

Dear President Brown,

I write to follow up on my question at University Council concerning BU's antiracism initiatives.

How exactly BU defines antiracism is essential for preserving our research and educational missions and commitments to open inquiry, academic freedom, and free speech.

Any vision of antiracism necessarily presupposes a particular vision of the racism that it means to resist. How racism is defined determines what is authorized in the name of resisting racism and pursuing antiracism. If racism is defined in problematic ways, then in the name of antiracism deeply problematic things follow, not least the betrayal of a university's research and teaching mission and its commitments to academic freedom.

As you may know, in the name of antiracism, Princeton faculty recently demanded the creation of an antiracism censor board to police faculty teaching and scholarship: "A committee that would oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research, and publication on the part of faculty." As free speech scholar Keith Whittington notes,

Make no mistake: this is a proposal to create a loophole in academic freedom through which one could drive a truck... It targets the substantive content of scholarly teaching and research... Given today's expansive and nebulous scope of what might qualify as "racist," it's not hard to imagine such a broad exception being used to remove professors who find themselves on the wrong side of this committee of public safety. With such a committee, can a scholar publish the results of her work on the constitutionality of hate speech or the policy merits of affirmative action or slavery reparations? Can we do unbiased empirical work on the causes of crime or poverty? Can we fairly investigate the causes of racial differences in the outcomes of medical treatment or public health problems? Can we even engage in serious literary criticism of "Huckleberry Finn" or "Othello"? My colleagues would be aghast if I were to propose forming a faculty committee to investigate and discipline un-American behaviors, incidents, research, and publications. They would recognize that such a standard is politically pliable, and that individuals standing on different ends of the ideological spectrum would come to different conclusions about what kind of scholarship poses such threats.

This problem, which has everything to do with how antiracism is defined and pursued, is neither distant nor theoretical. It has arrived at BU in full force.

Thus, in the name of antiracism, BU's Playwriting Program has published a policy that mandates racial hiring quotas, compels political speech, requires racial quotas in all course assignments and syllabi, and establishes a particular ideological lens as normative for instruction:

- "When academic faculty positions become available in the English Department in Playwriting, we will actively recruit BIPOC applicants, aiming for 50% BIPOC instructors"; "We commit to...hiring at least 50% BIPOC artists by 2023"
- All syllabi must "assign 50% diverse-identifying and marginalized [i.e. BIPOC] writers in assigned texts."
- "When teaching material or scholarship that emerges from a White or Eurocentric lineage, we will contextualize this work through an actively anti-racist lens."
- "Indigenous People's sovereignty" must be honored by reading a prescribed text "in the first rehearsal and in the pre-show announcement for every show." "Anti-racism protocols" must be "read out loud."
- The program is declared to be "a white space" that exacts an "emotional toll on BIPOC artists"

Likewise, in the name of antiracism and with a Dean's approval, CFA's School of Theatre has published a nearly identical policy. It requires an audit of all syllabi to ensure conformity to "an anti-oppression and anti-racist lens." There are plans to insert "minders" in every class to observe and report nonconformity to antiracist ideology. Sociology, for its part, has publicly announced that "White supremacy and racism is pervasive and woven into our own University and department."

All this is already unfolding at BU in the name of antiracism. *None of it is aberrant or incidental.* Instead, it is baked in to a certain way of conceiving what racism is and what antiracism requires. With all due respect to him, it is, in my scholarly view and that of many others, a direct result of embracing Professor Kendi's definition of racism and program of antiracism. Conceive racism as he does, pursue his antiracism, and racial quotas, rejection of academic freedom, and closure of inquiry inevitably follow.

Indeed, these BU policies perfectly mirror Professor Kendi's explicit proposals, including his advocacy for a non-elected federal "Department of Anti-Racism" "responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won't yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas." BU's racial hiring quotas implement his central claim that "the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination"—that antiracism requires race-based discrimination to eliminate all racial disparity in any outcomes.

I fully support Professor Kendi's right to advocate for his views, however misguided and antidemocratic I believe them. But his many followers do not do the same for any of us who reject racism and affirm the equal dignity of every human but believe his vision rooted in a false definition of racism. Any university that made views like his policy would thereby abandon its commitments to academic freedom and its identity as a research university. Playwriting, SOT, and Sociology offer one preview of what this looks like. The destruction of Questrom and Economics offers another: Dr. Kendi claims that "capitalism is essentially racist" and condemns as racist all research and teaching that is not anti-capitalist.

Those of us who reject Kendi's vision include Marxists like Adolph Reed Jr., economists like Glenn Loury, legal scholars like Randall Kennedy, linguists like John McWhorter, and philosophers like my mentor Cornel West, to name only some of his Black critics. We reject his belief, held not on any empirical basis, that *every* racial disparity in any domain *only* results from a racist policy, idea, or practice, and (b) that any policy, institution, or practice counts as racist merely if it produces or manifests any racial disparity. That view seems misguided and implausible. It entails that disproportionate educational achievement by Asian Americans, overrepresentation of Blacks in the NBA, and the fact that, conditional on parental income, black women outearn white women are all due to racism.

Further, Professor Kendi explicitly *rejects fact-based inquiry* concerning the myriad factors that may contribute to differential outcomes, insisting, dogmatically, that it is racism. He even claims that *such inquiry is itself racist*. It is a "racist idea" to inquire or investigate what, other than racism, might contribute to differential outcomes.

I am not writing to critique of Professor Kendi. Rather, I mention these points to make clear that definitions of antiracism are incredibly consequential and subject to fierce debate. I have especially wanted to suggest that the most influential vision of antiracism is not only problematic and antidemocratic but incompatible with academic freedom and open-ended, fact-based inquiry.

Almost all definitions of antiracism are saliently like Professor Kendi's. Many at BU share his vision in particular. Whether such visions are, as I believe, anti-intellectual and unethical, *they are, inarguably, ideological and controversial*. They are ideological in the same manner as Trumpism, Marxism, or libertarianism. They implicate highly contestable views on weighty matters about which reasonable people profoundly disagree. For a research university to take one or another side in such debates not only violates academic freedom but elevates a controversial vision of racial justice over its educational and research mission. Shall an ideology be given official institutional standing and enforced at BU?

Looming over all of this is the fact that many faculty refrain from objecting to or even questioning any of this for fear of being pronounced racist. This spawns illusions of consensus and allows radical views to go unchallenged. Whether anyone decided I was racist, when I asked my question last week, no less than two Deans felt the urgent need to convey in the group chat their view that my concerns were rooted in ignorance and were irrelevant to BU's antiracism work.

They are welcome to their views. But it only deepens my concern that figures with their degree of responsibility and power would be so quick to dismiss the question, so insensitive to what is at stake for academic freedom and our mission in defining antiracism, and so strongly invested in maintaining the fiction that committees whose entire rationale is antiracism could somehow function without defining racism and antiracism.

Coming perilously close to the recent message of University of Kentucky Deans - "We are devoted to being an anti-racist community. This is not a questionable concept, and there are no 'sides' to this argument. There is not room for intellectual debate" – this BU Dean insisted that faculty "debate" must not get in the way of antiracism work.

She wrote that the Antiracism Working Group would "examine specific policies, practices, *and ideas* at BU [to] assess whether they are racist [or] facilitate racism." *Here at BU is something more extreme than the antiracism censor board*

*Princeton faculty demanded.* Even if she is mistaken about the charge, that a BU Dean would think it compatible with our mission as a university for a committee to police *ideas* is itself breathtaking.

All of this directly contradicts Justice Frankfurter's foundational insight:

A university ceases to be true to its own nature if it becomes the tool of Church or State *or any sectional interest*. A university is characterized by the spirit of free inquiry, its ideal being the ideal of Socrates—'to follow the argument where it leads.' Dogma and hypothesis are incompatible, and the concept of an immutable doctrine is repugnant to the spirit of a university. The concern of its scholars is not merely to add and revise facts in relation to an accepted framework, but to be ever examining and modifying the framework itself.

Those who betray academic freedom and the Socratic ideal usually believe they are doing so for the best reasons. Transfixed by the justice of their cause, they excuse or ignore their betrayal. We see this happening already in racial hiring quotas and course content mandated on the basis of skin color. We hear it in a Dean endorsing the policing of ideas. This echoes earlier eras, when good ends, like protecting American democracy, led to decisions we now regard as shameful. Ironically, the betrayals themselves almost never achieve the end sought: as it was not *freedom* that loyalty oaths achieved, it is not *justice* that following the dictates of Professor Kendi and like antiracists will bring.

In moments like ours society and the common good *most* require the university to be what it is uniquely called and equipped to be: not another player in culture wars dividing a nation or a partisan echo chamber, but a site to plumb, discuss, and argue the depths of our disagreements with intelligence, respect, and good will, together pursuing the work of discovery and truth-seeking. Where else in our country will that happen if not here?

I therefore call on you to ensure that BU's embrace of antiracism does not compromise our ideals of academic freedom and our research and educational mission. *This requires defining exactly what is meant by 'antiracism.'* Failure to do so means a committee, without scrutiny, contestation, or argument, will impose and enforce some vision while denying it is doing so. BU's definition and pursuit of antiracism must actively guard against enshrining any ideology or controversial viewpoint, lest 'sectional interest' supplant the Socratic ideal. Likewise, antiracism committees must be distinguished by deep ideological diversity, maximal transparency and accountability, and robust debate. Given the timing of these initiatives relative to Professor Kendi's arrival and invocations of him in communications about institutional initiatives, I urge you to clarify that BU's antiracist initiatives do not represent an establishment of Professor Kendi's or any other scholar's views as those of the institution. Otherwise faculty will even more brazenly impose their ideology in violation of academic freedom and to the detriment of our mission, while others will be cowed into silence, under the reasonable impression that BU has decided their differing scholarly views are racist.

I look forward to hearing how you will safeguard our fundamental principles as a university in relation to these new initiatives concerning antiracism. I would be very happy to discuss any of this at your convenience.

Sincerely,



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