

Systemic racism in higher education

PAUL H. BARBER, TYRONE B. HAYES, I.-J. AND 10,234 SIGNATORIES +2 authors [Authors Info & Affiliations](#)

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The nexus of Black Lives Matter protests and a pandemic that disproportionately kills Black and Latinx people (1) highlights the need to end systemic racism, including in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), where diversity has not meaningfully changed for decades (2). If we decry structural racism but return to the behaviors and processes that led us to this moment, this inexcusable stagnation will continue. We urge the Academy to combat systemic racism in STEM and catalyze transformational change.

Everyone in academia must acknowledge the role that universities—faculty, staff, and students—play in perpetuating structural racism by subjecting students of color to unwelcoming academic cultures (3). Universities are not level playing fields where all students have an equal opportunity to participate and succeed. The misuse of standardized tests such as the GRE excludes students who could have otherwise succeeded (4). Once admitted, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) face challenges when transitioning to college life (5) and are more likely to be nontraditional students. Innovative pedagogies (6) and programs (7) can overcome these challenges but are not widely applied in higher education. Evidence-based, institution-wide approaches focused on equity in student learning are foundational to eliminating structural racism in higher education. Once we abandon the view of “fixed” student ability, more BIPOC students will succeed (8).

Academic culture also fails BIPOC faculty, who receive fewer federal grants due to systemic bias (9) and topic area (10). BIPOC faculty are most likely to invest substantial time in activities that promote diversity, which are devalued in the tenure and promotion process (11). BIPOC faculty are further disadvantaged in tenure decisions through cultural taxation of unequal service and mentoring demands. Given these burdens, BIPOC faculty cannot be expected to be the primary agents of institutional change. Instead, those most empowered to make change—non-BIPOC faculty—must join BIPOC faculty in their efforts to prioritize recruiting, supporting, and championing diversity.

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Finally, the false dichotomy of “excellence or diversity” must end. Diversity results in better, more impactful, and more innovative science (12), and it is essential to building novel solutions to challenges faced by marginalized and

nonmarginalized communities. Catalyzing these culture shifts in the Academy, however, will require making tenure dependent on excellence in research, teaching, and service that centers on equity and inclusion.

Making STEM equitable and inclusive requires actively combating racism and bias. All faculty, staff, and students should commit to learning about racism, engaging in courageous conversations with non-BIPOC colleagues, and calling out unfair practices to prevent the normalization of discriminatory behavior. Faculty should examine courses for ethnicity and gender performance disparities, ask whether departmental and lab demographics reflect society at large, and actively remedy any disparities.

Breaking down the barriers of systemic racism in STEM and achieving the promise of diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM require unwavering dedication and real work. It is time to make the commitment to be an agent of change.

Supplementary Material

List of signatories

References and Notes

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