



**Science
Societies**

Barriers to being involved in DEI efforts amid recent policy changes

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Scientific progress depends on people sharing ideas, asking questions, and contributing their expertise. This article explores the barriers that can discourage participation in DEI-related activities and highlights practical ways professional societies can make engagement more accessible and

welcoming.

Science moves forward when people feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, and collaborating across institutions and career stages. Recently, many scientists and professional societies have been considering how effectively they support this kind of open participation, especially in activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Policy discussions around DEI have shifted significantly over the past year. New guidance has encouraged institutions to review certain programs and ensure their practices comply with federal civil-rights law and avoid unlawful race- or sex-based preferences. The stated purpose of these changes is to prevent discrimination and maintain merit-based decision making.

What this means for scientists

As institutions interpret and respond to changing guidance, many are proceeding with greater caution. A committee might be renamed, a program paused for review, or the language used to describe an initiative may be revised. Scientists and students, in turn, may not always know which activities are still encouraged or how their department or institution will interpret certain terminology.

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language used to describe an initiative may be revised. Scientists and students, in turn, may not always know which activities are still encouraged or how their department or institution will interpret certain terminology.

That kind of ambiguity can shape behavior even when no one is directly told to step back. Graduate students, international scholars, postdocs, and early-career scientists often depend on supervisors, recommendation letters, and future employment opportunities. As a result, some may think carefully before joining a committee or speaking publicly about inclusion.

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That hesitation does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest; it may reflect concern about how visible involvement could affect someone professionally or personally. A student may hold back a question at a conference. A scholar may quietly pass on a leadership role. When similar decisions occur across a scientific community, professional societies may lose valuable perspectives and potential future leaders.

Barriers beyond policy

Not every barrier traces back to a policy change. Someone may avoid joining a committee because its purpose, responsibilities, or time commitment have not been clearly explained. Others may value the work but lack the time, funding, or institutional support needed to participate. When opportunities circulate mainly through established professional networks, newer members may not even know that those opportunities exist.

Participation can also carry a quieter, personal weight. A student may have something useful to contribute but not want to be treated as a spokesperson for an entire community. People should not have to disclose personal or difficult experiences to demonstrate that their perspectives are valuable.

Language adds another barrier: joining a technical discussion in a second language takes real confidence, and the assurance that there will be time and patience to find the right words. A person who is quiet during a meeting may still have valuable ideas but may prefer to contribute through writing, individual conversations, or private feedback.

Discussions may also present merit and inclusion as competing priorities. In practice, professional societies can maintain high standards while making their processes, expectations, and opportunities easier to understand and access. These barriers can exist even within organizations that sincerely want broader participation.



A person who is quiet during a meeting may still have valuable ideas but may prefer to contribute through writing, individual conversations, or private feedback. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Nattakorn.

Moving forward with clarity

Professional societies can help by being specific about what an activity is for—e.g., mentoring, conference accessibility, and outreach—rather than leaning on broad labels read differently by different people. Clear, concrete descriptions make it easier for members to decide, on their own terms, whether and how they want to contribute.

Offering more than one path to involvement is equally important. Mentoring a student, reviewing whether a meeting is accessible, helping with outreach, or providing feedback privately can all be meaningful contributions. Participation should not require every person to speak publicly or share a personal experience. Rather than assuming that quieter members have nothing to contribute, societies can create space for different communication styles and forms of participation. A genuine invitation from a senior colleague can sometimes make an opportunity feel more accessible.

The policy landscape around DEI continues to evolve, and professional societies will need to stay attentive to relevant guidance as it develops. What has not changed is the underlying goal: Helping capable people participate and contribute to the science the field depends on. Societies cannot remove every barrier, but they can communicate clearly, provide meaningful choices, and build trust. Sometimes progress begins with institutional action. Sometimes it begins with something as simple as saying hello.

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participate and contribute to the science the field depends on."

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