

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

I was exposed to a substantial amount of diversity in my doctoral program at the University of New Mexico (UNM). I say this for several reasons. In New Mexico, there is a rich indigenous culture that can be seen in nearly every aspect of life in the state. New Mexico has a deep colonial history related to Spanish settlement dating back to the late 16th century. Spanish settlers and indigenous tribes had complicated, sometimes combative relationships with one another. Even today, New Mexicans draw a distinction between Hispanos and Mexican-Americans. This diversity in ethnicity is easily observed on campus and in the classroom at UNM.

At the campus-level, UNM is a “majority-minority” university in that the most prevalent demographic groups on campus are considered to be a minority groups nationally. UNM is officially designated as a Hispanic-serving institution by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. Over the period 2000-2015, just under half of in-state students at UNM identified as such. These demographics were reflected in the courses I worked on, both as teaching assistant and instructor of record.

At the classroom-level, my students were predominantly Hispanic, complemented by a relatively large share of American Indian students. Many were first-generation college students. Working with them helped me appreciate the various challenges that students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds bring to the classroom. I took care to be sensitive to such issues, even if I was not personally familiar with them, and gave my students the benefit of the doubt whenever there was any question as to how to best proceed. As an example, I had a student in my Economics Tools course who had a relative who had been in a serious automobile accident in Mexico. This family member was of Mexican citizenship living several hours south of Albuquerque across the border. The student and I forged an agreement where I excused his absences for one week and he sent me all of the in- and out-of-class work via email on or before deadlines in the syllabus—a deal he honored. As a result, he was able to temporarily leave the U.S., support his family, and remain caught up in the course.

Also at the classroom-level, I assisted teaching courses for the American Economic Association’s (AEA) Summer Training Program for two years. This program has been in existence since the 1970s and targets talented undergraduates from minority groups interested in studying economics at the graduate level. Participants receive rigorous training in mathematics, microeconomics, and econometrics, and develop end-of-program projects that are presented at an AEA-sponsored conference. Participants were generally of color and from all over the United States and Puerto Rico. The demographic composition of AEA students was very different from the classes I taught at UNM: many students were from large metropolitan areas and were black and Asian. I worked closely with these students, delivering a handful of lectures, helping them with their coursework, grading their work, and providing hands-on help both in terms of completing their end-of-program projects and presenting them to an audience. Beyond academic work, I also actively participated in teambuilding exercises, including completing a group obstacle course, participating in a whitewater rafting outing, and led interested students into the mountains outside of Santa Fe—a first hike for many of them.

In another very different classroom experience, I taught a survey course in economics at a national, for-profit, private university to earn some additional income. Students were very different from other groups of students I had taught. Nearly all of my students were nontraditional students—generally older, many using GI Bill to fund their studies. Many of them were openly conservative and skeptical of monetary policy and any potential economic stimulus policies on behalf of the government. This led to lively debates, and required me to prepare special exercises and readings to try to help them relate more personally to the study of economics. I believe my strategies were effective, as students increasingly engaged as the course progressed. Because many of my students were combat veterans, I necessarily had to provide special accommodations on a fairly regular basis.

Further, my research itself directly addresses diversity and privilege in higher education. During my Ph.D. I co-authored a paper on achievement gaps in higher education. This project required examining how students from different race-ethnicity, gender, and family income complete college. We found very complex patterns in graduation rates and remedial course taking. We have been presenting our findings and engaging in discussion with community policymakers.

Most recently, my experience working at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) has deepened my awareness of the flexibility needed when working with groups from different cultural backgrounds. As an example, the largest project I am a part of at AUT involves examining the causes, prevalence, and consequences of low literacy and numeracy in adulthood. This project would not be possible if it were not for the strong partnerships forged between Pakeha (white New Zealand), Māori, and Pacifica (Pacific Island) stakeholders. When examining a sensitive topic such as adult basic skills, where skill deficits are clearly unevenly distributed across ethnic and geographic boundaries, our team remains acutely aware that context matters a great deal. It is simply not enough to note ethnic disparities—we must try to understand such disparities using a cultural lens—a lens that recognizes the long-lasting disadvantages that certain groups have suffered due to longstanding political oppression and exploitation. I have learned much in this latest cultural experience, and look forward to expanding my understanding of other cultures as my career progresses. As an educator, I believe being able to effectively teach and partner with individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds is vital.