

## The Death/Importance of DEI?

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The Chief Diversity Officer for Virginia recently stated, "DEI is dead." Martin D. Brown, who has served as the Chief Diversity, Opportunity, and Inclusion Officer for Governor Glenn Youngkin since November 2022, made this bold statement in a speech at the Virginia Military Institute. In a statement to *The Washington Post*, Brown asserted, "It has been proven that institutions achieve more with a diverse and inclusive workforce...however, equity has become a trade-off for excellence."

The issue, of course, is the politicization and co-opting of these terms. DEI, or diversity, equity and inclusion, is a framework dedicated to increasing minority representation in the workforce, schools and professional spaces at large. However, this movement has recently been co-opted in many spaces to instill fear among white Americans. As tensions in corporate spaces rise, it's easy to ask, is DEI dead? Most assuredly not. DEI is a simple commitment to diverse voices, so as long as minorities exist and continue to assert themselves in the world, such efforts will not end. However, where did this sentiment come from?

The issue stems from the forced nature of its inception in corporate and academic workspaces. As an increasingly liberal sentiment took over the nation during the Obama presidency, so did the call for equal representation and consideration for many identities. There was a wave of decentralizing the white man as the default in the workplace and efforts were made to signal an improved one. Virtue signaling, the phenomenon of doing virtuous things for the sake of appearing good, became prevalent in corporate strategy as being likable was directly correlated to being profitable. The problem is that DEI positions can only generate so much profit, usually in the initial announcement. As long as a company intends to establish a DEI department, most consumers are willing to overlook what happens afterward. This has led to an increased number of corporations dismantling related roles and departments.

This signaling approach to DEI does not indicate the death of the movement. It merely highlights the shallow commitment of some organizations and the need for a deeper, more authentic dedication to diversity, equity and inclusion. As long as marginalized communities continue to fight for their rights and demand representation, DEI will remain a necessary and ongoing effort.

Such positions have been disappearing from the job market and have been hit with layoffs at a higher rate than many other industries. It seems that after the death of George Floyd, some believe there is no longer a need, that the response has been adequate, and they can phase it out now. However, in a broader sense, DEI positions are correlated with increased profit and better business. It fosters a sense of belonging for individuals in the workplace and allows them to better participate in the work and the company. The retention rate among companies with DEI and without is much higher, indicating a greater level of comfort among employees.

Buzzword politics has also contributed to the disdain for DEI. Similarly, the term 'critical race theory' has been ostracized among educational spaces with very little consideration for its true definition and purpose. Despite being a niche study of law, it has been banned from being taught in public schools, which cannot even begin to introduce it to young students. Instead, the narrative around terms like 'DEI' has been

warped to signal the idea of prioritization of people of color or those who are differently abled over those who are more privileged.

As the acting DEI Senator for the Student Government Association, I wonder how my role will exist in the future. In a recent meeting, I was asked about my goals for the DEI role, and after thinking about it for a moment, I decided that ultimately, the role should persist. I wanted to do as much as possible to make sure that the lack of this position would feel like a gap that needed to be filled. The moment I took on the role, I felt all the possible responsibilities fall into my lap understanding that DEI is necessary because although there are endless issues that must be addressed, each of them is hidden under a layer of dust that must be brushed away.

The core of DEI is exposing all of these hidden underlying issues that persist in the way we discuss and interact with each other. They are so well hidden, however, that we could easily go on living without revealing them at all. The non-existence of DEI feels natural because it's work that goes against the grain. It is an uphill battle that ultimately shapes our common places into more accepting environments.