



A WORD FROM...

Abigail Thompson, a Vice President of the AMS



Courtesy of University of California, Davis

This essay contains my opinions as an individual.

Mathematics has made progress over the past decades towards becoming a more welcoming, inclusive discipline. We should continue to do all we can to reduce barriers to participation in this most beautiful of fields. I am encouraged by the many mathematicians who are working to achieve this laudable aim. There are reasonable means to further this goal: encouraging students from all backgrounds to enter the mathematics pipeline, trying to ensure that talented mathematicians don't leave the profession, creating family-friendly policies, and supporting junior faculty at the beginning of their careers, for example. There are also mistakes to avoid. Mandating diversity statements for job candidates is one such mistake, reminiscent of events of seventy years ago.

In 1950 the Regents of the University of California required all UC faculty to sign a statement asserting that "I am not a member of, nor do I support any party or organization that believes in, advocates, or teaches the overthrow of the United States Government, by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional means, that I am not a member of the Communist Party." Eventually thirty-one faculty members were fired over their refusal to sign. Among them was David Saxon, an eminent physicist who later became the president of the University of California.

Faculty at universities across the country are facing an echo of the loyalty oath, a mandatory "Diversity Statement" for job applicants. The professed purpose is to identify candidates who have the skills and experience to advance institutional diversity and equity goals. In reality it's a political test, and it's a political test with teeth.

What are the teeth? Nearly all University of California campuses require that job applicants submit a "contributions to diversity" statement as a part of their application. The campuses evaluate such statements using rubrics, a detailed scoring system. Several UC programs have used these diversity statements to screen out candidates early in the search process.

A typical rubric from UC Berkeley¹ specifies that a statement that "describes only activities that are already the expectation of Berkeley faculty (mentoring, *treating all students the same regardless of background*, etc)" (italics mine) merits a score of 1–2 out of a possible 5 (1 worst and 5 best) in the second section of the rubric, the "track record for advancing diversity" category.

The diversity "score" is becoming central in the hiring process. Hiring committees are being urged to *start* the review process by using officially provided rubrics to score the required diversity statements and to eliminate applicants who don't achieve a scoring cut-off.

Why is it a political test? Politics are a reflection of how you believe society should be organized. Classical liberals aspire to treat every person as a unique individual, not as a representative of their gender or their ethnic group. The sample rubric dictates that in order to get a high diversity score, a candidate must have actively engaged in promoting different identity groups as part of their professional life. The candidate should demonstrate "clear knowledge of, experience with, and interest in dimensions of diversity that result from different identities" and describe "multiple activities in depth." Requiring candidates to believe that people should be treated differently according to their identity is indeed a political test.

The idea of using a political test as a screen for job applicants should send a shiver down our collective spine. Whatever our views on communism, most of us today are in agreement that the UC loyalty oaths of the 1950s

Abigail Thompson is a professor in and the chair of the Department of Mathematics at the University of California, Davis and a vice president of the AMS. Her email address is thompson@math.ucdavis.edu.

¹few.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/rubric_to_assess_candidate_contributions_to_diversity_equity_and_inclusion.pdf

were wrong. Whatever our views on diversity and how it can be achieved, mandatory diversity statements are equally misguided. Mathematics is not immune from political pressures on campus. In addition to David Saxon, who eventually became the president of the University of California, three mathematicians were fired for refusing to sign the loyalty oath in 1950. Mathematics must be open and welcoming to everyone, to those who have traditionally been excluded, and to those holding unpopular viewpoints. Imposing a political litmus test is not the way to achieve excellence in mathematics or in the university. Not in 1950, and not today.