

Schools Must Resist Destructive Anti-racist Demands

Contrary to what activists seem to believe, campuses are not bastions of social injustice.

By [*John McWhorter*](#)

After George Floyd's killing last spring, protests have flowered on many campuses, and so have manifestos demanding that the schools fully commit themselves to an anti-racist agenda. More are likely as the school restarts and we move into spring. Some may feel that the enlightened course is to simply satisfy these demands out of a commitment to America's ongoing racial reckoning. However, just as many will see a mismatch between actual conditions on these campuses and the nature and tone of the manifestos, as well as the protest actions usually accompanying them. Administrations must decide where racial reckoning becomes racial wrecking ball, even amid a sincere commitment to addressing racism both open and systemic.

At Princeton last summer, [350 faculty members](#) signed an anti-racist manifesto that described the school as founded upon the pillars of its oppressive past, requiring an overhaul of faculty, curriculum, and admissions procedures to fumigate the campus of an all-permeating racism. Its nearly 50 demands included "exponentially" increasing the number of faculty of color; mandatory anti-racist training focused on identifying participants' "vulnerability" and fostering "productive discomfort"; rewarding the "invisible work done by faculty of color with course relief and summer salary;" and most controversially, the formation of "a committee composed entirely of faculty that would oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research, and publication on the part of faculty."

At Bryn Mawr College, anti-racist activists accused of intimidating students and faculty not actively involved in the protest essentially [shut down the school](#) last semester. Here, the claim was that Bryn Mawr is infested with a climate of racism that threatens Black students' survival, and the "strikers," as they titled themselves, demanded additional funding for the Black student center, a halt to evidently systemic "violence" against disabled students, and payment (as well as grade forgiveness) for protesters' anti-racist "work" during the "strike." President Kim Cassidy gave the "strikers" leeway, [allowing](#) some professors to cancel their classes or reformulate them into tutorials on anti-racism. Cassidy apologized for characterizing the strikers and their actions in a negative light.

At New York City's Dalton School, an elite private K–12 prep school traditionally a conduit to the Ivies, 129 faculty and staff members this summer signed a letter circulated among faculty, staff, and parents that was later leaked to the [Naked Dollar blog](#). The letter recommends, among other things, redirecting 50 percent of donations to New York City public schools; the hiring of 12 full-time diversity officers, as well as a full-time supporter of Black students with complaints; the elimination of tracked courses by 2023 if Black students don't perform as well in them as white students; public anti-racism statements from all employees; and an overhaul of the entire curriculum to reflect diversity narratives.

At Northwestern University, activism has been more targeted, focusing on the elimination of the [campus police force](#). Along with this issue, however, activists have called for exhuming the demands of Black protesters at the school in 1968. Even here, a certain disproportion is apparent between the demands and the tenor of the protest, which has included property damage, intimidation, blocking streets, and burning a banner in front of President Morton Schapiro's home.

As extreme as these documents and actions seem, they would qualify as legitimate if these campuses actually were bastions of social injustice. This is doubtful.

My colleague Conor Friedersdorf has documented that even some of the faculty who signed the Princeton petition were not necessarily united in adherence to its specific demands, or in agreement as to the depths of the university's depravity. Many wanted, simply, to deliver a nebulous acknowledgment that some anti-racist efforts would be beneficial. Although racism surely exists at Princeton, as it does throughout American society, Princeton is not the utter sinkhole of bigotry and insensitivity that the letter implies. American universities have long been more committed to anti-racism than almost any other institutions. Princeton is where, for example, Woodrow Wilson's name was recently [removed](#) from the name of the School of Public and International Affairs in acknowledgment of his implacably racist beliefs—albeit in response to student pressure.

The issue, as so often, is degree. Most liberals will acknowledge that it is useful and even urgent for institutions such as Princeton to be vigilant against subtle biases in attitudes and procedures. The question is whether, despite this modus operandi having been well established in such places for a few decades now, they remain so infested with entrenched racism that transformational manifestos such as the Princeton letter constitute progress as opposed to manipulation.

Figuring out where to draw the line is ever elusive, but one clarifying development in the Princeton case was, of all things, a threatened [civil-rights investigation](#) of the university. The United States Department of Education announced over the summer that, in light of the Princeton manifesto, it was looking into whether the university had been misrepresenting itself in reporting adherence to federal nondiscrimination law—i.e., whether it had gone afoul of legislation designed to protect students.

This approach was, of course, a ploy, rather than a sincere search for injustice. It was part of the Trump administration's callow play to the "populist" sentiments of its voter base as well as evidence of an overall numbness to even basic concern with issues of race, racism, equity, and racist legacies. However, the fact remains: If Princeton is really a place where the demands in the letter would be appropriate, then the idea of the school being formally investigated for racist practices shouldn't seem so absurd. A Princeton truly all about racism, bigotry, discrimination, obstacles, and inattentance to same—as the faculty letter richly implied and even stated—would be gracefully submissible to charges of civil-rights violation.

The only way to make sense of this contradiction is to allow that Princeton's problems must be much subtler, and also have much less actual effect, than what civil-rights law is designed to address. And if the letter refers to matters so elusive and indirect, one must question the uncompromising, alarmist extremity of the letter.

This skepticism is equally applicable to the other manifestos. At Bryn Mawr, as at pretty much all small, elite liberal-arts colleges in the 21st century, "woke" ideals are deeply inculcated and largely unquestioned; one can assume that most 19-year-olds have heard of the term *intersectionality*; and racism is considered the quintessence of human evil. The protests there were motivated not by an on-campus event, but by the police killing of a Black man a half hour's drive away in Philadelphia.

Dalton has made serious efforts to [accommodate the concerns and needs](#) of students of color, just a few years ago sponsoring a multi-school [workshop](#) on race, privilege, and community building, and assembling a student body that is substantially [nonwhite](#). That even these efforts may have left an imperfect situation is natural, but the idea that Dalton is such a heartless bastion of white privilege that it needs to be blown up at its foundations is less constructive than it is Kabuki.

The [letter](#) at Northwestern asks that the university recommit to the demands made by Black students who took over the bursar's office in 1968, with the implication that these were all but ignored by a callously racist institution. They weren't. The [1968 demands](#) included a Black dormitory, a Black student center, an increase in financial aid for Black students, Black-studies courses, and a Black psychological counselor. Today, all of those things exist except the Black dormitory, including not just Black-studies courses, but a whole African American—studies department, created in [1972](#).

Unmet demands included a call for Northwestern to meaningfully help uproot [racism in Evanston](#), Illinois, where it is located. This task would be Herculean, and, more than that, beyond the purview of what a university is supposed to be. Students in the '60s also wanted the university to admit half of its Black students from the inner city. This kind of experiment seemed promising 50 years ago but has long since been proved unwise: The unforgivable but undeniable effects of long-term poor education in depressed neighborhoods make it all but impossible for [students to get by at selective universities](#). Systemic problems in elementary and secondary education are, again, beyond the scope of a university.

Not only are these manifestos' depictions of the institutions overblown, but many of the demands in question would destroy the institutions themselves. At Dalton, all of the new hires and the

shunting of 50 percent of donations to New York City public schools would represent an enormous financial strain; eliminating tracked courses would be a huge blow to student competitiveness. At Bryn Mawr, where the administration essentially gave the “strikers” what they wanted, protests left students there bereft of genuine education for weeks in favor of simplistic agitprop hovering around the single topic of anti-racism. Some parents said they [planned to withdraw](#) their children from the school, and the optics of the strike, including especially the unpunished intimidation of students in disagreement (who may have constituted the majority of the student body), will likely reduce future applications. If Northwestern did commit the amount of money it would take to even make the appearance of attempting to uproot “racism” from Evanston, that would mean less funding for, as an example, counseling for Black students and the new Black student center currently under construction. And a Princeton supervised by a punitive Star Chamber of people appointed to smoke out “racism” would instantly become the least attractive of the Ivies to students, parents, and even faculty.

In our times, [New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio](#) and [various public-health officials](#) piously refrained from criticizing protesters gathering in close ranks and shouting together in the middle of a pandemic driven by an airborne pestilence, opining that agitation for racial justice was more important than spreading a lethal disease. We must wonder, then, how confidently university leaders will be able to resist the demands that would destroy the very functioning of their institutions.

But awkward and painful as it may be, they must. They must resist destructive demands, even by self-proclaimed representatives of people of color, and even in a society where systemic racism is real. To give in to anti-intellectual, under-considered, disproportionate, or hostile demands is condescending to the signatories and the protesters. It implies that they can do no better, and that authorities must suspend their sense of logic, civility, and progress as some kind of penance for slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, and the deaths of people such as Floyd. That “penance” would hurt only the community in the end, through lower educational quality.

Thus the model must be classics professor Joshua Katz at Princeton, who last summer took issue with the Princeton letter in a [Quillette](#) article, pointing out that the demands would lead to “civil war on campus,” and calling out a Black student association that serially harassed several Black students who disagreed with its philosophy. (Inadvisedly, he referred to the association as a “terrorist” group.) Predictable calls on social media for his dismissal were not successful because his tenure would have made it difficult, but in September, the American Council of Learned Societies withdrew his recent appointment as one of the federation’s two delegates to the Union Académique Internationale, on the basis of the social-media response to his article.

Katz is suing the ACLS. He is not an exemplar of white fragility, but a model for the future, in arguing for the very survival of the institution to which he has dedicated a career. He does not deserve to have honors stripped away from him for the service.

The writers of manifestos might classify resistance as racist, denialist backlash. But the civil, firm dismissal of irrational demands is, rather, a kind of civic valor. School officials must attend to the fine line between enlightenment and cowardice—for the benefit of not only themselves, but the Black people they see themselves as protecting.

*[John McWhorter](#) is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*. He teaches linguistics at Columbia University, hosts the podcast [Lexicon Valley](#), and is the author of the upcoming [Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter Then, Now and Always](#).*