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2026 Post-Secondary Essay Winner

On January 2nd, 2025, University of Alberta President Bill Flanagan released a statement that sent shockwaves throughout the community. “Words matter,” he wrote in an article of the *Edmonton Journal*, in an effort to explain why the institution would retire the term Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in favour of ‘Access, Community, and Belonging.’¹

In recent years, controversy has swirled around EDI, pushing back against its action plan for a number of reasons; including, but not limited to, sentiments that the representation of minority groups is prioritized over meritocracy in academic and career circles. However, these changes must be observed in the broader scope of a political shift, notably in the United States. Many political figures, such as President Donald Trump, have taken increasingly harsh stances against related EDI principles—known as ‘DEI’—in American workplaces and postsecondary institutions; consequently, such polarized discourse and the critical lens on EDI has impacted Canada greatly—a fact acknowledged by the Office of the Vice-Provost at the U of A.² Last October, the Mintz report was submitted to the Minister of Advanced Education for new recommendations on how the provincial government should fund educational institutions.³ On

¹ Flanagan, Bill. “Bill Flanagan: Why the U of A is moving from EDI to access, community and belonging.” *Edmonton Journal*, 2 January 2025, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/bill-flanagan-why-the-u-of-a-is-moving-from-edi-to-access-community-and-belonging>.

² University of Alberta. “Continuing Our Stories: What we heard during consultations for the Integrated EDI Action Plan.” *University of Alberta - Access, Community, Belonging*, Office of the Vice-Provost (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion), 1 May 2024, https://www.ualberta.ca/en/access-community-belonging/media-library/edi/survey-and-reports-page/2024_05_01_edi_whatweheard-edi-action-plan.pdf. Accessed 31 July 2026.

³ Frew, Nicholas. “Alberta panel suggests new post-secondary funding model, institutional neutrality.” *CBC News* [Edmonton], 9 October 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-post-secondary-panel-funding-neutrality-dei-9.6934099>.

the topic of institutional neutrality following EDI, the report raised vague concerns of self-censorship in university culture that impedes intellectual discussion: “In order to continue to receive public funding, post-secondary institutions must commit to reversing this culture and to affirm their commitment to this freedom.”⁴ Since Albertan postsecondary institutions rely on funding from the provincial government, many are reviewing their EDI policies following government recommendations.

These changes have already resulted in job cutbacks and downsized funding across companies; one example is the termination of people overseeing EDI resources at the Alberta Investment Management Corporation (AIMCO).⁵ Kristine Smitka, vice-president of the Association of Academic Staff of the U of A, related how many students and unions alike were under the impression that their input has not been sought out by those making such policy changes; conversely, individuals who have contributed their suggestions perceived no incorporation of such feedback after their employer’s revisions.⁶ It will also most certainly affect students’ choices to attend—especially for those from abroad, which finances a significant part of the U of A’s funding.

Nevertheless, studies by the Future Skills Centre reveal that the majority of Canadian workers (54%) have positive thoughts on EDI, while only a minority (16%) regard it negatively.⁷

This is reflected throughout the rest of the report, where the majority of Canadian workers are

⁴ Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness. *Report and Recommendations*. Government of Alberta - Ministry of Advanced Education, September 2025, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/0fc4d498-dcb5-440b-930d-9600e19c39b1/resource/a5e7a93b-0208-4721-a347-24a65b2c3ce7/download/ae-expert-panel-post-secondary-institution-funding-albertas-competitiveness-report-2025.pdf>.

⁵ Williams, Emily. “How some organizations are changing course on equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives.” *CBC News* [Edmonton], 15 February 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/how-some-organizations-are-changing-course-on-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-initiatives-1.7456341>.

⁶ Williams, Emily. “U of A staff, students speak out against move to axe EDI from hiring policy.” *CBC News* [Edmonton], 9 February 2026, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/university-of-alberta-removes-edi-from-hiring-policy-9.7076210>.

⁷ Cukier, Wendy, et al. *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Backlash? What Canadian Workers Really Think*. August 2025. *Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University*, Future Skills Centre (FSC), <https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/edi-backlash/edi-backlash-report-en.pdf>.

either positive or neutral on the topic of EDI as a whole. Thus, policy changes on EDI are enacted as a reaction to foreign policy trends and backlash, not domestic reactions.

It is in the interest of unions to push back against such changes as EDI intersects with other core values of a union. For example, the Canadian Association of University Teachers calls on unions to safeguard EDI principles as they are “central to labour rights and union solidarity.”⁸ The removal of EDI policies can threaten other protections: such as non-discrimination, academic freedom, and fairness. However, with EDI, diverse perspectives are uplifted and represented in the collective goal of strengthening workers’ rights—which benefits anyone regardless of their background.

⁸ Canadian Association of University Teachers. “Playbook: Defending equity, diversity and inclusion.” 2024, <https://www.caut.ca/publication/playbook-defending-equity-diversity-and-inclusion/>. Accessed 1 August 2026.

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