

Harvard hoisted by own petard as 'diversity' students protest decision to deny tenure to 'grievance studies' professor

by Michael Rectenwald



Angela Davis and Lorgia García Peña

The US university is learning the hard way that the more concessions are given, the more are demanded, as its own proudly-advertised 'affirmative action' students are now trying to dictate which professors it should employ.

[Lorgia García Peña](#), currently an associate professor of Romance languages and literatures at Harvard and the supposed

centerpiece of Harvard's fledgling Ethnic Studies program, was denied tenure in late November 2019. Her popularity among Latinx and other minority students, who were baffled and shocked by the decision, has led to [sit-ins](#) and protests, and an [open letter](#) to university administrators demanding the reversal of the tenure denial, with similar faculties from around the country chiming in with their support.

The New York Times [reports](#) that student fans of professor Peña feel that Harvard exploits their ethnic identities to meet admissions 'diversity' numbers, while their identities are taken for granted and their needs as marginalized students go unmet once they are on campus. They argue that their pet professor provides the recognition of their "stories" and "elevates their voices" as students from marginalized backgrounds.

Queer studies & critical whiteness theory are real, OK?

Unfortunately, the [scholarship](#) of Peña and other faculty in 'grievance studies' fields – to use a controversial, but clearly-understood term – can't be judged on anything like objective standards of excellence.

That's because the disciplines are based on the supposed marginalization, exceptionalism, and peculiarity of the fields and those who study them, including both faculty and their students. The primary criterion for being a grievance studies 'scholar' is membership in the oppressed and marginalized group being studied. Such groups are supposedly 'underrepresented' in the academy – on the basis of racism. And the standard of 'inclusion' in a social identity group is not an academic standard.

These programs are established as distinct from and at odds with the rest of the academy. Grievance studies scholars

[describe](#) the rest of the academy as “a hotbed for racist, sexist theorizing, research, and practices since its inception.”

Considering the accomplishments in other fields as due to white supremacy means that the standards in other fields reflect white supremacism as well. As a result of rejecting the standards in other fields, dismissing [rigor as sexist](#), and deeming excellence as white supremacist, the “lack of legitimacy given to ethnic studies continues to plague not only the programs, but also the professors who created and maintain them.”

Basically, lots of people, even inside the ivory towers, think that they are charlatans.

Yet how much respect do proponents of gender studies, masculinities studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, critical whiteness theory, and fat studies actually expect?

Campus Gandhi

Of course, students taking these courses – heavy on the jargon, light on substance – feel that their social identities should be the center of their educational pursuits. After all, this is what their professors tell them.

When they find out that their identities cannot (and should not) be the constant focus of their classroom experiences and social encounters, the grievances they’ve learned to nurture in grievance fields are redoubled, making them even more aggrieved.

In short, they throw a fit, or stage a protest, all the while imagining themselves to be Mahatma Gandhi or Rosa Parks.

Now, all this could be waved off as irrelevant Ivy League hijinks, if not for the lamentable fact that the effects of

grievance studies have long escaped the academy.

They have fueled the '*social justice*' drive for diversity. As Heather MacDonald [argues](#), and as I have [noted](#), social justice is eroding academic standards across all of academia, including in the STEM fields. The derailment of academic institutions by a victimology ethos originating in grievance studies fields not only harms students by denying them knowledge, but also undermines the broader society's faith in academic knowledge claims.

Harvard, not unlike the vast majority of US colleges and universities, cooked its own goose when it decided to pander to these interest groups. By placing the representation of social identity categories and social justice imperatives above the pursuit of knowledge, Harvard has harvested a social justice standard at odds with the standard of truth.

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