

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Higher Education Broke My Heart – and Why I Still Say

PRECIOUS PORRAS

Dear Higher Education,

You broke my heart; not because you are flawed, but because you are capable of more than you are willing to do.

I came to you believing your mission statements. I believed that institutions committed to truth, dignity, and the common good would have the courage to confront injustice structurally. I did not expect perfection. I expected coherence, that what you proclaimed publicly would align with how you governed privately.

Instead, I encountered something quieter and more enduring: the steady choreography of white supremacy culture embedded not in overt hostility, but in governance, evaluation, and institutional reflex.

I serve as Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) at a Catholic, Hispanic-Serving Institution. Our language is steeped in moral vocabulary, justice, veritas, and the inherent dignity of every person. That tradition sharpened my expectation that equity would be operational, not aspirational. In a faith tradition that names truth as sacred, I believed structural inequity would be confronted with clarity.

But I learned that fluency in justice language does not guarantee fluency in justice action.

White supremacy within you rarely announces itself loudly. It presents instead as procedural caution:

- Requests for additional data are made long after inequity is documented.
- Calls for “continued dialogue” when decisions are overdue.
- Concern about “timing” when urgency belongs to those harmed.
- Investment in diversity programming while leaving power structures intact.
- An insistence on civility that supersedes accountability.

It lives in tenure criteria, privileging dominant epistemologies.

In budget allocations that reflect comfort rather than conviction.

In governance models designed to diffuse responsibility rather than redistribute power.

This is not primarily about individual intent. Many within you are principled, generous educators. The heartbreak does not stem from malice.

It stems from design.

I remember one meeting with particular clarity. We were reviewing data revealing persistent retention gaps for Black and Latinx students. The disparities were not new; they were patterned and predictable. I could feel my

pulse in my wrists as I spoke — not from fear, but from the weight of what the data represented. These were not abstract numbers. They were students I had met. Students who had trusted us.

The room grew quiet.

Then came the familiar refrains:

“We need additional benchmarking.”

“What are peer institutions doing?”

“Is this the right moment to adjust the evaluation policy?”

“We don’t want faculty to feel blamed.”

No one denied the data.

No one disputed the disparities.

But the conversation shifted from what must change to how to preserve institutional equilibrium while appearing responsive.

I watched urgency dissipate in real time.

That was the moment I understood something embodied: ***equity was welcome so long as it did not destabilize hierarchy.***

You are structured to preserve equilibrium, even when equilibrium perpetuates inequity. You reward professionalism that mirrors dominant norms. You elevate neutrality while framing structural critique as divisive. You invite innovation, but within boundaries that protect inherited power.

As a CDO, I became an institutional shock absorber. I carried stories of harm into rooms calibrated for procedural restraint. I translated grief into executive summaries. I softened language so that truth could pass through defensive filters. I negotiated between moral clarity and political survivability.

This work demands strategy. It demands diplomacy. It demands stamina.

It also demands absorbing institutional anxiety when equity threatens comfort.

The emotional cost is cumulative.

It is exhausting to see heritage months celebrated while faculty evaluation systems are still untouched. It is disorienting to hear justice invoked in public forums and deferred in budget meetings. It is weary to recognize that courage is often conditioned upon reputational safety.

The heartbreak is not explosive.

It is incremental.

It is the slow recognition that institutions may cherish the appearance of justice more than the redistribution of power needed to enact it.

And yet, I remain.

I remain because I still believe in what you can become.

I believe in first-generation students who insist on belonging. I believe in faculty who risk professional capital to redesign curriculum. I believe in administrators who quietly move resources toward equity when it is politically inconvenient.

But belief is not reform.

If you are serious about justice, it must be embedded — not appended.

- Embed it in faculty evaluation criteria.
- Embed it in budget priorities.
- Embed it in governance reform.
- Embed it in leadership performance metrics.

Justice cannot survive as inspirational rhetoric. It must become institutional architecture.

Higher Education, you broke my heart because you are capable of transformation, and yet you often settle for symbolism. You have the intellectual tools to interrogate your own culture yet hesitate when interrogation demands redistribution. You do not lack intelligence. You do not lack mission language.

You lack alignment between conviction and mechanism.

If you wish to keep those of us tasked with equity leadership (particularly those of us whose bodies and identities are already politicized within your walls) you must do more than convene conversations and commission task forces.

You must restructure power.

Protect truth over comfort.

Reward courage over caution.

Tie equity outcomes to executive accountability.

Fund what you claim to value.

Because here is the sharper truth:

Hope without structural change becomes harmful.

It becomes harmful to students who trust you.

It becomes harmful to the staff who believe you.

It becomes harmful to leaders who carry the burden of translating injustice into institutional language.

My heartbreak is not a resignation. It is a *call to clarity*; a call to align belief with action.

I still stay, not because you have earned uncomplicated loyalty, but because I refuse to abandon the possibility that you can become the institution you profess to be.

But understand this: those of us who labor for equity deserve institutions as brave as the students we serve. Anything less is a contradiction.

Still here — but more discerning now.

*Sincerely,
Precious*

About the author

Precious Porras (EdD, CDE) is a senior diversity and equity leader in higher education and currently serves as Chief Diversity Officer at a Catholic Hispanic-Serving Institution. Her work centers structural racial justice, institutional accountability, and measurable equity outcomes. As a Black biracial woman in executive leadership, she brings both lived experience and systems-level analysis to questions of power, governance, and white supremacy culture in the academy.