

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Nothing Can Be Changed Until It Is Faced: A Baldwinian Call to Action

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Dear Higher Education,

I write to you as a Black male scholar-practitioner whose journey has been shaped by the intersecting realities of race, gender, sexuality, and privilege in America. As I navigate the complex landscapes of K-12 and higher education, my lived experiences profoundly inform my work. As James Baldwin once said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” This sentiment drives my commitment to challenging systemic inequities and fostering transformative possibilities for people of color.

My Journey and Commitment to Equity

In my roles—as a METCO¹ Director expanding opportunities for students of color, Assistant Vice President for DEIB at a Research 1 University, founder of Laing Equity Education Group, LLC, and a higher education instructor—I have worked to challenge systemic inequities and improve access to educational opportunities for marginalized students, faculty, and staff. My life’s mission aligns with Baldwin’s vision: confronting uncomfortable truths to drive meaningful change.

The 2024 Presidential Election: A Pivotal Moment

The 2024 presidential election has left the nation at a crossroads. Donald Trump’s return to office signals a conservative resurgence, while the failure of Kamala Harris’s historic candidacy highlights the persistence of systemic barriers. Baldwin’s words remind us that we must not accept the status quo, but must instead serve as catalysts for progress.

President Trump’s executive orders, signed immediately upon his return, target DEIB programs for elimination and enforce narrow definitions of gender identity, challenging the very principles of inclusivity in higher education and other sectors. The U.S. Department of Education’s two-week deadline to dismantle diversity initiatives under threat of losing federal funding has left institutions scrambling and, in many cases, dismantling all DEI programs. While legal challenges have stalled aspects of these orders, the broader implications remain clear: higher education must reaffirm its role as a brave space for all identities.

¹ METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) is a voluntary school desegregation program in Massachusetts that enables students from Boston and Springfield—predominantly students of color—to attend suburban public schools. Established in 1966, METCO aims to provide educational opportunities, promote diversity, and reduce racial isolation in participating school districts. The program fosters cross-cultural understanding and academic excellence while preparing students for higher education and career success.

A Path Forward

James Baldwin once said that “Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” In the context of higher education, this observation highlights the stark challenge facing institutions today: the persistence of ignorance, exacerbated by entrenched power structures, continues to undermine efforts to achieve true equity and justice. The fight against such ignorance—whether created through deliberate disinformation or passive exclusion—requires an unwavering commitment to knowledge, engagement, and innovation. Despite the ongoing attacks on DEIB initiatives across the nation, these efforts continue to yield undeniable benefits: improved morale, enhanced innovation, and strengthened institutional trust. These outcomes reinforce Baldwin’s assertion that “Nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Higher education institutions must confront these challenges head-on, not only to survive, but to lead the way toward systemic change.

To inspire transformation and navigate resistance effectively, institutions must adopt a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach:

- **Commit to Inclusive Leadership:** Inclusive leadership is not optional, but is rather a cornerstone of institutional transformation. Institutions must equip leaders with the tools to drive meaningful change.
- **Implement Leadership Development Programs:** One such model is the University of Michigan’s DEI Certificate Program, which equips faculty and staff with critical skills to foster inclusive environments. These programs should be a staple in leadership pipelines across all levels of academia.
- **Establish Executive DEIB Councils:** These councils, composed of top-level administrators, faculty, and students, can serve as the driving force to align institutional policies with DEIB goals. Their role should extend beyond advisory functions and into tangible policy-making to hold the institution accountable.
- **Tie DEIB Performance Evaluations to Leadership Compensation and Tenure:** Leaders should not only espouse DEIB values, but should be held accountable for their role in advancing them. Tying DEIB-related goals to compensation and tenure reviews ensures that these values permeate all decision-making processes.
- **Equip Governing Boards with DEIB Training:** Ensuring that those who hold power over the institution’s strategic direction are knowledgeable about DEIB is essential for accountability. This includes providing regular DEIB training for boards to ensure they understand the significance of these efforts in institutional governance.
- **Strengthen Community Partnerships:** True transformation requires active community engagement. Institutions must cultivate long-lasting partnerships to ensure their DEIB efforts resonate beyond campus walls.
- **Expand Pipeline Programs:** Partnering with K-12 schools and nonprofits, such as The Posse Foundation, helps build pathways to higher education for underrepresented students. These partnerships foster long-term relationships that support both academic and personal growth for students from marginalized communities.
- **Create Advisory Boards with Local Civil Rights Organizations:** By engaging local civil rights groups and policymakers, institutions can ensure that their DEIB efforts are both relevant and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. These boards provide valuable input on institutional priorities and strategies.
- **Establish Service-Learning Opportunities Centered on Racial Justice:** Service-learning initiatives that focus on racial justice and equity create opportunities for students to engage with real-world issues while developing the leadership and advocacy skills needed to drive change.
- **Facilitate Courageous Conversations:** Confronting issues of race and equity requires institutions to foster open, honest, and sometimes difficult conversations.

- **Host Annual Campus-Wide Dialogues on Race and Equity:** The University of Minnesota's Critical Conversations series exemplifies how institutions can foster open dialogue about race and equity. These forums should be held regularly to keep the conversation alive and ensure that it is inclusive of all perspectives.
- **Develop Peer-Led Discussion Groups:** Initiatives like Cornell's Intergroup Dialogue Project have proven to be effective in fostering deeper understanding between individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds. These peer-led dialogues provide safe spaces for honest conversation.
- **Establish Forums for Collaborative Equity Work:** Creating open forums for students, faculty, and staff to collectively address equity concerns ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in shaping the institution's DEIB strategy.
- **Invest in Allyship and Psychological Safety:** Sustained change requires the support of allies and the creation of environments where individuals can thrive.
- **Launch Allyship Training Programs:** Programs like Stanford's IDEAL Learning Journey are essential for educating allies about the role they can play in advancing DEIB. These programs teach individuals how to use their privilege and influence to support marginalized groups.
- **Recognize Faculty and Staff Contributions to DEIB:** Institutions should publicly acknowledge and reward the efforts of those who go above and beyond in promoting DEIB, through awards, incentives, and other forms of recognition. This not only motivates individuals but sets a cultural standard for what is valued.
- **Create Safe Spaces for Historically Marginalized Communities:** Providing physical and emotional spaces for historically marginalized communities to gather and receive support is key to promoting a sense of belonging and mental well-being. These spaces allow individuals to connect, reflect, and recharge in a supportive environment.
- **Remain Resilient Amid Backlashes:** Change is often met with resistance. Institutions must be prepared to endure and respond to setbacks, particularly in politically and socially charged environments.
- **Establish Rapid Response Teams:** In times of legislative or societal pushback, having a team in place to quickly mobilize and address threats to DEIB initiatives ensures that institutions can respond with agility and strength.
- **Develop Contingency Plans for DEIB Funding and Staffing:** Institutions should prepare for potential budget cuts or staffing shortages by developing contingency plans to safeguard critical DEIB programs and initiatives.
- **Publicly Reaffirm DEIB as a Core Institutional Value:** In times of resistance, it is crucial that institutions publicly reaffirm their commitment to DEIB, reinforcing that these values are integral to their mission and purpose.
- **Collaborate with Legal and Policy Experts:** Legal experts can provide guidance on how to navigate potential legal challenges to DEIB initiatives, helping institutions stay proactive in defending their efforts.

What's Next?

The work of advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in higher education cannot be reactionary; it must be proactive, strategic, and sustainable. The next steps require us to move beyond theoretical commitments and toward institutional actions that ensure long-term progress.

James Baldwin reminds us, "People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them." Higher education must break free from cycles of exclusion by making structural commitments to equity and justice.

- **Establish Policy Advocacy Initiatives** to form coalitions with peer institutions, legal experts, and civil rights organizations to challenge restrictive policies at state and federal levels.

- **Diversify Funding Sources** to develop long-term funding strategies, including endowments and private philanthropy, to sustain DEIB initiatives independent of federal funding.
- **Institutionalize DEIB in Strategic Plans** by embedding DEIB goals into institutional mission statements, accreditation criteria, and budgeting decisions.
- **Develop Crisis Communication Strategies** to prepare leadership teams with proactive messaging and strategic responses to attacks on diversity and inclusion efforts.
- **Empower Student and Faculty Activism** by providing resources and platforms for student and faculty advocacy, fostering a culture of civic engagement and institutional accountability.
- **Strengthen Alumni Networks for DEIB Support** by engaging alumni as advocates and donors to champion DEIB efforts and provide mentorship opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

We must ask ourselves: If not now, when? If not us, who? As Baldwin reminds us, “The world is before you, and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.”

Sincerely,



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