

Contested Commitments: A Study of Homiletics Professors' Experiences with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Abstract: *Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are prominent topics of conversation in higher education, including seminaries and theological schools. The Academy of Homiletics DEI study, funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, surveyed 81 professors, exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with incorporating DEI into their teaching of homiletics, the art of preaching. This phenomenological study, conducted in 2022, provides a mixed-methods analysis offering insight into the current state of DEI implementation in theological education, capturing a snapshot of the academic climate before the anticipated surge in opposition to DEI initiatives following the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The findings also provide a baseline to compare subsequent surveys as political and societal opposition to DEI initiatives intensifies across North America.*

Background and Introduction

Education within seminaries and theological schools is increasingly shaped by conversations surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion.¹ Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education include actively engaging with diversity in curriculum and communities to increase awareness, knowledge, and understanding of interactions within systems.² DEI initiatives in education encompass a multifaceted approach that necessitates critically examining language and pedagogical strategies to foster justice and equity within higher education.³ Integrating DEI principles into course content and learning activities can

¹ Geleana Drew Alston and Catherine A. Hansman, "Embracing Diversity and Inclusive Mentoring Practices for Leadership Development," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2020 (September): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20400>.

² Milton A. Fuentes, David G. Zelaya, and Joshua W. Madsen, "Rethinking the Course Syllabus: Considerations for Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion," *Teaching of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2020): 69–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959979>.

³ Liz Browne, "What Is Educational Leadership?" in *Routledge eBooks* (Informa, 2020), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429197154-2>.

reinforce or challenge existing norms and thus shape the classroom environment and student experiences,⁴ particularly in homiletic pedagogy.

The broader academic discourse emphasizes the development of effective strategies for DEI integration across various disciplines.⁵ Factors such as the institution's mission, values, resources, and individual faculty members' commitment, knowledge, and skills contribute to the variability in DEI implementation across institutions and disciplines.⁶ Homiletics professors who integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion into their courses may encounter a complicated landscape of support and possible backlash. Some professors may be enthusiastic advocates for DEI, while others may be hesitant or resistant due to concerns about academic freedom, theological interpretations, or perceived political agendas.⁷

With the election of Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the political climate surrounding DEI initiatives became increasingly hostile, creating uncertainty and fear among educators and administrators and potentially impacting the quality of education and research.⁸ The Trump administration's rhetoric about limiting DEI in universities and efforts to make policy shifts have potentially undermined diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within institutions of higher learning.⁹ Several states have recently proposed or enacted legislation restricting DEI initiatives in public universities, citing concerns over reverse discrimination and ideological conformity.¹⁰ These shifts required universities to re-evaluate campus DEI strategies.¹¹ Further, governmental scrutiny may lead professors to re-evaluate their teaching and research activities.¹²

The impact of DEI initiatives in higher education is complex, with consequences that extend beyond legal and policy changes, including palpable shifts in institutional priorities. This political polarization can manifest in several ways within higher education and theological seminaries.¹³ As faculty and administrators face pressure to avoid politically sensitive or biased

⁴ Michelle D. Evans and Hillary J. Knepper, "Building Inclusive PA Classrooms: The Diversity Inclusion Model," *Teaching Public Administration* 39, no. 1 (2020): 84–102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0144739420937762>.

⁵ Kaleigh Summer Soda, "Leadership and Its Impact on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: A Literature Review and Analysis," *Open Access Library Journal* 10, no. 9 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1109980>; Catherine A. Hansman and Chance W. Lewis, eds., *Handbook of Research on Educational Leadership for Equity and Diversity* (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076934>.

⁶ Evans and Knepper, "Building Inclusive PA Classrooms."

⁷ Joyce Victor, Ashley Gangaware, and Jacob Siek, "Strategies for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Principles of Nursing," *Nurse Educator* 49, no. 2 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1097/nne.0000000000001495>.

⁸ Veronica G. Martinez and Carlita B. Favero, "A Discussion of Diversity and Inclusivity at the Institutional Level: The Need for a Strategic Plan," *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education* 16, no. 3 (2018): <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30254540>.

⁹ Laura Parson and Laila McCloud, "Exploring the Use of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of HESA Introductory Syllabi," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2023.2203101>.

¹⁰ Judith L. Hepner, "Sustainability Challenges and Opportunities in Luxury Fashion: A Response to Policy Deregulation in the United States," *Journal of Sustainable Marketing*, (2025): <https://doi.org/10.51300/jsm-2025-139>.

¹¹ Mussie Tessema, Traci Hulback, Jennifer Jones, Ryan Santos-Leslie, Kisha Ninham, Amy Sterbin, and Nathan Swanson, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: History, Climate, Benefits, Challenges, and Creative Strategies," *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies* 11, no. 4 (2023): 780-794, doi: 10.4236/jhrss. 2023.114044.

¹² Martinez and Favero, "A Discussion of Diversity and Inclusivity at the Institutional Level."

¹³ For example, in Summer 2025, Baylor University received backlash from donors and alums about receiving grant funding to research the experiences of women and LGBTQ people in congregations. The university president made a public statement to rescind the grant funding, citing the University's Statement on Human

topics, standard course design may feel contentious when selecting curriculum material, readings, research, and guest speakers. Students might not share certain opinions if class discussions become tense due to divisive topics. Further, the expression of political views may impact faculty hires, promotions, and support from the administration.¹⁴

Faculty experience many obstacles in DEI implementation, such as a lack of resources, training, and institutional support. The backlash to DEI efforts in the classroom may include encountering resistance from students who perceive DEI initiatives as imposing specific ideologies, undermining academic freedom, or diluting the focus on traditional homiletical skills and knowledge. Furthermore, leadership, faculty, and students from more advantaged backgrounds may perceive no benefit to DEI integration and therefore may resist it.¹⁵ Faculty are told they must carefully balance integrating DEI principles with preserving intellectual rigor and academic integrity.¹⁶ Faculty members often engage in ongoing negotiation between the desire to address the needs of a diverse student population, deliver a superior educational experience, and uphold values related to professional and public service, all within the constraints of limited time.¹⁷

For theological schools seeking to cultivate inclusive homiletics courses and equip students with skills to integrate DEI into their preaching and ministry, understanding the supports and challenges professors face in the classroom is essential. The experiences of 81 Academy of Homiletics (AoH) professors who integrated diversity, equity, and inclusion in their teaching were examined in a 2022 study, providing insights into the support and resistance encountered in their classrooms.¹⁸ The data analysis provided an overview of the opportunities and obstacles homiletics professors experienced employing inclusive pedagogy. The study's findings will influence future studies about homiletical professors and the integration of DEI. Subsequent surveys will provide a longitudinal perspective on the evolving landscape of higher education amidst an ever-changing sociopolitical climate.

The Academy of Homiletics was founded in 1965 as an academic guild for those who teach, research, and practice the art and skills of preaching. Homiletics, the study of preparing, composing, and delivering sermons, involves scripture, theology, context, and rhetoric for public proclamation. At the time of this article, the Academy of Homiletics had more than two hundred members in the U.S., Canada, and several other countries. Membership in the Academy of Homiletics is open to professors and doctoral graduate students of homiletics, independent scholars, and retirees.

Methods

Sexuality, although the same foundation had funded Baylor's similar research for years.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/baylor-university-return-643000-lgbtq-inclusion-grant-rcna217848>.

¹⁴ As an example, a viral video of a Texas A&M University English professor's lecture on gender identity led to her termination, as well as the removal of the department head, dean, and eventually the president in the fall of 2025. <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/09/19/texas-a-m-welsh-firing-professor-gender-mccoul/>

¹⁵ Aarti Iyer, "Understanding Advantaged Groups' Opposition to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Policies: The Role of Perceived Threat," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 16, no. 5 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12666>.

¹⁶ John Saler, "The NIH Sacrifices Academic Rigor for DEI," *Wall Street Journal*, Opinion, March 12, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-nih-sacrifices-scientific-rigor-for-dei-f828a6c7>, accessed July 15, 2025.

¹⁷ Evans and Knepper, "Building Inclusive PA Classrooms: The Diversity Inclusion Model."

¹⁸ Victor, et al, "Strategies for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Principles of Nursing."

In 2022, the Academy of Homiletics (AoH) received a grant for a project entitled “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics” from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. The project included a survey designed to capture a wide range of information related to the experiences of AoH members teaching homiletics classes. The anonymous survey included questions about experienced or observed systemic racism in their teaching institutions, barriers encountered to teaching and DEI, and sources of support regarding DEI incorporation.¹⁹ The survey contained a blend of question types, including multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions, to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data.²⁰ This comprehensive approach to data collection ensured that the study could provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences of homiletics professors regarding DEI.

This article references survey data about demographics and reported systemic racism, barriers, negativity, positivity, and support related to DEI in their preaching courses. The Likert scale questions had an open-ended (no-limit response length) option to elaborate on their experiences and express more nuanced perspectives. The additional qualitative data obtained through ‘other’ text boxes accompanying the Likert questions provided further understanding of respondents' experiences.

The optional open-ended questions examined for this article are as follows:

- Share observations or experiences regarding systemic racism at your institution. (Please specify).
- Are there other barriers you have faced? (Please specify).
- Have you experienced other negative responses? (Please specify).
- Are there other sources of support and encouragement? (Please specify).
- Have you had other positive experiences while addressing DEI in your institution? (Please specify).

Demographics

Respondents in this study included 81 adults (49% female, 50% male, 1% no answer) with a mean age of 54 years. Two hundred thirty-four individuals received the survey, and 81 responded, giving a response rate of 34% (the target response rate was 40%). Sixty-four percent of the sample identified as white, 23% as Black/African American, 6% as African National/African Caribbean, 5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% as Native American/Indigenous, 1% as Hispanic/Latine, and 1% as Middle Eastern. Two percent did not identify with a listed race. Approximately 90% identified as straight or heterosexual, with 7% of respondents identifying as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Three percent did not identify with a listed sexual orientation. Respondents' reported political affiliations showed that 70% identified as progressive or liberal or very progressive or liberal, 19% as moderate, and 7% as conservative or very conservative. Recruited respondents were members of the Academy of Homiletics. Inclusion criteria included members who were seminary or theological school professors, Ph.D. students, independent scholars, or retirees.

Analysis

¹⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (The New Press, 2017).

²⁰ Aynsley H. M. Scheffert, Amanda Wilson Harper, and Gaynor I. Yancey, “Coping Behavior Changes in Christian Congregations in the United States: A National Survey,” *Social Work and Christianity* 50, no. 3 (2023): 218–38, <https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v50i3.340>.

The survey included an open-ended ‘optional’ text box at the end of five questions about systemic racism and barriers and support for DEI integration to allow respondents to provide answers not explored by predefined categories. The qualitative data from these four questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. While limited, the qualitative data from this study gives meaning and illuminates firsthand experiences with quantitative data and additional perspectives. Quotes identified supported emergent themes, providing further information about respondents’ experiences with DEI incorporation. The authors employed Excel to manage and organize the data.

Findings

This study aimed to determine the support and pushback homiletics professors receive when incorporating DEI-related content into their teaching. The hypothesis was that the lived experiences of these professors would include positive and negative feedback, but that the negative feedback would be significant when received. As the literature suggests, DEI conversations are highly polarized, and even minority opinions in institutions can make their voices heard and affect outcomes. Similar to Schade’s research assessing the hesitancy of pastors to preach about justice issues, one could suppose homiletic professors may also experience hesitancy in how they teach diversity, equity, and inclusion in preaching classes.²¹ Therefore, the expectation was that while many professors would likely receive support, those who did not would receive significantly negative responses.

Homiletics professors reported experiences of systemic racism in theological education

It is worth noting that when asked the degree to which they experienced or observed systemic racism at their institution, 7.55% report “a great deal,” 33.96% “a moderate amount,” and 37.74% report “a little.” In all, eight in ten respondents reported some degree of systemic racism at the institution where they teach. When invited to share one or two observations or experiences regarding systemic racism at their institution, the responses appeared to coalesce within three general categories: 1) administration and faculty, 2) classrooms and teaching practices, and 3) institutional heritage, milieu, and operations. Examining these categories and sample responses is worthwhile to understand better the institutions within which homiletics professors are enacting their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Administration and faculty

Some of the most blatant examples of direct racism were observed in meetings of faculty or administration. One respondent wrote that they “frequently hear chairs, deans, and administrators of this university refer to my colleagues of color as ‘diversity hires’ behind closed doors—which is often code for ‘diverse, but less qualified.’” This respondent also noted that “microaggressions abound.” Another noted that on search committees they “sometimes hear the barely veiled assumption that if a candidate researches/teaches in the traditions of a specific non-white constituency (e.g., Asian-American theology or Black preaching), their work ‘might not be relevant’ for the rest of the school; this concern NEVER comes up for researcher/teachers who focus on white European traditions and thinkers.”

Other respondents reported insufficient attention and preparation for expanding their faculty’s diversity. As one noted, “Invitations are given to people of color to interview, but the

²¹ Leah D. Schade, *Preaching and Social Issues: Tools and Tactics for Empowering Your Prophetic Voice* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

committee and institution do not prepare themselves for these interviews or consider how institutional patterns of behavior may affect people of color during the interview process and as they are considering joining our institution and geographical setting.”

Faculty of color also experience systemic racism through their institution’s general lack of support. As one respondent shared, “While my program is focused on African American preaching, I have not always felt that the program was fully accepted in the life of the school. An example was a conference sponsored by our program, which was left to fundraise for itself instead of having full support of the institution.”

Classrooms and teaching practices

A primary site of institutional racism in seminaries is the classroom and faculty teaching practices. An example would be a curriculum that centers on white European scholars. One respondent observed, “Many courses are still taught with a white canon.” Racist actions were also observed regarding individual professors. For example, one noted, “Some adjunct professors cross the line; students complain, and the dean deals with it.” Another observed, “Some older colleagues will not diversify their syllabi because they are unfamiliar with the work of non-white, non-male scholars. When pressed to become familiar with non-white, non-male scholarship, they generally fall back on excuses.”

This refusal to attend to DEI was reported by several respondents about colleagues in their institutions. For instance, one commented that “Despite several semesters of Latinx students suggesting in the evaluations of a course to expand the authors students read so that it reflects the experience of other racial, ethnic, and national minoritized people in the USA, the professor continued to teach the course the same.” Another noted that some professors often ignore Hispanic students in class.

However, AoH members also reported experiencing or observing racism from white students. For instance, one respondent wrote, “A white female student from the USA feels that her small group leader is discriminating against her for being the only white person in the group. The small group leader is a Black male from the USA who self-identifies as queer and uses ‘they’ pronouns. The student complains directly to the president, bypassing the process that requires her to present her complaint to the professor of the teaching team first.”

Other respondents reported less direct forms of systemic racism that manifest as general insensitivity, obliviousness, or lack of awareness. For example, one observed that “colleagues are generally unaware or inconsiderate of students from African American traditions/backgrounds in their courses.” Another noted that their colleagues are “unaware of racial reconciliation needs or issues. [They are] assuming inclusion without making it a real priority.”

Another example had to do with disconnects regarding language. One respondent shared, “The institution announces a Spanish master’s degree program. When students enroll, the institution requires them to take English classes, even though many do not speak, write, or understand English. The institution offers simultaneous interpretation to students who speak only Spanish. In the classroom, there are students whose first language is neither Spanish nor English who are not receiving the opportunity of simultaneous translation.”

Institutional heritage, milieu, and operations

For some respondents, it was the institutional heritage of the school or its general milieu and operations that communicated systemic racism. For example, one noted that “the buildings and traditions proclaim that this is a white (male) institution.” Another observed that “pictures

hanging on the walls are 95% white people.” For yet another respondent, the worship service reified white Eurocentrism: “Our chapel worship comes almost exclusively from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, with an occasional hymn from *All Creation Sings*. The commitment to denominational distinctiveness significantly impedes inclusivity.”

For others, it is how the institution conducts its day-to-day business that exudes an air of white hegemony. “Administrative systems operate according to white male customs,” wrote one respondent, “which means deeply embedded expectations for things like communication style, origination, etc. People from different cultures who cannot match those styles are seen as less competent.” Another noted that the embeddedness of the institution within a racist community bled into the institution’s environment: “This institution is located in West Texas, so racism is a palpable aspect of the surrounding social context.”

Others observed the unfair and unequal treatment of students outside of the classroom. As one reported, “A white male student from the USA is allowed to take seconds during the meal after worship without any comments from the servers. A Black female student from Ghana is scolded for trying to take seconds during the same community meal.” In another instance, an undocumented student was refused their degree even after completing all requirements. Still another noted that they observed racism “in the ways the [Covid-19] pandemic impacted students of different racial backgrounds and the limits of the institution to accommodate those circumstances.”

Finally, systemic racism is also evident in the homogenous demographic makeup of the student body, faculty, and staff of some institutions. As one pointed out, “Whereas we have done much programming to counter racism, we have a fairly white faculty, staff, and administration and do not draw much diversity in our student body.” Another wrote that their student body is ninety percent white, and “the lack of diversity speaks volumes.” Another noted, “While the faculty is diverse, the staff is completely white, which creates a disconnect.” A third observed that “there are not many minority faculty members.” Even efforts to diversify faculty can fall short. As one noted, “We work hard to *hire* faculty of color; we fail at *retaining* them.”

These experiences of systemic racism illustrate the overall atmosphere, practices, and either direct or indirect hostility to DEI within the institutions in which homiletics professors teach.

Issues drive the amount of pushback

Numeric trends from the quantitative data provided context for the insights extracted from the qualitative analysis. While most respondents reported minimal barriers, a significant number of respondents (nearly 20%) experienced moderate barriers, including: lack of interest among students (26.15%), lack of support from the institution (21.45%), lack of support among colleagues (18.46%), lack of resources (16.92%), and opposition among students (12.31%). However, the qualitative open-ended data provided insight into the quantitative survey data analysis, revealing that pushback tends to be determined by the discussed issue. One participant explained that the most pushback in their denomination is around LGBTQ+ issues and women’s ordination. Another participant noted that although they feel the need to address DEI components both in their syllabus and the classroom, a lack of knowledge makes this task difficult. Yet another wrote that the time and political climate have had the most impact, saying they got the most pushback on DEI-related material after the 2020 presidential election.

Responses, repercussions, backlash, and support

When asked what negative responses the professors received from addressing DEI-related issues in the classroom, the most frequent responses were angry words, letters, student emails, student complaints to administration (department head, dean, etc.), and some students refusing to speak to the professor. While a relatively small sample received negative feedback in this manner, qualitative data provided additional insight. Two responses noted that students take passive approaches to combating DEI inclusion, including written responses that only the professor reads or providing negative feedback in course evaluations. Some noted that what one professor called “the extreme right-wing” often pushes back, noting the polarities in the American political system. One indicated that negative feedback may come from “one student out of dozens.”

When asked what repercussions professors faced for using DEI-related content, most respondents (90.77%) reported receiving none of the options in the question. However, as with other questions, those who received backlash gave insight into anti-DEI sentiment. Less than 5% (4.62%) of faculty reported that their administration asked them to stop DEI-related content. At the same time, one participant indicated they were denied tenure or promotion due to it, and one reported they voluntarily left their appointment. Eight respondents (12.31%) reported that they experienced other repercussions, including receiving subtle comments from colleagues demeaning their work and warnings from deans and other officials. One respondent wrote that their tenure review letter included a warning to tone down DEI-related topics. These concerns highlight the importance of fostering open dialogue and providing resources and support to faculty members committed to integrating DEI principles into their teaching.

Thus far, we have examined the backlash and negative responses to faculty integration of DEI, but where do homiletics professors receive support in addressing DEI? Just under half (49.2%) reported receiving significant support from their teaching colleagues and administrators, including deans and department chairs. Meanwhile, 44.52% noted they received considerable support from their Academy of Homiletics peers. Other sources of support respondents reported were denominational bodies (56%), students (50.77%), administrators (24.62%), and public acclamation or support on social media (7.69%).

The qualitative data also shows a desire to address DEI issues; however, many report a lack of knowledge or training available. One white, heterosexual female at a historically white seminary fears inadequacy in addressing DEI issues, stating, “I have anxiety about not addressing issues of race competently; I am hesitant sometimes simply because I do not want to misstep and do inadvertent harm.” Unavailable resources exacerbate the challenges professors face when integrating DEI into their curriculum. Thus, institutions should prioritize increasing the available training and support, especially because faculty can feel unequipped to teach DEI topics.²² The findings further suggest the need for collaboration among professors, students, and leadership, developing a mutual understanding of the role of diversity, equity, and inclusion in theological education settings.

Implications

The experiences of AoH members offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of DEI implementation in theological education. The integrated findings for professors’ experiences with DEI illuminated that most respondents experience strong support

²² Nicole A. Hollins, Cody Morris, and Anita Li, “Integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Readings within Coursework: Suggestions for Instructors Teaching Behavior Analysis,” *Behavior Analysis in Practice* 16, no. 2 (2023): 629–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-023-00781-5>.

from colleagues, administrators, denominational bodies, or their peers in the AoH. The number and overall percentage of those who received negative feedback were minimal; however, when there was pushback, it came in a range of subtle, indirect, blatant, and severe forms.

The most extreme experiences included denial of tenure, risk of not being granted tenure, or admonishment from the dean or other supervisors, with one respondent reporting that they left academia because of DEI pushback. These examples of systemic and institutional reprisals are in line with our findings that a significant majority of respondents report systemic racism at their institution.

While this study shows that many faculty support integrating DEI into their course content, others reported that they do not feel equipped to navigate such topics in the classroom. This discomfort is consistent with the literature, with barriers to DEI including faculty members feeling unprepared or overwhelmed when broaching complex issues in class. Nevertheless, homileticians and academics must not become complacent in their efforts. Instead, support and mentorship are needed. By creating a safe space for discussion and facilitating open dialogue, instructors empower students to explore diverse perspectives, challenge assumptions, and develop a greater understanding of social justice issues. To address this challenge, institutions can invest in faculty development programs that offer training and resources on inclusive teaching strategies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and methods for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom. By including all stakeholders, the institution shows that it prioritizes students' needs and supports their success.²³

It is also essential for institutions to acknowledge that DEI is not a one-size-fits-all approach and that strategies must be tailored to each specific need and context.²⁴ By doing so, these institutions can ensure that their faculty are supported in their DEI efforts and that their students are well-equipped to lead with compassion, integrity, and a deep commitment to justice in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.²⁵ The reality of an ever-changing political and societal landscape requires theological institutions to remain resolved to enact and evaluate their DEI commitments. Professors need support integrating DEI principles, moving beyond simple policy mandates to encompass professional development opportunities, curriculum design assistance, and sustained mentorship programs.²⁶ These efforts ensure that DEI is not merely a consideration but that professors feel supported as they incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion into their preaching courses.²⁷

Incorporating diverse and inclusive perspectives in a course involves intentionally seeking opportunities to learn from those who give voice to underrepresented perspectives.²⁸ In theology, this can consist of inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and insights or assigning readings from scholars representing marginalized

²³ J. Sunds, S. Rohrbach, and A. Drais-Parrillo, "What Do Students Perceive from the Syllabus? The Importance of Syllabi to Communicate Belonging and Promote Engagement," *International Journal on Studies in Education* 5, no. 4 (2023): 568, <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.174>.

²⁴ Victor, et al, "Strategies for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Principles of Nursing."

²⁵ Nadia Ali Muhammad Ali Charania and Rushika Patel, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nursing Education: Strategies and Processes to Support Inclusive Teaching," *Journal of Professional Nursing* 42 (2022): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2022.05.013>; Martinez and Favero; William T. L. Cox, "Developing Scientifically Validated Bias and Diversity Trainings That Work: Empowering Agents of Change to Reduce Bias, Create Inclusion, and Promote Equity," *Management Decision* 61, no. 4 (2022): 1038–56, <https://doi.org/10.1108/md-06-2021-0839>.

²⁶ Victor, et al, "Strategies for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Principles of Nursing."

²⁷ Evans and Knepper, "Building Inclusive PA Classrooms."

²⁸ Chamany, et al.

communities. Continuous evaluation of existing DEI initiatives will be essential, accompanied by adaptability and innovation based on feedback and emerging best practices. Strategies to increase exposure to DEI in classrooms include opportunities for students to assess their values and biases, encourage open dialogue, and weave diverse voices and other perspectives into the curriculum.²⁹ These strategies could help neutralize the misconception that DEI is political or partisan and, in turn, support clergy as they teach the importance of DEI in a congregational setting.

Additional research after the impact of the 2024 election and subsequent presidency could help identify and further assess the lived experiences of professors engaging in DEI integration in their courses and how their commitments shift or become contested.

Strengths and Limitations

Combining quantitative and qualitative data provided a deeper and more comprehensive understanding than either data acquisition alone. The cross-validation of multiple methods strengthened the researcher's conclusions, providing context and explanation for the quantitative results. Researchers sought to increase the diversity of this sample; however, the lack of racial diversity among the respondents is one limitation. However, the sample is representative of the membership of the Academy of Homiletics.

Further, the AoH study finished before the 2024 election, and even in the first nine months of the current administration, the higher education landscape regarding DEI has changed drastically. On January 23, 2025, the current presidential administration passed executive orders limiting DEI, including using DEI terms in universities, even threatening to withdraw federal money from institutions that do not comply.³⁰ The researchers anticipate that a shifting political environment will influence future iterations of this survey. The ongoing political dynamics will likely shape the experiences of homiletics professors integrating DEI for years to come by potentially impacting how faculty perceive and implement DEI principles, thus altering their pedagogical approaches to teaching and curriculum development.

In fact, the speed at which the administration has enacted policies and practices hostile to diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia and the field of science may pose a challenge for assessment in future studies.³¹ Studying the effects of the administration's destabilization of longstanding norms, practices, and trust in science and education during this period of confusion and chaos may be nearly impossible. It is only after the upheaval has run its course and the dust has settled that we can truly evaluate the damage and discern what is needed for recovery and renewal in higher education and theological studies.

²⁹ Victor, et al, "Strategies for Teaching Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Principles of Nursing."

³⁰ U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Takes Action to Eliminate DEI," news release, January 23, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-takes-action-eliminate-dei>, accessed Sept. 30, 2025.

³¹ See: Juliana Kim, "Over 50 universities are under investigation as part of Trump's anti-DEI crackdown," NPR, Louisville, March 14, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/14/g-s1-53831/dei-universities-education-department-investigation>, accessed Sept. 30, 2025; Patrick Jack, "Trump's anti-DEI agenda 'already having grave impact,'" <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/trumps-anti-dei-agenda-already-having-grave-impact>, Aug. 4, 2025, accessed Sept. 30, 2025; Jeffrey Mervis, "NSF Held Captive: Trump directives have undermined a 75-year history of independence and threaten agency's vaunted track record for excellence," *Science*, Sept. 19, 2025, <https://www.science.org/content/article/under-trump-nsf-faces-worst-crisis-its-75-year-history>, accessed Sept. 30, 2025.

Conclusion

Incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into theological and homiletical studies curricula introduces the possibility of contested commitments for professors navigating the intersection of academic rigor, theological tradition, and current social justice imperatives. The study's focus on homiletics classes is particularly relevant, as preaching plays a central role in shaping religious discourse and influencing congregational attitudes.³² Teaching DEI in coursework influences how students will preach and minister in congregations. Understanding the contested commitments of homiletic professors is crucial for theological schools seeking to cultivate inclusive learning environments and equip theological students with the skills to integrate DEI in their preaching and ministry.

The AoH members' experiences reveal the tensions between traditional white, Eurocentric theological frameworks and contemporary DEI values, highlighting the need for innovative pedagogical approaches that bridge these divides. Contested commitments to teaching DEI accurately match a politically divided world, which can create a politically divided classroom or church. Homiletics professors have the critical task of preparing the next generation of preachers to find their voice and proclaim prophetic messages that are often ignored or received with hostility.

Cultivating inclusive learning environments requires a collaborative and participatory approach that extends beyond top-down leadership.³³ This could begin with support for professors integrating classroom dialogue around complex topics that preachers may encounter in their congregation and pulpit, including diversity, equity, and inclusion. Professors need education or training in integrating DEI principles to feel confident in pedagogical implementation. The study established a baseline for experiences of integrating DEI into preaching courses. Future research is needed, particularly as political and societal opposition to DEI initiatives intensifies across North America following the 2024 election. As the political divide increases and intensifies, commitment to creating more support networks to champion DEI efforts in teaching and preaching will be more needed than ever.

For Further Reading

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