

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Introduction

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Dear Higher Education: Letters from the Social Justice Mountain is an edited volume by three women, including an Italian American senior diversity administrator and two women of color (Latina and African-American) chief diversity officers, each with almost 30 years of experience. Dr. Menah Pratt, a Sierra Leonean-American, is the Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Diversity and Professor Education at Virginia Tech. [Name and description removed.] Dr. Michele Deramo is the Associate Vice Provost for Diversity Education and Engagement at Virginia Tech and leads diversity education and inclusive pedagogy initiatives. Menah and [name removed] worked together at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Virginia Tech; and Menah, [name removed], and Michele worked together at Virginia Tech. During the 2023-2024 academic year, Menah was selected to participate in the American Council on Education (ACE) leadership program. Menah selected the University of Minnesota as her placement institution and began collaborating with [name removed] and Michele on this project. This series is envisioned as an ongoing project, and this is the inaugural volume.

In recognition of the rapidly shifting sociopolitical, legal, and cultural environment impacting social justice and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education in the United States, and the growing antagonism toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues in the national conscious, particularly within the educational sector, the editors felt a call to capture the voices of those engaged in social justice work. One very profound result of the elimination of DEI offices, pursuant to state legislation, has been the elimination of websites and the content associated with reports, recommendations, and the history of DEI efforts at institutions. In addition, they realized that much of the transformational work that had happened at Virginia Tech, an institution founded as an all-White, all-male military college in a state that was the heart of the Confederacy, into a more inclusive community, had not been formally documented. This work included curricular changes; community and cultural centers; required diversity education; faculty and department head cohort programs; engagement with descendants of those enslaved on the land; building name changes; new historical markers; the founding of the Black College Institute; the hosting of the Faculty Women of Color in the Academy National Conference; new faculty diversity initiatives; the development of land and labor acknowledgments; the engagements with tribal nations; and the meaningful partnerships with HBCUs and MSIs. This work provides an example of a case study in the challenges and opportunities surrounding leading structural and systemic institutional change. In light of the current context of erasure, silencing, and invisibility, this project is a significant attempt to create visibility, awareness, and presence.

Another important context for this series is the current Middle East crisis. Almost 100 protests across the nation and over 2,000 arrests have provoked questions about freedom of speech, academic freedom, the freedom to peacefully protest, and the role of civil disobedience in response to oppression and injustice are at the surface of college protests against the war (Yerushalmy, Livingtone, Salam). These protests were not limited to the United States, and included Australia, Canada, France, Lebanon, Mexico, and the United Kingdom, among others (Burga).

The global context led to the expansion of the vision for this project to incorporate both a United States and a global perspective. Each editor has significant global experience and perspectives. During the course of the

fellowship year, Menah visited universities in Ethiopia, Benin, Senegal, India, and South Africa. [Name removed] brings an important global perspective informed by her work in Ireland. It is important to acknowledge the interconnected global ecosystem and the ways in which education systems and structures are often intertwined, and ongoing global collaborations between institutions.

Working in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion has always been challenging and difficult. In the past three years, however, the landscape has radically shifted, creating perilous and volatile conditions, particularly in the education ecosystem. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there was a nationwide reckoning when colleges, universities, K-12 schools, organizations, and corporations committed to addressing the ongoing legacy of racism in America. A mere four years later, akin to the end of Radical Reconstruction, a growing counter anti-DEI movement is seeking to dismantle these nascent efforts; to silence activists and educators; and to eliminate discussions about issues of diversity, equity, inclusion in the education system.

One key strategy has included reframing and redefining Critical Race Theory (CRT), a legal theory about justice. Several state legislatures have incorrectly asserted that CRT is an umbrella concept that promotes “divisive concepts,” ideologies, values, beliefs, and attitudes that are anti-American, anti-White, anti-Christian, and anti-conservative. This has led to legislation in several states limiting and circumscribing what can be taught in classrooms around issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and banning books that address America’s complex history.

One of the most notable examples relates to *The 1619 Project*, which was originally a series of essays, poems, art, and images in the New York Times Magazine to commemorate 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved people. Eventually, it became a book, a TV series, and a school curriculum. As of February 2021, *The 1619 Project* had been adopted by more than 4000 educators from all 50 states (Bridges).

However, as part of the backlash to DEI, as of July 2024, 18 states have enacted some form of legislation banning tenets they have associated with critical race teaching, and “divisive concepts.” In 17 other states, the legislation was proposed, but not successful, and in 9 states, legislation is pending. There are only 7 states where there has been no ban attempted (World Population Review). The pervasiveness of the legislative efforts is evidenced by the fact that between Jan. 1, 2021 and Dec. 31, 2022, local, state, and federal government officials have introduced 563 anti-CRT measures and almost half—241—were enacted or adopted (Waxman).

The legislation typically bans “the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Ray and Gibbons). It is not only at the state level, but also at the local school board level, and in some areas, the discussions have not been limited to race, and have extended to LGBTQ identity, gender, and sexuality (Ibid). The impact of the changing climate is profoundly personal, as according to *The Washington Post*, over 160 educators have lost their positions in the shifting political landscape (Natanson and Balingit).

In several states, the legislation allows students to report teachers who make them “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress,” based on race (Natanson). A South Carolina teacher who was recently reported to the school board by her students for teaching about race in an Advanced Placement English course, wrote in her journal: “teachers are afraid, teachers are silent, teachers cave” (Ibid).

These anti-DEI efforts continued in 2023 with Florida enacting legislation that prohibits the state’s public colleges and universities from funding DEI programs, as well as offering courses on issues of diversity, race, and equity. Texas also enacted legislation banning DEI offices and prohibiting mandatory diversity training (Bhaskara). Texas’ legislation resulted in the elimination of 300 jobs (Bolstad).

In 2024, in response to legislation, Utah eliminated its diversity offices and cultural and community centers (Bolstad). Legislation in Oklahoma resulted in the closure of a women’s leadership program, and the changing of names of offices (Martinez-Keel). Legislation in Alabama has impacted DEI offices and in South Dakota, the

Board of Regents recently enacted a policy that bars employees at its six public universities from putting their preferred gender pronouns or tribal affiliations in email signatures. Additionally, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Board of Trustees shifted \$2.3 million of DEI spending toward public safety and policing on campus and the UNC System Board of Governors abolished all DEI policies in place since 2019 at all 17 of its campuses (Bolstad).

The anti-DEI effort has already impacted faculty hiring, reflected by the experiences of two African-American women journalists whose work includes issues of race and racism. Professors Kathleen McElroy and Nikole Hannah-Jones both had tenured offers revoked by prestigious universities (Gamboa). The importance of this series is reflected by the reality that a tenured faculty member was encouraged NOT to contribute to this volume, given the political climate in the state.

In addition to these efforts, there are also federal judicial decisions that are impacting DEI. In June, 2023, the Supreme Court eliminated the explicit use of race as a factor in admissions decisions. Some states are expanding the interpretation of the decision to include race-based scholarships and diversity hiring efforts.

As a related aside, it is worth noting that the volatile DEI environment is not confined to higher education. It is also present in the for-profit corporate world. A July 21, 2023 Wall Street Journal article noted the precarious position of Chief Diversity Officers in corporations: “Two years ago chief diversity officers were some of the hottest hires into executive ranks. Now, they increasingly feel left out in the cold. Thousands of diversity-focused workers have been laid off since last year, and some companies are scaling back racial justice commitments.” In Fortune 100 companies, the number of CDO searches is down 75% in the past year, and demand is the lowest it has been in 30 years (Chen and Weber).

The concept of DEI is not confined to the United States education system. There are DEI efforts across institutions outside of the United States. Administrators and scholars across the globe are thinking about issues of identity, difference, and transformation, addressing historical inequalities (Hendley).

There are several goals associated with this project. The project envisions creating a fluid digital conversation space of letters to higher education about social justice. The Pressbooks platform facilitates open access and an ongoing project, creating a resource that documents multiple perspectives related to creating and leading diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education; shares personal real-life examples and experiences associated with DEI in higher education; documents historical and systemic challenges that require social justice activism; elevates various strategies and best practices employed by diversity practitioners in fostering inclusive campus climates; contributes to the current discourse about diversity, social justice, equity, and education; and provides a resource for the larger higher education community of faculty, staff, students, governance boards, and administrators who want to understand DEI in higher education.

Representing a diversity of racial, gender, sexuality, and disability identities, the contributors share letters to higher education on an extensive breadth of topics. The topics include, in part, the following areas: land and labor acknowledgments; student and faculty activism; governance and curriculum revisions; inclusive excellence and inclusive pedagogy; the perspectives of the descendants of the enslaved; disability activism; LGBTQ activism; White allyship; community and cultural centers; living-learning communities; institutional history narratives; chief diversity officers; decolonizing education; and the impact of anti-DEI legislation.

Subsequent series will elevate experiences of particular communities and will include open calls. As the founder of the Faculty Women of Color in the Academy National Conference, editor Menah Pratt knows that women of color need to share their experiences. Likewise, there are men of color who may need a forum for their experiences. Recognizing that identities are intersectional, we also aim to include reflections from those

who identify as queer, and trans, and represent the LGBTQ community. Those with visible and invisible disabilities constitute another important population.

This series is motivated by a desire to fight back against the attempts to silence, minimize, marginalize, and render invisible the work of social justice in higher education. It seeks to raise up the voices of those who have been laboring and working to make campus environments more diverse, equitable, and just.

We have organized the collection of letters into four areas:

Our first section, **“Why We Come to the Mountain,”** addresses the national and global landscapes for the work of social justice in higher education. These landscapes include the specific challenges to institutional diversity and inclusion work occurring across the United States, including threats to academic freedom and speech, and the integrity of the higher education mission, as well as global issues concerned with higher education’s handling of sexual violence and its narrow pathways for students minoritized by gender, caste, class, and religion or political affiliation. Each letter calls for higher education to address these challenges head-on to fulfill their highest aspirations.

Our second section, **“Why We Need You to Listen,”** amplifies individual voices sharing their experiences of exclusion and marginalization in higher education because of their intersectional identities. These letters speak directly of the pain and frustration felt by those whose concerns have been dismissed, their expertise undermined, and their appeals to be heard admonished as too angry or uncivil. Each letter reminds us that we need higher education—and all of us who occupy its space—to listen and respond to achieve the fullness of inclusion.

Our third section, **“Why We Must Tell the Whole Story,”** are letters from those whose lives intersect with hidden dimensions of higher education’s complicated history. This shared history includes higher education’s complicity with the expropriation of tribal lands upon passage of the Morrill Act that granted land to public colleges, the forced labor of enslaved people who built our colleges and universities, and the exploitation of poor, disabled, and minoritized people whose bodies were used without their consent or compensation for the purposes of research.

Our fourth section, **“Why We Believe Transformation is Possible,”** shares work that is being done to change the trajectory of higher education so that its future is one of equity and justice for all. This work includes initiatives that create access for faculty and students who previously had been excluded, foster competencies for inclusive teaching and leadership, and leverage the privilege of Whiteness for allyship.

We recognize that the dynamic nature of this project may facilitate additional areas of reflection and inquiry as we continue to receive letters from colleagues across the globe. And so, we invite you to join us on the social justice mountain, to speak your peace and to listen to the words spoken because we believe transformation is possible.

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