

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The Reimagining of a DEI Scholar's Dream

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Dear Higher Education,

My collegiate journey has always reflected that of the “lonely only”. I attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and became the first Black person to earn a Ph.D. in Communication at the mid-southern R1 institution I attended. I am currently at a moderate-size, research-intensive PWI in the southern United States, where Black faculty comprise fewer than 10% of full-time tenured and tenure-earning positions. I entered the university as an Assistant Professor and progressed through tenure and promotion to become the institution's first—and only—Black woman full professor. I am also its longest-serving Black woman department chair.

Although my career in higher education has been marked by numerous “firsts” and “onlys,” I have consistently drawn upon my intersectional lived experience to advance work in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). I first fell in love with the Communication discipline as an undergraduate student, where coursework in intercultural communication gave language to experiences I had long felt but could not yet name. This intellectual grounding deepened during my master's thesis and later my doctoral dissertation, as I began to interrogate intersections of race, gender, pedagogy, and communication practices. I have remained committed to this long-standing research agenda that seeks to unmute microcultural voices and affirm diversity in its many forms. This work has culminated in books and multiple peer-reviewed publications centered on equity, representation, and the deliberate celebration of difference.

As a Communication scholar, my professional life has been punctuated by local, national, and even international conference presentations and keynote addresses that illuminate DEI issues. These engagements have been so plentiful that they blur together in my memory; yet, they have never simply been mere professional obligations, but rather extensions of my deep commitment to social justice. That commitment led me to serve on the discipline's national diversity council and to found—and chair as its inaugural leader—the DEI committee for the Communication discipline's southern region. Through these roles, I found myself at the forefront of shaping policies and scholarship aimed not only at institutional change, but at conceptualizing a more just world grounded in human liberation and steadfast resistance to oppression in all its forms.

I assumed the role of department chair in 2020 during the height of the global pandemic, with a commitment to sustaining our academic mission amid unprecedented and unpredictable academic and personal challenges. As a complement to our administrative role, department chairs commonly have one-on-one meetings with the dean or their superior to discuss a span of topics. Agenda items often include providing updates on how the academic unit is performing, addressing personnel issues, seeking advice, and even just simple check-ins to maintain morale and a healthy working environment. In a recent one-on-one meeting with the dean, in addition to the standard agenda items, I was asked where I saw myself in 10 years. Though a highlight of my career has been teaching students interview skills, which consists of reflecting on one's longevity in a particular field, I was taken aback when asked about my own future in higher education.

How could this be? How could I—someone who has made a two-decade long career out of fluid communication practices—suddenly be left speechless? The answer, in retrospect, is disarmingly simple. I had imagined my career culminating in service as a university vice president or director of DEI. Every article I read, presentation I delivered, publication I authored, committee I served on, and course I taught was deliberate preparation for this role. For the past twenty years, I have oriented my professional life toward a position that, almost overnight, was rendered obsolete—dismantled under the weight of swaying political, legal, and ideological forces.

A shift in political administration ushered in a collage of senate bills, executive orders, and federal and state policies that now constrict or discourage using public funds for explicit DEI positions or programs. These restrictive practices have reshaped the landscape of higher education and resulted in many public institutions of higher education entirely eliminating offices or at least scrubbing DEI language from job titles, official websites, and programming. Roles once classified under the DEI umbrella have been either dismantled or reclassified under more politically palatable banners akin to student success, community engagement, access, belonging, and opportunity. Money resides at the core of these semantical shifts. Hence, universities complied, or perhaps caved, to protect funding streams and avert potential legal ramifications. Sadly, this compliance required higher education to abandon some of the core principles from which it was founded.

Higher education, have you forgotten that academic freedom is a normative principle of deep-seated learning, where faculty and students are free to teach, research, and question dominant hegemonic forces without fear of political retaliation? How can we advance knowledge through inquiry, scholarship, and pedagogy when faculty, especially those without the protections of tenure, teach under the constant threat that their work may be deemed “divisive”¹ and professionally punitive? Universities were conceptualized as spaces where learning communities could flourish through the cultivation of critical thinking, interrogation of assumptions, rigorous debate, and expressions of diverse lived experiences, especially from those at intersections of varied identities.

Though you (higher education) were supposed to function as our steward of knowledge, you have failed us. You waved the metaphorical white flag on DEI at lightning speed, indicating a disinterest in the “lonely only”. A system that was productive and generative was suddenly recast as disruptive and unnecessary. Higher education is lauded as a space designed to foster logical reasoning, civic engagement, and responsible leadership. Rather than resisting anti-DEI legislation or even slowing the pace of change to allow for ethical reflection, you acquiesced, choosing compliance over foundational tenets of social justice and institutional independence from political control.

As a woman of color whose career has been marked by DEI scholarship, pedagogy, and service, I carry a dream that now seems deferred. As I contemplate the conclusory stages of my academic career, I am forced to accept that the possibility of becoming a university vice president or director of DEI may not be materialized—not because my work lacks value, but because the political conditions surrounding it have hardened. I continue to grapple with the tension of institutional hierarchies that celebrate my labor and expertise rhetorically, yet restrict them in practice. Even so, I remain committed to the belief that transformation is still possible through a reimagining of how we teach, research, and honor diverse ways of knowing.

¹ For a definition of “divisive” concepts, see section II. Restrictions in SB129 (filed as Alabama Act 2024-34) located at: <https://deiguideance.ua.edu/>.

Higher education, be ye informed that I continue to pioneer DEI initiatives, despite your restrictive parameters. To avoid the possibility of legal sanctions on my pedagogy, I now use classroom spaces to clarify to students that faculty are afforded academic freedom to introduce, assess, and provide instruction on diverse and even controversial topics. I emphasize that the material I teach is grounded in research and aligns with student learning outcomes, not personal persuasion. My syllabi have become sites of both instruction and protection by explicitly stating that students may be asked to demonstrate understanding of particular concepts through assignments or assessments. However, they are not required to adopt, reject, or affirm any position deemed “divisive,” nor are they penalized for their stance. These pedagogical additions have been crafted out of necessity and reflect the careful recalibration of my teaching practice in response to the legal and political conditions that presently shape contemporary higher education.

While I have learned to temper certain aspects of my pedagogy within institutional classrooms, these restrictions do not apply to my independent and voluntary advocacy work in the community. Thus, I relish opportunities to partner with religious and social groups that seek fomenting human liberation and resisting oppression in all forms. Furthermore, my unfunded research agenda remains unchanged. So, as long as scholarly forums, journals, and conferences exist that welcome DEI scholarship, I am committed to illuminating the lived communicative experiences of black and brown bodies positioned at the margins. This work is not ancillary to my academic identity, but rather the conduit that connects my teaching, research, advocacy, and presence in the world.

Furthermore, as a university administrator I champion my faculty’s creative efforts to serve as agents of transgressive pedagogy amid anti-DEI laws. Specifically, I defend, nurture, and support student-led discussion groups, collaborative research projects, and off-campus learning opportunities akin to internships, community partnerships, and corporate collaborations. These pedagogical practices do not merely extend the university’s increasingly policed boundaries; they actively unearth the priceless potential of diverse learning and collective meaning-making in the face of systems designed to mute our voices.

I close by referencing the great poet and social advocate Langston Hughes, who queried, “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” Hughes suggests that when dreams are constantly delayed, denied, or dismissed, they risk being abandoned altogether. However, I refuse to let my dream “dry up like a raisin in the sun”, “stink like rotten meat”, or “explode” (Hughes 1951). Conversely, I choose to be the “lonely only” woman of color DEI scholar who willingly stays in the academy, notwithstanding the persistent chatter that my labor and expertise would be better valued elsewhere. My commitment to higher education remains steadfast. Though anti-DEI legislation has presented profound challenges for those of us working to illuminate the experiences of historically marginalized communities, I believe that constraints and possibilities can coexist. Thus, while my future in the academy may not be marked by an official vice president or director of DEI title, I enter each day with a sustained determination to reimagine what transformation can look like within today’s halls of ivy. Through intentional recalibration, I remain confident that our pedagogy, scholarship, and service can continue to function as powerful forces capable of reshaping the academy and affirming the lives of those navigating complex intersectional identities.

Sincerely,
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References

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About the author

Dr. Eletra S. Gilchrist-Petty (Ph.D., The University of Memphis) is Professor and Chair of the Communication Arts Department at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH). She is the author of three books and more than two dozen other publications. Gilchrist-Petty has held several offices with the National Communication Association (NCA), including chair of the African American Communication and Culture Division and committee memberships on the NCA Teaching and Learning Council, Affirmative Action and Intercaucus Committee, and Legislative Assembly. She is the founder and inaugural chair of the Southern States Communication Association's (SSCA) Committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the Identity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Division. She is also a member of the SSCA Finance Committee and the Association's forthcoming President. Gilchrist-Petty is, furthermore, a past Top Research Paper awardee with both the NCA and SSCA, and she is a recipient of the UAH Distinguished Teaching Award.