

# Inclusion doesn't lower standards

The cultural wars raging across the United States have sadly found their way into the world of science. Some university science faculty and administrators are resistant to making changes that would allow more students from under-represented groups to participate and thrive in the sciences. The rationale for this opposition is often that “accommodating” legitimate social and pedagogical needs of marginalized groups will lower the standards of mastery and excellence in these fields. But this concern is just a crutch that protects faculty and institutions from having to do the work of correcting social injustices in higher education.

It's common to hear that improving student diversity in higher education requires lowering the bar to admission and watering down the curriculum so that all students can pass the course of study. I'm not aware of anyone who is advocating such a trade-off. There are known methods of teaching that allow more people from different backgrounds to master scientific material without compromising the quality of education. These include a greater use of active learning methods that engage students with course material through discussions and problem solving (as opposed to passively taking in information). Making such reforms may require faculty to learn new ways of teaching. But isn't that the job—to foster education for everyone?

Another common refrain is that understanding science requires a high degree of skill in mathematics. I've heard firsthand from faculty that students can't pass their classes unless they have previously achieved a high score on standardized tests in math such as the SAT or ACT. That is a breathtakingly pessimistic view. These high scorers are often students who've had the opportunities and resources to prepare for pre-college exams, which vast numbers of students have difficulty accessing. Isn't the whole point of teaching to provide a pathway to achievement?

Social psychologist Claude Steele and others have demonstrated repeatedly that stereotype threat—in which symbols and signals of exclusion create negative psychological effects—measurably impairs learning. Names of buildings and sports teams that honor racism and racists send a discouraging message to marginalized groups. If removing symbols of exclusion is helpful, why wouldn't a university want to do that?

The most corrosive aspect of faculty members' resistance to change is their response to students' requests for the use of inclusive language and terminology: “Can you believe this student asked me not to say this?” Apparently, faculty cannot be inconvenienced to modify language in a way that creates a supportive learning environment. Rather than mocking the students for asking, educators should be inspired to learn new ways of communicating that make it easier for all students to learn. Institutions need to take responsibility for the needed changes and not put the burden on students. Some proposed solutions have even involved sending all the students to cognitive behavioral therapy to make them less sensitive. Why should they be the ones to do the work needed to fix a dysfunctional world they did not create?

The University of Chicago has engaged in a very effective public relations campaign over the past several years to brand itself as the “free-speech university.” It has issued many bold statements from faculty and administrators that welcome all ideas about controversial issues and create a space for conservative ideas to be shared freely. Many faculty opposed to diversity initiatives have praised the stance and assume that the university does not favor diversity initiatives or staff who are devoted to equity and inclusion.

But the institution's website for the division of student affairs reveals many identity-based resources, such as a team that helps students report and respond to bias incidents, a center for identity and inclusion, and much more. The University of Chicago understands that all students need support and resources to learn. I don't think anyone would accuse this institution of lowering its standards.

Opening the doors to science for everyone requires that faculty learn the most effective methods for teaching a diverse student body. Yes, it's more work on top of the many other faculty duties, so universities must provide resources to make the adjustments, such as revamping classrooms for active learning, providing time for faculty to redo their curricula, and doing the hard work involved in having the faculty and institution make the cultural changes that students need. And everyone should have more optimism about who can become a scientist.

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