

DEI—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Grouping together the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has its origins in the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a nonviolent struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 60s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law. Persons who currently are 60, 70, or 80 years of age may be able to recall from personal memory some critical moments in the movement: in 1955, Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott; in 1963, U.S. marshals protected James Meredith as he entered the University of Mississippi as the first Black student; many people can remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, *I Have a Dream*, delivered in August 1963 to an overflowing crowd of spectators on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Historically, the women's movement has played a role in the development of DEI, too. The women's movement had two early historical phases. The first wave of the women's movement during the 18th and 19th centuries focused on legal rights for women, especially the right to vote. During the 1960s and 70s, the second wave of the women's movement emphasized equal rights, equal opportunities, and greater freedom in every aspect of women's lives. The current wave of the women's movement continues the struggle for equal pay for equal work.

Another more recent aspect in the development of DEI is support for people with disabilities, ensuring that they have rights important to their general welfare. These rights are meant to ensure equal access and opportunity in the various aspects of a disabled person's life, especially in employment, public accommodation, transportation, and housing. For instance, discrimination in hiring, promotion, and other employment practices is prohibited by law by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Another hard-won victory is the accessibility of public places, such as department stores or restaurants. Accessibility is also important in housing and in various forms of transportation.

The foregoing historical accounts are brief, but they demonstrate the struggles that brought forth cultural, economic, political, and social changes over time in our American way of life. Many of these changes have been protected by laws enacted by several different Congresses over time. Although the gains made by people of color, women, and people with disabilities have become familiar, everyday practices, these same groups of people say there is still much work to be done.

Today, many corporations, businesses, and institutions of higher learning have adopted DEI as a policy that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people in their workplaces or schools. Human resource departments and university recruitment offices work to ensure that the variety of attributes making up human nature are well represented. It is an attempt to make sure that different races, national origins, genders, sexual orientations, ages, religions, and cultural backgrounds are represented in the workforce or student body. The presence of differences within such

groups generates creativity and innovation. Diversity also has been proven to be good for business. When clients or customers see someone like themselves working in various enterprises, they generally believe their needs will be better understood. Diversity in higher education simply enriches the learning environment.

The meaning of equity within the context of DEI focuses on fairness, especially with regard to opportunity and access to resources. The point is to provide necessary supports that position employees and students on level ground for success. However, fairness is not the same as equality. Equality impartially provides opportunity and resources in the exact same, measured way for each person. Fairness acknowledges that all people are not the same and have different needs. Accordingly, fairness seeks to address and overcome biases and barriers that have historically disadvantaged groups of people, that is, racial minorities, women, and persons with disabilities. This may mean providing resources and assistance unequally to overcome historical disadvantages to ensure a measure of success.

Inclusion, obviously and simply stated, embraces all, leaving no one out. It eliminates discrimination. Stated positively, inclusion aims to create a workplace or student environment where each person feels respected and has a sense of belonging. Such an environment is empowering and enables people to thrive and achieve a measure of success.

However, in recent years, there has been a backlash against DEI. DEI policies have been criticized and have become divisive as well as a source of political conflict in our country. There are many reasons for this. One major criticism falsely claims DEI is used as a quota system and is not based on merit. Some critics simply call it another affirmative action program. Most importantly, the interpretation of equity in opposition to equality within the context of DEI is a challenging concept; it is a very difficult principle for a large percentage of our population to accept.

Perhaps at the heart of these challenges is the status of white men. Up until the 60s and 70s, white men oversaw every aspect of American economic, social, religious, and cultural life. With the emergence of the new civil and social movements, white men lost some positions. Young, white men no longer could take for granted access to management positions; they found themselves in competition with racial minorities and women. It became unsettling for many white people.

Donald Trump, armed with the tenets of Project 2025, embraced the criticisms of DEI, and, through executive orders, upended federal laws and agencies related to DEI on his first day in office. He threatened corporations and businesses that had DEI policies. Some corporations and businesses capitulated to the administration. Some substantial corporations – Apple, Bank of America, and Microsoft, for example – ignored the president. Others are under constant threat. Some of the best American universities are under a cloud of uncertainty. The full weight of the federal government has challenged the universities by withholding grant monies, levying fines, or providing little opportunity for reasonable discussion. Fear, uncertainty, and chaos permeate the social and economic environment.

Any attempt to eradicate or diminish DEI is a moral issue. The Catholic social tradition offers a clear ethical response for why DEI warrants support. At the core of the tradition's response is respect for the dignity of each person. Respect for human dignity is a foundational principle and normative value rooted in the belief that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Because human dignity is reflective of God, the essence of human nature transcends race, gender, national origin, age, sexual orientation, religion, and cultural backgrounds. Every person has worth. Human dignity's position as a normative value means that the worth of human beings is the standard by which political, legal, and social institutions are to be evaluated. All human constructs need to be created to support and promote human well-being. The struggle to gain basic rights for a person is rooted in the meaning of human dignity as a foundational and normative principle simply because basic rights and benefits are needed to live a dignified life. The principle, human dignity, is embedded in the meaning, purpose, and value of DEI policies and warrant our support.

The Catholic social tradition's development of distributive justice is also supportive of DEI policies. Distributive justice is familiarly understood as rendering everyone their due. But satisfying the claim of one person or group is often in conflict with the claims of others. Distributive justice is the standard used by the tradition to sort out the claims of individuals or groups to participate in and access public goods and services. Examples of public goods or services are education, the economy, and health care. Public goods do not belong to any one person but are used by all.

The first step in applying distributive justice to conflicting claims is to protect and promote the dignity of everyone involved. The application of justice also involves an analysis of what prevents access and participation in public goods. What biases or barriers to access need to be removed? Lastly, the consideration of the **needs** of each person or group becomes a determining factor in achieving a reasoned, fair, and balanced outcome in settling conflicting claims. While these steps are just a brief description of distributive justice, it's the thinking undergirding DEI policies and the process used by many human resource departments to settle conflict.

A concrete situation may help in understanding how distributive justice is applied. For example, three people work in an office; one of the three people has a back problem. The person with the bad back receives the ergonomically structured chair if the office manager has only one. However, when the stakes are higher, as in many conflicts related to public goods, the just outcome is often not perceived as reasoned.

What does all this mean for the Sisters of Mercy? First and foremost, we need to review the policies that direct our recruitment, hiring, and promotion processes throughout all our ministries. Whether or not they are named DEI, we need to ensure that the values embedded in DEI are reflected in our policies. It's important that our employees and students feel valued, are comfortable enjoying a sense of belonging, and are able to grow as persons in the environments we create. This is not to say this is not happening. It is a reminder to celebrate our successes and to seek improvements. Support of DEI values begins with ourselves.

Our Critical Concerns of Racism, Immigration, and Women place us squarely in the midst of the DEI backlash. Acknowledging that we are an aging religious community, it is unlikely that many of our sisters will participate in protests or sit-ins. Our prayers are essential. But with regard to prayer, St. James, in his epistle, reminds us that prayer is accompanied by good works. Perhaps the accompanying good work for the sisters who are able is committing to learn more about DEI, its current national landscape, and how the various nuances affect our Critical Concerns.

Letter writing is another good work. The bishops, taking their lead from Pope Leo, are becoming more involved, especially with regard to immigration. We need to write them to thank and encourage them. Writing our members of Congress is a longstanding Mercy effort as well.

Our forefathers were wise men and had great foresight when they wrote in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness". This declaration also represents an unfinished goal that we can work toward fulfilling.