sense of the experiences and everyday interactions that shape the experiences of CDOs navigating the social phenomenon of anti-DEI action (Smith et al., 2012). Participants were identified through a series of identification protocols. First, anti-DEI action states were identified using the Chronicle of Higher Education's DEI Legislation Tracker. \ In order to participate, participants had to be the senior diversity officer for the university and either currently or recently employed by the university. Thirty-one, approximately one hour long interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing software and audio recorded and transcribed.

Preliminary Findings

Based on our analysis, we found that CDOs are organizational navigating anti-DEI actions through multiple organizational strategies rooted in racialized systemic structures: 1) functional reallocation of resources, 2) symbolic, and 3) relational. Much of the anti-DEI actions have created functional changes to organizations that create an even more unequal distribution of resources through reallocation and elimination of resources, realignment of organizational structure, and change in programmatic offerings. Other changes have been more symbolic than functional changes. While some may perceive symbolic office name changes or statements as less impactful, it has exacerbated a dynamic where any mention of race, identity, or diversity is seen as unlawful or inappropriate. This deterioration of symbolic language moves organizations to value colorblindness as a "credential" that legitimizes Whiteness and delegitimizes diversity and equity. Lastly, one of the most impactful ramifications of anti-DEI actions has been the change in relational dynamics between CDOs and internal and external stakeholders to diminish the agency of racial and other minoritized stakeholders. CDO mentioned she has been isolated by both her president along with her institutional leader peers.

Discussion

The results are from an academic year-long data collection process that garnered confidential data from CDOs that have garnered valuable insights to understand how anti-DEI action are impacting changes both individuals and organizations. Theoretically, it is helpful to understand the systemic racist structures are manifesting through anti-DEI organizational response, while also acknowledging the social system of which DEI work functions in. Practically, anti-DEI actions will continue to exist and evolve, so institutional leaders must be ready to face external and internal pressures to ensure faculty, staff, and students continue to have an educational environment that is diverse, inclusive, and equitable. The anti-DEI political movement has transcontinental implications and aims and will be helpful for U.K. and international audiences to understand in order to better navigate.

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