0:00:11.5 Dakota Pawlicki: Welcome to Today's Students, Tomorrow's Talent. It's great to be back with you. I'm your host, Dakota Pawlicki, and we have a really great show lined up for you today. I'm going to start today by reading a statement, and I'd like you to ask yourself whether or not you agree with it. Okay? Here we go. Everyone has a right to real opportunity, no matter where you come from, what you look like or how much money your family has, everyone could have what they need to learn, grow, and thrive. Okay? Right. Now, if you find yourself saying, yeah, that sounds right. I agree with that, then congratulations, you have joined the 87% of Americans that also agree with that statement. It's nice to not be alone, but with so much agreement on this basic idea that we all have the right to real opportunity, and that what we look like or how much money we have shouldn't determine our potential, then why is there such a backlash to college campuses, offering programs and other supports to make this a reality?

0:01:09.3 Dakota Pawlicki: Today we're talking about the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on college campuses across the United States. At the time of this recording, in early May, over 150 colleges in 19 states have made a range of changes to DEI offices, staff, faculty, and policies in response to anti-DEI legislation and sentiment. Later in the show, we're going to talk with Veronica Selzler from Hattaway Communications, who has been researching people's attitudes about racial equity and racial justice, and has put together several tools to help people have more productive conversations. But first, I wanted to learn about the scope and scale of what's actually happening. I certainly hear about high profile examples, but it turns out there are many more quiet efforts underway to eliminate the supports needed for people to have a fair shot at real opportunity. Luckily, two reporting fellows, Erin Gretzinger and Maggie Hicks from The Chronicle of Higher Education have been keeping track of these efforts and their impact. Let's jump in. I am really excited today to kick off our conversation with two reporting fellows from the Chronicle of Higher Education. Erin Gretzinger and Maggie Hicks have been tracking DEI efforts and tracking efforts that have been dismantling DEI around campuses around the United States. And were joining me now to talk a little bit more about their work. Erin, Maggie, thanks so much for all your work and for joining me today.

0:02:39.3 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, thanks so much for having us.

0:02:43.0 Erin Gretzinger: Mm-hmm.

0:02:43.1 Dakota Pawlicki: Of course. I've been reading up on the tracker. I've been following it. I mean, there is a ton of information to dig into that I'm definitely excited to bring to our listeners today. You know, I guess just to kick us off a little bit, you know, what made you all start tracking this? Like how did you decide to get into the tracking DEI business, I suppose?

0:03:02.0 Erin Gretzinger: Yeah, so we basically started last summer as fellows at The Chronicle of Higher Education, we're both recent graduates and something we've been focusing on since we started there was anti-DEI efforts. The Chronicle has been tracking legislation related to DEI since the beginning of 2023. However, we started to see over time that as these laws were being implemented, there was a more vague sense of how they were actually impacting colleges, how were they responding? And even in states laws didn't pass, was that still having an influence on colleges? And I think that was really laid bare in a story we'll talk about later on, in which we did a survey of all public colleges in Texas and Florida, and that really showed just a very wide response. Lots of variety and response. And from there, we just took that next step to basically put together a huge list. We enlisted our colleagues at the Chronicle. We even enlisted readers as well to send us changes that they were seeing on their own campuses because we really wanted to capture the impact. So we call it the Impact Tracker. You'll see it on our website as higher ed's dismantling or tracking higher ed's dismantling of DEI. And yeah, that's basically the main effort, main thrust of our story. Anything you wanted to add?

0:04:20.7 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, I mean, I guess, so the Impact Tracker is sort of a sister tracker to what was created last January, which is the DEI Legislation Tracker. So in the Legislation Tracker, you'll find any new legislation that's been proposed and then sort of just the trajectory that it goes on. So you'll find a legislation that's passed, a legislation that was tabled, that didn't pass through and anything that's been introduced. And so ours kind of bounces off of that and is looking at now, okay, what's the impact of all of these laws? Or what's the impact of just this pressure and how it's kind of spreading across the country?

0:04:51.6 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah. I so appreciate the follow-up, right? I mean, oftentimes I read Higher Ed News pretty regularly, for my job, and you read about this law is being proposed, or that law was just enacted, and then the news moves on and you've done such a great job of keeping track of what actually is happening as a result of some of these enacted bills or proposed bills. You're tracking changes at 151 different college campuses across 19 states. Give us a sense of the scale of the issue. What do you see happening most? I mean, what are some general trends that you can see coming out of your reporting?

0:05:28.8 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, so I mean, the scale is pretty wide. A lot of the times the laws are in red or purple states. The attack is sort of coming from the helm of Republican lawmakers who believe that DEI efforts are discriminatory in and of themselves. They're discriminating against students who have conservative viewpoints. They're discriminating against certain student groups if they're not allowed to be involved in these efforts, or clubs or groups, things like that. I think right now we've seen that laws have passed in 13 states. There have been 84 laws total introduced across 28 states. And so, I mean, it's a wide range, and the laws all look slightly different, but they all sort of have this main kind of focus on DEI efforts and attacking different proponents of DEI... Different components of DEI efforts.

0:06:23.6 Erin Gretzinger: Yeah, and I think I'd add to that too, that even in states where laws haven't passed, we've still seen how this pressure has continued to culminate on college campuses across the country. I mean, we've seen that the University of Oklahoma has altered some programs in response to an executive order. The University of Wisconsin system also made some changes regarding DEI, even though no laws have passed, administrators there ended up striking a deal with conservative lawmakers who were withholding funding. And that resulted in the elimination of dozens of jobs or supposedly the alteration. We haven't exactly seen how that's going to shape out yet. And at MIT as well recently, we saw that they decided to stop requiring diversity statements in hiring. So we've seen changes like that as well that are more resulting from this general pressure that just seems to keep building, started in 2023 legislative session. And now that has just continued this year. And now as our tracker gets into, we're starting to really see the impacts of those laws and more general pressures.

0:07:19.0 Maggie Hicks: I mean, especially MIT, there isn't even a law that's been introduced in Massachusetts. So that was especially surprising for us.

0:07:27.9 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah, I mean, just people trying to get maybe ahead of any pressure or ahead of any concerns and responding to a lot of different constituencies, I'm sure is part of it. And what I appreciate what you're talking about here too, is just the really wide breadth of what these laws, the ones that are enacted and the ones being proposed are actually about, and the resulting actions that camps are taking. So I know you've already mentioned a couple are just looking at hiring practices or banning diversity statements and others have gone much, much further. I guess, you know, going a little bit deeper into some of the laws that have been enacted or proposed, give us a sense of that range. Like what do you see on the very high impactful range versus ones that are responding to maybe just the political pressure and the other kinds of constituencies that they're trying to manage?

0:08:20.5 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, I mean, I think it's important to note that a lot of these laws are based off of this model legislation that came out at the beginning of last year. And the model legislation came from two conservative think tanks, the Manhattan and Goldwater Institutes and their legislation proposal basically targeted four separate categories. So that's diversity statements, diversity training, DEI offices and staff and preferential hiring and admissions. So hiring or admitting someone on the basis of their identity. So each law has sort of targeted either one or all of these groups. I think the biggest and most sweeping laws we've seen have been in Texas, Florida, and Utah, which have covered each of those categories. Like Erin was saying, in some other places, they've really only been diversity statements. Some like just hiring practices, which will have a little bit of a lower impact on the surface.

0:09:10.1 Maggie Hicks: You won't see these DEI offices closing completely. You won't see staff being fired. You won't see student organizations coming down or network student organizations, I'm sorry, like student groups or things that support services, things like that. Whereas in Texas, Florida and Utah, we're seeing a wide sweeping of sort of just DEI being eliminated across all of the boards in terms of both sort of background hiring, admitting, and also on the surface of things that students can access, things that faculty can access. I mean, DEI offices obviously just shutting down completely. So it really is a wide range, but they all kind of trace back to this model legislation and what they're targeting specifically.

0:09:48.8 Dakota Pawlicki: I think that's interesting, because, I guess, just to go a bit deeper on that too, what I'm hearing you talk about a little bit is that there are some that are focused on access, student access as well as hiring access. But there are some that are cutting a little bit deeper. So as you look kind of, I think, you said 28 states have either enacted or proposed some legislation at this point. Do you find it's mostly about the issue of access? You know, can students equitably access this institution, are we equitable in hiring? Is that mostly what it is or do you get a sense that it's something broader than just dealing with access?

0:10:30.9 Maggie Hicks: I mean, I think I think part of it is the way that conservative lawmakers are approaching this is access. They're saying like with these hiring practices, you are cutting off an entire group of people, of potential faculty, potential students who might have different viewpoints, who might have conservative viewpoints, or students might not have access to a support service, a mentorship program because they are not part of a specific identity group, or they have these specific viewpoints. So I think that it is focused on access. But I think it's access across the board. So it's both coming into the university and also when you get there, what can you access, what can you do while you're there? So yeah, I think that's sort of what it's being presented as. I think overall though, in the people that we've talked to, the anti-DEI folks that we've spoken to, they really see DEI as sort of this deeply rooted issue on college campuses. And it's something that they think is going to take a lot to sort of completely uproot and completely take out. Because I mean, I know we had spoken to one person who sort of referred to it as the tentacles to DEI, they're in all of these different places, so we'll get into this later, I'm sure, but they really see that this fight isn't over for them. And this is sort of just the first step.

0:11:45.9 Erin Gretzinger: Yeah, and I would add to that as well. It's really, it's sort of an ideology to them as well, that when you're thinking about things like hiring statements or diversity statements, they view it as the fact that you're sort of in a way forcing someone to profess a certain ideology because that's how they view DEI, that you're basically, especially in conservatives that are coming to campuses, if they're applying for campuses, students as well, they see this as sort of restricting who's able to get access to higher ed, as Maggie pointed out. But again, I think that that word ideology is something that conservatives are frequently using to describe DEI, of course, proponents of DEI, those advocates for it. That's a big part of the discrepancy, right? And we could talk all day long about how people view DEI differently, and how the definition in of itself has been viewed in a wide variety of ways, right? I think conservatives view it one way as this ideology we've talked about, but of course, those who are advocates for DEI say that this work has been mischaracterized, has been misrepresented, and that that's ultimately hurting students and inhibiting administrators from being able to create an inclusive environment on campuses.

0:12:57.5 Dakota Pawlicki: I have to imagine too that going along those lines of ideology that there are some attempts to actually alter curriculum, what's being taught, what happens in the classroom, we've been talking about access. We've been talking about entry requirements and hiring. We've talked about student services, whether or not there are certain offices that are designed to provide support to certain student groups. Have you also heard from folks as you've been doing your reporting about efforts or attempts to actually influence what happens or what's taught inside of the classroom?

0:13:33.5 Erin Gretzinger: I think that's one that's a little bit trickier. It's not something that in many laws we're seeing spelled out. If anything, that's actually what we've seen as pretty clear exemptions in these laws. However, I would say there is a broader chilling effect, right? I think faculty and staff are afraid to sort of bring up some of these topics. And we've documented that in a variety of different ways in Florida, in Texas, I think particularly Texas A&M, that was something I covered heavily last summer with the fallout from the derailed hiring of Kathleen McElroy there. I think that sort of just captured, it's sort of this essence that DEI is a word that has taken on a different meaning since the beginning of 2023. And something that higher Ed used to sort of in the view of some faculty members really appreciate, has now become something that can be sort of a bombshell or you can trip a trigger in, land in a political landslide of sorts. And I think that sort of uncertainty is something that faculty are dealing with in their classrooms.

0:14:31.5 Maggie Hicks: I think there is probably also going to be a pretty big exodus of faculty and students if they're able to leave some of these states where this is happening. I know especially even just in our reporting on Texas and Florida, we had a lot of experts telling us that there is going to be a lot of faculty members who are leaving, who are trying to go to institutions that will be more accepting of what they're teaching, of their values. And I think that'll have a huge effect on the classroom as well.

0:14:57.4 Dakota Pawlicki: Absolutely. And I also think too there is kind of... Sometimes we don't really fully appreciate all the things that DEI offices do in terms of all the kind of campus services. And there is obviously been through your reporting and others a lot of folks realizing some unintended consequences as a result of shuttering some things. But, you know I also really appreciate because you've been... To your Impact Tracker. You've also been cataloging how campuses have responded either proactively or reactively to enacted or proposed legislation. What are some of the notable actions that you've seen across the US as campuses respond to this new political pressure?

0:15:42.3 Erin Gretzinger: I think the biggest things that we've seen change so far, or some of the visual things that Maggie was talking about, we're seeing really sweeping responses in regards to offices being changed in terms of their name, in terms of some of their missions that are being tweaked. A lot of things with wording have been changed. So example offices that used to be the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion are now incorporating words like community, belonging. We're seeing sort of a change in the language surrounding DEI, especially on websites in the names, offices themselves. We're seeing these offices missions also be refocused, whether that's toward more compliance. Really referencing what is required by federal law seems to be something that many colleges are falling back on when they're thinking about how to reorient their efforts.

0:16:32.5 Erin Gretzinger: And then we're also seeing that colleges are sort of framing this as opening it up to all students. It's not always clear what that means, especially when you're thinking about an LGBTQ Center being opened to all students, advocates for DEI say that sort of defeats the purpose of what that space was meant to provide for students. However, we have seen colleges, especially in Texas and Florida, really rely on that sort of language. We've seen in compliance documents for the major university systems in Texas all sort of rely on this very similar language that nothing is against this law... Against these anti-DEI laws. If you just open up these services to all students, again, proponents of DEI would say that that's defeating the purpose of what these services are meant to provide. And yet we've seen that sort of in the case. And of course, there is also some big changes at specific institutions. I think in Texas, UT Austin has been an institution making sweeping changes. They also fired dozens of employees. The final numbers are still being, I think worked out. And I think same thing at the University of Florida, which also saw layoffs. But in general we've seen with jobs that most universities have been retaining their employees, but changing job titles, again, it comes down to the language.

0:17:47.8 Erin Gretzinger: And the mission is usually less clear. Right. I don't know, Maggie, if you have thoughts on that?

0:17:54.3 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, I think it definitely is. And I think another piece of it too, I mean, going back to UT Austin, at first, we were seeing a lot of colleges sort of taking this let's sort of wait and see approach. Let's like change the names of these offices. Sort of like adjusting to DEI, we even saw that when... There was a video that went viral a few weeks ago of a reporter going undercover and talking to DEI officers and they all sort of were like referring to it as DEI light or just like changing the names.

0:18:23.0 Maggie Hicks: I think following efforts like that, Republican lawmakers have really started to crack down in terms of compliance. We saw in Texas, Senator Creighton, came out saying, you have to, all colleges have to submit, a report about how they've been complying with these laws. But it was May 3rd. And that's in preparation for a hearing later this month that will go over what these colleges are doing. And that in response to that, or right after that is when Texas, University of Texas at Austin, closed its DEI office, fired all of those employees, because originally that university had only, was only going to change the name of a few offices. So, yeah, we're really seeing some reactionary from colleges, especially as lawmakers are, getting more worried about colleges not following these laws in good faith. There is an assumption that colleges won't be following them in good faith from lawmakers. And so they're doing everything in their power to make sure that, this is what they're doing and they're actually abiding by these laws.

0:19:32.9 Erin Gretzinger: And it's worth noting as well that you essentially have no one who's really happy with the implementation of these laws. You have, advocates for DEI saying that colleges are responding in sweeping ways that it's essentially an overcorrection. That we've seen in Texas, especially where student organizations are supposed to be explicitly exempt from the DEI law, that they've been impacted as well, increasingly as pressure has ramped up for colleges to do something that includes UT, Austin. And we're also, again, seeing from those who are against DEI that they're worried that these changes are simply cosmetic. They look at the names of these offices changing and they're wondering, how are we going to root out these true problems with DEI when they see colleges as really resistant and really wanting to cling to what they view as this ideology.

0:20:21.7 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah. Have you talked to, many campus leaders, about their approach? And I'm asking, in preparation for the show, I talked to a couple of folks on background who didn't want to come on the show because they're concerned about, retaliation and future employment, but, that have been impacted by some of these DEI office, closures. And, one of the things I heard from them is a little bit of empathy and sympathy with their campus leadership who, they oftentimes know are committed, to equity, committed to diversity, inclusion, but have to respond to these laws in certain ways. Have you had a chance to have any conversations with campus leaders about the kinds of decisions that they're confronted with and how they're plotting a course to really balance, all of the, all the things that they need to balance on at this time?

0:21:19.0 Maggie Hicks: I haven't quite yet.

0:21:21.6 Erin Gretzinger: I was going to say...

0:21:22.4 Maggie Hicks: They're a little hard to access.

0:21:23.3 Erin Gretzinger: Yeah, basically, we've probably found what you've run into as well that especially, at the administrative level, there is so much unknown still about, right now everything that the playbook has changed. Things that were previously celebrated and widely accepted, even encouraged in higher education surrounding DEI have now become the target of conservative critics, have become the targets of these laws, and in some cases, illegal and jobs are on the line. So there is a lot at stake for administrators who are in general, from what we heard in Texas of Florida, keeping their cards sort of close to their chest, in terms of how they're making these decisions. And what we've heard from faculty and students is that's actually one of the most frustrating parts. It's only adding another layer of uncertainty. Not only are these laws, which they characterize as vague, difficult to understand and understand how they're going to be implemented.

0:22:15.9 Erin Gretzinger: You have that other layer where institutions aren't quite forthcoming about how they're making their decisions. Things seem to come down in these, statements. You hear last minute that these offices are closing, a program's canceled, things are asked. Especially the University of Houston is a really interesting case in this regard, where students really had to claw their way every step to get information about DEI programs that were shut down by the school. And in that case, these were people who used to work in the DEI office, presumably, we're very invested in this work, and now they're, basically telling students like, we can't help you with these things. If you want to continue these programs on your own, you can, but they're not necessarily assisting. And it's those barriers and actually that lack of communication from leadership who understandably in some respects are nervous about this moment as well. There is a lot on the line. But, it's an information void. And, again, that's why it's so important not to, say what we're doing is really important, but showing that impact and as much transparency as we can give people in this moment about what is happening on campuses in response to these laws, the more clarity that we'll provide.

0:23:28.4 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, you're right. I think that administrators are in a really tough spot. You see it too with the ongoing protests on college campuses and just this pressure, this political pressure that they have. In talking to a lot of experts, higher education is under such a strong microscope right now. That administrators, faculty, staff, they're all very concerned about the next move that they might make. Because so many lawmakers are watching what colleges are doing now. We've seen it on the federal government stage with the hearings, with several college presidents. I think that that's a piece of it too, is just that there is that this very, very watchable eye that's almost getting closer and closer.

0:24:11.2 Dakota Pawlicki: I will say that the work you're doing is important. [laughter] I'll be the one to say it for you, because honestly, listen, again, like I said at the topic, I do follow this quite a bit, and we hear a lot about, Florida and Texas, a couple of others. But, just even looking now at the tracker here, University of North Dakota eliminated one optional course offered to employees on implicit bias and awareness of microaggressions. And, all the way down to things like you're talking about, completely removing DEI offices, firing staff, letting go faculty. I encourage folks, the links in the show notes to check out your tracker. At the top of the interview though, you also said, Hey, listen, a lot of this is happening in those blue and purple states. Are there groups, are there states that are resisting these efforts? Are there places that are saying, Hey, doubling down on DEI, in response to what's happening maybe in their neighboring states?

0:25:11.5 Maggie Hicks: Yeah, I just, one correction, I don't know if I said blue, but it's red and purple states. It's definitely conservative people and peers.

0:25:16.4 Dakota Pawlicki: Oh, yes. Sorry about that. That's my error.

0:25:18.8 Maggie Hicks: [laughter] I just want to make sure I said that correctly.

0:25:20.4 Dakota Pawlicki: No, my error.

0:25:21.5 Maggie Hicks: But yeah, We have seen some pushback. I think a lot of it has come from faculty and students mostly. Like Erin was saying, there is an exemption in a lot of the laws that's saying, this can't affect student organizations. This can't affect funding for student organizations. This can't affect student organizations that are targeting specific identities. So we have seen some students come back saying, Hey, we're going to build back this like DEI effort, we're going to build back these programs. Like Erin mentioned, the University of Houston, students really had to fight tooth and nail to get access to a list of services that were being eliminated. And their plan is to divvy up those responsibilities among themselves and figure out how to present this information and help students get access to what is being lost.

0:26:10.3 Maggie Hicks: I think that even held a lavender graduation ceremony for the LGBTQ community, which they use the alumni group to support that and get the money for that. I will say though, I think that even in that situation, we have DEI advocates who are saying like, that's not a student's responsibility. They should not be the ones who are doing that. And also we can't, students can't realistically build back these DEI programs in the way that they need to be because it's a full-time job and it's done by someone who's completely trained in that field. We also see some faculty who have been going to outside organizations, trying to connect with DEI like, related organizations in the community that can come and work on the campus in a legal way.

0:26:54.3 Maggie Hicks: And then one interesting thing that we found, especially from our survey of Texas and Florida, is there are some community colleges, that haven't made any changes. They are saying, look, like we inherently are an inclusive campus, so we never had a DEI office. We never had DEI staff. They're saying, look, we had one college, Coastal Bend College in Beeville, Texas that said, we're a Hispanic serving institution. We don't have to have DEI programs. Like we are inclusive no matter what. And I don't know that I would call that pushback. I think that that's more sort of seeing that these colleges are saying like, these laws really do not affect us, and we are not going to be changing our practices based on them because we are at full compliance.

0:27:36.2 Erin Gretzinger: And I think, what's interesting about the community colleges in particular, who responded to us essentially saying that, look, our efforts already are inclusive to everyone. We're trying to support every type of student, especially, and some of that's baked into the mission of community colleges in ways that might not exactly be equivalent at four years. But I will say that it gets at the bigger question of how are colleges going to shift their practices in general? There is still this demand. From 2020 on, especially, there was this sense that the pendulum was swinging the other way. To increase student access, belonging inclusivity. And now we're in a point where we're in retrenchment of that, and students are wondering what resources are going to be available to them. They're thinking about that in their college decisions. We've written stories that colleges are pitching themselves in terms of belonging, coming to places where you can feel that your identity is really respected and valued, and it's just going to be a new playbook. I think how we're thinking about these efforts and how colleges can still foster inclusive efforts even without some of that playbook, that's been really the main strategy for the past decade or so.

0:28:43.9 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah, I just... The job I wouldn't want today is to be a campus leader, really. [laughter] I thought earlier in my career I might be heading down that path and, I'm glad I did because I am, to your point about community colleges and other open access institutions, a lot of them too are saying, listen, we've been open access our entire lives. We serve anyone who walks into our door. We don't even have an application. Just come on in. If you need education training, you need to take one class to help you, re-skill, you need to get a promotion, come on in. We just want to help you be successful. And getting really wrapped up, in what could be a esoteric conversation, could be pretty challenging. What's the future going to look like? You've talked a little bit about, some folks are telling you, Hey, we expect some faculty and some students to, leave and vote with their feet, vote with their bodies, and move to other institutions. But what do you, what are you expecting to see? What do you think, what are you guys going to keep an eye on?

0:29:49.5 Maggie Hicks: One thing that we're definitely keeping an eye on is the way that lawmakers are holding colleges accountable. We mentioned a few times compliance. If you look closely at some of these laws, they have very specific carve outs for how colleges need to be compliant. For example, in Tennessee colleges each need to create a complaint system, a complaint form where people can send in complaints about, the law in Tennessee specifically violates, or specifically bans diversity training. If a student feels like they were being forced into diversity training, they could use this complaint form. And it's required that the colleges then publish a lot of what's being put in those forms. And then we see too, in other states, they'll have, in Indiana there is a new divisive concepts law.

0:30:36.0 Maggie Hicks: And in that state colleges are required to create these new committees in their board of trustees that will review, different complaints, and then they'll decide. And so I think that that's one piece that we're really watching closely is these lawmakers really cracking down on making sure that colleges are following these laws in good faith. And that will only continue to contribute to this chilling effect, based on what I've been talking to some DEI advocates about, they're worried that, for example, if a person is on one of these committees who maybe has it out for a faculty member, the faculty member might not want to do anything to walk, like cross the line. It's also adding to this continued confusion about, how are we following these laws? Because one of the biggest critiques from DEI advocates is that these are very vague laws with very strong compliance.

0:31:24.2 Maggie Hicks: And so it's hard for colleges to figure out, okay, how do we actually follow these compliances and how do we respond to this pressure when we don't fully understand, what the law is asking us to do? Because it can be so vague, from their perspective. I think that that is what people are worried about, is leading to this overcorrection of colleges really just taking these sweeping changes because they're concerned that lawmakers are going to come after them. They're concerned that they're going to become like this public institution, this public example of what not to do.

0:31:55.7 Erin Gretzinger: And in a bigger sense, there is also this question, colleges are still facing the fallout from October 7th. From what's happening in the Middle East. And that has, in some ways put wind in the sails of the anti-DEI movement because what a lot of conservatives are pointing to when we're thinking about, safety for Jewish students, they're saying historically the way DEI has been approached on campuses through oppressor and oppressed frameworks, this concept of privilege that, this has essentially created an atmosphere where antisemitism has been able to thrive. We've seen that, been brought up in multiple, the multiple committee hearings now on antisemitism. We've seen that become more prominent in general and how people are framing these attacks surrounding DEI. And it has, brought really up this question of how are colleges going to move forward from here when there is so much pressure to really consider what students and faculty are asking for in a lot of cases, which is really creating this inclusive environment and sort of the traditional tools.

0:32:58.9 Erin Gretzinger: And again, that playbook that was used in the past to get there. And really, what the Israel-Hamas war has thrown to the mix now is that additional layer of pressure to be thinking about the tactics the way colleges are approaching this since that is really at the heart of this issue. And again, like there is debates about how things are being characterized, if it's accurate or not, but again, that's important to consider as well, that that's been added as, again, wind in the sails of this movement and this moment. And, again, posing big questions for colleges and how they're using these sorts of traditional frameworks to promote DEI.

0:33:36.3 Dakota Pawlicki: Well, there is certainly a lot to keep track of, and I'm very glad you two are doing it for us. Thank you so much for your work. I'll also just say, a thank you to the Chronicle higher Ed for not putting this important tracker behind a paywall. That is an important thing as well as we're trying to keep track and everything that can be, equitably accessed, and I know I'm walking away from our conversation, not only, thinking about some of the deep cases, but also trying to keep in mind the truly large scale. We hear about some of the, salacious examples, the glowing examples, that around. But, it's these smaller changes and even the anticipatory ones like the one you mentioned with MIT for example, are important for all of us to keep an eye on, as we watch this go through. Erin, Maggie, thank you both so much for all the work that you're doing and for joining us and giving us a sense of what's going on around the country. Really appreciate it.

0:34:36.4 Maggie Hicks: Yeah. Thank you so much for having us on. This was great.

0:34:38.4 Erin Gretzinger: Yeah, thank you.

0:34:42.0 Dakota Pawlicki: Hey, everyone, welcome back. We're, I'm so excited to have our next guest with us. To get a little bit deeper, Veronica Selzler and her team at Hattaway Communications, along with Lumina Foundation, has been doing a lot of great research around how people actually feel when it comes to topics of racial equity, racial justice, and have put together a really great set of tools, to help people talk and have better, more productive conversations. Veronica, thanks so much for joining us today and for all the work that you've been doing on this front.

0:35:13.6 Veronica Selzler: Absolutely. Really glad to be here and continue this conversation.

0:35:17.7 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah. Okay. At the top of the resource. It's in our show notes. It's a great interactive webpage. It's a lot of really great materials in there we're going to dig deep in. But at the very, very top, it says, despite ongoing national conversations, people still lack a clear and consistent understanding of what racial equity and racial justice mean. My question to you to kick us off is like, is that really true? Is all this one big misunderstanding? We're just missing each other?

0:35:46.6 Veronica Selzler: [laughter] I love that. In some ways, I don't want to say it's that simple, but I do think it is, we're in the mess of the power of jargon in so many ways, and when we get caught up in words and that this is coming from, I'm a communications professional, and I think that words get in our way. [laughter] And, the idea of equity, of racial equity, of racial justice so much, especially in the last four or five years, has been a tool for flagging, this is what jargon is. It's flagging to say, this is an issue. I'm part of this community, that it matters to me, I care about it. But oftentimes it doesn't go beyond the actual use of that word to say what you actually mean.

0:36:48.9 Veronica Selzler: And I think that equity is a perfect example of kind of in-group jargon that then goes out into the world and people are saying it, but they're not really doing the work of like, what do I want that to mean for me? And I see that really happening in higher Ed where, we have both on, with people who are really, invested and empowered in making higher education work better for all kinds of students, and also the people who are trying to use it as a, use that equity as a tool to get whatever their political motivations moving forward. It is become a tool and it's I think we've lost in so many ways, like a meaningful way of talking about what racial equity actually is, getting stuck in the word. I think that's kind of the first place that entered into this work.

0:37:53.5 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah, I so appreciate that point. It can get really lost in jargon, and honestly, jargon can also be kind of weaponized or used in a lot of different ways to co-opt things, to draw some comparisons. One of the things that you all do is you go and you survey many, many people to get a representative sample of America. And one of the questions, or I guess two of the questions that you ask is, what does racial equity mean to you? What does that term mean to you? And what does racial justice mean to you? So as you asked Americans that question, what did you find?

0:38:33.8 Veronica Selzler: We found both in the kind of broader community and also within communities that are working on the issue itself, that it means a ton of different things for different people. And that is where the jargon gets in our way, because it loses the power of being kind of a tool for really specific change. Because we've talked to people where when they say racial equity, what they mean is they want equal opportunity. And opportunity is one of those interesting words because it brings ideas of access, but it doesn't necessarily get us all the way to outcomes. But you talk with other people who are speaking about different kinds of kind of redemptive efforts for racial equity. And so that brings up a whole other kind of conversation. And so I think just the fact that people are using this word but meaning a lot of different things. And also doing a lot of different work toward this vision of racial equity, it looks slightly different in whatever their environment is. And Lumina has made a commitment around racial equity.

0:39:51.5 Veronica Selzler: And of course, there is all kinds of inequities in our world that different people are paying attention to different things based on their community, based on the environments that they're working in. And so it can make it hard even in communities that are really working toward making higher Ed work for everybody, that there is a lot of different efforts kind of underneath this language. And so that for us was just such a clear marker, especially in this survey that we fielded in 2020. And then in 2022, asking what racial equity and racial justice meant to people, we saw it was all over the board and we said, "You know what? Maybe let's step back from the word and talk about what we actually mean and we can be a lot more effective that way."

0:40:51.4 Dakota Pawlicki: Yeah, so I appreciate the distinction that you're making there too, that when a lot of people hear the word racial equity, their mind goes a lot towards access to opportunity. And when we look at a lot of the headlines it's, is such and such college admissions policy fair? Are we hiring people? Should there be DEI diversity statements in terms of hiring? So much attention is focused on access. And what I think I hear you saying is that in that conversation, we're losing the focus on outcomes. Because if we all believe that Americans deserve a... And have a right to a real opportunity... We had the other part of equity, like the biggest part of equity probably has to come to outcomes. Is that kind of what you're talking about here?

0:41:52.6 Veronica Selzler: Yeah, absolutely. And that is where thinking about the vision of equity, I think that's the first place that we really started in trying to get to a more meaningful definition of racial equity for Lumina and the field kind of trying to understand what does this mean? What are the parts of it? And the first place we started was, what's that vision? What are we all trying to get to here? And it's that vision where higher education of all kinds is meaningfully serving everyone who is seeking it out. And that requires eliminating a lot of the barriers that are serving... That are getting in the way for some people and not necessarily everybody. And that's where the racial equity frame starts to come in. It's unpacking, we've got this vision, we have this place that we want to be. And the place that we want to be that isn't just the access part. The place that we want to be is, what's the purpose of higher learning? I think that's so much of what comes into this conversation around racial equity and justice in higher Ed. It's about what's our work here? What's our job? And are we doing it? Are we able to really do it well? And where is it not working?

0:43:23.9 Dakota Pawlicki: Let's dig into the numbers a little bit more. You had just said earlier that you did some of the survey work in 2019, 2020, repeated again in 2022. As you looked at the results of your survey work between those two periods, what changed?

0:43:41.4 Veronica Selzler: Less than we thought. [laughter]

0:43:46.6 Dakota Pawlicki: Okay.

0:43:47.8 Veronica Selzler: That's why... I mean, we fielded this survey again. It was actually just really incredible timing because we fielded this survey, I was doing this work in 2019, 2020, have this essentially baseline data for awareness and attitudes about racial equity in 2020 before all of the protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and just such an upswell of attention around this idea, around this word, right? Around racial equity. And so we had done this research 50... Half of people really weren't sure, weren't familiar with this term out of the context of... Or in the context of racial equity, of kind of what services or the kind of life people are living. And the first question, this is a really fun thing to ask in the survey, was open-ended. What does equity mean to you? And we coded those 3000 responses. And about half of them were... And we gave two opportunities to answer it. About half of those responses were hmm, money, mortgage, dollars, and I don't knows. And only about half of people in those kind of two opportunities to answer what equity means to them gave anything relevant to this definition of equity as it applies to the equal treatment of people, making sure that they have the same access and opportunity and outcomes.

0:45:39.3 Veronica Selzler: And so that for us was really interesting. We expected then in 2022, after all of this conversation, after all of this attention, that we would have an upswell of awareness, if not necessarily significantly higher care. We were at least thinking people would be more aware, but it really only increased like five or six points, percentage points of awareness. And then attitudes a little bit more, little bit more positive support, but not significantly. And I think that those just handful of percentage points difference was less than we expected given the amount of New York Times-level headline attention there has been to the idea of racial equity and the attention that we're seeing in higher learning, the attention we're seeing from companies, from Target to Apple, to, and all these really well-known places where folks might be seeing it. I think it just wasn't the sort of groundswell of understanding that we might have hoped. And I think for that, it's not a simple concept because it can mean so many things. It takes a lot of forms. And so I think one of the big lessons from the lack of really significant increase in deeper, thoughtful knowledge about what racial equity is, told us that we have to really reinforce that, that taking a step back and ask ourselves, what do we mean here? What is the clarity of thought of the world we're trying to create? What's getting in the way? And how do we really make change to create the world that we want to live in?

0:47:48.8 Dakota Pawlicki: And I think you kind of already started answering one of my other questions for you because if we notice that there wasn't a dramatic shift in awareness or attitudes between the two time periods, you also go... You all segment a little bit the audience out into these four groups, right? There is frontline activists, those that are champions of advancing racial equity and justice. You have budding activists of folks that feel that racial equity and justice are important, but they're not confident about their knowledge about the concepts. You have informed skeptics, people who know and are confident in their understanding of what racial equity and racial justice mean, but just currently kind of see them as buzzwords and then uninformed skeptics. Skeptics that are uncertain and also have kind of low engagement. How did that framework emerge to you? I thought that it was an interesting kind of way to segment the audience because you're really saying it's attitude plus awareness, and where do you kind of fall in? How did you all decide to cut the audience knowing that you could probably cut this audience in dozens and dozens of different ways?

0:48:57.0 Veronica Selzler: Yeah, and we tried lots of different ways of cutting it. And at the end of the day, thinking about how we wanted to understand our audiences, the intent of understanding our audiences through the lens of communications is basically what do they need and how do we as communicators of all kinds need to orient ourselves in different ways in order to engage them? And I think that that was the biggest thing that pointed us to as awareness and attitudes sort of approach. And thinking about effective communications, communications is a tool to be able to do a handful of things, right? It can raise awareness, it can inform attitudes, it can change attitudes, and it can also compel people to act. It can give people something to do and invite them to take action. And so that's what we wanted to understand is through communications, where are people now in their awareness and their attitudes? And so that's why do we need communications to do to shift their awareness and shift their attitudes in order to get them to act, in order to get them to pay attention, to engage whatever those calls to action might be. And so in that case, it was really important for us to distinguish these frontline activists, for example, who are very familiar with the concepts of racial equity and racial justice, they believe they're important. They tend to be both very passionate, but also really tired. [chuckle]

0:50:52.7 Veronica Selzler: What they need from communications and from engagement is they need to see that other people are with them, and that they are not alone in this effort and so that they can continue to feel invigorated to do the hard work of racial equity and making the world a more equitable place. Those kinds of communications are very different from the ones that you have with budding activists who, I think, can get clumped together because they really interestingly have high sense of kind of care about the issue. And yet they say they're not really familiar with it. And when we dug into that, what we saw here is that there was a reticence of saying the wrong thing. There was an uncertainty about having a right... Having the right answer to what it is or what to do. And so I think that reticence means a very different kind of communication to these people who are our allies in so many ways in this effort. Those folks are... You really need to show up with them saying, "Hey, you know what? It doesn't matter what language we use. There is not right or wrong language. There is a clear direction that we can do. And here's how you can help. Here's a role that you can play. And it's not about saying the right thing. It's not about policing language. It's about making sure that we all know we're on the same page here. We all want the same things. And here's a way that you can participate."

0:52:36.1 Veronica Selzler: And even with the informed and uninformed skeptics, these are folks that you could consider, kind of depending on strategies, like maybe you don't need to engage them, but actually they still have visions for what the world should look like. They still have visions for what higher Ed should be. And in fact, those visions are often very similar to the same ones that are frontline activists who are calling it racial equity, who are talking about systems that are making sure they're serving every student well. They want the same things from it and I think that that's taking the time to, depending on where your audiences are, getting on the same page with that shared vision. And when you start there, you can have a conversation about, "All right, let's talk about the challenges. Let's talk about the barriers." We don't have to get into the very specific kind of historical inequities about it. But also if communications is a tool to accomplish something, you don't need to. That's not the purpose of communications in so many cases. The purpose of communications is to get stuff done and to engage people in a way that is going to get them sitting alongside with you, doing helpful work, bringing their care and attention to it. And so being able to think about where audiences' awareness and attitudes are now, helps us move them to where we want them to be, and of where to focus the communications to engage them.

0:54:22.8 Dakota Pawlicki: I appreciate you saying that because I think for a lot of folks, I know sometimes I even can fall into this trap where it becomes... The mission is to convince someone else that my position is right. Right? I want to win this conversation and so... And the way I will win is if you use my language, you use my right words and you do the thing that I want you to do for the reasons that I want to do it. And it's like, I want both of those things. It's not just what we both want to do together, but rather I need you to do the thing that I want and I want you to have the same reasons for wanting to do those kinds of things. But when I'm going through the tools here in the toolkit, and you talk about how you communicate differently with each of these four segments, what I kind of appreciate, at least, and check me on this, is that we're not necessarily trying to go out to skeptics and say, "Hey, let's turn you into champions. Let's move your beliefs and the things that are important to you." But what I hear you saying is that, if we are better at communicating with each other, we might actually find that quite frankly, most of us want the same thing. Is that a fair assessment?

0:55:42.9 Veronica Selzler: Absolutely. I think one of my favorite sort of snarky strategy questions is, what's the point? And the point in so much of our communication is to get something done and to be honest about what we're trying to get done and what do we need from our audiences in order to get that done. And the way that we're talking to a state policymaker in Texas is different from how we're talking to an advocate who is there championing racial equity on the front lines. And that's okay. That's not a bad thing. And I think making it okay to use communications as a tool. It's a strategic tool. It is a tool in the toolbox of getting stuff done. And releasing a little bit of the pressure of having the right words allows for some of that flexibility to be able to get on the same page with folks around what's the point of higher ed? What's the point of my needing to engage this audience? What's the point of taking the time to understand somebody's point of view and it'd be okay that it's not the same. But like, why do... What's the point of me engaging them? Well, maybe I need their vote or maybe I need them to understand something about the barriers that are like... Community college students are experiencing but I don't need them to say back to me that racial equity matters. That can be somebody else's job. And I think that is one of the important things too to appreciate about the huge ecosystem of people and organizations who are doing such incredible work...

0:57:50.0 Veronica Selzler: To advance all of these really important efforts. You can have some people who are really out there on the front lines using language, using the jargon of social justice and the power of language to advance change. I think there is a... I don't want to dismiss the power of the words we choose. All this work is about framing. And when... The words we choose influence all the things that we are thinking about. And so we need to be really respectful and thoughtful about the words that we use. And also, you can have people who are really on the front lines of changing the way we use language while also having people who recognize that you have to talk to that policymaker differently than you talk to that frontline activist. And that is all in service of the broader goal.

0:58:50.0 Dakota Pawlicki: One of my... I really do love this toolkit quite a bit. And I've already been sending it to people. So I'm sure a lot of folks are like, "Dakota, get out of my inbox." But one of my favorite pages, going along with what you're saying about how important word choice and words are, is on page 10, about getting specific. And this is something that I find myself having to do a lot. When I'm not podcasting, I help run a organization that focuses on systems change and systems redesign and how to... People ask me, "Hey, Dakota... " I was at an airport bar the other day, and this guy comes and he was like, "Hey, what do you do for work?" I was like, "Oh, I help run an institute that helps communities solve complex social challenges through systems redesign." That's jargon. [laughter] And so it doesn't help him at all. It's a good way to just get someone to not interrupt you at a bar. You go on though, in here and you say, "We need to be specific. We need to provide tangible examples, for example, of the system, to expose hidden barriers that unfairly affect individuals." Haven't you seen that in play? Have you seen examples where folks have been able to come to a greater understanding with each other in part, by getting much more specific?

1:00:08.0 Veronica Selzler: Man, I'm so glad that you brought up systems, because that word, like, let's throw that in the trash...

1:00:15.6 Dakota Pawlicki: I know.

[chuckle]

1:00:16.3 Veronica Selzler: Of words that don't mean things. And it's okay. [chuckle] There is how... At Hattaway, we work with organizations who are trying to do systems change in every sector possible and trying to get folks out of their own language around systems change, which yes, is how we make change. And also, what is systems? [laughter] What does that mean? And that's what this question is about, is trying to look at the system through the experience of the person experiencing the system. And I think that is where I've heard some of the most impactful ways of getting on the same page of hearing... I just had a series of conversations with leaders in higher learning institutions in different states across the country, talking with some of the folks in Texas, in Florida, who can't use language of DEI in their work. And they basically have been compelled to be more specific about what they're trying to do and how they're trying to do it beyond this language, this proxy language, that they've been using to talk about their work.

1:01:41.6 Veronica Selzler: And so one of the big things that they actually have found as a win in being forced to change their language is the way they're talking about the system of community college transfer credits. And this is one of those things, that super confusing system, systems across community colleges, across universities and this system that just really break down the ability for many students to be able to get their meaningful degree, be able to go to community college and then transfer those credits to be meaningful credits in a university system. And who are the people who are doing that? Those tend to be students who are from poor families, students who are Black or Latino. And those... You don't actually need to get into those specifics, but by being specific about the system and telling the story, this is what I was hearing, these higher Ed leaders telling the story of a student who went to community college because it was the more accessible, affordable option, they were able to live at home, they got these credits and then went to go try to transfer them to be able to get their Bachelor's degree and just couldn't figure it out. And then they learn that half of those credits aren't transferable because of X, Y, Z. And they're having a hard time figuring out who to talk to in order to solve this problem.

1:03:36.6 Veronica Selzler: And despite all of their efforts and their desire for an education for this thing, again, this vision that we all share, that we want, we want people who want this to be able to get it. And they're not, because of these systems. It's naming the system through the experience of the student that was allowing these leaders to be able to make the case for why the system needs to change. And they were able to say, "Look at this. This isn't working. This isn't getting the job done that it needs to do. And here are the specific things that we can do differently, that we can change, in order to make that experience for the student work as it should. For us to be able to, as higher Ed professionals, do our job well, which is to make sure that student can go through that experience successfully, for us to do our job, we got to fix this." And so being able to name the system through that illustration of the student experience has actually allowed folks in these places, where they can't use language of DEI anymore legally, to be able to actually get stuff done. It's forced them, in so many ways, to be more specific and to get to that experience of the system.

1:05:01.9 Dakota Pawlicki: It kind of brings up the question. In the first segment, we heard about all these states and legislation, both enacted and proposed, that do exactly what you're talking about, kind of regulate language, curtail the use of DEI as words or in concept. Veronica, I guess, I'm curious to your take on that. Does it make sense to regulate language? I guess... [chuckle] What's your take on whether or not this is actually valuable, critical, important?

1:05:46.7 Veronica Selzler: Oh, man, that is a... It's a tough question, because... I see... My perspective is bad actors are using this as a tool to keep power. And so it's another way that jargon gets really taken out of the hands of the people who are using it and used her for nefarious purposes, and one of the challenges of not being specific in using these jargony words makes it... It makes it easier for that language to be taken over. I think that it's foolish, but I also can see the power of... Like, we can still do this work without these words. And so for me, it's more of a matter of keeping hope around the real purpose and the real effort behind it. I also think... There is a lot at risk, and it's quite scary. And I think there is a lot of... This is in the context of... Even more kind of in growing concern and skepticism from the average person around whether higher Ed is doing what it is supposed to. And that, for me, thinking to the focus groups that we've had with every day people in places across the country to understand, like, "What are they really looking for in higher learning, in education after high school?" They're not thinking about all of this political stuff. They're like, "I just want to be able to get a good education. I want to learn something that's going to be able to help me have a good life."

1:08:01.3 Veronica Selzler: And so I think that's where so much of this policing of the language and the politicizing of the language just distracts from the real job and is really disappointing to me, because it is showing to me that so many of the policymakers who are advancing... Putting effort and energy behind this sort of stuff, is... They're just really not paying attention to what matters to people. And I think that is one of the most disappointing and heartbreaking things to me about it, is it's... Like, what an unbelievable waste of time and energy and political power when people really just want to make sure that their education is accessible and affordable and is serving them well. And I think that there is... We can do that, that is possible, if we put energy and attention to it. And right now, that's not where the energy and attention is, which is really sad.

1:09:10.7 Dakota Pawlicki: Well said. And again, the data supports it. The majority of Americans agree with the foundational belief that everyone has a right to real opportunity. 87% of people said yes, everyone deserves the right to real opportunity. 60% of people agree that policies, practices, and beliefs in our education system unfairly hold back Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino people from achieving skills. Two thirds of Americans believe that opportunity isn't equal. 78% of Americans agree that we should remove barriers for students to right the wrongs and achieve just and fair outcomes for all. Yeah, it's incomprehensible sometimes. But I appreciate what you're saying, that we might need to be a bit more mindful and savvy consumers of what's being presented to us. And I think getting on the same page with communications, getting on the same page with language, getting more specific and grounding.

1:10:16.3 Dakota Pawlicki: I'm a local practitioner myself, so for me, it's like, we can talk about all the national level stuff, even the state level stuff, all you want, but at the end of the day, most people are caring about what's in their backyard, their neighbors, their community. And the more specific and tangible we can get around that, the more likely we're going to be able to find what we actually already have in common. It's not about even creating consensus; it's about identifying the consensus that we already have, that already exists. I guess, my last point, there is a lot of folks listening that are in these states, and they fall into one of your four categories. What's your... And they're all probably trying to talk to each other. [chuckle] What's your advice to them? If you could say, "Hey, tomorrow, go out and do this one thing," what would it be?

1:11:13.1 Veronica Selzler: I think the biggest thing is asking... Ask yourself the question, "What am I trying to do here? What world am I trying to create? And what is my job in removing the barriers to get to that place?" And that, at the end of the day, is really what efforts for racial equity are and can be. And asking... It's simple. It's kind of like, "What do I want the world to look like, and how can we make it happen?" And checking, "Do I need to use this jargon? What might the other person be thinking?" And so much of this, it's an act of curiosity and empathy and seeing communications as a way to get somewhere, not just an end in itself. And just say, like, [chuckle] huge kudos and just really amazed by the resilience of all the folks who have been navigating. And in a very messy, changing communications environment and in higher learning right now and continuing to hold the grounding of why they're here. So just continue to be so impressed and grateful for the continued care and reflection that everybody has been able to bring.

1:12:44.3 Dakota Pawlicki: Well, I'm impressed and grateful for your work and for that of the team. And I know you a little bit, Veronica, and I've had the chance to work with you guys closely, and it's been nothing but a pleasure. And thanks so much for coming on today and sharing your great work. All these are in the show notes, and I really hope people take advantage of the wonderful resources and research that you've all put together. So, thank you for the work that you're doing, and thanks for jumping on the show with us today.

1:13:08.7 Veronica Selzler: Absolutely. My pleasure.

1:13:14.3 Dakota Pawlicki: Let me end this where we started. Do you believe that everyone has a right to real opportunity? No matter their race, where they live, how much money they have, do you believe that every American should have a fair shot to learn, grow, and thrive? I gotta say, I travel a lot for my job. I work with all sorts of communities. None of them, no matter if they're red, blue, purple, something else entirely, none of them think that only some kids, some families, some people deserve a leg up. They want the best for all of their neighbors. They want thriving businesses and social organizations. They want people to own homes and to raise families of their own. This whole thing, honestly, confounds me. I see these efforts, I hear pundits and others that are disconnected from the real world, spouting their talking points, but real people, me, you, the folks that go to work every day, they just want a fair shot for themselves, for their neighbors and for their community. Come on. 87% of people agree that we all have the right to real opportunity. Two thirds of Americans believe that opportunity isn't equal and that where you're from or what race you are has a bigger impact on achieving your potential than your skills, your knowledge, and your drive.

1:14:33.5 Dakota Pawlicki: And I think that when we're honest with ourselves, almost all of us can point to at least a couple times in our lives when we needed a little extra support, something a little different than the person next to us needed, just to help us get our goals. Heck, I'll even get personal with it. Growing up for me wasn't easy. I'm going to spare you all the details, but let's just say a kid like me, from a broken family that was fighting homelessness, poverty, mental illness, drug abuse, I wasn't college bound. I'd walk past a gas station on my way to high school every morning, and there was this gas station, and on the front sign, there was this sign that said, "We're hiring," every single day. And I always thought to myself, walking to school, that that's where I was going to end up. But you know, people saw my potential. They saw my work ethic, they saw that I was a good kid. And you know what they didn't do? They didn't say, "Well, he's poor. He comes from that bad family. He doesn't deserve opportunity. If only he could pick himself up from his bootstraps." No, that's not what they did. They leaned in. They gave me a place to live, literally. They helped me find scholarship for kids like me, who need a little extra financial support despite not having the best grades. They helped me find jobs, get into college, stay in college. They made sure I didn't starve. They made sure I had a fair shot at my right to real opportunity.

1:15:52.2 Dakota Pawlicki: But you know what, along the way, I met a lot of other people who had very similar stories to mine, and they were not White men. And just because of that, because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, because of who they are, they had an even harder time getting the support that I got. They're just as deserving. Heck, a lot of them were more deserving than me, if I'm being honest. But it was so much harder for them to get a real shot at opportunity. This whole thing drives me crazy. Everyone out here is just trying to do the best they can, and everyone, every single one of us, needs a little help from time to time. And isn't that what our education system's supposed to be about? Evening the playing field, making it fair, making it so where you grew up, what race you are or how much money you have in your pocket today doesn't determine your potential? I don't even really have a good ending here. Honestly, I'm just pretty angry about all this. It's just so obvious. And according to the research, many of us agree. So what the heck are we doing spending all this time, energy and money just to hold some people back? I honestly don't know. I just really... I really don't know.

1:17:01.6 Dakota Pawlicki: But I guess what I do know is that there are a lot of great resources out there for those of us who want to maintain a focus on racial equity and racial justice. As I've mentioned, we have a lot in our show notes, including links to the Chronicle's Impact Tracker, the messaging framework, several other pieces. Check them out, use them, and maybe we all can get back to actually helping people achieve their fullest potential.

1:17:25.2 Dakota Pawlicki: My thanks to our guests, Erin Gretzinger, Maggie Hicks, and Veronica Selzler, for joining me today. Our show is produced by Jacob Mann and me, Dakota Pawlicki, with support from Matthew Jenkins, Amy Bartner, and the team at Site Strategics. Well Done Marketing supports the promotion of our show. Deborah Humphreys and Kevin Corcoran provide leadership for Lumina Strategic Engagement efforts. Thanks as always for being with us, and I really hope to see you next time.

[music]