

On what grounds should academic decisions be made?

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On what grounds should academic decisions be made? I mean decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion, as well as decisions about curricula and standards, about styles of teaching, about admitting students to university?

On academic grounds alone is one answer, the answer I favour. Another answer is on grounds also of diversity, equity, or inclusiveness.

So why not when making academic decisions try to increase diversity in the classroom and in the curriculum or try to bring more women and more people of colour into the professoriate? Because when we turn away from academic criteria, we're less likely to make the right academic decisions, and when we make the wrong academic decisions, we make it harder to serve our academic mission.

But doesn't having more women or people of colour around as students and professors make for a better university, academically speaking? Isn't a commitment to represent, in the content of our courses and our research, the experiences of many different people an academically sound commitment?

Our concern as academics is with developing an understanding of the ways of the world, or that aspect of them that is our focus. In that purely academic concern is already a desire for comprehensiveness, for including in our thought all that we need to understand the ways of the world is essential to our academic mission. A concern for comprehensiveness might lead us to bring the experiences of women and people from historically marginalized groups into our work and thinking, but it will do so simply because we are attempting to understand things.

On the other hand, should we change or expand our focus out of an interest in diversity or inclusiveness, we might find ourselves compromising the quality of our research and teaching, for we would be answering to social or political interests rather than academic ones.

Demands for diversity, equity, and inclusiveness almost always take the form of demands for policies and regulations, and policies and regulations come with the threat of oversight and enforcement. At Saint Mary's, the university where I teach, Section 10.4 of the Collective Agreement, our positive action clause, requires departments to make reports to deans, and gives deans a measure of oversight and control regarding what should, from an academic perspective, be department business. I doubt Saint Mary's is alone in allowing administrators to intervene in academic business to promote non-academic goals.

Hiring, curricula, and the rest, though, must be left to departments and their individual members, if the professors are to be able to exercise their judgement with regards to their academic goals and needs.

Perhaps a case can be made that by paying attention to diversity or inclusiveness, our universities would improve academically. One argument is that students from historically marginalized groups feel more at home in university and are inspired to do well when their professors are also from historically marginalized groups. Another argument is that many or most of us already in the academy hold preferences regarding teaching styles or subject matters that make it difficult for us to appreciate the research and teaching accomplishments of minority and women academics. A third is that unconscious bias still plays a factor in the hiring process, as shown in a research study from Yale University published in 2012, in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Science.

These arguments might well be sound. If they are, they teach us important facts about our students and about the range of academic endeavour, facts of which we should be mindful when we exercise our professional judgement. Those who think these arguments are sound must certainly be encouraged to try to educate their colleagues through discussions and criticism. They can explain the value of non-traditional subjects, approaches, and styles, and the importance to a diverse student body of a diverse professoriate. They can make us aware of biases so that we might rid ourselves of them (my preference is to hire from dossiers in which names and sex-identifying pronouns have been redacted). Professors who have learned from these arguments would do a better job when making decisions about hiring or curricula, for they will possess a greater awareness of academically relevant factors.

They would do a better job, though, not because they are thinking about diversity or inclusiveness, but because they are considering particular curricular suggestions or job candidates in light of a greater number of academically salient factors. Members of a department who expand their courses to include East-Asian history, say, or continental feminist philosophy, wouldn't be doing so for the sake of inclusion or respect, but because they believe that they and their students will benefit as scholars.

Decisions made on academic grounds serve the ends of teaching, research, and intellectual community. Since these are the only ends we, as academics, should be committed to serving, we should not bring concerns about diversity, equity, or inclusiveness into our academic decisions. We should certainly not invite our administrators to bind us to the pursuit of non-academic ends.