

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

---

## Before HE (Higher Ed) Kills Again

NATHANIEL SMITH

*Dear Higher Education,*

We have a problem. As a concerned higher education administrator and a doctoral student studying higher education, it pains me to truth-tell that we are majoring in trouble. The truth is that higher education is killing us.

We are in trouble because our sprawling campuses are crawling green with envy from external forces siphoning resources away. Campus politics and polemics render college presidents visually impaired with ivy-colored irises. Farsighted, unable to find a way forward. The revolving door of mission-driven visionary leadership is over and above attrition and six feet under attack.

We are in trouble because of rising tuition costs and dwindling federal and state aid. Students who carry the dreams of their families and ancestors are strapped for cash. They are overdosing off remediation, and we still find ways to overcharge them dead on arrival. Community cultural wealth is marked as underdeveloped foreign exchange, a non-acceptable form of currency for students who speak decoloniality and indigeneity.

We are in trouble because affirmative action's new port of departure checkpoints race at the main entrance. Admissions is now a duty-free bottleneck enterprise, an early decision distilling process to separate white wine from black liquor. We checkmark briberies, preferences, and legacies, but we fail to take early action correctively on Black students like me — a first-generation student from the poorest congressional district in America.

We are in trouble because we Sunday best our buildings with historical figures dressed in racist ideas but strip naked the patina of DEI fashion sense. Our consciousness about who and what belongs here has become seared along the seams, tailor-made seclusions and exclusions. What about educational reparations?

We are in trouble because our systems of oppression interlock to form a police state of mind. Mental health issues barricade our students and escape a campus-issued BOLO, minding their own business. Academic affairs and student affairs caution against sharing information that works towards a student's vertical advantage, causing vertigo. Advising students off track and derailing graduation goals that persist past advanced statistics.

We are in trouble because we have lost our sense of civility, camaraderie, and community. So I am here to offer the following victim impact statement on the state of higher education. I have more questions than answers in pointing towards a reconstructive reimagining of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM), the brainstem of higher education. Strategic enrollment plans are blueprints that institutional leaders and key stakeholders use to chart a way forward. They are neurological pathways that face forward in the direction of better, and are engineered in the reverse to be more equitable, inclusive, and diverse. Without anesthesia, the promise of higher education must be better. Without initiative and leadership support at the highest level, forward progress, advocacy for creative reimagination and redesign, and systems of accountability hardly materialize. Our students deserve better. The time is not never. The time is now.

Dear higher education, our ancestors built these halls and yet you continue to claim innocent lives in the name of higher learning. So while you are out on parole, I hope you reorient your critical thinking and cultural sensitivity to include us all not guilty. Through lessons learned, I wrote this poem and hope for you to become more reformed, reborn. The future of recidivism depends on you.

Crime scene evidence shows SEM negative blood type  
splattered litter  
brain matter glittered on campus sidewalks  
sideshow slideshow shows data  
analytics of mismeasured glam shows  
power pointing presenting iconography  
memorializing disfigured mission statements  
Do Not Admit  
coagulated arterial blood gas admission  
on account of mesmerized registrar racketeering  
student body counts coursing through campus  
tours torquing  
sightings of low vibrational enrollment  
riding high, tuition incest increases  
the latest contagious US News & WAP, WAP, WAP  
double-barreled late-night Student Affairs trysts  
twerking Academic Affairs foreplay pimping  
rendezvous point-blank range  
hemorrhaging  
towards enrollment cliffhangers, hangovers  
indecent value propositions  
dissident dollars & cents of belongings  
and other personal effects unpackaged  
financial aid-ing, abetting forces external  
unfair choices inside a higher dead  
chronicling strategic enrollment's diverse  
issues intrusive misuses  
advisor abuses, blunt force trauma  
headshot red dot unDACAmended silences  
swirling, transferring dropped shell casings  
of articulation disagreements  
memorandums of missed understanding  
by grade point avengers trafficking  
reticulated patterns, the lifecycle obituary  
of student success.

*Forever forward,  
Nathaniel Smith*

## Recommended Reading

- Bickerstaff, Susan, Beal, Katie, Raufman, Julia, Lewy, Erika, and Slaughter, Alvin. "Five principles for reforming developmental education: A review of the evidence." *Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness*, 2022.
- Hossler, Don, and Bontrager, Bob. *Handbook of strategic enrollment management*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2014.
- Kirp, David. *The college dropout scandal*. Oxford University Press. 2019.
- Minthorn, Robin, Starr, and Nelson, Christine. "Colonized and racist Indigenous campus tour." *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 73-88.
- Museum, Samuel, and Ravello, Joanna. "Characteristics of academic advising that contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success at predominantly white institutions." *The Journal of the National Academic Advising Association*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2021, pp. 13-25.
- Sandoval-Lucero, Elena, Hernandez, Ignacio, and McKnight-Tutein, Gillian. "Diversity of student populations and how we serve them." *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration 5th Edition*, edited by McClellan, George and Marquez Kiyama, Judy, Jossey-Bass, 2023, pp. 219-244.
- Secore, Scott. "The significance of campus visitations to college choice and strategic enrollment management." *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2018, pp. 150-158.
- Wilder, Craig, Steven. *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. Bloomsbury. 2013.
- 

## About the author

**Nathaniel Smith** is an ordained minister and serves as the Director of NYC Men Teach at CUNY Queens College. He is a doctoral student at the University of Colorado Denver's School of Education and Human Development's Leadership for Educational Equity in Higher Education program. His dissertation topic focuses on the lived experiences of Black males in doctoral education. Nathaniel is a 2024 Asa G. Hilliard III and Barbara A. Sizemore Research Course on African Americans in Education Fellow.