

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

My aspiration to be a professor comes with the recognition that it is a position of power in the university. Ideally, professors not only create diverse campuses but also foster positive, growth-oriented interactions between students of different backgrounds. From the perspective of a liberal arts education, these interactions will help our students understand the worlds they live in better. And from the perspective of justice, they are a way to use our authority to address historic inequalities and cognitive biases about our peers.

I recognized neither contemporary inequalities nor cognitive biases when I started college a decade ago. I moved from rural Illinois--an overwhelmingly white, conservative, Protestant area--to the south side of Chicago. My perspective on these changes varied from day to day. At its most pleasant, the diverse faces I saw in class and on the street were a warm reminder that the US I grew up in was not the one I read about in history, where segregation was enshrined in law and antagonism was lived through norms. In its most benign (and modal) state, diversity was a condition of little note: nice to know it existed but of no great consequence if that was here or somewhere else. And it veered into frustrated skepticism of initiatives to increase diversity rather than let it occur naturally.

I benefited greatly from happenstance encounters with sociological studies of race and inequality and unlikely (but fortunate) friendships with diverse peers. I learned that rationality was a tool that I (and many others) used grade the behavior of others without much concern for how it would apply to me. And I learned about many more diverse identities and experiences than I had familiarity with outside of stereotypes and media personalities. While my position on diversity was of little consequence for a white, heterosexual male such as myself, it was of great consequence to those who didn't happen to be in those categories.

I took for granted how inequality was embedded in laws, institutions, culture, and social networks. And I ignored how engaging with diversity can play a key role in creating more informed and compassionate citizens. With all that in mind, I cannot say that I bring experience of personal discrimination or institutional challenges to the classroom. Instead, my contribution is a) willingness to listen, b) patience in understanding, and c) acceptance of discomfort, vulnerability, and change in pursuit of a more equitable learning

environment. The first two attributes have always been central to my identity. But willingness to listen does little if you never seek out voices which can change you. And patience isn't required when most of the voices you hear are like your own. Indeed, the third attribute has demanded active development in contrast to the other two. While there are many little examples of this, two recent and prominent ones include teaching a course at Durham Technical Community College (Durham Tech) and serving as conversation partner for an English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

By the 2016-2017 academic year, I had acted as teaching assistant, athletic tutor, and instructor at Duke. However, I knew the students I worked with were hardly representative of the greater population of college students and that the comfort I had built operating in those contexts were not sufficient. To better prepare myself to serve less-privileged student bodies, I taught Introduction to Sociology at Durham Tech during the summer 2017 semester. Many of the differences between my Durham Tech and Duke students were predictable: the former students were more likely to be of lower socio-economic status, represented greater age and racial diversity, and were more likely to be pursuing education while working. Even so, I found that my Durham Tech students were much more likely to try and fit the readings into their own lives and, therefore, were much more likely to highlight limitations of these theories. In other words, my clean presentations of sociological theories didn't go as smoothly as it did at Duke. While this certainly put me on my back foot, I tried to embrace that posture by allowing my students more time to elaborate and draw on their unique experiences as they related them to the course content, recognizing that their stories provide insight to the broader theories and history we study in sociology. In some cases, the differences that students highlighted could be attributed to the competition between generalization and nuance in theory. But in many other cases, I gained insight into the lived experienced of the people sociologists actively study.

I have also been a conversation partner and occasional instructor for a local ESL program since the summer of 2017. While still in a position of power, this work has further helped me navigate the experience of filling multiple identities with inconsistent expectations. While the gut reaction to such people (some of them refugees) is with overwhelming pity, so much more is gained by recognizing their competencies and goals, letting them define themselves by who they are instead of what they had to live through. This required

stepping out of our roles as instructors and letting students talk in their own languages about their professions, families, and experiences--with much amusement from our poor Spanish, French, and Vietnamese skills. We were able to see the variation in people's experiences, moving them out of a singular category of "non-English-speaker" to differentiated categories such as "x-ray technician", "mother of two", "aspiring lawyer", and so on. This would not have occurred had we not let go of some of the privileges of our position in the classroom.

Through my work in the classroom, I hope to achieve those ideal goals (enabling numerical diversity and motivating positive experiences with it) through the strengths I bring and strive to fulfill (listening, patience, and acceptance of discomfort). This includes including ample opportunity for students to discuss or write about personal experiences, giving students some forms of agency in the course design, and offering alternative assignments which draw on students' strengths. But as a sociologist, I know that institutions and policies can either facilitate or hinder whatever personal characteristics I attempt to embody and the strategies I use in the classroom. So, while I have worked on facilitating experiences in the classroom, I understand that I need to recognize students' experiences in the university system broadly, and I need to recognize when my position can be used to advocate for their good.