

Does Race Get Short Shrift in Education Research and Teacher Training?

Frederick M. Hess, PhD, and Lindsey M. Burke, PhD

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Only two kinds of people could possibly claim that racism is never discussed in university settings: the disengaged and the dishonest.

At top-ranked colleges of education 48 percent of faculty include a “diversity keyword” as a research interest or area of study. At Berkeley, it is 78 percent.

So “White Fragility” author Robin DiAngelo’s assertion that top education programs are silent on racism is wildly and comically inaccurate.

In academia today, a heightened focus on issues of diversity and race has been accompanied by claims that education research, teacher preparation, and colleges of education have shortchanged these issues. It is conceivable that teacher training programs and education research can do a better job addressing race, since they educate more than one-half million aspiring educators annually in teacher preparation programs.

But those championing diversity, race, and equity do not merely argue that colleges need to do better. Rather, some of the most influential voices argue that such topics are functionally absent from the education school landscape. Robin DiAngelo, education consultant, television go-to, and best-selling author of *White Fragility*, asserts in chapter one of her influential volume, “I can get through graduate school

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6073>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

without ever discussing racism. I can graduate from law school without ever discussing racism. I can get through a teacher-education program without ever discussing racism.”¹

The danger is that such claims can be casually taken at face value—without regard to the facts of the matter. So, is the assertion actually true? What does the evidence suggest about the attention that the faculty at schools of education actually devote to this topic?

To answer these questions, we examined the research areas and biographies of faculty in colleges of education. For faculty who identify race, diversity, and equity as research areas, we examined whether those areas were the primary focus of their research and whether their scholarship is rooted in critical race theory.

Data

We sampled two sets of colleges of education: the top 20 schools of education as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report’s* 2020 Education School Rankings² and the top 20 schools of education by volume of teachers produced annually.³ Because Columbia University and Arizona State University made both lists, the final sample included 38 institutions.⁴

Methodology. For each education school, we examined all full-time faculty for a total of 3,190 core faculty—all assistant, associate, and full professors across the 38 institutions who had a publicly listed biography, CV, or research interest list. We also examined 237 adjunct faculty, 20 percent of the total adjunct faculty across the institutions in question.

We then coded each faculty based upon whether they identify issues of race, diversity, and equity as a primary field of study. We identified race, diversity, and equity as their primary area of study if this was stated in their publicly posted materials or if they described their research in a fashion that suggested it was organized around issues of race, diversity, or equity (e.g., “My research focuses on how race affects issue or outcome XYZ.”).

To determine whether scholars of race, diversity, and equity are part of the ideological faction invested in critical theory, we relied on keywords. Examples of keywords used to identify an individual as a more general scholar of race, diversity, or equity included terms like “discrimination,” “inclusion,” “human rights,” “race,” “school-to-prison pipeline,” and “social mobility.”⁵ Keywords used to identify scholarship as belonging to critical theory included such terms as “antiracism,” “Critical Race Theory,” “intersectionality,” “postcolonial theory,” “QuantCrit,” “Queer theory,” and “whiteness.”⁶

TABLE 1

Faculty Who Study Race, Diversity, or Equity

Faculty Type	Total Sampled	Number Who Study Race, Diversity, or Equity	Percentage Who Study Race, Diversity, or Equity
Adjunct Professor	237	72	30%
Assistant Professor	900	398	44%
Associate Professor	993	433	44%
Professors	1,286	561	44%

SOURCE: Authors' research.

IB6073  heritage.org

Results

Are schools of education giving short shrift to equity, race, and diversity? In a word: No. Not only is attention to this topic ubiquitous, but many of the top ranked and largest schools of education feature faculty whose agendas are steeped in critical theory.

Among the top-ranked colleges of education, 48 percent of faculty had a research interest or area of study that included one of the diversity keywords. This ranges from a low of 23 percent at Arizona State University up to 78 percent at the University of California-Berkeley. Among the colleges of education that produce the most teachers each year, 40 percent of faculty report that diversity is a research interest. That ranged from 8 percent at Central Washington University to a high of 70 percent at California State-Long Beach.

These numbers vary slightly when broken down by faculty type. As shown in Table 1, the percentages of faculty who study race, diversity, or equity are slightly lower for adjunct faculty compared to other faculty types, with 30 percent of adjunct professors studying race, diversity, or equity. For core faculty, 44 percent of the professors sampled within each group—assistant, associate, and full professors—studied race, diversity, or equity as a research interest.

Among the top-ranked colleges, 24 percent of faculty listed race, diversity, or equity as their *primary* area of study. Among the top teacher-producing schools, the figure was 17 percent. In short, large numbers of faculty study issues of race, equity, and diversity, and it is the area of primary interest for perhaps one out of every five professors. It is ludicrous to suggest that this topic is anything but central in most colleges of education.

Among the top-ranked colleges of education, and also across those that produce the most teachers, 13 percent of faculty indicate that they approach issues of race and diversity from the perspective of critical theory ideology. Since about 40 percent to 50 percent of all faculty study race, this means that at least between one-third and one-quarter of scholars who focus on race and diversity do so as critical theorists.

The Critical Race Perspective

Since it is simply inaccurate to suggest that faculty give issues of race short shrift at schools of education, a different question seems in order. Given that so many race-focused scholars use the lens of critical theory, it is worth asking *what they are actually teaching*. This is particularly true given the concern articulated by Sarah Lawrence College Professor of Politics Samuel Abrams, who suggests that “the various dictates of critical race theory” serve to promote “a logic of harm and victimization based on race and identity to the point that individuality is erased.”⁷

Rather than attempt to characterize what these critical race theory scholars are researching, it seemed most straightforward to note how these scholars explain their studies in their own words. What quickly became clear is that these scholars tend to think race permeates and defines every aspect of schooling.

At the University of Oregon, one full-time scholar focuses on “preparing teachers to challenge colonialism in curriculum, policy, and practice.”⁸ At the University of Pennsylvania, one faculty member’s research interests include:

[H]ow power and inequality are reproduced, especially in human learning and development, and the ways in which sociotechnical systems of quantification are working on, with, and in the body to generatively form and shape the movement and flow of power, difference, and inequality...[and] the potentialities of reconstituting sociopolitical relations and the movement and flow of social life.⁹

Another University of Pennsylvania scholar penned a book that “conceptualizes an alternative framing of bilingual education that re-centers political struggles against White supremacy.”¹⁰ At Stanford University, one faculty member “critically examines the ways students are criminalized and resist that criminalization through the mutually constitutive nature

of racism and ableism” and “how they interlock with other marginalizing oppressions.”¹¹

At Vanderbilt, one scholar examines “how interlocking systems of power, including racism, sexism, and heterosexism, shape unique experiences of oppression and resistance in undergraduate STEM education.”¹² Another Vanderbilt scholar, whose interests lie in “the intersection of urban and environmental studies, decolonial theory, critical race studies, feminist geography, social movements, and participatory research” focuses on “forms of algorithmic violence associated with data-driven planning.”¹³

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one assistant professor has written on “Critical Postmodern Methodology in Mathematics Education Research.”¹⁴ A Berkeley assistant professor works to “resist neoliberal logics that render math learning a stratifying project of race, class, and gender in schools.”¹⁵

Education Faculty Do Not Ignore Race

Claims that colleges of education give short shrift to issues of race, diversity, or equity are contradicted by the evidence. Indeed, scholarship on race, diversity, or equity constitutes a significant part of the research agendas of nearly *half* of all faculty training teachers today. Further, about one out of five faculty make clear that these issues are their area of primary study. Claims that race is peripheral at schools of education are simply unfounded.

The larger issue is that a substantial number of the faculty studying these issues appear to be doing so through the lens of critical theory—a politicized doctrine which rejects the notion of objective truth; approaches knowledge as a question of oppression; and emphasizes the importance of ascriptive characteristics like race, gender, and sexual orientation. A simple survey of public documentation suggests that many of these faculty may be inclined to approach their role as one more anchored in proselytizing than in pedagogy.

Conclusion

Donors, university trustees, legislators, and those concerned about the state of higher education should understand that the evidence does not support claims that there is a dearth of attention to diversity, equity, and race. There is, however, a place for hard questions about just what is being

taught under the banner of race, diversity, and equity—and how much intellectual diversity is on display in those institutions charged with preparing America’s future teachers.

Frederick M. Hess, PhD, is Resident Scholar and Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. **Lindsey M. Burke, PhD**, is Director of the Center for Education Policy and Mark A. Kolokotronis Fellow in Education, in the Institute for Family, Community, and Opportunity, at The Heritage Foundation. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) for Public Policy Research is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) educational organization. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors. AEI does not take institutional positions on any issues.

Endnotes

1. Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).
2. "Find the Best Education Schools," *U.S. News & World Report*, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-education-schools> (accessed March 16, 2021). The top 20 ranked colleges of education include: (1) Harvard Graduate School of Education; (2) University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education; (3) Stanford University Graduate School of Education; (4) University of California Los Angeles; (5) University of Wisconsin Madison School of Education; (6) Vanderbilt University Peabody College of Education and Human Development; (7) Northwestern University School of Education and Social Policy; (8) Columbia University Teachers College; (9) University of Michigan Ann Arbor; (10) New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development; (11) University of Oregon College of Education; (12) University of Southern California, Rossier School of Education; (13) Arizona State University Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College; (14) University of Washington College of Education; (15) Johns Hopkins University School of Education; (16) University of Texas Austin College of Education; (17) University of Virginia Curry School of Education; (18) University of Kansas; (19) Boston College, Lynch School of Education and Human Development; and (20) University of California Berkeley Graduate School of Education.
3. The top 20 colleges of education by volume of teachers produced annually include: (1) Grand Canyon University; (2) CUNY Queens College; (3) CUNY Hunter College; (4) Montclair State University; (5) Arizona State University, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College; (6) Texas State University; (7) Illinois State University; (8) Texas A&M; (9) CUNY Brooklyn College; (10) CSU Long Beach; (11) University of North Texas; (12) Brigham Young University; (13) Northern Arizona University; (14) Towson University; (15) Columbia University Teachers College; (16) Liberty University; (17) University of Central Florida; (18) Central Washington University; (19) University of Northern Colorado; and (20) Texas Tech (to replace Western Governors University).
4. Western Governors University, one of the largest producers of new teachers, does not have a faculty list available, so it was replaced with Texas Tech, the 21st-largest producer of new teachers.
5. Keywords in the category of broad diversity included: (de)segregation, achievement gap, affirmative action, African American, bias, Black, Chicano studies, cultural, cultural change, culturally responsive, disadvantage, discrimination, diversity, equity, ethnicity, feminist/m, gender issues, global citizenship, human rights, immigrant/immigration, inclusion, indigenous, inequity, interracial, Latino(x), LGBTQ+, microaggressions/macroaggressions, multicultural education, oppression, orientation, race, race/class/gender dynamics, radicalized, racism, school-to-prison pipeline, social mobility, socioeconomic disparities/dynamics, and implicit bias.
6. Keywords in the category of woke included: post-human studies, antiracism, Critical Race Theory, critical cultural studies, elite formation, feminist (methodologies), intersectionality, postcolonial theory, QuantCrit, queer (theory), radicalization, social justice, white/whiteness/white fragility/supremacy, and institutionalized racism.
7. Samuel J. Abrams, "Data Prove People Self-Censor in Fear of Woke Mobs," *Real Clear Policy*, March 23, 2021, https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2021/03/23/data_prove_people_self-censor_in_fear_of_woke_mobs_769331.html (accessed March 25, 2021).
8. "Leilani Sabzalian: Biography," University of Oregon, <https://education.uoregon.edu/people/faculty/leilani> (accessed March 25, 2021).
9. "Ezekiel Dixon-Román: Research Interests," University of Pennsylvania, <https://www.sp2.upenn.edu/people/view/ezekiel-dixon-roman/> (accessed March 25, 2021).
10. "Nelson Flores: Research Interests and Current Projects," University of Pennsylvania, <https://www.gse.upenn.edu/academics/faculty-directory/flores> (accessed March 25, 2021).
11. "Subini Ancy Annamma: Biography," Stanford University, <https://ed.stanford.edu/faculty/subini> (accessed March 25, 2021).
12. "Luis A. Leyva: Research," Vanderbilt University, <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/bio/luis-leyva> (accessed March 25, 2021).
13. "Sara Safransky: Research," Vanderbilt University, <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/bio/sara-safransky> (accessed March 25, 2021).
14. "Erika Bullock: Select Publications," University of Wisconsin-Madison, <https://ci.education.wisc.edu/fac-staff/bullock-erika/> (accessed March 25, 2021).
15. "Tessa Sengupta-Irving Research," University of California-Berkeley, <https://gse.berkeley.edu/tesha-sengupta-irving-shehers> (accessed March 25, 2021).