

DEI: WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, or DEI, as seen in businesses, schools, or government agencies, are intended to address inequities against historically marginalized groups that may be found within an organization.

WHAT IS DEI?

Here is what DEI experts and consultants define what DEI is and what these initiatives look like:

Diversity...	Equity...	Inclusion...
refers to the representation of people from a variety of backgrounds – particularly referring to people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, religions, and more – at all levels in an organization, including the leadership level.	focuses on fairness and justice, particularly referring to compensation and whether people are being paid or treated fairly.	is about whether people feel like they belong, and whether they feel heard or valued in an organization, experts say.

DEI Initiatives focus on three main areas:

1. training
2. organizational policies
3. practices/organizational culture

ERICA FOLDY

PROFESSOR, NYU WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

THE ROOTS OF DEI

DEI has its roots in the 1960s anti-discrimination legislative movement when laws like the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 addressed labor issues based on protected classes. Companies had to comply with these anti-discrimination laws, and the DEI movement stems from these efforts to continue to create equitable workplaces and schools.

“Somewhere around the late ‘80s, early ‘90s, people are realizing that simply trying to stop discriminating against different groups of people is not enough,” Foldy said. “The kind of ethos of those initiatives was to go beyond just avoiding discrimination and to actively changing organizations so that they were more welcoming and more inclusive.” And though DEI is in the spotlight, Foldy says, these initiatives are efforted under a plethora of different acronyms or names.

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Every DEI initiative may be run differently, experts say, but the overall goal is to make companies and leaders examine the way their company treats or serves marginalized groups.

“Historically, there have been some groups of people who have had more access and control over resources, money, time, other people, and the ability to affect policies, procedures, law,” said Opie.

“Are you saying that you think across the United States, they’re the only ones who are best equipped to run these companies? Is it something about their DNA, genetics or is it something else?” she added.

Opie and Foldy say DEI makes people uncomfortable because they feel that correcting power inequities can be seen as “unfair” to the people with power or privilege. Opie and Foldy believe critiques of DEI often frame these initiatives as unfairly giving something to marginalized people who “have not earned” it and are taking things away from people.

“Dominance and privilege – understandably, those things are hard to give up,” Foldy said. “For the greater good, of not just a workplace, but for our country, our democracy, we have to become a country that equally and passionately welcomes all the people who live in the country.” Opie argues some critiques see diversity as not an “us” issue, but a “them” issue.

“Initiatives focusing on policies, practices, and culture exist to **correct inequities within an organization.**”

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