

“You don’t seem like you’re from West Virginia,” is a phrase I have heard all too often. As a first-generation Ph.D. student from Appalachia, I understand how foreign it can be to navigate academia. When I decided to pursue economics halfway through my undergraduate studies, I was not aware that the majority of Ph.D. programs were funded, let alone all my other blind spots in graduate school admissions. I sought advice from Colin Cannonier, whose own path from the island of St. Kitts to being a tenured professor in Nashville, TN was non-traditional. Without his mentorship, I would never have been able to pursue a career in economics. This experience has made me committed to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion as an instructor, researcher, and community member so that people of all backgrounds can succeed in higher education.

As an instructor, I make a conscious effort to promote inclusivity in the classroom. I do this with choices both big and small. I provide students a spectrum of resources and opportunities to learn the material so that my class is accessible to all backgrounds and learning styles. On the smaller end, I mention to students at the start of each semester that I go by something other than my legal name: Alex, not Alexander. While a bit silly, my hope is that this makes students feel comfortable telling me they would like to be called by a name other than what is on file by highlighting that even someone who appears traditionally privileged has to correct people on his name. One student felt comfortable enough to ask me to call him Barney rather than his Chinese name midway through the semester. After that semester, I had multiple positive interactions with Barney in the department.

As a researcher, the principles of DEI improve my research in many ways. Directly, my research touches on topics of discrimination and equity, as it focuses on how different types of people are affected by discriminatory pricing practices by firms. Empirically studying these pricing practices is important for understanding how they impact consumers as the theoretical effects are often ambiguous. However, diversity is just as important during the research process. I was able to develop a numerical technique to solve a very challenging part of the model in my job market paper by talking to faculty members who work on both empirical and theoretical problems. All aspects of our background, both personal and professional, affect the way we view the world and approach problems. I have seen first-hand how underrepresented perspectives shape the trajectory of a research project.

As a community member, I know that my responsibility to DEI extends beyond teaching and research. When I was the president of the Economics Graduate Student Association at UNC, I officially registered the organization with the university, which allowed us to receive student organization funding. These funds are still received today and are used for planning events to create an inclusive environment amongst the economics graduate students. Although I have undoubtedly benefited from my race and gender, I am committed to breaking the barriers to success for others through mentorship. To this day, my mentor Colin connects me with Belmont students who hope to get into economics. I talk to his upper-level economics courses about getting into the discipline at least once a semester. At UNC, I gave many of my students advice regarding their career and graduate school aspirations. Regardless of where I go in my career, I plan to continue fostering an inclusive environment where people of all backgrounds are respected and can achieve their goals.