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Inclusion and Equity in the University: Reflections of a Teacher-Scholar-Administrator

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I began my professional career as a teacher-scholar in French Studies, a seemingly benign academic identity that was in fact fraught. I learned early on never to expect the model academic life in which teaching and scholarship flow naturally from each other. Indeed, because of the nature of my scholarship, institutionalized structures of French curricula, and the realities of the academic marketplace, there would be a fundamental disjunction between my research and my teaching.

As a literary scholar, I studied colonial discourses of race from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, with a focus on French Romanticism. I grappled with the histories of slavery, colonialism, and resistance in the francophone world, explored representations of colonized subjects, and interrogated race as an analytic category in Romantic novels. But at job interviews and in my first teaching positions, it became clear that the texts and historico-cultural materials of my research would rarely find their way into my classroom. First, the paucity of jobs in my field meant that if I were to land a tenure-track position, it would most likely be as a “generalist,” teaching a broad array of undergraduate courses in French language and literature, and not courses within my research area. Second, although the global reach of the French language dates back to centuries ago, undergraduate French curricula were Hexagon-focused both in framework and in course sequencing. With the exception of some attention paid to *francophonie* (which referred primarily to 20th- and 21st-century literature originating outside of France), an understanding of France’s active role in the global forces of colonial capitalism from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries was not considered to be foundational or indispensable for a student of French Studies. I am speaking of course of the core French curriculum, and not of specialized electives, where I had a little more leeway to introduce such topics.

The necessity to disrupt this (false) divide between my teaching and scholarship took on a particular urgency when I started as an Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston, a majority-minority campus where almost 60% of American undergraduates identify as belonging to a minority group. More than half of our students are the first in their family to attend college, and most work long hours off campus to pay for their education. A significant number of incoming undergraduates transfer into UMass Boston from community colleges, and students’ average age surpasses the 18-21 range. Several of our students are parents and caregivers; some are veterans. The French classroom mirrors the heterogeneity of the UMass Boston population, and a substantial number of French students are of Haitian or francophone African descent.

When I started teaching in the Modern Languages Department (now known as the Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department), my own commitment to inclusive teaching and the university's stated mission of social justice collided against an ossified French curriculum that had not been updated in decades. A case in point was the required *Civilisation* course, a staple offering in French programs that functions as a historical education for students of literature. Whereas *Civilisation* textbooks spoke at length about old regime social structures and the French Revolution, they made no reference to France's slave colonies (which contributed to France's global economic power during the *Ancien Régime*), or to the Haitian Revolution, whose geopolitical impact was perhaps as consequential as that of the French Revolution. Transforming the curriculum was an arduous process. It entailed introducing courses framed thematically rather than chronologically, desegregating course content so as to place colonial and metropolitan texts in conversation with one another, making course sequencing more flexible and expansive, and integrating relevant courses from other departments into the French major (for instance, courses related to European colonialism or revolution in History, or Caribbean-focused classes from the Africana Studies department).

Since those early days, I have taken on several formal and informal leadership roles at the university. I currently serve as Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, which houses nineteen humanities and social science departments. With a bird's-eye view of the college as a whole, I consistently encounter issues of professional equity and diversity in the portfolios that I oversee, and in my responsibilities as advisor to the Dean. First and foremost is the issue of faculty hiring. Prior to coming to the Dean's office, as Chair of my department I argued for a tenure-track line in Arabic, a language area that was absent from our department's programs, and crucial in my mind for our students' exposure to the Middle East and North Africa. The department now has an established minor in Arabic Studies, a significant enhancement in the diversity of our offerings. Although final decisions about faculty lines are made primarily by the Dean and Provost and dictated by budgetary and programmatic constraints, I have the opportunity in my current role as Associate Dean to provide some input on prioritizing positions that move us closer to creating a faculty body that is representative of the students that we serve. Another arena is that of service and gender equity: studies show that women faculty do disproportionately more service on college campuses in the absence of commensurate rewards. As I am closely involved in the creation of committees, task forces, and other initiatives across the college, I am vigilant about how service work is allocated, and more importantly, how it is evaluated and rewarded by the college leadership at the time of personnel reviews and the calculation of salary merit. Finally, I now reflect upon access and inclusion on behalf of students in the liberal arts more broadly, beyond the French classroom. For example, I direct the Undergraduate Research Portfolio program of the College of Liberal Arts, a program that aims to make research an activity that is accessible to the larger student body, and not just the exclusive domain of the most academically talented students accepted into our Honors College, or those who pursue a full-fledged thesis. In recruiting, mentoring, and guiding students to completion in this program, I must strive to keep the requirements both flexible for students with demanding work and family commitments, and rigorous enough to stand them in good stead for graduate school and professional life.

In my research, I have encountered francophone writers and thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the abbé Grégoire, George Sand, and Victor Séjour, to name a few—who

meaningfully associate racial inequality, class inequities, and gender discrimination in ways that we might recognize today as “intersectional” thinking. The texts that I study may belong to a long-gone era, but their scrutiny of inequity and social justice is surprisingly instructive in thinking through the questions of fairness and parity that we face today in the academy.

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