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## What Kind of Diversity Are We to Promote in the University?

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## WHAT KINDS OF DIVERSITY ARE WE TO PROMOTE IN THE UNIVERSITY?

*Todd R. Long*

Like many universities, Cal Poly has in recent years become so attuned to the issue of campus diversity that official campus diversity statements, policies, initiatives, and learning objectives have appeared and now have political momentum. I am sympathetic to much of this work. But, I also foresee trouble due to the language used in these diversity declarations (as I will collectively refer to them), and I note a tension between the language that is officially used to define the kinds of diversity the university seeks, on the one hand, and common attitudes about what kinds of diversity are to be promoted, on the other. In this paper, I have the modest goals of revealing the troubling language and highlighting some implications of it that may concern every member of the university. I do this in the hope of motivating serious campus-wide reflection on the kinds of diversity we really want on the campus and the reasons we want them; I think that failure to clarify these issues may well have bad results. I conclude with some remarks about how to proceed in light of the problems I highlight.

As an educational movement, diversity initiatives have risen to prominence in no small part as a reaction to the increasing legal precariousness of affirmative action policies, a number of which have been outlawed in recent years, including many in the state of California.<sup>1</sup> In response, many affirmative action advocates have sought to gain the hearts and minds of the educational community by focusing attention on the value of diversity. Whereas common rationales for affirmative action have pertained to redressing, reversing, or compensating for historic patterns of social discrimination against women and minorities, common rationales for diversity focus on its educational benefits both to individuals and the broader educational community. In what follows, I will take seriously

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the idea that these common rationales, rather than some narrower agenda, provide the actual motivation for diversity declarations.

Three rationales for diversity declarations seem to be mentioned most often. One is that, since the world is becoming ever more diverse and yet interdependent in various ways, it is educationally beneficial for college students to have considerable social, cultural, and intellectual interaction with diverse others. Another frequently mentioned rationale is that having a diverse set of members of a university is educationally beneficial for students who are members of historically underrepresented or disadvantaged groups because it improves the odds that those students will have exemplars who can both understand their special concerns and inspire them. A third, frequently cited, rationale is that lively and fruitful debate of the sort colleges prize is best served by the expression of diverse viewpoints.<sup>2</sup>

I am especially interested in the logical and conceptual relations between (i) these rationales, (ii) the language defining diversity in campus diversity declarations, and (iii) the kinds of diversity that are sought in the university by diversity advocates. I will focus my comments specifically on some ways in which campus diversity declarations can affect the hiring of members of the university community. Some Cal Poly diversity declarations clearly have university personnel in their purview. For instance, the “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity” speaks approvingly of exposing students “personally and directly to faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds,” for the reason that (here parts of an AAUP statement on diversity are quoted) “such personal interaction gives students an understanding of the ‘range of similarities and differences within and among ... groups’ that ‘no textbook or computer’ can provide;” and, the statement adds that “only through intellectual and first-hand personal exposure to diversity in its myriad forms—racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, geographic, socioeconomic, etc.—will students gain the understanding, empathy, and social skills that they will require to be effective, engaged citizens in an increasingly crowded and interrelated global community.”<sup>3</sup>

To be fair, I note that official Cal Poly diversity declarations focus primarily on promoting diversity with respect to the curriculum and co-curricular activities, and I do not intend to suggest that the university administration is coercing departments into hiring decisions consonant with campus diversity declarations. Nevertheless, the promotion of diverse personnel is plainly made by the “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity;” and it is no secret that many pro-diversity advocates are working to diversify the faculty, staff, and students of the university. As an example, a recent email on behalf of a group called “Cal Poly Diversity Coalition” was recently sent to some university personnel asking for their signature in support of the group’s request of the Trustees’ Committee for the Selection of the President to seek a Cal Poly president who will be committed to diversity initiatives, including working to remedy “the campus’s relative homogeneity,” which, the letter

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suggests, would be accomplished at least in part by “the recruitment and retention of diverse students, faculty, and staff and the greater appreciation and respect for diversity that comes with exposure to diverse others.” Given these facts concerning official Cal Poly diversity declarations and the political pressure from diversity advocates, it is well worth considering how we are to proceed if we want to make hiring decisions consonant with campus diversity declarations. Furthermore, I think we can best appreciate some difficulties by bracketing legal issues, at least initially. Our question is this: On the assumption that we want to diversify our faculty, administration, and students, what kinds of diversity are we to seek?

It seems sensible to turn to diversity declarations for an answer. The “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity” purports to define diversity:

The definition of diversity is specifically inclusive of, but not limited to, an individual’s race/ethnicity, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, disability and sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup>

This is the whole definition. It gives us some idea of conditions sufficient for a person’s counting as diverse. But, it is really not so helpful. I take it that pro-diversity declarers have in mind an idea of diversity that has its meaning in relation to certain features of the people who currently constitute the university. For instance, we could expect a pro-diversity advocate to say of a college constituted by 95% males that having more females would be a means of promoting diversity in the college precisely because that college is dominated by males. But, even if we charitably reconstruct the definition of diversity above to include this relational element, we would still fail to have a definition sufficient for our needs. After all, the definition tells us that diversity is not limited to a person’s race/ethnicity, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, disability, and sexual orientation.

If whatever makes for the relevant kind of diversity is not limited to the features cited above, then what other features of a person count for diversity? Typical claims suggest an extremely broad set of features. One prominent ethicist has said that colleges seek to recruit a diverse student body “both because it is desirable to distribute the good of education as widely as possible and also because lively and fruitful intellectual debate requires assembling representatives of as many viewpoints as possible.”<sup>5</sup> And, as we have seen, the “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity” says something similar about the breadth of the desired diversity: “Only through intellectual and first-hand personal exposure to diversity in its myriad forms” will students get the suggested goods of diversity.<sup>6</sup>

A nitpicky (yet revealing) problem is that both claims are false. Faculty, administrators, and students on this campus and others often engage in lively and fruitful intellectual debate despite the fact that they do not have representatives of as many viewpoints as possible (my students and I have had numerous lively and fruitful intellectual debates

with only a few viewpoints discussed), and one need not have personal exposure to diversity in its myriad forms in order to be an effective, engaged citizen in a crowded and interrelated global community; at least we had better hope so, for no Cal Poly student has had first-hand exposure to diversity in its myriad forms. Of course, this is not a special problem for Cal Poly students, since no student anywhere has satisfied that requirement or ever will. We simply do not live long enough to have first-hand exposure to diversity in its myriad forms or to experience all possible viewpoints, and, even if we did, it is hard to take seriously the claim that a life like ours would be well spent seeking such exposure.

You may think that this nitpicking is silly and without purpose. You may think that we know well enough what we mean by diversity. We certainly do not mean that we want to have as many viewpoints as possible represented in our community, for we do not want it populated by rapists, pedophiles, psychopaths, or terrorists (to name only a few of the many viewpoints that we do not welcome via representation in our community).<sup>7</sup> For the same reasons, we do not want diversity in its myriad forms represented in our population. We want much more circumspect kinds of diversity.

I think that the latter point is correct and that we are wise to be judicious in stating the kinds of diversity we want represented in our community. Thus, I think that we should stop saying things like ‘we want as much diversity as possible’ or ‘we want diversity in its myriad forms’. There are two reasons for this. One is that we have good reason to deny them. From an epistemic (or intellectual) perspective such as the one I presume we care deeply about in the university, it is generally better to say what we have good reason to believe is true than to say what we have good reason to believe is false. Furthermore, I think that, with respect to our policies and initiatives, we have an obligation to our students, the wider community, and ourselves to speak with honesty and integrity.

The other reason may be appreciated by considering the kind of scenario that motivated me to write this piece. Suppose that an academic department is engaged in a faculty hire, and suppose that its members want their hire to promote diversity in keeping with official university diversity declarations. For guidance, they turn to documents such as the “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity,”<sup>8</sup> the university’s “Diversity Learning Objectives,”<sup>9</sup> and “Diversity in the Curriculum Task Force Report,”<sup>10</sup> the latter two of which direct us to the former as providing the definition of diversity. Using the definition, a number of faculty members in this department—which contains an equal distribution of only white men and white women—think that it would be good for the department to hire a Latino. Doing so would surely promote some kind of diversity due to the fact that the department currently has no Latinos, and the diversity definition explicitly lists race/ethnicity among its examples. One rationale proffered is that having a Latino on the faculty would produce an educational benefit for the department’s Latino majors, since they would then have a role model and an instructor with whom they would feel more

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comfortable and by which to be inspired. Another rationale is that having a Latino in the department might provide intellectual viewpoints that are not currently represented in the department; thus, students would be exposed to intellectual diversity. Suppose that, after hiring a Latino, the department sends to the campus Diversity Initiatives newsletter<sup>11</sup> a press release touting the department's success in promoting diversity in the university for just the reasons mentioned above. I take it that the story would be widely hailed among pro-diversity advocates as exemplary for the rest of the university.

But, suppose that things go differently. Suppose that a group of faculty within the department point out that diversity would be just as well served, given the university's definition, by hiring a short, white male who holds a theoretical viewpoint that nobody else in the department shares. One rationale proffered is that having more short people on the faculty (which, say, has no member at or below the average height for his or her sex) would produce an educational benefit for the department's short-of-stature majors, since they would then gain a short role model and an instructor with whom they would feel especially comfortable and by which they might be inspired. Another rationale is that having a person with the disciplinary viewpoint that the short, white male has would definitely provide viewpoints that are not currently represented in the department; thus, the department's students would be exposed to increased intellectual diversity. Suppose that, after hiring the short, white male, the department sends a press release to the campus Diversity Initiatives newsletter, touting its success in promoting diversity for just the reasons mentioned. Would this hire be hailed among pro-diversity advocates as a good example for the rest of the university?

My sense is that it would not be, or at least that it would be thought to be a considerably less worthy example of the promotion of diversity on campus. And yet the definition of diversity under consideration does not so much as suggest that it would be improper or less worthy as an exemplar of diversity promotion. Moreover, all three of the widely mentioned rationales for diversity (cited above) provide support for this hire. Should the described department members feel proud to have promoted diversity in the university by hiring a short, white male? I honestly do not know the answer to this question, but it strikes me as a good one. Perhaps typical pro-diversity advocates would respond along the following lines: what we really want is to have considerably more members of the university community that are members of groups who are underrepresented or are subjects of the kinds of social discrimination that harm their self-esteem or job-acquiring power or money-making power and the like. Let me be the first to say that this strikes me as an admirable goal, although great care must be taken (especially in California), since the principles that seem to support it are very similar, if not identical, to those used in support of affirmative action.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to see that even this set of restrictions does not rule out the white male hire as being a good example of promoting

diversity, for a number of recent studies indicate that short people are discriminated against in ways that harm their self-esteem and put them at a disadvantage with respect to money-making power;<sup>13</sup> my own experience suggests that short students would benefit educationally by having more short faculty members with which to interact.<sup>14</sup>

I take this as a genuinely puzzling yet instructive case. Recent developments in neuroscience and the social sciences suggest that we are going to find out about more and more ways that people are disadvantaged and discriminated against. Should we think that all these cases are fair subjects for diversity initiatives? And, if not, then why? What are the general principles that will support whatever it is that we are going to do by way of seeking diversity among our campus personnel? These are hard, but, I take it, important questions.

Another interesting case would be a candidate who is a practicing member of a discriminated-against, minority religion.<sup>15</sup> Although religion is not explicitly mentioned among the features that make for diversity in Cal Poly's diversity declarations, it is listed in notable diversity declarations, such as those at the University of California Berkeley,<sup>16</sup> and for good reason. If there is anything that world events in the past 100 years have taught us, it is the almost unbelievable social power of religion. If exposure to diverse others is of crucial importance to our students' preparation for becoming good, productive citizens in an ever more interdependent global community, then it seems that exposing them to diverse religious others would rank near the top of the list.

Note that nothing has been said so far about the value of the intellectual diversity that would surely be promoted by hiring someone, whatever his or her skin color or other attributes, who holds a disciplinary viewpoint significantly different from others in the university. There is no doubt that diversifying personnel intellectually is a means of providing diversity of viewpoints, which is one of the often-cited rationales for diversity declarations. This issue prompts another question: Do typical pro-diversity advocates think that intellectual diversity itself counts? I honestly do not know. But, here is something I do know: many of Cal Poly's departments could be made substantially more intellectually diverse without any substantial change in the campus' demographics with respect to race/ethnicity, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, disability, and sexual orientation, and this could be done in ways that could be respected by the vast majority of our faculty.<sup>17</sup>

I raise these questions and highlight these problem cases not because my own vision for the university differs much from what I take to be a good portion of the vision had by typical pro-diversity declarers (I don't think it does), but because language in official university documents is starting to sound serious, and I predict severe internal and external conflicts down the road if we do not come to a clearer understanding of what kinds of diversity we want to promote in the university and why. As an example of this serious

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language, consider a passage from the “Cal Poly Statement on Diversity”:

... diversity serves as a fundamental means to enhance both the quality and value of education. It cannot be a mere adjunct to such an education but must be an integral element of the educational experience, infused throughout the community (faculty, students, and staff), the curriculum, and the cocurricular programs of the University.<sup>18</sup>

The “cannot” and “must be” language sounds serious to me. A straightforward reading reaches to the hiring, the curriculum, and co-curricular programs in the university. Thus, there is hardly a member of the university community out of its reach.

One more example from the university’s statement on diversity is worth commenting on in the present context:

Since the curriculum is the principal expression of our educational goals and values, it must signal the importance of diversity to the Cal Poly mission, to the institutional culture, and to our teaching and learning environment in clear and unambiguous terms.<sup>19</sup>

We are told that we must construct our curriculum so that the importance of diversity is communicated “in clear and unambiguous terms.” A problem is that our own official documents on diversity and its importance do not make clear what kinds of diversity we endorse. They do give us examples (which are surely better than nothing), but they give us little guidance with respect to a wide range of cases that could be the source of serious discord. I do not see how we can know we are fairly and best achieving the goals of our diversity declarations without a much clearer idea of what kinds of diversity we seek to promote and why.

For these reasons I think that we need to either soften the language of our official diversity declarations or come to a more precise campus-wide agreement concerning what kinds of diversity we want to promote and why. The latter would no doubt be complicated by various factors, not the least of which are legal. But I confidently think that, if we as a university are going to be as serious about promoting diversity as our recent diversity declarations suggest that we must be, it is in our interest to think long, hard, and well about these matters and to seek consensus about them; I predict that, if we do not, we will pay with dissension, strife, and lawsuits.

How might we go about seeking such a consensus? First, we might settle on some of the myriad forms or instances of diversity we will rule out from the start as being unwelcome. For instance, given our institutional desire to remain as a top-ranking public, master’s degree granting institution, we might agree to rule out job candidates who do not satisfy our current lofty professional standards, even if they meet minimum job qualifications and satisfy other diversity desiderata.<sup>20</sup> Second, we might precisely identify



the rationales for diversity enhancement that we find convincing and wish to endorse. Third, we might develop guidelines for dealing with difficult cases in which there are ties. These are suggestions. Perhaps other methods would be as good or better. However we proceed in clarifying our intentions and reasons with respect to promoting diversity, we should take this work very seriously; we should be prepared to live with their implications, even if the results do not fit so well with our personal agendas.<sup>21</sup> ☺

## Notes

- 1 California's Proposition 209, which went into effect in 2007, states: "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting."
- 2 Rationales along these lines are mentioned in current Cal Poly diversity declarations. Some prominent ones include the "Cal Poly Statement on Diversity" (<http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>), the Cal Poly "Diversity Learning Objectives" ([http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/diversity\\_lo.html](http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/diversity_lo.html)), and the Cal Poly "Diversity in the Curriculum Task Force Report" (<http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/specialinitiatives/diversity/Curriculumdiversity/documents/tskforcereport.htm>).
- 3 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 4 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 5 Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Rights in Collision: A Non-Punitive, Compensatory Remedy for Abusive Speech," *Law and Philosophy* 14(2), 1995, 203-243; reprinted in part in David Boonin and Graham Oddie (eds), *What's Wrong? Applied Ethicists and Their Critics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press) 2010, pp. 396-400.
- 6 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 7 Of course, rapists, pedophiles, etc. are not on the list in large part because discrimination against them is justified.
- 8 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 9 See [http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/diversity\\_lo.html](http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/diversity_lo.html)
- 10 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/specialinitiatives/diversity/Curriculumdiversity/documents/tskforcereport.htm>
- 11 As far as I know, there is no such newsletter or anything like it at Cal Poly. I use it in my hypothetical scenario to highlight the relevant issue under discussion.
- 12 For legal reasons, diversity activists have had to be careful in distinguishing the rationales for diversity from those for affirmative action.
- 13 For some reports that reference such studies, see <http://www.slate.com/?id=2063439>, and <http://www.news.com.au/features/tall-men-earn-1000-more-than-short-ones/story-e6frfl49-1225713033720>. A recent study ([http://www.nber.org/papers/w12466.pdf?new\\_window=1](http://www.nber.org/papers/w12466.pdf?new_window=1)) suggests that short people make less money than tall people because short people are stupider than tall people.
- 14 As someone who has been short his whole life, I recall feeling a special bond with short professors I have had, and it seems to me that my relationships with those professors boosted my self-esteem. It seems reasonable to suppose that these relationships played some causal role in my reaching the lofty height of Associate Professor at Cal Poly.

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- 15 Perhaps the scenario would be even more interesting and puzzling if the candidate were a white male.
- 16 See <http://hrweb.berkeley.edu/seads/diverse.htm>
- 17 That is, it could be done by hiring faculty whose work is respected by current faculty members and who have areas of expertise different from that of current faculty members. We could also do this in ways that would not be respected by the vast majority of our faculty. For instance, we could hire some intelligent design theorists in biology. The campus declarations do not rule out such things as good exemplars of diversity. And, note that, in the increasingly global community in which we are increasingly becoming interconnected, many of us will bump shoulders with, or have to deal with the cultural fallout from, intelligent design biologists.
- 18 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 19 See <http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/academicpolicies/Diversity-statement.htm>
- 20 And we might not so agree. I mention this proposal merely as an example of a substantive kind of limitation for which it would not be unreasonable to expect widespread support.
- 21 For helpful comments on earlier drafts, I thank Devin Kuhn, Steven Lloyd-Moffett, Paul Miklowitz, and Tal Scriven.