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How to Fix Diversity and Equity

Ritualized regimes of political expression must be rejected.

ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

THE REVIEW

By *Amna Khalid* and *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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Academic twitter lit up with acclaim when Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis [announced](#) that it had approved “new promotion and tenure options based on diversity, equity and inclusion work” earlier this month. A computer-science professor [captured](#) the prevailing sentiment: “Such amazing news! I hope more and more institutions will take this path.”

We can be certain that they will. Unfortunately, not only will this path fall short of its intended goals, but it will pose a serious threat to academic freedom.

The biggest problem with attaching distinctive diversity, equity, and inclusion rules and guidelines to tenure and promotion is the fact that most DEI work is flagrantly ideological. When Chancellor Nasser H. Paydar [celebrated](#) the new pathway to promotion and tenure at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, or IUPUI, as “another step in our campus’s ongoing anti-racist initiatives,” he signaled a commitment to a naïve, left-wing, paint-by-numbers approach to racial justice that we call “Antiracism, Inc.” It [imagines](#) that people, policies, and institutions can always be categorized as either racist *or* antiracist — and that social justice is a simple matter of consistently choosing the antiracist option. The bible of this movement is *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, a runaway best seller that has shaped DEI initiatives in nonprofits, corporations, and schools across the country. (Indeed, faculty and staff, including the chancellor, participated in a yearlong Kendi [reading group](#) during the 2020-21 academic year.)

The Antiracism, Inc., juggernaut has helped to make a commitment to diversity synonymous with rooting out racism. White folks, in this model, must be “[allies](#)” — or better yet, “[accomplices](#)” and “[co-conspirators](#)” in the struggle for racial justice. In a recent antiracism training session at our college, one of the trainers said that any professor who was not on board with the mission to “dismantle white supremacy” at their institution could not possibly be making a contribution to DEI work.

Many scholars across the political spectrum are skeptical of — or downright reject — both the definition of “white supremacy” on offer here, and the insistence that it is the root cause of injustice and inequality in the United States on campus and beyond. On the left, for example, the sociologist Adolph Reed Jr. [contends](#) that white supremacy is a “reductionist,” “ahistorical” model of the world — a “fantasy of monolithic, unchanged race-driven oppression” that ignores the extent to which “unequal life outcomes” are arbitrated by class. On the right, the economist Glenn C. Loury [maintains](#) that the term “white supremacy” is a “[bluff and a bludgeon](#)” that erases Black agency. Other scholars, including Angela D. Dillard, John McWhorter, and Orlando

Patterson, [regard](#) the term as an unhelpful, hyperbolic slogan that “alienates rather than converts.”

From [slavery](#) and [civil rights](#) to [Black politics](#) and [Black English](#), these scholars, all of whom happen to be Black, have written extensively about race and racism in the United States. Would they be disqualified from claiming DEI credit for their work because they don’t pledge allegiance to a highly specific, and contested, definition of white supremacy?

Any incentives, no matter how well-intentioned, that give special consideration to research in areas and topics that align with what is considered DEI pose a threat to free and open inquiry. In the University of California system, for instance, candidates receive a [boost](#) if their research contributes to “understanding barriers faced by women and racial/ethnic minorities.” This is an extremely narrow — and alarmingly instrumental — vision of what constitutes DEI scholarship.

Six hundred and seventy-nine of the candidates failed their trial by DEI metrics and did not have their credentials evaluated.

Beyond research, IUPUI will now [take into account](#) “DEI professional development” and “consulting work (paid or unpaid) related to DEI” in tenure and review cases. Tallying up DEI professional-development trainings will reward perfunctory undertakings that have been shown to be [superficial](#) and [ineffective](#). And including paid DEI consulting work as part of a candidate’s file poses all kinds of questions about conflicts-of-interest. Would IUPUI reward candidates for doing DEI work with ExxonMobil?

The problem of [ill-defined parameters](#) extends to definitions of key terms. Here is how IUPUI [defines](#) inclusion: an “approach designed to ensure that the thoughts, opinions, perspectives, and experiences of all individuals are valued, heard, encouraged, respected, and considered.” Like the “All Are Welcome Here” [yard signs](#) that populate college towns, we should be skeptical that “all” really means everyone. Does it include Republicans, free-market libertarians, religious

conservatives? All of the evidence we've seen indicates the answer is a resounding no.

Viewpoint diversity is all but nonexistent when it comes to campus DEI initiatives.

Mandatory diversity statements pose a particular challenge for faculty who are on the right or even somewhere in the center. Already required at some universities for promotion and hiring, diversity statements will only become more common in the future. They “put an added burden on anybody who might not subscribe to social-justice positions,” as Chris Beneke, a history professor at Bentley University, puts it. Abigail Thomas, a professor of mathematics at the University of California at Davis, has an even sharper assessment, [arguing](#) that diversity statements are tantamount to a “political litmus test” that serve [“as a filter for those with nonconforming views.”](#)

In the UC system, required diversity statements for hiring and promotion are scored according to a rubric, which you can download as an [Excel spreadsheet](#) at your convenience. UC-Berkeley has adopted an even more elaborate three-tiered, five-point [scoring system](#); in recent searches conducted by eight departments in the life sciences, it was [used](#) to sort through 893 eligible candidates. Candidates were first evaluated on “knowledge about DEI and belonging,” then on their “track record in advancing” DEI, and finally on their “plans for advancing” DEI. Six hundred and seventy-nine of the candidates failed to progress through this trial by DEI metrics and did not even have their scholarly credentials evaluated.

This [neoliberal approach](#) of applying rubrics, metrics, and matrices sucks the lifeblood out of the kind of work that genuinely advances diversity and inclusion, reducing something that should be a rich and complex phenomenon to an anemic box-ticking exercise. [Campbell's Law](#), one of the most robust principles in the social sciences, states that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” In other words, when numerical metrics determine outcomes, [“people do things you don't want them to do”](#): they game the system. We shouldn't be surprised that there are already guides and advice columns on [how](#) and [how not to](#) write a diversity statement. Arguably a lot of DEI work is simply learning proper [etiquette](#).

There are better and more powerful ways for institutions to approach DEI in hiring, tenure, and promotion. To begin with, a genuine commitment to DEI in the review process would look at existing ways of evaluating a candidate and reform those, rather than tack on new categories and requirements.

One of the most glaring diversity problems in higher education today is the extent to which the professoriate lacks ethno-racial diversity when it comes to Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native faculty. [According](#) to the National Center for Education Statistics, 6 percent of postsecondary faculty in 2017 were Black, 5 percent were Hispanic and less than 1 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native. Black and Hispanic faculty are notably underrepresented compared with Black and Hispanic students, who make up 14 and 20 percent of the undergraduate student population, respectively.

In part because of this lack of representation, faculty of color perform more [“invisible labor”](#) with respect to advising and mentoring minority students as well as diversity-related service work, including serving on special committees and task forces. That this [“cultural taxation”](#) work is often [“uncompensated, unacknowledged and unrewarded”](#) is an urgent problem that demands immediate attention. We are strongly in favor of recognizing and rewarding this work for tenure and promotion.

The key is to make visible and reward the work that isn’t usually taken into account for tenure and promotion — instead of making a separate DEI work category for all faculty.

Over the past year faculty of color, especially Black faculty, have been asked to advise and [serve on committees](#) to help shape the antiracism initiatives on their campuses. It is especially difficult for junior faculty to say no to service requests, lest they be seen as lacking collegiality and commitment to the institutions. Mentoring and service come at the [cost of research time and output](#). For this reason it is vital that promotion committees evaluate a candidate’s file from a holistic perspective that pays careful attention to service that could fall under a DEI heading.

In addition we need a more nuanced approach to counter the range of biases in hiring and review processes. For instance, publishing bias can factor into tenure and promotion decisions. A [study](#) on publishing in humanities journals found that the top 20 percent of universities represented in the sample account for 86 percent of the articles, with the top 10 universities alone accounting for more than half. There is evidence that shows that [minority graduate students](#) are less likely to be encouraged by their advisers to submit work for publication, and [scholars from the global south](#) face other kinds of barriers to publication in top-tier journals, such as astronomical article-processing charges, a practice that has become more common, particularly in the [sciences](#), with the growth of [open-access publishing](#). In the sciences, reviews often use metrics such as the Journal Impact Factor, which tends to be a [poor proxy](#) for the [value](#) of the research. To help diversify faculty ranks, institutions should take a careful look at how they assess journal prestige, quality and impact.

Elite and more selective institutions should also examine how their hiring and review processes may be affected by institutional prestige bias, as these impede diversity and reinforce existing inequities. [Women and faculty of color](#) have a considerably lower chance of being hired by [elite institutions](#) like Harvard and Yale, and are more likely to be clustered in public universities. This pattern is also echoed in student-body composition, with Black and Latina/o students and those from [low-income backgrounds](#) being far more likely to go to community colleges and public universities than to elite private institutions, thereby entrenching demographic and income inequities within the pipeline. As a 2015 [study](#) found, faculty hiring has a “steeply hierarchical structure that reflects profound social inequality.” The majority of tenure-track faculty across three disciplines (business, computer science, and history) — ranging from 71 to 86 percent — received their doctorate from just 25 percent of institutions. In [political science](#), 11 universities contribute 50 percent of the political-science academics who teach at research-intensive universities. Addressing institutional prestige bias would allow selective schools to diversify their faculty along demographic, income, and gender lines. What are some ways your institution can be mindful of the self-replicating features of academic elitism?

Colleges and universities in general should also be more supportive of minority faculty members who are already on campus. One obvious place to begin would be to invest in [minority faculty](#).

[development](#) programs. More ambitiously, institutions could reduce their dependence on contingent and adjunct positions. Given that minority faculty are concentrated [in these positions](#), institutions could create tenure lines to make space for more diverse faculty to come on board instead of treating them as [“disposable scholars.”](#)

Alas, the IUPUI statement about including DEI in promotion is a far cry from the kind of nuanced and meaningful measures proposed above. To the contrary, as the [FAQ section](#) on IUPUI’s new initiative announces, henceforth faculty will be penalized if they fail to engage in DEI work. (“Much as all faculty are expected to exhibit effective teaching and diligent professional service, all faculty will be expected to contribute to greater diversity, equity, and inclusion at IUPUI.”) This captures the overriding logic of new DEI initiatives, which are designed to hold everyone accountable for advancing DEI objectives. This resolve is no doubt well-intentioned. But we should be wary of bureaucratic, top-down approaches and the addition of even more formal review requirements.

In explaining the rationale for DEI statements, UCLA [says](#) that failing to ask candidates for a statement could put the university at a “competitive disadvantage” as “peer institutions increasingly adopt these practices.” The new DEI push, alas, is heavily informed by public relations, especially the optics of wanting to be seen doing the “right” thing. It is also, unfortunately, tied to a highly ideological vision of social justice. Combine the two and you have a powerful cocktail that will undermine academic freedom and generate much more paperwork than real institutional change.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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