Fundamental errors of data collection and validation undermine claims of ideological intensification in STEM

Emilio M. Bruna 🆔

Emilio M. Bruna (embruna@ufl.edu) is affiliated with the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation and with the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, Florida, in the United States.

@arizonalumni: Good luck to former #UofA student and @NASCAR champ @KurtBusch as he attempts to race in both the Indy 500 and Coke 600. #BearDown!

Efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at universities in the United States have emerged as another contentious issue in an increasingly polarized political climate (Diep 2023, Kelderman 2023, Kumar 2023). Many of the DEI programs now under fire were actually mandated and implemented decades ago by congress with broad bipartisan support (Watts et al. 2015) in response to the dramatic lack of racial, ethnic, and gender parity in STEM disciplines (Palid et al. 2023). More recent ones have been motivated by increasing evidence that diverse teams are more creative or have a competitive advantage (Hong and Page 2004, Fenster 2014, Hundschell et al. 2022), as well as employer demands for a diverse and culturally competent STEM workforce. Despite this long history and the demonstrable impact of many DEI programs, however, individuals and organizations critical of DEI programs often claim that these initiatives have become increasingly pervasive and ideological (Iyer 2022). However, this assertion is rarely supported with empirical evidence.

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) recently published a report by Mason Goad and Bruce R. Chartwell (Goad and Chartwell 2022) that Goad and Chartwell claimed is "the largest quantitative study of the growth of DEI-related language in the sciences" published to date. Goad and Chartwell (2022) searched university web pages and Twitter accounts, funding agency databases, and repositories for scientific literature for instances of "DEI-related terminology" (e.g., *diversity*, *equity*, *justice*, *race*). They claimed to have found a dramatic increase in the use of these terms in university communications and the scientific literature since 2010, which they concluded is unambiguous empirical evidence of "ideological intensification" in the academic and scientific arenas (Goad and Chartwell 2022). They also concluded that if these trends continue, "the future of STEM, along with the rest of the academy, is almost certainly imperiled" (see Goad and Chartwell 2022, p. 47) and encouraged others to use their data-mining tools and database to conduct similar research. Since the report's release in December 2022, it has been widely hailed and distributed by prominent DEI critics, such as Jordan Peterson and Christopher Rufo.

Readers of the NAS report, especially those familiar with scientometric research, will quickly identify some glaring analytical shortcomings. These include the absence of any formal statistical tests, the use of a single (and questionable) "control" term in literature searches, and using the absolute number of DEI-related tweets or scholarly publications emerging from universities as the foundation of their analyses and graphs (figure 1). This last issue is particularly egregious; the trends they purported to have documented and that they attributed to institutions increasingly emphasizing "DEI ideology" over science, are simply artefacts of both Twitter use and publication numbers increasing dramatically since 2010. Put another way, one would expect to see increases like those they report even if the proportional effort made by institutions remained unchanged, which is why it is essential to conduct analyses such as these with relativized rather than absolute values.

That said, none of this actually matters in light of what I discovered when accepting a challenge made by the report's authors in their technical appendix (pp. 48–50).

Goad and Chartwell made the laudable decision to make their code publicly available (National Association of Scholars 2022a), along with the "clean" data on which they base their conclusions (National Association of Scholars 2022b), "so that other analysts can scrutinize the methods and replicate them" (Goad and Chartwell 2022, p. 48). When I did so, I found that they failed to conduct even the most rudimentary data validation procedures prior to text mining. Using standard tools and simple methods (see the supplemental material; Bruna 2023), I found that their "clean" data sets contain thousands of irrelevant records and duplications. Notable examples include the tweet that opened this letter—one of over 12,000 about topics including sporting events ("race"), members of the Supreme Court ("justice"), and hedge funds ("equity")—along with at least 2000 National Science Foundation grants for ecological and evolutionary research on species "diversity." Others can be found in their data set of "DEI articles in STEM journals," which included at least 20,537 duplicated records (inflating their estimate of DEI-related publications in Google Scholar and PubMed by 18.74% and 26.7%, respectively), hundreds of articles published in non-STEM outlets such as *Critical Sociology*, *The Medical Law Review*, and *The Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, and thousands of non-DEI articles on topics ranging from palliative care for cancer patients to transcatheter aortic valve replacements (see the supplemental material).

Research from think tanks and advocacy organizations heavily influences policy, legislation, and contemporary debates related to scientific research and higher education (Gándara and Ness 2019,
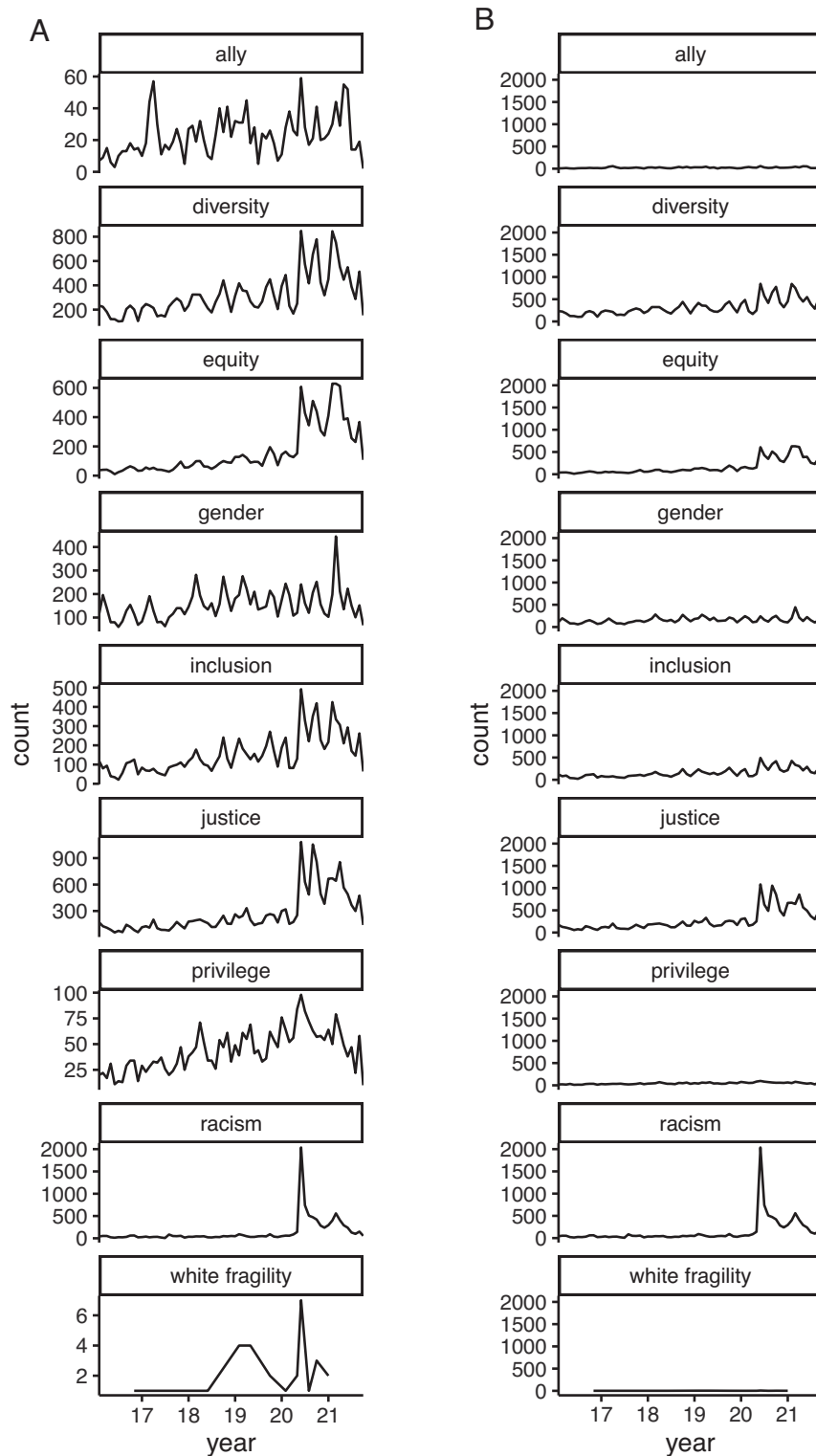
Figure 1. (a) Subset of figure 8 from the NAS report replotted with floating **y**-axes that accentuate negligible increases in very rare terms. (b) The same panels as in panel (a) but with identical **y**-axes scaled by the frequency of the most common term. Both sets of figures were made with the original, uncorrected NAS data (CC BY 4.0), so the actual number of tweets for each term is much lower.

Baig et al. 2020). Computational approaches can greatly expand the scope and impact of this research but only if the conclusions are based on robust methods and reliable data. Furthermore, methodological transparency by organizations publishing outside of the traditional scholarly literature are commendable but only when accompanied by self-accountability. Because the conclusions in Goad and Chartwell's (2022) report were based solely on data sets that are clearly of questionable quality, the NAS should adhere to its principles and retract the report. Failure to do so would be an ironic example of what they claim has become

pervasive in university settings: the prioritizing of ideology over intellectual rigor.

Supplemental material

Supplemental data are available at *BIOSCI* online.

Acknowledgments

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