

Culture battle over DEI rages after Harvard's Gay resigns; defenders contend conservative bullying



People take photographs near a John Harvard statue, left, Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2024, on the campus of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University President Claudine Gay resigned Tuesday amid plagiarism accusations and criticism over testimony at a congressional hearing... People take photographs near a John ... more >

PREMIUM

By Valerie Richardson

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Claudine Gay may be out as president of Harvard University, but the battle over diversity, equity and inclusion on campus is just heating up.

Harvard's legion of critics on the right wasted no time turning their focus from Ms. Gay to academia's pervasive DEI culture. They called for an end to the focus on race and identity politics, which many see as threats to free speech and academic standards.

“While this should be considered a victory, Gay's resignation will make absolutely no difference if she is simply replaced with another DEI hire,” said Will Hild, Consumers' Research executive director. “The problem was not with the singular instance of Gay herself but higher education's maniacal focus on race and sex, and every other strain of identity politics, rather than merit and truth.”

Billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman, a Harvard alumnus and a leading critic of Ms. Gay, said Wednesday in a lengthy post on X that the Harvard Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging “should be shut down, and the staff should be terminated.”

“Harvard must once again become a meritocratic institution which does not discriminate for or against faculty or students based on their skin color,” Mr. Ackman wrote, “and where diversity is understood in its broadest form so that students can learn in an environment which welcomes diverse viewpoints from faculty and students from truly diverse backgrounds and experiences.”

Defenders of DEI aren't going down without a fight. Civil rights provocateur Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network, called the uproar at Harvard an “assault on the health, strength, and future of diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

Ms. Gay resigned Tuesday amid widespread criticism over her handling of rising antisemitism on campus and more than 40 instances of alleged plagiarism in her scholarly works. Her supporters framed the move as racially motivated.

Mr. Sharpton said the network will picket Thursday outside Mr. Ackman's office at Pershing Square Capital Management in New York. He blames the CEO for his "relentless campaign against President Gay, not because of her leadership or credentials but because he felt she was a DEI hire."

"If he doesn't think Black Americans belong in the C-Suite, the Ivy League, or any other hallowed halls, we'll make ourselves at home outside his office," Mr. Sharpton said.

Leftist commentator Jemele Hill said Ms. Gay resigned "because conservatives Christopher Rufo, Bill Ackman and Elise Stefanik made it clear they weren't going to stop coming for her job."

"They bullied this woman out of her job and are happily dancing on the grave," Ms. Hill said on X. "For them, this was about the larger mission of unseating a Black person they didn't feel was deserving."

The DEI ideology divides people based on characteristics such as race into two camps: oppressed and oppressors. The framework, which labels Jews as "oppressors" and Palestinians as the "oppressed," came under fire as student groups and even some faculty sided with Hamas after its Oct. 7 terrorist attack on civilians in Israel.

Data suggests the DEI tide in business and academia is ebbing.

Jobs in DEI offices surged by 55% after the 2020 death of George Floyd. Since then, the "churn rate" for DEI jobs has been 40% versus 24% for non-DEI staffers at companies that underwent layoffs in 2022, according to Glassdoor.

Under pressure from legislatures in conservative-leaning states, universities have reduced DEI staffing. The Manhattan Institute and Goldwater Institute are fueling the movement with an initiative called "Abolish DEI Bureaucracies and Restore Colorblind Equality in Public Universities."

Last year, Texas and Iowa enacted laws defunding DEI programs at state universities. Arizona and Florida outlawed mandatory “diversity statements” for job applicants.

“Goldwater’s massive victory over radical DEI in Texas — the nation’s second-most-populous state — now sets the stage for additional wins across the country,” the Goldwater Institute said in June.

Christopher Rufo, a Manhattan Institute senior fellow, said the campaign against Harvard isn’t finished.

He ticked off the anti-DEI movement’s goals, including Harvard’s signature on the 1967 Kalven Report, which called for universities to remain politically neutral, and for the school to address the cancel culture attacks on faculty members Ronald Sullivan, Roland Fryer and Carole Hooven.

“Dear Harvard: Abolish DEI. Adopt a policy of colorblind equality. Rebalance faculty politics. Wind down activist pseudo-disciplines. Sign the Kalven Statement. Do justice to Sullivan, Fryer, Hooven. Restore truth to the highest,” Mr. Rufo said Wednesday on X. “Or we will keep coming after you, relentlessly.”

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"The techniques that DEI has used to squelch the opposition are found in the Red Scares and McCarthyism of decades past."

Billionaire Harvard alum [@billackman](#) says the university's problems are bigger than Claudine Gay.

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Little indicates that Ms. Gay's resignation represents the start of an institutional overhaul at Harvard.

In its Tuesday statement, the Harvard Corp. praised Ms. Gay effusively with only a brief reference to her "missteps" while blasting the "repugnant and in some cases racist vitriol directed at her through disgraceful emails and phone calls."

Ms. Gay isn't leaving Harvard. She is returning to teaching at the university, where she has served as dean of the arts and sciences faculty, with a reported salary of nearly \$900,000.

"She only resigned the president's job. Harvard is letting her go back to being an academic, despite the fact her academic credentials are bogus due to her serial plagiarism," Sean Davis, co-founder of The Federalist, said on X. "That tells you everything about Harvard: it has zero intention of getting rid of DEI."

At Harvard, faculty members interviewed by The Harvard Crimson expressed concern about what Ms. Gay's resignation meant for the future of DEI on campus.

Jennifer L. Hochschild, government and African American studies professor, condemned what she called the "deliberate campaign to destroy [Ms. Gay's] career and maybe destroy her personally."

"This is a way of getting at Harvard," Ms. Hochschild said. "It's a way of getting at broad concerns about diversity and inclusion."

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