

Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, university campuses are committing to more inclusive practices. My commitment to diversity and inclusion is grounded in my experience as a bi-racial woman of color scientist. I believe that excellence in teaching and research must include efforts to counterbalance systemic inequality that prevents all students from achieving academic success. Increased access to STEM for first-generation students, students of color, women, and students from low-income backgrounds will positively change the existing perception of who “belongs” in STEM.

I was born in Scotland and lived there in the early part of my life, but grew up in a Korean immigrant family in New York City. Being a bi-racial woman of color, and having same-gender parents frames and propels my own commitment to diversity and inclusion. I continue to learn about different forms of diversity that are not of my own experience. While in the Bonner Scholars Program, which is a national 4-year community service scholarship for students from underrepresented groups, I learned that community plays a critical role in fostering an inclusive environment for students to thrive. I learned with my cohort that recruitment of underrepresented groups is only the first step toward diversity and inclusion. Their thriving requires continual academic, vocational and personal guidance and mentorship. These resources are essential to the successful completion of their programs. This is a long-term commitment.

To address the shadows of systemic inequalities that come into the college classroom, I have worked to promote inclusion in my teaching and mentoring. Students from low-income communities may not have the same academic background as their peers to succeed in their introductory courses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, disparity is particularly pronounced in K-12 education due to differences in access to internet and resources at home. I engage pedagogies that tend to the gaps in competencies for students to feel more confident and be able to succeed. For example, I assess student background knowledge at the beginning of each new topic to adjust my introduction to the topic, and I review techniques and equipment before requiring students to use them. Since first-generation college students may not have the same tools as their peers to seek academic help, I strongly welcome and encourage students to attend discussion sections to receive focused, one-on-one help with problem sets and general course content. I also strongly suggest attending office hours with a classmate in case one-on-one help is intimidating. Feeling out-of-place, or like an imposter is prevalent for students who have been marginalized due to race, gender, disability, class, sexual orientation and other markers of social difference. My classroom fosters a learning community where students can feel comfortable to learn from mistakes.

As a faculty member, I will work toward reducing barriers to STEM and fostering a more diverse scientific community by recruiting students from underrepresented groups to conduct research in my lab. In my research mentoring I have been a positive role model for students, helping them reach their educational and professional goals. For undergraduate and graduate students, research experience opens doors to academic degrees, jobs, and careers in science in or outside of academia. I will use student-centered mentoring in order to increase success and visibility of students marginalized in STEM. Recently, I joined the Committee for Climate and Diversity in the Department of Entomology at Penn State, where I will help make improvements that will benefit our community and our science endeavors.

Finally, molded by my experience as a Bonner Scholar and as a graduate student and postdoc at two land-grant universities, I have developed a core value to promote diversity and inclusion through service. I was on the organizing committee for the 2020 Postdoc Research Exhibition at Penn State, and we chose to focus on diversity and inclusion for multiple events this year. Postdoctoral researchers and fellows from various backgrounds had the opportunity to discuss how diversity and access to education has impacted their lives. I have also mentored K-12 students across the United States for 6 years through the Planting Science program, an NSF-funded initiative to enable young students of all backgrounds to engage with plant scientists. I co-organize and host science activity booths for the Entomology Great Insect Fair, an annual public outreach event in State College, PA that reaches an audience across central Pennsylvania. Through these and other public engagement efforts, I hope to play a role in exposing youth to the excitement and creativity of science and reducing barriers to STEM education. I aim to help prepare a diverse generation of scientists because through diversity come the best solutions.