

Testimony for the People's Hearing on Threats to Diversity and Academic Freedom in Higher Education

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People's Hearing Chaired by Texas Rep. Lulu Flores (D-Austin)

Other Panelists: Texas Reps. Sheryl Cole (D-Austin), Mary González (D-El Paso), Suleman Lalani (D-Houston) and Christina Morales (D-Houston)

The consolidation of UT's Departments of African and African Diaspora Studies, Mexican American and Latino Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and American Studies; restrictions on curriculum as specified in the recent Board of Regents policy; and the broader sidelining of inquiry into issues of inequity and injustice all constitute political attacks on marginalized communities and academic freedom. At the same time, it is important to see that these measures are also attacks on the process of teaching itself.

True teaching is based on respect, caring, and love for all students. Caring for students means caring for who they are as people, which includes their backgrounds, experiences, and communities. There is no abstract or detached caring. Eliminating the departments that are interested in and dedicated to communities of color, and the devaluing of difference and diversity, is not only morally wrong; it also violates essential principles of sound teaching.

In addition, good teaching starts from curiosity, creativity, and even daring, since only in this spirit is curriculum engaging. But when we are discouraged from discussing certain so-called "controversial" topics (which is usually code for issues of power and identity), this short-circuits the spirit of inquiry in the classroom, and instruction falls flat. In fact, difficult topics are those that *most* need our attention as teachers and learners, since they require the rigorous reflection and investigation that good teaching can support.

Teaching is also based on relationships—relationships between teachers and students, and among students themselves. It is in dialogue, and in the community that we create with each other, that the deepest learning is possible. But when teachers are worried that students may report them for providing challenging curricula, and when students are afraid to express their perspectives in class or in protests on campus, then relationships and community are not possible.

In the current attacks on disciplines and curriculum that look beyond whiteness, as well as on instruction that invites students to explore relations of power and inequity, the university is turning against itself and its core pedagogical commitments. In this context, as we rise to defend these disciplines, to defend communities under attack, and to defend academic freedom, we at the same time also rise to defend teaching itself, and the possibilities that it can create for all students. As committed and caring faculty and educators, we can do no less.