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Antiracist Academic Leadership in Wake of Charlottesville

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Abstract

What obligations do chairpersons have to confront white supremacy when it impacts departmental and campus climates? And, what steps should chairpersons take when white nationalists come to campus? Participants in this session will have an opportunity to discuss these and other questions and explore the requirements of academic leadership that is avowedly antiracist.

Session Description

The white nationalist rally in the summer of 2017 in Charlottesville highlighted the implications of white nationalism for campus life. The national political climate has shifted dramatically in the past two years, with white nationalists becoming emboldened and more politically aggressive in light of the President's endorsement of white nationalist ideology. This change in climate is also being felt on campuses as non-white students, staff, and faculty feel increasingly threatened and marginalized. In part, this is because college and university campuses are not isolated from mainstream culture and political discourse as the stereotype of the ivory tower suggests, and in part because colleges and universities are being targeted by white nationalists in their attempt to recruit supporters and press their agenda.

In this changing political and cultural climate, academic leaders can no longer ignore the politics of white nationalism and will need to confront its presence on campus. The events in Charlottesville demand that department chairpersons, and academic leaders in general, examine the role they play in sustaining and enabling white supremacy within our departments and institutions.

The white nationalism on the rise is grounded in the system of white supremacy, which has long been implicated with universities and colleges and the outcomes they generate. Examples include universities being financed by profits from slavery, the long-standing practice of legacy admissions, and more recently the increasing drive towards privatization that coincides with the increasingly racialized diversity of student demographics. If higher education is to realize the goal of being an engine of equality and inclusion, then academic leaders need to confront both the legacy of white supremacy and how it is being sustained on campuses today. It is essential that we develop leadership training and leadership support mechanisms that will provide chairpersons and other leaders with the tools and skills to engage their campuses in antiracism.

The obligation of academic leaders to actively confront white supremacy is grounded in the obligation to create and sustain a climate and environment where students, staff, and faculty can feel included, and have an equal opportunity to flourish and succeed. To the degree that

white supremacy pervades that climate, academic leaders have the responsibility to take actions to confront and challenge it. There are multiple modes of action leaders can take, including symbolic, educational, and institutional. Making public statements in opposition to white supremacy and white nationalism signals to the campus community that we are committed to the success of everyone. Some steps that can be taken include organizing trainings and workshops for staff and faculty, and instituting new courses focusing on race and racism, contribute to the dismantling of white supremacy in the culture of the campus, and eliminating policies that subtly privilege one group while disadvantaging another.

This session will begin by framing the issues in this way, and then provide 15-20 minutes for engaged discussion of whether chairpersons have this obligation, what the obligation requires, and what chairpersons can do to fulfill this obligation.