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## Unjust Universities

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## Unjust Universities

Submitted by Zachary S. Ritter and Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt on August 7, 2020

Disclaimer: The list in this essay comes from a collective collaboration of Black Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and other marginalized administrators and faculty members who wish to remain anonymous. As colleges and universities undergo restructuring due to COVID-19 and make new commitments to address systemic failings as invoked by the recent public murder of George Floyd, new spaces for revisioning real structural changes have materialized. Such attempts to address structural changes are a reminder that we continue to live in a culture where racial and gendered disparity and violence are pervasive, persistent, insidious and deep-seated.

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Diversity workers, according to [Sara Ahmed](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, are “institutional mechanics,” and like mechanics, they “complain” about various malfunctions that obstruct their work. In other words, [filing complaints](#) <sup>[2]</sup> is a form of diversity work, according to Ahmed.

Unfortunately, when institutions target their own diversity workers for complaining that those institutions are failing to uphold their mission of enforcing best practices in diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice initiatives, we begin to lose our best and most idealistic professionals. Such targeting of diversity workers also creates purposefully hostile work environments.

Institutions continue to have various administrators and faculty members, predominantly white, whose primary function is to do damage control. Rather than developing a new culture of equity and justice that could move toward the creation of just colleges and universities, they actively participate in active and covert efforts to block such initiatives so as to protect white supremacist structures.

Additionally, human resource departments that should be protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized staff and faculty members (who are instrumental in systemic change) end up protecting the status quo of the most toxic individuals at many institutions.

While equity work requires constant disruptions, the disrupters are often punished. Disrupters are often courageous whistle-blowers, yet institutions are notorious for not protecting the inconvenient truths that whistle-blowers reveal. As you read these lists, you may hear your own experience in them, or you may start to wonder if that colleague who was deemed to be “a problem” and then left or dismissed was actually a whistle-blower who was summarily fired and slapped with a nondisclosure agreement to continue a culture of silencing.

Cornel West says, “[Justice is what love looks like in public](#) [3].” As you engage in these calls for justice and systemic change, we offer two sets of red flags to review regarding toxic environments in academe and encourage you to think whether your workplace would pass West’s litmus test.

We also encourage you to think about how you can use your platform and position of power to effect change instead of being a passive bystander next to someone who has been “transitioned out” for allying with BIPOC and GLBTQI students and faculty. As campuses rush to [open in the fall](#) [4] while the threats of the pandemic still loom above our heads, we want you to think how you can advocate for administrators, faculty members and students using an equity lens to protect those who have much less power than you do.

## **Red Flags: Toxic Administrative Work Environments**

The first set of red flags includes the following.

- Multiple administrators reach out to you saying they admire your work but that you should look for new job opportunities elsewhere because they have a feeling higher-ups don't appreciate it.
- Your boss has a private conversation with you, telling you, “You know these private schools don't want real social justice work.”
- Not-so-subtle lies are spread about your character or your work performance to build a fraudulent case against you, if and when you need to be fired.
- Senior administrators make microaggressive statements like, “I don't think of you as white, I think of you as a Jew” -- illustrating that whiteness is conditional when doing diversity work and challenging the status quo.
- Senior administrators ask you to leave their office and yell at you because you tried to create harmony on the campus by bringing activists into the decision-making process and encouraging them to voice their frustrations in a constructive

and harm-reductive manner.

- When colleges officials are challenged or inadvertently made to feel uncomfortable, you are fired, to take the blame for higher-ups and their incompetency.
- “What will the Board of Trustees think about our inclusion efforts?” is a common refrain uttered by those who are white on the president's cabinet when it comes to supporting students of color and funding diversity efforts -- rather than creating justice/equity training for the Board of Trustees to make better equity-minded decisions.
- Midlevel administrators turn over at a high rate by design: so that upper deans and presidents can make sure no labor or grievance organizing work can take place on the campus.
- Cultures of fear develop on the campus in reaction to firings, lack of funding and increased hostility toward workers even perceived to be close to or supporting student activists.
- Administrators are virtually forced to sign nondisclosure agreements, in exchange for compensation, to protect the reputation of the college. They are told that if they do not sign the nondisclosure and take the compensation, their reputations will be tarnished, and they will not be able to work in their areas of expertise.
- COVID-19 is used as an excuse to silence and remove certain staff members and administrators who are seen as being too challenging of the power hierarchy.
- Administrators are told to “tone down” their emails to students about BLM protests and not be “too political” in light of Black folks being killed by the police.
- Administrators are told not to speak of reform or oversight of campus police, because they are very “different” and more “collaborative” than regular municipal police (even though they often overpolice and target men of color).

If reading this list made you uncomfortable, we suggest that you examine your complicity in creating toxic work environments. Racial literacy cannot be accomplished by reading the latest books. We recommend that you engage in active dialogue by discussing, questioning and interrogating your own racialized desire to maintain the race, gender and class caste system at work. Please make your actions match the Black Lives Matter sign on your car (and the BLM message you've been meaning to send out to the campus). Trust that your paycheck will continue to come and your whiteness will not be automatically undone. In the meantime, please pick up a new tool, because the master's house is coming down whether you and higher ed are ready for the collapse or not.

In a follow-up essay, we will discuss the second list of red flags, which is related to toxic *faculty*-related work environments.

## Author Bio:

Zachary S. Ritter is interim associate dean of students at California State University, Dominguez Hills. He also teaches social justice history at the University of California, Los Angeles, and at Dominguez Hills. He recently co-edited [Marginality in the Urban](#)



[Center: The Costs and Challenges of Continued Whiteness in the Americas and Beyond](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and has a new co-edited book forthcoming: *A Peculiar Institution: Whiteness, Power, and Resistance to Change in U.S. Higher Education*. Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt is the Edith Green Distinguished Professor and teaches in the English department at Linfield University in Oregon. She is the author of [The Postcolonial Citizen: The Intellectual Migrant](#) <sup>[6]</sup> and is the lead editor of the forthcoming *Civility, Free Speech and Academic Freedom in Higher Education: Faculty on the Margins*.

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/08/07/some-red-flags-related-peoples-experiences-working-institutions-suffer-toxic>

## Links

- [1] <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv/>
- [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jf4sgw5NeQ&feature=youtu.be>
- [3] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S\\_WO6o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o)
- [4] <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/02/opinions/covid-19-colleges-racial-equality-risam/index.html>
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