"DEI is Unlawful": Examining Academic Libraries' Response as Institutional Isomorphism

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ABSTRACT

Recent rollbacks of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in US academic libraries are not isolated decisions, but patterned responses to intensifying political and legal pressures. Drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theory of institutional isomorphism, we analyze how coercive pressures (e.g., federal and state actions), mimetic pressures (e.g., copying perceived peer responses), and normative pressures (e.g., professional expectations) have driven three interconnected shifts: the renaming or elimination of DEI positions and offices, the scaling back of DEI programming and community outreach, and the depoliticization or narrowing of DEI-related professional development. We argue that the same isomorphic mechanisms that enabled libraries to rapidly adopt visible DEI structures after 2020 also produced standardized, symbolic reforms that were weakly rooted in structural change and thus easily dismantled in the face of backlash. Writing from our positionalities as Women of Color library practitioners and scholars, we show how these intertwined pressures expose the limits of isomorphic compliance and call for equity work that is locally grounded, community-accountable, and less vulnerable to rapid cycles of expansion and retrenchment.

Introduction

The challenges that librarians face in institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work are not new, and recent legislation has intensified these barriers. Libraries have a long history of invoking "neutrality" in spaces, collections, and policies (Gibson et al. 2017) to avoid responsibility to BIPOC communities. Even when libraries claim to care, BIPOC librarians are often tokenized and tasked with managing the institution's moral reputation through DEI work (Gibson et al. 2020). In the wake of the pandemic, as anti-DEI bills targeting higher education gained traction, academic libraries began to feel the ripple effects. The current administration's federal executive orders have recast DEI efforts as discriminatory and unlawful, generating legal uncertainty for colleges and universities. Since 2023, 136 anti-DEI bills have been introduced in thirty states, with twenty-nine signed into law (Gretzinger et al. 2025), leading many institutions to eliminate, rename, or restructure DEI positions, offices, and centers.

As institutions deeply embedded within higher education, academic libraries across the United States now face an unprecedented reversal. DEI initiatives that expanded rapidly

The Political Librarian, Special Issue, vol. 8.2 (December 2025)
ISSN: 2471-3155.

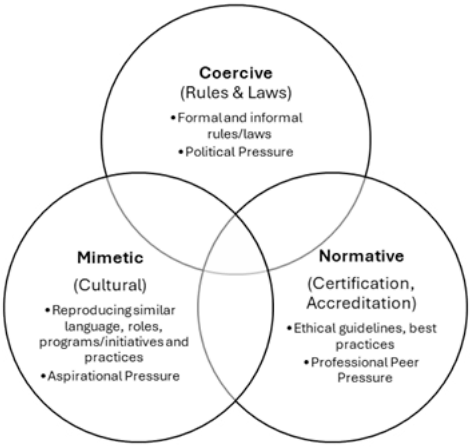
after the 2020 racial justice protests are being dismantled through federal executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, state legislation, and institutional reorganization (Phillips 2025; Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 created a legitimacy crisis for higher education and for academic libraries in particular. Within eighteen months, libraries across the country responded in strikingly similar ways: creating new DEI positions, launching parallel programs, and adopting nearly identical statements and frameworks (Coleman 2022; Hulbert 2023). Institutional isomorphism theory helps explain this convergence. When organizations confront public scrutiny and ambiguous expectations, they turn to what appears to work elsewhere: borrowing titles, structures, and language from peer institutions to signal alignment and legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Many academic library DEI efforts emerged through this patterned copying, making them visible but not necessarily deeply rooted in structural change.

The current systematic elimination of DEI programs exposes the fragility of reforms produced through these isomorphic responses rather than through sustained institutional transformation. Academic libraries that once moved quickly to establish DEI programs, positions, and statements now dismantle or rebrand them with equal speed. This symmetrical response reveals how libraries' embeddedness within higher education makes them particularly susceptible to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, ultimately constraining their capacity for long-term work on racial justice. This whiplash moment demands analysis: How did professional commitments to racial justice become institutionalized in ways that made them so easily reversible? Drawing on institutional isomorphism theory, we argue that the very mechanisms that enabled libraries to respond swiftly to demands for racial justice also produced standardized, superficial changes that were highly vulnerable to political winds and legal threats, making these DEI initiatives susceptible to rapid reversal.

A Conceptual Lens: Institutional Isomorphism

To examine this rapid cycle of expansion and dismantling, we draw explicitly on the concept of institutional isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe institutional isomorphism as the process through which organizations in the same field grow more alike over time. Rather than reflecting purely local needs or deeply held values, organizational decisions are often shaped by pressures to appear legitimate, aligned, and compliant. They identify three mechanisms that drive this convergence: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Figure 1 illustrates how these three mechanisms overlap and interact, reinforcing one another rather than operating in isolation.

Figure 1. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) Three Mechanisms of Institutional Isomorphism



Coercive isomorphism arises from formal and informal pressures exerted by governments, funders, and other powerful authorities and is "felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in collusion" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150). In the current context, federal executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, and state-level anti-DEI, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-CRT legislation signal that restricting or eliminating DEI work is expected, legitimate, and safer than maintaining it. It allows institutions both pressure and cover to redirect resources away from DEI positions, programs, and curricula. When funding, oversight, or legal risk are tied to compliance, academic libraries are pressed to follow suit through renaming roles, sunsetting units, and withdrawing public-facing commitments in ways that mirror state priorities.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations, facing uncertainty or political volatility, model themselves on peer institutions perceived as successful or safe (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In response to shifting federal guidance and heightened scrutiny, colleges and universities look horizontally: they watch how others restructure DEI offices, rebrand positions, or recast initiatives and then replicate those choices. This copying is not limited to states with formal anti-DEI legislation; institutions in other contexts also preemptively rename or suspend DEI work, citing risk management or budget cuts. For academic libraries, once a handful of institutions begin to redefine or roll back DEI, similar moves quickly become normalized across the field.

Normative isomorphism stems from professionalization, including expectations shaped by accrediting agencies, professional associations, and shared educational and career pathways. These networks define what constitutes responsible, innovative, or reputable practice and reward institutions that align with these norms. In the DEI arena, these pressures are uneven. Some library associations, such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), have maintained DEI language, committees, and initiatives. At the same time, other organizations and institutions have shifted emphasis to different priorities, including generative AI or "belonging" and "civility" discourses. Such mixed signals make it easier for institutions to reposition or dilute DEI commitments while still claiming professional legitimacy.

Taken together, coercive mandates, mimetic copying, and shifting normative expectations help explain both the rapid convergence around DEI initiatives after 2020 and their subsequent dismantling. We use institutional isomorphism not simply to name sameness, but to trace how these intertwined pressures shape what becomes possible, palatable, and expendable in academic library DEI work. These dynamics are not abstract for us: we have navigated them from within and alongside academic libraries, experiencing and enacting their consequences in our own roles. In the next section, we situate our positionalities to clarify how our lived experiences inform our reading of these isomorphic pressures and our critique of the institutionalization and dismantling of DEI.

Our Positionalities

We ground this study in our lived experiences and acknowledge the positionalities and privileges that shape how we write about DEI in academic libraries.

(Regina Gong, she/her) I am a Filipina American, cisgender, middle-class, bilingual, and able-bodied Woman of Color. I was born and raised in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States twenty-five years ago. In my current role in a private, Catholic institution, my portfolio includes DEI work, and I have experienced anti-DEI backlash firsthand, even though I work in the Democratic-led state of California. My job title was changed to replace the word "diversity" with "strategic initiatives." I was required to unpublish our DEI LibGuide, and our DEI committee was sunsetted, all framed as preemptive compliance. My service as chair of the ACRL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (2024) and the Diversity Alliance (2025) has expanded my engagement with DEI work across academic libraries. These responsibilities exemplify my DEI praxis and align with my research, which centers and amplifies marginalized voices.

(Silvia Vong, she/her) I am a Chinese Canadian, cisgender woman from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Treaty 13 territory with the Mississaugas of the Credit. My location and positionality as a former librarian in Canada influence how I engage in DEI work, often without the same institutional or legal pressures faced by many of my US colleagues. I chaired ACRL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (2023); served as past chair of the committee (2024); and currently serve as vice chair for ACRL's Diversity Alliance. My doctoral research examines antiracism work and institutional structures that perpetuate whiteness, while my professional research focuses on critical management studies and the racialized experiences of individuals in academic libraries.

As Women of Color and library practitioners who have witnessed and participated in the institutional dynamics we analyze, we have seen administrators ask, "What are peer institutions doing?" rather than "What does our community need?" These choices have resulted in DEI positions lacking structural power, nearly identical diversity statements, and standardized training programs that prioritize institutional image over accountability. This experiential knowledge, combined with our theoretical analysis, reveals patterns that neither detached critique nor defensive advocacy can capture. Our positions within and alongside these institutions enable us to examine how coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures shape DEI work. Our critique is not of DEI's necessity, but of how external forces and institutional isomorphism undermine meaningful and lasting commitments to racial and social justice.

Applying Institutional Isomorphism to DEI in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries are deeply embedded organizational fields within higher education institutions. Bolin (2018) characterized academic libraries as inherently isomorphic, exhibiting all three mechanisms outlined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when libraries align their structure, strategic direction, and mission with their parent institutions to comply with performance standards and mandated metrics. Mimetic isomorphism manifests when libraries turn to peer institutions for solutions to common problems. Normative isomorphism appears when libraries respond to the core values, ethics, and professional standards set by the American Library Association (Bolin 2018; Joseph 2020).

In applying institutional isomorphism to DEI initiatives in academic libraries, we must consider the pressures their parent universities face, as these directly shape library responses. The three mechanisms—coercive, mimetic, and normative—often operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, making them difficult to separate analytically. Therefore, for each example that follows, we examine how multiple isomorphic mechanisms drive institutional and management responses.

Renaming of DEI Positions and Elimination of DEI Offices

Language and naming shape institutional power in DEI work. They can empower implementation or enable elimination. The current renaming and erasure of DEI positions and offices reflects what Hudson-Ward (2024) identifies as conservatives' zero-sum philosophy, where anti-DEI proponents "aim to eliminate jobs, destroy career trajectories, and damage professional reputations"(para. 9). This targeting seeks to instill fear across higher education and academic libraries, silencing dissent through removal.

Coercive isomorphism emerges through formal or informal pressures from entities or institutions that depend upon them, such as the federal government, state, or funding bodies. With DEI declared illegal and unlawful, higher education institutions in Ohio, Michigan, Texas, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Virginia, and other conservative-led states have eliminated DEI offices, including the chief diversity officers and staff, in response to mandates, executive actions, funding threats, and lawsuits (Birch et al. 2024; Confessore 2024; Quilantan and Alexander 2025; Spitalniak 2025). Some institutions have integrated DEI programs into less visible units, such as human resources and student affairs, effectively erasing their autonomy (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Even in states without anti-DEI laws, institutions have renamed DEI positions and offices, demonstrating mimetic isomorphism, where organizations imitate their peers during times of uncertainty (Gretzinger et al. 2025; Joseph 2020). The vague wording in restrictive laws creates a chilling effect, driving preemptive compliance as institutions adopt "safe" moves, such as rebranding DEI with whitewashed language, including "belonging," "inclusive excellence," or "student success" (Birch et al. 2024; Gretzinger et al. 2025).

Academic libraries experienced these pressures before the current administration took office. In 2022, library directors expressed low confidence in DEI strategies due to waning institutional interest (Hulbert 2023). By 2024, Ithaka S+R found that library leaders believed collections and programming would remain unaffected by restrictive policies (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Yet, this confidence has now been replaced by fear as workers feel the direct impacts (Birch et al. 2024). This mimetic behavior extends beyond individual institutions, with some proactively restructuring programs even where restric-

tive policies were unlikely (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). More concerningly, library associations are following suit with the Medical Library Association, renaming its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee to "Community Building and Belonging" at the committee's own request (MLA 2025).

Normative pressures emerge through professionalization and shared values that often conflict with coercive mandates. Despite political vulnerability, librarians sustain their DEI commitments by drawing on professional standards, such as the *ALA Code of Ethics*, which calls for dismantling systemic bias, and tools like the *DEI Scorecard for Library and Information Organizations*, providing accountability frameworks (Harper et al. 2021). While job postings briefly emphasized EDI competencies for senior roles after May 2020, the profession maintains that these competencies remain essential for fulfilling institutional missions. Librarians are embedding equity into their everyday practice, even when formal structures are dismantled, by using normative mechanisms to preserve DEI values within hostile environments (Joseph 2020; Matthews 2021).

Scaling Back DEI Programming and Community Outreach

The revocation of Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funds by President Trump eliminated programs supporting underrepresented groups, leaving libraries with existing grants uncertain about future programming (EveryLibrary Institute 2025). Programming and outreach are especially vulnerable under current conditions, and their visibility and direct engagement with social issues make them prime targets for coercive restrictions and self-censorship.

Coercive pressures manifest through legislative restrictions and funding threats. A proposed Kentucky bill would criminalize partnerships between universities and local Black-owned businesses, exposing academic librarians to personal legal liability (Birch et al. 2024). State funding becomes a compliance tool with the University of Florida's "anti-racism" website and multicultural inclusion center disappearing under state mandates (McClung 2024; McEvoy 2024). Anticipating controversy, some library leaders have withdrawn financial sponsorship from campus programming altogether, choosing risk avoidance over engagement (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024).

Mimetic pressures reinforce this scaling back as libraries adopt "staying off the radar" strategies, collectively avoiding high-profile programming (Birch et al. 2024). Institutions reframe initiatives in less politically charged terms, shifting banned book programs into "critical engagement" academic activities and borrowing these "safer" models from peers to avoid scrutiny (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024).

Normative pressures rooted in professional values create both tension and opportunities for resistance. Librarians embed DEI principles through small acts of resistance by integrating Universal Design for Learning into instruction, incorporating diverse perspectives, and ensuring collections reflect campus diversity (Birch et al. 2024). They invoke campus missions and professional codes as shields, justifying DEI-aligned programming through the language of intellectual freedom. Student activism intensifies these pressures, with students demanding that libraries honor public DEI commitments. Successful student-led events, such as the "Can't Ban Us" Black History Teach-In, demonstrate how student voices compel libraries to maintain visible social justice commitments despite restrictions (Birch et al. 2024).

The Shift in DEI Professional Development and Training

Despite persistent issues with performativity and lack of follow-through in DEI training (Phillips 2025; Dali et al. 2021), recent library literature continues to focus on implementation while barely addressing the impact of anti-DEI legislation (Winn 2025; Leong 2023; Foy 2021). Professional development (PD) in academic libraries now sits at the intersection of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, becoming both a site of contestation and resistance.

Coercive pressures manifest through legislative restrictions on mandatory DEI training, compelling institutions to reframe equity-related content (Birch et al. 2024). These bans exploit longstanding conservative critiques that such training makes staff feel "attacked," deepening workplace polarization (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). The resulting climate of fear erodes morale, disproportionately burdens marginalized staff, and forces institutions to address mental health and workplace well-being while navigating a politically charged environment.

Mimetic pressures drive a retreat to politically neutral or "safe" topics, such as artificial intelligence or misinformation, reflecting institutional risk aversion over professional priorities (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Simultaneously, the suppression of formal DEI training has prompted library workers to pursue independent study in areas such as anti-racism and social justice. This demonstrates a bottom-up response to the collapse of top-down DEI infrastructure (Phillips 2025). These informal acts of self-education underscore how individuals strive to uphold their commitments to equity in the absence of institutional support.

Normative pressures remain rooted in librarianship's professional identity. Standards, such as the *ALA Policy Manual*, underscore a commitment to ongoing professional development that addresses power, privilege, and oppression, framing cultural competency as central to the profession's ethical mandate (ALA 2023). Library leaders recognize the need for political acumen, which is often underdeveloped in LIS training but is essential for navigating hostile politics (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). Tools like the *DEI Scorecard* further reinforce accountability, embedding expectations that libraries evaluate and fund DEI-related PD even when external conditions are hostile (Harper 2021). These normative commitments sustain professional development as both an ethical obligation and a resistance against coercive and mimetic narrowing. Together, these normative commitments sustain a vision of professional development as both an ethical obligation and a form of resistance that provides a counterpoint to the narrowing effects of coercive and mimetic pressures.

Concluding Thoughts

The immediate institutional responses to "unlawful" DEI in higher education and, in turn, academic libraries demonstrate how readily institutions adjust to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. The renaming or elimination of DEI roles and offices, the scaling back of outreach programs, and the sanitizing of DEI training exemplify how quickly visible commitments can be reshaped to align with shifting political expectations. The narrative that academic libraries and higher education inherently value fairness and equality functions to revise institutional histories and preserve a liberal self-image, even as racialized harms persist.

Henry and Tator's (1994) theory of democratic racism helps to name this contradiction: liberal commitments to equality coexist with attitudes and practices that sustain differential treatment of People of Color. Higher education is often imagined as central to democracy, yet

universities also reproduce oppression by excluding underrepresented communities and centering white and Western scholars. These patterns are reinforced both by professional norms and by macro-level forces such as state and federal legislation and policy projects like Project 2025 that seek to homogenize institutions and entrench racist and colonial logics.

Higher education as a field is further shaped by neoliberal policies that prioritize efficiency, risk management, and reputational protection. These dynamics intersect with the isomorphic mechanisms we have traced, producing rapid cycles in which DEI work is scaled up when politically advantageous and scaled back when framed as unlawful or undesirable. People working in libraries cannot afford to treat these shifts as neutral or inevitable. Institutional behavior is political. Taking action cannot be reduced to writing statements, drafting reports, or complying with whichever mandate comes next. It requires political engagement at the institutional, state, and federal levels, and moral courage from leaders and practitioners committed to social justice.

Derrick Bell (1991) reminds us that recognizing the permanence of racism is not an invitation to despair, but a call to sustained struggle. It is in that spirit that we end not with reassurances, but with questions that demand ongoing reflection:

- What if the ideological shift on DEI outlasts this current administration? How do we prepare for DEI's potential permanent transformation?
- What if the damage isn't something that can be undone through policy or legislative reversal alone? What forms of harm become institutionally embedded or generationally entrenched?
- What forms of resistance are already happening that don't depend on institutional permission?
- How can we build coalitions beyond libraries, including with faculty unions, student movements, and community organizations?
- What does accountability to affected communities look like when institutions abandon them?

These questions call us to hold uncertainty without resignation and to treat DEI not as a temporary initiative, but as a contested, ongoing political practice. We may not yet have definitive answers, but these are necessary questions to keep asking, especially as we envision futures in which DEI is neither outlawed nor reduced to mere compliance. Any rebuilding must move beyond rapidly adopted, easily reversed structures toward forms of equity and inclusion that are locally grounded, community-accountable, and less vulnerable to the pressures that made this rapid cycle of expansion and dismantling possible in the first place.

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