Eos

# Moving Beyond the Business Case for Diversity

*Efforts to diversify the geosciences must evolve from transactional to transformational, emphasizing the inclusion of and equity for individuals over the benefits they bring to institutions.*

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Over the past few years, **efforts to elevate** diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) **in the geosciences** have thankfully gained momentum as these imperatives are more broadly discussed in academic and research circles, the private sector, and professional societies **like AGU**. In many cases, institutions have adopted initiatives and created programs focused on DEIJ that are guided by mission statements espousing commitments to do

better. These statements, which distill institutions' motivations for pursuing DEIJ, vary in their phrasing but almost universally revolve around a similar theme.

Beginning in the 1960s, proponents of efforts to diversify and broaden participation in academia, government, and private industry mostly focused on complying with affirmative action measures. These measures were spelled out in President Kennedy's **Executive Order 10925** in 1961 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which looked to ensure that employers treated people "without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin" and to ban employment discrimination based on those attributes.

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Since those early days of affirmative action, the primary reasoning of companies and institutions of higher education or research has evolved into what is often referred to as the business case, or the instrumental rationale, for diversity [***Starck et al.***, 2021]. This rationale makes the argument, correctly, that a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds improves the quality of research, contributes to solving big scientific challenges, helps institutions attract more students and scientists, and improves employee happiness, among other benefits. Such justifications have been necessary to convince institutional leaders to buy into the idea of investing in and supporting measures meant to broaden diversity and inclusion. And as the business case for diversity has gained popularity, we have seen references to it multiply, appearing in countless scholarly papers, on institutional websites, and in funding solicitations and subsequent grant proposals.

The business case for diversity may thus seem sound. But it is not enough and is potentially even harmful. Put another way, it is inappropriate as the driving motivation for DEIJ work because it fails to acknowledge the paramount moral rationales for this work; more importantly, it can create

unintended negative impacts, particularly for students and scholars who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and for other marginalized groups. We therefore argue that institutions should reframe their views of DEIJ and their approaches to diversify their institutions.

## The Widespread Use of the Business Case

A recent study by ***Starck et al.*** [2021] examined both instrumental and moral rationales for diversity in U.S. universities and how different populations reacted to the different arguments. The researchers found that the business case is the most commonly applied argument for diversity efforts in higher education. Further, they found that white students and their parents reacted positively to those arguments, whereas Black students and their parents preferred moral arguments for diversity.

The ***Starck et al.*** [2021] study inspired us to conduct an extensive review of diversity statements from all 42 Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (**FFRDCs**) in the United States. Like that study, our analysis shows the prevalence of the business case throughout this research community. In fact, we found that nearly all of the diversity statements issued by centers or their managing organizations focused solely or primarily on the contributions of diversity to productivity, creativity, and employee satisfaction—in other words, the business case.

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For example, a **statement** by the National Renewable Energy Lab (NREL) reads, "At NREL, we believe that fostering an inclusive work environment maximizes the unique talents and innovative ideas of every employee. Our diverse backgrounds and expertise from across the globe enable the laboratory to create clean energy solutions built upon a wide range of

experiences and viewpoints." Similarly, a **statement** by the Southwest Research Institute (SwRI), which manages the Center for Nuclear Waste Regulatory Analyses, says, "Diversity and inclusion are key ingredients in the advancement of technology, and this is why SwRI aims to attract, develop and retain a highly diverse workforce at all levels." The managing organization of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, is one of only two examples we found whose diversity statements **mentioned moral reasons**, such as that it's "the right thing to do."

We don't dispute the validity of the business case; indeed, many studies have borne out its arguments. Diverse teams that bring a wider array of knowledge and experience to the table are more creative and set high bars for research and scholarly excellence, producing ideas that are both more innovative and more feasible than those produced by homogeneous groups [***McLeod et al.***, 1996]. However, although the business case makes valid points, it is ethically flawed.

## A Flawed Approach

The business case is problematic because it focuses on the needs and goals of the institution rather than on addressing exclusion as a justice issue. It's a utilitarian approach, justifying the inclusion of BIPOC and other marginalized people by their transactional benefits to the majority instead of by acknowledging the individual humanity of people. We see this focus in the private sector as well when companies try to reach new consumer populations. ***Thomas*** [2004] described how the chief executive officer of IBM saw the company's diversity efforts: "'We made diversity a market-based issue....It's about understanding our markets, which are diverse and multicultural.' By deliberately seeking ways to more effectively reach a broader range of customers, IBM has seen significant bottom-line results."

In addition to being ethically flawed, the business case relies heavily on making arguments for why an institution should invest in people from BIPOC and other marginalized backgrounds. This approach forces people of color into the position of having to explain why they should be seen, heard, and hired. Constantly having to justify one's value or worthiness as a result of systematic biases and systemic racism can cause highly capable people to

second-guess themselves [*Tulshyan and Burey*, 2021]. BIPOC **should not have to convince people** to allow them into different spaces, whether in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or in other fields, and they should not have to constantly second-guess the reasons why they are in these spaces.

> *Emphasizing the business case can be unfair and even harmful for people from BIPOC and other marginalized groups, and it can unintentionally build unreasonable expectations for individuals.*

Thus, emphasizing the business case can be unfair and even harmful for people from BIPOC and other marginalized groups, and just as affirmative action efforts often led to unjust assumptions that some people were hired on the basis of quotas not qualifications, it can unintentionally build unreasonable expectations for individuals. Under the assumption that scientific output and innovation will improve with more diverse teams, BIPOC and other marginalized scholars are implicitly expected to overperform and overcontribute in their work. These same unreasonable expectations are not placed on scholars in the majority, even when their work or productivity is mediocre. In addition, it is often assumed that BIPOC and other marginalized scholars will lead diversity efforts without asking whether they are interested in taking on such roles.

These are significant problems across STEM. Research has shown that women and people of color must outperform men, especially white men, to achieve the same recognition or reward. Women in leadership roles are all too familiar with this phenomenon, facing heightened attention on their performance and expectations that their hiring would quickly translate into higher sales, improved company performance, or better science output. Along with the unfair performance standards women have long experienced, they have also faced harsher judgments for mistakes [*Coury et al.*, 2020]. The *Pew Research Center* [2015] found that although gains have been made with more women in leadership roles, progress has been slowed by the burden of higher expectations.

Fewer than 6% of STEM faculty in academic institutions are people of color, which ***Watson*** [2019] claims is because "faculty hire faculty." In other words, people hire people like themselves. If they do hire a person of color, they often must convince other faculty that the person has the right "pedigree" to be part of the institution. Once a person of color is hired, tokenism and isolation can set in because of heightened expectations for performance—which are reinforced by instrumental rationales for diversity—and because the person may well be one of only a few people of color in their department. ***Watson*** [2019] further suggests that faculty of color leave academia in search of fulfillment elsewhere because the academic environment is not welcoming and because the bias of the majority becomes especially apparent in recruitment and hiring practices. Of course, not retaining individuals who are outside the demographic majority defeats the goal of increasing institutional diversity.

### Focusing on Equity over Expectations

We call for a new approach and reframed rationale for DEIJ work in the geosciences, indicative of a commitment to creating institutional environments that are inherently equitable, where all members are heard, seen, and valued without having to provide justification for their inclusion. Institutions should make intentional efforts to recruit and retain people with a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives because they are seeking to be equitable, not because of the benefits these people are expected to bring the institution.

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To help with transitioning to an equity-focused approach, we recommend that institutions and individuals **reflect on their reasons and motivations** for supporting the recruitment and retention of a more diverse workforce

and student body and how those motivations drive expectations of recruitment and retention. Words matter, so institutions should review their diversity and inclusion statements and update them to include morale rationales. Understanding and acknowledging the historic responsibility of an institution are often a first step. **Land acknowledgments**, for example, although performative as stand-alone actions, can be starting points for establishing authentic and equitable partnerships with Indigenous and local communities and can move institutions toward conducting science in more just and inclusive ways.

If your institution subscribes to the business case justification for diversity, question whether that approach creates inequitable or unrealistic expectations. Specifically, are there heightened expectations on new BIPOC hires? Are you expecting colleagues or students from BIPOC and other marginalized backgrounds to overperform? Do you have heightened expectations that hiring a few individuals will rapidly change the output of the group? Are all students and colleagues allowed to be average at times?

Creating and nurturing a transformative culture require institutions to embody DEIJ as a foundational component to support their community and workforce. No institutions are doing this perfectly, but there are examples of institutions working toward transformational change. At Colorado State University, faculty performance reviews and tenure and promotion packages in many departments now include, as an evaluation component, evidence of incorporating DEIJ efforts into research, teaching, and service.

Positive and productive changes in institutions come with structural change at all levels, and these changes can take time. The benefits of diversity for science and for organizations are not immediate. They also do not depend only on the contributions of BIPOC and marginalized scholars and so won't be realized simply by augmenting numbers. Instead, the benefits come from systematically creating inclusive and equitable spaces that allow all scholars to be productive, to contribute, and to be valued and evaluated fairly.

It is time for institutions to create transformational and equitable cultures by recognizing everyone's humanity and no longer treating efforts in diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as a business decision.

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