



# How Students Are Furthering Academe's Corporatization

By insisting on bureaucratic solutions to diversity problems, they are empowering administrations at the expense of the faculty.

NICOLAS OGONOSKY FOR THE CHRONICLE

## THE REVIEW

By *Amna Khalid*

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his past fall, the Core Strike Collective, a collection of student groups at Bryn Mawr College, submitted a list of [16 demands](#) to the college administration. At the top was a call for mandatory

**T** diversity, equity, and inclusion training for students, faculty, and staff. The students, insisting on robust “quantitative and qualitative assessments,” asked for a data dashboard to track 38 proposed equity metrics concerning recruitment, retention, and financing.

[Demands](#) for diversity training and other DEI initiatives such as [bias response teams](#) have been central to student protests against racial injustice since 2015 [and have only proliferated](#) in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. Many student demands have been framed in terms of resisting capitalism, corporate logic, and [labor exploitation](#). The Core Strike Collective [called out](#) Bryn Mawr as “a corporation that poses itself as an educational institution.” Indeed, the University of Virginia scholars Rose Cole and Walter Heinecke [applaud](#) recent student activism as a “site of resistance to the neoliberalization of higher education” that offers a “blueprint for a new social imaginary in higher education.”

But this assessment gets things backward. By insisting on bureaucratic solutions to execute their vision, replete with bullet-pointed action items and measurable outcomes, student activists are only strengthening the neoliberal “[all-administrative university](#)” — a model of higher education that privileges [market relationships](#), treats students as consumers and faculty as service providers, all under the umbrella of an ever-expanding regime of bureaucratization. Fulfilling student DEI demands will weaken academe, including, ironically, undermining more meaningful diversity efforts.

The rampant growth of the administration over the years at the expense of faculty has been well [documented](#). From 1987 to 2012 the number of administrators [doubled](#) relative to academic faculty. A [2014 Delta Cost Project](#) report noted that between 1990 and 2012, the number of faculty and staff per administrator declined by roughly 40 percent. This administrative bloat has helped usher in a more corporate mind-set throughout academe, including the increased willingness to exploit low-paid and vulnerable [adjuncts](#) for teaching, and the eagerness to slash budgets and eliminate academic departments not considered marketable enough.

College leaders, for their part, have been more than happy to comply with the recent demands for trainings and DEI personnel. Nothing is more convenient from an institutional perspective than hiring more administrators and consultants. It simultaneously assuages angry students and checks the box of doing the work of improving campus inclusivity, without having to contend with the sticking points of university policies and procedures where real change could be achieved: tenure-review processes, limited protections for contingent faculty, and student admission and aid policies that produce inequities.

Instead of tackling those challenges, institutions can rally behind quixotic rhetorical goals such as eradicating systemic and structural racism on campuses. They can, as Portland State University has done, [pledge](#) to apply “an antiracist lens to every signal we send, every model we create, and every policy we enact.” Or, like the University of Louisville has done, they can announce their aspiration of becoming “[a premier anti-racist metropolitan university](#).”

**H**iring executive DEI officers is the primary way in which many colleges have signaled their commitment to antiracism and diversity. More than [two-thirds](#) of major universities across the country had a chief diversity officer in 2016. Even in lean times, institutions of higher learning appear to have continued appointing executive diversity officers. Consider the [University of California system](#), where in 2010 faculty and staff had to take up to three and a half weeks of unpaid leave due to a \$637-million cut in state funding. Later the same year the San Francisco campus appointed its first vice chancellor of diversity and outreach with a starting salary of \$270,000. In 2012, faced with the threat of a \$250-million cut in state funding, the San Diego campus nonetheless hired its first vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion, with a starting salary of \$250,000.

The other chief beneficiaries are diversity trainers and consulting firms. Diversity training is [a billion-dollar industry](#). A one-day training session for around 50 people can [cost](#) anywhere between \$2,000 and \$6,000. Speaking fees for Ibram X. Kendi, the antiracist scholar at Boston University, are [\\$20,000](#), and Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*, [charges](#) \$50,000 to \$75,000. Some colleges, I’ve been told, are forking out north of \$140,000 for multi-session antiracism and diversity training for faculty and staff.

EAB, a prominent higher-education consulting firm, reports on its [website](#) that racial justice is by far the largest driver of student activism over the past five years. The firm points out that acting on racial-justice demands requires the coordination of five departments: athletics, health services, student life, housing, and the administration.

Note the conspicuous absence of academic departments. What we have is a wholesale transformation of colleges where faculty members, once the beating heart of educational institutions, are sidelined. And every additional dollar spent on augmenting college administration eats away at finite resources.

In the name of riding out the pandemic, some colleges are freezing and cutting faculty positions. Many, including those [purportedly committed to diversity](#), are laying off [contingent faculty](#), a group that is [more racially and gender diverse](#) compared with tenured and tenure-track faculty. A number of liberal-arts colleges are choosing to [focus on STEM](#) and business at the [cost of the humanities and social sciences](#). These are the very departments and programs that attract [more diverse faculty](#) than STEM fields; what's more, these are precisely the academic domains that focus most heavily on issues of race, equity, and social justice.

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To be clear, student concerns about inequities are genuine and important. But instead of asking for bureaucratic solutions such as trainings, students would be better served if they insisted that colleges redirect resources towards things such as increasing financial aid, providing better academic support systems for [underrepresented students](#), and instituting educational initiatives.

A good example is the University of Pittsburgh's [multidisciplinary course](#) "Anti-Black Racism: History, Ideology, and Resistance" introduced in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and which all first-year students are required to take. Drawing on the [expertise of Pitt faculty](#) from the humanities, social sciences, public health, sciences, and the arts, as well as Pittsburgh-area

activists, the course focuses on the Black experience and Black cultural expression, and it considers the interplay of race with ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality.

Other efforts, like tailored coursework, [seminar series](#), [discussion panels](#), student speak-outs, collegewide teach-ins, exhibitions, performances, and [common readings](#) allow institutions to harness the [knowledge and expertise](#) that their faculty, students, and staff already have on issues of race and inequality.

Alas, such thoughtful responses have been few and far between. The vast majority of college administrations have simply genuflected to student demands for trainings. The most galling aspect of institutional responses, one that is conspicuously neoliberal *and* anti-educational, is the embrace of the-customer-is-always-right attitude. [Evidence and research](#) suggest that diversity-related trainings are [not effective](#). According to the sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, diversity training has [“failed spectacularly”](#) when it comes to reducing bias. To the contrary, these trainings can [reinforce stereotypes](#) and heighten bias. Yet colleges and universities across the country have chosen to disregard the evidence and instead pander to the “customer.”

Institutions of higher learning, the very bastions of rigorous analysis and evidence-based knowledge production, have reneged on their key responsibility of educating students. In doing so we are squandering a prime opportunity to seriously think through and constructively address some of the most serious problems that plague American society. Indeed, it is a grim moment in the history of education when the *raison d'être* of colleges is overwhelmed by the logic of the market. For reasons very different from those of the students at Bryn Mawr, I find myself coming to the same conclusion: Colleges today are indeed corporations masquerading as educational institutions.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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