

The Anatomy of a Diversity Equity and Inclusion Takeover

A Case Study of the University of Tennessee



John Sailer writes in the [National Association of Scholars](#):

Introduction

“It is critical,” University of Tennessee Chancellor Donde Plowman wrote on June 8, 2020, “that we do not let this moment pass us by but instead do the hard work of addressing our own shortcomings as individuals and a university.”¹ She proceeded to ask the University Leadership Council to read *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, while calling for “a meaningful dialogue about the changes we need to see in our university.”

One month later, in a follow-up letter, Chancellor Plowman noted that each unit on campus was developing a Diversity Action Plan.² While these plans had been under development since the previous year, Chancellor Plowman’s treated them as

a way to make good on her promise to address the “systemic racism and injustice prevalent throughout our society.”³

Through a public records request, the National Association of Scholars has acquired a copy of each of these Diversity Action Plans. In the following report, we offer our analysis of the plans, which leave no corner of the university untouched. Every academic college issued a plan—from the Herbert College of Agriculture to the Tickle College of Engineering to the College of Architecture and Design. Likewise, every Vice-Chancellor Unit on campus issued plans, from the Provost’s Office to the Athletics Department. True to Chancellor Plowman’s vision, these colleges and units propose extensive and ideologically-charged reforms.⁴

We find in these plans nothing short of a blueprint for an institutional overhaul—the anatomy of a diversity, equity, and inclusion takeover. Such a takeover will have obvious implications for education at the University of Tennessee. True education will erode. Indoctrination will flourish. These plans, moreover, reveal in extensive detail what an exhaustive diversity, equity, and inclusion program looks like. Thus, our report provides a case study in the rolling revolution under way in academia.

Key Takeaways

- **The Diversity Action Plans institute a far-reaching curriculum overhaul for every academic department.** Departments in the university have adopted measures that will substantially alter the way students are taught. These measures include instituting DEI course audits; DEI curriculum audits; mandatory DEI statements on course syllabi; required DEI learning outcomes; a new minor in social justice; “critical consciousness” assessments; and new required courses on diversity, inclusion, and intercultural “fluency”—to

name only a few.

- **The plans espouse an unmistakably ideological orientation.** This includes explicit endorsement of critical race theory. The School of Social Work, for example, commits to inserting “critical race theory” into its curriculum. Meanwhile, the Division of Diversity and Engagement and the Office of Research and Engagement both commit to working with the Critical Race Collective, a campus group that “strive[s] to bring a critical race theoretical perspective to the University of Tennessee.” (UTK leadership only abandoned the Critical Race Collective after it was reported on by *The College Fix*.)
- **The plans make DEI an effective litmus test for professional advancement.** Four departments require or recommend DEI statements from faculty job applicants. Several departments go further, requiring or recommending DEI as a formal requirement for tenure and promotion. The Tickle College of Engineering demands “explicit consideration of DEI work in annual performance reviews and promotion and tenure recommendations.” Such measures will further silence any dissent from faculty members; pushing back against DEI programming will display a lack of commitment to the very values that faculty members are required to promote.

Curriculum Overhaul

Every department’s Diversity Action Plan uses the same template, which requires changes to the curriculum. Taken together, the various commitments made throughout the university, from the College of Law to the College of Veterinary Medicine, constitute a substantial curriculum overhaul. The fifth goal in the template asks departments to “Ensure that curricular requirements include significant intercultural perspectives.” That goal is vague—but the

objectives, actions, and metrics proposed to meet that goal are concrete. In practice, they ensure that every corner of the curriculum is influenced by the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Several departments mandate a sort of social justice audit, promising to assess curricula, courses, and course syllabi for their “intercultural perspectives.” The College of Law promises to “Assess curriculum (including individual courses) for the inclusion of intercultural perspectives and issues related to social justice, equity, and the elimination of bias.” The College of Communication and Information mandates “providing DEI and cultural competency content in courses.” Meanwhile, the Provost’s office makes a similarly sweeping commitment: “Facilitate departmental review and update of curriculum and individual courses to address inequities.”

For some departments, the Diversity Action Plans mandate new courses that focus specifically on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The School of Social Work goes a step further, creating a new minor in Social Justice. Unsurprisingly, some schools establish diversity, equity, and inclusion learning outcomes, such as the College of Architecture and Design. The Haslam School of Business even establishes “cultural competency” assessments for students.

| Department | Notable Measures ⁵ |
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| College of Law | Assess curriculum (including individual courses) for the inclusion of intercultural perspectives and issues related to social justice, equity, and the elimination of bias in teaching legal doctrine, policy, practice, and theory. |

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| <p>College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences</p> | <p>All departmental instructors will interpret and reflect on DEI perspectives in their own curriculum and instruction (self-work – e.g., personal biases, classroom power structures, etc.) for current courses instructed. (Self-knowledge development.)</p> <p>All departmental instructors will apply DEI skill sets and dispositions in their own curriculum and instruction. Minimum of 75% of all instructors will revise one course syllabus annually to reflect increased self-knowledge.</p> |
| <p>College of Social Work</p> | <p>Identify ways to integrate anti-racism and social justice content into the curricula.</p> <p>Develop undergraduate Social Justice Minor.</p> <p>25 UG students will have completed the minor.</p> <p>Develop process for systematic review of course syllabi to ensure continuity of intercultural perspectives in all CSW programs.</p> |

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| <p>Haslam School of Business</p> | <p>Use BUAD 100 to expose Haslam first year students to the value of inclusion and diversity along with a continuation in BUAD 200 and 300 to promote intercultural and intergenerational fluency</p> <p>(Metric) Satisfactory feedback on pre and post cultural competency assessment tool to gauge student growth over the semester.</p> <p>Further develop class curricula addressing issues related to disparities, systemic injustice, and social inequities.</p> |
| <p>College of Arts and Sciences</p> | <p>Assure a wide range of courses, including general education requirements, and First Year Studies seminar courses address one or more of the following subjects: race, ethnicity, religion, creeds, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientations, physical abilities, age, veteran status, and social, economic, or educational backgrounds.</p> <p>Provide financial support for departments to develop, implement, and support professional development opportunities and programs to assist faculty and staff in transforming curricula to integrate diversity-related themes.</p> |

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| <p>College of Communication and Information</p> | <p>Mandate participation in providing DEI and cultural competency content in courses.</p> <p>Encourage and support faculty to incorporate implicit bias, antiracism, and allyship curricula in their courses, where appropriate.</p> |
| <p>Tickle College of Engineering</p> | <p>For engineering seminar or professional courses, require students to attend the DEI session and write a two-page reflection essay that summarizes the seminar content and evaluates their own biases and professional conducts. The Harvard Implicit Association Test might be included as part of this assignment if the instructor finds it helpful.</p> |
| <p>College of Veterinary Medicine</p> | <p>Include a DEI statement on every syllabus and Canvas website</p> <p>Develop recommendations for faculty preparedness/knowledge regarding DEI in the graduate curriculum as based on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) faculty assessments</p> |
| <p>Division of Diversity and Engagement</p> | <p>Support the creation of “pop-up” courses—short, topical courses that are responsive to socially relevant / popular topics—as half-semester, full-credit courses aimed particularly at students who withdraw from a course and need a replacement to maintain full-time status.</p> |
| <p>Provost’s Office</p> | <p>Facilitate departmental review and update of curriculum and individual courses to address inequities.</p> |

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| Student Life | Departments providing academic courses for students will include learning activities relevant to the outcome related to social justice and inclusion. |
| College of Architecture and Design | <p>Develop a DEI Program Learning Outcome for each program</p> <p>Assess students' intercultural development at the beginning of first-year (prior to DEI course) to use as a starting measure.</p> <p>Engage school curriculum committees to establish one or more upper level courses where content from foundational DEI curriculum is reiterated, reemphasized, and honed.</p> <p>Establish a method of accountability through the inclusion of a Diversity Sector in the Course Evaluations for foundations and designated upper level courses.</p> |

Taken together, the Diversity Action Plans make DEI a new *de facto* core curriculum. Again, the ambiguity of some of these measures raise questions. How will a department determine the “increased self-knowledge” of faculty? How will they define “intercultural and intergenerational fluency”? What does it mean, concretely, to “address inequities”? This very ambiguity encourages university members to take ever more extreme measures, since there is no well-defined goal. The work is never done. Ultimately, many of these measures will exert a silencing pressure on faculty and students who dissent from mainstream notions of diversity, social justice, or cultural competency.

The plans also emphasize, at various points, personal and inward transformation. They call on faculty to assess their “self-knowledge” and students to evaluate “their own biases

and professional conducts.” Such measures go far beyond what is usually prescribed by the curriculum, aiming to transform the character of students and faculty.

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