

By  
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Several months later, I hesitate to offer yet another election postmortem for higher education. Like many of you readers, I have read countless such essays from within and beyond the academy. Some people have argued that the rise of white supremacists (they prefer to be called the “alt-right”) was only to be expected given the proliferation of identity politics in higher education. According those observers, by providing limited space and resources on campuses for the acknowledgment and celebration of various social identity groups that are underrepresented in colleges and universities,

as well as marginalized across society, it was only a matter of time before white students would want to assert themselves as well.

The only trouble with that view, as was brilliantly enunciated by Cheryl Harris in 1993 in her discourse on **whiteness as property**, is that the very idea of whiteness and the racialization of white people over and against all others is the invention of propertied, Protestant Christian, Western European settlers in the Americas. Whiteness was the means of preserving their wealth and status within an ideologically theocratic capitalist system. This argument is disingenuous and ahistorical.

Other commentators, such as **Mikki Kendall recently**, have noted higher education's failure to educate its students about race and racism. In that argument, white students are rightfully presented as being allowed to believe in their own merits while at the same time denying the meritorious potential of anyone unlike them -- particularly those who are members of racially minoritized groups. Despite first-year orientation diversity sessions and general-education requirements including a plethora of options to expose students to diverse perspectives (but few which present a challenge to normative worldviews), most students leave college with the same assumptions with which they entered: that the dominance and overrepresentation of certain people in college, in leadership and among the ranks of the wealthy and envied is natural and optimal. Most students -- not even just white students, necessarily -- believe that advancement and opportunity is exclusively a function of merit, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, as noted by legal and educational scholar **Lani Guinier**.

What I have not yet seen in these electoral postmortems seeking to diagnose how working-class white people in the United States seemingly voted against their own economic interests leading to the election of Donald J. Trump is: 1) an acknowledgment by higher education scholars that it was as much the vote of college-educated, middle-class white men and women that informed this presidential election's outcomes (see [here](#)), and 2) that reality is a result of the decision of historically white colleges and universities to engage a politics of appeasement instead of a true liberal education.

Kendall's prescient observations reflect the effects of this politics of appeasement, except those who are being appeased are not who some pundits, decrying the excessive political liberalism of the academy, have led us to believe. The greatest strength of an institution lies in its ability to persevere over time, with its most fundamental modus operandi challenged but unchanged. That has never been more true of the institution of American higher education as engendered and still practiced by historically white institutions (HWIs). As I shared during a [talk](#) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign recently, acknowledgment and celebration of diversity were not the primary goals of the student activists of the 1960s through the 1980s, who pushed for ethnic studies departments, student centers and increased recruitment and retention efforts focused on racially minoritized students, faculty members and staff members. No, it was through such avenues that those generations of activists hoped to inspire institutional transformation through the presence of a critical mass of people of color on campuses.

That is where the politics of appeasement comes into play. Underestimating institutional stability, HWI university leaders

quieted complaints and concerns from opposing sides: on the one hand, students of color and their supporters, and on the other, trustees and nervous donors -- liberal and conservative -- who wanted their colleges and universities out of unflattering public spotlight. The same type of appeasement is happening in the current generation of student activism, whose demands sound hauntingly familiar:

- Advance more racially minoritized faculty and staff through tenure and promotion and into senior-level roles.
- Admit more racially minoritized students and offer more scholarships to help them afford to attend and achieve a degree.
- Train faculty to effectively lead and deal with issues of equity in the classroom.
- Reduce and respond to incidents of microaggressions on the campus.
- Hire counseling center staff members who are competent to address the psychological stress of minoritized students.
- Create safe spaces on campus where minoritized students of various identities can share, heal and organize.
- Recognize the multiple identities of minoritized students and the intersecting oppressions they face on the campus.

In response, administrative leaders of HWIs are hiring chief diversity officers, establishing special endowments to support increased financial aid, launching cluster hires for faculty of color and investing in diversity programming, speakers and consultants. Those efforts seek to quiet the protesters, trustees and donors at the same time, all the while creating little systemic or transformative change on the campus.

## **Diversity and Inclusion vs. Equity and Social Justice**

Such “Kool-Aid” approaches (again, check out my [talk](#) at UIUC) leave not only the institution fundamentally unchanged but also its students. Students with minoritized identities continue to face the same indignities and hostile campus climates, despite moderate increases in the compositional diversity of the campus. But until they are no longer students, they often fail to recognize that what they asked for was insufficient to change the campus culture and climate.

Students for whom HWIs were designed to educate for societal leadership receive not only no challenges to their (perhaps unconscious) internalized sense of racial, ethnic, sexual, gender and social class dominance but also reinforcement of the notion that diversity and inclusion are achieved by having people with different backgrounds in the same spaces.

As I shared in my remarks at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, diversity and inclusion rhetoric asks fundamentally different questions and is concerned with fundamentally different issues than efforts seeking equity and justice.

- Diversity asks, “Who’s in the room?” Equity responds: “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?”
- Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?” Justice responds, “Whose ideas won’t be taken as seriously because they aren’t in the majority?”
- Diversity asks, “How many more of [pick any minoritized identity] group do we have this year than last?” Equity responds, “What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?”

- Inclusion asks, “Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong?” Justice challenges, “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?”
- Diversity asks, “Isn’t it separatist to provide funding for safe spaces and separate student centers?” Equity answers, “What are people experiencing on campus that they don’t feel safe when isolated and separated from others like themselves?”
- Inclusion asks, “Wouldn’t it be a great program to have a panel debate Black Lives Matter? We had a Black Lives Matter activist here last semester, so this semester we should invite someone from the alt-right.” Justice answers, “Why would we allow the humanity and dignity of people or our students to be the subject of debate or the target of harassment and hate speech?”
- Diversity celebrates increases in numbers that still reflect minoritized status on campus and incremental growth. Equity celebrates reductions in harm, revisions to abusive systems and increases in supports for people’s life chances as reported by those who have been targeted.
- Inclusion celebrates awards for initiatives and credits itself for having a diverse candidate pool. Justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups.

By substituting diversity and inclusion rhetoric for transformative efforts to promote equity and justice, HWIs have appeased their constituents and avoided recognizable institutional change. But it is time for historically white institutions in American higher education to pursue real change and abandon the politics of appeasement.



A truly democratic education must not be ideologically neutral; rather, it must ardently pursue the preparation of students for engaged citizenship in an ostensibly democratic society. Whether HWI leaders will gather the institutional will and the moral and ethical courage to provoke and institute real, substantive institutional transformation is unknown. The first step on that road, however, is to make equity and justice the yardstick by which leaders measure progress instead of merely diversity and inclusion.

## Bio

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