

To cite this article: Jeff Jawitz & Teresa Perez (2015): Investing in teaching development: navigating risk in a research intensive institution. International Journal for Academic Development, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1081852
To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1081852>

Investing in Teaching Development: Navigating Risk in a Research Intensive Institution

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“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal for Academic Development on 12 September 2015, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1081852>.”

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the South African National Research Foundation under grant number 74003

Investing in Teaching Development: Navigating Risk in a Research Intensive Institution

It is often assumed that academics working in a research intensive university are unlikely to invest in the professional development of their teaching. Institutional structures and culture tend to undermine investment in academics' teaching role. This study, conducted at the University of Cape Town, draws on an analysis of the environment within which academics make decisions to invest in their role as teachers. While acknowledging the privileging of research embedded in the institution, a significant group of academics have found ways to assert their academic identities as teachers despite the possible consequences and risks that this position entails.

Keywords: academic identities; agency; higher education; risk; teaching development

Introduction

Concern about the effectiveness of the higher education system in South Africa in producing sufficient numbers of quality graduates has turned attention to the development of academics as teachers. The drivers of this focus on teaching development include; concerns about the poor completion rates in light of increasing numbers; diversity of students enrolling in higher education; and the greater demand for accountability and changing local socio-political conditions (Scott, Yeld & Henry, 2007). Recent government proposals on ways of growing the next generation of academics include specific reference to supporting the development of teaching expertise (HESA, 2011; DHET, 2014a). Efforts to professionalise teaching in higher education have included the introduction of a range of short courses, certificates, postgraduate diplomas and Master's programmes across several institutions in South Africa.

This article draws on an analysis of data collected from academics at the University of Cape Town (UCT) as part of a National Research Foundation (NRF) project undertaken at eight universities between 2010 and 2013.ⁱ The NRF project investigated how structural and cultural aspects influenced individuals' engagement with professional development (PD) opportunities for teaching in higher education in South Africa. Ethical clearance was obtained from each participating institution and all information identifying specific individuals was removed at the stage of transcription and storing of data.

Institutional context: UCT

As a research intensive, English medium institution, UCT forms part of a cluster that dominates the national research output in South African higher education (DHET, 2014b). In its report on UCT's institutional audit in 2005, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) raised concerns about the way in which the management of teaching and learning at UCT was devolved into the separate faculties (HEQC, 2006). In its response, UCT acknowledged uneven practices across faculties (UCT, 2006) and restructured the academic governance of teaching and learning by appointing a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) for Teaching and Learning, establishing a Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and

streamlining the committees responsible for oversight of the teaching function.

The Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) formed in 2000 at UCT, has provided a range of professional development opportunities in teaching for academics. The Post-Graduate Diploma and Master's in Education (Higher Education Stream) were the first programmes to be introduced, followed in 2003 by an annual series of Teaching with Technology workshops and seminars. In 2004, the New Academic Practitioner Programme (NAPP), an induction programme for new academic staff at UCT was launched. External funding has supported these initiatives since their inception. The Language Development Group in CHED has also provided support for lecturers in integrating writing development within the curriculum. Several formal and non-formal discipline-based initiatives for professional development in teaching have been established such as in the Health Sciences and Commerce faculties. There are no formal incentives for attending such opportunities and no charge for participating in the non-formal programmes.

Theoretical framework

In keeping with the broader NRF project, analysis of the UCT data draws on the critical realist approach of Margaret Archer (2003). Of particular use is her emphasis on individual deliberations in the mediation of 'structure' and 'agency'. The context of UCT is therefore understood as an institution (structure) within which 'propositions and doctrines' (culture) emerge (Archer, 2003). The institutional structure and culture have the potential both to limit and facilitate the desired achievements of academics and the power over individuals is not absolute. For example, where the cultural dominance of research positions teaching as having lower status, it does not uniformly condition academics to neglect the development of their teaching skills (Young, 2006). The focus of this study is on the ways in which academics experience and negotiate the enabling and constraining aspects of the UCT context, with reference to their ability to pursue PD opportunities to improve their teaching.

The key theoretical assumption made is that academics at UCT have 'agency'. This firstly means that they can anticipate the relative ease or difficulty that they may encounter in the pursuit of improving their teaching. It also means that they have the capacity to circumnavigate constraints strategically to either achieve their desired goals or pursue a 'second best' alternative outcome. As such, academics have 'degrees of freedom in determining their own course of action' (Archer, 2003, p. 6).

This paper contributes to qualitative research on academics' perceptions of PD for teaching (McKenna & Boughey, 2014; Pickering , 2006; Stenfors-Hayes, Weurlander, Dahlgren & Hult, 2010). In particular we focus our attention on how academics articulate elements of risk involved in engaging in teaching development. We understand the notion of risk as a social construct 'created from the contingent judgments about the adverse or undesirable outcomes of choices made by human beings' (Fox, 1999, p. 19). Ideally academics seek an environment in which they can 'explore new [teaching] ideas, challenges and practices without risking damage to others or self' (Taylor, 1997, p. 46).

How academics perceive professional development opportunities 'in terms of taking risks within their faculty has significant implications for changing the way teaching, learning and scholarship are viewed and consequently enhanced' (Nicholls, 2001, p. 107). Developing teaching involves a set of tasks, all of which involve risk, most prominently the

risk of failure. This is within a broader context of the increased importance of student evaluations and concern over a decline in teacher ratings (Budge & Clarke, 2011), which particularly affects new academics who reported a ‘culture of fear of taking risks in teaching’ (Mathieson 2011, p. 253).

The culture within research dominant institutions such as UCT is often viewed as hostile to teaching, with the ‘frequent presumption that improvements to teaching require resources to be diverted away from research’ (Neame, 2012). In such contexts there is often an ‘ambiguity about the importance of academic practice in relation to teaching and student learning’ (p. 332). There is a danger that ‘a desire to improve one’s teaching is equivalent to indicating that one is not a real academic’ (Taylor, 1997, p. 47). There is often the need for a ‘refuge’ which provides ‘safety for experimentation, and *from* more hostile aspects of their work environment’ (p. 47).

One form that refuge can take is through the establishment of communities that provide for ‘the development of trust and energy to encourage risk-taking’ (Cox, 2013, p. 19). It is argued that teaching development programmes, especially induction programmes for new academics, should do more than provide approaches to teaching and learning and seek to build such communities. This should provide academics with opportunities to reflect on the complexities of their contexts and focus on developing their agency (Mathieson, 2011).

Research method

The UCT case study involved the collection of the following data sets:

- A survey of permanent academic staff to assess their level of engagement with PD opportunities in teaching. (171 respondents indicated by “survey” label on quote).
- Interviews with four members of senior management: two from senior leadership level (SM1 and SM2) and two faculty Deans (SM3 and SM4).
- Interviews with eleven academics selected from the survey respondents, to form a diverse sample with respect to discipline, gender, raceⁱⁱ, length of service at UCT and level of engagement with PD opportunities in teaching. (These are indicated using abbreviations L1 - L11).

A thematic analysis was conducted with reference to Braun and Clarke (2006). At the ‘familiarisation stage’ (p. 87) transcripts were read for text that linked to enabling or constraining aspects of the structure and culture at UCT. Transcripts were annotated and codes were developed to indicate different strategies used by academics to address constraints to improving their teaching. Within these explanations, the pursuit of professional development for teaching was variously positioned as a risk. From here ‘the overall story the analysis tells’ (p. 87) was composed from the different inferences made at each re-reading of the transcripts from each data stream: senior management interviews, academic interviews and qualitative survey data.

Findings

Research dominance

The dominance of research in the institutional culture is evident throughout the data.

UCT's thinking as a research first institution is quite widespread. All the staff know it...we all know that all you have to do is be a good researcher and you will get ahead. And teaching is quite secondary, to such an extent that you can...fudge your teaching (L6).

There are a lot of people at the university who think of themselves as researchers primarily and teaching is a chore that they have to do (L4).

Structurally the research emphasis is entrenched by the way in which UCT's academic salaries are constructed, so that the only opportunity for a salary increase is through promotion. The link between promotion and salary increases at UCT means 'you can end up five years down the line and on the salary that you had five years previously if you don't publish' (L9). Hence, spending time on PD for teaching rather than research can involve the risk of limiting earning potential and career advancement.

Senior management acknowledge the difficulties that research dominance poses for academics:

At the end of the day ... being a researcher is key to your success ... All of the implicit and explicit messages favour research and allocating time there (SM1).

[UCT is an] institution that prides itself on being research-led... Drivers for research in a research led institution threaten to overwhelm the teaching function (SM4).

Both senior leaders interviewed argue that change in the institutional valuing of teaching needs to be driven from the top. One senior leader argues that change can be accelerated by making professional development in teaching compulsory for all new lecturers, as well as enforcing the proper use of student evaluation data. However, their sense of agency in bringing about this change is constrained by the need to navigate within an institutional structure and culture, which requires any proposals to be ratified by the faculties.

The Deans interviewed agree that the implementation of any decision made by the university executive depended on the approval at faculty level. They both praise the quality of teaching within their faculties, describing their colleagues as 'fantastic' teachers (SM4), 'outstanding... enthusiastic, committed and excellent' (SM3). They point to the many staff nominations for the Distinguished Teacher Award (DTA) as proof of the high standard of teaching in their respective faculties.

Senior management indicate structural elements such as the existence of the DTA, the annual Teaching and Learning conference and the increased visibility of teaching in promotion criteria, as evidence of the valuing of teaching in the institutional culture. Recent increases in the relative weighting of teaching in relation to research and the introduction of sub-minima for teaching in the promotion criteria in two faculties point to

an uneven but steady shift in this regard. After observing the *Ad hominem* process across all faculties at UCT, the Dean of CHED recently concluded that “if it was ever the case that it was possible to be promoted at UCT without taking teaching seriously, it is certainly not the case now”. While the process differs across faculties, each faculty applies its criteria to interrogate “a teaching portfolio of evidence provided by the applicant” (Shay, 2014, p.1).

The majority of academics surveyed (74%) agree that there are many opportunities for PD in teaching available at UCT and many (61%) agree that they are well publicised. However, the interviews and survey of academics point out a gap between the rhetoric of leadership figures and the experience of the valuing of teaching. Many academics feel that their promotion is dependent on their research more than their teaching.

Though teaching is recognised for promotion, it counts very little. Overall, the university provides very few rewards for teaching excellence and while it states that it supports teaching, the experience of teachers is very different (Survey).

[On paper] good teaching is required for promotion... My impression is that in practise its priority is very much second to research in most departments (Survey).

Not everyone experiences research dominance as a constraint to the same extent across all departments. There is evidence of ‘unevenness across the departments in commitment to the faculty’s Teaching and Learning agenda’ (SM3). The differing implementations of institutional policy across faculties and departments, goes some way to explaining the experience of a gap between policy and implementation raised by academics in this study.

No matter how much academics enjoy teaching they have to navigate the institutional environment and balance teaching and research. Some disciplinary contexts, for example the Humanities, offer opportunities for synergies between research and teaching where an academic’s area of research might provide the teaching material and focus for their courses.

Colleagues who are able to incorporate their research interests into their teaching love that (SM3).

If you play your cards right...[teaching and research] complement each other (L9).

Overall, the study confirms the environment at UCT as one where to attend PD for teaching is to go against the cultural norm. Some academics struggle to see the rationale for spending time on PD for teaching despite comprehensive provision.

It is hard to justify spending time on improving my teaching when I know that the main determinant of my getting a permanent position or promotion is my research (survey).

Other evidence presented of teaching’s subservience to research is the absence of any requirement to engage with PD for teaching:

[There is] no requirement for you to have done courses, ... [or] for you to be a particularly good teacher. It doesn't seem to be rated very highly (L11).

Attempts by senior management to communicate that teaching is valued, through the DTA and shifts in promotion criteria, do not carry sufficient weight to make spending time on PD for teaching seem worthwhile.

Choosing to develop teaching

Given this environment, the question arises as to why some academics decide to invest time in attending PD opportunities for teaching, thus contributing to a 'commitment to one course of action over another' (Archer, 2003, p. 7).

At one level this decision is influenced by a positive attitude towards and an enjoyment of teaching. Many of those surveyed and interviewed expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards their teaching - a possible reflection of the self-selected nature of the sample that completed the survey or volunteered to be interviewed. Several indicated that their motivation to be an academic, at least in part, stemmed from the pleasure that they take from teaching: 'As much as I enjoy the research, I actually really enjoy the teaching' (L5). One academic described teaching as 'a thrilling experience when it goes well' (L4). A second response to this question appears to stem from a concern about providing quality teaching and being responsible for student success:

...I have no training on how to teach and it's a core part of my job that I have to spend a lot of time on. And so I feel quite motivated to try and learn more about teaching methods, how to teach large classes, how to teach in more interactive ways, so that I can provide a better service to the students essentially and that I can learn as I go along and try and become a better teacher (L2).

For some of the respondents, the commitment to teaching development was explicitly formulated in spite of the constraints imposed by the environment.

I really don't care what other people do or what other people think in the department. I'm doing what I feel the job is requiring of me. I've just become more immune to what I think might be the opinion of the department (L3).

The motivations above reflect elements of academic identity that enable actions that circumvent constraints imposed by the structural and cultural research dominance. However, investing in one's PD for teaching is often difficult to justify given the multiple competing demands on academics' time. Administrative and family obligations have to be met alongside demands related to research and teaching. Striking a balance is difficult, given the lack of guidance available for most academics; 'the university is not always clear about how it wants its staff to balance their responsibilities' (L5).

Taking risks

At UCT PD for teaching is regarded as a voluntary activity. It involves academics having to make their own choices and justify spending time on improving their teaching. Given the institutional culture and structures, which emphasise research and where teaching is of lesser significance, such choices may involve substantial risk. The themes that emerge from the data include the risk of wasting time, being labelled and not keeping up with new developments in teaching.

Wasting time

A key element of risk in attending PD opportunities for teaching is that of ‘wasting time’. Some argued that spending time on areas of academia that are not seen as vital to promotion was hard to justify.

Teaching (well) is enormously time-consuming. ... I am not prepared to sacrifice even more time to further enhance my teaching skills at the expense of my research (survey).

Spending time on improving one’s teaching becomes even more difficult to rationalise where academics are confident about the effectiveness of their practice.

I happen to be good at teaching and get consistently good feedback from students even about the courses I would prefer not to teach, but I resent having teaching impact so negatively on my research time (survey).

Teaching to some extent was seen as something that anyone can do, which makes attending PD for teaching seem unnecessary:

Allocating time to participate in opportunities that seem relatively common sense is not a priority (survey)

Some offered the view that PD activities were too theoretical:

Teaching is fine, but huge dollops of time to deal with theory of education is not (survey).

Another aspect of wasting time relates to the perception that some professional development activities on offer were too generic and do not take into account the specific disciplinary teaching contexts:

Broad general courses that are not focused on teaching in a specific set of disciplines can be annoying time-wasters...! (survey)

However, a counter view is also evident, namely one that values attending PD in teaching activities even if it does not focus on a specific disciplinary context. Several respondents

articulate a sense of responsibility for making what they experience in such PD activities relevant to their own contexts. Even generic topics are seen to be ‘applicable to all disciplines in some way’ and one respondent argues that she is able to ‘apply what I learn’ regardless. With reference to a multidisciplinary event that she attended with colleagues from several institutions, one interviewee commented that although she was unable to relate to some participants’ concerns, she remained ‘really glad’ she had invested her time and ‘would probably use some of the stuff in future’ (L3).

Labelling

Several interviewees related experiences of being labelled for choosing to participate in PD activities in teaching. Those who are perceived as good teachers, yet still choose to spend time on PD for teaching, are often labelled as people who are more interested in teaching than research. One interviewee (L3) explained that there is ‘so much pressure on being a good researcher’ that there was the risk of being put ‘in a box’ as someone ‘who defends teaching over research’. A consequence of being labelled as the person concerned about teaching is that ‘people don’t really respect you as much’.

The more obliging you are and helpful to other people, with regard to teaching ... the less people take you seriously (L3).

As a result this interviewee confessed that there had been times when she ‘could have made an effort to be a better teacher, [however] in order to do better research I didn’t make that choice’ (L3). Several respondents characterised participation in PD for teaching as something required by staff in need of help, or dealing with a level of challenge or incompetence in their teaching:

[PD activities] seem to cater to academics who are grossly under qualified (survey).

CHED ... seems to mainly ... help academics who are out of their depth ... to cope with teaching, rather than helping academics who are adequate to good, to improve further (survey).

Older academics who have been here for a very long time who perhaps are quite set in their ways, ... need to go through those processes (L8).

Both aspects of labelling above convey an element of stigma associated with choosing to strengthen teaching as part of one’s academic identity. Such choices could potentially trap academics into second class roles within the institution.

Keeping up

In addition to the risk of wasting time or being labelled, there were also risks associated with not keeping up with new developments in teaching, for example with regard to the rapid changes and increased uses of technology.

I like to... keep up to date with what's happening and see if I can incorporate that in what I do (L3).

[I attend PD] just to see what people are doing and see what's out there because, if you're not particularly technological, you're not always aware of what you can bring into the classroom (L3).

One of the consequences of failing to 'keep up' is the risk of becoming marginalised and therefore 'isolating yourself' (L3). Therefore risks are not only confined to the unwise use of time, but also link to the potential consequences of missed opportunities.

Interpretations of neutrality

The data reflected differing interpretations and responses to UCT's institutional culture in relation to teaching. Some argued that UCT as an institution does not care about the standard of teaching, evidenced by the absence of rigour or frequency in monitoring what happens in the classroom.

The only time [UCT] requires that you ... are OK as a teacher is when you apply for promotion. Otherwise I don't think the institution could care less (L6).

In several instances this absence of attention to teaching and lack of active support for teaching development was described as a form of neutrality.

[UCT] plays a relatively neutral role in the quality of my teaching ... It doesn't get in the way. ... If I want to go on some course...nobody is going to say 'No' (L6).

Interviewees interpret this sense of neutrality in different ways that either help or hinder their desire and ability to pursue ways of improving their teaching. The following examples illustrate the agential 'powers of reflexive deliberation' enabling individuals to 'conceive of and pursue projects' that might otherwise be restricted by constraints (Archer, 2003, p. 7). The choices reflected in the data sampled suggest a strong element of agency amongst staff committed to improving teaching and learning that enables them to circumvent the dominant research culture that constrains other academics.

Firstly, perceptions of neutrality contribute to a climate in which there is an absence of barriers. Some staff argue that they do not need encouragement to take an interest in developing their teaching (also reflected in the comments by L6 above):

I don't feel that there's a lot of support from the department to encourage good teaching...[but there's] nothing stopping us ... I enjoy the development stuff so I seek it out from a personal perspective (L2).

I don't think my environment hinders me at all ... I don't feel anybody is putting any barriers in my way... to me the environment has been very enhancing (L7).

Secondly, neutrality was interpreted by some as freedom to be creative and develop one's

own teaching style, with the onus on the individual to take responsibility.

Nobody really checks what I teach...or how I decide to give my lectures.... there's quite a bit of freedom in that sense, which is nice (L1).

[Being] left to your own devices ... you just have to look out for opportunities for yourself and when they arise take them (L4).

Some interviewees made the distinction between the absence of UCT actively promoting professional development and the lack of acknowledgement, when academics took steps to develop themselves as teachers. Where the effort that academics put into their teaching development is not taken into account, this affects the extent to which academics feel valued in their teaching.

I don't need somebody to... go like 'oh you're so great and you're so wonderful'. But I need to be acknowledged (L10).

Agency and academic identity

Academics do not all respond to the constraints posed by the dominant institutional culture in the same way. The ways in which respondents describe taking advantage of the perceived institutional neutrality towards teaching, described above, suggests that this sample display a high level of agency in negotiating the cultural constraints. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, a significant number of academics interviewed and surveyed, express strong positive sentiments with regard to their engagement with teaching. Academic interviewees often described themselves as 'self-starters', 'self-motivated', or 'self-driven'.

They were able to rationalise their involvement in PD for teaching by taking an approach that simultaneously contributes to challenging the dominant research culture and minimising the consequences posed by the risks. This approach emphasises the functions that PD for teaching fulfils in building communities and providing the opportunity to reflect critically on their practice.

Building community

Some academics do not limit the value of attending PD for teaching events to the content and justify their participation because it provides them with access to a supportive community and an opportunity for reflection:

[The New Academic Practitioners Programme] was a nice way to meet people because I was new here... [and helped with] finding out how to navigate UCT (L1).

The importance of this community building experience was expressed by L8:

I think that some of the spaces that have been created ... [provide] an amazing experience for me to meet other academics from across disciplines... we've gone through a joyous experience and you have this sense of a UCT community (L8).

The value of this social dimension is spoken about in terms of building collegiality. Professional development opportunities ‘offered space to start conversations’ and encourage individuals to be interested ‘in each other’s work in a kind of respectful way’ and helps to develop ‘natural collegiality’ (L8).

Space for critical reflection

Furthermore professional development opportunities are seen as challenging academics to think critically and shift in their views on their teaching practice.

Most of us need to understand that we constantly need to re-evaluate what we are doing, and ... get ourselves out of our comfort zones and challenge ourselves and be challenged by other people, by doing things differently (L4).

This comes back to a risk of non-participation as resulting in being left behind. Although there is no explicit criticism levelled against colleagues who do not attend PD for teaching, there is an underlying sense that given the obligation that one has to students one has to make some effort to develop as a teacher. The consequences of not embracing change and acting to improve one’s teaching would be to stagnate.

Years could go by and everybody could kind of bumble along doing exactly what they’ve been doing and it’s not necessarily the best that they could be doing (L2).

If we weren’t self-driven people and if we weren’t people of integrity, you will stagnate within a year or two and where do you go? (L10).

There is one instance of judgement being cast on those who choose not to attend;

You don’t have to go to them, [but] you are a fool not to... I go to anything that’s on offer if I can possibly schedule it (L7).

The above elements strongly reflected in this research sample, suggests the existence of a group of academics at UCT who are building their academic identity to include a passionate engagement with the development of their teaching, despite the research dominance of the institutional culture.

Conclusion

This study produces evidence confirming the dominance of research in academic life at UCT. While this dominance has historically manifested itself through the structural arrangements governing career advancement, i.e. promotion processes, there is a growing rhetoric promoting a valuing of teaching. The gap between existing institutional practice and this emergent emphasis on teaching leaves many academics uncertain as to how to interpret these conflicting messages. The risks identified in this research reflect the challenges for colleagues attempting to engage with teaching development.

Our analysis of the data surfaces the existence of a vibrant teaching culture amongst a significant group of academics who embrace teaching as an essential part of their academic identity. Their views, expressed through the survey and interviews, strongly highlight their agency in acting out their own agenda in spite of a perceived institutional indifference towards PD in teaching. Despite the risks associated with spending time on teaching development, these members of the UCT community have chosen to invest in it for reasons primarily associated with their love of teaching and their commitment to supporting student learning. Where PD opportunities for teaching are not specific to their discipline, they work with the material in ways that make it meaningful to their own context. They act as the translators and interpreters in making the connections rather than expecting someone else to do that for them. At the same time they surround themselves with a supportive community of colleagues that enables their agency in relation to teaching development.

Notes on contributors

Associate Professor Jeff Jawitz is a specialist in helping academics become more effective teachers. He spent 16 years working in educational development in Engineering at UCT before transferring, in 2005, to the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) with responsibility for academic staff development at UCT.

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To cite this article: Jeff Jawitz & Teresa Perez (2015): Investing in teaching development: navigating risk in a research intensive institution. *International Journal for Academic Development*, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1081852
To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1081852>

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Notes

- ⁱ The eight case studies are: Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Durban University of Technology, University of Fort Hare, Rhodes University, University of Cape Town, University of Stellenbosch, University of Venda and the University of the Western Cape.
- ⁱⁱ Historical 'race' classifications continue to be used as indicators of disadvantage in South African education institutions to monitor and implement transformation policies and hence our use of them in this research. At UCT staff and students are asked to self-classify their race when completing admissions and employment documentation.