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Publication Date

2023-10-23

Peer reviewed

WHAT ABOUT CLASS?

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COMMENTARY OFFERED ON THE CSHE ROPS**
Is the University of California Drifting Toward Conformism?
The Challenges of Representation and the Climate for Academic Freedom
by Steven Brint and Komi Frey – ROPS CSHE.5.2023

October 2023

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Jonathan Haidt has argued that while universities may take social justice as their chief aim, they cannot do so while retaining the traditional aim of the university, which he claims is the search for truth. This search is founded on academic freedom: the ability to survey a number of perspectives, investigate a wide array of possible factors and expose arguments and findings to possible refutation and disconfirmation.

In contrast, according to Haidt universities oriented toward social justice take as their aim dismantling oppressive structures that marginalize and disempower certain groups. Consequently, they must police and even ban the expression of certain arguments, perspectives and findings lest they demean or marginalize members of certain groups or make them feel unsafe. In exploring the causes of poverty in the United States, for example, it is permissible, Haidt says, to explore the impact of economic change, a rigid political system or structural racism.

What is not permissible is exploring the impact, say, of the decline of marriage, bad personal decisions and dependency. These are among the “ideas, theories, facts ... that one cannot use” and that count as “blasphemy.” They may turn out not to be causally significant,¹ but Haidt argues that precluding them from the start contracts the Millian space for free inquiry and creates barriers to discovering the truth.

Focusing on the University of California and on its efforts to expand diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), Steven Brint and Kofi Frey try to locate just what Haidt says cannot be found: the balance between contributions to social justice – here in the form of DEI efforts – and the university’s commitment to

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** The author was invited by the ROPS Editor to critique and review the ROPS contribution “Is the University Of California Drifting Toward Conformism?” by Steven Brint and Komi Frey. Authors are responsible for the content, and the views and interpretations expressed are not necessarily those of CSHE's research staff and other affiliated researchers.

¹ See, Matthew Desmond, *Poverty by America* (New York: Random House 2023) pp. 36-37.

academic freedom on which its intellectual mission relies. They do devote the bulk of their article to detailing existing imbalances. Yet throughout their article they stress the importance of DEI efforts and they conclude with proposals that promote it while giving appropriate weight to the needs of scholarship and research.

Brint and Frey note some of the more notorious imbalances at the University of California such as putting a UCLA professor on leave after he declined to give a “no-harm” final exam after George Floyd’s murder by police and advising UC Berkeley professors not to call America a melting pot or land of opportunity. Still, Brint and Frey are more concerned with imbalances in the daily workings of the university. They discuss three in particular.

First, like many other universities, the University of California requires “contributions to diversity statements” from applicants for academic positions as well as from faculty seeking merit advances and promotions. For certain faculty recruitments, search committees consider an applicant’s diversity statement first and advance the candidate to the next stage of consideration only if the diversity statement is what a UC Davis vice chancellor described as “persuasive and inspiring.” [UC Berkeley uses a rubric](#) to evaluate these statements with those that don’t discuss gender or race/ethnicity receiving the lowest score. Brint and Frey regard this use of diversity statements as a threat to academic freedom and they add, “The problem would be compounded if, in addition, these searches included implicit or explicit expectations that applicants write to a specific prescribed view in their diversity statements.”

Other unbalanced practices they cite involve limiting faculty searches to a pool of diversity candidates pre-chosen by a system-wide committee, curricular reviews to enhance DEI emphases in courses, diversity trainings that are of questionable value and the stipulation that contributions to diversity always be considered in evaluating research, teaching, and service.” Brint and Frey claim that these practices violate academic freedom and “however well intentioned... place representational goals ahead of purely academic judgments.”

A second focus of their concern is, like Haidt’s, what they consider social justice over-reach. To be sure, social justice activists on campus are themselves critical of what they consider DEI’s overly tepid response to the need to transform the university from the bottom up. Yet, Brint and Frey argue that their strength ultimately stems from the DEI commitments of the administration and faculty Senate. The problem here, they say, is that these social activists attribute all disparities on campus to systemic racism and White supremacy even where these concepts have no purchase.

According to Brint and Frey, systemic racism refers to the funneling of Blacks into the lowest levels of the U.S. class structure while White supremacy refers either to the legal system of the Jim Crow South or contemporary attitudes consistent with it. Brint and Frey question how either concept is applicable to the university as long as it admits “a sizeable number” of Black students who are free to study whatever subject-matter they want. They also worry that the terms can be “weaponized” to criticize academic structures and policies with which campus social activists simply disagree, while belittling those that support them as exemplars of White fragility and defenders of outmoded conceptions of rationality and objectivity. Brint and Frey do not deny either the racist history of the United States or ongoing inequalities in health, housing, job opportunities, policing and so on. Yet why, they ask, reject the very aspirations towards reason and objectivity that can discover, document and help to correct these inequalities?

Finally, Brint and Frey are afraid that the focus on DEI efforts contributes to a culture of conformism on campus by silencing those who favor more traditional academic values. One study finds that faculty on one UC campus divide quite equally into four groups: first, radical critics who think DEI efforts do not go

far enough in either dismantling racial hierarchies and myths of objectivity; second, supporters who agree with DEI efforts but see no conflict with traditional academic values, third, ambivalents who see arguments on all sides; and forth, traditionalists who see DEI policies as a threat to the university's mission. Yet ambivalents and traditionalists rarely voice their concerns. "Because DEI has been identified as a core value of the University, those who raise questions about particular DEI policies or about the rhetoric of the anti-racist movement risk being stigmatized as heretics."

In concluding their article, Brint and Frey offer a number of proposals that might help rebalance DEI efforts with the traditional values of the university. These build on Carlos Cortes's recommendations for a "non-disinfecting diversity" that does not police speech and for "a robust speech" environment that welcomes the expression of different viewpoints.

They also call for expanding the scope of diversity beyond race, ethnicity and gender to include religion, national origin, class, geography and viewpoint; recognizing class inequality as deserving of special attention; assisting in the improvement of K-12 education so that all students have equal chances to enroll in university; promoting "robust" outreach programs and summer research opportunities, sponsoring fellowships for members of under-represented groups; recognizing the biases that have often tainted research and scholarship; and encouraging constructive dialogues on campus as well as a "climate of inquiry that is as free and open as possible."

These are excellent proposals and offer an important alternative to Haidt's either/or ultimatum. Especially important, I think, is Brint's and Frey's call for attention to class inequalities. One could argue that across America's universities, DEI's preoccupation with race, ethnicity and gender has led to more rather than less inequality.

As early as 2006, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* was concerned about the socio-economic status of students at prestige universities: "In the late 1960s major universities were recruiting low-income or so-called ghetto blacks. Not so today. If Harvard has set the pattern for others, it appears likely that most blacks currently enrolled at our elite institutions of higher education come from middle- or high-income families."

This pattern has not been disrupted. Bertrand Cooper estimates that of all 2020 college graduates, "Black students from poor families received 1.4 percent ... the other 98.6 percent of those degrees went to students from other backgrounds." Referring to Harvard, he notes that its 2020 first-year class included 154 Black students. Yet if we extrapolate from other statistics, it turns out that "only seven or eight of said 154 Black freshmen would have come from poor families. The other 140 or so Black students at Harvard were likely raised outside of poverty and probably as far from the bottom as any Black child can hope to be."²

The same pattern holds for faculty. A 2022 study investigated the socio-economic backgrounds of tenure track faculty at Ph.D. granting institutions across eight disciplines in STEM, the humanities and the social sciences.³ It found that almost a quarter (22.2%) had a parent with a Ph.D. and over half (51.8%) had a parent with some sort of a graduate degree. This background is true of less than 10% of people of similar

² Cooper, Bernard. 2023 "The Failure of Affirmative Action" in *The Atlantic* (June 19)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/06/failure-affirmative-action/674439>

³ Morgan, A.C., LaBerge, N., Larremore, D.B. et al. 2022 "Socioeconomic roots of academic faculty" in *Nature Human Behavior* 6, 1625–1633 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01425-4>

ages. Faculty whose parents held Ph.Ds. also received more support from them and were more likely to be employed at elite institutions. Indeed, nearly a third of the faculty at top-ranked universities have parents with Ph.D. (29.8%), as compared with a fifth (19.0%) at lower-ranked institutions. Given the racial stratification of the American work force, these findings surely account for much of the difficulty universities have in diversifying their faculties but they also suggest that DEI efforts that look to race/ethnicity and gender alone are unlikely to make much of an impact. What is needed, as Brint and Frey suggest, are, at minimum, intensive and large-scale reforms that guarantee an equal education for all from Pre-K on and pipe-line efforts that target socio-economic status.

Of course, socio-economic status does not work well as a focus for DEI efforts. It can't be celebrated the way race, ethnicity and gender can. Class is embarrassing. Those born into money try to downplay the luck of their birth while those born into poverty are exhorted to rise above it. Even if one understands poverty as a dire circumstance rather than a personal failure, one is unlikely to celebrate it as a contribution to diversity. It might be good for elite universities to enroll more poor students, but they can hardly revel in their poverty as they can in their students' diverse races, genders and ethnicities.

Something similar holds for the socio-economic diversity of their faculty. If students who come from less economically secure families and whose parents have less educational attainment of their own never make it through graduate school, there is little for DEI programs to do. How can they diversify, act equitably toward or include those who are not part of academia in the first place?

This failure of DEI efforts to focus on class or socio-economic status raises another question: ought we connect DEI efforts to social justice at all? Does their exclusive concern with demographics in university faculties not obstruct much of what those faculties might do precisely to advance social justice? Among other imperatives, it surely requires radically rethinking the criminal justice system, putting an end to police violence, passing voting rights legislation, reforming education, finally overcoming poverty and doing something about the environment and environmental racism.

If universities like the University of California were really interested in social justice, would they not support the best research on these problems and rather than constricting search procedures, rejecting candidates without a full review of their dossiers and narrowing the pools of candidates, would they not insist on open searches with the deepest and widest pools possible in order to facilitate the employment of the best and brightest in these areas? If a faculty member's research concerns the direst environmental threats to the planet, should we really criticize that faculty member for failing to mention race, ethnicity or gender in a diversity statement? Very many, if not most, of the candidates for these crucial academic positions will be members of under-represented groups.

Efforts at diversifying the faculty and employing the best and the brightest are clearly not at odds. Yet current DEI procedures are overly geared towards optics. Their popularity may derive from the boost that good racial, ethnic and gender numbers can give to an administrator's career or a university's ranking but they are not designed to develop its capacity to help solve real social ills.