

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement

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In addition to being an astrophysicist, I have also been a musician for nearly my entire life. I have played the violin since age four and have performed in ensembles around the world. Having played many auditions for orchestras throughout my life, I am keenly aware that orchestras have tackled the issue of diversity perhaps better than any other industry. Specifically, every orchestra I have auditioned for has involved blind auditions, which entails performing behind a curtain. Furthermore, candidates are not permitted to speak, must remove footwear, are only identified by their candidate number in all stages of the hiring process, and are not allowed to wear perfume or cologne. These careful precautions effectively make it impossible for an adjudicator to surmise the gender, age, race, ethnicity, etc. of a candidate. Quite simply, the best musicians are hired, period. As a result, orchestras are highly diverse work environments. My participation in both the music industry and academia has uniquely prepared me to try and instill the hallmarks of diversity in music into the generally less diverse field of astrophysics.

I recognize that strong prejudices exist in our society against people that are perceived as different. As I remember from one of my favorite musicals, *South Pacific*, the song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” describes that prejudice is not born in us, it happens after we’re born. As accurate and as demoralizing as this is, it still yet offers us hope that if something can be learned, it can also be unlearned. Perhaps Mark Twain said it best, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.”

Sadly, I know that the USA has become more self-centered and less understanding since I moved to Australia in July 2016. Living abroad, watching the happenings in my homeland from the outside, from the perspective of a foreigner, has really opened my eyes to the detrimental developments occurring in America. Despite its faults, home is where the heart is, and I endeavor to return to the USA. I will do so with a new outlook on life and a desire to make my country a better place.

I know that travel has enriched my life in ways that are hard to measure. My research has allowed me to travel and live outside the USA, an opportunity that I will forever cherish. I try my best to share my experiences with my kin back home, to somehow bring understanding and acceptance into their lives. As the world continues to become “smaller,” more interconnected through the ease of travel and the Internet, I hope the world will indeed become less prejudiced and more accepting of all people.

I am committed to creating an inclusive culture for my students. Therefore, I must strive to know and understand their needs to enable all students to reach their potential. A genuinely inclusive culture means that students feel empowered to bring their “whole selves” to the classroom. This inclusion necessitates a celebration of the strength that comes from different cultures, knowledge, backgrounds, and perspectives.

Fortunately, astronomy is naturally suited for the inclusion of students from all backgrounds. Astronomy is the most ancient and humbling of all the sciences. Civilizations from around the world have studied the heavens since the time of our earliest human ancestors. All people of the world share the study and advancement of astronomy. Furthermore, it makes us realize that we all share this tiny Earth in the midst of an unfathomably vast Universe.

The language of astronomy is that of mathematics and physics. Mathematics is universal to all tongues and creeds. Humans have a natural allure and sense of wonderment when it comes to the shared sky above all of our heads. Moreover, it is necessary to train an informed constituency of citizens to appreciate the importance of studying space and exploration for the advancement of humanity. The milestones of space exploration also have a uniting effect on people; the entire world was simultaneously in awe and experienced a collective sense of accomplishment when Neil Armstrong set foot on the Moon in 1969.

Diversity alone will not provide lasting change if we do not make students feel included like they are part of the journey; only then can we realize the benefit of diversity. Being inclusive is more than “accepting” differences. It is one thing to know that people have a different culture, sexual orientation, or ability than you, and to “accept” that, it is another to actively remove barriers and obstacles that enable students to feel like they are part of the class/university/society.

Creating an inclusive culture is about recognizing the different skills and world views people join us with, each of us taking ownership of removing barriers and creating platforms that will change students' experiences for the better. It is vital to make sure all students feel comfortable and like they are part of the class. Identifying students who are less vocal and inviting their opinions in classroom discussions is a simple way to make sure they feel included. Sometimes it is easy to underestimate how powerful small actions can be to someone who is looking for a sign they are welcome.

The goal of properly recognizing diversity and inclusion is to achieve equity in opportunity for all. It is the onus of professors to acknowledge that inequality still exists in education and strive to remedy and make amends for past and ongoing injustices. Perhaps the most grievous impediment to education is poverty. For this reason, it is paramount for colleges to provide equal opportunity to students from families of all incomes. Toward this goal, I would be happy to sit on an admissions committee to help recruit students from socioeconomic quantiles that are consistent with the State.

I am a white, heterosexual male who grew up in Kansas; I understand that to all outward appearances, I would not increase the diversity at a university that might hire me. I was raised in a rural Southeast Kansas farming community. My childhood friends and family collectively form a society with little knowledge of the outside world beyond Kansas. Most of my family members have never had a passport or traveled much beyond the Midwest to experience cultures different from their own. I feel unique and fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to travel the world and live outside the USA in pursuit of my scientific research.

I have gained so much from my experiences and have developed a level of understanding of different cultures that I know would not have been possible if I had remained in Southeast Kansas my entire life. I do not judge those who are perhaps less cosmopolitan than I am. I strive to share my acquired understanding with my childhood friends and family members to help them improve their appreciation of diversity and to become stewards of inclusiveness and change in our society. I know that as an American who has lived abroad, I can offer a positive perspective to students from the wisdom I have gleaned from a life of learning and enriching experiences beyond the USA.