

November 6, 2012

Dear President Hennessy and Provost Etchemendy,

As I patiently waited to cast my ballot today I surveyed the long line of fellow voters and couldn’t help but notice the great diversity of my neighbors. I imagined the vast range of opinions represented in the line and felt energized by the ability of such different viewpoints to be expressed through the democratic process. America is a place where we pride ourselves on the diversity of our ideas, backgrounds, and experiences. Nowhere is this diversity of opinions more appropriate than in education, where we prepare students to be participatory citizens of our democracy. Students need civic education to critically analyze competing and conflicting ideas and values. Academic freedom of ideas and opinions, along with protection of our freedom of speech, is imperative to our American democracy.

Unfortunately, not all educators believe that academic freedom is important. Two mathematicians, one of whom Professor James Milgram holds a position at Stanford, have engaged in academic bullying, explicitly attempting to silence a colleague who simply holds a different opinion, based on her well recognized and awarded research. Schools and universities are the ideal settings for disagreement, debate, and exploration of ideas. These professors’ disagreement with their colleague provides a perfect opportunity to engage in this rich debate to enhance students’ critical thinking in preparation for civic participation.

Civic participation and equitable education can also empower us to work toward social justice. As a (former) public high school math teacher (current doctoral student) myself my purpose in mathematics education is to use it as a vehicle to increase equity in mathematics achievement and access to higher education opportunities. We can empower our students through their education for both civic participation and higher educational and career opportunities. I engage in this work in the classroom and also by facilitating conversation amongst educators by co-organizing the Creating Balance in an Unjust World Conference. Creating Balance in an Unjust World is an annual conference that addresses Mathematics Education and Social Justice. The conference explores themes such as the improvement of achievement for all students of diverse backgrounds, equitable pedagogical approaches, and increasing access to higher education. We value the work of educators such as Professor Jo Boaler, committed to improving the mathematics achievement of traditionally underserved students.

Professor Boaler’s work has influenced the core organizing committee of the Creating Balance in an Unjust World Conference. All four of us are current or former public high school math teachers who implement Complex Instruction in our classrooms as a means of increasing equity and rigor. (Complex Instruction is a pedagogical technique that Professor Boaler’s research found increases equity and achievement, and I had the opportunity to learn about Complex Instruction from Professor Boaler as a Master’s student in 2001.) At Vanguard High School in New York City, where I taught and where one co-organizer still teaches, rigorous instruction through Complex Instruction beginning in 2001 facilitated the introduction of AP Calculus in 2007. One of our graduates, who recently completed her undergraduate studies, reflects on her experiences in math class. “Math at Vanguard is what helped me discover my passion for numbers. This was one of the classes I looked forward to daily. The class was challenging but at the same time fun!”

Students all over the country need voices like Professor Boaler’s. Visionaries like her ignite the fire that is spread from researcher to teacher to teacher and ultimately to students who matter the most. Her scholarship contributes to the body of knowledge of mathematics education, which our country so desperately needs to continue improving. Professor Boaler’s research has revealed pedagogical approaches that increase equity and achievement in mathematics. Others may feel free to disagree and engage in respectful debate. I teach my high school students not to bully but to respectfully disagree to push each other’s thinking to both enhance learning and prepare them for civic participation.

As a proud Stanford graduate (B.S. 1999, M.A. 2001) I hope that Stanford lives up the image and values I associate with my alma mater. I truly remember diversity and integrity as values that Stanford not only promoted but demonstrated through its actions, such as admitting and supporting an incredibly diverse student body and respecting students through the honor code (I never once saw a fellow student disrespect the honor code). Academic bullying is unacceptable and unimaginable to me at the Stanford I remember. I hope the university administration investigates and takes action to address the behavior of Professor Milgram (including removing his paper from the Stanford website) to ensure that academic freedom, respect, and integrity are upheld at Stanford.

Today I felt prepared to engage in civic participation as I cast my vote through the education I received at Stanford where we debated and analyzed opposing ideas for hours, most memorably in our undergraduate dorms. I remain optimistic that Stanford will preserve academic freedom to promote the civic education not only for Stanford students, but to be an exemplar for all universities and schools across the country. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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