

Writing a diversity statement

As you search through job advertisements in your field, you may find that many of them ask for a “diversity statement.” This has been standard in some fields for several years now. In others, they’re relatively unknown. Recently, however, many universities and colleges have been making efforts to remove barriers to the success of members of historically excluded groups. In some cases, this has led to the requirement that all faculty job searches ask for a diversity statement from candidates.

What is meant by diversity?

“Diversity statement” is short for “statement of contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Search committees want to know that you are willing and able to help them make their department more equitable by working to dismantle structures and attitudes that make it more difficult for some students and colleagues to succeed.

These structures range from intentional, exclusionary policies and perpetuating stereotypes, to the failure to recognize the specific needs of excluded groups. They target people on the basis of their:

- Race
- Color
- Sex/Gender
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Disability
- National origin
- Class/Socioeconomic status
- First-generation college student status

What should I write about?

A common misconception is that a diversity statement is where you list all the ways that you yourself define yourself as “diverse.” Some universities have put out sample statements that focus heavily on the candidate’s own background and experiences. This may not be the best approach for everyone, however. Candidates who have experienced racism, ableism, or other kinds of prejudice should not be required to lay out their trauma for a search committee to read. In fact, candidates should not be obligated to disclose any aspect of their identity that they’re not comfortable sharing with strangers.

Rather, focus on the work you do to build a more equitable community of learners and to help students from underserved groups overcome barriers to success. Of course, your own identity may well be the foundation for that work, giving you an awareness and understanding of the challenges others face and the motivation to persevere as your success inspires others.

Because of these factors, writing about your own identity can make for a powerful statement. Decide for yourself how, and how much, to write about your own personal story.

Show that you understand what's at stake

One way to begin is by providing a statement outlining your understanding of the problems currently facing your field in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Are certain groups underrepresented at the undergraduate, graduate, or professional level? Do some people experience hostility or erasure in classrooms or labs? Has research in your field tended to focus only on the needs and interests of the dominant group? This could be your opening paragraph, or you could precede it with a sharing of your own experience.

Focus on your past, current, and future work

This DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) work may be evident in the kind of research you do, in the content that you teach, in the way that you teach, or in work such as mentoring, professional organizations, or community work. Some of these may not be relevant to your field or your research, of course.

- Research – architects might be designing accessible buildings; medical researchers might be working to ensure that their interventions are effective for women and people of color; AI researchers might be developing algorithms that don't perpetuate and exacerbate social inequalities, for example by ensuring that voice recognition systems can handle people with regional accents, or that facial recognition systems can differentiate between people with dark skin.
- Curriculum – putting women and writers of color on your Great Books curriculum; citing women and scholars of color and including their work on your reading list; teaching about the histories of marginalized groups; acknowledging the contributions of people from marginalized groups in your field
- Classroom practice – developing assignments that can easily be accommodated for students with disabilities; respecting cultural differences within the classroom; adopting inclusive pedagogical principles
- Mentoring and service – serving on committees or in organizations that support underrepresented students; developing outreach programs to connect the local community with opportunities in higher education; mentoring individual students by introducing them to your network, writing letters of recommendation, or giving advice on how to access opportunities

You can and should write about past and current experiences, but the search committee also wants to know how you can contribute to their own work. Find out what initiatives there are at the institution you're applying to and indicate how you would contribute to them if hired. Write

about projects you'd be interested in developing that would be relevant to the university's DEI goals and its specific setting (for example, does the city have a substantial immigrant, Native, Latinx, or African American community that the university should be partnering with?). If you don't yet have a lot of relevant experience, it's fine to focus on future work as long as you've thought it through so that your plans sound realistic.

For further reading:

<https://www.brandeis.edu/diversity/dei-recruitment-hiring/contributions-to-diversity-statements.html>

<https://physicalsciences.ucsd.edu/files/examples-submitted-diversity-statements.pdf>

<https://facultydevelopment.cornell.edu/rubric-assessing-candidate-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

https://pdco.med.jhmi.edu/job_search_toolkit/academic/diversity-statements/

<https://www.cmu.edu/diversity/>