A Response to “A Word From…” in the December 2019 Issue of the AMS Notices

There is a false equivalence underlying the entire argument behind Abigail Thompson’s essay in the December 2019 issue of the AMS Notices. Thompson draws a comparison between the loyalty oaths of the 1950s in the University of California system on one hand, and the diversity statements that are currently required by applicants for positions in that same system on the other. Loyalty oaths were an insidious outgrowth of the Red Scare that gripped the nation at the outset of the Cold War. Public figures like US Senator Joseph McCarthy and California State Senator Jack B. Tenney were capitalizing on the allure of fascist political techniques during an era when citizens had well-founded fears of nuclear war. Their tacit goal was to sow fear of the “other” in order to maintain their own power. The explicit goal of diversity statements is to promote equity in the workplace, in higher education, and in the marketplace of ideas. I fail to see how these are comparable.

Thompson also misrepresents how the rubrics for evaluating the diversity statements are to be applied. Here is what the Berkeley Office for Faculty Equity and Welfare says:

Consider creating a cut-off score for advancing equity and inclusion, below which a candidate would not move forward in the search process (would be considered “below the bar”), regardless of their scores in other areas, similar to what would be done for research quality or plans. For example, if 5 points are given for various components of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., understanding 5 points, track record 5 points, and plans 5 points), assign a value below which a candidate would not be considered competitive and would not move forward regardless of their scores in other areas (e.g., any single 0 or 1 out of 5 would disqualify a candidate from further consideration). Set a high bar.

These are stated as recommendations, and it is left to the faculty to decide how important equity and inclusion are to their department. Thompson’s approach is to appeal to emotion, and presents no evidence that this is having a negative impact on any actual mathematics department’s hiring practices. The AMS editors have failed the membership by publishing a prominent essay by an esteemed officer whose arguments are fallacious and scientifically ill-founded.

Additionally, Thompson asserts, “Politics are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized.” No, politics is the exercise of power in service to an ideology. Individual and institutional values are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized. The University of California is displaying its institutional values by requiring a commitment to diversity. It has the authority to promote this vision by recommending that each department utilize a policy of inclusion and equity in their hiring practices. Thompson has opted to politicize this issue by exercising her power in her capacities as chair of the UC Davis mathematics department and Vice President of the AMS.
Racist and sexist policies—both written and unwritten—are obstacles for many Americans who would like to seek higher education and opportunity. This is documented fact, not politics. Professors who are mindful of this fact will present an antiracist and antisexist face for the University of California system. Values, not politics. The UIC system is taking an active role in addressing these facts and promoting these values. In doing so, they continue to uphold Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun’s words: “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently.”

This opinion is my own, and may not represent that of my employer.

Dr. Xander Faber
IDA/Center for Computing Sciences

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Letter in Relation to Abigail Thompson’s Essay

Universities that want to value diversity are requiring diversity statements as a way to demonstrate this to the applicants. What can possibly go wrong with that? Unfortunately, an unintended and yet pervasive effect of the diversity statements in practice is the normalization and encouragement of the worst sexist/racist prejudices, the very thing they are supposed to fight.

The strongest open sexism I have ever felt in academia happened around diversity statements that we’ve been dealing with at UICs for over 10 years. People often list writing joint papers with women as their contributions to diversity, something that may have been akin to the “I am not a sexist” declaration in the 70s, but definitely has the opposite connotation at this time and age. Occasionally students even refer to their (prominent) female advisors in this regard! Worse yet, some job-seekers list their collaboration with female peers as contribution to diversity. Regardless of their intent, it definitely hurts the image of young women mentioned that way (as well as, of course, of women as a group) in the community’s eyes.

At my university, we also have (not fully mandatory, so far) diversity statements for all our merit actions, happening roughly once every three years. Some faculty do the same, listing collaborating with (often senior!) women, inviting women to conferences, etc. as their contribution to diversity. Some list their appointing as editors women (as some recommendation letters). Unfortunately, the focus on diversity statements only takes attention away from this important topic.

Moreover, I believe that at tenure track hiring, which is largely about promise, the difficulties that affect most women and minorities at the early stages should be taken into account, in a sensible way. It may also be justified to resolve some other ties taking into account the role model considerations. However, I think that the often present push to increase percentage of women beyond what is currently reasonably warranted by merit, only multiplies the biases, is very damaging for the community’s perception of women as a group, and thus is very harmful for the climate. As one example, I was recently on a committee to select the winner of an important prize. It went to a female mathematician. I am sure that most people who don’t closely know her

3Justice Blackmun wrote this while contemplating the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment during the 1978 case Regents of the University of California v. Bakke.
Dear Sir/Madam,

Abigail Thompson’s article which appears in the December 2019 issue of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society deserves a thorough airing.

I disagree, very strongly, with, in my view, its very limited sense of the scale and scope of the mathematics community and its conflation of the use of diversity statements in some hiring practices for mathematics jobs with McCarthyism.

I recognize that the AMS has worked and continues to work assiduously to address the issue of underrepresentation. However, the evidence, much of it documented and disseminated by the AMS, makes very clear that the actual outcomes, i.e., are we as a community demonstrably more diverse than we were ten years ago, indicate that much work still needs to be done in order for us to be truly a community of equity and excellence.

In a deep sense, this essay, from a Vice President of the AMS, even though Prof. Thompson makes clear that she speaks for herself and not for the Society the article’s tagline prominently identifies her as a Vice President of the AMS, makes a compelling argument for the need for diversity statements in hiring.

For context, consider the following questions: how many tenured African American professors of mathematics are there in the UC system? Closer to my home, how many African American assistant professors do we have on the tenure track in the entire CUNY system in mathematics?

At Medgar Evers College, where I have worked for almost twenty-five years, we have two, yes two, tenured mathematicians of African descent. The pace of change, when viewed from my vantage point, is painfully slow. I note, for some perspective, that Black Americans have received just one (1) percent of the doctoral degrees in mathematics granted over the last decade.

How do we change this?

We must become a community that holds, as a priority, for the discipline of mathematics, the critical importance of increasing the number of African American and other mathematicians of color.

How do we do this?

It is evident that we must hire mathematicians who have demonstrated some evidence of their willingness to work on this challenge. I.e., if we are serious, our intent must be accompanied by some supporting infrastructure, an appropriate set of policies and practices aimed at achieving our desired ends. Therefore, requiring that applicants write some form of diversity statement is but a small piece of such an infrastructure. A diversity statement is simply an element of one’s Teaching Philosophy. It is not a political identity.

I close by reiterating: research requires new ideas; new ideas come from new people. Excellence in mathematics is...
a function of diversity. We, the mathematical community, elide this truth at our peril.

Be well.

Terrence Blackman
Associate Professor
Department of Mathematics
School of Science, Health & Technology
Medgar Evers College, CUNY

Visiting Professor
Department of Aeronautics & Astronautics
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Member, Executive Council, The National Alliance for Doctoral Studies in the Mathematical Sciences
Building a New American Community in the Mathematical and Statistical Sciences
https://www.mathalliance.org/

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I was delighted to see the December Notices of the AMS publish Abigail Thompson's thoughtful article. I was equally shocked and disappointed to see the subsequent attacks on the AMS. The AMS Notices did what it is supposed to do: Promoted the open exchange of thoughtful opinions on an important and controversial topic. Please continue on your mission.

Regards,

Yannis Papakonstantinou
Professor of Computer Science and Engineering
UC San Diego

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