

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Introduction

DR. MICHELE DERAMO

Dear Higher Education: Letters from the Social Justice Mountain was created to document the voices of those laboring to make campus environments more diverse, equitable, and just at a time when the sociopolitical, legal, and cultural landscape sought to erase, silence, and render invisible the work of social justice in higher education. We began assembling the first set of letters at a time when antagonism toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education had deepened resulting in the elimination of diversity and inclusion offices, pursuant to state legislation. With the dissolution of these offices, web sites were taken offline and the content on those sites—reports of work accomplished, and milestones achieved—disappeared.

But the people responsible for that work remained, sometimes displaced or assigned to other units, but nonetheless present—people with ideas, experiences, and stories to tell. We needed to counter the erasure by creating spaces where their ideas, experiences, and stories could be situated, amplified, and shared. The fluid, digital conversation site of *Dear Higher Education* became one such space.

Shortly after the inaugural issue of *Dear Higher Education* was published in the fall 2024, Donald Trump was elected as the 47th President of the United States. Stunned by another Trump victory, we girded ourselves to face what was ahead. His campaign platform to Make America Great Again, built on 20 core promises, included among them promises to “cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, radical gender ideology, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content on our children” and “deport pro-Hamas radicals and make our college campuses safe and patriotic again.” Higher education—as both an institution and as a body of people who studied, taught, learned, nurtured, created and contributed—were targeted. What would be the implications of another Trump presidency on higher education? How prepared was higher education to preserve academic freedom and research integrity, and safeguard the hard-won gains toward a welcoming, hospitable, safe, and accessible academy? How could those of us who work for equity in higher education resist the paralysis of fear and choose to act despite the obstacles we may face? These urgent questions were the foundation for this special post-election issue of *Dear Higher Education*.

The implications of Trump’s presidency became clear on his very first day in office with Executive Order 14151, “Ending Radical and Wasteful DEI Programs and Preferencing,” that called for the elimination of all diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility programs, grants, positions, performance indicators or services, including any related to environmental justice, which were described as discriminatory and illegal. This was followed on January 21st with Executive Order 14173, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” a broad and vague order aimed at eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion work at all federal agencies and by federal contractors. Both orders lacked any meaningful guidelines for interpreting what might be considered illegal yet carried ominous threats of “enforcement” for non-compliance.

On February 14th, the Acting Assistant Secretary of the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague” letter asserting that American educational institutions had racially discriminated against students, specifically naming white and Asian students. The letter claimed that institutions had 14 days to ensure compliance with existing civil rights laws and to cease all efforts to use race or proxies for race in their programming or risk having federal funding revoked. It was a confusing and not so collegial letter with its

imposition of an unreasonable timeframe for response, a draconian threat, and a link to an online complaint form that individuals could use to snitch on one another.

A series of lawsuits followed, including a motion for a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction filed by NADDOE (National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education) and its co-plaintiffs. These lawsuits argued that the Department of Education had overstepped its legal authority, imposed vague legal restrictions that violated due process and the First Amendment, and limited academic freedom. A federal court issued a nationwide preliminary injunction against the enforcement of certain provisions in the two Executive Orders targeting DEI programs, which were determined to be unconstitutionally vague and a form of viewpoint discrimination. The injunction temporarily halted the enforcement of these measures.

On March 1st, the U. S. Department of Education released a follow up to the “Dear Colleague” letter, an FAQ that provided further guidance on nondiscrimination obligations for schools, colleges, universities, and other entities receiving federal funds and clarified that educational, cultural, and historical observances and programs focused on various cultures and heritages were permissible if they were open to all. The FAQ also addressed how the decision is *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* impacted racial classifications, preferences, and stereotypes, and how the Office for Civil Rights would interpret this ruling in enforcing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Institutions grappled with how to proceed in an environment that was becoming increasingly chaotic and hostile. Trump’s impact on higher education was not limited to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. In a preview of its spring 2025 issue of *Academe*, the American Association for University Professors published a series of short articles under the title, “[Trump is Revealing Our Higher Ed Crisis](#)” (Jonathan Feingold and Veena Dubal) discussing the barrage of executive orders as “assaults” and demonstrating how their collective impact erodes the integrity of higher education:

There were the shocking assaults on federal grant-making agencies, and the dismantling of USAID that resulted in widespread hiring and graduate admission freezes, researcher furloughs, and the disruption of critical research projects occurring at and in partnership with universities.

There were the horrific assaults on noncitizens and campus protests that resulted in the revocation of student visas, the arrest and detention of student activists Mahmoud Khalil, Leqaa Kordia, Badar Khan Suri, and others, and the consequential resurgence of fear and insecurity among international and undocumented students across the nation. Likewise, there was the weaponization of antisemitism as a means of suppressing free speech and leveraging heavy penalties on elite campuses such as Columbia and Harvard.

There were the assaults on transgender people, beginning with the inauguration day order that defined sex as binary and immutable (and the consequential implications of this on federal identification documents such as passports and visas), followed by bans on transgender people serving in the military, the removal of transgender women from sports teams at educational institutions, the refusal of gender-affirming care for people under the age of 19, and the devastating impacts of these actions on the mental and physical well-being of people who Trump described in speeches and executive orders as “anti-American, dangerous, dishonorable, and deceitful.”

Feingold and Dubal, along with the other authors in the series, counseled their readers to beware of voluntarily complying in advance "in hopes of appeasing an unappeasable threat." Higher education, with its tradition of open inquiry and democratic spirit, was well situated to resist the forces of authoritarianism. Yet, many of our most powerful and well-funded institutions are failing to meet the historical moment. Ultimately, those of us laboring for justice within higher education need to forge alliances beyond our walls, to do the work in collaboration with professional organizations, academic unions, voluntary associations and pro-democracy groups. We must build communities of care and mutual aid so that we can care for our most vulnerable members. We who can must speak boldly in whatever forums are available to us, while strengthening our whisper networks so that information and action can continue to circulate.

Once again, we come to the Mountain, and this Mountain is especially steep and demanding.

The 15 letters in the special issue are organized into three sections. Our first section on Why We Come to the Mountain begins with a letter from one of the *Dear Higher Education* editors, Menah Pratt. Her letter, "Dear Higher Education: Are You Worth Dying For?" is written in the aftermath of a Resolution, signed by the Board of Visitors of her institution, to dissolve the office she led. Pratt's reflection is one of grief as she considers how swiftly the work of a decade was erased; yet it is also a testament to the fact that this dissolution of the office did not go unchallenged. More than 1200 students, faculty, staff, community allies, and retirees marched in protest on the day the resolution was signed, and many others gathered in open forums. Three hundred alumni wrote letters and emails, including a young alum who recalled writing an op ed for the school newspaper as a first-year student critical of diversity initiatives, and now reported that their thinking had evolved to understand and appreciate the value of diversity as a young professional.

The letter from Shawntal Brown and Florencio Aranda III, "Weathering Yet Another DEI Storm," follows. Brown and Aranda, coming from the front lines of the battle to undermine and dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion work in Texas, provide recommendations based in their combined lived experiences and shared beliefs in the possibility of transformation for navigating the historical moment. Their letter is followed by one from Onwubiko Agozino, whose personal experience as a childhood survivor of the genocidal Nigeria-Biafra war led him to the work of intellectual activism. Agozino's letter, "Tips Against Banning Critical Race Theory in Public Education," offers a sweeping overview of theorists whose collective canon advances liberatory intersectional thought relevant for our time. The section concludes with a compelling letter from Nathaniel Smith, whose letter, "Before HE (Higher Education) Kills Again," uses evocative prose to illustrate what he regards as both a threat to and the threat of higher education under a Trump administration means for Black and minoritized students, faculty, and administrators.

Our second section, What We Must Preserve, speaks strongly to personal accounts of how the actions of the Trump administration impact the authors, both as individuals and as members of groups that feel targeted by the executive orders issued thus far. The section opens with a brief letter from J. M. Galilei (a pseudonym evoking the memory of Galileo Galilei) whose letter, "When They Call Us the Enemy, We Must Respond," speaks to the urgency of the moment, especially if we hope to preserve academic freedom, shared governance, and research funding. This is followed by a letter from Chenelle Boatswain, "In Spite of it All," who writes from the standpoint of a Black professional woman in higher education. Boatswain raises the question of how to preserve the memory of Black women whose struggle paved the way for civil rights legislation, the integrity of which is undermined as that same legislation is now being weaponized to foreclose opportunities. Similarly, Karren Shaalini Gunalan's letter, "Belonging in Uncertainty: Navigating Higher Education as an International Professional Post-2024 Election," speaks to the fear as well as the frustrations felt by international professionals. Gunalan urges higher education to recognize the unique conditions and exclusions facing international students and professionals, and to preserve the contributions they make to our institutions. Elizabeth McLain raises up the feelings of distress and alienation felt by those who are disabled and neurodivergent in her letter, "This Autistic Professor Chooses Hope," and in doing so makes a powerful case for preserving intersectional, cross-movement work as

critical in confronting ableist discrimination in higher education, which is expected to grow exponentially under Trump. Leslie Skeffington calls higher education to prioritize accountability, prevention, and meaningful intervention in her letter, “The 2024 Election and the Revenge of Rape Culture.” Skeffington states that her entire educational experience was shaped by the normalization and pervasiveness of rape culture, a reality for many that is expected to worsen now that Trump has been reelected and has appointed to his cabinet individuals (like himself) with sexual misconduct charges against them. Esther Lawrence writes that “No One is Coming to Save Us: Navigating the PWI Roller Coaster as an AfroCaribbean American Women,” thus the most essential object of preservation must be our own mental health and well-being. LaTrina Johnson confirms this sentiment with expressive language in her letter, “Monsters We Know: A Letter from the Flesh”: preservation of the work of resistance and critical consciousness is essential to defeat the monster before us.

Despite the fear, distress, anger, and alienation articulated across the letters, there is also a declaration of hope. In our final section, Why We Believe Transformation is Possible, our authors look to our own histories and communities, as well as to one another for the way forward. Theresa Canada’s letter, “Transformation--Is What We Do,” mines the history of her own family who traveled north to Harlem as part of the Great Migration, and her own experience of school desegregation for the examples of mental fortitude necessary for change. Likewise, Tony Laing draws upon the work of James Baldwin for discovering transformative possibilities in his letter, “Nothing Can Be Changed Until it is Faced: A Baldwinian Call to Action.” The letter to higher education from Carlos Fitch and Vanessa Falcon Orta is an invitation to learn from those who are on the border, literally. They write in “Transcending Borders and Enacting Servingness: A Love Letter for Border-HSIs Transformation,” how they as *Transfronterizx* scholar-activists created various initiatives to recognize and affirm the presence and humanity of students and their families living on the borderlands. In conclusion, Brittany Davis’s letter, “Weary in Well-Doing: My Journey of Finding Hope,” reminds us that when we are most weary, we find our strength in coming together with others.