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Why Diversity Initiatives Fail

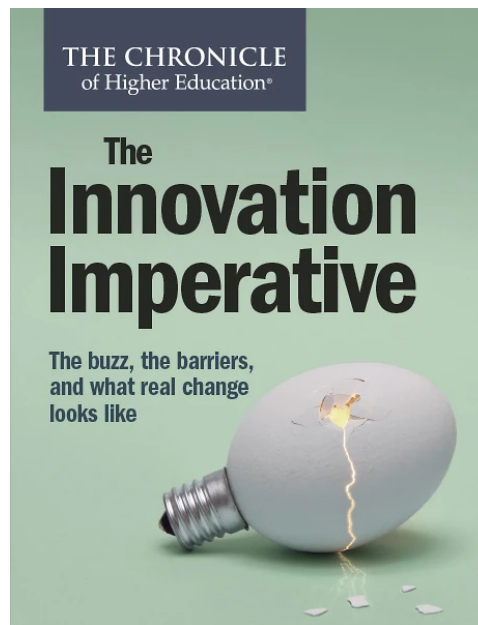
Symbolic gestures and millions of dollars can't overcome apathy.

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By PAMELA NEWKIRK

During more than 30 years of my professional life, diversity has been a national preoccupation. Yet despite decades of hand-wringing, costly initiatives, and uncomfortable conversations, progress in most elite American universities has been negligible.

While racial and ethnic minorities make up roughly 39 percent of the national population, they are (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_csc.pdf) just 19 percent of full-time professorships. Put another way, whites make up 60 percent of the population but hold 81 percent of full-time professorships. Meanwhile, African Americans and Hispanics, who account for about 31 percent of the national population, are just 4 percent and 3 percent, respectively, of full-time professors. And while the percentage of faculty members who are from underrepresented minorities modestly ticked up at the tenure and tenure-track levels from 1993 to 2013, it mushroomed (http://www.tiaainstitute.org/sites/default/files/presentations/2017-02/taking_the_measure_of_faculty_diversity.pdf) for part-time and nontenured positions over that span.



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In recent years, protests around the country have highlighted the extent to which many of the issues that roiled campuses in the 1960s persist. In 2015, students of color at institutions like Princeton, Yale, Wesleyan, and the University of Missouri expressed their sense of alienation on their predominantly white campuses. Professors and administrators of color were few in number, they noted, and their history, culture, and daily experiences were not meaningfully addressed in the curricula or by academic leaders. While protests in the '60s had resulted in the creation of programs like black studies, most colleges have done little to meaningfully remake themselves in response to America's carefully constructed racial caste system, which universities played a role in legitimizing, and which has created and maintained systemic inequality.

Universities responded by pledging hundreds of millions of dollars to increase faculty diversity, including a \$50-million commitment by Yale, nearly \$23 million by Dartmouth, \$25 million by Johns Hopkins, \$60 million by Cornell, and \$165 million by Brown. Some, like Missouri, have for the first time hired diversity czars, while others have commissioned campus-climate surveys, consultants, and anti-bias training, or expanded the number of diversity officers in schools and departments. While these initiatives have helped power the

multibillion-dollar diversity industry, there is little indication that they have resulted in more diversity or less bias. And there's some evidence that some of the anti-bias strategies can actually make matters worse.

“Strategies for controlling bias — which drive most diversity efforts — have failed spectacularly,” Harvard’s Frank Dobbin and Tel Aviv University’s Alexandra Kalev concluded in their study (<https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>) “Why Diversity Programs Fail,” published in *Harvard Business Review* in 2016. Dobbin and Kalev, both sociologists, examined three decades of data from more than 800 U.S. firms and interviewed hundreds of managers and executives. The study took an especially dim view of mandatory training, which was found to trigger a backlash against those it was intended to help.

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“Everybody is quick to do unconscious-bias training and not interventions,” says Cyrus Mehri, a civil-rights lawyer who successfully litigated a number of landmark discrimination lawsuits against companies including Texaco and Coca-Cola. Mehri, with the late civil-rights lawyer Johnnie Cochran Jr., is credited with devising what became known as the Rooney Rule, adopted by the NFL, which requires the inclusion of a person of color in the final candidate pool for head-coaching or front-office jobs.

“They want drive-by diversity,” Mehri says. “If diversity and inclusion is buried in the organizational structure, it’s not going to have a lot of power. When you keep choosing the options on the menu that don’t create change, you’re purposely not creating change. It’s part of the intentional discrimination.”

Meanwhile, in sharp contrast to the impressions of students and faculty of color, a 2018 Inside Higher Ed and Gallup survey (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/2018-surveys-admissions-leaders-pressure-grows>) of college presidents found that 80 percent believed race relations on their campus were excellent or good, an incongruence that indicates they see no need to change. Moreover, 61 percent believed that public attention and policy related to diversity in higher education would recede in the future, a sign that attention paid to diversity may be tied more to negative headlines than to a genuine commitment to social justice.

Still, the campus turbulence around race has refocused attention on the unfinished business of diversity efforts begun in the '60s, when black students demanded more faculty of color and curricula that moved beyond a Eurocentric canon. These demands came in the midst of spiraling urban unrest that in 1967 inspired President Lyndon B. Johnson to impanel the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. A year later the panel largely blamed white indifference for the despair plaguing black America. A century after emancipation, it [called](https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/1968-kerner-report) (https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/1968-kerner-report) on leaders of American institutions to address “pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education and housing, which have resulted in the continuing exclusion of great numbers of Negroes from the benefits of economic progress.”

Johnson moved quickly to enforce new laws. He substantially increased federal funding for schools, then used those funds as a lever to ensure compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act forbidding discrimination based on race, color, or religion in public accommodations.

The burden of history has not been shared by all but shouldered solely by its victims.

The results were “astonishing,” writes Joshua Zeitz, author of *Building the Great Society* (Viking, 2018). “Between 1965 and 1968, the number of black students in the South who attended majority-white schools rose from roughly 2.3 percent to almost 23.4 percent,” and would go on to peak at 43.5 percent in 1988. While Johnson’s programs and policies had begun to bear fruit, his transformative vision became a target for conservative politicians from Ronald Reagan to Paul Ryan, who worked tirelessly to dismantle key programs and policies that had begun to disrupt generational poverty.

By the end of the 1970s, affirmative action — which had begun to close the racial gap in income and education — had given way to cries by whites of reverse discrimination. In 1978, in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the U.S. Supreme Court narrowly ruled in favor of Allan Bakke, a white student who sued the University of California at Davis’s School of Medicine after he had twice been denied admission. In a 5-to-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the use of racial quotas in college admissions, ruling that they violated the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.

Writing for the majority, Justice Lewis F. Powell said it was unfair to impose the burden of history on the innocent. The ruling meant that past discrimination of disadvantaged groups could no longer be considered in admission decisions. The burden of history, then, would not be shared by all but shouldered solely by its victims. The decision seemed to wipe the slate clean, as if history were unrelated to contemporary realities, and suggested that all members of society now operated on a level playing field. While quotas were deemed unconstitutional, diversity was viewed as a compelling state interest that enriched the overall college environment. Colleges could still consider race as one of myriad factors in admissions decisions.

The *Bakke* decision was followed in 1981 by the dismantling of federal antidiscrimination programs under the Reagan administration; affirmative action continued to be dismantled even after quotas were eliminated. By then, many of the gains made during the '60s, including school integration, had been erased, along with federal policies that had begun to close the education-and-poverty gap without whites' losing ground. Following *Bakke*, many, including Abigail Fisher in 2013 and 2016, have made similar claims in an attempt to undo policies helping those who had been systemically denied opportunity.

Columbia University President Lee Bollinger has been at the heart of this legal fight, and so last fall I visited him at his stately six-story limestone-and-brick townhouse in Morningside Heights. We met in a sitting room with high ceilings and wainscoting just off the main entrance, and he became animated when the talk turned to *Bakke*.

“We’re deprived of the context that gave it a sense of mission,” Bollinger said, referring to the diversity movement since that ruling. “Every college leader is told, ‘Do not refer to history.’ I think we have a meaningless, abstract conversation about diversity without a rationale.”

Bollinger, a First Amendment scholar, had become president of the University of Michigan in 1997 and was soon initiated into the affirmative-action battles. In October of that year, Jennifer Gratz, a white student who had been denied admission to the University of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, served papers on the university. In *Gratz v. Bollinger*, she claimed that she had been denied admission as a result of reverse discrimination.

That same year, Barbara Grutter, another white student, was denied admission to the university's law school and decided to sue. Instead of settling the lawsuits, Bollinger chose to defend affirmative action as moral and just. "I decided we would fight this to the end," he told me. "This would be the centerpiece of my six-year tenure."

(Harry Haysom for *The Chronicle*)

Bollinger came of age during the civil-rights era and was not prepared to reverse course. In 2003, a year after he moved to Columbia, the Supreme Court, responding to *Gratz v. Bollinger*, deemed as unconstitutional the university's use of a point system that accorded 20 points to members of underrepresented minorities. That same year it decided *Grutter v. Bollinger*, this time affirming diversity as a compelling interest in college admissions.

However, the *Grutter* decision was not enough to help universities recapture the progress made during the civil-rights era. Since *Bakke*, universities have been required to avoid discussing past discrimination even though it is precisely that history that is responsible for the inequality they seek to address. Given the legacy of slavery and legal discrimination marked by "massive disadvantages" for African Americans and "massive advantages" for white Americans, Bollinger says, "you have to believe in a principle of justice." He continues: "I think it's a matter of intention. If it's a pipeline issue, you have to work on the pipeline. The entire institution has to be behind it. Left to its own devices, it won't happen."

In 2005, Bollinger announced an \$85-million initiative for faculty diversity recruitment and retention. At Columbia's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, from 2008 to 2018, the percentage of underrepresented minorities who were tenured or on the tenure track expanded (<https://fas.columbia.edu/diversity-statistics>) from 8 percent to 9.2 percent. The greatest gains were in the humanities (7.7 percent to 10.4 percent), followed by the natural sciences (3.9 percent to 4.9 percent). The social sciences saw a slight dip (from 12.9 percent to 12.7 percent) over that span, while the percentage of underrepresented-minority doctoral students grew (from 11 percent to 14.9 percent).

During the fall of 2017, Columbia announced (<https://news.columbia.edu/news/university-commits-another-100-million-faculty-diversity>) an additional \$100 million for its faculty-diversity initiative. In an interview, Dennis Mitchell, a dental-school professor turned vice provost for faculty advancement, described it as incentive-based — "no stick, all carrot."

Departments compete (<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2019/02/01/columbia-has-185-million-in-dedicated-funds-why-is-hiring-diverse-faculty-still-so-difficult-9/>) for target-of-opportunity faculty lines that allow them to recruit leading scholars from underrepresented groups. Resources ranged from \$125,000 annually for non-lab-based lines to \$250,000 for lab-based lines. Mitchell said that while the incentives are great, the university does not penalize programs that choose not to participate.

A 2018 report (<https://fas.columbia.edu/files/fas/content/Columbia-ArtsandSciences-PPC-Equity-Reports-2018.pdf>) concluded that the target-of-opportunity hiring was having “a discouraging effect” on the program’s potential. The report was the conclusion of a study that sought to understand why, given the university’s commitment, progress in diversity hiring had not been greater. Because the lines are funded for only three years, with costs thereafter absorbed by the departments, some faculty members contend that the target-of-opportunity appointments compete with other programmatic priorities. The report recommended that diversity hiring become part of the mainstream “and not be seen as something departments do only for target of opportunity hires.”

Unfortunately, measures such as targeted diversity hiring were created precisely because diversity was not being realized through the normal process. The reasons for this are deeply entrenched. The faculty search process is typically run by a committee appointed by the chair of a department. That committee generally has wide latitude to reach out to anyone it deems desirable. Hiring, then, is a subjective process, and finalists typically mirror the networks of those leading the search. Searches often result in the hiring of friends and former colleagues, or of people whose backgrounds, scholarly interests, and sensibilities mirror those of the committee members. The candidates, then, tend to reflect the overwhelmingly white composition of the faculty. Add to this self-referential decision-making process the network of influential people who are asked to write letters of recommendation, and all but a small number of racial minorities are left out of the loop. For junior-level prospective candidates whose scholarship challenges white norms and views, the odds are especially long.

But even well-intentioned initiatives, like targeted hiring, can provoke resentment and speculation that a two-tiered system presents a lowered bar to underrepresented scholars, even when they are otherwise overlooked. Moreover, once colleges put a high priority on diversity, many attempt to recruit the same cadre of proven stars in their fields while overlooking emerging scholars of color in the pipeline. As a result, the same superstars of

color are recycled among colleges, while the overall number of underrepresented faculty members remains unchanged. The bidding wars over a relative handful of star scholars further incites resentment among some white faculty members and perpetuates the sense that racial minorities are the ones who receive preferential treatment. It's a vicious cycle that for decades has helped maintain the status quo.

Faculty composition is just one of the issues that contribute to campus unrest across the country. In November 2015, student protests rocked (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/At-Yale-Painful-Rifts-Emerge/234112>) Yale's bucolic campus — where students of color complained that they had been turned away from a “white girls only” fraternity party. Days later they received threats, and a forum on race was rescheduled. The culminating event was a mass email to students sent out by Erika Christakis, then an associate master of one of Yale's residential colleges. In response to an email from college officials urging students to avoid racially offensive Halloween costumes, Christakis appeared to downplay the need for such guidance, asking, “Is there no room anymore for a child to be a little obnoxious ... a little bit inappropriate or provocative, or, yes, offensive?”

The email stoked days of protests and brought the paucity of faculty members and administrators of color to the fore. As Richard Bribiescas, an anthropologist and Yale's vice provost for faculty development and diversity, later told me, “In the academic community, we live in a bubble. That bubble burst.”

Few presidents appear willing to go beyond symbolic gestures.

Bribiescas and I spoke three years after the tensions had subsided. He said that while there had been some 65 appointments of faculty of color since 2015, the overall number of underrepresented faculty members had slightly decreased because of low retention. While the overall faculty numbers (<https://faculty.yale.edu/faculty-demographics>) were slightly down, from 2015 to 2017 the percentage of African American faculty members remained largely unchanged, dipping from 3.5 percent to 3.4 percent; Hispanic faculty members slightly increased, from 3.4 percent to 3.8 percent, while Asian faculty members fell from 14 percent to 13.7 percent. The “unknown” racial category expanded from 3 percent to 5.4 percent. Bribiescas attributed the retention problem in part to the campus climate: “You have to feel you are wanted at the university.”

He is especially attuned to concerns of students of color, given his academic discipline and his own Mexican heritage. He recalls growing up in South Central Los Angeles when, as an 8-year-old, he was stopped by immigration authorities and questioned about his parents' immigration status. Later, in the 1980s, he was a student activist at UCLA during protests over racial issues. "Fraternities would throw beer and tortillas at us."

Many of those racial attitudes persist. An epidemic of parties and other campus events featuring white students in blackface or flaunting other racially offensive stereotypes (such as a "Bullets and Bubbly" party at the University of Connecticut Law school) continue around the country. The U.S. Department of Education reported (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/After-2016-Election-Campus/242577>) a 25-percent increase in reported hate crimes on campus between 2015 and 2016.

"It's endemic," Bribiescas said. "We started to think we're leaving this behind, but it was just plastered over. Now, with social media, it's being documented. It's empowering."

Among the other challenges for university presidents at legacy institutions such as Yale are alumni, who are overwhelmingly white and male and often less inclined to champion diversity. "Sometimes you have to take a hit from the press and the alumni," Bribiescas said. "You have to admit you have a problem, that the school has a problem." He cited as a model the former Harvard president Drew Faust, who conceded the university's racial challenges.

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Bribiescas was encouraged by the appointment of Weili Cheng as executive director of Yale's alumni association. He is also inspired by Yale's long-term investment in scholars of color through its Presidential Visiting Fellows program, which brings about 10 underrepresented scholars to campus each year, and by its Dean's Emerging Scholars program, which provides funding for 15 doctoral students.

He challenges colleges to do more than hire diversity directors to deal with systemic issues that have stymied progress. Columbia's Mitchell agrees. "You need intention and leadership," he told me. "It's not going to happen by mistake." In 2002, while a Columbia

dental-school professor, Mitchell was tasked with the challenge of addressing what he called “the lonely only” — the incoming class of 75 students had just one from an underrepresented minority.

Mitchell immediately set about designing a pilot pipeline program with the medical school, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Within six years, the percentage of underrepresented minorities at the college increased sevenfold, from 3 percent to 21 percent. And contrary to naysayers’ predictions, the college remained within the top three in the country for the quantitative scores of incoming students.

This fall a U.S. District Court dealt Harvard a win in the closely watched discrimination case (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Everything-Is-Not/247262>) filed in 2014 by Students for Fair Admissions. Allison D. Burroughs, the district judge, defended Harvard’s use of race-based admissions to ensure the inclusion of underrepresented minorities. “Ensuring diversity at Harvard relies, in part, on race-conscious admissions,” she wrote. “The use of race benefits certain racial and ethnic groups that would otherwise be underrepresented at Harvard and is therefore neither an illegitimate use of race or reflective of racial prejudice.” The group plans to appeal the decision.

Bollinger worries that even if Harvard eventually prevails, “each challenge chips away at the support for affirmative action and diversity, and that’s a pity.” He believes that diversity advocates are losing the battle of public opinion:

“We are not making the case that it’s reasonable and good for society. I think you have to have a civil-rights consciousness in order to have this really work. ... Every institution should speak to this. Instead we’ve hidden from it. ... We’ve allowed this loss of memory to take hold and the people who oppose it to set the agenda.”

But leaders willing to buck the tide of resistance to diversity from the courts, and the public at large, are apparently in short supply. Few presidents appear willing to go beyond symbolic gestures to substantially expand the pool of underrepresented students and faculty of color; the chronically dismal numbers reported year after year are a predictable

outcome of this apathy. If anything, the trend is moving toward a flattened diversity-for-all mantle that embraces diversity of all kinds while ignoring the history and legacy of structural racial disadvantage baked into the educational system.

The plodding pace of change makes clear the need for a diversity conversation that moves away from a rosy “we-are-the-world” ideal to one fired by a mission to combat systemic racial injustice and pervasive delusion about where we stand. Unless and until white America — including academics and those who claim progressive values — comes to terms with the reality of persisting injustice, diversity initiatives will continually fail.

Pamela Newkirk is a professor of journalism at New York University. This essay is adapted from her new book, Diversity, Inc. (Bold Type Books).