

# MEDIA Coverage

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## We can face the anti-DEI movement with intercultural skills training | Opinion

*By Dale Caldwell*



My parents were married in 1957 in Greensboro, North Carolina. My dad, the Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell, made reservations at the Mount Airy Lodge in the Pocono Mountains so they could spend their honeymoon in that beautiful resort. They drove eight hours, only to be turned away because the hotel did not accept Black guests. This emotional incident — combined with the racism and segregation my parents faced in the South — inspired my dad to be a foot soldier in the Civil Rights Movement. He participated in the Selma March, the March on Washington and Mississippi Freedom Summer. He also marched arm in arm with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in an effort to integrate the Boston Public Schools in 1965.

My parents, along with many others, fought hard against those injustices, and times changed for the better. Today, many people believe we live in a colorblind society and racism no longer exists. That's simply not true. How do I know? As an educated and experienced Black professional, I have lived it myself. Unfortunately, I can say with certainty that ignorance and racism are driving the anti-Civil Rights Movement threatening diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, programs across our nation.

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## A rise in anti-DEI rhetoric

When my appointment as the first Black president of Centenary University in Hackettstown, New Jersey, was announced last year, well wishes poured in from many people. Yet, I also received some messages rooted in racism.

“The only reason you were selected,” they stated, “is because you are Black.”

I was honored when members of the board of trustees told me I was selected because of my experience as a higher education leader with impeccable academic credentials and over three decades of experience in business, education, government and public service. Tragically, others ignored my background and saw only race. Even worse, they minimized my hard-fought accomplishments, concluding that race gave me an unfair advantage in the hiring process.

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique. I have friends around the country who tell similar stories of being undervalued when they earn a prestigious position or, even worse, being denied positions because of their race. Clearly, racism and bias are still commonplace in the United States. As a society, we need to be aggressive in addressing this cancer on humanity.

A well-funded and coordinated anti-DEI movement has gained momentum across the United States, and elected officials in some states have responded with a wave of bills designed to limit or eliminate DEI on college campuses. A study last month by Axios revealed that since 2021, anti-DEI legislation has been introduced in more than 20 states. To date, nine states have approved laws eliminating college-based DEI programs — with the potential for more to come.

## We need a new, inclusive approach

This controversy has had a chilling effect that limits the effectiveness of current DEI programs, even in states with no current pending challenges. It is clear that we need a new approach to human interaction focusing on elements of diversity that are much more inclusive. In addition to race, ethnicity and gender, we must consider differences related to culture, religion, political beliefs, family income and other personal and family influences. I believe this approach — which I call Intercultural Skills Education, or ISE — is the only way to promote a deep understanding of and respect for those from different backgrounds.

Intercultural Skills Education helps people develop an awareness of their personal influences, understand their impact on personal perspectives, develop greater appreciation of cultural differences, and learn how to demonstrate empathetic listening and communication.

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*These are not only critical skills for all leaders, they are essential capabilities for everyone who lives or works with others of different backgrounds and perspectives. This training achieves the goals of DEI by teaching that intercultural skills are the secret to improving effectiveness, engagement, retention and productivity in public, private and nonprofit organizations.*

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There is a great deal of unfounded criticism of DEI training — often labeled “wokeism” — because many believe it focuses exclusively on racial differences. The very strong lobby against DEI strengthens the case for Intercultural

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Skills Education, which applies to people of all races, ethnicities, genders and backgrounds. Instead of sowing divisiveness, developing true intercultural competence helps us to transcend barriers. It moves beyond differences like age, race, ethnicity, gender, political beliefs and language spoken to demonstrate that we have much more in common than we think.

To put it simply: Intercultural Skills Education benefits all of us. It also means we can silence the DEI critics and move on with the important work of advancing our diverse society. With a hotly contested presidential election in full swing, our country is now more divided than ever. To continue to make social progress and minimize the cultural, political, and training divide, it is essential that Intercultural Skills Education replace DEI training throughout the country.

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