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Op-Ed I'd like to thank the Academy...for capitulating to the PC police



Justin Lane / EPA

By **William Goldstein**

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The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has long been under attack from self-righteous critics. Now its traditions and procedures are under attack by the academy leadership, which last week capitulated to political correctness.

The #OscarsSoWhite controversy, as it's known on social media, is bedeviled by misinformation. I have read numerous accounts of how 6,200 mostly old white males produced the lily white nominations of 20 actors this year. In fact these nominees were selected by the 1,138 members of the actors branch, which has a larger percentage of African Americans than other branches, and probably skews younger as well. (The academy doesn't keep statistics on age.)

These same voters in the last few years gave best acting Oscars to Forest Whitaker (“Last King of Scotland”), Mo’Nique (“Precious”), Viola Davis (“The Help”), Lupita Nyong’o (“12 Years a Slave”), and a nomination to Chiwetel Ejiofor (“12 Years a Slave”).

Beyond the acting category, it's absurd to pretend that the academy ignores films created by or about people of color. "12 Years a Slave" won three Oscars in 2014. "Selma" was nominated for best picture in 2015. A few months ago, the academy gave Spike Lee an honorary Oscar for his contribution to cinema.

And the academy routinely recognizes socially conscious films. This year, for instance, two films dealing with LGBT themes received nominations in the acting category: "Carol" and "The Danish Girl."

The academy does not make movies. Critics unhappy with the number of black, Latino or Asian directors and actors must look elsewhere — to the studios and independent producers.

As for what gets nominated, as an academy member it seems to me that we should remain colorblind and reward artistic excellence without regard to race (or class, or creed, or gender). Of course, in years with many great performances and thought-provoking films, worthy work can escape official recognition.

Why is no one talking about which actors should not have been nominated, so that colleagues of color could have taken their place? Could it be that the current nominees are all worthy? Why is no one talking about the nominations in non-acting branches? Alejandro G. Iñárritu, who is Mexican, won a directing Oscar last year and is nominated again this year for "The Revenant." Aren't Mexicans still considered a minority in PC circles?

I certainly count myself among those who value inclusion and believe that our country's demographic diversity is a positive good. But why must the academy perfectly mirror that diversity? It's a meritocracy. The only entrance requirement is excellence in one's chosen field. At least, that was true until last week.

Since 2012, the academy has encouraged its branches to seek qualified artists from diverse backgrounds. Change was occurring naturally. Unfortunately, not fast enough for some. Succumbing to years of pressure, the academy leadership Friday unveiled a radical plan to satisfy the PC mob. With the express goal of doubling the number of female and racially diverse members by 2020, the leadership decided to "supplement the traditional process in which current members sponsor new members by launching an ambitious, global campaign to identify and recruit qualified new members who represent greater diversity." The leadership also moved to curtail lifetime voting privileges. "Each new member's voting status will last 10 years, and will be renewed if that new member has been active in motion pictures during that decade."

In case it's not obvious, the point is to purge older (presumably white) members and create something akin to affirmative action for new members.

Among other issues, I find it troubling that the leadership pushed through these changes without consulting the academy at large. It may be legal for less than 1% of the academy to unilaterally upend

tradition, but is it moral? It's certainly not democratic.

Since its creation, the academy's focus has been excellence in motion pictures. The new focus, apparently, is diversity, and I'm sure I'm not alone in finding this re-conception misguided. In the past, black, Latino and Asian industry professionals could rest assured that they were admitted to the academy or awarded an Oscar for one reason only: the brilliance of their work. Now they and outsiders will wonder if they were tapped to fill some arbitrary quota.

These measures seriously risk devaluing the importance of membership, the Oscar itself, and the Academy's reputation as a benchmark for moviemakers.

The academy is not a government agency, and it's not our job to legislate social change. We can, however, inspire and give opportunity to young filmmakers by expanding the academy's educational outreach programs.

A good film touches the souls of people all over the world regardless of their race, gender, politics or sexual orientation. Filmmakers' only concern should be to strive for that level of achievement; academy members' only concern should be to recognize that level of achievement.

Of course, this matter goes beyond the academy or the arts in general. We must all commit ourselves to creating a society where, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, we are judged by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin.

William Goldstein is a longtime academy member who serves on multiple executive committees. He has been a recording artist for Motown and CBS Masterworks and has composed music for films and the concert hall.