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Authors	Smith, Carlton R
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The Last Director, not the Last Hope: Personal Reflections on DEI Persistence in an Anti-DEI Climate

Carlton Smith

This article will highlight the personal narrative of the author's final months as the Director of Multicultural Affairs as their institution began to comply and implement Anti-DEI policies and shutter cultural centers. The narrative explores the author's initial feelings of hopelessness while highlighting the community presence and support that will remain in the face of these policies. Throughout this article, the author provides an exploration of the impact of these policies on student sense of belonging as well as their potential identity development throughout their college experience while also exemplifying the importance of Cultural Centers and DEI-focused staff and spaces.

Keywords: DEI, Multicultural Affairs, sense of belonging, identity development, campus environment

Carlton Smith (He/Him) is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Educational Leadership at UNC Wilmington. Carlton served as a practitioner in both Higher Education and Student Affairs for nearly 10 years in the functional area of Multicultural Affairs before joining the department. He received his Ph.D. in College Student Affairs Administration from the University of Georgia. He received his B.A. in Government from the College of William & Mary where he also received his M.Ed. in Higher Education Administration with a concentration in Multicultural Affairs.

His research interests focus on the development of sense of belonging in various student populations, virtual campus environments, and the impacts of technology on the student experience. Through these interests, he hopes to better understand the students of today while providing resources and guidance for practitioners to best support the next generation of students.

This is a human experience...one that has unfortunately been shared by many other DEI focused practitioners. As such, I want to open this article with my experience and my humanity as the final Director of Multicultural Affairs. It's an odd thing to open this piece by addressing the "end" of codified Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at my prior institution. That said, it never really was the end, just another roadblock that we unfortunately continue to have to overcome. While my tenure as the last Director of Multicultural Affairs has ended, department funds were reallocated, and other DEI focused staff were moved or (re)moved, efforts to create inclusive campus environments and the principles of DEI continue to persist and strengthen almost to spite the Anti-DEI climate and most importantly to support our students. This article will explore my personal narrative in my last months as the Last Director, the community efforts that showcased that all hope was not lost and will include a wider discussion on the impacts of Anti-DEI legislation on students in their sense of belonging as well as their potential racial identity development.

Personal Narrative

I want to begin this portion by acknowledging the team that I was fortunate to work with despite the outcome of my tenure in the role. It was nothing short of a privilege to be among fellow student affairs practitioners and DEI focused colleagues that cared not only about their students, but about the larger field as well. While most of my time as Director of Multicultural Affairs was spent as largely a near one-person operation, I want to also acknowledge and thank both my Administrative Assistant and Assistant Director as their time, talent, and energy were instrumental in both our office and our team running successfully and healthily. Our office not only provided programming for the campus community, but we also provided workshops, trainings, and maintained a community house that collaborated with both our student food pantry/meal market and a local LGBTQ+ community organization.

The Last Director

When I came into the role in the Winter of 2022, I was met with a wealth of institutional knowledge in the form of past Directors that had moved into other roles at that institution. I remember being full of hope and optimism reading through the strategic plan before my final interview and seeing "Diversity & Inclusion" not only listed as a priority, but it was the first listed priority they talked about. I remember my campus tour seeing semi-permanent banners signifying land acknowledgments, Black Lives Matter, and Pride and thinking to myself, "They already have the symbolism front and center, and it seems like the whole of campus is rallying behind these symbols, now we can truly build on these efforts and begin the real work." I wish I could say that thought lasted the entirety of my tenure in the role, but these thoughts were quickly dashed before my first year was up.

In early 2023, early Anti-DEI efforts began to appear in my state specifically targeting diversity statements and employment processes. Even with those early attacks, faculty and staff within the campus community began to operate out of a fear-driven mindset. Conversations around renaming "Diversity & Inclusion" committees were already beginning to take shape when no additional

Anti-DEI efforts had come...yet. But to see how quickly staff, faculty, and campus leadership were to lean into removing these efforts at the first sign of pushback was... alarming to say the least.

Shortly following this push, the banners that adorned the central campus library came down. The symbols and messages surrounding the banners were felt across all campus populations: students, faculty, staff, recent alumni, community partners, and even prospective students. In my role, I served as one of the Student Government Association (SGA) Advisors and they were quick to work on legislation and advocacy to return the banners to their rightful home. This moment showcased that there were pockets of campus that did not operate in a fear response, but rather the campus community had resistance and advocacy built into their spirits. To advocate and to fight for what's right was second nature to our students and this second nature was only a taste of the resiliency that was yet to come.

Over the 2023-2024 academic year, our office and our work continued to be impacted as our system attempted to push a stance of widespread "institutional neutrality". In this moment, I had to consider which actors were calling for "institutional neutrality". They meant to use it as a muzzle for higher education to prevent us from doing the work of activism and justice that higher education has historically been a part of. This push for neutrality had far reaching implications if weaponized properly. While at first it applied to staff, the potential risk of its application in the faculty sphere was more concerning. Being limited in how faculty teach or talk about certain subjects would certainly encroach on academic freedom while also impacting the student learning experience. Students, especially at my prior institution, grappled with the world as it was and often looked to us (faculty and staff) to have those conversations. Institutional neutrality, on paper, would have heavily restricted our ability to not only have those conversations both in and out of the classroom, but also restrict student learning within the confines of a neutral educational environment. Higher Education is not neutral.

Our legislators wanted to rewrite the fabric of higher education to focus less on activism and social justice, using broad language such as "topics of the day", with more focus on career placement and employment rates post-graduation. I remember asking a student affairs staff member that worked in the Vice-Chancellor's office if anyone is advocating on behalf of DEI staff across the system at these board meetings. To hear such a frank "No" told me that my time and our efforts were ending...either by choice or by force. Fast forward to April 2024, I received word that the System Board had decided to vote and adopt a policy of full neutrality that would not only close or severely limit Identity-based centers but would either remove their staff or relocate them into roles that may not align with their original goals. It was at that moment, the notion of being the Last Director fully resonated with me. However, just as quickly as I found myself down and despairing over being the Last, I saw that hope persists. Almost immediately after the article regarding the Board's prospective legislation came out, an email flew into my inbox full of action steps, advocacy plans, and strategies to push back against their efforts, to make sure the voices of faculty, staff, and students were heard. Students took active steps to resist. The SGA administration that I mentioned earlier, connected with their SGA counterparts across the various system institutions to draft a joint statement and advocate as a collective, while also joining the general student body in protest on campus. A thread of impacted faculty, staff, and students had been born from the darkness and in that moment, I was certain the work would continue to persist even if (and when) the board adopted the legislation later in 2024.

DEI work never goes quietly into the night, rather its grassroots power becomes more apparent. The students continue to push and advocate for inclusive campus environments, staff and faculty continue to come together to support each other and their students, and while the loss of a role, an office, and explicit iconography is a heavy hit, their efforts should not be ignored because contrary to what Anti-DEI advocates think they're doing, our work continues. Our capacity to care increases. The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion continues despite their efforts. I may be the Last Director of Multicultural Affairs at my past institution, but I know for a fact that there is hope and there is intention and that brings me solace to know that our work will always continue.

That said, these Anti-DEI policies have real impacts both at the theoretical level and in practice. It would be foolish of me to assume that even though our work continues, no damage was done by the execution of these policies. Anti-DEI policies impact student belonging, campus environments, and oftentimes identity development while in post-secondary education. This narrative covered my real experiences in practice as the "Last" Director of Multicultural Affairs. This is what the impact of Anti-DEI legislation feels like. But I want to use the rest of this article to look at the state of the world beyond myself and my experiences. The following sections will address the larger implications of these policies and how they impact the physical environment and identity development of student populations from a more theoretical perspective.

Sense of Belonging

The removal of positions, spaces, and community outlets because of Anti-DEI legislation will ripple through not just student populations, but the entire campus community as well. I want to focus specifically on students for the time being, more specifically how policies like this can negatively impact their sense of belonging. Scholars have long discussed the ins and outs of sense of belonging as it relates to aspects of the collegiate experience such as attrition, persistence, community, and involvement among other aspects (Tinto, 1993; O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013).

Early iterations of belonging rooted the concept in college student attrition, keying higher education into the critical nature of interactions and their influences on college student departure (Tinto, 1993). DEI-focused student affairs professionals, under this early viewing of belonging, are already critical elements to the collegiate experience. Having dedicated staff towards creating inclusive and equitable environments on campus has fostered positive environments for various marginalized student populations and as such these students are more likely to persist through their degree program. However, beyond degree completion, DEI related staff and spaces further expand on this idea of involvement by acting as bridge-builders to campus resources that often do not actively or passively reach marginalized student populations (Hypolite, 2020b).

From its earliest iterations, sense of belonging focused on involvement and interconnectedness, placing an emphasis on ensuring students, all students, were able to find meaningful connection and space to get involved (Tinto, 1993; O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013). Multicultural Affairs centers, Identity-based centers, and other campus DEI resources have largely existed to represent the earliest core of belonging by connecting students with key resources, connecting students with mentors and trusted support avenues on campus, and creating and sustaining environments for students from

historically marginalized backgrounds to feel safe, find community, and rest; all key elements of establishing belonging (Smith, 2022).

Anti-DEI practices and legislation further serve to put their sense of belonging in jeopardy. In the 2010s, scholars expanded how we think about belonging in marginalized communities. More specifically, past literature argued and further confirmed that marginalized student populations often experience additional marginality when campus environments fail to truly engage with diversity with this failure leading to negative student outcomes (Strayhorn, 2008; Meeuwisse et al., 2010, Strayhorn, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). In other words, current campus environments at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) continue to perpetuate messaging that this environment was not designed for students with marginalized identities (Cabrera, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Strayhorn 2013; Strayhorn 2018).

Given this, it is no surprise that, in comparison to white students, Black and Brown students experience lower levels of sense of belonging (Gray et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). Physical environments and institutional history often contribute to these lower levels of belonging, especially within Black student populations (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Dahlvig, 2010; Flint 2019). Historical landmarks (ex. Confederate monuments) and building names (ex. buildings named after segregationists) are samples of tangible testaments to the values of an institution that can often oppress, resist, and/or disrupt an impacted student's experience (Flint, 2019). Strange & Banning (2015) posit that general physical design can directly relate to either the goal of inclusion, inviting students in, or the goal of exclusion, keeping certain students out.

Taking that logic a step further, an intentional inclusive focus on physical design, such as intentional building names or intentional identity centers, can and often does positively influence cultivating a sense of belonging through an intentional focus on resting spaces of inclusion, community, and identity exploration (Hypolite, 2020a). Many institutions are currently focused on cultivating a sense of belonging in their students, Identity Centers not only physically contribute to developing a sense of belonging for students from marginalized backgrounds, but they also prove the need for their own existence in the face of Anti-DEI legislation. It is hard to reconcile a desire for inclusion and belonging while also not advocating for centers, staff, and students when Anti-DEI legislation is discussed, enacted, and followed without resistance.

Marginalized Student Identity Development & Identity Center Benefits

Outside of sense of belonging being negatively impacted, shuttering intentional identity and cultural centers and their respective staff has potential negative impacts on the identity development of marginalized student populations. While I have discussed identity centers and multicultural affairs centers in a general sense, in this section, I want to narrow the scope and discuss Black identity development and how identity centers are uniquely equipped to scaffold this journey. In narrowing this scope, I hope to utilize a portion of Cross' Nigrescence Model for Black Identity Development.

Cross' model examines four stages of Black identity development, those being: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization/internalization-commitment (Evans et al., 2010; Cross, 1991). Cultural centers, especially Black Cultural Centers, contribute directly towards Black students who may find themselves going through each of the four stages in some capacity (Hypolite,

2020a). The pre-encounter stage, for example, relies on a lower awareness of race where individuals are resonating with the perceptions of white supremacist subcultures and whiteness while either passively or actively distancing themselves from embracing their Black racialized identity or acknowledging their culture as valid (Evans et al., 2010; Vandiver et al., 2001). In this stage, individuals have experienced either minimal or no conflict within their racial identity. As with most identity development theories, it is imperative to note that students enter college at various stages of their respective racial identity process (Hypolite, 2020a).

Cultural Centers and spaces exist in the space between the “pre-encounter” stage and the following stages of the model. As students begin to enter conflict or experience hate and bias incidents that target their racial identity, they begin to explore the “encounter” stage and later stages of the model (Cross, 1991; Vandiver et al., 2001; Evans et al., 2010). Cultural Centers, especially Black Identity Centers, often have trained staff that share the Black racial identity with their students. These staff members are essential to cultural centers in their efforts to, “...guide students individually as they consider their own racial identity,” (Hypolite, 2020a, p. 239). It is because of these staff and these spaces which have been specialized for students either holding one specific marginalized identity or holding multiple marginalized identities that these students, often few at HWIs, find roads to persistence and find opportunities to develop positive campus experiences.

In addition to having specialized staff in these spaces, programming also plays a role in facilitating racial identity development. Looking back at Cross’ model, programming in Black Cultural Centers can guide students through the rest of the model as they further grapple with and explore their Black racial identity by providing a cultivated space where interactions with staff, faculty, and community members can help students consider their Black racial identity as well as their larger experiences within the Black community (Hypolite, 2020a). Speaking broadly then, Cultural Center programming, educational offerings, and support services often play a pivotal role in recruitment, retention, and persistence for students who hold marginalized identities while also serving as a space for students to intentionally explore their identities. (Sanders, 2016; Hypolite, 2020a).

Speaking of community, Identity Centers serve as beacons of community both in the sense of physical place and the essence of the people that inhabit said space. Community, for the sake of this work, is conceptualized under an Afrocentric paradigm. That said, community contains place (physical), people (sense of belonging and some commonalities in worldview, experiences, etc.), and history (shared experiences) (Nobles, 1986; Goodard et al., 2014; Fairfax, 2017). Under an Afrocentric paradigm, Identity Centers and, by extension, Offices of Multicultural Affairs double as community centers by creating and cultivating systems that inform the people so that the people can then inform the community (Fairfax, 2017). Community in this context is an essential tool for realization of social goals and human development (Agulanna, 2010; Fairfax, 2017). These spaces were always more than just a physical location, they represented a home to many, a place to grow for some, and a place to connect for all.

Conclusion

From the legislators to university governance structures, these attacks on DEI work will undoubtedly continue. However, we will continue to resist at every interval. To any practitioners in the DEI or Multicultural Affairs functional area (past, present, and future), I wanted to share some advice and practical suggestions from the other side:

- Save what you can where you can: Our offices and centers do a lot more than legislators assume and we often do it severely under budget, understaffed, and under supported. Identify the key functions of your office and work to find alternative homes of campus for them to inhabit. For example, if your office is responsible for an Identity-based graduation ceremony (ex. Lavender Graduation or Donning of the Kente), work to connect with academic departments (Gender & Sexuality Studies, Africana Studies, etc.) or local community organizations to ensure these key rituals are not lost.
- If you find your role being transitioned into something other than what you applied for: Work with your supervisor to advocate for saving key elements of the work that you did. As my role transitioned to align with legislation, I had some agency in preserving aspects of my Director role. Our community house was something I wanted to make sure remained supported and open given the resources it provided, and I made sure to carry that responsibility over to the new role.
- Feel your feelings: If Anti-DEI legislation comes for you and your office, I want you to know you are not alone. You may feel a mix of emotions...good, let yourself feel the totality of what is about to happen. Students, community members, and other institutional partners will often ask or check in to see how you are doing (hopefully). As someone who doesn't play politics, I was upfront and honest, especially when I was asked seven times in one day, "This decision hurts, but the work didn't stop before and it won't stop now," was my go-to phrase.
- Remember your WHY: When Anti-DEI legislation was implemented at my former institution, it was incredible to see the outpouring of support and resistance from faculty, staff, students, and the local community. It reminded me that, on those days where I felt alone in the work there were other bastions of support, and they will continue to resist even after our Office closed.
- Closing an Office or Center is much more complex than legislators and governing boards realize: From final accounting to the physical space, a massive undertaking is required to properly close a center, and you may find yourself doing the work alone. Make sure you connect with any Student Organizations that your office supported to ensure they are set-up for at least the next academic year. Identify where certain rituals and campus traditions may need to be housed before you shut the doors. Secure storage or identify an archival space for any materials (art, books, programming, etc.) that your center utilized during its lifespan.
- Lean on your community: This is related to feel your feelings from earlier, but slightly different. Either way you look at it, even though the work will continue, this is still a heavy personal and professional hit that leadership will almost never fully understand

the gravity of. Utilize your support structures to keep you balanced, to listen as you process the change, and to uplift you when those sunny days look more like dark nights. You may not have had institutional support but remember your work and your connections allowed you to forge relationships with not just students, but the local community as well.

From my earlier narrative to exploring sense of belonging and racial identity development, cultural and identity centers remain a critical part of modern higher education. Recent Anti-DEI legislation has sought to remove these physical spaces, supportive staff, and supportive programming under a guise of either institutional neutrality or an asinine notion of being “post-racial”. However, the work continues. We are still here, we will still work to create inclusive campus environments, and most importantly we will ensure students from marginalized backgrounds and identities are equipped to thrive despite the environment.

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