

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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# Race on Campus

Engage in higher ed's conversations about racial equity and inclusion.  
Delivered on Tuesdays.

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AUGUST 31, 2021

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**From:** Sarah Brown

**Subject:** Race on Campus: DEI or Antiracism?

Welcome to Race on Campus. Does your college call itself antiracist? If it does, do its leaders really know what that means? Antiracism is often conflated with a general commitment to diversity, experts told our Sarah Brown. And that confusion can make it difficult for chief diversity officers to decide where to focus their attention.

If you have ideas, comments, or questions about this newsletter, write to me:

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## Not a New Debate

Malika Carter has seen two schools of thought emerge recently among chief diversity officers in higher education.

One champions the idea that antiracism should be the explicit focus of the post-George Floyd moment. The other stresses the importance of advocating for all identities — in other words, what people might call diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI.

Carter, who is chief diversity officer at the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry, said she tries to strike a balance: She explicitly talks about race when the moment calls for it, while also emphasizing the vulnerabilities that affect a range of marginalized groups and how people's different identities intersect — say, being both Black and a woman.

What Carter identified isn't a new debate, but it's a key challenge facing colleges in 2021, said Benjamin D. Reese Jr., who spent 16 years as chief diversity officer at Duke University. Institutions and chief diversity officers, Reese said, must “gain greater clarity of the overlap and the difference between things we refer to as diversity, equity, and inclusion, and things we refer to as structural and systemic racism.”

DEI and antiracism aren't the same thing. DEI work entails strategically diversifying the student body and campus work force, said Shaun R. Harper, a professor of education and business at the University of Southern California and executive director of the USC Race and Equity Center.

DEI also means bringing people together across different identity groups, Harper said, and ensuring that everyone has access to the same resources and support systems on campus.

Antiracist work, meanwhile, has some of the same goals, like increasing racial diversity on campus. But it specifically involves disrupting racist structures, policies, and practices. “It’s decidedly in opposition to something,” Harper said. “It isn’t a ‘kumbaya.’”

Student activists have been making antiracist demands for decades, Harper noted, including decolonizing the curriculum, which calls for professors to overhaul their syllabi and uplift the perspectives of people of color in their respective disciplines. Colleges have only recently jumped on the bandwagon.

Many college leaders have embraced the term “antiracist” over the past 15 months, but Harper doesn’t think they all know what it means. He recently spoke to community-college board members who told him that their institution was becoming antiracist. But asked to elaborate, several board members defined antiracism as a general commitment to diversity, without saying much about race.

Reese wrote about that phenomenon [in an essay last year](#), noting that colleges often rely on DEI language to avoid having difficult conversations about racism and systems of oppression.

In the essay, Reese shared his experience of going to a college campus to speak about racial implicit bias and having the president tell him, as he describes it: “We value diversity. It’s not about race. I admit that we’ve had some issues in the past, but we all try to get along.”

“In a country built on the subjugation of Indigenous and Black people, it is going to take more than respect for all differences to deal with the structures and unconscious biases that continue to marginalize — and kill — Black Americans,” Reese wrote.

## **‘Fighting Against Boxes’**

At times, though, some diversity officers have faced pressure to focus on combating racism instead of taking a more holistic approach to diversity.

Venessa Brown, who served as chief diversity officer at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville for 14 years, said she doesn't view the recent antiracist movement in the same way as others do. She intentionally applies a wide lens to her diversity work. As she sees it, if chief diversity officers want to lead institutional change, they need to bring everyone on campus along. They can't focus solely on injustice against Black people.

That's not always a popular stance, she said. Some people, including others in the Black community, have questioned her approach because she advocates for many different groups in the same breath. "People like to box you in," she said. "I've lived my life fighting against boxes."

Brown has taught a course called "Who Am I?" in which she prompts students — even white students — to dig deeper into their identities. "You can't say, 'I'm white,'" she said. "You don't get to be a socially constructed term." Instead, she encourages students to describe themselves as German, or Scottish, or Irish. They found out, she said, that they were more diverse than they'd ever imagined.

"You've got to understand you," she said. "That's what helps you understand others." Understanding others, she added, leads to the relationships that are key to creating an inclusive environment.

This spring, Brown moved into a new role, as the first associate athletics director for diversity, equity, and inclusion at SIU-Edwardsville, where she's excited to help coaches and college athletes draw a connection between belonging and winning. A new vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion now serves as chief diversity officer and is [leading the university's antiracism task force](#).

While chief diversity officers are still figuring out what the relationship between DEI and antiracism should look like on their campuses, Harper said, they should have the staffing, resources, and authority to do both.

Asking one campus administrator to handle all issues of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and other identities — what Harper described as “multitasking the multiple dimensions of multiculturalism” — while also moving the institution toward becoming more antiracist, he said, is unsustainable.

Two other things are clear: Neither DEI nor antiracism involves quick fixes. And neither is supposed to make colleges feel comfortable. —*Sarah Brown*

## Read Up

- Last week, our Katie Mangan interviewed Adam Harris about his new book on America’s chronic underfunding of historically Black colleges. This week, *The Chronicle Review* published [an excerpt from the book, \*The State Must Provide\*](#), in which Harris describes how North Carolina’s Bennett College narrowly escaped closure.
- What happens when New York’s elite private schools try to [become antiracist institutions](#)? There’s plenty of pushback, to say the least. (*The New York Times*)
- When crimes are committed against Indigenous women, the victims are often misidentified as white or Hispanic. That’s among the reasons the United States has [no definitive count of missing and murdered Indigenous women](#), a problem whose scope authorities are just beginning to understand. (NBC News)

—*Fernanda*

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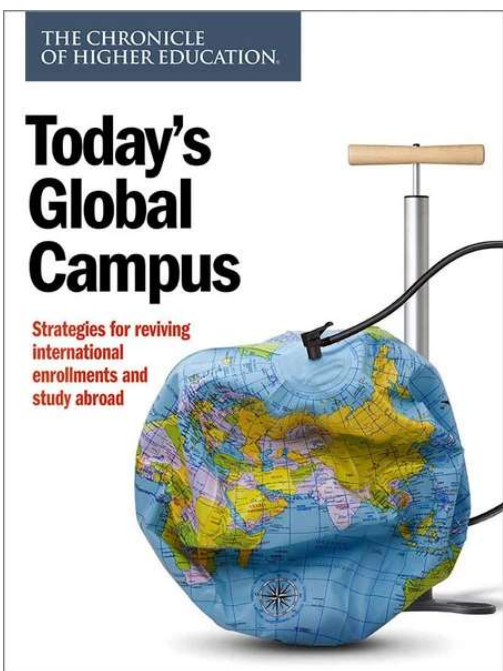
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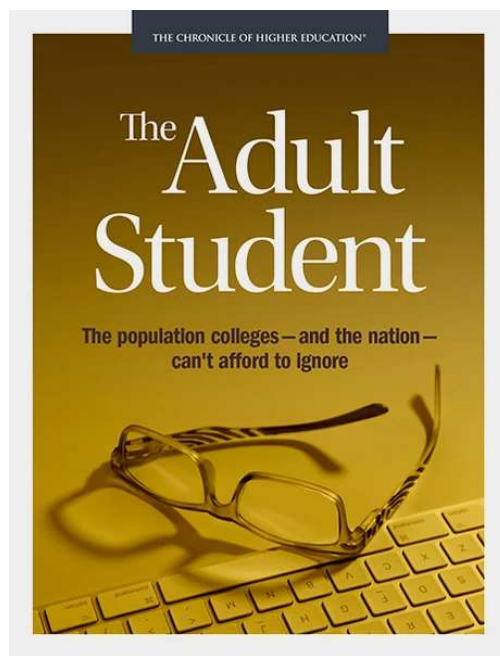
## Sarah Brown

Sarah Brown covers campus culture, including Title IX, race and diversity, and student mental health. Follow her on Twitter [@Brown e Points](https://twitter.com/Brown_e_Points), or email her at [sarah.brown@chronicle.com](mailto:sarah.brown@chronicle.com).

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