



REPORT FROM THE FIELD

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Idea Lab: On Defense— Academic Librarians in DEI Battleground States

ABSTRACT

As legislation against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) sweeps the nation, workers in academic libraries are beginning to feel the impact. Three librarians working in states with passed or proposed anti-DEI legislation share their experiences and observations on the cultural, professional, and educational shifts taking place on their campuses. Read how these librarians are learning to navigate the uncharted waters of intensifying retrenchment politics in their day-to-day work and the consequences of anti-DEI legislation for librarians at both public and private institutions.

The Idea Lab authors shed light on the chilling effect anti-DEI legislation has created on college campuses across the United States. One author describes the prospective personal and professional consequences for librarians engaging in DEI activities and outreach programs. Another author considers how librarians are embedding DEI into their daily practices and performing small acts of resistance to maintain DEI efforts despite looming political and administrative pressures. The final author critiques a collective shift in library staff behaviors to sidestep DEI efforts through self-censorship to fly under legislative and administrative radars.

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Introduction

Stephanie Birch, Critical Race Theory Collective

Within the last few years, there has been a subtle but powerful shift in far-right political rhetoric, and academic libraries have already begun to feel its effects. Between 2020 and 2021, critical race theory (CRT) was employed as a rallying cry for the far right to galvanize the general public against

the rising demands for racial justice across the United States. Politicians like Ron DeSantis and organizations like Moms for Liberty falsely claimed that secondary and elementary (K–12) schools were teaching CRT, a legal framework created in the 1980s that “evolved in reaction to critical legal studies...and dissected the idea that law was just and neutral” (Ellingwood 2021). According to far-right claims, CRT caused White children to feel responsible for past injustices and learn to hate themselves. Educators swiftly refuted these claims as disinformation, clarifying that schools were not teaching CRT and impressing the importance of social-emotional learning and culturally relevant teaching. Soon thereafter, far-right rhetoric evolved from CRT to DEI.

I remember it clearly—the day I first observed the shift from anti-CRT to anti-DEI rhetoric. My colleagues shared a tweet that made us both chuckle and groan. It was a tweet by Daily Beast reporter Justin Baragona, with a screenshot from Fox News host Laura Ingraham’s show, which aired the previous night.



The segment was called “DEI” Lessons Teach Our Kids to Hate Themselves and Their Country, with the image of an infographic taken from the University of Florida Libraries’ website. I instantly recognized the image because I had made it when I served as chair of the Libraries’ DEI committee.

Less than a year after the murder of George Floyd and the summer of racial justice that followed in 2020, the results of far-right retrenchment politics were already taking effect. Black faculty outside of the library were the most impacted, and I knew it was only going to get worse. As a pre-tenured Black Studies librarian and founding member of the Critical Race Theory Collective (CRTc), I became increasingly worried that I could be denied tenure—not because of the quality of my work but the content. As a solo parent raising a Black, queer, and disabled child, I was doubly concerned about my ability to continue providing for them while also keeping them safe in an increasingly hostile political environment.

I ultimately made the difficult decision to resign and relocate to the University of Connecticut, where I could enjoy more academic freedom and less political interference in my work. Thus, I became part of Florida’s “brain drain”—a mass exodus of faculty and scholars from the state of Florida (Susca et al. 2023). As I anticipated, things have gotten worse in Florida and many other states, as well. But even in the “quiet corner” of Connecticut, I observed the waning commitment of library leaders to uphold DEI values and actions.

As of August 2024, far-right politicians have introduced eighty-six anti-DEI bills across twenty-eight states. While fifty-four bills have failed to pass into law, fourteen are pending final legislative approval, and an additional fourteen have been codified into law. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education’s DEI Legislation Tracker, we are witnessing and experiencing an “assault on DEI,” resulting in restrictions on DEI offices and staff at public universities, DEI statements, mandatory DEI training, and identity-based preferences in hiring and admissions (Chronicle of Higher Education 2024).

This Idea Lab article spotlights the work of librarians in the DEI battleground states of Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Florida and their efforts to navigate (and

even resist) legislative and administrative attempts to eliminate DEI efforts from US colleges and universities. Each author is a practicing academic librarian living and working in a state with proposed, failed, or passed anti-DEI legislation. Their experiences speak to the collective challenges facing library professionals at this moment in time. Regardless of our roles or institutional type, librarians are on the defensive line.

Library Outreach Under Repressive Legislation

Alexandra Howard, University of Louisville

As an academic librarian, I believe “education is the practice of freedom” (hooks 1994). The anti-DEI legislation ravaging the nation threatens this freedom and our ability as a society to teach and to learn. I work at a public, urban research university located in the most diverse city in the predominantly White and conservative state of Kentucky. As I am writing, the flagship university in Kentucky just closed its diversity office as state legislation has been introduced seeking to prohibit public higher education institutions from spending any resources on DEI initiatives, arguing that DEI promotes “discriminatory concepts” (Kentucky Senate Bill 6, 2024). In reaction to the University of Kentucky disbanding its diversity offices, Kentucky state Senator Mike Wilson argued that “a true elimination of these DEI policies in our public universities will end the division they promote and allow our colleges and universities to be the true bastion of free thought we need them to be” (Schreiner 2024). The manipulation of DEI and intellectual freedom vocabulary by anti-DEI advocates is incendiary in its irony and demonstrates a willful ignorance of research data and basic definitions. Dystopian anti-DEI legislation is a threat not only to my outreach and engagement activities as a librarian and my ability to educate as a faculty member but also to our freedom and democracy as the United States of America.

In a case study published in the *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement*, I describe my outreach efforts to connect local Black-owned businesses with library and university resources (Howard 2024). This outreach led to an undergraduate class partnering with a local business owner to do research projects that included uncovering data about the nation’s racial wealth gap and barriers to business ownership for underrepresented groups. If passed, the anti-DEI legislation introduced in Kentucky will render outreach and engagement initiatives like this illegal. I could be personally sued for pursuing DEI-related work as an employee of a public university despite the academic freedom that is supposed to be guaranteed as a faculty member. Universities, as “the true bastion of free thought” (Schreiner 2024), are being destroyed by governments outlawing evidence-based education that seeks to ensure curriculums and classrooms are inclusive of people who were not even permitted to attend our public universities less than eighty years ago. It is a scary time to be a librarian, an educator, and an American, as our freedom to be an educated society is under attack.

Small Acts of Resistance in Everyday Librarianship Practices

Mary Elizabeth Schiavone, Beloit College

In the past few months, I have been reminded many times that I work in a state that has introduced anti-DEI legislation and that those sentiments can be further reaching than is immediately recognizable. Since I work at a private college, my library would have been less directly restricted by the recently

introduced Wisconsin legislation; however, our staff felt genuine fear that the anti-DEI sentiment would eventually sweep our campus.

The biggest impact this has on my work is the questions it raises: How will these sentiments affect our students, even if the legislation does not pass or would not directly name us? What will we do if our programming causes a negative reaction within our community? How can we best reach students? How can we get students involved without unintentionally forcing them into public forums that might become unsafe?

These questions continue to weigh heavily on my mind, especially during the 2024 election cycle. As such, I have been reflecting on what seemed to work last semester and how we can adjust it for this semester. The biggest strategy we have is weaving DEI ideas into every aspect of library practice: using tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in instructional design for classes and library workshops, finding diverse examples when teaching, and expanding our collection to represent better the different identities that make up our campus. We also lean into our campus community: collaborating with student groups to make book displays that reflect their identities, showing up at campus events so students get to know us outside of the library, collaborating on social media content with other campus units to increase our reach, and using our campus mission statements to support the programming we offer. We have also found success in passive programming: leaving bookmarks, pins, and other handouts out for students to grab without having to sign up for or even actively participate in an event. Above all, we have learned to be agile in both our planning and during outreach, so I'm hopeful that we will find new ways to engage and support our students, even in the tougher semesters.

Laying Low vs. Actively Defending DEI in Libraries

Michelle M. Nolan, University of Florida

Statewide anti-DEI reactionary politics have caused a palpably chilling effect on Florida higher education. I work in a large academic library system at a public R1 university where librarians are fortunate to be in tenure-track faculty assignments within an established faculty labor union, offering us many protections from retaliation regarding academic freedom. Nonetheless, I have observed a significant shift in our libraries towards a culture of anticipatory obedience, where colleagues fear the most draconian interpretations of the law will be enforced and act accordingly. As much as my colleagues have expressed wanting to continue doing DEI-focused outreach, the prevailing sentiment seems to be that we must weather the storm and stay off the radar of those who truly mean to eliminate DEI programs from public higher education. As a library system, we have responded in some ways with self-censorship, such as rebranding existing initiatives to decenter DEI using whitewashed language like "community" or "inclusive excellence." In other ways, we have simply taken our collective foot off the gas.

In March 2024, the University of Florida eliminated all positions related to DEI, closing the entire Office of the Chief Diversity Officer and dismissing thirteen full-time workers across the institution. Other campus initiatives (such as the "anti-racism" website launched after the murder of George Floyd) and offices (such as the multicultural inclusion center) have quietly disappeared (McClung 2024). While the greater university pulls back from DEI, students are looking to our library spaces as places of safety and comfort amidst a hostile learning environment. They are looking to library workers to see how our dedication to DEI holds up against state pressure to comply or self-censor. I think students are also judging how true our public commitments to DEI were

in the past when they were celebrated rather than demonized. Last year, I helped to organize a teach-in event in our main library space focused on Black history and curriculum banning across the state. Faculty supplied the space, but students took the lead in choosing speakers and running the event (Gaer 2024). It was the most successful library program I have ever organized and demonstrated that students want their voices heard in their library spaces. I encourage all library workers facing state repression to find similar ways to get creative and have our students' backs because it is more important than ever for libraries to remain the loudest defenders of marginalized students and intellectual freedom.

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