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10.1126/science.adu1943

Protect US racial affinity groups

On its first day, the Trump administration released several executive orders terminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, calling them "illegal," "immoral," and "discriminatory" (1, 2). DEI programs include racial affinity groups, which counter the systemic barriers to inclusion and advancement that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) face in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (3, 4). These organizations provide a welcoming space for under-represented scientists to give and receive culturally aware mentorship (5). Given that diverse teams produce more innovative science (6), racial affinity groups benefit not only BIPOC scientists but also their employers and the public. Racial affinity groups do not violate US antisegregation or antidiscrimination laws; they enable equitable access to resources that support academic advancement for all. To protect scientists and scientific output, US stakeholders must work to protect affinity groups from government interference.

Racial affinity groups—which include academic societies, social media groups, nonprofits, employee resource groups, and institutional and departmental organizations—strengthen the STEM community. They increase retention of BIPOC scientists through professional development and mentoring (7). These scientists then contribute to the scientific enterprise by bringing new perspectives through their academic work, expanding science networks, and mentoring the next generation of STEM trainees (8). Racial affinity groups are critical communities of support and

compassion for BIPOC scientists, many of whom are the only member of their racial or ethnic community in their workplace.

Although most employed US adults support DEI efforts in the workplace (9), the recent federal directives are only the latest in a series of attacks on DEI. More than half of all states have introduced legislation limiting DEI activities, and members of Congress have mocked DEI programs (10). These actions, in addition to the removal of race-related affirmative action policies in colleges (11), foreshadowed the current onslaught of anti-DEI actions.

The current political climate is tremendously hostile for BIPOC scientists. Affinity groups provide solace and a loving community, but the burden of resistance cannot fall on the most marginalized (12). Those with privilege must step up on personal, collective, and institutional levels. Institutions—including private and public universities, professional societies, state governments, nonprofits, and private foundations—must financially support racial affinity groups and challenge disinformation about their role in STEM. These institutions must resist by taking legal action against civil liberty violations that result from anti-DEI directives. Last, rather than advise BIPOC scientists to stay quiet, institutions and those in positions of authority should provide affinity groups and their members with protection and job security. As political parties in the US and beyond seek to recodify white supremacist philosophies (10), STEM leadership must take urgent action to protect and support all members of our diverse scientific community.

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COMPETING INTERESTS:

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