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Statement of Commitment to Diversity

Based upon a cursory glance at myself and my biography, one would be unlikely to suspect any factors that would lend themselves to a sensitivity to diversity concerns: I am a white, protestant, heterosexual, cisgender male, living and working in a political and socioeconomic institutional framework dominated by people who look like me. Nevertheless, as academics go, my story is unique enough that it has gifted me with a deep sense of relative alienation, sufficient to impress indelibly upon me the importance of fostering classroom and social-academic communities and spaces of inclusion, and of maintaining an open attentiveness to situations and students that may deserve special attention.

I am from the Midwestern United States, about forty-five miles south of Champaign, Illinois. I grew up surrounded by cornfields and factories. I am a dyed-in-the-wool, blue-collar kid, and my parents were both farm kids who migrated to the factories when they reached working age. My stepfather was a long-haul semi-truck driver, and between my two homes, I grew up with seven siblings. Struggle was my reality and my way of life from as early as I can remember. As a child, I passed my summer days with my grandfather at the cemetery, where he spent his life working as the head groundskeeper and caretaker. When I reached the age of thirteen, I lied about my date of birth to obtain a work permit, allowing me to work at the cemetery with my grandfather and begin earning a paycheck; in addition to cleaning headstones and general groundskeeping, I was also responsible for helping dig graves and tend to the responsibilities of post-funereal resolution and cleanup.

While the importance of a college education was paid due lip service by my parents during my adolescence, neither they nor I had any sense of how one went about applying to colleges, much less of how to think about *paying* for college, or how to get by financially while attending college. And my parents, preoccupied as they were with the paying of bills, lacked the enthusiasm to light the college fire under me when the time came. High school graduation came and went, and college seemed like a fairy tale, a luxury for the affluent. A few months after graduation, I accepted a job at the print factory where my father had spent all of his adult life, and began working fifty to sixty hours a week. Two years later, my wife and I were married, at which point we bought a home and did things that working-class married couples do – landscaping, wallpapering, barbecues on weekends, church on Sundays, and so on. By that time, college seemed more and more remote and implausible.

One morning – almost four years out of high school – I awoke to the realization that I was unhappy, and decided to return to school. By this point, we were on the way to starting a family, and my initial motivations for pursuing an education were simply to earn an associate's degree, in order to advance myself at the print factory where I worked. That all changed when I took my first philosophy class, at which point I began planning to not only continue my education past the local community college, but to see it through to my doctorate. But given the realities of my life – a family and a mortgage – doing so meant continuing to work full-time while going to school full-time through my undergraduate career. It also meant that money would be a constant concern throughout my graduate career.

At each stage of this journey, I have had the constant, nagging feeling of incongruity. When starting back to school, I was older than my counterparts, and while four years may seem inconsequential, the difference between eighteen and twenty-two is huge, a difference compounded by my having a family and all the attendant responsibilities. Moreover, my full-time employment demanded that I progress more slowly than my fellow students, such that the time lapse between myself and my counterparts increased the further I progressed. A psychology professor once rolled his eyes at me when I expressed a desire to go to graduate school. By the time I finished my bachelor's degree, I was twenty-eight years old. But more significantly, the more my education and academic career advance, the more aware I become that I am from a very different world than most of my colleagues, a disparity more keenly felt than the difference in age between my earlier classmates and myself. I am still that Midwestern kid – who spent his summer days in the cemetery, passed his Saturday evenings at his uncle's bonfire parties, his Sundays at church potlucks, his winter weekends traipsing by himself through the forests, his summer weekends kayaking and camping; whose stepfather parked his motorcycle in the house, who lived for autumn hayrack rides and corn mazes, who has had to fight hard for every shred of advancement in his life, and

who would just as soon drink a cold Mountain Dew as he would a glass of red wine. The blue-collar, Midwestern ethos runs deep in my DNA, and the more I have tried to suppress it to fit in with my peers, the more saliently its inextricability is revealed.

To be clear, nothing in my story in any way qualifies me to understand the struggles of one who comes to higher education from an underrepresented group. There are innumerable obstacles in life that I have *not* had to overcome, simply in virtue of the fact that I *am* a white male. What my life experience *does* afford me, however, is the very real recognition of being, significantly and undeniably, different – a life as a square peg in a round hole – and of being judged and perceived as insufficient, whether explicitly or not, on the basis of that difference. As a result, I take very seriously the challenges that the more institutionally entrenched differences of race, gender, and class pose to students. This manifests in my pedagogy and mentoring in a number of ways and on a multitude of levels.

At a basic level, I work into my syllabi a number of 'abiding questions' concerning gender, race, and class – questions that we are to keep in mind as we work through the course material. In my lectures, these questions will frequently emerge. Then, I draw attention to problematic passages of text in my lectures, highlighting the subtle ways in which the seemingly innocuous commitments of certain thinkers can be entangled with more troubling aspects of their thinking. In addition, I send out and discuss in class secondary literature analyzing specific topics in the Western tradition – Plato on the role of women in the *Republic*, or Hume on race, for instance. Finally, even when teaching texts or figures from the Western canon, it is easy to open discussion to traditions beyond the Western – when teaching Spinoza or Nietzsche, for instance, I will draw parallels with Taoist and Buddhist thought. These basic gestures demonstrate to students my awareness of and sensitivity to questions of difference, which is an important component to fostering a community of inclusion. It is also important to infuse diversity into the curriculum itself when possible. In my Intro course, for instance, we read *Frankenstein* as a critique of Western masculinist attitudes towards rationality, science, and nature; in my Early Modern European course, I taught women philosophers alongside and in communication with the men; in my first-year seminar, I teach Buddhist and Taoist thought, along with a great deal of reference to Judaism.

In addition, I make a deliberate effort to pay attention to the singularity of each student, maintaining an attunement to subtle mannerisms and comments that may indicate an area where special attention is warranted. Once, in a first-year seminar, I had a Latina student who expressed in the first week of class a strong sense of alienation – coming from the Bronx, she found herself surrounded by kids who were mostly white, and mostly from backgrounds of affluence. While her casual remark was not meant to attract attention, my administrative partner and I made a point to check in with her from time to time, inviting her to come and talk with us in our offices at a few points in the semester, in an effort to learn more about her and figure out ways to help her plug in to social pipelines at the college. In another, similar case, I had a first-year African American student from Philadelphia who was suffering from homesickness. He was gay, missed his family, and was going through a particularly bad breakup. In this case, I invited the student to lunch with me, and to many subsequent office chats where we got to know more about each other, forming a lasting student-teacher friendship. Such strategies function with greater and lesser degrees of success – the first student found her niche and is now thriving here at Gettysburg; the second, languishing in the throes of heartbreak and homesickness, transferred his studies to Philadelphia (though he and I have continued to touch base). Nevertheless, the effort itself conduces to the creation of an environment of inclusiveness.

Finally, I have taught at different types of institutions, to students of many nationalities, races, religions, gender identifications, employment statuses, sexual orientations, ages, educational backgrounds, classes, and so on. My most significant discovery through these experiences has been that celebrating diversity *strengthens* the pedagogical environment, a realization that paralleled my own acceptance of my Midwestern, blue-collar identity. Each student from every walk of life brings to the discussion something unique, and these singularities all have their ways of complementing, critiquing, and enriching our study of philosophical traditions. I strive to impress this truth upon my students, and I take very seriously the necessity of this task.