

Steve Lechner: Statement on Inclusive Excellence

A deep commitment to inclusivity drives my research and teaching. I believe that respect for others serves as inclusivity's fertile soil. Engagement and practice provide the nutrients necessary for inclusive excellence to flourish.

Living and working in a variety of settings has exposed me to diverse perspectives throughout my life. Born and raised in New York State, I also lived in Boston, Missouri, Los Angeles, Oklahoma, Iowa, and Maine before settling down in North Carolina in 2008. My personal journey informs how I craft and approach historical questions whether in the archives, the classroom, or the public sphere. I developed into an active listener by sharing life with people who hailed from backgrounds different than my own. As a result, I have an intense curiosity in other people's perspectives, memories, values, hopes, and concerns. Practicing law and serving as an ESL instructor further sharpened my listening skills. My classes at NC State tended to be more diverse than the institution's demographic profile with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, and first-generation college students. Moreover, William Peace University, where I currently teach, has a diversity profile consistent with Methodist University: 46% White; 33% African American; and 7% Latinx.

My collaborative research projects further demonstrate the extent to which I value diversity and inclusion. My dissertation, *Recalling Ethnic Yorkville: The Histories, Heritage Practices, Imaginaries, and Identities of Two Ethnic Communities in One Urban Neighborhood*, attempted to discern and reflect multiple perspectives connected to a shared urban space. My work in Yorkville bridged persistent divisions among the interpreters of this once working-class neighborhood's past. To a striking degree, many of these groups had operated within "siloes" of historical interpretation and production. Prior to my research, for example, Yorkville's Hungarian and German heritage communities had only a passing awareness of one another. Moreover, the institutions responsible for constructing a kind of hegemonic grand narrative of Yorkville's "ethnic past," such as New York City's print press, paid little heed to the

perspectives of these ethnic heritage communities. By connecting disparate voices through my collaborative endeavors, my work has helped produce a richer, more inclusive narrative of this Manhattan neighborhood.

My commitment to inclusivity also animates my teaching. While at NC State, I worked to ensure that the courses I taught advanced the school's stated commitment to diversity. Thus, the secondary and primary sources I assigned, the lecture topics I featured, and the tone and tenor of class discussions all challenged students to consider the past through multiple lenses. As we proceeded through time in *Modern American History*, starting with Reconstruction, many students described feeling as if they were learning United States history anew. I supported each of them as they engaged critically with a challenging array of historical evidence and source material. I have successfully continued this approach at William Peace University, a more diverse institution with a high number of "first gen" students.

At both institutions, I created and nurtured an environment suitable for discussing and digesting students' observations, opinions, concerns, and questions. Building team and fostering trust and mutual respect within the group are predicates to asking the difficult questions too often avoided by society at large. Class discussions were student-led but instructor-guided. Each student had an opportunity to serve as our class leader, a position requiring them to develop a written plan, fine-tune it with my assistance, and, ultimately, lead the group through a journey to the past. Not only did discussion leaders grow as a result but the entire class benefitted by experiencing students from different backgrounds acting as our historical guides. This approach, while requiring a high degree of scaffolding and management, yields a classroom that models respect, active listening, and inclusion. Many former students have reached out to describe how these lessons transcended the course, in the process reshaping their personal and professional perspectives. In a society where we are bombarded with messages of social and political division, educators must lead the way in prioritizing diversity, inclusion, and our shared humanity.