Is Diversity Equity And Inclusion Officially Dead?

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For the last few years, it seems that the anti-DEI sentiment has gained traction. In a time where the post-George Floyd era was actually shifting the public’s consciousness; old habits have indeed been hard to break. The Supreme Court’s decision to [end Affirmative Action](https://www.forbes.com/sites/shaunharper/2023/06/29/supreme-court-ends-affirmative-action-in-college-admissions---heres-what-will-happen-on-campuses/?sh=76f478775d49) and [strip away](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/politics/supreme-court-303-creative-lgbtq-rights-colorado/index.html) LGBTQIA+ rights has been the cherry on top of the DEI-hate train. The critiques of DEI have been escalating; in 2020 President Trump issued a [diversity training ban](https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/09/05/trump-bans-diversity-training-claiming-its-divisive-anti-american-propaganda/?sh=2bc8ece665ce) and almost three years later, [conservatives](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/13/gop-attorneys-general-tee-off-on-large-corporations-over-diversity-policies-00106232) are hoping to limit corporate DEI efforts.

The chief diversity officer for Virginia [recently stated](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/04/27/vmi-dei-equity-/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=44444444-4444-4444-4444-444444444444) that “DEI is dead.” Martin D. Brown, who has been serving as chief diversity, opportunity, and inclusion officer for Governor Glenn Youngkin since [November 2022](https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/news-releases/2022/november/name-941996-en.html) made this bold statement in a speech at Virginia Military Institution. In a [statement](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/04/27/vmi-dei-equity-/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=44444444-4444-4444-4444-444444444444) to *The Washington Post* Brown asserted “it’s proven that institutions achieve more with a more diverse and inclusive workforce...however, equity has become a tradeoff for excellence.”

So then, what is the future of DEI? When this question was asked to an audience on LinkedIn via a poll, [the results](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/janicegassamphd_linkedinfamily-dei-activity-7085659077342556160-8c9Z?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop) garnered some interesting findings. Out of over 500 responses, 40% of respondents felt that the future of DEI is less investments and funding in DEI. 25% of respondents indicated that there will be less focus on race and racism in DEI efforts. 19% of respondents said that what we’re seeing now is the end of DEI as we know it, and 16% felt that DEI would stay the same. Several factors point to a shift in the DEI landscape.

DEI in higher education is facing repeated attacks. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has become one of the most vocal figures in the anti-DEI movement. In May of 2023, DeSantis signed [legislation](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/15/us/politics/ron-desantis-dei-bill.html) prohibiting public colleges and universities from funding DEI initiatives in the state of Florida. An anti-DEI legislation tracker from [Bestcolleges.com](https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/) revealed that as of June, there were several states where anti-DEI legislation had been introduced or approved including Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana and Oklahoma.

According to a February *NBC News*[article](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/diversity-roles-disappear-three-years-george-floyd-protests-inspired-rcna72026), DEI roles also seem to be shrinking. *The Seattle Times* [reported](https://www.seattletimes.com/business/big-tech-layoffs-are-hitting-diversity-and-inclusion-jobs-hard/) in January that tech layoffs are hitting DEI roles, which are seeing sharp declines. [Hady Mendez](https://www.linkedin.com/in/hadymendez/) is a DEI practitioner that worked for a large tech company until she was laid off in March. Mendez, who is the founder and CEO of Boldly Speaking LLC, shared that while she thinks corporations are sold on the “business case” for DEI, she anticipates pushback. “I think [some] organizations might use the current environment as an excuse to be compliant...but to otherwise move away from prioritizing DEI initiatives that were never a priority in the first place.”

The results of the [aforementioned LinkedIn poll](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/janicegassamphd_linkedinfamily-dei-activity-7085659077342556160-8c9Z/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop) indicate that many feel that DEI will become less focused on race. “From 2020 to early 2022, I believe companies focused a lot on racial equity and wanted to do their part to level the playing field,” shared DEI practitioner [Lambert Odeh Jr.](https://www.linkedin.com/in/lambertodeh/) “Unfortunately, starting in mid 2022, I [started] to see equality being the focus [again].” Odeh expressed concerns that progress will be halted with a move away from an equity-focus. “We’ve learned a lot about equity versus equality in the last couple years so we unfortunately know this is all headed back towards the status quo.”

Anti-racism should be the nucleus of any DEI efforts; a failure to prioritize racial equity in DEI work means that inequities will continue to persist. The result of the divestment from DEI will have deleterious effects on racial diversity in the workplace. Deprioritizing DEI means that racial disparities will widen. Many of those hardest hit by layoffs, particularly in tech, are [Black workers](https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2023/02/19/black-workers-are-the-hardest-hit-by-tech-layoffs/?sh=726cc2f0313e), as well as workers from other marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds. Workplaces that adopt race-neutral policies will hinder their ability to find the best and most competitive talent.

“DEI is absolutely *not* dead,” shared DEI thought partner [Adriele Parker](https://www.linkedin.com/in/adrieleparker/). “Yes, we’ve seen a backlash against DEI, fueled by political agendas, misinterpretations of what DEI even means, and the dismantling of Affirmative Action. Historically, DEI initiatives have always been first on the chopping block when resources get tight for organizations, especially in today’s volatile economy.” Despite what should be [an obvious](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters) need to continue to prioritize DEI, the future may include more cutbacks and less DEI funding.

Though anti-DEI sentiments seem to be rising, DEI is far from over. This is just one of the many metamorphoses that the industry will experience. As Parker explains, “DEI can’t die as long as there are people. Our diversity is what makes us, us—humans...if we want to coexist peacefully in these shared spaces, DEI is a requirement. Folks may want to call it something else, but the core goal—fostering understanding and fairness amongst people—continues to be the same.”

This article was originally published in [*Forbes*](https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2023/07/16/is-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-officially-dead/?sh=264683ef49e1).