

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

A Letter of Farewell

MICHELE DERAMO

Dear Higher Education,

I am writing to say farewell.

My career in higher education, which has spanned over 35 years, is ending.

It is not my choice. I thought I would have another four years or so before I retired. I thought I would enjoy a retirement send-off with the many colleagues I've met over the 30 years spent at my current institution—colleagues from across colleges and departments, since my work was about building collaborations, establishing partnerships, and fostering dialogue. I thought that when I retired there might be an article in the campus news chronicling my contributions over the years, which included procuring over \$1.2 million as the first director of service-learning, establishing a community engagements program that supported refugee resettlement, and delivering thousands of hours of professional development to faculty, staff, and administrators. I thought, perhaps with some vanity, that I might even be nominated for emeritus status, even though I was an administrator. An administrator whose most recent title was Associate Vice President.

None of this will happen.

I received a non-reappointment with a one-year reassignment in April 2025.

I am another casualty of the movement to eliminate diversity and inclusion initiatives in organizations receiving federal funding. Of course, I wasn't the only one. Others at my institution whose job descriptions overlapped with diversity, equity, and inclusion work, including administrative assistants, fiscal officers, and campus communicators, received similar non-reappointments with reassignments. But among those impacted, I had the longest tenure at our institution.

We anticipated the dissolution of our office. We had been following the national climate for years, tracking the closure of offices and cultural centers, witnessing the spread of misinformation and government overreach. But we trusted in our university leadership, believing that they would find a way to preserve the work we were doing as core to the institutional mission even if we had to recommission ourselves to be in compliance with this awful new reality. We trusted that we would be placed with new responsibilities, ones that considered our expertise, impact, and experience, that acknowledged our value to the institution and the individuals within it who we served.

That is not what happened.

On the day after the formal dissolution of our office by the institution's governing body (80% of whom were appointed by a Republican businessman-governor with presidential aspirations), a story was released stating in the most effusive language that leadership affirmed university principles, values, and commitment to "evolving laws." The president was quoted as being "heartened by the board's commitment as expressed in the first two

paragraphs of the resolution, that our university highly values diversity, including diversity of thought and experience, and fosters an inclusive environment, encouraging a culture of opportunity for all, and is committed improving the quality of life and the human condition.” If you did not know otherwise, you might have thought something good had happened for diversity, that we had prevailed despite it all.

There was no mention of the subsequent bullet points in the resolution template—written and distributed by the Attorney General to every public college and university in the Commonwealth—“to dissolve effective immediately the (insert name of DEI office).” There was no indication that the process of scrubbing the website of diversity and inclusion work had begun. There was no indication of how the so-called affirmation of principles and values would be realized without dedicated leadership or signifying metrics. There was no acknowledgement of *us*.

In the week that followed the formal dissolution of our office, there was confusion. No one was able to predict the implications of the decision. There were meetings with university leadership—people who had been our colleagues and were now our auditors, who would determine if our programs could or should continue. We had meetings to strategize in preparation for these meetings, and subsequent meetings to deconstruct them. We had meetings with colleagues who looked to us for advice, courage, and direction about their own work—content they taught, research they led, advocacy or counselling they extended to students of color, students who were trans or queer, disabled or neurodivergent, international or activists.

We were emotionally exhausted.

And then we each, individually, met with the functionaries who informed us that in compliance with the resolution, we were non-reappointed with a temporary reassignment. Because I had been at my institution for 30 years, I received a one-year reassignment at the same salary and benefits, but without a merit increase. The equivalent of those who were at the institution for two or more years.

Thirty years plus four distressing months. I was naive to think that being a 30-year employee meant anything to a large institution beyond free parking and a lapel pin.

I am not okay with this farewell.

I resent that my final years in higher education have been shortchanged. I am sad that the programs we led, programs once celebrated as innovative and critical to achieving bold institutional priorities, have now disappeared. I miss the co-workers with whom I shared an office suite and who are now, like me, tucked away in makeshift office spaces until their time on reassignment expires.

I am not okay with this farewell, but I will be fine. The fact of early retirement appeals to me. I am reducing expenses, simplifying my time, and spending more of it outdoors. I am beginning some writing and painting projects. And I am participating in activism—including a campaign for a nationwide vote of no confidence in politically appointed governance boards.

Nonetheless, my farewell is tinged with mourning, not for myself, but for you, higher education.

Higher education has given me a good life (despite the various points during my career when I earned \$20,000 less than my male counterparts). Higher education has exposed me to alternative ways of being, challenged my inherited knowledge of the world, stretched and refined my thinking, and offered me better language and processes and navigational tools for moving through the world. Higher education has been transformative for me....

But is transformation possible for you, higher education, in the world we live in today?

I mourn for the college presidents hauled before Congress on spurious antisemitism allegations and forced to give yes or no responses, when everything about their education and the complexity of academic leadership precluded the simplicity of a flat answer.

I mourn the legions of scientists, artists, and humanitarians dismissed from their work at federal agencies, museums, libraries, and cultural centers, whose expertise, research, and expansive knowledge about the “wicked problems” of our times are subject to the whims and opinions of those currying the favor of billionaires and oligarchs.

I mourn for my colleagues who, after presenting years of carefully assembled data about what was best for students’ residential wellbeing, sat mute while their proposal was voted down by the Board of Visitors, whose financial interests lie elsewhere.

I mourn for every student who sits anonymously in large classrooms, as well as every student who will never sit in a classroom at all, because higher education has become a corporation where students are “products” (to quote someone on our governing board) who can be added or subtracted to balance the bottom line.

I mourn, as well, that more of us aren’t speaking up, that my offer to the president to assist in facilitating some of these conversations (because that is *my* area of expertise) wasn’t taken seriously.

During those distressing first months of 2025, as we grappled with how to work with integrity while navigating the very real risks before us, I stated that we may need to look beyond the university for the support and resources we need. I was particularly inspired by a colleague who spoke about realizing early on in her life that we cannot rely securely on large institutions—we need to instead build communities of reliance and mutual aid. A radical proposal when you think deeply about what this means for taking care of one another in the interregnum, this “time of monsters.”¹

So, it is time to say farewell.

I appreciate what I had in higher education. But there is no longer a place for me here. I will instead dedicate my final chapter of work to world-building beyond the campus.

Perhaps someday our paths will intersect.

Michele Deramo

Reference

Gramsci, A. (2011) *Prison Notebooks Volume II, Notebook 3*, 1930, SS-34, Past and Present 32-33. Columbia University Press.

¹ The quote—“The old world is dying and the new struggles to be born. This is the time of monsters.”—is attributed to Antonio Gramsci and is loosely translated from the original: *La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi piú svariati.* (The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.)

About the author

Michele C. Deramo was the Associate Vice President for Education and Engagement in the Office for Inclusive Strategy and Excellence at Virginia Tech. She is currently a special advisor for community and belonging in the Center for Teaching and Learning, as well as president of the Italian American Studies Association. She recently joined the Coalition for Action in Higher Education.