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Diversity statement for job application

The diversity, or inclusion, statement is becoming a staple of the academic job packet. But unless the hiring institution is clear about what they expect, how do you know what to write? And further yet, how do you go about writing it? A 2018 paper from the University of Michigan described the common elements of diversity statements written for a postdoctoral fellow-to-faculty program. The program informed applicants “that the university was looking for indicators of demonstrated commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion and valued the different ways this might be demonstrated.” Arguably, any department or institution that incorporates the diversity statement into their evaluation of a candidate would have similar expectations. Below are four steps that you can use to craft a diversity statement. The first three steps will guide the incorporation of three key components to a compelling statement: your background, what drives your commitment to diversity, and how you demonstrate that commitment. The final step provides resources and suggestions to refine your statement for inclusion in your job packet. 1. Provide Your Context This is where you write your life’s story. Well, part of it anyway. Your experiences, expectations, and identities as a human all influence your perspective on diversity. Furthermore, they are potentially important context for the reader to fully understand your commitment and solutions. Since step four is revision, go ahead and write down any potentially important background information that comes to mind. There are reasons (e.g., legal, personal, political) why you may not want to reveal all of your identities and there are professionals who advise against it. If that is the case for you, skip over them. 2. Identify Your Diversity Conflict Why are you committed to diversity? What realization or life experience(s) prompted your commitment? These are the questions that need to be answered during step two. I call this a “diversity conflict” because the answers to these questions are generally the situation(s) where an internal (or external) conflict arose. As an example, my own diversity conflict occurred when research on gender inequity in STEM shattered my long-held belief in meritocracy. Because I have a strong, motivating desire for everything to be fair, the resolution of that internal conflict was a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Like in step one, think back and list any personal experiences, or experiences that you witnessed, that prompted a similar internal conflict. Importantly, the conflict(s) need to resolve into your commitment to diversity. If that resolution hasn’t occurred yet (it hadn’t for me!), then I encourage you to use this exercise as a means to identify it for yourself. 3. Demonstrate Your Commitment How do you demonstrate your commitment to diversity? Many (if not all) of the answers to this question are already at your fingertips, in your CV or resume! List every position you held or project that you worked on (yes, even your research!) that furthered equity and inclusion. Remember, the goal is to demonstrate commitment, so historical (even pre-diversity-conflict) examples are fair game — dig out your old CVs and resumes, too. Next, think outside the nine to five. In many cases, your personal diversity conflict and resolution also led to changes in your everyday that also demonstrate commitment. For example, did you start a blog or YouTube channel to talk about your diversity conflict (e.g., the challenges of LGBTQIA+ life in the rural U.S.)? That’s furthering diversity through outreach. 4. Revise and Refine Your Statement Now it’s time for the hard part. You need to sort through everything you wrote in steps two and three to find a cohesive message for your diversity statement. To know what needs to be kept or tossed, first brush up on diversity statement etiquette and revise accordingly. Next, chose your diversity conflict and flesh out the details: what happened, when, where, how did you react, what was your resolution, etc. (Remember, if appropriate, ask permission before sharing another’s experience!) After the conflict has been described in the appropriate detail, go back through the first section to set the appropriate context. Ensure that there is enough detail (but not too much) for your reader to understand the full impact of the conflict for you. Ideally, the context and conflict will comprise the first half of your statement and the second half will focus on how you demonstrate your commitment to diversity. Be sure that you’ve crafted a logical flow that seamlessly transitions your reader from your background, through your diversity conflict, and the demonstration of your commitment to diversity. Finally, get several colleagues (from diverse backgrounds) to give your diversity statement a read and incorporate their suggestions as appropriate. By the end, you should have a diversity statement that reflects both your values and your value. More Diversity Statement Resources: Vanderbilt Center for Teaching The Professor Is In: Making Sense of the Diversity Statement Check out more Top Articles on HERC Jobs. About the Author: Dr. Ada Hagan is a microbiologist with a passion for making science accessible. In 2019, Dr. Hagan founded Alliance SciComm & Consulting, LLC as a means to use her strong background in communications and higher education to help make scientific concepts more easily understood and make the academy more inclusive to future scientists from all backgrounds. Her writing and research have been featured by BBC Radio 4, Science Careers, The Scientist, Massive Science, and the American Society for Microbiology. This handout will help you write a diversity statement in preparation for an academic job. Although it is geared toward academic jobs, much of the advice throughout this handout can be used to construct diversity statements for other fields. Overall, this handout offers insights into the form and construction of an effective diversity statement. What is a diversity statement? The diversity statement is a relatively new addition to the job application portfolio. It tends to be a one- to two-page document that explains your experiences with and commitments to diverse populations of students. A university that seeks this statement from applicants is typically concerned with ensuring that faculty hires are familiar with its diverse student populations and willing to support students in line with the university’s mission statement. A successful diversity statement talks about your background and how you will create a diverse and inclusive learning environment for all students. What is diversity? There is no universal definition that all institutions use for diversity. This lack of definition can be frustrating. You may find yourself at a loss for how to talk about a concept that is not defined. However, there are still clues, usually provided by the institution. You can ask: Does the university have a diversity statement on its website? Does the university have a diversity and inclusion office? If so, what is its mission statement? How has the university’s alumni magazine discussed the current student population? Does the office of institutional research publish public reports about diverse populations? However, not having a definition can be freeing. It allows you to really consider your commitments to students and examine what diversity could mean. For example, if you are considering a college or university set in the mountains, it may mean a student population that identifies as Appalachian. Conversely, schools in North Carolina might be concerned with the enrollment and matriculation of Indigenous students. In other words, how diversity is interpreted depends largely on the institution, its location, and its current student population. Ask yourself: Have you worked with first-generation students? International students? Students from underrepresented minority groups? Have you worked with students from rural or urban environments? Are you familiar with students from the South, Northeast, Midwest, Northwest? Have you worked with students who identify as neurotypical? Have you worked with students who identify as LGBTQIA+? Are you familiar with students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds? Have you worked with non-traditional students? This list of questions is not meant to be comprehensive but to help you think about how you consider diversity as a future instructor at a university. If you happen to have little to no experience working with diverse populations of students, do not fear. There are strategies, which will be addressed below. Before you start writing Bear in mind that writing this statement will require you to be flexible in both how you define diversity, as we discussed above, and how you have encountered diversity throughout your career. Below are some strategies for demystifying the expectations for diversity statements. Consult models Because the diversity statement is a new addition to the application portfolio, you may find that your usual mentors are unable to give you more direct guidance in its composition. However, it does not mean that you do not have options. You might: Reach out to colleagues and friends in the early stages of their career and ask them about their experiences writing diversity statements. Ask your university’s career services if they have any examples. Try to find examples from successful job candidates. Ask people who have recently served on hiring committees. All of these suggestions can help demystify the process of writing a diversity statement. You also might want to reflect on how diversity is discussed on your current or most recent campus, and compare it to how diversity is discussed at the potential new campus. Research In order to tailor a diversity statement to a specific institution, you need to think about the concerns of your audience and how your approach to diversity fits into the broader mission of the university and the department. In essence, this essay allows you to communicate how you will potentially serve the students at your new university in a way that is slightly different than your teaching statement and job application letter. Below are some questions you might consider: How has the university approached diversity recently? Does the university have a diversity and inclusion office? How has the university defined diversity in the past? How are they defining it now? What populations does the university serve? Are there any populations on the rise or in decline in the university or university system? Is the university in the midst of any diversity initiatives? If so, what are they? Whom does the department serve? Do certain student populations take more courses in the department than others? Is the department involved with any diversity initiatives? These questions can help you consider the institution’s commitments and make clear the populations of students with whom you will be interacting. Moreover, they can help you understand your audience and anticipate what information might be most pertinent or interesting to them. After all, part of the goal in writing this statement is presenting yourself as capable and competent in teaching and interacting with the students whom the university serves. Writing a draft Because diversity statements continue to evolve, there is no set form. The lack of a standard form allows for creative freedom—hopefully a positive. As such, this section will provide a variety of considerations and strategies to compose a diversity statement. Organization You have many options for crafting your statement to emphasize the aspects of diversity most important to you. Below are a few examples of different organizational strategies: Think of your statement as a narrative (past, present, future). This strategy allows you to build upon past experiences to point towards future development. You might consider these questions: How have your previous experiences informed your understanding of diversity? How do you currently approach diversity and inclusion in and outside the classroom? How do you think your current practices will translate to a new environment? If you have had little interaction with students from diverse backgrounds, how have you learned about diverse student populations? How might you make your classroom inclusive? How might you apply the knowledge you have learned in the future? This approach can help you think about how your approach to diversity has changed over time and demonstrate your ability to adapt to new environments. Structure your statement around your commitments to diversity. This strategy asks you to prioritize your commitments and expand upon them based on your past and current experiences, as well as your future goals. You might consider these questions: How have you made your classroom accessible and inclusive? How have you invested in diversity or inclusion in the past? Have you worked with specific groups of students or student organizations? Have you integrated your commitments into your research? If so, how? Have you integrated your commitments into your teaching? If so, how? How does your research inform your teaching? How have you or will you make the classroom inviting to a variety of students? This approach ultimately helps you think about how diversity is an integral part of who you are as a researcher and instructor. It can help demonstrate how you connect your work inside and outside the classroom. Narrow your focus to teaching. This strategy focuses on practical application of diversity in the classroom. It asks you to think about how you may have shifted your teaching to serve different groups of students. You might consider these questions: How do you foster diverse student perspectives? How have you integrated diverse perspectives in your teaching? How have you approached controversial topics, such as religion or politics, in the classroom? How did you include all students in these types of discussions? How does your course material reflect contributions from diverse perspectives? How have you modified class discussions and course materials to include all your students? How have you in the past and how will you in the future continue to encourage students to think about the effects of racial, cultural, gender, socioeconomic, and other differences? This approach can characterize what is distinctive about your teaching and how it serves students, as well as how it expands their view of diversity. Make it autobiographical. This strategy focuses on you as an individual, and it should explain how diversity has impacted your career. In this essay, some applicants might choose to self-identify. Others may instead choose to focus on their pedagogical experience with diverse populations over their career. Talk about your own experiences as a member of an underrepresented group. Discuss how you have grown to understand diversity over your education and instructional experiences. Discuss how you have been impacted by diversity throughout your academic career, directly or indirectly. Possible pitfalls Not being specific. Make sure that when you talk about a certain strategy or a certain group of students that you provide a concrete example. The diversity statement is not simply a list of all the work you have done working with diverse student populations or a restatement of your CV, but it should highlight the most important aspects of how you have approached diversity in the past and include a reflection on those actions. To avoid falling into this trap of listing, you need to think about your specific experiences as evidence. This list is not exhaustive, but it will help you consider the type of examples that a reader might expect in a diversity statement: Specific topics you covered in class and student reactions. Specific assignments and students’ reactions. Specific strategies you have used to include all students in the classroom. Specific anecdotes and comments from students. Examples from course evaluations. Specific events or initiatives you participated in and their success. Not telling the truth. Above all, be honest! If you have not had experiences with diverse groups of students or you are not a member of an underrepresented group, then you can talk about how you would approach working with students from diverse groups and backgrounds. You can mention that you have researched or studied pedagogy working with diverse groups of students. You can offer examples of techniques or classroom strategies that you would use or think would be helpful for the institution that you are applying for. Forgetting to revise. Remember your first draft is not your last draft. For some, the revision process is the most difficult part of writing. However, sometimes the best way to tackle indecision about a draft is to receive feedback from a variety of different readers. Outside readers can help you see any shortcomings, point out places where you might need more information, and affirm that you have done a complete job. You can ask: your advisor, your mentor/s, colleagues, and other early-career scholars. For more information about the revision process, see our Editing and Proofreading handout or Proofreading video for some strategies. Ignoring your audience. Make sure that you address the needs of the department and university. Neglecting to consider the short term and long term goals of the university or the needs of the student population at the institution makes you appear at best unprepared or ill-informed and at worst obtuse. Not doing yourself justice. The statement should not be an exhaustive list of all the times you worked with diverse populations, a treatise on the ideal classroom, or the appropriation of a student’s or a student group’s experiences as your own. Nor should your statement fail to offer some personal reflections on your experiences in teaching or possibly outside of the classroom. The statement should share your thoughts and recognize the rewards, challenges, and difficulties of making course material and research relevant to diverse student and faculty populations. Works consulted We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find additional publications. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial. We revise these tips periodically and welcome feedback. Bryce, Leah. n.d. “Making Sense of the Diversity Statement.” *Chronicle Vitae*. Accessed April 4, 2014. . Flaherty, Colleen. 2018. “Breaking Down Diversity Statement.” *Inside Higher Ed*. November 19, 2018. . Golash-Boza, Tanya. 2016. “The Effective Diversity Statement.” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 10, 2016. . Kelsky, Karen. 2015. “What Is a Diversity Statement, Anyway?” *In The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide To Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job*, 185–90. New York: Three Rivers Press. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. n.d. “Writing a Diversity Statement.” Office of Graduate Studies. Accessed October 19, 2019. . This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License. You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Make a Gift

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