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The EDI to ACB Transition on UofA Students, Staff, and Unions

Recently, the University of Alberta (UofA) announced a shift from Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles to a broader Access, Community, and Belonging (ACB) framework among recent backlash to EDI ideals.

This transition entails moving from vigorously targeting specific historical and contemporary inequalities to generally advancing unity and belonging via removing systematic barriers. Abandoning such highly targeted, equitable approaches for generalized ones offers equal opportunities to university staff and students as an end goal. On the other hand, erasing targeted EDI initiatives for broader initiatives suggests the UofA is shying away from necessary work to appear agreeable. This is best examined in the context of hiring: EDI principles ask to favour applicants from historically under-represented groups among similarly-qualified candidates; the transition from EDI removes this equity-based hiring principle, preferring merit. In essence, applicants from privileged and under-represented groups have equal chances of getting hired, while equity is pursued via removing barriers to representation instead. Meanwhile, unions are greatly damaged by this development as EDI principles are integral to effective bargaining, which is explored later.

This change follows a broader cultural and political shift against EDI; many do not find

its timing coincidental—among the Alberta government’s stance on EDI and interventions on university affairs by board members. The UofA however cites two main justifications: decreasing polarization with a “less polarizing” alternative to EDI, and a focus shift toward the desired result of equitable initiatives rather than the means of achieving them. ACB is generally considered a safer framework as it concerns general unity rather than rigorously targeting specific inequalities. Put simply, the means to equity will shift from compensating for inequities—potentially appearing unfair on the surface—to removing the inequity-causing barriers in the first place. Such is the University’s attempt at improving accessibility in a less controversial way, meanwhile members of under-represented groups observe a loss of historically-tailored support.

Unions must defend EDI principles as the pursuit of diversity is inseparable from a strong and determined workforce; the backlash towards EDI thus undermines a union’s work. Diverse workforces and unions more effectively bargain for rights and improved conditions as the more diverse the union, the more difficult it is for alternative or counterproductive motives to find support. Motives to improve the shared profession and human experience are therefore most strongly advanced. Furthermore, addressing systemic inequities within the workplace opens more opportunities for minority groups to join the workforce and their unions. By more accurately representing the workforce, union legitimacy—and thus bargaining power—increases. Many unions such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have largely diversified since formation; CUPE is currently the largest, most diverse Canadian union, continuing to push their initiatives further by updating their bargaining policy—particularly to resist the recent rise in precarious employment. CUPE has since grown and succeeded as it understands the invaluable nature of diversity in unions.

The move from EDI to ACB removes specifically-tailored supports and undermines union initiatives for the sake of appearing digestible to some; EDI frameworks should thus be actively defended.

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