

Between Compliance and Belonging: Navigating DEI in Restrictive Climates

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the complexities of sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in a politicized higher education climate marked by anti-DEI legislation. Drawing from my experience as the inaugural Director of Organizational Development at Virginia Tech University Libraries, I explore how values of belonging and organizational well-being can be advanced even under restrictive conditions. The paper examines the tension between compliance and values, providing examples such as the transformation of the University Libraries Diversity Council into the Belonging and Wellness Council as a case study in adaptation. Regional insights from my role as Visiting Program Officer for the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) further demonstrate how external pressures reshape professional spaces for BIPOC librarians in a field that remains predominantly white. Ultimately, the paper argues that while legislation may shrink the space for equity work, it cannot erase the human need for belonging. Libraries, as institutions of access and trust, hold a responsibility to ensure that promise endures.

Introduction

My academic library role was an inaugural position at a major R1 institution in a politically mixed (“purple”) state, combining organizational development with diversity and inclusion. Over time, my focus naturally shifted toward institutional needs, but one goal always remained constant: to cultivate a welcoming, psychologically safe, and supportive environment where every employee could thrive. Navigating a politicized climate—with anti-CRT and anti-DEI rhetoric, shifting institutional compliance, administrative contradictions, and employee anxieties—made that mission both urgent and complex. Some staff felt personally attacked or unsupported by decisions they saw as capitulating too early, and they looked to me and others in administration for clarity, reassurance, or resistance.

At first glance, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education may seem like a collection of initiatives, such as retreats, workshops, and mission statements. But for those of us living this work, it is deeply personal. DEI is not a campaign or fad; it is about repeatedly shaping culture, creating belonging, and protecting safe spaces for every person, even when under attack.

That tension has become increasingly real in today’s environment, particularly with the Dear Colleague letters from the Department of Education and Executive Order 14151. These directives have prompted institutions to adopt a more anticipatory compliance mindset, often

driven by fear of losing federal funding. As a result, employees whose roles include a percentage of DEI responsibilities are directly affected. This shift has had a noticeable impact on aspects of my work and, more broadly, threatens to undermine the very values that libraries have long upheld.

As the inaugural Director of Organizational Development at Virginia Tech University Libraries, I have witnessed firsthand the clash between institutional values and political pressures. Libraries have traditionally been spaces of access, equity, and intellectual freedom. Yet external forces now pressure leaders to tread cautiously on race, gender, and identity topics. The risk is that once-visible communities can become overshadowed or forgotten behind safe, often vague language. Opportunities that once aimed to elevate underrepresented communities were suddenly in jeopardy, potentially facing suspension or elimination.

Balancing Values and Compliance

DEI work now demands creativity, resilience, and a strong foundation of education. Without proper training, practitioners in the field may unknowingly replicate harm or become vulnerable to critique. I have seen this firsthand when well-meaning but untrained facilitators attempted to lead white supremacy culture workshops, only to unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or alienate participants. Poorly executed DEI efforts are not only ineffective, but they also serve as ammunition for those eager to discredit the entire field.

Staff frequently ask me, “Can I even say diversity’?” or “Will this email be FOIA’d because I used a buzzword this administration dislikes?” These questions were rare years ago, but the landscape has shifted. For library leaders, the challenge is holding firm to access and inclusion while navigating institutional optics and compliance. It is emotionally taxing to exist in this middle ground, but it is essential for this work.

In response, I began framing belonging and equity through lenses that resonated across political divides: leadership development, organizational health, and employee well-being. For example, our Community Circles became platforms for connection and reflection. We described them as wellness spaces, but in practice, they cultivated cross-cultural dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding—the very outcomes DEI work seeks. My Supervisors Group, which I lead, hosts monthly sessions on topics such as sustainable leadership, navigating difficult conversations, accountability, burnout, and supporting neurodivergent employees—all aimed at equipping our managers with the tools to better support their teams. By framing these sessions under the lens of organizational development, rather than explicitly labeling them as DEI initiatives, we’ve been able to continue fostering critical conversations that strengthen our workplace culture while also reducing the risk of external scrutiny. The emphasis is not about replacing DEI with organizational development, but about embedding equity, empathy, and belonging into everyday leadership practices in ways that feel both authentic and sustainable.

Adapting to Institutional Change

Anticipating Change

Even before policy shifts intensified, I anticipated challenges ahead. Though Virginia’s governor initially expressed support for diversity and inclusion, his board appointments suggested a gradual pullback. By February 2025, when the “Dear Colleague” letter heightened

scrutiny of programs, we had already aligned our initiatives with compliance expectations a year and a half before.

One program I inherited was the Diversity Residency Program, designed to support early-career librarians—especially BIPOC professionals—in gaining experience across academic libraries. While the word “diversity” had become politically delicate, the mission remained intact: mentorship, exposure, and advancement. When institutional compliance began auditing programs, our framing and structure held strong, with the only change being the removal of the word “diversity.”

Regional Ripple Effects

The ripple effects extended beyond Virginia Tech. In my role as Visiting Program Officer (VPO) with the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), I saw how quickly fear of retaliation for perceived non-compliance reshaped initiatives. A group I provided programming for that had been intentionally curated for BIPOC librarians was restructured into broadly inclusive sessions shortly after the “Dear Colleague” letter, leaving fewer distinctly safe spaces. The situation was concerning in a field that remains overwhelmingly homogeneous: 86–88% of librarians identify as white, with projections showing only a modest drop to 83% by 2033 (Kendrick, 2023). Shrinking identity-centered spaces risks silencing the very voices most in need of visibility.

Transforming the Diversity Council

One of the clearest examples of adaptation within my institution was the transformation of the University Libraries Diversity Council (ULDC) into the University Libraries Belonging and Wellness Council (ULBWC). When I assumed leadership, the ULDC was struggling. Years of conflict, fatigue, and limited organizational support had left it stigmatized and ineffective. Some employees dismissed it as “performative” or a hollow funding outlet. Simultaneously, nationwide DEI councils faced scrutiny or dismantlement.

Rather than abandon the structure, I initiated a redesign. Through a historical review, interviews, and a SWOT analysis, I identified consistent themes: employees wanted clarity, trust, and meaningful contributions. With those insights, we reframed the council’s identity to reduce political risk while staying true to our purpose and overall mission of the university. The new name—Belonging and Wellness Council—signaled a fresh start. “Belonging” underscored inclusivity, while “wellness” emphasized mental health and organizational care. The transformation was more than cosmetic. Membership was streamlined to reduce burnout, new leadership roles were introduced, and one-year terms encouraged fresh perspectives. Interest groups, such as Accessibility and Neurodivergence, allowed employees to engage without formal committee seats. Meetings were redesigned with intentional agendas tied to three drivers of success, while transparent processes were created for grant distribution.

The council soon regained credibility. It launched heritage month observances, wellness-centered programming, advocacy workshops, and food pantry initiatives for students. These efforts culminated in University Libraries receiving the 2025 Library Excellence in Access and Diversity (LEAD) Award. What began as a fractured, fatigued council evolved into a trusted and sustainable committee—evidence that meaningful adaptation is possible even in climates hostile to DEI.

The Human Side of Resistance

What grounds me most in this work are the human stories. I think often of the staff member who quietly said, “I finally feel seen here,” after participating in a Community Circle. Or the resident who admitted after a session that they felt less isolated knowing others faced similar systemic barriers. These moments remind me why the work cannot stop, even if it has to adapt.

DEI fatigue is real, especially in climates where legislation feels hostile. I have learned that naming the fatigue itself—acknowledging the emotional toll—fosters solidarity. Employees feel validated when leaders admit the weight we are all carrying. That, too, is an act of resistance: refusing to pretend everything is fine when it is not.

Sometimes resistance looks bold and public, like a dean sending a message reaffirming our principles of community. Other times it is subtle, like embedding equity into hiring practices or leadership development. Both approaches matter. Both sustain the values we hold.

Reflection and Closing

Looking back, I see DEI work today as a dual practice: visible and invisible, bold and subtle. At times, we lead public-facing programs that openly celebrate inclusion. At other times, we embed equity into leadership training, recruitment, or wellness initiatives, knowing that language matters as much as intent in restrictive climates.

Sustaining DEI is not about choosing between compliance and values; it is about ensuring values endure, even when the packaging changes. That is where hope lives—in the quiet but steady work of making sure people feel they belong, regardless of what the headlines say.

Anti-DEI legislation may shrink the public space for equity work, but it cannot erase the human need for belonging. Libraries, as institutions of access, knowledge, and trust, have a unique responsibility to keep that need at the forefront. As professionals, we not only carry the burden of political climates but also the power to adapt, resist, and continue the work in new forms. DEI is not a trend; it is a promise. And even in restrictive environments, promises can be kept.

Reference

Kendrick, C. (2023, April 18). *Changing the racial demographics of librarians*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318717>

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Eric Glenn is the Director of Organizational Development for the University Libraries at Virginia Tech, the former Visiting Program Officer for the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), and the past President of the Virginia Tech Black Caucus. He leads initiatives focused on supervisor development, employee engagement, the residency program, organizational strategy and effectiveness to name a few.

Eric's career spans sales, research, and librarianship—reflecting his belief in the non-linear nature of success. He earned a B.S. in Neuroscience on an athletic scholarship at King University and began graduate studies in Counselor Education at Virginia Tech before transitioning to Louisiana State University,

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He holds multiple certifications and has completed training through Cornell, Virginia Tech, and the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice, all focused on building inclusive, psychologically safe workplaces. Eric is passionate about cultivating strong communities, well-being, and human-centered leadership across higher education.