

House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Hearing on “DEI on Campus”

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Chairman Owens, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Workforce Development Subcommittee, my name is Erec Smith and I am a research fellow at the Cato Institute. Thank you for giving me a platform to speak on the issue of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education. As someone who has been both faculty and administration in higher education, including a stint as a diversity officer, I feel I can lend some clarity to an otherwise obfuscating issue.

Introduction

Many people, especially those left of center, grow more and more incredulous upon hearing adamant disapproval of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. The incredulity doubles when disapproval comes from a person of color. It may triple when that person of color is black. And yet, it may yet quadruple if that black person is an academic and, therefore, someone both liberal enough and intelligent enough to know better. However, if they were to ask a black academic why he opposes DEI, they would realize that their assumptions about the nature of such an initiative were just that: assumptions. They would realize that most contemporary DEI initiatives have less to do with diversity, equity, and inclusion and more to do with disempowerment, symbolic gestures that cater to resentment, and the desire for power and a social transformation toward intolerance and subjugation of one’s individuality to social engineering. At worse, they may realize that the most prominent leaders in the DEI industry, especially in academia, do not want to reform what they see as a broken system; they want to tear it down completely.

The most common criticism of DEI is that it is divisive and anti-white. However, I want to show that DEI is harmful to the very people it claims to help; it stifles agency and, paradoxically, is decidedly anti-black. As a black academic, I have been called a white supremacist, by blacks and whites alike, for trying to empower black students, provide them with

tools that can better ensure success, and help them develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy to make their own ways in society. Apparently, what I should tell my black students is that the world is out to get them, that the only way to succeed is to betray your race, that there is only one way to be black, and that way is undergirded by ever-present anger, victimhood, and misery. I should tell them that anything said or done by a white person or a person who is not made uncomfortable by “whiteness” is inherently racist and cannot be trusted. I should tell them that race relations have not improved, and the country is a racist now as it was a century ago. I should tell them, in so many words, that to be black is to feel disempowered at all times. In other words, I should feed them the ideology that undergirds contemporary DEI.

Of course, I refuse to do all of that and resolve to do the opposite: empower students of color both intra-personally and communally, promote positive self-regard, and help them navigate the discourse of the real world and not the fabricated hellscape many proponents of DEI will have you believe America to be for minorities.

Because of the confluence of my research and experiences in academia, I will focus primarily on race. DEI initiatives are known to address all marginalized groups, with race and sexual orientation being the frontrunning categories in America’s collective consciousness. However, both experience and research make race the most salient category on which I can speak. For similar reasons, my examples will involve black Americans primarily.

Within the world of contemporary DEI, virtues and vices seem to have switched places. I’ve been challenged by white people and black people alike when I express the apparently insane and risible idea that we should have more faith in the agency of our minority students, especially black minority students, who seem to be the downtrodden poster children of victimhood. This lack of confidence in these children is called empathy. This lack of optimism in succeeding in life is called empowerment. The dismissal of valuable skills that can better ensure success in life is called social justice. And anything that could possibly instill a positive outlook, self-awareness, emotional self-control, delayed gratification, achievement orientation, and adaptability is called “white supremacy with a hug.”¹ Whenever I hear of educators advocating for such interpretations of higher education, I always say the same thing to myself: Thank God these weren’t my teachers when I was growing up. I would have nothing, I would normalize

¹ Dena Simmons, “Why SEL Alone Isn’t Enough,” Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, March 1, 2021. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/why-sel-alone-isnt-enough>

curling into a fetal position while weeping, I'd have a learned helplessness that would keep me from even attempting to achieve my hopes and dreams, or I may not even have hopes and dreams at all.

Background

From the age of four, my neighborhood was predominantly white, and both my peers and the adults never failed to let me know it. I feel these facts were important to the construction of race and ethnicity I was building at the time. To be black was to be marginalized, not good enough, wrong. However, to not associate with the white kids was to not associate with any boys my age at all.

What all this boiled down to was a need for escape. I felt that in high school, I could find sanctuary with other black kids like me and finally feel somewhat comfortable in a social environment. The local high school was extremely diverse and had a large population of black students. So, when I finished the 8th grade, I was eager to get to a place where I could feel at home and be around "my people."

However, when I arrived at high school, my outlook on ethnicity was altered forever. There I found fellow black freshmen and quickly became just as much of an outcast, if not more of one, than I was amongst my former, predominantly white, student body. To my African American peers, I was not really black. To them, I portrayed an image of *whiteness* that they considered foreign; all we had in common was skin color and racial descent. The way I spoke gave them even more reason to come down on me, for my 'proper' speech seemed, for some reason, to make me some sort of phony black male.

Despite all this, what perplexed me the most was the overall internalization of the misconception of black inferiority. Although I was vilified for my race repeatedly among my white peers, I never internalized the idea that I was inherently inferior. Yet, my new black peers seemed to have actually internalized the idea of black inferiority. Racial self-degradation was a typical way of passing the time. What was confounding was that this was done amidst fellow black students, and not amidst whites, as a pathetic attempt to fit in. A very popular insult was to comment on how *African* one's physical features were, or how dark one's complexion was. The telling of these jokes every so often would have been one thing, but their frequency was blatant testimony to their tellers' inherent lack of racial pride. I did not fit in with my African American

peers because I wasn't 'black' enough, yet one's racial characteristics could summon cruel insults I had only previously heard from white people, and not nearly as frequently.

So, I was too black for the white kids and too white for the black kids. Both groups were hellbent on my degradation. Although the white kids and black kids had apparently opposite reasons for their treatment of me, they were both saying essentially the same thing: how dare you feel good about yourself; don't you know you're black?

So why do I tell you this story? These two groups have not really gone away for me. They can still be found in my life in college faculty lounges, deans offices, ed schools, and institutions for putting forth educational policies. They can be found in multi-cultural activists circles. They can be found proudly signaling how anti-racist they are. My bullies are now in control. Many seem to be fueled by the veiled inferiority complex displayed by my black high school peers. People are familiar with the accusations that DEI is an anti-white ideology, but too few realize that it is profoundly anti-black.

The distinction between my peers and me, like the distinction between contemporary DEI and diversity work in the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, is a matter of discourse, by which I mean the values, attitudes, and beliefs of a particular context. As far as I can tell, my white peers valued a sense of racial superiority and zero-sum virtue. They had attitudes of the protagonists in their own movies, movies in which I was the inadvertent comic relief, the inferior other, for whom they were doing a favor by allowing to hang around. Thus, their collective beliefs were in a prescribed racial essentialism, that black people should know their place in the aforementioned narrative. I could only be a protagonist while playing basketball. My black peers seemed to value status as perpetual outsiders, and value victimhood as a kind of suit of armor protecting them from the pain of failed dreams. Their attitude was fueled by the defiance of all things hegemonic, even those things that would have benefited them to embrace. They believed, like their white counterparts, in a prescribed racial essentialism. They also believed that anyone who didn't push back and could be optimistic in such a world could never truly be one of them and that failing to succeed in that system was a form of activism and authenticity.

My own values, attitudes, and beliefs were a bit different from both sets of aggressors. I valued self-determination, the power of sincere persuasion and real dialogue, and equality regarding everyone's right to dignity. I had the attitude that I would later call self-reliant, or stoic, and that I was as worthy of respect in any situation as anyone else. I believed that I was

never inherently inferior to anyone based on race, that I could defeat racial discrimination and champion true equality if I put my mind to it, and that, with proper planning, I could achieve anything I wanted. In fact, after my experiences with my black peers and my realization that I was on my own, I made the conscious decision to sketch out my path to life, liberty, and happiness. I began to consistently make honor roll, I began to care less about what others thought (a rare feat for a teenager), and I began to build a healthy sense of agency and self-efficacy. I wanted to help others embrace a similar mindset and instill in my students' self-efficacy and positive self-regard beneficial to achieving one's hopes and dreams. Specifically, as a professor of rhetoric, I would have them do this through a strong command of communicative savvy. For this, I am vilified in my field.

Later in life, I would become a diversity officer at a liberal arts college and do my best to instill values into a methodology of anti-racism. Aligned with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, I wanted to abide by the original definition of Affirmative Action: the prohibition of racial discrimination and the assurance that all Americans would have knowledge of and access to all available resources.² This was my discourse of anti-racism. I still embrace this discourse, but in that embrace, I've come to realize how antithetical it is to that of contemporary educators, especially those who claim dedication to contemporary versions of DEI.

Contemporary DEI in Higher Education

Upon hearing the words “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” many people conjure up images of the Civil Rights Movement, personified by Martin Luther King Jr and canonized as a crusade for true civil rights. They may think of the original definition of affirmative action: the insurance that people will not be discriminated against based on skin-color and that all people, regardless of race, will have knowledge of and access to available resources. They attribute commonly understood definitions of these terms: diversity denotes the favored presence of a variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, etc.; equity denotes fairness and impartiality; and inclusion denotes the acknowledgement of, and dignity afforded to all people involved in an endeavor, be it academic, vocational, or otherwise. This is why so many people are shocked to hear that so many people oppose DEI initiatives in higher education. After all, what kind of person does not

² “A Brief History of Affirmative Action,” Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity, https://www.oeod.uci.edu/policies/aa_history.php.

want a diverse campus in which people are treated fairly and are not excluded from the best things that campus has to offer?

People who think like this assume that those pushing DEI initiatives in higher education hold similar conceptualizations, but they would be mistaken. Yes, some people in charge of DEI in higher education are creating initiatives with the aforementioned values in mind. They see social justice as the insurance that all people are afforded the opportunity to make the best of classical liberal values like freedom of speech, equality before the law, private property, and individuality. They fight to make sure all people, regardless of group affiliation, have the right to life, liberty, and happiness. However, this is not the version of DEI that is being vilified by people across the political spectrum. (Anti-DEI sentiment is not just a right-wing endeavor.) Contemporary DEI—as opposed to the kind that could be construed as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement—is decidedly illiberal in that it promotes a denial of free speech, the shirking of individuality, the suppression of critical thinking and inquiry, the demonization of deliberation, and the derision of the very concept of equality. All this stems from a few ideological and methodological tendencies that make contemporary DEI the problem it is: Critical Social Justice ideology and prescriptive racial essentialism.

The discourse of contemporary DEI is disempowering and reflects the tenets Critical Social Justice Ideology.³ Critical Social Justice (CSJ) is an ideology, commonly called “wokeness,” whose basic argument is that America is structurally designed to hold down minorities—especially black people—and labels whites as irredeemable oppressors and others as irredeemably oppressed. When applied to “anti-racist” education, one of its primary tenets is “The question is not ‘did racism take place?’ but rather ‘how did racism manifest in that situation?’”⁴ This is to say that racism is always already a part of any interaction between whites and nonwhites; one just has to find it. Assessing the situation is considered unnecessary, even naive. One need not *think* when it comes to racial justice; the narrative—the script—does the thinking. In fact, it is the narrative that says sound arguments against the efficacy of systemic racism simply don’t exist, so how can they be considered? The narrative says that once something is labeled conservative, it need not be taken seriously.

³ Lee Jussim, “Social Justice: Liberal or Critical,” *Unsafe Science*, February 6, 2023, <https://unsafescience.substack.com/p/social-justice-liberal-or-critical>.

⁴ Robin Diangelo, “Anti-Racism Handout,” *Robindiangelo.com*, 2012, <https://robindiangelo.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Anti-racism-handout-1-page-2016.pdf>

This ideology, which distinguishes contemporary racial justice from that which undergirded the Civil Rights Movement, values counterhegemonic defiance at all turns, pity for all minorities, cancellation, a mistrust of equality, color-blindness, and merit, a diversity, equity, and inclusion as racial orthodoxy, equality of outcomes, and the denial of free speech. In higher education, proponents of Critical Social Justice have an us vs. them attitude and a “by any means necessary” approach to education and activism. They think they are clearly better than anyone who does not see the world as the bigoted hellscape they do. They believe that both silence and words are violence, that intention never matters, that anti-black is ubiquitous and the cause of all black problems and disparities, and that pedagogy’s primary focus should be the squashing of whiteness, that anything embraced by mainstream society is always already racist, that the world is a large conspiracy against minorities, and that anyone who does not share this belief are bad actors or dupes that cannot be trusted. They also believe that minorities students are always already embracing a victim mentality and need those who have “done the work” to save them. They believe that black people see the world as an impossible obstacle course full of devils bent on holding them down.

Of course, this is not so, and some prominent black figures in America’s past and present have tried to explain why. They have tried to explain that black people are individuals who do not interpret things the same way. They have tried to explain that, even if black people can agree on an issue, they may not agree on its solution. And they have tried to explain that such “alternative” interpretations and solutions derive from pride and a sense of dignity.

I learned the hard way that trying to explain this was not to be tolerated. For wanting to teach standard written English to all students, including students of color, and for wanting to have a real conversation about the efficacy standard English in American life, I was deemed a pariah. On an academic listserv⁵ specifically for those in English Studies (literature, rhetoric, writing), I was accused of white supremacy, of being unconcerned how such thoughts, coming from a black man, were doing harm to other black people. They would deride me to each other

⁵ This listserv, titled “Writing Program Administrators’ Listserv” or WPA-L, is now defunct. The catalyst for its demise was my pushback on CSJ and its affect on academia, especially in the field of rhetoric and composition. As of the writing of this essay, the archives of this listserv are no longer available.

while ignoring my explanations and clarifications. I was accused of doing things I didn't do and saying things I didn't say. Any attempt to clarify my points or address an erroneous claim on my part was ignored. Many who did not participate in these online degradation ceremonies cheered on those who did. This behavior is not an aberration; it is the norm in many academic fields.

Conclusion: The Effects of CSJ-DEI

So, what are the effects of critical social justice and its concomitants, especially prefigurative politics and prescriptive essentialism? Based on my experiences in academia, they boil down to the following bullet points.

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- Racism, either individualistic or systemic, is the root cause of all problems experienced by racial minorities.
 - Good-faith conversation between whites and minorities cannot be trusted. Deliberation is considered a “white way of knowing” and cannot be tolerated.
 - Objectivity is an illusion except for the objective statements made by those in your chosen identity group.
 - Habits of mind that seem to have derived from European sources are seen as inherently racist, even those with clear benefits (individualism, the scientific method, discipline and hard work, etc.)
 - The goal is not to reform society to be fairer and more equitable; it is to revolt against society for complete societal transformation.
 - Happiness, success, and comfort can only be a sign of privilege.
 - There is a set of acceptable behaviors based on skin color/group affiliation. Going beyond these behaviors is considered a sign of inauthenticity.
 - For the proponents of critical social justice, the appropriate behavior for minorities, especially black people, is victimhood and a distrust of anyone considered privileged or hegemonic.
 - A black man who is happy and successful in modern society is an implicit detriment to black people.

- In the context of critical social justice, empowerment is viewed as anything that shirks classical liberal values and counters a society that works to abide by them.

These bullet points constitute the ideology of contemporary Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. For this reason, I have dedicated my career to combatting its implementation in academia and beyond.

I will end this testimony with a recent development. On February 21st of this year, an email was sent out to several professors in the field of rhetoric and composition—the same group that performed the degradation ceremony that started me on this path—calling for volunteers to form a “Special Committee on Difficult Dialogues and Politically Charged Discussion Within and Beyond the Classroom” under the aegis of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, henceforth known as 4Cs. I wanted to trust the good faith of a group of people who consistently hide intolerance within connotations of tolerance.

The email read that the committee’s ultimate charge would be the creation of a guide that would “clearly articulate a stance for [4Cs] that documents the value to learning of discomfort (particularly for those most privileged and benefitted by such forces as white supremacy, heteronormativity, cis-gender identity, etc.) and of critical thought and engagement are enhanced by participation in difficult dialogue with scaffolded pedagogical support.” Now, notice the parenthetical phrase there: “particularly for those most privileged and benefitted by such forces as white supremacy, heteronormativity” and so on. It does not say “mostly” for the privileged or even “especially” for the privileged. It says “particularly” for the privileged. Which is to say this is not a committee charged with handling difficult dialogues across differences. The “difficulty” is the emotional labor endured by certain topics, themselves. It is a “How to talk to people who already agree with you about topics that make you sad or angry” committee.

My colleagues do not acknowledge the sound, well-researched, and clearly articulated arguments that the detriments of hegemony are overstated at best.⁶ Sadly, this email indicates a

⁶ See Erec Smith and Matthew Abraham, *The Lure of Disempowerment*, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 2022. See also Erec Smith, “Moving Beyond the Politics of Pity,” *Quillette*, April 2, 2023, https://quillette.com/2023/04/02/moving-beyond-the-politics-of-pity/?utm_source=pocket_saves. See also Erec Smith, “The Specter of Harm in Contemporary Social Justice Activism,” *Cato at Large*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.cato.org/blog/specter-harm-contemporary-social-justice-activism>.

fundamental aspect of contemporary, CSJ-infused DEI: an intolerance of counterpoints and anyone who makes them. What makes this particular group especially egregious is the fact that they are professors of rhetoric, i.e., experts of communication. When academics charged with theorizing and teaching effective communication refuse to communicate at all, higher education has truly lost its way.

A full literature review of such work is beyond the scope of this essay, but work refuting the efficacy of critical social justice in the realm of education can be found in the work of John McWhorter, Coleman Huges, Glenn Loury, Walter Williams, and others.