

COMMENTARY

Minding the gap: Mindful inclusion of opposing perspectives to protect DEI initiatives

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If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

—African proverb

We agree wholeheartedly with the authors of the focal article and appreciate their drawing attention to this critically important phenomenon and the call to action for the field of I-O psychology (Follmer et al., 2024). Although the letter and spirit of these anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislative actions are abhorrent and will certainly curtail access to important opportunities for marginalized populations, the harsh reality is that these actions are happening and will likely continue to happen moving forward. It is in this context that we lay out a potential approach for I-O psychologists to actively engage with and respond to DEI issues: mindfully including multiple perspectives in research and educational activities.

We assert that there has never been a more important time for I-O psychologists to (a) deliver scientifically based information to students and trainees with pedagogically sound approaches; (b) provide data-based consultation to lawmakers, think tanks, and advocates seeking to craft new legislation; and (c) offer expert testimony during court proceedings and legal challenges to problematic existing legislation and in cases brought against individuals. However, we also assert that reasoned arguments about the benefits of DEI alone—even when backed by contemporary and historical data—are likely to fall on deaf ears among specific audiences. As such, an important question the field must contend with is how to navigate a landscape that has become increasingly resistant to what some consider to be “woke,” “divisive,” and detrimental to society.

We argue that to do so more effectively, I-O psychologists must understand the underlying social psychological phenomena explaining why individuals align themselves with arguments and issues propped up by vocal minorities within their own political affiliations, even when such individuals may not necessarily agree with those issues or approaches. For example, prior work has shown that individuals are more likely to hold favorable attitudes toward a social policy when one’s political party supports the policy, regardless of whether the objective content of the policy is ideologically aligned (i.e., Democratic respondents were more likely to agree with a social policy supported by Democrats, even if the policy is ideologically conservative in nature; Cohen, 2003).

With this in mind, we suggest that to preserve space in classrooms and workplaces for DEI initiatives, I-O psychologists may have to deploy reasonable strategies meant to overcome such political entrenchment. Although multiple approaches are shown to be effective in overcoming such biases, for brevity and clarity, we focus on one: mindfully presenting multiple perspectives. We begin by discussing existing psychological research that demonstrates how including multiple perspectives can contribute to more persuasive arguments than one-sided messages. We then

consider how such an approach can be appropriate and consistent with many of the ideals of higher education and consider the psychological mechanisms that explain why this approach could help build bridges. Finally, we present an overview of legislation recently passed in Indiana that advocates for “intellectual diversity” as an interesting case study and argue that it is possible to leverage such diversity of thought to help reduce reactionary “anti-woke” sentiments and foster greater communication across lines that are being drawn ever more deeply based on ideologies. In so doing, our hope is to foster climates in which DEI is no longer seen as a “bogeyman,” which would hopefully allow for the preservation of DEI initiatives in a context in which anti-DEI sentiments exist.

Including multiple perspectives can build bridges

It is clear from the social psychological literature that people are more likely to accept a persuasive argument when contrary or multiple perspectives are provided (compared to when only one perspective is provided). Specifically, a one-sided message tends to reinforce the beliefs of those who already agree with the message, contributing to confirmation bias (Lerman & Acland, 2018). Furthermore, messages that are one sided are likely to only offer partial truths, which can perpetuate false information and unfounded opinions. For instance, narratives that Germans in the Second World War were inherently evil, merely following, orders, and/or unaware of the many horrors of the Holocaust are predominant, though none are supported by historical data (Isaacs & Morphet, 1974). A meta-analysis of the persuasion psychology literature demonstrated that two-sided messages in refutational (i.e., opinion based as opposed to fact based) and nonadvertising (i.e., not trying to sell a product) contexts are perceived to be significantly more credible and convincing than similar one-sided messages (O’Keefe, 1999). Using counterarguments allows the persuader to demonstrate their understanding of their argument, which in turn decreases resistance to new ideas and suppresses concerns among listeners. Furthermore, arguments with opposing views can enhance audience involvement by motivating individuals to question their preconceived notions, engage in critical thinking, and feel more confident in their opinions (Mayweg-Paus & Jucks, 2018). This will strengthen the effectiveness of the message and ultimately leave a lasting impact.

Political polarization has increased substantially in recent years, and many argue that a lack of intellectual diversity among media outlets has contributed to distrust of formerly trusted authorities. For instance, recent research indicates that public trust in the British Broadcasting Company has waned since 2016, whereas many consumers (particularly younger ones) place more trust in more open-source and diverse outlets such as TikTok and other social media as their sources of information (Bauer et al., 2024). However, news feeds on social media are not monitored for accuracy and are curated to increase engagement with the platform (not to provide a diversity of thoughts and opinions), which can contribute to false perceptions that (a) the information on these platforms is accurate and that (b) the opinions are widely shared among society.

A reluctance to properly discuss and listen to opposing views can stem from feelings of not being heard or respected (Itzchakov et al., 2024). In terms of trustworthiness, researchers have found that communicators who used two-sided messages were perceived to have higher levels of expertise, benevolence, and integrity compared to those who use one-sided messages (Hendriks et al., 2022; Mayweg-Paus & Jucks, 2018). Introducing multiple perspectives results in an increase in acknowledgment for both parties while also promoting openness and respect for other viewpoints (Xu & Petty, 2024). Despite having similar objectives or aspirations for the change they want to see, opposing parties can sometimes differ on how to proceed. Showcasing various perspectives can help both parties be empathetic and highlight shared goals to foster a basis of unity (Xu & Petty, 2022). Cultivating a safe environment and avoiding an “us versus them” mindset can help achieve a just and innovative dialogue.

A balanced approach aligns with higher education ideals

The purpose and utility of higher education have been the subject of contentious debates for decades (see Lagemann & Lewis, 2015). Across these different perspectives, a resounding consensus has emerged that higher education should provide students with (a) content knowledge (i.e., facts and information) and, more importantly, (b) the ability to think, reason, and solve problems by taking multiple perspectives into account, weighing and assessing their relative merits to arrive at informed decisions (see APA, 2023). For example, Dekker (2020) demonstrated the importance of engaging with multiple perspectives in the development of critical thinking skills for college students.

The first author has experienced the importance of balance as both a student and instructor. As a student, he experienced castigation from fellow classmates for asking questions during class as a cadet at the US Air Force Academy. Indeed, his questions were met with responses such as “why don’t you agree with what’s being taught?” and “you’re just being contrarian” from squad mates—connections that are much closer than typical classmates experience. Rather than fostering a climate for intellectual curiosity, these responses made it clear that diversity of thought was abnormal, unexpected, and unappreciated. The first author transferred institutions shortly thereafter in search of a learning environment more conducive to intellectual diversity. Incidentally, this example included reprisal for questioning conservative narratives.

As an instructor, the first author has attempted to maintain this balance in his own classroom, particularly when discussing sensitive and controversial topics. Issues related to race/ethnicity are always difficult, so in his diversity classes, he makes clear that the focus is on empirical data and sets the expectation that open discussion of stereotypes and discrimination will often include identities, characteristics, and experiences that students themselves have. In his paranormal psychology class, he explicitly states that the purpose of the course is to educate students about the state of scientific knowledge related to phenomena typically understood to be unexplainable by current scientific thought, the factors that contribute to such beliefs, and the implications of these beliefs for daily life. The purpose is *not* to convince students that certain things are real or are not real, and many examples of phenomena that were formerly widely accepted to be supernatural (e.g., nocturnal demonic spirits and alien abduction experiences) can be easily explained by contemporary science (e.g., sleep paralysis and social contagion). This maintains the possibility that phenomena that are currently unexplainable are likely to have scientific explanations once sufficient knowledge is gained (e.g., advances in string theory and quantum mechanics). Similarly, when teaching the Psychology of Human Sexuality, the first author has led very difficult discussions that showcase differing justifications for opinions related to topics such as sex education and abortion rights. Few students’ personal opinions are swayed, but it is important that they recognize that their views are not universal or immutable. Further, activities can be developed in which students analyze both sides of an argument and identify the logical fallacies in how each side may present their argument along with the underlying cognitive biases that could result in receivers of the argument being more drawn to the message (see Bachiochi, 2024).

Thus, we assert that mindfully providing multiple perspectives is completely aligned with the ideals of higher education. Instructors should be training students how to think, not what to think. Most of the existing empirical literature highlights the value of DEI initiatives and progressive ideals (e.g., abstinence-only sex education is related to *higher* unplanned pregnancies and incidence of sexually transmitted disease, and sexual orientation diversity is prevalent across animal species; Anderson et al., 2024; Hogben et al., 2010; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). We next turn to recent legislation that, on the surface, advocates for balanced intellectual discourse in institutions of higher education.

Indiana Senate Enrolled Act 202

Indiana's Senate Enrolled Act 202 is focused on state-funded institutions of higher education and mandates intellectual diversity and freedom of expression such that "‘intellectual diversity’ means multiple, divergent, and varied scholarly perspectives on an extensive range of public policy issues." Although several local and national advocacy groups have decried the law as targeting DEI initiatives, lawmakers in support of the legislation assert that the law is intended to foster and support diversity (Quinn, 2024). One key aspect of the law includes the mandate to include cultural and intellectual diversity in diversity programming. Although this would ideally foster more careful consideration of the perspectives of multiple groups, it could constrain initiatives designed to promote specific identity groups. One interpretation of this aspect of the law could entail activities that promote majority/already empowered groups along with minority/marginalized groups (e.g., "straight pride" or other similar initiatives).

Another section of the law mandates the protection of free speech and disciplinary actions for curtailing the expression of free speech. Again, although this should foster deeper, more meaningful conversations, one consequence of this is that speech that is considered discriminatory or offensive could be protected, contributing to further isolation and ostracism of minority/marginalized groups. The law also prohibits employees from being forced to engage in activities based on identity, political, or ideological movements, which could reduce backlash to such initiatives among those who are resistant to them. However, the implications of this could include avoiding mandatory diversity statements in hiring contexts or mandatory participation in diversity training initiatives. Faculty can also be denied tenure or promotion for failing to promote intellectual diversity, and this standard will be enforced in new posttenure reviews held every 5 years. Finally, impacted institutions are now mandated to establish procedures for submitting complaints about faculty who are not fostering intellectual diversity and to provide yearly reports of their DEI initiatives to ensure they comply with the law. This provides a new level of oversight over these initiatives compared to before, which could improve or limit their intended scope and impact, depending on how they are enacted. The most important crux of this legislation will be *how* the promotion of intellectual diversity will be measured and evaluated, which is not specified. However, this type of legislation at least maintains the importance of DEI narratives, albeit alongside opposing narratives, whereas other recent legislation formally outlaws discussion of progressive narratives.

Given the reality of this law and others like it—along with the potential issues highlighted above—it is important to clearly understand the nature of such laws along with the requirements of these laws while they are in place. Although laws such as this can have a chilling effect, thoroughly understanding these laws and approaching instruction with sound pedagogy *should* allow for continued instruction of challenging and important topics within the boundaries of these laws. We assert that drawing on research to demonstrate core course learning objectives and working to build a respectful and inquisitive classroom environment is a real value in all classrooms.

In sum, given the realities of current and prospective sanctions against DEI initiatives spurred by conservative motivations (as outlined well in the focal article; Follmer et al.), it will be imperative to find ways to find a middle ground that allows progressive narratives to persist. We have argued that encouraging diversity of thought may be one way of achieving this. However, we also *strongly* assert that some boundary conditions will be necessary. Just as it is irresponsible (and unlawful) to joke about carrying explosive devices in airports, it would be irresponsible to give legitimacy to false narratives (see Taylor, 2012). A comprehensive discussion of these boundary conditions is beyond the scope of the current paper, but we encourage more research on how to implement intellectual diversity effectively in ways that preserve progressive narratives related to DEI in educational and organizational contexts.

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