UNPRECEDENTED ADVISING: ACTIVATING NURTURED CO-CURRICULAR ADVISING TO SUPPORT BLACK STUDENT LEADERS IN AN ANTI-DEI ERA

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As anti-DEI legislation expands across the nation, higher education is experiencing a profound shift in campus climates, heavily impacting minoritized student populations. While much of the dialogue surrounds academic administration, this shifting reality deeply disrupts the co-curricular sphere, particularly leadership development and student involvement at Primarily White Institutions (PWIs). This theory-to-practice brief positions campus activities professionals and student organization advisors as vital institutional agents who can bridge the gap Black student leaders face in these restrictive climates. Fusing the HBCU-derived model of nurtured advising with the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, this article introduces a framework for nurtured co-curricular advising. This approach operationalizes proactive care, cultural validation, and community connection to empower Black student leaders, sustain their organizational efficacy, and safeguard their holistic well-being. Actionable recommendations are provided for co-curricular advisors working to adapt their advising strategies, navigate the shifting legal landscapes, and foster resilient student-led communities.

The phrase "unprecedented times" has echoed across headlines and campus conversations, capturing the turbulence now shaking higher education. Colleges and universities are navigating uncharted waters, facing challenges that set this era apart from any before (Major, 2020). While the landscape of higher education is always evolving, since 2023, a dramatic cultural shift has emerged on campuses, fueled by a surge of legislation targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts (Harper et al., 2024). These rollbacks have become a nationwide reality, fueled by the Trump administration's federal crackdowns and a wave of restrictive state laws (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2026). For years, DEI programs have aimed to celebrate unique student backgrounds, ensure fair opportunities, and create inclusive campus spaces. (Lang & Lee, 2024).

The era of anti-DEI measures now presents a defining challenge for colleges and universities, threatening to undo decades of progress in equity-based initiatives (Harper et al., 2024). In the face of this legislative backlash, institutions are forced to reconsider their commitment to diversity and inclusion amid rapid policy changes (Harper et al., 2024; Major, 2020). For example, states like

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Florida have passed Senate Bill 266, prohibiting public colleges from spending state or federal funds on DEI programs; Georgia legislators introduced measures seeking to restrict DEI spending in higher education; and Ohio and Texas passed bills to limit DEI-related initiatives at public universities (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2026).

Recent legislation has created significant leadership barriers, notably for Black students, within the co-curricular domain, as student leaders experience the closure, erasure, and removal of campus centers, offices, and clubs that provided campus support and belonging (Beatty et al., 2025). Among Black student leaders (BSLs) at Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), legislative changes are leading to heightened vulnerability, organizational burnout, and compliance-related anxiety. In this rapidly evolving landscape, co-curricular advisors must be prepared to understand how the removal of DEI initiatives could potentially affect their daily practices within the campus environment.

This theory-to-practice brief encourages co-curricular advisors to use an advising approach grounded in nurtured co-curricular advising to navigate the unprecedented. This approach merges the HBCU-derived nurtured advising model (Williams et al., 2008), which centers student support and relationship building, with the Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996; Harper & Kezar, 2021), which emphasizes collaborative leadership for a common value-driven purpose. Together, this conceptual framework provides actionable strategies to intentionally support and empower BSLs, helping them enhance their leadership abilities and adapt within changing campus climates.

Literature Review

This abridged literature review analyzes how anti-DEI mandates, driven by an evolving political landscape, shape institutional policies and shift co-curricular campus involvement. By synthesizing scholarship on anti-DEI legislation, Black student leadership, and student involvement, this review examines the broader influence of political environments on Black student engagement.

National Context of Anti-DEI Legislation

Nationally, critics of higher education view DEI as "divisive," claiming that diversity-based initiatives lead to lower-quality education and unequal advantages for racialized minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). As of May 2026, 152 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across 30 states, with 32 bills passing into law, eliminating DEI practices at several institutions. Critics have characterized these legislative outcomes as "victories for higher education" and "bringing back America's Golden Age" (U.S. Department of Education, 2026, para. 1).

State Context of Anti-DEI Legislation & Co-Curricular Challenges

The political environment, especially in conservative-leaning states, plays a decisive role in whether institutions maintain DEI initiatives and centers (Coley et al., 2026). As a result, universities such as The University of Missouri and the University of Florida have closed diversity-centered offices and eliminated positions that previously demonstrated a commitment to campus diversity (Kabbany, 2024). Restrictive legislative actions not only threaten DEI infrastructures but also heighten institutional uncertainty, increase compliance demands, and reduce resources for

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students, faculty, and staff whose needs continually evolve (Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). Simultaneously, they found students of color are leading the charge to organize and engage in cultural activities despite the removal of DEI centers.

Briscoe and Ford (2024) highlighted that political environments shape the roles of student organization advisors, particularly for practitioners serving as advisors in conservative states. They noted that the role of advisors was shaped by the perspective of white legislators and administrators, noting that advising required more advocacy for students as campus atmospheres became tense, making students of color feel unwanted and not valued, negatively impacting BSLs' well-being.

Impact on Black Student Leadership and Student Involvement

Black college students connect their everyday campus experiences to the broader, systemic racial climate in the United States, and their leadership and activism are largely shaped by ongoing societal issues, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Mwangi et al., 2018). Anti-DEI mandates not only restricted classroom curriculum but also curtailed diversity-based student involvement, resulting in frozen BSU budgets, limited cultural programming, and intensified hostile campus climate (Harper et al., 2024). On the one hand, Black student leaders are navigating burnout and fatigue as spaces that fostered belonging undergo title changes and are removed from campus (Beatty et al., 2025). Wilson et al. (2025) describe the reality of navigating anti-Black racism, such as police violence, as contributing to a perpetual state of grief and exhaustion for undergraduate Black students. Noting that systemic tools like white supremacy and anti-DEI laws block students from properly mourning the compounding trauma of state-sanctioned violence, which is constantly amplified on social media.

On the other hand, restrictive policies have mandated that advisors and campus leaders be innovative in maintaining inclusive learning environments that promote student involvement (Jackson, 2025). As campus environments shift, a successful advising relationship should be nurtured and adaptable and can be monumental in shaping BSLs involvement as they seek to find their leadership identity (Droste et al., 2006; Jackson, 2025). Wicker (2024) shed light on how institutional actors influence Black and Indigenous student retention as members of students' well-being networks. In this study, she found that Black students coped differently: men sought deeper institutional connections, while women relied on family/community.

Conceptual Framework

Nurtured advising combines high emotional support with high accountability, meeting students where they are academically and, at times, even physically, to provide care and instill the direction needed for long-term success (Williams et al., 2008). This approach, first recognized and commonly adopted in HBCU culture, emphasizes care beyond the typical role of the advisor and encourages students' growth and development. Hadley (2011) defines nurtured advising as "when students believe someone at the university cares about them, expects them to do well, and guides their steps, they are more motivated to do their best" (p. 135). The four components of nurtured advising include creating a family dynamic where students feel cared for, implementing high intentional expectations, engaging in "street advising" or pervasive engagement that meets students where they are, and holistic guidance and compliance that values the whole student and prioritizes their holistic well-being.

The SCM views leadership as a collaborative process that engages a common purpose and core values to create positive social change (HERI, 1996). These values are commonly known as the 7 C's which prioritize three domains: the individual (Consciousness of Self, Commitment and Congruence), the group (Collaboration, Common Purpose, and Controversy with Civility) and the community/society (Citizenship) (Komives & Wagner, 2009). Harper and Kezar (2021) argue that Black students often report greater interest in leadership, particularly in social change, than their white counterparts, and emphasize that, when engaging with BSLs' liberation, the model should incorporate storytelling, fellowship, system challenging, and support networks.

Incorporating nurtured advising into the model allows for prioritization of support networks that cultivate resilient student leaders in challenging environments by structuring advising in a culturally responsive manner, affirming the values and well-being of BSLs, and integrating radical care with leadership development. Together, these approaches enable advisors to embed care into leadership education by setting high expectations and fostering meaningful connections, transforming vulnerable students into empowered citizens capable of cultivating positive societal change.

Recommendations

As diversity programs become more limited at PWI institutions, Black students face more obstacles to their well-being and leadership development (Beatty et al., 2025). As a result, advisors need to focus on relational leadership by creating support networks that can sustain BSLs' leadership development when tangible supports like programs, physical spaces and grants are eliminated. The following recommendations engage intentional care practices into individual, group, and community dynamics to provide support in changing campus climates.

Individual: Holistic Wellness Check-Ins

A key aspect of nurtured advising is building a relationship that emulates a concerned family member, which can help students feel a sense of security (Williams et al., 2008). Diverse students often face environments that lack identity affirmation, which can lead them to withdraw from leadership, which can be exacerbated by anti-DEI legislation (Lang & Lee, 2024). Advisors can counter this by using teachable moments based on life experience to help students build leadership efficacy (Williams et al., 2008), cultural storytelling to create a shared vision, (Harper & Kezar, 2021), and active reflective listening (King, 2022) to validate student emotions without judgment. Practicing what King (2022) terms 'serving as a mirror' allows advisors to observe and reflect a student's emotional state, creating a supportive, empathetic space before pivoting to organizational business. Additionally, holistic wellness check-ins allow students to deeply explore their personal values (i.e. consciousness of self), time and energy (i.e. commitment) and consistency of their beliefs and actions (i.e. congruence).

Group: Coalition Building and Student Empowerment

Rather than leaving students to navigate these policy changes on their own, advisors can empower them by setting high expectations. These expectations allow BSLs to build leadership efficacy, which Guthrie et al. (2021) defined as "the belief in one's ability to engage in leadership using learned knowledge, skills, and values" (p. 48). For example, advisors can set expectations that students engage in cross-campus collaboration with historically dominant student organizations,

such as Student Government. Advisors can encourage students to co-sponsor events, share risks, and pool resources, which might otherwise be unavailable to a culturally specific organization. By equipping students with these tools, building deep relationships, and implementing strategies such as weekly campus collaboration meetings for peer support, advisors enable students to advocate for themselves and navigate evolving campus environments. Thus, incorporating controversy with civility as students learn to speak across differences and engage in collaborative practices.

Community: Strategic Policy Translation

SCM emphasizes the importance of developing citizenship. In other words, students must effectively handle conflict and contribute to a larger society. DEI work must extend beyond DEI centers on campus (Harper et al., 2025). Teaching BSLs how to navigate complex compliance language amid shifting state mandates can incorporate hands-on learning and teachable moments into student organizations. A pedagogical approach could be incorporating state, federal, and institutional policy translations into student leader executive board meetings. Emphasis should be placed on equipping student leaders to negotiate institutional bureaucracy without compromising their collective values, ultimately empowering them to sustain their civic engagement and continue community advocacy.

Institutional Implementation

While navigating legal restrictions is challenging, continuing this work is viable through deliberate, targeted action (Harper et al., 2025). Anti-DEI legislation places genuine burdens on co-curricular advisors, including compliance fears, professional pitfalls, and care fatigue. To effectively support student leaders, campus leadership should provide legal literacy workshops to clarify statutory boundaries and reduce anxiety, alongside trauma-informed training to navigate heightened student emotions. Additionally, Harper et al. (2025) note the crucial need to build broad coalitions and collaborative networks locally and nationally. This work cannot exist in silos. Student leader support must be collaborative, creative, and extended beyond traditional DEI offices. NASPA, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, provides online learning and professional development opportunities focused on understanding anti-DEI legislation and supporting student leaders (NASPA, 2026).

Conclusion

The leadership development of BSLs at PWIs within an anti-DEI era demands an intentional departure from hands-off advising toward an active model that blends intentional care with a value-driven leadership process. This reality issues a definitive call to action for co-curricular advisors to radically reframe their institutional purpose. Practitioners must act as vital institutional agents of preservation, care, and social change. By adopting this proactive framework, advisors can safeguard cultural organizations and equip BSLs to navigate systemic barriers.

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