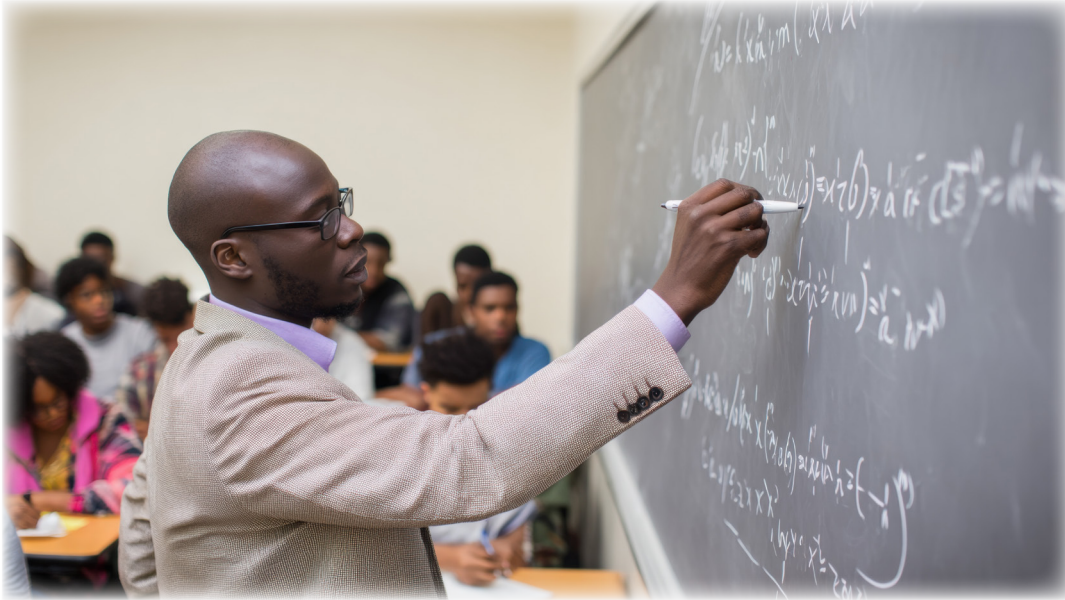




NEPC Experts Push Back Against *Atlantic* Author's Attacks on DEI



Amid the many attacks on DEI over the past several years, one has gained particular attention: an August 10th essay in [*The Atlantic*](#) authored by a former assistant professor named Tyler Austin Harper, who wrote about his experience as a Black faculty member at Bates, an elite liberal arts college in Maine. His critiques of DEI initiatives have gone [viral](#), including coverage from [NPR](#), [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), and [The Washington Post](#).

Austin Harper mocks the “wokeness” and “insufferable hypocrisy of elite academia.” He describes several experiences that he viewed as “tokenism,” including being asked to lead the college’s MLK Day celebration. Among his conclusions:

It had been obvious to me since my arrival at Bates that I was what conservatives like to call a “DEI hire”—that is, I likely wouldn’t have gotten the job were it not for the color of my skin. True, I’d gone to a top Ph.D. program, had prominent ad-

visers, scraped together an above-average amount of teaching experience, and graduated with distinction. I was more than qualified for the job I was hired to do. But was I more qualified than every other candidate who'd applied? Probably not.

Taking note of the essay and its uptake among DEI opponents, two NEPC Fellows offered some critiques of the critique: University of Southern California professor [Shaun Harper](#) and Western Michigan University professor [Julian Vasquez Heilig](#).

Vasquez Heilig is a former provost and dean whose research includes studies of how higher education curriculum, policy, and leadership impact equity. In a post on his personal blog, [Cloaking Inequity](#), he notes that Austin Harper draws most of his sweeping conclusions on the basis of a single faculty search in which Austin Harper felt that a candidate had reached the finalist stage even though her research was subpar—largely because she was Black and had experience with DEI work.

Search committees constantly and vigorously disagree about research quality, teaching effectiveness, methodological sophistication, interdisciplinarity, institutional fit, curricular needs, grants, future trajectory, and the relative importance of each criterion. One professor's obvious choice can be another's obvious rejection. . . . Yet from this experience, Tyler reaches for one of the most inflammatory analogies imaginable, describing what he witnessed as "a sort of woke Jim Crow." But Jim Crow was a system explicitly designed to subordinate Black people after slavery and Reconstruction. Whatever one thinks about DEI initiatives, comparing equity practices to Jim Crow does more than critique university bureaucracy. It collapses the profound historical distinction between an oppressive racial regime designed to exclude and subordinate Black people into an analogy that gives people who already oppose equity a remarkably comfortable argument: racial inclusion is simply Jim Crow in reverse.

Vasquez Heilig cautions that "Tyler's critiques can travel from *The Atlantic*, to liberal readers who send his essays to Black colleagues, to one of the country's most influential conservative legal gatherings. [He spoke

at the Federalist Society’s meeting.] Different audiences may encounter Tyler for different reasons, but his Blackness is giving particular authority to arguments about DEI, affirmative action, group identity, merit, and the qualifications of Black scholars that some readers may be far less comfortable making in public themselves without his permission.”

“But,” Vasquez Heilig concludes:

Black intellectual life has never spoken with one voice. We debate. We disagree. We challenge one another. That is not a weakness of diversity. **That is diversity.** No Black scholar gets to be the final word on Black people, Black faculty, or the policies designed to address generations of exclusion.

In a column in *Inside Higher Ed*, Shaun Harper, who founded the USC Race and Equity Center and is an expert in DEI and higher ed, adds his own perspective, albeit without drawing further attention to Austin Harper by naming him or linking to his work: “[I]t should not be presumed that one diverse person’s publicly reported experience is universal,” he writes.

Harper explains that anecdotes about the personal experiences of one Black faculty member do indeed have value, especially to the institutions where they occur. However, he posits that they should not “finance a ‘higher education is broken and DEI is the blame’ national tour based largely on anecdotes from a single institution where the headliner spent four to five years as a tenure-track assistant professor.”

Harper offers an alternative to paying six figures to bring a speaker like Austin Harper to campus to hobnob with faculty and deliver a speech. “[I]t would be fiscally much more responsible to invest resources into assessing their own campus climate,” he proposes. “Doing so will enable leaders and others to determine if employees on their campuses are experiencing phenomena similar to what the trending article author recounted about the culture and climate at a completely different, faraway institution.”

NEPC Resources on Higher Education

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