University Mission Statements and Whiteness

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Abstract

Universities create institutional statements to communicate their founding principles, their goals, and ideals to students, faculty, and staff. In the age of neoliberalism, it has become customary for institutions to add verbiage about their commitment to diversity or diverse populations. These statements often highlight the institution on its efforts towards diversity, acceptance, and inclusion. While these statements seem to be promoting these ideals, my analysis shows that they can actually perpetuate white normativity on campus and in society. I argue that the combination of colorblindness, neoliberalism, and rhetorical strategies of whiteness used in institutional statements create a different experience for students of color. This paper examines the ways that mission and diversity statements at three universities exhibit rhetorical characteristics of the discourse of whiteness.

Introduction

According to the George Mason University website, the university was founded in 1954 and was named after one of the founding fathers of the United States. George Mason was a fourth generation slave owner after he inherited his father's over 300 slaves but is noted by historians to be one the few founding fathers who was very outspoken against slavery (Broadwater, 2009). Mason is also noted for being a key creator of the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, which later became the inspiration for the Bill of Rights still used today in the U.S. constitution.

In 2016, George Mason University was named one of the most ethnically diverse schools by the U.S. News and World Report's Campus Ethnic Diversity list. On September 21st, 2016 a student organization called Honors College Black Ambition held a discussion named "Caja. Millie. Tom. Liberty: The Forgotten Narrative" to discuss the problematic past of George Mason from the perspective of its students of color. According to their GetConnected page, HCBA is "intent on creating a diverse presence within Mason's Honors College," and chose to name this event after four of the slaves that Mason owned. During this discussion, the students wanted to highlight the historical context of George Mason's history with slavery, his relationship with Africans, and his core values as a person. The president of the organization ends the discussion by asking his peers, "Do equal rights actually apply to everyone at Mason?"

Despite the reports, statements emphasizing inclusion at George Mason, and their mission statements, students of color still felt a false sense of home while going to school. I argue that this hypocritical culture runs deep in academia. The literature made available to students by their universities emphasizes diversity, acceptance, and inclusion.

Students of color at universities in America are reading about how their universities emphasize inclusion and diversity; but see no real action to achieve an environment where every student has an equal amount of opportunity and resources. Just like at George Mason, students are receiving mixed messages about their acceptance on campus through the institutional statements like diversity and mission statements. In this paper, I argue that university mission statements perpetuate white normativity, which creates a different experience for the students of color on campus.

<p align="center">Literature Review</p>

Three separate sections frame this literature review: the discourse of whiteness, the relationship between the discourse and the concept (or intentions) of mission and diversity statements as well as how this affects the students of color's perception. These sections spotlight how institutional statements that perpetuate white normativity affect the perception of the institutions' values, intentions, and goals to the students of color on public and private universities around the United States.

Discourse of Whiteness

Goldberg (1993) emphasized the power of racialized discourse in his book *Racist Culture*. Bonilla-Silva (2014) defined racism as a power system utilized by one race to disadvantage another. He adds that racism is expressed in many forms depending on the context of when it is being used. Racism disadvantages people of color in areas of housing, education, medical care, food access, and that "Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014)" In his

book, he argues that the field of discourse is riddled with racialized expressions. Gans (2016) defined racialization not as a single act, but as a process of ascribing attributes to groups of people based on their race. They argue that racialization can be used economically, socially, politically, orally, or verbally to "other" a certain group. Racialized expressions are defined as "beliefs and verbal outbursts, acts and their consequences, and the principles upon which racialized expressions are based (Goldberg, 1993)." Goldberg adds that these expressions can also include verbiage that comes from the historical introduction to the context and analysis of race. He argues that the concept of race itself creates a space where racist expression can be formulated. These expressions ascribe both external and internal assumptions upon a race of people similarly to Gans (2016) observations about racialization. In summary, the idea of race, the concept that based on skin color that people are inherently different, allows for language that perpetuates this idea to be created. Regardless of whether or not an individual believes that difference in skin color means anything, because the idea of race exists, individuals will encounter, create, and interact with racialized expressions. Since racialized expressions are inevitable in a race-based society, racism will continue to be embedded in our discourse. Goldberg emphasizes that, "racialized discourse emerges with modernity and comes to colonize modernity's continually reinvented common sense." Since racialized expressions are inevitable, they will continue to be a part of everyday language but will simply take different shapes depending on society. This means that no matter how "progressive" the world becomes, racialized discourse will still be an integral part of language and discourse. In other words, racism will continue to be

embedded in discourse as long as the concept of race exists, and will continue to exist regardless of how society does.

Raka Shome (2003) wrote about the emergence of "whiteness studies" in the critical race scholarship field. "Race scholarship usually tends to study the "other" and in doing so leave the "norm" (whiteness) intact and free from any critical scrutiny." The academy helps to perpetuate the idea that whiteness is the standard for all by choosing to label any study of people who are non-white as "other". Morris (2016) emphasizes that whites' positionality in the center (white normativity) allows for "the pressing concerns of minority groups to be marginalized, even while it simultaneously acknowledges their exceptional achievements."

Krizek and Nakayama (1995) defined whiteness, as a strategic rhetoric is "rhetorically constituted through discursive strategies that map the field of whiteness. Whiteness, as a strategic rhetoric, aims to "place" whiteness at the center of all discourse. This ability to keep itself at the center directly relates to the power held by whiteness not only in the field of rhetoric but also in a political or social context. As Nakayama states, "it's clarifying some of the ways that white has exerted its force on everybody else, on me."

They emphasized that there is invisibility to this discourse of whiteness that creates ideas of white normativity, and offers those who are white hidden privileges. The rhetorical strategies of whiteness identified by Krizek and Nakayama include 1) Tying white to power in a crude manner, 2) defining "white" negatively, 3) naturalizing whiteness using a scientific definition, 4) confusing whiteness as nationality, and 5) refusing to define oneself or label oneself as any race. These plays make it so that other

rhetoricians can identify and expose whiteness in the works. Some examples of these strategies were highlighted in Krizek and Nakayama's analysis. For the first strategic play, white respondents answered open-ended survey questions about their identity. They defined "white" as "majority", "status" and "that I am part of the majority of people living in America and that I have been brought up white American." Defining whiteness simple as "majority" hide the histories and power that comes with being the majority in America. This position of "majority" is made specific to whites in this context and the power associated with it hidden from critique. When identifying play number two, another pattern in answers was the participants describing white as "not being Hispanic, black, etc." or "just being white." By choosing to identify as non-white, respondents see white as simply lacking any other mix of ethnicities; meaning that whiteness is the default race. Using scripts such as Black, Hispanic, etc, defines race by its impurity of whiteness deemed by a system of dominance. In society, it is standard to openly call out oppression, but not the oppressive class (white). White in this context can only be a negative and thus invisible. "This characteristic of whiteness is unique to its discursive construction and must be understood as a part of its power and force. Its invisibility guarantees its unstratified nature (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995)." Play number three reared answers that defined whiteness scientifically and "white just being the color I am". In this strategy, whiteness is confused as natural and not cultural. Classifying whiteness as a scientific definition once again protects it from its historical and social implications. Relating whiteness to science also privileges it with the characteristics used in America in relation to our beliefs about science. We see science as reasonable, objective, masculine, and most of all trustworthy. While this play contradicts play number one (whiteness

being related to a position of power), it equally contributes to keeping whiteness at the center. The fourth play had answers defining "white" as a nationality (mostly American) rather than as a race. Whiteness is seen as having national borders, a physical location. To choose rhetorically to claim a territory, and one known to have vital power politically, culturally, and socially (USA) means that whiteness is associated directly with power. In this example whiteness and US citizenship is conflated to the point where the idea of a "melting pot" of immigrants is challenged. This play simultaneously ties whiteness to American power and erases non-whites from American history. Finally, the last play had respondents choose not to identify with the concept of race. In this play there is an emphasis on individualism over the social construct that is race. Blatantly claiming whiteness would attribute the histories and power to the individual. The power of whiteness in this play is completely absolved from critique by all who inquire. Only one or two of the respondents who answered this way were white males. While white females are non-white, they are female, which has battles over identity, labeling, and acceptance. White women were seen to be more accepting of the labeling process more than white males because of their position as women - an underserved class of people. Due to white males being higher on the power totem pole, males have more to lose by claiming their whiteness. All of these patterns absolve whiteness of the years of power and privilege that are deeply imbedded in being white or whiteness as a whole. These statements continue to deflect whiteness from being the center of attention, which inherently promotes white normativity. By not allowing whiteness to be scrutinized, whiteness keeps its center in society. By remaining out of the spotlight, whiteness can remained unchallenged, and thus keep out those who wish to criticize it.

Another factor that helps to perpetuate White normativity at universities is the introduction of neoliberalism into the academy. Henry Giroux (2002) argues that neoliberalism is "the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment." Giroux writes that individualism is commercialized by corporate culture, which leads to individualism being redefined as a "pursuit of mass-mediated interests, pleasures, and commercially produced lifestyles." Giroux continues to say that neoliberalism creates language that distances the academy from the political sphere. By removing the academy from the political sphere, criticism of the political process is no longer encouraged. I add that neoliberalism encourages universities to create unoriginal pieces of literature to market to the public to be seen as accepting. Universities create these pieces of literature in order to sell and market their institution to those who wish to give them money. Neoliberalism makes individualism commercialized. Institutions capitalize on commercializing individualism by marketing their institutions as being the first step for many who wish to become individuals in society. These "individuals" are business owners, those who create their own forms of revenue, who are unique in their studies, and have insightful ideas to bring to the world. Most college students aim to "become their own person", leave university with a high paying job, and try and change the world either through research or practical ways. Universities use their institutional statements to convince the public that their experience will give them a better chance at achieving the ultimate individual status.

Finally, colorblindness, or the notion that we live in a "race-less" society is not only a part of the system of white normativity, but is also an integral part of university culture and neoliberalism. Eduardo Bonilla- Silva (2014) argued that colorblindness is the

newest strategy that Whites use to keep Whiteness at the center. Silva argues that teachers aspire to colorblindness because they mistake seeing race as being a racist. Once again, the rhetorical strategy of whiteness can be seen in colorblindness by literally refusing to acknowledge any race including White. The power and privilege with whiteness is reduced to nothing, the history of white power on the world is ignored, and the conversations surrounding criticism of mainstream ideas is discouraged.

The discourse of whiteness is communicated rhetorically through written, typed, and digital mediums and continues to keep whiteness at the center of all systems in the United States, including education. I am suggesting that institutional statements such as mission and diversity statements exhibit these defining characteristics and help perpetuate the ideas of white normativity. I propose that these institutional statements function rhetorically in different ways that perpetuate white normativity.

Mission and Diversity Statements and Discourse of Whiteness

According to Morphew and Hartley, mission statements for universities often reflect the ideals, purposes, and the realities for that specific institution. While these statements are supposed to reflect the current climate of the institution, Morphew and Hartley (2006) highlight that "institutions put inside their statements, what their benefactors value." The true purpose of these statements are meant to establish credibility with not just students, faculty, and staff but also the alumni, major donors, and others who may wish to fund the university.

In order to garner necessary attention, it has become common practice to utilize certain terms or phrases to signal that an institution has progressive thinking. Ahmed

(2012) conducted a study to discover the similarities within mission and diversity statements of eighty institutions in the United States (Ahmed). This study found that of the eighty schools, 75% of these schools had statements that mention *diversity* but only 19% actually defined *diversity* in racial or ethnic terms. Fifty-two (65%) of the schools have separate diversity statements and only eighteen of those statements use the racial or ethnic definition of diversity while the remaining thirty-five percent said nothing about diversity at all. When diversity was mentioned, it often referred to welcoming an "other" or a group of "others" into the institution rather than transforming the community.

Diversity can be defined on an external and internal level with both visible and invisible attributes. The University of Michigan Health Systems (2012) assert that diversity has visible attributes like gender, age, and ethnicity as well as invisible attributes like personal interests, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, etc. In 2016, Tew highlighted the commonality of institutions focusing on the visible attributes of their students in their statements. It was shown that Western Oregon University had institutional statements that focused primarily on the visible attributes of its students. They concluded that universities should strive harder to include more invisible attributes (personality traits, disabilities, sexual orientation, etc.) in institutional statements so as to not create a false sense of home for vulnerable populations of students, staff, and faculty on campus. Additionally, institutions' demographics, research about the student body, and the students' genuine experiences should paint a holistic view of the university to prospective students. Failure to be upfront about the true demographics and culture of an institution can cause distrust between the institution and those who function in the

community on a daily. Failure to be explicit about the campus culture in order to falsely persuade potential students is not a new phenomenon.

Last year, Squire (2017) emphasized that those in the field of institutional rhetoric regard mission statements as just empty statements and calls the rhetoric of diversity "vacuous" or mindless.. Institutions' benefactors value diversity, but under a more surface level definition. Administrators want to give the illusion of inclusivity in order to recruit students of color; but fail to acknowledge the different experiences students of color experience on campus. Universities need to start being explicit about race; but when they do, backlash often come next.

Perceptions of universities' dedication to diversity from students of color

These findings about mission statements being intentionally vague and only being written to earn funding helps to explain why students of color distrust when institutions include diversity language inside of their statements. The second part of Tew's (2016) study looked at the difference of how Western Ohio University students defined diversity and the institutions' definition of diversity. As stated previously, Western Ohio University focused solely on visible attributes in their official literature. However, when surveyed, the student body most closely identified with diversity in the invisible attribute definition. This is just one example of the disconnection that university statements have with their student body.

<u>Methodology</u>

I chose to look at the institutional statements of three institutions with varying student, geographical, and academic demographics. Higher education is meant for the

general public so I wanted to ensure the universities I chose reflected a diverse and broad

category. Additionally, research is not meant to be generalizable; but makes assumptions

about general institutions. Using Krizek and Nakayama' s strategic plays as the

framework, I will analyze these statements by identifying which plays are being utilized

in the writings. The institutions that I chose to analyze are Bennett College, University of

Texas at San Antonio, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Bennett College (11,000 students)

Bennett College is an all Black women's private liberal arts college in North Carolina. It

started in 1873 as a school meant to provide education to newly emancipated slaves.

Bennett College also recently raised $8.2 million to bolster appeal to remain accredited

by the SACSCOC. On February 5th, 2019, according to their website, Bennett College

reached their goal with their nationwide campaign, #StandWithBennett. As I searched

their homepage, I immediately clicked on the "About" tab to find a mission statement.

Their homepage was user-friendly, easy to navigate, and did a great job of highlighting

their brand. On their "About" page tab, located furthest to the left, I saw statements

labeled "Mission", "Vision", "Philosophy", "Foci Areas" and "Bennett's Competitive

Advances."

University of Texas at San Antonio(38,000 students)

The University of Texas at San Antonio was founded in 1969 in the northern part of San

Antonio, Texas. It is designated as a Hispanic serving institution with more than 52%

Latinx students in its population (utsa.com). In the past year, UTSA has had seven

political incidences ranging from a black student having the police called on them in

class, banners depicting rape being posted in the on campus housing complexes, and even

the posting of a racist banner by a white nationalist group in the student union. While

navigating the UTSA website, I clicked again on the "About" page tab; located furthest to

the left at the top of any page. There I found similar headings as Bennett College titled

"Our Mission", "Our Vision", and "Our Core Values." Other statistics as well as the

future goals of the institution were also visible from this page.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (11,000 students)

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is a private research and technology

based institution. They have about 11,000 students in attendance with 30% international

students, 32% white students, 17% Asian, 9% Latinx, and 3% African American. This

institution focuses mainly on the math and sciences and prides themselves on being

"welcoming to talented people regardless of where they come from." Navigating the MIT

website became tricky. As a new user, I found myself confused about where to start to get

a good look at their mission and values. After clicking on the last tab to the right, I came

across only one of the institutional statements I was looking for. "Mission" was the only

header on the page that resembled the portions I was looking for on the past websites.

        These schools are meant to be examples of different rhetorical characteristics that

contribute or bring out the greater issue of white normativity. Similarly to how Krizek

and Nakayama did, the purpose of this study is to bring white normativity inside of

institutional rhetoric and out of the center in order to clarify a way that others can identify

these commonplace practices. By revealing those practices, institutions can begin to

recognize the misconceptions they have with their students of color. They can then begin

to strive to have their statements reflect the true demographics and cultures of their

respective institutions.

These schools represent a breadth of institutional types relative to student

population. These institutions represent wide variety of institutional types varying from

institution classification as a historically Black college, predominantly white, Hispanic

serving, high international student population, etc. They also represent a variety of

population demographics, geographical locations, and classifications as a public or

private school. Finally, these schools represent a variety in student diversity.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze institutional rhetoric to explore what it

communicates about racial inclusion in the neoliberal era. Without explicit disclosure

about race and the culture around racism in mission statements, students of color will

continue to be convinced that their institutions will ensure that equal opportunity is

offered to all students.

<u>Research Question</u>

What rhetorical characteristics do mission and value statements exhibit that

reinforce white normativity?

<u>Main Findings</u>

Bennett College

<u>Mission</u>

Bennett College prepares women of color through a transformative liberal arts

education to lead with purpose, integrity, and a strong sense of self-worth. Bennett

provides educational access to students while promoting inquiry, civic engagement, social justice, lifelong learning, and equity for all.

Vision

Bennett College is renowned for its intimate, engaging learning community that produces phenomenal women scholars and global leaders.

Philosophy

Bennett College's undergirding philosophy is that a high quality college experience should provide its women students with strong academic and co-curricular programs that encourage their personal development, endorse life-long learning, and prepare them to meet the needs of an ever-changing society.

Bennett College values and respects every member of its community. As a United Methodist Church-related institution, the College believes that education should be related to humanitarian ends."

Analysis

"About Bennett"

Under the About tab, the first link was "About Bennett". The sections on the page were as follows: "Mission"; "Vision"; "Philosophy"; "Foci Areas"; and "Bennett's Competitive Advantage." Focusing on the first three portions of this webpage, the language verbatim reads:

Out of all five strategic plays, I find that Bennett's statements intersect with none of them. By explicitly stating that their services are meant for "women of color", and "women scholars" at their institution; Bennett does the opposite of play #5: refusing to

define oneself or label oneself as any race. Through their use of explicit language on their

student population, I find no other strategic plays at work here.

University of Texas at San Antonio

Our Mission

The University of Texas at San Antonio is dedicated to the advancement of

knowledge through research and discovery, teaching and learning, community

engagement and public service. As an institution of access and excellence, UTSA

embraces multicultural traditions and serves as a center for intellectual and creative

resources as well as a catalyst for socioeconomic development and the

commercialization of intellectual property – for Texas, the nation and the world.

Our Vision

To be a premier public research university, providing access to educational

excellence and preparing citizen leaders for the global environment.

Our Core Values

We encourage an environment of dialogue and discovery, where integrity,

excellence, inclusiveness, respect, collaboration and innovation are fostered.

"About"

UTSA starts off the webpage by stating, "The University of Texas at San Antonio

is a multicultural discovery enterprise institution with more than 32,000 students. It is the

largest university in the San Antonio metropolitan region." UTSA states that it is a

"multicultural discover enterprise institution" and then proceeds to number the amount of

students in attendance. The use of the word "multicultural" lumps all minorities into one

category; and stating the number of students right after that phrase highlights the notion of the institution being full of diverse students. I argue that this statement best exemplifies strategic play #5: refusing to define oneself or label oneself as any race. Like many other institutions, instead of simply stating or posting the statistics of diverse students at the institution; the institution decides to remain inexplicit about the number of "multicultural" students that attend the university.

"Our Mission"

The phrasing of "an institution of access and excellence, UTSA embraces multicultural traditions," I argue best identifies with strategic play #1: tying white to power in a crude manner. The word "embrace" in this context means to be tolerant of or accepting of multicultural traditions. Which cultures? What traditions specifically? The failure to be explicit continues to take whiteness outside the realm of critique and instead makes "multicultural" students and traditions the main focus.

"Our Vision"

I argue that this statement also identifies best with strategic play #1: tying white to power in a crude manner. By saying that the institution is in charge of "providing access", UTSA is saying that they are using their privilege for the good. They use their access to provide for "citizen leaders". With a school made up of 55% Hispanic undergraduate population, and more than 70% of all its undergraduates being the first in their families to graduate, using the word "citizen" seems misplaced.

"Core Values"

I found no plays to be at work in these values.

MIT

Introductory Paragraph on "About MIT"

"The MIT community is driven by a shared purpose: to make a better world through education, research, and innovation. We are fun and quirky, elite but not elitist, inventive and artistic, obsessed with numbers, and welcoming to talented people regardless of where they come from."

Mission Statement

To advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century.

Motto

"Mens et manus" or "mind and hand."

Community

4,547 Students

Women

2,092 (46%)

Minorities

2,130 (47%)

Graduate students

6,919

Women

2,391 (35%)

Minorities

1,262 (18%)

"About MIT"

Under the "About MIT" tab, there are several pieces of writing on the webpage.

<u>Introduction Paragraph</u>

In the last line we can see strategic play #5 at work. When the phrase "regardless of where they come from" is used in this context, it is meant to be a catch-all term for the diverse populations of students attending the institution. By "catch-all" I mean that MIT is lumping all races of students into one category. While MIT emphasizes that anyone can come to their institution, they also qualify the students who will be accepted as "talented". This erases the reality of admission acceptances for MIT for students of color. According to their website, the class of 2021 had over 20,000 applicants but only 1,438 students were accepted into MIT.

Under the first paragraph, the beginning line states, "Founded to accelerate the nation's industrial revolution, MIT is profoundly American. This statement ties best to strategy #4: confusing whiteness as a nationality. ." According to their website, MIT's population is made up of more than 60% international students, meaning more than half of its population have homes and citizenship outside of America. To say that MIT is "profoundly American" erases the more than half of international students that call MIT home.

<u>Community</u>

Instead of explicitly stating the individual ethnicities of "minorities", MIT personifies strategy #1: Tying white to power in a crude manner. I add that MIT is also crudely tying misogyny into the mix. The only two categories are "Women" and

"Minorities" which hold less than half of the undergraduate population, and a little more than a third of the graduate population.

<u>Mission Statement and Motto</u>

These statements do not exhibit any of Krizek and Nakayama's strategic plays.

"Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion"

In the search bar in the top right, I typed in "diversity" to see what websites may pop up for MIT. Many links popped up but the one that caught my eye were the "Diversity & Inclusion: MIT Division of Student Life" and "Diversity – Equity – Inclusion at MIT" webpages. Under the webpage of MIT Division of Student Life, the tabs state, "LGBTQ@MIT", "Women@MIT", "Multicultural Programs", and "SPXCE". Three webpages meant to be seen by the minority populations of MIT to use and find others who are like them. The two that stuck out most to me were the "Women@MIT" and "Multicultural Programs." Women are such a vulnerable population, that they all need a place to meet, bond, and find others like them. I find this contradictory to their "About Page" that emphasized that women were about half of the undergraduate student body. The word "multicultural" is also problematic as there are a wealth of cultures at MIT. Their website states, "In 2017-18, MIT students came from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and 129 foreign countries." With so much variety in the student body it seems impractical to have all of them utilize a single webpage or service office.

Recommendations

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