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More Colleges Are Asking Scholars for Diversity Statements. Here's What You Need to Know.

By Sarah Brown | JANUARY 29, 2019

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Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Chris Golde, a career adviser at Stanford U. (right, with Jennifer Cryer, a Ph.D. candidate), sees diversity statements as opportunities to think about the role higher education plays in society.

Michelle A. Rodrigues has been on and off the academic job market since 2012. During the current hiring cycle, she's noticed something: Many more institutions are asking her to submit a statement with her application about how her work would advance diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The requests have appeared on advertisements for jobs at all kinds of colleges, from the largest research institutions to small teaching-focused campuses, said Rodrigues, a biological anthropologist and postdoctoral fellow at

the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The statements tend to be one page, maybe two. In them, scholars are supposed to explain how their experience can bolster institutional efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. Colleges are under increasing pressure to increase access and completion rates for students from underrepresented backgrounds, the thinking goes, so they should hire faculty members who understand their role in improving those outcomes.

Coming up with material for a diversity statement isn't a challenge for Rodrigues. She's Indian, and her research focuses on women of color in science. If anything, such a statement might seem to give her an edge.

Rodrigues doesn't necessarily see it that way, though. She's concerned about how search committees will evaluate the statements. She also worries about backlash. Committee members who are skeptical of intentional efforts to promote equity in the academy might even penalize her.

Rodrigues's thought process reflects some of the anxieties surrounding required diversity statements, which are becoming increasingly common in faculty hiring. At least one institution, the University of California at Los Angeles, has moved to require them for tenure and promotion.

Supporters of the statements say they're a way to ensure that scholars of color receive credit for often invisible labor, like mentoring underrepresented students and serving regularly on committees.

By requiring them in the hiring process, colleges can signal to scholars of color elsewhere that they are trying to diversify their mostly white faculties. And requiring them for tenure portfolios can prompt faculty members already at a campus, particularly white academics, to think about how they might help create a more welcoming culture.

But some academics have sounded an alarm about the statements because they see them as potential political litmus tests and consider them threats to academic freedom. Even people who support efforts to strengthen diversity in higher education have their reservations about how committees might use the statements, among other things.

N.D.B. Connolly, an associate professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, has led efforts to attract more-diverse applicant pools there. Requiring all candidates to write a diversity statement, he said, "kind of waters down what gets to count as that kind of work."

"Any intellectual can find a way to make a statement that meets some requirement," he said.

'An Affront to Academic Freedom'

UCLA's announcement last year touched off much of the recent debate over diversity statements. Scott Waugh, the provost, wrote in a memo that the documents would be required not only for tenure-track job candidates, but also, starting in the 2019-20 academic year, for professors going up for tenure or promotion.

Criticism of UCLA's policy gained steam last fall. One of the most prominent dissenters was Jeffrey Flier, a former dean of Harvard University's medical school. Flier wrote on Twitter in November: "Requiring such statements in applications for appointments and promotions is an affront to academic freedom, and diminishes the true value of diversity, equity of [sic] inclusion by trivializing it."

He elaborated this month in *The Chronicle Review*, where he also voiced concern that, in his view, it's taboo in the academy to criticize the goals and consequences of diversity programs.

Two professors at the University of Texas at Austin wrote a response. "Diversity statements as critical scholarly documents will foster productive conversations about the faculty's role in shaping and improving higher education," argued Charlotte Canning, a professor of drama, and Richard J. Reddick, an associate professor of education and of African and African Diaspora studies.

Jerry Kang, vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion at UCLA, described the new policy to *The Chronicle* as a common-sense move. When the California system updated its personnel manual, in 2015, officials added language — approved by faculty leaders — about giving "due recognition" to diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring and promotions, he said.

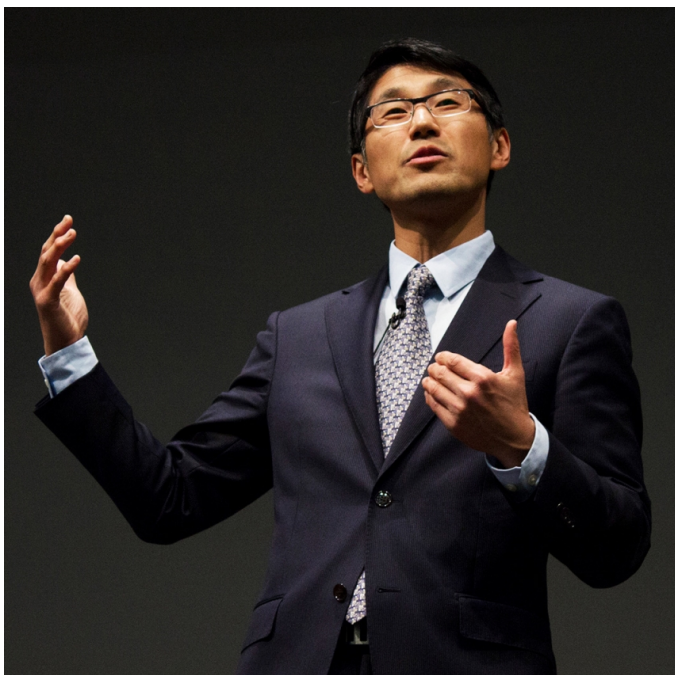
But there was no campuswide framework at UCLA for getting that kind of information from candidates. Some departments were asking for diversity statements, but many weren't. "We weren't taking it that seriously," Kang said. Meanwhile, most of the University of California system's institutions already required the statements in their hiring processes.

UCLA has compiled guidance that departments can provide to candidates who are wondering what they should put in such a statement. It includes a question-and-answer document in which administrators outline definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and emphasize that the requirement doesn't compromise academic freedom.

The university also supplies a rubric that search committees can use to evaluate the statements, ranking candidates from "poor" to "excellent" (or "unable to judge") on criteria like "Potential (Demonstrated ability) to effectively teach students from underrepresented communities." There are no plans to train committees specifically on evaluating diversity statements, Kang said.

Calling the statement "extra credit" might sound trite, he said, "but it is credit for otherwise invisible and uncredited work." Scholars who don't have much to say about diversity won't be penalized, he added. Officials are considering creating a "one-click option" for candidates to opt out of submitting one.

Kang admits that some UCLA professors are skeptical. So are academics elsewhere. "We have signaling mechanisms in place that already incentivize people to take fairly progressive political positions in their personal statements," said Chris Beneke, a professor of history at Bentley University. "This will put an added burden on anybody who might not subscribe to social-justice positions."



Kailey Rishovd, The Daily Bruin

UCLA officials are in the process of crafting guidance for how to use the statements in tenure-and-promotion cases. They want to ensure that expectations for committees are clear, Kang said, while letting individual departments make their own judgments.

"Our job," he said, "is not to overly police what it is that departments think are genuine contributions to equity,

Jerry Kang, a vice chancellor at UCLA, says it is crafting guidance for how to use required diversity statements in tenure-and-promotion cases: "Our job is not to overly police what it is that departments think are genuine contributions to equity, diversity, and inclusion."

at the department and college level.

Talk About Teaching

Requirements around diversity statements tend to be vague about what should go in the documents. That's on purpose, because they have to be applicable to different disciplines and to candidates who come from a variety of backgrounds. Yet that vagueness can cause confusion.

Chris M. Golde has been trying to help. Golde, a career coach for Ph.D. students and postdoctoral fellows at Stanford University, says the uptick in required diversity statements began about three years ago. Her office started offering workshops on crafting the documents in 2017, as part of a weeklong boot camp on the faculty job market.

The questions Ph.D.s ask her about the statements are similar to the ones they ask about any part of a job application, Golde said: What do search committees want? What are they going to read first? How much weight will they put on this? She is upfront with them: "I don't know."

Golde sees the requirements as an opportunity to think about the role higher education plays in society and why diversity matters in that context. Some candidates will be able to talk about their personal stories and how their presence will diversify the professoriate.

For scholars without such a personal story, the easiest way to talk about diversity is through teaching, Golde said. What will you do in your classroom to make sure every student is able to learn? If you're in a lab science, who will you be recruiting in terms of graduate students, and how will you make the lab environment more welcoming?

diversity, and inclusion."

Elsewhere, many colleges, like the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the University of Washington, are experimenting with diversity statements

Rodrigues, the Illinois postdoc, said she focuses on how she's promoted inclusion among undergraduates, both in the classroom and through mentoring. She then explains how her research into women's role in science has given her evidence-based information that can help transform faculty culture.

Carmen Mitchell, a third-year Ph.D. student in health sciences at the University of Louisville, isn't on the job market yet. But Mitchell, who is black, plans to talk in her statement about the importance of combating racial and gender disparities in the context of health care. She wrote an op-ed about diversity statements last fall.

Mitchell said she'd also discuss the mentoring she's gotten from all types of scholars. One of the people who wrote her a letter of recommendation for graduate school is white, male, and libertarian, and leads the Center for Free Enterprise in Louisville's College of Business, she said.

Tabbye Chavous has done some research on what goes into diversity statements and how institutions use them to evaluate candidates. Chavous, director of the National Center for Institutional Diversity and a professor of education at Michigan, co-wrote a study that found that the statements were all over the map in terms of content.

That challenges the criticism that colleges are looking for academics to espouse particular political beliefs or ideologies, she said.

Calling for Specificity

Many scholars say diversity statements can give academics of color in particular a venue to articulate the many hours they spent helping students and scholars from underrepresented backgrounds — and can ensure that such work is acknowledged and accounted for. By calling on all academics to think through how they will promote student success and inclusion, requiring the statements can also be a way to distribute that burden more equally.

But even professors who applaud colleges for acknowledging that kind of labor are tepid in their support for diversity statements. Many academics are concerned about the attendant uncertainty.

Colleges tend to throw around diversity-related terms without explaining what they mean, said Needhi Bhalla, an associate professor of biology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. When colleges require these statements, she asked, are they trying to rectify marginalization associated with a college's history? Are they focused on educational access? Do they simply want to bring in a few scholars of color to check a box?

Chavous said her study found that diversity statements tend to be more useful to search committees when institutions provide a definition of diversity and explicit expectations for what should go into the statement.

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Despite her concerns, Bhalla said, she's seen the benefits of diversity statements. The Division of Physical and Biological Sciences at Santa Cruz has asked faculty candidates to submit them for a couple of years; recently the university expanded the requirement to campuswide searches.

The benefits became clear during one recent search, she said, in which the chair had the search committee read diversity statements early in the process — and all of the candidates invited to the campus were women. The scholars weren't from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups. Still, she said, "it demonstrated, potentially, the powerful role of using a diversity statement early in the assessment process as a holistic evaluation of the candidate."

Connolly, the historian at Johns Hopkins, supports reframing the prompt to focus more on fixing systemic discrimination in academe. Candidates would submit a reflection on the history of their discipline. That would necessarily include discussion of equity and diversity, he said. And it would make clear that departments are grappling with the question of what needs to be done to change their respective disciplines.

It remains to be seen whether diversity statements will yield more-diverse applicant pools and, eventually, more-diverse faculties. At UCLA, Kang, the vice chancellor, said he'd consider the requirement a success if he hears fewer stories from faculty members — especially women and people of color — about doing so much important work for the university and never getting a "thank you."

Plenty of scholars, like Flier, the former Harvard dean, would rather do away with the statements altogether. "The more the expectations become influenced by critical race theory and related concepts, and the more they are used to hold back or reject faculty who fail to echo the latest expectations, whatever they might be," Flier wrote in an email, "the greater the chance for damage to academic credibility, and the opportunity to erect politically tinged litmus tests."

But most people trying to secure an academic job are not going to question the requirements, said Golde, the Stanford career coach. "When people approach the faculty job market, the prevailing mindset is, I need to do whatever I need to do to meet the

expectations.

"They're not in a questioning mode. They're trying to meet the prompt. They're trying to do what's expected of them."

Sarah Brown writes about a range of higher-education topics, including sexual assault, race on campus, and Greek life. Follow her on Twitter @Brown_e_Points,

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