

Michael Poliakoff:

Good afternoon, or for our guest, Dr. Tabia Lee, good morning. Dr. Lee is in California. It's a great privilege to have you with us here today. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. We've been around for now 27 years, and we have stood for academic freedom, academic standards and accountability in higher education. And with me is my colleague Dr. Steven McGuire, who is our Paul and Karen Levy fellow in Campus Freedom. Steve, why don't you introduce yourself?

Steve McGuire:

Sure. Hi. Nice to meet you. Nice to be here. Really sorry to hear what you've been going through lately, Dr. Lee, but we're glad that you can be here with us today to talk about it.

Michael Poliakoff:

We're so impressed at the way you have fought in the arena of contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. No easy arena to be in. You've undergone personal loss in doing so. You put your heart and your intellect into your work to advance human flourishing. And you've been fighting in what you expressed in that great conversation you had with Eric Smith, you fought for classical social justice. That equality of opportunity that characterizes a free society rather than the critical social justice approaches that now seem to be dominating the world of education and to our peril, society at large. So with that, I'm really eager to be able to share with our ACTA audience in higher ed now, your thoughts, your experiences. And I'm going to turn this right over to my colleague Steve.

Steve McGuire:

Yes. Dr. Lee, since many of our listeners might not yet be familiar with your story, I thought we'd open just by asking you to tell us a little bit more about yourself, about your academic background, about your position at De Anza College, and then a quick overview of what you've endured in the last little while there.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Thank you, Dr. McGuire. I am a lifelong educator. Teaching is not just a profession, it's my vocation. People ask me, how long have you been teaching? I say since I was an elementary school student. When I was in gifted and talented education programs, and they didn't quite know what to do with us, so we often spent a lot of time playing Oregon Trail and serving as peer tutors. So that's why I say it's been about 40 years here in this field. But I did of course go on to get formal education and formal teacher training. After my bachelor's degree I went into K through 12 sector, moved to Los Angeles where I ended up serving for over a decade as a gifted English language learner teacher. And I taught subjects like English, social studies, and I developed a civic education program during that time, which actually received accolades from the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education for the positive impact that it had on the students and the community.

And during that time, I also was involved with teacher training around technology, around serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. At this time in California, this was during the Proposition 209 years. So this was when English only education was a legislative mandate. And there were some teacher perceptions that if a child or a student didn't have English language proficiency, they couldn't possibly be gifted. And so I helped break down those misconceptions and helped people to understand giftedness as something that's translingual. And so I was very passionate from the beginning doing work

around diversity, inclusion, equality, equity, and all of those various topics that later came into my work. The subject that we're talking of now. After receiving my doctorate, I went and traveled outside the US for some time. I even did some time volunteer teaching in the post-soviet nation of the Republic of Georgia. And then I came back and I said, I'm really going to focus in on higher education and teacher education specifically.

But the job search was quite long and arduous. I spent many years as an adjunct teacher. Adjunct professor. I just couldn't land that full-time position. Often with the promise that one would be coming, but one never manifested. And I'm sure many of the folks here in education can relate to that. It didn't go as smoothly as I thought it would after my doctorate program. But in that time, I was serving as an educational consultant and also presenting at state, local, national, and international conferences and just basically trying to share my knowledge and the things that I had learned as a teacher that was transformative in K through 12 with other educators. So I worked in the field of TESOL, which is teaching english speakers of other languages and teacher education around those areas and topics.

The pandemic had a bit of a silver lining for me. That was when I first entered into the community college space. And so I landed this position at a local community college that was an institution-wide position as an instructional designer. Faculty instructional designer. But the trick with that one was it was a temporary position. So full-time, tenure track, temporary. And I just loved it so much Dr. McGuire, that I said, this is the space for me. Part of my background is that as a GATE student, I was one of the early dual enrollment students in a California community college. In my local one. I actually accrued so many credits that I graduated two years early from high school and I had to get all these special permissions. Now it's commonplace, and this is a common thing that happens. But at the time I was doing it, it was a new thing and everyone was kind of nervous about it.

And so I had benefited from California community colleges and having that temporary position, I just felt so good giving back to the system that had helped shape who I am as a scholar early on. And so when that temporary position ended, I started just job searching in the community college space specifically. I was very intentional about that. And that's when I discovered this position at De Anza College. This is in 2021. The summer of 2021. I applied to it. I went through a very rigorous application process. Multiple panel interviews, teaching demonstrations. And at the end of that process, I was interviewed by the president of the college and some of his cabinet members. And then I got the call a couple of days later that they liked what I had to say and that I was being hired on as a faculty director for the office of equity, social justice and multicultural education. And again, I was always looking at faculty leadership positions. My doctorate's in educational leadership and administration, but my focus of my whole career has always been teacher leadership. So I was intentionally not looking for a deanship or anything of that nature. I'd like to be in the trenches with my colleagues as a support for fellow faculty to help refine our craft.

Michael Poliakoff:

I'm sorry. So you had this really rich background for what you would be doing. You had been in the trenches from the beginning with students who were showing high promise, but were not being given that level playing field. You knew the world of education and you had personal deep experience with community colleges. This should have been a marriage made in heaven between you and De Anza.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. And that's what I thought. Throughout the process, Dr. Poliakoff, I was very transparent about who I am, what were my values, what was my teaching philosophy. I really communicated that in every interview, at every turn. When the panel identified what I call their pain points, they said, "The office

that you would be working in potentially is a little too woke." And when they said that term, the panelists, I of course double clicked it. And I said, "Could you tell me what that means?" Because that's a term that's used so often that each person who uses it has a different meaning. And then they explained to me that what they were meaning was that faculty didn't feel comfortable coming to the office as a resource. That often they would use a calling out approach to engaging faculty and some people have been accused of being racist and made to feel uncomfortable.

And so I assured the panel that by that definition, I don't identify that way. However, I work with people from diverse perspectives and backgrounds, and I'm able to bring together different faculty members who are working from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives and to help us to identify points of commonality. I have a lot of training in dialogue and the use of dialogue and in transformative dialogue specifically. I even did my teaching demonstration on calling in over calling out because it was directly addressing what had been stated to me. And the panel seemed to enjoy that. They gave me positive feedback about it. And then I advanced to the next panel interview. So I said, okay, I'm making strides here, which was amazing and I was just thrilled.

When I met with the president, he told me he would be making the decision. It would be a tough decision. He said there was another finalist, but he would make the decision that was best for the college. And when he said that, as a candidate, I was like, oh my goodness. That sounds foreboding a little bit. And I said, "Oh, I probably was maybe too honest this time. I said, I probably won't get the call." But then about 48 hours later, I got the call and I was just thrilled. I was so excited to be able to be in a space where my approach, which is a unique approach, very dialogical reflective, inquiry based, was receiving an opening at a community college. And I said, this is going to be great. The job was to lead an institution-wide transformation around the topics of equity, social justice, and multicultural education. And I said, this puts all the skills that I've developed over all these years with transformative change and guiding faculty through it and pedagogy and andragogy and all of those things that I've always been passionate about refining, this gave me an opportunity to do that in a teacher leadership capacity.

Michael Poliakoff:

Could you talk a little more about the difference between calling in and calling out? That seems to be a very, very rich topic. We hear a lot of calling out lately. What's calling in?

Tabia Lee:

Calling in is an invitation to dialogue. It's an invitation not to prejudge someone or to assume that you know their position, but to really just talk and dialogue. Not debate, not discuss, tear things apart, but actually have a dialogue. Create some flow of meaning between different groups of people or individuals. And it involves ... If you think you've heard something that you might question from an equity or equality perspective or from a diversity perspective, instead of accusing someone and saying, "Wow, you're a racist, or you're transphobic," or giving someone a label and calling them out on it, instead you ask questions like, "Oh, could you explain what you meant when this statement was made? What experiences do you have that your perspective is rooted in?" You try to learn more about a person or a group of people if that's the case, instead of just coming in with a prejudgment and making judgments about people.

So you're really taking that open inquiry approach. You're not coming in and accusing someone, making judgements about someone. It's a much more holistic form of communicating. Non-violent form of communicating. It has a lot of roots in those kinds of fields of open inquiry and learning from one another through dialogue. Not needing to prove a point. So it's intellectual humility really is what it is.

Steve McGuire:

It sounds like a really positive approach. And it sounds like you had a really exciting opportunity before you when you joined De Anza. By your account you were totally honest with them about your approach to these matters. They seemed to put you through the ringer as they were hiring you, and they seemed like they were excited about what you were going to bring to the table. But based on what I've read it sounds like almost immediately you started to meet resistance when you got on campus and your approach was not welcome. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about what some of the problems were that you ran into and also maybe something about ... How many people are we talking about on campus? Was it the majority of people on campus that were objecting to your approach, or was it a vocal minority? What issues were you running into?

Tabia Lee:

So as I started to do my work, as someone who does take an inquiry based approach, Dr. McGuire, I never come in thinking that I know everything about a situation just from what I've read through their communications or even their institutional documents. I do that work, but I really wanted to talk to people to see how did they perceive the office, what did they think the needs were, and what were their perceptions around the equity work of the campus? Because that was to be a large portion. And inclusion on the campus. Because that was also something that was stated that I'd be focusing on. So I did over 60 hours of needs assessment conversations with faculty, staff, senior leadership.

One of the first ones I had was with ... Not my staff, but the office staff of the office of equity. Because I wanted to hear from the people I'd be working directly with early on to get their perceptions. And one of those first needs assessment conversations was with one of the office staff members. It's a small office, so there's only two other people, myself, and then there's an associate from the Women Gender and Sexuality Center. And so I met with one of the staff and I was asking them, "Tell me about what's going on here and what what's happening in the office." This is my third weekend. Very early on. They disclosed to me that they were a finalist for the position and they were heartbroken. They said that they had been there all these years doing the work. They didn't understand why I was selected. They were very angry.

And I empathized with that because I've been part of searches where things fizzle and it is heartbreaking as a candidate. I had just had that temporary position that didn't flow into full-time so it was fresh for me. And so I'm sitting there listening to them and I'm like, "Wow, I can relate to that. How can we move through that?" But they were just very angry and hostile. And they told me at the end of the conversation, "I was a student here, I've been doing the work. I don't know you. I don't know who you are. This should be my job." And they said, "You're going to have a rough road ahead of you."

Steve McGuire:

Wow. That's a tough situation to find yourself in. You do empathize for the other person, but that is a tough way to start a new position.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. And as I mentioned, I felt that pain and I knew it was very painful. So I did everything I could to be extra accommodating, to make myself available. I wanted them to get to know me and see, hey, this is going to be okay. This is a colleague who's like-minded and so forth. But that simply wasn't allowed to happen Dr. McGuire. In early meetings with the team, that same individual ... As I met with the team, we had a few meetings but they were very casual. And remember, I'm supposed to lead a strategic

transformation institution wide. And we did the few casual meetings. That was great. But then the side of me that has worked with program evaluation and institutional transformation, I said, "We've got to start setting some goals and formalizing things and really coming together how are we going to transform and change the flatlining that had been described to me for the past 20 years."

And so I asked them. I said, "When do you meet?" They said, "We meet weekly. We try to get together." I said, "How do you take notes?" "We don't really take notes." And I was like, okay. So that's a way in for me to start structuring things. And so I made a Google Doc. I wanted to be very collaborative. Not imposing anything. That's not my style. I'm trying to hear what they do and have a more informal approach. And so I said, "I have this Google Doc and we're all editors on it. Maybe we can start setting agendas for our meetings. Maybe we can put ideas up there and you all can tell me what's your process, what events are coming up, maybe we can identify how to support each other." And as I was explaining that, that's when the individual stopped me and they said, "Stop what you're doing." And they had a very serious look on their face. This is on Zoom, remember. We're all online during all these things. So I could see everyone in the grid. And they all had very serious looks. And I was like, okay.

And he said, "What you're doing right now is you're white speaking and you're white splaining." He said, "You're being transactional and you're supporting white supremacy." And I had never heard any of those terms. Transactional, yes, because I'd studied leadership, but the others I had not heard before and had never heard someone call someone those words or use them the way that they were using them. And especially not myself. I had never even encountered someone saying that. I didn't know what white splaining was and white speaking was. But I knew it felt inappropriate. It made me feel bad. And they had these really self-righteous smug looks on their faces.

My response was, "I'm new here. I have not come into this space saying or calling you any names or any words that are disparaging." I said, "What you just said, it feels to me very bad." I said, "Please do not use those kinds of words against me." I said, "It makes me feel uncomfortable." And my team members, their demeanor changed as though I was shockingly offensive and that I had somehow injured the person that I said, please don't say those words to me. And so it just instantly shifted. You know how you can feel a dynamic as a leader? You're like, oh my goodness. This is not good. And then right after that, there became this claim that I'm not inclusive. That I'm coming in and not being collaborative. And so I went to my dean, who's my supervisor. I told them what happened. When I told them about what happened their affect was very flat. They didn't say anything one way or the other.

And I said, "You know what? I think our team is going to need some outside communication supports." I said, "Normally I would be the person who would do this healing conversation. How do we incorporate a new team member?" But I said, "Because I'm the person being attacked, I'm unable to. It shackles me because I was the enemy at this point. So I said, "We need to bring in someone else from outside to talk to the team about effective communication strategies, appropriate ways to engage one another." And I told the supervising dean, "I feel very uncomfortable by what's happened. I grew up in the Central Valley, which is in California. I'm a California native in a small town. And every time I had heard the term white supremacy used, it was in the context of the KKK and neo-Nazis. And so to have myself as a racialized black woman being called supporting white supremacy and white speaking, white splaining," I said, "that's very problematic."

I said, "It was a jump. We weren't even talking about topics of that nature." And I said, "I feel like I was attacked. And that when I said, please don't say that, the people on the call thought I was offensive." And so the dean's solution was to ask that person to apologize to me, and they never did. In fact, they ramped up the harassment and bullying after that. And not only that, no person was brought in. The support I asked for was never provided. Instead, that dean began to attend the meetings but as I said, I would like for you to attend just to observe and see the dynamics. Instead of doing that and observing

and seeing the dynamics, that supervising dean became one of the main bullies as well. And so it was like I was in group meetings where I'm being attacked by the group and it didn't improve things. And this went on for two years.

Michael Poliakoff:

Dr. Lee, it sounds to me ... And of course I wasn't there. It sounds to me as if there was a combination here of personal assault from disappointed applicants that the fuel that was being used maybe opportunistically by these people was ideology. And it seems to me that these terms, white splaning and so forth, are in and of themselves offensive terms to be used against anybody. I remember seeing this all starting in the '80s. Actually, it goes back to seeing Houston Baker at University of Pennsylvania using this newfangled adjective, whitemale, just one word. And I thought, that's some strange identitarian language. We didn't even have that term identitarian in the '80s. But what I'm seeing here are highly offensive words. And I'm not one that hits the offense button, but I'm also aware of the fact that these are things that in another context, if we change the adjective, change the color would be seen for what they are. And yet they seem to be routinely accepted. I want to get your thoughts on what we're doing to ourselves just by being nonchalant about how these linguistic dynamics are working.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. I had to come up to speed very fast on this Dr. Poliakoff because I had truly not heard it. And I've had people ask me, they're like, "How could you possibly not have heard?" I hadn't worked in any setting where those terms were being used as a way to transform institutions or to engage public education or educators. I really hadn't. How I found out what was being meant when it was said to me, those words, the dean and the staff members, I started going to their presentations and workshops and I would see this slide that they would put up. It said white supremacy characteristics. And one time it had a citation. And I grabbed that and I went to Google Scholar and I started looking up, who are these researchers? What is their research? And I discovered that what they were using and holding up at an institution-wide level was a different definition of white supremacy than one that I've ever encountered in years of research and interaction.

And they were holding this up as the truth, Dr. Poliakoff. And they would say, "These are things we need to avoid." Being on time, being objective, the written word. All these characteristics were there that I've commonly taught my students and other teachers, to be a successful person in academia, you would want to be on time, you would want to ask questions, you would want to be objective. But these were being used in a disparaging way. And people were being told, when you see people doing these things, they are white supremacists and they're supporting white supremacy. And then I started to go to other community college workshops and meetings. I have a professional development addiction. I'll just be transparent with that. I love to learn. And I started to see this in other spaces. So it's like a system-wide thing. It wasn't just unique to De Anza College.

I was going to other workshops from the local areas in the Silicon Valley in that region, the Bay Area region and I kept seeing it over and over again, upheld as a model of what we are opposing. We are against this. There would be statements like that. And then I realized that this was very much a worldview potentially that's being promoted. Not just to teachers and faculty, but to staff. To students because students would often be present. And what are we doing to ourselves? I think we're doing something that's very dangerous. I think that we're doing something that's very harmful to students, to communities, to teaching professionals by holding up that model and saying that this is how we see things. And if you do these things, we will attack you and remove you. And it causes a whole bunch of ripple effects throughout the organization. Because from that ... And this whole concept of decentering



whiteness is often mentioned in professional development meetings. And it becomes problematic for students who are racialized as white, for students who are not racialized as white. For everyone. Because it's this idea of constant struggle. A constant focus on oppression. This constant focus on tribalistic identity is what I call it. And unequal identity groups and vying for power and resources.

It's making its way into governance structures. It's making its way into the educational master plan. And when that was happening, this was during my time at De Anza, I simply was asking questions about it. When it came to the academic senate, and they said, "We want our racialized affinity groups to have voting rights in the academic senate." I just had a lot of questions about that. What does that mean? Because to me, the academic senate is a space for faculty representation institution wide. And I just questioned, why is the question on the floor to bring in racialized affinity groups when we only had three at that time and they were not representative of all the groups on campus? And even with those racialized affinity groups, the membership was not representative of the entire campus.

Like if you have one group ... I'll just say the Black Faculty Staff Association, which I'm a member of, it's not representative of the entire black teaching, staff, administrative population. Because as we know on our campuses, when we have these different groups of networks, politics becomes involved and other things become involved and organizational structure becomes involved. And some people engage and some don't. So I questioned representation. Are they truly representative? I questioned foundationally ... Our school has focused on academics and has a rich history of it. Academic senate has representatives from the academic disciplines that are voted in by the entire body of the faculty in that discipline. So are we now having a different focus on racialized affinity groups and then they developed a gender ideology focused affinity group? Is that now what we're focusing on instead of academics or in addition or are we all expected to do this? I was just raising questions like that and what could be the legality of it, given that we don't have a white affinity group. I was called a white supremacist again for asking that question.

Steve McGuire:

I know you have your own positive vision for what DEI and anti-racist work can look like, and I'd like to ask you about that. But just briefly before we get to that, just to make sure that our listeners fully understand what you've gone through. My understanding is that you've had these difficulties basically since you first joined De Anza College, but then recently you went through a tenure evaluation and that is where everything hit the fan. And now you're still under contract there until the end of the spring, I believe, but then you will no longer be working at De Anza College. Is that correct?

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. And the attacks ... Just to be clear, Dr. McGuire, there was push out attempts nonstop in phase one, which was last year. My tenure review committee attempted to get me out phase one. I had intervention from an organization called a Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism. And their legal advocacy team came in and advocated on my behalf because there were all kinds of things happening at the end of last year. Some representatives from these racialized affinity groups, two of them, went to the board of trustees and demanded my immediate termination. They said this during public comment. They said I was attacking affinity groups. That I was undermining the equity progress that had been done. That I didn't represent the ideas I was hired to represent with fidelity and all of these other things that no one had ever talked to me about or informed me of. And they were very angry and demanding my immediate termination beyond even the manipulations that had taken place in my tenure review process.

In that process, it was literal written comments of ideological attacks saying that what I was doing was dangerous, that I was deeply offensive, that I should never broach or speak about controversial topics in my work and other things in writing from the evaluators. Those types of comments and verbally as well. And very hostile interactions, which should have been collegial conversations. They were just like putdowns, demeaning, demoralizing. And I endured that and even had predictions that the vote will be coming from the committee and it would be unanimous. Before it happened I was told that. So of course I'm doing all the things that my teacher's union would tell me to do, but none of those things seemed to matter. And it took literal ... I believe the outside intervention advanced me to phase two.

But here's the problem with that. The leadership was committed to not intervening in a positive way or to providing the supports that would be needed to make that pathway forward. So I literally still was in a very hostile environment from day one all the way through. It didn't clean up. You would think people would say, "Hey, this is our faculty director of equity. We better shape up and do the right thing." That's not what happened. Instead, it was a doubling down and an even stronger push out. And even though the committee was reconstituted for phase two, the same supervising dean remained on, and the same thing happened in phase two. So it's a lot of lack of movement in a positive way at a leadership level, which was disappointing to me because as a person living this every day, it was tough to go through.

And then two, the people you think you can rely on or that you should be able to rely on, not being able to have that support to move forward in a positive way and having my work ... Actually this year, I was censored. My events were removed from the college events calendar. They were not promoted. In the tenure review process in my conversations there was profanity use, which I thought was highly inappropriate, and I've never experienced at any institution beyond here. So it just became a larger scale of a push out culminating in this movement. And the sad part about this, and I want to just make this clear, I have strong student support. The De Anza student government, they even made formal resolutions to support the work I was doing around heritage month work group and trying to increase inclusion, one of my job duties. They voted to support that effort. That same presentation and information went to academic senate and it was shot down. It was not supported because a small group of ideologues, extremists are in control in that body and they mischaracterized what we were doing, and they presented concerns about it. They didn't want a multi-faith calendar. They didn't want a heritage on calendar. They just said, we're not going to support those things without even logical rationale behind it.

The students could see the value, but the adults, the small extreme could not. And this is the thing that really concerns me. Because I had started pulling people in who had previously had nothing to do with the office. And this was very obvious to my tenure review committee. And that just made them more urgently want to get rid of me because I wasn't advancing their ideology. And I say that because in some of the writings, they said, "I'm a third wave anti-racist, and Lee, what she did in this workshop was deeply offensive to me."

They identified themselves that way. So I'm not imposing something or saying anything. And at one point, I even told my supervising dean, I said, "There's this perception that maybe we are opposites and we don't work together. Why can't we leverage that to really bring people together and to move us forward out of this stasis that we've been in for many years?" I said, "I can work with anyone." I said, "I can work with you. I can work with the people who have been mean to me." I said, "Why can't we reset this?" And again, flat affect. No response. No interest in that. You're wrong. You don't belong here.

Michael Poliakoff:

Clearly intellectual diversity is not one of the diversities that's recognized. I'm really quite chilled and shocked that the administration would allow the whole idea that there is a ban against talking about



controversial topics. What after all do we do in the academy except discuss the things that are the issues either in our academic areas or indeed in the public policy arena? Has there been no support coming from trustees or the president simply about what the values of the institution are? I keep going back to the classic C. Vann Woodward committee report that the academy is the place where we challenge the unchallengeable, discuss the unmentionable. What's happening at De Anza, and an even more disturbing issue that you raised, is this now becoming widespread in the California community colleges? If so, we're in a very dangerous situation.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. And as I started to ask questions, there's a statewide body of academic senates for the California community college system, and I discovered from people who had gone to meetings where the topic of anti-racism was addressed, that when some faculty members from certain regions and representatives just asked questions ... What are we meaning when we're saying anti-racism? How are we defining it? They were actually shouted down and booed down on the floor of the statewide body of academic senate. So when I learned that piece of information, the response I was getting from my local academic senate made much more sense. There's this effect happening throughout the whole system starting at state level. From the chancellor's office there's been this adoption of we're committed to anti-racism, but no one has defined what philosophy is undergirding that? What ideology of anti-racism is in effect? It's this blind adoption of words and policies. We're supporting racial equity. What does it mean? How are we defining race? How are we defining equity? None of those things are critically examined and there's this rush to move.

And I believe that that rush to move is very intentional by the activists who are doing these movements, who are placed at the state level in the chancellor's office as well as at the local levels. When I first started out, when I was starting to ask questions, one of those activists came to me and they said, "We just want to tell you, Lee, we worked hard to advance anti-racism here and nothing's going to get in the way of it." And to me, it felt like a veiled threat and I didn't understand why that person was saying that to me. I'd never met them. They had never met me. How was I a threat? But the threat was, Dr. Poliakoff, just that I had already asked some questions in some key settings, and I was trying to get people to think about things instead of rushing to act without considering what are the long-term implications here. Those are the kinds of questions that I'm always asking. And I'm never trying to guide someone to say yes or no or adopt this position or that. I'm just posing questions to get us to think critically and that was considered a threat.

Steve McGuire:

I think just the fact you've stressed several times that you're asking questions and these are the responses that you get illustrates one of the core problems with some versions of DEI that we see in the academy today. I think that provides a nice segue to ask you, what is your positive vision for DEI work? I assume that since you were applying for this job and willing to take this job that you think there is a need for DEI work in the academy. Could you tell us a little bit about how you think these issues ought to be approached?

Tabia Lee:

I believe Dr. McGuire that there's a definite perspective that's in place and in action at De Anza College and other California community colleges. They were not transparent about that with me. Even in the job description they could have easily stated, we work from a critical social justice perspective and we are looking for candidates that will uphold that with fidelity. They could have stated that and been

transparent and I would've known like, oh, that's maybe not a good fit for me because I am more of a classical practitioner. I have a different focus on things. I believe in things like free will and human agency. The things that I value and what I believe a just society is is one that has equality of opportunity. That's different from critical social justice where the focus is on equality of outcomes in every sphere of life. And so I think there's a lack of transparency and honesty. There's a push to move things in.

Under the DEI approach, there's a default approach that's in effect in many colleges and universities and even civic organizations. I've been getting contact from public librarians and other people nationally where this is affecting their workplace as well. And they're being told that they need to believe that society is structured by victims and oppressors. That's a critical social justice ideology perspective. They're being told that they need to focus on oppression. They need to focus on identity based understandings of the world. And no one's saying that's because we're trying to infuse critical social justice ideology into everything. But I think we need to start naming that more in educational leaders, superintendents and principals and presidents and chancellors. If that's what they're bringing to their communities, I think they need to start saying it and naming it so that people can make a choice. An informed choice.

And at first I thought maybe they're unwittingly doing it. They just maybe don't know. They don't have the naming for it. So now some of my colleagues, Dr. Eric Smith and others, myself, have been doing some work around naming. So we're getting the naming out there. And now it becomes a matter of are we going to transparently name what we're doing? Are we going to, when we say in our mission, we support equity, really define out what we mean by that and what ideology underlies that understanding of equity? Because there's a different understanding of even equality.

When I did my work at De Anza, part of the first workshops I did was around defining these terms. Bringing people together to talk about and define. And those were considered offensive workshops. And because I really wanted to know. The needs assessment conversations, people told me we're all saying these words, but we're meaning different things and that's why we can't all get on the same page and support our students. And so I really wanted to name and to understand and to have people talk about those definitions. I think more institutions need to do that at the senior leadership level, and they need to get on the same page together and have a clear vision about these things before we're just blindly adopting and saying things that extremists can then take hold of and just undermine the whole institution mission wave.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to step back even a little further. My sense of how we got into this whole mess in which suddenly equity replaces equality of opportunity, where diversity is only physical appearance or gender choice, not the intellect of heart and mind. And my bewilderment that America saw Barack Obama win a Nobel Prize, get elected president twice. Although of course he then caught a lot of flack for speaking out against cancel culture. One must note he rather boldly asked young people to stop doing that and to start listening to each other, and suddenly the mob is beginning to turn on him as well. And this comes at a time ... I was just looking again at Stephen Pinker's, Enlightenment Now. There's been such a sharp decline in racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes over the 13 years in this millennium that he covered. Interracial marriages were at just a paltry few percent in the '60s when I was a teenager to 19% in 2019. Public approval rises to 94%. Why now? I want to get your take since you've been in the field. Why now? What's happened to us?

Tabia Lee:

I'm bewildered to Dr. Poliakoff. Because usually in education we always say transformation takes place slowly. It ekes through. And what we've seen is a tremendous quickening of transformation and of adoption of things. And I think some of the societal things that have happened, some of the things that we all were transfixed on as we were in lockdown situations and at our computers more often than we would be and on social media. We all saw a lot of different things that maybe we wouldn't have seen. We heard a lot of different things that maybe we wouldn't have heard. And some of these extremist activists have seized the moment, if you will, and really just demanded that their institutions make immediate changes. "We can't go on the way we've been," I've often heard people say. "We have to do something now. To do nothing is to be complicit."

There's been a lot of language that we're all familiar with. Of course when you hear the term anti-racist, you're like yes. I'm anti-racist. I don't want to be called racist or associated with that. I don't want my institution associated with that. Okay, sure. We'll adopt an anti-racist policy. Without realizing and thinking and stepping back from ... The moment is hot. The iron's on me. But what's the long-term effects for my institution? What are these people really talking about? Too many of us didn't step back and just press that question and just pump the brakes a little bit to get that information to bring people together in dialogue and say, really, what are we talking about? What is that rooted in? What's the theory behind it? Those questions weren't asked. There was this pressure to act immediately and it hasn't stopped it. It's going through all other sectors too.

And when a leader hears that you feel compelled, you have to do something right? And then to do something ... Someone has a pre-packaged thing right there. This is the program we need to bring in. This is the policy we need to adopt. Here are some examples. Do it. Okay, we've done it. Now what? And so we're all hostage now because we've adopted these policies, we've started doing these practices, we've put in racialized affinity groups into our board structure, our school structures, our civic organizations, and now we're starting to go, was this such a good idea? And there's going to have to be some changes that are made as a result of that. And some people are going to be upset about that and they're going to not like people stepping back and becoming more critical. But I think that's exactly what we need to do.

We need to have more critical thinking, more dialogue. And when people tell you, no, we can't talk about this. It's a not-negotiable. We're in it. We're there now. I think that's something we need to question. When someone tells us there's only one way to do this and we all have to do it, that's something for a leader to question. So our leaders need to step up and they need to start guiding their communities through these critical thinking exercises and dialogues about what are we meaning? What is the potential impact? What is this all rooted in? And are we all on board? And creating spaces where even those ... Because some people, they have opinions, but they're so afraid of the loudness of the canceling that takes place, of the bullying that takes place, even when questions are asked are considered, that they just close their classroom door and they just do their work with their students and don't want to be bothered by any of it. But we have to get bothered and we have to all come together and start to talk about this because if not, where we're headed is not someplace that's very positive.

I don't know if folks want this to be a world where equality of outcomes is the end all be all, and everything is standardized and looks the same or not. I really believe in the American spirit and the American experiment. It's not perfect. There are things we need to take a look at, but that's the beauty of it, and it's a beautiful thing and I don't want to see it destroyed. Some people talk about destruction and dismantling. That's part of the critical social justice ideology. When you ask them what happens after that, they don't have the answers. So I don't want to just destroy everything here. I want things to build. I want to be generative, and I want us to have a world where our students and the young people have a future that's not rooted in toxic anti-democratic and anti-republic ideologies.

Michael Poliakoff:

That was magnificently said. Dr. Lee. I realize we've been on for about an hour. You've been very generous with your time. Steve, you may have some more questions as well. But it makes me think back with a certain sadness about what we've lost. I think about what Martin Luther King said. His dream that his four children will live in a nation where they won't be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character and whether that's talking about an African American, an Asian, or a Caucasian, it's all the same. It's what's in our hearts and minds. I was very heartened. We gave our annual award for outstanding contribution to liberal arts education to John McWhorter from Columbia. And I guess he's such a learned man, he must have thought about how that really aligned with what Dr. King had said. My daughters are lively young people taking their places in this thing called life. I shudder at the thought of someone on a college admissions committee in the not too distant future reading their dossiers and finding out that their being biracial is the most interesting thing about them or even frankly interesting at all. And I'm so impressed at what you've done at personal cost to try to bring us back to those principles of what makes us humans. What links us all and gives us real hope for being a real community.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. And that's something that I remain committed to. It's something that's so important. We can spend a lot of time in different camps and really digging into those. But what I think we really need to do is come off of the extreme polarities and meet somewhere in the middle with each other. And we can only do that by really actively listening. Some people tell us we need cultural humility. I think we really need intellectual humility. To know that none of us has all the answers, none of us possibly could. We're all working in this imperfect world as imperfect people, and that's okay. And we can all come together and make something wonderful with that commitment to humanity, to human dignity, to the values that underlie the academy and that always have. We don't need to scrap those or throw them away.

One of my tenure evaluation committee members ... You mentioned John McWhorter. I cited his book, *Woke Racism* in one of my presentations. And I was told, "Watch who you cite. We looked at your citations and you have some things." And I told that person, "I cite whoever I've read who influenced my thought, and then I want to share it with others so that they can then go read for themselves and see how I came to my conclusions." This is what scholarship is about. It seems so basic. I thought I was just doing what every teacher does. And I'm going to stay committed to that is what I was doing and that what I was doing was okay. And we just need to pull things back from the extremists on all sides of the spectrum where decent people can just focus in on compassion, on teaching and learning and the science of teaching and learning, and the things that we know are good for students and communities. Not things that are racialized ideologies or gender ideologies or all these ideologies that are just clouding up the academy. We need to get back to our disciplines and return back to the focus of our educational institutions.

Steve McGuire:

Dr. Lee, one last question from me. You mentioned earlier that your work had received some support from the students at De Anza and that it was really some of your fellow faculty members who have given you so much trouble. I wonder if that is a sign of hope. I know from my own experience as a teacher, I've certainly encountered some students who come in having already imbibed a certain ideology and it's difficult, if not impossible, to get them to question that or to think about things from a different perspective. But my experience has often been that students are quite open to learning. They like to hear what their various professors have to say. I've often heard conservative students tell me that

one of their leftist professors is their favorite professor that they've ever had. But I wonder if you could just say a little bit more about your experience with the students at De Anza and whether that's something that does in fact give you hope for the future.

Tabia Lee:

Yes. Yes. The students are a great hope. Some of the work I've done this year has been specific to raising awareness around the race ideologies in practice I call them, and these different philosophies or ideologies of race that students are encountering. And I did workshops where students came and the feedback I received from them was so positive because they said, "I'm realizing that most of my classes are coming from one ideology. I never hear of these other perspectives." So it's eye opening for students to have frameworks where you do have a matrix and you put these different ideas or perspectives next to each other. I was told that doing that is dangerous and wrong to do. But I think that's the very much right thing to do. Because when people see things next to each other, they're able to think of the commonalities and the differences between them and to think further of that, of what resonates with them.

So for the students, there's great hope. It all depends on what they come in contact with. Now, when you have a situation like in many of our California community colleges, sometimes the students are steeped in an ideology, a singular ideology, and then they become employees of that organization. So they become even more committed to the intellectual complex of that particular ideology because now it's part of their paycheck and that's their livelihood. And so they even more vociferously adopt it. And then we put them out in leadership positions or even further up the ranks. So we need to pay attention to that too, because students, what is nurtured is what flourishes. And so when you're indoctrinated into a particular ideology and everything in your environment tells you positive to keep promoting and doing that one thing, you become even more committed to it and even more of a strong advocate of it.

So I think that we need to pay attention to that. And I love some of these organizations that are coming in around viewpoint diversity for students and starting college chapters. I think that's something that we definitely need to do to engage students in critical thinking. If we have to do it through a club because it's not taking place in the instruction and curriculum, great. But just exposing and making aware, it makes such a huge difference in the lives of students and learners to know when someone's telling me there's only one way to do this or see this, and someone else comes and says, "Hey, actually, there's this way and that way, and what feels right to you." You're giving that choice of agency and free will that's so vital to students and empowering. Because then they say, "Okay, well, I was going along with this because everything I hear says that, but I have some other thoughts now. Maybe I can revise some of the things I've thought, or I'm even stronger in some of the things I thought."

I think our job and role as educators shouldn't be to tell people what they need to think, but just to teach the learning skills of metacognition. How to think. How do I process things? Why do I understand things the way that I do? That's useful for a learner. And I believe that the more teachers start to do that ... Again, we used to do that. I don't think it's so far gone. I think we can still do that again, and we should, because that's the greatest gift you can give to any individual. That ability to think critically. To consider the content of an argument, not just the emotional response that you have to it.

Michael Poliakoff:

Dr. Lee, hearing your vision as an educator does give me a bit of optimism that you are making such a contribution to the world of education and to the country, and at the same time some pessimism that you haven't been appreciated properly at De Anza. But it's my profound hope that your ideas will be the

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ideas that win the day. And thank you for being with us. It was an inspiring conversation and I know I speak for my colleagues. I hope our paths will cross before too long.

Tabia Lee:

Thank you.

Steve McGuire:

Thank you.