

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement: Thomas J. Durfee

In academia, DEI is about acknowledging students' needs, giving them a serious reflection of their lived experiences during my class, and actively checking in with students. It is important to me that I ensure my students have what they need. Doing this requires planning, communication, and understanding the needs of my students to ensure that they have the tools and support that they need to succeed. In research, DEI means understanding what problems a policy is intended to solve, listening if that policy is deployed in bad faith, and understanding how to reflect the lived experiences of stakeholders in an honest analysis. This involves following research in areas outside my expertise, to understand where there is already work on these issues.

As the president of the student government graduate club for our department I collaborated with fellow students to develop a set of recommendations for how the department could be more supportive of minority students. In the summer of 2020, the Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency threatened to rescind F-1 visas for international students unless they took classes in person, despite the ongoing pandemic. At the same time, our Asian/Pacific Islander students reported being targets of hate speech on campus as the Covid-19 pandemic progressed. Our Black students reported feeling unsafe and unsupported after the murder of George Floyd, and many of our students felt anxious as the National Guard initiated curfews.

When our students shared these concerns with me, I organized listening sessions with students, collected feedback about the shortcomings of the university policy, developed guidelines for faculty to better support their students, and developed department action items to ensure change. We established tools for our faculty to check in with their students, disseminated information to students, and began a long term dialog with the department. As the student representative of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee, I took the information we collected with students during these listening sessions and collaborated with faculty to develop long run strategies, such as check-in procedures with students and their advisors and recurring listening sessions.

Since 2016 I worked under Samuel Myers Jr. at the Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice at the University of Minnesota. We use applied econometric techniques to provide nonpartisan policy analysis that highlights racial inequality and produces research to help craft solutions. The Roy Wilkins Center gave me experience with guiding groups to identify and learn the ways their diversity shapes their communication as a team. We hosted Executive Leadership Institute training seminars for public sector work groups and aspiring researchers to practice mindful inclusivity in policy analysis. We teach participants to identify unintended policy failures that lead to disparities, and intentional bad faith policy designed to discriminate.

My time at the Roy Wilkins Center informed my research and taught me to explore the ways economic tools can explain and address discrimination and disparity. We have produced research

on the economic costs paid by society due to persistent racial inequality in access to health care, the availability of state contracting with historically disadvantaged business enterprises, and academic research on racial discrimination using data from the American Time Use Survey.

My research on the employment effects of the subminimum wage began because during our simulation of the effects of the minimum wage in Minneapolis in 2016 we valued the careful exploration of the ways the lives of minority workers differ under this policy. We reported the effects of the minimum wage on employment among recent immigrants, highlighted the prevalence of “small” exempt firms, and presented the demographics of typical minimum wage earners. We found low wage jobs disproportionately were racial minority workers and, despite common narratives of teenagers as minimum wage earners, one third of minimum wage workers in Minneapolis were over age 40. This kind of mindful engagement brought important context to the minimum wage debate in the cities of Minneapolis and St Paul. My dissertation covers the minimum wage exemptions often applied to J1 visa workers and persons with a disability.

As an instructor I made design choices for my lecture videos to ensure accessible learning. I made instructional videos that explained how to use the tools in Microsoft Excel. I included arrows to point to a tool and focus student attention, I made the arrows pink to contrast the green color scheme of Excel so low vision students could identify them, and I included keyboard tricks to use the same tools for low-vision students who have difficulty using a mouse. I updated my closed captions for hearing impaired students or students whose primary language is not English and who can read faster than they can listen. I broke up my lectures into multiple short lectures rather than one long lecture for students with attention difficulty. I learned audio engineering to ensure that my voice was consistent, clear, and not distracting. These choices take time, but early attention ensures that all students can learn in my class. I formalized these lessons for making accessible content into a best practices guide for our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. This guide included ways to design content to allow students with visual and hearing disabilities to still engage with our material, and to give them the highest quality education possible.

To provide my students with the resources that they need to learn, it sometimes requires that I step in and give extra effort. I collaborated with former classmate Colette Salemi (University of Victoria) to design a platform for tactile graphics as educational aids for a visually impaired student. We combined foil inserts with stackable frames to make a booklet so low vision students could feel raised graphs with braille labels. When I had a low vision student who needed additional context, I held one-on-one office hours with them to ensure they were provided reasonable accommodations to engage with the class.

I want to provide my community with research that reflects their lived experiences and provide my students with the tools they need to learn. This requires humility to know my limitations, and patience to learn about unfamiliar contexts, but the benefit is that everyone involved is empowered to flourish.