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Resegregating the Academy: How Anti-DEI Politics Dismantle Faculty Racial Equity Infrastructure

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Since 2021, state legislatures and then the federal government have moved to dismantle programs and offices built over seventy-five years to reduce barriers for racially marginalized people in American higher education—losses largely examined in scholarship and media piecemeal, one policy or state at a time. We argue that the supports under assault constitute a system of *faculty racial equity infrastructure* spanning K-12 supports, college access, cultural programming, curricular content, research opportunities, and faculty hiring and retention. Drawing on 103 interviews with faculty across 38 states, stratified by legislative context, institution type, and field, we document the coordinated dismantling of this infrastructure and theorize it as a form of *resegregation*, the systematic re-exclusion, restriction of placement and advancement, and sorting of racially marginalized scholars into less resourced parts of a sector they had only partially entered. We characterize resegregation in the contemporary period as both removing mechanisms of desegregation and purging people of color. This resegregation is legitimated by recasting acknowledgement of inequality as discrimination and the criminalization of racial redress. Universities advance this racial project through anticipatory compliance, often before any law requires it. Structural interdependence means losses cascade across career stages, producing racialized social closure and loss of talent and knowledge.

"They have weaponized DEI…. We were doing our best with what we had, with the incremental opportunities offered. People were making do, and that has all basically been rolled back, or at least violently shut down."

Anna (Black woman, SSHA, Flagship, In Flux)

For roughly seventy-five years, racially marginalized people have made inroads into a profession that once almost entirely excluded them (President's Commission on Higher Education 1947; Thelin 2011). That progress owes much to the organizing and equity labor of racially marginalized faculty, students, and staff, which federal policy, state governments, and postsecondary institutions were pressed to answer, and often absorbed into a sprawling apparatus of recruitment and scholarship programs, cultural centers, ethnic studies departments, mentoring and bridge initiatives, and inclusive hiring practices (Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2019; Ahmed 2012). Since 2021, and with greater force since 2023, state legislatures and then the federal government have set about dismantling it by closing diversity offices, rescinding scholarships, banning race-conscious hiring, consolidating ethnic studies departments, and pressing faculty to strip race from their courses and research. Each measure has tended to be treated as a discrete loss.

The supports under assault are not a scatter of unrelated programs but a single, dispersed system we call *faculty racial equity infrastructure*, which has, however partially, moved racially marginalized people, and the ideas they carry, into and through the academy and into its professoriate. Scholarship and media coverage have largely examined its removal piecemeal, one policy or state at a time, mostly before the federal escalation of 2025 (e.g., Chronicle of Higher Education 2025; Pedota et al. 2026a, 2026b; Schachle-Gordon, Coley, and Tettah 2025). Seen as a whole, the coordinated dismantling resegregates the academy by excluding racially

marginalized scholars outright, limiting their movement through academic ranks, and sorting them toward less resourced fields and institutions–undoing a partial but hard-won desegregation. We describe this as a racial project (Omi and Winant 2015), pursued across multiple levels of government and involving the anticipatory compliance of colleges and universities that dismantle supports even when not required to do so by law. Its cumulative effect is to re-center whiteness, re-monopolize the academy's scarce goods, and drive scholars of color away in a racialized brain drain.

We develop this argument through 103 interviews across 38 states with university respondents, most of them faculty, who reported engaging in racial equity labor (Lerma et al. 2019). Because the assault has unfolded unevenly, we sampled across three state legislative contexts—most restrictive (anti-DEI bans in place), in flux (legislation introduced but not passed), and more supportive (none passed after 2020). We also stratified by public institution type and field (STEM and SSHA, or Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities), allowing us to trace both how the infrastructure is dismantled and how that process varies. In what follows, we offer among the first systematic, multistate accounts of this dismantling, reframing it theoretically as a form of resegregation and empirically tracing how withdrawing infrastructure reproduces racial hierarchy.

Building a More Integrated Academy

American higher education was built as a racially exclusive and exploitative institution (Wilder 2013). Its desegregation, while real, has been what as Anna (quoted earlier) called "incremental," with scholars "making do" rather than reaching parity. Concerted effort changed the near-total absence of underrepresented groups from the professoriate: racial minorities were under 3 percent of U.S. faculty in 1970 (Bayer 1973), 8.3 percent of tenured professors by 1999, and 12.1

percent by 2021. Women saw parallel but similarly uneven gains across disciplines and ranks (Wotipka, Nakagawa, and Svec 2018). These improvements have lagged well behind the student body. By 2021, underrepresented racial minorities (URMs) earned 37.8 percent of undergraduate degrees yet held only 12.1 percent of tenured posts—a gap exceeding twenty-five points that has widened, not closed, as enrollment diversified. By contrast, white men held 42.6 percent of tenured positions while making up just 21.8 percent of completers. Thus, before the surge of anti-DEI (anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion) governance, the academic workforce remained markedly out of step with both the students it educates and the public it serves (Figure 1).

This partial desegregation was not happenstance. It was produced by people and held in place by a dispersed array of supports spanning the academic career trajectory. Research on diversifying the academy has long relied on metaphors like pipelines and pathways to critique how institutional factors narrow scholars' career trajectories (Cannady et al. 2014; Shange 2019). We frame these metaphors within a broader concern about infrastructure, which not only facilitates the movement of people but also knowledge. Infrastructure is embedded, relational, dynamic, multi-dimensional, and taken for granted yet made visible when it breaks down (Star 1999). Because infrastructure requires ongoing investment and maintenance, it can also be defunded, withdrawn, and dismantled.

These supports constitute what we describe as *faculty racial equity infrastructure*: the scaffolding of access, recruitment, mentorship, funding, belonging, advising, and accountability that makes possible the movement of marginalized people and knowledge through the academy. Those who built and sustained it often aimed for full equity and integration, not the partial desegregation it achieved. However, infrastructure, once institutionalized, is shaped by the constraints of the organizations and institutions in which it is embedded, and therefore may be

unevenly implemented, subject to competing priorities, and rarely equal to its original aspirations. What this infrastructure produced, though, was movement and representation that would not have otherwise occurred.

The benefits of this infrastructure are well documented across the academic career. Before graduate school, and even as early as K-12, same-race teachers, outreach programs, mentorship, scholarships, cultural centers, and ethnic studies coursework broaden opportunity, strengthen belonging and persistence, and increase engagement and completion for underrepresented students (Gershenson et al. 2022; Jones 2013; Strayhorn 2012; Patton 2010; Dee and Penner 2007). Mentored research, in particular, builds scientific identity and propels underrepresented students toward graduate study (Estrada et al. 2016). At the faculty entry stage, structured search practices (i.e., evaluation rubrics, diverse and accountable committees, and diversity statements), targeted recruitment, and postdoctoral pipelines increase tenure-track hiring and interrupt the biased preferences that reproduce existing networks (Culpepper et al. 2021; Griffin 2020; Liera 2020; Smith et al. 2004). The viability of fields such as African American, Chicano, Gender, and Ethnic Studies, Sociology, and Education is itself bolstered by a diverse professoriate, as these departments employ disproportionate shares of faculty of color and women (Li and Koedel 2017; Rojas 2007). Faculty of color persist and advance when equity-focused work is funded and credited and when the cultural taxation of mentoring, committee work, and community demands is recognized rather than extracted without reward (Padilla 1994; Lerma et al. 2019; Zambrana et al. 2015). In turn, these faculty contribute to recruiting and mentoring the next generation.

Despite its accomplishments, this infrastructure rested on fragile ground. Its gains were incremental and dispersed, and much of it was externalized into discrete diversity offices,

targeted programs, and grant-funded lines financed by federal agencies or foundations rather than built into core budgets. Scholars of diversity regimes have long noted this problem. Diversity work is often symbolic and decoupled from an organization's central operations, more appended than embedded (Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015; Thomas 2020). As we show, where inclusion was more structural, as at many minority-serving institutions, it proved hard to dislodge. Elsewhere, what was appended could be easily removed, and the features that rendered this infrastructure legible as "DEI" made it an easy target.

Unmaking the Integrating Academy

The measures dismantling this infrastructure share a common logic, articulated in the first Trump administration's 2020 executive order on "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping." That order branded ideas about racial and sexual inequality as "divisive concepts" unfit for the federal workplace, advancing an inversion that has organized the movement since. Efforts to name structural inequality or remedy discrimination against marginalized groups are themselves framed as discrimination and a violation of individual rights. Though rescinded in 2021, its logic migrated to the states.

States became laboratories for the agenda, first in K-12 education through anti-CRT (critical race theory) legislation and then in higher education through anti-DEI bills that restricted or banned associated offices, programs, curricula, and hiring practices (Schachle-Gordon et al. 2025). A converging legal current reinforced it: the decades-long campaign against race-conscious remedies, culminating in the 2023 Supreme Court case *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* which effectively ended race-based affirmative action in higher education. With the second Trump administration, anti-DEI governance returned to the national stage as federal policy advanced through executive action

rather than law; agency directives and grant terminations aligned federal power with state legislation and reached even into states with no restrictive laws.

Understood together, these efforts form what Omi and Winant (2015) label a racial project. That is, anti-DEI governance is a coordinated attempt to redefine the meaning of race and redistribute resources along racial lines. It redefines race by rendering the acknowledgment of racial inequality as the real discrimination and criminalizing efforts at repair, and redistributes resources by stripping the supports built to counter it and purging people of color from the academy. We characterize this racial project as a type of resegregation.

In the United States, segregation has historically operated through multiple dimensions: outright exclusion, vertical stratification in placement and advancement, and horizontal stratification in access to prestige and resources (Massey and Denton 1993). In the decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, K–12 schools, once modestly desegregated, resegregated as the legal and political supports for desegregation were dismantled (Orfield and Lee 2007). As that case illustrates, resegregation requires no mandate to segregate. It often follows from the withdrawal of the mechanisms that produced desegregation in the first place. However, resegregation can occur more rapidly when people and knowledge are also expunged from desegregated spaces and repair itself is seen as forbidden. Because the academy's desegregation was always incremental and partial (Hamilton et al. 2024), its reversal is best understood not as an aberration but as the latest contestation between racial progress and retrenchment (Omi and Winant 2015), in which gains are conditional on infrastructural supports and vulnerable to cooptation.

Even at their most inclusive, postsecondary institutions often calibrate their routines, resources, and rewards to whiteness (Ray 2019). Dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion

supports does not make them race-neutral but rather re-centers whiteness as the default and drains the resources and standing of racially marginalized members. Through a race-evasive inversion of what counts as "divisive," institutions treat race-conscious programs as illegitimately "racial" while structures that overwhelmingly serve white constituencies pass as neutral and escape scrutiny (Bonilla-Silva 2021).

Organizations interpret the legal environment, often selectively. In higher education this tendency takes the specific form Garces et al. (2021) call repressive legalism, as administrators construe legal risk so broadly that they suppress race-conscious work the law does not require them to abandon. This is why resegregation has advanced even where no law has passed and federal guidance carries no force of enacted legislation. The project is carried out not only by legislators but by administrators speculating about tolerable losses that motivate anticipatory compliance (Bose 1995).

Postsecondary resegregation produces racialized social closure. The academy's scarce goods, including admission and degrees, research training, faculty positions, and the authority to define knowledge, are hoarded by groups who never lost them and were already advantaged in the sector (Tilly 1998; Parkin 1979). Because faculty racial equity infrastructure was a system rather than an assortment of parts, this closure compounds, cascading from one stage to the next. Students never recruited do not become graduate students, those never mentored do not become faculty, and faculty pushed out cannot mentor the students who would have followed. The cumulative loss is not of discrete programs but of the interdependent architecture through which racially marginalized scholars progressed and produced knowledge within the professoriate.

DATA AND METHODS

Our team conducted 103 interviews between June 2025 and February 2026 with respondents,

primarily faculty, who engaged in racialized equity labor to address structural inequities faced by racially marginalized groups in the academy. This labor included supporting group-based centers, living learning communities, racial-ethnic student organizations, courses and majors addressing racial equity, recruitment and pipeline programs, and mentoring racially marginalized groups. We also sought to interview those who had moved their racial equity labor outside of university-sanctioned spaces.

Our stratified sampling ensured representation across 38 states and three state political contexts, defined primarily by the presence of anti-DEI legislation affecting higher education—bills banning or regulating training on racism or sexism, diversity statements and the consideration of race in hiring, diversity infrastructure such as centers and positions, curriculum on race and inequality, and faculty academic freedom. We consider three tiers of restriction, visible in Figure 2.[1]

Twenty-three "most restrictive" states had active anti-DEI legislation at the start of interviews; Missouri, Virginia, and Alaska are included because governors or boards imposed equivalent mandates by executive action. Twelve "in flux" states had introduced legislation that was tabled, vetoed, or pending. Fifteen "more supportive" states had introduced none after 2020. We intentionally oversampled faculty in more restrictive states; 11 of our most restrictive respondents were located in Florida and Texas, two states known for their aggressive anti-DEI positions. In each political context we interviewed faculty in both STEM and SSHA (Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts) fields and across three public institution types: flagship universities, other research institutions, and community colleges.

To identify interviewees, we used publicly available information from university

[1] We gathered legislative information from multiple sources, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "DEI Legislation Tracker" (2025). We cross-checked against official state legislative records.

websites and profiles, supplemented by large-language model queries, to generate lists of faculty associated with racial equity work. We sought faculty recognized through awards, involved in DEI programming, or with stated commitments to racial equity in their lab missions or webpages. We also asked interviewees to recommend faculty at other public institutions who met study criteria. To reduce risks for those fearing retaliation, we avoided words such as race, equity, or diversity in initial emails, directing faculty instead to a link with more information and alternative avenues of communication.

Anonymity was essential; faculty frequently indicated that participation could place their employment at risk. We assign pseudonyms to all participants and omit identifying information, including field, institution, and state, referencing participants as: pseudonym (race, STEM or SSHA, institution type, state political context). We also altered the names of specific programs, offices, and awards.

As Table 1 illustrates, the sample included more women than men. Black scholars made up nearly half of participants, followed by Latine, White, and Asian scholars; those coded "other" were Indigenous, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, or Multiracial. SSHA faculty were slightly more represented than STEM faculty. A small number of interviewees, concentrated in community colleges, were non-faculty administrators or staff. Around a quarter of faculty participants were untenured; around two-thirds were associate or full professors. Nearly 40 percent of respondents were employed at state flagship universities, around 42 percent at other public four-year institutions, and around 20 percent at community colleges. Roughly a third of respondents worked at public Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), primarily Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Approximately half were in most restrictive states, and about a quarter each were in in-flux and

more supportive states.

All three authors and an executive staff member (a Black man, two Latinas, and a White woman) conducted the interviews remotely via Zoom. All conducted both same- and cross-race interviews, drawing on our different positionalities across race-ethnicity, gender, and career to strengthen data collection and knowledge production (Mathijssen et al. 2023). Interviews typically lasted 1.5 hours and covered perceptions of anti-DEI pressures and consequences for racial equity infrastructure, institutional responses and resistance strategies, impacts on and of racialized equity labor, and costs for student and faculty well-being and academic trajectories. Topics evolved iteratively through theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Respondents received a $50 gift card for their time.

We took an abductive approach to analysis, moving between inductive and deductive coding (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Our focus on faculty racial equity infrastructure emerged from line-by-line coding of an initial subset of interviews, revealing how this infrastructure cohered as a whole and the scope of its dismantling. We then systematically coded all 103 interviews for references to specific facets of infrastructure, examining variation by political context and other factors. We sought to include as many voices as possible, quoting 51 respondents across the analysis.

RESULTS

Faculty racial equity infrastructure spans the supports that move racially underrepresented students through the academy, into tenured faculty positions, and toward long-term retention. We document the effects of anti-DEI pressures on college access and recruitment, cultural and retention programming, curricular exposure, research opportunities, faculty hiring, and faculty retention, attending throughout to state political context, before turning to other sources of

variation.

College Access and Recruitment

Faculty diversity begins long before graduate school, with K-12 teachers who share students' backgrounds, early mentorship, and targeted recruiting and scholarships. Respondents reported the systematic elimination of these supports as state and federal pressures operated sequentially. State legislation struck first at recruitment and teacher pipelines; federal cuts then eliminated what survived.

The introduction of state legislation, even where it failed to pass, was used to justify dismantling teacher training programs focused on increasing representation and responsiveness. Rasheed (Black man, SSHA, Other Research, In Flux) described an effective program in his state designed to increase teachers from marginalized communities: “They had this tremendous teacher program.... to increase teachers from marginalized communities, to work with marginalized communities, and this had been a pretty successful initiative…. Well, instantly, that ended.” Donna (Black woman, SSHA, Other Research, In Flux) indicated, “We used to have a program… designed specifically to bring African American males into the teaching profession. That program has been dissolved.”

State pressure also collapsed high school recruitment infrastructure. Alden (Black man, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) had run outreach through a 20-person diversity office, recruiting Black students to a predominantly white institution. “Two years ago, the office was shut down under this state law.” The consequences were immediate and measurable: “We are close to 40,000 students, and it's down now to about 3 percent African American…. We grew it up to about 10 percent before the state started coming up with all these laws.” Even student-led recruitment was curtailed. Sabine (Asian American woman, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive)

shared that racial-ethnic student organizations previously given "$12,000 to do a high school recruitment event," had been defunded by the university.

Federal cuts reached the mentorship and teacher training programs that had initially survived. Alden had shielded his STEM institute for underrepresented youth by moving off state funds and relying solely on federal grants, until those too disappeared. "The whole mission of the institute was totally the opposite of government priorities, so all that had to stop." More supportive states were also impacted. Jacqueline (Latina, SSHA, Flagship, More Supportive) described losing funding across four NSF grants: "All of those grants were trying to support teachers, to teach mathematics in a way that was more accessible to all students."

Targeted scholarships were eliminated or gutted in the most restrictive states. Charles (White man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described a scholarship tied to a Black student protest archive, designed for Black students to reflect on their connection to that history: "They had to revamp that to remove the emphasis on Black students." He noted the irony of watching white applicants' videos for the award. Even privately funded scholarships were not safe. Aida (Black woman, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive), a leader in her state's Black Alumni Association, described being told her organization could no longer direct donations to African American students: "Every year we give out three to five scholarships to African American students. Now we're being told we can't focus on African American students with our money."

Undocumented students faced compounding pressures. Tywon (Black man, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive) described the dismantling of a DREAM scholarship for undocumented students at his institution: "People are calling the 25 [students] who are going to have their grants rescinded [and] the tuition is going to increase.... If they could not provide documentation that they're residents of [the state], then it's gonna be out of state tuition. So is this anti-Hispanic? I

would say yes."

Cultural and Retention Programming

Cultural centers, retention programming, student organizations, and identity-based resources form core infrastructure during the college years. Their elimination was most aggressive where legislation passed but not absent elsewhere.

As Amir (Black, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) explained, "With the new state legislature coming in, we had a governor who wants to be, in my opinion, more racist than DeSantis in Florida and Abbott in Texas. He campaigned on it, and in doing so, his first day in office…he announced that all DEI is eliminated in the state, therefore over 4,000 people were losing their jobs across the state that day." Similarly, Kate (Black, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) reported, "We had a [Diversity Center] for a really, really long time, going back decades, and that whole student services area was completely eliminated…. They would do a lot of social gatherings and try and provide academic support for any student who needed it, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds…. Our legislation really stripped us to the bone. I don't know if you can take away anything else."

Faculty mourned what students lost. Sayeda (Black, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive) shared, "We used to have a group called Women of Color in Science. We can no longer have that program…. There used to be a section of the dorm, [the] Rising Kings Program…and they would do programming for [Black men]. Can't do that anymore. When classes leave, all of the students of color are almost always walking solo, because it's just not a lot of them, right? And it makes me kind of sad, because even when they go back to the dorm now, they don't have these kinds of programs to look forward to." As Chloe (White, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive) put it, "It feels as if the institution is sacrificing the students for survival.

Marginalized students in particular."

Even though anti-DEI legislation typically allowed race-focused student organizations to exist, they were often stripped of funds, faculty advisory support, space, and other vital resources. Ramón (Latino, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive) was angry that the university defunded a Hispanic student STEM organization and forced him to step down as an advisor, noting that students felt "like the university left them and didn't fight for them." More broadly, Patrick (White, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive) explained, "We've had lots of changes from state policy that have shifted the ways we can support student clubs, multicultural clubs, and that used to be such a centerpiece of what made our college fantastic…. The legislation is intended to close these support systems down. [State leaders] don't believe they should exist."

Retention efforts for marginalized populations were typically run through DEI offices; when those closed, the institutional knowledge and accountability they provided disappeared. As Bernadette (Black, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described, "Every year, there was a State of the University address that [the diversity office] would do, and talk about… [group specific] retention, and we don't get that anymore…. If you were to ask me now, what is the retention rate of Black students who identify as Black or biracial Black, I couldn't tell you. Graduation rate? I couldn't tell you. [The diversity office] used to do all of that work for us."

In the most restrictive states, universities faced scrutiny designed to prevent even symbolic compliance. When someone visited campuses across Thomas' (Black man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) state with a camera, filming faculty and staff claiming they were still doing DEI under different names, the legislature wrote to higher education leaders warning that rebranding would not be tolerated. As Thomas, who led cultural programming in a large unit noted, "I've done it three times now. I've had to certify that we do not have DEI work happening

in our unit. It's kind of Orwellian."

The rollback was not confined to the most restrictive states, however. In flux and more supportive states, retrenchment was institution-led. Diane (Latina, SSHA, Flagship, More Supportive) reported her university eliminated large, celebratory identity-based graduations without any directive. "The thing is, we didn't get any dictates from the [Trump] administration to do that. [The university] just did that beforehand." Raúl (Latino, SSHA, Flagship, In Flux) was unsparing: "We folded like a wet blanket…. They took away the [Race-Focused] Resource Center. It doesn't exist anymore. Fifty years of protracted struggle, and they just… [It was] cowardly, absolutely cowardly."

Curricular Exposure

The infrastructure also includes curricula on structural racism, racial identities, and the intellectual traditions of marginalized communities. For many underrepresented students, encountering this material is a first formal recognition of their histories and a pathway into the questions that motivate doctoral study. Losses were most acute in the most restrictive states.

As Chris (Black man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) recalled of his undergraduate experience at an HBCU, "The professor started to talk about Kemet, and started to talk about Kush and Nubia. And at that moment, I knew this is the piece that I've been missing…. It pulled the veil back on the history that I had been denied…. [That] course was the first time officially…my intellectual academic sensibilities were turned on." By the interview, Chris had stopped teaching his HBCU course. Teaching it accurately required discussing slavery, which he feared risked running afoul of state anti-DEI bans. "I refuse to whitewash the course. I'd rather just not teach it…. Which means people just don't get it…. [This] is just a hard fact. It's a part of higher ed history."

In many states where anti-DEI legislation had passed, curriculum was formally granted an exception. In practice, however, faculty reported substantial regulation. Nicole (Latina, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described a new requirement that every syllabus—including the instructor's name and schedule of topics—be publicly accessible. Having removed herself from her university's directory after sustained harassment tied to politically contentious debates, she understood the stakes: “I know there's a direct connection between that kind of easy access to information about who to harass and harassment.” She reported faculty reconsidered teaching in their areas of expertise rather than risk doxxing.

Institutions often played an active role in restricting content. Ondraya (Black woman, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described a course in which even clinically grounded claims required vetting by her department chair: “We can't talk about racism, but we can talk about the social determinants of health.” Her chair demanded every claim be backed by approved sources, a standard rendered impossible as federal agencies scrubbed race-related findings from their websites. The mechanism was what Ondraya called “tacit structural violence”: demands for citations before teaching well-established facts as that knowledge is being disappeared. “By the time it is actually written into the policies, we will have no choice but to say, ‘Oh, that seems normal,’ because we've been going through it for so long.”

Faculty described institutions acting not on legal mandates but what Arthur (White man, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) called “an extortion framework”—anticipated funding cuts, federal fines, or compliance reviews that made preemptive restriction feel necessary. His university's board engaged a law firm whose lead attorney helped draft Project 2025 to conduct a compliance review, calling faculty in for interviews about their teaching and research. “They got caught doing it, and that sent a chill around the university for anyone teaching race-related

issues, gender-related issues. That chill is still being felt right now." Donna (Black woman, SSHA, Other Research, In Flux) described her university stripping all references to diversity from syllabi and curriculum two years prior, before any legislation was introduced. When the interviewer noted there was no law requiring it, she confirmed: "No law, no law whatsoever." But noted she was told, "'You're going to do it.'"

Requirements in the most restrictive states that all perspectives be represented made certain courses non-viable. Francisco (Latino, SSHA, Other Research, Most Restrictive) had taught a popular social justice course with a waitlist every year, until the "balanced viewpoint" requirement made honest engagement impossible. Material could be assigned but not discussed, and surveillance made even that fraught: "I don't know who's recording or filming. It just takes one student to say this happened, and then I'm put on administrative leave." Francisco stopped teaching it. Charles (White man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) identified the deeper problem: the state assumed a legitimate counterpoint to scientific consensus where none existed. "The state is not rooted in what we know sociologically, biologically, or any other thing."

The chilling effect ultimately displaced intellectual community itself. Faculty could no longer engage freely with students inside institutional walls; conversations about race, identity, and structural inequality had to be moved outside, off the record, beyond surveillance. Juan (Latino, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive) told students asking about politics or minority communities, "I cannot say anything…. Whenever you want, we can go out and talk outside the university. That's the safest." Chris, who had stopped teaching his HBCU course, told students the same: "[You] want to have a conversation…let's step out of the building."

Research Opportunities

Undergraduate and post-baccalaureate research programs are another critical layer. For many

underrepresented students, funded placements, mentored research, and bridge fellowships provide not just technical training but the relational scaffolding that turns a student into a researcher. Their elimination cuts off critical entry points into research careers across all contexts.

Natalie (Latina, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) directed an undergraduate science program founded with an explicit mission to increase the number of Black students earning PhDs. Her university interpreted the 2023 federal affirmative action ruling as preventing race-conscious selection criteria. The demographic shift was measurable: cohorts recruited before the ruling were "primarily Black," while "the following cohorts are not." Before the change, the program was exactly the kind she credited with her own entry into academic life: "I personally got interested in research or involved in an academic career through a summer research program" targeted at underrepresented students. "Every Black student that I met when I was in grad school did a program like that," she observed, "and now, with the changes, a lot of them don't exist."

The impact was widespread because so much funding came from federal sources. Rashmi (South Asian woman, STEM, Flagship, More Supportive) reported a cascade through her lab after her NSF-funded Research Experiences for Undergraduates program was cut. Her postdoc, a man of color, left when his funding disappeared; her lab manager, a woman of color, had to find other employment; a graduate student she would have admitted went unfunded. "I'm mentoring fewer people," she said, "and most of them have left academia, so there's just fewer students of color in the pipeline for academic jobs."

The loss of LSAMP, the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation program, was particularly devastating. Liomar (Black man, STEM, Other Research, In Flux) connects the program to dramatic gains in minority STEM participation between 1990 and 2023, documented

in NSF's own indicators. The program worked, he argued, because its design required partnerships across institution types—minority-serving and not, private and public, community colleges and research universities—creating "for the first time a golden formula" to open STEM access. By the interview, Liomar estimated fewer than half of the original LSAMP programs remained, as directors across the country received emails "stopping completely their program."

Nathan (Black man, STEM, CC, Most Restrictive), whose research focused on LSAMP, understood the cuts as part of a historical pattern designed "to limit students of color from participating in their development in STEM spaces." He had spent the summer of 2024 immersed in civil rights history, and when the funding was cut, the pattern became present tense. "I was livid because I saw exactly what I read, and I was heartbroken." He watched mass disappointment spread among "professors, [program] coordinators, students" who "were in the middle of developing new skills that can help the country, getting passionate about it."

Federal cuts eliminated not just programs but positions, often without warning. When the postdoctoral fellowship Jessica (White woman, STEM, Flagship, In Flux) directed was terminated, "They gave us six hours to shut down payroll, shut down all activities." Fellows who should have been finishing research found themselves instead "trying all of a sudden to teach math prep workshops to incoming freshman." Jessica was direct about the damage: "It's just so cruel."

Postdoctoral pipeline programs intended to move underrepresented scholars onto the faculty fared no better. Darren (Black man, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive) witnessed the elimination of a Future Faculty Development Program he helped create, responsible for over half the faculty of color at his institution: "I'm very concerned about our recruiting of faculty of color into the university, because most of them were coming in through that program, which we

don't have anymore." Vanselle (Black woman, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive), who had just secured her position when the cuts came, described "a seismic shift in who was going to be allowed to participate" in her field. Having survived "the initial blast" herself, she was clear-eyed about those who had not: "I don't want to use the word catastrophic, but there are so many people who rely on funding sources that fall under the umbrella of DEI that aren't gonna have access to them…. The dismantling of those supports I feel is gonna be… really bad."

Faculty Recruitment and Hiring

Infrastructure supports hiring racially marginalized faculty by surfacing inequities in hiring, countering bias, and creating avenues for underrepresented scholars. Faculty reported race-evasive and openly discriminatory changes to hiring wherever anti-DEI legislation had been introduced or passed, with one exception.

That exception came from a large university system that had resisted eliminating diversity statements longer than most but ultimately fell in line. Jasmine (Black woman, STEM, Other Research, More Supportive), within that system, noted the change came without explanation: "They didn't say why, or they didn't say the real reason why, but it came within this year, so you can sort of put the dots together." Elsewhere, even the introduction of legislation without passage prompted university policy reversal. As Catalina (Latina, SSHA, CC, In Flux) explained, "We had just recently gotten language into the hiring policy to focus on diversity, equity and inclusion" but "a new draft… is striking all of that language. The step we had made… is now a step backward."

Where oversight bodies had enforced consistent standards across candidates, their removal created openings for discrimination. Malik (Black man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described a previous search in which a Black woman candidate with a proven record

of research and teaching lost out to a white candidate finishing his PhD with no such record, on the basis that he had "studied under [someone famous]." Her written evaluation noted she "would be an excellent candidate, except she's coming from an HBCU." The search was shut down. "In the past," Malik emphasized, "[We] were really the watchdog… for making sure… everybody had an opportunity to be successful." Without that check, discrimination went unchallenged. The same erosion reached the composition of search committees. Dolores (CC, Most Restrictive), long sought out as one of few Black women in STEM, found the requests had stopped: "There's not an intentional effort to make sure the search committee is racially, ethnically, or…gender [diverse]—that's not a focus anymore."

Race-evasive practices ignored structural racism and marked racially marginalized spaces and people as "having race," treating white spaces and people as race-neutral, by contrast. Abigail (Indigenous woman, STEM, Other Research, In Flux) was "advised not to" recruit at the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) or similar conferences, while recruitment in predominantly white venues remained fully permissible. The message was clear. Diversity-focused recruitment spaces were now suspect; implicitly white ones were not.

The programs through which many faculty of color had entered the professoriate were being eliminated. Kristy (Latina, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive) described being hired through "a [racial equity] program trying to increase the number of BIPOC professors…. They had to get rid of that program because of the [state law]…. There was an emphasis on hiring Latino faculty under this HSI initiative. But those can't exist anymore." Rosa (Latina, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive), hired under a similar initiative, was direct: "I tell my students there's no way I'd be hired now—that my position wouldn't exist." As search committee chair, Rosa was also

receiving administrative pressure to ensure search criteria did not exclude white applicants: "Apparently conducting qualitative research can be code for DEI. Community engaged research can be code for DEI…. [also] conducting research with communities facing the worst [inequality] problems." In her field, these areas disproportionately include underrepresented scholars, yet she was being instructed to deprioritize them.

Fields and programs disproportionately attracting faculty of color were targeted for contraction, evaluated against narrow metrics designed to undermine their viability. Aida (Black woman, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described her department, previously valued for serving thousands of students in general education, being suddenly assessed on major counts alone: "Now they're looking at us, 'Oh, you got 15 majors. Not enough.' And that's purposeful." Sage (Latina, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described plans to consolidate ethnic studies and gender studies into a single department, cutting staff, budgets, and untenured faculty: "They won't tenure any of our untenured faculty…. Oh, absolutely [no new hires]…. This is also part of the playbook."

The selective targeting of these fields was thrown into sharper relief by simultaneous investments in conservative intellectual infrastructure. Aida observed, "They want to create a school of intellectual freedom… a school that posits conservative ideas and voices. I have no problem with that, but to do that at the same time you're dismantling African American Studies and Latinx and Native American Studies and Gender Studies—that is so ridiculous and so unfair." Nicole (Latina, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) noted that her institution's equivalent center, producing nearly "a hundred percent white" hires, "received no scrutiny," operating entirely outside the norms governing every other unit on campus.

Faculty Retention

The infrastructure also depends on retaining racially marginalized faculty to advance their careers and mentor the next generation. Across all state contexts, faculty reported new barriers to tenure and advancement, erasure of their scholarly identities, and credible threats to their positions.

For assistant professors, the dismantling of diversity infrastructure created direct tenure-clock barriers. Isabel (Latina, SSHA, Other Research, More Supportive) spent her sabbatical in continuous crisis response, meeting with university presidents, law enforcement, student organizations, and community groups, and was angry about the cost to her career. “This shit really, really impacted, like, detrimentally impacted my intellectual production, 100 percent.” She had hoped to complete 70 percent of her book; she finished a chapter. Time, however, was not the only barrier. Tomie (Black woman, SSHA, Other Research, Most Restrictive) found her institution would no longer sign off on grant applications to foundations doing equity work, while still expecting external funding as part of her tenure case. Blocked from foundations “that I've been working with for years to develop these ideas,” she had no viable path to the funding her tenure case required. “We just don't know what to do, those of us who are pre-tenure,” she said. “It's hard enough to figure out how to navigate it, but now there are extra landmines.”

For tenured faculty, possibilities for career advancement evaporated. Linda (Latina, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive), a scholar whose research centered on racially marginalized students, was instructed to “scrub” her research presence and was eventually erased from her university's web pages. “They have erased me,” she said. Asked to pivot, she pushed back: “Am I allowed to say the name of my new book? Am I allowed to keep running the studies that I run?” When an administrator advised faculty to leave DEI work off annual reviews, Linda raised her hand in a room full of colleagues: “For those of us who do actual DEI work, how do

you exactly think I'm going to do that?" The administrator, she noted, "had nothing, because there is nothing to say." The longer-term consequence was non-promotion: "They could never let me go up for full. That's a super easy one."

The damage extended beyond careers into scholarly identity itself. Ryan (Black man, STEM, Other Research, Most Restrictive) captured what losing a research agenda means at a human level: "It's the thing you built your whole professional identity around as a scholar. You woke up one morning and that had no value." Pivoting was not possible. As he stated, "I'm not going to just turn today and study plastics." What Ryan shared with "colleagues of color across the country" was "a deep emotional scarring" that does not stay contained. "If there's lingering trauma from studying certain things or being in certain fields," he explained, "then that trauma has consequences for what you tell your students to pursue and what kind of research questions you go after."

The threat of program and departmental elimination jeopardized positions disproportionately held by racially marginalized faculty. Aviva (Black woman, SSHA, Flagship, In Flux) spent August 2025 waiting to learn whether her job and department would survive an explicit threat of layoffs to tenured and tenure-track faculty after administrators followed through on firing lecturers and adjunct faculty. "That meant no research productivity, that meant sleepless nights, that meant new additional meetings." When layoffs did not come, her dean urged faculty to calm down. Aviva was unconvinced: "That threat has not passed. You've made us vulnerable, and you've shown us you can turn around in a blink of a second and find a way to get rid of us." She pulled back her discretionary effort, conceded the administration's motto of "do less with less," and described her relationship to the university as "mistrustful, suspicious, planning for uncertainty always." The uncertainty extended to her career horizon: "Will tenure

exist when I'm supposed to go up?"

In the most restrictive states, the threat of termination became the calculated price of refusal. Vanselle (Black woman, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) continued her research on quantitative justice despite pressure to abandon it, "as if it was like some trendy fad," while naming the stakes: "I accept that there's a cost to what I'm doing, that means I may not be in the academy very long."

Amir (Black man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) had spent months with the ACLU preparing lawsuits against the governor, his institution's administration, and the board of trustees, fully aware of the likely consequence: "If I do that, I am going to be fired, because this is how this administration has responded to everyone who has challenged them." Colleagues across his institution had gone quiet. He stood largely alone and acted anyway. "Somebody has to do it. I have to be the sacrificial lamb…. So far, I am the only one willing to step on this landmine."

Sources of Variation

Throughout we have addressed how state political context shaped the dismantling of faculty racial equity infrastructure. Faculty reports, however, point to additional factors, some amplifying anti-DEI pressures, others buffering against them.

State political tiers, while useful, sometimes failed to demarcate meaningful differences in political terrain. Emma (White woman, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described a strong libertarian streak in her state that "blunted a lot of the things we're seeing on the right... it's very like, leave me alone," producing a most restrictive context meaningfully different from states where MAGA-aligned legislators actively targeted higher education. Jeremiah (Black man, SSHA, Other Research, Most Restrictive) drew the same distinction, contrasting his "George Bush Republican state" with a "straight MAGA state" where changes were more "extreme."

The strength of shared governance also shaped institutional responses. Where governance had weakened, over-compliance followed. Rosa (Latina, STEM, Flagship, Most Restrictive) described how a new bill in her state "basically dismantled shared governance... democratic faculty representation and decision-making leadership roles have basically been demolished." Where governance remained intact, it functioned as a check. As Eileen (White woman, STEM, Flagship, In Flux) explained, "We have a very strong [faculty governance] structure here.... If there is an attack, [the faculty senate] is going to try to change things. There's a very well distributed system here to protect different aspects [of the university]." The fate of faculty racial equity infrastructure, in this sense, was inseparable from the fate of faculty power itself.

Second only to state context, institution-type was strongly predictive of impact. Before the second Trump administration, flagship universities were somewhat shielded from state pressures by federal support for DEI. By our interviews, the federal government had reversed course, aligning federal and state pressures on a visible target—state flagships. As Malik (Black man, SSHA, Flagship, Most Restrictive) explained, "Nobody gives a darn about the other campuses. Everybody, the legislature is focused solely on the flagship, and that's us... [at] another state university not an hour and 15 minutes away... [there was] not a peep." When administrators across his state system convened, Malik found himself reporting on controversies while counterparts at regional campuses said "this isn't happening to us" because, as he noted, "they don't have the level of pressure or visibility like the flagship and the land grant, [and] we are both."

High-profile R1s often shared the spotlight with flagships. Regional R2s faced less scrutiny but were not unaffected. As Francisco (Latino, SSHA, Other Research, Most Restrictive) described, "The story that I have heard since I got here is we're waiting to see what

[three large R1s in the state do]…. Then I feel like everyone else in the state acts after them." By contrast, community colleges were sometimes off the radar. Michelle (White woman, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive) noted that legislators "don't really know what community colleges do—they think we're just workforce training, and if that's what they want to think, let them think it." Matthew (Black man, SSHA, CC, Most Restrictive), who had been spearheading extensive DEI programming noted, "We haven't changed a thing."

Faculty at Minority-Serving Institutions where a marginalized population comprised the vast majority of the student body had strikingly different experiences than peers at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Jaime (Black woman, SSHA, Most Restrictive) and Jeremiah both worked at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in different states; Juan (Latino, SSHA, Most Restrictive) worked at a predominantly Hispanic-serving institution where most of the student body was Latine. All three described their institutions as largely insulated from DEI dismantling, not because they were protected, but because diversity and inclusion had never been externalized into discrete offices or programs that could be dissolved. As Jaime put it, "I have heard that some of the PWIs, they had to shut a lot of stuff down... but not the HBCUs. We're still operating the same." Juan made a parallel point: "You cannot tell us not to serve Hispanics because there's no other way [here], it's [over 75] percent." As Jeremiah elaborated, the structural difference was simple: "We don't have an office to dissolve because this shit, it's ingrained in our everyday culture."

That structural difference extended to funding. Long excluded from the federal grant ecosystem, HBCU faculty were largely unmoved by the Trump administration's cancellations. They were not indifferent but had hard-won familiarity with exactly this kind of exclusion. "When Trump went out [after] all these grants, HBCUs were still unfazed," Jeremiah said. "Shit,

[we] weren't getting them anyway." What PWI colleagues experienced as crisis, HBCU faculty recognized as a chronic condition: "What universities today are complaining about is our reality. We've been here. We've been in this state of being underfunded, being threatened. This is normal to us. Welcome to the party."

Discussion

The dismantling we have described is usually analyzed one state or one closure at a time. Our central claim is that these losses must be read collectively. The mentorship, recruitment, cultural centers, curricula, research training, and hiring and retention practices now under attack form a system we call faculty racial equity infrastructure. While pipeline and pathway metaphors foreground the movement of underrepresented people into academic careers (Cannady et al. 2014; Shange 2019), we emphasize infrastructure to encompass larger systems that move not only people but also ideas and innovations. Infrastructure facilitates dynamic movement, which is why structural loss is so costly. Because the components are interdependent, a cut at any point weakens the entire system.

We theorize that our findings represent a profound resegregation of the academy, reversing a desegregation that was already incomplete. This is a racial project that both removes mechanisms of desegregation and purges people of color. It is fueled by efforts to redefine acknowledging inequality as discrimination and criminalize racial redress. Contemporary postsecondary resegregation is not only the work of the state or federal government. As semi-autonomous meso-level organizations (Ray 2019), universities carry out this racial project on their own initiative, often before any law requires it. The inversion at the heart of anti-DEI governance—recasting awareness of and efforts to address inequality as "illegal" discrimination—is what makes this dynamic self-reinforcing. Administrators who understand

inclusion as legally risky need no further instruction to retreat, surrendering practices the law never barred. Repressive legalism (Garces et al. 2021) and anticipatory compliance (Bose 1995) therefore help explain the spread of anti-DEI governance even to states with no anti-DEI legislation. Universities do not become race-neutral when these supports fall away. Instead, they revert to a baseline already tilted toward whiteness (Ray 2019; Wilder 2013).

Dismantling was concentrated in the 21 most restrictive states, where anti-DEI measures had taken effect, but its extent varied. Curricular restrictions stayed almost entirely within those states, while hiring changes surfaced wherever bills were introduced or passed. Damage to other supports reached further, though this was also most severe in the most restrictive states. Recruitment and research training, dependent on federal grants, were damaged across the country once the post-2025 cuts landed, while cultural and retention programming and faculty retention diffused through institution-led, often anticipatory, compliance. Severity also tracked institutional type. Flagships, stripped of federal sponsorship, were targeted more heavily while community colleges were often overlooked, and strong faculty governance slowed the process where it survived. The rollback was contingent, shaped jointly by a state's legal climate, the federal funding a support relied on, and an institution's visibility and structure.

Minority-Serving Institutions offered an exception. HBCUs and predominately-Latine Hispanic-Serving Institutions were largely unfazed, and their insulation came from two features. Inclusion was built into the institution rather than housed in offices that could be closed, and these schools, especially HBCUs, had long been denied the federal grants now being stripped from others (Harris 2021), leaving little to lose. This insulation does not negate the racialized horizontal stratification that concentrates Black and Latine people in less-resourced institutions (Hamilton et al. 2024); instead, it suggests that those institutions may not be among the most

acutely affected by anti-DEI governance. We theorize, therefore, that postsecondary resegregation takes hold most readily in institutions where racial inclusion was auxiliary rather than constitutive of the institutional mission. Some MSIs escaped notice because they had been passed over all along.

The lesson, however, is not simply to embed inclusion rather than append it. Embedding offers partial protection: the supports most widely eliminated are those reliant on external grants or carrying explicit "DEI" labels, precisely because they are visible and not deeply integrated. Supports woven into core institutional structures prove harder to remove, even those give way with enough pressure. Ethnic studies departments have been consolidated, curricula altered, shared governance dismantled, and budgets cut. The loss exceeds any single campus or state. As these supports disappear, scholars from racially marginalized backgrounds are deterred from academic careers, scholarship narrows, and the faculty that teaches and certifies the next generation comes to look less like the public it serves. The result is a racialized social closure (Tilly 1998; Parkin 1979).

These findings capture a particular moment in a racial project whose trajectory, if uninterrupted, leads toward resegregation. Supports that took half a century to build have been eliminated in months. The scholars and students who might have benefited cannot be easily recovered, and the window for intervention narrows as each dismantled component weakens those that depend on it. Our data, drawn from faculty engaged in racial equity labor, charts what is being dismantled. The downstream consequences must be measured by later work. But those consequences are not unknowable, as they are written into the structure of what is being dismantled. Where college access and recruitment infrastructure crumbles, the graduate pipeline narrows. As mentorship and research opportunities contract, fewer racially marginalized people

advance into tenure-track faculty positions. When hiring supports disappear, the loss registers in faculty composition. As faculty of color are pushed out, fewer remain to recruit and mentor those who would follow. Later work should measure these outcomes over time, compare state regimes, and trace the effects of intersecting federal and state anti-DEI pressures.

The faculty in this study have not stood by. Many have recommitted to and reimagined their work. They have declined to comply, often at personal cost. Their persistence is a reminder that what is underway is a reversal, not an ending, and that racial projects, as Omi and Winant (2015) show, are always contested. This infrastructure was built deliberately, over many decades, through political will that can be reassembled. Left unchallenged, the reversal will cost a generation the ground it gained, and the academy the talent, knowledge, and public legitimacy it cannot afford to lose.

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Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Respondent Characteristic	Count
Gender	
Woman	60
Man	43
Race	
Asian	7
Black	49
Latine	24
White	17
Other	6
Field	
STEM	47
SSHA	56
Rank	
Non-Faculty	13
Untenured	24
Associate	29
Full	37
Institution Type	
Flagship	40
Other Public	43
Community College	20
Minority-Serving Institution	
Yes	33
No	70
State Political Context	
Most Restrictive	51
In Flux	25
More Supportive	27
Total	103

Figure 1. Demographic Composition of Tenured Faculty and Students across U.S. Postsecondary Institutions, 1999-2023

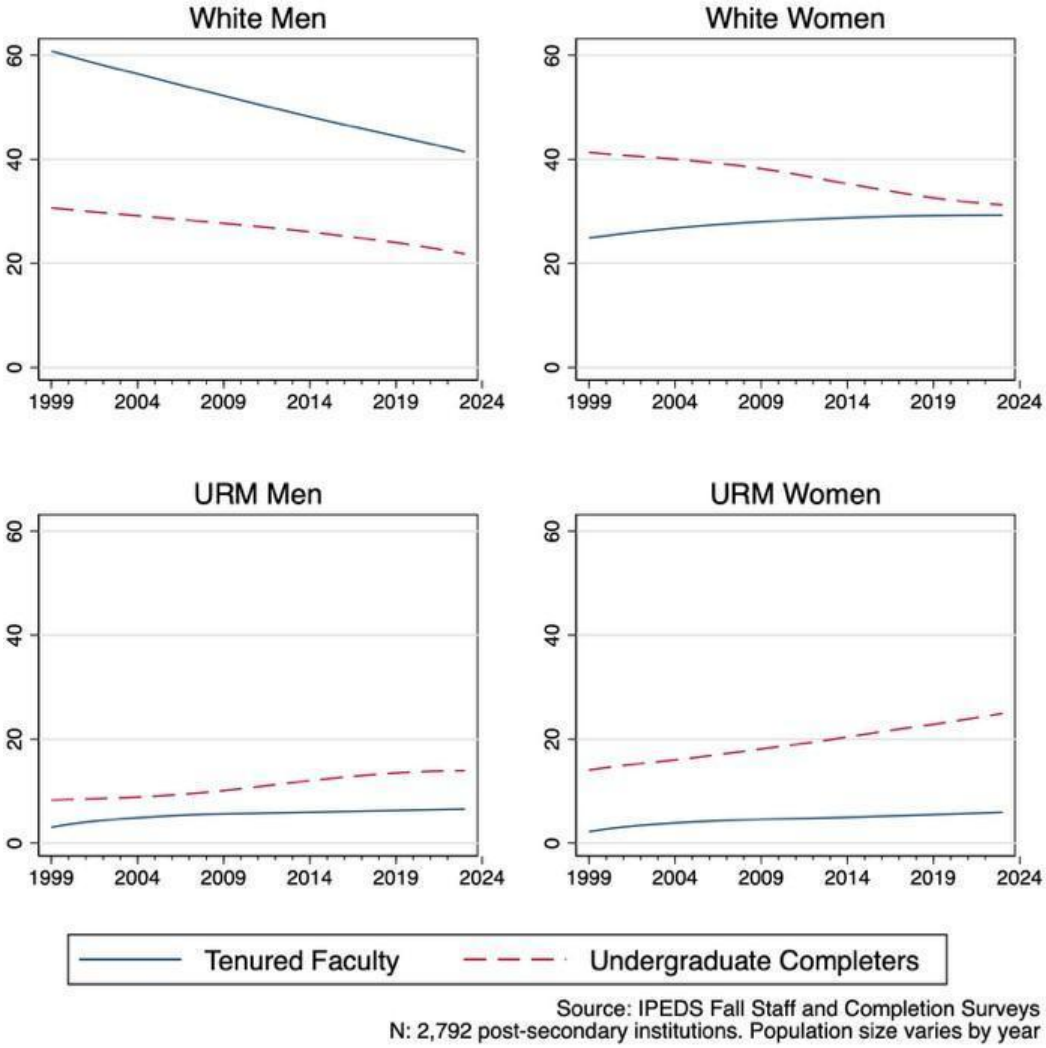

Figure 2. State Political Context