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Perspectives on Undergraduate
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Sustaining Career Pathway Programs Across the Sciences

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Introduction

This article situates pathway programs within a rapidly shifting political and funding landscape. We focus on the cuts to funding for the National Science Foundation, the termination of more than ten awards in the National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates Program within the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate, and a United States Senator's public listing of thousands of programs targeted for supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Directors of funded programs have been forced to respond under conditions of uncertainty, often with limited institutional protection and few viable funding alternatives. While philanthropic support and institutional commitments have provided partial relief,¹ they cannot fully offset the withdrawal of federal support or the chilling effects of political scrutiny. This invited viewpoint draws on collective experiences and informal knowledge-sharing among pathway program directors to examine how programs are adapting to these constraints. We argue that sustaining pathway programs requires strategic, risk-balanced action across multiple levels, including institutions, individuals, and networks. Rather than treating adaptation as capitulation, we frame it as a form of strategic endurance aimed at preserving core mentoring infrastructures, research training opportunities, and long-term equity goals across scientific fields

Grad School Prep/Pathway Programs: The Current Landscape

Through a series of interventions—such as summer labs, mentoring, and professional development workshops—pathway programs aim to support the academic development of disadvantaged student populations by helping them to overcome systemic barriers that impede academic performance. In practice, such programs function as “bridges” into graduate education, providing structured access to research opportunities, mentoring networks, and professional socialization. For several decades, pathway programs have been shown to improve access, retention, and post-graduate success for students from historically excluded groups across different educational levels and institutions (Beasley et al., 2024; González-Rostani et al., 2025). Many longstanding pathway programs have become institutionalized over time, shifting toward results-based models and disseminating lessons

¹ In May 2025, The Spencer Foundation, in collaboration with The Kapor Foundation, The William T. Grant Foundation, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, created a rapid response bridge grant opportunity for scholars whose research was impacted by cuts to the NSF. See: <https://www.spencer.org/news/meeting-the-moment-together>

learned to support emerging initiatives. For example, several programs have established national or regional alliances to promote the adoption of best practices, enhance the efficiency and equity of resource sharing across campuses and colleges, and sustain ongoing engagement through cohort-based networks (Brathwaite, 2023; Ghee et al., 2014).

While funding limitations have always constrained pathway programs and their reach, the challenges they currently confront are unprecedented. Since 2025, these programs have operated within a landscape shaped by political attacks, legal uncertainty, and unstable funding. The current political leadership in the United States has characterized such initiatives as “wasteful” and “radical”.² This, in turn, has contributed to a chilling effect: institutions have reduced, renamed, or restructured programs by shifting language away from an explicit equity framing and have attempted to institute compliance with federal policy in ways that significantly constrain programs’ original design.

While the rapid dismantling of DEI infrastructure was foreshadowed in Project 2025 and accelerated almost immediately at the outset of the second Trump administration, it is important to recognize that these developments are part of a much longer trajectory. The political right has mounted sustained challenges to DEI and related equity efforts for decades, particularly through the courts. In higher education, these efforts have been shaped by a series of legal precedents. For example, in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the Supreme Court held that to justify the consideration of race, a university must demonstrate a compelling interest in diversity and ensure that race-conscious policies are narrowly tailored. More recently, in 2013 and again in 2016, a conservative-leaning Supreme Court decision further constrained race-conscious admissions practices, declaring certain policies at select institutions to be unlawful (Anderson, 2023). These rulings laid the groundwork for a broader wave of challenges to equity initiatives beyond admissions at the state level. According to an analysis of anti-DEI efforts conducted by The Education Trust advocacy network, at least 180 bills have been introduced at the state level to restrict diversity and equity initiatives. Of these proposed pieces of legislation, 38 were enacted by November 2025. Such bills mostly include prohibitions on “diversity statements” in admission processes, banning “divisive concepts,” limiting spending on DEI initiatives, and closing offices of diversity at public universities (Martinez-Alvarado & Perez, 2023; Weissman, 2025).

During the Biden administration, Congress passed the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, authorizing \$81 billion in funding for the NSF between 2023 and 2027. Nevertheless, appropriations in fiscal years 2023 and 2024 fell well short of these targets following an 8% cut authorized by Congress. In an inflationary context, this shortfall complicated long-term planning and weakened the sustainability of undergraduate research and training pipelines (Palmer, 2024). These pressures intensified sharply under the second Trump administration. President Trump’s explicit opposition to DEI frameworks, formalized in Executive Order 14151 (January 20, 2025), which terminated federal funding for DEI initiatives, introduced new risk for institutions supporting equity-oriented programs. Many NSF-REU Sites were subsequently forced to scale back or cancel initiatives designed to support underrepresented students in STEM fields. Taken together, these developments reveal a structural vulnerability in the current model for undergraduate research and pathway programs: their heavy reliance on unstable federal funding leaves them highly exposed to political shifts, calling into question whether existing arrangements can sustain these programs as instruments of institutional change.

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

Advancing Broader Systemic Change in Higher Education

Attacks on undergraduate research programs pose challenges to their use as a lever of change in higher education and to collective efforts aiming to end the underrepresentation of marginalized social groups in that institutional setting. The volatility of the federal research funding landscape and the insufficiency of existing federal funding for undergraduate research motivate the need for strategic innovation to secure resources to build and sustain undergraduate research and training infrastructures. Although philanthropic support is unlikely to meet the scale of the needs created by the withdrawal and reduction of federal support for undergraduate research,³ philanthropy has an important role to play at this juncture.

While some philanthropic organizations complied in advance with Trump administration's directives on DEI,⁴ in April 2025, more than 700 philanthropic organizations pledged to support "United in Advance," a coordinated response to the Trump administration's attack on philanthropic organizations and their charitable giving practices (Allen et al., 2025). Many of these organizations have been significant supporters of research training programs for scholars and aspiring researchers from groups underrepresented in higher education and research careers. In this context, philanthropic support can ensure the continuity of programs that would otherwise be forced to pause or close, particularly by providing bridge funding and targeted operational support.

However, it is important to stress that more significant support from the philanthropic sector was needed even before the Trump administration's attacks on undergraduate research and training programs. This is because the NSF REU program was not designed to support REU Sites in perpetuity, but rather to serve as a significant seed investment to launch and establish programs. Thus, the intention was that these programs would, over time, secure institutional support for their operations. Yet, in the context of austerity cuts to higher education, right-wing state-level attacks on programs associated with DEI, and inequities within the higher education sector, sole reliance on support from home institutions has never been a viable long-term solution to the challenge of funding undergraduate research and training programs. Thus, philanthropic organizations have sometimes stepped in to make critical, long-term commitments that have helped programs diversify their funding sources and reduce their vulnerability to abrupt policy and budget shifts.

To be clear, we do not claim that governments should be absolved of their responsibility to train the research and scientific workforce. The pursuit of diverse sources of support is a safeguard against political interference in the operations of research training. At the same time, funding diversification alone is not a substitute for structural reform in higher education. Existing approaches to broadening participation in the sciences have generated substantial societal and intellectual benefits, yet they have often fallen short of producing sustained systemic change and communicating their impact to the broader public. Still, undergraduate research programs—particularly those that create mentored training opportunities and bidirectional institutional bridges—remain essential tools for advancing broader transformation efforts across higher education. To be clear, expanding access to programs that enable broader participation in the sciences need not be zero-sum, whereby access to one group takes place at the expense of others. Rather, increasing participation in the sciences can follow optimal approaches that increase participation from groups historically underrepresented in such programs while sustaining support for groups that have historically had access.

Reframing Rhetoric, Program Goals, and Activities Under Political Constraint

Recent political directives have required pathway program leaders to review public-facing language and grant materials carefully for compliance with federal guidance. Terms such as "female,"

³ <https://indicators.sciphil.org/key-findings>

⁴ <https://www.science.org/content/article/hhmi-kills-program-aimed-boosting-inclusivity-stem-education>

“political,” or “institutional” in grant proposals can trigger scrutiny under anti-DEI orders, so programs must describe their goals precisely. For most, this has meant clarifying program objectives and emphasizing areas of overlap with current priorities, such as first-generation student support, economic mobility, workforce development, and scientific competitiveness. For example, some universities have renamed DEI offices “Student Success Centers,” a semantic shift that preserves their function in a compliance-sensitive climate. Similarly, pathway programs that formerly emphasized minority-group access are revising their missions to emphasize eligibility criteria and training activities that overlap with current priorities. The goal is not to hide or misrepresent DEI work, but to preserve lawful broadening-participation efforts through transparent and strategic alignment with the policy language institutions are now required to use.

Recruitment and Application Materials: Shifting Language, Expanding Labor

These constraints have been especially consequential during recruitment. Programs historically oriented toward underrepresented students, including first-generation college students and students from marginalized backgrounds, have had to revise application language extensively. Personal statements, which previously invited applicants to discuss identity, structural barriers, or political motivations for research, now require careful redesign. Reviewers have faced increased labor as well, needing to infer applicants’ backgrounds and trajectories without relying on explicit language that is now discouraged or absent.

The REU Site on [Mobilization and Political Economy \(MPE\)](#) is one example of a program that has carefully revised its public materials to remain compliant while preserving its core training mission. Originally framed as a program to provide research training opportunities to students from groups underrepresented in research careers and broaden participation in the social and behavioral sciences, the MPE program has reviewed and revised its public-facing descriptions, recruitment materials, and application language. One of the central challenges has been that the program’s longstanding broadening-participation mission remains, even as current guidance constrains how that mission can be described in federally funded materials. As a result, program staff have emphasized criteria such as first-generation status,⁵ interest in applied research, and prior exposure to structural economic change, categories that create areas of overlap with current priorities but require more interpretive work from reviewers and mentors alike.

Reframing Research Topics Without Abandoning Them

One important pathway for reframing has been to situate long-standing political economy and mobilization research agendas within areas of overlap with current federal priorities around artificial intelligence, automation, and workforce development. There is a broadly shared appreciation for the importance of scientific and technological advancement across the ideological spectrum. Programs can foster understandings of their work that exhibit such shared appreciation and the importance of expanding access to and broadening participation in the sciences. Internal NSF guidance and memos have emphasized AI-related research, national competitiveness, and the preparation of a technologically literate workforce. Programs have responded by articulating goals in terms of the societal implications of AI-driven structural change.

Within this framework, the core intellectual content of many programs remains intact. Research on labor markets, inequality, political participation, and institutional trust is reframed as the study of

⁵ Even though the MPE Program focuses on first-generation students, the program still recruits predominantly minority students because of the significant overlap between these groups. For example, surveys show that 67% of all Latinx students are first generation, and 42% of all Black students are first generation students (see: <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/immigrant-origin-students-in-u-s-higher-education-updated-august-2024/>)

how automation, digitization, and platform-based production reshape economic opportunity and political behavior. Training in qualitative and quantitative methods is presented as essential for analyzing AI's downstream consequences for governance, regulation, and democratic accountability. In this sense, the AI framework operates not as a thematic departure but as a discursive bridge, enabling programs to pursue foundational questions about society, science, and governance that is prioritized by the government, without abandoning the core questions that inspired the program in the first place. This focus is also substantively warranted: AI and related labor-saving technologies have the potential to displace large segments of human labor, intensify economic inequality, and exacerbate political alienation (Boix et al., 2027; Gonzalez-Rostani, 2026), making them a central object of interdisciplinary scientific inquiry rather than a convenient rhetorical substitute.

This logic of translation also extends to specific substantive areas. Research on the political economy of fossil fuels, for instance, can be reframed as work on energy transitions, technological substitution, or industrial policy in carbon-intensive sectors. Similarly, studies of mobilization around fossil fuels or environmental justice can be described as investigations into community responses to technological and regulatory change. What is emphasized is not protest or contentious politics per se, but adaptation, governance, and policy feedbacks in the face of structural transformation.⁶

Admittedly, in practice, reframing often feels like a bitter compromise to scholars and program staff alike. For example, one NIH-funded researcher was told she had 24 hours to alter her grant title or lose funding; she ultimately chose to remove politically sensitive references to a state's policy decision, effectively "de-partisaning" her project's description (Oza, 2025). This wordsmithing may be demoralizing, but if the project were terminated, the research would go unfunded. By clarifying program language and documenting alignment with funder priorities, it is possible to keep important research and training programs alive. In the long run, keeping these initiatives afloat is crucial. As Goldman urges, the scientific and educational community must "hold the line" and ensure that essential equity work continues through lawful, transparent adaptation; in her own words, "despair is not an option" (Cashel, 2025; Goldman, 2025). In the context of pathway programs, this strategy has allowed faculty to continue mentoring students on questions of power, inequality, and collective action, even when those terms are no longer explicitly named.

The Risk of Drift, and the Case for Survival

Of course, these adaptive strategies are not enacted without cost. As many researchers argue, naming is a political act. Many research concepts that travel across scientific and policy fields, such as food sovereignty, sacrifice zones, and others, have emerged from exchanges between grassroots struggles and critical scholarly work, or from efforts to contest mainstream categories such as development (Escobar, 2011; Juskus, 2023; Levkoe et al., 2020). Program leaders express concern that sustained reframing may gradually alter the substance of programs, narrowing the range of questions students feel empowered to ask and/or reshaping the intellectual identity of pathway initiatives. Over time, one fear is that programs designed to broaden participation could be transformed into more generic research experiences, disconnected from their original equity-oriented missions.

Insights from social movement theory, however, offer a different perspective. Research on strategic adaptation by challengers emphasizes that organizations often survive hostile and even authoritarian political environments by muting visible claims or adopting strategic communication

⁶ "Policy feedback" is a term referring to the ways that public policies shape future political outcomes (see Mettler, S., & SoRelle, M. (2018). Policy feedback theory. In *Theories of the policy process* (pp. 103-134). Routledge).

while maintaining internal capacities, alliances, and norms (Duong et al., 2019; Mirshak, 2019; Taylor, 1989). From this viewpoint, adaptation for survival itself constitutes a form of resistance. The continued operation of pathway programs, even in modified rhetorical form, preserves mentoring networks, institutional knowledge, and training infrastructures that can be reactivated when political conditions become more favorable.

Applied to the current context, this suggests that reframing should be understood not as capitulation, but as strategic endurance. By aligning accurate program descriptions with administratively acceptable language, programs ensure their continued existence and their ability to support students who might otherwise be excluded from research careers. Importantly, these programs continue to cultivate critical thinking, methodological literacy, and substantive expertise, skills that are particularly valuable in an AI-driven economy where social consequences often outpace technical solutions.

Taken together, these experiences underscore that pathway programs are operating within a constrained—but not closed—political space. Program personnel are actively negotiating the boundary between compliance and commitment, using reframing to align with administrative priorities without abandoning the study of important social problems. Through careful adjustments to language, recruitment practices, and thematic framing, programs have sustained their core mission: preparing students, particularly first-generation and historically excluded students, for advanced research and graduate study.

Strategic, Multi-Level, Risk-Balanced Actions

In the face of a coordinated, federally-led assault on programs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is incumbent upon these programs to coordinate in their own defense. To that end, we argue that broadening participation in the sciences—and advancing science for the public good—requires action on multiple fronts and at multiple levels. These include coordination with broader systemic change efforts in higher education and key societal institutions; mobilizing significant resources to scale existing programs; strengthening ties among program leaders, stakeholders, and advocates to drive social and policy change in educational settings; and promoting broader cultural shifts that affirm the value of diversification and inclusion of historically excluded groups.

This will not be accomplished by simply waiting for a new—and hopefully sympathetic administration—to come to power. Instead, the academic community must take calculated risks now to ensure the survival of DEI infrastructure, while continuing to make a vigorous case for why it is important to broaden participation in the sciences. That said, all risks should not be shouldered equally. Central to the understanding of equity is the notion that responsibility must be adjusted based on a holistic accounting of a situation. Below, we expand on this idea, discussing how the risk that individuals, programs, and institutions take on should correspond to their overall level of vulnerability, and especially the resources they have at their disposal to mount a defense.

Institutional

We contend that institutions with substantial resources (i.e., large endowments and reputational prestige) should be at the forefront of fending off assaults on higher education and academic freedom. These institutions must leverage their financial and reputational capital to defend core principles that create the conditions for the continuity of pathway programs, including academic freedom. Harvard's ongoing legal engagement with the Trump administration over its attempt to punish the University for refusing to comply with federal demands that would constrain academic freedom, restrict campus speech and research priorities, and expand federal access to institutional and student records is a prime example of this. Although some might view the evolving settlement agreement as a capitulation, an alternative perspective views prolonged and costly legal

engagement with the Department of Justice (DOJ) as a strategic form of resistance, one that slows the machinery of censorship, and occupies the limited capacity of federal prosecutors who might otherwise pursue other administrative priorities.

Individual

In this context, scholars and advocates of diversity and equity in higher education can no longer afford to remain sequestered within academic walls. Now is the time for scholars to engage in public scholarship practices that translate research beyond the academy, connecting intellectual discourse to broader public conversations. By grounding research in community-led efforts of resistance, scholars can contribute to efforts on the ground by situating the assaults on higher education within broader historical and political contexts, enriching movement rhetoric and fostering cross-sector solidarity. Moreover, this type of public engagement enriches scholarly work, lends it legitimacy, and bolsters the reputation of institutions that support such scholarship.

At the same time, public engagement entails risk and must be approached with care and thoughtful intent. Individual scholars vary in their capacity to engage, and such efforts are safest and most effective when done collectively and as part of a community. Since the beginning of the second Trump administration, there have been a number of high-profile cases of professors and instructors being persecuted for teaching “DEI-related” content. Some of these professors have sought legal recourse on the grounds of academic freedom, and many of their cases continue to move through the court system. While recognizing that the burden of defense should not be placed on any individual, we must still acknowledge that faculty, instructors, and researchers occupy uneven positions of vulnerability and protection. Early-career scholars, part-time faculty, and individuals from historically marginalized groups are often the most vulnerable to retaliation. Accordingly, tenured scholars should leverage their relative security and privilege to speak out and shoulder the consequences on behalf of their more vulnerable colleagues.

Networks

At a time when DEI programs are being selectively targeted for defunding and cancellation, and formal support mechanisms are increasingly constrained, informal networks are critical to sustaining equity work in higher education. Programs must build and consolidate networks to rapidly exchange information and resources, and to coordinate strategy and response with existing networks advocating for academic freedom. The rapid succession of executive orders in the first months of the second Trump presidency, and the ensuing chaos and confusion, highlighted the need for efficient, rapid flows of high-quality information. Shared interpretation of directives, real-time identification of enforcement priorities and tactics—and even intentional, well-timed leaks from sympathetic individuals in positions of power—can be critical resources. In the context of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) investigations of certain programs, NSF REU program directors and staff have informally convened semi-regularly to exchange timely updates on how to navigate the rapidly changing landscape of government funding. Such exchanges can reduce duplication of effort and enable programs to pivot effectively.

Conclusion

This article argues that adaptive responses are necessary to sustain pathway programs amid sustained backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion. Preventing regression on prior gains requires coordinated action across complementary levels—individuals, institutions, and informal networks—rather than reliance on any single strategy. Scholars, particularly those in more secure positions, have a role to play in publicly defending academic freedom and broadening participation, while recognizing that effective resistance is inherently collective. At the programmatic level, principal investigators and administrators must invest in diversifying funding sources, strengthening partnerships, and sharing resources to reduce vulnerability to abrupt policy shifts. Reframing

recruitment, outreach, and research language, while neither sufficient nor cost-free, can serve as a pragmatic strategy for preserving core mentoring and training infrastructures under constraints. Through collective coordination and calibrated risk-taking, pathway programs can maintain continuity in research access and training, even as formal support structures remain uncertain.

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