

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

White Allies for Transformational Leadership

MATTHEW T. HOLT

Dear Higher Education,

Who am I? My name is Matt Holt. I currently serve as professor and head of the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech. Additionally, starting in the fall of 2022, I am a co-leader of the Virginia Tech Advantage initiative, a sprawling campus-wide initiative to provide more financial and programmatic support for underserved students. In addition to these things, I am also a first-generation White male originally from the American heartland. Specifically, I grew up on a commercial row crop and livestock farm in north central Indiana in the 1960s and 70s. In addition to my parents, I had 14 aunts and uncles, only one of whom had a college degree. I was the first member of my immediate and extended family to earn a doctorate. And to think, I barely made it to college in the first place, let alone only initially had my sights set on earning a two-year degree in agriculture and returning to the family farm. I am nothing short of a poster child for how a land-grant university can permanently and positively transform not just one life but the lives of many future generations. At a basic, intuitive level, I understand the power of higher education to transform lives and elevate livelihoods.

What does the above have to do with social justice, being a White ally, or doing the hard work necessary to elevate and implement diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) at a modern university? I believe the conversation starts with a simple word: awareness. Of course, awareness means many different things. And all the more so in the DEIB space. For me, however, awareness starts with the realization that while my background was limited in many ways, all of the policies and institutional structures that supported my higher education journey were designed by, supported, and effectively created for people who look like me. I benefited tremendously from what is known as the Morrill Act of 1862. And while land grant universities, indeed, most U.S. public universities were not explicitly created and managed in a way to be exclusive or exclusionary, in reality, many were. Putting it succinctly, land-grant and public universities often operated in ways that were exclusionary, i.e., racist, and reinforced racial and gender stereotypes and norms. As an undergraduate and a graduate student, I do not recall encountering a domestic BIPOC student in my degree programs. And yet, the evidence is strong: people identifying as BIPOC disproportionately face numerous financial, time management, and social obstacles when working to complete a college degree. Another way of saying it is that to the extent we fail to be genuinely inclusive, a university like Virginia Tech is not truly living up to its land-grant mission.

Considering the above, how does an individual, let alone an institution, start to make meaningful progress in creating a more inclusive, supportive university? Many metaphors and clichés spring to mind. For example, every journey begins with the first step. And every new book starts with the first word. But when thinking about making meaningful progress on becoming a more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming institution, these clichés have merit: the work, my work, must start somewhere. It also begins by recognizing my power and influence are likely greater than I think. As a department head, I help guide the hiring process. I help decide which graduate students are worthy of funding. Perhaps most importantly, I help set the tone that ultimately defines the culture of my department. As a department head, I have latitude in how I spend my time. Yes, various duties are mandatory and require my prompt attention. I must also deal with ad hoc requests and issues that crop up daily and are

part and parcel of the ebb and flow of any academic unit. But beyond these duties and obligations, I decide which new and ongoing initiatives are worth my time and energy. Put another way, I help shape and guide the strategic direction of my department. Yes, my role is still one of an academic middle manager. But the things I give voice to shape and guide the strategic direction of my college and even my university. To believe otherwise is, in my view, an outright dereliction of duty akin to professional cowardice. If I believe DEIB issues are primary, I have a significant pulpit from which to act.

Have I acted? And if so, what have I learned? Answering the first question is subject to the self-evaluation and self-serving biases that are part of the human psyche. But from an objective point of view, the department I manage has increased its faculty diversity during my watch, even adding and (so far) retaining several BIPOC faculty members. We have enjoyed less success in attracting and retaining BIPOC students. Concerning faculty hiring, my department was able to participate in a campus-wide program that facilitated recruiting and hiring diverse faculty members. I firmly believe in the value of programs that allow departments to identify and recruit diverse talent; without this program, I doubt my department would have enjoyed even our modest gains in building a more diverse faculty profile. Also, to be more effective in recruiting students of color, we need a faculty profile reflective of the diversity we strive to enjoy.

Regarding the second question, what have I learned? I have learned nothing more profound than the obvious. DEIB work is challenging—making progress requires persistence and a long-term commitment. It is also a team effort. For most DEIB initiatives to bear fruit, it is necessary (although not sufficient) that the department, college, and university be aligned. For example, it is helpful to have access to dedicated resources that support faculty and student recruitment and retention efforts. Beyond resources, it has been beneficial to have access to and participate in an established community of like-minded administrators, each with the same overarching objectives. At Virginia Tech, this community was officially launched in 2021 by Dr. Menah Pratt and Dr. Michele Deramo. The White Allies as Transformative Leaders (now the Academic Allies for Inclusive Excellence) has become a space for sharing goals, challenges, and aspirations in the DEIB space. In addition to having a community for support and sharing ideas and information, I have also learned something fundamental. Building a diverse and more representative faculty profile begins with a hire, but the real work starts when the faculty member arrives. While it is in many ways intuitively obvious, the mentoring and coaching needs of BIPOC faculty members often differ substantively from those we might otherwise be more accustomed to. The likely reasons are both obvious and subtle. But perhaps most importantly, and this has been the case in my department, BIPOC junior faculty often have no senior mentors who look like them and have experienced many of the same challenges and barriers. In this regard, I have found no simple formula beyond active listening and constant encouragement. And I confess, more often than not, I feel inadequate to the task. Be that as it may, I am proud of my colleagues; most of them demonstrate a sincere desire to mentor our BIPOC junior faculty members.

What is the path forward for hiring and mentoring BIPOC faculty members? In my profession, we struggle to recruit qualified BIPOC faculty candidates for our academic positions and BIPOC student students for our programs. Although I have nothing to offer except subjective opinions, I believe that part of the problem is we have not tried as hard as we might to recruit. Many departments like mine (including mine) have not formed strong and lasting relationships with, for example, our sister departments in the 1890 land-grant and regional state institutions, which generally serve a more diverse student population. This gap is our fault. It is too easy to shrug our collective shoulders, throw up our hands, and assume the challenges we face are too systemic for us to make progress. We can speculate about why more effective bridges do not exist. But the only thing that matters is what we do moving forward. We also need to be more proactive in our professional associations about forming and implementing shared mentoring programs that are accessible to diverse faculty and students. Many professional organizations and societies have started mentoring programs, including the ones I belong to. But they need our ongoing support and attention. Our students and faculty need the resources and administrative support to take advantage of the various opportunities they have for mentoring.

Much work remains. The work associated with ensuring we have a diverse and representative faculty, staff, and student profile is daunting; however, the real work in this regard necessarily occurs in academic departments and units. In my experience, success comes in fits and starts; progress often seems slow at best. But this is why it is incumbent on every academic leader to make DEIB an integral and vibrant objective for their area of responsibility. Only in this manner will we hope to create the kind of academy that represents the society within which we live. Let the work begin.

*Sincerely,
Matthew T. Holt*

About the author

Matt Holt has been named dean of Clemson University's College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences, to begin September 1st, 2024. He was Professor and Head of the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech since 2017. His Ph.D., in Agricultural Economics, is from the University of Missouri; he earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Purdue University. His research encompasses topics relating to markets for food and natural resources, focusing on nonlinear dynamics and structural breaks in econometric time series models. He served on the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association's Executive Board as an elected member, 2005-2008. He has received numerous awards for his research from the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA), including Association Fellow (AAEA, 2009).