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The Anatomy of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Takeover:

A Case Study of the University of Tennessee

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A report by the

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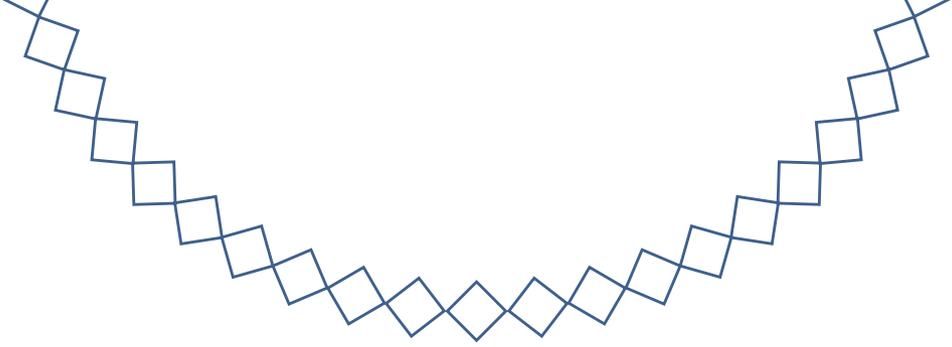
National Association of Scholars

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The National Association of Scholars is an independent membership association of academics and others working to sustain the tradition of reasoned scholarship and civil debate in America's colleges and universities. We uphold the standards of a liberal arts education that fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship.

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We publish a quarterly journal, *Academic Questions*, which examines the intellectual controversies and the institutional challenges of contemporary higher education.

We publish studies of current higher education policy and practice with the aim of drawing attention to weaknesses and stimulating improvements.

Our website presents educated opinion and commentary on higher education, and archives our research reports for public access.

NAS engages in public advocacy to pass legislation to advance the cause of higher education reform. We file friend-of-the-court briefs in legal cases defending freedom of speech and conscience and the civil rights of educators and students. We give testimony before congressional and legislative committees and engage public support for worthy reforms.

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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.

1 Donde Plowman, “Addressing Our Own Shortcomings as Individuals and a University,” The University of Tennessee, June 8, 2022, <https://chancellor.utk.edu/2020/06/08/addressing-our-shortcomings-individuals-university/>.

2 Done Plowman, “Equity and Inclusion: What We’re Doing,” The University of Tennessee, July 7 2020, July 7, <https://chancellor.utk.edu/2020/07/07/equity-and-inclusion-what-were-doing/>.

3 Plowman, “Addressing Our Own Shortcomings.”

4 The university lists “Diversity Action Plans” on its Diversity and Engagement page, but these plans are not nearly as detailed as those that we acquired through our public records request: “2022 Campus Diversity Action Plans,” Diversity and Engagement, The University of Tennessee at Knoxville, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://diversity.utk.edu/2021-campus-diversity-action-plans/>.

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
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.
College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences	<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.</p> <p>Minimum of 75% of all instructors will revise one course syllabus annually to reflect increased self-knowledge.</p>

⁵ All measures listed are direct quotations from the Diversity Action Plans.

College of Social Work	<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>
Haslam School of Business	<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>
College of Arts and Sciences	<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>
College of Communication and Information	<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>
Tickle College of Engineering	<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>
College of Veterinary Medicine	<p>Include a DEI statement on every syllabus and Canvas website.</p>
Division of Diversity and Engagement	<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>
Provost’s Office	<p>Facilitate departmental review and update of curriculum and individual courses to address inequities.</p>
Student Life	<p>Departments providing academic courses for students will include learning activities relevant to the outcome related to social justice and inclusion.</p>

College of Architecture and Design

Develop a DEI Program Learning Outcome for each program
 Assess students' intercultural development at the beginning of first-year (prior to DEI course) to use as a starting measure.

Engage school curriculum committees to establish one or more upper level courses where content from foundational DEI curriculum is reiterated, reemphasized, and honed.

Establish a method of accountability through the inclusion of a Diversity Sector in the Course Evaluations for foundations and designated upper level courses

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 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.

Explicit Ideological Content

The Diversity Action Plans display the marriage of managerial procedure and identity politics. As bureaucratic documents, the action plans often use vague or euphemistic language. They employ undefined concepts such as “cultural competency” and “language sensitivity” throughout their various edicts. Elsewhere, however, the action plans make unequivocal ideological commitments—most notably by endorsing critical race theory.

Department	Notable Measures
The College of Social Work	<p>Adopt and integrate theoretical frameworks (e.g., womanist, social constructionist, and critical race theory) into relevant courses in BSSW, MSSW, PhD, and DSW programs.</p> <p>Students at every level will be assessed on their critical consciousness related to anti-racism and social justice, with 90% rating 4 or above on 5 point scale.</p>
Division of Diversity and Engagement	<p>Partner with the Critical Race Collective (CRC) to create a CRC Center that will enhance research and scholarship capacity in this area of study and identify current racist policies and practices on campus.</p> <p>Creation of CRC Center and report highlighting inequitable practices with recommendations for improvement.</p>
Office of Research and Engagement	<p>Support Critical Race Collective in hosting a minimum of 3 events per semester.</p>

In making such commitments, these departments take an explicit stand on highly controversial issues. Students and faculty, of course, should be free to discuss and adhere to the tenets of critical race theory. Far from merely ensuring such academic freedom, however, these plans give a hotly contested ideology the university’s positive stamp of approval. Moreover, the plans pair this ideological commitment with an emphasis on inward transformation. Social work students will now be assessed on their “critical consciousness” regarding “social justice,” in the same way that faculty in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences have been asked to reflect on their “self-knowledge.”

The Critical Race Collective—now explicitly supported by two departments in the university—is “a collection of researchers, teachers, and scholars” committed to bringing a “critical race theoretical perspective to the University of Tennessee.” According to its web page, all members of the collective adhere to a list of tenets. These include affirming “that racism is a central component of American life” and challenging “the claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society.”⁶

⁶ “Critical Race Collective,” University of Tennessee, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://cssj.utk.edu/divisions/critical-race-collective/>.

Hiring, Evaluation, Promotion, Tenure

The Diversity Action Plans make DEI engagement a requirement for professional advancement throughout the university. Throughout the university, job applicants, faculty, staff members, and administrators are required to be evaluated for their expected or proven contributions to DEI. These evaluations are not only mandated within disciplines that have long embraced DEI, such as humanities or social work. At the Tickle College of Engineering, DEI contributions will now be considered in tenure and promotion reviews.

This professional pressure to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion begins with faculty recruitment. Multiple schools and departments require diversity statements from job applicants.

Department	Notable Measures
Provost Office	Ensure all search committees have Diversity Champions
College of Law	Consider requesting applicants/candidates to complete a diversity statement during the application process to explain how the candidate contributes to the COL Diversity (sic) & Inclusion Mission
College of Communication and Information	Require DEI Statement from all applicants
Tickle College of Engineering	Require job search candidates to include diversity and inclusion statement with application Promote strong confirmation of value of diversity in interview meetings with upper level administration
College of Architecture and Design	In job announcement, require applicants to submit a value statement on diversity, equity and inclusion

Other departments require DEI evaluations for faculty and staff. The College of Law even creates DEI student evaluations, which are designed to solicit student feedback on the effectiveness of faculty DEI efforts.

Department	Notable Measures
College of Architecture and Design	Assessment of DEI included in faculty teaching reviews and staff evaluations Establish a method of accountability through the inclusion of a Diversity Sector in the Course Evaluations for foundations and designated upper level courses

College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences	<p>Department, units, and centers develop Diversity Action Plan that promotes and sustains DEI</p> <p>Department heads annual evaluations include implementation and outcomes of respective plans</p>
College of Law	Provide students the opportunity to evaluate courses and faculty members on the effectiveness of their efforts

Moreover, several departments have moved to make DEI work a consideration in promotion and tenure. The Provost’s Office promises to review “P&T processes for equity, fairness and inclusiveness” and to give more credit to “invisible labor.” The concept of “invisible labor” is often invoked as a rationale for making DEI work a feature of tenure review. If DEI is just as important as teaching and research, the argument goes, then it should be acknowledged and rewarded as work.

Department	Notable Measures
Tickle College of Engineering	<p>Explicit consideration of DEI work in annual performance reviews and promotion and tenure recommendations</p> <p>Updates to all department bylaws to explicitly include DEI contributions as part of annual performance review and P&T review</p> <p>Include improving diversity, climate, and inclusion in administrator evaluations, for example DHs, ADs, Directors</p>
School of Social Work	Review Retention, Promotion and, Tenure procedures for equity and inclusion
College of Law	<p>Consider including in the bylaws competence in Diversity & Inclusion as part of the expectations for faculty rank and requirements for tenure and promotion of faculty</p> <p>Review APPR and P&T processes for equity, fairness and inclusiveness</p>
Provost Office	<p>Create more elaborate method of capturing teaching and service efforts and accomplishments</p> <p>Greater recognition of invisible labor</p>

For faculty members, the message is clear: diversity, equity, and inclusion is integral to professional advancement. As a result, DEI programming will likely continue to grow at the University of Tennessee—even beyond what is mandated in the Diversity Action Plans. After all, university professors and staff alike will have to show sustained commitment to such programming.

Meanwhile, faculty who dissent from the mainstream orthodoxy on diversity, inclusion, or social justice will be faced with a dilemma. Either they will lose out on opportunities for professional advancement—including, at least in some cases, tenure—or they must hide their dissent and display an active commitment to an ideological framework that they privately reject.

Managerial Means, Ideological Ends

The Diversity Action Plans are extensive in scope. Each plan consists of six goals, numerous objectives under those goals, numerous actions to meet those objectives, and numerous metrics by which to measure those actions. In this sense, the plans employ managerial precision—and a multiplicity of managerial tools—to meet ideological ends.

Climate Surveys: A total of 15 departments utilize climate surveys, most of which will be readministered on a regular basis. The Provost’s Office promises to create a task force “to review campus surveys to identify and address climate issues” and to “hold deans accountable for creating programming to address department-level climate issues.” While in principle, surveys are harmless tools, in practice they can be used as a tool to ensure the permanent growth of the DEI bureaucracy, especially if they are revised prior to being readministered.

Accreditation and professional standards: The plans illustrate the influence of accreditation and professional standards. The College of Social Work, the Tickle College of Engineering, and the College of Veterinary Medicine justify certain new measures by referencing accreditation standards. The School of Social Work’s first objective notes that “Per the Council on Social Work Education Educational Policies and Standards” the school will “demonstrate an ongoing commitment to fighting anti-Black racism and pursuing social justice.” Likewise, the College of Veterinary Medicine cites the following standard: “Opportunities throughout the curriculum for students to gain and integrate an understanding of the important influences of diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine, including the impact of implicit bias related to an individual’s personal circumstance on the delivery of veterinary medical services.”

Diversity and Bias Incident Reporting: Schools throughout the university commit to creating and using bias incident reporting tools. The College of Nursing promises to “Create a system for internal (CON) reporting of DEI complaints and processes to follow to investigate and settle to issue (*sic*).” The College of Arts and Sciences commits to establishing “procedures for reporting diversity-related incidents within the Departments and College.” Such reporting tools, however, have a track-record of backfiring, as students employ them to shut down the discussion of controversial topics.

Activism: Several departments in the university commit to teaching and encouraging student activism. These include the Department of Athletics (“Develop a curriculum to equip all student-athletes and staff with educational resources on topics ranging from racial, gender, and sexual orientation inequity to activism, protest, and systemic oppression”) the

College of Architecture and Design (“Design DEI content for foundational courses that introduces students to humanitarian dialogue, social and civic activism, and diplomacy, required in all programs”) and the Division of Diversity and Engagement (“Conduct DEI presentations for K12 and community partners, agencies, and organizations to promote community diversity and inclusion”).

Conclusion

Every department and unit at the University of Tennessee was given a simple charge—to remake themselves. As we have shown, the Diversity Action Plans that followed constitute a true transformation—intricate in design, far-reaching in ideological scope, and ultimately, self-perpetuating. The plans embrace explicitly ideological content and establish diversity, equity, and inclusion a hallmark of the university’s curriculum. In many cases, they make diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts—however defined—a condition for employment.

The University of Tennessee has instituted a series of plans that will further entrench the dominance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. At their most explicit—and most honest—these plans espouse an ideology that puts narrow identity categories at the center of everything.

