How to Read and Evaluate a Diversity Statement

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It is important that universities ask for a diversity statement as part of faculty applications.

Every hire is a diversity hire, because we know that every new hire impacts JEDI – Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion.

Our hope is that today’s leaders make positive impacts contributing to the greater inclusion, retention, and success of faculty, staff and students of color.

We believe that sharing examples can help faculty and students. For students, this should be a part of socialization since writing a diversity statement may become a standard for applications and this will help faculty on other search committees and for general understanding.
Diversity Statements and Searches

- Search committees at colleges and universities nationwide increasingly require candidates applying for faculty or leadership positions to submit a diversity statement.

- And while we have developed some guidelines in writing such statements, frequently, search committees do not know how to evaluate this component of the application.
We recently sat on a committee looking to make a faculty hire in a leadership position. For our search, the diversity statement was one of 3 materials requested.

But many members of our committee did not know how to evaluate what amounted to one-third of the materials provided.

While this presented us with a pedagogical opportunity for our committee, it also made us realize the importance of having these conversations.
RED FLAGS to watch for

- Making references to examples that cannot be linked directly to their efforts alone.
- Exhibiting a failure to understand systemic issues and institutional practices that disadvantage and/or exclude people of color.
- Failing to illustrate experience in addressing systemic issues and developing and implementing solutions.
- We are both ethnographers and true to form, we developed three tropes that kept popping up in our review and discussion of diversity statements: diversity by proxy; personal stories of redemption; and exceptionalist arguments.
Problematic Tropes

- Diversity by proxy
- Personal stories of redemption
- Exceptionalist arguments
Diversity by Proxy

- Diversity by proxy is when candidates borrow from the success of others or some organization or program.

- Candidates speak specifically about their department’s student demographics or a program for students of color that they direct, are a part of, or that they appreciate. “____ (university’s name) is one of the most diverse campuses in the country, we are ____% white, ____% Latinx, ____% Asian/Pacific Islander, ____% African American.”

- This is the candidate taking credit for work that is not their own
Examples: Diversity by Proxy

- “I’m a faculty mentor for the McNairs Scholars program and we have had wonderful, bright students who just need intense mentorship.”

- The message of “I support success for people of color” can be followed by surprise and self-congratulation. “We have students who do very well, one or two have even gone on to graduate school at very good schools! One of my students, from Chicago, a first generation student from a single parent household, is a first-year PhD student at Berkeley.”

- We called this Diversity by proxy because the candidate’s example relies on numbers that tell us about where they are and not who they are or what they have done. And secondly, they are borrowing identity/status/achievement by linking themselves to the success stories of students of color and/or faculty. In this way, they give undue credit to themselves as a savior.
Candidates write of personal experiences that have occurred outside of the academy and are meant to reflect their appreciation for diversity and inclusion and their dissatisfaction with racism.

They may write about an event that solidified their understanding of privilege - “I grew up in a small town where there was only one Indian family and one of the girls from that family became a close friend. And then, in the 6th grade, everything changed. She and I both auditioned for the school play, Annie, and it was clear that another girl got the lead because she was white and looked the part. But my friend was clearly better than everyone else. I felt bad for her but there was nothing I could do. And that is why I really feel so strongly about racism and exclusion and do what I can to help students of color.”

They may also talk about how they work with and learn so much from their colleagues of color and students of color. The focus is on their feeling and how they assuage their feelings of social injustice by their engagement, but does this lead to fighting structural issues found in the academy? The playing field is never level and so what do they do for those who they do not deem “clearly better?”
The Exceptionalist Argument

- Candidates also write that they are in favor of diversity and inclusion but they have not been in a position to fight against exclusionary practices.
  
  - EX: “Diversity is important, but I can’t do it because my discipline is based on dead white men.”
    Or “I believe in diversity, but I have not been in a leadership position where I might make decisions. I would be supportive if there were some people of color.”

- The exceptionalist argument suggest that impact can only be made from certain positions, thereby exonerating most people who do not go against the grain. This obscures the roles that all faculty play in maintaining the status quo and contributing in small and large ways to discriminatory practices and negative outcomes for faculty, staff and students of color.

- Bias can lead to mis-assessing students, even creating unequal learning conditions.
What to Look For - Key Frameworks

- Diversity as a Strategy
- Evidence of Addressing Structural Challenges
- Recognition or Underscoring of Invisible Labor
- Demonstrated Enlightened Mentoring
DIVERSITY AS A STRATEGY

- Creating a plan, rather than simply doing an action, resulting in systemic change
  - EX 1: There are interlocking issues - food insecurity is connected to student learning, impression management with professors, matriculation and well being.
  - EX 2: a candidate may have buttressed student support with financial and social support, mentoring, and even made changes to policies that excluded certain people groups based on criteria that is unnecessary.
- The strongest statements are those where candidates articulate how diversity is used centrally in re-thinking budget, curriculum, and/or access.
EVIDENCE OF ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Related to the point above, strong diversity statements include examples of candidates advocating for structural changes. They show that they recognize and make systemic changes to address this.

EX 1: Candidates can write about “white space” and how they have educated others and implemented new practices that go against the status quo.

EX 2: They may have found systemic holes and problems that have disparate effects on women of color.

EX 3: They may have counteracted systemic and institutionalized practices. For instance, strong candidates mention noticing varying language (for example, different adjectives) in the evaluations of faculty, staff and students of color.
Supporting faculty and staff of color must be multifaceted.

It is widely known and acknowledged that faculty of color have different experiences - they are counted on to take on certain service because they are a person of color; students of color look to them more than to white colleagues; and they face student racism.

Look for this as evidence of contributions to service that are often rendered invisible.
DEMONSTRATED ENLIGHTENED MENTORING

Mentors who are:

- “woke” to and address structural challenges,
- who use diversity as a strategy,
- who recognize/underscore the invisible labor and challenges of faculty, staff, and students of color

They will mentor in ways that have longer term impacts and that mitigate exclusion and discriminatory practices.
THANK YOU!!