Bridging the gap in DEI support: The challenges and opportunities of teaching DEI in 2023

Abstract

The prominence of DEI has increased in recent years, and most schools have developed infrastructures to support diversity awareness on campus. Other stakeholders have also increased their focus on DEI, and the space has become controversial. Some feel that more effort and resources should be invested in promoting diversity awareness, while others feel that too much emphasis has already been invested and that it impinges free speech. This panel of administrators and deans from various contexts will discuss how they are navigating this landscape, and audience members will be asked to share their experiences.

Keywords: DEI, stakeholders, politics

Introduction

Issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are prominent in the higher education space. For example, the Supreme Court is expected to rule soon on the constitutionality of affirmative action practices in admissions, which are seen as giving unfair advantages to certain demographic groups (Gluckman, 2023). A legislator in Georgia recently requested institutions in the University System of Georgia to report on allocated resources to support DEI initiatives, along with documenting specific courses, curriculum, programs, and personnel that advance such priorities (Stirgus, 2022). In a similar tactic, neighboring Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, has asked universities to develop inventories of classes teaching DEI topics, which are framed as "divisive topics" (Kelderman,2023). Movements to stifle DEI-related education and programming are in direct contrast to what employers demand when it comes to ensuring workforce readiness and competence. A recent report by McKinsey and Company (2022) revealed that firms benefit from DEI in terms of competitive advantage and financial performance. Simply put, DEI matters to employers and employees (Caminiti, 2021; Buss, 2022). In our panel session, we intend to unpack the numerous competing forces for management educators and academic leaders as we work to build and sustain a culture of DEI inside and outside of the classroom.

Theoretical Foundation

We hear politicians railing against Critical Race Theory, which until recently was a relatively unknown academic model. Multiculturalism, identity, and bias training are now part of the public discourse, with vocal critics and defenders. Lawmakers are drafting bills to limit the teaching of divisive topics, and according to PEN America nearly 20 states have signed such measures into law (Kelderman, 2023). Faculty are generally perceived as liberal, and universities

as bastions of liberal indoctrination; the logic is that conservative students feel muzzled and uncomfortable expressing their views in class. Campuses should be open to "free speech", which includes the full range of political discourse. These arguments likely have some threads of truth that are worth considering, but in the politicized environment it can be hard to discuss the pros and cons.

On the other hand, advocacy can also be seen within our field, for example in the AACSB standards (2022). "The school is expected to demonstrate a commitment to advancing diversity and inclusion issues in the context of the cultural landscape in which it operates. The school fosters awareness, understanding, acceptance, and respect for diverse viewpoints related to current and emerging issues" (AACSB, 2020, p. 19). Many schools have developed diversity statements that appear on their websites with their mission and vision. Significant resources have been directed to offices of DEI, staff, and programs intended to improve diversity on campus. Schools are tracking their progress in diversity and expanding the ways they define diversity to make sure they are truly inclusive. AACSB has also challenged universities to identify focus areas of societal influence and thought leadership that will have direct, positive impact. Universities like Georgia State University (Higgins, 2022), among others, seek to strategically advance DEI for positive impact and many are aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) as a framework. Additionally, management educators have been, for several years, disseminating meaningful scholarship that helps business professors address these topics in their courses (e.g., Julien & Stratton, 2014; Liu, Bredenthal & Schaffer, 2022; Leigh & Rivers, 2023; Lo, 2023). This trajectory is creating a tension between public universities wanting to promote and publicize their DEI efforts, and at the same time wanting to "fly under

the radar" to avoid challenges from their state legislators who control at least some of the institutional funding.

There is some movement towards supporting open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. One author of this proposal regularly receives notices about third party workshops on campus DEI topics (for example, hosted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*). Most of these are in the pro-diversity camp, about improving and growing diversity on campus. The Heterodox Academy (https://heterodoxacademy.org/) has been offering resources to support viewpoint diversity, and could be classified as holding the neutral space. Sources note that faculty and administrators need good communication skills to hold difficult conversations on these topics.

How are administrators and faculty supposed to bridge this difficult space without running into challenges from DEI critics and supporters - those who say too much is being done vs. those who think more must be done? Are there approaches or resources that administrators have found to be useful? In this session, four academic leaders will share their experiences and strategies for leading related to DEI, and audience members will be invited to share how they have coped with the politically charged space. This session is open to all levels of experience and would be best scheduled in a space that allows for open discussion.

Panel Overview and Description

We are requesting a 60 minute symposium session. Our 4 panelists represent a range of institutional contexts, including public vs. private universities, red vs. blue state political contexts, and liberal arts vs. professionally focused.

Timeline:

Introduction - 5 minutes

Brief panelist introductions and explanations of their contexts - 16 minutes (4 panelists, 4 minutes or less for each)

Whole group discussion - 30 minutes - all participants share their thoughts on the topic. Depending on the size of the group, we may break into smaller tables. We can run a single discussion with up to 20 participants, so it is unlikely that we will need to split into subgroups.

Summary and wrap-up - 10 minutes

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