

The Do's and Don'ts of Writing Diversity Statements and Some Ideas to Get Started

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For many academic positions, including tenure-track assistant professor and teaching-focused positions, you may be required to submit a diversity statement, also sometimes called an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) statement (and sometimes abbreviated as DEI). This statement should discuss how your teaching, service, and research (optional) supports EDI. For those with less work experience (e.g., PhD candidates), the statement can focus more on plans around how you would support EDI efforts.

Why do so many universities ask for this? EDI is important to the mission and productivity of most universities and employers. For example, EDI efforts can help firms, especially universities, attract qualified workers from diverse backgrounds (Flory et al., 2021), boosting productivity. Students also come from diverse backgrounds and may have particular needs or face particular challenges, such as discrimination. So, it is important to improve EDI in the field so that smart and talented students who face challenges due to their background and the sometimes poor climate in economics do not leave economics (Bayer, Hoover, and Washington, 2020; AEA 2019). This differential exit of women and minorities from economics at different stages, from undergraduate majors to full professors is often referred to as the “leaky pipeline”.

Many applicants choose to spend minimal time on their diversity statement because they either do not think it is important or did not have time to prepare one. Those that do write the statement sometimes misinterpret what the statement is about. Having a poor diversity statement could hurt an application in later stages of review, when hiring committees review all application documents more closely and focus more on “fit”. Spending just a couple of hours to write an organized and reasonably polished diversity statement can set you apart significantly as a more professional candidate who has better “fit” and values for most departments. While it is rare that a solid diversity statement will net you a job, the marginal benefit of working on the diversity statement and other documents can be often larger than the marginal benefit of working more on the job market paper to, for example, add another appendix table that is unlikely to be read in your initial application.

¹ I thank Mackenzie Alston and Anneliese Singh for helpful comments.

This short chapter seeks to provide advice on writing a diversity statement for academic jobs. I also hope to bust common myths, such as the statement only being about listing your minority statuses or that “white cis male straight non-disabled etc.” people can’t write a good statement. While I focus more on economics in my examples and sources, the advice applies to most other fields. I’ve structured this as a “Do’s and Don’ts” style list to point out issues I’ve seen with diversity statements and to provide tips that can be helpful.

DON'Ts

DON'T mention your “diversity credentials”, or lack thereof, in isolation

The intent of the diversity statement is not just to list which minority status(es) you hold or for search committees to solicit this information.² The goal is to learn how candidates can support EDI efforts. This could correlate with minority status,³ but it’s entirely separate. Someone from a very “diverse” background could be doing nothing related to EDI, or have no EDI-specific plans, while a “cis white guy” could have fantastic EDI experience or plans. If you are comfortable doing so, you can certainly mention your background, but do so when it’s relevant to a point you are making.⁴

DON'T include discussions of how you learned about EDI issues or “White savior” narratives

The concern is with statements, not exclusively by White people or involving race or ethnicity, which follow the pattern of: (1) being exposed to some disadvantaged group, (2) learning about their plight, and (3) that somehow inspiring you to care about an EDI issue. Common examples are discussing a “voluntourism”⁵ trip to do “community” work in a Global South country or mentioning an *insert minority group here* professor who inspired you to care about diversity.

² Note that, in the US (and most other OECD countries), it is illegal to make employment decisions based on protected characteristics, such as sex (including pregnancy or assumptions about fertility), gender and identity, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. See <https://www.eeoc.gov/youth/what-employment-discrimination> (accessed December 30, 2022) for information on the US federal law, but note that many states have broader laws (see, e.g., Neumark et al., 2019).

³ E.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, and queer people often have a larger burden of service in academia, either because they identify EDI issues more often and seek to address them, or because they are asked to perform service more often (both related to EDI and unrelated to it) (see, e.g., Domingo et al., 2022).

⁴ E.g., “As someone (who is demographic X), I know how important (issue Y) is, and I (seek to address it / have addressed it) by doing (act Z).”

⁵ For a critical discussion of these all-to-common “volunteer” trips, see, e.g., <http://yris.yira.org/comments/4830> (accessed December 30, 2022).

While these statements come from a good place, they can be cringe-worthy and miss the point. They are surprisingly common, so they never come across as you being particularly informed or thoughtful. They miss the point because they usually do not discuss concrete actions or plans. They change the focus to your *personal EDI discovery journey™*, which is honestly not interesting, rather than focusing on your actual actions or plans. This isn't about you.

Simply consider removing statements about how you learned about some EDI issue, unless it is novel and relevant (hint: it probably is neither), and just focus on your plans or actions. We don't need a story about how you had to have some notable experience just for you to start caring about EDI.

DON'T include "cheap talk"

Anyone can say they care about EDI. Lots of people say this in their statements, and they don't elaborate. But this "cheap talk" is meaningless if you don't follow that up with what you've done or a thoughtful plan. By being specific and supplying examples, you set yourself apart as someone who takes action, or credibly plans to. Show, don't tell.

DON'T try to include everything

The diversity statement is short, usually a page or two, and there is no way to discuss everything, nor are you expected to. If you, say, focus your statement on your contributions and plans around gender equity, few would accuse you of not caring about the other groups not mentioned. The main goal is to show – credibly – that you care about and have concrete experience or plans to bolster EDI efforts. This can be done without mentioning every possible group or situation. If you try to include too much, your statement could lose some focus, such that the reader doesn't have a clear takeaway. So, don't worry at all about coverage and focus on the content.

DOs

DO consider EDI broadly to get ideas

Some academic job market candidates can get stuck on the statement only being about, say, race, and feeling like what they can write about is limited. However, thinking about EDI issues and affected groups broadly can open more possibilities. For example, do you do anything, or plan to do anything, in your teaching, research, or service that supports...⁶

...racial and ethnic minorities?

⁶ This is not an exhaustive list, but some examples to give you ideas and to help you learn about issues that some groups are facing in our profession.

Hopefully issues of race and inclusion are something you've thought about, but, if not, I highly recommend that you do some reading to learn about the issues in economics⁷ and the numerous possible solutions.⁸

Keep in mind the diversity within the broad “racial and ethnic minorities” category, as this may give you more ideas for what you could discuss. The broad category also includes groups that can face significant discrimination, disparities, or challenges in academia and higher education but are less often part of the conversation. This includes Indigenous Peoples (e.g., Bailey, 2016), English language learners (ELL) (e.g., Bergey et al., 2018), and those from intersectional backgrounds, such as women of color (e.g., Turner, González, and Wong, 2011).

...women?

Economics recently had, and is still having, a “#MeToo moment”⁹ and, fortunately, brave economists are pushing the profession to make long-overdue strides (or perhaps steps) to improve the often-toxic climate for women and others (e.g., AEA, 2019; Wu, 2020; Dupas et al., 2021) and to help close disparities such as women in economics getting less mentorship (AEA, 2019).

As for what might help, CSWEP leads the charge with resources such as mentoring programs¹⁰ and numerous professional development resources¹¹ that are useful to everyone. Many of the tips on making economics more inclusive from Bayer et al. (2019) and Div.E.Q. (2022) are also relevant. Just be sure to discuss how you apply, or plan to apply, the tips rather than just listing the tips.

...individuals with disabilities?

Disability is a broad category¹² that many people fall into in some form at different times in their lives. Unfortunately, society creates – intentionally or not – barriers that

⁷ I cannot recommend Bayer, Hoover, and Washington (2020) enough as a fantastic overview of these issues but see also Spriggs (2020) and CSMGEP's most recent annual report (CSMGEP, 2021).

⁸ The American Economic Association (AEA) publishes some useful best practices (Bayer et al., 2019), with more from Diversifying Economic Quality (Div.E.Q., 2022). Bayer, Hoover, and Washington (2020) is again useful by discussing numerous approaches to improving diversity and climate.

⁹ See, e.g., <https://www.marketplace.org/2022/12/15/5-years-later-economics-faces-another-metoo-moment/> (accessed December 31, 2022).

¹⁰ See <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/programs> (accessed December 31, 2022).

¹¹ See <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/programs/resources> (accessed December 31, 2022).

¹² For more on the diversity within the disability community and definitions/models of disability, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3F4Hp0N_A1Q and (accessed December 30, 2022) and Burkhauser, Houtenville, and Tennant (2014).

make it difficult for researchers and students with disabilities to fully engage their talents in the academy or the classroom.

It is also important to stress that many disabilities are invisible or relate to mental health. Common mental health conditions that create barriers to learning include anxiety (generalized or exam-related) and learning disabilities. There is much that instructors can do beyond formal requirements, set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), to accommodate students with disabilities. For example, not all disabilities are documented, and the formal supports provided, such as working through a disability center, may not always be sufficient. For more ideas, see NCCSD Clearinghouse (2022).

...LGBTQ+ people?

Unfortunately, the climate in the economics profession can be homophobic, transphobic, etc., too. For example, out of all non-heterosexual economists surveyed in the 2018 AEA Climate Survey, only 25% reported that people of their sexual orientation are respected in the profession, and only 13% reported that transgender or gender non-conforming economists are respected (AEA, 2019). LGBTQ+ students and scholars face concerns about if and when to come out or transition, which can make navigating the job market and tenure difficult.

The Committee for the Status of LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Economics Profession (CSQIEP) was only made a full AEA committee in June 2019 but has quickly start offering services such as a virtual mentoring program, a virtual seminar series,¹³ and support for researchers using data on, or doing research on, LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴ But much work remains to be done, particularly with recent increases in homophobic and transphobic violence.¹⁵

...non-traditional students?

Some institutions or academic programs focus on students who juggle some combination of full or part-time work, childcare or eldercare responsibilities, and classes. These students face different concerns and barriers to learning compared to full-time,

¹³ See <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/aealgbtq> (accessed December 31, 2022).

¹⁴ See Badgett, Carpenter, and Sansone (2021), <https://sites.google.com/view/dariosansone/resources/lgbt-research?authuser=0>, <https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/aealgbtq/datasets> (accessed December 31, 2022), and (accessed December 31, 2022).

¹⁵ See, e.g., <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/10/1091543359/15-states-dont-say-gay-anti-transgender-bills> and https://www.huffpost.com/entry/drag-story-hour-protests_n_638e4d5de4b0411f9e7b7e75 (accessed December 31, 2022).

non-parent, students who live on campus. Do you, for example, allow flexibility in course attendance (e.g., HyFlex)¹⁶ or accommodate students with children?¹⁷

...lower socio-economic status individuals?

EDI is not just about demography; socio-economic status can be a major barrier to success in academia and in economics courses. Perhaps you help with this by using free textbooks or textbook alternatives? Or perhaps you help connect students with funding opportunities? And, of course, research can often focus on important EDI issues such as poverty.

DO keep it to one page

Having short cover letters, teaching statements, and diversity statements was something that I heard Dr. Karen Kelsky figuratively yell at me about in her “The Professor is in” blog, now a highly useful book (Kelsky, 2015) for those on or approaching the market. As someone who has now been on the other side of the market too, I can tell you that she’s right: keep your documents short!

Search committees have limited time and rarely read all your documents, especially supplementary documents such as the diversity statement. If they do read them, they usually skim. Keep your diversity statement to one single-spaced page unless you have extensive EDI experience, or your second page is just references. A short document ensures that search committees will focus on the key information. Less is more.

DO translate your EDI-focused research into teaching or service

It is not expected or required that your research have an EDI focus or angle: most research does not. However, if you do have a clear EDI angle to your research, then, in addition to summarizing your research very briefly in the diversity statement, aim to also mention how this research informs teaching or service. For example, perhaps you study the gender wage gap in one of your dissertation papers, and turned that into an engaging lesson plan.

DO structure the statement to improve readability and recall

In addition to keeping the statement to ideally one page, you can do other things to improve readability, such as:

¹⁶ In HyFlex, students can usually participate in one of three ways (1) in-person, (2) remotely (e.g., Zoom), (3) asynchronously (e.g., watch Zoom recording, complete content on the learning management system).

¹⁷ For excellent examples of family-friendly syllabi, see these examples provided by Dr. Melissa Cheyney: <https://studentlife.oregonstate.edu/childcare/family-friendly-syllabi-examples> (accessed December 30, 2022).

1. Having a clear thesis. Since you aren't expected to cover everything, and readers will likely skim your document, it's best to have a clear thesis. That is, have a clear focus and statement you want to make. For example, maybe your thesis relates to how we face pipeline issues in economics (Bayer, Hoover, and Washington, 2020) and you seek to address that by teaching introductory courses that focus on policy issues (see Bayer et al., 2020) and include diversity content (e.g., Button et al., 2021). Aim for clarity over coverage, so the reader has a clear takeaway and remembers what you're about.

2. Having shorter paragraphs. These improve readability, which is why you see them in news articles so often. A huge paragraph feels daunting and a reader who is skimming will probably skip it.

3. Using bolding or underlining to highlight key points. This helps focus a skimming reader and highlight your thesis. While this may seem unusual, it's a common tactic used by grant writers, who also face space constraints and distracted readers.

Here are two examples for how bolding or underlining could be useful. First, if you have a one-sentence thesis statement (e.g., "I focus on narrowing the gender gap in economics by improving mentorship opportunities."), then you could bold it so that the reader doesn't miss it.

Second, if you, say, have three main points, you could highlight those. E.g., suppose you detail three things you do, or plan to do, in your teaching, say (1) highlight diverse economists, (2) incorporate active learning, and (3) showcase real-world economics research, and you have a short paragraph or bullet point for each. You could bold those three items so they stick out to the reader and solidify the organization around those three ideas. It is like having three sub-section headers but without adding words.

DO include hyperlinks to your relevant sources and documents

By including hyperlinks to related documents or information, you can encourage readers to view your other documents in addition to sending positive signals. For example, if you discuss your research and how it relates to EDI, add a hyperlink to an ungated copy of your paper(s). If you discuss a teaching activity, from, say, *Diversifying Economic Quality* (Div.E.Q., 2022), that you use, or plan to use, that improves EDI in the classroom, link to information on that activity, or link of evidence of you doing it (e.g., handout you made).

Even if the link is not to one of your documents and is to an external resource—for example, a source that discusses or backs up your point about disparities or climate issues facing a group—it can help show that you know what you're talking about and is helpful to a reader who wants to learn more.

While adding hyperlinks is obviously minor, it's essentially free advertising for you since it doesn't take up space. It can also free up space by avoiding full URLs, and you

could even add hyperlinks to all your in-text citations to avoid adding a references section to your diversity statement.

DO consider sometimes adding minor tailoring

During the economics academic job market, you will likely apply to, say, between 75 and 250 jobs if your search is not too constrained. Therefore, you will not have the time to tailor your application to each job. Most economics jobs will know this and not expect this. However, it can be worth the time to do some quick, minor tailoring in a few cases when the institution has a clear EDI specialization or concern. For example, a historically Black college or university (HBCU) needs evidence that candidates are sensitive to the academic barriers that Black students face.¹⁸ It may only take a minute or two to add this tailoring, but it could have a large return for institutions that screen significantly based on EDI qualifications. One way I tailored my job market documents was to make versions, e.g., you could write a default diversity statement, and then slightly different versions that focus more on, say, gender, race, etc. This is a much more minor version of tailoring compared to the typical tailoring of having a more research-focused (default) cover letter and more teaching-focused cover letter.

DO proofread your statement and seek feedback on it

Proofreading your statement may seem obvious, but it seems like many do not do it. While errors are unlikely to matter much, weird ones can sit with the search committee (e.g., I just read a “Deversity” statement). Even better is to have others, such as your peers on the market, more junior graduate students, family members, or anyone, really, proofread your statement and provide feedback. You should absolutely ask for this minor help during this crucial time! Often our writing makes sense to us but is confusing or comes across differently to others. I’ve read many statements where there was something odd or unclear in them that would likely have been flagged by someone else or caught through proofreading.

Conclusion

It may seem daunting to write a diversity statement given the massive time crunch involved with going on the job market. However, the fact that you are thinking critically about EDI issues and making an effort to write a thoughtful and more polished diversity statement is already going to put you above other candidates. Unfortunately, the bar is low here since this statement is unfortunately neglected. So, your time-constrained efforts

¹⁸ Other examples include that women’s colleges are interested in candidates that are attuned to the issues that women face academia and in the classroom, Hispanic-serving institutions such as San Diego State University would view any discussion of Hispanic students more favorably, and universities pushing for more Indigenous inclusion (e.g., many in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of the US) would welcome any relevant mention of that.

will still be highly effective at setting you apart as a more thoughtful and inclusive candidate – someone our profession desperately needs.

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