



Academic Grieving: (Critical) Reflections on the Dangers of Romanticizing DEI in Engineering Education

GUEST EDITORIAL

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ABSTRACT

The following editorial shares a perspective on a contemporary issue that we are aware can be considered controversial. As active members of the engineering education research community we welcome open dialogue concerning our position; that is why we chose this venue because of its explicit mechanism enabling such discourse. We understand the potential of our urgent tone to be perceived as critical, even perhaps hurtful, though we write assertively in order to describe entities and circumstances we consider having already caused tremendous hurt. Our intent is to provide a sobering perspective to our comrades who have invested significant time and energy in working toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) over the past few decades, an investment we see ourselves as having made. We seek not to chastise, instead realizing that as knowledge producers we have a responsibility to engage with knowledge already produced, and with the practices that have resulted. The serious flaws that critical DEI scholars have already delineated should not be dismissed because the pain is widespread now.

As an engineering education researcher (James) and a historian of engineering (Amy), we each have a demonstrated record of personal and professional efforts to appreciate various forms of diversity, enact equity, and broaden inclusion, including but not limited to: leadership within ASEE's Liberal Education/Engineering & Society Division; co-founding the Equity, Culture, and Social Justice Division; authoring a book characterizing the disenfranchisement of engineering education within Historically Black Colleges/Universities; and facilitating after-school enrichment programs in low-wealth communities, to name a few. Additionally, James is an untenured faculty member, though positioned at a well-resourced and highly regarded institution, whose federal Faculty Early Career Development Program (CAREER) grant was recently terminated. We are not unscathed, though we suspect the norms of conflict evasion in engineering could cause the tone of the message to be used as a scapegoat for the discomfort it may provoke (Tonn & Hira 2024). At the same time, we know that conditions of institutional employment and occupational security can constrain our conduct. Thus, many within the engineering education community who are decrying recent political actions regarding DEI have caused harm themselves or neglected the harm caused prior to and during the growth of DEI initiatives in recent years

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(Dietz et al. 2023; Feinstein et al. 2025; Holly & Coley 2023). Therefore, following recent conversations with our friends and colleagues we center the perspectives and reflect the tone of those whose viewpoints remain outside the mainstream discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Black students have always advocated for safety in all its forms, to live and learn freely at institutions of higher education (Carpenter et al. 2024; Johnson 2020). They have never asked for DEI and are mistakenly most often taken to be the main beneficiaries of these initiatives. The inception of DEI in US higher education followed what is commonly referred to as the Civil Rights era (Willis 2023)—a time when Black students became the customary faces of educational desegregation. Subsequently, mainstream discourses have framed the value and effectiveness of DEI based on its supposed impact on Black students, despite DEI bringing no pervasive enhancement of Black civic, economic, and political security in the country (Singh 2012; González Stokas 2023). Now Black educators and students find themselves wrestling with defending the existence of a construct (i.e., DEI) created to preserve historic race relations rather than dismantle them (Abrica & Oliver Andrew 2024), while simultaneously commemorating past legislative actions that were more apt for projects of racial tranquility than racial justice (Bell 1987; McClure 2016).

In a moment when many are distraught, we assert that attributing DEI's elimination in corporations, universities, and influential organizations, such as ABET or the University of Michigan, to a sudden upsurge in racism leaves us ill-equipped to interrogate the structural nature of racial violence. It gives us little grasp on the historical role of such violence in the design of these institutions. DEI cannot readily be associated with ill-will or falsity on the part of its advocates, but it has trapped many into a cruel optimism (Berlant 2011; Meer 2022) as it has normalized the promises of economic opportunity within majority-serving capitalist structures in lieu of truly reparative educational policy. President Donald Trump's anti-DEI executive orders since his inauguration in January 2025 feel cataclysmic, particularly given their disproportionately detrimental impact on marginalized populations (Curran 2025; Mangan 2025; Weissman 2025). Nevertheless, during Trump's first presidential term Stewart (2017, paragraph 9) aptly outlined the ways institutions avoid transformative change. She described how students "with minoritized identities continue to face the same indignities and hostile campus climates, despite moderate increases in the compositional diversity of the campus." Similarly, Greer (2025, paragraph 3) declares these recent actions may be "frightening and disappointing but not surprising if one knows anything about the Black experience in America." Anguish in the face of these current actions has brought about a widespread sense of what some have termed "academic grieving" (Kersey 2018); though for all its poignancy, some of the lament appears to obscure the brutalizing role of race in engineering education. We place this process of obscuring at the center of this editorial.

WHAT IS BEING MOURNED AND WHY?

Grieving, while often associated with the death of a loved one, can include "physiological distress... yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future" (APA 2018). In academia, we are hearing this distress in chorus notes of mourning for DEI institutional projects now curtailed, fueling anger at the national leadership that has brought about this crisis. Although we respect these feelings of grief, we stand with others who choose not to mourn the passing of DEI. There is no question that the actions of DEI proponents have established interventions in support of individual minoritized engineering aspirants which include outreach, mentoring, bridge programs between high-school and college, scholarships, and human-centered curricula. However, our social structure has prevented these efforts from mitigating the foundations of racial, gender, ethnic, and other long-standing inequities in the country.

Consider the operations of Minority Engineering Programs (MEPs) in US universities. These student support centers were first established in the 1970s to address the systematic exclusion of Black, Latine, and Indigenous students in engineering degree programs (Slaughter et al. 2015) and have

since grown to provide spaces of instruction and community in many colleges of engineering. MEPs may represent visible and individually impactful forms of student programming, but they have not been able to disrupt the historical mapping of non-majority identities onto diminished educational and economic prospects (Lee et al. 2021; London et al. 2020; Slaton 2010). Ironically, MEPs have become a part of what Ahmed (2012) calls the institutionalization of diversity, being used to shield institutions from allegations of racism even as they remain woefully underappreciated (Damas 2024). We do not fault DEI laborers, like MEP staff, for the sustained barriers that constrain participation in engineering, but it seems disingenuous, or at the least unhelpful, for organizations to continue calling for more DEI programming in conventional framings (NAS 2023) when effective and longstanding mechanisms lack adequate support.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of diversity has generated an over-reliance on superficial measures of success to garner the favor of decision-makers within the engineering education ecosystem. For example, Lee et al. (2024, p. 99) describe the underrepresentation argument as “using the demographic makeup of engineering to illustrate a lack of parity when compared to national demographics.” This argument identifies demographic absences but omits any reckoning with hegemony in spaces of engineering education or policy making. Many scholars have helped us see that inclusive racial reform efforts overall amount to a very partial response to racism and autocratic terror (Ahmed 2012; Benjamin 2017; Berry 2015; González Stokas 2023). Consequently, institutional formulations of DEI have fostered circumstances in which universities, funders, and researchers have risked relatively little for those occupying positions of security and changed little for those who are marginalized; schools of engineering help constitute this landscape.

The narrowed possibilities for transformative social action have long existed within engineering study and work (McGee 2021; Riley 2008), and the expression of grief for lost resources and lost opportunities can lay a problematic veil over this history. Amid the inclusive programming undertaken in engineering education, the anti-Blackness on which US economic prosperity has rested—including the development of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as elemental to White-led capital and geopolitical projects—has neither been named, nor we suspect, understood as such (Vakil & Ayers 2019). Such analysis is important at a time like this when scholars continue to reveal the nuanced ways Black students are marginalized within engineering classrooms (Dickerson et al. 2024; Henderson 2024), because if the proliferation of DEI initiatives were effective, we ought to see more scholarship elucidating how harm for racially minoritized students is being reduced. Engineering students at the margins are being socialized on how to fit into an exclusionary culture (Campbell-Montalvo et al. 2022). There is evidence of Black, Latine, Indigenous, queer, and disabled joy in these spaces (Bang & Medin 2010; CLEAR Collective 2021; Fifield & Letts 2019; Hamraie 2017; Vakil 2018); however, the prioritization of institutional security has constrained the impact of DEI in engineering education, and emancipatory change under these conditions seems highly unlikely to us (Zarch & McGill, 2023).

FROM IDEOLOGY TO MATERIALITY: RESEARCH FOR REPAIR

Expressions of grief always contain more than nostalgia; they invariably also contain fear of more losses to come. Looking to militant and revolutionary educators of the past as models (Givens 2021), we urge some critical thought about that fear of loss and what might be newly built in its wake. This moment may not be a time to be politically productive and achieve desired outcomes but could be an opportunity to better analyze the essential features and magnitude of iniquity in this country—perpetually manifested through disdain for non-Whiteness. We implore engineering education scholars to sharpen their skill of epistemological recognition (Honneth & Margalit 2001) which is about reframing and redefining how research is done about and with marginalized populations in engineering (Mejia et al. 2022). In essence, while DEI made marginalized populations more physically visible their academic and social needs remain unrecognized. Materialities of education including assured resources, debt reduction, and physical safety have remained almost entirely outside discussions of racial equity in engineering, as solutionist discourses of meritocratic pedagogy, cultural pluralism, and welcome have overwhelmed critiques of naturalized White security (la paperson 2017; Táíwò 2022). Recognition is, fundamentally, about reframing the politics

of representation beyond narratives of suffering and triumph (Russworm 2016), shifting from constantly trying to prove the humanity of the dehumanized to instead accurately understanding the structures that prevent their humanity from flourishing (Annamma et al. 2013; King 1991).

In this moment of anti-DEI action on the part of government authorities, let us recognize that certain terms have long been in place when it comes to racial justice in the United States, and these terms need not be accepted. Historically, “all mainstream forms of sociopolitical progress have emerged in the wake of Black death. In essence, Black death precedes and is necessary for the enactment—often performatively—of institutional social justice efforts” (Thomas et al. 2024, p. 227). We saw this prominently as many engineering Deans made statements, some including pledges to improve their academic context, and many Black people were hired in engineering colleges following the multitudinous heinous murders of Black people in 2020. Black engineering students and educators must navigate spaces where violence persisted despite said pledges, and institutions are now further disincentivized to protect them; the vulnerable are even more vulnerable. Critical scholars have shown that inclusive impulses alone will not displace violent racial legacies; for example, majority deference for the voices and experiences of minoritized people does not necessarily produce material change (Táíwò 2020). They move us toward a holistic understanding of our nation’s violent character, in which the economic, political, and social expendability of non-White, -straight, -Christian nationalist and -abled bodies makes death in some cases natural and deserved; to feel grief at such losses would be inappropriate, and increasingly in 2025, unpatriotic (Mbembé & Meintjes 2003). DEI as we know it simply does not grapple with these rubrics of death and loss; it has yet to speak honestly about the conditions that cause Black women in engineering to remain sick, and tired, of being sick, and tired (Brown & Morton 2023).

CONCLUSION

We envision a culture of knowledge exchange where we can do more than simply quote scholars like Octavia Butler and James Baldwin, rather developing similar skills to be able to recognize the moment and anticipate what is to come. Grief has its place in this recognition: For those who have lost jobs, benefits, and institutional resources since the inauguration, the actions of the Trump administration are personally devastating. Notwithstanding, we encourage thoughtfulness across our engineering education community about what is being lost and by whom. While some are experiencing tangible losses of livelihoods and resources, for others it is the ideological belief that their academic community has valued the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some folks have been forced into disillusionment as the myth of DEI progress is being exposed, perhaps in their work they had experienced finite disappointment but never lost infinite hope, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it. Perhaps some are grieving the idea that justice can come to society with no loss of security for themselves, for all those who have never had to worry about their own safety. As we see it, such grieving for the end of DEI continues a legacy in which the opponents of racial justice have in large measure set the terms of that justice, of what resistance might include (Stewart 2021). Redistribution and abolition are not often imagined in projections of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Let us now try to imagine justice beyond DEI, possibly beyond grief, as we build the institutions we need, but have never had.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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