

*Critical Leadership for
Civil Rights in Higher Education:*

THE EXPERIENCES OF CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICERS NAVIGATING ANTI-DEI ACTION



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Design Statement

The abstract cover artwork and visual motifs that appear throughout this report aim to symbolically depict the complexity of CDO experiences. CDOs contend with many conflicting forces and pressures, which are represented through textural dot gradients and intersecting lines and paths. Overlapping shapes hint at their multi-dimensional, layered experiences, while a thumbprint texture, unique to each individual, symbolizes the personal nature of each CDO’s journey amid anti-DEI actions and systemic challenges. At the center of the chaos is the CDO, represented by a central circle, who bears much of the burden when facing opposition and who seeks to make a lasting impact despite the challenges they face.

Critical Leadership for Civil Rights in Higher Education:

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Executive Summary

As the U.S. continues to debate whether and how to reckon with racial and social injustice, political rhetoric and action has increased on whether to invest resources, build initiatives and infrastructure, and create systems of accountability to provide equal opportunity for all university stakeholders. Accountability structures can be traced back to historic civil rights movements that enabled higher education institutions to create organizational mechanisms and infrastructure to advance and protect the civil rights of faculty, staff, and students. What the U.S. is grappling with today is a concerted campaign to discredit diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within higher education and beyond; however, little empirical research exists highlighting the experiences of the professionals doing DEI work. The National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) at the University of Michigan, with the support of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), created this report based on the experiences of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) participants.

This qualitative study of 40 Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) examines organizational responses to anti-DEI action to show how CDOs navigated the impacts of such actions. Our analysis shows how CDOs strategically deployed three distinct organizational responses. One approach involved the deliberate choice not to alter current organizational structures or practices (*strategic inaction*) thus allowing time to observe how future political trends may evolve. Alternatively, in the absence of legal mandates, other CDOs chose *proaction*, responding to foreseen anti-DEI actions to ensure they could successfully support all students, faculty, and staff without the disruption of political attacks on specific naming conventions or activities. Lastly, CDOs that had to navigate legislation and/or administrative directives were left with no choice but to choose

reaction, which included actions such as significantly altering policies and programs to adhere to legal or proposed legal action, eliminating staff positions, stifling speech and workplace diversity discussions, and dissolving critical student support services. Participants attempted to respond to anti-DEI action while also upholding institutional missions, visions, values, and academic freedom.

The report highlights the negative consequences of anti-DEI action that impact not only organizations,

but the individuals leading institutions through the political turmoil. In particular, CDOs experienced negative mental and physical health outcomes due to job insecurity, professional isolation, and personal attacks.

Along with presenting empirical results, this report also presents accurate definitions and representations of DEI work and practical recommendations for higher education executive leaders.

To navigate anti-DEI action and support those doing important civil rights work that supports diverse campuses and furthers nondiscrimination, access, and inclusion in higher education, leaders in higher education should:

- Mitigate Anti-DEI Intimidation Tactics
- Create a Shared & Collaborative Culture for DEI Work
- Build External Coalitions
- Continue to Use Research to Guide Decisions
- Expect Equal Accountability
- Support Professional Development & Network Cultivation
- Support the Mental & Physical Health of DEI Officers & Practitioners

We hope this work can provide accurate information to all those leaders, governing board members, policymakers, faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and private sector executives genuinely interested in how to further and protect civil rights in higher education.

Introduction

Policy Context

For decades, Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) have played a crucial role in leading the strategic visions of healthcare organizations, businesses, municipalities, and institutions of higher education. Critically, CDOs work to create equal opportunities for, and protect the rights of, diverse stakeholders by implementing organizational accountability systems, creating support services, and providing professional development and support across ideological spectrums—until recently. Starting in 2021, there was an increase in rhetoric and legislation targeting critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives through coordinated efforts from more radical, well-funded think tanks, many forms of media, and anti-DEI activists and lobbyists that have significant influence with political actors. Since then, state-focused anti-DEI legislation has increasingly been proposed, passed, and enacted, threatening civil and human rights progress.

According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* DEI Legislation Tracker, by the first half of 2023, 40 bills targeting DEI initiatives were introduced in 22 states. By 2024, 85 bills were introduced across 28 states, and 14 had become law. Since then many more legislative bills, executive orders, and administrative actions have been introduced. These bills aimed to at least 1) eliminate DEI offices and DEI-focused staff, 2) prevent colleges from considering social identities and experiences in admissions, 3) ban mandatory diversity training, 4) decrease student support services, and 5) prevent the use of diversity statements as part of the hiring and promotion processes. In addition, governors signed executive orders, governing boards and presidents enacted administrative policy changes, and public discourse has created chilling effects that contribute to a broad range of anti-DEI actions.

At the time of this publication, there are federal executive orders and proposed legislation that seek to further curtail DEI programming and civil rights progress. The consequences of anti-DEI action are felt across higher education institutions, impacting staffing, resources, student support, free speech, and negatively impacting campus social climate. Widespread anti-DEI action has impacted all of higher education, not just institutions that must comply with enacted law, and is designed to frame DEI work as not appropriate or preemptively unlawful.

The Chief Diversity Officer Role

To adequately support increasingly diverse student and employee populations, higher education leaders must have precise expertise, skills, knowledge, and capacities to further and protect civil rights. Similar to other administrative functions that require precise expertise, CDOs are equipped to provide organizational structure and key advice to higher education leaders. The CDO role is an executive-level position that can manage administrative, student service, and academic units, along with advising executive leaders like the president and provost on strategic initiatives and communications. Many CDOs manage a portfolio of compliance processes including Title IX investigations and disability accommodations, while also designing and implementing student success initiatives, and leading strategic planning with many stakeholders. Though CDO roles differ by institution, many have broad responsibilities, both internal and external to the organization.

Given the complexities of the variation in institutional types, the range of resources directed towards supporting a diverse campus, and the expected knowledge, skills, and abilities of CDOs,

NADOHE adopted the *Standards of Professional Practice* (NADOHE, 2020; Worthington et al., 2020). CDOs apply this standard of practice to the central administrative role of guiding, facilitating, and evaluating DEI efforts (William & Wade-Golden, 2013). As stewards of DEI and civil rights efforts, the CDO’s responsibilities include coordinating and leading DEI strategic planning, coalition-building, and accountability by embedding DEI work within the organizational strategy, institutional values, and everyday tasks.

As a result of misinformation campaigns, many participants in the study described how they spend valuable time and resources navigating political dynamics through actions like responding to false reports from anti-equality organizations, providing truthful information to misinformed alumni, donors, and news outlets, and engaging with policymakers around the need for services for an increasingly diverse student population. In 2023, 55% of CDOs named the political environment as the most important challenge facing the future of DEI work in higher education (Swartout, 2023). Time spent on correcting misinformation and defending DEI practices means CDOs have less time available to improve the experiences and outcomes of students, faculty, and staff.

“
There was a sense that everybody does diversity work, and so [some might argue that] there’s not a need to have a robust central operation because everyone’s doing it.

And so I had to make the case, well, everyone’s doing research, but we still have a central research office that has people to support the research function. Everyone should be promoting student success, but we still have an office of student affairs because it’s important too, right?

DEI Work: Definitions and Applications

We use the work of organizational psychologists Hebl and King (2024) to correctly define the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Defining DEI

Diversity is the representation of a variety of social identities that differ in meaningful ways, including but not limited to, race and ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, culture, national origin, religion, age, disability status, and political perspective.

Equity is fairness in the distribution of resources, opportunity, achievement, and attainment. Actions taken to create equity may differ between populations based on a history of oppression and current access to opportunity.

Inclusion is defined as the access and ability for all to feel a sense of belonging among others with different identities, experiences, and perspectives.

DEI work can encompass many types of work including, but not limited to:

- Outreach and recruitment of underrepresented and international students (e.g., urban students, rural students, low-income students, first-generation students)
- Specialized research-driven services for student populations (e.g., students of color, disabled students, military-connected students, religious students, first-generation students, international students, rural students)
- Intergroup dialogue programming to develop mutual understanding and communication skills
- Climate assessments to understand the experiences of groups and barriers to their equal educational opportunity
- Educational training to combat biases and discriminatory practices
- Human resource initiatives for inclusive hiring and retention of staff and faculty
- Strategic communication and planning
- Collaboration with legal counsel and institutional communications staff to advise and address legal and public relations needs
- Campus planning and infrastructure development
- Stewardship of alumni and business relations to increase visibility, external donations, and community relations
- Faculty, staff, and research support to provide equal opportunities for success, promotion, and leadership

DEI work is integral to achieving the aims of the U.S. Civil Rights Act and nondiscrimination laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA), and multiple titles under the Higher Education Act. For example, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 codified precise protections from discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. This included increased institutional accountability for school desegregation, voting rights protections, and equal opportunity for employment. These codified protections needed new organizational mechanisms to ensure all opportunities (e.g., voting, employment, housing, education) were equally attainable and, furthermore, required more organizational infrastructure to educate, assess, and evaluate how social institutions advance and protect civil rights. Over time, the nondiscrimination laws in the U.S. expanded to include Title IX in the Higher Education Act of 1965, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in education programs or activities receiving federal assistance. In 1992, the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in areas of employment and education. But history shows that legislative action alone has never been able to create equality—it takes the difficult work of activists, a network of coalitions advocating change, political will from public and private sector leaders, and embedded organizational accountability systems like CDOs.

While questioning civil rights initiatives and support systems is not new, the current vilification of DEI work has taken a uniquely malicious approach based on misrepresentation of programs, divisive terminology, and public misinformation. These misinformed and false characterizations are not based on the truth of lived experience. As one participant in the study said:

“
First of all, I can’t indoctrinate a student.

If I could, I would get them to take a shower and maybe eat a meal. I don’t have that kind of power... I would like to understand: please tell me what you think is happening in colleges and universities! ... Please come spend a day with me. Spend a day sitting in my office, and please come and see what it is that we actually do.

Because DEI work has become a lightning rod for political culture wars and as a way for some politicians to undermine civil rights accountability, CDOs and other DEI staff have found their work in jeopardy of elimination or extreme dilution (Prasad & Sliwa, 2024). Amid the political turmoil, new administrative regulations and legal ramifications, diversity officers find themselves caught between the interests of internal stakeholders (e.g., governing board members, university presidents, executive leaders, students, faculty, and staff) looking for more inclusive environments and the pressures that accompany ambiguous new laws and veiled threats from external stakeholders (e.g., lawmakers, alumni, donors, families, anti-DEI political actors). *This report examines how CDOs lead their organizations through anti-DEI action and identifies the personal consequences CDOs experience as a result.*

Benefits of DEI

Within the past few decades, there have been rising concerns about how institutions can systematically respond to national demographic trends. While student and employee populations are increasingly diverse, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds do not attend or graduate from college at the same rates as other students (Cahalan et. al., 2024). Institutions have responded to such discrepancies by creating and implementing DEI programs and policies with the goal of providing equal opportunities for all students. In addition, for those students already on campus, DEI programming and policies contribute to greater cross-cultural engagement and educational benefits. For example, greater diversity in the classroom leads to better student learning outcomes, including intellectual engagement and academic skills, for all students (Gurin et al., 2002). Outside of the classroom, an increase in informal interactions with a diversity of peers leads to positive impacts on learning outcomes

(Alvarez-Huerta et al., 2022), cognitive development (Bowman, 2010), and civic engagement (Bowman et al., 2016). Beyond student outcomes, there is also research that shows having a sense of belonging and inclusion relates to alumni giving (Drezner & Pizmoney-Levy, 2020). While research has shown how DEI policies and programs impact the student and faculty experience, more research is needed to understand how institutions protect civil and human rights, provide equal opportunities for all, and create inclusive learning environments. Scholars have argued that DEI initiatives are only effective if campus leaders maintain a governance process, respond to changes in sociopolitical contexts, and evaluate the impact of initiatives on climate and structure (Barnett, 2020; Patton et al., 2019). One institutional approach involves the implementation of CDOs as stewards of DEI efforts across campuses.

Description of Study

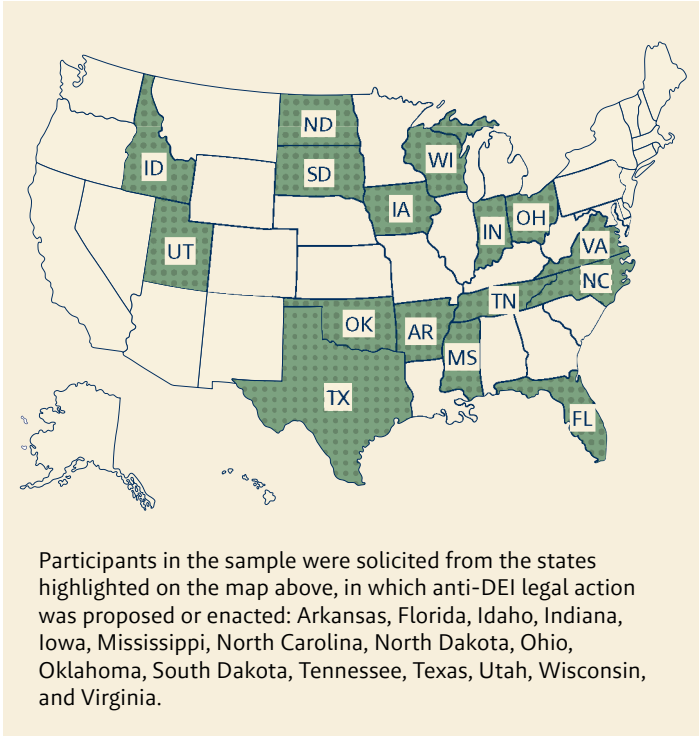
Data for this study were collected through 40 qualitative interviews with CDOs from four-year public institutions within particular state contexts. State contexts were chosen from three different criteria at the time of the interview: 1) states with anti-DEI or anti-CRT executive orders; 2) states in which anti-DEI legislation was introduced; and/or 3) states in which anti-DEI legislation was passed and signed into law.

A list of potential participants was identified in partnership with NADOHE, general searches of institutional websites/periodical reports, and using *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* DEI Legislation Tracker. All potential participants were currently or recently employed with institutions within states meeting one of the three criteria described above, but not all participants were members of NADOHE. Interviews about CDO experiences responding to anti-DEI action were conducted between November 2023 and June 2024 and lasted approximately one hour.

CDOs in the study were experienced executives who all had at least a decade of experience in faculty and/or administrative roles prior to becoming a CDO. They did however have varying years of experience at their current institutions, with some being newer to the institution and others having over 20 years. All CDOs had at least a master’s degree equivalent while most had a terminal degree (e.g., Ed.D., J.D., Ph.D.). The participants were well-versed in DEI topics ranging from racial justice, disability rights, student success, and human resource best practice.

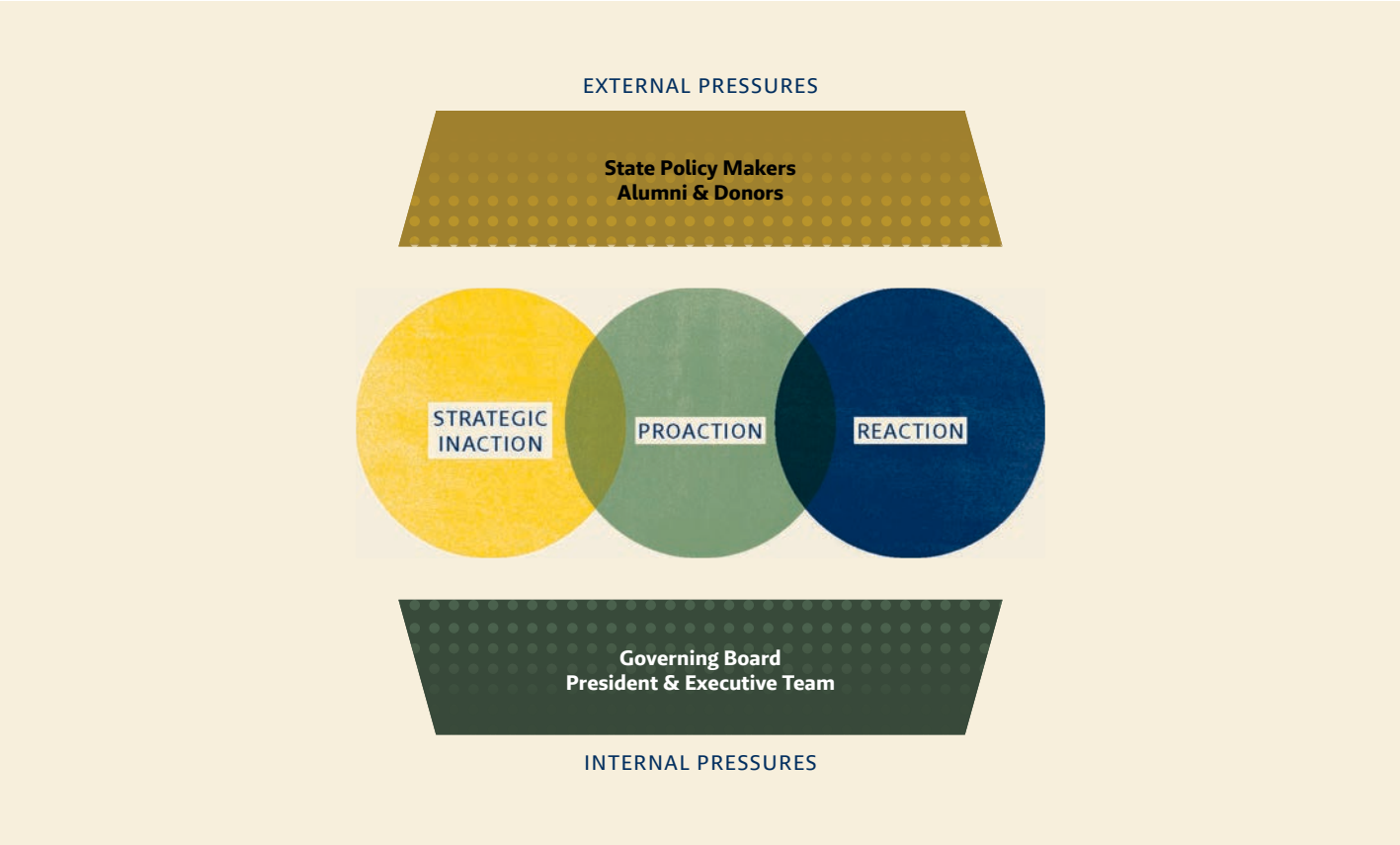
This study received Institutional Review Board approval through the University of Michigan and George Mason University. Recognizing the sensitivity of participant information and the need to protect data at the highest levels of

confidentiality, a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health was obtained, which prohibits the disclosure of identifiable and sensitive information to anyone not part of the research team. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, individual names and information will not be used for this report.



The results are presented as follows: (1) organizational responses to anti-DEI action and (2) personal consequences of anti-DEI action.

Organizational Response to Anti-DEI Action



Participants engaged in a wide range of organizational responses to navigate anti-DEI action. They noted these actions led to pressures coming from both outside their institutions (e.g., state policymakers, alumni, and donors) and within them (e.g., governing boards, presidents, and their executive teams). In order to protect academic freedom, freedom of speech, and support campus stakeholder civil rights, measures broadly fit into three overlapping categories of strategic organizational response: strategic inaction, proaction, and reaction.

Strategic Inaction

Some CDOs intentionally and strategically did not change current organizational structures or practices by the time of the interview. This “inaction” was a strategic and purposeful approach to see where future political winds would shift and/or to avoid proactively complying with assumed future policy shifts. While only a minority of participants used this approach, some CDOs deliberately refrained from reacting to anti-DEI intimidation tactics through anticipatory obedience before gaining administrative, legal, and political clarification.

One CDO explained their strategic inaction response through lessons learned over a long career in DEI work, saying, *“I’m not considering shifting until I have to... I’ve been doing this long enough to not be shaken by things that I shouldn’t be shaken by... I’ve seen it all.”* Another described the importance of precision in their actions in order to continue working without

significant disruption. When asked how they accomplish this, they said:

“I think you have to [do DEI work] very strategically with the precision of a surgeon... So I try not to do things that are going to poke the bear, but also I’m principled and valued enough that I still want to continue to serve in a way that feels right and appropriate...”

When making decisions, they ask themselves,

“How do you continue to move this important work forward, build momentum, but do it in ways that allow you to live to see another day?”

Strategic Inaction & Proaction Overlap

Many CDOs intentionally decided not to respond to anti-DEI action proactively and took action to learn from in-state peers and from CDOs in states with similar legislation. Professional learning communities and consultative spaces with peers were vital strategies CDOs used to anticipate anti-DEI action and create innovative solutions and responses for their unique campus contexts. One participant mentioned how they were in touch with counterparts within their state as well as states with similar political characteristics. They said,

“I spoke with others—especially in other states that look very similar to us before things have changed in their state. So we’re trying to learn [how to respond] from other states.”

Proaction

Most CDOs engaged in a form of proaction in anticipation of more forceful legal or policy requirements. CDOs often chose to proactively respond to anti-DEI action in the absence of legal mandates to ensure they could successfully support all students, faculty, and staff without the

disruption of political attacks on specific naming conventions or activities. Some more precise strategic proactive actions were:

- Renaming and reorganizing DEI offices and programs to proactively comply with anticipated restrictions in law or to ease tensions to prevent increased restrictions.
- Changing communication strategies and terminology to minimize unwanted attention and anti-DEI pressure.

One CDO explained how they reviewed their programming to try and change issues that were of particular concern for specific lawmakers. They said,

“We tried to remove things that might serve as hot buttons, that would draw their attention.”

Proaction & Reaction Overlap

While a majority of CDOs engaged in some sort of proactive work to stave off increased scrutiny and lessen the impact of anticipated policy directives, some CDOs also engaged in dialogue with governing board members, legislators, and other stakeholders to moderate future policy changes that would demand additional compliance.

While a few CDOs created new campus coalitions for collective messaging and advocacy, this is an area of underutilized potential. CDOs who engaged in this strategy effectively reached out to campus constituents like faculty shared governance bodies, business communities seeking graduates equipped with skills to work with diverse teams, and alumni who recognized the positive impact of a diverse community on their experience. They additionally began dialogue with anti-DEI policymakers to dispel persistent myths about DEI work.

One participant discussed how they engaged

anti-DEI policymakers. When they were able to have civil and reciprocal dialogue, policymakers were able to learn the truthful actions of DEI work, which significantly altered anti-DEI policy discussions. The participant said:

“I sat with [anti-DEI policymaker]. The [anti-DEI policymaker] said, ‘Well, I misunderstood what you actually do.’ We invited a conservative think tank to spend a day with us and they too said, ‘What people are saying about what you do is not true and we’re not really sure what the problem is here.’”

Ideally this type of dialogue would have been initiated by policymakers, but in this instance it was the CDO participant who was able to engage policymakers for constructive dialogue.

Reaction

Lastly, there were CDOs who had to navigate passed legislation and/or administrative directives that required specific changes to dissolve DEI initiatives, resources, and staff. Many CDOs were legally mandated to eliminate staff positions, stifle critical discussions about workplace diversity, and dissolve student support services. Describing the urgent consequences of anti-DEI legal mandates, one CDO shared:

“Universities have taken steps to align with the legislation because what is going to happen if you don’t do it? They’re going to cut the budget of the institutions.”

The participant later explained,

“One of my division departments was dissolved, the [student support center], which supports our LGBTQ students and supports all of our multicultural organizations. We can’t support them. You were a paid employee, [now] you have to be a volunteer to support those groups. The other

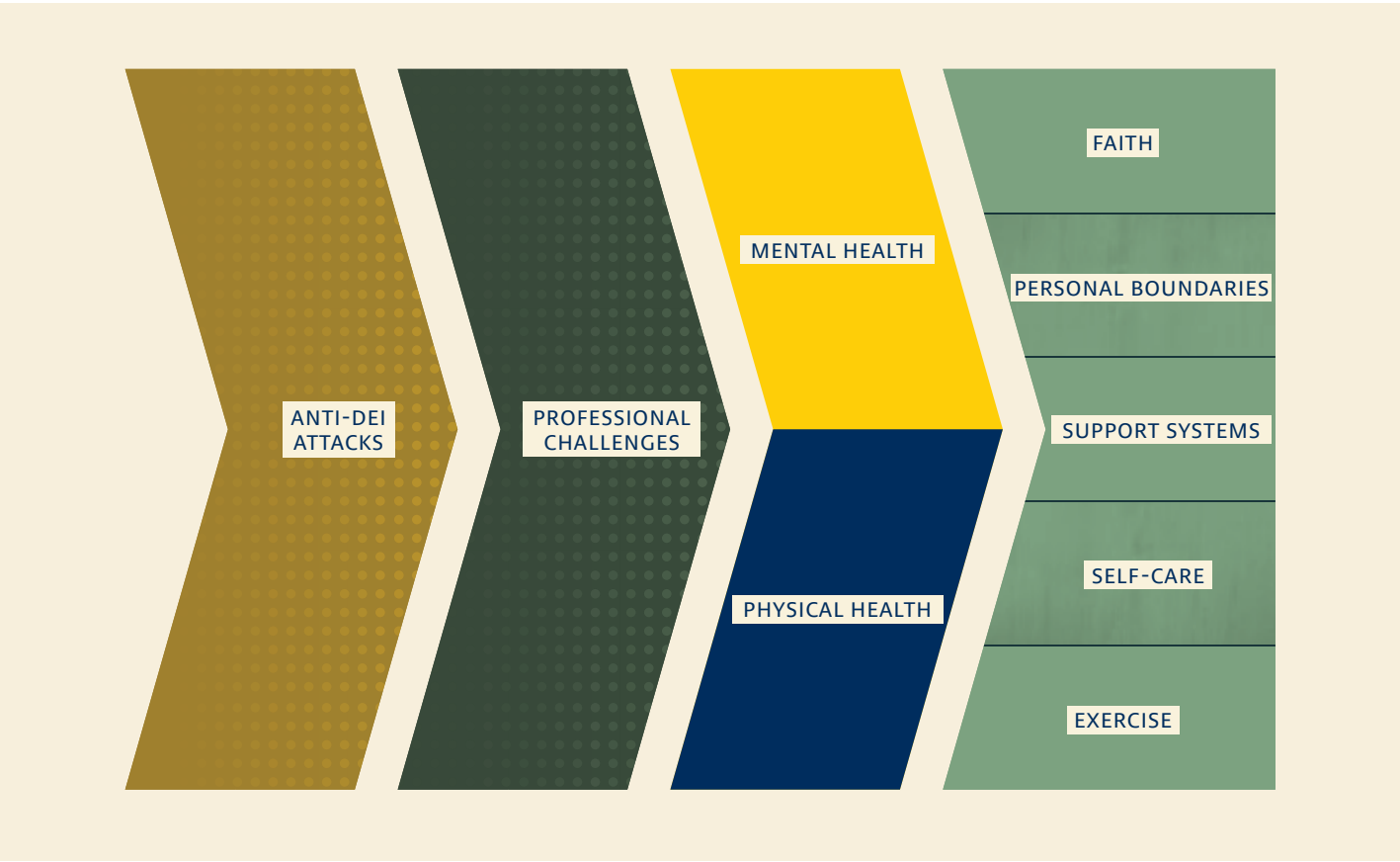
thing is with the dissolving of that department, all the employees will be reassigned.”

By contrast, CDOs who faced legal mandates not directly demanding the elimination of DEI offices used various responses to ensure compliance while maintaining a level of support, such as:

- Significantly altering the scope and activities of divisions, departments, and roles
- Significantly altering programmatic offerings related to student success, diversity education, and human resource education
- Modifying or eliminating terminology within mission statements and organizational goals to clarify purpose, access, and impact

CDOs are tasked with managing their own personnel and divisions while advising presidents and other executive leaders on navigating evolving and concerted anti-DEI action. While CDOs implemented a range of responses, each had to consider their unique campus contexts and legal requirements in the face of often ambiguous political threats and directives.

Personal Consequences of Anti-DEI Action



This model represents the mechanisms CDOs utilize to cope with the professional and personal challenges brought on by anti-DEI action. The participants in the study recognized that once DEI work became a culture war issue in political discourse, legislators, campus administrators, and other higher education stakeholders began to over-surveil and scrutinize CDOs based on misinformation and political posturing rather than research and evidence. Anti-DEI actions created professional pressures: CDOs experienced concerns about employment security, isolation from campus colleagues, and the suppression of their own speech for fear of retribution. These professional challenges led to significant mental and physical health implications for CDOs. Personal consequences ranged from increased blood pressure, panic attacks, difficulty

sleeping, increased need for psychotherapy, and, in a few cases, concerns about physical safety for themselves and their families. In response, through individual and communal resilience, CDOs developed coping mechanisms in order to manage personal and professional challenges.

Anti-DEI Pressure

Anti-DEI action came in multiple forms. One of its most common manifestations was hostile rhetoric from anti-DEI policymakers at the national, state, and local levels; popular and fringe media; and political activists. Occurring both within institutions of higher education and across the broader landscape of the U.S., rhetoric and actions seek to dismantle and/or challenge decades of civil rights progress.

Impact on Professional Career

As a result of the aforementioned anti-DEI action, CDOs experienced a broad range of significant professional impacts. These challenges include, but are not limited to, suppressed speech, career instability and uncertainty, and isolation from peer executive leaders. Experiencing such personal consequences took a substantial toll on CDOs.

One CDO shared that while there was a significant and appropriate focus on student well-being, they and their staff experienced professional challenges that were not addressed by other executive leaders. This lack of support was felt deeply by the CDO as they navigated through their own emotional and professional difficulties:

“

We were tasked with reaching out to make sure students felt good.

No one reached out to me to see if I was okay.

Another participant reflected on the personal toll of the profession, expressing doubts about whether they could continue in the field. This sense of exhaustion and uncertainty about the future of their careers was shared by many CDOs:

“

I don’t know if this profession or this work or this industry is one in which the costs are becoming too great for me to continue down the same path and maybe a different path is needed.

Impact on Mental Health

The professional challenges participants faced have profound personal consequences. Many CDOs reported that challenges stemming from their roles have had negative impacts on both their mental and physical health. Many CDOs underscored the mental health toll that resulted from navigating antagonistic environments shaped by anti-DEI action. One CDO mentioned how anti-DEI action has caused more personal trauma than other adversities they have faced:

“

All my trauma started coming to reality when it comes to my lived experience.

And I’ve come from [a different national context]. I’ve come from a lot of adversity. But coming in this role, man, it was just... I had panic attacks and anxiety. Throughout my career in higher education, I’ve never felt the pressures that I felt when I was in that position.

Impact on Physical Health

The mental health implications, particularly the stress, anxiety, and social isolation that arose as a result of this anti-DEI climate, likely played a significant role in the emergence of physical ailments. Some CDOs experienced serious health issues directly linked to chronic stress, such as hypertension, fatigue/sleep issues, and physical illness. Two CDOs shared how the stress of DEI work and anti-DEI action was the cause of physical disease:

“

I had developed [physical illness] because of the stress, and I was carrying everything with me.

And after that I was like, ‘No, no, no, this can’t happen.’

“

I’ll be perfectly frank with you. I was diagnosed with [serious physical illness].

I wholeheartedly believe it was the result of this work and the stress of not taking care of myself.

Coping Mechanisms

As a means of managing the physical and mental stress of their roles, CDOs often relied on a variety of coping mechanisms, including reflection through faith traditions, physical exercise, and establishing personal boundaries. Prioritizing one’s psychological and physical health through self-care while cultivating strong social support systems are essential strategies that help CDOs navigate challenging environments amid anti-DEI action. CDOs mentioned a few ways they have prioritized their health:

“
Yeah, I’m a person of faith, so I might take some time to have a little worship or meditation, whatever that is.

“
And I reclaim my time.

I ignore emails until the next day, and I’ve figured out how to prioritize what’s important, not important, what’s urgent, what’s not urgent...

Summary

These personal consequences are stark reminders of the toll that anti-DEI action has created for CDOs already tasked with a difficult and complex role. Many CDOs mentioned they drew upon the teachings of the civil rights movement and other social movements and relied on the wisdom and spiritual energy of ancestors to continue performing their duties in the face of stark opposition. Yet, despite these sources of strength and inspiration, the personal toll of anti-DEI action upon CDOs cannot be understated. Anti-DEI action not only has had detrimental impacts on organizational capacity and effectiveness; it has directly decreased health outcomes for the DEI workforce, a community whose members are often from marginalized populations that already face health disparities.

Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

DEI work remains crucial to advancing the missions of higher education and continuing the legacies of the civil rights movement: to protect academic freedom and freedom of speech, as well as to ensure all students, faculty, and staff have equal opportunities to be successful and have access to socioeconomic mobility. DEI work is essential to the future of U.S. democracy, prosperity, and equality.

In the Harvard Business Review, Nishiura Mackenzie and colleagues (2024) provide a list of

key strategies, based on social movement research and theory, to ensure inclusion work continues in the face of significant and evolving anti-DEI political pressures: 1) Sustain networks for people engaged in DEI work, 2) Preserve the collective memory, 3) Reframe and rename the work for survival, and 4) Nurture the collective identity within the DEI community. Based on this research project and the sage advice of others, we offer reflective questions and actions leaders can engage with in their own practice (see Appendix) and the following recommendations:



RECOMMENDATION 1:
Mitigate Anti-DEI Intimidation Tactics

Higher education leaders should resist anticipatory compliance and letting coercive tactics dictate organizational action and behavior as much as possible. We encourage higher education leaders not to act or comply with *potential* or threatened anti-DEI action. Sometimes, changing terminology can be a productive approach to deterring forced policy changes—and sometimes, doing so will only exacerbate continued anti-DEI action. Anti-DEI proponents will test rhetoric and threats to determine the resolve and will of higher education leaders, and it is critical for higher education leaders to let organizational missions, value statements, and the public purposes of higher education guide action for near and long-term strategies. As a result of anti-DEI intimidation tactics, organizational chilling effects can often have an outsized impact on organizational response.



RECOMMENDATION 2:
Create a Shared & Collaborative Culture for DEI Work

Higher education presidents/chancellors must ensure executive leaders (e.g., legal counsel, and senior officers in academic affairs, student life, human resources, communications, and government relations) are actively collaborating with CDOs to create a collective voice and strategic action for DEI. With fewer resources and the ability to promote equitable student success, leaders must create what Kezar and colleagues (2021) call a *Shared Equity Leadership* culture, where equity work is not only designated to one person but is the responsibility of the collective university administration.

Creating a shared and collaborative culture will require additional professional development and accountability metrics to ensure all leaders are committed to the institutional missions that support equal opportunities and civil rights. In the current study, support from executive peers was mixed at best. Social and professional isolation was a leading cause of both professional and personal challenges that CDOs faced. Leaders must create a culture of collaboration among executive leaders to support and collaborate with CDOs. Equitable work and educational environments must be created and sustained regardless of the terminology, staffing, or speech restrictions.



RECOMMENDATION 3:
Build External Coalitions

With a few exceptions, our participants did not report significant partnerships with external local, state, and national entities like business communities, political leaders, etc., to advance understanding of higher education or campus DEI efforts. CDOs and higher education leaders must build external coalitions between alumni, donors, policymakers, business communities, nonprofit leaders, and other entities that have a vested interest in higher education, particularly admitting and graduating a diverse and inclusive student body. Many external stakeholders in higher education seek to build a workforce that can work within diverse teams, build inclusive environments, and serve diverse communities, and they rely on college graduates to meet this need. More collaborative coalitions must be built to share unified voices for the need for DEI work in higher education.



RECOMMENDATION 4:
Continue to Use Research to Guide Decisions

Many anti-DEI influencers have attacked DEI work on ideological grounds rather than through assessment of program outcomes. CDOs, scholars, and higher education leaders must continue to evaluate, assess, and research DEI programming, initiatives, and structures to ensure lack of data is not a reason for anti-DEI action. Participants mentioned having difficulty keeping up with providing evidence for new and evolving critiques. Even if seemingly futile, research and data must continue to be collected, analyzed, and communicated to improve DEI efforts and to show the real story of DEI work.



RECOMMENDATION 5:
Expect Equal Accountability

DEI work and CDOs should be held accountable, similar to all other organizational units. CDOs must continue to have robust evaluations of programs and reporting mechanisms to show the impact and influence of DEI work. As with any administrative unit, there are likely ways DEI work can be improved for efficiency and effectiveness, but organizational accountability should be expected of everyone, not just DEI offices. The work of CDOs and their offices should be evaluated on explicit criteria at regular and predictable intervals through processes that are comparable to the evaluation of other units. In addition, CDOs should collect and provide evaluative data to higher education leaders to show the impact of their work.



RECOMMENDATION 6:
Support Professional Development & Network Cultivation

Higher education leaders must support CDOs through ongoing professional development training and opportunities to connect with peers in similar roles. Similar to Nishuria et al. (2024), we posit that nurturing the DEI community is an essential way of ensuring CDOs have the necessary mentorship, support systems, and collaborative opportunities to guide their institutions through anti-DEI action. Collective professional networks were one of the most useful and necessary resources for CDOs to navigate anti-DEI action. Understanding and sharing successful strategies is essential to creating unified voices and collective action.



RECOMMENDATION 7:
Support the Mental & Physical Health of DEI Officers & Practitioners

CDOs and those doing DEI work are in a precarious position of supporting all university stakeholders, while having to spend significant personal time and financial resources on navigating evolving anti-DEI action. This can cause feelings of job instability and increased work stress that can lead to mental and physical health issues. Higher education leaders and executive leaders must recognize the immense stress related to DEI work and support them personally by consulting with CDOs to determine appropriate supports such as (but not limited to) compensatory time for meetings with students and community members outside of normal hours and specialized resources for professional development. This is to ensure CDOs are well enough to support the campus community, perform responsibilities that are aligned with the mission of higher education, and do critical civil rights work.

Conclusion

This report captures the sociopolitical moment: how institutions and CDOs respond, navigate, and are impacted by today’s unprecedented anti-DEI action. It is important to understand CDOs’ narratives about their work. Unlike much of the anti-DEI rhetoric circulating, this report relies on the real narratives of DEI leaders about the intentions and actual implementation of their work on university and college campuses. This is important to document because many of the CDOs had their own personal and professional speech suppressed through administrative directives and political scare tactics, so they were unable to share the truth of DEI work publicly themselves.

In our first finding, we explore the multiple ways CDOs led their institutions’ responses to anti-DEI action through strategic inaction, proaction, and reaction. These organizational responses were thoughtful and deliberate actions taken to understand and address the political context, campus culture, and stakeholder needs while continuing to ensure all university stakeholders are supported. The second finding explores the toll taken by anti-DEI actions and the multiple ways CDOs coped with the resulting personal and professional challenges. The individual and communal resilience that is needed to navigate complex and often hostile political environments is immense, while the mental and physical toll on CDOs is vast.

The CDO role, and DEI work in general, is a mechanism to ensure the progress of civil rights movements is woven into the organizational fabric of higher education institutions. As the demographics of the U.S. and higher education continue to diversify, the need for inclusive educational environments will only increase. Higher education leaders and stakeholders will have to grapple with how to ensure all students,

faculty, and staff can be successful while continuing to aim for a diverse democracy where everyone is afforded equal access to opportunity. This cannot be done without a concerted effort, organizational structure, data-driven practice, coalition-building, expert leaders serving in diversity officer roles, and a political will to protect and support the civil rights of all people.

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APPENDIX

LEARN, REFLECT, ACT QUESTIONS



- RECOMMENDATION 1
- Mitigate Anti-DEI Intimidation Tactics
- RECOMMENDATION 2
- Create a Shared & Collaborative Culture for DEI Work
- RECOMMENDATION 3
- Build External Coalitions
- RECOMMENDATION 4
- Continue to Use Research to Guide Decisions
- RECOMMENDATION 5
- Expect Equal Accountability
- RECOMMENDATION 6
- Support Professional Development & Network Cultivation
- RECOMMENDATION 7
- Support the Mental & Physical Health of DEI Officers & Practitioners

<div>Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders</div> <div>The recommendations presented in the report are informed by the THESIS model (Transforming Higher Education for equity, Success, & Inclusion of all Stakeholders). The THESIS model is based on the idea that transformational change is a continuous and iterative process, and it encourages ongoing reflection, learning, and action.</div>				
Recommendations	<div> Reflect</div>		<div> Learn</div>	<div> Act</div>
<div> Mitigate Anti-DEI Intimidation Tactics</div>	How much are my actions guided by preemptive compliance?		What are the legal parameters of new policy and how are those different from interpretations or actions?	Provide guidance to ensure stakeholders are not overcorrecting based on chilling effects.
<div> Create a Shared & Collaborative Culture for DEI Work</div>	What is impeding collaboration among executive leaders and CDOs?		What resources and leadership do CDOs need to be successful?	During cabinet meetings and individual meetings, ensure executive team knows and understands the importance of collaboration with CDOs.
<div> Build External Coalitions</div>	What external entities have similar DEI goals and have a vested interest in higher education being diverse, inclusive, and equitable?		What coalitions and partnerships are already established that higher education leaders can be a part of?	Work with communications and government relations team members to identify potential coalitions to advance DEI work.
<div> Continue to Use Research to Guide Decisions</div>	What data is needed to show the effectiveness of DEI programming?		What data and strategies have been successful in communicating the effectiveness of DEI initiatives to internal and external stakeholders?	Use evaluative and assessment techniques to gather, analyze, and communicate data regarding DEI outcomes.
<div> Expect Equal Accountability</div>	How are different administrative units held accountable? Are those metrics equitable?		How do other organizations and institutions ensure DEI work is not held to unattainable standards in relation to work in other administrative units?	Create public communication mechanisms for administrative units to share their accountability metrics.
<div> Support Professional Development & Network Cultivation</div>	How are financial and time resources allocated for CDOs to connect with professional development and networks?		What associations (e.g., NADOHE), working groups, and professional learning communities are helpful for CDOs and other exeuctive team members to connect with others facing similar challenges?	Allocate financial, human, and time resources to ensure CDOs and other DEI leaders can engage with others to share challenges, successes, and innovative ideas.
<div> Support the Mental & Physical Health of DEI Officers & Practitioners</div>	What efforts and resources are available to support DEI leaders? What is known about their personal well-being?		What are the tangible and intangible actions DEI leaders need to feel more job stability and experience less work stress?	Recognize the unique work demands and stresses related to DEI work and consult with CDOs to determine appropriate supports such as (but not limited to) comp time for meetings with students and community members outside of normal hours and specialized resources for professional development.

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CASCaDE

CASCaDE (Change Agents Shaping Campus Diversity and Equity) is an initiative to enable equity-minded transformation in higher education. CASCaDE is part of the National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan. The project aims to empower change agents to enact transformational change through knowledge, tools, research, and convenings centered on building equity-minded leadership skills for both formal and informal leaders in higher education.

National Center for Institutional Diversity

Vision:

Our vision is to empower people and institutions to leverage knowledge and skills around the benefits, challenges, and opportunities of diversity in order to create a truly equitable and inclusive society.

Mission:

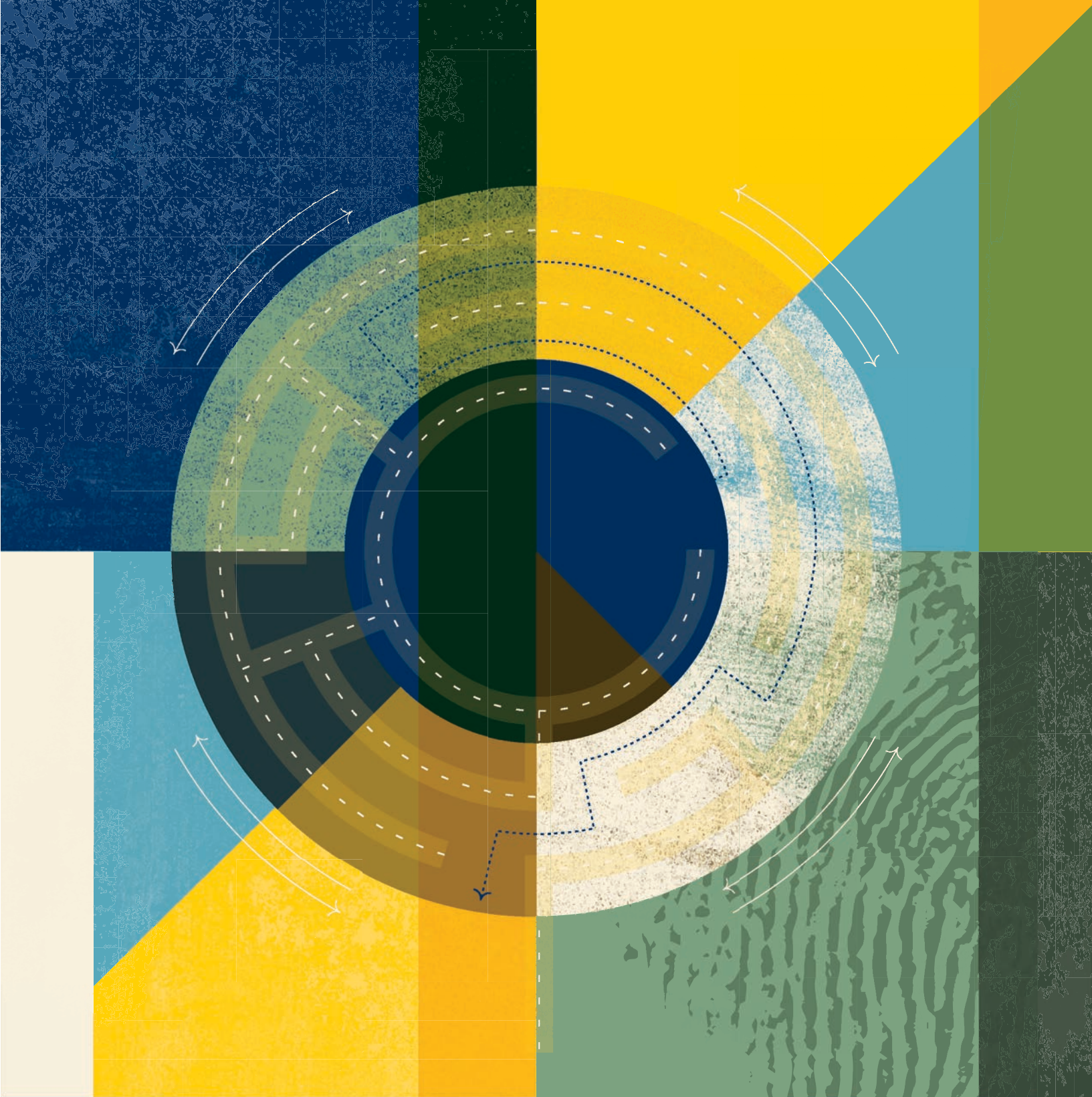
To create a more equitable and inclusive society, we produce, catalyze, and elevate diversity research and scholarship. In this pursuit, we also build intergenerational communities of scholars and leaders to integrate these evidence-based approaches in addressing contemporary issues in a diverse society.

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