

Living It: DEI

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has been a controversial topic since its inception, much of this resulting from a misunderstanding of the purpose of DEI. With many valuable outcomes from higher education to the workforce, DEI can positively impact those it is directly targeting and create a structure that can increase overall performance, productivity among teams, greater innovation, and cultural competency.

I've engaged in various capacities with programs created to encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion. I've gained experience with corporate departments, received academic scholarships, and collaborated with committees across various institutions/programs. These DEI initiatives have been vital to my academic and professional growth. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts have helped me open doors that were once completely locked and exposed me to resources that encouraged growth and becoming a leader in my industry as a woman of color.

There were many opportunity gaps along my path to obtaining a degree and postgraduate opportunities.

- Black and Hispanic woman
- Both parents working full time +
- Challenging family dynamics
- First-generation college student
- Limited academic resources and guidance
- Lack of exposure to college readiness materials and courses

- Needing to work while going to school and other financial barriers

These initiatives gave me the next step I needed to navigate these gaps and create opportunities that would best serve me. DEI has put in tremendous effort to creating an inclusive environment, that supports advancement and success regardless of one's identity group. This creates a feeling of belonging and acceptance that translates to higher outcomes of success, especially for those who historically had not been welcome in these spaces. DEI helped guide me to a career that was more than a paycheck, but a fulfilling career by exposing me to new opportunities and people, expanding my knowledge and reach. These programs helped form who I am.

Part of the controversy around DEI is a misconception that it aims to advance one group over the other when in reality the goal is equitable opportunities across identity groups. DEI's goal is not to achieve hierarchy, but to dismantle the hierarchy we see when viewing enrollment, student success, and professional outcomes. Another misconception is that these programs are rolling out the red carpet and allowing students to breeze through, taking an easier route than their peers. Which again, is not reality.

Being a part of these programs was transformative in so many ways, but by no means did that make my education 'easy'. I had to work to maintain a GPA and meet specific requirements and commitments to stay in the program and/or receive funding. I had to work to study for back-to-back exams, as I was taking the maximum credit load and had

multiple courses that needed my undivided attention. I had to learn everything that was once unfamiliar to me as a first-generation college student, beyond what could be taught to me through mentorship. I had help in the form of resources and a network, but I still worked hard. Thanks to these programs, the doors were unlocked for me, but making my way through them required me to put in the effort.

Reflecting on my experiences and my peers, DEI programs are not putting minority students, or employees, 'ahead'. They are creating equitable opportunities for growth for people like me. People who have "black" names and may be denied an opportunity solely for that reason. People who for generations have had financial barriers that prevent them from being able to give their full attention to their studies or jobs. People of a group who have been systematically oppressed for hundreds of years, and would benefit from a mentor (who looks like them!) to help them navigate a space no one in their circle has been in before.

It defies logic to remove DEI in efforts to protect all students, because systematically not all students need protection. They don't need supplemental resources, because for generations on end, they've received extras. If we continue to pretend we are already equal and support everyone the same, the disparities in communities of color will grow, and we will stray further from equality. These disparities include economics, education, healthcare, jobs, and more.

This is not to say ONLY these students struggle, obstacles can be faced by anyone regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. However, DEI is addressing a specific need,

one that has impacted certain identity groups for generations. Additionally, DEI isn't in place to only help individual students but to empower these groups as a whole to achieve greater success, and to diversify our social, political, and economic landscape in a way that will inspire new ideas and reach our full potential in each of these aspects.

We exist in a world with fast-growing technology like AI, which essentially can replace many of the skills people utilize for the 'top jobs'. As technology advances, we see certain skills become obsolete and there becomes an increased need to have 'soft skills'. I'm no tech geek, and who knows the true capabilities of AI, but it's more than likely that to be able to stand out and do the job that a computer cannot, we must know how to engage, connect, and understand each other in a way that creates an efficient and collaborative workplace. DEI is a great opportunity to start learning those interpersonal skills and cultural competencies that cannot be duplicated and are necessary in many industries.

DEI isn't the reason black women made it into positions of power. DEI isn't handing jobs and money to people who didn't work for it, or aren't qualified. We are seeing the diversification of schools, workplaces, and public offices because it was earned. There is a unique perspective that our world needs to hear if we are ever going to undo our wrongdoings and move toward a solution to the inequalities that many face every day, and DEI is working to support the leaders who are going to provide that perspective.

Without DEI, minorities will lack a platform for truth and storytelling, students will be limited in the opportunities that they are eligible for or will suit their needs, people

will struggle to enter their dream industry, and workplaces will lack structures for retention and quality employee experience. Without DEI initiatives to help provide equitable opportunities, we will be leaving talent on the table. As a collective, we will go backward in the progress made toward equity and accepting of peers regardless of identity and forfeit valuable opportunities for progress as a society.