The DEI Backlash: Navigating the Threat to Social Work Education

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Landscape of the Anti-DEI Movement

The beginning of 2023 brought several pieces of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (anti-DEI) legislation to government entities across the United States. This legislation targeted policies, programs, content, and practices in both K-12 education and higher education. In K-12 education, the most prominent form of anti-DEI sentiment manifested through book banning and became one of the most prominent forms of censorship in the United States (Webb, 2023). In the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, the number of book bans in the United States K-12 education system rose by 28% (Pengelly, 2023). This sharp rise in censorship represents a targeted effort to control the content that youth in the U.S. school system have access to read.

Additionally, a large portion of the banned books cover topics such as race, racism, the lived experiences of people of color, and contain LGBTQ+ characters or themes (Pengelly, 2023; Lavietes, 2023). The most challenged books across the country in 2022 were documented by the American Library Association. Of these books, several contained LGBTQ+ characters or themes that were noted as “sexually explicit” or “pornographic” (Petri, 2023; Lavietes, 2023). In 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union tracked at least 479 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States (ACLU, 2024). Targeting LGBTQ+ supportive books and removing them from school libraries further contributes to the erasure that LGBTQ+ communities are already experiencing (Wolfe, 2023). Removing books from school libraries about the lived experiences of historically and presently excluded communities also signals that they are not valued in our society.

Over the past two years, higher education anti-DEI bills were introduced in 38 states,

with 12 states passing them into law, and it is expected that more bills will pass in the upcoming months. These states include but are not limited to Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, and Ohio. These states cited concerns that state appropriations are utilized to divide groups, as a tool to indoctrinate, and support discrimination against majority groups (Asmelash, 2023). For example, in 2023, Texas passed laws that eliminated DEI offices and positions at all state public higher education institutions (Brahm, April 2023). Ohio legislators introduced a bill that would prohibit public institutions from implementing mandatory DEI training or reaffirming a commitment to diversity in hiring statements (Brahm, April 2023). Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has been a staunch opponent of DEI education efforts. Governor DeSantis dedicated much of his efforts in the last year to ensuring that DEI initiatives at public institutions in Florida and any curriculum that would talk about systemic inequities in the United States no longer exists (Diaz, 2023; Farkas et al., 2023). Most recently, the newly re-elected Trump Administration issued several executive orders that directly target DEI initiatives (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). These orders impact government entities, K-12, and Higher Education which includes schools of social work. To effectively push back against the anti-DEI movement in relation to this profession, one must first understand how it impacts schools of social work.

Impact of the Anti-DEI Movement on Social Work

The long-term outcomes of anti-DEI legislation will directly impact DEI offices and their staffing, the retention of diverse campus constituents, academic freedom, and the accreditation of social work programs. Attacks on DEI work are not new and are part of a strategic movement to eradicate years of progress on creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces in the United States. Nikole Hannah-Jones (2024) argues that the concept of colorblindness has been co-opted

by conservative groups to sabotage racial justice work. Colorblindness was a civil rights strategy that focused on highlighting how all policies in the United States at one time centered whiteness and should decenter whiteness to intentionally provide opportunities for racially marginalized groups. Conservative groups are now demanding that policies and efforts intentionally developed to provide access to racially marginalized groups should be "colorblind" and not consider race or ethnicity at all (Hannah-Jones, 2024).

A prime example of this is the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling to strike down affirmative action. As of February 2024, the Education Counsel has been tracking the number of anti-DEI bills that emerged throughout the United States. They found 23 states with anti-DEI bills focused on higher education. DEI and spaces have been deliberately developed to rectify the structural exclusion of historically and presently excluded groups in the United States.

The amount of DEI backlash that colleges and universities face across the country resulted in additional concerns within social work education. PEN America (2024) is tracking the number of educational gag orders introduced across the United States between 2022-2024. As of October 2024, they catalogued 365 entries. Cutting DEI programming, policies, dismantling DEI offices, and firing DEI staff reinforces an institution's level of commitment (the dedication to fight for the space and number of resources they are willing to provide) to create inclusive spaces. These actions will negatively impact the overall diversity of the profession, contribute to a deficit in learning for new practitioners, and create barriers to living out the professions core values. Additionally, diverse students, staff, and faculty groups will become increasingly difficult to retain. Students are concerned that their experiences of inequitable treatment will only be amplified under these new laws and their sense of belonging at their institutions will be negatively impacted (Wong, March 2023). Early reports from states that already passed anti-DEI

legislation note that faculty and staff are considering leaving their institutions for states with more inclusive policies (Brahm, July 2023). A mass exodus of faculty and staff will result in fewer spaces to learn from a range of colleagues and practitioners in the field. Individuals from marginalized communities may be concerned about how they will be accepted at institutions without a concrete commitment to DEI and how they will cultivate a sense of belonging during their matriculation (Farkas et al., 2023; Brahm, July 2023).

DEI backlash will negatively impact academic freedom and the accreditation of social work programs. Teaching specific subject matters such as social justice, the importance of cultural humility, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and equity are critical to the social work profession. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics explicitly states that "social workers challenge social injustice" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). To act in any other way is to be direct in opposition to an ethical principle of the social work profession. Additionally, considering these principles promotes critical thinking skills in students and provides a space for social work educators to challenge their students to think about the world from a systemic context (Sampson, 2016). Social workers cannot address systemic inequities if they cannot identify the systems causing barriers.

It is critical that schools of social work preserve spaces for students, faculty, and staff to reflect on their own privileges and the ways they are complicit in perpetuating harm against marginalized communities (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). The Council on Social Work Education specifically states that accredited social work programs at both the Bachelor's and Master's levels are required to educate students on how to be "respectful and responsible social workers for diverse cultures and communities (n.d.)."

Considering the growing legislative backlash against DEI initiatives, social work

programs must take proactive steps to ensure that the core values of the profession are upheld. Initiatives such as financial support for underrepresented groups, employing equitable admissions practices, hiring diverse faculty/staff, cultivating affinity/community spaces, updating curriculum, and providing opportunities to communicate with groups that are different from each other are just some of the necessary supports that DEI offices in schools of social work facilitate (NASW, 2023; Hampton et. al, 2025). To fully understand the gravity of these legislative threats, one must examine the impact they have on the theoretical foundations that inform social work education. Feminist theory and intersectionality provide crucial frameworks for addressing the complexities of identity and oppression, both of which are central to effective DEI initiatives.

Feminist Theory and Intersectionality

Feminist theory, particularly the concept of intersectionality, highlights the importance of recognizing the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression that individuals experience based on race, gender, class, and other identities. DEI initiatives within social work education played a critical role in centering intersectional approaches to practice, ensuring that students are prepared to address complex social issues affecting marginalized communities. Without DEI programs, social work education risks becoming overly simplistic and failing to account for the nuanced ways in which systemic oppression manifests in the lives of individuals. By stripping away DEI initiatives, legislators ignore the lived experiences of those at the intersections of multiple oppressions, limiting the ability of future social workers to engage in effective, culturally responsive practice (Lavietes, 2023). In turn, this endangers the profession's commitment to social justice as outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021).

Structural Social Work Theory and Systemic Oppression

Structural Social Work Theory provides a critical lens through which to examine how social, economic, and political structures create and perpetuate inequality. This theory argues that social problems, such as poverty, racism, and gender discrimination are not the result of individual failings, but are rooted in oppressive systems. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in social work education aim to equip students with the tools to challenge these structures through advocacy and systemic change. The erosion of these initiatives compromises social work programs' ability to prepare students for this type of transformative practice, weakening the profession's core mission of promoting social justice. As Brahm (2023) points out, anti-DEI legislation risks reinforcing the status quo by limiting critical dialogue around the systemic causes of oppression. Without robust DEI programs, future social workers may lack the understanding needed to effectively challenge structural inequalities, which is central to the application of Structural Social Work Theory.

Critical Pedagogy in Social Work Education

Critical Pedagogy, rooted in the work of Paulo Freire and adapted for social work education, emphasizes the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters necessary consciousness and empowers students to become agents of social change (Moch, 2009). In social work, Critical Pedagogy encourages students to analyze social systems, question dominant ideologies, and engage in praxis that challenges oppression. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives play an essential role in supporting this pedagogical approach by offering frameworks, resources, and spaces where students can explore issues of DEI through an investigative lens. Dismantling DEI programs compromises the profession's ability to foster this kind of transformative education. Without these initiatives, social work programs risk reverting to

traditional models of education, limiting the development of practitioners who are prepared to engage in social change.

Given the integral role these social work theories play in shaping practice, the dismantling of DEI initiatives not only threatens these theoretical applications but also challenges the broader educational standards outlined by accrediting bodies. The 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) offer guidance on how social work programs can effectively respond in the face of such challenges.

What Schools of Social Work can do in Response

The 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) set forth by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) provide a clear framework for how schools can respond to these challenges. The EPAS emphasizes that social work education must equip students to engage in anti-racist practice, promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice, and demonstrate ethical and professional behavior (CSWE, 2022). Grounded in this 195 understanding, the following are recommendations for schools of social work.

Mobilize Students, Faculty, Alumni, and Community Members as Advocates

Schools should empower students, faculty, alumni, and community members to serve as advocates for social justice and DEI initiatives. Organizing advocacy training and workshops prepares these groups to engage in policy work and community activism, directly challenging 200 harmful legislation that seeks to undermine DEI efforts (Brahm, 2023). Alumni, particularly those with DEI experience, can help advocate for systemic change, drawing on their practical experiences to push for more inclusive policies within communities and professional organizations (Farkas et al., 2023).

Schools of social work must prioritize policy advocacy, as outlined in Competency 5 of

the EPAS (CSWE, 2022). By mobilizing students and faculty to engage in legislative advocacy, schools can fight back against harmful anti-DEI bills. Partnerships with local policymakers and advocacy groups allow schools to challenge discriminatory policies that negatively impact marginalized populations (Asmelash, 2023). Faculty expertise in social justice issues can help guide students in these efforts, ensuring that social work programs remain at the forefront of advocacy for vulnerable communities.

By leveraging alumni networks, schools can strengthen their external influence, enhancing their ability to advocate for DEI at the local, state, and national levels. Community members, particularly those from underserved populations, should also be invited to participate in advisory boards and curriculum development to ensure that DEI remains a central focus of education and practice (CSWE, 2022).

Integrate Anti-oppressive and DEI Competencies Across Curricula

Given the EPAS mandate to integrate anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices into social work curricula, schools should ensure that every aspect of the educational experience addresses these competencies. By addressing white supremacy, privilege, and oppression in coursework, schools equip students with the skills to engage in anti-racist practice. As noted by Samson (2016), integrating critical thinking around DEI into the curriculum helps future social workers address inequalities and systemic racism more effectively.

Protect and Support DEI Leaders and Offices

Schools of social work must protect DEI leaders and offices from legislative efforts that threaten their existence. Legislative attacks on DEI are increasing, particularly in states like Texas and Florida, which have seen efforts to defund DEI programs in higher education (Diaz, 2023). Despite external efforts, it is crucial for schools of social work to ensure that DEI offices

are well-funded and leaders are supported for the school to maintain a focus on social justice. Schools should also consider creating networks with other institutions to collectively resist harmful policies and ensure the sustainability of DEI initiatives (Brahm, July 2023). Examples of such networks include collaborative programs, interschool committees, and general space to gather in community as colleagues engaged in this work.

Establish DEI as a Research and Policy Priority

Engaging in community-based participatory research (CBPR) is another way to combat the marginalization of DEI initiatives. As Abe (2020) highlights, CBPR provides a method to address inequities by involving community members directly in research and advocacy efforts. Schools of social work can partner with local communities to highlight the importance of DEI through research, helping create evidence-based solutions that address the needs of marginalized populations.

Faculty, students, and alumni can collaborate to develop research projects focused on the effectiveness of anti-racist policies, the impact of systemic inequities, or the outcomes of culturally responsive interventions. Additionally, schools can form research partnerships with community-based organizations, amplifying marginalized voices and ensuring that research is responsive to community needs. The outcomes of this research can be used to advocate for policy changes at local, state, and national levels (NASW, 2021).

Foster Collaborative Advocacy with DEI-friendly States

While some states are enacting anti-DEI legislation, others remain committed to advancing equity and inclusion in higher education. Social work schools should form strategic partnerships with institutions in DEI-friendly states to create exchange programs, share best practices, and jointly develop DEI initiatives. These collaborations can include joint training

programs, faculty exchanges, and student internships that focus on areas such as human rights advocacy, social justice policy development, and anti-racist practice. These collaborations can also provide students with opportunities to learn in environments that prioritize social justice and diversity, while also fostering a network of schools working together to push back against anti DEI rhetoric. By aligning with states that uphold DEI values, schools can provide support for their faculty and students in hostile environments, while offering opportunities for professional growth and innovation in practice (CSWE, 2022). Administrative leadership should also consider the risks involved. These risks could include, but are not limited to adjustments to funding from private and public sources, additional uncompensated labor for those in historically and presently excluded communities, and opponents of DEI-related content strategizing to enact legislation that makes this information even more difficult to share freely. The leadership teams at schools of social work must do their due diligence to create sustainable action plans to address these additional concerns.

Conclusion

Schools of social work are uniquely positioned to lead advocacy efforts in defense of DEI, not only because of their commitment to social justice but also because of their role in shaping future practitioners. The 2022 EPAS makes clear that DEI is not an optional component of social work education but a foundational aspect of it, woven into the very competencies that define what it means to be a social worker (CSWE, 2022). Without strong DEI programs and leadership, schools will be unable to meet these core educational standards which threatens the future of social work education as a whole.

The Trump Administration utilizes executive orders to make deeply concerning and inaccurate remarks about DEI programming and policies on a national scale (The White House,

2025). However, these executive orders are not federal laws yet and many states have challenged the validity of these orders through legal means (ABC News 3340, 2025; Durkee, 276 2025; Penley, 2025). It is crucial that social workers act now because choosing not to do so will not only harm current and future students but also the communities that social workers serve. DEI work is not merely a “nice to have.” It is essential for preparing social workers to engage effectively in anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, as well as a requirement under the NASW Code of Ethics and the EPAS Competencies. Schools of social work, therefore, must be at the forefront of advocacy efforts, not just to protect DEI, but to safeguard the very future of social work education itself. Through collaboration, research, and policy engagement, schools can build stronger, more inclusive institutions while advancing the profession's long-standing commitment to equity and justice.

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