March 13, 2018

Over the past year, there has been a proliferation of targeted attacks on scholarly work addressing diversity and inclusion in STEM education, including work in engineering education specifically. Many of these attacks have appeared on conservative outlets and in broader alt-right media and social media networks. When specific faculty members are targeted, they and their colleagues are often subject to harassing and threatening calls, emails, tweets, and more.

Such attacks serve to undermine academic freedom. The principle of academic freedom is grounded in the professional status and expertise of faculty. More than mere tolerance of different views, academic freedom affirms that Engineering Education Researchers and STEM Education Researchers possess specialized knowledge and expertise in diversity, inclusion, workforce development, and equity that is of critical importance to our economy and broader society. Attacks on individual faculty are in fact attacks on the broader discipline of engineering education, and attacks on their research are attacks on the engineering profession's values of diversity and inclusion.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has recently launched a campaign focused on addressing the targeted harassment of faculty across all fields of higher education. They have noted that this targeted harassment of faculty is strategic, coordinated, and funded by large foundations such as Koch, Bradley, and Goldwater (e.g.; https://www.aaup.org/news/targeted-online-harassment-faculty; https://www.aaup.org/article/fine-print-restrictive-grants-and-academic-freedom).

These attacks erode the progress we have made toward developing a culture of inclusive excellence and promoting success through diversity at all organizational levels and in all sectors that employ engineers. If engineering education and STEM education researchers are under threat in this way, they may be deterred from working in the area of diversity and inclusion, which will slow down progress in this critical area, one which has been a national priority for STEM workforce development for several decades.

The value of diversity and inclusion has been articulated by multiple engineering professional societies including the American Association of Engineering Societies (AAES), American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), American Nuclear Society (ANS), American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE), American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME), Engineering Research Consortium of America (ERCA), Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), Engineers without Borders (EWB), Mexican American Engineering Society (MAES), National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME), National Association of Minority Engineering Program Advocates (NAMEPA), National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE), Society of Women Engineers (SWE), Women in Engineering ProActive Network (WEPAN), Great Minds in STEM, and the National Academy of Engineering, as well as the vast majority of engineering employers such as DuPont, IBM, Intel, Boeing, Shell Oil Company, BP, Chevron, and federal, state, and local governments.

Joining with other organizations such as the AAUP, ASEE commits to support its members who conduct research in the area of diversity, inclusion, and equity. ASEE further encourages other engineering professional societies to join in supporting their members who advocate for diversity and inclusion.

Universities can commit to supporting scholars focused on diversity and inclusion research in multiple ways. The AAUP noted in a recent webinar the importance of keeping a focus on protecting the institution's values around academic freedom and diversity and inclusion, especially when media attacks have the potential to make the desire to protect the brand seem all-important. Universities can defend the expertise and credentials of individual faculty, and defend the legitimacy and value of their disciplines. This is an essential component of defending academic freedom. Ignoring an attack, or simply defending a researcher's free speech rights, tends to undermine the reputation of the individual, their discipline, and ultimately the very enterprise of higher education.

Similarly, universities can support their researchers, using existing mechanisms and perhaps developing new tools to close gaps where they exist. One clear priority is the enforcement of existing statutes such as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Nineteenth Century Civil Rights Act (amended in 1993). Some appropriate responses may include email filtering, threat assessment, coordination with local, state, and federal law enforcement, and various types of legal action to protect the institution and its activities. It is a crucial time for sharing creative approaches and new strategies that may help universities preserve our core values and missions.

University Administrators, including Presidents, Deans, and Department Heads are in a particularly strong position to support their faculty, including ensuring that responses from media and public relations units defend faculty expertise and institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion, following up on measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of faculty under attack, and pursuing additional ways to strengthen diversity, inclusion and equity in all aspects of university life. Administrators more broadly can work with faculty to develop appropriate institutional policies to defend academic freedom, and prevent and respond appropriately to harassment.

Faculty Peers can take steps to actively defend scholars under attack, individually and collectively, both at their local institution and on other campuses. Possible actions include learning more about targeted harassment of faculty; speaking out about the issue in public and scholarly fora, both to defend academic freedom and to condemn attacks on colleagues; continuing their own scholarship undeterred; collaborating with scholars under attack to lend clout where it may have been diminished; offering a listening ear; and working on strengthening institutional policies to protect academic freedom and aid scholars under attack.

Students can educate one another about organized groups that undermine higher education, particularly on their local campus; they can use their voices to speak out about harassment of faculty and other students; they can support faculty members who have come under attack by insisting they continue with their teaching and research activities. Finally, they can use their voices as engineers to advocate for the values of the engineering profession.

Industry Allies can continue to create inclusive and diverse working environments that helps shift our culture. They can further support the effort by increasing funding and partnering with Universities to further advance diversity, equity, and inclusion research.

Federal agencies charged with the enforcement of relevant statutes including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Education, and the Office of Civil Rights can proactively address diversity and inclusion efforts and be responsive to reports of any violations. Policymakers can strengthen monitoring, reporting and enforcement related to hate crime legislation, and ensure that all students have access to education regardless of national origin.

ASEE is strongly committed to upholding our shared values of diversity, inclusion, and equity, especially in STEM education. We call all constituents and our governing agencies to join in addressing and stopping attacks and preventing further harassment.

Resources

Here are some resources that could support institutions, administrators, faculty, and students in our community.

https://onefacultyoneresistance.org/

https://www.facebook.com/AAUPNational/videos/1819187414781402/

https://www.aaup.org/news/targeted-online-harassment-faculty

http://ed-osprey.gsu.edu/ojs/index.php/JUME/article/viewFile/347/224.

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09518398.2017.1399666

https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/07/09/essay-how-support-scholars-under-attack

https://www.chronicle.com/article/If-There-s-an-Organized/240683

https://www.splcenter.org/20170810/alt-right-campus-what-students-need-know

Signed,

Board of Directors

American Society for Engineering Education.