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## Diversity Work: Testing the Waters of Academic Freedom and the Cultural Climate on Campus

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### Abstract

In this article, the authors describe the process and lessons learned from conducting diversity work in academia. They define diversity work as the commitment to develop programs, workshops, and opportunities to discuss the experiences, issues, and concerns of the intersectional identities, group affiliations, and ideas that exist within academia. In doing diversity work the authors came to understand the importance of a support network for faculty from underrepresented groups, as well as the implications of diversity work for academic freedom. The support network grew from group discussions to hosting a four-day diversity symposium on campus in which faculty, students, and staff spoke together about these issues. While some conversations were intense and challenging, they were relevant and necessary to promoting academic freedom and a campus culture in which the appreciation of diversity issues could be addressed and celebrated. Although at present the cultural climate seems to be more open to dialogue about diversity on campus and how we can protect both students and faculty, challenges remain.

Diversity in higher education has been a popular topic in the past couple of decades.<sup>1</sup> Specific budgets and offices have been created and designated to oversee the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty, and to create training sessions to help administrators and faculty understand the cultural and campus implications of having a more diversified faculty.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay we use our university's definition of

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*diversity*: “Diversity and inclusion promote the exchange of ideas and knowledge, scholarly discourse, and community engagement. Simply put, diversity helps the University provide a richer learning experience for students, a better teaching and researching experience for faculty, and a more productive working experience for staff.”<sup>3</sup> We feel that our work to promote diversity awareness on our campus exemplifies this definition.

As often happens, at our university, faculty and administrators are left to do the work of promoting diversity efforts on campuses. This type of work is crucial to campus climate and the perception of diversity on campus. With that in mind, we define “diversity work” as the commitment to develop programs, workshops, and opportunities to dialogue about the experiences, issues, and concerns of the intersectional identities, group affiliations, and ideas that exist within the academic institution. The goal of this work is to foster an environment that provides opportunities to raise awareness and critically think about such issues and how they relate to our students and faculty at the institution and in daily life.

Typically, when we hear the word *diversity* we think of people, ones representing different backgrounds and cultures, because people have different ideas, knowledge, and experiences from which we can learn. Numerous articles and books have been written about the experiences of faculty of color, women, and those who are historically underrepresented, often from the perspective of faculty who have been at predominately white institutions (PWIs). *Historically underrepresented faculty* (URF) are individuals who do not come from the dominant group in society and in academia. Some of the factors used to identify underrepresented individuals are race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity and orientation, religion, and level of ability (people with disabilities).<sup>4</sup> In our role as faculty members who do diversity work on campus, we have come to realize that regardless of the type of institution, the experiences of URF are relatable. Lourdes Follins, Lisa Paler, and Jose Nanin point out these parallels: “Overall, while there are certain negative experiences that are unique to certain subpopulations of URFs, there are also shared experiences. For example, invisibility and heightened visibility is a common issue; along with issues related to tenure and promotion, negative student reactions, and nonexistent-to-poor relationships with other faculty.”<sup>5</sup>

Along with the infusion of diversity, the role of academic freedom in the promotion of campus diversity is also increasingly discussed.<sup>6</sup> In 1915, the American Association of University Professors first formulated the concept of academic freedom that became prevalent in the United States over the following century.<sup>7</sup> According to Ellen Schrecker, “The concept, so seemingly simple to define, is actually a complex set of beliefs, traditions, procedures, and legal rulings that govern many of the relationships between faculties and their employing institutions, the government, students, and the broader public.”<sup>8</sup> *Academic freedom* refers to the right of both faculty members and students to engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or

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retaliation. It gives both students and faculty the right to express their views orally and in writing, including electronically, both on and off campus. They should not fear sanction, “unless the manner of expression substantially impairs the rights of others or, in the case of faculty members, those views demonstrate that they are professionally ignorant, incompetent, or dishonest with regard to their discipline or fields of expertise.”<sup>9</sup> The above definitions of diversity and academic freedom underpin our work. Based on these definitions, we maintain that true academic freedom is essential to meaningful diversity work. The lack of academic freedom would create serious restrictions or even prevent the intended message from being delivered.

Aware of the risks this relationship entails, we decided to embark on diversity work. As untenured junior faculty from underrepresented groups, we began this work on our campus, one of six community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, with a diverse body of students who come from over 140 countries and speak more than 70 different languages. Sixty percent of the students are the first generation in their families to attend college. Due to the demographic composition of our student body, our institution is not considered to be a PWI, but the racial composition of the administration and faculty resembles that of such an institution. Also, although historically at the community college level the scholarly work expected of faculty has been less than at the four-year colleges, the requirements have been increasing. Faculty members thus have to balance the demands of teaching schedules, scholarship, and service to the institution.<sup>10</sup> This is a challenge in itself. Now add the kind of diplomacy or finesse needed to conduct meaningful diversity work without creating antagonisms that could jeopardize our message or efforts.

We are entitled to our academic freedom unless the manner of expression substantially impairs the rights of others. Demonstrations or verbal expressions that promote hatred, violence, or discrimination against certain groups or that put others’ safety at risk should not be allowed. The definition of precisely where one group’s rights end and another’s begin has proven contentious throughout history. There are those who would “cry wolf” the moment a word is said against what they believe to be true, even if their beliefs, actions, and policies infringe on the rights of others or put others’ safety and livelihood at risk. Having to maintain a balance between educating others about diversity, advocating for true diversity, and signaling where diversity is lacking (in sum, diversity work) tests our academic freedom. When we continuously worry about offending others, being labeled as antagonistic to the dominant groups, or suffering negative professional consequences because of our diversity work, true academic freedom cannot exist. This is where our greatest challenge begins.

In doing diversity work we came to understanding the importance of having a support network for URF. Faculty who experience racial and gender bias can feel powerless to change things, making raising awareness

of diversity issues on campus an even more daunting task. It wasn't until beginning this type of work that we began to test what the climate regarding academic freedom and diversity really was on our campus.

We started out as cofacilitators of an interest group that discusses diversity issues in academia. The diverse group provided the opportunity for all faculty, but especially those who self-identify as URF, to discuss issues related to their experiences in academia and on campus. Staff who were interested in these issues were also welcome. Among the many faculty interest groups on campus, at the time this was the only one that offered an opportunity for people from different groups of URF to share their experiences and to review research and publications that dealt with their experiences as professors and scholars in higher education. We also explored the intersections between some of these identifiers. The group had been developed and facilitated by two other faculty members who since had left the group to focus on their scholarly work and administrative tasks, as part of their service to the institution. We had been members of the group for some time and volunteered to continue the work that they had initiated.

In addition to discussing the readings and each faculty member's area of expertise, the group had developed as a safe space, and a sort of support group, for faculty to share their experiences in academia, and on campus, as URF. After a semester of meetings, we decided it was time to delve into deeper issues that our colleagues faced. We selected readings that spoke to our experiences, with topics including microaggressions at work,<sup>11</sup> minority faculty tenure and promotion, teaching styles that incorporate cultural differences, and respect in the classroom. We also shared teaching strategies and activities that each of the group members had created or identified and used in the classroom to infuse diversity into his or her courses. It was important to us that our students felt that they were represented as part of our courses' curriculum. Most of the readings discussed in the diverse faculty group referred to the experiences of faculty of color, queer identified, or women at predominantly white institutions.<sup>12</sup> Although the readings resonated with the group members, the difference for us was that we were not at a PWI. However, some of the faculty reported experiencing situations like those URF encountered at PWI. For example, some of our colleagues talked about microaggressions they experienced from students, colleagues, and administrators. Those situations made us question who holds the power and who is in control, even in institutions like ours with highly diverse student populations. Some members of the group felt they were not always being treated the same as some of their colleagues, or provided with a nurturing environment in which they could thrive and ultimately obtain tenure and promotion. Highly qualified adjuncts with doctoral degrees were not being hired to full-time positions when those became available. Regardless of the situation, members generally felt that the group's meetings provided a safe space to address such concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Aside from being very supportive of our colleagues, and keeping everything they shared with us in confidence, there really wasn't much that we could do, especially since we both were untenured. Before long, we understood that our small group addressed concerns that spoke to the greater college community, and that it could benefit from dialogue on these issues as they related not only to the experiences of the faculty but also to those of many of our students from underrepresented groups. If we wanted to educate and generate change on campus we needed to open up the discussion to the greater college community. We needed to identify or create a forum in which we could come together as an institution to talk about issues related to diversity. Faculty would have an opportunity to use their academic freedom to teach and discuss diversity and equity issues with other faculty, staff, and students as these related to their experience on campus and throughout life. We immediately thought of organizing a one-day symposium.

One situation that repeatedly came up in the group's meetings was that our faculty did not mirror the great diversity of our student body. This is common on campuses across the nation.<sup>14</sup> Faculty members were very concerned about how their message of diversity and equity would be received and about how they should address or question certain issues affecting them or their students. We found this disconcerting. Some wondered how they would be perceived or treated by others. Would their efforts to educate others about certain historically underrepresented faculty be perceived as inflammatory, subversive, or "discriminatory" toward individuals or groups traditionally defined as the norm? Would they be viewed as deviating from unspoken institutional rules? Would they be perceived as dissidents attacking the institutional way of thinking? All these concerns ultimately related to our academic freedom.

We observed that there were two distinctive worlds operating at our institution. In order to try to bring these two worlds closer together we decided we should go ahead with our idea for a diversity symposium. It was imperative to discuss these themes and concerns with the greater college community. The purpose of the symposium would be to address concerns that came up in our diversity group meetings that might be experienced by faculty and staff members who never attended our meetings. We sought to reach faculty members who might want guidance or support on some of the issues presented, as well as to educate students on diversity and equity issues. Surprisingly, while we thought the idea of a one-day symposium would be welcomed at our institution and financially supported, at first, we did not receive this kind of response. Financial support was imperative for our one-day symposium.<sup>15</sup> Our first thought was to apply for grants from our institution, as well as other offices on campus. We initially approached the office whose budget supported our diverse faculty group. It had a budget to provide our group with books and food, so we thought it would support our expanded efforts for a symposium. Instead of funding, however, we received responses such as "Well, we didn't ask you to do this" or "The most we can give you is \$250."

Since we did not receive the expected funding from our institution, we decided to apply for a grant through the CUNY, university-wide, Diversity fund. The mission of the university's Diversity Fund is to provide "funding for educational projects, scholarly research, creative activities and other programmatic initiatives that promote diversity, equity and inclusion, affirmative action and nondiscrimination for the benefit of the University community."<sup>16</sup> We felt that our proposal for a one-day diversity symposium fit the criteria for the funding, but it was turned down. No reason or feedback was provided regarding the denial of funding. After the initial disappointment, we decided to find another way to make our idea happen. Since the event would be for faculty and students, we contacted the Office of Student Activities. Thanks to its support we were able to budget about \$1,500 for our event.

The first symposium, "Creating Safe Spaces in a Diverse Environment," was hosted during the Fall 2014 semester. The theme of the first symposium reflected the concerns that emerged from our diversity group discussions. Principal among these was the feeling that the climate on campus didn't make some URF feel safe discussing issues related to faculty diversity, in particular feelings of exclusion, bias, the presumption of incompetence, and the effect that these attitudes would have on the faculty members' ability to exercise their academic freedom.<sup>17</sup> That first symposium would have not been possible without the support of the group of highly motivated faculty members who were part of the diverse faculty group and other faculty who helped plan the symposium, supported its mission, and offered to give presentations and lead workshops. Faculty from many departments and programs supported the event by bringing their classes to the different sessions, especially when the topic of the session related to material covered in their courses.

The first symposium was so successful that the newly hired college president asked if we could host the event each semester. At the time, we could not see doing the work each semester. However, we were excited to receive his support in the form of a set budget specifically for diversity programming. The university-wide diversity office allots a budget for each campus to promote diversity efforts through programming and other campus initiatives. We were not aware of its existence until the arrival of the new college president, who had a strong commitment to diversity initiatives.

We decided to host a symposium each fall and a small workshop event in the spring. Our second-year theme was "Identities in Context," the third-year symposium addressed "Social Justice and Diversity: Moving Past Tolerance," and our fourth-year symposium was titled "Activism 101: The Fight for Human Rights." Our diversity symposium program grew in four years from a one-day event to a four-day, weeklong event. We expanded the fall symposium to include a film and arts festival, Immigration Day, and most recently Food Day. We also established the Student-Led Diversity Symposium in the spring semester of the third year.

From the beginning, one of our goals was to make the students an important part of the symposium, giving them the opportunity to exercise their academic freedom. A student panel, organized with students, was part of each symposium. Students also have been part of other workshops, together with faculty, staff, and guest speakers from the community. They have presented and discussed topics they felt were relevant. The students at the college are the main audience for the event. Prior to the second symposium, we established the Diversity Symposium Committee, composed of students, staff, and faculty. This allows for voices to be heard from all sides.

Getting representatives of the variety of cultures on campus proved to be a key challenge, especially when it came to discussing different groups' experiences based on their race, ethnicity, religious faith, or immigration status.<sup>18</sup> This was true of not only students but also some faculty. Faculty from certain groups seemed reluctant to participate or share their research in the field, but we had no way of knowing exactly why they felt this way. In one instance, the reluctance to participate seemed to be related to the possible negative reaction of other members of the faculty member's religious faith. Apprehension about being labeled, discriminated against, or ostracized for sharing information that might cast people of their cultural or religious background in a negative light also seems to have motivated some to not participate. Once again, now as organizers of the symposium, we encountered self-censorship due to perceived lack of academic freedom. Not that everyone had to be onboard, but we saw the same relatively small group of faculty members and administrators support the event year after year.

However, a session in the last symposium really caught the attention of several faculty on campus whom we had not seen in previous years. In this session, faculty members were discussing a report from their research into the experiences of URF on our campus. Several faculty members from a leadership group on campus expressed their interest in going to the session to hear the report. Since this session conflicted with a faculty meeting set by the leadership group, some proposed that the meeting be rescheduled. There was an unsavory exchange of emails in which some representatives from the leadership group on campus seemed to be more interested in keeping the meeting as originally scheduled than in supporting the dissemination of research on the experiences of URF with respect to recruitment, tenure, and promotion. The faculty member responsible for representing the concerns of the faculty body did not seem to consider these issues to be of importance and even suggested that the organizers of the event should have thought of the leadership meeting and scheduled the event around it (the leadership group was unaware that the symposium date had already been scheduled nearly four months earlier).

One might wonder if the email dialogue was a window into the divide among faculty over diversity issues. However, eventually the problem was resolved, with the leadership meeting rescheduled an hour earlier to accommodate faculty members who wanted to hear about the report on URF experiences on campus. The session was one of the most fruitful we had in the symposium over the years because faculty, administrators, and students got a real glimpse into the experiences of URF; and audience members offered many suggestions about how to move forward. It was encouraging to see faculty and administrators who had not attended previous symposiums participate in this session. Also, we were pleasantly surprised to see so many students attend a session related to faculty matters. Although most of the students were brought to the session by faculty, they were extremely interested and engaged. Unfortunately, soon after the session the researchers had to discontinue the work reported in this session due to lack of funding.

Early in our second symposium, we faced another challenge concerning academic freedom. While we encourage open dialogue about diversity issues, we weren't completely prepared for the backlash that some of the sensitive and controversial topics could elicit. For example, as part of the second symposium we had a panel on religion. The panel was composed of religious leaders, faculty, and students. During the session, a student made a comment about Muslims, which he acknowledged was his former practice. The response from some of the students on the panel was a bit harsh and confrontational. One of the faculty organizers called for respect, unity, and understanding. We were notified that after the session the student who had made the comment was accosted and berated by other students. While this was disheartening, we learned that the students who were upset by his comments later approached him again. After a conversation with him to get a better understanding of his ideas, they apologized for their initial reaction. We were impressed that the issue was resolved before we had to intervene. We took this as a sign that the work we were doing was achieving what we intended: to help people from different backgrounds and with different thought processes converse and come to an understanding and agreement about their differences. We hope that this will be a catalyst for addressing the many issues that URF have been reluctant to speak on and will promote more academic freedom for those speaking out on these issues, while also including students in the discussions. This experience, however, also showed us that much more work needed to be done to fully achieve academic freedom for faculty and students on our campus.

While doing diversity work we realized that we may be asked to measure or tone down the message, or screen out some speakers when planning events. In fact, we were asked not to invite certain speakers deemed controversial who might offend some faculty or make them feel like their beliefs were being attacked. We have found out that political and religious issues are sometimes conflated, treated as one issue when in reality they are not; we live in a nation that on paper separates state and religion. This "editing" of potential speaker



invitations may be requested or imposed by administrations in order to avoid the risk of offending certain groups of people, but it compromises the right to academic freedom. Such censorship may be couched as an attempt to get the message across to as many groups as possible, to encourage as many members of the campus community to get involved in diversity programming. In seeking to avoid “controversy,” administrations also eliminate potential outcomes such as meaningful dialogue on topics on which people take divergent viewpoints, conversations where members of the campus community can learn from one another, understand each other’s perspectives, or even come to agreement on some of the issues. At times this left us feeling that in order to be able to do diversity work we had to relinquish our academic freedom. Also, by “suggesting” censorship, the university contradicts its own definition of diversity (and inclusion), mentioned previously.

Since the first symposium, the dialogue developing on our campus is charged with issues that seem to constantly challenge our academic freedom. The campus climate is weighted with inflammatory, one-sided, and apparently irreconcilable viewpoints. Perhaps the more visible participation of faculty from all backgrounds and their attempt to address the inequities in our university system and in society has created a higher level of dialogue. This in turn has created controversy on campus. Claims of violations of academic freedom seem to echo down the hallways. Schrecker indicates that, “like pornography, we know, or we think we know academic freedom (or the lack of it) when we see it. In its traditional formulation, it is, above all, a special protection for the faculty that shields professors from losing their jobs if they take politically unpopular positions in their writings, classes, and on- or off-campus activities.”<sup>19</sup> Drastic measures to control or eliminate the dialogue on campus and the work being done to promote equity would certainly violate the special protections implied by this definition of academic freedom.

What we have learned from doing diversity work is that, despite the challenges it entails, the work is necessary not only to raise awareness but also to have a truly democratic process of exchanging ideas and promoting academic freedom among students, faculty, and staff. Discourse and dialogue outside of the classroom are equally as important as learning in the classroom. Of course, our work is never done, and while the appreciation for this type of work has grown, more awareness is still needed. While some conversations have been intense, to say the least, they also have been relevant and necessary.

At present, individuals from divergent points of view seem to be more open to dialogue about the diversity on campus and how we can protect both students and faculty. The campus climate surrounding these exchanges is not always the most positive, perhaps running the risk of impinging on the rights of others. There are also situations in which no matter the content, a message or comment is immediately labeled as

offensive to some groups, when in reality what is being stated or pointed out is the lack of equity and intellectual debate. The fact that more faculty are willing to openly state and defend their points of view is a sign of progress. This newfound activism highlighting the importance of diversity and academic freedom could very well reflect not only the controversial issues and events taking place on campus, including the Diversity Symposium, but also the present political and social climate in this country.<sup>20</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aguirre, Adalberto, Jr., and Rubén Martínez, "Leadership Practices and Diversity in Higher Education," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002): 53–62; Rodney W. Jordan, "Diversity and the AAC&U Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility," *Liberal Education* 93, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 50–55; National Association of Scholars, *Words to Live By: How Diversity Trumps Freedom on Academic Websites*, June 29, 2006, 1–12.

<sup>2</sup> "Diversity, Leadership, and Organizational Culture in Higher Education," *ASHE Higher Education Report* 32, no. 3 (2006): 23–45.

<sup>3</sup> City University of New York, *Building on a Strong Foundation: A Strategy for Enhancing CUNY's Leadership in Areas of Faculty Diversity and Inclusion. Diversity Action Plan*, 2014, [http://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/hr/diversity-and-recruitment/DiversityActionPlan09\\_17\\_14.pdf](http://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/hr/diversity-and-recruitment/DiversityActionPlan09_17_14.pdf). We work for a university system comprised of senior colleges and community colleges. We refer to *university* as the larger body that provides the budget and governance for the senior and community colleges within the system, and use *campus* and *institution* interchangeably to refer to the college where we work or colleges in a general sense.

<sup>4</sup> Follins, Lourdes D., Lisa Paler, and Jose E. Nanin, "Creating and Implementing a Faculty Interest Group for Historically Underrepresented Faculty," *Community College Journal* 39, no. 9 (2015): 839–51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 844.

<sup>6</sup> Alison R. Bernstein, "Protecting and Promoting Academic Freedom in Perilous Times: A Philanthropist's Perspective," *Change*, March/April 2008, 7–9; Donald A. Downs and Stanley G. Payne, "The Wisconsin Fight for Academic Freedom," *Academic Quest* 29 (2016): 152–60.

<sup>7</sup> American Association of University Professors, "1940 Statement on Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure," <https://www.aaup.org/file/1940%20Statement.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Souls of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: New Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Cary Nelson, "Defining Academic Freedom: Penn State Professors Move to Give More Leeway to Faculty Members Dealing with Controversial Issues," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 21, 2010, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/12/21/defining-academic-freedom>.

<sup>10</sup> Follins, Paler, and Nanin, "Creating and Implementing a Faculty Interest Group."

<sup>11</sup> Derald W. Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores-Neimann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris, eds., *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Downs and Payne, "The Wisconsin Fight for Academic Freedom"; Follins, Paler, and Nanin, "Creating and Implementing a Faculty Interest Group."

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, "Protecting and Promoting Academic Freedom"; Follins, Paler, and Nanin, "Creating and Implementing a Faculty Interest Group."

<sup>15</sup> Ben Myers, "The Flagship Diversity Divide," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/flagship-diversity>.

<sup>16</sup> City University of New York, *Office of Recruitment and Diversity Annual Report, 2016–2017*, 4, <http://www2.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/hr/diversity-and-recruitment/ORDAnnualReport2017.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Follins, Paler, and Nanin, "Creating and Implementing a Faculty Interest Group"; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., *Presumed Incompetent*.

<sup>18</sup> Erica G. Foldy and Tamara R. Buckley, *The Color Bind: Talking (and Not Talking) about Race at Work* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Schrecker, *The Lost Souls of Higher Education*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bernstein, "Protecting and Promoting Academic Freedom."