

ADVICE

## 5 Don'ts in Writing Your DEI Statement

Search committees routinely ask candidates to submit a statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Here's what not to write.

By *Manya Whitaker*

NOVEMBER 24, 2020



GETTY IMAGES

At a time when many institutions aren't hiring, I just finished chairing my second search committee this year. With a third search in the works for next spring, I've been reflecting on what's gone well in our hiring

process and what needs to be improved. And aside from minor tweaks (things like better scheduling of virtual campus visits), the one thing I keep mulling is how best to assess applicants' commitment to antiracism and equity.

Like most departments, we ask candidates to submit a statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion (or as everyone calls that troika now, DEI). During the interview, we ask them to discuss how they will contribute to antiracism. But the less-than-stellar answers we've been hearing suggest that one of two things is happening:

- We are not asking questions in the correct way.
- Applicants have no idea what constitutes "good" commentary on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

I doubt Option No. 1 is the problem since our DEI prompts are pretty straightforward. But I also struggle to believe that Option No. 2 is in play because it's easy to find detailed advice online ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), for examples) on how to write a powerful, effective DEI statement.

The more I think about it, the more it seems clear that while applicants have plentiful advice on what to say with respect to diversity and inclusion, there is little advice about what *not* to say. So in what follows I present — in order from least to most egregious — the top five worst approaches to discussing diversity, equity, or inclusion during the hiring process (or ever, really).

**No. 5: The Theoretical Approach.** Asked to talk about what you can do to contribute to diversity, equity, and inclusion, you explain how your teaching and research deal with issues of race, class, gender, language, etc. This is the most common type of DEI statement because it aligns closely with what academics naturally do: Fall back on our training and expertise.

But this question is not asking about what you *know* — it is asking about what you are prepared *to do*. The difference is subtle but important because having knowledge of a troubling phenomenon does not necessarily mean you are prepared (or committed) to eradicating that phenomenon. Taking this approach to a DEI statement is saying, "I understand these issues theoretically but don't confidently know how to translate theory to practice." That's a red flag for a search committee.

**No. 4: The "I Am [Fill in Marginalized Identity]" Approach.** Here, people point to their identity as a member of an underrepresented group as proof that they understand inclusion, theoretically and personally. Implied within this framing is the suggestion that one's identity automatically means a person can't be racist/classist/sexist.

However, as a Black woman in academe — and in America — I, like most racial minorities, learned long ago that all skinfolk aren't kinfolk. By that I mean that shared identities do not equate to shared values or ideals. Further, my own professional experiences continue to remind me of the myriad ways that society is structured to force minority groups to compete among themselves for resources to which majority groups have unending access. If anything, marginalized applicants need to move beyond DEI statements that emphasize who they are and instead discuss how their identities intersect with their professional practice.

**No. 3: The Acknowledgment Approach.** Statements that merely acknowledge the existence of oppression do not go far enough to explain how a job candidate may be complicit in it. This approach is akin to saying, "I have a lot of Black friends." Such commentary suggests that you are a keen observer of how other people are disenfranchised but have yet to understand how their being marginalized affects you. The natural conclusion, therefore, is that you have no personal investment in ending oppression — just a passing interest in how it plays out for others.

DEI is not a by-proxy kind of thing. Search committees ask the question because we already know that these issues are embedded in institutions of higher education and that they frame our professional work. The committee would like to know that you understand when, how, and for whom issues of equity may arise and, more important, what you are prepared to do to mitigate that possibility when it happens.

**No. 2: The Savior Approach.** Applicants who take this approach to DEI are basically telling the committee that everyone else is racist/classist/sexist, and, if hired, they already know how to teach all of those problematic people how not to be. Such candidates support their claim with an exhausting list of diversity-training sessions they have attended as well as the ever-growing list of books they've read to educate themselves.

By attempting to prove how "woke" you are, you are conveying that you are an expert in DEI and have nothing else to learn. This is supremely problematic, as antiracism and equity are not checkboxes. They are a way of life.

**No. 1: The Diary Approach.** DEI statements that read like reality-TV confessionals are the most problematic. Here, applicants center themselves by sharing anecdotes about when they "realized" how bad it was to be discriminated against — or the alternative: when they realized that they had "unknowingly" been discriminating against someone.

Instead of focusing on eradicating systems of white supremacy, applicants are focused on their own journey and making themselves simultaneously both victim and social-justice champion. Apart from the obvious self-aggrandizement, this approach completely misses the mark and suggests that an applicant

does not understand racism/classism/sexism as endemic to societal functioning but rather as individual acts that can be easily corrected.

Each of those five types puts off the search committee for different reasons. And each of them fails to meet the goals of a DEI statement: to demonstrate how you can contribute to the eradication of white supremacy.

The current sociopolitical climate has made DEI statements an important part of the job application that can't be faked with jargon and book titles. If you don't know where to start, begin by learning about emerging issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in academe. Have conversations with colleagues about what has already been done on college campuses to enhance equity and inclusion, and what is yet to be done. Finally, ask mentors to share their thoughts about, or examples of, successful DEI statements.

Institutions are finally taking seriously the need for faculty and staff members to be well versed in issues of equity. While a few years ago you could spend less time on this part of the application package than on other elements, I suggest that you prioritize this document and use it to frame the rest of your application.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

**FACULTY LIFE**

**GRADUATE EDUCATION**

**LEADERSHIP**

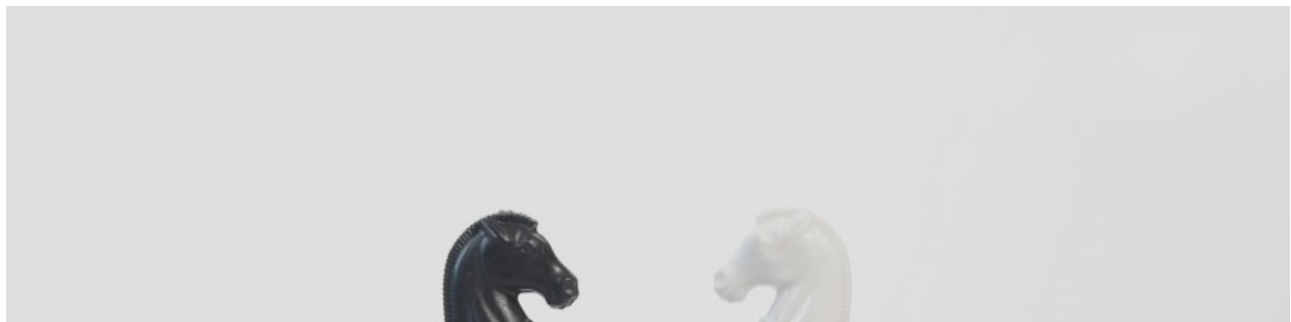
**TEACHING & LEARNING**

**SERVICE AND OUTREACH**

[Manya Whitaker](#)

Manya Whitaker is an associate professor of education at Colorado College and chair of its education department. She writes regularly for *The Chronicle* about academic-career issues. Read her previous columns [here](#).

## RECOMMENDED READING





ADVICE

## Ready to Be an Ally for Black Academics? Here's a Start

By Ebony O. McGee

Twelve ways that white faculty members can better support Black academics in their department and across the campus.



ADVICE

## How a Search Committee Can Be the Arbiter of Diversity

*By Lucy Leske and Christine Pendleton*

The old ways of running administrative searches haven't exactly produced the diverse pool of leaders that higher education claims to want.



ADVICE

### Is a Timely Rejection Too Much to Ask? (Hint: It's Not)

*By Andrew Cheng*

It's demeaning to find out about the status of your faculty application from an academic-jobs wiki. When and why did departments normalize this?



1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037  
© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education