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Statement of commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion & belonging

At the beginning of every class, I greet students and ask what's on their mind, what course information needs clarifying, what questions I can answer. Recently, a student raised their hand and asked, "Pronouns. Why's everybody putting their pronouns on everything?" In light of increased social awareness of trans people in recent years, more of us have been declaring our personal pronouns in everyday communication contexts such as social-media profiles and email signatures. For this student, such sightings simply reached a critical mass and they had to ask.

The resulting impromptu discussion featured several intrepid students contributing their own reasons and insights for doing so, and I explained my own motivations for sharing mine. I don't list them just to label myself or to performatively display my own social consciousness, but rather to embolden others to feel safe in naming themselves. My own email signature links to an article by a trans person thankful of cis-gender people for participating in this new social practice. "When you do that," they wrote, "I feel more comfortable putting my pronouns — they/them. I feel more comfortable being visibly out as nonbinary. I feel more comfortable asking people to use the pronouns that feel most like *me*, that make me feel most seen and whole."

As a lifelong communication professional and scholar, I recognize the big impact of such seemingly small gestures. In addition, from my own experience as a gay man (who came out in the '90s), I know well the positive power of making social identities increasingly visible, as well as the magnitude of social change that can swell from such apparently miniscule changes in language, labels, and imagery. In every engagement within a university community, I make whatever room is necessary for all students, faculty, and staff to empower the representations of who they are so that they are indeed most seen and whole.

Supporting students in academic environments

Whether in classrooms, research settings, or community outreach, I always work to foster and maintain an inclusive learning environment. In designing courses, for instance, I strive toward equity and diversity by prioritizing and centering the contributions of scholars from underrepresented backgrounds in the readings and viewing materials. Previously, I had made efforts toward representative equity merely by adding a week or two of sources focused on such perspectives — the "diversity week" approach, which I know now only increases the marked status of certain voices. In reviewing and updating the syllabus for UC San Diego's Introduction to Communication lecture, I started by *first* selecting works and studies from global, non-white scholars as nodes for the term's themes, and *then* adding additional, "canonical" texts. Throughout the term, this kind of re-centering surfaced a more nuanced and reflective understanding of the field and its own diverse evolution.

In addition, as I prepare for individual classes, I make sure that all of my materials are ready for multiple levels of accessibility. Part of my typical first-day advice reminds students not only to be tolerant of each other's opinions and respectful of diverse backgrounds but also to show consideration for different levels and styles of comprehension. I also attend to this in my design of slides and the formatting of multimedia materials — making slides available to students before class begins, preparing different ways of explaining certain key concepts (using examples relevant to different social groups, if possible), and enabling transcriptions or captioning videos. If digital captioning is unavailable, I make sure to have the text posted online or printed as a handout. (This has proven crucial to all levels of understanding during my course on protest music, as we often listen to songs with lyrics that even careful, expert listening may struggle to discern.) The reverse of this is also important: making sure to read aloud any text I've placed on slides or otherwise project. The rapid shift to online teaching during the pandemic exposed the challenges of ensuring that digital communication is accessible to all students, and I will continue applying what I've learned to the preparation of all my classes going forward.

Supporting students from diverse communities

I am deeply committed to supporting students from diverse communities, recognizing the unique challenges they may face in higher education. As a mentor, I have worked closely with students who identify as underrepresented minorities, LGBTQ, first-generation, and non-traditional learners. (I am glad that, during the decades of my teaching career, the urgency for me to stand as a protector and role model for LGBTQ students has slackened a bit, though I remain vigilant in this regard and have gained new understandings and skills for shepherding trans students.) My mentorship strives to stay rooted in understanding the individual experiences and challenges that each student brings to the table. Especially this fall at UCO, where I'm leading some of the most diverse enrollments I've taught since my initial years at a community college, I am thankful for a particular strategy I picked up years ago: individual student conferences. They're time-consuming twice a term, but it's time very well-spent — learning for myself about each student's unique background and experience, and being able to fine-tune individual learning based on that knowledge. This helps to reduce feelings of isolation and ultimately to increase retention rates.

Overall commitment to equity and belonging

A commitment to achieving equity and enhancing diversity has been a central tenet of my professional and personal philosophy. Throughout my journalism career, I wrote a significant amount of reporting and criticism about the socially conscious folksinger Woody Guthrie (buttressed by a yearlong research fellowship at the Woody Guthrie Archives). I continue to hold up Guthrie's forthright, plainspoken advocacy for the dignity and worth of all people. In an oft-quoted passage, Guthrie expressed disdain for any expression that does anything besides lift people up or open people's understanding of each other, concluding that "no matter what color, what size you are, how you are built — I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work. And the songs that I sing are made up for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you." His mission statement is easy to adapt, and I strive to keep it in practice daily — making my teaching spaces and my messaging not just accessible to all but defensive of an equal opportunity to think, speak, and learn. To paraphrase Woody, I am out to create classroom and research experiences that make all students take pride in themselves and their work and to produce scholarship in which "all sorts of folks" can see themselves.