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# A Farewell Letter to DEI Work

Such departments, centers and divisions are spaces of impossibility -- they can't do the things they are tasked with, as they are not empowered to hold people accountable, writes

[Tara Brown](#) // August 20, 2020



[https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/media/young-black-female-character-holding-a-big-red-arrow-success-growth-vector-id1128027356.jpg](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/young-black-female-character-holding-a-big-red-arrow-success-growth-vector-id1128027356.jpg)

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As a plague spreads across the world and [police](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/buffalo-police-shove-protester-unrest.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/buffalo-police-shove-protester-unrest.html>) [prove](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/protests-police-brutality-video/2020/06/05/a9e66568-a768-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html) ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/protests-police-brutality-video/2020/06/05/a9e66568-a768-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/protests-police-brutality-video/2020/06/05/a9e66568-a768-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html)) [the](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/26/us/rayshard-brooks-garrett-rolfe-2015-three-shots/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/26/us/rayshard-brooks-garrett-rolfe-2015-three-shots/index.html>) [points](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/06/police-violence-protests-us-george-floyd) (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/06/police-violence-protests-us-george-floyd>) [of](https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/lost-eye-price-protesting-police-brutality-) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/lost-eye-price-protesting-police-brutality->

At the end of 2019, I left a position I was deeply unhappy and morally misaligned with and moved back home with my parents and sister in South Florida to rest, work on turning my dissertation into a book and commit as much time as I could to finding a position that gives more than it takes away. With hindsight of 2020's unfolding, it wasn't the best decision, but what can you do?

The role I left lived under a division with a title with an [ever-expanding acronym](https://medium.com/@eec/dei-is-the-new-checklist-662e06734e4b) (<https://medium.com/@eec/dei-is-the-new-checklist-662e06734e4b>). While once campuses focused only on diversity, many institutions have broadened that focus to include equity and inclusion, so it now commonly refers to all three, as in the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, or DEI. These words, and the intentions they seek to express, are well and good, yet they fall flat as offices fail and refuse to address systemic white domination, anti-Blackness, misogyny or any group-specific violence in their mission statements.

In our case, the division was headed by one of the lower-paid members of the senior staff at an elite higher education institution; they were also the [only Black person on the senior staff](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/02/racial-gap-among-senior-administrators-widens) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/02/racial-gap-among-senior-administrators-widens>). In higher education and in general, such offices are supposed to advocate for Black existence and, while [being a Black person is costly](https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2015/12/30/black-college-students-face-hidden-mental-health-crisis/) (<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2015/12/30/black-college-students-face-hidden-mental-health-crisis/>), [it doesn't pay very well](https://www.epi.org/blog/black-workers-have-made-no-progress-in-closing-earnings-gaps-with-white-men-since-2000/) (<https://www.epi.org/blog/black-workers-have-made-no-progress-in-closing-earnings-gaps-with-white-men-since-2000/>). The devaluation, in coin and experience, partially explains why colleges and universities are hemorrhaging Black [students](https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2018/jan/17/why-do-black-students-quit-university-more-often-than-white-peers) (<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2018/jan/17/why-do-black-students-quit-university-more-often-than-white-peers>), staff and [faculty](https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2019/07/23/why-are-there-so-few-professors-of-color/#5b1d5be3e2e3) (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2019/07/23/why-are-there-so-few-professors-of-color/#5b1d5be3e2e3>).

Our office was staffed exclusively by people who have been historically excluded from elite institutions: Black, Latinx, and Asian people, mostly womxn -- many first-generation college graduates and many queer, like me. While I recognize and value the specific nuances of each of our individual experiences there, the institution, unfortunately, could probably be any other.

We were tasked with, among many other things, identifying and advising all campus constituencies on the best practices of social justice. The role was student-facing, and I was expected to support students, administrators and faculty members in activism and educational efforts on and off the campus. What I found was that I could agree with, support and encourage campus activism -- *unless* that implicated the mistakes or misdoings of the institution. I could tell students how power operated and how decisions that affected their daily experience on the campus were made, but I was encouraged to say, "You didn't hear it from me."

were expected to be nice. We had to incentivize this work, make it inviting and exciting for everyone, because it was not required of anyone.

I remember a student conduct meeting with a provost or maybe a dean or president where they laughed while explaining, "Well, we can't *make* the faculty do anything." A Black student had cried in my office that week because a faculty member kept calling them by another Black student's name; it was the latest in a long line of such erasures on the predominantly white campus.

These departments, centers, divisions and programs are spaces of impossibility; they cannot do the things they are tasked with as they are not empowered to hold community members accountable when they fail to uphold stated investments in equity. They operate on a hope that edifying others with best practices means that those people will implement such practices. They exist not to create systemic change but as evidence that the work has already been done. [Here \(https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20191106-Newkirk\)](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20191106-Newkirk), organizations say, is our investment in equity: engage with it, ignore it or belittle it as you'd like.

Like most diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and programs created within large, well-resourced institutions, these roles are additive rather than transformative. They add to already [bloated administrative \(https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-Forces-That-Drive/240160\)](https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-Forces-That-Drive/240160) expenditures. They don't and can't interrogate institutional investments. They don't and can't put faculty or staff members on probation for failing to uphold a stated commitment to a welcoming environment for all.

A world that values Black lives, that understands that Black lives are beloved, will look radically different than this one. In this world, students will have a formative, decisive role in their educational experiences. In this world, institutions will commit to pay equity and transparency; they will commit to a living wage for all employees. Institutional ties to local police departments will be radically renegotiated, if not severed altogether. Sacrifices will have to be made; we will have [to \(https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/2/19/harvard-divestment-sues-university/\)](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/2/19/harvard-divestment-sues-university/) [divest \(https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/5-links-between-higher-education-and-the-prison-industry-80894/\)](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/5-links-between-higher-education-and-the-prison-industry-80894/) [meaningfully \(https://www.chronicle.com/article/Saving-the-Planet-Hasn-t/247057\)](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Saving-the-Planet-Hasn-t/247057/) -- [right \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/nyregion/nypd-budget-defund-police.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/nyregion/nypd-budget-defund-police.html) [now \(https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/defunding-the-police-will-actually-make-us-safer/\)](https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/defunding-the-police-will-actually-make-us-safer/) -- from structures that condemn historically besieged groups to premature death from COVID-19 or otherwise. Perhaps most alarmingly for the potent liberalism that pervades higher education, feelings will be hurt and people will need to be fired, regardless of the lawsuits that will follow.

## Impossible Expectations

- How do you deal with resistance from the faculty? what I heard was: How much are you willing to endure from people who are determined to misunderstand you? Or how are you going to convince X or Y that Black students matter without hurting their feelings?
- What are strategies you use to invite novices to this work? What I heard was: How warm are you? How much can you smile while explaining how much harm is being done? How can you make difficult, radical transformative work palatable in an hour?
- How long might you stay in this position? I answered: I will stay as long as this work does not take more than it gives, and as long as I have administrative support in my investment in radical change.

And when I once raised the question “How do you respond to student demands for immediate change?” the provost raised their eyebrows -- frozen in surprise for a moment because of a Zoom glitch -- and responded, “It’s the students’ job to push us forward, to make our institution innovative.”

What, then, I wanted to ask, is an administrator’s job?

After writing [a piece for \*McSweeney’s\* \(https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/we-condemn-all-institutional-racism-except-our-own\)](https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/we-condemn-all-institutional-racism-except-our-own) with Amanda Lehr, frequent *McSweeney’s* contributor, and a colleague and friend from my graduate school days, I was asked what made me want to write my reflections on the many recent, empty condemnations of racism I’d heard from higher education institutions. I said that the trauma of being Black in higher ed for about eight years means I’m always writing pieces like this in my head and in the margins of my notebooks.

I chose to study literature, with a focus on Black testimonies, to learn from others how to tell the truth beautifully. The truth is, I can’t do this work anymore without a promise of radical change, reparations and reconciliation. The truth is that when many of these institutions say that Black lives matter to them, they are [lying \(https://hechingerreport.org/after-george-floyds-killing-many-colleges-are-promising-to-do-better-for-black-students-will-anything-change/\)](https://hechingerreport.org/after-george-floyds-killing-many-colleges-are-promising-to-do-better-for-black-students-will-anything-change/) or willfully misunderstanding the extent to which Black lives are imperiled at their hands.

Between interviews, contract work and buying plants to keep me company, I’ve been going on long car rides, listening to music too loudly and screaming along. I rode with my sister one day, driving along an agricultural road decorated with nurseries and farms where people labor to make things grow.

“Would you ever be a farmer?” my sister asked.

# Bio

*Tatiana McInnis has since been offered a visiting professorship at Texas Christian University, where she will continue her work as an educator of historical asymmetries of power and resources that dictate who lives and dies. Her research focuses on anti-Blackness in South Florida and the hometown there she loves to hate. Find her at @[Dm12Tatiana](https://www.twitter.com/Dm12Tatiana) (<http://www.twitter.com/Dm12Tatiana>) or email her at [tatianadmcinnis@gmail.com](mailto:tatianadmcinnis@gmail.com) (<mailto:tatianadmcinnis@gmail.com>).*

Read more by [Tatiana McInnis](#)



(</print/views/2020/08/20/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-offices-cant-be-effective-if-they-arent-empowered>).

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