



Effective Educational EDI Reforms: How to Move Beyond Tokenism, Polarization, and Performative Politics in Teacher Education

Sofia Noori¹, Ardavan Eizadirad^{2,3*}

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¹University of British Columbia, Canada

²Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

³ **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5821-1076

*Corresponding author: Ardavan Eizadirad, aeizadirad@wlu.ca

Abstract. This article mediates the polarized equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) discourse in higher education by fostering dialogue between critics of “woke culture” and advocates for social justice. Rather than reinforcing binaries, we advocate for constructive and critical conversations that prioritize action, relational accountability, and institutional effectiveness for effective educational reforms rooted in dialogue and not debating. We engage critiques of EDI from multiple perspectives including concerns related to meritocracy, reverse discrimination, political indoctrination, victimhood culture, and threats to free speech. By reframing these debates as opportunities to reimagine educational structures, we argue that EDI can broaden merit and excellence while fostering innovation and equity, particularly in teacher education programs, which serve as key sites for such interventions. Overall, this article discusses strategies for moving beyond checklist equity (“chequity”) toward authentic community engagement and data-informed structural transformation. Cultivating brave spaces as part of the process is significant as it encourages reflection and dialogue. This makes it possible to constructively work through tensions, charged emotions, and complexities involved in identifying immediate needs and taking actions for institutional improvements.

Keywords: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), anti-woke discourse, institutional transformation, brave spaces, and harm-reduction approaches.

Introduction

This article mediates the polarized equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) discourse in higher education by fostering dialogue between critics of “woke culture” and advocates for social justice. Rather than reinforcing binaries, we advocate for constructive and critical conversations that prioritize action, relational accountability, and institutional effectiveness rooted in dialogue rather than debating. We engage critiques of EDI from multiple perspectives including concerns related to meritocracy, reverse discrimination, political indoctrination, victimhood culture, and threats to free speech. As part of facilitating dialogue, we examine numerous case studies and discuss how to shift from divisive debates to critical conversations that humanize social issues and focus on action-oriented solutions. Within this approach, there is a role for everybody ranging from allies to people with systemic advantage.

In an era marked by heightened political polarization, legislative rollbacks of EDI initiatives, and declining public trust in higher education, the need for constructive, evidence-informed dialogue has never been more urgent (Ghaffar-Siddiqui & Eizadirad, 2026; Liddle, 2025; Sider et al., 2022; Eizadirad & Walton, 2025). By reframing these debates as opportunities to reimagine educational structures, we argue that EDI can broaden merit and excellence while fostering innovation and equity, particularly in teacher education programs, which serve as key sites for such interventions (Abawi et al., 2025; Eizadirad et al., 2022). By cultivating brave spaces that encourage reflection and dialogue (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Eizadirad & Parker-Shandal, 2025), it is possible to constructively work through tensions, charged emotions, and complexities involved in identifying immediate needs and taking actions for institutional improvements.

Public confidence in higher education has declined significantly over the past decade (Eizadirad & Walton, 2025; Sider et al., 2022). According to the Pew Research Center (2025), a growing share of Americans across partisan lines believe universities are “headed in the wrong direction” (para. 4). In Canada, similar scepticism has emerged regarding teacher education, program length, cost, and relevance (Jones, 2025) with most recently in the province of Ontario. Major changes introduced by that Ministry of Education will take effect in 2027, including, but not limited to: introducing Chief Executive Officers to districts, new financial modeling, teacher certification being reduced to one year, and reconsidering the roles of school trustees. These trends suggest that dissatisfaction with postsecondary institutions is not confined to one discipline or ideological camp. It reflects broader anxieties about institutional effectiveness, accountability, and social cohesion.

In response, we are inviting scholars, readers, and community members, regardless of political or ideological affiliations, to engage in constructive dialogue. Both extreme sides of the political spectrum agree that institutions including higher education are not working at an optimal level. Both sides want institutional reforms. Therefore, what we present

throughout the article is not meant to be a one-sided reply nor a debate. Our aim is to discuss what constitutes quality education and how to implement sustainable long-term reforms that are effective.

Mitigating Polarization- The Power of Constructive Dialogue

This work emerges from the authors' sustained engagement with EDI initiatives and the emotional demands it entails, especially being part of historically equity-denied communities with respect to identity and upbringing as well as professors in teacher education programs in Canada. Experiences within institutional EDI contexts for both authors have included navigating performative politics, pressures to conform, and exclusion from opportunities due to rigid interpretations of checklist-based approaches to doing equity work within post-secondary contexts. In recent years, hiring committees have prioritized visible markers of diversity aligned with predetermined institutional targets. Furthermore, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, institutions across North America issued public commitments to racial justice followed by expansions to EDI offices and anti-racism training. While some of these efforts led to measurable gains in representation and diversity, others were criticized for being symbolic rather than structural (Ahmed, 2021; Jimenez et al., 2019). Several universities launched high-profile Black faculty cluster hires, yet without parallel reforms to tenure criteria or workload distribution, which are conditions that research shows disproportionately burden underrepresented faculty (Ghaffar-Siddiqui & Eizadirad, 2026; Jimenez et al., 2019; Kezar & Posselt, 2020). This pattern has been described as the “non-performativity” of diversity work wherein institutional declarations do not necessarily translate into structural change (Ahmed, 2021).

Polarization related to systemic social justice issues, referred to as a “woke,” and how to solve them has intensified in recent years. In the United States, several state legislatures introduced or passed laws restricting EDI programming in public universities while the 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* significantly limited race-conscious admissions policies. In Canada, while the legal framework and context differs, political discourse increasingly mirrors American “anti-woke” rhetoric. These developments underscore that EDI is not merely a campus initiative but a flashpoint within broader culture wars concerning ideologies related to merit, fairness, national identity, and democratic values.

We position this article as an intervention and mediation within polarized discourses by modelling how disagreement can be engaged in without dehumanization. The perspectives that follow are structured in a way to engage with debates between pro-EDI and anti-woke discourses to identify how both sides can work together through the tensions and complexities involved to enhance institutions and their effectiveness. Rather than caricaturing critics of EDI as regressive or dismissing advocates

as ideological, we take seriously the concerns raised about meritocracy, free speech, indoctrination, and reverse discrimination while also grounding our responses in empirical research, case studies, and lived realities. It is important to note that the purpose of this is not to divide but bring us together as a collective and continue the much-needed conversations, even when it is uncomfortable or gets people emotionally charged. As Audre Lorde (2012) reminds us, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138).

In terms of structure for our article, it is not traditional, nor does it conform to typical sub-sections expected in a peer-reviewed journal. This is meant to increase accessibility of content to non-academics and community members by encouraging people to be part of the discussions and extend the big ideas highlighted here into their local contexts. By intentionally adopting a dialogic and claim-response structure, we aim to bridge scholarly research with public discourse and policy debates (Gagnon et al., 2022; Roberson et al., 2017; Tuck, 2009).

At their core, both critics and advocates of EDI seek institutions (whether in education, government, or the private sector) that function efficiently, uphold high standards, and operate with accountability (Michaels, 2006). Therefore, in the following subsections various EDI claims are stated and then examined through research-informed responses. We identify points of convergence, bring to surface the frameworks that inform these positions or assumptions, and delineate plausible avenues for constructive dialogue or policy reforms. For example, rather than debating abstract terminology such as “privilege” or “equity,” institutions could systematically assess how specific initiatives such as inclusive hiring practices, mentorship pathways, or community-engaged partnerships affect recruitment, retention, workplace climate, and long-term organizational health. When impact is measured and publicly reported, EDI shifts from symbolic rhetoric to accountable practices.

Overall, this article argues that EDI is at a crossroads. It can either remain trapped in symbolic gestures and polarized verbiage, or evolve into a data-informed, relational accountability-driven, community-engaged framework that strengthens institutional effectiveness while honouring pluralism (Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025; Manji, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Engaging mindfully therefore requires intellectual humility, empirical rigor, spiritual nourishment, and a shared commitment to institutional improvement across differences. The more productive question, then, is not which side holds moral authority, but how institutions can (re)design frameworks that enhance excellence and fairness rather than compromise it.

Meritocracy Argument

Claim: EDI policies undermine merit-based systems by prioritizing diversity and identity politics over merit and qualifications.

Critics argue that initiatives such as Black faculty cluster hires, Indigenous-targeted admissions, or equity-informed recruitment practices displace the “most qualified” candidates in favour of identity-based considerations. This claim has intensified in the United States following the 2023 Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, which significantly restricted race-conscious admissions, and subsequent political pressure from conservative lawmakers and the Trump campaign platform calling for a return to what is positioned as “exclusively merit-based” admissions and hiring. These developments reflect a broader political push to redefine fairness as equality where all applicants are treated identically rather than addressing historically uneven access to opportunities which intersects with questions related to who defines knowledge, how it is valued, and whose voices and experiences are authorized within educational institutions (Abawi et al., 2026; Copland, 2021; Manning, 2005; Razack, 2002).

But there are also cases where change under the EDI discourse has been ineffective and reversed over time. For example, beginning in 2022, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) replaced merit-based admissions (e.g., auditions, portfolios, and entrance assessments) for several specialty secondary programs with a random lottery system when applications exceeded available spaces (Piercey, 2025). While intended to increase equity and broaden access, critics argued that the lottery undermined the purpose of specialized programs by granting equal probability of admission regardless of demonstrated preparation or talent. Concerns also emerged that students who had invested significant time developing skills were treated no differently than those without prior experience which contributed to perceptions of unfairness and lowered standards (Piercey, 2025). The polarization on this issue illustrates how equity-oriented reforms, when implemented without clear communication or structural supports, can generate backlash and be perceived as performative rather than principled. As of October 2025, after two years under this new admissions lottery system, the TDSB announced that it was returning to the previous requirements where prospective students will submit a portfolio with their application along with grades.

At the heart of this debate is the question: What counts as merit and who has historically defined it? (hooks, 1994). Traditional conceptions of merit often prioritize standardized test scores, GPAs, degrees from elite institutions, citational counts, and publication metrics (Eizadirad, 2019; Sider et al., 2022). Yet research consistently demonstrates that these indicators are shaped by structural advantages including access to wealth, high-resourced schooling, social networks, and freedom from systemic discrimination (Abawi et al., 2025; Michaels, 2006; Holzer & Neumark, 2000). Standardized testing, for example, strongly correlates with family income and access to extra-curricular supports, raising concerns about whether such measures reflect innate ability or accumulated opportunity

(Eizadiard, 2019; Sider et al., 2022). This does not mean that we should not use standardized scores in any capacity to make decisions for educational reforms. Rather, we should discuss how can standardized scores be supplemented with other relevant success indicators for more holistic and effective decision-making.

Quantitative data complicate the assumption that equity initiatives lower standards. Holzer and Neumark (2000), in their large-scale review of affirmative action policies, found little evidence that such programs reduce overall institutional performance. Similarly, longitudinal analyses of race-conscious admissions in U.S. law schools found that eliminating affirmative action would significantly reduce the number of Black and Latino professionals entering high-status fields without clear evidence of improved academic outcomes for institutions (Ayres & Brooks, 2005; Rothstein & Yoon, 2008). While critics such as Sander and Taylor (2012) argue for a “mismatch” effect, subsequent re-analyses have demonstrated that these claims are sensitive to methodological assumptions and often overstate negative impacts.

In faculty hiring at colleges and universities, cluster hiring initiatives have been shown to increase interdisciplinary collaboration and institutional retention when paired with mentoring and structural support (Jimenez et al., 2019). Importantly, Jimenez et al. (2019) also found that underrepresented faculty disproportionately shoulder diversity-related labour which suggests that representation without structural reform can create additional burdens rather than advantages. This finding highlights that equity hiring alone is insufficient and that institutional design for support of minoritized faculty must accompany recruitment to facilitate their thriving.

The backlash narrative towards EDI hires often relies on high-profile symbolic examples. For instance, the National Football League (NFL)’s decision to partner with rapper and artist Jay-Z to expand outreach to racialized audiences and the inclusion of Spanish-language performances at the 2026 Super Bowl featuring artists like Bad Bunny has been mocked as “EDI hires” rather than strategic cultural engagements (Melendez, 2026). Yet such moves are frequently tied to demographic market realities where in the United States Latino populations represent a rapidly growing consumer base. Therefore, from an organizational perspective, broadening representation can reflect adaptive strategy for greater viewership and profits, and by extension being a form of inclusion rather than about lowered standards.

In teacher education and school board hirings, similar tensions arise and exist (Eizadirad & Walton, 2025). In both Canada and the United States, the teaching workforce remains disproportionately white relative to increasingly diverse student populations (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020). Research indicates that students of all racial backgrounds benefit academically and socially from exposure to diverse educators including improved expectations, reduced suspension rates, and increased graduation outcomes (Egalite et al., 2015). Thus, hiring practices aimed at diversifying

the profession will likely enhance and not dilute educational quality. In no cases, individuals should be hired if they are not qualified as per the job description and its key responsibilities. However, it is important to note when diversification efforts are implemented through rigid numerical targets or checklist-driven hiring processes, they risk being perceived as unprincipled. In such cases, a way forward should include investments in mentorship, retention strategies, or access to structural supports to make equity goals substantive and sustainable.

Immigration debates further complicate narratives of merit. In the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policies link migration to economic threats rooted in arguments about “deservingness” and citizenship. In contrast, Canada frequently positions itself as a multicultural “peacemaker” nation (Razack, 2008). However, Sherene Razack (2002, 2008) cautions that Canada’s self-image as benevolent and neutral often obscures the racial and colonial hierarchies that structure belonging, citizenship, and access to opportunities. In *Race, Space, and the Law* (2002), Razack emphasizes how legal and institutional frameworks spatialize racial difference which marks some identities as naturally entitled to space and legitimacy while others, predominantly racialized identities, are constructed as outsiders or threats. In *Casting Out* (2008), Razack further demonstrates how contemporary Western states produce “unworthy” subjects who are often racialized migrants or Muslims, whose exclusion and acts of oppression against them, is justified through narratives of cultural deficiency or being security risks.

Applied to meritocracy debates, Razack’s work on ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ subjects invites us to interrogate how “merit” itself is racialized and spatialized. Readers are invited to question how assumptions about competence, professionalism, neutrality, and excellence, including in teacher education and within schools, are often aligned with dominant norms of whiteness, colonial ideologies, and settler belonging (Kovach, 2009; Tuck, 2009). In both Canadian and American contexts, discourses of merit frequently operate as race-neutral linguistically but race-conscious in effect which reinforces who is imagined as naturally fitting within educational and professional spaces (Kumashiro, 2000; Matias & Mackey, 2016). This dynamic becomes particularly salient in teacher education admissions and hiring. If merit is defined primarily through standardized metrics without accounting for unequal schooling conditions or access to opportunities, along with other relevant factors such as immigration histories, language skill mastery, or intergenerational exclusion, then what is being measured is not simply talent but accumulated structural advantages (Berkley, 2024; Eizadirad, 2019).

The critique that EDI undermines merit therefore presents an opportunity, not merely for rebuttal, but more importantly for reconstruction and reimagination of what is possible. Redefining merit as historically situated rather than universally neutral allows for a nuanced and critical approach to effective implementation strategies. For example, hiring

committees are encouraged to ask: Whose knowledge systems count? Whose forms of leadership are valued? Whose linguistic repertoires are seen as assets rather than deficits? These questions do not dilute excellence. They deepen it by recognizing that institutional criteria have always been shaped by unequal power relations (Abawi et al., 2025; Grande, 2015; hooks, 1994; Maxwell, 2026). Through this line of inquiry, institutions can expand superficial understandings of merit to more holistic visions.

We also acknowledge a valid concern within the backlash discourse towards EDI initiatives where some scholarship and institutional messaging have relied heavily on critique and moral indictment without articulating actionable pathways forward for measuring impact of their EDI initiatives. When EDI discourse becomes primarily accusatory by framing individuals solely as beneficiaries of “privilege” without clarifying shared institutional gains, it risks entrenching defensiveness and emotional resentment. Solution-oriented scholarship must therefore articulate how equity reforms enhance institutional outcomes for all partners and community members involved (Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025). Research conducted by Page (2007) demonstrates mathematically and empirically that diverse groups often outperform homogenous ones in problem-solving and innovation under many conditions. Organizational research further shows that racially heterogeneous teams improve decision-making quality and long-term adaptability within organizations (Roberson et al., 2017). Diversity, in this sense, is not a deviation from excellence, but one that upholds merit and facilitates achieving at higher standards.

Another approach is to consider applying a multidimensional definition to ‘merit’ that might include conventional metrics (academic preparation and professional experience) alongside contextual strengths (community-engaged scholarship, multilingualism, resilience, mentorship capacity, and lived experience navigating systemic barriers). Such an approach does not discard or lower standards. It recalibrates them to reflect both excellence and equity in complex, pluralistic societies. Therefore, inclusive excellence is not the abandonment of merit but its modernization.

Reverse Discrimination Argument

Claim: EDI policies unfairly disadvantage majority-group members by privileging identity over qualifications, thereby constituting “reverse discrimination”.

Concerns about reverse discrimination often emerge from a scarcity-based framework that assumes opportunities are finite and that gains for historically marginalized groups result in losses for majority groups, particularly white men. Critics argue that diversity targets, equity hiring, or race-conscious admissions may result in qualified candidates being overlooked solely because they do not belong to a historically excluded group (Peterson, 2021). This zero-sum framing positions equity as

redistribution rather than expansion which presumes that institutional excellence is threatened when access broadens. However, EDI policies are not designed to penalize individuals based on identity. If implemented authentically and effectively, they seek to correct systemic distortions and harms that have historically constrained access to opportunities for equity-denied identities and communities. Affirmative action policies, for example, have been shown to reduce disparities without lowering institutional standards (Holzer & Neumark, 2000). Large-scale economic analyses indicate that affirmative action modestly shifts opportunity structures while maintaining performance benchmarks which indicates that equity initiatives recalibrate access rather than dilute rigor.

Sander and Taylor (2012) advance a “mismatch” thesis arguing that students of colour admitted to highly competitive institutions may experience lower academic outcomes if their credentials differ from institutional averages. Yet Rothstein and Yoon (2008), using the same Bar Passage Study data, identified methodological limitations and selection bias in Sander’s conclusions. They found that the mismatch effect to be overstated. Subsequent empirical research suggests that removing race-conscious admissions would significantly reduce representation of Black and Latino professionals in law, medicine, and academia without demonstrable improvements in overall institutional performance (Ayres & Brooks, 2005). In other words, the costs of eliminating equity policies are measurable and negatively substantial. Importantly, perceptions of reverse discrimination are often amplified during periods of rapid demographic change or economic uncertainty, when majority-group status is experienced as fragile rather than secure. Yet representation data reveal that dominant groups continue to hold disproportionate access to power and decision-making across leadership positions in higher education, corporate governance, and political institutions in both Canada and the United States (Gagnon et al., 2024).

We advocate that the aim of EDI is not replacement but recalibration of available opportunities. Institutions benefit when they recognize that talent exists across all demographics and that historical exclusion has obscured, not diminished, capability (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). When equity reforms are framed as institutional strengthening rather than demographic substitution, they provide a shift from threat narratives to shared benefit narratives. Michaels (2006) offers a related critique arguing that North American institutions often focus on racial diversity while neglecting class-based inequality. He contends that organizing the world primarily through race can obscure the economic structures that limit access to opportunities across multiple identities. This intervention complicates rather than contradicts EDI by suggesting that equity frameworks must incorporate socioeconomic indicators alongside race, gender, disability, and other axes of marginalization. Admissions policies that consider family income, neighbourhood poverty rates, school resource levels, and intergenerational

wealth disparities may address structural inequality more comprehensively and effectively. Focusing on wealth gaps, rather than a single marker of identity, acknowledges how historical discrimination accumulates across generations through factors related to housing, education, and labour markets.

Moreover, demographic data collection and transparency are essential to evaluating the benefits and unintended consequences of equity initiatives. Publicly funded universities and colleges carry fiduciary and democratic obligations to demonstrate effectiveness. Without disaggregated, longitudinal data on recruitment, retention, graduation rates, leadership representation, and post-graduation outcomes, debates about fairness remain anecdotal and ideologically driven. Berkley (2024) emphasizes that robust data infrastructures allow institutions to assess whether EDI initiatives reduce disparities, create exclusionary side effects, or require recalibration.

Transparency also protects against performative equity work and its backlash. When demographic and outcome data are publicly available, institutions are accountable not only for representation gains but also for climate, belonging, workload equity, and advancement pathways. Public reporting fosters independent scholarship, informed civic dialogue, and responsible allocation of government funding and resources. Therefore, data-informed evaluation strengthens both equity and merit by ensuring that policies are assessed on measurable metrics rather than political rhetoric.

Overall, reverse discrimination concerns should not be dismissed outright as they reflect anxieties about fairness, access to opportunities, and institutional trust (Manji, 2019). The path forward is not in abandoning equity initiatives but in designing them with empirical rigor and transparent metrics so that fairness is demonstrable and its impact well-documented over time. When equity work is multidimensional and relational, it becomes less about redistributing scarcity and more about expanding collective capacity for thriving schools-community ecosystems.

Political Indoctrination Argument

Claim: EDI initiatives function as ideological indoctrination by promoting a singular political worldview and suppressing dissenting perspectives.

Some critics argue that EDI training and programming promote a divisive and unbalanced political ideologies. Concepts such as “white privilege,” “systemic racism,” or “gender identity” are framed by opponents as imposing guilt, fostering resentment, or socializing students into a predetermined moral framework that involves self-hate for members of dominant group who often experience more system advantages. McWhorter (2021) characterizes certain antiracist approaches as dogmatic while Copland (2021) points to municipalities where civic activism among students coincides with lower literacy scores. These critiques resonate with

broader anxieties that schools are shifting from knowledge transmission toward political socialization.

At the same time, legislative and policy responses have intensified. Across numerous U.S. states, laws have been introduced or enacted to restrict teaching about Critical Race Theory, systemic racism, or 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion (Abawi et al., 2025; Hernández-Truyol, 2023). Book bans and curriculum mandates have expanded, often targeting discussions of slavery, colonialism, gender diversity, and genocide. Such interventions risk narrowing intellectual inquiry and contributing to historical revisionism and erasures, including residential school denialism in Canada or Holocaust distortion. The tension is not simply between activism and neutrality but between competing visions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and histories. This highlights a genuine challenge in EDI implementation: ensuring that equity education fosters critical inquiry rather than ideological conformity (Eizadirad & Walton, 2025). If EDI initiatives are delivered prescriptively, without space for questioning, evidence-based dialogue, or intellectual humility (e.g. pressures of cancel culture contributing to fear of speaking up and sharing opinions and different experiences), they risk reinforcing the very polarization they seek to address and mitigate (Liddle, 2025; Manning, 2025; Maxwell, 2026). When educators dismiss dissent rather than engage it, stalemate replaces dialogue, and rhetorical cycles of backlash intensify.

Teacher education programs are particularly consequential in this landscape. Future educators will navigate increasingly diverse classrooms while confronting politicized scrutiny from parents, media, and politicians (Eizadirad et al., 2022). Teachers shape classroom climate, disciplinary practices, curricular framing, and students' long-term academic trajectories. Research consistently shows that students' sense of belonging, representation, and teacher expectations are linked to long-term educational and social outcomes (Osterman, 2000; Osterman, 2023). As K–12 educators face public criticism over topics such as sex education, 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, or teaching about colonial histories, teacher preparation programs must equip candidates with both content knowledge and dialogic competence rooted in inclusive pedagogies (hooks, 1994). Embedding EDI within teacher education should therefore be about pedagogical rigor and raising political consciousness, as they are associated with being an effective teacher.

A productive pivot reframes EDI not as a fixed doctrine but as a framework for cultivating democratic and inclusive literacies that values multiple perspective and action-oriented activism. One way to think of such democratization is outlined by Matias and Mackey (2016), who outline that critical pedagogies can disrupt dominant narratives while still encouraging reflective engagement. Similarly, Arao and Clemens (2013) distinguish “brave spaces” from “safe spaces,” emphasizing that discomfort, when structured and facilitated responsibly, is integral to meaningful learning. In

this sense, EDI can function less as ideological prescription and more as a scaffold for disciplined inquiry, empathy-building, and civic competence.

Preparing educators to navigate contested knowledge requires training in data-informed decisions, facilitation of disagreement, and awareness with trauma-informed engagement (Eizadirad & Parker-Shandal, 2025; Noori, 2025). Teachers are encouraged to become comfortable in cultivating brave spaces that recognize classrooms as spaces where multiple identities, beliefs, and lived experiences intersect and should co-exist. Programs that shape professional standards play a critical role in advancing curricula that are both academically rigorous and socially responsive. While many teacher education programs integrate EDI components, they must move beyond checklist compliance toward sustained, reflective practices.

One way of expanding and reframing existing euro-centric and neoliberal discourses that feed into fears of ideological indoctrination is democratizing and appreciating epistemologies that facilitate an openness to a plurality of ideologies. Take for instance, Indigenous epistemologies such as Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk), which emphasizes the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, or African concept of Ubuntu (“I am because we are”), which centres relational interdependence, through which institutions can reframe equity as reciprocal responsibility rather than competitive entitlement. Re-engaging with these frameworks suggest thriving systems depend on collective flourishing rather than single-independent advancement. Engaging both critics and advocates for EDI can move discourse away from blame and toward shared, relational accountability models (Eizadirad & Walton, 2025).

The example of Egerton Ryerson illustrates the stakes of historical pigeonhole thinking. Celebrated for designing Canada’s early public school system, Ryerson is also implicated in shaping segregated and assimilationist school models (Knight, 2021). While he is often symbolically positioned as the central architect of residential schools, responsibility ought to be extended across governments, churches, and institutional networks that operationalized Indigenous family separation, cultural erasure through residential schools, and cover-ups associated with abuse and murder. Engaging this history responsibly requires resisting simplistic hero or villain narratives. It demands layered analysis that acknowledges structural complicities rooted in institutional neglect and failures.

The deeper question is not whether education is political (it always has been) but whether institutions can cultivate the intellectual maturity and curiosity to examine power, history, and identity collectively without collapsing into coercion, conformity, blaming, or silence due to fear or having unpopular opinions. Postsecondary institutions, particularly teacher education programs, must sustain spaces both ideological and physical, where difficult perspectives and histories (as well as opposing perspectives) can be examined rigorously through dialogue and empathy instead of being suppressed or weaponized. Instead of framing EDI as a battleground between neutrality and activism, a more constructive path may be to ask:

What capacities do democratic societies require from educators and schools to contribute to thriving communities? If teachers are expected to guide students through pluralistic realities marked by difference and disagreement, then preparation programs and by extension higher education institutions, must model those very skills (Maxwell, 2026). The challenge is not to eliminate discussing polarizing topics but how to work through its tensions constructively by honing multiple perspectives and taking time to understand what the perspective is rooted in and why. Through this framing, EDI becomes less about political allegiance and more about cultivating competencies to discuss social issues without retreating into binary-models of explanation that create resentment or polarization. The measure of success would then shift to become whether educators and schools can foster classrooms where disagreement is possible without dehumanization.

Victimhood Culture Argument

Claim: EDI frameworks cultivate a “victim mentality” by centring oppression and identity in ways that diminish individual responsibility and achievement.

Some argue that initiatives such as equity-based hiring of Indigenous, Black, or racialized scholars risk framing individuals primarily as beneficiaries of systemic redress rather than as accomplished professionals in their own right. According to this view, emphasizing structural injustice may inadvertently overshadow personal agency, perseverance, and merit. This critique highlights a tension between acknowledging systemic inequities and affirming individual empowerment. The concern is not entirely unfounded: if EDI discourse becomes exclusively damage-centred focused on mitigating trauma, exclusion, and harm, it may unintentionally reproduce deficit narratives (Tuck, 2009). However, this interpretation mischaracterizes much of the scholarship informing equity work. Eve Tuck (2009) cautions against “damage-centred research” that defines communities solely by suffering and advocates instead for desire-based frameworks that foreground complexity, vision, and futurity. Similarly, Sandy Grande (2015) emphasizes Indigenous resurgence and intellectual sovereignty rather than victimhood. Therefore, effective EDI frameworks do not deny oppression. Through asset-based perspectives and approaches, they cultivate leadership, creativity, and resistance (Noori, 2025). For example, Indigenous scholars and educators employ land-based pedagogies, storytelling, and community-rooted epistemologies as assertions of strength and continuity (Kovach, 2009). Such approaches demonstrate that confronting colonial histories can coexist with cultural flourishing and institutional transformation. The goal is not to freeze identities within narratives of harm but to present a holistic, nuanced perspective that illuminates how communities navigate, resist, and transform structural constraints and barriers.

Debates surrounding trigger warnings illustrate this tension. Content addressing slavery, genocide, colonial violence, or gender-based oppression often includes advance notice by instructors intended to safeguard students' emotional well-being. Yet experimental studies (Bellet et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2020) suggest that trigger warnings have limited protective effects and may increase anticipatory anxiety for some students. Some scholars argue that routine warnings risk framing higher education as emotionally hazardous which can potentially discourage intellectual risk-taking and engagement with difficult material (Nolan & Roberts, 2024). Overuse of trigger warnings may also unintentionally reinforce the very vulnerability it seeks to mitigate. When discussions of systemic injustice are consistently preceded by signals of emotional fragility, marginalized identities and communities may be implicitly constructed as uniquely delicate or perpetually traumatized. These dynamic risks reinforcing a "single story" (Adichie, 2009; Tuck, 2009) which reduces multidimensional identities to narratives of harm. If trauma becomes the dominant framework through which equity-denied identities and communities are understood, then institutional discourse may pathologize rather than empower.

A recalibrated EDI approach does not eliminate acknowledgment of violence or injustice. It situates these realities within broader narratives of empowerment, innovation, intellectual contribution, and collective agency. Intersectional storytelling that highlights scientists, educators, artists, and leaders from historically marginalized communities expands representation beyond suffering and toward excellence. This balanced storytelling affirms that individuals can critique systemic inequities while simultaneously embodying competence, ambition, and self-determination. Thus, a pathway away from deficit, harm, victimhood narratives is reframing survival as a strength rooted in responding to oppressive institutional conditions. Importantly, responsibility and structural awareness are not mutually exclusive. Recognizing systemic barriers does not absolve individual accountability or responsibility. Rather, it contextualizes achievement within uneven terrains of access to opportunities. Empowerment-oriented EDI frameworks encourage both institutional reform and personal agency. The challenge lies in cultivating pedagogies that neither sanitize history nor entrench identity within perpetual grievance. When equity work foregrounds capacity alongside critique, it shifts from a discourse of victimhood to one of empowerment and future possibilities (El-Kurd, 2025). In this framing, the purpose of EDI is not to highlight victimhood, but to expand the institutional conditions under which collective flourishing become structurally achievable and sustainable.

Free Speech and Academic Freedom Argument

Claim: EDI initiatives suppress free speech and academic freedom by labelling dissenting viewpoints as discriminatory and enforcing ideological conformity.

Critics argue that university EDI policies can minimize open debate by positioning certain perspectives as unacceptable. This is common on topics related to Palestinian solidarity movements or mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations. Individuals may self-censor out of fear of professional repercussions or social ostracization. This critique reflects a broader concern that universities, once seen as marketplaces of ideas, are perceived increasingly as spaces of ideological regulation (Benitez & Freidman, 2025). The concern is not trivial. Academic freedom is foundational to democratic societies and scholarly inquiry. Yet the framing of EDI as inherently antagonistic to free speech collapses two distinct issues: fostering inclusive environments and policing unpopular perspectives. Institutions committed to equity are not tasked with eliminating disagreement. They are responsible for ensuring that participation in discourse does not reproduce harassment, discrimination, or denial of others' humanity (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013). As hooks (1994) reminds us, education as the practice of freedom requires dialogue across differences.

The concept of "brave spaces" provides a useful framework for navigating this tension. Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that brave spaces move beyond simplistic binaries of censorship versus unrestricted speech. They acknowledge historical and structural power imbalances while encouraging rigorous, respectful, and accountable engagement. Therefore, within brave spaces, participants are invited to take intellectual risks, question assumptions, and confront discomfort without fear of humiliation or violence. Discomfort alone is not censorship. It can be a necessary condition for democratic growth and constructive learning.

EDI does not require ideological uniformity. It requires equity in voice, participation, and protection within institutional frameworks and policies that respects everyone's human rights that are legally established. Kumashiro (2000) argues that anti-oppressive education must create room for critique, including critique of equity initiatives themselves, while maintaining clear boundaries against dehumanization and outright discrimination. The challenge lies in distinguishing between disagreement and harm. Speech that critiques policy, pedagogy, or institutional direction falls within democratic debate, but speech that targets individuals or groups in ways that deny their dignity often crosses into discriminatory conduct. This distinction is not abstract. In Ontario, the Human Rights Code (2013) protects individuals from discrimination and harassment on enumerated grounds including race, gender identity, religion, and disability. Institutions must therefore balance charter-protected expression with statutory obligations to prevent discrimination and harassment.

Recent incidents of political violence emphasize the urgency of this balance. The murder of Charlie Kirk, a polarizing conservative commentator, intensified debates about political extremism and public discourse (Manning, 2025). Regardless of ideological disagreement with his views, Charlie Kirk's death signals the dangers of a climate where polarization escalates into acts of violence. Many of his supporters argued that he articulated perspectives others felt unable to express openly due to fear of repercussions or being seen as a racist (Ziegler, 2025). This perception, whether empirically grounded or not, points to a deeper institutional challenge: when individuals feel unheard, they may gravitate toward spaces that validate grievance without accountability. We have seen this type of violence also target many equity-denied groups such as Muslims, Indigenous Peoples, and Black leaders amongst many more.

Collaboration with organizations such as the Heterodox Academy, which promotes viewpoint diversity, may offer opportunities for structured engagement across ideological divides (Liddle, 2025). However, such partnerships must prioritize dialogue over spectacle and inquiry over adversarial debate which has not been the case at all Heterodox events. The aim should not be to stage ideological contests, but to model how disagreement can coexist with shared institutional commitments to dignity and human rights. It also means finding common ground to work together to enhance institutions and the conditions for all to thrive. One of the authors, Dr. Eizadirad, has collaborated with members of the Heterodox group at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Toronto to facilitate some of these conversations through the spectrum game that encourages multiple perspectives to be shared and backed by evidence-informed rebuttals. This approach has shown promising as the events have shifted to prioritize dialogue rather than debating.

The more pressing question is not whether universities should discuss polarizing ideas, which we argue they should, but even more importantly how they can cultivate intellectual cultures capable of working through tensions (ideological and emotional) without fragmentation. If EDI is framed as censorship, it will generate resistance. If free speech is framed as an exemption from responsibility, it risks enabling harm. The work ahead lies in designing institutional ecosystems and cultures where shared accountability and self-expression are mutually reinforced and seen as supplementing one another rather than being mutually exclusive. In this light, the defence of academic freedom and the pursuit of equity need not be adversaries. The challenge and call to action is to practice them together deliberately, transparently, and with courage.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Throughout the article we have examined five central critiques of EDI: meritocracy, reverse discrimination, political indoctrination, victimhood culture, and free speech suppression. Taken together, these

arguments reveal challenges and tensions related to EDI implementation and their effectiveness. It emphasizes deeper anxieties and challenges related to judging and tracking fairness, institutional responsibilities, and intellectual freedom. Rather than dismissing these concerns, we have treated them as entry points for constructive dialogue to create conditions for thriving institutional ecosystems.

A recurring insight throughout this analysis is that much of the polarization surrounding EDI stems from definition ambiguity and implementation inconsistencies. When merit is narrowly defined, equity appears exclusionary. When equity is framed as a moral indictment, it appears accusatory. When dialogue is replaced with compliance, it appears coercive. And when representation is prioritized without structural reforms, it appears performative. These tensions are amplified in the current geopolitical moment, particularly in the United States and Canada, where right-wing nationalism and legislative rollbacks of EDI initiatives intersect with broader distrust and anger in higher education and with school shortcomings. Simultaneously, at times progressive institutions have implemented ineffective and performative EDI initiatives without much long-term impact to appease political donors, public pressures, or manage reputational risk. All of these factors have contributed to increased and intensified polarization on many social issues.

Therefore, the path forward requires moving beyond rhetorical battles and ideological debates toward empirically grounded, relationally accountable institutional practices and policies. EDI, in and of itself, is neither inherently corrosive nor inherently transformative. Its impact and effectiveness depend on design, transparency, implementation, and accountability which needs to be measured through relevant qualitative and quantitative indicators and reported on publicly. Equity initiatives that lack measurable outcomes invite scepticism or dismissal. Conversely, abandoning equity under political pressure risks entrenching long-standing structural disparities and systemic barriers.

For teacher education specifically, the implications are profound. Teacher preparation programs sit at the intersection of knowledge production, civic formation, and policy reforms. If educators are expected to guide students through increasingly pluralistic, contested, and digitally mediated realities, they must be equipped with subject-specific expertise but also with dialogic and inclusive pedagogies to hold complexity without retreating into polarization. For postsecondary institutions more broadly, the implications extend beyond curriculum and effective pedagogies. Universities and colleges must demonstrate that equity initiatives strengthen institutional effectiveness rather than undermine it. This requires transparent identity-based reporting, collection of disaggregated data, retention analysis, and leadership pathway tracking. Without such metrics, claims, whether celebratory or critical, remain anecdotal.

Government policies and available resources also play a decisive role. Publicly funded institutions carry fiduciary obligations to the

communities they serve. Policymakers should incentivize evidence-based equity practices, protect academic freedom grounded in human rights frameworks, and fund longitudinal research to assess intended and unintended impacts of EDI reforms. We also have to be cautious of legislative changes, whether blanket bans or unchecked mandates, which risk replacing one form of rigidity with another.

We hope to have left readers with the notion that reimagining EDI requires shifting from guilt-centred narratives toward responsible and institutionally accountable frameworks (Eizadirad & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2025). Intersectional and harm-reduction approaches remind us that structural inequities are historically produced and therefore require structural and not symbolic or performative responses. Effective implementation of EDI initiatives involves investments in collective capacity where systemic advantages are leveraged through mentorship, allyship, solidarity, policy redesign, and resource reallocation to strengthen institutional competencies and cultural reforms. To align with this, future research is encouraged to examine leadership pathways and pedagogies that foster dialogue without dehumanization. Institutions must also move beyond performative compliance toward adaptive, transparent, and community-engaged strategies grounded in measurable impact. Public reporting of outcomes is essential to callout performative EDI and restore public trust through data-informed success indicators. The future of teacher education and postsecondary institutions depends not on rhetorical positioning (who shouts the loudest to express their concerns), but on working together as a collective. Through collaborations that involve diverse approaches and perspectives, educational institutions can demonstrate to current and future generations that academic rigor and inclusion are not competing goals but complimentary to one another. They strengthen educational excellence and foster pathways and futurities that uphold dignity and facilitate meaningful democratic engagement.

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