

GRANTWRITING UNDER TRUMP 2.0

Guidance for an Evolving Political Landscape



FEBRUARY 28, 2025

The Context & Challenge

Research and higher education communities are navigating a rapidly evolving landscape for federal grant funding under the current administration.¹

Recent changes, including Executive Orders⁴ like “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” and “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity” signal a shift away from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and toward merit-based practices and national security priorities.

In response, program officers at the National Science Foundation (NSF) are, allegedly, evaluating programs, proposals, and funded grants for “trigger words”² - including terms traditionally associated with DEI. Many agree that proposals containing these terms will face increased scrutiny, and, in some cases, be at risk of being defunded. There have also been hints and suggestions government scientists may

not be able to serve as co-author on manuscripts that include DEI-related terms, concepts, or priorities.

The exact vetting process for identifying flagged language remains unclear. While it appears to involve a mix of automated screening tools and manual reviews, we do not yet have a complete picture of how this new paradigm will unfold.

This uncertainty presents a real challenge for grant seekers: How do you comply with current guidelines while maintaining a strategic and authentic approach in your proposed work.

Understandably, many grant seekers (and grant makers) are feeling uncertain about how, and whether, to adapt to these rapid changes. Some are attempting a simple “find and replace” approach to avoid using flagged terms or using AI tools to suggest alternatives. However, grant professionals have found that this strategy often leads to

circular logic where proposed replacement words are also on the flagged list, or they fail to convey the original intent effectively.³ Others are exploring frameworks like the FAIR (Fairness, Access, Inclusion, and Representation) model, which seeks to achieve similar outcomes to DEI without triggering policy concerns.⁵

Like many institutions, Thorn Run Partners (TRP) has encouraged grant seekers to continue writing proposals unless or until there is clearer guidance from federal sponsors. We recommend that you aim for compliance with current guidelines while maintaining a strategic and authentic approach.

This advice is all well and good, but we also recognize the need for more practical and nuanced tools to help grant seekers navigate this new terrain.

TRP’s Alternatives for NSF “Trigger Words” list was developed to fill this gap. We took a deeper level of analysis to create a tool that recommends two approaches.

- ▶ **Rephrase** offers direct alternatives to avoid problematic language.
- ▶ **Reframe** goes further, suggesting ways to align proposed project with broader Administration priorities (Column 4) like national security, economic development, and scientific leadership.

This dual approach ensures that grant proposals remain competitive, thoughtful, and aligned with evolving federal expectations.

The list is not simply about avoiding ‘trigger words’ but about understanding the context in which these words might be problematic and strategically navigating around them without losing the proposal’s impact.

One
Solution

The Rephrase / Reframe List

TRIGGER	REPHRASE	REFRAME	PRIORITY
Activism Activists	Local involvement, civic contribution, community-driven action	Civic responsibility through local participation, community-driven programs	■
Advocacy Advocate	Championing community needs, advancing regional goals, program support	Advancing regional development, supporting programs that enhance local economies	■
Barrier Barriers	Challenges to progress, constraints, entry points for growth	Overcoming obstacles, creating pathways to educational & economic opportunities	■ ■
Biased Bias	Decision-making patterns, perceptual influences, cognitive approaches	Promoting transparent decision-making, processes that reduce unintended influences	■
BIPOC, Black & Latinx	Diverse heritage groups, global ancestry communities	Communities with rich heritage contributing to economic & educational growth	■ ■ ■
Community Diversity	Regional influence, local economic development, varied community input	Regional influence, local economic development to highlight community-wide benefits	■
Community Equity	Proportional community benefits, balanced access, transparent outcomes	Establishing balance in resource distribution, promoting transparency, local solutions	■ ■ ■
Cultural Differences	Distinct community traditions, varied social practices, local heritage	Highlighting community traditions & local heritage, emphasizing context-aware practices	■ ■
Cultural Heritage	Traditions, historical contributions, regional legacy	Honoring historical contributions, supporting regional legacies	■ ■
Culturally Responsive	Contextually aware, adaptable strategies, tailored community approaches	Promoting community-tailored approaches, enhancing effectiveness	■
Disabilities	Varied abilities, unique requirements, accessibility needs	Supporting individuals' needs through accessible healthcare, education, employment	■ ■ ■
Discrimination	Unbalanced practices, selective challenges, inconsistency in access	Promoting transparency, ensuring balanced access	■ ■ ■
Backgrounds	Personal experiences, life histories, regional expertise	Building a skilled American workforce, leveraging individual & regional talent	■ ■ ■
Diverse Diversified	Broadening skill sets, enriching perspectives, enhancing community fabric	Expanding perspectives, introducing varied experiences, boosting economic readiness	■ ■ ■
Enhancing	Strengthening, building upon, advancing community initiatives	Reinforcing local infrastructure, boosting resilience	■ ■
Equal Opportunity	Accessible opportunities, merit-based inclusion, balanced access	Providing accessible pathways for broad community engagement	■ ■ ■
Equality	Transparent practices, proportional access, balanced community outcomes	Using proportionate impact, transparent practices in developing & allocating resources	■
Ethnicity	Cultural heritage, ancestral background, community affiliation	Regional heritage, community identity	■ ■
Excluded	Overlooked, under-recognized, limited participation	Enhancing reach, supporting regions with limited access	■
Gender	Demographic characteristic, social identity, individual role	Inclusion of all demographics, support for diverse talents & skills	■ ■ ■
Hate Speech	Negative discourse, unconstructive narratives, divisive communication	Facilitating healthy discourse, encouraging community dialogue	■ ■

TRIGGER	REPHRASE	REFRAME	PRIORITY
Inequalities Inequities	Imbalances, resource distribution, inconsistent access	Addressing imbalances through broader resource availability, balanced strategies	■ ■ ■
Marginalize	Limit engagement, reduce visibility, restrict community input	Extending engagement, enhancing community input	■ ■ ■
Multicultural	Varied cultural perspectives, cross-cultural, globally influenced	Cultural richness, community variety, engagement in community support networks	■
Social Justice	Ethical practices, transparent outcomes, balanced governance	Promoting ethical practices, ensuring transparency	■
Underrepresented	Limited presence, minimal engagement, fewer opportunities	Widening involvement, increasing visibility through targeted initiatives	■ ■ ■
Underserved	Not yet reached, under-supported, in need of community resources	Enhancing resource availability, improving access for communities	■ ■ ■
Victim	Impacted individual, person facing adversity, community member in need	Assisting those facing obstacles, providing resources for overcoming challenges	■ ■
Women	Participants of all demographics	Accessible opportunities in career & education pathways for all	■ ■ ■

Trump Admin Priorities	■ Educational & Inst Reform	■ Econ Growth & Workforce Dev	■ Healthcare & Social Services	■ Nat'l Security & Public Safety	■ Religious Freedom & Cultural Policies
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Final Notes

Our guidance, created in response to NSF's approach to complying with the Administration's mandates, is intended as a starting point – not a one-size-fits-all solution.

First, consider how these strategies may be adapted across a range of federal funding opportunities by taking into account to the target agency's mission, priorities, and program requirements.

Also, for many organizations, DEI is not just a strategy but a core part of their mission. We understand that reframing language in grant proposals may be uncomfortable or even contradictory to your individual and institutional values.

Each organization must make its own decisions about how to approach federal grant seeking authentically. Our goal is to provide tools that support informed, thoughtful decision-making.

References

- ¹ Blake, J., & Knott, K. (2025, Feb 03). How Trump's executive orders are disrupting academic research. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/science-research-policy/2025/02/03/how-trumps-executive-orders-are-disrupting>
- ² Novak, M. (2025, Feb 05). The List of Trump's Forbidden Words That Will Get Your Paper Flagged at NSF. Gizmodo. <https://gizmodo.com/the-list-of-trumps-forbidden-words-that-will-get-your-paper-flagged-at-nsf-2000559661>
- ³ Rustic, H. (2025, Feb 18). Banned and Trigger Words in Federal Grant Writing in the Trump Administration 2.0. <https://grantwritingandfunding.com/banned-and-trigger-words-in-federal-grant-writing-in-the-trump-administration-2-0/>
- ⁴ U.S. Government. (2025). Executive Orders by Donald Trump. Federal Register. Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders/donald-trump/2025>.
- ⁵ Zheng, L. (2025, January 23). What Comes After DEI: How a new framework built around fairness, access, inclusion, and representation can succeed where DEI has failed. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2025/01/what-comes-after-dei>



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Jessica co-leads TRP's Grant Enterprise Growth Strategy Practice. In this role, she delivers a unique combination of solutions-focused consulting services to help clients identify and pursue multiple pathways to sustained success in the Federal funding marketplace, including: strategic planning, government relations, public relations, faculty development, partner engagement, Team Science, program design, and grant proposal development. Her client portfolio includes local governments, colleges, universities, academic medical and other health systems, community groups, professional associations, and for- and non-profit organizations.