Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Learning is Transforming: Strategic Education for Inclusion and Equity

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Dear Higher Education,

Let me introduce myself. I am the associate vice provost for diversity education and engagement in the office for inclusion and diversity. I admit that I never imagined myself at this level. Who even knew what a provost was? I'm a first-generation Italian American woman from a working-middle class family. My grandparents immigrated as children, and as far as I know, none had a high school diploma. A college degree and the economic benefits flowing from it was the American dream my parents had for their children.

My work is that of a thought leader. When you come from the working class, the work of creating ideas is a privileged one. It is important that I protect my time so I can dedicate it to the creative process at the heart of learning. I don't describe the product of my efforts as "training," which suggests conformity and compliance. Instead, I think about language, capacity, development, growth, and the necessity of living intentionally in a space of ambiguity that eludes definitive answers. I can share with colleagues some words and tools that have been shown through research and practice to promote inclusion, foster dialogue, diminish bias, and increase engagement across difference. But--I can't guarantee that they will work. Sometimes we must acknowledge when harm has been done and trust has been broken--possibly beyond repair.

Perhaps my approach is influenced by the paganism of southern Italian Catholicism, where the grind and suffering of daily life was eased through an intermediary. While I'm not claiming to be the saint on the shelf, perhaps I am someone whose approachability makes the challenging work around equity possible. After all, I was raised to be nice, to please, to smile through adversity. My intention is not to convert. Instead, I approach diversity education as a form of cultural work that offers words, practices, stories, and community so that we can do better and be more fully ourselves.

In this letter, Higher Education, I want to make two points about educating for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The first is that diversity education should be a tool for building the capacity of the committed rather than a cudgel for converting the minds of the skeptical. A 90-minute class or workshop is unlikely to produce significant change. What it does provide is a space for acquiring new insights, practicing new skills, and growing confidence in your beliefs. As more people voluntarily deepen their ability to listen and dialogue, and as more people seek out knowledge of and exposure to the varieties of human experience, our communities will flourish. Younger generations will be socialized into an expectation of diversity. Social norms that value inclusion will gain power. These social norms will be codified into processes and policies.

As I reflect on my (almost) thirty-year career at Virginia Tech, I can see how this evolution occurred. In 1995, when I arrived at Virginia Tech from St. Joseph's University (a Jesuit institution with the mission of serving faith through the promotion of justice), there was no office of diversity and inclusion. University leadership was overwhelmingly White, male, and straight. A walk down the hallway of most buildings featured rows of photographs

of students and professors who were also, overwhelmingly, White and male, sometimes in military uniforms. However, there were small cohorts of committed individuals—faculty, students, student affairs professionals, and more—who met in committees to continually raise the questions of race, gender, sexuality, social justice.

Thus, my second point is that diversity education should lead to allyship. Allyship, the authentic kind, is rooted in humility. It incorporates both an understanding of privilege and oppression, as well as an ability to leverage privilege to foreground listening, believing, and making space for those who have been historically excluded. The early diversity committees of the 1990's often lamented that they were preaching to the choir. However, those committees included people from many sectors of the university, some of whom now hold positional leadership. Some of those people are still present today, attending programs and workshops so they can continue to learn—since learning has no end point. They are now situated to influence change in a way that is strategic and transformational, beyond the journey of the individual self.

My work in diversity education began in 2013, after spending almost 20 years administering community-based learning. In my new position, I inherited a program of four-to-six-hour workshops on topics such as fundamentals of diversity, appreciating differences, communicating respectfully, and unconscious bias, as well as a range of electives. Participants completed sets of scaffolded courses to earn Ally or Advocate certificates. Eventually, a third level of Ambassador was created so that long-term participants could develop projects that applied their diversity knowledge to the workplace.

The Diversity Development Institute (DDI), as it was called, was created as one among several recommendations by the Task Force on Race and the Institution (Virginia Tech 2007) convened in response to racist incidents on campus. When DDI was launched, the office of the vice president for diversity and inclusion was a part of senior administration, but its standing on the president's cabinet was a marginalized one. Its staff remained small in proportion to the size of the university, and its leadership was not sufficiently authorized to make strategic decisions. I mention this because the Diversity Development Institute was well received on campus, with hundreds of people enrolling in the courses each year; however, the people attending were mostly administrative staff or professionals. As much as they reported learning and benefiting from the workshops, they consistently wondered aloud: *Now what?* Which was often followed by the question: *Why isn't leadership taking these workshops?*

I believe everyone has a sphere of influence, so it did matter that staff and AP (Administrative Professional) faculty were making time for these courses. But their observations raised several important points about the state of diversity education. First, the workshops were heavily weighted toward personal growth and awareness. Participants were engaged and stimulated within the workshops, but they returned to workplaces where the processes and protocols seemed impervious to change. What more could they do to make a difference, beyond communicating respectfully and paying attention to their own bias?

Further, the design of the long workshop limited who could be involved. Some teaching faculty participated, but many were unable to take four hours to attend a program that did not have a direct correlation to their departmental obligations or the existing rewards structure that was heavily weighted toward research productivity. Similarly, administrative leadership could rarely afford to spend half of a day in a workshop unless it was held outside of the academic semester. Even then, their positional demands made it difficult for even the most well-intentioned to participate meaningfully for more than an hour at a time. Thus, the centerpiece of diversity education, while nicely done, was not strategically placed.

In 2014, a major restructuring for diversity and inclusion work occurred. The existing office was dismantled, and its programs distributed to other units across campus. DDI became a part of the organizational and professional development unit in Human Resources. For one year, the university experimented with a version of a distributed model led by diversity liaisons representing constituencies across campus. It seemed counterintuitive that the

plan for establishing a more robust diversity and inclusion commitment would be to eliminate the office. Fortunately, the plan was a transitional one. The newly appointed President of Virginia Tech, Timothy Sands, authorized a search for a Chief Diversity Officer to lead Inclusive VT, the institutional and individual commitment to *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) in the spirit of community, diversity, and excellence. Menah Pratt, when offered the position, negotiated that her role included oversight of university strategic planning. In doing so, the diversity office began its migration from the margins to the center of university life.

I returned to the diversity and inclusion team in 2017. We would sunset DDI shortly thereafter. The program had accomplished its original purpose. Now, there were new objectives to be met. The implementation of Inclusive VT was marked by the development of four high-level diversity strategic goals to which every senior management area was beholden and for which metrics were established. Diversity education was redesigned to advance the strategic goals of sustainable institutional transformation, representational diversity, a welcoming campus climate, and the integration of equity across the academic mission.

One of the first actions toward these goals was the implementation of all-campus DEI learning so that every student and employee had a shared understanding of fundamental diversity concepts. The DEI learning modules received approval from the Board of Visitors as a requirement for all incoming students, both graduate and undergraduate, and as an expectation for all full-time wage and salary employees. You may think that the implementation of a sweeping diversity education requirement would meet resistance. For the most part, this did not happen. Virginia Tech was experiencing a sea change in its leadership, with women and people of color entering the ranks of leadership. Colleges created their own diversity director positions. Diversity committees were formed in almost every organizational unit. The distributed model of Inclusive VT, with its clearly defined goals as its beacon, gave direction in a way that catalyzed action. The all-campus DEI learning modules were solid content-wise, but alone had limited impact. (Participants completed the modules online, on their own time.) Its significance lay in what was communicated: that these concepts of diversity, inclusion, equity, belonging—they mattered at Virginia Tech.

The diversity strategic goals prompted other educational innovations:

We produced 20 Inclusive VT Insights, short videos of 6-8 minutes with discussion guides on a single DEI question. These were written in collaboration with and delivered by colleagues across campus so that anyone, anywhere, anytime, individually or by unit, could have conversations and gain actionable skills for being an ally, creating safe and affirming spaces, interrupting bias in the workplace, communicating respectfully, retaining a talented and diverse workforce, and more. Some of these videos were used to construct online courses with discussion boards and quizzes, that could be completed for a digital badge.

We created content to support a diversity search advocates program that informed search committees about how bias showed up in the academic search process and offered tools for redirecting deliberations away from speculation or snap decisions and toward a mission-focused assessment of candidates. Every faculty search committee was required to appoint one of its members as the diversity search advocate, thereby necessitating a supplemental learning experience for fulfilling the search advocate role.

We created ten workshops on inclusive teaching and did so in collaboration with the university Professional Development Network and its computer refresh program that offered faculty new technology and software after completing 12 credits of professional development. We organized inclusive teaching cohorts with academic departments and contributed to a five-year Inclusive Excellence in STEM program led by the Office of the Vice President for Undergraduate Education and funded by a Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant.

We formed a cohort program, White Allies as Transformational Leaders, comprised of senior faculty and department chairs from every college, to meet monthly to read, reflect, and discuss what it means to be an inclusive

academy, and how the work of inclusion is embedded in the way we recruit, hire, retain, mentor, and facilitate faculty success. Reflections from some of the first cohort of White Allies are included in this collection. We have recently formed a parallel cohort, Transformational Allies as Inclusive Leaders (TRAIL), for administrative faculty at the director level and higher.

All these efforts were supported by two large-scale touchpoint events: an Inclusive VT Summit held every August to kick off the new academic year and an Advancing Diversity Gathering in January to highlight programs and initiatives occurring across campus.

The summer of 2020 was a turning point.

The quarantine imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic beginning in March 2020 required that we adapt our programming for online delivery using the Canvas learning management system. Prior to this, I had been skeptical about the effectiveness of online courses. The interpersonal engagement of diversity education was too important. People needed to talk with one another, to be in a common space, to form communities of learning. Now, we had no other choice. And then, while we were still figuring out how to organize a Zoom webinar, George Floyd died in the custody of a white police officer on May 25th.

What made the murder of George Floyd stand out among the dreadful history of police-involved killings of Black citizens was the fact that the entire event from arrest to his final breath was recorded on a cell phone, uploaded to social media, and viewed an estimated 1.4 billion times over the next week (Pex in dot.LA, June 2020). I remember the moment—my son, Vincent, running to my room, cell phone in hand. We watched a man die while Derek Chauvin calmly knelt on his neck as his fellow officers looked on, and bystanders shouted helplessly. The viral witnessing of the event galvanized a global conversation around police brutality, system racism, and the insidious persistence of white supremacy.

The corporate and institutional statements followed. I counted 37 statements made by the Office of the Provost, colleges, departments, caucuses, and student organizations at Virginia Tech, in addition to the official university statement signed by President Sands and Menah Pratt-Clarke. Across the university came the recognition that, "from the marked disparities in COVID-19 illness and death across racial, ethnic, and economic divides, to the unrelenting burden of racism, past and present, systemic and overt, we cannot continue to expect incremental change and the goodwill of the majority to solve a multigenerational problem" (University Statement, VTX News, May 31, 2020).

To be strategic, diversity education must also be responsive.

On June 5th, our office hosted the first of a series of webinars, Unfinished Conversations Around Race and Racism. President Sands opened the conversation, acknowledging the pain of Black Americans, and asking "what we can do to accelerate sustainable transformation, beyond words, programs and resources, what structural changes are needed?" Menah and I continued the conversation, using personal narratives of the mothers from whom we came as critical pathways into deeper, structural insights. Menah stated that education was a powerful engine for change, that this was a moment to think out loud about how to move forward. I affirmed that education includes knowing our history, beginning with our own. Three hundred questions were submitted by viewers.

Subsequent conversations over the next year included ones with White male allies, White women allies, with the Virginia Tech Athletics director, Black women pioneers at Virginia Tech, Virgnia Tech's first African American student, and with faculty using anti-racist teaching practices in their classrooms. As the quarantine lifted, we recorded fewer webinars and eventually returned to in-person modalities with a zoom option. Our newfound expertise in using technology, and university investments in equipment and technical support, enabled us to adopt a more inclusive system of delivering education.

As we approached the fall of 2020, my work as a thought leader and content creator had accelerated. I was shifting all diversity education workshops to online, self-paced, digitally badged formats. This required a reimagining of how to present material so that participants were both receiving information and engaging with it. The long workshop, time bound, and place based, now evolved into micro-learning modules that moved fluidly from one topic to the next while allowing participants to stop and resume at their own pace. Even though participants were completing the courses independently, it was important that my presence and voice be vivid to them, and that they be in conversation with one another. Each module concluded with a discussion board, and each course concluded with a 3-2-1 assessment that asked them to identify three insights gained, two actions they would take, and one question they still had.

One of the courses reimagined for the fall 2020 was a workshop I had delivered a few times that went by the name, "Teaching Race While White." In the summer's aftermath, it was clear to me that much more would be demanded of the topic than I had previously delivered. Thus, I redesigned the workshop, naming it Anti-Racist Teaching.

The Anti-Racist Teaching course is comprised of five modules. The first, "Being a Black student on a predominantly White campus", features videos, writing and spoken word poetry by Black undergraduates and graduates describing their experiences of isolation, fear, pressure, and prejudice on their campuses. The second, "Bringing racism into the classroom," identifies seven practices that well-meaning professors often deploy, such as playing devil's advocate or claiming objectivity, that enable racism in the classroom. Each practice is coupled with an alternative, culturally responsive practice. The third module, "Building our racial literacy," guides participants through a close reading of the article, *Pushing Back Against Racism and Xenophobia on Campuses* by MarYam Hamedani, Hazel Rose Markus and Paula Moya (May 14, 2020), that advances the concept of racism as a doing rather than a being, making the point that if we do racism, we can also undo it, and connects them with three JSTOR Daily crowd-sourced collections: The Institutionalized Racism Syllabus, Charlottesville Syllabus: Readings on the History of Hate in America, and most recently, Politics and Power in the United States (giving context to the January 6 insurrection). The final module, "Enacting Anti-Racist Pedagogy," draws upon the "Anti-Racist Discussion Pedagogy" guide by Drs. Selfa Chew, Akil Houston, and Alisa Cooper (August 2020) to present actionable practices such as community guidelines and discussion prompts, that helps participant with the process of revising a course to reflect an antiracist pedagogy.

Since its launch, the Antiracist Teaching course has been the most highly enrolled of the inclusive pedagogy courses. And it is not only faculty in the social sciences and humanities pursuing the course. A significant number are from STEM and Business fields. While there is occasional confusion among some about how to proceed --"I teach cell biology, so we don't have these discussions in class"--most participants discover a point of connection: "There are relatively few BIPOC individuals in my field. I think that by talking about why that is and highlighting notable BIPOC figures, we can spark discussions in the classroom. Just because the subject matter is insects doesn't mean that our field and the way we perceive it is not influenced or informed by social inequities."

Recently, colleagues in Architecture, Arts and Design and the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences initiated an Antiracist Teaching network to create community and advance scholarship among faculty committed to critical pedagogies. These faculty represent some of the most vulnerable in the academy because their expertise in topics of race, gender, queerness, disability, and social disparity makes them potential targets of groups (often external, but not always) wanting to preserve the legacies of white supremacy culture. Academic scholarship is distinct from diversity and inclusion education; however, diversity and inclusion education is dependent upon the work produced by these scholars. We need to ensure that they can continue their work, including their direct engagement with students.

Initially, the one- question-you-still-have prompt in the final assessment was intended to be rhetorical. Learning is generative, thereby producing new questions. I decided soon after implementing this assessment format to

respond to each question. A question asked on the Antiracist Teaching discussion board is this: "*How do we effectively and efficiently create an anti-racist environment?"*

Dear Higher Ed, please take note of my response.

To be effective, institutions must be willing to have the conversation, beginning with an interrogation of their own history. They must be willing to have many conversations, in a variety of formats, with varying audiences. But efficiency should not be a goal. To be efficient is to avoid the inherent complexity of doing the work. There isn't an efficient way to address systemic racism or any of the structural inequities that diversity education aims to address. What an institution can do is invest in the task by providing resources for professional development and diversity education. Institutions can invest in the task by rewarding individuals who demonstrate effort by taking time to build their capacities for allyship, as well as rewarding departments that embed a commitment to research-informed best practices for equity into their mission. Institutions can invest in the task by supporting scholars and practitioners within their organization who have thought long and hard about these topics and can serve as our thought leaders and thought partners.

In recent years, diversity and inclusion education has come under scrutiny on multiple fronts--for having negligible impacts, for being performative, for sowing division by focusing on difference. Perhaps we are expecting diversity and inclusion education to do more than it is equipped to do. Instead, I invite us to engage more deeply with others, to "hear beneath" the surface to better understand the fears and skepticism that often drive division. Personal encounters of vulnerability are what break through the walls of ideological difference. Building trust is an ongoing process, and as trust builds, we feel more courageous about facing the hard questions of our times. I believe that education for diversity and inclusion can give us tools to make this happen.

Let's be courageous together.
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About the author

Michele C. Deramo is Associate Vice Provost for Diversity Education and Engagement in the Office for Inclusion and Diversity at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg. In this capacity, she develops and delivers educational experiences that advance inclusive excellence and build strategic capacity. Deramo earned her Ph.D. from the ASPECT program (Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought) with concentration in cultural and social theory at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on performative identities in diaspora, forced migration, Italian feminism, autoethnography, and arts-based methodologies. She was inducted into Phi Beta Delta Honor Society for International Scholars in 2009. She earned master's degrees from Duquesne University (Education), and the Iliff School of Theology (Religion and Social Transformation).