

285. Why Universities Should Not Be Anti-Racist

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Following the killing of George Floyd on 26 May 2020, universities throughout North America declared anti-racism to be their official policy. Here's a sample of quotations.

“We must ask how Princeton can address systemic racism in the world, and we must also ask how to address it within our own community.” Princeton University president Christopher L. Eisgruber.

“The University [of Toronto] is strongly committed to equity, diversity and inclusion and to confronting and eradicating anti-Black racism. Anti-Black racism impacts everyone, and it is our collective responsibility to foster and promote Black inclusion.” Cheryl Regehr and Kelly Hannah-Moffat, vice-presidents at the University of Toronto.

“The University of Ottawa reaffirms its commitment to combatting Racism.” University of Ottawa president Jacques Frémont.

I swim against a strong tide, then, when I say that universities should *not* involve themselves in any anti-racism initiatives at all. It is not the business of a university to combat racism or to call it out or to promote racial justice or harmony.

In fact, enlisting itself in anti-racist struggles cannot but turn a university away from its academic mission.

But surely, one might counter, racism both outside and within the university has hindered the advance of research and prevented students and scholars from reaching their potential. It is the business of a university to promote research and learning and to create conditions under which scholars and students can engage in their academic pursuits pleasantly and productively. Racism, then, affects the university at the heart of its mission. That is why anti-racism is indeed the university's business.

To respond to that objection, let me remind us that the point of the university as an institution is to protect and promote *academic* endeavours. The university should use its resources to support the academic mission of investigating, interpreting and evaluating the things of the world.

These resources should be distributed fairly and on academic criteria alone. Since race is not an academic criterion, race should not be used in deciding resource allocation.

My key thought in rejecting anti-racist initiatives is that to distribute resources on any grounds other than academic need or merit is for the institution itself to rank a non-academic value or end above its academic mission. If any institution wishes to hobble itself, no better way exists than for it to prefer extraneous ends to its own proper ones.

To distribute resources fairly according to *academic* criteria is to be entirely blind to race. Hiring, promotion, student housing, research grants, academic programs, curricula—no university decision in any of these areas should involve the thought that here is a place in which we can do our part to help as good anti-racists.

Another objection to removing the struggle against racism from consideration is that professors tend to teach and research in the narrow range of what has historically interested Europeans. They teach the areas and problems they were taught. Because of the lacunae in curricula and research these biases introduce, a university would promote its mission by encouraging its faculty to study black and other minority people and topics in a liberationist spirit—or so we are invited to conclude.

Certainly, a curriculum heavy on the thought of canonical Western authors can be criticized for narrowness. Narrowness, though, is an academic fault, given that scholars, as scholars, want to develop comprehensive understandings of the world.

Opening research and teaching to neglected areas is an academic imperative. It should not, however, be done in order to make minority students and professors feel welcome. Nor should it be done because doing it is thought to correct past social wrongs or to create a more just future.

If Eurocentrism is a problem in universities, it's an academic problem, not a social one. As an academic problem, the solution lies in a renewed commitment to academic values themselves.

Nonetheless, shouldn't the institution try to make black and minority students and professors feel welcome and valued? Wouldn't an official stand against racism and for quick action to deal with racist utterance or behaviour be excellent ways to show minority students and scholars that they're valued? That students perceive themselves as unwanted because of their race will certainly affect the quality of their work or sour them on the university. So here, at least, we're told, anti-racist initiatives directly promote the academic mission.

While being black might be important to any particular black person's identity and sense of who he is, a black person who is a professor or student is also an academic. Part of his identity is tied up with being an academic. That is the only part of his identity a university is competent to nurture and honor.

A university nurtures and honors our identity as academics, whatever race we are, by enabling us to pursue our academic ends within an academic community. Black students, that is to say, should feel welcomed simply as students—as junior or apprentice members of a community of scholars and intellectuals.

Moreover, race-conscious policies meant to promote respect and good will within a university community threaten grave harm to the academic ethos of a university and to its academic mission. They will do so by either openly or quietly restricting discussion and the free and open expression and exchange of ideas. Students and even, sometimes, professors need to be socialized into the ways and values of scholars and intellectuals so that they value the discussion of disturbing matters over whatever disturbance they might feel.

One thing committed scholars and intellectuals do not do is complain of being offended by what someone has said or the way he has said it.

That is because they conceive of themselves as intellectually and morally autonomous agents able to consider and evaluate even views that pain them to hear. Respectful campus policies, though, must come with enforcement mechanisms that will encourage members of the university community to take offense and to complain. Though such policies are lauded as anti-racist, their effect will be to prevent people from acquiring intellectual or moral autonomy.

Respectful-campus policies do not make minority students and others feel valued as equal members of a university community since such policies exempt them from academic ways. Instead of helping the student to become an intellectual, the university mollifies or coddles him, thereby confirming him in his dependence on authority and short-circuiting his academic development.

Nothing I have written speaks against making race, racism or anti-racism a topic of research, teaching or discussion at a university. If a professor wants to inquire into these topics, he should be free to do so. If a department judges that holding a course on one of these topics is in the students' interests as budding intellectuals, then it should create and staff such a course. Such a course might well focus on determining the most effective ways of countering racism.

The point of the research and teaching, though, must be to study and *understand* the phenomenon, not to stimulate or direct activism (although professors and students are welcome to use what they discover or learn in their wider society when they are wearing their activist hats).

I could end by making the point that a commitment to applying academic criteria and only academic criteria to academic matters is, ultimately, the best anti-racism policy a university could adopt. Any university serious about promoting anti-racism would do well to hold itself to academic criteria and ordinary fairness and not seek to secure social justice through direct action.

I believe that that point is true, but I'm going to forgo making it. To say that universities should stick to their academic mission in order to serve anti-racism, or even to serve justice, is to prize a university's policies and procedures for a reason other than their contribution to academic life. That would be to set a value or goal above academic values and the academic mission, a goal to which its values and mission would then have to answer.

For my part, I would hold universities to academic values even if serving those values did little to end racial prejudice or to further racial justice. *Fiat investigationem ruat cælum.*

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