



College Diversity Politics and American Higher Education: An Institutional Analysis

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Abstract

In light of the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC*, this paper reexamines the politics of diversity and affirmative action. Exploring legal constructions and three core dimensions of diversity—structural, interactional, and viewpoint—the study identifies three perverse outcomes of the prevailing “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) paradigm in American higher education. These include suppression of viewpoint diversity, feelings of reverse victimization due to antagonistic framings of identity, and suboptimal cognitive outcomes for minorities. Next, the paper analyzes interview and observational data from a faith-based Texas university to closely examine the process of college diversity policymaking. The main finding is that risk-averse college administrators succumb to the omnipresence of DEI as an institutional norm, even when they prefer to balance organizational mission and laws in devising diversity policy. An additional analysis of online diversity content from four strategically selected universities in Texas reveals specific discursive markers that perpetuate ideological DEI norms.

Keywords DEI · Affirmative action · URM · Safe space · Universities · Institutions · Bounded rationality

Introduction

The Supreme Court’s recent ruling in the *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC* cases has renewed attention to the politics of diversity and affirmative action. Three dimensions of diversity are discussed in this paper: structural—related to physical characteristics, interactional—related to engagement, and viewpoint—related to diverging ideologies. Previous Court rulings acknowledged the potential cognitive gains from having a diverse student body in holistic terms. However, these rulings also allowed advocates of affirmative action to implement diversity policies based on narrow structural factors, specifically race and gender. The diversity paradigm that emerged from this legal landscape restricted college diversity policymaking to dialectical or antagonistic framings of identity encapsulated through “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) programming.

In replacing holistic conceptions of diversity with the ideological program of DEI, American colleges and universities have created three unintended outcomes. The first is the suppression of viewpoint diversity through discriminatory hiring practices, biased college programming, and censorship in the name of creating safe spaces. The second is reduced interactional diversity as a result of dialectical framings of identity categories such as race and gender, creating feelings of reverse victimization and disengagement. The third is that minorities themselves may lose out in the prevailing DEI paradigm since it seems to prioritize achieving structural diversity over actually increasing minority cognitive and employment outcomes.

Precisely because the Court’s reversal of precedent in its most recent ruling challenges this DEI paradigm, it is useful to reexamine how diversity policymaking happens and why policies with perverse outcomes are promulgated. In this paper, I develop an analytical approach for explaining these processes of diversity policymaking. I frame policymaking through the prism of higher education administrators who are imperfect, risk-averse human beings contending with multiple constraints.

In developing this line of analysis, I use observation and interview data to examine the case of diversity policymaking

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in a faith-based university in Texas. I also briefly analyze online diversity content from four strategically selected university-cases in the same region. The main finding is that college administrators succumb to the ideological pervasiveness of DEI as an institutional norm in American higher education, even when they prefer to balance organizational mission and laws in devising diversity policy. Second, ideological DEI components are reified through specific discursive markers or code words, particularly in online diversity content. Before developing this analysis, the section below provides an overview of the legal, conceptual, and political dimensions of diversity.

Reviewing College Diversity: Legal, Conceptual, and Political Dimensions

The legal history of diversity policy in American higher education follows a somewhat linear path, one that incrementally restricted the scope of affirmative action to diversity-related ends in furtherance of a “compelling state interest.” *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) first brought the issue of affirmative action and college diversity to national attention, highlighting the conflict between ensuring representation for minorities and adhering to the Fourteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act. The Court found that reserving a specific number of seats for minority students violated these laws, but it permitted considering race as one factor among many in college admissions decisions. A series of Court decisions in 2003 further restricted the scope of affirmative action tools that could be used in promoting the compelling state interest in diversity. In *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), the Court found that a points-based system, which assigned extra points to applicants based on racial and ethnic factors, constituted an illegal quota. The University of Michigan’s inability to meet the strict legal standard had much to do with its quantification of diversity, that is, the use of transparent, binary quantitative metrics, particularly when qualitative, holistic alternatives were available (Hirschman et al. 2016). It was the Court’s perspective that such a system was tantamount to reserving seats for specific groups, a practice previously determined to be illegal in the *Bakke* case.

However, in the concurrent *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) ruling, the Court affirmed the educational benefits of a diverse student body and permitted a 25-year period for implementing race-conscious admissions as part of a holistic set of criteria. Although the Court validated race-conscious policies, it insisted they be time-limited and part of a broader, more comprehensive admissions assessment. In setting this legal standard, the Court broadly relied on social science research associating increased diversity with improved cognitive outcomes for students (Pidot 2006, pp.

762–763; Pike and Kuh 2006, p. 426). The Court again reaffirmed this stance in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2016), ruling that holistic admissions policies, considering race as one of many factors, would promote a compelling state interest in securing the educational benefits of a diverse student body.

The Court’s recognition of a compelling state interest in college diversity seemed to align legal interpretations of affirmative action with college diversity policy (Pursley 2003, p. 807). This was partly a result of the political response to the Court’s conception of diversity. In restricting the scope of affirmative action, the Court had rejected the rationale brought forth by many affirmative action advocates, that race-based admissions policies were needed to correct the historic wrongs of minority exclusion. The Court determined that such a rationale, engaging in reverse discrimination against even one individual for the purpose of correcting past discrimination, would violate that individual’s rights under the Fourteenth Amendment (Baehr and Gordon 2017). In response, affirmative action advocates repackaged their policy proposals using the discourse of diversity (Baehr and Gordon 2017). In this sense, proponents of affirmative action adopted diversity policy because this was the only way they could practice affirmative action.

Taken together, these cases signaled that the Court sought to legalize, and, at once, de-quantify race-conscious affirmative action policy in higher education, in an effort to encourage policies such as holistic admissions. By contrast, in its most recent ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC* (2023), the Court reversed precedent and held that race-conscious admissions policies violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection clause. How exactly this decision will affect college diversity policymaking remains to be seen. However, given the suboptimal outcomes of the college diversity policies that I examine in this paper, this recent ruling may indeed provide the legal framework for reorienting the prevailing policy paradigm.

Along with Court rulings, congressional legislation has provided another layer of constraints on college diversity policymaking. The Higher Education Act of 1965 (2022), which has since been amended and renewed several times, more clearly establishes racial and ethnic criteria for affirming the compelling state interest in college diversity. This includes a long history of government support for initiatives such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The 1992 amendment added Title V, establishing federal funding to Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), that is, colleges with a minimum 25% enrollment of Hispanic students under a certain income threshold. Currently, 31% of the 539 colleges that have achieved this designation are private institutions of higher learning (Excelensia in Education 2019).

HSI designation allows schools to compete for federal funding that can be allocated toward a wide berth of

institutional priorities, including administrative budgets, faculty development, instructional materials, and student programs. The Higher Education Act is unlikely to be impacted by the recent ruling in the Harvard/UNC cases, partly because it does not discriminate against specific individuals in ways that race-conscious affirmative action policies do, and partly because the enrollment criterion for HSI designation also has specific income-based components. Indeed, the Higher Education Act's explicit focus on racial criteria for diversity provides a meaningful segue into my discussion of the three conceptual dimensions of diversity that are increasingly in tension in contemporary policymaking.

There are three conceptual dimensions that factor into debates on college diversity, namely, structural, viewpoint (intellectual), and interactional forms (Pidot 2006; Pike and Kuh 2006; Rozado 2019). Structural diversity encompasses factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and veteran status, while viewpoint diversity represents variations in intellectual perspectives, theoretical orientations, ideologies, and political leanings (Pike and Kuh 2006; Pursley 2003). Interactional diversity signifies the degree and frequency of engagements between various groups (Pidot 2006). Notably, while structural and viewpoint diversity are outcome-oriented, interactional diversity is process-oriented. Despite the existence of these different conceptions of diversity, much of the discourse and policymaking on college diversity has narrowly centered on structural forms.

This conflation of diversity with narrow structural dimensions was an outcome of historical legal developments surrounding affirmative action. Proponents of affirmative action initially sought to assert an institutional responsibility to correct historic wrongs against minorities, especially African Americans. When the Court rejected this rationale as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, proponents quickly adopted the discourse of diversity as a backdoor for affirmative action; affirmative action was then proposed as a crucial tool for achieving diversity, though diversity was not the initially intended outcome of affirmative action (Baehr and Gordon 2017). In this vein, increasing engagement with diversity politics in American higher education seemed to provide a legal means of achieving the ideological goal of correcting historic wrongs.

Given the ideological underpinnings of this diversity paradigm, it has been argued that its proponents use dictatorial means to enforce their ideas on anyone who disagrees, mainly through the construction of negative value judgments on forms of knowledge, expression, and identity associated with non-minority categories such as males or whites (Mac Donald 2018). Indeed, the sometimes uncritical, unquestioned, and illogical adoption of DEI as the only programmatic means through which college diversity is to be understood and communicated is an important component of these policy tools. Below, I review some of the suboptimal

outcomes and unintended consequences of replacing good-faith conversations about promoting holistic diversity with authoritarian DEI tools.

First, in all the debates over the legality and quantification of affirmative action, the ideal of viewpoint diversity seems to have been offered up as the “sacrificial lamb” of sorts. The American system of higher education system has long upheld viewpoint diversity as an engine for the cultivation of truth, using it to broaden students' understandings of contemporary reality (Dent 2014, p. 166; Von Bergen and Bressler 2017, p. 33). However, as part of reconfigurations toward a DEI framework, colleges seem to have adopted a diversity narrative that privileges physical, and by extension, structural over other forms of diversity. For instance, Rozado (2019) studied online activity of 50 elite universities in the USA and discovered:

[A] pattern of elite universities overwhelmingly identifying the concept of diversity with demographic subtypes of diversity such as race, ethnicity, or gender over intellectual denotations of diversity such as opinions, principles or ideas (p. 262).

These patterns go hand in hand with the decades-long underrepresentation of conservatives in academia (Rozado 2019) and the now oft-cited suppression of conservative perspectives on some college campuses (Dent 2014; Von Bergen and Bessler 2017; Greer 2020; Al-Gharbi 2018).

Some of the main tools that DEI promoters use to exclude unwelcome viewpoints include discriminatory hiring practices, biased college programming, and censorship (Dent 2014). For instance, conservatives, along with Blacks and Hispanics, are now among the three most underrepresented US faculty groups in all fields (Al-Gharbi 2018). In a study at UCLA, only 12.8% of faculty identified as conservative or far right, as opposed to 59.8% who identified as liberal or far left (Von Bergen and Bessler 2017, p. 28). Similarly, Brown University's student publication reported that not a single Republican was among the 2019 invitees to the university's famous political lecture series; only 5.5% and 5.6% of invitees identified as right-leaning in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Greer 2020). Even more pertinent than discriminatory hiring practices, the clearest manifestation of viewpoint exclusion in American higher education is through censorship, often couched in the discourse of “safe spaces.” The implication here is that censorship is acceptable to the extent that it protects minority college students from speech or views deemed “offensive” to the DEI project (Munger 2019; Palfrey 2017).

However, the invocation of the phrase “safe space” in this manner is both ironic and anachronistic. Historically, the idea of creating safe spaces in American college classrooms referred to promoting academic freedom and constructing

the American university as a place where students could voice their true opinions and beliefs, presenting them for public debate (Palfrey 2017; Munger 2019). In contrast, the safe spaces of contemporary DEI programs rely on restrictive discursive tools such as “speech codes, trigger warnings, *ad hominem* attacks, boycotts, and shaming rituals” to stifle dissent from a liberal orthodoxy (Von Bergen and Bressler 2017, p. 33). An obvious example is the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement that seeks to target, silence, and eradicate pro-Israel viewpoints completely from American higher education. Interestingly, such censorship policies may have a more negative impact on the intended beneficiaries themselves, subjecting them to an ideological bubble where they are unlikely to develop the ability to argue and reason with diverging viewpoints (Munger 2019).

A second, perhaps unintended, outcome of narrowly promoting college structural diversity at the expense of viewpoint diversity is that it actually amplifies racial class distinctions. Non-URM groups increasingly attribute college DEI policies to reverse discrimination (Palfrey 2017). One reason for this is the adoption of normative critical theory–based DEI communicative tools dialectically or antagonistically categorizing entire groups as “diverse” or “not diverse,” leading to increased feelings of victimization among white students who perceive these narratives as exclusionary (Tanaka 2009). In effect, the ideological nature of the DEI project tends to stifle not just the proliferation of multiple viewpoints, but also the potential for creating new informal interactional spaces through increased structural diversity.

A third and final outcome of the DEI policy paradigm in American higher education is related to the original intent of correcting historical wrongs. Mismatch theory, developed through an emerging research program in political economy, has shown that a narrow focus on achieving structural diversity on college campuses decreases cognitive opportunities for underrepresented minorities by placing them, in many instances, in institutions for which they lack adequate academic preparation (Mac Donald 2018; Arcidiacono et al. 2016; Arcidiacono and Lovenheim 2016). For instance, Arcidiacono et al. (2016) consider admissions data drawn from highly selective and less selective schools in the University of California system, showing that less prepared URMs would persist in science majors at higher rates at less selective institutions versus at highly selective institutions; this would also lead to more socio-economic mobility as science majors from less selective institutions still earn more than non-science majors from highly selective institutions.

Affirmative action seems to provide improved long-term outcomes for minorities only in highly prestigious law schools, particularly when transparent admissions statistics provide potential applicants with an additional layer of information about a program’s rigor (Arcidiacono and

Lovenheim 2016). Still, in cases of high mismatch between school prestige and student preparation, “the dual goals of affirmative action of generating a diverse student body and supporting the educational attainment of minority students may be at odds with one another” (ibid., p. 46). Generally, minorities may perform better and become more successful in institutions where they are placed among their academic peers, though light preferential admissions policies, such as admitting students based on their high school rank rather than race, may provide a better balance between mismatch and elite university gains for minorities.

In short, through the uncritical adoption of the DEI paradigm, American colleges and universities have created three perverse outcomes, some of which may perhaps be unintended. The first is the suppression of viewpoint diversity as a condition for achieving structural diversity; this has most directly manifested as suppression of right-leaning viewpoints, through discriminatory hiring practices, biased college programming, and censorship in the name of creating safe spaces. The second is reduced interactional diversity as a result of critical theory–informed dialectical framings of diverse and non-diverse groups; since these dialectical categories rely on factors such as race and gender, they can create feelings of reverse victimization and disengagement. The third is the outcome elucidated by mismatch theory, that minorities themselves may lose out in the prevailing DEI paradigm since it seems to prioritize achieving structural diversity over actually increasing minority cognitive and employment outcomes.

By diminishing open discourse, the drivers of DEI have contributed to excessive political polarization within American academia and beyond, raising questions about whether commitments to diversity are even indeed well-meaning. For instance, Von Bergen and Bressler (2017) note that blacks with conservative viewpoints are often discursively excluded from the minority category (p. 23). The implication here is that structural diversity as a goal may be secondary to maintaining the ideological barriers of DEI programming. This seemingly deliberate exclusion of conservative viewpoints and ideologies from many institutions of higher education has resulted in a conservative backlash against American higher education. This includes the diversion of donor funds away from colleges to foundations such as the Manhattan Institute (Dent 2014), attempts to undermine the value and objectivity of colleges in public discourse (Von Bergen and Bressler, p. 43), and most recently, political crackdowns in states like Florida against a putative “DEI bureaucracy.” On the other hand, many conservative professors do eventually find a niche in universities, though most pretend to be liberal until earning tenure (Shields and Dunn 2016).

In any case, in my case-based analysis of diversity policymaking in the next three sections, I move beyond schematic attributions of perverse diversity outcomes to closely

examine how and why college diversity policymaking produces such outcomes. In doing so, I develop my analysis in three sections. The first section below provides a brief framework for analyzing processes of college diversity policymaking. This framework considers college administrators as imperfect, risk-averse human beings, reacting to different sets of constraints rather than with any clear dictatorial intent. Their decisions can be explained through the prism of a bounded rationality, a rationality that draws on rules of thumbs and heuristics in the absence of clear and consistent information (Levi 2009; Ostrom et al., 2014).

In the second section, I examine the case of a faith-based university in Texas as it struggles with developing and implementing new diversity policies consistent with its organizational mission. This section includes an analytical summary of my findings as well as the construction of “personas” of higher education administrators and executives, based on my structured interviews. This persona method is often used for capturing consumer behavior in data-driven businesses and some public service organizations (Adlin and Pruitt 2009; Onel et al. 2018) but I repurpose it here to capture the behavior of organizational policymakers. Finally, the third section presents a brief content review of online diversity content of four strategically selected university-cases in the same region. I share two main findings. First, college administrators succumb to the ideological pervasiveness of DEI as an institutional norm in American higher education, even when they prefer to balance organizational mission and laws in devising diversity policy. Second, ideological DEI components are reified through specific discursive markers, particularly through online content.

A Framework for Analyzing Diversity Policymaking Cases

I conceptualize the higher education industry as the overarching institution which may take different forms including public, private, faith-based, and research-based. The overarching institution of higher education is an abstract concept that encapsulates shared norms, values, and practices across all types of organizations. It is through this institution that the DEI program analyzed in the previous section emerged. Individual organizations within this institution reflect specific operational models, goals, and educational approaches, but the overarching institution’s general norms and values can exert significant influence on the policy decisions of individual organizations. As such, organizational policies are shaped not just by the strategic behavior of actors within given institutional constraints, but also by the institutional ideas and norms, such as, in this case, the adoption of DEI in place of more holistic conceptions of diversity.

In this framework, organizational policymakers are boundedly rational “satisficers.” Bounded rationality, in this sense, refers to an institutionally guided rationality which accounts for the norms, interpretations, capabilities, and heuristic “rules of thumb” that guide decision-making under rapidly changing information contexts and where external risk is high (Levi 2009; Ostrom et al., 2014). In effect, diversity policymakers in American colleges and universities are imperfect, risk-averse human beings reacting to an amalgamation of internal organizational preferences, legal constraints, and the proliferation of DEI as an institutional norm.

The following sections of this paper develop case-based analyses of college diversity policymaking processes. The first analytical section below focusses on college diversity making at a faith-based university in Texas. The case selection here is meant to examine diversity policymaking in a context where organizational mission and culture are more clearly specialized. Faith-based universities contend with specific mission-based and community-based internal constraints that many other institutions do not have to contend with; thus, these internal preferences are expected to play a significant role in the final outcomes of diversity policymaking. If they do not, then this dynamic illustrates the relative strength of DEI as an institutional norm. I present my analysis first as a summary of interview and observational data, and then as an examination of the various personas of organizational diversity policymakers.

The second analytical section focusses on discourse, that is, the content and language that colleges use to construct and communicate institutional conceptions of diversity. Von Bergen and Bressler (2017) have argued that language is a core tool that colleges have used to exclude viewpoint diversity from their conceptions of college diversity. In other words, language and discourse are core components to the DEI ideological program, aiding in the proliferation of DEI as an institutional norm. The focus of this case-based analysis will be on the types of discourse that colleges use in their online diversity content.

Constraints on College Diversity Policymaking: Organizational Mission vs. DEI as an Institutional Norm

The university selected for this case study, affiliated with a conservative church body, but located in a culturally heterogeneous part of Texas, presents itself as a distinct case. It is designated an HSI by the federal government, indicating a higher than 25% undergraduate enrollment of Hispanics under a certain income threshold. Students attending the school come from a variety of backgrounds, viewpoints, and faith traditions, meaning the school faces very significant challenges in devising and implementing mission-sensitive

diversity policy. As such, the university presents itself as an incisive case study for organizational policymaking on college diversity.

Data for this case was collected in three ways. The initial exploratory data emerged through observation of diversity-related hybrid-format events, such as a weekly chapel session and a special session on black tech entrepreneurship. These initial observations were meant to help guide and direct the research process. Second, major communiques, such as memos and letters from organizational leaders as well as leaders of the governing church body, were analyzed. Finally, using snowball sampling, this study employed several, in-depth structured interviews with executive and administrative organizational policymakers. The interview data was coded and categorized to bring out and examine key themes relevant for institutional analysis and the different dimensions of diversity. The specific name of the university, as well as the interviewees, is kept confidential, given the sensitivity of the university's ongoing policy challenges.

The first sub-section below provides an analytical summary of the interview data in line with the analytical framework for this study. As such, the focus will be on analyzing (I) legal, political, and conceptual dimensions of diversity policymaking; and (II) DEI influence on policymaking. The second sub-section provides a snapshot of five different personas of organizational diversity policymakers based on the interviews. This persona method is commonly used for analyzing, pooling, and predicting consumer behavior in data-driven businesses and some public service organizations (Adlin and Pruitt 2009; Onel et al. 2018). I use it here to pool my interview responses into distinct preference groups, allowing for insights into how personal convictions, organizational mission, and DEI norms collectively influence individual decision-making for policymakers with diverging preferences. These personas do not each align directly to specific individual responses but are rather a reflection of the types of boundedly rational stakeholders that influence decision-making for the purposes of institutional analysis.

Analytical Summary of Findings

The university began to enact new diversity policy during the initial phase of my study, leading up to the hiring of a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). The leadership then decided to move away from CDO model to a committee-based model, partly due to pressures from the church body and faith adherents. Many of the university's new initiatives led to heated disagreements with the governing church body. An accounting of the exchange of letters between the governing board of the church and the organizational leaders reveals that the organization's orientation toward a secular conception of diversity and DEI was a major component of disagreements. The hiring of a "sexuality affirming" counselor

was one of the main issues of disagreement, though financial pressures were also evident, given the university's increasing reliance on driving enrollment and maximizing tuition revenue. Toward the culmination of this study, the university dissociated its governing structure from the relevant church body, choosing to act more independently in setting diversity policy. Shortly thereafter, it received a multi-million-dollar federal grant under the HSI program.

I) Legal, Political, and Conceptual Dimensions of Diversity Policymaking.

Most respondents recognized non-structural dimensions of diversity as at least marginally important; even within structural diversity, respondents went beyond race and gender, discussing the importance of accounting for diversity in socio-economic status, academic ability, age, and religious belief. There is also evidence of attempts to conceptualize diversity in terms consistent with the university's theological orientation. For instance, one respondent noted that the increase in structural diversity among faculty was consistent with the university's faith calling toward inclusivity.

Nevertheless, it was clear from the interviews that legal constraints significantly influence the university's approach to diversity policymaking. The university's federal HSI designation and the demographic changes in the city where the university is located likely present an incentive toward narrower structural conceptions of diversity consistent with DEI. The HSI designation seems to focus institutional efforts toward enhancing racial diversity, particularly given the prospect of government funding. As such, in policy discussions, there was a strong tendency to conceptualize diversity in primarily racial and ethnic terms, even as policymakers privately subscribed to more holistic conceptions of diversity.

II) DEI Influence on Policymaking.

Policymakers in this study exhibited a proactive orientation toward enhancing racial diversity, particularly in positions of authority, reflecting an attempt to align faculty and staff demographics with those of the student body. Similarly, in response to conversations about racial inequality, the university sought to address what it deemed "racial inequity issues," particularly concerning retention and graduation rates of African American students. These initiatives indicate an organizational propensity toward addressing diversity through race-conscious means, likely influenced by DEI norms. Policymakers seem to be balancing pressures of DEI norms with their own theological or internal commitments to creating an inclusive environment.

What gives credence to the influence of DEI norms was the evidently increasing influence of external consultants hired by the university leadership. The consultant visits and the results of the reports were often not publicized,

indicating an organizational struggle to quietly address external expectations. In some cases, these consultants generated resistance, particularly when the policies seem forced or deviated from the perceived meritocratic practices. These tensions are very evident to organizational policymakers. For instance, it is evident that many of the conversations about diversity started after a consultant started a meeting with faculty and administration by declaring, “there is too much white here.” Similarly, perceptions of forced race-based and discriminatory hiring practices were evident, as one respondent was told, “you will not hire someone who is white, specifically a white male” for a faculty position. These dialectical understandings of race are entirely consistent with the ideological DEI norms that pervade American higher education, and are more prevalent in actual policy decisions than theologically inspired diversity practices.

As a result, the institution grapples with fears among its faith constituency regarding the potential ideological implications of DEI policies. Policymakers had to walk a tightrope to ensure that concepts such as social justice and equity did not inadvertently create divisions or alienate parts of the community. Indeed, several stakeholders identified these concepts as being antithetical to the university mission, preferring to focus simply on the “D” and the “I” of DEI programming. This challenge indicates the delicate balance between addressing real diversity challenges and avoiding ideological tensions with university faith-based mission.

Furthermore, the leadership later became aware of perceptions among the faith community about the university’s diversity policy, and the influence of federal funding and political pressures. The leadership attempted to respond to some of these perceptions and alleviate concerns in two ways. First, the university moved from a Chief Diversity Officer model to a committee-based model for crafting new diversity initiatives and policies. Second, the university most recently tried to diminish the ideological contours of “DEI,” enacting its own acronym for diversity programming inspired by its theological commitments. However, the acronym has not yet been publicized and it is not clear that it would move away in any significant manner from the ethos of the DEI program.

Analytical Personas of Interviews

Persona A: The Faith-Rooted Diversifier

Persona A sees diversity as a foundational element of their faith, viewing it as an instrument to fulfill a “Great Commission”: “I would define diversity as an openness to different races, lifestyles, all of the above, so that everyone has a chance to be served and to benefit from God’s people.” They are enthusiastic about the increase in diversity, especially in positions of authority and in the student body. However, they

are highly cautious about adopting a non-Christian view of DEI programming, cautioning, “I think we can do diversity in a way that honors God, without getting caught up with an ideology that is unhealthy.” For them, diversity policymaking must remain within the faith-based context of the institution, so that diversity can be a source of growth and learning.

Persona B: The Risk Manager

Persona B feels a level of risk management toward diversity policy, often seeing it as a result of both internal desire and external pressures. For them, the institution’s HSI status has a significant influence on its diversity direction: “I think that we all kind of default to racial and ethnic diversity, and that tends to be what is most on our minds. There’s reasons for that, largely the HSI push, right? But sometimes, I get frustrated its limited to specific avenues, like race or sexuality and gender issues.” In this regard, they are aware that other institutional priorities sometimes overshadow the importance of viewpoint diversity, but also note the existence of structural inequities, particularly around retention and graduation rates of African American students. They see a need for more focused efforts to address these structural issues, particularly since a lot of social movements are mobilized around these issues. In short, they recognize the potential impact of political constraints on the university’s policy decisions, but do not see these as the sole reason that the institution champions diversity.

Persona C: The Holistic Visionary

Persona C advocates for a broader conceptualization of diversity, extending beyond just race and sexuality to include factors like academic ability, socio-economic status, and age. They have a strong enthusiasm for the institution’s unique diversity framework: “we have been unpacking those phrases from a theological view and we have our own acronym for diversity programming that we have been unpacking.” They recognize the institutional bureaucracy challenges in establishing clear accountability for diversity initiatives and believe there’s a need for clearer communication about the purpose and scope of these initiatives to counteract external misconceptions.

Persona D: The “Public Square” Advocate

Persona D values the diverse and supportive environment the university provides for its students. They appreciate the small class sizes and increased faculty-student interaction, which they see as a strength of the institution. They’re enthusiastic about the progress made in making faculty and staff better reflect the student body’s diversity. However, they are conscious of the challenges students face in accepting

differences and managing civil conversations, explaining the challenge as “how can I be civil with people who are different than I, and draw them into a good conversation, without having anybody shut anybody else off? How can we all enter the public square, bring all that we value with us, and have meaningful conversations?” They see these challenges as opportunities for personal and community growth, but they also recognize the increasing difficulty of enacting policies to preserve the public square within the university.

Persona E: The Skeptical Pragmatist

Persona E views the institution’s diversity policy with a sense of skepticism, while also advocating for diversity programs that focus on inclusion and belonging. They acknowledge the heavy impact of external consultants on leadership policy decisions. They also observe the strategic action in hiring practices to ensure structural diversity but question how these align with meritocracy, noting,

We get feedback from various consultants and leadership hangs on every word. We hired a consultant who looked around our chapel audience and said, ‘there’s too much white here’. Since then, I have been told by leadership, ‘you will not hire someone who is white, specifically a white male’ though we’ve hired diverse faculty throughout.

While they value the integration of diversity in teaching and learning, they express concern about the political charges and divisiveness that “DEI” initiatives can sometimes bring, noting, “it really should be about how can we make people feel welcome and safe rather than veering off into all of these different initiatives that make people divided.”

Online Diversity Policy at Similarly Located Universities

In this final analytical section, I analyze the online content-based discourse of diversity policy at universities located in the same region as the case examined above. I consider four American institutions of higher learning in Texas, two each in two categories, state and faith-based. Again, these two categories are adopted because state and faith-based institutions are most likely to contend with strong internal preferences, stemming from more specialized missions. State universities are tasked with a representational and service component related to the public interest. Faith-based universities are tasked with value-based commitments that are rooted in religious principles. Thus, adopting these categories and keeping all the cases within Texas control for variances in mission in the adoption of ideological discourse in diversity policy, as well as for the

effects of different state laws. This gives the study a different significance from that of Rozado (2019) whose findings pertained only to elite universities.

To further control for ideology, two colleges considered “conservative” and two colleges considered “liberal,” based on publicly available data from higher education monitors such as *USNews*, *Chron*, and *Niche*, were used. Finally, the colleges have comparable enrollment numbers within each category, and they are all located in relatively urban locales. The four institutions selected for diversity content analysis are University of Texas-Austin, Texas A&M University-College Station, St. Edward’s University, and University of Dallas. The categorizations are presented in the table below:

Ideological leaning	Institution type	
	State	Faith-based (Catholic)
<i>More liberal</i>	UT-Austin	St. Edward’s
<i>More conservative</i>	Texas-A&M	University of Dallas

University of Texas-Austin

The University of Texas, Austin, is a research-oriented public university with a total enrollment of 51,090. Its setting is urban, and it is a highly selective institution. It features two diversity pages on its website, one for its Office for Inclusion and Equity, and one for its Graduate School. The page for the Office for Inclusion seems designed primarily for issues of legal enforcement rather than recruitment or policy-setting. Overall, the language and discourse on the page are highly legalistic, perhaps indicating the specific public interest mission of a state university.

The Diversity and Inclusion page from the Graduate School lists all the forms of diversity that are welcomed: “race, religion, color, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, genetic information, disability, or veteran status.” There is a hint at promoting viewpoint diversity, as it claims “the university is dedicated to attracting highly-qualified students, faculty and staff with a wide range of backgrounds, ideas and viewpoints.” However, the next sentence offers a qualifier: “This includes those from all races and ethnicities; first-generation college students; women; and others who have been historically underrepresented on campus.” The implication here seems to be that the university’s welcoming of diverse “backgrounds, ideas, and viewpoints” goes hand in hand with its commitment to recruiting minorities. This is a line of argument that the Court has shown some lenience toward, that interactional and viewpoint diversity automatically stems from structural

diversity, though the dialectical nature of DEI programming has severed this link.

The following sections delineate student and faculty demographics with a heavy focus on race. This is followed by a listing of diversity resources, such as those related to disability, gender and sexuality, and multicultural affairs. None of the demographics or resources bear any reference to ideological diversity or promotion of engagement among different viewpoints. All in all, the content on the diversity policy page for UT-Austin seems to affirm conceptualizations consistent with the dominant effect of DEI norms. There is an exclusive focus on physical characteristics, especially race, and no mention of fostering dialog between different backgrounds. In the one place where viewpoint diversity is mentioned, it is immediately qualified by an association with issues of structural diversity, signaling an assumption that structural diversity and stronger minority representation automatically leads to viewpoint diversity.

St. Edward's University

St. Edward's University is a private Catholic university in Austin, Texas, with a total enrollment of 3443. Its setting is urban, and it is a slightly selective institution. St. Edward's has a Diversity and Inclusion page with two large photographs. The photos seem to feature a clearly international group of students posing together. The first impression that is communicated is that there is a large international student population at the school. There is also the invocation of a new word, "dignity," that did not show up in the page for University of Texas-Austin. The forms of diversity that are valued are also explicitly listed here: "race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religious and spiritual beliefs, nationality, and other important identities, experiences, and perspectives." What is strikingly different here from the UT-Austin list, of course, is the clear invocation of viewpoint diversity narratives, with the inclusion of "experiences" and "perspectives" on equal footing with all other forms of diversity. There is no qualifier here affirming a legal basis for adopting a specific diversity rationale or equating structural diversity with viewpoint diversity.

In fact, lower down on the page, there is a listing of resource links for students interested in a variety of student clubs and events. Again, there is no invocation of specifically physical dimensions of diversity here. More importantly, there is no breakdown of student or faculty demography. Again, this could be because there is no public interest mission inherent to faith-based universities, as there are in public universities. Still, the striking difference between online diversity discourse displayed at St. Edward's and UT-Austin seems to suggest that the former may not be as influenced by DEI norms.

Texas A&M University—College Station

Texas A&M University—College Station is a research-oriented public university with a total enrollment of 71,109. Its setting is college town, and it is a moderately selective institution. The school's diversity page is in its Student Affairs section, affirming a commitment to welcoming different groups and characteristics. It also defines diversity as "the exploration of differences, identities, and ideas in a welcoming and nurturing academic environment." This actually seems to affirm a number of conceptual pillars of holistic diversity policy, as it seems to conceive of a "safe space" for exchanging diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, there is no assumption that structural diversity automatically leads to interactional and viewpoint diversity—indeed all dimensions are given equal weight in this page. Further down, there is a listing of diversity awards and diversity resource links pertaining more to minorities. Still, with respect to content, this page seems to communicate diversity in more holistic terms than DEI norms would dictate, perhaps because the university is identified as conservative-leaning.

University of Dallas

The University of Dallas is a private Catholic university with a total enrollment of 2489. Its setting is urban, and it is considered a moderately selective institution. Its diversity policy page is named "Diversity and Dignity," and this invocation of the word "dignity" is similar to that of St. Edward's. This implies word is significant to the mission-orientation of the two faith-based institutions selected for this study. However, the page for the University of Dallas is far more rooted in its Catholic identity than St. Edward's was, perhaps because it is a more conservative institution.

The page features considerable discourse on the dignity of the individual human being, and quotes from religious figures like the Pope. It stresses the need to respect the uniqueness of each individual, and also affirms dignity of the unborn. It encourages conversations on critical issues and also lists a variety of resources for URMs.

What stands out most is an anti-racism brochure that features Biblical quotes affirming the unity of the races and nations. The page itself equates racism with "original sin." The brochure then relates an *Acts* excerpt of visitors from around the world who are able to speak in their native tongues and still comprehend each other. Most notable is the verse from Revelation 7:9, painting a picture of a pledge to peace "from every nation, race, people and tongue."

The content on the diversity page for University of Dallas seems an exception to the predictions of the analytical framework adopted in this paper, though this case may be *sui generis*. The school seems to develop its own unique sense of diversity, one rooted in individuality, and in affirmation of

Creations of God. This conception is clearly deeply rooted in the school's faith-based mission. There does seem to be an encouragement of viewpoint diversity, with the page's reference to "conversations on critical issues." The conception of diversity here is one rooted in religious unity, and the content evokes a strong, uniquely Christian sense of justice and peace.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In this paper, I examined the legal, conceptual, and political dimensions of diversity and identified the ideological underpinnings of the contemporary DEI paradigm. I argued that the DEI paradigm results in three perverse outcomes. The first is the suppression of viewpoint diversity, the second is the antagonization of different identity groups, and the third is the potential for negative cognitive outcomes for minorities. With these negative outcomes in mind, I sought out to examine how diversity policymaking happens and why DEI norms are promulgated as policy despite their suboptimal diversity outcomes.

In doing so, I used interview and observational data to examine the case of diversity policymaking in a faith-based university in Texas. I found that policymakers do not necessarily enact policies with a dictatorial intent. Rather, even when they privately subscribe to more holistic conceptions of diversity, the influence of DEI as an institutional norm in American higher education pervades the policymaking process. I also analyzed online diversity content from four strategically selected cases in the same region to identify specific discursive codes that emanate from ideological DEI norms. Although my findings are not generalizable to the institution of American higher education, my hope is that the study provides a new framework for understanding the complexities and challenges of diversity policymaking.

The main policy implication of this study is the need for a new and more effective policy paradigm for reorienting diversity in American colleges and universities. Unlike DEI, this paradigm would need to adopt programming based on sound concepts and specific organizational needs, rather than resorting to ideologically biased boilerplate policy templates and communiques. It would be naïve to expect that the Supreme Court's recent decision effectively halting affirmative action in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* will have an immediate influence in enacting this new policy paradigm. As seen in this study, most of the constraints on college diversity policymaking come from deeply ingrained institutional DEI norms. Thus, the first step toward enacting this new paradigm would be an end to the conflation of diversity and inclusion with social justice and equity, and the discursive adoption of a new

holistic conception of diversity, in line with the Supreme Court's former affirmation of the educational benefits of a diverse student body. In other words, there can be no holistic diversity paradigm without the immediate end of the divisive and polarizing DEI paradigm in college diversity politics. The end of the DEI paradigm would open the room for more critical, informed, and productive social and political dialogs, paving the way for new and more effective policy proposals. These proposals could go beyond affirming holistic conceptions of diversity, reinvigorating American higher education with a spirit of civility, fairness, and dialog.

The core imperative in these policy responses is to ensure diversity policies promote, rather than undermine, the important dimensions of interactional and viewpoint diversity. The first policy response has to do with changing modes of discourse. This starts with a reconceptualization of diversity. Rozado (2019) argues that universities should seek to "stretch their understanding of the term diversity to encompass intellectual denotations of the word with the same vigor with which they already direct their diversity efforts to the demographic connotations of the word" (p. 265). Since we have seen that discourse is an important component of diversity policy, this discursive reorientation would go a long way toward effecting a more holistic commitment to campus diversity. Palfrey (2017) refers to this reorientation as encompassing a dual and equal commitment to the values of liberty and equity. What this means is that education administrators should concern themselves with questions of academic freedom and viewpoint diversity, even as they seek to address corrective outcomes of diversity.

Second, and along these lines, this also means that colleges should make a concerted effort to broaden the body-politic represented in their respective campus to ensure the proliferation of diverse and contrarian academic perspectives. More specifically, this means a commitment to increasing representation of underrepresented ideological groups among faculty, including conservative academics. Von Bergen and Bressler (2017) suggest one way to do this is by introducing special visiting professorships specifically for outstanding conservative and libertarian academics. Finally, colleges should also scale back on the excessive adoption of critical theory in their conceptualizations of interactional diversity. Whereas critical theory can inform important questions of class and identity, it also tends to promote dialectical interactions that perpetuate the polarization issues analyzed in this paper.

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Data Availability Data supporting the findings of this study is available from the author upon reasonable request, but confidentiality restrictions apply to the availability of some of the data.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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