

# USC Race and Equity Center

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## **University of Michigan**

Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education

Professor Torres and Members of the Faculty Search Committee,

Please accept this letter in support of my application for the position of Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Michigan. I am especially drawn to this position given its invitation for faculty members specializing in issues of student experiences, higher education policy, and organizations and campus climate in postsecondary contexts. As evidenced in my research, teaching, and service, I believe my application is a strong match worthy of the committee's serious consideration. Specifically, my professional experience supports the overall mission of the School of Education and clearly demonstrates a shared commitment of improving educational practice through the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

I am currently an Assistant Professor of Clinical Education at the University of Southern California (USC), where I also serve as Chief Strategy Officer and Director of Research at the USC Race and Equity Center. For nearly a decade, I have used qualitative approaches to broadly explore the roles, relationships, and functions of power, ideology, identity, and culture on campus. Much of this work has been in the context of leading center research programs, first at the Penn Center for the Study of Race & Equity in Education and, now, at USC. At the former, I primarily led mixed-methods assessment teams in the investigation of campus climates at more than a dozen postsecondary institutions across the United States. The findings from my previous studies were instrumental in providing the content foundation for creating of our current center's National Assessment of College Campus Climates (NACCC), the first national survey *exclusively* dedicated to the study of campus racial climate. Additionally, I have supported more than 5,000 practitioners at dozens of community colleges, four-year institutions, and policy organizations advance agendas for racial equity. More specifically, through the development of curricula and providing direct instruction I have helped college and university faculty, student affairs professionals, and senior-level administrators improve their racial literacy and anti-racist praxis.

The aforementioned experience deeply informs my individual work as a scholar. As a researcher specifically concerned with contemporary issues of racial equity, I take inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to challenge dominant narratives about racially minoritized communities. More specifically, I center the agentic roles of racially minoritized students and communities as political actors, particularly those engaged in processes of social and institutional change. In this regard, my research actively resists racist, deficit-laden narratives replete with biological and cultural determinism, informs postsecondary policy, and supports minoritized communities enacting various levels of individual and institutional transformation.

My current research program is guided by the aforementioned framework and focuses on activism, political engagement, and organized resistance in higher education. However, as an inter- and trans-disciplinary scholar, I routinely traverse epistemological boundaries of social movement theory, political and postsecondary ecology, digital media studies, and education policy analysis. For example, I use ethnographic and digital research methods to expand resource mobilization perspectives to investigate contemporary student organizing practices within socio-institutional movements. Through

employing alternative and activist new media frameworks, my research illuminates the digitally-mediated actions of student activists and the technological resources a part of their social movement repertoires. As greater ubiquity technology is achieved, my work has broader implications for expanding our understanding of the digitally-mediated lives college students and the expanding of postsecondary environments off- and away from campus.

Recently, through grant support from the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity, I have expanded my research program to include an important, but relatively understudied policy focus in higher education. Specifically, my policy research critically interrogates the interlocking relationship between campus, system, state, and federal policymaking and their desired impact to stifle student protest. Through the Protest Policy Project™, my research team and I are examining policy decisions related to punitive campus speech codes at colleges and universities across multiple state contexts. Using ecological models in conjunction with critical race policy analysis, this dimension of our work has begun to conceptualize how political suppression of student activists reinforces institutionalized white supremacy. Using findings from recent Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and NACCC reports on student participation in protest, we are refining our analyses to further argue such policies disproportionately target and punish racially minoritized students.

As a faculty member at the University of Michigan, I would continue the aforementioned work and prepare to launch a larger-scale project in which the full gravity of available survey data on student activist participation could be leveraged. In particular, these data present unique opportunities for a broader perspective on students' political behaviors. More specifically, I imagine leveraging findings from big data in combination with qualitative research teams conducting interviews, campus observations, and document analysis to yield the National Study of Student Political Engagement™ (NSSPE). The project would trace the historical antecedents and precipitating events of contemporary campus unrest; longitudinally examine student activists' political attitudes and behaviors, and; assess the ongoing role of student activism and political engagement in higher education and democracy. Given the current sociopolitical climate, and the demonstrable increase in visibility of student activism in recent years, such a study would be as timely as it is important for the field of higher education. A study of student activism at this level, at least to my knowledge, would be the first of its kind since such work was undertaken by Astin and associates in the 1960s.

As a scholar-practitioner, research and practice directly guide my role as an instructor. Having started my teaching career as an adjunct, I taught graduate-level courses on student development, gender in college, and social movements in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania. Now, as full-time clinical faculty, I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses focused critical issues of social difference, systemic oppression, and transformation in education and its social contexts. In these unique courses, I have directly witnessed the transformative and liberatory power of teaching and learning. Through culturally-sustaining pedagogies of communal responsibility, students and I are able to work together to 1) achieve greater political consciousness, and 2) transform the educational institutions and society within which we all live, work, and learn. In addition, I advise masters and doctoral students in supervision of their respective theses, dissertations, and research projects. As an advisor, and especially as someone predominantly working with minoritized and marginalized students, I have sought to provide human-centered care and direction in addition to stringent preparation for field advancement. I routinely encourage my students, for example, to prioritize self-care and access to healthy choices while in pursuit of their academic goals, which I further encourage to be intellectually ambitious, epistemologically challenging, methodologically rigorous. At the University of Michigan, I am interested in continuing this work through teaching courses that engage critical theory, campus climate, organizational change, student activism and social movements in college. Additionally, as a methodologist of multiple methods, I would be interested in further supporting course offerings in introductory and advanced qualitative research methods.

The aforementioned illustrations of my scholarly and pedagogical commitments to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are also reflected in my service record. In particular, I have regularly supported the Association for the Study of Higher Education's Council for Ethnic Participation (CEP) as a proposal reviewer, discussant, session chair, and mentor in the CEP Mentor Protégé Program. Additionally, I was appointed to the Curriculum Committee for the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Strategic Imperative on Racial Justice and Decolonization, of which served as co-chair during the 2017-2018 academic year. At the institutional level, I currently serve on two complimentary committees to advance the university's focus on EDI. The first is the USC Strategic Planning Subcommittee on Institutional Transformation, which specifically focuses on institutional change toward the ends of greater compositional diversity, equitable student outcomes, and inclusive professional practices across all levels of the University. Secondly, I serve on the Academic Senate's Campus Climate Committee, which is primarily tasked with identifying and sharing effective approaches to cultivating an institutional culture of equity, inclusivity, and respect. Given how instrumental this work is institutional and organizational change, I very much look forward to serving the University of Michigan and School of Education in similar ways.

In summation, I am ardent and eager about the prospect of joining the faculty at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. I strongly believe, with a firm and steadfast resolution, that my professional experiences reflect the mission, vision, and values most important to the School of Education as it seeks an exemplary candidate for this position. To further support my candidacy, I have included my curriculum vitae and three samples of my scholarly work in addition to this letter. Should members of the committee have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [charlesd@usc.edu](mailto:charlesd@usc.edu) or via phone at 703-975-1916.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'CH.F. Davis III', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Charles H.F. Davis III, Ph.D.