

EDITORIAL

Teaching in an Era of Political Polarization

—Benjamin D. Jee

Dear readers of *Currents in Teaching and Learning*,

Once again, I am pleased to introduce the latest edition of *Currents*. As I sit down to write this editorial, I am halfway between the end of the spring semester and the beginning of fall. Not a bad time of the year to reflect on current events in higher education, and what they portend for the year ahead.

Surely the most consequential news in American higher education is the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to reverse decades of precedent on race-conscious admissions programs, effectively ending affirmative action as we know it. This decision adds to the contentious atmosphere surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and practices in schools and in the workplace. While most Americans say that it is a good thing to focus on DEI at the workplace, there is a wide disparity in terms of political orientation. Democrats are far more likely to say focusing on DEI at work is a good thing (78%) than Republicans (30%) (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Political polarization is playing out in numerous ways at colleges and universities around the country and the wider world. One startling example comes from New College in Florida, where five professors were denied tenure by a newly installed—and highly conservative—Board of Trustees. This decision essentially vetoed the approvals that these candidates received at every other step in the process (Moody, 2023). There have been other recent attempts to eliminate or severely restrict tenure at U.S. colleges and universities, notably in the states of North Dakota, Texas, Ohio, Louisiana, and North Carolina. Though anti-tenure bills ultimately failed in these states (for now), conservative politicians may recognize that they can score political points by simply introducing the bills in the first place. As Nietzel (2023) put it, they were “more interested in making noise rather than history.”

Academic freedom also faces challenges from the political left. Faculty who self-identify as politically

conservative are more likely to report that they have personally experienced a worsening “cancel culture” on campus in which actions or speech that is deemed unacceptable is shunned or silenced (Norris, 2023). This trend appears to emerge from power disparities as opposed to liberal ideology per se. In socially conservative societies, left-wing scholars are the ones who report a worsening cancel culture (Norris, 2023). Still, because U.S. faculty members tend to lean left politically (Langbert & Stevens, 2020), there may be a greater risk of intolerance for conservative opinions on college campuses, feeding claims that higher education is unwelcoming of political viewpoint diversity. Indeed, there has been no shortage of media attention when right-wing speakers are shouted down or disinvited (Alonso, 2023).

The intense political and public interest in higher education can make it seem like we're teaching under a microscope. Any word or action in the classroom can be taken out of context and stretched out of proportion. Yet, the outsized interest in higher education provides testament to the important role that college and university instructors play in society. As educators, we occupy a unique position of power, helping to shape our students' minds during a formative time in their political and personal development. In the current politically charged climate, we face difficult decisions about whether and how to teach about controversial topics. Yet preparation and consideration can help ensure that our best intentions materialize into effective pedagogy. The present issue of *Currents* speaks to issues that are on many of our minds at the beginning of the academic year. As you prepare for the challenges ahead, I hope you find something to inform and inspire you in this latest edition of the journal.

The first article in the present issue is “Class Matters: Teaching about Class in U.S. Higher Education” by Joe Bandy and Brielle Harbin. Class exerts a powerful influence in many societies, and often operates discreetly. The authors explore various strategies for teaching about class, aiming to foster honest discussions about this

Era of Political Polarization *continued*

emotionally complex issue. They discuss the importance of incorporating both cognitive and emotional approaches to foster student learning.

In “Using Community-Engaged Research to Teach Information Literacy,” Julia Waity, Emily Crumpler, Jennifer Vanderminden, and Stephanie Crowe explore how students can be taught crucial information literacy skills through community-engaged projects. The authors connected students to members of their local police department, forming a collaboration to determine why rates of crime vary between districts within their city. Students not only improved their skills at consuming and producing research but also experienced the value of bridging different perspectives through community partnerships.

The theme of bridge-building continues in the paper by Linda Ann Treiber, Evelina W. Sterling, and Ravi Ghadge, titled “Exploring Racial and Ethnic Identities with PechaKucha.” Treiber and colleagues asked students in their Race and Ethnicity courses to create a biographical PechaKucha presentation that touched on race and ethnicity. The authors describe how the assignment allowed students to see and be seen in new ways, promoting understanding and empathy.

Developing student empathy was the explicit goal of Catherine Langran, Aby Mitchell, Sawsen Sabbah, and Georgiana Assadim as discussed in their paper, “Utilizing Simulated Patient Videos to Develop Student Empathy and Readiness for Interprofessional Working.” The authors brought together students from various medical disciplines to discuss simulated patient videos. Students who completed the interprofessional learning sessions showed increased empathy and more positive perceptions of each profession involved. The work provides another example of the power of collaborative learning experiences.

Of course, not all student collaboration is beneficial to learning. In “An Empirical Examination of Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty within the Context of Semantics, Environment, and Role,” David McClough and Jeff Heinfeldt present findings on different forms of cheating

and how they are perceived by students. The authors find cheating to be commonplace, especially outside of the classroom. The article raises important questions about how to design assignments to minimize opportunities for dishonest conduct.

The final article in the present issue also explores the issue of student assessment. In “Toward the Co-Construction of Assessment: Equity, Language Ideology and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy at the Community College,” Jason M. Leggett describes his experiences developing a grading rubric for student writing that sets out clear communication goals without imposing a particular academic style of writing. Like other articles in the present issue, this work demonstrates the value of involving students in the creation of course materials, activities, and policies.

As editor, I am grateful to the authors for choosing *Currents* as the outlet for their scholarly work. I appreciate the generous contributions of the reviewers, copyeditors, and members of the *Currents* advisory board, who help to bring out the best in each article and issue. These individuals are acknowledged in the back section of the issue. I want to recognize Dr. Henry Theriault for his many contributions as the executive director of *Currents*, including his behind-the-scenes efforts to keep the journal running smoothly. Finally, I am pleased to announce that my colleague, Dr. Brittany Jeye, will serve as editor for several upcoming issues of the journal. Dr. Jeye is a cognitive neuroscientist by training, with expertise in human memory and learning. A passionate teacher and scholar, I am sure she will excel in the role. I look forward to her first *Currents* issue next year.

Until next time,

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EDITORIAL

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