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Making a Statement: Research, Teaching, and Diversity Statements for the Academic Job Market

Kelly Bauer¹, Colin M. Brown²,

Maricruz Ariana Osorio³, & Melissa L. Sands⁴

1.Nebraska Wesleyan University 2. Northeastern University

3. Bentley University 4. London School of Economics

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What Do You Need to Know?¹

Research, teaching, and diversity statements are core elements of applications for faculty positions. In this chapter, we offer practical guidance for those developing these statements. We argue that the process of writing statements can play an important role in developing one's academic identity and plotting a trajectory. We offer reflection prompts for each statement and reiterate the importance of long-term reflexive practices and career preparation. The structural difficulties of the current job market raise the stakes of this process and limit the effectiveness of any strategy an individual applicant can adopt. Nonetheless, we hope the following allows students to approach their statements more confidently and prompts reflection on their professional identity.

Why Does It Matter?

Research, teaching, and diversity statements provide information beyond the CV. These statements bring a candidate to life and give the committee insight into how a candidate narrates their interests, ideas, and plans. They also signal to a committee the candidate's personality and motivations, which can help demonstrate fit to a particular type of position (e.g., an interdisciplinary focus or experience with a specific student population). The writing process is a way to reflect on your long-term goals and to detail the kind of scholar, teacher, and colleague you are now and are trying to become (Kaplan et al 2008, 243; Kearns et al 2010, 74). If started early, this drafting process may highlight aspects of your work to develop in the final year(s) of your graduate studies.

Below, we offer suggestions about how to think through and craft these three statements. But first, two caveats. First, we write this chapter drawing on our own experiences as applicants and search committee members, but we cannot represent the full variation across institutions, candidates, or even across search committees. Second, while these statements matter, search committees' deliberations are unobservable and therefore difficult to generalize, especially given the structural realities of the academic job market. There is no direct way to deal with this opacity, but we encourage candidates to seek advice and support from trusted colleagues, peers, and mentors on their statements as well as the ambiguities and unknowables of the process.² (See chapters 7 and 13 for more insight on seeking advice from advisors and mentors.) With these limitations, we offer some suggestions for this reflective drafting process.

What Should/Can You Do?

Research Statements

Writing research statements challenges applicants to articulate the broader empirical, theoretical, and/or methodological questions motivating their research. The research statement provides the committee with a holistic sense of you as a researcher, linking your CV to your overall trajectory. This document demonstrates that you have interesting ideas and projects, will “hit the ground running,” and will ultimately make a strong tenure case.

The first few sentences typically summarize your scholarly identity by describing the “big questions” to which your work speaks and contributes, which should contextualize your writing sample(s). You do not need to describe every interest in the first paragraph. Use the remainder of the statement to describe your research interests, indicating the specific status and timeline of each project (e.g., about to go under review, published in [journal name], etc.) and any grant support. Anecdotally, the authors have repeatedly heard advice that statements from PhD candidates should devote 75% to work completed or in progress, and 25% to future work. Describing work in progress or planned is important for demonstrating an ongoing, productive research pipeline.

The research statement should signal the broader significance and impact of your current or planned work. Your statement will almost always be read by individuals outside of your subfield, so it is prudent to assume that your audience is not necessarily familiar with the state of your field. Avoid overly technical jargon and be relatively explicit about the contributions that your work makes (or is likely to make). For the same reason, we recommend that all research statements should speak across subdisciplines and observe that presenting research interests narrowly grounded in a specific subdiscipline carries a larger risk than being too broad.

How a committee reads these statements varies by department and university. For example, a liberal arts college (LAC) may read for a candidate’s contributions to an interdisciplinary department. Others will read for whether the research is feasible with institutional resources, and implying needing start-up funds or extensive fieldwork may alienate potential colleagues at an institution that does not provide this type of support. Tailoring for individual universities probably has little impact, although there may be some benefit to having one statement for research-heavy universities (R1/R2) versus teaching-focused institutions or institutions with limited resources.

Some Helpful Questions to Ask Yourself

- Where would you situate yourself in the landscape of political/social science research?
- What is novel, unique, or innovative about what you do? How does your work push knowledge forward?
- What are the key contributions of your dissertation project? (Be sure to relay these in “everyday” language.)
- If a friend introduced you to a search committee member, how would they describe your research?
- What research questions will attract your attention in 5 years?

Teaching Statements

Teaching statements communicate your pedagogical priorities and experiences. Teaching statements should also clarify an applicant’s teaching experience, and their range across disciplines, subfields, methodology, and level of coursework, and may include details about work outside of the traditional classroom environment such as sponsoring student organizations, overseeing undergraduate research collaborations, and mentoring or advising individual students.

Good teaching statements provide specific examples of how you put your teaching commitments into practice. Show evidence that you have developed your teaching methods by engaging with (and listening to) students and that you are capable of growth as an instructor. Those enrolled in a program

that does not require extensive experience as a teaching assistant or instructor of record, but applying to teaching-focused jobs, may find it worth seeking additional teaching experiences or opportunities to craft teaching materials in order to develop and articulate their teaching priorities.³ Some committees will ask for teaching evaluations (formal and/or informal), syllabi, lesson plans, assignments, annotated syllabi, and more. Keeping track of this type of teaching evidence throughout graduate school will provide useful evidence to reflect on in your teaching statement.

While there are some common understandings of what makes teaching statements successful, this is mostly “received wisdom” and has only occasionally been studied systematically. In the most extensive such interdisciplinary survey, Kaplan et al (2008) found five themes in successful teaching statements: 1) evidence of practice, 2) student-centered, 3) reflectiveness, 4) conveying the intrinsic or extrinsic value of teaching, and 5) clear writing. While these documents are often called “statements of teaching philosophy,” and it is important to demonstrate some familiarity with broader ideas in pedagogy, successful teaching statements are more practical than “philosophical” texts (The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, “The Job Market”).

Committees’ evaluations of teaching statements vary widely depending on institutional priorities, departmental context, and the student population. At a LAC, for example, a teaching statement is likely expected to demonstrate an applicant’s teaching repertoire and will likely be evaluated on whether the applicant’s pedagogical priorities map on to those of the institution. Lecture-heavy classes are less likely to set a faculty member up for success in tenure and promotion reviews at one of the author’s institutions, while an emphasis on “experiential education” is expected at another author’s. Smaller departments will usually require faculty to teach regularly outside their subfield, while larger departments are more likely to want teachers who can diversify a catalog of more specialized courses. We do not suggest tailoring teaching statements to particular institutions, but having different versions for R1/R2 institutions, LACs, and community colleges may allow you to change emphases or highlight particular affinities if you plan to apply widely. Tailoring the teaching statement may be useful for positions with very specific missions, such as positions at minority serving or women’s colleges, or for clinical or teaching professorships.

Many schools are likely reading a teaching statement for evidence that candidates show awareness of and/or implement inclusive teaching practices. Concrete examples include ensuring that assigned reading lists reflect diversity of various forms (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, geographic region), providing for various forms of contact and participation with an eye towards accessibility, accommodating students who have caregiving or other responsibilities, and challenging exclusionary language.⁴

Some Helpful Questions to Ask Yourself

- What motivates your approach to teaching?
- What skills and content do you want students to take away from your courses, and how do you observe or assess that?
- How do you engage with students?
- What pedagogies—theories and methods of teaching and learning—have you used, and why did you implement them?

Diversity Statements

Diversity statements are a relatively recent addition to job applications, and as such norms around the content of these statements are less well-established.⁵ In the authors’ experiences, the most common advice is for candidates to balance a reflection on how their identities and/or experiences influence their work as a political scientist with evidence of their past, present, and future commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work. Golash-Boza (2016) suggests acknowledging obstacles and/or privilege in your life and using your personal story to reflect on how you work with students. Describe specific actions you have taken to help facilitate the success of students from historically excluded backgrounds; and demonstrate a practical commitment (including examples where possible) to supporting DEI work on campus. It is also important to demonstrate an awareness of the issues that face faculty members

once hired; how will you show concrete support for fellow faculty from historically excluded groups,⁶ and how will you help your department/unit actively promote and retain these colleagues? Diversity statements can be read as more political than other statements, so tailoring these statements may be more important or necessary than teaching and research statements. However, candidates do not know the level of proficiency or cultural competence among committee members or their understanding of diversity, so there are also inherent risks to trying to anticipate how they will be read.⁷

There are ongoing critiques of diversity statements. Hiring committees may value certain components of candidate identities for a number of reasons, including ability to connect with students in ways that the current faculty cannot. Diversity statements, however, may effectively require applicants to disclose legally protected information. They may also encourage applicants to disclose trauma that they may otherwise not wish to share, and that trauma may then become subject to legal scrutiny and other human resources processes. Furthermore, many highlight how these statements are representative of a common approach to DEI work not as a pursuit of justice, but rather tokenizing and reinforcing the burden on historically excluded groups to solve structural problems of exclusion themselves (Lerma, Hamilton and Nielson, 2020).

Self-disclosure is a particular difficulty for applicants. Disclosing one's identities, especially historically excluded identities, risks invoking the reviewers' implicit or explicit biases. For this reason, some have argued for limiting self-presentation in any kinds of application or interview materials (e.g., Lucas & Murry 2002) and at least one study has found a significant amount of self-concealment by post-doc applicants (Baker et al 2016). This is one unfortunate way in which the burden of adapting to potential discrimination ends up falling to the applicant rather than the institution and may also cause the candidate to downplay aspects of their application that could in fact be specifically valued (Kang et al 2016a, 2016b). Ultimately, self-disclosure is a personal decision. Should you choose to explicitly self-identify, it seems wise to describe how your background and experiences inform your approach to research, teaching, mentoring, and service and offer unique advantages in each of these aspects of your academic identity (Schmaling et al 2015).

Writing the diversity statement should also be a chance to reflect on the questions or concerns you have about the institution you are applying to. A good practice for applicants' preferred positions would be to invest time into reading institutions' strategic plans and diversity statements, if publicly available, before applying. Does the institution's approach to diversity reflect the actual promotion and retention of a diverse faculty? Does the institution appear to be inviting diverse applicants into a conversation, or expecting them to solve issues of faculty and student diversity on their own? Does the institution have specific DEI goals, processes, resources, and intended outcomes?

Some Helpful Questions to Ask Yourself⁸

- How or why is diversity important to your work in higher education?
- How does your commitment to promoting diversity manifest in your teaching and course design, research, and/or in your service to your department, school, or discipline?
- Does the language in your statement reflect a commitment to supporting and sustaining a diverse institution, and does it reflect a proficiency in the work that excluded scholars are doing to make the field more inclusive?
- In what ways will this institution provide you adequate support to actually promote diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts? And will it, really?

The following question may be helpful for personal reflection but introduces the issues of self-disclosure mentioned above:

- How do your identities impact your work, including your work with students?

General Advice

Imagine yourself in the shoes of a search committee member tasked with reading possibly hundreds of

applications. How can the applicant make that work easier? Statements should be well-organized, clear, and concise, with a strong opening paragraph. Search committee members may be skimming a given statement or cover letter from each applicant, so make sure that the critical pieces of information are obvious on quick reading. And while each statement provides different details and emphases, the job packet should be cohesive with all of the documents reiterating and reinforcing the others.

As we suggest above, different institutions will look for different elements in these statements, and many candidates prepare a few versions of these statements. While tailoring to the type of institution can be useful (ex: R1 vs LAC vs CC), we advise against tailoring statements to specific institutions, which takes an extensive amount of time to do well, and is unlikely to significantly impact a committee's first-round evaluation. We recommend some degree of institution-specific tailoring in the cover letter, where an applicant might specify their interest in or connection to a specific institution. (Chapters 36-40 provide more in-depth advice about how to successfully apply for positions at different types of institutions.)

Applicants likely have a number of resources available to help them develop these materials, though the availability and quality of each will vary by institution and may be less accessible after leaving one's graduate program. The most obvious starting point are research advisors, graduate studies directors, and (in larger programs) placement directors, all of whom should in theory be available to help develop draft statements. Most faculty development offices or centers for teaching and learning will offer programs to develop teaching statements, and many grants and/or research offices will have programs or consulting to help develop research statements. APSA members may also participate in the APSA Mentor program, and academic meetings like the APSA Annual Conference also regularly sponsor professional development panels. Recent graduates of one's doctoral program may also be supportive mentors, and Twitter and Slack communities have begun to provide opportunities for advice and mutual support among applicants.

Ultimately, most job candidates find their time spent "on the market" to be rife with uncertainty and even anxiety since so much is beyond the candidate's control. We hope that this general advice gives candidates some assurances of having done all they can, despite the structural issues. Though easier said than done, it may help to conceptualize the process of preparing for the market as a period of intense professionalization. Authoring research, teaching, and diversity statements provides an opportunity for the candidate to introspectively reflect and plan for the future. In fact, these materials may become the basis for a promotion file, or for the next set of academic or non-academic job applications. We recommend approaching these specific statements through conversation and in community to adapt to the fluid nature of the market and to build long-term professional support.

Endnotes

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- 2 Sometimes there are types of support that your professional or personal networks cannot provide; for these, consider utilizing your institution's mental health or other resources (Almasri, Read and Vandeweerd 2021).
- 3 More specific recommendations are difficult because of the significant variation in how (and whether) graduate students teach in different graduate programs. For example, see Ishiyama, Miles, and Balarezo 2010; Ishiyama, Balarezo, and Miles 2014; Trowbridge and Woodward 2020.
- 4 We encourage applicants to familiarize themselves with current conversations happening around this work. APSA Educate frequently collates resources, such as "JPSE: The Inclusive Classroom Reading List," and "Teaching Black Lives Matter."
- 5 For additional context and resources, see Beck 2018. For specific guidance for international applicants, see Koutseridi 2021.

- 6 The use of “historically excluded groups” is intentional by the authors to acknowledge power dynamics inherent in these definitions.
- 7 Search committee members may have different understandings of “diversity” from each other. Michele Lamont, for example, has found that support for diversity on funding panels often balances very different ideas of gender, racial and ethnic, geographic, and topic diversity, while using the same language of “diversity” (2009, p. 212-214).
- 8 See also the “Job Market Do’s and Don’ts” guide generated by the People of Color Also Know Stuff working group: <https://sites.google.com/view/pocexperts/blog/job-market-dos-and-donts>.

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