Former Harvard dean's tweet against required faculty diversity statements sets off debate

Submitted by Colleen Flaherty on November 12, 2018 - 3:00am

The debate over required faculty candidate statements on diversity and inclusion[1] heated up again over the weekend, after the former dean of Harvard University's medical school shared his pointed criticism on social media.

“As a dean of a major academic institution, I could not have said this. But I will now,” Jeffrey Flier, Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor and Higginson Professor of Physiology and Medicine, tweeted Saturday. “Requiring such statements in applications for appointments and promotions is an affront to academic freedom, and diminishes the true value of diversity, equity of inclusion by trivializing it.”

Flier was commenting on a recent post[2] on the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education's website by Robert Shibley, that organization's executive director. Shibley wrote in response to a recent news article[3] on the political website Real Clear Investigations about required diversity statements at the University of California, Los Angeles, and elsewhere.

Shibley was critical of such required statements as chilling academic freedom, saying that by allowing “administrators to rely on broad, subjective and ideologically-loaded terms to influence hiring decisions,” the Los Angeles campus headed in the wrong direction, away from broad public support.

Many academic freedom watchdogs value FIRE’s commentary and advocacy. But Flier’s comment -- given Harvard’s perennial cachet and the fact that it’s currently embroiled in its own legal battle[4] over how it factors in diversity in admissions -- attracted widespread attention. Comments went both ways, from describing Flier as a hero to someone painfully unaware of his own bias.

Here’s a sampling:

Paul Bieniasz
@PaulBieniasz

Replying to @jflier
I completely agree with this. Some of these statements, particularly those required by UC schools, appear to be political litmus tests. I will never make such a statement myself and will aggressively oppose their introduction elsewhere@HdxAcademy

Benjamin de Bivort
@debivort
Flier said via email Sunday that the reaction to his initial tweet was “vastly bigger than any I had before. Most of the comments I saw were very supportive. Many new followers. Many people I greatly respect retweeted it. Many people reached out to me directly to thank me for ‘being brave enough to speak’ about this. I was very encouraged.”

As for the "expected" negative comments, Flier said he found nearly all of them “missed the point, and misunderstood why I was taking the view that I did. Also the requisite number of crazies.”

Asked whether he was bothered by the fact that diversity statements are required for many faculty candidates, or more about how they’ll be weighed by hiring committees, Flier said, “At this point nobody knows how they would be used today or in the future. I suspect in most cases they will not have much impact. Other more traditional factors will play the greatest role in decisions.”

But many professors likely “will be trying to figure out ‘what they are expected to do or say,’ to not have this held against them. That could lead to some beneficial things, and some bad behaviors.”
Flier summed up his primary objection to the “whole idea” as follows: what “should mainly be an objective evaluation of a faculty member's accomplishments and reputation will now potentially be influenced by a politically contentious set of factors that will likely be gamed. And even more, this opens up academic assessment to even further inroads from political influences, which was well known in prior history.”

None of the above has "anything to do with support for more diversity, which I fully support," he added.

Shibley’s takedown of required diversity statements says that it’s “one thing to tell candidates that their work in the areas of equity, diversity and inclusion will be credited to them and make sure these do not go unrecognized by departments.” But it’s “entirely another to indicate to candidates that their mandatory [statement] is going to be awfully lacking if they happen to spend too much time pursuing teaching, research and service goals that may be both worthy and excellent, but which simply don’t move the needle in the direction of equity, diversity or inclusion,” he wrote.

He also asked readers to imagine that diversity, equity and inclusion be replaced by values that might not make “mainstream Republicans” uncomfortable, such as “capitalism, freedom and patriotism.”

Shibley told Inside Higher Ed that he thought it was “obvious” that committees will be more likely to offer jobs to those with “better” statements, however better is defined, “just as they would with any other component of an application.” Otherwise, he said, what would be the point of such a requirement?

Shibley said he worried more about something else, though: that requiring such statements means "strongly nudging faculty to take a certain direction in their work," violating their academic freedom.

"Some scholars may not, on their own, wish to pursue equality, diversity and inclusion, as defined by UCLA or by anyone else," he said. But with mandated diversity statements, scholar have "enormous incentive to disregard" what their "scientific conscience" might be telling them -- if they want to advance in academe.

Statements describing one's interest in and evidence of work on equity, diversity and inclusion, are required from faculty candidates at the California university system’s Los Angeles campus, among several others. Ricardo Vazquez, a spokesperson for Los Angeles, noted that relevant campus policy specifically says that these statements will not compromise academic freedom. He also said that the university's Academic Personnel Manual "explicitly marks academic freedom as a core institutional value.”

Vazquez said that asking candidates to submit an EDI statement, as they're known on campus, doesn’t alter the main criteria for evaluating faculty candidates. Rather, the diversity statement requirement just "makes the process more explicit, accurate and salient, and offers the university a vehicle to gain better information about a candidate's contributions to diversity and equal opportunity," he said via email. "It differs little from comparable requirements throughout higher education for a teaching statement or statement of research interests.”

University policy on that issue says contributions "in all areas of faculty achievement that promote equal opportunity and diversity should be given due recognition in the academic personnel process, and they should be evaluated and credited in the same way as other faculty achievements.”

Philip Kass, vice provost at the university's Davis campus, is currently overseeing an open faculty search initiative that emphasizes the role of diversity work for certain hires. Individual hiring committees will
Still decide how to judge or weigh those statements, however.

Kass said that he found Flier's statement "ridiculous," and criticized Shibley's argument as intimating that required diversity statements were part of some "leftist plot." Instead, he said, they're an additive part of a portfolio, just like awards or other honors.

Using himself as an example, Kass said that when he comes up for a merit review, he may or may not submit an optional statement on his work on diversity and inclusion, with the assurance that it can only help -- not hurt -- him. The same is true of Los Angeles's initiative, he said. (Davis also requires diversity statements for faculty candidates. Statements are optional for promotion and merit decisions.)

Saying there's no requirement for as to what the statements say, Kass said they "can document the sorts of things I'm doing that go beyond the bounds of expectations with regard to equity, diversity and inclusion. But the converse is not true. I'm not penalized for not doing these things and not writing about them."

Critics' worst fears about diversity statements are simply not true, Kass continued, in that diversity work is not a new, fourth criterion for faculty evaluations, after teaching, research and service. But, especially in a majority-minority state such as California, he said, diversity work can be an important part of teaching, research and service.

"We are a public university, and that means providing students access to a diversity of ideas and diversity of peoples and never, ever lowering our standards for academic excellence."

**Diversity**


Links
[6] https://twitter.com/HdxAcademy?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
[7] https://twitter.com/PaulBieniasz/status/106142536629477362?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
[8] https://twitter.com/debivort/status/1061629409566883840?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
[10] https://twitter.com/suplexi/status/106151509296280832?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw