



The Promise of Diversity Statements: Insights and an Initial Framework Developed from a Faculty Search Process

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ABOUT CURRENTS

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Introduction

As students in colleges and universities continue to diversify along myriad dimensions, there is a need to hire faculty who have the expertise, knowledge, and commitments needed to foster intellectually and culturally rich, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. Faculty can make these contributions in multiple ways. They can play critical roles in and out of the classroom (e.g., designing and implementing inclusive curricular, pedagogical, and mentoring practices) and in informal and formal leadership roles, impacting institutional policies and practices that promote equitable allocation of resources and positive campus climates. They can also bring scholarly knowledge around a range of social and cultural topics that inform our understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as they impact our campuses, society, and the global context. To fully realize these important contributions, faculty must reflect a diverse range of cultural and social backgrounds and life experiences that in turn shape the different perspectives, ideas, and approaches they bring to their campuses.

How can this be achieved? Nationally, faculty hiring efforts have moved beyond efforts focused only on enhancing demographic diversity and toward also identifying and recruiting faculty whose scholarly, teaching, and engagement/outreach experiences and efforts can enhance DEI on campus. One promising approach involves requesting diversity statements from faculty candidates as a means to identify and evaluate DEI contributions. As it becomes more common to request diversity statements as a component of faculty job applications (Canning & Reddick, 2019; Kelsky, 2014; Willis, 2017), a corresponding interest has arisen in understanding what should be included in diversity statements. Recent guides and workshops provided by university offices of academic affairs, campus teaching and learning centers, graduate student development and career offices, or individual faculty experts emphasize the utility of writing about knowledge, commitments, and action-based experiences that promote DEI (Beck, 2018; Gemein, 2017; Reyes, 2018; Wong, 2016). Furthermore, these experiences could include past and present, formal and informal, and future aspirations and plans for the faculty role. Taken together, these guides suggest that faculty applicants could include a variety of experiences and perspectives within their diversity statements.

Some academic faculty and leaders have engaged in public discussions to support or critique the use of diversity statements. Proponents of diversity statements

highlight the benefits of identifying and bringing a range of talents, views, and skills to the work of teaching, scholarship, and service. They also assert the benefits of diversity statements for signaling and demonstrating institutional values around diversity (i.e., institutions should evaluate what they say are core values in hiring processes) (Flaherty, 2018b; Mitchell, 2018). Some criticisms reflect concerns that diversity statements are tools for advancing “political correctness” or that institutions are looking for a particular, narrow set of social ideologies or values (Flaherty, 2018a).

Despite the increasing attention paid to diversity statements, little systematic research has investigated these statements and their content, that is, the types of views, experiences, and skills that are described in these statements. To our knowledge, the only research on faculty diversity statements are two studies by Baker, Schmaling and colleagues that focused largely on coding applicants’ conceptualization of diversity (e.g., identity categories such as age, ethnicity/race, gender, sexual orientation) and how applicants disclosed and described their own diversity characteristics (Baker, Schmaling, Fountain, Blume, & Boose, 2016; Schmaling, Trevino, Lind, Blume, & Baker, 2015). These studies provide important insights into the varying identity-based terms that applicants use to reflect their diversity contributions, as well as the overall low disclosure in self-identification among underrepresented or minoritized groups. While applicants in the noted studies were prompted to describe in their statements how they would advance diversity through their research, teaching, and service, the studies did not systematically examine the different ways applicants framed and described their diversity contributions in these domains.

The representation of various personal and social identities among the faculty is important to the intellectual and cultural richness of our campuses, but it is also critically important to examine the many ways that faculty may think about and work to enhance DEI on their campuses. Doing so will allow us to more fully understand faculty DEI contributions as intellectual work and would help counter the tendency to equate “diversity contribution” with individuals’ identity groups (racial/ethnic, gender, social class, sexual orientation, etc.) within hiring and evaluation processes, a common phenomenon in higher education and in many organizational contexts. Furthermore, conflating diversity contribution with group membership or identity categories tied to ideological values in this way could lead to confusion or skepticism about the value of diversity statements.

As such, it is important for hiring units/departments to be clear about what they mean by diversity contributions and to: (a) conceptualize diversity/DEI commitments as part of the intellectual work of faculty, entailing the DEI-relevant knowledge, skills, competencies that individuals would use in their faculty roles, rather than simply identity membership or ideological beliefs; (b) explicitly articulate this definition to prospective applicants; and (c) provide prospective applicants with guidance around this definition, including examples that reflect the diverse ways that faculty might demonstrate their commitments to DEI through their scholarly work, teaching and mentoring, and/or service and engagement efforts.

A Case Example: Diversity Statement Framework

In this paper, we present a case example that reflects the above principles, in which we analyzed diversity statements written by faculty applicants across social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences departments in a college of liberal arts within a large research university. Our comprehensive analysis of the content and features of applicants' diversity statements informed the development of an initial diversity statement framework, providing an organization for the numerous ways an applicant might articulate their demonstrated contributions to DEI. This type of framework can be useful to faculty applicants as they approach writing their DEI statements and for institutions that request DEI statements to support their ability to effectively identify and evaluate information about desirable skills, knowledge, and perspectives for their faculty roles.

Participants and Procedures

We analyzed diversity statements from 39 participants from a consented sample of 150 assistant professor applicants from the academic year 2016-17. (The final study sample was derived through random sampling within the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences applications). Statements were part of application materials, and participant consent was acquired from applicants after the hiring cycle and process was completed. Applicants were provided with guidance on writing their application materials, including directions for the diversity statement that emphasized the program's focus on hiring outstanding scholars with demonstrated commitments to DEI through the domains of scholarship, and/or teaching and mentoring, and/or service and engagement activities. The guidance also included examples of the different types of efforts that could reflect DEI commitments and

contributions across these domains (see Appendix A).

Elements of Diversity Statements: “What” Contributions Applicants Described

Using an open-coding approach, our research team derived themes and patterns from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Themes were refined through iterative analysis and cross-checking. Our research team also consulted with the program’s evaluation guide (see Appendix A) and drew from scholarship and practice literatures on faculty diversity to refine codes and terminology. Ultimately, seven elements were derived from applicant statements, highlighting the types of contributions and experiences participants described in their statements around advancing DEI. Below we outline these elements and provide example statement excerpts.

Three elements involved applicants’ personal efforts as related to their DEI-related interests and goals as faculty: 1) valuing and understanding DEI, 2) personal background and experiences, and 3) skill building and personal growth.

Valuing and Understanding DEI included applicants’ asserted support for advancing DEI goals (e.g., promoting inclusive environments, acknowledging and leveraging diverse perspectives) and the rationale or basis of these goals based on their understanding of DEI issues (e.g., awareness/understanding around the nature of social inequalities, their impacts and manifestations).

I hope to continue providing an open and diverse approach to literary study, both in the classroom and in my scholarship, by considering not only racial diversity but also matters of class and cultural difference.

Because I have never experienced, nor will ever experience, the negative consequences of sexism, racism, or other forms of systemic discrimination, the only way I can know what these consequences are is to listen to those who have faced them; without defensiveness, without denial, and without trying to rationalize the situation.

Personal Background and Experiences reflect applicants' descriptions of their personal identities and backgrounds, as well as direct experiences (e.g., area of residence, work, program participation, or education) and indirect experiences related to their backgrounds. In most instances, when applicants included discussion of their personal backgrounds they also articulated how their background experiences shaped their perspectives on, approach to, or actions around DEI.

After college, I worked in...a large financial firm to gain research experience before pursuing graduate school. In 2008, I witnessed firsthand how [the financially privileged] prospered while over four million Americans lost their homes. This insider experience led me to [my discipline] to study how elites in the financial sector perpetuate inequality.

As an undergraduate, I benefited from outreach programs and learned to understand the value of leadership that advances diversity and equity in higher education. These experiences were a motivating factor in my decision to pursue a Ph.D. after my undergraduate education.



Skill Building and Personal Growth are applicants' described efforts to develop competencies and knowledge around DEI that could be integrated into their teaching, scholarship, engagement, and/or personal behavior as a faculty member. Development could be achieved through formal activities (e.g., trainings, workshops, or other structured initiatives) or informal efforts (e.g., interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds that shaped their thinking or behavior, reading articles or books).

As a visually impaired Chicano student, his presence in my classroom made me aware of the abilities I privilege in my teaching. He turns in his political poster. "When you grade my work can you close your eyes and feel the poster?" I tell him, "Yes, of course." I have never graded an assignment with my eyes closed. I touch the poster. The sand is rough. I stop as my fingers hit a sharp point.

I attended the inclusivity conference for my field with a group of graduate students. That conference set out to compile a list of recommendations for funding agencies, universities, departments, and individuals, in an effort to provide a framework to create inclusive environments, remove barriers to access, and establish a community of inclusive practices. This meeting reinforced my commitment to listening to the experiences of those not like me, and gave me a concrete framework through which I can actively combat prejudice and exclusive practices. After returning from the meeting, I and four of the other students who went, gave a colloquium to our department outlining: the problems of racism, sexism, other forms of discrimination, and the combinations thereof; how these problems restrict people from being successful in our field; and what we can do to begin to address them.

Four elements involved domains of action/efforts related to DEI: 4) teaching, 5) mentorship, 6) research/scholarship, 7) and engagement/service. In many instances, applicants described contributions in more than one domain and also described how these domains influenced one another (e.g., how scholarly work influences mentoring or service/engagement, etc.).

Teaching contributions included applicants' described efforts for advancing DEI within instructional practice and classroom spaces and were articulated within three spheres: 1) curricula, 2) pedagogical practice, and 3) classroom climate.

Across all my courses, I emphasize the intellectual contributions provided by scholars from underrepresented groups and feature studies of a range of diverse research subjects.

As an educator in both public and private institutions with diverse student demographics, I made explicit efforts in my courses to bring intersectional discussions through classroom dialogues but also group projects. For example, the social observation assignment on the campus racial climate or the mini-ethnographic study on gender fluidity acceptance in students' dormitories were designed to help highlight subtle forms of discursive racism and transphobia in the everyday life.

Mentorship included applicants' approaches to mentoring students from minoritized or underrepresented groups that extended beyond the classroom setting. This could include individual/one-on-one or group efforts and could reflect activities within formal programs or informal activities. Some applicants also noted the value in serving as a role model, particularly those who saw themselves as representing historically marginalized populations in academia.

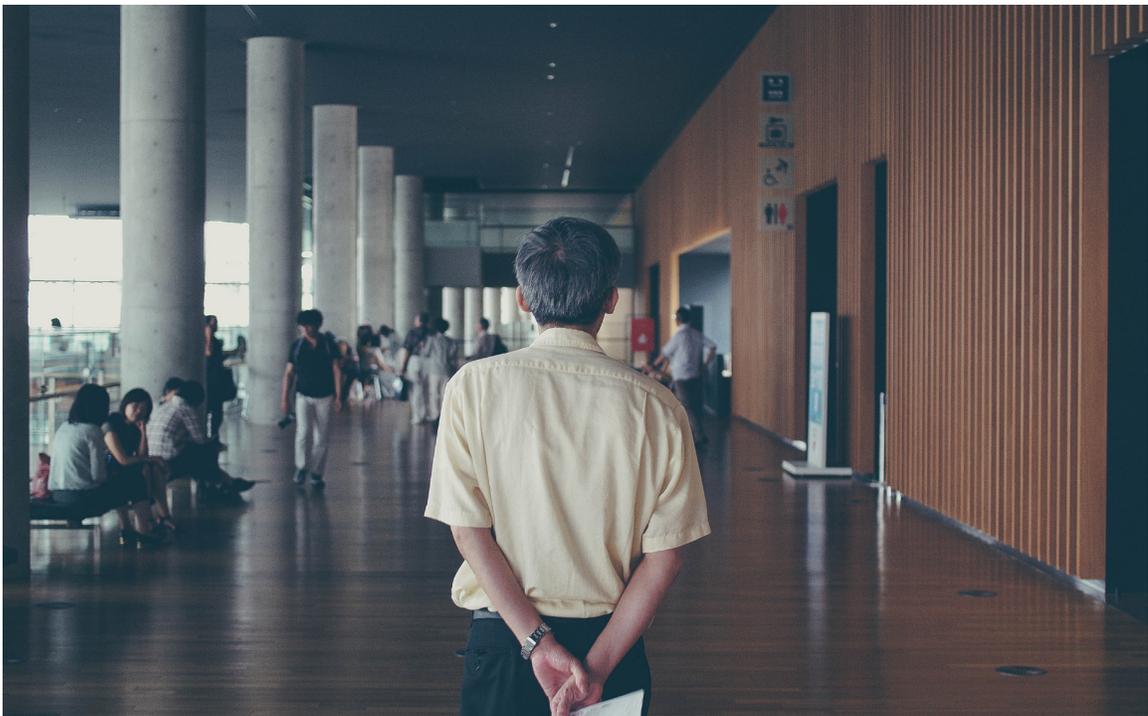
In an effort to pay homage to my early mentors, my goal is to become a university professor where I can provide field school opportunities for students to gain firsthand experience in archaeological research and serve as a mentor to students from underrepresented backgrounds.

My inclusion could serve to tear down certain stereotypes that present people of color as academically subpar when in fact, their lack of participation could be linked to such factors as exclusion, poverty, general lack of awareness etc. I strongly believe that mentoring would help significantly to inspire the younger generation of minorities towards rising above all preconceived stereotypes.

Research and Scholarship contributions were those that advanced efforts to broaden knowledge and understanding around DEI issues, often utilizing theoretical/conceptual frameworks related to DEI (e.g., focused on particular historically minoritized populations, the illumination of cultural processes, or issues of inequality). Some applicants also described contributions to the development of positive DEI practice in research (e.g., moving DEI scholarship into the public realm, building diverse research teams).

My next project, an ethnographic study of mentoring relationships across two communities – a predominantly white, middle-class suburb and a racially diverse, working-class urban neighborhood – builds on my prior research exploring support for marginalized youth. I plan to build on the insights gained through this research to work with the university and local groups to cultivate more productive pathways and practices for mentors and mentees.

In my own research practice, I concentrate on identifying and asking urgent questions about our social conditions, but also working with diverse team members who carry different sets of expertise and knowledge.



Engagement and Service involved applicants' efforts to advance DEI outside the classroom, and included plans that had been implemented or proposed for their new faculty role. These commitments often manifested as 1) engagement with organizations or programs that were DEI-focused or identity-based, on campus, in discipline/professional societies, or in other community spaces, and 2) active promotion of policies and practices that advance DEI.

I was one of the founding members of the Students for the Advancement of Latinx Scientific Achievement (SALSA) – the local chapter of the National Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (NSHPE). During my time there, SALSA connected undergraduate mentors with high school students in Upward Bound – a program for low-income families and those who would become first generation college students.

Within the academic environment, I plan to continue promoting diversity and inclusion by fostering awareness of inclusive practices. This includes, for example, helping departments develop qualitative metrics that go beyond quantitative measurements that are known to inject bias in the admissions and hiring process.

Features of Diversity Statements: “How” Applicants Described their Contributions

In addition to the seven elements, or the “what” of applicants were describing, our analysis revealed a set of features reflecting “how” applicants were describing their DEI contributions. Three qualitative features were identified: 1) elaboration and reflection, 2) quality of engagement described, and 3) the focus of influence.

Elaboration and Reflection involves the ways that applicants articulated their experiences or efforts to advance DEI. Some applicants elaborated on their efforts in a purely descriptive manner (e.g., listing efforts and activities), and others provided reflection on what motivated their efforts or how their experiences or efforts impacted their thinking and behaviors.

Quality of Engagement reflected applicants' descriptions of the sustained nature and intensity of their DEI efforts, including: a) frequency of engagement (e.g.,

one-time or sustained), b) specificity of plans (e.g., general or concrete proposal, proposed or implemented actions), and c) leadership and initiative (e.g., exhibiting formal or informal leadership qualities or more passive participant in described activities).

Focus of Influence refers to the target(s) of impact for applicants' DEI efforts and includes: a) the focus of applicants' efforts for intervention or change (e.g., one-on-one with individual mentees, with groups, and/or structural/systemic/institutional change efforts), and b) the community of stakeholders involved (e.g., local department community, campus community, and/or broader public communities). Note: no one focus of influence is viewed as superior to another, but distinguishing this feature provides a means for understanding variation in how prospective candidate might make impacts in their faculty roles.

Discussion

Requesting diversity statements is a promising strategy for enhancing how we consider diversity contributions in the faculty hiring process. Diversity statements allow faculty applicants to describe their DEI skills and competencies, which are critical to meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse academic community. Of course, although writing about DEI-related experiences in faculty applications is relatively new for many institutions and fields, the work itself is not. Faculty, often those from underrepresented backgrounds in the academy, have long been engaged in intellectually-grounded scholarly, pedagogical, and service work that advances DEI, often without acknowledgement or recognition. For instance, many elements and features described in our framework mirror those seen in literatures on “invisible labor” and “cultural taxation” among faculty of color (Crain, Poster, & Cherry, 2016; Joseph and Hirschfield, 2010; Matthew, 2016; Padilla, 1994). Requesting diversity statements during the faculty hiring process can attach needed visibility and prestige to DEI work and reinforce the notion that these efforts should be the responsibility of all faculty, not just those from historically underrepresented or minoritized backgrounds.

In our case example, we analyzed diversity statements submitted by faculty applicants across multiple disciplines in order to understand the different ways applicants articulated their DEI contributions and experiences. Our analyses informed an initial organizing framework that distinguishes multiple elements and

features of diversity statements that can support both the applicants who are writing statements and the reviewers evaluating their statements. Three of the seven elements focused on values, knowledge, and background experiences; personal/professional development interests; and efforts that undergird applicants' past, present, and future contributions. Four other elements included the specific domains of applicants' focus, actions, and plans around DEI (teaching, mentoring, research/scholarship, engagement/service). Three features distinguished qualitative differences in applicants' engagement in their DEI efforts.

The analyzed diversity statements largely reflected areas included in the provided applicant guide (e.g., contributions in scholarship, teaching and mentoring, and/or service and engagement). However, the content of the statements across elements and features varied greatly in terms of the specific activities, efforts, experiences, and perspectives that applicants described to reflect their demonstrated DEI commitments. That is, there was no single way applicants appeared to think about or articulate their DEI commitments. We also emphasize that while our framework provides a way to make sense of the content contained within diversity statements, it does not make value judgements around the combination of elements and features that make up the "strongest" statement. Rather, multiple combinations of elements and features can form the basis of a well-constructed statement, and there are many ways of seriously and effectively describing one's DEI skills or approaches.

Our study also suggests the utility of institutions being clear and upfront about what they are looking for in diversity statements and providing thoughtfully crafted guides that help applicants understand diversity commitments as skills and assets that individuals bring to the faculty role. Based on our prior experiences in faculty searches, we think the guide in our case example resulted in more specific, focused diversity statements than we would have received otherwise. For example, in the study sample and larger application pool, we did not see examples of statements where applicants stated an identity characteristic alone (e.g., their race, gender, or socioeconomic or first-generation status) as their "contribution" to diversity. Instead, if identity characteristics were mentioned, they were tied to the impact of that identity on their approaches, actions, or interests in relation to the faculty role they were seeking. Furthermore, prior research by Baker, Schmaling and colleagues (2015, 2016) found very low rates of applicants' identity self-disclosures in their diversity statements, especially for underrepresented or minoritized identities. Our case example did not show this pattern. That is, 90% of our sample disclosed a

social identity; from that group, 91% shared a marginalized identity, and 9% shared a privileged identity. As such, we speculate that in addition to supporting more stronger statement content, providing guidance with clear definitions and values around diversity may make applicants more comfortable in sharing their personal identities as a part of their faculty applications.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Our initial diversity statements framework, while preliminary, can provide faculty applicants across disciplines with a starting point for how to conceptualize and articulate their DEI contributions and experiences. This type of framework can prompt faculty candidates to reflect on their past and current work, what they hope to achieve, and how their own backgrounds and experiences may have influenced their perspectives and efforts.

Such a framework can inform search committees in their evaluation processes. Proponents of diversity statements highlight their benefits in identifying specific skills and assets related to DEI (Canning & Reddick, 2019), while critics of diversity statements have suggested they are vague and subjective, with questionable value in the hiring process (Flaherty, 2018). In our analysis, we found that applicants were highly descriptive and provided diverse, specific, and tangible ways in which they would contribute to their given department, institution, and academia. As noted, we posit that this rich variation was influenced by pre-application guidance provided. Given that these statements are fairly new to many faculty hiring processes, we encourage departments to provide applicants with clear definitions and expectations around how their diversity statements will be evaluated. In doing so, diversity statements will more likely be comprised of measurable and valued work to allow reviewers to identify faculty who will be able to contribute to the department's and institution's scholarship, teaching, and service missions. In contrast, if applicants do not have a clear sense of the institution's view of diversity, it may encourage some to focus on describing their social identity characteristics rather than on the skills and knowledge they would deploy as faculty to enhance the institution. Such statements are likely to be more general and homogenous and, consequently, less useful to hiring committees seeking to distinguish and assess applicants' DEI strengths in relation to unit/departmental goals (Smith, 2019). [Note: Our analyses did not focus on how statements were evaluated by faculty/hiring committees, however, future research might take up how diversity statements are evaluated

by review committees and investigate if statements with particular elements and features are more likely to lead to positive assessments and faculty offers.]

Finally, academic administrators can use this type of framework to revise and establish review structures for their current faculty around DEI contributions, e.g., in annual reporting, tenure and promotion reviews. If institutions assert that DEI is central to their university mission and are moving toward selecting faculty in part based on the expectation that they will support institutional efforts to bring about DEI, then institutions should also be prepared to evaluate and reward faculty for work done in these areas.



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Appendix A

Writing the Personal and Diversity Commitment Statement

This statement should document your commitment to, and personal achievements in, advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals within academia and beyond. This can include sustained engagement, service, or leadership to increase access, retention, and success of underrepresented populations in higher education.

Some areas of interest to the program are:

Potential to contribute to higher education through the scholarly understanding of barriers facing women, domestic racial/ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and other members of groups underrepresented in higher education, as may be evidenced by life experiences and educational background. Examples include but are not limited to:

- ability to articulate the barriers facing specific groups in fields where they are underrepresented;
- attendance (undergraduate or graduate) at a minority serving institution;
- participation in higher education pipeline programs such as Summer Research Opportunity Programs or McNair Scholars;
- significant academic achievement in the face of barriers such as economic, social, or educational disadvantage.
- commitment to allyhood through learning about structural inequities demonstrated by, for example, extensive reading or focused coursework, or participation in professional development programs or institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

A record of academic service to advance equitable access to higher education for groups in fields where they are underrepresented (i.e. women, racial/ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, student veterans).

Demonstrated engagement with historically underserved populations, and bringing this experience to the scholarship, teaching, and learning mission of the university. This commitment may be reflected by leadership or active participation in:

- departmental or institutional committees, task force groups, or other workgroups;
- local or national service related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access, such as through professional societies and organizations;
- scholarship, practice, or policy efforts to advance diversity, equity, inclusion or social justice for historically underrepresented or marginalized groups (at the campus, local community, state, or national levels);
- other community engagement or outreach activities relevant to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion and access, such as volunteer activities, consulting, or advising.
- a record of leadership or significant experience performing public service addressing the needs of our increasingly diverse society.

Particular consideration will be given to the following:

- A record of leadership or significant experience teaching and mentoring undergraduate and graduate from broadly diverse demographic and social backgrounds, including students from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education.
- Capacity to pedagogically address and respond to the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds. For example:
 - » Development or use of curricula designed to enhance participation of students from groups underserved by higher education;
 - » Engagement in training or professional development activities designed to enhance intercultural or intergroup competencies and skills.
 - » Ability to integrate contemporary issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion into the classroom.
- Ability to create an inclusive learning environment, addressing one or more of the following issues:
 - » How your own and your students' identities (i.e., race, gender, class), background, experience, and levels of privilege affect classroom dynamics;
 - » How diverse perspectives can be integrated into teaching methods and approaches.

If applicable to your research, you may choose to address the following:

- How the scholarship has the potential to serve the needs of groups that have been historically underserved by academic research.
- How the research/research interests focus on underserved populations and understanding issues of social inequalities. For example:
 - » research that addresses issues such as race, gender, diversity, equity, and inclusion;
 - » research that addresses topics such as health disparities, educational access, and achievement, political engagement, economic justice, social mobility, civil and human rights, and similar topics;
 - » artistic expression and cultural production that reflects culturally diverse communities or voices not well represented in the arts and humanities.
- How the academic research brings to bear the critical perspectives that come from the scholarly understanding of the experiences of groups historically underrepresented in higher education or underserved by academic research generally.
- How the research contributes to understanding the barriers facing members of groups who have been historically underrepresented in specific fields in higher education. For example,
 - » studying patterns of participation and advancement of women, racial minorities, and other groups in academic fields where they are underrepresented;
 - » evaluating research programs, curricula, and teaching strategies designed to enhance participation of students from groups underserved by higher education.



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