

Scholar-Activist Faculty Hiring in America



WITH:
JOHN D. SAILER
MANHATTAN INSTITUTE

March 4, 2026



4:30–5:30pm talk

5:30–6:30pm taco bar



Discovery Building
H.F. DeLuca Forum Room
330 N. Orchard St. - Madison

FREE TACO BAR!

PRESENTED BY:



TGT

TOMMY G. THOMPSON
CENTER ON PUBLIC LEADERSHIP
UNIVERSITIES OF WISCONSIN

Sailer's investigative work has explored issues related to faculty hiring, the academic talent pipeline, and grant funding. His work on the use of diversity statements in faculty hiring has led to substantial policy change throughout the country.

Sailer will discuss the "scholar-activist pipeline" — the way that universities, foundations, and (until recently) the federal government have encouraged scholars to view their work as an extension of a social or political agenda.

Naming the Issue

The scholar-activist pipeline.

- Universities, foundations, and government agencies have worked in tandem to create career pathways for scholar-activists.
- This takes the form of fellowships, jobs, career advancement, and revised hiring criteria.
- Justified as a tool to increase “diversity.” In practice, has created homogeneity.

Goal of this talk

Unpacking the scholar-activist pipeline

- Diversity Statements
- Cluster Hiring
- Career Investment: the case of the Mellon Foundation

Discussing implications

- Trust in higher education
- Viewpoint diversity
- Scholar-activism

Diversity Statements

- Origin: early 2010s, University of California
- Practice: requiring job applicants to submit statements on their commitment to DEI
- Use: By 2021, 19 percent of academic jobs required diversity statements (AEI). 45.6% of large institutions had adopted DEI criteria in tenure standards (AAUP).

Diversity Statements in Practice: Rubrics

University of South Carolina

FIRST FIRRE SEARCH

Rubric Component	1-2	3	4-5
Plans for Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vague or no statements about what they would do regarding DEIB if hired. May even feel doing so is someone else's/ another office's responsibility. Describes only activities that are already the expectation of faculty (e.g., being willing to supervise students of any gender or ethnic identity). Explicitly states the intention to ignore the varying backgrounds of their students and "treat everyone the same." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentions plans or ideas but more is expected of a faculty member or for their career stage. Plans or ideas mentioned lack detail or clear purpose or clear connection to DEIB work. For example, if "outreach" is proposed, who is the specific target, what is the type of engagement, and what are the expected outcomes? What are the specific roles and responsibilities of the faculty member? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies existing programs they would get involved with, with a level of proposed involvement commensurate with career stage (a tenured faculty member would be expected to commit to more involvement than a new assistant professor would). Clear and detailed ideas for advancing equity and inclusion generally and within their field, through their research, teaching, and/or service. Level of proposed involvement commensurate with career level (for example, a new assistant professor may plan to undertake one major activity within the department over the first couple of years, conduct outreach to hire a diverse group of students to work in their lab, seek to mentor several underrepresented students, and co-chair a subcommittee or lead a workshop for a national conference. A new tenured faculty member would be expected to have more department, campus-wide, and national impact, and show more leadership). Convincingly expresses intent, with examples, to be a strong advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within the department/school/college and also their field.

Diversity Statements in Practice: Weighing

- Some hiring committees weighed statements as highly as 30% of overall score
- Berkeley Initiative: first round cut is just diversity statements

Scoring matrix:

Appropriate degree	Research fit to ad	Post-doctoral experience	Research quality and productivity: publications	Research quality and productivity: grants	Teaching experience: large classes	Teaching experience: online classes	Teaching experience: ABP	Diversity statement: knowledge	Diversity statement: track record	Diversity Statement - Plans	Pre-interview score	Rank Sum score (Lower is better)	Letter of Recommendation	Zoom interview	APPLICATION SCORE	TOTAL SCORE
10	20	10	25	20	10	10	10	10	10	10	145	10	30	40		

Diversity Statements in Practice: Texas Tech

Motion: Prioritizing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion of Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty in the Department of Biological Sciences, Texas Tech University

REAFFIRMING Texas Tech University's commitment to inclusive excellence^{1,2};

APPRECIATING that a diverse faculty increases success of our students and research agenda;

NOTING that the Department of Biological Science's student body is diverse³ and that TTU is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI);

RECOGNIZING that the tenure-track faculty in the Department of Biological Sciences at Texas Tech University lacks diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender and does not mirror the student body⁴;

FURTHER RECOGNIZING that the Department of Biological Sciences currently has no Black or Indigenous faculty;

NOTING that the DBS has plans to hire new faculty;

The Department of Biological Sciences (DBS):

1. EMPHASIZES Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in faculty hiring processes;
2. REQUIRES DBS faculty search committees to: i) require and strongly weight a diversity statement from all candidates and provide an evaluation rubric; ii) provide questions to all candidates prior to off-campus interviews; iii) provide a report to the DBS faculty that includes diversity metrics and a report on the evaluation of the required diversity statements and strategies implemented.

Diversity Statements in Practice: Texas Tech

Weaknesses

Mentioned that DEI is not an issue because he respects his students and treats them equally. This indicates a lack of understanding of equity and inclusion issues. Mentioned that we should have a training but seemed to only be thought of as box checking. Was interested in leading trainings but did not have substantive ideas for what would be in the training. It was unclear, but he may have been thinking of EEO training and could not differentiate this from DEI training. Did not have any understanding of equity and inclusion and focused only on diversity. Mentioned that he was an experienced professor and did not need any training. Contrasted this to someone at a postdoc stage, who would be worse in these issues because of lack of experience. The committee is concerned about motivation for growth, considering he feels he is well prepared and does not feel that DEI is an issue. Diversity was only defined as country of origin and notably never mentioned women. Active learning was mentioned, but he did not speak to how this would improve classroom equity and inclusion.

Strengths: Willing to learn and likely responsible to engagement, described good practices for inclusion that he is doing (e.g., transparency in learning and teaching, eye contact, assigning groups, respectful of students), experience with first gen and presents as a role model as he is first gen (relatable).

Weaknesses: Poor understanding of the difference between equity and equality, even on re-direct, which suggested rather superficial understanding of DEI more generally. Answers were rather generic (didn't acknowledge the challenges of minoritized groups), commented on the importance of best practices but didn't provide many examples, nor did he ask us for any. Bit odd that he didn't have any questions for us.

Diversity Statements in Practice: Texas Tech

DEI Report:

Strengths: Insightful and thinking of things the committee has yet to think about or get to, particularly with respect to students and inclusivity. We learned from him. Interest in Indigenous communities and opportunities. Wanted to know more about resources at Tech at the Uni level to support recruitment and retention of diverse grad students. Interested in improving undergrad recruitment strategies, possible future focus of grant proposal. His research focuses on classroom inclusivity through evolution/climate change acceptance. Land acknowledgement in talk.

Weaknesses: Some concern that actions needed to be funded or connected to existing initiatives. Didn't provide many/any concrete examples of what he would do with modest resources.

Red Flags: NONE

Diversity Statements in Practice: Ohio State

Starting around 2020, the College of Arts and Sciences required all search committees to fill out a diversity faculty recruitment report.

Position Title and Number:	
Search Committee Chair:	
Search Committee Diversity Advocate:	
Search Committee Members:	

Submit this form by email:

Date: Must be sent prior to extending invitations to Columbus campus candidates for on-campus interviews

To: Divisional Dean, Divisional Dean's Assistant

cc: Interim Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Korie Little Edwards, edwards.623@osu.edu

Subject: Approval Request: Faculty Search Diversity Recruitment Report

Directions: Please provide a brief response to each question below.

1. APPLICATIONS AND COMMITTEE TRAINING

- When did the search committee chair and/or members attend one of the seven "Searching for Inclusive Excellence" workshops? Was there anyone on the search committee who did not? If so, why?

- Indicate the objective of this search [e.g. hire assistant professor in the field of [x] and the time period of the "active" search [e.g. October 2022-February 2023]:

Diversity Statements in Practice: Ohio State

- For each candidate chosen for a campus interview, briefly describe how each candidate would amplify the values of diversity, inclusion and innovation. How does the candidate's teaching, mentoring, research, and/or outreach and engagement amplify diversity and inclusion? How would the candidate contribute to ongoing or new diversity and inclusion initiatives in the unit?

Name	Description
1. [REDACTED]	Dr. [REDACTED] research and teaching—with stand at the intersections of ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, and postcolonial science studies—directly interrogate how fatphobia and ableism are institutionalized in public infrastructure through race science, gender oppression, and legacies of colonialism. Dr. [REDACTED] also identifies as "a first generation, fat, queer scholar of color."
2. [REDACTED]	Dr. [REDACTED] is an interdisciplinary scholar of Feminist Science and Technology Studies and Critical Race and Ethnic studies who demonstrates commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in all areas of her work, including her research, her feminist anti-colonial pedagogy, and her community collaborations. She also identifies as "a disabled scholar and queer woman of color."
3. [REDACTED]	Dr. [REDACTED] research centers the historical role of medical science in producing and perpetuating racial and gendered inequities. But beyond her historical research, she's actively engaged in addressing contemporary healthy inequities. This is evidenced, for example, in her lecture at Yale School of Medicine's inaugural Anti-Racism Session (for incoming medical students) and her active collaboration with SEICHE Center for Health and Justice at Yale. Her teaching and public-facing scholarship also consistently center themes of equity and justice in the medical sciences.
4.	
5.	

Diversity Statements in Practice: Ohio State

- For each candidate chosen for a campus interview, briefly describe how the candidate would contribute to the diversity of the department/school. How would each candidate amplify the values of inclusion and excellence? How does the candidate's teaching, mentoring, research, and/or outreach and engagement amplify diversity and inclusion? How would the candidate contribute to ongoing or new diversity and inclusion initiatives in the unit?

In alphabetical order:

- 1) [REDACTED] awareness of some of the challenges facing URGs in higher education is partly informed through his marriage to an immigrant in Texas in the Age of Trump. In his thoughtful diversity statement, he discusses his history of mentoring women and his commitment to integrating his commitment to diversity into his research.
- 2) [REDACTED] writes of the importance of considering a potential student holistically, including aspects beyond traditional measures such as test scores and grades. His experience as a student who needed to support himself while at university is not shared by all professors at top universities.
- 3) [REDACTED] has a history of leading an inclusive, diverse research program. He has mentored students and

Diversity Statements in Practice: Ohio State

2) As a white male [redacted] does not outwardly present as a diversity candidate. However, we want to call attention to [redacted] research which is focused on design for diversity equity and inclusion as exhibited by his most recent 2021 publication "Critical Race Theory, Design Education, and Change, Rehearsing Racial Equity: A Critical Anthology on Anti-Racism and Repair in the Arts ." We also wish to note that the College of Arts and Media at the University of Colorado Denver is an urban campus located in a less affluent community and strives to advance underserved student populations through



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Diversity Statements: Implications

- Diversity statements raise serious issues of academic freedom and free speech
- The practice has been substantially rolled back (Texas, MIT, Harvard, California, Michigan)
- One broader implication: the effects of ideological filtering remain.

Cluster Hiring

- Hiring multiple faculty members all at once across many disciplines.
- Notable: this allows administrators to expand their involvement through conditional funding for faculty lines.

Cluster Hiring in Practice: Emory University

- At Emory, heavy reliance on diversity statements
- Thematic focus on issues of race, racism, social justice.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Case for Cluster Hiring to Diversify Your Faculty

By Carla Freeman

October 9, 2019

Diversity statement, then dossier. Our first cluster hire took place in 2016-17 and involved an open-rank, open-field search across eight STEM units in the college, with more than 30 professors serving on various departmental search committees. It proved to be one of the most ambitious faculty recruitment efforts we had ever undertaken.

Cluster Hiring in Practice: NIH FIRST

- The NIH FIRST program began in 2020
- It gave \$250 million in grants for faculty hiring
- A key requirement: hiring had to heavily weigh diversity statements

Cluster Hiring in Practice: NIH FIRST

Morgan or Katie,
Can you say more about # 42. [REDACTED]? Is this a second look person that
NIH would like?
Jane

Hey all,

[REDACTED] would not qualify as a second look candidate per NIH's definitions.

Katie (since you've been part of the Math meetings) and the rest,

Should we give approval then for # 53. [REDACTED] and 7. [REDACTED]? (i.e.,
NOT approve # 42?). We've said that Math is really low on women.

Jane

Hi Jane,

Yes, that would absolutely be my recommendation. You might send the same email that you just
sent to SHS to math to explain our decision.

Katie

Cluster Hiring in Practice: NIH FIRST

Subject:

Re: NIH definition

Date:

Wednesday, April 12, 2023 8:31:02 AM

Hi Jane,

Yes, good luck!

For me as long as we are diversifying our departments and go with what we wrote in the proposal I am happy. I don't want to hire white men for sure, we did a very good job in the grant with the tables and numbers and that's what we should follow in my opinion.

Thanks

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Career Investment (case study: The Mellon Foundation)

LaVelle Ridley,
Assistant Professor,
Queer and Trans
Studies at Ohio State

Dr. LaVelle Ridley is a queer black transsexual writer and mentor whose interests emerge from the intersection of transgender studies, black feminist theory, and life writing studies. Dr. Ridley's research focuses on the radical cultural politics of black transgender women in the U.S. and advances an anti-capitalist, prison abolitionist agenda.



Career Investment (case study: The Mellon Foundation)

Ridley's Career Path

Mellon funding can follow scholar-activists through their careers. Consider LaVelle Ridley, an Ohio State professor. Ridley's research, as one speaker bio put it, "focuses on the radical cultural politics of black transgender women . . . and advances an anti-capitalist, prison abolitionist agenda." That agenda is Mellon-funded. As an undergraduate, Ridley was a Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Fellow. After graduate school, Ridley became a fellow at UC Berkeley through the Mellon-backed PFPF, researching the topic of "black trans insurgency." In 2024, Ridley began as a professor of queer and transgender studies at Ohio State, a faculty role created as a part of a series of cluster hires focused on "race, inclusion, and social equity." That year, Ridley's department received a grant from the Mellon Foundation and promised to "prioritize feminist leadership while supporting the critical study of race, gender and sexuality."

Career Investment (case study: The Mellon Foundation)

Ridley's Career Path

As a professor at Ohio's flagship university, Ridley continues to participate in, and benefit from, the Mellon Foundation's extensive network of activist-inflected, career-advancing programs. Take Mellon's work on gender. In 2024, Mellon gave the University of Kansas \$1 million for its Trans Studies at the Commons project. The grant proposal, which I acquired and [previously reported on](#), states applicants' intention to "galvanize efforts aimed at . . . social justice today." Specifically, program administrators promised to fight laws restricting "gender affirming care."

One key goal of Trans Studies at the Commons is to expand transgender studies. To that end, it created a virtual fellowship that would dole out small research grants to "scholar-activists" throughout the country. Ridley was selected as one of the program's first fellows.

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