

When DEI is Defunded: Politics, Teaching, and the Fate of Social Justice in the U.S. Today

James S. Baumlin | Missouri State University

<https://doi.org/10.71106/OHSC8683>

Through four decades I taught in the English Department at Missouri State University (MSU), a state-funded school in a politically conservative region of a U.S. Midwest state. The fall 2024 semester was, however, my last. The semester began in August so, on July 1 or some time thereabouts I visited the MSU website, aiming to prep for my last assignments in teaching: ENG 513, Shakespeare Seminar; ENG 340, Survey of Early English Literature; and ENG 289, Literature, Culture, Conflict. I had taught these courses before; many times. Visiting the web link to ENG 289 first, I glanced through the student photo album; a handsome group, some fifteen in all. There was an English major and three education majors, but the course had attracted what seemed a surprising number of students majoring in the social sciences, including political science and several in criminal justice. Then I noticed that the course title had changed—that I was assigned to teach ENG 289, Literature, Culture, Social Justice. Apparently, I had not paid attention to recent curriculum changes.

My Last English Lit. Course

The shift in title from “Conflict” to “Social Justice” was a surprise that, really, was no surprise to me at all. Like so many English departments in so many universities across the United States, mine had responded to what had been a catalyzing event in American race relations, the 2020 murder of George Floyd:

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black American man, was murdered in Minneapolis by Derek Chauvin, a 44-year-old white police officer. Floyd had been arrested after a store clerk reported that he made a purchase using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face-down in a street. Two other police officers, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane, assisted Chauvin in restraining Floyd. [...] A fourth police officer, Tou Thao, prevented bystanders from intervening. (“Murder”)

The web article continues:

Floyd’s murder resulted in a global protest movement against historic racism and police brutality. In the United States, protests of racial injustice in mid-2020 were the largest since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and gave way to

widespread civil unrest. Protests began locally on May 26 in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area before quickly, within a few days, spreading nationwide and in over 60 countries internationally supporting Black Lives Matter. Over 2,000 cities in the United States had seen demonstrations as of June 13. [...] While the majority of protests were peaceful, demonstrations in some cities descended into riots and looting, with more being marked by street skirmishes and significant police brutality, notably against peaceful protesters and reporters.

“Black Lives Matter” (BLM) became a rallying cry for progressive social-political change.

Traumatized, the Minneapolis-Saint Paul “twin cities”—scene of the Floyd murder and subsequent riots—sought to rebuild itself communally, spiritually, institutionally, and ideologically, starting with its police force and justice system and extending to its schools. I visited the cities in 2022; driving through Saint Paul suburbs, I saw “Black Lives Matter” signs displayed prominently in windows, on porches, and in front yards. Back in Springfield, Missouri, the response to Floyd’s murder and “Black Lives Matter” was more subdued. Driving the city streets, I’d see an occasional BLM car bumper sticker; more often, I’d see bumper stickers and yards signs announcing “Back the Blue” (alluding to the traditional blue police uniforms) and “All Lives Matter,” reflecting the Ozark region’s socially-politically conservative demographic.

I confess that the change in title had little impact on my teaching. I kept the course reading list intact, which included Maya Angelou’s autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Jean Anouilh’s politically ambiguous wartime drama, *Antigone*, Margaret Atwood’s dystopian *Handmaid’s Tale*, Tarif Bakdash’s *Inside Syria: A Physician’s Memoir*, Elie Wiesel’s holocaust memoir, *Night*, and Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone*, a “hillbilly noir” novel set here in the Missouri Ozarks. And I kept the old course description:

This course explores how literature imagines cultural identities, conflicts within and between cultural groups, and efforts to resolve these conflicts. For the purposes of this course, culture will be understood in terms of such categories as nation, region, language, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, family structure, gender, sexuality, age, and dis/ability. Through the critical analysis of literature and through personal reflection on literary texts, students will learn to recognize, describe, and understand their own and others’ cultures, the histories of these cultures, and their divergences/convergences. Students will also consider how knowledge of multiple cultures can form a foundation for ethical decision-making and action in a variety of public arenas.

Over the course of the semester, I came to appreciate the ways that social justice became interwoven with questions of culture and identity. I did not have to preach social justice; the literature spoke for itself. And students made their own personal connections with the literature. Several students were African American and spoke of it; several were Hispanic and spoke of it; several were gay and spoke of it; several had experienced trauma or disability and spoke of it. My task was to sharpen their tools, supplying critical concepts and vocabulary. There was, however, a curious dynamic affecting classroom

discussions: we were meeting in the heat of U.S. presidential campaign, and the final weeks of class coincided with the election of our 47th president, Donald J. Trump. The students knew their minds and spoke them, strongly. I ended the semester with an appeal to democratic dialogue: Irrespective of our fears and personal wounds, we must keep talking to each other. If we keep talking, we'll make it through as a nation.

Of course I knew that it takes two sides to make a dialogue, and the Trump administration came out swinging against instruction of any sort that explored cultural identity or acknowledged cultural diversity. Trump was elected on November 5, 2024 and inaugurated on January 20, 2025. By January 29, I was emailing my department head, asking if ENG 287 would ever be taught again. February 1st would be my official date of retirement, so I was still nominally a member of the English faculty. Toward the end of this narrative, I'll give my department head's response.

Farewell, Diversity

I watched from the sidelines as colleagues in English Studies returned for the spring semester under the second Trump presidency. Trump had campaigned on the promise to destroy the so-called “woke” ideology, rooting it out from government offices, from business hiring practices, and—of heightened interest to me personally—from the nation's public-school systems and universities. Even as I write, the Trump administration is making good on that promise.

On January 29, 2025, university faculty and staff received an email memorandum from the MSU Office of the President, titled an “Update on Missouri State's diversity, equity and inclusion”:

Good morning,

As you are probably aware, the idea of and support for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is under considerable scrutiny on a national basis and closer to home in Missouri's state legislature.

In the last several years, there have been many bills filed to eliminate DEI within state agencies, including higher education. While none were successful in gaining passage, we at Missouri State took note.

In 2023, we reviewed and updated programs that provide support to students, faculty and staff to ensure that they are inclusive for all members of our campus community. That work included:

Discontinuing limited instances in which individual departments were requiring diversity statements from job applicants and communicating with all units that diversity statements will not be required in the future.

Eliminating diversity hiring policies that streamlined the hiring process for diverse faculty and staff candidates.

Removing scholarship requirements that limited eligibility based on race, sex and other characteristics. This included institutional scholarships, college/department scholarships and donor-funded scholarships.

Removing program participation requirements that limited eligibility based on race, sex and other characteristics.

Removing old web content that described DEI activities/programs the university no longer offered as of 2023.

Since 2023, discussion of DEI by state leaders has become increasingly heated. More recently, they have focused specifically on Missouri State's DEI programs. Thirty-eight percent of our budget comes from the state. For us to continue providing a quality education to our students, we must align with the expectations established by state leadership. Our Board of Governors agree and support this assessment. As a result, we will take the following steps:

The office of inclusive engagement will be eliminated. Employees who were faculty prior to their current positions will return to their respective colleges. The remaining staff will move to open positions across the university.

The Collaborative Diversity Conference and Inclusive Excellence Awards Gala are eliminated as university supported events. This year's events are canceled.

We will continue to evaluate how to be in full compliance with state and federal mandates.

As we move forward, we will continue to provide appropriate resources and support for all our students, faculty and staff while at Missouri State.

Thank you for the hard work you do every day to be a successful student, and to faculty and staff who are the heart of Missouri State.

Biff

Richard B. Williams, PhD, ATC

President

The MSU community was swift to respond, as evidenced by an English faculty member's Facebook post (dated that same day, January 29):

In more news today, Biff announced that MSU is closing the Inclusive Excellence office, moving those people to new jobs, getting rid of any mention of previous equity work the university has done, and deleting any reference to equity and inclusion from HR "in compliance with federal and state mandates." MSU has 38% of its budget funded by the state. Republican legislators are a majority and want to get rid of fair hiring practices for all people, so MSU is pre-complying. Please understand this affects everyone. Are we editing our public affairs mission as well? Will we delete cultural competence and ethical leadership and change community engagement to "some communities engaged"?¹

¹Comments left on that faculty member's Facebook page proved thematic. Most respondents were dismayed though "not surprised" by the university's proactive, "voluntary" closure of DEI-related offices and initiatives, and most were "saddened" as much as angered. Several of the more expansive comments follow:

By the next day, local media had picked up the story. In a January 30, 2025 web article of the *Springfield Daily Citizen*, Steve Pokin quotes from a previously published guest column by the previous MSU president, Clif Smart:

“By the time my tenure as university president ended, DEI was just about creating a welcoming environment for faculty, staff and students of all backgrounds, narrowing achievement gaps, and celebrating different cultures. It was not discriminatory, and it was about more than race.

“...These kinds of programs help provide both access and support for veterans, older people, minorities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

“And they worked. They spurred growth and created a more welcoming environment for all without discriminating against anyone and caused very little controversy. They serve as a model of how DEI programs can exist in Red States because they are primarily about creating welcoming environments and paths for success, not indoctrination.” (qtd. in Pokin)

The opposing view comes from Republican Congressman Eric Burlison, who represents the 7th District covering Southwest Missouri and MSU. In a text published by the *Daily Citizen*, Burlison writes:

Missouri State University’s dismantling of its DEI program is a commendable return to focusing on education and merit. Universities should educate and prepare leaders based on talent and hard work, not identity. “Equality of outcome” undermines the very opportunity it claims to support, promoting mediocrity over merit. We must restore meritocracy to ensure our best minds can thrive in a competitive world. It’s time to prioritize true equality of opportunity, not engineered outcomes. (qtd. in Pokin)²

This is a huge step in the wrong direction, and as an alumnus of MSU I am extremely disappointed by this decision. Decisions like this revert higher education back to its roots of only educating wealthy white men, which so many people have fought to dismantle. I’m severely frustrated, but not surprised.

I came to Missouri State on the Inclusive Excellence scholarship. It paid out \$20,000, some of which I also used to obtain my master’s degree at MSU. I wonder if that scholarship would be erased too. I’m not sure I would have gone to MSU if it weren’t for that scholarship, as scholarship was a deciding factor. The university, under [previous president] Clif Smart, realized the importance of having diverse voices in their student population. Diversity was celebrated. This is a terrible decision that has impacts unknown.

Very weird to have learned so much in the classroom at MSU about the benefits and strength DEI programs bring to institutions, only to have them undermined and villainized. They can’t take away our knowledge, but this is tough to swallow.

²Responding to a draft of this essay, my colleague and *LLIDS* co-author, George H. Jensen, texted me the following:

Several things struck me about the MSU president’s letter. First, he normalizes his decision. He makes it sound like it is an ordinary, everyday decision rather than a dramatic and historic reversal. Second, he does not acknowledge that DEI is a value worth fighting for. Third, he justifies his decision with a short history (ten years or so) that denies any agency on the part of the university and makes his decision seem like it is inevitable. It is almost a history of the present, which I find typical in the rhetoric of Trump and MAGA. The president doesn’t explain any of the history of why DEI developed. He should know better. Finally, he seems to be saying, “I am just following orders.” So much for the Nuremberg Trials.

The conversation continued in social media. A Facebook post of January 30 came from a prominent MSU alumnus and one-time administrator within the university's Division for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DDEI). The author's eloquence bespeaks a life and career pursued in service of social justice:

Diversity is not about quotas, preferences nor lack of qualifications and/or merit. Valuing the inclusion of diversity means all of us value the individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, thought, and life experiences) and the group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, religion, non-religious, and ability, as well as cultural, geographical, veteran, and socio-economic status) that characterizes ALL of us.

Contrary to what has been portrayed by too many detractors, pundits, and political opportunists, the university sought to create a welcoming environment where all were treated with respect and dignity whether a poor rural white student, a student of color or a child raised by a single mother in the urban areas, a student or international students who may or may not have immigrant parents. Whether religious, agnostic, able, disabled, foreign or domestic.

Sadly, and regrettably, it's clear that too many individuals and even some who may serve as public officials too often engage in the political rhetoric that has been fomented by some to equate the lack of merit with inclusive efforts to increase access, success and equity for all students who may be underrepresented, underserved and/or under-resourced. The university, as well as the Springfield community, sought to increase access and success for all so that the "promise of America" is attainable for all by seeking to create a welcoming environment where a sense of belonging benefited each and every stakeholder.

Unfortunately, the misinformation and disinformation campaigns that have been going on for some time, are waged by some in promoting the so-called "cultural wars," and are designed to further divide and polarize our citizens primarily for political gain.

However, all of us live in a global society and a global economy, so we must become culturally conscious enough to compete and relate to a broad range of citizens, residents and international neighbors. There is nothing wrong with increasing our individual and collective awareness, knowledge and skills development to effectively compete and relate to a more diverse world. ("Missouri State University's inclusive excellence model")³

As for Congressman Burlison, Jensen's comment is succinct: "The Republican congressman cites 'merit,' which invokes the whole idea of the U.S. being a meritocracy, without any awareness that maybe you can't have a meritocracy when so many don't have a chance to develop merit or, if they happen to be statistical outliers, they won't be rewarded for their merit."

³Again, I am quoting the university's quondam DEI administrator, whose post responds publicly and at length to the program's closure—a program that he had promoted, nurtured, and overseen. His Facebook post continues:

Personally, and professionally, I am disappointed and dismayed by the lack of leadership on many levels by those especially in public service. As a former student & community activist, an elected and appointed public servant, educator, mentor, father, and grandfather I have always believed that public service is the noblest good! However, the lack of such leadership, especially by those

As the news spread virally, the topic reached down into private text messages and talk in faculty offices. A colleague in English wrote the following to me personally, replying to my own email request (sent January 29), “Would you take a few minutes to write out a response to the closure of DEI offices and the impact such changes might have on the English curriculum?” Her reflective answer came several days later:

Like many—or most—of my colleagues, I reacted to the recent closure of Missouri State University’s Office of Inclusive Engagement and immediate suspension of DEI initiatives with less surprise than profound disappointment. [...] The times are changing, and it feels like the end, this backlash to the innovative and transformative work of the past few decades, not just in the academy but in our culture more broadly. It seems obvious that actively opposing diversity and equity puts a person on the wrong side of American history, and it is terrifying to be faced with this wrong side as the current shapers of that history nonetheless.

But I’m not entirely ready to despair, and the end of funded and named DEI policies is not necessarily the end of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. In my field, literature and culture, over a 30+ year career, I’ve seen with my own eyes the declining need for purposeful, systematic mandates to include, say, women writers in canonical anthologies, or writers of color in American literature. The British literature anthologies didn’t used to be critical of colonization, including the voices of white abolitionists and colonized and post-colonial peoples across the world. American literature classes used to comprise only the white guys, with other writers siloed in specialty classes. We knew next to nothing about neurodiversity when I began, and now nearly every professor I know cares deeply about creating an accessible classroom for a wide variety of students.

It would take more than they’ve got to make all of that progress disappear. (“Like Many”)

Thus began the ideological “cleansing” of Missouri State University. Gone were the offices, staff, and policies aimed at advancing and protecting social justice initiatives premised in DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. As described by the school’s elected representative in Republican-controlled Congress, such high (indeed, noble) progressive initiatives did little more than promote “mediocrity over merit.” The threatening weapon, needless to say, was economic. Federal and state dollars underwrite institutions like MSU, so the prospect of defunding led administrators to a swift, complete (and, to my mind, ignoble) surrender.

charged with providing insight, perspective, awareness, knowledge and skills development; and who by commission and/or omission, engage in actions or non-action to limit and divide us as Americans and/or citizens of the world is particularly disturbing, painful, and appalling.

The lack of such cultural consciousness is pervasive and has not served our city, region, state, and nation well in effectively addressing and resolving the historic “-isms” that have limited our abilities and our potential for far too long. It is beyond time for this city, region, state, and nation to do better. Maya Angelou once said, “If you know better ... then do better!”

Hopefully, all of us can learn and work to do better! (“Missouri State University’s inclusive excellence model”)

Now let me quote the rest of my colleague's email. Though the school administration had capitulated, the faculty remained committed and resourceful. Frankly, I find her words inspiring:

I am not ready to let go of formalized DEI practices in the academy, even in my comparably progressive field. I fear we haven't yet done enough. But maybe the floodgates we've opened won't close again so easily. Even without the institutional scaffolding, the proclamations of diversity as our laudable goal, the organizational tools and resources that enabled and prioritized diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments, we do still have some power. They can't rewrite our principles unless we let them. They can't make us not diversify our workforce, not innovate pedagogically, not get creative about how our learning and living and workspaces could be more equitable and inclusive. I believe it is true that our progress will slow—and I worry a lot about immigrants, about queer people, about those who will continue to be disabled by unaccommodating spaces, about those who will be hurt by new eruptions of good old-fashioned racism and misogyny. But we don't have to go backwards on the gains we have made. It's just up to us now. At least, it's up to us for now. We need to think our way out of disappointment and fear and commit to continuing the work ourselves. (“Like Many”)

In the meantime, the MAGA-led assault on education continues its march nationwide, with so-called Ivy League schools in the headlines most recently. While these and other schools are being threatened with defunding, their students—particularly those foreign-born and here on visas—have been rounded up and detained, threatened with deportation. The lack of legal “due process” makes their plight more dire, more like persecution than prosecution for no fault other than an occasional exercise of free speech. So it's not just DEI offices and faculty that have fallen under siege; it's the nation's students as well. The school where I had taught through four decades will not make national headlines like Columbia, Brown, and Harvard. As I've noted, MSU is a state-funded school in a conservative region of a Midwest state. But I give this brief account precisely because its story is so typical, repeated time and again in schools across the United States.

And yet, in telling this story, I commit to the notion that all politics is local and all experience personal. As reflected in materials published in this Special Issue on social justice, the full impact of social justice and the attacks levelled against it must be seen, not in statistics or news headlines, but in the experience of individuals and their communities.

What Next?

This brief essay began with a description of a college undergraduate English course grounded in the cultural criticism of literature and containing “Social Justice” in its title. Back in January, I had asked my department head if ENG 287 would be taught again. His response: “I don't know; we'll see.”

These same words hold for virtually every question worth asking regarding the Trump administration's dismantling of SJ programs, policies, and agencies. Much of the

world around us has suddenly become tentative. On virtually any political topic today, what more can we say than this?

We don't know; we'll see.



Works Cited

- “In more news today.” *Facebook*, 29 Jan. 2025.
- Jensen, George H. “Several things struck me about the MSU president’s letter.” Private email correspondence, received by James S. Baumlin, 2 May 2025.
- “Like many—or most—of my colleagues.” Private email correspondence, received by James S. Baumlin, 3 Feb. 2025.
- “Missouri State University’s inclusive excellence model.” *Facebook*, 30 Jan. 2025.
- “Murder of George Floyd.” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_George_Floyd.
- Pokin, Steve. “Critics Question Why Missouri State ‘Rolled Over’ and Ended DEI Programs, Others Applaud Move.” *Springfield Daily Citizen*, 30 Jan. 2025. <https://sgfcitizen.org/schools/springfield-colleges-universities/critics-question-why-missouri-state-rolled-over-and-ended-dei-programs-others-applaud-move/>.
- Williams, Richard B. “Update on Missouri State’s diversity, equity and inclusion.” University email, 29 Jan. 2025.