

Contributions to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement – Tatiane Santos

To be honest, writing my statement of Contribution to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has been intriguingly hard for me. I found myself recounting, and sometimes reliving, my very own journey as a Latin American immigrant woman in the United States. For this statement, I am taking a mixed approach of sharing some of my own experience, what I have done to expand my opportunities and the opportunities of others in similar positions, and what I will do as a researcher and educator in an academic institution.

Based on my experience, what I have, finally, come to realize is that my playing field has never been level with that of my peers. At times, we may have played in different fields altogether. I am determined to continue my work in leveling the playing field so that everybody can reach their full potential as best as possible. Otherwise, the underrepresented even in their strongest, will continue to feel like they're swimming against very strong currents. As I have, throughout most of my 29 years in the US.

My journey to this point has not been easy and it's ok to acknowledge and share this reality. In fact, it is of utmost importance that I fully embrace my reality in order to try to make it easier for other underrepresented groups to achieve their full potential. At key moments in my life, I have come across supportive individuals who saw my potential and "took a leap of faith" in me "despite the odds". However, I have also come across too many people who blocked my access to opportunities, or who were likely well-intentioned but unaware of their biases which usually translated into less or lower quality opportunities for me. The latter group is more prevalent than we would like to admit, and occupy the various ranks of society.

What has worried me deeply about my own experience is that I am an intelligent, strong and assertive woman who is very comfortable having uncomfortable conversations, respectfully. I had to learn to navigate the fine line between communicating respectfully and deliberately and the potential to "upset" the people who I might need support from. Many people from underrepresented groups would not dare speak up. There is a real fear of retaliation, of being cut from resources, of being excluded, and anxieties surrounding what might happen if they communicate their needs and positions on matters.

My experience and the experience of those around me underlie my long-term commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. This pre-dates the recent push for our society's institutions to take a more serious stance on these issues and to offer pragmatic solutions to them. It also pre-dates my desire to become a professor and researcher. In the next few paragraphs, I will share some of my past, present, and future contributions to DEI through service, research, and teaching.

My past contributions date back to 2002 when I worked with undocumented immigrant youth. My work with the youth covered many areas of public speaking, civic engagement, community work, self-esteem building, and many other activities that sought to encourage the youth to see themselves as productive members of society. In fact, many of these youth were among the first "Dreamers" and gave testimonials on "Dreamers" rights (e.g., Dream Act) to state and federal legislators. Some of this work culminated into the first Brazil Week at Harvard University in which the youth exhibited [photographs](#) to depict their experience as immigrants. I have kept in contact with the majority of these youth and have given them mentorship over the years especially as it relates to their careers and education.

During my time at the Cambridge Health Alliance, one of Massachusetts' largest safety-net providers, I also contributed to DEI internally for the staff, and externally for the populations we served.

I led a successful initiative to share information about health care reform in MA (2006) with the vulnerable populations we served. Our goal was to enroll individuals in Medicaid coverage, to help them access care, and to ease anxieties about deportation related to “public charge” for immigrants who access public benefits. Internally, I leveraged the expertise and cultural knowledge of our diverse staff by enabling them to lead discussions within the organization and in the community. The staff felt proud of their work and that their cultural heritage and language skills were valuable. We saw a steep increase in Medicaid enrollment and community members were better able to navigate the healthcare resources newly available to them.

My ongoing DEI work is a mix of service, research, and teaching. As an early career population health scientist, I am building a research program that will shed light on key aspects of equity/inequity related to access, quality, and health outcomes. My work has prioritized evaluating the impact of policies that seek to narrow the equity gap across various underrepresented and under-resourced populations (e.g., Medicaid reform, Medicaid expansion, behavioral health integration in primary care, and population-level Federal demonstrations). I am committed to disseminating the findings of my work to a non-academic audience and decision-makers to facilitate evidence-informed decisions. A recent example is my work with the Colorado School of Public Health COVID-19 Modeling Group. I worked closely with several local elected officials and stakeholders to disseminate the findings from our epidemiological models and other data to support real-time decision making. Importantly, I worked closely with our [local stakeholders](#) to refine our [regional epidemic models](#) and to develop an online resource with [user-friendly data and visualizations](#). These resources are especially important for our rural partners as they have substantially less financial and technical capacity. In the next phase of the Colorado Data Dashboard project, we are encouraging students to use the dashboard data in their capstone and practicum projects. Future initiatives will include providing small grants for student-led research that uses the data for projects focused on equity-related questions.

My contributions to DEI through teaching include mentoring master-level students in their practicum or capstone projects, presenting to and mentoring young scholars in the Summer Undergraduate Minority Research Program at the University of Pennsylvania, and providing research mentorship to undergraduate students from underrepresented groups. Some of my mentees have secured jobs through which they will make their own contributions to DEI.

I have been the lead instructor for a course titled “Mental Health Systems and Policy”, given many invited lectures on the equity implications of social and health policies, and served as a teaching assistant in several master-level “Health Equity” and “Health Systems, Management, and Policy” courses. Teaching on the topics of health equity and justice is both rewarding and challenging because these topics are likely to resonate deeply with some or all students in the classroom. It was humbling to realize my own biases and be given the chance to work through them as I heard the perspectives from students and speakers. I specifically remember facilitating sensitive discussions on topics including the impact of policies on segregation in housing that have perpetuated so many other inequities, the experience of LGBTQI+ with healthcare providers, disparities in compensation for women, disparities in health outcomes for rural residents, Blacks, Latinx and other underrepresented groups, policies that artificially separate mental and physical health coverage, and many other important topics that likely struck a very personal chord for students in the classroom. Undoubtedly, my participation and contributions to these courses have led to valuable insights for me and, I hope, to students.

My future plans to contribute to DEI involve a mix of continuing, expanding, and innovating my research, teaching, and service activities. In addition to my ongoing research, my commitment to

become a leading health equity scholar will fundamentally shape all the research and funding opportunities that I seek. The foundation of my research is to understand how social policies influence the behavior and contributions of public health actors to address the social determinants of health (SDOH), individually and collaboratively. The focus on the SDOH allows me to explore various dimensions of inequity (e.g., income, geography, race, gender identity, and education). Part of this commitment involves research and dissemination activities on how to best leverage existing databases to conduct methodologically robust equity-focused studies, and to improve the systematic data collection on vulnerable and underrepresented populations.

In the next phase of my academic career, my educational activities will amplify my focus on building the pipeline of scholars and practitioners who will have the institutional knowledge, methodological skills, and cultural humility necessary to improve health systems and health policies for the most vulnerable populations. I am also interested in initiatives that increase the pipeline of underrepresented individuals in academia at the undergraduate and graduate levels. I'm primarily interested in encouraging high school and community college students to consider higher education. This will involve partnering with high schools located in low-resource communities and community colleges, facilitating discussions about higher education, providing 1-on-1 mentoring, and encouraging students who take my courses to participate in these activities. I will be honored to set up and lead this initiative, or to join an existing effort at the institution. Importantly, this work must provide continued support for the individuals from underrepresented groups to successfully complete their college education once they enroll. There were several occasions when I was working on my education (bachelor, master, and PhD) while struggling to meet my, and my family's, basic needs including food and shelter. I also remember volunteering hundreds of hours at a Mass General Hospital lab because I knew it was important for my academic and professional growth. However, I also had to have a paying job to help buy food for the house. This is what I mean by "swimming against very strong currents". It is critically important that we fully support our more vulnerable students so they can dedicate more time to their academic lives.

In the classroom, I will always strive to reflect on and address my own biases. I will start by developing a syllabus grounded on threading DEI strategies in the classroom with the understanding that it will always be a working document. I will encourage early and ongoing feedback from students through formal evaluations and informal conversations on how to best facilitate an environment in which students feel included, safe, and motivated. I will also share parts of my own journey with students as another way to normalize open discussion, with the class or one-on-one, about the challenges that students themselves may be navigating but keeping to themselves. I've reviewed several recent documents from academic institutions that outline how to enhance DEI activities in teaching. Clearly, there is no shortage of creative approaches to move towards DEI in the classroom. I will weave DEI in my teaching in two main areas: course design (learning objective, assessments, and course content) and course delivery (grading and feedback, active learning, discussion, and group work). Importantly, I will approach DEI in my teaching as a continuous work in progress by piloting some strategies, gathering student feedback, and refining the syllabus and didactic approach.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my experience through this statement. I especially appreciate being able to draw from my experience to imagine a better world, a world to which we can gradually arrive with pragmatic solutions, endurance, and love. I will always strive to create an environment in which every person can reach their full potential, whether in academia or elsewhere. Importantly, I will continuously examine, reflect, and work on my own biases.