

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Dear Higher Education: Are You Worth Dying For?

DR. MENAH PRATT

Dear Higher Education,

I am still grieving. This is a grief I have not known in many years. A dear friend compared it to the grief of losing a mother. I didn't want to acknowledge that the grief was so deep. But, sadly, it is. On March 24 and 25, 2025, the Board of Visitors at Virginia Tech voted to dissolve the Office for Inclusive Strategy and Excellence. This was a new office I was leading after an internal restructuring just a few short months before, in December 2024, had dissolved the Office for Inclusion and Diversity, which I had led for nine years.

For nine years, I went to work every day with a true passion for making a difference at Virginia Tech, an institution founded for White males and with, at its founding, a requirement to train students in the military arts. I came to an institution where Black students represented 3.8% of the population. I came to an institution with no cultural center for Native American or APIDA students. I came to an institution where the Black Cultural Center and El Centro were student organization spaces. I came to an institution where the LGBTQ space was a little closet library. During these nine years, we created strong and viable spaces for these communities, with directors and assistant directors and program managers. These centers host over 300 programs a year for the campus community. They are vibrant, fun, intellectual, and social spaces for the entire campus.

For nine years, I came to work to think about how to diversify faculty, to bring more women and people of color for our students—not just students of color—, because White students often want to see and hear from other faculty.

For nine years, and for five years before that, I had run a conference (which I also founded) for women of color in higher education to be in community with one another—to feel valued, to feel affirmed, to feel seen, and to feel heard.

For the last seven years, I had spent every summer supporting the Black College Institute, a program focused on the experiences of African Americans. It was designed to recruit African American students, largely from the east coast of Virginia, to the state's southwest corner—a five-to-six hour drive for many. I wanted to help parents answer the questions, “Why should I send my child there, so far away, so non-diverse, so big?” and “Will my child be ok, will there be people there to love my child?” I wanted parents to know that we are a community of care and compassion, that we will care for their children, and that their children will grow and develop and become amazing here.

For the last nine years, I had come to work with a real excitement to be in community with the most diverse team (almost 40 people) that I had ever worked with, and with so many other diversity advocates and allies and ambassadors across the institution—close to 100 faculty and staff. We were creating a Beloved Community here. There was so much work to be done, but we had planted the seeds. For nine years, our office advocated for InclusiveVT—the institutional and individual commitment to Virginia Tech's motto, *Ut Prosim* (that I may serve), in the spirit of community, diversity, and excellence. I often said that *Ut Prosim* meant that we needed to make

sure our students were able to be of service to anyone, anytime, anywhere. To do that, they needed to understand humanity, human differences, and identities. It is work I deeply believe can and must be done.

Then, one day, with a stroke of a pen, an executive order was signed. The executive orders continued to be signed, like swords striking out against the very words, “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” The swords sliced away websites, sliced away people and programs, and sliced away research on vulnerable communities.

And one sword sliced away the new Office for Inclusive Strategy and Excellence. It sliced away our new team, which had met in January for a two-day retreat to create a new vision and mission statement that connected strategy to diversity, that had created a website to share our new identity with the world, and that now found itself in the midst of conversations about dissolution and the uncertainty of where jobs would go, and would the jobs even exist.

What I did not realize, however, is that for nine years, almost invisible, an army was being trained. Not the corps of cadets, but a corps of social and human rights advocates, right here at Virginia Tech—often seen as a school only for science and engineering. But we are more than that. Right here at Virginia Tech, an army rose up to protest on Tuesday, March 25, 2025, the day the full board voted to use the sword at Virginia Tech.

The corps showed up in mass, 1,200 in total, marching more than a mile, to make its concerns known: “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, the BOV has got to go. Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, the BOV has got to go.”

This march encouraged my defeated soul and spirit. For days and weeks, since January, I had had more meetings and conversations than I can ever remember, not just with our office, but with many members of the campus community. The questions were nonstop: “Can we say diversity, equity, and inclusion? Do we have to stop our diversity committee? Can we teach ‘diversity courses’? What will happen with my research based on diversity? Will I lose my grants? How will I get tenure if I cannot do research in my field of interest, my area of passion and expertise, the area I have studied for years to master? What will become of my career? Will we lose community and cultural centers? Why are you changing the names of the centers? Should we change the name of our offices?” Most nights, when I came home, I collapsed on my bed, ordering Uber Eats, trying to write a to-do list, to track what needed to be done to persist, to continue, to fight.

I often did not have answers. I only had a presence—a presence I cultivated daily in which I tried to remain calm, collected, and cool, for I realized that I could not think straight if my anger was not controlled.

And, then, the guillotine, the reality, the emails about the edict: “Be it Resolved, The Office for Inclusive Strategy and Excellence is hereby dissolved.” The edict required immediate implementation: the website had to be taken down immediately. It was our website that let the campus community know we existed, that we were real people waking up every day and doing important and transformation work. It was gone.

We were invisible. And so, I have cried and cried and cried. Not for me. I cried for the work, for the team. It has been uncontrollable.

Yet, there have been moments that have encouraged me. A wonderful friend came by my house and left flowers on the porch with a beautiful note. Flowers were sent to my office. I received many phone calls and texts of care and concern.

And then I received an email from a graduate from Virginia Tech. He interviewed me during his freshman year and wrote an article in the campus newspaper that was critical of DEI. He sent his letter to me in advance of a campus town hall with the president:

I am a Virginia Tech alumni who graduated in 2021 with a Bachelors in accounting and information systems. When I was a freshman I wrote an op ed to the collegiate times criticizing what I thought were flaws in the DEI initiatives taking place at Virginia Tech. The op ed received positive comments from the community and at the time I felt genuinely persuaded that I had made a good point. Seven years later, I can honestly say I never thought things would go in this direction. Nor did I anticipate my thinking on this topic would grow up in the way that it has. I have learned how diversity is a central part of what enriches our lives in this country. I've seen how embracing diversity is a necessary component of good work. The university is one of the only places many of us would have the opportunity to be taken out of the limited box and worldview we grew up in and be exposed to all kinds of perspectives, cultures, stories, and yes, even racial and ethnic identities. I thank God that I was educated with the office for diversity and inclusion in place at Virginia Tech which, as I experienced firsthand, was led by people who were passionately determined to enrich the lives of all students using whatever was afforded to them, and with grace. This was not just another "check the box" DEI initiative that has become so infamous in the corporate world. This was a program with ideas and sincere effort towards helping to build a stronger community. Conversations about funding, budgets, structure, and content are all necessary and productive. But getting rid of this program altogether is just shutting out the conversation. And as both distant and recent history has shown us, that is never a long term solution. And if I can communicate anything in this conversation it's that for the sake of the students still here and to come, please be serious about keeping the mission of InclusiveVT alive, and keeping the conversation around diversity and inclusion alive, even during this time that the office technically isn't. Thank you.

The alumnus asked that his statement be read at the Town Hall. I hope it will be.

I am on vacation as I write this. I hope the windy desert of Albuquerque can help to start some healing of the cuts from the knife-edged sword. I rarely stepped away, used vacation days, because it was a cause I loved and felt called to work for. It was a calling to show up every day, grinding away at the difficult and challenging work of social justice at Virginia Tech. There were so many days of racism and sexism, of disrespect, of being ignored, of being made subservient to men, of having to speak up when no one else did, because I was the only one in the room with a different view. It has been extremely difficult work, often lonely and isolating, in a community with no soul food restaurant, no oxtails, no collard greens, no mac and cheese (the way Black folks make it), no peach cobbler, no "really good" fried chicken. But it was a calling, and I had been sent here by the universe to serve.

And so, I had to take time away. Time to "proper cry," as Nikki Giovanni writes. Time to grieve, to cry, and to try to heal enough to write this letter through the tears. I cannot even talk about this without tearing up. I hope one day I will be able to, but at least I can write this letter to Higher Education.

Higher Education, you thought the sword was just for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and so you were willing to allow that to be sacrificed and scrubbed. That was an incorrect assumption. The sword is for all of higher education, for all of what higher education stands for—the freedom to pursue ideas, the training of minds, the freedom to research, the freedom to speak up. All of what happens in higher education institutions is at risk.

Higher Education, it is time for the revolution—time to revolve, turn around, look at yourself. It is imperative that you clarify what you stand for.

This is a battle for survival, and no institution is immune or protected. Like COVID, again. Every day, we wake up and don't know what or who is being attacked. Where is the vaccine? Where is the antidote for the poison?

How many will have to literally and figuratively die—losing grants for vital research, losing jobs, losing opportunities to find cures, to protect vulnerable populations?

The erasure of websites, of decades of work, of positions, of jobs, of resources for vulnerable faculty and students—it's happening. The removal of the words, "diversity, equity and inclusion" is happening. The deletion of words related to environmental justice is happening.

Higher Education, you must stand up and fight for academic freedom, for freedom of speech, for sacred spaces of learning, and, most importantly, for the humanities and the arts and social sciences. It is through those fields and disciplines—that teach us about people and power and history—that we might be able to save not only higher education, but the world. STEM, AI, and technology will not alone save us.

We have to find courageous voices that can paint pictures, sing songs, and help us dance to new music to impact the world. Most importantly, we must show up, we must march, and perhaps, like in the civil rights movement, we may need to be prepared to die in the fight to save higher education.

Higher Education, are you worth dying for? I hope so.

*Genuinely and Sincerely,
Menah Pratt*

About the author

Dr. Menah Pratt is a scholar-activist, academic advocate, and creative artist-public speaker. She is Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Professor of Education at Virginia Tech. She has received several national awards, including the 2023–2024 American Council on Education Fellowship; Women We Admire in Virginia, 2023; the 2023 Individual Winds of Change award by the Forum on Workplace Inclusion; and the 2021 Inclusive Excellence Individual Leadership Award by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education.

She joined Virginia Tech in 2016 and has almost 25 years of leadership experience in higher education, including serving as chief strategy officer, chief diversity officer, university compliance officer, assistant university secretary, university board member, and attorney. She is the founder of the Faculty Women of Color in the Academy National Conference and the Black College Institute at Virginia Tech. She previously worked at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), Vanderbilt University, and Fisk University.

Her book, *Blackwildgirl: A Writer's Journey to Take Back her Superpower*, based on 45 years of journals, is a unique and non-traditional autobiography of her life journey from Black girlhood to Black womanhood in America. It builds on her book about her mother's life, *From Cotton Picking to College Professor: Lessons about Race, Class, and Gender in America* (2018), winner of the American Education Studies Association Critic's Choice Award for outstanding scholarship. She writes about women's leadership, critical race theory, Black feminism, auto-ethnography, spirituality, and African-American history.