

Title: DEI Statements: Compassion Filter or Ideological Test?

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Transcript

Alex Small

In my own life and work, I think one of the best examples I've seen of how ideology and compassion really have so little to do with each other is when I've done volunteer work. If you volunteer, at say, a homeless shelter, you will find a very wide range, not just of people who wind up homeless, but a very wide range of volunteers. For all of their ideological differences, the one thing they have in common is that they are all very willing and eager to show up and do important work for other people.

Zach Rausch

Professor Alex Small. On today's episode, we look at the increasing use of diversity statements to hire, recruit, and promote in higher education. I'm Zach Rausch. This is Heterodox Out Loud.

Over the past few years, there's been a sharp rise in the use of diversity, equity and inclusion statements to determine who should and should not be part of academic communities. Our guest on the show is Alex Small. He is a professor of physics at California State Polytechnic University. Alex argues that while inclusion statements are aimed at highlighting caring, compassionate behavior by students and professors, they may simply be filtering for conformity. Alex's blog post is called Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Statements: Compassion Filter or Ideological Test. Before we chat, here's his blog post from our website.

The full blog post can be found on our website here:

[Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statements: Compassion Filter or Ideological Test?](#)

Zach Rausch

Now my discussion with Alex.

So, you're a physics professor, and I'm wondering, what's your connection to Heterodox Academy, viewpoint diversity, and this issue?

Alex Small

So my connection to Heterodox Academy is that I'm a member, and I'm also involved in the writing group, a group of people who critique each other's writing as we write about viewpoint diversity. How I got into viewpoint diversity, it wasn't really via physics as physics, I mean, my research in physics is pretty basic, even in more applied physics. Where I got interested in the more socially oriented aspects of viewpoint diversity was when I took my job as a professor at a more teaching-focused University. And what I noticed is that in a lot of discussions around teaching, especially at workshops sponsored by universities or professional societies, there's really a pretty narrow range of perspectives, which on some level is fine, maybe people converge on things that work, but everyone talks as though embracing whatever is currently the most common or trendy perspective makes you really innovative, which just seems very paradoxical. It would be one thing to say that everybody converged because of evidence. It's another thing to say that everybody converged because they're so clever and creative and unique. It seems very paradoxical to me.

Zach Rausch

And so then what's the connection between what you're talking about here and diversity statements, which this blog really focuses on.

Alex Small

Looking at things against the grain, for a while, I was primed to notice the increasing prevalence of diversity statements and take issue with them. And to some extent. I've noticed for a while that institutions are requiring them. Several years ago, my University started requiring them. And what I noticed is that a lot of the rhetoric out there is really pushing towards a narrow range of acceptable stances in diversity statements that you should really go for, again, the most popular view that everyone else is saying, and that seems like a really dumb idea, not just for all the reasons of freedom and viewpoint diversity. But look, we're College professors. We were very good students. We know how to do well on a writing assignment. If you say to someone who's been a good student and done well on writing assignments their entire life, "Please write an essay that really hammers on these points that the more senior academics around you really want to hear," I mean, we've been

trained for this for decades. This is not a test that we're going to fail unless we choose to fail it. So I don't really see how we're learning anything of use there.

Zach Rausch

So I just want to take a step back, and let's talk a little bit about the bigger picture here. What exactly are diversity statements?

Alex Small

So a diversity statement is something that is included in just about all job applications these days. It's supposed to be an essay where you talk about diversity and how well you will work with diverse groups of people and how well you will understand people from different backgrounds. And on one level, it's a perfectly reasonable thing. Of course, we want people who are capable of working with other people. Most graduate programs are pretty diverse, at least by some measures. Okay. Most graduate programs have people from around the world. They might not have a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. They might not have people from certain disadvantaged backgrounds in the US or other places, but they're going to people from around the world. So anyone who's been to a graduate program can probably write an essay about working and studying with people from all sorts of backgrounds. And they can say that it went well and say nice things about it. And that's great. It clears a certain minimal threshold. They're really trying to get issues of disadvantage. So talking about how you worked with affluent international students from somewhere, is not going to be the same as talking about how well you could teach a struggling student from a disadvantaged background in the United States.

And they want that. I mean, if you read between the lines, it's clear that that's what they actually want. And again, on one level, I think that's great. On another level, it's a little bit patronizing that, okay, you're going to talk about how well you can help someone who is struggling in class. Now let's really focus on these ethnic groups. Why is it that discussions of working with certain ethnic groups have to go hand in hand with discussions of doing badly in school? That should bother us a little bit.

Zach Rausch

What is the scope of these statements? How prevalent really are they right now?

Alex Small

Pretty much every job ad you'll ever see for a faculty position or a lot of academic positions, besides faculty administrative positions, will ask for one of them. Many schools, from what I hear, require these as part of tenure files. But as far as how meaningful that scope is, it's not always clear to what extent these things are actually filters rather than checkboxes, but everybody has them, and how they use them is highly variable, right?

Zach Rausch

So they really are omnipresent. They're all over, and used differently, kind of, in each University, but like you mentioned in the blogs, there are all sorts of issues related to how effective these are in actually meeting their stated goals. Why have they become so entrenched in institutions? What function are they serving?

Alex Small

There's a few things. I mean, the best reason is that people genuinely care about diversity and disadvantage, and universities have all made it their mission to address these issues, which is on some level laudable, but on another level sort of runs into the problem of, well, what does it mean to credential an elite and then say that it's not elite to then say it's not selective, to then say it's inclusive rather than exclusive, but still, there's a lot of good intentions. I think a less good reason is that once something gets wrapped up in very hot button issues, once it goes to more than just, hey, write a nice essay about how you got along with your international classmates to tell us what you think about poverty, about disadvantage, about discrimination, and tell us that you're able to talk about it the right way once it gets really hot button. How does anyone oppose it? How do you come out and say, "Well, I don't think that we should be talking about this", or "I don't think that we should care about this." No one wants to say that. You really can't argue against something once it's been targeted as a problem that everyone agrees we should care about.

Zach Rausch

And one thing that a critic of somebody who might read your blog, they might say, right, by rejecting the value of them, are you saying that you don't really care about inequality and diversity in higher ed more broadly? How do you respond to a critic like that?

Alex Small

I would say that there's a big difference between caring about something and valuing a particular kind of writing assignment. I think the problem of inequality in society and disparate educational outcomes is really important. But I also think that if you've got a writing assignment that pretends to want to hear a lot from us, but really just wants to check which side we're on, you don't need a two page statement, a sentence saying I endorse whatever book is currently trendy and maybe the subject of a faculty center reading group that should be more than sufficient to tell them what they want to know.

Zach Rausch

So I just want to pivot a little bit more to some advice that you give to professors or students who work in universities. These statements do have a real effect on what you're saying: hiring, tenure. What are some advice that you would give to people who are inside the Academy right now?

Alex Small

I mean, the most practical advice, of course, is to play the game. But that is sometimes a little bit easier said than done because to say convincingly what you think people want to hear, I mean, even though I just said that we all did well on writing assignments, a certain kind of sincerity can still be tricky. So I think the next best answer is to find a trusted person at an institution like the one you're applying to, if not at that particular institution, then at least a similar institution. Because although official University spokespeople will all say the exact same things about diversity, behind the scenes, different schools have very different expectations. You can't assume that a private research University and the public commuter school have the same internal politics. They almost certainly don't. And so you should find someone, if not at that school, that you're applying to at least a similar type of school and say, okay, what's going to read well here? And ultimately, a job application is a sales pitch. And so one way to sell yourself while still retaining some honesty is to illuminate what is most distinctive about you and show how it makes you a human who can relate to students and their challenges.

This might involve a certain amount of boilerplate. So after doing this thing that doesn't fit the traditional mold, I'm able to relate to your diverse students and say the right things about it, but still something that humanizes that journey, I think, will help to inject some honesty while still making the concessions to whatever it is that people need to hear.

Zach Rausch

One of the arguments you make in the piece is that diversity statements really are a proxy of trying to see how compassionate you are as a person. And really, are you a good teacher? What's the quality of your teaching in terms of? Are you willing to help out a student in need? Can you adjust to students coming from different backgrounds? And so the underlying assumption that's made through these statements is that taking a certain ideological stance, a progressive stance on an issue is a proxy for how compassionate you are and kind of your worth as a human. And I think that it's just incredibly powerful observation because it reflects a lot around our views of politics beyond higher Ed in general. So I was wondering if you can expand a bit more on that?

Alex Small

I can say that hypocrisy is not exactly a novel observation. It's not something that a few social scientists discovered recently. There's a famous 18th century quote about how the loudest cries for Liberty often come from slave owners. And Jesus talked about how the hypocrites love to pray in public. In my own life and work, I think one of the best examples I've seen of how ideology and compassion really have so little to do with each other is when I've done volunteer work. If you volunteer, let's say at a homeless shelter, you will find a very wide range, not just of people who wind up homeless, but a very wide range of volunteers. You will find, on the one hand, some very obviously stereotypically Liberal do-gooders with coexist bumper stickers on their cars, and you'll find some incredibly conservative churchgoing types, and you'll find everyone in between. And for all of their ideological differences, the one thing they have in common is that they are all very willing and eager to show up and do important work for other people. And I think if we took the people I've met while volunteering and put them into some sort of diversity training session or some book club to discuss whatever book on systemic disadvantages currently trending in academia, some of them would love it, and that's great.

They like that. They agree with it. Good. Some of them would absolutely hate it. But what they all have in common with each other is that when you ask the question, who's willing to give up some of their time and do some work to help other people, that's something they all have in common. And these are all people that I would be happy to have in the faculty lounge. I think that all of them are perfectly capable of doing good work for disadvantaged students. And so why would I choose to filter based on that? I think that experience with people who actually do good for others shows just how little ideology and compassion have to do with each other.

Zach Rausch

In your mind, what would be an alternative approach?

Alex Small

You look for teaching experience, and besides getting someone to just say for themselves, "Oh yes, I was a great teacher," ask for a rec letter from a supervisor or colleague who was in touch with what they were doing in the classroom. And I think a rec letter from someone who's actually seen them work with students is going to do far more than checking whether someone has read the most trendy book on diversity these days.

Zach Rausch

Before we end, what do you want to make sure our audience takes away from your piece?

Alex Small

What I think I want people to take away is that we are imposing this criterion that really has very little to do with actions. And the good news is that most people know this is kind of absurd. And so they aren't filtering very stringently. They're acting in good faith and accepting any reasonable statement. But the bad news is that these things are still sitting there ripe for abuse, and we're just leaving the door wide open for political operators who know how to tell us exactly what we want to hear. We're really decoupling words from actions here and that is just ripe for abuse. And so I hope we'll focus more on tangible experience. I think that's the best way to select people for a job.

Zach Rausch

Alex Small on Heterodox Out Loud. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe to stay updated for new and exciting conversations with our prolific and wide-ranging blog authors. In addition, you can meet many of them and hear other exciting speakers at our first in person conference in over two years. It's being held in Denver in June. You can learn more at our website: heterodoxacademy.org. Big thanks to Davies Content for producing this show, and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. Thank you for taking the time to listen. I'm Zach Rausch, until next time.