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Guest columnist: Lawmakers must protect free exchange of ideas on campus

By Timothy Minella Guest columnist

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For over five years, I served on the faculty of the Lewis Honors College at the University of Kentucky. I was proud to teach and mentor hundreds of wonderful students. I taught my students that real education only happens when students and teachers commit to the pursuit of truth free from dogmas and ideological blinders.

I also saw how many students struggled to afford tuition payments that increased year after year. For these reasons, I strongly believe state lawmakers must act to eliminate a barrier to freedom of inquiry and a major source of wasteful spending: discriminatory “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) initiatives at public colleges and universities.

Although the goals of DEI appear unobjectionable, DEI initiatives promote discrimination, division, and distrust. DEI offices advance a narrow ideology that divides the world into the binary categories of “oppressor” and “oppressed.”

Accordingly, the only way to pursue justice is to practice discrimination against those deemed “oppressors.” DEI thus rejects the American ideal of equal opportunity regardless of race, color, or creed.

This narrow ideology leads to misguided policies. For example, the UK Office for Institutional Diversity maintains an online form where anyone can anonymously report an incident of alleged discrimination. These bias reporting systems are common throughout American universities. Using this form, a student could report a professor for assigning a book that the student finds offensive. A student could report a classmate for stating an unpopular opinion in a class discussion.

These bias reporting systems have a chilling effect on the free exchange of ideas on campus. That's why public institutions should be prohibited from investigating or disciplining individuals for these sorts of "bias incidents." In addition, we should protect the rights of everyone at public colleges or universities — students and faculty alike — by prohibiting institutions from requiring anyone to endorse any particular political or social ideology, including the dictates of DEI.

This provision would safeguard academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas, essential conditions for the pursuit of truth.

There's more we can do, too. Eliminating DEI offices would save taxpayer money and reduce the administrative bloat that pushes tuition higher and higher. As current UK student Gavin Cooper wrote in a letter to the House Education Committee, the employees in UK's DEI offices make a whopping \$10.5 million in salaries. Cooper, a leader in the UK College Democrats, reported that the money spent on these salaries could have provided thousands of dollars in support for low-income Kentucky students.

Employees in DEI offices do not teach courses or conduct research as their primary responsibilities. These employees provide yet another layer of bureaucracy that adds no value to the institution and requires continual increases in tuition that hurt low-income students the most.

Kentucky students deserve access to an affordable college education that challenges them to pursue the truth through the free exchange of competing ideas. DEI initiatives inhibit freedom of inquiry while increasing costs. Instead, we should renew the promise of higher education in Kentucky by removing this barrier to excellence and opportunity.

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