

G. Michael Lavigne

Statement on Diversity and Inclusion

The diversity of the student body is among university's greatest strengths. The experience of living in a multicultural environment will create a more powerful, lasting impression on the students than any single lesson they learn in the classroom. However, this diversity is not a virtue in and of itself. In order for students to grow from this experience, the value of diversity must be understood and established as an important element of the campus culture. Furthermore, the identities we carry with us into the classroom can have a profound impact on our experience of learning. My work as an instructor can not begin until my students feel unequivocally welcome in my classroom, making it incumbent on me to make inclusivity a foundational element of the classrooms I lead.

The culture of a university campus is not only a product of the students that comprise it, but an invaluable resource for their personal growth. In every class I have taught at NC State, there has been a vibrant combination of urban students, rural homeschoolers, alumni of elite magnet programs, and foreign students witnessing their first lecture in English. In diverse settings like this, eighteen year old students from small-town religious backgrounds may be exposed to LGBT people and people of non-christian faiths for the first time, and young people who may have never left the US will be exposed to peers with ethnic backgrounds from around the globe. These young people are in the process of understanding the world and their place in it. Aside from career prospects, the true value a student gains from the university experience lies in the exposure to coequal peers who do not look like them, sound like them, pray like them, or love like them. It is not enough, however, that this diversity simply be present on campus. Rather, it must be enshrined and celebrated as a foundational pillar of the campus culture, and recognized for the tangible value that it adds to the student experience.

Introductory math classes are in some sense the gatekeepers of the undergraduate experience, setting the tone for their academic career as well as this period of tremendous self-discovery in their lives. As the representative of the college in that space, it is imperative on me to set a strong tone of inclusivity, not only as a means to establish the rules of engagement in my own classroom, but to set the tone for culture and values of our campus. I may be the first authority figure they have ever heard address trans inclusivity, normalize using mental health services, or discuss sexual assault awareness. By sending these strong, unequivocal statements about the values of this campus and my classroom, I hope to speak directly to those students who experience "otherness" and tell them that their place in this space is sacred and valued. Furthermore, that message is designed to communicate loud and clear that the community we build together here on campus is in no way beholden to the stigmas, prejudices, and barriers that may have existed back home. The campus belongs to the us, and there must be a concerted effort in making it the inclusive, supportive environment that we wish it to be. These statements belong in the course syllabus. Committing to champion these issues in the foundational document for the course assures my students that no part of their personhood need be left at the door when entering my class, and enshrines those values as a necessary element of our work.

Growing up as a gay person in rural Louisiana, I am intimately familiar with the experience of "otherness", and though I am fortunate to now feel universally supported in my personal and professional life, I am acutely aware of the sensation of not belonging. The math classroom is, unfortunately, a space where many people feel that they do not belong. They may have internalized that girls are not supposed to like math, or they may feel that they can not live up to a racial stereotype about math proficiency. Our classroom is enriched that diversity, and the community we form around the study of this material will bridge those artificial divides. A first generation college student or a student with physical or learning disabilities may doubt their place in the college math classroom, holding them back during lecture time. My classroom is designed with accessibility in mind, with a wide variety of materials including animations, review sheets, and concept checklists that extend beyond the far 50 minute lecture. By providing a wide array of materials, I hope to address the needs of a broad variety of students. I also jump at opportunities to implement other features to improve accessibility in my classroom, such as lecture capture technology.