



Epsilon Theory

The Intellectual Rot of the Industrially Necessary University

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Photo credit: J. Sellers Hill for [The Harvard Crimson](#)

I've never met Claudine Gay, but I *know* Claudine Gay.

We both went to grad school at Harvard in the government department (what they call political science pretty much everywhere else), me from 1986-1991 and Gay from 1992-1998. We both got a masters degree and Ph.D. there. We both had the same dissertation advisor, famed statistical methodologist and all around nice guy Gary King, yet neither of us were statistical methodologists at heart. We both used regressions and econometrics as a toolkit to help us answer questions that we wanted to explore, Gay in American politics and me in international relations, and we were perfectly proficient with the tools, but we didn't really care about the tools. We cared about the questions. I didn't overlap with Claudine Gay chronologically at Harvard, but I overlapped 100% with the classes and the places and the people and the life.

After graduation we both did the tenure track publish-or-perish thing, but here the close similarities stop. Gay had a significantly more successful academic career than I did. I had a good start at NYU but ended up with tenure at SMU, which is pretty much a dead end in prestige academic terms. Looking back now, I can see how impatient I was with the game of academia and how poorly I played it. Gay started at Stanford and ended up with tenure at Stanford, which is anything but a dead end. Harvard brought her back with a full professorship within two years of that. Gay was patient, and she played the game extremely well.

Interestingly, we both stopped teaching a few years after getting tenure. Me to co-found a software company, which required leaving academia completely, Gay to go into university administration as a dean, which locked her into academia for life. There but for the grace of God ... I am SO lucky that I got out when I did.

I'll be saying a lot of critical things about American higher education in this note. I mean, it's got "Intellectual Rot" in the title, so I think you can tell where this is going. And throughout this note I'll be coming back to Claudine Gay as a manifestation of that rot, which will come across to some as if I'm saying critical things about her. I'm not. Or rather, I am, but not in the way that you probably think.

I've lived that life. I *know* that life. I *know* that Claudine Gay is an incredibly smart and accomplished human being. I *know* that anyone who believes that Claudine Gay is some sort of DEI or affirmative action hire, even in her miserably failed role as university president, is completely mistaken. I *know* that Claudine Gay is neither a 'plagiarist' nor an 'antisemite' in any reasonable sense of those words. But I also know this:

It's so much worse than that.

My god, if only Claudine Gay were an antisemitic plagiarist faker who conned everyone to undeservedly take the helm of Harvard University! How much easier this would all be if that were true, and we could 'solve' the problem by purging Claudine Gay and all the other Claudine Gays from American higher education.

But it's not true. It's not true at all.

The problem is not Claudine Gay. On the contrary, Claudine Gay is *exactly* the sort of person you would want to hire for your meritocratic organization. She would have absolutely killed it at Bridgewater or Citadel or (lol) Bill Ackman's Pershing Square if that's how she had wanted to apply her abilities.

The problem is the *office* of a university president or dean. The problem is the *system* of university administrators and faculty. The problem is the *role* of higher education in modern society, transformed from investment good into consumption good, serving as a gigantic Hogwarts sorting hat while masking an increasingly rigid and polarized caste system beneath.

The problem is the intellectual rot of the modern University that *perverts* and *diminishes* the works of its faculty and administrators, no matter how smart they are, no matter how accomplished they are, no matter how well-intentioned they are, a rot that *requires* plagiarism and *promotes* antisemitism.

Exactly like the medieval Church.

In form and function, the modern University IS the medieval Church. Our colleges and universities today play the same roles in American society as the Catholic Church played in European society for a thousand years, physically permeating every city and town, economically permeating every hierarchy of work, emotionally permeating every family, intellectually permeating every text. Americans today set the calendar and the cadence of their lives through their educational system in the same way that Europeans 800 years ago set the calendar and cadence of their lives through their religious system.

Did you know that one in every 11 Americans with a job ([May 2022 data](#)) works in educational services? The only sector that employs more Americans is healthcare. Within that broad category of educational services, three *million* Americans work for colleges, universities and professional schools, and about half that number are faculty of one sort or another. One and a half *million* college professors, all suspended in an enormous hierarchy of rank and titles, all supported and governed by an equally enormous and stratified bureaucracy of one and a half *million* staffers and administrators. We've changed the words ... *deacon*, *monk*, *priest*, *abbot*, *bishop*, *archbishop*, *cardinal* have become *adjunct*, *lecturer*, *professor*, *dean*, *provost*, *president*, *chancellor* ... but we've kept the structures and the forms. We've even kept the clothes.



Photo credit: Justin Knight for the [Harvard Divinity School](#)

Everywhere you look in America, you see the University. Colleges and universities are one of the top employers and top landowners in every city and town in the country. Every airport, every bus stop, every commuter rail station is plastered with their billboards and advertisements. Every weekend and most every night your TV offers up hours and hours of live sports programming from colleges and

universities. Growing up in North Alabama, I joke that I grew up in the Church of Bear Bryant, but it's not really a joke.

One hundred and forty-five million Americans are current or former college students, all sharing essentially the same multi-year experience.

One hundred and forty-five *million*.

The University is an [industrially necessary institution](#), meaning that it is irreplaceable in our social fabric and is legitimized through immensely powerful belief structures. These belief structures are largely tacit, not because they're weakly held, but on the contrary because they are universally held and not at all up for debate. In other words, as powerful and omnipresent as the physical institution of higher education is in our lives, our shared belief – our faith! – in the institution of higher education is even more powerful and omnipresent. Our most fundamental Common Knowledge structure – what we all know that we all know! – is this:

Getting a good education from a good college is the path to a better life for ourselves and our children and our children's children. Amen.

This is the shared belief of every American, regardless of race, class, age, religion, ethnicity or political party. Understand *this*, and you understand American society and politics and economics in the year of our lord 2024 at a tectonic level. Replace “a good education from a good college” with “God's blessing from the Church” and you understand European society and politics and economics in the year of our lord 1517 in the same way.

But just as higher education today has the same social importance and central social role as religion in the Middle Ages, it also has the same failings. Cultural elitism, [economic rapaciousness](#), intellectual rot ... everything we complain about the University today was complained about the Church then. The specific complaints were different – I mean, plagiarism and antisemitism were considered features in the Middle Ages, not bugs – but for all its centrality to everyday life, there was at least as much muttering and complaining about priests and bishops then as about professors and university presidents today. Still, “Yay, Church!” provided an ample Narrative shield against any break in the common knowledge structure, just as [“Yay, College!”](#) does today.



Until this guy came along.

I give you Johann Tetzel, the Claudine Gay of 1517.

Tetzel wasn't as smart or accomplished as Gay. He was a friar and an inquisitor, not an archbishop like a Harvard president would have been back in the day, and he wasn't an administrator at all. He was a salesman. And what he sold were *indulgences*, a get-out-of-purgatory-free card – a literal piece of paper – signed by your local bishop or archbishop, that would reduce the punishment you would receive in the afterlife for your sins before you were allowed to enter heaven. There's

a long history of indulgences in the Catholic Church, all stemming from the idea that the good works you do in this world should have some reward in the next, with the result that lots of churches and hospitals and orphanages and the like were built by rich guys as penance for their sins. Nice! But you can probably see where this is going. Hey, why don't we cut out the real-world building of churches and hospitals and orphanages, and just sell these indulgences for cash to the mass affluent market? And hey, why should these indulgences be limited to people alive today as forgiveness for their sins, when we could sell them to grieving descendants of the dead as forgiveness for *their* sins? I mean, who isn't gonna pay up to whack 10 years off the purgatory sentence for dearly departed granny and get her through those Pearly Gates pronto? To put it in terms that my Wall Street friends will understand: in the early 1500s the Catholic Church securitized an afterlife-backed promissory note to pay down its construction loans and fund a special dividend to senior management, and Johann Tetzel was the lead derivative sales guy.

And he botched it.

Exactly like Claudine Gay, Tetzel waaay overplayed his hand. He was too eager. He couldn't read the room. When a hostile ~~Republican Congresswoman~~ German bishop publicly asked him if his ~~DEI~~ policies indulgences allowed for ~~students to call for the death of Jews and the destruction of Israel~~ parishioners to purchase forgiveness for future sins not yet committed, he doubled-down on a legalistic, procedural explanation of indulgences and ignored their obvious perversion of the original virtues they were intended to support. Exactly like Claudine Gay, Johann Tetzel was a catalyst for fundamental change in the ~~University~~ Church.



Martin Luther (1483-1546)

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther sent a long ~~email~~ letter to his bishop complaining about Tetzel's sale of indulgences in Germany to fund the Pope's construction of St. Peter's (yes, that St. Peter's! *the* St. Peter's!), and he ~~tweeted~~ posted his "95 Theses" ~~thread~~ paper on the door of the

Wittenberg church. Not only did Luther's observations about the blatant ~~antisemitism, plagiarism and woke bullshit~~ corruption in the Catholic Church strike a chord with the general public, particularly among those who had paid up for a crazily expensive ~~diploma~~ indulgence that Luther said was probably worthless, but it also mobilized many ~~Republican politicians~~ German princes and electors who saw this as a powerful wedge issue they could use in their power struggle with ~~Democrats~~ the Pope. And thus the Protestant Reformation was born.

Luther pointed to two pillars of the Catholic Church that specifically allowed the securitization of indulgences and more generally poisoned the Church's core mission by creating a *system* of offices and roles that perverted and diminished the efforts of *all* priests and bishops, no matter how smart or accomplished or well-meaning they were.

1) Divine truth can only be understood through learned intermediaries who interpret and teach the holy texts, not directly from the holy texts themselves.

2) Eternal reward can be achieved through externally-expressed good works and externally-expressed observation of the proper forms, without reference to an internally-held faith.

Luther's answer to this intellectual rot at the heart of the Catholic Church came in two phrases: *sola scriptura* and *sola fides*.

Sola scriptura means "by the Bible alone". It's a rejection of the Catholic doctrine that the path to understanding God's Word is *only* through an institutionalized priesthood that interprets the Bible for you and teaches you its true meaning. Instead, Luther wrote – as did Peter – that all baptized Christians are a priesthood in and of themselves, each able to understand and interpret the Bible directly, without intermediation.

Sola fides means "by Faith alone". It's a rejection of the Catholic doctrine that good deeds on Earth, in and of themselves, have a reward in the afterlife. Instead, Luther wrote that eternal reward comes from living an authentic (i.e., externally and internally consistent) life of Faith. Doing good deeds on Earth is an *effect* of living an authentic life of Faith, not a *cause* for some payoff after you're dead.

THE TWO FUNDAMENTAL FAULTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE AGES:

1) TRUTH CAN ONLY BE KNOWN THROUGH AN INSTITUTIONALIZED CASTE OF LEARNED INTERMEDIARIES

2) EXTERNAL, PROCEDURAL DISPLAYS OF 'VIRTUE' ARE PRIZED AND REWARDED IN AND OF THEMSELVES

ARE THE SAME FUNDAMENTAL FAULTS OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY.

Not kinda sorta the same fundamental faults, but *exactly* the same fundamental faults. The University expresses these faults secularly today and the Church expressed these faults religiously then, but there's zero difference between University and Church in the essence of their failings.

And here's the kicker, true then and true now: the larger these institutions become, the worse these failings become *at an increasing rate*. Why?

Because there is no scalable way to demonstrate authentic learnedness.

Because there is no scalable way to demonstrate authentic virtue.

There is no way *to keep score* in institutionalized academia or institutionalized religion like there is in institutionalized markets (money) or institutionalized politics (votes), meaning that there is no internally consistent and externally verifiable clearing mechanism for learnedness or virtue at scale.

And so we fake it.

We fake learnedness and virtue at scale.

How do we do that?

To answer that question I first need to describe two linguistic constructions we have in Epsilon Theory-speak: the yay-something construction, like “*Yay College!*”, and the trademark-something construction, like *Bitcoin!™*.

We use yay-something for the *narrative constructions* of the Nudging State and Nudging Oligarchy, as prominent representatives of the most powerful institutions cheer on a simplified version of a complicated topic to avert any criticism of their self-interested manipulation and control of the topic.

We use trademark-something for the *institutional structures and practices* that create this real-world manipulation and control of the topic, structures and practices that collect hidden rents of money or power or prestige in a perversion of the topic's original intent or meaning.

They go together like peanut butter and jelly, the yay-something construction providing narrative cover for the real-world corruption of trademark-something. For example, today you can see mainstream Wall Street institutions aping the words and memes of “Yay, Bitcoin!” like laser eyes, even as they market and promote Bitcoin!™ products like ETFs that are a perversion of the original goals and virtues of Bitcoin.



Or for an example a little closer to home with this note's subject, the Harvard Extension School – a non-competitive, “no application required”, degree-granting entity within Harvard University – offers

a Harvard!™ “graduate certificate” for the low, low cost of \$12,880 in fields such as *Digital Storytelling* (“learn how to produce and distribute journalistic content through engaging, innovative digital formats”), *Museum Studies* (“gain a deeper understanding of what it takes to be an agile museum practitioner for the twenty-first-century museum”) and *Social Justice* (“develop an understanding of the economic systems, such as capitalism, socialism/egalitarianism, and the welfare state, and societal structures conducive toward cultivating a just community”). Here’s the Harvard marketing photo for your Social Justice graduate certificate, in case you were wondering.



<https://extension.harvard.edu/academics/programs/social-justice-certificate/>

But all of this pales in comparison to my personal fave Harvard!™ program: *Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Leadership*, where “through self-reflection and the application of lessons from history, psychology, legal studies, social sciences, and management studies, you will cultivate skills to develop and lead diversity and inclusion initiatives”.

Mmm, yes, self-reflection. Not quite sure how that’s graded, but I’m sure it’s a rigorous thing. Reminds me of the old Woody Allen joke – how he was caught cheating on a metaphysics exam because he looked into the soul of the guy sitting next to him.

Anyhoo ... friends, what you really need to know is that this is not just an ordinary graduate certificate, this is an **EDIB Leadership Certificate**.

EDIB Leadership Certificate Overview

With a graduate certificate in Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB) Leadership, you can become a powerful voice for strategic change within your organization. You will gain critical knowledge and skills to address bias and marginalization and to foster an inclusive corporate culture.

Through your coursework, you will:

- Develop a strong understanding of history, bias, and power and privilege in the workplace
- Identify the opportunities and challenges of developing diverse, inclusive, and equitable initiatives and policies
- Become a more effective diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leader
- Learn to facilitate productive conversations that address equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Create a plan for addressing a real-world organizational challenge in DEI

<https://extension.harvard.edu/academics/programs/equity-diversity-inclusion-and-belonging-leadership-graduate-certificate/>

You'll be pleased to know that the Harvard Extension School accepts MasterCard, Visa, American Express, and Discover for the \$12,880 "tuition" for your 4-course, online *Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Leadership* graduate certificate program. They do, however, recommend that "to avoid delays in payment processing, use a credit or debit card without a daily charge or transaction limit and enter the billing address exactly as it appears on your credit card statement." Sage advice, to be sure. Also, and I can only guess they feel the need to warn about this because the issue has come up a time or two, "Harvard Extension School is not responsible for fluctuations in international exchange rates or interest charges due to the timing of credit or debit card charges or refunds."

"YAY, HARVARD!"

Sadly, federal, state and institutional loans and financial aid are not available for graduate certificates, not even the world-renowned **EDIB Leadership Certificate**, oddly enough. However, "you may consider applying for a credit-based private student loan to assist you in financing the courses required for admission to a program", and the Harvard Extension School would be delighted **to connect you directly with those private lenders**. To parse this language for you, Harvard is saying that you actually can't get a private student loan directly for the vaunted **EDIB Leadership Certificate**, but if you represent that you intend to use these courses as part of your preparation for admission to an actual academic program (not credit! no one gives you credit for ~~crap like this~~ the **EDIB Leadership Certificate**, but you can mention it in your application), you can get a loan for *that*.

So when I ask “*what does it mean to fake learnedness and virtue at scale?*”, I suppose I could just keep on giving you Harvard!™ examples, but I’d rather make this a broader exercise.

What does it mean to fake learnedness and virtue at scale?

It means mouthing the words of “Yay, Academic Research!” and following the forms of Academic Research!™, most notably by requiring and rewarding the publication of formulaic, derivative crap. Much of Academic Research!™ is p-hacked, non-replicable, essentially fabricated work. Even more of it is plagiarism, not only of the obvious *oops-sorry-I-forgot-the-quotation-marks* variety, but also of the much more damning *there’s-not-an-original-bone-in-my-body* type.

It means mouthing the words of “Yay, DEI!” and following the institutionally scalable forms of DEI!™ in student admissions, student life, and faculty hiring and promotion practices, rather than acting authentically to further the very real and very important virtues that are non-capitalized, non-sloganeered, non-scalable diversity, equity and inclusion. It means turning an instrument of penance for past sins into a bureaucracy of Inquisition for future sins born of heresy.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH!™

Academic Research!™ starts with grad student Ph.D. dissertations, and I’ll focus on two that have recently come under fire for plagiarism: [Claudine Gay’s 1997 political science dissertation](#) and [Neri Oxman’s 2010 material science / computerized design dissertation](#). I’ll be giving my personal views on the intellectual merit of these works, based on my 15-year professional experience in reading, advising and writing dissertations, and I’ll start with this simple truth: *all dissertations are somewhere between 95% and 99.9% formulaic, derivative crap, and they skew waaaay to the 99.9% side*. What distinguishes a “good” dissertation in the authentic, non-scalable sense of the word isn’t whether you sufficiently switched around a few words or whether you really should have used quotation marks in that particular example of paraphrasing. It’s whether or not you wrote anything BUT formulaic, derivative crap.

I don’t know what to tell you, folks. ‘Discovering’ plagiarism in dissertations is like ‘discovering’ a holding penalty by offensive linemen in the NFL. [If you look hard enough, there is offensive holding on every play in professional football](#). Sure, it’s ‘legal’ holding if you keep your hands inside your shoulder pads and don’t pull the defensive player to the ground, just like it’s ‘legal’ plagiarism if you switch around a few words and don’t copy too overtly. But it’s holding/plagiarism all the same! Playing professional football successfully *requires* an offensive linemen to hold the defensive players. It is literally part of the game. Ditto professional academia.

The authentically good dissertation – like Claudine Gay’s, which won the departmental prize for best dissertation that year – is the one that is *only* 95% formulaic, derivative crap, that has a whiff of an original idea buried somewhere deep within. Did Claudine Gay repeat pretty much verbatim some of

her dissertation advisor's published words about how to describe some arcane stochastic distribution in the by-rote section of her dissertation where you must dutifully repeat the Rite of Methodological Soundness? Of course she did. So did I. So did every solo-authored dissertation in the past 50 years (and don't worry, all you STEM Ph.D.s who replaced a dissertation with being the umpteenth author on a couple of journal articles, I'll get to you in a second). What Gay did is plagiarism in the same sense that repeating some doctrinal catechism about transubstantiation as written by some abbot of whatever in the 13th century is plagiarism ... it's *required* plagiarism to observe the proper forms of fake learnedness at scale. It's small, stupid stuff that makes everyone's eyes glaze over to read, it is the modern equivalent of describing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and it *must* be included to allow reviewers to check the box of "learnedness".

AND it is plagiarism.

Ditto for the dissertation written by Bill Ackman's wife, Neri Oxman. It is also, IMO, an authentically good dissertation, meaning that it is only 95% formulaic, derivative crap and has a whiff of an original idea buried deep within. It's a different kind of idea – honestly a bigger idea than Gay's – but less originally and thoughtfully executed. Does it surprise me that [Business Insider](#) gives multiple examples of Oxman lifting entire passages verbatim from Wikipedia? No, of course not. 95% of the entire dissertation is essentially a collection of dutifully cited Wikipedia-esque entries, one example after another of forms following function in nature, each example a jargon-heavy mile wide and a Wikipedia-inch deep. The examples are interesting to read if they're new to you, but then you hit a section on a topic you know something about and you think, "my god, the author has a *completely* superficial understanding of this topic ... hey, I wonder if the topics that were new and interesting to me are also shallowly understood ... nah, can't be." It's one long exercise in [Gell-Mann Amnesia](#), but that's what it means to have a dissertation – even a perfectly fine dissertation like Oxman's – overwhelmingly made up of formulaic, derivative crap. Checking the box of "learnedness" *requires* a grad student to cover every possible tangential reference that their advisors bring up, so many references that they cannot possibly be understood in more than a superficial, Wikipedia-esque manner.

AND it is plagiarism.

Again, these are the good dissertations! At least there is a redeeming quality in the smattering of original ideas found in Gay's and Oxman's dissertations, at least there is an *effort* to say something new and different. There's not even that in the vast majority of solo dissertations, where you may find *hundreds* of direct quotes and endless chapters of paraphrasing others. No plagiarism here! Bah. No, it's worse. It's just *all* formulaic, derivative crap, just as far as the eye can see. It's all *Good Will Hunting* all the time. *Of course that's your contention!*

Why are the vast majority of dissertations like this, devoid of any meaningfully original thought?

Because the purpose of a dissertation is not to "advance knowledge" or some such poppycock.

The purpose of a dissertation is to get a job.

The purpose of a dissertation is to serve as an entrance exam and certification of ‘learnedness’ for the one and a half *million* intermediaries that are *required* by the industrially necessary American system of higher education.

The top four graduate departments in pretty much any academic discipline can supply more than enough bodies to fill every tenure-track research scientist position available in the country. But we have scores of Ph.D. graduate departments in every academic discipline! Why? Because we need *bodies*. Because we need *labor*. Because every year we need thousands of freshly minted, pathetically paid, non-tenure-track post-docs and teaching fellows and adjunct professors – all of whom have been certified as ‘learned’ through their completion of a dissertation – to intermediate knowledge in an institutionally cost-effective way for the 19 million college students in the United States today. I mean, most of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) disciplines don’t even go through the charade of a dissertation before they ~~hand you a rifle~~ give you a Ph.D. and ~~throw you into the front lines~~ give you a lab/TA job as a lowly infantry grunt post-doc. Just get a grad student by-line on a couple of journal articles published out of your principal investigator’s research lab, and there’s your job application/certification right there. It’s a more honest way to churn out the worker drones, really.

It gets worse from there.

The industrially necessary requirement to publish formulaic, derivative crap doesn’t stop after you finish your dissertation and get that initial job certification. Nope, now your publishing isn’t to get a job, but to keep your job. To keep your funding. To keep from admitting to yourself that you’re just a middling parish priest. To satisfy your administrative superiors who have constructed an elaborate scheme of demonstrating “the advancement of knowledge” through the publication of still more formulaic crap in academic journals. To play the game at a professional level.

Like I said earlier, Claudine Gay played the game really well.

Is Claudine Gay’s original dissertation idea a big idea? an important idea? Nah. It’s a nicely framed and nicely investigated small idea (*does having a black representative in Congress make the white voters in that district less likely to vote, all other things being equal?*), the answer to which (*yes, most of the time it seems to have a small but consistent effect in many but not all states*) might not seem terribly surprising to you. And that’s okay! This is bread and butter accretive research. It’s fine. More than fine. It’s a journal article. But it’s not a career, at least not a career in the big leagues. It’s not a big idea. It’s not a ‘research program’. It’s not gonna get you tenure at Stanford and a professorship at Harvard. For that you need a big idea.

To play the game, Gay had to puff up her nicely framed and nicely investigated small idea into a big idea, and the problem with that is that once you start the puffery, you have to continue. You can’t stop. You can’t walk it back. Plus there’s no *time* to come up with another idea, maybe a bigger idea, and research and study *that*. Nope, the clock is ticking. Publish or perish is no joke, not if you want to stay on that prestige track of Stanford and Harvard.

So you start to fudge things around the edges a little bit.

Oh, nothing terrible. I'm not making any accusations that haven't already been made, and I think that some of the accusations that have been made are nonsense. But like I say, I *know* this life. I know how the game is played. You find a 'data reliability' reason to carve out a district or two that was giving you outlier results. Maybe the reason for fiddling with the scope of the data is totally legit; certainly it will be defensible. But by the most amazing coincidence, the observations that fit your regression well are *never* eliminated for data reliability reasons. You try a dozen different operationalizations of a variable and you only present the one that worked best, memory-holing the 11 pretty similar operationalizations that were meh. You stumble across a set of variables and a regression technique that p-tests well and you work backwards to come up with a hypothesis that this result 'tests', and then you rewrite your introduction to incorporate that hypothesis as a blindingly obvious deductive idea.

To put it in terms that my hedge fund friends will understand, this is all in-sample testing. Nothing is *ever* tested out of sample. *Every journal article that uses data, i.e. everything that isn't a purely formal methodological flight-of-fancy, is a backtest.* Every single one! And that's an enormous problem for anything other than fake learnedness at scale. Why? Because in the real world, the non-academic world, the world of actual money put at actual risk by investing in an idea or a model or an empirical result, you never fully trust a backtest. You might be intrigued by a backtest. You might dig into everything around the backtest, looking for supporting evidence and supplemental tests. You might decide to invest in the team or the pedigree or the theory anyway, but you never invest in *just* a backtest, because you know how easy it is to slliiide your way into statistically significant results. Not because you think the author is a cheater or a liar, but because it's the way smart people solve a puzzle they care about ... they *will* find a solution. It's not *wrong*. It's not a *lie*. It's just ... how you play the game.

The problem is that we don't call it a game. We don't even call it a job. We talk about teaching as a *calling*. We have profound, deep-seated common knowledge structures that there is an inherent *goodness* in teachers (and nurses, not coincidentally another non-scalable, poorly paid profession), even to the extent that we celebrate great teachers (and nurses) as *saints*. We have profound, deep-seated common knowledge structures that there is an inherent *nobility* in professors (and doctors, not coincidentally another non-scalable, decently paid profession) in that their learnedness and academic research are somehow in public service and somehow derive to the public good. And if, god forbid, a teacher/professor should get on the wrong side of that common knowledge, like Claudine Gay did with her "plagiarism" ... well, no punishment is too great for a *sinner* like that.

Enough.

We must be brave enough to call things by their proper names.

DISSERTATIONS ARE ACADEMIC JOB APPLICATIONS.

JOURNAL ARTICLES ARE A CLEARING MECHANISM FOR THE *GAME* OF INDUSTRIALLY NECESSARY ACADEMIA.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ASCRIBE VIRTUE (LEARNEDNESS/TRUTH) TO DISSERTATIONS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES THROUGH ANY CURSORY EXTERNAL REVIEW, AND IT IS A TERRIBLE MISTAKE TO BASE POLICY ON VIRTUES ASCRIBED IN THIS WAY.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ASCRIBE SIN (PLAGIARISM/ANTISEMITISM/RACISM/ALL-THE-ISMS) TO DISSERTATIONS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES THROUGH ANY CURSORY EXTERNAL REVIEW, AND IT IS A TERRIBLE MISTAKE TO BASE POLICY ON SINS ASCRIBED IN THIS WAY.

Does virtue in the form of authentic learnedness and truth exist in academic research and publishing? Absolutely! But it is revealed through *time* as that learnedness and truth are replicated and built on and polished and honed and advanced and it is revealed through *transparency* as the underlying data and discoveries are made available for everyone in the field to kick and prod and poke.

Does sin in the form of authentic plagiarism and data fabrication exist in academic research and publishing? Absolutely! But it is similarly revealed over time and transparency as those lies and shortcuts fail to support replication and new results, as confounding work and original thought comes to light.

Would it be nice to have more authentic learnedness and less authentic plagiarism emerge from the University? Absolutely! And to achieve those goals, we should require a LOT more transparency and allow a LOT more access to ALL underlying data, research findings and publications. But this isn't what is poisoning our society.

What poisons our society is when politicians use "Yay, Academic Research!" to pass a new law or regulation, when they say "studies show" this or "studies show" that.

What poisons our society is the purging of university administrators and faculty for "plagiarism" or "antisemitism" or "transphobia" or "racism" or any other externally scalable evaluation of their published work.

In both cases it's ascribing virtue or sin to the industrially necessary practices of Academic Research!TM. It's pure sophistry. Everything that Democratic politicians say about what academic studies "show" for their preferred policies *and* everything that Republican politicians say about what academic studies "show" for their preferred policies ... everything that Bill Ackman says about Claudine Gay's plagiarism *and* everything that Business Insider says about Bill Ackman's wife's plagiarism ... it should ALL be setting off your bullshit detector like crazy.

But it doesn't. Set off your bullshit detector, I mean. Because we've been told "Yay, Academic Research!" for so long and we want to believe in academic virtue and learnedness so badly that we are *played* – again! – by politicians and oligarchs and their media Renfields.

If it's any consolation, it's not just all of us on the outside of academia that are being played. It's everyone on the inside, too.



And that brings us to DEI!™.

DEI!™

You know who understands the game better than anyone? Who understands that both their clients and their employees have a ridiculously romanticized narrative about academic virtue and learnedness stuck in their heads, and that this *totally* works to their advantage? Why it's the massive, industrially necessary, non-scalable institutional edifice of American higher education, of course. And they have gleefully adopted the common knowledge structures of "Yay, College!" and "Yay, Academic Research!" to give everything they do an aura of sanctification, a halo-effect of good, a shield behind which they can be their money-grubbing and power-grubbing and otherwise-grubbing true selves.

But as much as this massive, industrially necessary, institutional edifice of American higher education is money-grubbing and power-grubbing and otherwise-grubbing – and it is! – it is ALSO staffed and led by some of the nicest, smartest, most sincerely caring people in the world.



Image credit: [NBC News](#)

Sally Kornbluth, Elizabeth Magill and Claudine Gay ... you may not believe me and you may not care, but I am telling you that these are good, smart people who care enormously about the wellbeing of their university's students ... ALL of their university's students. That's true for every college administrator I've ever met – from assistant deans to university chancellors – and I've met a lot of college administrators.

But also as a rule, college administrators believe in their heart of hearts that American society in general and institutions of higher education more specifically have sinned greatly in the past through discrimination and exclusion, and they are determined to right those wrongs. College administrators – because they are such nice, intelligent, caring people – want to *atone* for their institution's money-grubbing and power-grubbing and otherwise-grubbing sins, not in the next world but in this world, now.

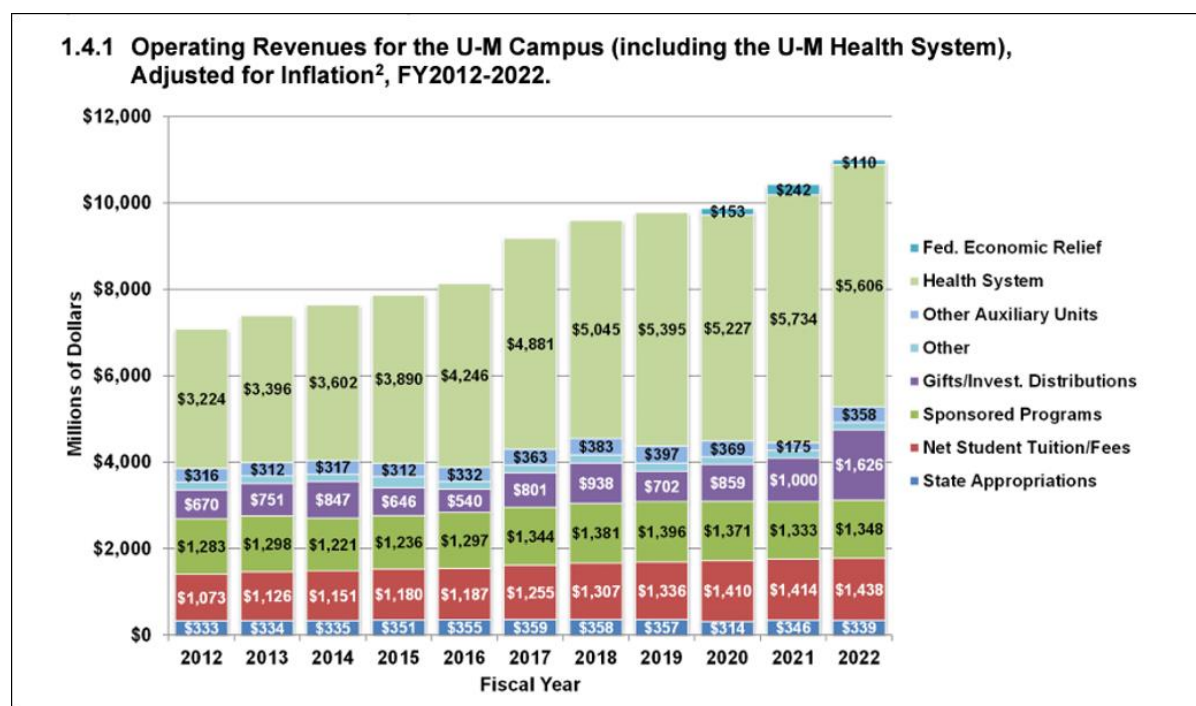
They seek *penance* for their institutional sins, and the easiest, quickest, most efficient way to do that is through an indulgence.

If you have the money – and god knows our universities have the money – then you *buy* your way into being a penitent, sin-absolved institution by hiring a group of earnest “facilitators of productive conversations” who have self-reflected enough to come to a “strong understanding of history, bias, and power and privilege in the workplace” and are prepared to do the hard work to “foster an inclusive culture” across the university. You don't build a hospital or a monastery or a chapel as penance for your sins and the price of your indulgence like you would have done 1,000 years ago. No, today you build a DEI Office.

DEI!™ is a secular indulgence, purchased not by well-meaning, wealthy individuals for their families but by well-meaning, wealthy administrators for their institutions.

Here, we’ve been picking on Harvard to illustrate our points so far, so let’s move to a big, prestigious state school – the University of Michigan – to illustrate this one.

This academic year, there are 33,500 undergraduates at the flagship Ann Arbor campus (I’m not counting the UMich hospital or the Dearborn or Flint campuses), about equally divided between in-state and out-of-state students. Tuition plus average room and board for in-state students is more than \$30,000 per year for the 2023-2024 academic year, and for out-of-state students it is more than \$71,000 per year. **Operating revenues in 2022** for the University of Michigan ex-health services were more than \$5 billion, of which net tuition was only about \$1.4 billion. The largest source of operating revenue was “gifts and investment distributions” of \$1.6 billion. Sponsored programs (research grants) contributed \$1.3 billion, and the state of Michigan contributed more than \$300 million. The federal government has contributed about half a billion dollars to the University of Michigan since 2020 through various pandemic “emergency support” programs. I am not making this up.



Source: [University of Michigan](#)

Anyway, it’s pretty clear that UMich is not hurting for money, with operating revenues ex-health services up about 25% (from about \$4 billion to about \$5 billion) over the past ten years per this chart, *on an inflation-adjusted basis*. **On an actual dollar basis, operating revenues for the University of Michigan ex-health services are up more than 50% over the past ten years, significantly outpacing both inflation and student admissions.**

Now let’s look at how these increasing revenues played out in faculty and administration/staff headcount.

In 2023, there were **3,195 tenured and tenure-track faculty** at the Ann Arbor campus, about 1 for every 10 undergraduate students. In 2014, there were 3,051 tenured and tenure-track faculty, for a 4.7% growth rate over the past ten years. Not 4.7% per year over ten years, but 4.7% total over ten

years. Oh wait ... actually, all of that increase came between 2014 and 2019. The tenure-track faculty headcount has actually gone down over the past four years.

In 2023, there were **4,994 full-time non-tenure-track and “supplemental” faculty** at the Ann Arbor campus, faculty who typically go by the title of “Lecturer” or “Instructor” in the UMich lexicon. In addition, there were more than 1,000 post-docs at the university, but it’s unclear how many post-docs teach. In 2014, there were 3,801 non-tenure-track and supplemental faculty at Michigan, which ties out to a 31.6% increase over the past ten years, and about the same in more recent years.

In 2023, there were **18,422 “regular” administrators and staff and another 5,745 “supplemental” staff** at the Ann Arbor campus, for a total of more than 24,200 administrators and staff (again, I am not counting the UMich hospital, which has more than 20,000 administrators and staff of its own). In 2014 there were 13,937 “regular” administrators and staff, for a 32.2% increase over the past ten years, also increasing at a similar rate in more recent years.

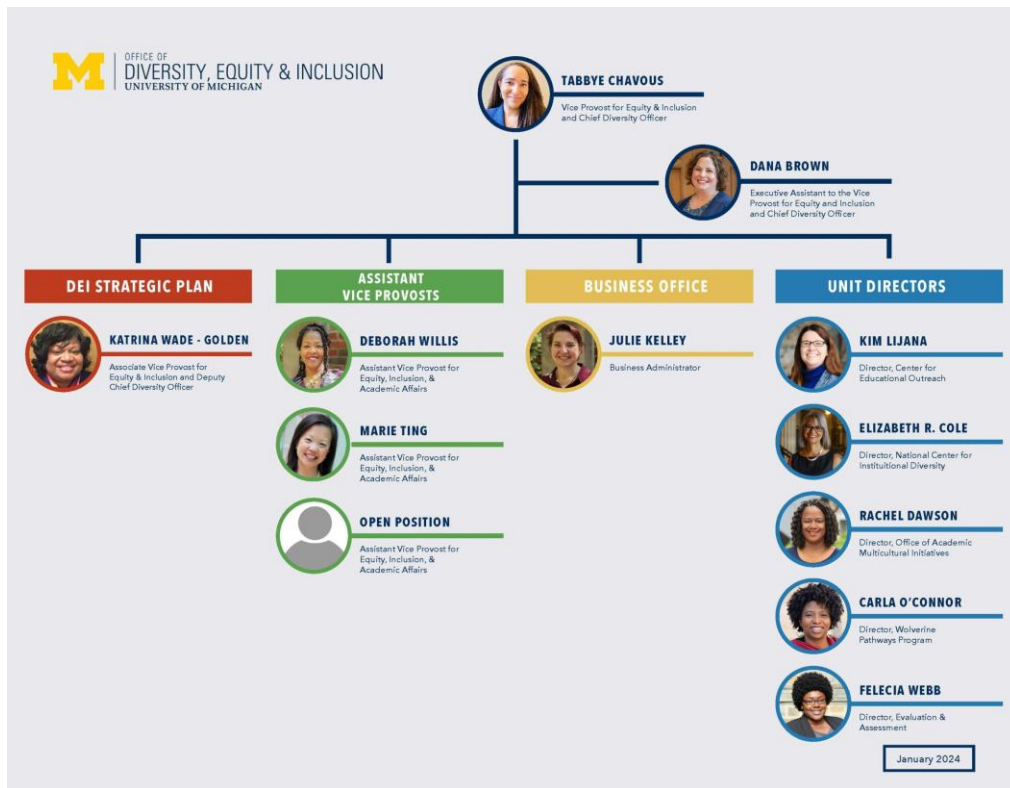
OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HAS ADDED 5,307 ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFFERS TO ITS HEADCOUNT, AS WELL AS 1,193 NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY. OVER THE SAME PERIOD, THEY HAVE ADDED A TOTAL OF 144 TENURED AND TENURE-TRACK FACULTY.

OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HAS ADDED 2,008 ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFFERS TO ITS HEADCOUNT, AS WELL AS 529 NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY. OVER THE SAME PERIOD, THEY HAVE *ELIMINATED* 7 TENURED AND TENURE-TRACK FACULTY POSITIONS.

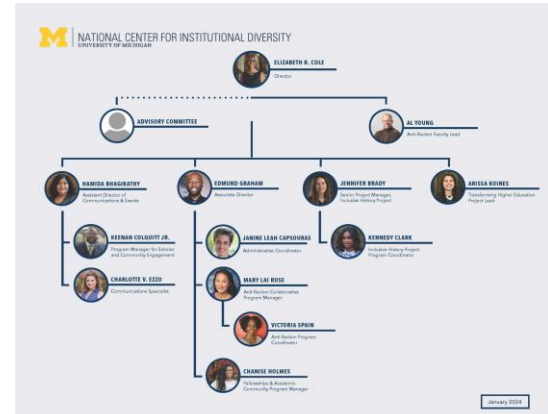
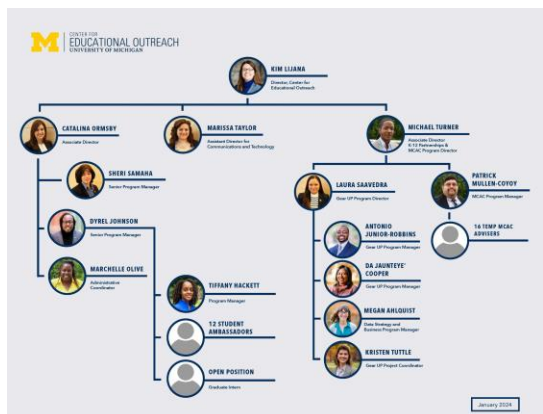
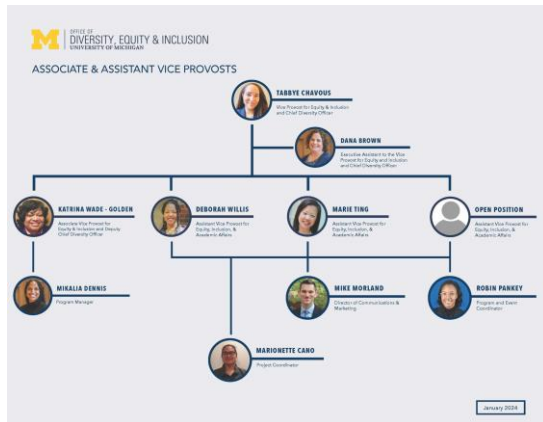
What does it mean when I say that the industrially necessary, institutional edifice of American higher education is money-grubbing and power-grubbing and otherwise-grubbing? This. What does it mean when I say that higher educational systems are non-scalable? This.

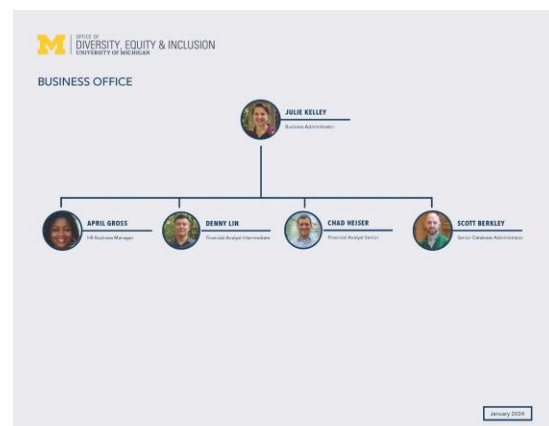
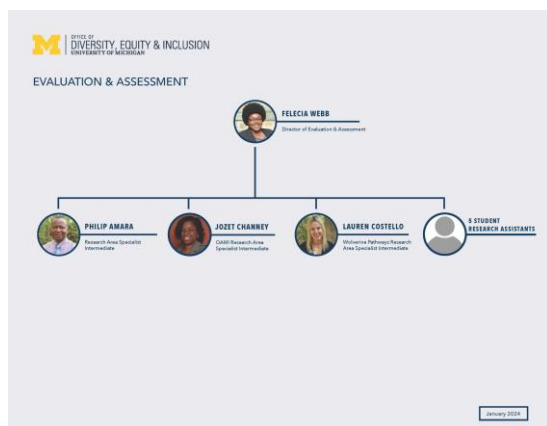
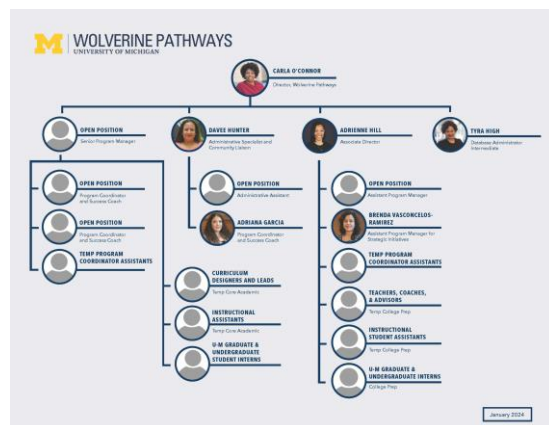
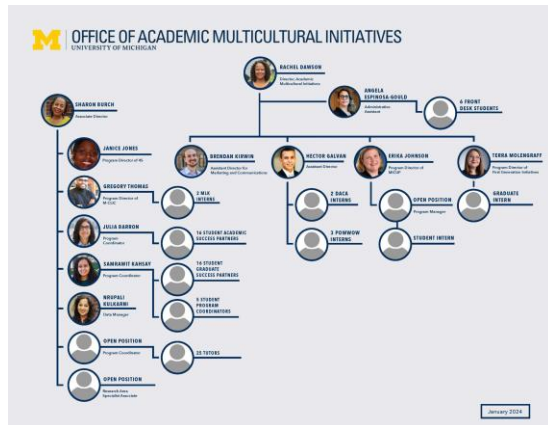
But I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet, which is the 100+ person DEI office, launched in 2016, now with an annual budget of more than \$18 million.

Below are the org charts for the Office of DEI, taken directly from [their website](#).



<https://odei.umich.edu/leadership-staff/>





Pretty nice org charts, amirite? I mean, they have 3 dedicated employees for creating “collateral” like this, but still. As best I can tell, the Office for DEI is the only administrative office at the University of Michigan that publishes beautiful org charts like this, and that’s important for understanding the indulgence nature of DEI!™ and the desire for penance that underpins all of this.

No one is trying to hide DEI programs within the University. There’s nothing secret or conspiratorial about all this. On the contrary, Michigan trumpets the Office of DEI and its staff and its initiatives,

unlike any other administrative staff and initiatives. It is *extremely* public, exactly like rich sinners in the Middle Ages were *extremely* public with the hospitals and schools and chapels they built as penance for their sins. Indulgences are intended to be extremely public!

Note that these org charts are for the formal Office of DEI and do not include an additional **125 administrators and staff** with DEI functions in the 51 individual University of Michigan schools and programmatic “units”, each responsible for developing their own “DEI unit implementation plan”, all coordinated with the Office of Strategic Planning within the Office of DEI. In total, the administration of DEI programs accounts for about 1% of all University of Michigan administration and staffing, which maybe seems like a lot to you or maybe seems like a little (to me it seems like a lot). But it’s not so much the absolute numbers of DEI administrators that’s critical, but their dispersion throughout the university. **From sports to academics to student life to business affairs to maintenance, DEI cadres are formally embedded in ALL University of Michigan schools, departments, programs, functions and offices.**

It’s exactly what the Soviet Union did with political officers throughout its military units. It’s exactly what the Chinese Communist Party does throughout every important institution in Chinese society today. More to the point of this note, it’s exactly how the papal Office of Inquisition was set up ... a central office in Rome, and then individual Inquisitors formally embedded in every archdiocese, monastic order, department and office. Only about 1% of the total administrative staff, but distributed in such a way that its reach and influence were far greater than its numbers.

Did I mention that Johann Tetzel’s official position in the Catholic Church was that of Inquisitor?

Hold that thought.



We have much more to do before our community is as diverse and welcoming as we envision. I remain committed to DEI being a major focus of my presidency, and I look forward to joining you as this important work continues into DEI 2.0.

Santa J. Ono, President



This academic year, the Office of DEI – with the full support of university president Ono, who is a very smart, very nice guy and believes strongly in redressing the institutional wrongs of the past – is fully engrossed in the extremely public rollout of [DEI 2.0](#), which “represents the University of Michigan’s continued commitment to ensuring a diverse, equitable and inclusive community with even more sharply defined goals, new innovations and investments, and enhanced measures of accountability—shaped and informed by our own university community.”

DEI 2.0 is an significant expansion of the Office of DEI’s reach at the University of Michigan, well beyond its original mission, which they refer to, reasonably enough, as DEI 1.0. That 1.0 mission, similar to original DEI missions in pretty much every college and university in America, was to atone for the discriminatory sins of the past. It’s neatly summed up here:

DIVERSITY	EQUITY	INCLUSION
We commit to increasing diversity, which is expressed in myriad forms, including race and ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, culture, national origins, religious commitments, age, disability status and political perspective.	We commit to working actively to challenge and respond to bias, harassment and discrimination. We are committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all persons and do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, religion, height, weight or veteran status.	We commit to pursuing deliberate efforts to ensure that our campus is a place where differences are welcomed, where different perspectives are respectfully heard, and where every individual feels a sense of belonging and inclusion. We know that by building a critical mass of diverse groups on campus and creating a vibrant climate of inclusiveness, we can more effectively leverage the resources of diversity to advance our collective capabilities.

DEI 1.0 manifested itself in some silly ways, like in an official [Office of DEI calendar](#) that includes more transgender “holidays” (International Transgender Day of Visibility, Transgender Awareness Week, Transgender Day of Remembrance) than Christian holidays (Easter and Christmas), but for the most part I’d characterize the initiatives of DEI 1.0 – like a [merit scholarship program for non-traditional and disadvantaged graduate students](#) and a [free college prep and college guidance program for 7th through 12th graders in poor school districts of Detroit, Southfield, Ypsilanti and Grand Rapids](#) – as *exactly* the sort of programmatic penance that all big state universities should be undertaking. This is really good stuff!

But these 1.0 programs, while continuing, are not at the core of DEI 2.0. Here's what's new in [DEI 2.0](#):

DEI Education and Training Resources

Curriculum in DEI 2.0 will move beyond awareness into the realm of skill building. Targeted programming will help equip our leaders with the strategies and techniques needed to:

- Prevent workplace issues and retaliation
- Disrupt bias
- Engage in anti-racism dialogue
- Build psychological safety in the workplace

DEI 2.0 is intended to “move beyond awareness” in university faculty and staff, and to start *educating* and *training* university faculty and staff in the creeds of Anti-Racism and Social Justice.

Anti-racism: This institutional change approach to advancing DEI is compatible and aligned with the values and goals of anti-racism.

While there are a variety of ways to define anti-racism, generally it is an active process and commitment to analyzing self, systems, ideologies, practices, and policies that produce and reinforce inequalities in access, opportunity, legitimacy, safety, and life outcomes based on race. Anti-racism explicitly challenges systems and norms grounded in white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Anti-racism also seeks to transform institutions toward ways of working and interacting that value and honor the full humanity of all people. U-M's strategic plan definitions of DEI encourages attention to many areas of diversity - including race and racism - and the DEI efforts of many across our campus are specifically focused on anti-racism.

Justice: Justice involves bringing to the center those communities that are most marginalized and vulnerable and prioritizing those communities in change planning and efforts.

A key premise is that doing so achieves equity and uplifts all. Justice involves taking stock of historical harms done to different communities and building this knowledge into planning and action. Justice is about disrupting, sharing, redistributing power. Working from our DEI institutional change model, U-M's DEI efforts seek to broaden access such that members of all communities have equitable opportunities to enter, participate and thrive. As such, these efforts must account for differences in the experiences and opportunities of different communities. From the perspective of our framework, in order to leverage the benefits of diversity - we must create the conditions of equity and true inclusion. By definition, this means that things must change (with “things” meaning who has power, influence, and voice in priorities and decision making).

Education and training to what end?

To the prevention of sinful thoughts, which in turn will surely lead to sinful deeds.

What are those sinful thoughts?

Any understanding of the non-capitalized concepts of diversity and equity and inclusion and racism and justice that has not been sanctioned by the learned intermediaries of an Office of DEI.

What are those sinful deeds?

That by *not* publicly professing the sanctioned texts of Anti-Racism and Social Justice, you are inherently acting *for* racism and *against* justice.

DEI!™ is an indulgence against the sins of the future that are born in the sinful thoughts of today, what would have been called heresy in another day and time.

Did I mention that Johann Tetzel expanded the sale of indulgences from penance for past sins to penance for future sins?

Once again, we must be brave enough to call things by their proper names.

DEI PROGRAMS ARE A MODERN, SECULAR INDULGENCE, A PURCHASE OF SECURITIZED PENANCE FOR PAST SINS.

THE INEVITABLE EVOLUTION OF INDULGENCES, BOTH MODERN/SECULAR AND HISTORIC/RELIGIOUS, IS AN EXPANSION OF THEIR SCOPE FROM SINS OF THE PAST TO SINS OF THE FUTURE.

A FORMAL BUREAUCRACY OF INQUISITION — AN INDUSTRIALLY NECESSARY MEANS TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL SINS OF THE FUTURE— IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE EVOLUTION OF INDULGENCES, AND FATALLY SUBVERTS THE FUNDAMENTAL VIRTUES OF THE HOST INSTITUTION, BE IT CHURCH OR UNIVERSITY.

THE MODERN BUREAUCRACIES OF INQUISITION — FOUND TODAY IN OFFICES OF DEI THROUGHOUT AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION — MUST BE DISMANTLED IF THE FUNDAMENTAL VIRTUES OF THE UNIVERSITY ARE TO SURVIVE.

DEI!™ transforms an Office of DEI from an instrument of penance into a bureaucracy of Inquisition, charged with ferreting out heretics, requiring public protestations of faith, and re-educating the faithless.

And this is the tragedy, as the zeal for Inquisition – and there is no zeal like Inquisitional zeal! – blinds everyone in the institution but particularly its leaders to the reality of what is *actually* virtuous and what is *actually* sinful.



This is how the University loses its soul.

Just as the Catholic Church lost its soul.



Johann Tetzel



Martin Luther



The Thirty Years War, 1618-48

This has all happened before.

And I think it's all going to happen again.

The Reformation that Johann Tetzel catalyzed and Martin Luther instigated led to some of the bloodiest, most violent events in the history of the world. About 20% of the entire population of Germany died as a direct result of the Thirty Years War, with some states suffering population losses of 50% or more. Why were the events that Tetzel and Martin Luther set in motion ultimately so bloody? Because the political potentates and popinjays of the 16th and 17th centuries embraced the sundering of an industrially necessary institution like the Catholic Church for their own ambitions.



Photo credit: Ken Cedeno for [Reuters](#)

Just like today.

My hope is for a new Reformation that reshapes the meaning and common knowledge structures of the University through internal reform, not external pressure.

Which is what the Catholic Church did. Eventually. After it lost so, so much. After the world lost so, so much.

I hope we can get there more easily this time.

It's not a crazy hope.

It's not a crazy hope because there is a reservoir of positive energy as deep as humanity itself in the grad student who wakes up every morning thinking about that puzzle she can't quite solve just yet, in the adjunct who feels that on-stage rush every time he gets in front of the classroom, in the tenured research prof who still gets butterflies while waiting for the latest assay to run, in the dean and chancellor and president who care more than you can *possibly* imagine about the well-being of their students.

Academics aren't fake; they are our *best*.

But they are trapped in a system that sucks that positive energy right out of their souls, that fakes learnedness and virtue at scale, that perverts and diminishes their work, yes, but even more so *them*.

I know that a lot of them get it. I know that a lot of them will join us in our efforts to reshape the University through internal reform.

Our Reformation is for them. And for us. It's not a single action and it's not a purge. It is a rebuilding and a reframing. It is a shift in our common knowledge.

But a Reformation it must be all the same.

95 Theses? So far I've got eight. To be continued ...

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- 1) **DISSERTATIONS ARE ACADEMIC JOB APPLICATIONS.**
 - 2) **JOURNAL ARTICLES ARE A CLEARING MECHANISM FOR THE *GAME* OF INDUSTRIALLY NECESSARY ACADEMIA.**
 - 3) **IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ASCRIBE VIRTUE (LEARNEDNESS/TRUTH) TO DISSERTATIONS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES THROUGH ANY CURSORY EXTERNAL REVIEW, AND IT IS A TERRIBLE MISTAKE TO BASE POLICY ON VIRTUES ASCRIBED IN THIS WAY.**
 - 4) **IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ASCRIBE SIN (PLAGIARISM/ANTISEMITISM/RACISM/ALL-THE-ISMS) TO DISSERTATIONS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES THROUGH ANY CURSORY EXTERNAL REVIEW, AND IT IS A TERRIBLE MISTAKE TO BASE POLICY ON SINS ASCRIBED IN THIS WAY.**
 - 5) **DEI PROGRAMS ARE A MODERN, SECULAR INDULGENCE, A PURCHASE OF SECURITIZED PENANCE FOR PAST SINS.**
 - 6) **THE INEVITABLE EVOLUTION OF INDULGENCES, BOTH MODERN/SECULAR AND HISTORIC/RELIGIOUS, IS AN EXPANSION OF THEIR SCOPE FROM SINS OF THE PAST TO SINS OF THE FUTURE.**
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