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How 'Diversity' Policing Fails Science

An open-records request reveals that Texas Tech faculty penalize candidates for heterodox opinions.

By John D. Sailer

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The entrance to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, April 13, 2022.

PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

At Texas Tech University, a candidate for a faculty job in the department of biological sciences was flagged by the department's search committee for not knowing the difference between "equality" and "equity." Another was flagged for his repeated use of the pronoun "he" when referring to professors. Still another was praised for having made a "land acknowledgment" during the interview process. A land acknowledgment is a statement noting that Native Americans once lived in what is now the United States.

Amidst the explosion of university diversity, equity and inclusion policies, Texas Tech's biology department adopted its own DEI motion promising to "require and strongly weight a diversity statement from all candidates." These short, written declarations are meant to summarize an academic job seeker's past and potential contributions to DEI efforts on campus.

The biology department's motion mandates that every search committee issue a report on its diversity statement evaluations. Through a Freedom of Information Act request, I have acquired the evaluations of more than a dozen job candidates.

To my knowledge, these documents—published in redacted form by the National Association of Scholars—are the first evaluations of prospective faculty DEI contributions to be made publicly available. They confirm what critics of DEI statements have long argued: That they inevitably act as ideological litmus tests.

One Texas Tech search committee penalized a candidate for espousing race-neutrality in teaching. The candidate "mentioned that DEI is not an issue because he respects his students and treats them equally," the evaluation notes. "This indicates a lack of understanding of equity and inclusion issues."

Another search committee flagged a candidate for failing to properly understand "the difference between equity and equality, even on re-direct," noting that this suggests a "rather superficial understanding of DEI more generally." This distinction arises frequently in DEI training, always as a markedly ideological talking point. According to the schema, equality means equal opportunity, but, to use the words of Vice President Kamala Harris, "Equitable treatment means we all end up in the same place." Somehow, failing to explain that distinction reflects poorly on a biologist.

The biology department's search committees also rewarded fluency in the language of identity politics. An immunology candidate was praised for awareness of the problems of "unconscious bias." "Inclusivity in lab" was listed as a virology candidate's strength: "her theme will be diversity, and she will actively work to creating the culture—e.g. enforce code of conduct, prevent microaggressions etc." Another candidate's strengths included "Land acknowledgement in talk."

Many critics rightly point out that diversity statements invite viewpoint discrimination. DEI connotes a set of highly contestable social and political views. Requiring faculty to catalog their commitment to those views necessarily blackballs anybody who dissents from an orthodoxy that has nothing to do with scientific competence.

The Texas Tech documents show how DEI evaluations can easily seek out these contestable social and political views. The search committees espouse a narrow definition of diversity, encouraging a myopic fixation on race and gender—a definition over which reasonable people can disagree. "Some of us were surprised that there was limited mention of BIPOC issues," one evaluation notes, using a DEI acronym for "black, indigenous and people of color." For another candidate, "Diversity was only defined as country of origin and notably never mentioned women." Of course, many scholars actively seek to avoid a fixation on race and gender, preferring to promote diversity of thought and equality.

Throughout these reports, the search committees displayed an eagerness to find breaches of DEI orthodoxy. One cell biology candidate was given a "red flag" for alleged "microaggressions towards women faculty." The report names two examples: "assuming one junior faculty was a graduate student" and "minimizing the difficulties of women in the US by comparing to worse situations elsewhere."

The evidence shows that diversity statements function as political litmus tests, but it's worse than that. Heavily valuing DEI while selecting cell biologists, virologists and immunologists constitutes a massive failure of priority. This is an issue of academic freedom, and it is a degradation of higher education.

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