

Diversity Statement

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From my childhood growing up in a predominately rural county in eastern North Carolina, through my undergraduate education at Berea College—the first racially integrated and fully coeducational college in the American South—to my graduate work at the University of North Carolina, I have developed an acute awareness of the many obstacles and challenges that face college students today, from food and housing insecurity to lack of adequate academic preparation. As a scholar and educator, I am dedicated to helping students to overcome these challenges and foster student success in the classroom and beyond.

I never expected to pursue an academic career. Academia isn't typically presented positively (let alone as a viable profession) in the daily life of a declining tobacco town. My parents, however, were determined to provide my siblings and me with an enriching and liberating education in the hopes of overcoming the obstacles of our situation. While both had college degrees, my father was often without work, and we were saddled with immense medical debt after my sister was born with a life-threatening heart condition. While we made do with hand-me-down clothing, part-time work, and a steady diet of red beans and rice, my dad ensured that our family was never wanting for books, and our family meals were taken around a table on which my mother pasted a world map (the better to encourage the burgeoning curiosity of her children). While my older brother worked a full-time job to put himself through college, I was fortunate enough to gain admission to Berea College—a unique work-study school that offers a tuition-free liberal arts education to promising students from low-income backgrounds. While at Berea, I worked in a first-year dormitory as a peer counselor, and then as a teaching assistant in the departments of political science and economics—experiences that gave me an intimate look into the challenges faced by students today, particularly those faced by students from historically under-represented groups in academia. It was during this time that I first developed a professional interest in academia, having witnessed the incredible transformative power of liberal learning in the lives of students like myself. My own life experiences have driven me to give serious thought to developing strategies for making a liberal education accessible to students from all backgrounds.

In the classroom, I work to create an environment where every student—from adult and continuing learners to dual-enrolled high school students—may grow and flourish. This requires dedicated effort to removing obstacles to student access and success. To facilitate comprehension of difficult texts, I often distribute reading and discussion questions prior to class, as well as defining key terms or providing annotations for particularly challenging readings. I often begin class meetings with a short mini-lecture focused on describing the historical, political, and social context of each reading, defining key terms and briefly outlining the main points of argument, providing all students with a common ground of understanding prior to discussion. I design course assignments such as essays and presentations to progressively develop academic skills, building on prior successes and instilling even struggling learners with confidence. In addition, I offer opportunities for dialog outside of class time, scheduling one-on-one meetings with every student several times throughout the semester to field their questions, identify their learning needs, and establish open communication for future questions or mentorship opportunities. Take-home exams, well-scaffolded assignments, and clear and detailed instructions all serve to make academic work more accessible. Finally, I offer a varied approach to

classroom participation, using new tools such as in-class polling and an online Slack instant-messaging workspace to provide opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and conversation, while also permitting students who may be uncomfortable speaking up in class (or simply need more time to formulate their thoughts) to contribute to discussion. In each of these educational strategies, I assume little in the way of background or familiarity, but work to bring all students up to a common standard of excellence.

Some of the most important work I do comes in the construction of syllabi and assembly of course reading lists. I aim to address questions of representation and present the variety of human experience throughout curricular decisions. When I ask my students to read historical or ‘canonical’ texts, it is not to unquestioningly absorb the wisdom of ancient sages, but instead to join in dialogue with other students across time and space. While many students initially feel that political theory is obscure and esoteric, I encourage them to see every text and thinker as a potential conversation partner. In order for all students to feel welcomed into this ‘conversation of humanity,’ I pair the familiar with the unfamiliar; classic texts with thinkers from outside the Western canon; well-worn historical staples with works of great contemporary relevance. Students in my classes have compared and contrasted the poetry of Amanda Gorman with the political theology of John Winthrop, listened to popular musicians alongside articles by nineteenth century philosophers, and written essays that interpret modern social movements and phenomena through critical and theoretical lenses. The wide-ranging study of political theory thus becomes, for my students, not the exclusive domain of an ivory tower elite, but a set of questions and conversations that they themselves may engage in, whether they hail from a tobacco town like myself, urban metropolises, or other nations around the world.

Political theory often addresses deeply contentious matters of justice, history, identity, and human experience, and course discussions often consider matters of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, and class. I take care to bracket potentially divisive topics in ways that are sensitive to the experiences of all students, while preserving an atmosphere of open inquiry. Within this context, few things are as critical as mutual trust and civility. One-on-one meetings, small group work, and carefully designed conversations early in the term work to cultivate interpersonal trust, openness, and the common pursuit of truth. I likewise expect—and aim to model for my students—the highest standards of civility, intellectual engagement, and mutual respect, particularly when we touch on matters of political ideology or identity. In so doing, students learn to raise their own standard of conversation and dialogue, while engaging with ideas and each other with respect, care, and vigor.

My own experiences as a perhaps-unlikely entrant into the academy, supplemented by training received at Berea College and the University of North Carolina, have well equipped me to serve a diverse student body. Beyond my efforts to make classroom learning more accessible, I have had occasion to work with students to succeed despite challenges raging from learning in a non-native language, to balancing childcare and work responsibilities with their education, to struggles with food and housing insecurity. A liberal education changed my life, and I am dedicated to sharing those goods with others, by expanding access to education and welcoming students into a community of learning where they may discover and develop their own capacity for living a well-examined life.