

Academic Dispatch

June 9, 2020



Tomorrow Must Be Different

The witnessing of the horrible murder of George Floyd, coming to us as yet another injustice against peoples of color, has catalyzed world-wide protest, reflection, and expressions for change. The community of the Black diaspora needs to grieve, and to be seen. Their many allies are there to lend their voices to calls for continued change to the systems of racism that have for too long dominated their lives, and our lives too. This is a critical moment.

Within academia we have an essential role to play in creating this change, because social justice is founded on education. At the same time, across the country, we must look to our own institutions and consider where our own systems of power perpetuate the oppression and injustice that we see too vividly playing out in the deaths of persons whose transgression was being Black. Are our own

processes of selecting students, selecting topics to be taught, recruiting, retaining, and rewarding faculty, and evaluating scholarship, really free of the systemic racism that permeates society? While we might like to claim them so, how could they be so free – academia is part of society, not separate from it. The accepted systems that support racism in society at large do not stop at the campus boundary.

In many ways our system sends messages of exclusion and creates systems of elimination. Is it really objective if to become a fellow of your professional society you must have another fellow (typically a white fellow) to recommend you? Is the system balanced and fair when career advancement depends on having your work read and complimented by the famous academic, but the critical informal networking opportunities at conferences exclude people of color? Is the environment encouraging when a colleague's identity is raised as a reason for a recognition or hire?

Late last week a group of scientists, led initially by two accomplished black astrophysicists, Brian Nord and Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, started a [movement](#) to make tomorrow, June 10, a day of learning, thought, and action focused on anti-Black racism in the STEM fields within academia, and a day of recovery for Black academics. Other academics picked it up, and over the last few days a number of scientific academic professional societies have started thinking and exploring where within their own apparently dispassionate and “objective” intellectual traditions systemic racism might lurk. While we may think of science as objective and separated from the cultural issues of the day, long threads of research from Thomas Kuhn to Stephen Jay Gould speak to the complex interconnection of scientific thought and cultural expectations, and long histories of exploitation of peoples of color in scientific research from Henrietta Lacks to the Tuskegee “experiment” speak to the deeply harmful influence of racism on supposedly objective science. The under-representation of scientists of color speaks clearly and empirically to the impact of systemic inequities within, with fewer than 9 percent of U.S. science and engineering Ph.D.'s in 2016 going to Black, Hispanic, and Native American scientists.

June 10th has been offered as a time for academic STEM scholars to repurpose their time – a day to organize or attend a protest, a time to discuss specific actions that will support black scientists, a time to educate ourselves about the history of violence towards people of color and anti-Black brutality. One day will not change our culture – for it is our own way of thinking and behaving that we must change – so June 10th is also offered as a day to plan for the long-term and sustained action that is needed to support Black lives, students, and scholars in academia.

Some of our colleagues at UNM are thinking and planning for these challenges, and about how to task themselves for tomorrow. Of course, we are not together but are socially distanced, mostly connected only through the tether of the internet. But we can still unite and look for the needed changes in ourselves and the systems we collectively make. Call a colleague, come together in Zoom, learn more, but then determine to act. To get you started, the Division of Equity and Inclusion has created a reading

list on [Becoming a Diversity Advocate in the Classroom, Labs and by promoting the hiring of Black, Native, Latinx, and women faculty in STEM and other fields](#). I'll add a couple books for consideration: Black STEM USA: America's Next Civil Rights Movement by C. M. Williams and Sharon Ewell Foster; and Making Black Scientists: A Call to Action by Marybeth Gasman and Thai-Huy Nguyen.

Tomorrow does not have to be like today. But it will be different only if each of us is different.

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