

# Ways Philanthropic Foundations Can Respond To Costly Attacks On DEI



*Foundations must protect investments they have made into DEI initiatives.*

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Philanthropic foundations have invested billions of dollars into programs, research, partnerships, and other initiatives that help reduce racial, gender, and socioeconomic disparities. Those efforts have been in response to longstanding, well-documented inequities in wealth, health, juvenile and criminal justice, and education, to name a few. Reckless, politicized attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion threaten to undo much of the progress that has resulted from those foundation investments.

The anti-DEI movement is well-funded and masterfully coordinated. And it's working, as evidenced by the banning of DEI-focused books and lessons, the discontinuation of DEI-related resources in K-12 schools and higher education institutions, the firings of chief diversity officers and their teams, and the defunding of professional development experiences for educators. The movement has picked up steam in education over the past three years and is now swiftly making its way into corporations, our nation's military, and other workplaces. Money is needed to stop it.

Philanthropic support will help save our democracy from one of its biggest, most unnecessary threats. Secondly, it will help foundations protect their past, current, and future financial investments. More inequity is guaranteed to ensue as DEI activities go away. Hence, much of the money that foundations have already committed to addressing inequities will be wasted. Furthermore, when this ridiculous movement ends, foundations will be left to help clean up the mess of inequities it produced. Recovery will be far costlier than would bold, preemptive attempts the decelerate the movement now.

## PROMOTED

Beyond grantmaking, many foundations have explicitly declared commitments to equity in their mission statements and elsewhere. Remaining silent and doing too little to expressly fight back against politicized attacks on DEI call into question the depth and integrity of those espoused values. Some program officers of color and other employees who make foundations diverse are wondering whether their workplace, which has so proudly and repeatedly pronounced a commitment to equity, is going to contradict itself during this horrifyingly consequential time.

At this point, awarding grants to support DEI-focused projects while remaining silent on politicized attacks against the aims of those very projects isn't what our nation needs from its philanthropic investors. In addition to awarding and renewing grants to support difference-making DEI work, here are at least five additional ways foundations can step up at this moment.

## 1. Leverage Influence To Help People Understand Why DEI Is Essential

Attackers often make bold, overwhelmingly false generalizations about DEI. Foremost, they claim it's divisive. Foundations know better. They understand that DEI efforts aim to unite people, right past wrongs, eliminate disparities between groups, and make organizations and communities stronger. They've invested in thousands of high-quality initiatives that have advanced DEI across the U.S. and around the globe. Foundations are therefore perfectly poised to disrupt misinformation and disinformation pertaining to DEI.

## 2. Unite Previous and Current Grantees

Foundations have enormous convening power. They also know who've they've invested in and which of those organizations used their grants to effectively address racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequities. Those grantees could be brought together to identify ways they might collaboratively fight back against politicized attacks on DEI. Foundation dollars could support the DEI sustainability agendas that previous and current grantees co-construct. If funders set the right tables, organizations that do high-quality DEI work could easily furnish evidence that disproves the lies exaggerators are effectively spreading.

## 3. Invest in DEI Defense Efforts

Foundations ought to seek out and award their largest grants to organizations that are actively fighting back against politicized efforts to dismantle DEI. Most funders try to stay out of politics and may therefore convince themselves that investing into DEI defense movements is a form of political side-taking. They should pick the right side. One side is using divisive partisan politics to trick as many Americans as possible into believing that DEI is what it isn't.

But the other side is simply defending the work that rigorous foundation vetting processes previously deemed worthy of investment. They're also responding to credible research that shows persistent and pervasive racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequities. They're defending democracy. These high-trust organizations ought to be given the resources needed to not only defend DEI, but to also greatly expand longstanding work that has helped communities, organizations, and professions begin to correct problematic histories, cultures, mindsets, structures, systems, practices, and policies. These organizations need money to finance their defense activities, especially since the destructive anti-DEI movement is so well-financed.

## 4. Adapt Rapid Emergency Funding Processes

In the early stages of the pandemic, many foundations impressively evolved their grantmaking processes to rapidly fund research on the Coronavirus, including its higher rates of infection and mortality within communities of color. Grants were also awarded to study the impact of Covid on educational outcomes for students. In addition to research, foundations awarded grants to organizations that were providing Covid testing, hotspots to schoolchildren in internet deserts, vaccine promotion campaigns, and other programmatic responses to the public health crisis.

Politicized attacks on DEI are sure to produce catastrophic levels of inequities that will negatively affect millions of Americans. It's an urgent national crisis at this point. Surely, there are lessons that foundations learned as they awarded rapid emergency grants as part of their Covid responses. The DEI crisis necessitates a reboot of the best of what worked well within and across foundations 3-4 years ago.

## 5. Join With Other Foundations to Collectively Respond

Despite some inescapable bureaucratic challenges and maneuverable cross-organizational tensions, much about funders' collaboratives works well. Groups of funders pool funds to make a collective impact on a pressing issue or opportunity about which each individual foundation cares. Again, many foundations say equity is among their highest priorities and they annually award numerous grants to organizations that are working on DEI-focused projects. These shared priorities set those funders up for successful co-investment partnerships during this highly-consequential moment in American history.

These aren't the only ways that foundations can help rescue our democracy from one of its biggest cross-sector threats. But these five actions would undoubtedly help them enact their espoused values while supporting grantees who are fighting back against politicized attacks on DEI. It would be a real shame if a 3-5 year senseless, misguided movement reversed decades of progress that philanthropic dollars helped achieve. Individually and collectively, foundations must protect their investments.