THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF DEI IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS FACULTY IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

Shannon R. Dean-Scott
Texas State University

Paige Haber-Curran
Texas State University

Abstract

In this reflexive essay we examine the shifting landscape of higher education in the southern United States, focusing on the impact of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation on public higher education. Across the United States over 136 anti-DEI bills have been introduced since 2023, significantly affecting university programs and structures. This essay explores the challenges faced by student affairs professionals and the ethical responsibility of faculty members in student affairs professional preparation programs to prepare practitioners to foster inclusive environments, focus on students' holistic development, and serve all students. Through sharing our reflections and experiences, we highlight the importance of DEI principles in student affairs and advocate for continued engagement in DEI discussions in curricular spaces. The essay underscores the critical role of student affairs faculty in promoting equity and inclusion within the current sociopolitical climate.

Keywords: *DEI, Texas, legislation, professional preparation, faculty*

Please direct inquires about this manuscript to: Paige Haber-Curran, ph31@txstate.edu. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3596-0314

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In the last three years there has been a significant shift in the landscape of higher education in the United States, particularly through the introduction of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation. Since 2023, and at the time of the writing of this essay, there have been over 136 anti-DEI legislation bills introduced in 29 states, many of which are in the southern United States (DEI Legislation Tracker, n.d.). In Texas, where we are faculty members at a public institution, we have experienced significant shifts in university programs, services, and structures due to Senate Bill 17 (SB17), which prohibits specified DEI activities in public higher education institutions. Much of the anti-DEI legislation (e.g., Texas SB17) has directly impacted co-curricular programs, institutional structures, and administrative contexts. In the case of SB17, despite the legislation not focusing on research, curriculum/teaching, and non-mandatory training, some institutions and university systems have over-interpreted or mis-interpreted the legislation, implementing changes outside of the scope of legislation and thus impacting research, curriculum, and other university facets (Haber-Curran et al., 2025; PEN America, 2024; Rice, 2024).

So far much of the legislation has not bled into academic and curricular contexts (DEI Legislation Tracker, n.d.). However, this is shifting in some states. Recently legislation has encroached on academics within Florida and Ohio (Lieb et al., 2025). Recently, Texas passed Senate Bill 37, which will give the Governor politically-appointed control over academic curriculum, majors, and minors, shifting oversight and power away from public institutions, university systems, and faculty senates (Lieb et al., 2025).

Anti-DEI shifts affecting higher education provide significant challenges for institutions. Further, these shifts have a considerable impact on the profession of student affairs—both in the implementation of programs and services and in the conflict with the philosophical values, principles, and aims of the student affairs profession, which strongly emphasizes equity, inclusion, and social justice (ACPA/NASPA, 2015; Dean-Scott et al., 2024; Reason & Broido, 2017). We believe this is even more pivotal now than ever as many spaces, programs, and communities that students may have previously sought out have been eliminated from institutions (e.g., DEI offices, LGBT centers). It is the responsibility of higher educational professionals, while working within the confines of the law, to help foster a sense of belonging and inclusion across all student affairs offices and functions. Given the current sociopolitical landscape, it is critical that faculty in student affairs preparation programs also recognize their role and ethical responsibility. Faculty members are in a pivotal position of preparing current and future student affairs professionals to do just this—to bring a DEI lens to their work to support students from all backgrounds and identities and help cultivate an inclusive and welcoming campus community.

In this reflective essay, we consider the challenges related to anti-DEI legislation through our perspectives as two faculty members in student affairs professional preparation programs. We briefly overview key principles of the student affairs profession relevant to this discussion, followed by our own experiences, reflections, and work faculty in Texas. With 79 student affairs graduate preparation programs across the 14 states in the SACSA region (SACSA, n.d.), we see this conversation as critical not only for guiding student affairs graduate programs in the region, but also for the larger campus communities in which graduates of these programs will be working and leading.

Principles & Shifting Priorities

The student affairs profession is guided by established principles (Reason & Broido, 2017; Saunders & Wilson, 2017). One foundational principle is care and concern for the student (Saunders & Wilson, 2017). Early notions of student development guiding the profession emphasized holistic development, encouraging educators to consider

the whole person, including but not limited to their race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities (Saunders & Wilson, 2017). Forty years ago, Kitchener (1985) argued that "differences (that is, inequalities) in background may be relevant when considering the services that a group needs in order to make use of the educational environment" (p. 24). More recently, the CAS (2023) core standards and the standards specific to master's level higher education and student affairs professional preparation programs further emphasize the importance of social justice and inclusion and advocating for diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities. These principles remain, and it is imperative faculty prepare practitioners to engage and work within the current climate while upholding these principles.

Role and Responsibility of Student Affairs Faculty

Faculty have more protection and freedom to discuss DEI issues with students than student affairs professionals (at least for now, though additional legislation looms). We have the privilege (and responsibility) of focusing on DEI topics and supporting students as they navigate the current climate, both politically and within higher education. As higher education has dramatically shifted in recent years, it is imperative faculty in student affairs preparation programs equip students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to navigate these spaces. We must prepare students to be equity-minded and work within existing systems to meet the needs of all students.

On our campus, we recognize the shifting political climate has limited many of our student affairs colleagues' ability to outright discuss these challenges. Thus, we create space for this within the classroom through curriculum, pedagogy, and a strong commitment to supporting students holistically as they navigate these spaces. We approach our work through co-constructivist and inclusive pedagogical frameworks in our classroom spaces (Kay & Kibble, 2016), inviting students to be part of the co-educating process, not just as learners but also as teachers. We focus on inclusion through readings, assignments, and other activities that engage students in the learning process. Examples of how we bring this to life include:

- Curating diverse readings: Selecting scholarship and perspectives from individuals who hold underrepresented identities in research and higher education to ensure a range of voices are present in the classroom.
- Flexible assignments: Designing assignments that allow students to choose the format (e.g., video, infographics, traditional papers), enabling them to demonstrate their learning in ways that best fit their strengths and experiences.
- Identity-inclusive reflection projects: Encouraging students to develop positionality maps or reflective narratives exploring how their backgrounds and experiences shape their approaches to leadership and student support. Engaging students around identities that have brought them joy or pain – seen or unseen – or which identities they know little or much about. Voluntary sharing of these reflections honors diverse lived experiences and fosters empathy and dialogue.
- Dialogue circles on belonging: Facilitating structured dialogue circles around prompts such as "When have you felt most supported in your educational journey?" or "What practices help students feel they belong?" These create community, elevate student voices, and build connections across perspectives.
- Student-driven inquiry projects: Empowering students to pursue research or applied projects on issues they care about—such as first-generation student access, inclusive leadership practices, or equity in campus organizations. This agency fosters

ownership of learning while allowing equity-focused themes to surface organically.

By framing students as co-constructors of the classroom environment and empowering them to engage their whole selves, these practices not only support student learning but also model ways to integrate DEI principles into professional practice in student affairs.

Historically, higher education has protected faculty's academic freedom, allowing autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy, and enabling debate and discussion without fear of censorship (Nelson, 2010). Until recently, higher education encouraged engagement in intellectual, philosophical, and real-life situations, including DEI. However, the tides are shifting, and faculty academic freedom may soon be under scrutiny. For now, it is the responsibility of student affairs faculty to engage students in DEI discussions and help them develop competencies to create inclusive environments and serve students from all backgrounds.

Conclusion

Institutions within the SACSA region educate many graduate students who are or will be student affairs professionals. It is critical for faculty in these programs to further DEI advocacy. We must work within existing systems and promote inclusion as anti-DEI legislation threatens higher education and student affairs. Student affairs graduates and professionals significantly impact students' holistic development. Faculty in student affairs programs must fully embrace the responsibility to prepare students to embody the profession's core values and principles, especially within the current legislative landscape.

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