

Writing diversity statements for job applications in agriculture

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Many universities are now requesting diversity statements as part of application packets for faculty positions. Diversity statements are less common when applying for positions in the private sector, government agencies, or academic staff positions.

Hiring committees utilize diversity statements to evaluate how a candidate will contribute to an inclusive campus climate, and the information from a diversity statement is intended to help recruit faculty who are knowledgeable about the issues facing historically excluded groups within academia. Few hiring committees will choose to interview a candidate based on the quality of their diversity statement alone, but a dismissive or poorly written diversity statement can be a red flag for hiring committees that may prevent them from inviting a candidate for an interview.

The considerations we offer you in this article are based on our personal experiences since we have not been formally trained on writing diversity statements.

General Guidelines and Tone

While diversity statements are a relatively new addition to the academic packet, in many ways they are very similar to research statements or teaching philosophy statements. Your diversity statement should include information about the ways that a diverse workplace impacts you. This does not need to be restricted to race and gender since there are many other communities that are underrepresented or historically excluded within academia and agricultural sciences. Many other identities could be important to your experiences in the workplace, such as class, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, or others.

When you're writing your diversity statement, try to match the tone and formatting of the other essays in your application packet. Most packet materials should be more

personal than the writing you do for journal articles. At the same time, your packet materials should have a more formal tone than most blog posts or emails.

Be sure to follow any length, spacing, text size, or other formatting limitations specified in the job post. If the job post does not include format guidelines, plan on your diversity statement being approximately one to three pages of single-spaced text. For most applicants, your diversity statement should be the same length or shorter than the other essays in your application packet. Unless the job post includes a more specific writing prompt, the diversity statement may describe your past or current contributions and activities to build a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming environment and/or a vision for promoting these ideals as a researcher and educator.

Developing the Statement

Like with writing most essays, getting started is the hardest part. Consider starting with some free writing related to how your identities have influenced your experiences as a student or in the workplace. Is the position you're applying for primarily focused on research, teaching, or extension? If so, focus on experiences that relate to the primary appointment for the job you're applying for.

In your diversity statement, include at least one story about how your identity has informed your experiences in research or in the classroom. If you have faced structural or cultural barriers to education, it can be valuable to discuss the steps you've taken to overcome these barriers in your own life. Also share some concrete steps you've taken to improve diversity and inclusion within your professional life and the places where you have worked.

In the same way that you may modify the content of your research statement to the needs of a particular university, aim to tailor your diversity statement to the culture of the specific institution. You may want to consult university websites to better

understand the institution's core values regarding diversity and inclusion. This information can often be found in a university's mission statement or their diversity office's website. Also consider how student body demographics may impact daily life and social interactions on a given campus, and share stories about how you may fit into the community. For example, if the position you're applying for is at a historically black college or university (HBCU), tribal college or university (TCU), or Hispanic-serving institution, your diversity statement should directly address how your experiences prepare you to support the mission of the college or university.

Land grant universities generally have a high emphasis on local and state-wide community outreach, even for faculty positions that have a low extension appointment. You may want to discuss who is a part of the agricultural workforce near the university, who is affected by land management decisions, and how your research and outreach may affect the surrounding community.

Just as hiring committees won't expect a single essay to encompass all of a candidate's thoughts and experiences regarding diversity, they also won't expect a single candidate to have experience and knowledge about all potential underrepresented communities. Consider discussing how the types of privilege you may hold have reduced your exposure to the issues facing others in your community. It can be valuable to highlight ways you have learned about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the past and how you plan to continue learning throughout your career.

Resources

- Glossary of the Anti-Violence Project, University of Victoria:
www.antiviolenceproject.org/glossary
- Definitions for the Revolution, Colors of Resistance:
www.coloursofresistance.org/definitions-for-the-revolution/
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Glossary, University of California–Davis:
<https://diversity.ucdavis.edu/about/glossary>
- Racial Equity Tools Glossary, MP Associates, Center for Assessment and Policy Development and World Trust Educational Services:
www.racialequitytools.org/glossary
- Glossary of Bias Terms, Center for Diversity & Inclusion, Washington University, St. Louis, MO: <https://students.wustl.edu/glossary-bias-terms/>
- Glossary of Human Rights Terms, Ontario Human Rights Commission:
<https://bit.ly/3LT2EUR>
- Dos and DON'Ts—Diversity Statements, *The Headtail Connection*:
<https://bit.ly/3LYuWNW>
- Breaking Down Diversity Statements, *Inside Higher Ed*: <https://bit.ly/3dUQWfT>

Inclusive Language

Using inclusive language helps express your awareness of and value for DEI. Avoid using words that might emphasize exclusion of individuals due to their age, gender, sexual orientation, race, disability, or other characteristics. We recommend reviewing articles in the Resources section of this article, which includes some examples of words and phrases to avoid along with inclusive alternatives. For example, consider the pronouns used in your writing. Avoid using “he” or “him” as general pronouns for all people or people of unknown gender. Instead, the use of singular “they” or “them”

would be a more inclusive alternative.

Individuals may have different preferences between common phrases. For instance, some people prefer person-first language (“person with a disability”), and others prefer identity-first language (“disabled person”). Some people have reclaimed the word “queer” and use it as a self-identifier while others consider this word a hurtful slur. Language changes over time and between communities, so in addition to learning from discussions around diversity and inclusion in your life and utilizing language guides like those listed in the Resources section, we recommend asking trusted colleagues, friends, or diversity consulting offices about the language in your diversity statement.

In addition to general best practices for utilizing inclusive language to describe members of marginalized communities, also consider language that is specific to a research area. For example, in the area of urban food systems, the phrase “food desert” may not be the most appropriate choice, especially where food justice advocates are using phrases such as “food sovereignty” and “food apartheid.” Being aware not only of general inclusive language but also those specific to agricultural research is crucial when writing your diversity statement.

Conclusions

After reading your diversity statement, a hiring committee should have more information about how the identities you hold impact your work life. A well-written diversity statement should give the hiring community insight into the communities you would represent and be able to support if you were hired.

Writing your diversity statement can be a useful opportunity to reflect on ways that your identities have impacted your experiences and guide your approach at work, but the writing process can be draining, especially for marginalized applicants or folks who

have had traumatic experiences in academia. Give yourself plenty of time to draft your diversity statement, and plan to get feedback from trusted colleagues throughout the writing and editing process.

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