

Michael S. Jeffress, PhD

Diversity Statement

I am a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white male, and I recognize both the privilege this has afforded me and the challenges my intersectionality can present, but I have a proven record as one who values, embraces and promotes diversity. For over a decade, I worked in the non-profit sector in the southern US, where I worked tirelessly to increase racial diversity and inclusion. I created conferences and events that brought people from different races together. I also faced resistance from those who did not support the goal and regularly had to confront groupthink and engage in crisis communication and conflict resolution.

In academia, I have always taught racially diverse students, used racially diverse examples in my teaching, and promoted critical thinking about race and ethnicity. I think African American students have appreciated my efforts because I have been invited on multiple occasions to attend NAACP events and to serve as a judge at the same's annual talent show. I have worked in racially and ethnically diverse contexts at The University of the West Indies and in my current post at Tennessee State University, which is a Historically Black College and University. My family is an example of diversity. I have a son and a daughter with physical disabilities, both of my sons-in-law are racial minorities, and all of my grandchildren are bi-racial.

At Nicholls State University, I was known as a "safe" instructor among the LGBTQ students. In an area marked my conservative politics and fundamentalist religious beliefs, my students knew that I created safe spaces in my classroom. In my public speaking courses, for example, I had students frequently come out in class speeches. I was also tapped to serve on the university's Committee on Transgender and Identity Issues. In my interpersonal communication courses, I always have students identify stereotypes related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability for us to unpack and critique in class discussion.

As it relates to gender, I have two daughters and want a better future for them. I value having gender diversity within my work teams. At Nicholls State University, I served on a faculty search committee twice, and in both instances, I recommended a female hire to promote staff diversity. In my courses, I always engage in critical evaluations of cultural artifacts through a gender lens. I have students critique representations of gender in print, digital media, film and television, as well as examples from their own experiences. My goal is not merely to teach students how to be effective

communicators; I want them to be ethical communicators.

Perhaps what I am most passionate about is creating better understanding and equality for people with disabilities. My son has Duchenne muscular dystrophy and one of my daughters has a physical disability from childhood cancer. I have been involved in disability advocacy since the late 1990s. I also worked as a supported employment specialist for Vocational Rehabilitation Services in North Carolina prior to becoming a full-time academic. I was a job coach for people with developmental disabilities. I have published books and journal articles within the field of disability studies. I was among the first cohort of instructors to teach in a transition program for students with developmental disabilities at Nicholls State, where I also sponsored the student service club of the Office of Disability Services and formed and coached an adapted sports team. I promoted advocacy through class assignments that resulted in some ADA code violations being corrected on campus.

Before I end, I will emphasize that I grew up in a rural and white community. I grew up hearing racist, misogynistic, homophobic jokes and language. I never thought such talk was funny or appropriate. I also spent many years among intolerant, religious conservatives. I went to private Christian universities and was a pastor until 2008, when the culmination of education, critical thinking and life experiences led me to a different place in life. My journey from being a “conservative preacher” to a “liberal professor” is the stuff of Lifetime movies. Although, some might see my background in theology and be alarmed, I think it makes me a stronger candidate who can better appreciate the value of diversity because of where I have been. Also, I understand the worldview of many students entering their first year of college. I can meet them where they are. I understand it, and I can have empathy in talking with people who have a narrow worldview as I try to open their minds to new ways of seeing the world and the people in it. What made the difference for me is that I never stopped reading, thinking, asking questions, and, above all, experiencing cultural diversity. I met people and made friends with people who were of different races, religions, sexual orientations, etc., and every time I did, a stereotype was shattered. People fear what they do not understand. My job is to help them become open to new ways of thinking and new experiences that can replace fear with understanding and acceptance.