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Hard Truths About Race on Campus

After recent protests, universities are scrambling to expand diversity programs that will only heighten tensions. There are better paths to racial justice in higher education



A student walked by a campus notice board at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., on Nov. 12, 2015. More than 1,000 students, professors and staff at Yale gathered to discuss race and diversity amid a wave of demonstrations at U.S. colleges over the treatment of minority students. *PHOTO: SHANNON STAPLETON/REUTERS*

By **JONATHAN HAIDT** and **LEE JUSSIM**
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Imagine that you were the president of an American university at the end of 2015, as student protests over racial concerns swept the country, energized by the Black Lives Matter movement. The president of the University of Missouri resigned over controversies

there, and other college leaders were confronted on their campuses. Now it's your turn. A hundred students march to your office and present their demands. They give you one week to respond. What should you do?

If you had looked to your counterparts at other institutions for guidance, the message was clear. The president of Yale pledged to spend \$50 million to increase faculty diversity and to satisfy other demands. The president of Brown pledged \$100 million for diversity training and other steps to create a more “just and inclusive campus.”

With such big moves by Yale and Brown, who could blame you for following their lead? After all, much of the students' agenda was simply an amplification of what American colleges have been doing for decades: They demanded increased affirmative action, more diversity training, more funds to support scholarship and teaching about race and social justice. What harm could it do?

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We are social psychologists who study the psychology of morality (Haidt) and the causes and consequences of prejudice and stereotypes (Jussim). As far as we can tell, the existing research literature suggests that such reforms will fail to achieve their stated aims of reducing discrimination and inequality. In fact, we think that they are likely to damage race relations and to make campus life more uncomfortable for everyone, particularly black students.

A basic principle of psychology is that people pay more attention to information that predicts important outcomes in their lives. A key social factor that we human beings track is who is “us” and who is “them.” In classic studies, researchers divided people into groups based on arbitrary factors such as a coin toss. They found that, even with such trivial distinctions, people discriminated in favor of their in-group members.

None of this means that we are doomed to discriminate by race. [A 2001 study](#) by Robert Kurzban of the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that race was much less prominent in how people categorized each other when individuals also shared some other prominent social

characteristic, like membership on a team. If you set things up so that race conveys less important information than some other salient factor, then people pay less attention to race.

A second principle of psychology is the power of cooperation. When groups face a common threat or challenge, it tends to dissolve enmity and create a mind-set of “one for all, all for one.” Conversely, when groups are put into competition with each other, people readily shift into zero-sum thinking and hostility.

With these principles in mind, it is hard to see how the programs now being adopted by many universities will serve to create campuses where students of color feel more welcome and less marginalized.

Of all the demands made to university presidents—for a comprehensive list, from some 80 schools, see TheDemands.org—the most common is that universities admit more black students and hire more black faculty. Sometimes a specific target, like 15%, is mentioned, to mirror the proportion of blacks in the U.S. population. But what will happen if these targets are met using methods that increase the importance or value of individuals’ tracking each other by race?



University of Missouri President Tim Wolfe announced his resignation in November after black Missouri football players threatened to boycott future games, alleging that Mr. Wolfe mishandled incidents PHOTO:JUSTIN L. STEWART/COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Since its introduction during the Kennedy administration, affirmative action has referred to a variety of initiatives to improve the recruitment, training and retention of talented minority candidates. Such programs are not colorblind, and we strongly support taking such deliberate steps to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups.

But as practiced in most of the top American universities, affirmative action also involves using different admissions standards for applicants of different races, which automatically creates differences in academic readiness and achievement. Although these gaps vary from college to college, [studies have found](#) that Asian students enter with combined math/verbal SAT scores on the order of 80 points higher than white students and 200 points higher than black students. A similar pattern occurs for high-school grades. These differences are large, and they matter: High-school grades and SAT scores predict later success as measured by college grades and graduation rates.

As a result of these disparate admissions standards, many students spend four years in a social environment where race conveys useful information about the academic capacity of their peers. People notice useful social cues, and one of the [strongest causes of stereotypes](#) is exposure to real group differences. If a school commits to doubling the number of black students, it will have to reach deeper into its pool of black applicants, admitting those with weaker qualifications, particularly if most other schools are doing the same thing. This is likely to make racial gaps larger, which would strengthen the negative stereotypes that students of color find when they arrive on campus.

And racial gaps in classroom performance create other problems. [A 2013 study](#) by the economist Peter Arcidiacono of Duke University found that students tend to befriend those who are similar to themselves in academic achievement. This is a big contributor to the patterns of racial and ethnic self-segregation visible on many campuses. If a school increases its affirmative-action efforts in ways that expand these gaps, it is likely to end up with more self-segregation and fewer cross-race friendships, and therefore with even stronger feelings of alienation among black students.

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Another common student demand is to commit money to programs and departments devoted to specific ethnic or identity groups. Such centers may provide many benefits, but will expanding them advance the protesters' stated goal of reducing feelings of marginalization?

[In a 2004 study](#) designed to examine the effects of "ethnic enclaves," a team of social psychologists led by Jim Sidanius (now at Harvard) tracked most of the incoming freshmen at the University of California, Los Angeles. They measured attitudes in the week before classes started and surveyed the same students each spring for the next four years. The study allowed the researchers to see how joining an organization based on ethnic identity changed students' attitudes.

The results were mostly grim. For black, Asian and Latino students, "membership in ethnically oriented student organizations actually increased the perception that ethnic groups are locked into zero-sum competition with one another and the feeling of victimization by virtue of one's ethnicity." The authors also examined the effect on white students of joining fraternities and sororities and found similar effects, including an increased sense of ethnic victimization and opposition to intergroup dating.

There may be academic reasons for creating these ethnic centers, but if the goal of expanding such programs is to foster a welcoming and inclusive culture on campus, the best current research suggests that the effort will backfire.

Might the negative effects of these policies be counteracted by diversity training? We don't know. Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars that corporations and universities spend on them each year, such programs "have never been evaluated with experimental methods," as [a comprehensive 2009 study](#) in the Annual Review of Psychology concluded.

The evaluations that have been done are not encouraging. [A major 2007 review of diversity training](#) in corporations concluded that "on average, programs designed to reduce bias among managers responsible for hiring and promotion have not worked." [A review of diversity interventions](#) published in 2014 in the journal Science noted that these programs "often induce ironic negative effects (such as reactance or backlash) by implying that participants are at fault for current diversity challenges."

In the past few years, a new approach has gained attention and become a common demand of campus protesters: microaggression training. [Microaggressions are defined](#) as brief and commonplace daily indignities, whether intentional or not, that make people of color feel

denigrated or insulted. The idea covers everything from asking someone where they are from to questioning the merits of affirmative action during a classroom discussion. But microaggression training is likely to backfire and increase racial tensions. The term itself encourages moralistic responses to actions that are often unintentional and sometimes even well-meaning. Once something is labeled an act of aggression, it activates an oppressor-victim narrative, which calls out to members of the aggrieved group to rally around the victim. As the threshold for what counts as an offense falls ever lower, cross-racial interactions become more dangerous, and conflict increases.

Protesters also have demanded that microaggression training be coupled with anonymous reporting systems and “bias response teams.” Students are encouraged to report any instance when they witness or suffer a microaggression. It is the “see something, say something” mind-set, transferred from terrorism threats to conversational blunders and ambiguities.

But such systems make it far more important to keep track of everyone by race. How would your behavior change if anything you said could be misinterpreted, taken out of context and then reported—anonously and with no verification—to a central authority with the power to punish you? Wouldn't faculty and students of all races grow more anxious and guarded whenever students from other backgrounds were present?

Interracial contact can yield many benefits. In [a review of more than 500 studies](#), published in 2006 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp concluded that when people of different races and ethnicities mix together and get to know each other, the effect is generally to reduce prejudice on all sides. This is a good justification for increasing diversity.

But the researchers also found that these benefits depend in large measure on certain conditions, like having common goals, a sense of cooperation and equal status. The benefits disappear when there is anxiety about cross-group interactions. On a campus, this means that increasing the number of black students and professors could, in theory, improve race relations, but such benefits are unlikely when accompanied by microaggression training and other measures that magnify racial consciousness and conflict.

So what should a college president do when faced with protesters' demands? The essential first step is to take the long view and seek hard evidence about what will work, rather than spending vast sums of money to respond to the political pressures of the moment.

The U.S. has a serious problem with its academic pipeline. High-school graduation rates and the quality of academic preparation vary a great deal by race. Universities can't draw from this broken pipeline and then hope to declare equality on campus, but they can be part of the effort to fix the problem. Many are already doing that by bringing talented, disadvantaged high-school students to campus for intensive academic training and mentoring. But the inequalities arise long before high school, and they won't disappear in college until we close the gaps in the entire K-12 system.



Sgt. John Hilton in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, on Aug. 26, 1990. Sociologists say the U.S. Army became a model of integration by the time of the Gulf War. *PHOTO: TANNEN MAORY/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Because the current evidence about diversity programs is so inconclusive, universities and their social-science faculties also should take the lead in designing experiments—true experiments, with control conditions and random assignment of students—to evaluate existing efforts and proposed new ones. Given the frequency with which well-intentioned programs backfire, no program should be implemented widely until it has first been rigorously tested.

In their book “All That We Can Be” (1996), the sociologists Charles Moskos and John Sibley Butler describe how the U.S. Army escaped from the racial dysfunction of the 1970s to become a model of integration and near-equality by the time of the 1991 Gulf War. The Army invested more resources in training and mentoring black soldiers so that they could meet rigorous promotion standards. But, crucially, standards were lowered for no one, so that the race of officers conveyed no information about their abilities. The Army also promoted cooperation and positive-sum thinking by emphasizing pride in the Army and in America.

Universities should consider a similar approach. Race would become less powerful as a social cue if schools shifted their attention away from the raw numbers of students in each category and focused instead on eliminating the gaps between the races, as the Army did. Universities need not abandon racial preferences entirely, but they should experiment with using them less while maintaining or increasing other elements of affirmative action. Universities also need to steer discourse about these issues in a positive and cooperative way. Leaders should remind students constantly that diversity is challenging and that bringing people together from so many backgrounds and countries guarantees that there will be frequent misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Handling diversity well thus requires generosity of spirit and an attitude of humility. Instead of focusing on microaggressions, our campuses might talk about blunders, misconceptions and self-righteousness—and about civility and forgiveness. As Martin Luther King Jr., put it in 1957: “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.”

The policies and programs that universities have pursued over the past half-century don’t seem to be working, at least as judged by the recent campus unrest, so reflexively expanding them probably isn’t the answer. The time may be right for a bold college president to propose a different approach, one based on the available evidence about what works and what doesn’t. That would be the best way to create a university community in which everyone feels welcome.

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