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Legislating a Strategic Plan: Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ Discourse and the Political Agenda Reshaping Higher Education in Oklahoma

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Abstract

Oklahoma has become a focal point in the national escalation of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-DEI efforts, emerging as one of the most aggressive states in proposing and advancing bills that undermine queer and trans rights across sectors, including public education, healthcare, free speech, and civil liberties. Although many bills do not pass into law, the volume, language, and momentum constitute a discursive and political terrain that actively regulates 2SLGBTQIA+ lives. This study retools the concept of strategic planning—typically associated with institutions' mission-setting—as an analytical heuristic to examine how legislative efforts operate as a coordinated political agenda. Drawing on critical policy analysis (CPA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the authors map selected legislative texts from 2021 to 2024 to demonstrate how Oklahoma lawmakers are using policy discourse to reshape higher education into an extension of state power, advancing white cisheteronormative logics. By framing these efforts as ideologically coherent rather than isolated, this analysis contributes to the urgent work of identifying and resisting the restructuring of public education against 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.

Keywords: anti-2SLGBTQIA + legislation; anti-DEI legislation; Oklahoma higher education; critical policy and discourse analysis; strategic planning

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Oklahoma has witnessed an alarming rise in legislative actions aimed at restricting the rights and freedoms of 2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual + (2SLGBTQIA+) individuals. These bills have targeted various aspects of their lives, including gender-affirming healthcare, education, free speech, and civil rights. For example, during the 2023 legislative session, House Bill 2177 and Senate Bill 613 imposed significant legal and financial barriers to trans healthcare, restricting public funding for providers offering gender-affirming care (HB 2177, 2023; SB 613, 2023). Additionally, Senate Bill 408 and House Bill 1449 sought to redefine "women" in a way that effectively excluded trans women and girls (SB 408, 2023; HB 1449, 2023), while House Bill 2186 targeted drag performers and expressions of queer identity and queer culture (HB 2186, 2023). Governor Kevin Stitt's Executive Order 2023-31 (2023) further prohibited state agencies and public universities from using state resources for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, directly impacting 2SLGBTQIA+ students across college campuses.

By 2024, Oklahoma led the nation with more than 89[1] proposed anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills introduced over just two legislative sessions, accounting for nearly 10% of the nation's

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total (Fife, 2023; American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 2024). This surge is part of a national escalation in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ efforts, with over 510 bills introduced across the United States in 2023 and another 479 by early 2024 (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 2024). These actions significantly endanger the rights, safety, and well-being of queer and trans individuals, particularly students within higher education institutions. Far from being isolated incidents, these legislative attacks reflect entrenched societal efforts to regulate, marginalize, and erase queer and trans lives (Nicolazzo, 2017; Snorton, 2017).

Dean Spade's *Normal Life* (Spade, 2015), written during a moment of major queer policy gains—such as the legalization of same-sex marriage—examines how legal reforms can reinforce systemic inequalities even while appearing to offer protections. Spade positions readers to understand laws and policies not merely as protective mechanisms but as regulatory tools that uphold the status quo by disciplining marginalized communities, particularly trans people. His focus on the administrative mechanisms of governance illustrates how everyday bureaucratic processes produce material harm under the guise of neutrality.

Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender* (Butler, 2024) emerges from a different sociopolitical time, as "gender" becomes a focal point for right-wing movements and political actors seeking to weaponize fear, cultivate hatred, and galvanize authoritarian movements. While Spade emphasized the administrative and material violence embedded within ostensibly progressive or liberal legal reforms by critiquing the limitations of individual rights frameworks, Butler foregrounds the affective and discursive dimensions of contemporary authoritarian mobilization against so-called "gender ideology". Together, Spade and Butler's work—written over a decade apart—illustrates an important shift: From an early 21st-century critique of human rights, or liberal rights frameworks, to a contemporary analysis of how authoritarianism leverages manufactured fears around gender discourse to consolidate political power. Despite different temporal or analytical emphases, both scholars insist that laws and policies must be understood as part of an interconnected, systemic framework of power. They illuminate how legislative efforts function not in isolation but as part of a broader matrix of sociopolitical control that shapes life chances, identities, and public discourse.

To trace and better understand the systemic logic of these efforts in Oklahoma, this paper draws on the concept of strategic planning as an organizational and analytical tool. Strategic planning typically refers to a structured process in which an organization defines its vision, mission, goals, and corresponding strategies (Mathies & Ferland, 2022; Mitaki & Gitonga, 2018). A strategic plan serves as a bridge between an organization's current mission—what it does—and its envisioned future—what it seeks to become (Hinton, 2012; Lick & Kaufman, 2001). This process involves identifying the most effective strategies and tactics to achieve goals, uphold organizational values, and advance a long-term vision (Mitaki & Gitonga, 2018; Lick & Kaufman, 2001; Alhosseiny, 2023).

Applied here, strategic planning serves not as the object of critique but as a heuristic for understanding how Oklahoma's legislative initiatives form part of an intentional, goal-oriented political project. Drawing on the traditions of critical policy analysis (CPA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper examines how policies and legislative efforts operate as strategic interventions that seek to reconfigure the sociopolitical landscape of higher education and life beyond the institution. Examining the discourse embedded in specific legislation—both proposed and enacted—reveals the tactical coherence behind these efforts: a systematic attempt to reshape higher education, civic life, and broader societal norms. Mapping Oklahoma's legislative actions as strategic interventions enables a clearer analysis of how power operates both locally and nationally and how targeted

responses might be crafted to defend 2SLGBTQIA+ rights within higher education and democratic values more broadly.

2. Brief National Context and the Coordination of Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ Policies

Legislative assaults on 2SLGBTQIA+ rights have become a defining feature of U.S. state governance. Under the rhetoric of "parental rights", states are restricting discussions of gender and sexuality in K-12 schools, mandating the involuntary outing of students, and escalating mental health risks for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth (Clingan, 2024; Lange et al., 2019). Florida's SB 1320 (2023) and HB 1069 (2023), Arkansas' SB 294 (2023), and Indiana's HB 1608 (2023) are emblematic of a larger legislative agenda. These efforts increasingly extend into higher education, where states are dismantling DEI offices, banning identity-based programming, and prohibiting teaching about so-called "divisive concepts"—fundamentally reshaping curricular and co-curricular spaces (Lemerand & Duran, 2024; Goldberg, 2024). Institutions, pressured to close 2SLGBTQIA+ resource centers and limit inclusive programming, are less able to meet marginalized students' needs, deepening feelings of abandonment, vulnerability, and disenfranchisement (Gretzinger et al., 2024; Rodrigues, 2024).

Beyond censorship, these laws promote and privilege cisheteronormativity and whiteness as society's standards. As Halperin (2012) argues, heteronormativity constructs a "normative horizon of expectation for human flourishing", (p. 451). Following Berger and Luckmann's (1966) stages of social construction—externalization; objectification; and internalization—state powers build structures grounded in cisheteronormative assumptions; codify them into law; and condition individuals to perceive them as natural. Efforts to ban gender-affirming care, criminalize drag performances, restrict trans athletes, and enforce binary bathrooms and housing policies are deliberate attempts to foreclose non-normative futures. Although national media often centers Texas and Florida, Oklahoma is a key but unrecognized node in this network. Its legislative patterns mirror national trends. Senate Bill (SB 1100, 2022), banning nonbinary gender markers on birth certificates, made Oklahoma the first to enact such a law, quickly replicated in Florida (e.g., HB 1233 (2024)/HB 1639 (2024)) and Texas (Executive Order 15168, 2025). These efforts are propelled by political leadership overwhelmingly composed of conservative white men who wield state power. Oklahoma's actions reveal that 2SLGBTQIA+ erasure is not a series of local anomalies but part of a diffuse, national movement designed to push cisheteronormative and conservative social order.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical and Methodological Framing: Higher Education as a Site of Governance

Critical policy analysis (CPA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are employed to examine the discursive landscape shaping contemporary legislative efforts in Oklahoma. Rather than treating policy texts as neutral documents, CPA foregrounds how policies are sociopolitical artifacts that reflect, reinforce, and reshape power relations (Diem & Young, 2015; Diem et al., 2014). Early scholars emphasized the importance of discourse in policy analysis. For example, Marshall (1997) stressed that "…those who control the discourse discredit or marginalize other 'truths'" (64). Similarly, Ball (1994) and Taylor (1997) highlighted how power is negotiated, constructed, and enacted through discourse. Policies are not self-evident; they are discursive formations that produce social realities and reinforce political ideological orders. As Gee (2014) notes, all discourse is inherently political, and CDA provides tools to interrogate legislative texts to "…uncover tacit ideologies or what has become naturalized as 'common sense' through relations of power" (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 359). Through analyzing language-in-use with a selected corpus of

legislative texts, CDA allows an examination of not only what is communicated but also where, how, and what remains unsaid—and how different modes are juxtaposed (Dorner et al., 2023, p. 360).

Strategic plans in particular offer a critical entry point for analyzing governance. As Dooris and colleagues (Dooris et al., 2002) observe, strategic plans act as key mechanisms through which universities prioritize initiatives and align efforts within broader political agendas. Strategic plans often reflect neoliberal trends in higher education, such as market-driven funding models, a focus on productivity and efficiency, and the corporatization of university structures (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Building on this insight, this paper reverses the typical use of strategic planning frameworks. Rather than analyzing institutional strategic plans, we treat Oklahoma's legislative initiatives as forming a de facto strategic plan—deliberate, coordinated interventions in the governance of higher education. This methodological move makes visible the underlying architecture of the state's political project and highlights how discourse operates as a key site of power and governance.

3.2. Developing the Strategic Plan Heuristic: Pillars, Strategies, and Tactics

To structure our analysis while employing CDA, we developed a heuristic rooted in three components of strategic planning widely recognized in the literature: pillars, strategies, and tactics. First, we identify broad domains or areas of intervention—*pillars*—the key sites through which legislative power targets education; in particular anti-2SLGBTQIA+ efforts across educational spaces. Next, *strategies* describe the overarching methods used to operationalize or enforce its political projects within those domains. And lastly—*tactics*—the often granular mechanisms or tools used to carry out the strategies in practice. These tactics often reflect legal, social, financial, and administrative tools that the state employs to create structural barriers, regulate discourse, and enforce ideological conformity. Finally, legislative actions are traced back to their broader *mission* and *vision.* The mission captures the immediate objectives embedded in governance efforts, while the vision reflects the ideological end goal. This heuristic captures the multiscalar nature of governance projects: From broad ideological commitments to organized methods of intervention to the concrete tools of enforcement. While strategic planning frameworks are typically associated with institutional self-governance, we repurpose this structure analytically to better understand how political actors organize discourse to pursue ideological projects at the state level. Using these components also aligns with CPAs emphasis on tracing the layered and often opaque exercise of power through policy texts (Young et al., 2017). Importantly, this use of strategic planning aligns with CPA and CDAs broader commitments: to understand how discourse structures social reality, to trace power as it moves through language, and to expose the logic underpinning seemingly neutral or technical policy maneuvers. Using this heuristic allows us to map not only what legislative discourse seeks to accomplish but also how it organizes itself to make those accomplishments possible, revealing the sophisticated discursive work underpinning what might otherwise be perceived as isolated or piecemeal legislation.

3.3. Building the Corpus of Legislative Texts

This study constructed a legislative corpus to examine Oklahoma's political landscape. Bills and executive actions from the 2023 to 2024 legislative cycles were prioritized, as these years marked a significant rise in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-DEI initiatives. To fully capture the strategic nature of these attacks, pivotal legislation from 2021 to 2022 was also included to account for key legal and ideological precedents (See Table 1).

Table 1. Selected anti-2SLGBTQ+ legislative efforts in Oklahoma.

Bill	Year Introduced	Primary Sponsor	Status	Summary
HB 1775	2021	Rep. Kevin West (R); Sen. David Bullard (R)	Signed into law	Prohibits certain teachings in public schools, including concepts related to critical race theory.
SB 1777	2024	Sen. Nathan Dahm (R)	Died in committee	Prohibiting public funding for provider of gender transition procedures
SB2 (Save Women's Sports Act)	2021, 2022	Sen. Michael Bergstrom (R); Rep. Toni Hasenbeck (R)	Signed into law	Requires student athletes to compete in sports based on their biological sex.
HB 1007	2022	Rep. Charles McCall (R); Sen. Greg Treat (R)	Died in chamber	Conditioned $39.4 million in federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) on the University of Oklahoma Health System's agreement to cease providing gender-affirming treatments for trans youth.
HB1011	2023	Rep. Jim Olsen (R); Rep. Terry O'Donnell (R)	Died in Committee	Redefining sex: biological sex
SB 0129	2023	Sen. David Bullard (R); Rep. Kevin West (R)	Died in Committee	Prohibiting certain uses of public funds, public facilities, and public employees.
SB 1098	2023, 2024	Sen. Shane Jett (R)	Died in committee	Public display of lewd acts; prohibiting lewd acts or obscene material in public places; creating felony offenses for intentional display of lewd acts or obscene material to minors.
SB 613	2023, 2024	Sen. Julie Daniels (R)	Signed into law	Prohibits gender transition procedures for minors under the age of 18.
SB 0878	2023, 2024	Sen. Randy Grellne (R)r; Rep. Nicole Miller (R)	In committee	Creating the Oklahoma Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act; prohibiting gender transition procedures; providing for administrative and civil enforcement.
SB 0345	2023, 2024	Sen. Warren Hamilton (R)	Died in committee	Making certain medical treatment (gender-affirming care) unlawful; defining term; providing for certain penalty
SB 0250	2023, 2024	Sen. Nathan Dahm (R); Sen. George Burns (R)	Died in committee	Prohibiting public funding for provider of gender transition procedures
SB 2177	2023, 2024	Rep. Kevin West (R); Rep. Jim Olsen (R)	Died in committee	Prohibiting gender transition procedures
HB 3217 (Patriotism not Pride Act)	2024	Rep. Kevin West (R); Sen. David Bullard (R)	Passed committee	Prohibits state agencies from displaying flags representing sexual orientation or gender identity on state property.

We relied on resources maintained by the ACLU of Oklahoma and Freedom Oklahoma—two community-based advocacy organizations focused on queer and trans rights. Their legislative trackers allowed us to systematically identify bills aligned with anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-DEI strategies, supplemented by independent reviews of bill texts and legislative histories. Bills were selected if they met one or more of the following criteria: (1) restricted 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals' access to gender-affirming healthcare, educational resources, or full participation in educational settings; (2) censored queer and trans self-expression or freedom of speech; (3) regulated the conditions of higher education institutions (e.g., curriculum, student life, faculty governance); and (4) invoked ideological constructs such as "wokeness", "DEI", "CRT", "biological sex", "parental rights", or related ideological constructs. Our multi-stage screening process—memo writing, cross-verification, and database comparison—ensured comprehensiveness.

3.4. Analysis Process and Operationalizing the Heuristic

Consistent with CDAs emphasis on analyzing language-in-use (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) and CPAs focus on policy as discursive production, we approached each legislative text not as neutral communication but as a strategic effort to exert authority, organize meaning, and enact ideology. We attended closely to explicit word choices, framing devices, and intertextual references across legislative texts. Our reading practices and analytic strategies emphasized how language functions as social practice, how discourse constructs social realities, and how power operates through texts.

We employed a hybridized inductive-deductive approach, inductively identifying emergent discursive formations while deductively applying our strategic plan heuristic to trace pillars, strategies, and tactics within discourse. Throughout the process we engaged in team memo writing and iterative and collaborative coding discussions. This recursive practice aligns with CDAs emphasis on moving between text and context, description and interpretation (Fairclough, 2013). To ensure trustworthiness and to stay consistent with CDA and CPAs commitments to situated knowledge production (Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), we engaged in ongoing critical reflection of our own positionalities, interpretive sensibilities, and assumptions. By doing so, we align with CPAs commitment to tracing the layered and often opaque exercise of power within policy texts (Young et al., 2017)—engaging with what this means for ourselves as queer professionals living in Oklahoma and working within higher education.

3.5. Study Limitations and Researcher Positionalities

While this study provides a mapping of Oklahoma's anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislative landscape, several limitations must be acknowledged. While legislative texts offer critical insight into the language, framing, and potential consequences of these bills, critical discourse analysis alone cannot capture how laws are interpreted, enforced, or experienced in practice. Future research could extend this work by examining the lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and faculty navigating these environments, as well as institutional responses to the shifting political landscape. Particular attention is needed to explore how these efforts affect individuals at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression.

Second, the corpus focuses primarily on legislative efforts introduced between 2021 and 2024, including foundational actions such as HB 1775 (2021) and Executive Order 2023-20 (2023), also known as the Women's Bill of Rights. Earlier legislative histories are not exhaustively mapped, and thus this project cannot fully account for the historical evolution of conservative governance in Oklahoma. Finally, although Oklahoma's reflects broader national trends in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policymaking, state-level contexts vary. Therefore,

findings here illuminate patterns but are not presumed to be generalizable without comparative analysis. Despite these limitations, this project contributes to an important theoretical and strategic analysis of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policymaking in Oklahoma, offering a foundation for future work that seeks to map, resist, and dismantle these coordinated governance strategies.

This research emerges from our lived realities and professional experiences. We both identify as queer and work at the same predominantly white, flagship public university in Oklahoma—one as a faculty member in a college of education and the other as a student affairs practitioner with prior experience advising queer and trans students in a 2SLGBTQIA+ Resource Center. Our proximity to the subject matter and these systems positions us not as distant observers, but as individuals directly implicated in the structures under examination. Following Burleigh and Burm (2022), we recognize ourselves as "both the researcher(s) and the researched" (p. 4). Our epistemological standpoint is rooted in critical reflexivity, queer worldmaking, and resistance to structures seeking to erase 2SLGBTQIA+ existence. This orientation informs the analysis and grounds the urgency, care, and accountability with which it was undertaken.

4. Findings

Our analysis revealed that legislative documents strategically use discourse that works to regulate, marginalize, and surveil educational spaces. Through our application of the heuristic across the corpus, two interrelated pillars of discursive strategy emerged: (1) state-sanctioned 2SLGBTQIA+ censorship and (2) the reduction of life chances and livability for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. Across these texts, strategic language choices, framing patterns, and omissions consistently worked to constrain critical inquiry, restrict representations of race, gender, and sexuality, and recast education's purpose as reproducing a singular ideological vision. In the sections that follow, each pillar is unpacked by tracing the tactics, discursive strategies, and textual evidence that surfaced through our analytic process.

Guided by theories of discourse that illuminate sites of social struggle and governance (Foucault, 1977), our analysis treats legislative language not as a neutral reflection of policy but as an active mechanism for producing and maintaining ideological control. In these texts, discourse shapes not only what is permissible but also what is conceivable, legitimate, and livable. In Oklahoma, legislative discourse becomes a key technology of state power, codifying white cisheteronormativity while foreclosing the possibilities for 2SLGBTQIA+ alternative futures. Drawing from Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of the social construction of reality and Foucault's (1977) theorization of surveillance and disciplinary power, we locate Oklahoma's legislative efforts as part of a broader state apparatus that manufactures conformity across higher education.

The following sections trace the strategic plan, organized around the two pillars that emerged from our analysis. First, in Pillar 1: State-Sanctioned Censorship, we highlight how censorship is enforced through two primary strategies: 1.1. Censorship in Curriculum and 1.2. Censorship of 2SLGBTQIA+ Representation in Co-Curricular Spaces. Then, in Pillar 2: Reducing Life Chances and Livability of 2SLGBTQIA+ People, we analyze three additional strategies: 2.1 Institutionalizing Cisheteronormativity, 2.2 Preventing Institutional Support, and 2.3 Creating Barriers for Social Participation. Within each strategy, we identify and describe specific tactics that operationalize the broader discursive and structural goals of the state. The comprehensive list of these tactics, later addressed, can be found in Figure 1. Readers are encouraged to consult Figure 1 as a companion to the analysis, where granular operations are mapped alongside broader discursive functions and terrain.

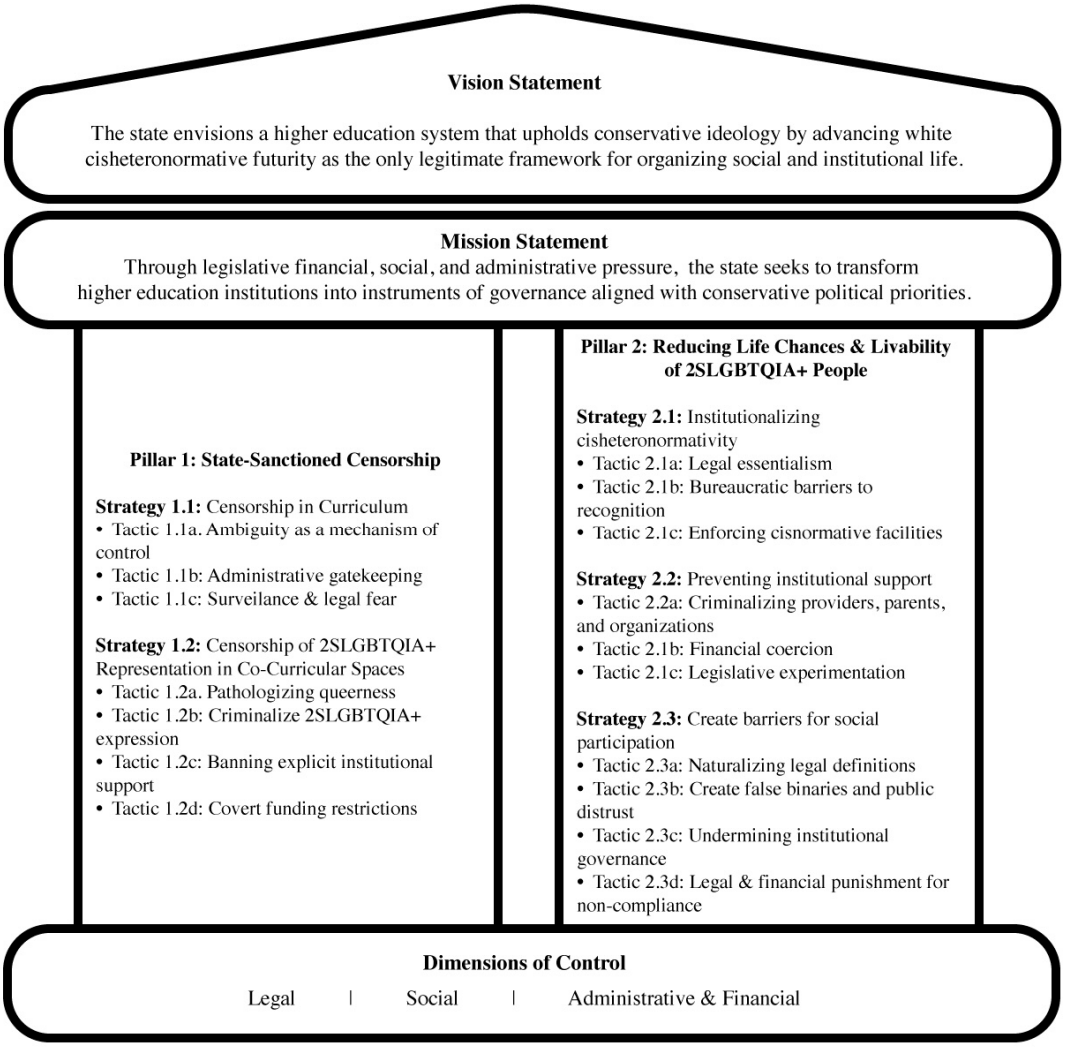


Figure 1. Oklahoma's Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ Legislative Landscape as a Strategic Plan.

4.1. Pillar 1: State-Sanctioned Censorship

The Oklahoma state government and its affiliated political actors exert control over education primarily through censorship. While K-12 education faces more aggressive restrictions—such as book bans and curriculum changes that erase 2SLGBTQIA+ identities and discussions of gender and sexuality—higher education is also increasingly affected. Although academic freedom protections at some universities limit direct curriculum control, state-imposed restrictions profoundly shape students' transitions from K-12 to college and constrain critical inquiry at the university level. Censorship manifests through two primary mechanisms: (1) Censorship in curriculum and (2) censorship of 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in co-curricular spaces.

4.1.1. Strategy 1.1: Censorship in Curriculum

HB 1775 and DEI Restrictions

In 2021, Governor Kevin Stitt signed the first piece of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ and anti-DEI legislation in Oklahoma—House Bill 1775—or; more commonly referred to as the critical race theory (CRT) ban bill; purportedly aimed at combating racism and sexism in public schools. HB1775 prohibits educators from teaching content that could cause students "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex (HB 1775, 2021, General Prohibition 7). This vague and abstract listing within the language of the law makes enforcement subjective and broadens the scope

of censorship, potentially discouraging faculty from engaging in critical discussions on racism, sexism, and social inequities. In 2024, Republican legislators introduced Senate Bill 1305 (SB 1305, 2024), which expanded these restrictions by framing DEI initiatives under the invented category of "DEI-CRT"—explicitly targeting discussion of systemic racism, privilege, intersectionality, and gender identity. Although eventually dying in committee during legislative session, SB 1305 stipulated that:

> "An institution of higher education or any employee, appointee, or committee acting on behalf thereof may not require, solicit, or incentivize faculty to apply or participate in DEI-CRT practices or include DEI-CRT-related content in any course as a condition of approval, designation, or listing as part of any academic degree program, including general education, major, minor, or certificate requirements, or as a condition of consideration in any faculty member's performance assessment, promotion, tenure, salary adjustment, or any other incentive".

While faculty technically retain academic freedom in their classrooms, the bill ensures that students are neither required nor encouraged to engage critically with these subjects, fundamentally altering general education curricula and degree pathways. Programs focused on race, ethnicity, or gender studies remained nominally "exempt"—meaning protected on paper but structurally weakened, as they cannot satisfy general education or major requirements beyond fulfilling university credit-hour totals. This segregation disincentivized enrollment, threatening long-term viability and promoting programmatic precarity. Although neither HB 1775 nor SB 1305 explicitly mention or target 2SLGBTQIA+ topics or people, their legal precedents create conditions that marginalize gender and sexuality discussion by the discursive construction and classification of them as "divisive" concepts, signaling to institutions that 2SLGBTQIA+ narratives are to be marginalized without explicit prohibition.

Proposed House Bill (HB 3135, 2024) sought to prohibit public schools and universities from using state funds to "promote, encourage, or provide instruction on topics related to sexual choice, sexual orientation, drag queens, or similar topics". Framing 2SLGBTQIA+ existence as inherently political or deviant, this legislative text attempted to reduce discussions of gender identity and sexuality to ideological indoctrination. HB 3135 (2024) also prohibits not only the instruction but also the development, procurement, and use of curricular materials related to these topics. Even if educators wished to discuss gender and sexuality, they would be starved of the institutional support and resources necessary to do so.

Surveillance and Punitive Enforcement

Beyond content restrictions, Oklahoma legislators are actively introducing mechanisms to enforce compliance and legalize fear. Senate Bill (SB 843, 2023) proposed mandating that every public higher education institution within Oklahoma's State System of Higher Education establish a formal committee dedicated to monitoring and investigating reports of "indoctrination". Students would be emboldened to report faculty for perceived ideological bias, restrictions on expression, or deemed inappropriate behavior. Notably, SB 843 (2023) singles out socialism, communism, and Marxism as forms of "anti-American bias", positioning critical theories, ethnic studies, and gender studies as "threats to public safety" and fundamentally "unpatriotic in nature". The bill proposed that universities establish a reporting infrastructure for students to submit complaints through hotline or email systems, suggesting an ongoing atmosphere of surveillance to chill both teaching and learning. The bill categorized reported incidents as potential "criminal activity" or actions that "reasonably have the potential to endanger campus safety". The language

mirrors broader authoritarian trends in governance, where ideological dissent is not only discouraged but reframed as a security threat warranting state intervention.

4.1.2. Strategy 1.2: Censorship of 2SLGBTQIA+ Representation in Co-Curricular Spaces

Efforts to suppress 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in co-curricular spaces (i.e., student programs, services, and out-of-classroom engagement) often unfold beyond the formal realm of educational legislation. Nevertheless, these broader state-led initiatives profoundly impact 2SLGBTQIA+ students (and all students) in higher education by criminalizing gender nonconformity, erasing institutional support, and deterring universities from hosting or funding programming. Critical discourse analysis reiterates how these efforts function, not merely to regulate specific events but to reshape public meanings of queer and trans life, rendering 2SLGBTQIA+ identities as obscene, deviant, or obscene.

Efforts to Criminalize 2SLGBTIQA+ Visibility: The Case of Drag Bans

One of the most prominent examples of this censorship is the surge of drag bans introduced across the United States. In Oklahoma alone, four separate drag ban bills emerged in 2024—House Bill 2186 (HB 2186, 2024), Senate Bill 503, House Bill 2736, and Senate Bill 1098—representing a coordinated effort to redefine gender nonconformity as inherently obscene, inappropriate, or dangerous. For instance, proposed bill HB 2736 (2024) broadly defines drag as

> "A performance in which a performer exhibits a gender identity that is different from the gender assigned to the performer at birth using clothing, makeup, or other physical markers and sings, lip syncs, dances, or otherwise performs before an audience for entertainment".

Similarly, HB 2186 reclassifies drag performances as "adult cabaret performances", placing them alongside topless dancing and stripping, while SB 1098 (2024) and SB 503 (2024) attempted to criminalize so-called "lewd acts" in public, applying vague definitions that could encompass any non-normative gender expression different from their sex (*not* gender) assigned at birth. HB 2736 (2024) and HB 2186 further classified drag performances as "harmful to minors", equating them with pornography, nudity, and sadomasochistic content. HB 2186 even criminalizes Drag Queen Story Hours, attempting to make it a misdemeanor, punishable by up to one year in jail for anyone who "organizes or authorizes" such an event where minors are present.

These bills deliberately conflate gender nonconformity and drag, weaponizing moral panic to justify censorship. Despite no evidence suggesting drag performers or performers are harmful to minors, legislators frame them as threats to public morality—a discursive strategy of problem framing where marginalized groups are sources of social danger and therefore require surveillance and suppression. Moreover, the intentionally vague language enables broad application, risking the criminalization of 2SLGBTQIA+ students simply existing in public spaces, as their gender expression could be misinterpreted as "drag" under the law's definition—gender nonconformity itself becomes a potential legal liability. Proposed laws are vague enough to instill such fears, deter expression and individuality, and may force marginalized communities into invisibility without needing consistent formal enforcement.

The proposed legislation also imposes significant financial and legal risks: Bills like SB 1098 and SB 503 (2024) introduce private rights of action, allowing individuals to sue organizers or performers if they claim to have been "unwillingly exposed" to a drag performance. HB 2186 imposes felony charges, including up to two years in prison and $20,000 in fines, for hosting drag events. This tactic deputizes the public to police 2SLGBTQIA+ visibility, creating a chilling environment at university-sponsored, student-led events.

Beyond Performance: Funding Bans, Institutional Retrenchment, and Preemptive Compliance

Legislative efforts extend beyond banning performances to cutting off financial support for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Proposed House Bill 3217 (HB 3217, 2024), known as the "*Patriotism Not Pride Act*", prohibits state agencies from allocating public funds for Pride Month activities, 2SLGBTQIA+ educational initiatives, or displays of Pride symbols, including the flying of Pride flags at universities. These intended measures communicate—discursively and materially—that 2SLGBTQIA+ people on campus (students, staff, faculty, and the larger campus and local community writ large) are unwelcome; intensifying feelings of exclusion and abandonment in environments already marked by hostility. By systematically attempting to remove signs, symbols, and speech that affirm public narratives about who belongs, they are reinstated and reinforced.

This chilling effect extends beyond the immediate intent of legislative 2SLGBTQIA+ erasure and censorship. In 2023, Governor Stitt signed Executive Order 2023-31 (2023)—the "Anti-Discrimination Order" or the "anti-DEI" ban—which included a review of DEI programs at state-funded higher education institutions. Without explicit directives, several Oklahoma universities preemptively shut down DEI offices, including 2SLGBTQIA+ resource centers, in a bid to appease state authorities. 2SLGBTQIA+ student organizations, although technically exempt, faced escalating barriers as funding was restricted and surveillance mechanisms—such as SB 843's ant- "indoctrination" committees loomed over co-curricular spaces (e.g., drag performances and other DEI initiatives). Concurrently, although it did not advance, HB 2736's (2024) attempted ban on any state funding for any programming that includes drag performances or similar topics, and threat to cut financial resources for student organizations, cultural programs, and educational initiatives lingered. This institutional withdrawal reflects anticipatory compliance, a form of self-censorship driven by perceived political threats rather than direct legal orders. By potentially forcing institutions to withdraw resources, these efforts weaken student organizations and limit their ability for advocacy. These restrictions create significant financial, legal, and reputational risks for universities and student groups, effectively discouraging them from organizing events. Collectively, drag bans, funding restrictions, and intended acts of erasure work synergistically to eliminate 2SLGBTIQA+ presence in higher education.

4.2. Pillar 2: Reducing Life Chances and Livability of 2SLGBTQIA+ People

Beyond restricting representation, Oklahoma legislative efforts also work to reduce the life chances and livability of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals—particularly trans people—by denying them access to essential services; creating barriers to public participation; and preventing institutions from providing necessary accommodations. These efforts are not simply about limiting rights in an abstract; they intentionally make survival more difficult for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, pushing them out of public spaces altogether.

The intense legislative focus on trans individuals is strategic, not accidental. It reflects a broader political effort that uses trans communities as legal and cultural scapegoats, fueling division while expanding state control. By portraying trans, especially trans-femme-identifying individuals, as threats to "public safety" and invoking transphobic narratives of "protecting women and children", legislators normalize policies that criminalize trans existence and block institutional efforts to support trans lives. Three key strategies animate this pillar: (1) Institutionalizing cisheteronormativity, (2) preventing institutional support, and (3) creating barriers for social participation.

4.2.1. Strategy 2.1: Institutionalizing Cisheteronormativity

At both the state and national levels, anti-trans legislation increasingly seeks to codify heteronormativity into law, embedding binary gender structures into every facet of public life. restricting institutional support for trans students and reinforcing rigid binary structures. While many policies do not directly target education, their impact on higher education institutions is substantial. A key example is Executive Order 2023-20, known as the "Women's Bill of Rights "(Executive Order 2023-20, 2023). Signed by Governor Stitt in 2023, this order mandates an essentialist and binary definition of sex and gender. requiring terms like "male", "female", "man", and "woman" be based exclusively on biological characteristics:

> "female", when used in reference to a natural person, shall be defined as such a person whose biological reproductive system is designed to produce ova.
>
> "male", when used in reference to a natural person, shall be defined as such a person whose biological reproductive system is designed to fertilize the ova of a female.
>
> "woman" and "girl" shall refer to natural persons who are female.
>
> "man" and "boy" shall refer to natural persons who are male.

These definitions now govern all administrative agencies, boards, and commissions, including those overseeing public universities. As a result, institutions must comply with state law in how they process gender markers on driver's licenses, birth certificates, and student IDs—entrenching a rigid binary framework across administrative processes.

The impact extends beyond documentation, shaping campus infrastructure itself. Highly visible ways this manifests are in access to public facilities, including restrooms, housing opportunities, and other gendered campus spaces. A notable example is the renewed push for "bathroom bills" across the country, which seek to force individuals to use restrooms that align with their assigned sex at birth. For example, in 2022 Governor Stitt signed Senate Bill 615 into law, mandating that K-12 public schools enforce bathroom and locker room usage based on the sex listed on a student's birth certificate. Noncompliant students are relegated to single-occupancy facilities, effectively isolating trans and gender-nonconforming students. Although SB 615 (2022) does not apply to higher education, it legitimizes binary and essentialist understandings of sex and gender, influencing campus policy, infrastructure, and climate. Higher education institutions thus find themselves constrained in their efforts to create inclusive environments. Efforts to expand all-gender restrooms, revise housing policies, or update campus records face significant legal and political obstacles. By codifying essentialist definitions into law, the state ensures that trans students face systemic barriers not only in administrative processes but also in daily life on campus. The broader effect is to render public institutions increasingly unlivable for trans people, forcing many either into precarity or out of Oklahoma altogether.

4.2.2. Strategy 2.2: Preventing Institutional Support

Beyond legally defining gender to erase trans existence, the state has moved aggressively to restrict access to gender-affirming healthcare. These policies are not merely about limiting medical services—they are designed to enforce state control over trans bodies; delegitimize trans existence; and create systemic barriers to necessary care. Senate Bill 613, signed into law in 2023, bans both surgical and non-surgical gender-affirming care for minors. It broadly defines "gender transition procedures" to include surgical intervention, puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and any medications that delay puberty or facilitate gender transition. Healthcare providers who offer such care or, rather, engage in gender-affirming treatment noted as "unprofessional conduct", equating it with fraudulent medical

practices, risk losing their medical licenses and facing criminal liability. SB 613 goes further by permitting lawsuits against healthcare providers up until the trans individual reaches the age of 45: an extreme and unprecedented expansion of legal vulnerability. Additionally, the law allows the state attorney general to intervene in enforcement, ensuring that prosecution remains possible even if local authorities decline to pursue cases.

While SB 613 applies to minors, efforts to expand restrictions to trans adults quickly followed. In 2024 alone, sixteen proposed bills sought to raise the threshold for accessing gender-affirming care. Bills like HB 1011 (2024) and SB 345 (2024) attempted to prohibit such care for individuals under 21, with SB 345 proposing mandatory minimum three-year prison sentences for providers, parents, and patients. Other bills, such as SB 878 (2024) and SB 1777 (2024), targeted healthcare funding, seeking to revoke Medicaid and public funding from any provider or institution offering gender-affirming care to people of any age. Additionally, SB 129 (2024) and SB 250 (2024) proposed cutting all public funding to providers or facilities offering gender-affirming care to trans individuals of any age, while SB 1777 (2024) sought to ban insurance coverage for such care, ensuring that even privately funded services would be inaccessible. These proposals aim to eliminate every financial and institutional pathway to access, making care not only legally risky but also economically inaccessible.

Although these bills primarily target healthcare providers, their impact on higher education is profound. University health centers often serve as the most accessible and primary source of medical care for students. Given that many college students rely on campus healthcare services due to affordability, accessibility, and confidentiality, these restrictions leave trans students without crucial medical support during formative periods of transition and development.

State lawmakers have also used financial coercion to enforce mandates on higher education institutions. For example, in Fall 2022, Oklahoma Republican lawmakers introduced House Bill 1007, which conditioned $39.4 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the University of Oklahoma Health System's agreement to terminate gender-affirming care for trans youth. Funding intended for improving medical records, expanding mental health resources, and supporting the University of Oklahoma's Stephenson Cancer Center in Tulsa was effectively used as a bargaining tool to pressure OU Health into ending its gender-affirming care services. The Roy G. Biv Program at Oklahoma Children's Hospital, a leading provider of gender-affirming medical care for trans adolescents in the state, became a direct target of this coercive funding tactic. Despite opposition from medical organizations and 2SLGBTQIA+ advocates, OU Health did not resist; instead, it "proactively planned" the dismantling of its gender-affirming medical services (Leonard, 2022). This case highlights how financial pressure is wielded as an enforcement mechanism—particularly at public universities dependent on state appropriations and federal grants. By systematically dismantling institutional support, Oklahoma's legislative agenda seeks to make higher education and public life more broadly unlivable for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, particularly trans youth and young adults.

4.2.3. Strategy 2.3: Create Barriers for Social Participation

The legal codification of the binary sex and gender definitions in Oklahoma extends beyond healthcare restrictions to direct attacks on social participation, particularly in education. Laws targeting transgender student involvement in athletics serve as a strategic mechanism for reinforcing gender roles, erasing trans people from public life, and stripping institutions of autonomy. In 2022, Governor Kevin Stitt signed Senate Bill 2—the "Save Women's Sports Act"—into law; barring trans women and girls from competing in women's sports at both K-12 and collegiate levels. SB 2 mandates that all school-sponsored

athletic teams be designated by "biological sex" assigned at birth and requires students or their legal guardians to submit affidavits confirming their assigned sex at birth prior to participation. The law also allows students and schools to sue if they believe they have been harmed by a trans woman's participation, creating a punitive legal framework to deter institutional inclusivity.

Framed as a defense of fairness and women's rights by "protecting women's sports", SB 2 weaponizes performative feminist language and positioning to justify exclusion. It falsely positions trans women as threats to cisgender women's opportunities, disguising a broader agenda of institutional exclusion and control. Rather than ensuring fairness, these laws reinforce binary gender models, deny the legitimacy of trans identities, and manufacture moral panic around trans inclusion. In 2023, the introduction of Senate Bill 1007—the "Save Men's Sports Act"—further exposed the broader goals underpinning these legislative efforts. Unlike SB 2, which targeted trans women, SB 1007 sought to bar trans men from competing on men's teams and prohibit cis women from competing on men's teams as well. Though it ultimately failed, the bill's introduction again clarified the state's project: To enforce rigid gender conformity and eliminate institutional flexibility that affirms gender diversity.

Beyond policing individual students, these laws undermine the autonomy of universities and athletic organizations by removing their ability to set their own policies on gender inclusion, ultimately restricting institutional self-governance. State agencies, including the State Board of Education, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, and intercollegiate athletic associations, are prohibited from investigating or challenging schools that enforce the mandates. Schools that attempt to implement inclusive and affirming policies risk financial penalties, lawsuits, and reputational damage. As a result, institutions are legally coerced into compliance with state-imposed gender norms.

These consequences extend beyond athletics, discouraging trans students from broader campus engagement. Sports participation becomes a mechanism of exclusion, signaling that trans students are unwelcome across social and extracurricular spaces. By framing trans presence and participation as inherently threatening, these laws cultivate a hostile environment that isolates trans students from campus life and systematically denies them access to opportunity, visibility, and community across public education altogether.

While the preceding sections outlined discrete legal and policy strategies used to reshape higher education, attending to the discursive formations in text, it is integral to examining the underlying mechanisms that sustain and extend these strategies. The following sections trace two dimensions of control—social and administrative/financial—through which the state embeds ideological conformity into the structures and futures of higher education institutions. These dimensions are not new strategies but further illustrate how legal and policy interventions are operationalized, internalized, and reproduced across educational systems and social life. In this way, LGBTQIA+ exclusion is not only enacted through law but also woven into the administrative, cultural, political, social, and future-oriented fabric of higher education.

5. Further Findings—Dimensions of Control

5.1. Social Dimension of Control

Oklahoma's governance strategies function not only through legal mandates but also through the construction of a social environment that normalizes compliance and marginalizes resistance. Through legislative interventions that chill discourse, redefine institutional neutrality, and stigmatize DEI initiatives, Oklahoma as a state reshapes the everyday social landscape of higher education institutions. The social dimension of control

operates by cultivating fear, self-censorship, and disengagement among students, faculty, and staff, particularly those committed to inclusive education.

By legally defining cisgender and heterosexual identities as "natural" in definitions and institutional policies, the state constructs a social and legal boundary between what is considered legitimate and what is deemed "unnatural" or unacceptable. Because legal systems, policies, and institutional structures operate within this framework, any identity that falls outside of this constructed norm is systematically excluded and delegitimized. This legal framework does not merely reflect preexisting social biases and conditions—it actively produces and sustains cisheteronormative futurity by structuring the material conditions in which people understand their identities, roles, and possibilities for existence. To achieve this, the state stokes cultural fear and distrust in institutions through a dual strategy: Pathologizing queerness and transness while disguising oppression as protection. Through rhetoric and legal framing, the state portrays 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals as dangerous, deceptive, or undeserving of institutional support, casting them as disruptors of societal norms. 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are framed as harmful, inappropriate, or inherently political, justifying bans on gender-affirming care, DEI efforts, and 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in education. The criminalization of 2SLGBTQIA+ cultural expressions—such as drag bans—paints queer representation as obscene or predatory, reinforcing moral panic. This messaging is often coded within the language of legislation, allowing it to signal anti-2SLGBTQIA+ ideology to conservative supporters while maintaining plausible deniability through the neutral language of the laws. Instead, these laws rely on male/female definitions of sex, implicitly framing trans and gender-nonconforming individuals as threats to social order without ever explicitly stating it.

This legal framing is coupled with a broader cultural panic, in which 2SLGBTQIA+ people—particularly trans individuals—are falsely portrayed as predators or groomers. These laws pit trans inclusion against different populations, cultivating public hostility toward trans students by implying that their presence endangers others. For example, the "Women's Bill of Rights" positions cisgender women in direct opposition to trans women, framing trans inclusion as a violation of women's safety and rights. This tactic is further reinforced by the "Protect Women's Sports" and "Protect Men's Sports" bills, which seek to exclude trans athletes under the guise of defending fairness for cisgender students. These laws create manufactured conflicts, falsely suggesting that trans inclusion comes at the direct expense of cis students, when these policies are designed to exclude and erase trans individuals from public life. Through these cultural and legal strategies, the state manufactures division, distrust, and moral panic, ensuring that anti-trans and anti-DEI efforts are framed as necessary protections rather than acts of exclusion. By embedding these policies within legal, educational, and institutional structures, the state guarantees that cisheteronormativity is not just reinforced in the present but into the very fabric of the future, ensuring that queer and trans ways of existing are structurally, socially, and legally erased.

5.2. Administrative and Financial Dimension of Control

Beyond social pressure, the state's governance strategy also exerts control through financial and administrative mechanisms that embed compliance within the operational infrastructure of higher education. This tactic allows the state to achieve the same goal as an outright ban while maintaining the appearance of neutrality. These policies also weaponize administrative processes to restrict trans students' access to basic institutional support. Legislation that mandates gender be defined strictly by biological sex at birth prevents universities from recognizing gender marker changes on student IDs, birth certificates, or official records, which also means that institutions cannot implement inclusive housing

policies, restroom access, or gender-affirming healthcare without conflicting with state law. While these policies do not explicitly state their intent to marginalize trans students, their practical effect is to embed structural barriers that make it impossible for universities to accommodate trans individuals, forcing them into an administrative system that erases their identities. At the same time, the state employs financial coercion as a means of controlling higher education institutions, compelling them to enact anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policies through economic pressure. One of the most effective tactics is restricting how institutions can allocate and spend funding, ensuring that universities conform to state mandates or face severe financial consequences. Although Executive Order 2023-31 (2023) technically exempts student organizations from its restrictions on DEI programs, other bills targeting 2SLGBTQIA+ expression—such as drag bans and legislation restricting institutional funding for queer initiatives—create financial and administrative barriers that serve as de facto restrictions. These laws invoke vague concerns about "indoctrination" and "protecting students" to justify cutting off financial support for 2SLGBTQIA+ student groups, programs, and events, even when these initiatives are student-led and voluntary. Drag bans, for instance, frame queer cultural production as inherently explicit or inappropriate, allowing the state to block universities from sponsoring or even indirectly supporting these events. The result is an institutional environment where 2SLGBTQIA+ students are denied access to the resources and institutional legitimacy necessary for cultural and communal engagement. Beyond restricting how universities spend their budgets, the state leverages public funding as both a coercive tool and a punitive measure to enforce ideological compliance. Institutions that fail to align with state policies risk severe financial penalties, defunding, and legal action (as exemplified in gender-affirming care). Even when federal law protects access to this type of care, the state's ability to withhold financial resources forces universities to abandon these services, effectively eliminating access without the need for an explicit statewide ban. By tying essential funding streams to compliance with anti-trans policies, the state was able to achieve its goal without the need for direct legislative prohibition. Through administrative restrictions, financial penalties, and the calculated manipulation of institutional policies, the state ensures that universities become enforcers of its ideological agenda, restricting academic freedom and erasing trans and queer inclusion from higher education. By dictating how institutions allocate resources, shape curricula, and govern administrative processes, these laws reshape universities into vehicles for enforcing a cisnormative and heteronormative educational environment—all while maintaining the illusion that these decisions are being made independently.

As demonstrated throughout this tracing, the state's interventions across legal, financial, administrative, and educational cultural domains do not operate independently but rather cohere into a strategic plan. This plan is not merely a collection of reactive policies but a proactive blueprint for transforming higher education itself. What emerges from this analysis is a definable mission and vision—an ideological North Star—that reveals the long-term stakes of Oklahoma's governance project of higher education.

6. Discussion—Mission and Vision Statements

The legislative and policy interventions analyzed throughout this study reveal a coherent and intentional governance strategy aimed at reshaping higher education into an instrument of state control. Through legal codification, cultural coercion, financial manipulation, and administrative enforcement, Oklahoma's political actors remake institutions into mechanisms of ideological governance. Rather than relying on direct mandates, this system embeds compliance with the structures of academia itself, ensuring institutions self-regulate through fear, financial necessity, and administrative burden. This section distills the mission and vision underpinning this strategic plan.

6.1. Mission: Higher Education as an Extension of State Control

Mission Statement: Through legislative, financial, social, and administrative pressure, the state seeks to transform higher education institutions into instruments of governance aligned with conservative political priorities.

The mission reflects a systematic effort to reconfigure higher education institutions as ideological arms of the state's power, rather than autonomous centers for knowledge production. By weaponizing governance, the state erodes institutional autonomy and compels universities to internalize and normalize state-mandated ideologies. Compliance becomes a survival strategy, ensuring that institutions not only enforce but also reproduce political agendas that restrict 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, DEI efforts, and critical inquiry.

6.2. Vision: Enforcing Cisheteronormative Futurity in Higher Education

Vision statement: The state envisions a higher education system that upholds conservative ideology by advancing white cisheteronormative futurity as the only legitimate framework for organizing social and institutional life.

The vision positions universities as active participants in reproducing conservative social orders. White cisheteronormativity is upheld and reproduced in policy, curricula, and campus culture, disciplining nonconformity and erasing marginalized futures. The cumulative effect of policy restrictions, funding limitations, legal threats, and cultural suppression ensures that 2SLGBTQIA+ people, particularly trans communities, are systemically unrecognized, unsupported, and institutionally erased. Higher education's role is thus redirected—from fostering critical thought and democratic engagement toward sustaining a narrowly defined and dehumanizing social order.

7. Implications

7.1. Understanding Higher Education as a Site of Political Struggle

Higher education institutions—and educational settings more broadly—must be understood as politicized sites where the state asserts control to advance its ideological project (Sperling et al., 2025). Future research should not only document the harm legislative efforts impose on students but also interrogate the broader political and ideological objectives behind these policies, their creators, and their structural impact on higher education. Rather than framing each policy or law as isolated or reactionary, researchers must recognize these efforts as part of a coordinated strategy aimed at restructuring institutions, constraining academic freedom, and suppressing 2SLGBTQIA+ support within public education. Scholars should also examine how non-education-specific bills intersect to reshape the conditions under which universities operate. These broader legislative ecosystems shape campus environments and student support systems. Additionally, this framework invites scholars to move beyond reactive analyses of individual policies and instead trace the power structures at play at the state level. Understanding the intent behind these bills allows us to situate them within a larger project of ideological control, not treating each effort as an unprecedented phenomenon. Sperling et al. (2025) have emphasized the importance of historical contextualization in identifying the key political actors, funding networks, and ideological influences shaping these efforts. Future research should examine these patterns across state lines and over time, highlighting how authoritarian educational restructuring operates beyond 2SLGBTQIA+ rights to also target racial justice, reproductive rights, labor organizing, and other areas of social progress within higher education.

7.2. Beyond Compliance: Institutional Complicity and Pathways for Resistance

Scholars and practitioners must critically examine how higher education institutions over-internalize and enforce restrictive measures beyond what the law requires. Adminis-

trative gatekeeping, risk-averse decision-making, and anticipatory compliance can position institutions as agents of state control rather than defenders of academic freedom and student support (Phan, 2024). Recognizing that legislative ambiguity and financial threats are often intentional tools of coercion, researchers, practitioners, faculty, staff, and students must work together to resist administrative overreach and maintain institutional commitments to 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion. This includes maximizing the use of existing legal protection, ensuring that compliance measures do not exceed what is legally required, and protecting student organizations' rights to organize without political interference. Protective legislation should be developed that explicitly prohibits retaliation against institutions for maintaining 2SLGBTQIA+ services, reaffirms the importance of academic freedom, and limits the state's ability to weaponize public funding against marginalized populations. Policies must also safeguard student organizations' rights to organize and receive institutional support without political interference. However, as Dean Spade's (2015) cautions, resistance must move beyond surface-level inclusion efforts to address structural exclusion. Future policymaking should focus on collective structural change that disrupts the mechanisms producing exclusion and precarity for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Policy efforts must also focus on dismantling the administrative and financial mechanisms that allow institutions to function as extensions of state control in addition to advocating for further protective legislation that affords higher education institutions and their agents autonomy to protect their constituents.

At the same time, faculty and staff must work proactively to understand the legal parameters and leverage them to support 2SLGBTQIA+ students in research, teaching, and student services. Practitioners must develop long-term, sustainable interventions that ensure 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion persists despite political attacks by embedding support within broader institutional frameworks, securing alternative funding sources, decentralizing reliance on vulnerable DEI offices, and fostering coalitions across student, faculty, and community networks. Given the volatility of formal structures, resistance requires the creation of alternative infrastructures of support outside of the institutions—informal networks with community and advocacy organizations; underground resource sharing; mutual aid structures; and internal advocacy strategies that are less visible to external surveillance but deeply supportive of 2SLGBTQIA+ students; faculty; and staff. Community-based networks can offer critical support to 2SLGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff without being subject to the same forms of legal and financial coercion. By shifting some support beyond institutional boundaries, these networks limit the effectiveness of state legislation that seeks to control or dismantle 2SLGBTQIA+ resources through funding threats or compliance mandates.

Finally, higher education must recognize that cisheteronormativity is not the inevitable foundation or way to organize our social reality and institution—opening the door for queer worldmaking as a deliberate and necessary practice within higher education (Phan, 2024). Scholars and practitioners must engage in active reimagining and build affirming environments that center safety, thriving, and justice for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Higher education cannot claim neutrality in this struggle; it must take an active role in defending institutional integrity, defending academic freedom, resisting the systematic erasure of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and creating futures where all students can flourish.

8. Conclusions: Architectures of Erasure

Oklahoma's legislative approach to higher education reveals its deliberate authoritarian strategy: A coordinated and powerful effort to reshape public institutions by enforcing a specific ideological agenda. Through the lens of critical policy analysis and critical discourse analysis, it becomes unmistakably clear: These legislative strategies are not isolated

reactions to cultural anxieties but part of a systematic campaign of discursive suppression and epistemic control. Through policies like drag bans, DEI defunding, and curricular censorship tactics, governing powers systematically pressure universities to signal exclusion to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and reinforce their marginalization in public life and pressure universities to align with a deeply coordinated conservative right-wing counter-hegemonic project (Sperling et al., 2025).

Discursive formations and manifestations help reveal how such legislative efforts work not merely at the level of law but through the management of discourse itself—controlling what can be said; how it is said; who can be seen; and whose lives are legitimized within public institutions. Seemingly disconnected policies now instead uncover broader goals of ideological restructuring, one that relies on cultivation of uncertainty, fear, and self-censorship to discipline both individuals and institutions. Rather than responding to organic public concern, these policies actively construct moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), producing an environment where self-censorship, self-surveillance, and institutional compliance become normalized outcomes of state power and surveillance. Rather than preserving "neutrality", Oklahoma's legislative agenda enforces a redefinition of public education: One where critical thought is suspect, histories are rewritten, and whole communities are made invisible. These efforts have never been merely about silencing drag or banning books; they are about who gets to know, who gets to belong, and who gets to live.

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Note

[1] This was not the first time Oklahoma led the nation; in 2016, Oklahoma was named the "slate of hate" for the highest number of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bills.

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