

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## She, Desperately Seeking a More Courageous HE

PATRICE W. GLENN JONES

*Dear Higher Education,*

There was a time when I admired you. Truly, I did. Not that you'd notice or care; after all, I'm no political power player, and I don't have deep pockets to offer you. I'm just a humble career educator, one who began in the high school classroom and now finds herself entangled in your web of administrative hierarchies. The fact that my admiration for you has waned may be of no concern to you, but it troubles me deeply.

I once stood in awe of your grand expanse, your promises of enlightenment, and the ideological courage you seemed to champion. I walked your campuses, marveling at the freedom you provided. Faculty, students, even administrators were free to debate and to advocate for causes, even when those causes were contentious or provocative. I didn't always agree with what I heard or saw, but I admired you for offering a space where ideas could breathe, where voices could rise. You were, as I saw it, a crucible for change — a place where advocacy and justice took root. You were the stage on which the Civil Rights Movement was born. From your quiet halls and basement rooms came the champions who dared to demand more from society. You laughed in the face of danger, standing firm as a titan in the American social structure.

Or so I thought.

Today, you've lost that bravery. You've shrunk from your former glory. Now, you seem more like a cowering fledgling, a timid creature easily swayed by political whims and the threat of not being liked. I think I'll just call you "HE" from now on. It's a fitting abbreviation for what you've reduced yourself to — something small and uncertain.

So, HE, allow me to explain why I now see cowardice where once I saw courage.

For one, you seem terrified of your own role as a platform for discourse. Rather than fostering dialogue on the social issues that matter most — racism, sexism, discrimination of all kinds — you've taken the easy way out. You sidestep controversy, avoid backlash at all costs. Look at how quickly you silence discussions on critical topics to avoid ruffling feathers. Once, you would have leaned into these conversations, embraced the tension as a necessary part of progress. Now, you censor. You suppress. Faculty and students find their voices restricted, particularly when it comes to teaching or exploring social justice theories.

Just look at the situation with Nikole Hannah-Jones. We would all understand if you denied her tenure because she didn't put in the work, but that wasn't it. *The 1619 Project* (New York Times, 2019; Hannah-Jones & Watson, 2021), which reexamines U.S. history through the lens of slavery and its lasting impact on American society, was just too controversial for you. How is it that you have come to stifle critical discussions on race and history in the classroom? Only after significant public outcry and protests from faculty and students, and in an act of hypocritical cowardice, did you change your mind, and offer Hannah-Jones tenure. Really, that's what you do?

Discussing slavery's impact on American society is a critical conversation, and you'd rather mute it because the conversation is uncomfortable and inconvenient for you?

And think about Florida. DeSantis' "Stop WOKE Act" prevents Critical Race Theory and related concepts from being taught, framing them as divisive or anti-American. It is unfortunate, but the truth is that racism *is* American. Where were you when this act was passed, HE? Yes, some faculty at various public universities in Florida expressed concern that the law restricted their ability to teach and discuss systemic racism, white privilege, and other topics central to social justice, but the potential collectiveness of your larger voice was silence. Rather than stand up against this absurdity, you accepted it, far too quietly. I don't understand how you can be charged with preparing tomorrow's leaders, tomorrow's professionals, when you refuse to take an active role in representing the diversity of a society — diversity that is a product of that society's history, including slavery. Most African Americans would not say that they "benefited" from slavery or the loss of millions of Black lives during those centuries. (Maybe all the blacksmiths that still have such a pivotal role in American society feel differently — sarcasm intended.)

Then there's your ongoing failure to address systemic inequalities. Why would you address them if you cannot even admit the truth about racism? These inequalities have been "stamped from the beginning" of this country's foundation (Kendi, 2017). Some like to believe that we've come a long way and that systemic racial discrimination exists only in the minds of people of color. They're wrong. Racism exists, despite attempts to ensure that no one, including you, disrupts White America's sense of comfort. But do you speak up? Do you give voice to the groups of people whose existence in this country has a history of discomfort?

There is also the debate over race and admissions. Whether or not you officially consider race in your admissions practices, in so many ways you still perpetuate a gap between the privileged and the marginalized. Think of legacy admissions. Instead of reimagining how you admit students — looking beyond test scores and GPAs to who they are and what they've overcome — you cling to outdated, inequitable systems.

And pay disparities. The gaps between what you pay women and minority faculty and what you pay their White male counterparts are shameful. Some sources, like the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (Schneider & Bichsel, 2024), have found that women in your faculty ecosystem make 82 cents for every dollar made by White men. And when we include race in the scenario, the disparity worsens. Black women faculty make 76 cents and Latina women faculty make 72 cents for every dollar made by White men (Schneider & Bichsel, 2024). Still, in 2024.

You conduct salary audits as a show of good measure, but when it comes to substantive change, you opt for tokenism. A few shiny diversity initiatives here and there, just enough to make yourself look good, but without any real impact. You boast of diverse student populations, but where are the diverse faculty members to lead these students, to mentor them, to reflect their realities?

Your reputation, it seems, has become your top priority. You'd rather cover up misconduct than confront it. Instead of seeking justice for victims of discrimination and harassment, you sweep these crimes under the rug. Justice is inconvenient, isn't it? And those who dare to speak out? You punish them. Retaliation against whistleblowers has become a common practice in your halls.

You've also developed a strange loyalty to the past. You cling to old curricula, holding onto texts and ideas that no longer serve the diverse needs of today's students. You resist updating your syllabi to include authors and perspectives from around the world, stubbornly perpetuating a narrow, exclusionary worldview. Policy reform, too, meets resistance. When it comes to gender-neutral facilities or accommodations for students with disabilities, you drag your feet, stalling progress rather than driving it.

I can't help but notice how money talks with you, HE. Financial motivations seem to outweigh ethical considerations at every turn. I understand that government funding is vital in some cases, but bending to the will of politicians who prioritize their own political agendas over advancing professional capacity among students and our future? Gutless. You should not allow yourself to be led by politicians who know nothing about education.

You accept donations with strings attached, allowing corporations and wealthy individuals to influence academic freedom. You prioritize profit over access, raising tuition and fees with little concern for the students who are being priced out of their education. Low-income students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, are left scrambling for resources while you cater to the whims of your wealthier benefactors.

And then there's your relationship with activism. It's lukewarm at best, hostile at worst. You suppress student voices, imposing regulations on protests and penalizing those who challenge you. You hesitate to endorse social movements like Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ+ rights, afraid of stepping into political territory. I remember a time when you stood on the front lines of these issues. Now, you barely whisper in support.

When crises hit — whether acts of racism, police brutality, global pandemics — you respond too slowly, too weakly. Your students and faculty look to you for leadership, for decisive action, and you hesitate. And as mental health crises rise, particularly among communities affected by social injustices, you provide inadequate support, leaving students to fend for themselves.

Even your resource allocation is inequitable. Departments like Ethnic Studies and Gender Studies, which could be beacons of change, are chronically underfunded. And campus facilities reflect broader social inequalities, with some students learning in pristine environments while others make do with outdated, neglected spaces.

Your decision-making processes are opaque, excluding the very voices that should be at the table. The most underrepresented are often left out of conversations that directly affect them, and your lack of transparency only perpetuates the cycle of bias and exclusion.

You were once a king, HE. Now, you're just a shadow of the victor you once were.

But in the face of this disappointment, I believe in the potential for your transformation. While the nation's future remains uncertain, you possess the tools to shape it. The challenges we face — political, social, and economic — are daunting, but they also present unprecedented opportunities for innovation and reinvention. It's time for you to reclaim your role as a crucible for change, not by retreating into outdated systems and narrow-minded practices, but by boldly embracing the future.

To begin, reimagine your purpose. You are not merely a gatekeeper of traditional degree attainment and conservative, historical knowledge. Through your doors, social equity and thought innovation can flourish. Forge partnerships with industries that prioritize ethical innovation, not just financial gain. Yes, I understand that money is necessary for operations and providing students with opportunities, but we cannot sell out to those who want to hold us back and stifle growth. "Man up" when it comes to politicians; instead of following them, take the lead to guide them toward our next social steps for a better huManity. Also, HE, you must develop curricula that reflect the complexities of our world — curricula that prepare diverse students with varied exceptionalities and abilities to navigate uncertainty with empathy, critical thinking, and adaptability. This means going beyond the traditional degrees and offering more learning opportunities that offer faster pathways to workforce opportunities.

HE, your decisions must be transparent, inclusive, and forward-thinking. This requires dismantling the old hierarchies that keep marginalized voices out of the conversation. Students, faculty, and community stakeholders must be invited to the table. Their perspectives, rooted in lived experience, are essential for crafting a future where education serves as a pathway to both personal growth and societal progress.

Embrace emerging technologies — not as a replacement for the human element, but as tools that amplify access and opportunity. Imagine a world where online learning is not a lesser alternative but a powerful complement to traditional methods — where virtual labs, AI-driven learning platforms, and global classroom collaborations redefine what it means to be educated. Use these innovations to expand access, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized by both education and society.

And let activism thrive within your walls. Support students and faculty as they champion causes that push society forward. Equip them not with fear of repercussions but with the knowledge and resilience to face the challenges of the modern world. Stand firm against political pressures that seek to undermine academic freedom and social justice.

Lastly, acknowledge that you are not perfect, but that you are capable of evolving. The courage to confront your own shortcomings is the same courage that will lead you to a better future. It's a future where education isn't a privilege reserved for the few, but a beacon of hope and possibility for the many. If you can do this, those of us who once admired you will not only return to your side, but will stand with you, shoulder to shoulder, as you lead this nation into a new era of possibility and progress.

Because while the future is uncertain, it's not beyond our ability to shape. And I, for one, need to believe in your potential to be the leader we need.

*Signed,*  
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## About the author

**Patrice W. Glenn Jones** is a trailblazer in online education, driving the integration of innovative learning experiences and technologies to create transformative virtual learning environments. As the founding Executive Director of Online Education and Programs at Alabama State University, she has played a key role in fostering virtual learning at the institution.

A lifelong educator and “forever teacher,” Patrice is passionate about fostering student engagement through curiosity, real-world applications, and emotional connection. Her leadership extends beyond the classroom as a 2023–2024 Propel Center Fellow and ACE Leadership Fellow, and as a graduate of the Stevens Initiative Academy, where she honed her skills in innovation and global collaboration.

Patrice’s diverse career includes roles as assistant professor, program director, educational consultant, and assistant dean. She has published extensively in prominent journals, including *The Journal of Negro Education* and *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. With a PhD in educational leadership from Florida A&M University, and degrees in information science and English, Patrice combines deep academic knowledge with visionary leadership. Dedicated to empowering educators and students, Patrice is committed to leveraging cutting-edge technology and innovative pedagogy to inspire lifelong learning and drive institutional growth.