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The Professor Is In: Making Sense of the Diversity Statement



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This year, all of a sudden, every application is asking for some kind of diversity statement. What do I do?

The diversity statement is quickly emerging as the fifth required document of the typical job application, along with the CV, cover letter, teaching statement, and research statement. And because it's of such recent origin, nobody has the foggiest idea what it's supposed to do (including, I suspect, the requesting search committees themselves).

That includes me. I have over the years established quite dogmatic ideas about what each of the four basic job documents should do and how they should do it. But the diversity statement? That's a tricky one.

But advice is needed. I'm asked about the diversity statement at least once a week at this point. So based on some informal polling I've done among my clientele and crowdsourcing on the Professor Is In [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter feed](#), I've compiled these thoughts.

The first thing to realize is that a diversity statement can take several different angles. It can address how you deal with a diverse range of students in the classroom. It can address how you incorporate diversity into your teaching materials and methods. It can also address how your personal background has equipped you to deal with diversity among your students. Beyond teaching, it can discuss how you administratively support diversity among staff and faculty. And it can consider how you address diversity in your own research and writing.

So this is a lot of angles to choose from, and you don't have to choose just one. You can combine several.

Taking my own case as an example, from back in the day when I was an assistant professor, I might have constructed a diversity statement around a few central ideas.

Doing my Ph.D. at the University of Hawaii was for me, a suburban haole girl from Pittsburgh, a trial by fire in American race politics. During my time in graduate school the Hawaiian sovereignty movement took off, and I became acutely aware of the charged history of white presence on the islands. The anthropology department was deeply (although mostly unwillingly) implicated in this politics, and by the time I finished my Ph.D., I had been well-schooled in the mutual enmeshment of anthropology as a discipline and the history and epistemologies of colonialism. My teaching and research could not remain unaffected by this understanding.

The classroom teaching experience I gained in Hawaii taught me the challenges and opportunities of managing a multiethnic classroom. Speaking in broad generalizations, I had to learn how to keep the white students from dominating all classroom discussion. And I had to learn techniques to encourage the Asian and local students (who often come from cultural backgrounds that encourage a quiet deference to authority) to speak up. And I had to learn how to create space for Native Hawaiian students to express their often tentative but critical perspectives.

None of these things happened without conscious effort; I had to critically examine what I was teaching. Did the content of the course thoughtlessly reproduce the standard white and Western model of legitimate knowledge? Or did it include a variety of voices from different subject positions of race, ethnicity, gender, and genre? Did my teaching methods squelch challenges to my authority, or did I have means to open up a space for critiques and questions?

Later, after beginning my career as an assistant professor at the University of Oregon, I had the opportunity to work with Native American graduate students from local tribes. I learned these lessons again, but in a new historical and political context. How did the presence, and the critiques, of Native American students change the way I taught anthropology? Did my own anthropology? Trained students to work in the academy, and on behalf of their own tribes? This

caused me to question: What was the responsibility of anthropology—and the academy as a whole—to the wider community in which it's located?

I don't offer these thoughts as a diversity statement model. If I were to write my own diversity statement, all of these questions would be replaced by declarative statements explaining exactly how my teaching, research, and mentoring changed as a result of these experiences.

I offer them instead as a set of prompts. You all have your own histories—your own places and families of origin, your inspirations, your trials by fire. As a white, suburban, straight (at the time) young woman, I didn't offer much diversity to institutions in terms of my own subject position within cultural anthropology (where white straight women are a dime a dozen, so to speak). But I had experienced a lot of diversity in my training and life experiences, and the way I did my work changed because of it.

If I wrote a diversity statement now, I would also weave my queer identity into it. How do I teach in non-heteronormative ways? How do I empower queer students to feel safe to speak in the classroom? How does my scholarship and my professional life reflect a commitment to queer visibility, including working with queer professional associations in my disciplinary units?

And by the end of my career, as a tenured faculty member, I would include mentoring and supporting a range of junior faculty, and promoting—financially and administratively—initiatives on campus that promote diversity in a variety of forms.

A reader asked me how to answer the question “without offending anyone.” I'm not really sure what that means. Your experiences are your experiences. Your commitments are your commitments. Diversity is diversity. Explaining how you work with different kinds of people is not inherently offensive. It is actually a valuable exercise, although in the context of an already overburdened and unreasonable and emotionally fraught job search process, I'm sure it doesn't feel that way.

Dear Readers: Have a question about the academic job market and/or professionalization? Send it to me! I welcome any and all questions related to the job market, preparing for the job market while in graduate school, coping with the adjunct struggle, and assistant professorhood. Send questions to me at gettenure@gmail.com.



[Karen Kelsky](#) is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.

For more advice, order Dr. Karen's new book, [The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job](#).

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