

Pervasive Hypocrisy: A Foundation for Academic Betrayal and Trauma

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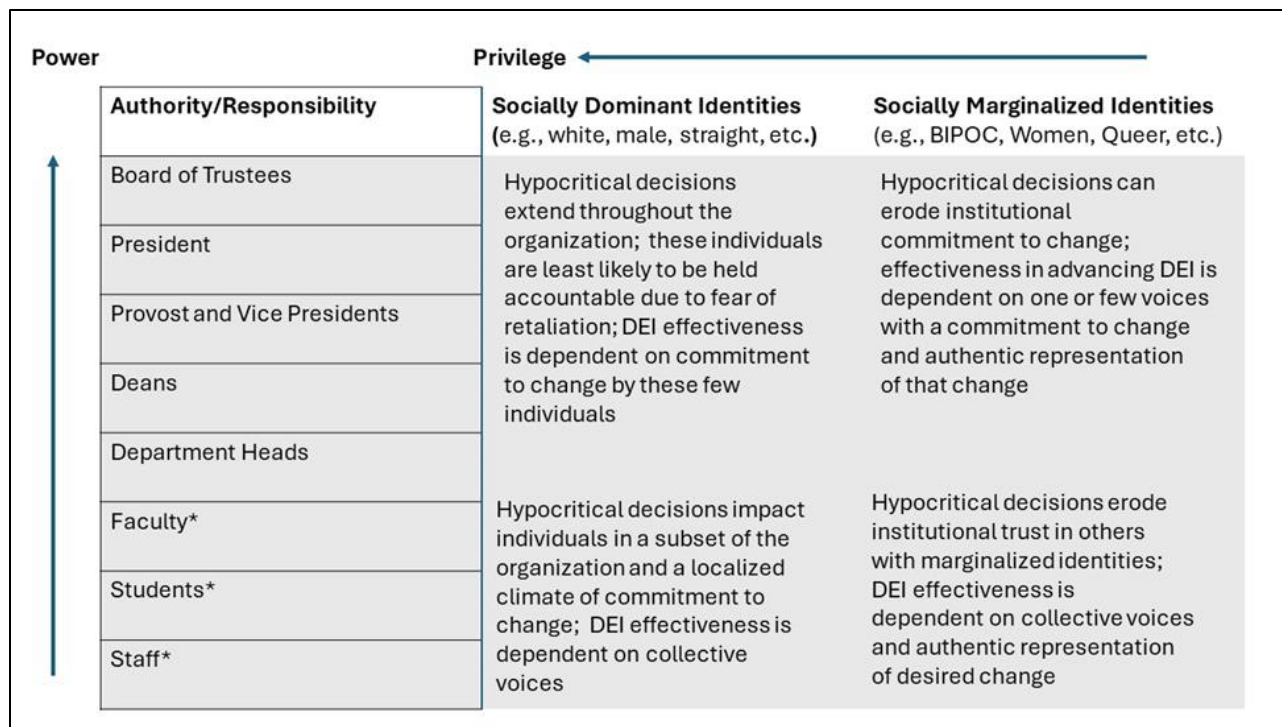
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Having lived for over 70 years and having spent over 53 years in academia as a student or employee, I write this perspective to call out what I see as a common and pervasive behavior in academia that leads to confusion, mistrust, anxiety, and trauma among those affected by the behavior: hypocrisy. As context for my views on this topic, I have studied and worked at six Research 1 universities in the northeast, south, and western U.S. as both a man and a woman. During the past 20 years I have been an “out” member of the LGBTQ+ community as a faculty member, staff member, administrator, and a member of a university Board of Trustees. I used my lived professional experiences and observed effects of hypocritical behavior, especially among leaders, on students, staff, faculty, administrators, and alumni as the basis for this perspective. While certainly not all people in academia exhibit hypocritical behavior, when even a minority of the population exhibits this behavior, especially leaders, hypocrisy can have profound effects on many other individuals (Stamenkovic, 2020). Full disclosure: I have been directly affected by such behavior and may have seen it where others may not, and I very likely have inadvertently exhibited this behavior myself. But I want to bring attention to the issue so that those in academia can be aware, leaders can engage in self-evaluation around the topic, and those affected can seek the assistance that they need. The most egregious instances of hypocrisy, in my opinion, are associated with advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in academia; but the behavior can most often manifest itself in any instance where there is a power differential. My experiences and observations were influenced most heavily around DEI, so that is where much of this perspective will focus (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Conceptual framework for academic hierarchies of power and privilege in which hypocritical behaviors have different effects on institutional commitment to advancing DEI goals.



*Locations in the institutional hierarchy where collective voices are particularly important through Faculty Senate, Student Government, Employee Unions and institutionally recognized identity groups.

From Merriam-Webster, hypocrisy is defined as “a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not: behavior that contradicts what one claims to believe or feel; especially: the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion.” Goldonowicz (2014) described hypocrisy as a branch of the theory of cognitive dissonance that had not been applied to the field of higher education. More recently, Yaghi and Yaghi (2021) surveyed 517 faculty and 175 administrators in 13 universities in the Middle East and found that 81% of all respondents reported experiencing more than one hypocritical incident in the last year; 84% of the academic managers and 64% of the professors were directly affected by hypocrisy. In academia, commitments are made by leaders of the institutions to meaningfully advance DEI, but too often

the institution does not clearly demonstrate advancement in these areas (Ballard et al., 2020). During my career, I have seen more than 500 examples of department heads, deans, provosts, and presidents making a “commitment” to advancing DEI and then making decisions that do not reflect that commitment because their decision, in their opinion, was “in the best interest of” the department, college, or university. I have seen hundreds of examples of faculty and administrators speaking of advancing student success and then placing unrealistic obstacles in the paths of students, especially graduate students and students from historically excluded and still-underserved groups. For example, students working in labs on projects unrelated to their degree program takes time away from their degree progress and extends their time to degree. In addition, students collect data, analyze it, and the results are not what the advisor expected; so they tell the student to collect more data hoping to find the “expected” result, extending time to degree. These are just a few examples prevalent among international and minority students when I was graduate dean. Hypocrisy is often revealed when the power and privilege of the majority population is at risk or when the “good of the institution,” or, worse yet, when the good of the individual faculty member, dean, or administrator, takes precedence: the ends justify the means. It is clear to me that when it comes to advancing DEI, many academicians, especially leaders, fall into the camp with white moderates who were called out by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1992).

Contextual Framework for Hypocrisy in Academia

Universities are organizations like many other organizations, but they have an administrative hierarchy that is unique and remarkably consistent across nearly all institutions of higher education (see Figure 1). From the standpoint of advancing DEI efforts at an institution, the hierarchy of authority interacts directly with socially privileged identities, by way of who is

appointed to the various positions in the academic hierarchy, and the decisions made by those individuals. At the highest level of institutional authority, Boards of Trustees are responsible for assessment of the President's performance, but the performance metrics (budgets, graduation rates, faculty salaries, etc.) rarely if ever assess whether or not the means by which metrics were achieved reflect consistent commitments to DEI or if hypocritical decisions were made in order to advance any particular metric. These institutional metrics are typically applied along the administrative hierarchy as provosts, deans, department heads, and faculty are assessed in their individual annual performance reviews. Consistent and unwavering commitment to DEI objectives across all levels of the hierarchy would be the ideal situation for advancing change in the organization, but that situation is unrealistic given external pressures from politicians and alumni, and those within the organization exercising their academic freedom to voice opposition to DEI advancement. When institutional leaders reflect the dominant identities in society, then their commitment to change and their avoidance of hypocritical decisions becomes imperative. But the pressure to adhere to a DEI commitment is even greater when those individuals whose identity has a history of social marginalization are then appointed to upper-level administrative positions. Hypocritical behavior by members of the latter group can erode trust in the institutional commitment to change and undermine the efforts of others committed to change. My experience is that hypocritical behaviors occur among all four domains illustrated in Figure 1, but those that occur in the upper left region of the diagram are common and those individuals are the least likely to be held accountable. Hypocritical behaviors by those in the upper right of the figure have seemed to be less common; however, there are few examples of people holding these positions. Hypocritical behaviors by individuals representing the lower left and right of the figure can have profound effects on academic programs, research labs, and departments, and

these behaviors can become entrenched in local cultures, especially in some STEM fields. Those in the lower left and right of this diagram can also have profound effects holding those in the upper levels of the diagram accountable through their collective voices when individual voices may go unheard, or worse yet, when retaliation may result. Pushing against power to enact accountability comes at risk despite institutional policies and procedures.

Positionality for this Perspective: Roots for My Own Biases

As a young child I was faced each day with what I saw and heard from my family and our conservative community as inconsistent with my own gender identity. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, I (and by observation, many others) did not feel safe discussing these discordances with anyone, nor was it safe to call out discriminatory behaviors in others. I learned to become a bystander observing bullying of children of color and LGBTQ+ children and dismissing Indigenous peoples as even existing any longer. I spent most days as a child and young adult asking myself, “Where does the truth lie?” I did not have an answer, but I was absolutely convinced that I was wrong even by asking that question and that I should hide myself, my feelings, and my questions if I wanted to stay safe. Only through decades of introspection, observing, listening, and therapy did I reach a point where I realized that I was not wrong and could be my authentic self, but that only became possible after I had gained privilege as what appeared to most others as a well-educated cisgender white guy.

Hypocrisy Observed But Not Resolved

As a “not out” transwoman, my life was a matter of dealing with my own hypocrisy daily. I dealt with it because I knew that my gender was something that I needed to address, but fear kept me a hypocrite in that regard. For many identities in our society, being out is not an option and I often pondered how many of the students, staff, faculty, and administrators were not out

about their own identities. That information was simply not knowable. I had to believe that I was not the only one, and there were a very few other transgender people in the academy who I heard about, usually in a disparaging manner by my colleagues. My approach was to do what I could to support women, minorities, international students, and LGBTQ+ members and colleagues; but out of fear that my own identity would be revealed, I became a bystander, not intervening when hypocrisy was obvious, but passively resisting when that was possible. I was simply a faculty member and administrator working as what appeared to most others as cisgender and white, pushing for change, quietly, meekly, and, for the most part, ineffectively. At least some of my colleagues were playing a similar role, though their identity challenges may or may not have played a part. I lived and worked in a largely white, cisgender academic bubble in the South and the West. After being awarded tenure and securing an administrative position, I had the capability to call out inappropriate hiring practices that did little to support women and minorities, but I was not effective. I could have called out what I saw as differential treatment of international vs. domestic students, and I saw LGBTQ+ students who were afraid to come out, but I did not speak up effectively for them. Nor did my colleagues. The administration at the time pushed for increased representation of women and minorities on the faculty, but most hires looked like me at the time. While over half of the graduate students who I worked with were women or international, the path to a career was not clear for any of them in my white, male-dominated STEM field. As an administrator at a northeast university, I added women and people of color to the faculty, but some were able to persist and some were not, because departmental and college committees questioned the value of their work. Some were able to persist, some were not; but in retrospect I did not work hard enough to support any of them. I saw the same pattern repeated in other departments in my college and in other STEM departments across campus, and in

departments similar to mine throughout the country: consistent sentiment about diversification of the faculty ranks, with woefully inadequate results. Many of my colleagues and I were complicit. I was not being authentic, and my colleagues were either not authentic as well or were viewing diversification as something they agreed with but then did not advance it. Hypocritical behavior was remarkably common. Those individuals not in the majority identities saw the hypocrisy clearly, and if they called it out then they were dismissed, and ineffectiveness was rationalized, and people were not held accountable.

Pushing for Change Loudly, Boldly, and Ineffectively

Decades of fear associated with coming out left me with self-doubt as a leader, but my transition to identifying as an “out” transwoman granted me freedom to be authentic both in my professional and personal identity. With tenure and an administrative position, I felt empowered to push for change with others, especially under-represented individuals in the STEM fields. I worked within four Research 1 institutions where diversifying faculty and administration employees was stated as a priority to ensure that there was at least the appearance of diversity at the university. Clear expectations for hiring practices were given to department heads, deans, and the provost. The needle on diversity at each institution moved little if at all, especially at two large public universities. At one of these institutions, an NSF ADVANCE grant ensured that all upper-level administrators received training on difference, power, and discrimination with a focus on implicit bias awareness in diversification efforts. In addition, at several institutions, training was provided to faculty search committees on best practices for crafting position descriptions, review of applications, interview protocols, and job offers while being aware of implicit biases. The only thing that seemed to make a real difference in hiring practices was accountability in the form of restricting funding or pulling positions back centrally to the provost

for reallocation. With limited budgets and most funding in a university assigned to salaries, filling positions reflect power and the pathway to future research and academic programs. Taking the step of reducing funding or pulling back positions places the provost in a position of immense influence on the direction of the institution, so commitment to change is essential. Any hypocritical behaviors by the provost (or president) in allocation of positions can easily erode trust among deans and other leaders. But of course, hiring is only the first step, and retention suffered in many administrative units. So, the struggle to diversify continues, and those holding others accountable were criticized for obstruction of filling much needed positions to advance teaching, research, and outreach. The responsibility for diversifying faculty ranks fell to the provost, but responsibility without holding people accountable was ineffective.

Demonstrating Entitlement to Oppression Through Hypocrisy

Excuses are cheap when there are no consequences, so change in diversity representation among administrators, faculty, staff, and students can be glacial; and that would be an insult to glaciers (effects of climate change notwithstanding). Diversity hiring mandates coming from leadership and supported by groups representing diverse identities are often outwardly embraced by those charged with making change but rejected when change stands in the way of their views of progress. Commitments to diversity are often a job requirement that is listed last among many other job duties but is almost never considered a reason for denying a promotion or other forms of merit. Finding the “best person for the job” relies more on narrow disciplinary experience than on other factors, so people are often hired who identify much like the others in the administrative unit. Decisions about hiring and retention at times have included whether the person was a good “fit” for the unit, further homogenizing the unit demographics. “Diversity candidates” may be overlooked because they lack “essential” skills or experience, making it easy to exclude them

from the interview pool and the hiring decisions. Achievements of applicants from historically excluded communities likely will have been devalued throughout their life and career, but yet it was easier to justify that they were not qualified for positions that were then filled by people with greater social privilege. The effects of implicit biases not only affect hiring decisions but also expectations we make of student success. When under-represented faculty, staff, and students see such hypocrisy happening continually around them they are more likely to either push back (usually without effect) or leave for better options. But do we know why they leave? Too often, exit interviews are not required to understand the reasons people leave, and in cases where exit interviews are required, the interviewees may not be forthcoming in their responses if they fear repercussions in the form of non-supportive letters of recommendation for future positions. It is likely that only those with nothing to lose will be forthcoming in their responses (DesAutels, 2019).

Follow the Money

Change can come to institutions if those with power over funding are willing to risk or forgo sources of funding to advance diversity objectives. Unfortunately, most universities are incredibly risk averse. Philanthropy is often represented by people from the dominant socioeconomic status, so unless philanthropists specify gifts that are required to diversify student and employee populations, more often the money goes to a new building, a research project, or a new instructional program. Clearly diversity efforts can be built into these more traditional donor foci, but too often it is not a restriction on the gift. Development offices could prioritize gifts from donors who wish to include diversity as a key component of their gift, but too often development offices are led by and staffed by people who will connect well (“fit”) with the donors who are from the dominant socioeconomic status in our populations. With greater

reliance on philanthropy to advance university priorities, development offices are complicit in hypocritical statements about diversity while not making a difference in that regard. They do not want to offend the donors, either explicitly or implicitly, so the easy path is to promote the dominant identities at the expense of the marginalized.

Meaningful foci on diversification waxes and wanes in federal agencies depending on the direction of political winds. Industry contracts are often focused on a specific product output, and diversity is not usually an explicit consideration, except that excluded identities are often the source of manual labor. Consequently, except when the rare ADVANCE grant appears in a university research portfolio, attention to diversification can be opportunistic and plays into the verbiage that we see in job descriptions, with attention to diversity being the last required skill or more often a desired but not required skill; and more importantly, these skills are rarely evaluated with much if any rigor to identify demonstrated work, achievement, and significant investment of effort.

Breaking the Camel's Back

Having questioned, seen, and experienced consistent examples of hypocrisy and collateral damage primarily to those with non-dominant identities, I and a few, very few, others challenged authority around this issue. We had tried different approaches, requirements, training, and cajoling. But even those individuals ultimately responsible for change demonstrated hypocritical behaviors. For me, when a change in leadership was made and hypocrisy was demonstrated once again, the path forward left little room for me to be effective, authentic, or without trauma. I had options: return to a faculty position, where I knew full well that hypocrisy was consistent, and I would face the same behaviors from different people; or I could leave. I

simply left. I was done. I was broken. I had no more to give. The conclusion that a leader is indeed a hypocrite motivates employees to leave the organization (Greenbaum et al., 2015).

Finding Trust while Healing from Trauma

I spent the next year coping, focusing on graduate student advising, teaching a few courses on a part-time basis, which I loved, and trying to forget the trauma that I had experienced. I needed to heal, but instead I simply put bandages over the wound, which stayed open. It has stayed open to this day, though it is not as raw as it once was; and that healing came in part from a trusted colleague who offered me a position as an interim administrator at her university. While continuing to see instances of hypocrisy at this new university in many administrative units, I was working with and being supported by someone whose ethical standards were beyond reproach. Her support and trust and the trust of those with whom I worked and shared a passion for social justice allowed me to cope with trauma from the previous institution. For that I will always be grateful. While I am still processing trauma, I knew from this experience that I had support and that I was not alone.

Can We Break the Cycle?

DesAutels (2019) described “value hypocrisy” as supporting a desirable value but failing to act in accordance with that value. While value hypocrisy is fairly common in the workplace, there is a poor understanding of its psychological impact on individuals, especially those with a history of traumatic betrayal experiences (DesAutels, 2019). DesAutels (2019) failed to find any workplace programs that assessed or addressed value hypocrisy or workplace betrayal.

Administrators swayed by the opportunities of large donations, huge grants, and national awards at the expense of others will allow hypocrisy to continue “in the best interest of the institution.” The cycle of hypocrisy resulting in collateral damage to others, especially those with

non-traditional academic identities can only be broken if academicians, especially administrators, are authentic in their commitment to ethics and social justice and are willing to take risks to make DEI advances in an ethical manner. Budgets at universities are an excellent statement of priorities. Administrators regularly take some level of risk when funding new facilities or creating a new academic unit or faculty line. Assumptions are made about income to support those investments. Rarely have I seen significant budget lines prioritizing diversification to the degree that buildings, faculty, and research are prioritized. Until we see those sorts of financial commitments coupled by behaviors that reflect a consistent commitment without hypocrisy, we cannot expect to see significant changes on campuses. Key to success is accountability. But a reviewer of this manuscript raised an excellent question: “What could or should effective accountability look like among administrators?” Given the potential, and indeed, the reality, of negative repercussions for people with less authority to hold accountable people with more authority, then internal accountability efforts are necessary but insufficient. In the case of DEI advancement, third party, independent review of policies, procedures, and tactics over multiple levels of authority are needed. These assessments should include a deep understanding of the lived experiences of students, staff, and faculty from marginalized groups, as well as understanding why people left the institution (review of exit interviews). But any outcomes from these assessments must include the authority to make, or at least heavily influence, changes in policies, practices, and people. While periodic external review of academic and research programs currently occurs at most universities, the responsibility to respond to the findings and recommendations of the review lies with university administrators. The consequences from these reviews can (and do) range from no meaningful response to profound changes. Meaningful assessment by university accrediting bodies provides one opportunity for clear consequences

(accreditation), but too often DEI is but one of many metrics considered (if at all), and the means to achieve metrics is not always clear. Boards of Trustees and administrators with an authentic commitment to ethics and justice must have authority to take risks to advance diversity and social justice in meaningful ways, but they must also be held accountable. Accrediting bodies are one opportunity for ensuring accountability if DEI is a metric that matters to that accrediting body. Unfortunately, the most effective accountability can come in the court of public opinion.

As I and others heal from the trauma of hypocrisy in academia, it is important to remain hopeful and supportive of those still pushing for change and ethical behaviors. Simply writing this essay for the ADVANCE Journal is an effort to demonstrate that support, and it likely will be my final push for accountability. Others need to continue the effort and those with nothing left to lose need to step up and demand the changes that are needed.

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