

## **BOARD #164: Shifting the Focus: Lessons Learned from the LEGACY Scholars Program**

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## **Introduction**

In 2020, President Donald Trump passed Executive Order 13950, “Combatting Race and Sex Stereotyping,” setting a precedent for the development of state-based anti-DEI legislation across the United States due to its perceived divisive nature. Although President Joe Biden overturned this order, since 2023, it has led to the introduction of 86 bills across 28 states and the U.S. Congress [1]. This executive action also created a “chilling effect,” where individuals and organizations have scaled back or avoided DEI initiatives out of fear of backlash, legal challenges, or negative perceptions [2].

The rhetoric of Executive Order 13950 and state-based legislation promotes an identity-blind perspective to diversity that minimizes demographic differences and denies structural forms of discrimination [3], [4]. States like Florida and Texas have created anti-DEI rhetoric restricting universities’ DEI practices. Among these restrictions are forbidding the use of diversity statements, closing DEI offices, firing staff, and barring the consideration of demographic information, such as race, sex, and ethnicity, in admission processes. Ultimately, these legislative initiatives raise significant concerns about the long-term implications for equity and inclusion in higher education.

## **Background**

The LEGACY Scholars Program was directly impacted by the proposal of anti-DEI bills in Ohio and the dismantling of other historic legislation, specifically Senate Bill 83 and Affirmative Action, as Ohio State University preemptively reacted to the bill’s proposal by beginning to dismantle programs, offices, and funding related to DEI efforts. The original mission of LEGACY was to increase the number of underrepresented postdoctoral scholars who transitioned to faculty in the College of Engineering. Additionally, the program sought to diversify the next generation of engineering leaders in academia.

The inaugural cohort of LEGACY Scholars consisted of seven scholars across four of the thirteen engineering departments. As a part of the program, scholars developed a mentorship team using the intersectional mentorship model [5], which consisted of four different mentor types: traditional, non-traditional, out-of-the-box, and personal. The intersectional mentorship model encouraged scholars to select at least one mentor in each of these categories to provide holistic mentorship in preparation for successful transitions to faculty positions.

In addition to mentorship support, LEGACY provided financial support for scholars to become independent researchers and strengthen their portfolios for positions at Ohio State or another institution. Per the original structure of LEGACY, scholars participated in a targeted hiring process within the College of Engineering that allowed them to be hired into Assistant Professor positions within their home department. LEGACY supported scholars for two years in the program, with the possibility of renewing for a third year before applying to faculty positions. One scholar from the inaugural cohort received multiple offers from Biomedical Engineering departments and accepted an external offer after just one year in the program.

As the remaining six scholars progressed in the program, Ohio State’s academic affairs office created a faculty hiring task force in October of 2022, charged with reviewing effective faculty hiring practices used within the university and externally to design a university-wide process for faculty recruitment. Additionally, the new hiring model was to assist the university with meeting its Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action obligations (Office of Academic Affairs, 2025). The result of this task force was the development of the Strategic Hiring Initiative for Faculty Talent (SHIFT). While aimed at creating a unified process

for recruitment and hiring, the SHIFT initiative barred targeted searches, which directly impacted our remaining scholars, many of whom moved across the nation and globe to participate in the program. Scholars now went from almost guaranteed positions within their home departments to joining an applicant pool with other professionals seeking the same tenure-track positions.

The LEGACY Scholars Program encountered challenges on multiple fronts. Among these included (1) navigating the university's preemptive decisions to dismantle DEI programming and (2) supporting the professional development of remaining scholars under the constraints of the newly established SHIFT initiative and the June 2023 Supreme Court ruling against race-based admissions. Despite these obstacles, the program remained steadfast, adapting rather than faltering to the limitations imposed by new policies. A primary focus included aiding scholars in navigating these restrictions, particularly those who desired to become faculty at the institution.

Through this process, our program successfully supported the transition of two scholars into faculty positions and one into a research scientist role at Ohio State. Additionally, one scholar secured an international faculty position, and two others pursued opportunities in academia and industry outside of Ohio State. While not all scholars transitioned directly into faculty roles, our experience working alongside them and navigating the academic landscape revealed several important lessons including: **1)** navigating postdoctoral to-faculty culture and potential barriers, **2)** aligning engineering department priorities and program outcomes, **3)** acknowledging and addressing institutional wrongdoings, and **4)** responding to systematic failure that arises from abrupt policy changes. Each of these lessons is detailed in the following section.

## **Lessons Learned**

### **Navigating Postdoctoral-to-Faculty Culture and Potential Barriers**

The path to a faculty position presents unique challenges, particularly for scholars navigating institutional and systemic barriers. Within our program, several benefits emerged to support postdoctoral scholars through these stages, with the cohort model and mentorship proving especially impactful.

The cohort model provided a collaborative and supportive structure that fostered peer learning and mutual growth. For example, one scholar completed their application and interview process earlier than the others, enabling the cohort to benefit from shared insights as this scholar relayed their experiences, strategies, and lessons learned. Additionally, the collaborative environment enabled scholars to exchange feedback on their application materials.

Mentorship, both within and outside the scholar's respective departments, was a key factor in scholar success. Mentors provided tailored guidance, helping scholars refine their application materials, navigate the interview process, and strategize for negotiation and transition phases. The combination of mentorship and peer support offered a foundation of stability and confidence, even amid uncertainties brought on by shifting institutional policies.

A distinguishing feature of this program was its focus on empowering scholars to bring their authentic selves into their roles, rather than emphasizing assimilation into existing departmental cultures. This shift in emphasis is particularly significant for institutions seeking to replicate programs that cultivate true diversity. By encouraging scholars to prioritize their values, unique perspectives, and lived experiences, the program demonstrated how authentic representation can enrich academic environments.

### Aligning Engineering Department Priorities with Program Outcomes

In the wake of anti-DEI legislation, universities have restructured the way these programs are advertised and, subsequently, the way scholars are supported. For instance, universities in Alabama, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah have restructured the advertisement of their programs due to legislation limiting DEI efforts [6]. These legislative efforts can distort the initial missions of these conversion model programs and cause departments to falter in their support. To prevent this, it is valuable for relationships to be formed with postdoc programs and prospective departments to increase buy-in and support for scholars.

The director of LEGACY worked with the scholars' traditional mentors, most of whom were faculty within departments at Ohio State, to ensure they understood the goals of LEGACY and checked in through annual evaluations. One recommendation we would make is to ensure that conversion model programs are conducting annual evaluations with mentors and frequent check-ins with scholars to ensure their needs are being met.

A major component of LEGACY was mentorship and community; a portion of this community comes from the scholar's department. Studies have shown that a structural barrier to postdoc transition is toxic departmental culture [7], [8], with departments using niceness as a method of conflict avoidance and a lack of attention to the sense of belonging [9]. Therefore, it was important for LEGACY to analyze and discuss with scholars the culture of the departments they were entering, while also aligning them with faculty within those departments that prioritize their success. Check-ins with scholars and annual evaluations allowed the program to determine if departments and faculty were in alignment with the program's mission.

The establishment of SHIFT raised concerns among scholars about how to evaluate departmental cultures and assess a department's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment for new faculty. Scholars were left uncertain about whether potential positions aligned with their values or if they would find supportive environments as faculty members. In some cases, the fear of potential legal implications appeared to outweigh prior commitments made to scholars. To address this, LEGACY recommends implementing a contract or memorandum of understanding between the program and departments to ensure consistent support for scholars, regardless of policy changes. Cobb et al. (2025) highlighted that postdocs from marginalized communities often faced the challenges of navigating anti-DEI legislation without understanding its potential impact on their faculty careers. While most scholars successfully transitioned to faculty roles within the university, some departments were unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices. Ultimately, these legislative actions resulted in institutional harm to postdoc scholars, with universities and departments offering little acknowledgment of the damage caused.

### Acknowledging and Addressing Institutional Wrongs

As a former inaugural department chair at the Ohio State, the director of the LEGACY Scholars Program was keenly aware of the cultures and politics at play at the institution. Among these included several marginalized postdoctoral scholars being positioned as the first and/or only faculty of their demographic in their engineering departments; historical resistance in the college to open conversations about issues of race; and a culture steeped in stereotypical ways of working (e.g., male-dominated and predominantly white).

Culpepper et al. (2021) note similar structural barriers and institutional challenges that often impede the success of many postdoctoral conversion programs, too. Structural issues in

these programs include racial biases, unwelcoming environments, and limited definitions and conceptions of excellence. Institutional challenges might involve ambiguous plans about the postdoc-to-faculty conversion process and inadequate mentoring and professional development support.

As a woman of color with a STEM background and a doctorate in higher education, the program director set out to address expected resistance to the program's success at the institution during scholars' recruitment. When she became a Fellow in a national leadership development program, she interviewed senior leaders across the university. This included leaders who oversaw academic, fiscal, and other business decisions at college and university levels. From these interviews, she discovered more about the inner workings of human resources, institutional equity, general counsel, ethics and compliance, and diversity, equity, and inclusion units.

When she poked into the daily actions of the organization to discover how business was run, the program director concluded that few mechanisms addressed historical grievances against marginalized people (e.g., experiencing microaggressions). Although ethics and compliance offices were erected at the request of the university's board of trustees around 2019 consolidate all regulatory offices, nothing responded consistently and thoroughly to potential grievances of marginalized people whose issues (e.g., experiencing microaggressions) didn't fit neatly into the organization's preset ways of working.

During interviews, several senior leaders referred to a solution to grievances that were not aligned with current policies to be restorative justice. The primary objective was to bridge gaps between reports that did not violate policy and unresolved tensions. At a departmental level, Culpepper et al. (2021) suggest that units that do not care for scholars during a conversion process be prevented from recruiting future scholars until they demonstrate abilities to grow and change in the areas of support and retention.

Institutionally, however, no plans to address possible harm to those impacted for DEI policy shifts have been communicated. Little to no accountability exists for shifting drastically from being committed fully to DEI and then cowering as equity efforts are denounced more intensely under a new U.S. presidential administration. This lack of humanity modeled at government levels sets a tone that requires marginalized groups and our postdoc scholars to brace themselves for what a DEI-less future looks like.

#### Responding to systematic failure that arises from abrupt policy changes

Despite systemic barriers, the program's cohort structure played a vital role in fostering resilience and self-advocacy. When scholars faced rejection or were unable to apply for tenure-track positions, they leaned on their peers for encouragement, feedback, and strategies to broaden their job searches. This collaborative environment empowered scholars to identify opportunities at other institutions that aligned with their goals and values. Mentorship also proved instrumental in these moments of uncertainty. Mentors guided scholars through the process of applying to new positions and refining their materials to reflect their unique strengths and perspectives. The program director played a critical role by assisting with extensions for scholars who had not yet secured positions, ensuring they had the time and resources needed to transition successfully. This collective response to systemic failure underscores the importance of adaptability and support in postdoctoral programs. By combining mentorship, peer collaboration, and institutional flexibility, the program not only supported individual scholars but also provided a model for how academic institutions can mitigate the impacts of abrupt policy changes and systemic barriers.

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