

With state bans on DEI, some universities find a workaround: rebranding

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At the University of Tennessee, the campus Diversity, Equity and Inclusion program is now called the Division of Access and Engagement.

Louisiana State University also rebranded its diversity office after Jeff Landry, a Trump-backed Republican, was elected governor last fall. Its Division of Inclusion, Civil Rights and Title IX is now called the Division of Engagement, Civil Rights and Title IX.

And at the University of Oklahoma, the diversity office is now the Division of Access and Opportunity.

In what appears to be an effort to placate or, even head fake, opponents of diversity and equity programs, university officials are relaunching their DEI offices under different names, changing the titles of officials, and rewriting requirements to eliminate words like "diversity" and "equity." In some cases, only the words have changed.

For some universities, the opposition to diversity programs comes at a challenging time. They face an incoming student shortage, the result of declining birthrates and skepticism of the value of an expensive college degree. Others are worried about how the ban on race-conscious admissions will affect the complexion of their campuses.

In either case, many college officials feel they need DEI offices to market to an increasingly diverse generation of students and the faculty who might attract them. While no two campus diversity programs are exactly alike, they often preside over a variety of functions, including operating student cultural centers, ensuring regulatory compliance and hosting racial bias workshops for students and faculty members.

Conservative critics have questioned the cost of what they call DEI bureaucracies, which in some places have budgets reaching into the tens of millions of dollars, and attacked the programs for being left-wing, indoctrination factories.

In a recent webinar making the case for the continuation of DEI efforts, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, a professor of history, race and public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, said the backlash is based on "a few anecdotal examples of some terrible training module that went haywire."

In announcing the renaming of the Louisiana State DEI program, the school's president, William F. Tate IV, said that there had been no political pressure.

But he also recently told the faculty senate that "we most certainly have paid attention to the ripple effects that have happened to campuses around the country." He vowed that the university, one of the most diverse in the Southeastern Conference, is "still committed to DEI."

Todd Woodward, a university spokesperson, said that the idea of "engagement," which is now used instead of "inclusion," has been the centerpiece of the university's strategic plan since before Landry was elected.

According to The Chronicle of Higher Education, at least 82 bills opposing DEI in higher education have been filed in more than 20 states since 2023. Of those, 12 have become law, including in Idaho, Indiana, Florida and Texas.

This has led to layoffs and closures. The University of Florida recently announced that it would lay off more than a dozen diversity employees. At the University of Texas at Austin, the Multicultural Engagement Center closed. And about 60 administrators received notices that they would lose their jobs, according to the state chapters of the NAACP and American Association of University Professors. Some Texas campuses shut down their LGBTQ+ centers.

But some schools, even in states with DEI crackdowns, have reacted more moderately.

Florida State University, in Tallahassee, seems to be taking a "damage mitigation approach," Will Hanley, a history professor at FSU, said in an interview.

The school has reshuffled jobs and turned the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office into the Office of Equal Opportunity Compliance and Engagement.

But there have been limits to how far it will go.

FSU students are required to take two "diversity" courses, which include dozens of topics like Buddhist ethics, German literature and LGBTQ+ history. A faculty committee recently proposed renaming the requirement "perspectives and awareness."

The faculty senate rejected the idea. In the senate meeting, Hanley, who specializes in the Middle East, said that the new name would obfuscate the requirement's very intent.

"In the context of attacks on DEI, I wondered if changing the name of this requirement gives weight to those attacks," he said, according to minutes of the meeting.

In Georgia, David Bray, a finance professor at Kennesaw State University, sees things another way, and says that diversity officials should have been eliminated rather than given a new title. Kennesaw State announced last December that its diversity chief would now be the vice president overseeing the Division of Organizational Effectiveness, Leadership Development and Inclusive Excellence.

The move came after the state Board of Regents approved a policy change barring Georgia's 26 public colleges from requiring applicants and employees to fill out diversity statements.

"It's the same lipstick on the ideological pig," said Bray, who is gay and opposes diversity programs, arguing that they promote equal outcomes rather than equal opportunity. "As soon as DEI was uncovered as political left, they now reinvent the language and have morphed into the 'sense of belonging' crew."

But for many administrators, name changes are often an attempt to keep the mission of diversity programs intact.

Donde Plowman, the chancellor of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, told the faculty senate in November that the school had "not historically done well" attracting students from underrepresented groups to its campus. The percentage of Black students declined between 2020-23, from 5.5% of total enrollment to 4.2%.

After a professor asked whether prospective faculty and lawmakers "looking for red meat" would be put off by the name change of the DEI program, the Division of Diversity and Engagement, Plowman said, "What has happened is those words have become weaponized -- they create noise and distractions away from the real work."

Thus, the newly renamed Division of Access and Engagement.

Plowman has "consistently discussed the change to access and engagement on campus as a broadening of our mission to reach and support students, faculty and staff," said Tisha Benton, a spokesperson for the chancellor.

Tennessee lawmakers seemed wise to the workaround. A bill introduced in January specifically stated that no such offices should be operating "regardless of name or designation."

The legislation had seemed destined for passage in the overwhelmingly Republican legislature. But the mood shifted during a committee meeting after members considered a letter from the Knoxville Jewish Alliance, which expressed concern that the ban would limit how the University of Tennessee reached out with support for Jewish students.

The bill was killed, unanimously, on a voice vote.