

# Iowa Edition: Why Is Attacking DEI More Important Than Your Health and Education?

By Lina-Maria Murillo

As many students are preparing to start the fall semester across Iowa, I'm sure they're hearing plenty about DEI in the state and across the country. Legislators have been hard at work on this issue. Since 2022, [fourteen states have passed some form of anti-DEI legislation](#) with at least thirty other bills in the pipeline. Not to mention the Trump administration's campaign targeting businesses and [public](#) and [private colleges and universities](#) for their incorporation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. This is especially true in the state of Iowa--[considered by some experts to have the most draconian anti-DEI legislation in the country](#), instated well before Trump took office the second time.

You may have heard about the recent University of Iowa employee captured by some gotcha journalist discussing how diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts were continuing on campus despite the state's strict mandate to end these practices. [Fox News](#) and other outlets paraded the heavily edited video on the internet as though a university employee had been caught embezzling [taxpayer dollars](#) or [sexually harassing students and staff](#). The breaking story caught the attention of Iowa's governor Kim Reynolds, who [moved quickly to demand an investigation via Iowa's Attorney General's office](#).

I'm sure many of you are wondering: why does discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion merit such political mobilization in a state grappling with [the second highest cancer rates in the country](#), the [fewest obstetric and gynecology doctors per capita in the United States](#), and [the most polluted waterways in the nation](#)? Why does stopping DEI have more political clout than protecting and expanding Iowans' access to good health and a clean environment?

Let's try to answer these questions together.

As a former professor at the University of Iowa, a historian whose research interests include reproductive justice and care, contraception, and abortion, and as an expert on the history of social justice movements in the United States, I have been captivated by this obsession with DEI. In my classes, students study the history of race, class, and gender-based discrimination as an objective fact of US history. To obstruct discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion would be to deny the truth about our nation's past, allowing for inequality and oppression to fester in the present.

For centuries, wealthy white elites in the United States have used racism and sexism as a cudgel against nonwhite people to keep them subordinate to whites in the American racial order. Poor whites have been told that while they may not be economically wealthy, they have social capital invested in this racial hierarchy, where whites figure prominently on top. In other words, [you might be a poor white man](#), but at least you're not Black or an immigrant. You may not be a slave master or a factory owner, but you *do* hold power over your wife and your children. There

have been variations of this social and economic ladder over the centuries, but elites, with varying degrees of success, have used this “[possessive investment in whiteness](#)” to keep poor whites and poor people of color from organizing together for labor protections, wage increases, and universal healthcare. The resourced, corporate class has quickly deployed propaganda that blames poor Blacks, immigrants, or other marginalized groups for lack of jobs, low wages, lack of access to healthcare, loss of education, and so much more.

I teach my students how racism, sexism, and poverty have shaped the histories of economically poor women and their troubling relationship with the medical care system, one that often denied them a dignified experience with motherhood. For decades, states like [California](#), [North Carolina](#), and even [Iowa](#), [passed eugenic sterilization laws](#) that made it legal to coercively sterilize poor women, Black, Latina, Native, [Asian](#), and white, because lawmakers thought their “disabilities” (including illiteracy, homosexuality, and alcoholism) or poverty could potentially pollute the American gene pool. But these indignities are hardly relegated to the past. A [recent report suggests](#) that as of 2022, thirty-one states continue to have coercive sterilization laws on the books.

Students in my classes also learn about the deep entrenchment of eugenic thinking in our society throughout the twentieth century. [Eugenics](#), the pseudoscientific idea that through social engineering we can weed out the biologically weak, worked its way through education, public accommodations, and healthcare systems. [Jim Crow segregation](#) manifested itself most perniciously, and famously, with its “separate but equal” doctrine deeply steeped in scientific racism that deemed white people racially superior to all other racial groups. This meant that in many areas of the country, Black people, but also [Latinos](#), [Native people](#), and [Asian people](#), would be separated from white people in [neighborhoods](#), [school houses](#), [hospitals](#), [libraries](#), [grocery stores](#), [jobs](#), and [public transportation](#). But these separate spaces were never equal in resources or access to power.

I also teach my students that in the twentieth century, battles for equality coalesced in massive political organizing from the 1950s to the 1970s. Remember it was not until the [1965 Voting Rights Act that all citizens of the United States](#), regardless of their ethnic or racial background, gender, or class, were able to vote freely. Voting power helped energize social justice movements on the ground to fight against [racial](#) and [gender](#) segregation, discrimination toward [gay and lesbian people](#), and to [open the doors for the economically poor to have access to higher education](#).

Despite so much ground gained during these years, discrimination, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism did not fold easily. By the 1970s and 1980s, as a way to correct generational lack of access to economic, social, political, and cultural power, [historically marginalized people filed lawsuits seeking repair and recompense](#). These lawsuits transformed into demands for affirmative action in the workplace, pushing for companies, academia, and the government to provide opportunities to all people without regard for race, gender, class, or sexuality.

Even as affirmative action slowly challenged the status quo, [not everyone supported these ideas](#), including a large percentage of conservatives and some liberals. Conservatives believed opening the doors to so many diverse people was tantamount to a social, and likely economic, handout to

nonwhite people and women who truly had not earned it. Some liberals believed the same. Still, change continued, and questions about creating a more multicultural and diverse labor force began to take shape. What would it mean that a growing number of people of color were now receiving higher education degrees? How might company cultures shift and change to accommodate this fast-growing, diverse, and well-educated labor force? How should people adapt if boardrooms, teachers' lounges, and hospital emergency rooms more adequately mirrored the communities that they served?

These questions triggered what pundits called the [culture wars of the late 1980s and 1990s](#), as conservatives and liberals fought over the meaning and importance of changing racial and gender demographics. During these years, [state legislatures began fighting over US history standards](#) and core curricula. Should K-12 US history courses challenge and expand students' knowledge of United States history or merely glorify America's past?

For most of my students, this is when history starts to bridge the past with the present, as some can recall being two or three years old when many believed Barack Obama would usher in the end to these conservative culture wars in 2008. This is also about the time when the acronym "D.E.I." entered our vocabulary. It was a corporate term created to make discussions about historically marginalized groups easier to have in schools and boardrooms across the country. In a "post-racial" America, we could have conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion, without talking explicitly about the history of racism, sexism, or homophobia.

As it turns out, the election of our first Black president reignited the flames of a smoldering segregationist and eugenically-minded minority hellbent on eradicating the gains made by the poor and communities of color across the country since the 1960s. [Social media only fanned the flames](#) of extremist discourses that all but obliterated any tolerance for historical nuance and open conversation. While some demanded [access to single-payer healthcare](#), others [screamed about seeing the president's birth certificate](#) to prove he was a US citizen. Meanwhile, a growing resentment among many Americans that neither side of the political aisle knew how to fix America's problems bloomed.

We all remember the image of Donald Trump coming down the gilded escalator announcing his [bid for the presidency in 2015 by denouncing Mexicans as "rapists and murderers."](#) His flagrant disregard for "political correctness"--attempts at ending overtly racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist language--enshrined his brand. Many of us were appalled, [others cheered](#). Trump's way of dismissing and ridiculing [immigrants](#), [women](#), [disabled people](#), [Arab and Muslim people](#), [Jewish people](#), [Black people](#), [Asian people](#), and [transgender people](#), to name a few, blew open the door for all sorts of bigots, racists, and chauvinists to fully embrace what many began to see as a backlash to the Obama years.

In 2020, backlash to that backlash came swiftly and forcefully, as people at home and abroad mobilized to protest yet another murder of an unarmed Black person at the hands of police. During the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the video footage of George Floyd crying out for his mother as a police officer's knee crushed his neck [set the world ablaze from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Auckland, London, Paris, and Bogota](#), to name just a few.. As one scholar put it, race, gender, and class-based violence in America "constitutes the fabric of our

society,” but so too do street protests. The 2020 mobilizations were the largest racial justice demonstrations since the Civil Rights Movements. Importantly, they were also the most multi-racial protests in all of US history. As social justice activists rejoiced in this moment of collective organizing for solidarity and racial progress, [conservative forces saw this moment as a critical tipping point](#). These demonstrations could be the catalyst that upended the racial and gender order they had long used to control those at the bottom of American society.

Christopher Rufo, a self-avowed anti-woke and anti-CRT crusader, laid the blame for this dangerous multiracial movement at the foot of American universities. Rufo’s new life mission was to make questioning racism, gender inequality, transphobia, and xenophobia a crime--boasting that he helped craft fifteen states’ anti-CRT and DEI legislation. After promising to help pass bills that would make discussions of CRT, gender theory, and diversity, equity, and inclusion illegal first in universities and then in the private sector, Rufo began by working with Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida.

DeSantis himself had been busy pushing bills such as the infamous [“Don’t Say Gay” bill in March 2022](#), [“Stop Woke Act” in April 2022](#), and then blocking the teaching of [Advanced Placement African American Studies in public schools in January 2023](#). To further usher in a full anti-woke transformation, [DeSantis invited Rufo to sit on the New College’s Board of Trustees](#) that same month. Known as one of the state’s most progressive campuses, [New College faculty began to flee after DeSantis announced these changes](#). Championed by DeSantis, Rufo began a full-blown assault on the topics he found troubling. His rationale for ending the study of gender at New College was to hopefully push women out of the college community. [According to Rufo, teaching gender studies “caused all sorts of cultural problems” and made the college a “social justice ghetto.”](#)

What many don’t remember is that Florida was late to the party, because Iowa had been leading the way in anti-woke legislation for more than a year without Rufo’s help. Although [DeSantis signed an anti-CRT law in April 2022](#), Governor Kim Reynolds had signed a similar bill banning the teaching of CRT [from being taught in public K-12 schools in the summer of 2021](#).

Reynolds had been at the forefront of these deep cultural shifts since the Covid-19 pandemic, signing a wave of [laws prohibiting mask mandates in 2021](#) and [Covid-19 vaccination requirements](#), helping usher in an extreme conservative backlash to the summer of 2020 protests. Reynolds made Iowa one of the first states to minimize [penalties for vehicular assault if a driver is accused of hitting protesters in the street](#). She followed those policies by enacting legislation [that would ban transgender children from joining school sports in 2022](#), [signing a book ban](#) and [forcing through one of the most extreme school voucher programs in the country in 2023](#), and [reinstating a six-week abortion ban in 2024](#). Even after she tied her [political future to sputtered-out presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis](#) in 2024, Reynolds kept the culture wars going by [rejecting federal summer food assistance for poor Iowa children](#) and making [it illegal to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion in Iowa’s public education system](#).

Organizations such as the ultra-conservative [Goldwater Institute claimed victory](#) as Iowa became yet another anti-DEI state. As Iowa universities attempted to comply with this new dictate, lawmakers in early 2025 pushed to pass further restrictions on teaching topics related to

diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education [by inviting representatives from Rufo's Manhattan Institute to testify before the newly formed House on Higher Education committee in January](#). Curtailing the teaching of these topics would have been a major attack against free speech and academic freedom--Iowa would have been the first in the nation to do so. Despite the best attempts by some of the [most conservative lawmakers in the state of Iowa](#), no such provision was passed. Anti-woke warriors in the Iowa legislature contented themselves instead by passing the [first-in-the-nation legislation to rescind civil rights protections for trans people](#).

So, after all this history, how can we answer the questions I posed at the beginning? Why is so much political power allocated toward eradicating the public discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a state like Iowa?

[Conservatives have made their intentions clear](#). They believe discussions of DEI promote division in our country. They believe that discussing the negative parts of America's past and making attempts to right the wrongs in our nation's history breeds shame instead of pride. Or worse, they believe talking about [inequality promotes bigotry against white people](#).

Most frightening to Iowa conservatives is that students will ask questions about the *past* to understand the *present*. So, what kinds of questions are Iowa students asking now?

[Why are cancer rates skyrocketing in Iowa?](#) [Why does Iowa have some of the most polluted rivers in the country?](#) [Why is Iowa becoming more diverse?](#) [Why is college so expensive?](#) [Why is running for political office so expensive?](#) [Why are states defunding public education?](#) [Why is health care so expensive?](#) [Why do we have maternity care deserts in Iowa?](#) [Why hasn't the federal minimum wage gone up in decades?](#) [Why don't we have unions?](#) [Why do we have so many voting restrictions?](#) [Why are there so many billionaires?](#) [Why don't they pay taxes?](#) [What's wrong with being gay?](#) [What's wrong with being trans?](#) [Why are people poor?](#) [Why is our society so unequal?](#)

Conservatives are afraid you'll get truthful answers to these questions if they allow DEI to stay. They don't have any real solutions, which is why they don't want you asking questions in the first place.

What they do know is that honest answers will unite young people to demand justice and accountability for the world they are inheriting. History shows us that people will organize and resist using knowledge as power. Conservatives are afraid of your power. Don't let them take it without a fight. Stay woke!

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