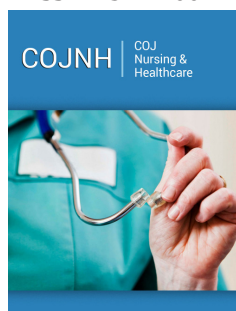


Navigating DEI Challenges: Experiences of Students of Color in Predominantly White Institutions

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Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are foundational principles in modern educational settings, designed to cultivate environments where all individuals, regardless of their background, can thrive [1]. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) intersect significantly in the shared objective of addressing systemic inequalities and promoting social justice. This section is conceptual, drawing on existing literature to explore the theoretical underpinnings of these frameworks. Despite their importance, students of color often face distinct challenges in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) which can hinder their academic and social experiences [2]. The challenges, examination of both the systemic barriers and the institutional efforts to understand issues of students of color will be discussed. By understanding these issues, stakeholders can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) hold particular importance in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for several compelling reasons. Firstly, DEI initiatives help create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for students, faculty, and staff from underrepresented backgrounds. This is crucial in PWIs, where individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups might otherwise feel marginalized or isolated. By fostering an inclusive atmosphere, PWIs can enhance the sense of belonging and community for all members, which is essential for personal and academic success. Moreover, DEI efforts in PWIs contribute to a richer educational experience. Exposure to diverse perspectives and ideas prepares students for a globalized world, enhancing their cultural competence and critical thinking skills. This diversity of thought is invaluable in broadening students' understanding and preparing them for diverse workplaces and communities. Additionally, prioritizing DEI in PWIs helps address historical and systemic inequities. It ensures that all students have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support, which can help close achievement gaps and promote social mobility. This commitment to equity is vital for fostering a fair and just educational environment.

Furthermore, DEI initiatives can improve the overall institutional climate and reputation. Institutions that are seen as leaders in diversity and inclusion are more attractive to prospective students and faculty, enhancing their ability to recruit and retain top talent. In summary, DEI is crucial in PWIs for creating an inclusive community, enriching educational experience, addressing systemic inequities, and enhancing institutional reputation.

Academic Challenges

One significant academic challenge faced by students of color in PWIs is the underrepresentation of diverse perspectives in the curriculum. Courses often lack content that reflects the histories, contributions, and experiences of minority groups, which can make

students feel marginalized or invisible within the academic setting [3]. This lack of representation can lead to disengagement and a sense of alienation, as students may struggle to see themselves in the material they are studying [4]. Additionally, the scarcity of minority faculty members further exacerbates this issue. Faculty diversity is crucial for providing mentorship and creating a relatable academic environment [5]. The absence of diverse role models can limit the support systems available to students of color, making it difficult for them to navigate the complexities of academic life in PWIs [6].

Literature Review Strategy

The literature review employed a multi-step process to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased selection of sources. Initially, a broad search was conducted using keywords such as “DEI initiatives in universities,” “challenges in DEI implementation,” and “student outcomes in DEI programs.” This search was refined by applying filters for peer-reviewed articles, reports, and policy briefs published between 2020 and 2025. Studies focusing on predominantly white institutions (PWIs) were prioritized to align with the scope of the research [7]. Additionally, seminal works foundational to the field, such as those on Critical Race Theory (CRT), were included to provide theoretical context [8].

To ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the review incorporated both qualitative and quantitative studies. Qualitative research provided insights into the lived experiences of students and faculty, while quantitative studies offered measurable outcomes such as retention rates, graduation rates, and the impact of DEI programs on academic performance [9]. Reports from organizations like the Economic Policy Institute and the National Center for Education Statistics were also analyzed to include data-driven insights and policy implications [10].

The review process also included a critical evaluation of the sources to assess their relevance, credibility, and methodological rigor. Studies that lacked empirical evidence or were based on anecdotal observations were excluded to maintain the quality of the review. Furthermore, the inclusion of recent legislative analyses, such as those examining the impact of anti-DEI policies, ensured that the review addressed current challenges and opportunities in the field [11]. This systematic approach provided a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of DEI initiatives in higher education.

Analytic Approach

The analytic approach utilized thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across the selected literature. Key themes included the effectiveness of DEI initiatives, the challenges posed by legislative restrictions, and the broader implications for institutional culture and student outcomes [7]. Each theme was analyzed in depth to understand its significance and interconnections, providing a nuanced perspective on the state of DEI in higher education [8].

A critical lens was applied to evaluate the methodologies and findings of each study. For instance, studies that relied on self-

reported data were scrutinized for potential biases, while those employing longitudinal designs were highlighted for their ability to capture long-term impacts [9]. This critical evaluation ensured that the analysis was both balanced and comprehensive, incorporating diverse viewpoints and addressing potential limitations in the existing research [10].

To enhance the robustness of the analysis, counterarguments and critiques of DEI initiatives were also examined. For example, recent legislative efforts to dismantle DEI programs were analyzed to understand their implications for institutional policies and student experiences [11]. By integrating these counterarguments, the analysis provided a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities associated with DEI efforts, offering actionable insights for stakeholders in higher education.

DEI and Critical Race Theory

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) intersect significantly in the shared mission to address systemic inequalities and promote social justice. This section is conceptual, drawing on existing literature to explore the theoretical underpinnings of these frameworks. CRT provides a framework for understanding how systemic racism and historical injustices have shaped societal structures, which DEI initiatives leverage to identify and dismantle barriers that perpetuate inequality within organizations and institutions [12]. Both DEI and CRT emphasize the importance of equity over equality, focusing on recognizing and addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by marginalized groups. CRT’s focus on the lived experiences of people of color informs DEI strategies to create more equitable environments [13].

Critics of CRT argue that its focus on systemic inequities can be polarizing, as it challenges dominant cultural narratives and emphasizes identity categories. However, proponents contend that this focus is essential for addressing historical injustices and fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, CRT challenges dominant cultural narratives that often marginalize or ignore the experiences of people of color, and DEI efforts incorporate these perspectives to ensure diverse voices are heard and valued, fostering a more inclusive culture [14]. CRT encourages individuals and institutions to critically examine their own biases and the role they play in perpetuating systemic racism, which aligns with DEI initiatives that include training and development programs promoting critical reflection [15]. Both DEI and CRT advocate for changes in policies and practices to address and rectify inequities, using CRT as a lens to more effectively identify areas for improvement and implement strategies that promote fairness and inclusion [16]. In essence, DEI and CRT complement each other by providing both the theoretical framework and practical strategies needed to address and overcome systemic inequities, fostering environments where all individuals can thrive.

Institutional DEI Efforts

Numerous predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have adopted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs

designed to promote inclusivity [4]. This section critically examines the efficacy of these initiatives by analyzing institutional reports and case studies. While certain institutions have made notable progress in fostering supportive environments, others have struggled to address the systemic barriers that sustain inequality [6]. For example, insufficiently funded student support services, such as counselling centres and cultural organizations, hinder their capacity to adequately meet the needs of minority students [11]. These services are essential for providing both resources and a sense of community for students of color (Davis, 2021).

Recent research underscores the pivotal role of DEI programs in enhancing student retention and academic success. Specifically, initiatives such as tailored mentorship programs and inclusive learning communities have demonstrated significant improvements in the academic performance of first-generation college students, who often encounter distinct challenges, including financial hardships and cultural transitions [10]. These programs not only address the needs of underrepresented populations but also cultivate a sense of belonging, which is critical for academic achievement.

However, the effectiveness of DEI initiatives is increasingly threatened by legislative restrictions. Since 2023, over 135 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across 29 states, with 29 of these becoming law [7]. These laws often target DEI offices, diversity training, and identity-based hiring practices, undermining decades of progress in creating equitable educational environments. The rollback of these initiatives has raised concerns about the long-term viability of diversity efforts in higher education [9].

One of the most significant challenges facing DEI programs is the lack of consistent evaluation metrics. While many institutions collect data on student demographics and graduation rates, few have developed comprehensive frameworks to measure the broader impact of DEI initiatives on campus culture and student outcomes [8]. This gap in accountability makes it difficult to assess the true effectiveness of these programs and to secure the necessary funding for their continuation.

The political climate has also created a chilling effect on DEI efforts. In states like Texas, where DEI programs have been banned in public universities, students of color report feeling less safe and supported on campus [9]. This sentiment is echoed by parents, who express concerns about the availability of resources to address discrimination and foster inclusion. The erosion of DEI programs not only impacts individual students but also threatens the overall diversity and inclusivity of higher education institutions.

Despite these challenges, some universities are taking proactive steps to preserve and strengthen their DEI initiatives. For example, institutions like the University of California system have filed lawsuits to challenge federal directives that threaten DEI programs, arguing that these policies violate constitutional protections [8]. Such legal actions demonstrate a commitment to upholding the values of equity and inclusion, even in the face of significant political and financial pressures.

Moreover, the benefits of DEI programs extend beyond underrepresented groups. Research shows that diverse learning environments enhance critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving skills for all students, preparing them for a globalized workforce [10]. By fostering a culture of inclusivity, universities can create educational experiences that benefit the entire student body, not just those from marginalized backgrounds.

To ensure the sustainability of DEI efforts, universities should adopt a multi-faceted approach that includes securing alternative funding sources, engaging in transparent dialogue with stakeholders, and integrating DEI principles into core academic and administrative functions [7]. By doing so, institutions can not only address current challenges but also build a more equitable and inclusive future for higher education.

Movement to Stop Using DEI Language in Universities

The movement to remove Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) language from universities is rooted in complex political and ideological debates concerning the role and impact of such initiatives in higher education. Critics of DEI argue that the language and policies associated with these initiatives can create divisive environments by emphasizing differences among individuals rather than fostering a sense of commonality and shared purpose [17]. This perspective suggests that an overemphasis on identity categories may inadvertently lead to increased polarization within academic communities, detracting from the primary educational mission of universities.

Furthermore, there is a concern that DEI initiatives may impinge upon free speech and academic freedom. Some critics contend that these programs can impose a specific ideological framework that prioritizes certain viewpoints over others, potentially limiting the diversity of thought and intellectual debate on campuses [18]. This perceived ideological imposition is seen as antithetical to the foundational principles of higher education, which emphasize the importance of open inquiry and the exchange of diverse ideas. As such, opponents of DEI language argue for a reevaluation of these initiatives to ensure that they do not inadvertently suppress academic discourse.

Additionally, the debate over DEI language in universities often centers on concerns about meritocracy and academic standards. Critics assert that an overemphasis on identity-based considerations in admissions and hiring processes could undermine the principles of merit and excellence that are central to academic achievement [19]. This argument posits that prioritizing diversity metrics over traditional measures of merit may compromise the quality of education and research. Consequently, the push to remove DEI language reflects broader societal discussions about the balance between fostering inclusive environments and maintaining rigorous academic standards (Williams, 2021). This ongoing discourse highlights the challenges universities face in navigating the complex interplay between inclusivity and academic excellence.

Combating the Removal of DEI Language in Universities

To effectively combat the attack on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in universities, it is essential to first articulate the intrinsic value of these programs in fostering an inclusive academic environment. DEI initiatives play a crucial role in promoting a diverse student body and faculty, which enriches the educational experience by exposing students to a wide range of perspectives and ideas [20]. By highlighting empirical evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of diversity on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, universities can make a compelling case for the continued support and expansion of DEI efforts [21].

Moreover, universities should engage in transparent and open dialogues with stakeholders, including students, faculty, and the broader community, to address misconceptions and concerns about DEI initiatives. By facilitating forums and discussions that allow for the exchange of ideas and perspectives, institutions can foster a more nuanced understanding of the goals and benefits of DEI programs [22]. This approach not only helps to dispel myths and reduce resistance but also reinforces the commitment of universities to uphold academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas.

In addition to dialogue, universities can strengthen their DEI initiatives by integrating them into the core academic and administrative functions of the institution. This includes embedding DEI principles into curricula, research agendas, and hiring practices to ensure that these values are reflected in all aspects of university life (Smith, 2015). By institutionalizing DEI efforts, universities can demonstrate their commitment to creating an equitable and inclusive environment, thereby countering arguments that these initiatives are merely superficial or politically motivated.

Finally, universities should actively measure and communicate the outcomes of their DEI initiatives to showcase their effectiveness and impact. By collecting and analyzing data on the success of DEI programs, such as improvements in student retention and graduation rates among underrepresented groups, institutions can provide tangible evidence of the benefits of these efforts [23]. Sharing these results with the university community and the public can help build support for DEI initiatives and counteract efforts to undermine them by demonstrating their essential role in advancing the mission of higher education.

Social and Cultural Challenges of College Students

Social isolation and cultural alienation are common experiences for students of color in PWIs [23]. The campus climate can often feel unwelcoming, as these students may find themselves in situations where they are the only person of their racial or ethnic background [11]. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and exclusion, making it challenging to form meaningful connections with peers [1]. Additionally, students of color frequently encounter microaggressions and implicit biases, which can have profound psychological effects [2]. These subtle, often unintentional,

discriminatory comments or actions can perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce a sense of otherness (Lee & Gonzalez, 2021). The cumulative impact of such experiences can take a toll on mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy [24].

Strategies for Improvement using the Tenets of Critical Race Theory

To improve DEI efforts in PWIs, institutions must prioritize enhancing representation and fostering inclusive environments [2]. Increasing faculty diversity is a critical step, as it not only provides students with relatable role models but also enriches the academic discourse with a variety of perspectives [25]. Additionally, curricula should be revised to include diverse voices and narratives, ensuring that all students see themselves reflected in their education [24]. Institutions should also implement initiatives that promote inclusivity, such as bias training for faculty and staff, and creating spaces for open dialogue about race and identity [4]. By actively engaging students, faculty, and administrators in these efforts, PWIs can cultivate a community that values and respects diversity [5]. To enhance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) on the campuses of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for students of color, it is essential to apply the foundational pillars of Critical Race Theory (CRT). One of the primary tenets of CRT is the recognition of the pervasiveness of racism in society. By acknowledging that racial biases are embedded within institutional structures, universities can begin to dismantle these barriers through comprehensive policy reforms and practices that address systemic inequities [12]. This involves revising admission policies, financial aid distribution, and support services to ensure equitable access and opportunities for students of color.

Another pillar of CRT emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge and the voices of marginalized communities. Universities can increase DEI by creating platforms for students of color to share their experiences and perspectives, thereby informing institutional policies and practices [14]. This can be achieved through the establishment of advisory councils, focus groups, and regular forums that include students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds. By valuing and integrating these narratives into decision-making processes, institutions can foster a more inclusive and responsive campus environment.

CRT also advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing racial issues. To increase DEI, PWIs should incorporate CRT principles into their curricula across various disciplines, ensuring that students engage with diverse perspectives and critical analyses of race and power dynamics [15]. This can be accomplished by offering courses that focus on race, ethnicity, and social justice, as well as by encouraging faculty to integrate these themes into existing courses. Such curricular enhancements not only enrich the educational experience for all students but also prepare them to navigate and contribute to a diverse society.

Finally, commitment to social justice and activism is a core component of CRT. Universities can support DEI by actively promoting and participating in initiatives that address racial and social injustices both on and off campus [13]. This includes supporting student-led organizations and movements, providing resources for community engagement projects, and fostering partnerships with local and national organizations dedicated to equity and inclusion. By aligning institutional goals with broader social justice efforts, PWIs can create a more equitable and inclusive environment for students of color, ultimately enhancing their academic and social experiences.

Conclusion

Students of color face numerous challenges within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), including academic inequities as well as social and cultural obstacles. These barriers profoundly influence their educational experiences and outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address systemic inequities [6]. Although Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies and programs have been implemented to mitigate these challenges, the pursuit of genuinely inclusive educational environments remains an ongoing and multifaceted endeavour [11].

Enhancing representation within PWIs is a critical step toward cultivating a more inclusive campus climate. This effort requires not only increasing the presence of students and faculty of color but also ensuring their active participation in institutional decision-making processes. By prioritizing diversity in recruitment and retention strategies, institutions can begin to address the underrepresentation that perpetuates existing disparities [1]. However, representation alone is insufficient without parallel efforts to transform the cultural and structural frameworks of these institutions.

Revising curricula to incorporate diverse perspectives is another essential element of advancing DEI within PWIs. Integrating materials that emphasize the contributions and lived experiences of marginalized groups can enhance cultural competency and create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. Such curricular reforms encourage critical engagement with issues of race and equity, equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and contribute to an increasingly diverse society [1].

Finally, fostering open and meaningful dialogue is vital for the success of DEI initiatives. Establishing spaces for discussions on race, identity, and inclusion can help dismantle cultural barriers and promote mutual understanding within the academic community. These conversations must be supported by institutional policies that actively encourage participation from all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and staff [2]. Achieving equity and inclusion requires a collective commitment, with continuous collaboration and dedication from the entire academic community, to create a future where all students can thrive.

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