

A Statement on Diversity Equity and Inclusion

My parents, both educators themselves, made it a priority in our family to value compassion, curiosity, and acceptance above all else. We celebrated the religious traditions held by both sides of my extended family, we traveled, were exposed to diverse cultures and belief systems, and spoke openly about humanity, our differences and similarities, and equity and justice. The environment that I grew up was much more inclusive than the outside world was when I began venturing out on my own. It became quickly apparent to me that the world can be cruel and unkind. And though I had learned of events from history, I found myself taken aback by the scope of unfairness I witnessed and experienced after I left the safe environment of home.

The loneliness that comes from helplessness and hopelessness can often be overwhelming, not only to those directly experiencing it, but also those witnessing it. The world is so beautiful and is also so painful. It wasn't until I read Glennon Doyle write "find what breaks your heart and that will be your purpose" that I understood. Witnessing loneliness and helplessness and hopelessness in others, breaks my heart. And so, my purpose became to help people feel less lonely, less helpless, and less hopeless. Counseling offered me the opportunity to sit with people, listen, offer support and hope, and maybe even help.

For the first five years of my counseling career I worked almost exclusively with marginalized populations, helping my clients and community members navigate systems that at best seemed built to dismiss them, and at worst seemed built to destroy them. The generational trauma, personal experiences of trauma, and disenfranchisement that is experienced by people of color, refugees and immigrants, those in the LGBTQIA2s+ community, and those with visible and invisible disabilities can seem unending. Though counseling allowed me to support individuals and families, I began to feel called toward ways that I could create more widespread change. My belief is that societal change happens through a combination of political action and education. While I do have an interest in politics and see the absolute need for local, state and federal policy changes, I have not yet developed the community roots or skill set. However, education is something I hold dear, not only as a family tradition, but also because I have valued my own so intensely.

Throughout my own education I encountered educators with seemingly little awareness or interest in addressing their own biases, prejudices, and problematic actions. Rather than drive me away, it was the professors who spoke down to students that held different belief systems and

cultural traditions than them and instructors who retaliated against those who sought to advocate for themselves and others were some of the experiences that helped bring me into the field of counselor education. These negative experiences held two obvious concerns for me. The first was that if these professors treat their students this way, one can only hope they do not treat their clients similarly. The second was that by providing educational instruction in the way, it modeled and taught this behavior to counseling students as they embark on their own clinical career. With the goal to offer support, knowledge, and opportunities to students who may have been dismissed by some professors, I intended to learn from their errors. I am by no means fault and bias free, but my hope is that my self-awareness allows me to continue to learn and challenge these biases.

The intentionality toward inclusion, honoring diverse traditions, and advocating for equity that I was raised with, is something that I continue to carry with me and work to incorporate into my teaching and supervision. While counseling degree programs should remain mostly focused on the content to be learned, it is important to me that I know my students and they know me. We are humans first, and counselors and counselor educators second. One way I do this is to begin each semester sharing some of my own identities and belief systems related to counseling and our course. I then ask them to complete a short introductory writing assignment so that they are able to share parts of their own identities with me. Though I am intentional in maintaining boundaries with my students, it is also important to me that I am approachable and accessible to them. Additionally, this allows them to informally tell me how I can support them and what experiences they bring with them as they enter into our learning environment. In many ways, counseling is as much about the counselor as it is about the client. Allowing counseling students to begin thinking about their own identities and how they impact both the classroom and the counseling room, in the context of whatever the course topic may be, is one of the most beneficial skills to teach new counselors.

Finally, as mentioned previously, my interest in politics may one day grow to become a larger part of my professional work. However, until then, I work to advocate and promote diversity, inclusion, and equity in my clinical counseling and counselor education work. Whether it be to advocate for my clients or for new systems and supports to be put into place, promote the importance of ethical standards, or directly address unfair or biased behaviors, it my duty and honor as a counselor, supervisor, counselor educator, and human being to seek out ways to include diversity in equitable ways in all of the spaces that I am in.