

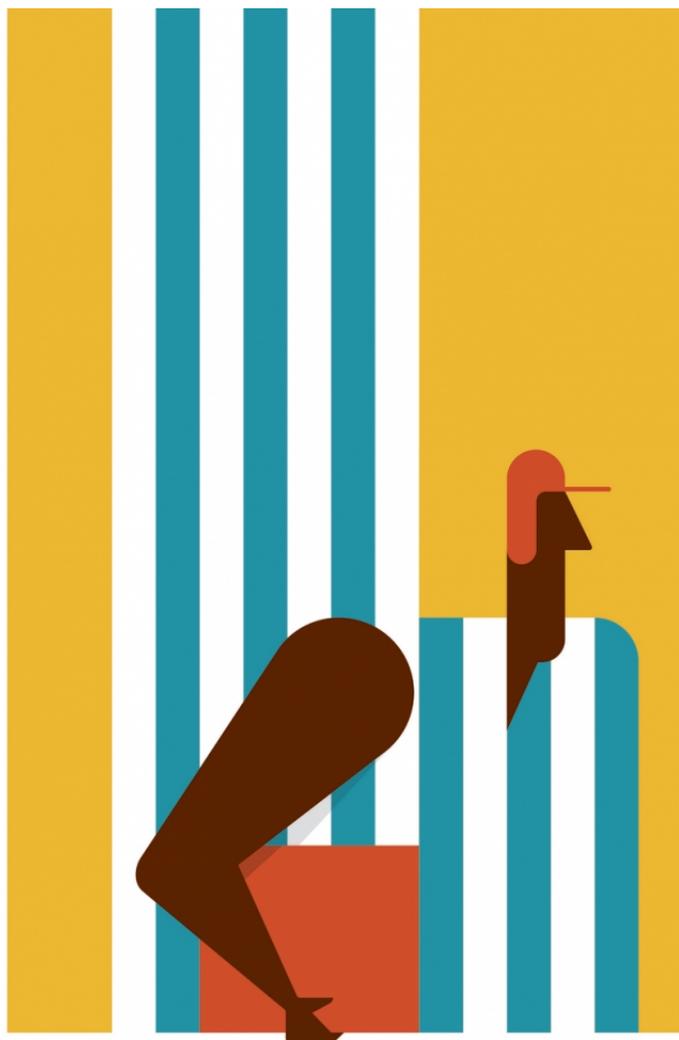
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◀ Back to Search Results

SPECIAL REPORTS

Why We Need a 'Scholarship of Belonging'

By *Julio Frenk* | MAY 15, 2016



Martin Leon Barreto for The Chronicle

Last year, while I was serving as dean of Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, students and faculty members reacted with alarm to incidents around the country that highlighted the disturbing persistence of racism and intolerance. We held a town-hall discussion about the shootings in Ferguson and New York, about the Black Lives Matter movement, and about the public-health dimensions of racial injustice, which often center on health disparities and gun violence. To my surprise, the conversation shifted fairly quickly from what was

happening outside our walls to what was happening within them.

Students of color at the school spoke passionately about feelings of alienation and discomfort. It was evident that despite being at a diverse school, many felt that they did not belong.

I was stunned. Although we had embarked on a number of efforts to improve our levels of diversity, the town-hall discussion made me realize that diversity in numbers was not enough. A month later, at a meeting with deans, Harvard's president, Drew Gilpin Faust, expressed the need to develop what she called a "scholarship of belonging." I began reflecting on ways to put such a powerful concept into practice.

When I became the president of the University of Miami a few months later, I devoted part of my inaugural address to the themes of diversity, inclusion, and belonging. I articulated a defining vision for the institution, which included the core aspiration to be what I called "the exemplary university."

Who Sets a College's Diversity Agenda?



True diversity remains a struggle for many colleges. This **special report** looks at who actually sets a college's diversity agenda, and what makes that agenda flourish or flop. These questions have taken on a special urgency as race-related protests have erupted on many campuses and as the nation's population grows more diverse.

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Today we are in a defining moment when universities must themselves embrace the values we hope to see reflected in society. At a time when many voices question the worth of universities, I would submit that we must trace our *value* to our *values*. One of the most important ways a university can be exemplary is by embracing diversity

in all its dimensions — race and ethnicity, national origin, gender, economic assets, sexual orientation, religion, age, physical capacities. But representation means little if people do not have a sense of being at the right place, where who they are and what they do matters.

Diversity can flourish only in a climate of tolerance — a value that is also under threat. In our turbulent times, universities must lead the way in intentionally cultivating the free expression of diverse perspectives. The late British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin proposed the comparative studies of other cultures as an antidote against intolerance, stereotypes, and the dangerous delusion by individuals, states, political parties, or religions of being the sole possessors of truth. The goal is to promote empathy, so that we may value both our differences and our common humanity.

How, then, can our campuses be dynamic engines of tolerance?

For me this is deeply personal. My father and his family were forced to leave Germany in the 1930s. I would not be here today if they had not found a welcoming refuge in Mexico. I am proud to be the University of Miami's first Hispanic president. I am also keenly aware that each of us holds more than one identity. Even as a white male, I have had occasions where I have felt the sting of difference, or been the subject of stereotypes as a Mexican, or as a Jew, or as a person of mixed German and Spanish descent.

Because most of us have multiple identities, at least one facet of ourselves may fall out of the mainstream and be stigmatized in some way. Your accent, the color of your skin, a disability, an illness, an economic burden, a family secret — feeling the sting of stigma leads us to do the hard work of what the legal scholar Kenji Yoshino terms "covering" in his brilliantly crafted book titled exactly that.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois powerfully described this "double consciousness": "One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

By integrating and celebrating our diverse identities, we can reject an exclusionary definition of "others." Each of us is all of us. National politics and international diplomacy would be much more effective if they were driven by this conviction. Exemplary universities must demonstrate that such an enlightened pathway is indeed possible.

The political scientist Robert Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: bonding capital, which allows you to connect with people who are like you, and bridging capital, which allows you to connect with people who are different. On campuses today you see more bonding than bridging. If we do not deliberately create conditions to encourage real bridging, we are left with a series of disconnected conversations that do not feed or challenge one another, a kind of archipelago of islands of like individuals occupying the same ocean, and not a community forged of common ground.

Ideally, college is a place where we develop our own identities while coming into contact with diverse communities. Universities must create a safe environment where people know that their viewpoints will be met with tolerance and respect. At the same time, we cannot create an antiseptic environment that avoids conflict or discomfort.

Universities must commit to exploring this tough balance, and that is why we need a scholarship of belonging. The components of "belonging" are suggestive: "Be" — as in being — signifies authenticity and freedom from the need to cover aspects of one's identity. "Longing" reminds us of the profound human yearning to connect with others and be part of something that transcends us.

Isaac Prilleltensky, dean of the School of Education and Human Development at Miami, has written that the sense of belonging involves two mutually reinforcing elements: feeling valued and having the opportunity to add value. We need to feel that we are seen, that we matter, that we count. But that is not enough. Our strengths must be acknowledged and engaged in the work before us.

Osamudia James, a law professor at Miami, talks eloquently about people of color being relegated in predominantly white colleges to roles of "service but not belonging." If people of color cannot operate in roles that enable them to add value to the community, they are relegated to satisfying an abstract ideal of "diversity" to enrich the learning environment of the majority.

Scholars like these have been studying community for as long as academe has existed, but I am calling for a renewed sense of urgency to be brought to the scholarship of belonging. For far too long, society has treated minority groups from a deficit analysis, focusing on what they lack rather than what they add. Institutions have reacted to racial tensions instead of proactively creating inclusive spaces. We have taught people how to adjust to an unacceptable status quo instead of sharing the legitimate means to challenge injustice. By not taking the time to listen to people, we have let efficiency trump listening and allowed limited diversity to supplant real

equity at the table, at the lectern, and in the boardroom. We have blamed victims instead of engaging in a shared effort to understand the sources of bias and develop interventions to counter them.

We all have good will, but we must move beyond good will. Universities can help improve a sense of belonging by setting clear goals, fostering inclusive environments, and challenging negative stereotypes about certain groups. We have to create structures that ensure participation of minority groups in decisions. We need to model and teach the competencies of deep listening and respectful dialogue across differences. We must also determine how to work cooperatively to transform deeply embedded practices that have created barriers to belonging.

Universities must also rely on their students and alumni to push them to change. If you do not feel you belong to your alma mater, your most valuable contribution may be to push it — hard — to become a better place. I know it is difficult to see resistance as a form of investment, but we must model our tolerance for discord and conflict with the same self-confidence we display in our admissions brochures, our websites, and our Instagram feeds.

Let us launch a movement to develop the scholarship of belonging, first by conceptualizing it with clarity, then by designing innovative interventions, and finally by conducting rigorous assessment.

We can move beyond good will. We can all add value. We can all feel valued. And we can all belong.

Julio Frenk is president of the University of Miami. This essay is adapted from a recent speech he delivered at Yale University's annual Edward A. Bouchet Conference on Diversity and Graduate Education, where he received a leadership award.