

Erec Smith
Research fellow for the Cato Institute
President of Free Black Thought
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“Sacrificing Excellence for Ideology: The Real Cost of DEI”
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The Case Against DEI in Higher Education

Chairperson Grothman, Ranking Member Krishnamoorthi, and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to give my thought on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives that have swept through higher education. DEI is championed by its proponents as transformative tools for social justice. However, when one dissects the ideological foundations and real-world impacts of DEI, a more troubling picture emerges. Understanding the ideological roots, operational consequences, and institutional incentives that sustain DEI is crucial for policymakers, educators, and the public. It is not enough to ask whether DEI sounds virtuous; we must ask whether it functions in a way that advances or obstructs the mission of higher education.

To be clear, DEI is not a benign reform agenda; it draws from radical Marxist theory, systematically dismantles meritocratic principles, harms students’ readiness for post-college life, encourages performative prefigurative politics within campuses, and has spawned a thriving industry nourished by university dollars. This essay examines these critiques in turn, revealing how DEI has become antithetical academic excellence, integrity, and genuine empowerment.

DEI’s philosophical roots trace back to Marxist critical theory rather than classical liberalism.¹ Central to Marxism is a framework of oppression and power—where society is viewed in binary terms: oppressors and oppressed. DEI imports these binaries into the academy, prioritizing collective identity over individual agency. The academic ideology of DEI has the general term of Critical Social Justice (CSJ),

defined by Helen Pluckrose as an ideology that argues the following that knowledge is socially constructed by a dominant group (white, male, heterosexual, etc.) for their own benefit and normalized to the point where all people think that knowledge is “just the way it is.”^[1] Thus, anything considered “normal” is suspect. Discrimination is rarely seen overtly; it does most of its damage covertly.

What’s more, *all* human interaction in Western society is framed as “oppressor vs oppressed.” This is reflected in one of CSJ’s primary tenets: “The question is not ‘did racism take place?’ but rather ‘how did racism manifest in that situation?’”^[2] This means that any interaction between a white person and a black person is implicitly an act of racism and an interaction between a white man and white woman is implicitly an act of sexism. There is no need to analyze the situation to determine if discrimination is happening. For CSJ proponents, discrimination is definitely happening, one just has to be adequately trained to notice it. You can see here that the “critical” in Critical Social Justice is different the “critical” of critical thinking. CSJ isn’t critical at all in the standard meaning of that term; they start with the conclusion (e.g., racism is happening) and work backwards to formulate the argument. This is the opposite of critical thinking. In fact, within the framework of CSJ, “critical” could be understood as “counter-hegemonic” or “counter-cultural.”

So, because modern DEI is undergirded by CSJ, it creates initiatives in which power dynamics are not a subject of investigation but an assumed framework.^[3] (Henceforth, the term “DEI” will always denote social justice initiatives based in CSJ.) Paulo Freire’s model of “critical consciousness”—encouraging marginalized groups to see themselves only in opposition to oppressive systems—is foundational in DEI pedagogy.^[4] Scholars Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay trace the contemporary activist mindset back to postmodern critiques that displaced empirical inquiry with standpoint epistemology.^[5] “Often, these postmodern critiques are considered the primary source of CSJ ideology, but I think they are better seen as tools to destabilize dominant forces: cultural Marxism is the soldier, postmodern critique is that soldier’s weapon.) In this worldview, knowledge and truth are filtered through racial, sexual, and gender identities rather than evidence, reason, or debate.

One of the salient effects of DEI subverts traditional meritocratic processes in favor of demographic representation and ideological conformity. In hiring, admissions, and curriculum design, qualifications increasingly take a back seat to race, gender, and perceived allyship with DEI principles. I, a Black man and former academic, have reported being professionally isolated for simply questioning DEI orthodoxy.^[6] This aligns with broader observations, such as those of Heather Mac Donald, who

documents how universities have redefined excellence to mean political compliance.^[7] Shelby Steele has similarly warned that institutions use DEI not to elevate students but to soothe their own guilt.^[8] The result is a weakening of academic standards and a chilling effect on intellectual dissent, particularly for students and faculty who deviate from ideological norms.

Another salient effect of DEI is the disempowerment of marginalized groups. DEI proponents claim to empower students from underrepresented backgrounds, but in practice, it risks infantilizing them. By portraying students as perpetual victims of systemic injustice, DEI undermines resilience, agency, and academic engagement. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt describe this phenomenon as ‘coddling’—manifested as an avoidance of intellectual discomfort that is believed to harm students’ psychological development.⁸ Meanwhile, Arum and Roksa show that many college students fail to develop core skills in reasoning and writing.⁹ Time spent on ideological reeducation is time not spent on education itself. Employers are beginning to notice.

Claimed attempts to empower students seem to make more sense if the goal is to disempower hegemony and those who enjoy it. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the concept of ethnomathematics, which is a form of math pedagogy that is considered distinctly anti-white. In *A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction: Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction*,^[9] Sonia Cintron et. al argue that current math pedagogy is saturated with whiteness and must be re-imagined, especially for the sake of black students. In this document, things like “showing work” and “getting the right answer” are considered white expectations and, therefore, tools of racism when expected from non-white children. This is not just insulting to black people but detrimental to the development of black students. This is DEI applied to teaching.

Pedagogies like equitable math come from institutions of higher education and teacher education schools (Ed Schools) that have been captured by DEI. In this kind of spaces, the bubble of academia, DEI is the hegemonic force. It operates according to the logic of prefiguration: acting now as though a future utopia has already arrived. This results in symbolic reforms—pronoun rituals, ‘safe spaces,’ and land acknowledgments—that prioritize performance over substance.

Rachelle Peterson has chronicled how DEI administrators institutionalize these practices through bureaucracy, transforming colleges into echo chambers.^[10] David Bromwich warns that when universities see themselves as sites of revolution rather than education, their mission is lost.^[11] Rather than fostering civic debate and moral imagination, prefigurative DEI promotes intellectual tribalism.

Perhaps most cynically, DEI has become a lucrative industry. Although not necessarily as a sign of wrongdoing, the capital gained for DEI initiatives cannot be ignored. From multi-million-dollar diversity consultancies to ever-expanding administrative offices, the business of equity is thriving—often funded by tuition, taxpayer dollars, and student loan debt.

DEI has other money issues. In “The Next Battle Against DEI is Student Loans,” Andrew Gillen and I reveal how DEI expenditures are routinely justified through student loan revenue.^[12] Institutions use moral cover to obscure fiscal irresponsibility. Perhaps what was most problematic in the last several years was the money received from federal grants to fund DEI initiatives.^[13] It is not difficult to imagine how those millions of dollars could have been better spent on student achievement than lessons on how math is a specifically white way of knowing. Max Eden and Amber Todoroff describe the DEI industry as a self-perpetuating system: the more racism is perceived, the more DEI staff and training must be hired.¹¹ This profit motive undermines DEI’s moral claims. It’s no longer about justice; it’s about job security and branding.

This essay is meant to be a brief overview of DEI’s detriments, but it is also imploration to recommitment to intellectual seriousness, scholarly integrity, and moral courage. We need institutions that teach students how to think, not what to think. We need institutions that prepare students for a challenge, not protect them from it. This is not just a critique of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives constituted by CSJ ideology. This essay is an invitation to build institutions that empower people—all people—not just to express their identities, but to transcend them.

^[1] Helen Pluckrose, *The Counterweight Handbook* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2024), 20.

^[2] Robin DiAngelo, “Anti-Racism Handout,” 2016. Accessed June 21, 2025. [Anti-racism-handout-1-page-2016.pdf](#)

^[3] Erec Smith, “The Institutionalization of Racism? Contemporary DEI’s Effect on Higher Education,” *Free Society*, Summer 2024.

^[4] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

^[5] Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).

^[6] Erec Smith, “I’m a Black Ph.D.—Here’s Why I Left Academia,” Cato Institute, March 7, 2024.

^[7] Heather Mac Donald, *The Diversity Delusion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

^[8] Shelby Steele, *White Guilt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

[9] Sonia Michelle Cintron, Dan Wadlington, and Andre ChenFeng, *A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction: Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction*, Equitable Math, 2021.

https://equitablemath.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/1_STRIDE1.pdf.

[10] David Bromwich, *Politics by Other Means* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[11] David Bromwich, "Trapped in the Virtual Classroom," *The New York Review of Books*, July 9, 2015,

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/07/09/trapped-virtual-classroom/>.

[12] Andrew Gillen and Erec Smith, "The Next Battle Against DEI Is Student Loans," *Cato Institute Commentary*, March 3, 2025, published in *Washington Examiner*,

<https://www.cato.org/commentary/next-battle-against-dei-student-loans>.

[13] . Max Eden and Amber Todoroff, "Making Science Great Again," *Washington Examiner*, March 6,

2024, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/faith-freedom-self-reliance/3236252/making-science-great-again/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.