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Messaging Playbook: Navigating DEI in Higher Education

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Takeaways

- The loud blowback against DEI risks important—and uncontroversial—programs that focus on student success, sense of belonging, and academic support getting caught in the crosshairs.
- Many of the college programs that might be characterized as “DEI” have key principles supported by those on both sides of the aisle, even in a polarized environment.
- Voters understand the connection between college student support programs and positive outcomes after graduation. Focusing on how these programs promote equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes cuts through the noise and speaks to supporters from all ideological perspectives.

Over the past year, higher education leaders have been caught in a maelstrom of changes and uncertainty. While funding cuts, enrollment woes, and challenges to freedom of speech are all top of mind, the onslaught against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has proven to be among the trickiest to navigate. The Trump Administration has seized on a politically salient issue and worked overtime to redefine DEI in the court of public opinion as “divisive, excessive, and inefficient.”¹ The stakes are high for higher education leaders navigating multiple perspectives and constituencies with varied views on a high-temperature issue. Yet to move forward effectively, we must listen for the signal through the noise and contrast the Trump Administration’s actions on DEI with Americans’ actual concerns, remaining clear-eyed about what colleges and universities can—and should—do to ensure that all students can succeed and belong.

To get at the heart of the issue, Third Way partnered with polling firm GS Strategy Group to survey 1,000 likely voters on their views about DEI and higher education in July 2025. We also oversampled an additional 100 Black men, 200 Hispanic voters, and 200 voters making under \$50,000 per year—groups that made up a new coalition that propelled President Trump to a second term. What we found may surprise you: voters largely support the values that undergird DEI principles, but they are also clear in their belief that higher education has taken it too far. Voters see a gap between the values of equal opportunity they support

and how DEI is put in practice by colleges, creating a chasm ripe for symbolic wokeness and a futile battle over political correctness. And they fear that this has led to a shift in focus away from the fundamental purpose they want higher education to serve: getting students across the finish line to a valuable degree and into good jobs with salaries that allow them to repay their student loans.

Based on key lessons learned from our research, this messaging guide is written with college and university leaders—and those who advise them—in mind. First, we show where voters stand on the role of a college degree and how higher education can promote equality of opportunity. We then unpack where voters believe that higher education has missed the mark, specifically their concerns about colleges valuing preference over merit. Finally, we offer messaging guidance and a reframing of key issues to help inform critical decisions on college campuses, aiming to avoid overcorrection and steer the narrative in a productive direction. This guide should not be read as anti-DEI. Instead, it aims to elevate the nuances of American public opinion—and show that a shift in language around a controversial topic need not be indicative of a change in values—offering a path forward for institutional leaders confronting an incredibly charged issue.

Recognize the widely shared understanding that a college degree is key to success for people from diverse backgrounds.

Voters across the political spectrum (75%) have a favorable opinion of colleges and universities—including 87% of Democrats, 75% of Independents, and 65% of Republicans. Most voters, including those who make up the New Trump Coalition, view a college degree as key to success for people from diverse backgrounds. As such, higher education is seen as a great equalizer in society, where students all have an opportunity to succeed regardless of their background. While higher education experts know access and completion are complex issues, the public still broadly sees a college degree as a cornerstone for lifelong success.

Try this: Talk about how we can agree on the value of a college degree and the path to economic security it can provide. Highlight that the opportunity to attend college, work hard, and graduate is a shared goal for *all* students, regardless of background. With only 28% of voters believing it has gotten easier over the past five years for people of diverse backgrounds to succeed, there is a clear opportunity to discuss the continued need for students to have a fair chance to reap the benefits of a college degree.

Address concerns about higher ed’s treatment of merit and preference by emphasizing a commitment to equal opportunity, not equal outcomes.

There is consensus around the principles undergirding DEI, and 68% of voters (including just over half of Republicans and Trump voters) support promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in society. Those who support DEI say they do so because they believe everyone deserves equal opportunity, fair treatment, and a chance to succeed. Those opposed view it as an unfair system that gives preferential treatment without regard for merit. Critically, most voters (59%) fall in the latter camp—including 61% of Republicans, 58% of Independents, and 49% of Democrats. Drilling down further, when asked which should be the priority in America today, three in four voters agreed that “equality of opportunity to guarantee that everyone has the same chance to get ahead should prevail over equality of outcome to guarantee that those who are disadvantaged make gains.” That support holds for 80% of Trump voters.

The sentiment also holds when explicitly asked about DEI programs on college campuses. Over three-quarters (77%) of voters—including most Trump voters (75%)—agreed that “DEI programs work when they provide ‘equality of opportunity,’ not ‘equality of outcomes.’ Colleges and universities should ensure that all students have the same chance to succeed, but it is up to individual students, not the school, to make the most of that chance and excel.” As they consider their response to concerns about overreach, higher education leaders will need to recognize that most Americans think higher education’s pendulum has swung too far from its original purpose, but deeply want students to have fair opportunities to succeed. Previous Third Way [polling](#) has shown that even right-leaning voters give the green light to campus programs that help students achieve strong post-graduate outcomes, get good jobs, and repay their student loans. But people may need assistance separating real-world DEI programs from the politicized bogeyman they’ve heard about—and understanding how these programs help ensure student success both in college and after walking across the graduation stage.

Try this: Stay grounded in higher education’s role in providing equal opportunity for students and creating a level playing field. Don’t belabor unproductive claims that DEI is antithetical to merit; instead, focus on uplifting core programs that prioritize academic support and a sense of belonging on campus to make sure all students who want to work hard and succeed have the chance to demonstrate their abilities. Use the opportunity to take a mainstream approach that moves away from hollow symbolism toward celebrating the

core values that voters want higher education to deliver to its students: freedom of thought and equality of opportunity.

Programs targeted to specific student groups don't phase voters, but they want to see support that goes beyond race and gender.

In the current climate, there is a risk that any targeted student success initiative could be swept up in the anti-DEI movement. But most student support programs are thoroughly uncontroversial. Nearly three out of four voters—including 59% of Trump voters—believe that colleges should always be able to offer programs that welcome students, make them feel like they belong, and provide opportunities for all students to succeed academically, regardless of who is in the White House. Nor do voters instinctively take issue with programs designed to support specific groups of students, though they can be easily persuaded by arguments that such programs benefit some to the detriment of others. To get past this preconception, we asked about their thoughts on common programs, offices, and support structures targeted at specific student groups, and whether they should be allowed or banned. In doing so, we provided examples of the different forms such programs take and how they may include resources for students from specific backgrounds. From the outset, 71% agree that these programs exist to help all students succeed, while acknowledging that different students on the same campus have unique needs. No program fell below 50% support, although some are more popular than others. Voters recognize that students arrive on college campuses with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and they are supportive of programs targeted to the needs of specific groups.

When mentioning that colleges could be forced to eliminate programs they value, such as those for women in STEM and Black student leadership initiatives, nearly a third (31%) of voters (including a plurality of Trump voters) would prefer to keep those that they support the needs of specific groups of students but eliminate those that they feel give preferential treatment. Critically, college and university leaders must understand that voters want to see programs that support *all* facets of a student body, beyond race and gender. For example, 68% sign off on programs supporting rural students, 65% support courses that teach history around the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, 63% like groups that support students of faith, and 61% back programs specifically supporting students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Try this: Voters recognize that students come to a college campus with diverse backgrounds and experiences and aren't inherently opposed to programs targeted to the needs of specific

groups. Show the breadth of your institution's support for students across all groups. This can include programs that focus on race and gender, but should also include programs that support other groups, such as rural, religious, and first-generation students. A part of shifting the narrative is showing—not just telling—your institution's baseline commitment to student success, irrespective of the background or identities a student brings to your campus.

Demonstrate that your institution's commitment to diverse perspectives includes viewpoints and thoughts.

The disconnect between shared values and what voters don't like in higher education hinges on the belief that colleges and universities are committed to a one-sided worldview that doesn't allow for diverse thought. Institutional leaders likely disagree—yet to navigate through the current moment, they must consider that until they work to prove otherwise, perception is reality in the minds of Americans. Most voters (76%) recognize that college campuses are diverse, creating a richer student experience and more well-rounded graduates. That desire for various viewpoints also extends to faculty, with 55% of voters supporting the part of President Trump's executive order that calls for colleges to support intellectual diversity among faculty.² This is less about political viewpoints and more about colleges taking an active role in helping students practice what they preach—treating others the way they would want to be treated—and ensuring that all students have a chance to understand and respect each other. For voters, this is a throughline to the role they believe higher education should play in society by giving students fair opportunities to reap positive post-college outcomes.

Try this: Recent headlines have framed institutions as intolerant of dissenting viewpoints. Without a doubt, there's nuance—yet voters also need to see campuses with diverse perspectives that offer space for productive dialogue and constructive understanding among students from all backgrounds. Campuses must prove how to prioritize respectful, constructive dialogue among students and faculty with diverse ideological perspectives to lower the temperature around anti-DEI sentiment.

Take advantage of the opportunity to rein in overreach, move past symbolic wokeness, and keep student success at the center.

The public is split on how President Trump is handling DEI. In fact, a majority of voters (including majorities of the New Trump Coalition) oppose President Trump's executive order to eliminate it on college campuses nationwide, and there is nearly a 50-50 split on whether voters support the job that President Trump and his Administration have done regarding DEI programs. While 84% of Republican voters support President Trump's actions, only a third (33%) of Independents do—a divide of over 50 percentage points. Within the voter groups that delivered President Trump a second term, a majority disapprove of President Trump's handling of DEI, including 58% of Black men, 55% of Hispanics, and 50% of voters making less than \$50,000.

A word of caution: just because the public is split does *not* mean that voters don't want to see institutions making meaningful changes. Recall that a majority of voters believe that higher education's current playbook favors preference over merit. Even if you may disagree, doubling down on earlier messaging won't shift the tide in your favor in the court of public opinion. There's a clear window for higher education leaders to re-engage the public with a mainstream approach grounded in reasonableness. To do so, demonstrate a commitment to supporting students who may need it, and to ensuring that all students have a fair opportunity to succeed.

Try this: Higher education has viewed DEI in a binary way: either you support it, or you don't. The reality is far more complicated, and for institutional leaders, this presents challenges in communicating how any shift in approach isn't indicative of throwing out support for all students with the bathwater. It is important not to dismiss Americans' well-intentioned concerns around DEI in higher education. Remember that you and your campuses may have a distinct perspective from that of the average voter, but dismissing their concerns won't move the needle in a productive direction or help solidify support for uncontroversial student success programs. Address those concerns head-on, be willing to engage in thoughtful dialogue, and give grace to those who want to learn. Avoid alienating potential supporters with unnecessary litmus tests, making DEI unnecessarily out of reach, and positioning it as preferential rather than merit-based.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the attacks on DEI in higher education have been challenging, particularly for colleges and universities that have instituted targeted programs and services in good faith to ensure students can succeed and are worried they might be harmfully caught up in the chaos. Yet higher education leaders shouldn't be dismayed in the current moment, as voters have offered a clear path to move forward: a shared agreement that a college degree is the key to success, a belief in the values that support a diverse learning environment in higher education, and the desire to see colleges and universities move to the mainstream and focus

on why students go to college in the first place. Even though recent court challenges have sidelined some of President Trump's DEI agenda, higher education leaders shouldn't squander the moment. The time is ripe to demonstrate unequivocally to the public that colleges and universities are committed to student success and to highlight a diversity of viewpoints, recognizing that no two students arrive on campus with the same experience.

The Third Way Higher Education team is ready and able to assist with any further questions you may have on messaging guidance or navigating this challenging moment in higher education.

Methodology

GS Strategy Group conducted an online survey between July 30 and August 1, 2025. The sample included 1,000 likely voters nationwide plus an additional oversample of 100 Black men, 200 Hispanic voters, and 200 voters making under \$50,000 annually. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%.

ENDNOTES



1. United States, Congress, House. “*Divisive, Excessive, Ineffective: The Real Impact of DEI on College Campuses.*” Congress.gov, 7 March 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/LC73057/text>. Text transcript accessed 28 January 2026. 119th Congress, 1st Session.
2. “Reforming Accreditation to Strengthen Higher Education.” Press Release, *The White House*, 23 April 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/reforming-accreditation-to-strengthen-higher-education/>. Accessed 28 January 2026.