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Introduction to the Second Special Issue of Behind Enemy Lines: Advancing the Work of Inclusion, Equity, and Justice in Precarious Times and Places

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Abstract: What does it mean to do work "behind enemy lines" in academic institutions? While academic institutions are themselves facing an unprecedented time of peril, it feels dangerous to offer critiques that might cause fatal fractures to the system. But if we love academia and believe in the promise of education as liberation, then we must fight for academia to become that which it has always promised and never quite achieved. This special issue of ADVANCE provides guidelines for this fight to save our beloved from its own worst impulses to wash over hard truths with the apparent neutrality of the myths of meritocracy and universality.

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In a way, as members of academic institutions, we are not so much behind enemy lines as we are within the ranks, resisting illegal orders. And as much as we do this work in coalition, we are also often quite isolated. Opportunities to come together are rare. We come from both inside and outside STEM, and are from a variety of backgrounds, yet we have come to a very similar place of resistance to the destruction of the work with which we have all been deeply involved: making academia better and more useful to society. Instead of a traditionally co-authored introduction, we offer our four personal narratives, followed by our summaries of the texts in this special issue. This structure shows the struggle of this moment to build collective action as those who do the work of making academia more inclusive and more equitable are increasingly isolated as DEI efforts are dismantled through both overt actions and anticipatory compliance. This structure allows our individual voices to be clear, while also demonstrating through our shared themes the extensive challenges to stay true to the missions of our higher education institutions and of academia writ large in the current climate.

Michele's Personal Narrative

When I was invited to be a guest editor, I was still in the early phase of a late career transition to being both a faculty member and administrator at a STEM-forward private institution. I had been in a women's and gender studies department for the previous twenty years of my career at a public institution. I was familiar with the cyclical attacks on women's and gender studies as a knowledge project. I have learned much from listening to local and national colleagues in STEM fields grappling with ongoing attacks and the dismantling of critical programs. There is power in documenting and witnessing resistance and adaptation.

Marcia's Personal Narrative

As STEM faculty and principal investigator of one of the last ADVANCE

institutional transformation awards and one of a few awarded to Historically Black Colleges and Institutions (HBCUs), I hold multiple understandings of the importance of the chronicling and preservation of this work. My own contributions to the ADVANCE Journal as author were both harrowing and cathartic to relive and write. Serving as a guest editor reminded me of the importance of this work and the need to support its continued existence.

Wei Ming's Personal Narrative

Two weeks after I had been sitting with the university president and provost who were telling me about their deep commitment to DEI and to the office for which I was interviewing to be AVP, I got the call. But instead of the job offer I had been expecting, I was told that the entire DEI office was being shut down by the state legislature as part of the early anti-DEI wave that became a tsunami across the country (this story is told from a different perspective in Enjo Salonga's article in this issue). This moment was an inflection point in a journey that had started two years earlier when I, then a professor of Asian American Studies at a public teaching institution, began being recruited for DEI leadership roles because of a Justice Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Pedagogy Institute I had co-created. Co-editing this Special Issue has given me a little room to breathe again, even as I continue to do DEI work in the midst of the backlash I first anticipated in Summer 2020. At the time, I had thought to myself, "Is this real? How long will this last?" The breathing space to do this work lasted longer than I expected, and we were able to build more institutional transformation than I thought we would. We named things. We made things visible. We finally said things out loud and in public that we had only ever been allowed to whisper. And, finally, Academia was living up to her promise to uplift our society through transformational learning. So now, I grieve for Academia. We were starting to do such good work together! I feel like my beloved Academia has been given a terminal diagnosis, and yet I will still strive to engage her in the best life she can live, to be the best version of herself she can be, rather than preparing her for

death.

Kalenda's Personal Narrative

In the late spring/early summer of 2020 when the world was on lockdown, a group of colleagues and I were frequently meeting to design a new institution-wide course for students entering the university that Fall. The committee's mandate was to support the recent strategic plan and its focus on belonging and inclusion, with an emphasis on providing students from different backgrounds with tools and language for success. Each of us considered this work a bright spot during a period of unrest, uncertainty, and injustice. However, shortly after our work began it ended, incomplete, and thus began what became a gradual effort across the nation over the next few years to "roll back" policy, support, and general understanding connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational spaces. When I was approached about co-editing the Special Issue of ADVANCE my initial thought as a non-STEM scholar was "why me?", but as I worked with colleagues on this issue, listened to their experiences, participated in generative discussions on the state of the academy, and had the opportunity to read the scholarship of academic warriors responding to the removal of not only funding, but also the ethos of many of our institutions, I understood that regardless of discipline we are literally all we have. So, as before, the special issue has become a bright spot during a chaotic time, but it feels different. I commend the series editors on their resolve to keep it (and us) going and ensure the publication of research that will serve as a record of this time and a mighty blueprint for the next.

Pieces in Special Issue

Marcia

In "The Politics of Protection: Institutional Betrayals During Academic Doxing Campaigns," Finn Johnson's personal account both illuminates and asks questions. Research on LGBTQIA+ individuals, generally, and in this case, specifically

transgender scholars in engineering education faces challenges in being accepted for publication. However, once it is published, its authors face malicious responses across the internet and the academy, including doxing and threats of violence. In describing the experience, questions arise regarding what duties of care, protection, and support should researchers reasonably expect from academic institutions? Termed as “institutional betrayal,” this compelling personal narrative chronicles and interrogates the personal, political, and institutional complexities of engaging in scholarship that is labeled as “novel, eye-opening, and potentially transformative,” yet “inappropriate” for particular journals.

Similarly, in a personal reflection from the perspective of minoritized student, Enrique “Enjo” Solanga, in “Trained With Bravery: DEI, Mentoring, and Navigating Uncertainty in Higher Education,” expands the conversation. This piece articulates specific lessons, including navigating the failures and uncertainties in the existence and closure of DEI offices, the importance of representation in mentorship, and how these experiences expose and shape individual character. Ultimately, the painful decision of a graduate student to leave an institution underscores the impactful need for the most vulnerable in the academy to still move with courage and integrity.

Wei Ming

In, “When Hospitality Retreats: Incivility, Anti-Intellectualism, and the Erosion of Pedagogical Authority,” Seon-Myung Yoo describes how attacks on academic freedom represent a deliberate anti-intellectualism, particularly in higher education in the Southern United States. Student incivility, Yoo argues, “is increasingly framed against instructor competency,” particularly in the context of women of color faculty and in the shadow of SB 17, the Texas anti-DEI law. Thus, in the frame of “Southern Hospitality,” dissent against structural inequity, “becomes indistinguishable from rejecting hospitality itself,” which renders the complainant a “bad guest” rather than an integral member of the institution raising legitimate concerns.

The legitimate concerns come with receipts, as in Eleanor Fleming’s personal narrative, “3.8%: Why Black Dentists Matter,” which is tied to the dearth of research

on Black dentists, who make up just 3.8% of dentists–a statistic that has not changed in close to two decades. By tracing her own awakenings–first to the need for oral health justice, and then for the fight to be an explicitly anti-racist Black woman dentistry researcher and teacher, Fleming charts a critical path for those doing work on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In her poem, "Level 1 Termination," Fleming catapults her personal narrative into the present moment of a generation of research and scholarship being flushed by the federal defunding spiral, and formulates an elegy to a research life ended prematurely by government fiat. And yet this determination lays bare that "the work" never belongs to the researcher because "all that funding was the university's" to begin with. Where does this realization leave those of us who are researching, as Fleming puts it, "woke work"? The refrain, "Just breath" calls us back to our bodies, a reminder for us to awaken from our illusions about the security of working in higher education as though our institutions will return our loyalty and the sweat of our brows with protection or any kind of care.

Similarly, LaShaune P. Johnson's poem, "Contact Dermatitis" powerfully connects the author, both caged and buoyed by her title, "P-R-O-F-E-S-S-O-R," to the labor of her grandmother, a cleaner. Johnson recognizes her academic labor of supporting "the Jacksons and the Garcias" among her students as uncompensated and undervalued cultural taxation that will continue to be her labor, but will never be the labor of those who will not be sought (or trusted) by those students, whose "intellectual fecundity" will continue to be unrecognized and undervalued in a system that has yet to fulfill the promise of making the world a better place for all.

Michele

"LGBTQ+ Diversity in STEM" examines the persistent lack of data that makes LGBTQ+ employees visible in STEM fields by turning attention to what can be observed in everyday departmental environments. Using a creative combination of digital content analysis and ethnographic methods, the study surveys eleven STEM departments at a single institution, assessing both online and physical spaces for visible indicators of LGBTQ+ inclusion and allyship. The findings reveal that while

departments often gesture toward broad diversity, explicit signs of LGBTQ+ support are limited. Examples include the absence of pronouns in faculty bios, difficulty accessing gender-neutral restrooms in science buildings, and a lack of visible markers—such as door signs—indicating completion of LGBTQ+ competence training. Drawing on both the study's findings and existing scholarship, the article concludes with recommendations for making LGBTQ+ inclusion more visible and actionable within STEM departmental cultures.

In "Insurgent Art as Feminist Praxis," Mehra Shirazi and Yolyamanitzin Gomez examine insurgent art as a form of feminist praxis emerging from collective resistance to institutional harm within a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at a predominantly white institution. They situate their analysis in the context of a series of challenges and traumatic experiences within their program, highlighting how creative practices became a vital means of response and transformation. Supported by Mellon Foundation Affirming Multivocal Humanities funding, the authors describe a set of initiatives they organized, including the art exhibit "Art Against Gendered Violence," poetry workshops led by award-winning poet Jamila Osman, and a public reading.

The article details how the exhibit foregrounded interconnected struggles, such as Palestine as a gendered site of conflict, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, QTBIPOC grief and resistance, and violence against Trans communities. It also emphasizes how Osman's workshops modeled alternative forms of knowledge production, positioning poetry as a method for confronting injustice, holding space for grief, and fostering collective action. Through this account, the authors contribute to broader conversations about the transformative and ethical possibilities of insurgent art, underscoring its capacity to challenge institutional norms while functioning as a practice of care.

Kalenda

"Researching, Advising, and Teaching During Precarious Times: Insights from a Racial Equity in STEM Education Research Project" reflects on the rapid and

challenging political shifts in higher education. The focus on the University of Wisconsin campuses localizes the realities of national institutional compliance with federal mandates and threats to STEM education during the second Trump administration. The authors present a multi-genre approach to a research study focusing on HMoob student experiences with racism on UW campuses. Autoethnography, qualitative, and quantitative research (including interviews with STEM instructors and students) present layered responses to student experiences and institutional blind spots regarding the student population. The article asks important questions about what happens when relationships between instructors, advisors, students, and the larger institution do not consider a "racial care ethic," in the distribution of services and knowledge.

"In the Twilight of DEI: Perspectives of a Community of Practice of Faculty DEI Advocates Amidst a Political Backlash," examines what happens when members of a university-supported DEI taskforce are faced with the changing reality of federal mandates designed to disrupt the foundational methods and tenets that drive the group's work. The article presents the original charge of the group, the process through which members designed Bystander Training and workshops, and the ultimate shutdown of the ADVANCE office that originally supported the work. The perspectives of the authors whose initiatives were disrupted on the verge of implementation provide insight into the real effects of federal anti-DEI policies on individuals forced to abandon efforts to create equitable spaces across a public university. Secules, Kumar, Kali, and Rose present analyses of the period before trainings began, their methods and processes during the workshops, and what happened after the abrupt shutdown of the ADVANCE office.

These coeditor personal narratives and the summaries of the content of this Special Issue are not stories of resilience and resistance, but of responsibility—to personal self-care and to community self-determination. We need to survive to thrive. Our institutions are not "ours" no matter how much we labor on their behalf, and this realization can be crushing particularly when we need the support, and we know we are doing good work that is needed—even if it is not always valued or even

welcomed. Knowing this, the authors in this issue show us how to create the spaces we need for ourselves and others in community and with angry hope for the future we deserve.