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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The University's New Loyalty Oath

Required 'diversity and inclusion' statements amount to a political litmus test for hiring.

By Abigail Thompson

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ILLUSTRATION: DAVID KLEIN

Seventy years ago the University of California introduced a loyalty oath, requiring employees to swear they were “not a member of the Communist Party.” After a contentious period in which 31 faculty were fired for refusing to

sign, the requirement was reconsidered. An eventual consequence was the current Standing Order of the Regents 101.1(d): “No political test shall ever be considered in the appointment and promotion of any faculty member or employee.” This is a statement of principle. No one will be denied a position at the University of California based on political beliefs. No communist, no conservative, no progressive, no liberal.

Now the university appears to be abandoning this principle. In the past few years “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” statements, in which applicants for faculty positions profess their commitment to these social goals, have become required on eight UC campuses and at colleges across the country. These requirements are promoted as fulfilling worthy goals: to help redress the historic exclusion of underrepresented groups, to ensure that candidates from all backgrounds apply for and are given fair consideration

for faculty jobs, and to make sure faculty respect and support all students in their teaching and mentoring.

There are many constructive ways to pursue these admirable aims. For example, professors can reach out to underrepresented communities at every level. We can enact family-friendly policies that help young faculty balance family life with jobs. We can encourage students from all backgrounds to explore and succeed in academic careers.

The mathematical community, my own discipline, has widely embraced the ideals of inclusiveness. But I have become increasingly uneasy with the use of DEI statements in faculty hiring. This spring the university issued guidelines instructing each campus to develop and use a scoring system, called a “rubric,” for applicants’ diversity statements. No longer will faculty hiring committees use their own judgment about how best to create a diverse and inclusive environment in their fields.

Instead, each candidate’s commitment to diversity will be assigned points. To score well, candidates must subscribe to a particular political ideology, one based on treating people not as unique individuals but as representatives of their gender and ethnic identities.

A rubric from the Berkeley campus, singled out because it is available online, specifies that job applicants who describe “only activities that are already the expectation of Berkeley faculty (mentoring, treating all students the same regardless of background, etc)” will score poorly (1 or 2 points out of 5). A low score in this or other areas will disqualify a candidate. This system specifically excludes those who believe in a tenet of classical liberalism: that each person should be treated as a unique individual, not as a representative of an identity group. Rather than helping achieve inclusion, these DEI rubrics act as a filter for those with nonconforming views.

Earlier this year, I was invited to submit an essay to the Notices of the American Mathematical Society, the most widely read journal in mathematics. I decided to express my view that these required statements have become political litmus tests, and that this should worry us all. My submission provoked an intense controversy—confirming that this has become a dangerously politicized issue.

Social media posts called my views disgusting, condemned the American Mathematical Society for publishing the essay, and called for my public shaming. Mathematicians were urged to steer their students away from studying at UC Davis, where I teach, and to contact the university to question my fitness as chair of the math department.

A letter misrepresenting my views attracted hundreds of signatures. It inaccurately stated that I had equated “actively attempting to include more students in mathematics” with the “Red Scare.” Two supportive letters also

circulated, gathering hundreds of signatures. One emphasized the value of open discussion without fear of intimidation if we are to make mathematics a welcoming community for everyone. Another agreed that mandatory diversity statements “undermine faculty governance.”

I received more than 150 emails, overwhelmingly supportive, many from leading mathematicians in the U.S. and overseas. Some recalled similar required statements in Soviet bloc countries, which they encountered earlier in their careers. Some pointed out that the diversity statements tend to be formulaic, with many candidates coached on how to write them, and that the content often emphasizes ideology over accomplishments. Others noted that the statements disadvantage foreign applicants and candidates from low-income groups, who may not have opportunities to participate in voluntary activities that demonstrate a commitment to diversity.

Many emails contained a disturbing theme, typified by this line from one of them: “Some day I, too, hope to speak out on this issue, but it is simply too dangerous at present.” This is a frightening sentiment to hear in academia. If expressing a widespread but controversial view is seen as taking a tremendous personal risk, the university system isn’t healthy. Ideas cannot thrive and mistakes cannot be corrected if people are afraid to speak out.

To its credit, the UC Davis administration has supported my right to speak. I hope that continuing discussion will confirm the vital principle that scholars discuss ideas, they don’t silence them.

Mandatory diversity statements can too easily become a test of political ideology and conformity. “No political test shall ever be considered in the appointment and promotion of any faculty member or employee.” This fundamental principle, forged in one of the most difficult periods the UC system has ever endured, must not be abandoned.

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