

## Diversity Statement

I am strongly committed to diversity in all its forms. We are strengthened and enriched through our exploration and embrace of difference. As academic leaders, we must strive daily to view our institutions through the multiple perspectives of those we serve and to apply with intention what we learn to create a campus culture where all have a sense of belonging and may not only succeed, but also thrive. I come to this work humbly with curiosity and an open heart. In the words of the late Stephen Covey, “I seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

My own experience as a Pell-eligible, first-generation college student at a regional comprehensive university has informed my work throughout my career. I understand what it feels like to learn to navigate an academic world so different from what many have known. Over the years, I have mentored numerous students, faculty, and staff from a wide variety of backgrounds through that process and worked to create programs and resources on campus to help all students, faculty, and staff to achieve their full potential. This experience also has influenced how I approach faculty and staff development and recruitment, as it is important to help all members of the university community and especially those from marginalized populations to feel welcome, valued, and connected. To be successful, we also must include students’ families and support structures and our surrounding communities in this important work as well.

My passion for creating and sustaining inclusive learning and work environments is grounded in experience. As my *CV* illustrates, diversity has been a strength on the campuses on which I have served. Located north of Houston, Sam Houston State University (SHSU) recently attained the Hispanic Service Institution (HSI) status at 25 percent and has an African American student population of about 17 percent. Texas A&M-University Kingsville (TAMUK) is an HSI and Minority Serving Institution (MSI) with a Hispanic student population of about 62 percent and a large number of international graduate students (when I served as dean). For 11 years, I also worked as a faculty member and administrator in the greater New York City metropolitan area. About 20 percent of students at Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) were from underrepresented groups while I was there. The Danbury community itself was even more diverse than WCSU with students in the local school system speaking more than 50 different languages. At Slippery Rock University (SRU), SHSU, TAMUK, and WCSU, a substantial percentage of students are the first in their families to attend college. As a working-class, first-generation college student, I am honored to have the opportunity to pay forward the transformative experience that I had as undergraduate at a public institution similar in mission to SUNY Oswego.

At SHSU, as Dean the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), I saw a need for a stronger focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and formed the university’s first diversity and inclusion committee. As the first such committee among the seven colleges, this committee led the way for many positive changes on campus. Composition of this faculty-led committee eventually expanded to include student leaders (from our NAACP and LULAC student chapters, for example) and representatives from Student Affairs, Human Resources, and at least one other college. In addition to planning programming (speakers/events) throughout the year, this committee developed a diversity-and-inclusion statement for CHSS and collaborated with other units on campus for a highly successful “Diversity Read” program that brought faculty, students

and student groups, staff, and community members to discuss that semester's book outside class. This program was so popular that we had several hundred participants each year, and we were able bring authors such as the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis to campus.

As dean, I also led the effort to increase the diversity of our faculty and to align our hiring processes with best practices. I am happy to report that we made tremendous progress on both fronts. Faculty learning circles supported this work through reading and discussing books such as Patricia Matthew's *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure* (2016), as open, equitable support and evaluation practices are a crucial part of the tenure journey for faculty from marginalized groups. Too often faculty from marginalized groups, for example, are taxed with higher and/or invisible advising and service loads. Cutting-edge research as well as the scholarship of engagement from marginalized faculty also are often discounted as being less than. Leading by example, several department chairs and I took part in these book discussions.

Collectively, for these efforts, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences received an inaugural SHSU Inclusive Excellence Award. I consider this award among the major achievements of my career because it illustrates what an active group with a purpose can do.

Most recently, at Slippery Rock University, in my role as Provost and Chief Academic Officer, I advanced several diversity-related initiatives. These initiatives included hiring SRU's first Frederick Douglass Institute Scholar and adding a diversity requirement to the Rock Studies gen-ed program with full implementation in Fall 2022. As provost, I also increased faculty professional development opportunities in the areas of online learning and inclusive pedagogical practices (through ACUE). To teach the diversity gen-ed course, faculty first must become certified through a faculty-led and developed training program. For developing this approach, SRU faculty quickly have become thought leaders in the PASSHE system. In another example, in response to multiple racial incidents at SRU, I was asked to take the lead with Dr. Terrence Mitchell, special assistant to the president for diversity and inclusion, on the campus response because of my reputation for valuing diversity and my excellent relationship with the impacted communities. Together, we hosted an open town hall with more than 100 participants where we were able to discuss tough issues in a respectful environment. I also worked to ensure that the DEI strategic plan was fully integrated into the new university strategic plan.

As a side note, my diversity work at SRU led to many notes of appreciation before and after my departure because of the positive change that I was able to lead. Here are a couple of examples:

*"Provost Abbey Zink deserves much credit for leading the way by advocating for increasing D&I staffing and programs; requiring all staff and faculty to participate in D&I training; developing a general education graduation requirement for diversity courses; pushing to add diversity components within all SRU departments; and for developing diversity labels for the Banner catalog of courses that make such courses easy to find. Respect all and listen before making any assumptions!"*

– Paul Scanlon, director of sustainability, in an 8 April 2021 opinion piece published in the SRU *Rocket* student newspaper

*“We know that Provost Zink has been a supporter of DEI initiatives; without her, the 3-credit DEI requirement for undergraduates that goes live in fall 2022 might not have happened. She was a fierce supporter of this and has provided material support for the Online DEI Certification Training and its continuation. She also supported the creation of an Associate Provost for Academic Inclusive Excellence and Experiential Learning position.”*

– Dr. Cindy LaCom, professor and director of Gender Studies, and 30 other SRU faculty in an 8 April 2022 letter to President Behre and the Council of Trustees

These unsolicited comments affirm that I “walked the walk”—that I led by my values—in helping to advance DEI initiatives at SRU.

DEI work is not an add-on, a checkbox, or a catchy PR slogan. It is an ongoing intentional, open, and thoughtful systemic approach to working toward equity and to creating learning and working environments where all may not only succeed, but also thrive. Too many campuses still “talk the talk,” but have not made the transition to “walking the walk.” As an academic leader, I’ve worked tirelessly for more than 20 years to put in place systems to support equity and to create opportunities to advance this important work.