



# DEI Supporters See Echoes of America’s Fraught Racial History in Attacks on Diversity Efforts

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February 23, 2024

**CNN** — Dr. Franklin Tuitt has 25 years of experience as an academic and an administrator in higher education, with many of those years spent fostering diversity, equity and inclusion – commonly known as DEI.

Tuitt, now the University of Connecticut’s vice president and chief diversity officer, told CNN he sees historic parallels between the growing outrage over DEI and the backlash to previous efforts to integrate education and expand civil rights.

“Some of the tactics that are being used, whether it’s through legislation or through intimidation, are tactics that have been used previously,” Tuitt said.

But he argues this wave of attacks is more targeted than anything he has seen before.

“I think it is fair to say that we’re seeing a much more focused and intentional and strategic effort to limit the effects of diversity, equity and inclusion and it’s a very multilayered approach,” he said. “I do think that is new.”

“It’s taken on a greater level of focus than I’ve seen in my career in higher education,” he added.

As efforts to promote DEI in academia increasingly come under fire, defenders, like Tuitt, tell CNN they are trying to uphold American ideals while critics accuse them of advantaging some groups – like racial minorities – over others.

## **Critics link DEI to ‘critical race theory’**

Paulette Granberry Russell, president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, said she feels the criticisms of DEI have negatively impacted public opinion about what the work can accomplish in the classroom and beyond.

“I think the strategy has been somewhat successful in terms of reinforcing fears and using inflammatory language that misrepresents what this work is all about,” she said.

Tuitt said, the goal of DEI programming is to create institutional environments that allow all students to access resources and achieve at the highest level regardless of their background.

“Our students need to graduate from our institutions being set up to succeed in an increasingly diverse and global society,” he said, adding that it’s important for students to learn about America’s history of discrimination and structural inequities so they can shape a better world.

“We need leaders and change agents capable of creating systems that don’t exploit others.”

But some of the most outspoken critics of DEI initiatives and policies have argued they are unnecessary, divisive, harmful and even, in the words of billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman, racist.

Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, who also opposes DEI, has led a yearslong crusade against “critical race theory,” or CRT, which recognizes racism in American society as systemic and institutional. He suggested in a December essay for the City Journal that institutions like Harvard have used DEI initiatives to indoctrinate students in CRT.

CNN contacted Rufo for comment. He did not respond by the time of publication.

Since the start of 2023, more than 70 bills targeting DEI in academia have been introduced in more than two dozen states, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education. Eight have become law.

In some cases, state legislatures interested in dismantling these policies get help from scholars hired by organizations like the Claremont Institute, a conservative think tank that believes “the 1964 Civil Rights act, and especially its administrative and jurisprudential offspring, have warped American law and culture and traded one set of racial preferences for another.”

Ryan P. Williams, president of the institute, told CNN he believes the ideology behind DEI is “fundamentally anti-American.”

“The words that the acronym ‘DEI’ represent sound nice, but it is nothing more than affirmative action and racial preferences by a different name, a system that features racial headcounts and arbitrarily assigned roles of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ groups in America,” Williams said in an emailed statement. “If we continue to do democracy this way, it will only end in acrimony, strife, resentment, and American collapse.”

The anti-DEI campaign has put colleges and universities under a spotlight. CNN contacted some two dozen universities that have been recognized for their commitment to DEI, but only a handful agreed to discuss the issue at all and just one agreed to a visit.

## **Defining diversity**

Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville has been recognized for its commitment to diversity 10 years in a row by Insight into Diversity Magazine.

Dr. Sheila Caldwell, the SIU system's vice president for anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion, said the university defines diversity broadly, encompassing not just ethnic background, but also gender, sexual orientation, physical ability and political, religious, socioeconomic and geographic differences.

After noticing racial differences among students dropping out of school, Caldwell said SIU Edwardsville introduced an initiative that increased first to second year retention rates for Black students by 10 percent and for Hispanic students by nearly four percent. And although they were not targeted, retention rates for White students rose too, Caldwell said.

The school has also seen an increase in enrollment for Black, Hispanic and Asian students and has improved retention of diverse faculty members, Caldwell said.

To be effective, supporters say DEI initiatives must be well-defined and measurable and there must be genuine buy-in from university leadership. Dan Mahony, president of the Southern Illinois University System, agreed.

“One of the things I think that's really important to point out is a focus on DEI anywhere in society usually helps everybody,” Mahony said. “When we do this right, everybody wins.”

Some students CNN interviewed said it was important to learn from and to learn to work with people of different backgrounds and views.

“With any type of social change, there's always backlash,” said Brandi Spann, an SIU Edwardsville junior. “But I think the direction we're headed in the future is this is necessary.”

### **DEI supporter turned critic**

Erec Smith said while he believes some institutions are taking the right approach to DEI, many are not, in part because these days “diversity means diversity of skin color and that's it.”

Smith was a DEI officer at Drew University in New Jersey and chaired the diversity committee at Ursinus College outside Philadelphia, but he said he became disillusioned by what he saw as an increasing focus among DEI advocates on things like microaggressions and an us-versus-them framework.

“It is important to ask for operational definitions. When people say ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ ask ‘What do you mean by that?’” said Smith, now a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

“I want to see a DEI that is undergirded by classical liberal values like individuality, equality, merit, right? Free speech and forgiveness.”

Caldwell said the DEI framework at SIU is heavily inspired by the words and ideals in America's founding documents, like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

"American principles are DEI principles," she said. "We seek to fulfill those promises made to groups that have been historically denied.

DEI defenders argue legislation and intimidation, key tools used to maintain the status quo during the fight for equal rights throughout the 20th century, remain the primary tactics being employed by DEI critics today. These days, harsh rhetoric has mainly replaced threats of physical violence. But Tuitt said the goal is the same – to slow efforts to create a more equitable society.

"The attacks we're seeing on DEI are not new," Tuitt said. "These things happen in cycles."

Tuitt likened the present fight to his own experience as a student at Connecticut College in the 1980s, when he joined demonstrations advocating for a greater focus in the curriculum on diverse voices and histories, the societal contributions of a broader range of people and for diversity training for faculty and staff.

"We were conscious about the type of environment that we were experiencing in our institutions," he said. "And then, depending on how well institutions responded to those requests, you started to see pushback with this notion that some communities were losing ground because other communities were being provided with access to resources."

Caldwell worries the ongoing criticism of DEI efforts could have a chilling effect that limits discussions around the roles that bigotry and inequitable access to resources play in American society.

"That's one of the reasons why it's being attacked, because if you remove it from higher ed, you are left with very few spaces in America where this dialogue is consistent and ongoing," she said.