

Sanktionen rechtlich angefochten haben, traditionelle Programme wie die Ausrichtung von Abschlussfeiern für URMs auf dem Campus letztendlich ein, was den allgemeinen abschreckenden Effekt der Anordnungen verdeutlicht. Die Zukunft von DEI bleibt ungewiss, der Schaden ist jedoch bereits erheblich.

Der abschreckende Effekt, der Abbau der Infrastruktur für Gleichberechtigung und Diversität sowie die Rücknahme feministischer und bürgerrechtlicher Errungenschaften markieren eine tiefgreifende Krise der akademischen Freiheit und der Demokratie der USA. Aus feministischer Sicht ist diese Gegenreaktion bekannt – sie ist Teil eines historischen Musters, in dem Fortschritte in Bezug auf Geschlechtergerechtigkeit und racial justice ausnahmslos heftigen Widerstand hervorrufen. Doch die Geschichte lehrt uns auch: Unterdrückung kann neuen Aktivismus entfachen. Mit der Verschärfung der Gegenreaktion könnte auch die Entschlossenheit für inklusivere, demokratischere Institutionen wachsen.

#### References:

Zippel, Kathrin (2025). Wissenschaft als Kampfzone: Die ideologische Neuordnung der US-Wissenschaftslandschaft. *Leviathan* Jahrgang 53, Heft 2, S.264-270, DOI: 10.5771/0340-0425-2025-2-1

Dobbin, Frank (2024). *Do Faculty Diversity Programs Work? Evidence from 600 U.S. Universities Across 20 Years*. DFG Research Center; Modi organisationaler Diversität; Universität Potsdam. Auftaktveranstaltung des DFG-Netzwerks an der Universität Potsdam, 29.11.2024. Online verfügbar unter <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/medien/691284.html>, zuletzt geprüft am 15.07.2025.

### Anti-Gender, Anti-Science, Anti-Democracy: The War on DEIA in US Higher Education (English Version)

As U.S. universities shutter diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and force graduation ceremonies for minoritized groups off campus, advocates warn

of declining institutional commitment to recruiting and retaining women and underrepresented minorities in academia. The Trump administration has positioned DEI as a source of societal dysfunction – from aviation accidents to leadership failure – while launching a “crusade on wokeness” through a series of executive orders targeting federal agencies and higher education. The systematic dismantling of DEI infrastructure within American higher education reflects a coordinated authoritarian backlash that assaults institutional autonomy seeking to undermine the epistemic authority of science and the potentially critical role of universities in democratic societies. Framed through “anti-wokeness,” this agenda fuses anti-gender, anti-science, and anti-intellectual logics aimed at reversing Civil Rights and feminist gains. DEI and antisemitism have been strategically instrumentalized to curtail academic freedom and dismantle federal-university partnerships through targeted defunding (Zippel 2025).

Federal research agencies have suspended or cancelled programs, projects and stipends, with deep budget cuts proposed for NASA (The National Aeronautics and Space Administration), NSF (National Science Foundation) und NIH (National Institute of Health) signaling a broader strategy to erode universities’ capacities to conduct (critical) research while infringing on academic freedom (Zippel 2025). This epistemic violence is particularly acute in contested knowledge domains—gender identity, critical race theory, climate science, and public health—where feminist and anti-racist scholarship disrupts hegemonic perspectives rooted in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) populations. These efforts do not only target individuals—by cutting PhD and postdoctoral fellowships (especially for members of minoritized groups) —but also undermine broader institutional transformation by withdrawing funding from structural DEI initiatives and prohibiting any university-based DEI efforts. I focus here on the backlash against these programs on gender equity and other university DEI infrastructures, where anti-gender and anti-science politics converge to undermine inclusive knowledge production and the universities’ role in sustaining democracy.

## Executive Orders and other Governmental Action against Anti-DEI in Universities

The contemporary assault on DEI extends decades-long cultural wars against “political correctness,” now reframed as “anti-wokeness” by its proponents. The current backlash began with state-level legislation including Florida’s Stop W.O.K.E. Act, signed in 2022, and Texas Senate Bill 17, which banned DEI offices and programs at public universities. The Supreme Court’s 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, which prohibited race-conscious admissions, further legitimized and accelerated these anti-DEI efforts.

At the federal level, the backlash escalated dramatically in 2025. On January 20, 2025, the Trump administration issued two pivotal executive orders targeting DEI across government and academia. Executive Order 14168, “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government,” established federal policy recognizing only male and female as biological sexes, effectively revoking federal recognition of transgender identities. Executive Order 14151, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing,” systematically dismantled federal DEIA policies, mandated agencies to terminate DEI-affiliated personnel, and dissolved DEI offices across federal organizations. Critically, this order requires federal contractors and grantees to certify they operate no DEI programs that allegedly violate anti-discrimination laws, effectively extending federal anti-DEI mandates to universities through funding mechanisms.

The Department of Education has enforced recent executive orders by systematically targeting DEI infrastructure in universities. The agency issued a “Dear Colleague” letter giving federally funded institutions 14 days to eliminate all DEI programs or risk losing federal funding, while launching investigations into over 50 universities for alleged “racial preferences and stereotypes.” Simultaneously, the Department purged DEI initiatives from its own operations, instructing staff to terminate programs that

“fail to affirm the reality of biological sex.” This dual strategy—dismantling internal DEI and threatening external funding—invokes rhetoric about combating “ideological coercion” to justify systematic equity infrastructure removal and the erasure of feminist, queer, and antiracist frameworks in higher education.

Federal research agencies, particularly NSF, systematically dismantled diversity programs following the executive orders. NSF terminated over 1,600 grants of projects deemed non-compliant with “agency priorities.” Three flagship diversity programs were archived with hundreds of ongoing awards cancelled: ADVANCE (NSF’s 24-year initiative for intersectional gender equity in STEM professorships that served as a model for Germany’s Women in the Professoriate program), AGEP (increasing underrepresented minorities in STEM graduate education), and portions of INCLUDES (broadening participation). These cancellations represent over \$260 million in terminated funding and the systematic dismantling of decades-long federal investment in STEM diversity infrastructure.

NSF uses dual review criteria for all proposals—intellectual merit and broader impacts demonstrating societal relevance. “Broader impacts” in particular have historically encompassed DEI-aligned outreach efforts, including high school programs, summer internships in labs, and other initiatives for underrepresented students. Universities pressured principal investigators to terminate such DEI initiatives in order to comply with the executive orders.

## Legal Challenges and Institutional Responses

Universities and academic associations—including Harvard University—have filed lawsuits challenging new federal anti-DEI directives, with some early legal victories. In late April 2025, courts blocked enforcement of Department of Education guidance, ruling that the definition of DEI was unconstitutionally vague, enabled arbitrary enforcement, and violated the First Amendment’s free speech protections. Since there is no constitutionally guaranteed academic freedom in the United States, the lawsuits instead

focus on freedom of speech. They have also contended that the actions constitute federal overreach by the government, noting that the relevant funding programs had been previously authorized by Congress. On June 10, 2025, a California court ruled that some DEI-related federal grant programs, including NSF-funded initiatives, are partially shielded from political defunding—though this protection currently applies only to specific plaintiffs. Legal outcomes remain unsettled.

Across higher education, institutions have exercised what can be characterized as preemptive obedience and compliance under the threat of losing federal funding. Harvard University, facing the loss of \$2.2 billion in federal grants, renamed its DEI office “Community and Campus Life” while launching legal challenges. In a climate of coercion and legal uncertainty, institutions demanded “letters of assurance” from faculty principal investigators, certifying that DEI activities tied to federal grants had ceased. DEI units were renamed or disbanded, officers dismissed, programming eliminated, and websites scrubbed of “sensitive” content—including faculty hiring guidance. This institutional capitulation demonstrates how federal funding leverage circumvents legal protections, creating a chilling effect beyond direct legal requirements.

### Anti-Wokeness as the basis for Anti-DEI

The executive orders frame DEI as illegal, claiming it undermines meritocracy by favoring underrepresented groups and enabling reverse discrimination. Some also challenge disability accommodations as excessive – thus the “A” in DEIA. This backlash draws on the “anti-wokeness” ideology, promoted by think tanks like Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, which portrays DEI as a derivative of Critical Race Theory. Using rhetoric of “colorblindness,” “neutrality,” and “reverse racism,” anti-wokeness serves as a catch-all to dismantle feminist, antiracist, queer, and disability-inclusive frameworks in public institutions.

Research demonstrates that DEI strategies most commonly implemented by universities at the faculty level—such as mandatory anti-bias training and

grievance procedures—show negative or limited effectiveness for increasing white women’s and underrepresented minority faculty representation (Dobbin 2024). More effective measures which remain underutilized include mentoring programs, faculty-led task forces, and work-life offices. Support for these initiatives has been at times limited, even among well-meaning faculty and administrators, some of whom perceived DEI structures as overly bureaucratic or procedural. Rather than discrediting DEI altogether, this evidence supports feminist critiques that institutional DEI efforts have proven inadequate, as universities continue falling short of reflecting broader demographic diversity. Sustained DEI initiatives remain essential for promoting equitable access to education and economic mobility—prerequisites for inclusive democratic participation.

Beyond programmatic functions, institutional DEI offices serve a symbolic function, signaling to women and underrepresented minorities that they belong in the university community. Their dismantling has caused deep disillusionment among marginalized students and faculty. The loss of DEI infrastructure undermines recruitment, retention, and essential support systems, while also communicating cultural exclusion, eroding trust, belonging, and institutional safety—amounting to a form of institutional betrayal.

### Conclusion

Williams College, an elite liberal arts school in Massachusetts, has declared it will pause NSF and NIH funding, *rejecting new DEI certification requirements as violations of academic freedom*. Such resistance also represents a defense of democratic values of equity and inclusion. However, even institutions like Harvard that have legally challenged these sanctions have curtailed traditional programming such as hosting campus graduation ceremonies for URMs, demonstrating the broader chilling effect.

The future of DEI remains uncertain, but the damage is already substantial. The chilling effect, dismantling of equity infrastructure, and rollback of feminist and civil rights gains mark a profound crisis of academic freedom and democracy. From a feminist lens, this

backlash is familiar — part of a historical pattern where progress on gender and racial justice invariably provokes fierce resistance. Yet history also reminds us: repression can ignite renewed activism. As backlash intensifies, so too may the resolve for more inclusive, democratic institutions.

**Biography:** Kathrin Zippel is Einstein Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, a position she has held since July 2022. After completing her Vordiplom in Mathematics and Political Science at the University of Hamburg, she pursued an academic career in the United States for three decades. She earned her Ph.D. in Sociology with a minor in Women's Studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, conducted postdoctoral research at Columbia University, and was a visiting assistant professor at Harvard University. From 2002 to 2022, she was a faculty member at Northeastern University and taught in the Consortium for Graduate Studies in Gender, Culture, Women, and Sexuality at MIT. She has also been a research fellow at the Women and Public Policy Program at the Harvard Kennedy School and co-chaired the Social Exclusion and Inclusion Seminar at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard.

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