

## The Attack on DEI: How Political Rhetoric Shapes Scientific Inquiry in America

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The fight for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has always been central to American identity and discourse, even before DEI emerged as the socio-cultural paradigm we know today. DEI formally emerged from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and is best described as a framework that creates equitable opportunities, eliminates barriers to access, and fosters environments where everyone is valued and included. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, violent acts of discrimination (such as the murder of George Floyd) catalyzed a new wave of DEI initiatives in the United States. This momentum, however, is threatened by the Trump administration's attempts to strategically shift the narrative surrounding DEI, turning a social justice paradigm into a political and cultural weapon. When detractors label DEI programs as reverse discrimination against majority groups, they equate equity with a zero-sum game and reduce the nuanced, on-the-ground work of social justice advocates to address structural and cultural violence. This misleading and emotionally charged rhetoric is dangerous, and critics who claim DEI impedes progress fail to recognize that it is, in fact, a prerequisite for the very societal and economic development they seek.

In October of 2024, Texas Senator Ted Cruz released a report titled "Division, Extremism, Ideology: How the Biden-Harris NSF Politicized Science." This report provides a case against government funding for research that implements principles of DEI, characterizing DEI as an intrusion of the far-left's political agenda into the objective, hard sciences: "...the Biden-Harris administration, through NSF, is deliberately and systematically inserting a divisive political ideology into 'scientific research.' Instead of identifying the best or most talented scientists, NSF funded researchers who prioritized filling out research teams and programs based on ethnicity, cultural background, or political perspectives." (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 2024)

The report claimed that supporting DEI in university research programs would lead to NSF's complacency in the "neo-Marxist indoctrination of students" and that DEI-based projects are one cause of anti-Semitic violence on college campuses (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 2024). Presenting DEI as a threat to meritocracy and a misuse of taxpayer dollars, Cruz's report effectively taps into potent conservative concerns and blames DEI as the root of these anxieties. However, the methodology used in the report—which categorizes grants by their use of specific keywords such as "equity" and "social justice"—conflates the goal of broadening participation in science with the imposition of a political ideology. Ironically, the report itself serves as a case study, demonstrating through its own misrepresentations of DEI why public funding for propaganda and for bias research is necessary in the first place.

Through conservative educational and legislative crackdowns that vilify initiatives using DEI terminology, the acronym "DEI" becomes synonymous with the "radical woke left," and its true meaning is deliberately subverted to uphold structures of oppression and erase decades of scientific research. DEI has wide-reaching, measurable, and positive impacts, especially in the academic and corporate worlds. Research consistently demonstrates that DEI initiatives yield significant benefits across various sectors. In the corporate sector, a seminal study found a strong positive correlation between executive team diversity and financial performance, with companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity being 15% and 35% more likely to outperform their national industry medians, respectively (Hunt et al., 2015). Furthermore, in academic settings, the implementation of structured diversity interventions is empirically linked to improved outcomes; a longitudinal study concluded that campus diversity experiences significantly enhance students' academic development, intellectual engagement, and civic preparedness (Milem et al., 2005). DEI's positive

impact extends to innovation, as further research reveals that companies with above-average diversity scores reported greater levels of innovation revenue—45% of total revenue—compared to 26% for companies with below-average leadership diversity, providing strong evidence that diverse teams are better equipped to drive novel solutions (Lorenzo et al., 2018).

As for STEM fields, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that enhanced diversity leads to more innovative and impactful research. Studies have shown that diverse teams are significantly more likely to produce novel and highly cited scientific work (Hofstra et al., 2020). This innovation is further linked to better financial outcomes and organizational performance (Gomez and Bernet, 2019). In medicine, racial concordance between provider and patient has been associated with an increased likelihood that patients adhere to prescribed treatments and receive preventative care (Marrast et al., 2014).

The literature reveals that DEI is a driver of economic growth and industry while fueling scientific discovery. However, DEI can and should be extended beyond the aim of "better science," explains Lauren Bauman, a Physics Research Coordinator and Consultant with a Physics Education group at the University of Washington (L. Bauman, personal communication, July 31, 2025). Beyond leveraging DEI for its tangible benefits within existing systems, scientists should aspire to a critical reimagining of the entire discipline—one that dismantles entrenched structures of exclusion and actively decenters the legacy of colonialism and white supremacy. We should transcend diversity quotas and box-checking requirements and question the very foundations of scientific practice by asking important questions: Whose knowledge is valued? What questions are deemed worthy of investigation? For whose benefit is research conducted? Bauman asserts that DEI initiatives grounded in interest convergence—the temporary alignment of diversity goals with institutional self-interest—are unstable and ineffective, and a systems-level approach must be taken instead (L. Bauman, personal communication, July 31, 2025).

By replacing methods built on historical inequities with frameworks that are inherently just and inclusive, we can create a scientific enterprise that is not only more equitable but also more rigorous and objective. Scholars argue that a lack of diverse perspectives can entrench methodological biases and blind spots, limiting the scope and validity of scientific inquiry (Intemann, 2009). The sciences therefore necessitate a "decolonial turn" and an active re-working to foster practices that are ethically engaged and socially accountable by critically examining how Western knowledge acquisition has historically been complicit in oppression (Bhambra et al., 2018). Ultimately, this necessary turn is not about lowering standards to increase diversity, but about raising standards by ensuring that science is built upon a foundation of plurality of thought realized through social justice and collective empowerment. It is precisely this transformative potential that makes DEI a target for political attacks, as it endangers the current balance of power in science.

Like all other scientific research groups in the United States, Bauman's team must submit grant proposals to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for funding. Whether or not a grant is allocated funding depends on the project's alignment with NSF priorities, which aim to "strengthen the U.S. economy, improve global competitiveness, and provide tangible societal benefits" (National Science Foundation, 2022). The Biden administration introduced DEI-focused priorities that many research groups used to guide their projects. However, in mid-April of 2025, the NSF, whose funding is provided by the federal government, updated their priorities to align with the Trump administration's interests, such as artificial intelligence, quantum science, and nuclear energy (University of Washington Office of Federal Relations, 2025). Consequently, funding was pulled from projects centering DEI and misinformation research (L. Bauman, personal communication, July 31, 2025).



**Figure 1.** Image above from a article by Urbina-Blanco et al.,2020 highlights how marginalized scientists need the required supporting systems to continue the process of change and destigmatization.

Bauman's team received an official letter of termination for their grant for "Spatial Justice in the Physics Classroom," which investigated the factors that make up a just classroom and involved a critical reimagining of mainstream approaches in Physics Education. The termination letter stated that their grant "no longer effectuated" the priorities of the NSF, and the resulting funding cuts permanently halted the project. Bauman's study was one of many projects liquidated as per the new NSF guidelines, and these sweeping reforms have had drastic consequences for STEM in the United States. "It was a complete 180," explained Bauman. Groundbreaking studies that had collected data for decades were shut down, and thousands of scientists now find themselves jobless due to the closures of entire research departments (L. Bauman, personal communication, July 31, 2025).

The ripple effect of shifting government priorities and the attack on DEI reveal themselves is an attack on the nature of STEM itself, which is to evolve and continuously self-correct. As Bauman puts it: "The critical work of interrogating the fundamental things we don't ever critique because they're 'just the way they are' is essential, even if it makes us feel shitty about the world in which we live." Questioning the world, however uncomfortable it may make us, is the engine of scientific progress. By stifling this process, we risk stagnation. The future of American science is at stake.

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