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Fighting the Shadow Pandemic

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 has caused mass xenophobia, racism and discrimination, writes B. Venkat Mani, making the need for inclusive teaching all the more



// May 14, 2020

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(https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/styles/large/public/media/vector-of-a-sign-with-virus-crossed-out-on-it-vector-id1224019252.jpg?itok=gCPudkNm).

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In addition, the inequalities existing in the United States through the segregation of neighborhoods and school districts along racial and class-based lines have been rendered visible through the massive deadly impact of the novel coronavirus on the African American and Latinx populations of cities like [New York](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-race-deaths.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-race-deaths.html>), [Chicago](https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-coronavirus-chicago-coronavirus-deaths-demographics-lightfoot-20200406-77nlylhiavgjzb2wa4ckivh7mu-story.html) (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-coronavirus-chicago-coronavirus-deaths-demographics-lightfoot-20200406-77nlylhiavgjzb2wa4ckivh7mu-story.html>) and [Milwaukee](https://newsone.com/3918016/coronavirus-killing-black-people-milwaukee/) (<https://newsone.com/3918016/coronavirus-killing-black-people-milwaukee/>). A [shortage of hospital beds and ventilators](https://fortune.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-ventilator-shortage/) (<https://fortune.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-ventilator-shortage/>) and [lack of health insurance for the socioeconomically underprivileged](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/28/coronavirus-millions-of-americans-uninsured) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/28/coronavirus-millions-of-americans-uninsured>) has underlined how poorly prepared the nation was in pandemic management.

Meanwhile, away from the nationwide uncertainty and the disturbing peace and quiet of the streets and workplaces, for the past two months a noisy pandemic of racism has been unfolding. While racism in the United States has long been with us, what is especially cruel about it now is that it is unfolding in a moment of extreme suffering, when the virus itself is not making any distinctions between race, ethnicity, gender or nationality. When the entire humanity, and millions of Americans -- regardless of their physical or financial differences -- are worried about their health, their futures, their financial security, the hatred of anything different and foreign is reaching its peak.

Indeed, there is ample evidence that the worldwide spread of COVID-19 has caused [mass xenophobia, racism and discrimination](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-covid19-xenophobia-racism/607816/) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-covid19-xenophobia-racism/607816/>). As populist manipulation of publics continues around the world, mostly to hide the lack of preparation of governments in fighting the spread of the virus, human beings who are deemed outsiders have become scapegoats again. Given the initial spread of the virus in Wuhan, China, there has been a resurgence of militant, racist Orientalism. Asians have been the direct targets of racist and xenophobic abuse in numerous countries, including in the United States, [members of the East Asian community](https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811363404/when-xenophobia-spreads-like-a-virus) (<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811363404/when-xenophobia-spreads-like-a-virus>); in the United Kingdom, [British Asians and Asian migrants](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism>); in India, [students from northeastern states](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/students-from-northeast-complain-of-racism-at-kmc/articleshow/74071475.cms) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/students-from-northeast-complain-of-racism-at-kmc/articleshow/74071475.cms>) enrolled at colleges in Delhi and other big cities. Such incidents have also occurred in [Switzerland](https://www.nzz.ch/panorama/coronavirus-rassismus-gegen-asiaten-nzz-) (<https://www.nzz.ch/panorama/coronavirus-rassismus-gegen-asiaten-nzz->

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(<https://www.facebook.com/uwasianam/posts/2978906008829845>) directed against our Asian students on a sidewalk of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, when I teach literature. This incident of chalking was just one of the manifestations of the growing racial bias and hate speech against Asian and Asian American students, which the campus newspaper *Badger Herald* [reported](https://badgerherald.com/opinion/2020/02/11/as-the-coronavirus-spreads-to-madison-so-does-discrimination-against-asian-americans/) (<https://badgerherald.com/opinion/2020/02/11/as-the-coronavirus-spreads-to-madison-so-does-discrimination-against-asian-americans/>) well before COVID-19 took over the entire nation. In response to the chalking, the university leadership released a statement on "[Community Respect and Support](https://covid19.wisc.edu/statement-on-community-respect-and-support/)" (<https://covid19.wisc.edu/statement-on-community-respect-and-support/>), which acknowledged an uptick in racism against students of East Asian and South Asian heritages. The dean of students organized a virtual town hall on Zoom. Yet an event that was supposed to be a step toward healing ended up hurting people more. As the [student newspaper reported](https://badgerherald.com/news/2020/03/26/dean-of-students-hosts-virtual-town-hall-in-response-to-increase-in-racist-incidents-on-campus/) (<https://badgerherald.com/news/2020/03/26/dean-of-students-hosts-virtual-town-hall-in-response-to-increase-in-racist-incidents-on-campus/>), "One student appeared on camera with their pants pulled down, singing an obscene song, while another student interrupted the panelists and spoke obscenities for several moments before officials shut down their microphone."

In the words of the medical anthropologist [Monica Schoch-Spana](http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-people/schoch-spana/) (<http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-people/schoch-spana/>), who studied the fissures and fault lines of race and class in the segregated city of Baltimore during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918: "[[Pandemics](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/03/19/coronavirus-projections-us/)] [bring with them an almost shadow pandemic of psychological and societal injuries as well](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/03/19/coronavirus-projections-us/)" (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/03/19/coronavirus-projections-us/>). Unlike the 1918 flu, however, the shadow pandemic today is not restricted to physical spaces. In fact, it has been proliferating by the second in the virtual space: on Facebook and through Zoom, WhatsApp and Twitter. President Trump's declaration on Twitter of the [ending of immigration](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-immigration-ban.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-immigration-ban.html>) is just one example of state-endorsed legitimization of the shadow pandemic of racism and xenophobia.

Slowing the Spread

How can we slow down and eventually stop this shadow pandemic? As the spread of the coronavirus has shown, hiding truths and facts and pretending that a dangerous disease-causing virus does not exist or is manageable simply does not work. Similarly, owning up to the continued existence of racism and xenophobia on American campuses, and their manifestation in mild and severe forms -- from everyday microaggressions to what universities term "isolated incidents" of direct verbal assaults on human dignity -- will be the first step to

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all those who are impacted, leading to a decline in productivity. The cycle of incident, statement of regret and warning, and incident can be broken. Instead of waiting for yet another racist or xenophobic incident to occur, universities should put effective measures in place that send a strong message of zero tolerance for racism and xenophobia in all spaces, including classrooms, dorms and administrative offices.

That is why now would be the worst time to cut the budgets of the university's equity, diversity and inclusion offices, centers of excellence for the marginalized and minoritized students, disability resource centers, and programs in international studies. It would be delusional for universities to think that issues that their underrepresented minorities face -- racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, ableism -- are just problems of these minoritized communities with no relation or impact whatsoever on others. Discriminatory behavior impacts everyone. Disinvesting in diversity now would mean disinvesting in the university's own future, depriving its majority students a chance to enhance their learning experience by interacting and bonding with fellow human beings from backgrounds other than their own.

But none of this work can be left solely to leadership or the offices of equity, diversity and inclusion on our campuses. As we know from scientists and experts tracing the virus, irresponsible behavior in one section of the city, neighborhood or community assures the spread of the pandemic everywhere. If the strong measures and messaging will help with prevention, emphasis will have to be placed to develop a campuswide culture of resistance of discriminatory practices. Everyone will have to be together, physically or in the virtual space, to resist and fight the shadow pandemic.

In addition, without erasing differences of class, gender, religion, nationality or ability, we need to obliterate the compartmentalization of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination and see them as a network of behavioral practices that have no place in an institution of higher education. Thinking of separate solutions for racism against Asian Americans, Latinx students, African Americans or international students and faculty will be hardly productive. Adding new courses to educate students in Asian American or Asian cultures or throwing in more ethnic studies requirements will not lead to finding a sustainable solution to this problem. What institutions can certainly do is reemphasize the significance of programs in international studies and feature courses offered by scholars in migration, race and ethnicity, and globalization and cultural studies.

As a professor, I cannot overemphasize the urgency for inclusive teaching, no matter what you teach. That would require an awareness of differences among our students and thinking of their needs, especially of those who come from socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds. Colleges and universities across America provide excellent resources for [inclusive teaching strategies \(https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/building-inclusive-classrooms/inclusive-teaching-strategies\)](https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/building-inclusive-classrooms/inclusive-teaching-strategies) or make [professional development](#)

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the very core of a university's teaching, learning and research mission. Diversity statements, which now proliferate on institutional and even departmental websites, should be considered the beginning and not the end of our commitment to diversity.

For me, inclusive teaching requires being aware of the demographics of the students you teach in tandem with the course material and using that awareness to underline equity and diversity as beneficial to everyone, not just our minoritized students. Inclusive teaching requires a constant unlearning of your own privileges as a professor in order to accommodate understanding of and compassion for students who might be less privileged, no matter what their visible differences might tell us. In teaching courses on literature, migration and refugee studies, my inclusive teaching focuses on encouraging students to think through what I call "modes of connecting with the otherness of the other" through the syllabus and discussions, as we remain aware of the intersectionality of our identities.

The great online transition in spring 2020 has reinforced the fact that college itself was never an equalizer. Higher education did pave the way for many to continue their lifelong struggles for upward financial and social mobility. Now that such mobility or a better future looks bleak for all, colleges and universities should place the highest priority on equitable, inclusive and diverse learning experience.

Thinking of university education in post-COVID times, the question that is being discussed is how we are going to teach: in person or online. But the bigger questions will be what we are teaching, to whom and for which larger public good? The disappearance of students from campuses has not made the imposed and constructed social divisions disappear. As we sit in the safety of our shelters in place, we need to think of what happens when we come out of quarantine, self-imposed or otherwise.

In these troubled times, as the deepest fissures of our societies become visible along with tragic news of the deadly spread of the virus, we as teaching professionals bear a special responsibility to fight and resist racism and xenophobia. Our health-care professionals are doing their parts in hospitals. We can do ours in our classrooms by fighting exclusion and xenophobia through inclusive teaching. By staying cognizant of the needs of those who are less privileged, by assisting those who might need extra support and caring to assure their professional and personal success, we will actually contribute collectively to prevent the blockage of an entire pipeline of young scholars who might be thinking of dropping out in these stressed times.

This is the time when the entire humanity is in crisis. Shutting national borders for health reasons should not encourage shutting down the borders of our humanitarian concern for each other. For professors, this means that precisely in the time of a major crisis, those who have been minoritized and marginalized are not edited out

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Bio

[B. Venkat Mani \(https://gns.wisc.edu/person/b-venkat-mani/\)](https://gns.wisc.edu/person/b-venkat-mani/) is professor of German and world literature, director of the Center for South Asia, and a diversity liaison fellow of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Read more by [B. Venkat Mani](#)

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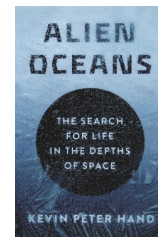


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