

Robert JS McDonald | Statement of Diversity

Yale University

Studies have shown that productivity increases when people from varying backgrounds and perspectives are brought together to share ideas. Regular exposure to different cultures and traditions can also help to develop communication skills, and enrich our life experience. Diversity is important, and that is why in and out of my classroom, I am committed to building a community in which diverse learners of all backgrounds feel respected and valued. All students, regardless of where they are coming from, are able to reach their full potential. More than just being accessible, the classroom and learning environment should be actively inclusive of students from all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual preferences, socio-economic statuses, religions, and disabilities.

I am personally sensitized to the issue of representation because of my family's Native American heritage. American Indians are tragically underrepresented in post-secondary education. This is one reason why I was part of the BRIDGE program at UConn, and First-Year Scholars at Yale (FSY) at Yale. Both are summer programs aimed at incoming freshmen from underrepresented groups and first generation students. As a graduate student at UConn and again at Yale, I helped manage a team of undergraduates who had previously been in the program as freshmen. In both programs, I taught while the team ran small discussion sections. The goal was to help give students the advantage of creating study groups before the semester began. I found the experience incredibly rewarding, and have made lasting relationships with some of the students.

More notably, for the last four years I have had an increasing interest in the Deaf community, and have spent this time learning American Sign Language (ASL). My good friend and colleague is a Deaf Ph.D. student in mathematics, one of only a few in the country. I've learned a lot from him about ableism, discrimination in favor of able-bodied people. Even now, the Deaf are still very much oppressed. Every day, Deaf individuals are denied basic access to communication with authorities, first responders, and organizations which operate under the assumption that everyone can hear. Especially in mathematics, Deaf students are underrepresented. Helping to bridge this divide is the driving force behind my learning the language and becoming more involved. In Connecticut, we have what was the first school for the education of Deaf children in America. In the future, I hope to use my experiences for outreach to students in schools like this into STEM education.

At the University of Connecticut, from 2015 to the date of my graduation, I ran the peer mentor program in my department as the TA Network Coordinator. From the first semester they begin at UConn, graduate students are teaching. The peer mentor program was designed to support new graduate students that were both researchers and teachers for the first time, by assigning them a more experienced volunteer math graduate student. When I arrived at UConn, the program had no interested graduate student to run it, so I was not assigned a mentor and had a difficult adjustment. I volunteered to revive the program, and even secured funding for pizza and game nights, aimed at getting those in the program to socialize with each other. I was very thoughtful in my pairing of students. In particular, gender minorities have a unique challenge in academia, so I tried to pair such incoming students with someone who could understand that struggle. I really enjoyed offering support to new students, and made myself the unofficial mentor for *every* incoming graduate in the department. At Yale, I have also had the pleasure of mentoring new faculty and graduate students, and would love to continue to work in such retention programs at my next institution.