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The Academic Freedom Alliance urges institutions of higher education to desist from demanding “diversity statements” as conditions of employment or promotion. The rapid and widespread dissemination of such statements has proceeded with far too little attentiveness to obvious threats to academic freedom. At the very least, institutions should pause any continued solicitation of diversity statements until there has been a thorough airing of their putative benefits, how they are assessed and used, what safeguards can protect against misuse, and what might constitute less dangerous alternatives.

The practice that prompts our concern is requiring that members or prospective members of faculties submit statements in which they are forced to detail ways in which they have advanced or plan to advance “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI). A school of engineering requires that all applications for faculty positions include “a statement of your experience with or knowledge of inclusion, diversity, equity, and belonging efforts and your plans for incorporating them into your teaching, research, mentoring, and service.” A school of medicine has proposed that faculty members “be required to show effort toward advancing DEI in at least one mission area for which they are evaluated by including a short narrative DEI summary in their personal statement and by listing DEI-related activities on their CVs.” A history department directs applicants to submit a diversity statement that ‘highlights an understanding of the role of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in a university setting. Please include examples from past experiences and reference plans to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in your teaching, research, and service.’”

Requirements for diversity statements have spread quickly and will continue to do so absent a determined effort to persuade academia to reconsider a practice with conspicuously disturbing features.

Academics seeking employment or promotion will almost inescapably feel pressured to say things that accommodate the perceived ideological preferences of an institution demanding a diversity statement, notwithstanding the actual beliefs or commitments of those forced to speak. This scenario is inimical to fundamental values that should govern academic life. The demand for diversity statements enlists academics into a political movement, erasing the distinction between academic expertise and ideological conformity. It encourages cynicism and dishonesty. An industry of diversity statement “counselling” has already emerged--and could easily have been predicted. There are prevalent and reasonable suspicions that beneath the stated rationales for diversity statements lurk unstated motives that include providing a way to screen out candidates who express ambivalence about DEI programming.

The growing regime of DEI testing through forced pledges of conformity threatens to impose a suffocating orthodoxy, penalizing expressions of DEI skepticism though such skepticism exists



across a wide ideological range that includes not only right-leaning scholars but left-leaning scholars as well. Fortunately, there are signs that increasing numbers of academics are becoming aware of the need to respond with candor and determination to procedures that might seem to be innocuous but that are detrimental to core values of higher education.

The Academic Freedom Alliance supports efforts to ensure that colleges and universities offer to all members of their communities – staff, students, and faculty – environments free of bigotry. We also support efforts by institutions of higher learning to do all that they can, consistent with their academic mission, to ensure that faculty members offer their services on an equitable basis. It is, however, our firm conviction that compelled diversity statements undermine the best of the intentions that propel DEI initiatives. It is one thing for schools to take action against wrongful discriminatory conduct; institutions are under a legal as well as moral and pedagogical obligation to do that. A very different and disturbing thing is monitoring beliefs by demanding pledges of allegiance to an array of policies that are often vague, frequently ambiguous, and invariably controversial.

References:

1. FIRE statement: <https://www.thefire.org/fire-releases-statement-on-the-use-of-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-criteria-in-faculty-hiring-and-evaluation/>