

Robert J.S. McDonald – Statement of Diversity

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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 devoted to a wholly-inclusive learning environment. On the first day of class, I ask students to reflect in groups on questions like: Whose input matters in this community? How can we make others feel safe and listened to? How should we validate ideas? This is an important opportunity for an open discussion about inclusivity. I show my students the importance of diversity by posing examples for which there are many methods that lead to a solution, and asking students to discuss them with each other in groups. Students lead the class in a discussion about each strategy and its effectiveness. This exercise shows students the value of having different backgrounds and perspectives at the table. In the larger discussion, I excitedly highlight how many different approaches there are to even a simple question.

Unfortunately, individuals with disability, women, and minorities are still largely underrepresented in science, technology, and mathematics (STEM). This is an issue that I am personally sensitized to because of my family's Native American heritage. My wife is a teacher at East Hartford High School, a community with a hugely diverse population of students from many races, classes, and backgrounds. She actively encourages them to pursue higher education, and can attest to the fact that the issue of underrepresentation starts much younger than college age. It is only through involvement in these communities that we can hope to find a resolution for this issue. This is something I am interested in becoming involved with at my next institution.

More notably, in the last two 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 during this transition. 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 related education.

My experience teaching a diverse student body, ties to the surrounding communities, and interest in underrepresented groups has offered me a unique perspective on diversity. Moreover, my involvement with student mentor and retention programs has prepared and inspired me to continue to be involved in this effort. I am excited for the opportunity to work with recruitment and retention programs at my next institution, and hope to use my experiences make a difference. Please see my teaching statement for more information on the roll of inclusivity in my classroom.