

# JEFF SHERWOOD

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## Statement of Diversity

Growing up in a bilingual Korean-American household in an expatriate community in Seoul, Korea, shaped my perspective and ability to see the humanity in others. Moving to Plano, Texas, during second grade brought new challenges as I tried to assimilate into a new culture and society. My immigrant parents created a safe environment at home, but they could not always shield me from micro and macro aggressions. It was my involvement in the arts that allowed me to embrace and celebrate my identity, helping me realize that my differences have great value.

My passion for the arts began at a young age. When I was 10 years old, my parents divorced. Although my parents' divorce was initially devastating, it opened new opportunities for me. Both of my parents worked, so after school activities were plentiful. My parents enrolled me in piano lessons, 2D and 3D art classes, and even martial arts classes. I grew to enjoy learning through the arts and having access to a positive, creative outlet for my grief. My collaboration with people from all backgrounds in the arts brought greater support and meaning to my own identity.

Diversity is essential, especially at the collegiate level. Students are taking on new experiences, discovering their own identities, and undergoing identity transitions, all while being put together in a classroom to learn. In the classroom, learning and development extends beyond the course material when students collaborate with each other and learn from their classmates' diverse experiences and identities. Theatre is a collaborative art, and students need the ability to communicate and learn from others, in the classroom and beyond.

Diversity encompasses the individual identities we embody, that when combined with others can challenge us and help us grow. It is something that should be celebrated. Diversity includes race and ethnicity, gender identities, access to learning, learning abilities, and so forth. Diversity allows us to grow in empathy for others. I am committed to embracing diversity in my academic, professional, and personal life.

Before I can begin to describe my commitment to diversity, I recognize the need for self-reflection. I undergo regular self-reflection to understand my personal biases and how I can focus my communication in embracing others of all backgrounds. I also seek to identify my power and privilege and how I can support underrepresented individuals and help them to be successful. I learn from the examples of others and seek continued diversity, equity, and inclusion training for these purposes.

I seek to establish an inclusive classroom environment as well as center course material on works from diverse artists. I foster a community-based classroom environment to help students feel safe and willing to contribute. I do this by getting to know students on an individual level, including learning their preferred names and pronouns. By getting to know the students' backgrounds I can help them connect their backgrounds and interests to enhance the course material. I also provide opportunities for students to get to know each other through group projects and in-class activities.

I teach students to view new concepts, ideas, and practices as something exciting to understand and appreciate rather than dismissing them as weird or strange just because they are new to the student. Within this safe sharing environment, I focus the course material on studying works from BIPOC and underrepresented artists. In my Introduction to Western Theatre class, I structured the course material around works from August Wilson, Lauren Gunderson, Lynn Nottage, and others. Studying from these works gave students opportunities to dive deeper into the artists' backgrounds and the context for their work, allowing for insightful class discussions.

In addition to the classroom, I am also committed to diversity in mentorship. Currently I am mentoring underrepresented individuals in production work, including international students, who specifically sought out my mentorship. In another instance, a student from a different institution felt comfortable based on our previous interactions to approach me and discuss their challenges in having a diverse identity. I recognize I do not have the same experience as others, though my related experiences allow me to empathize with diverse and international students. My personal experiences drive my commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, especially when serving in a mentorship capacity.

While creating an inclusive environment in class and in mentoring fosters learning and growth, the environment within the institution must also be inclusive of all backgrounds to recruit, retain, and support diverse students, faculty, and staff. In my current position I have had multiple conversations with colleagues about furthering an inclusive environment. I was also instrumental in establishing diversity-focused practices such as including the university land acknowledgement in the playbill and preshow announcement, as well as working to change titles of crew positions and theatre terminology to be more inclusive. Even these small steps can make a meaningful impact in helping others feel like they are welcome and belong to the greater campus community.

I am also committed to advancing diversity in my professional work, specifically by helping emerging underrepresented artists land their first job in the industry. When I interview candidates for positions at professional theatres, I encourage the company to recruit and employ BIPOC and underrepresented individuals. While a strong education is important, placing artists in their first job launches their career. I also seek out opportunities to work alongside artists with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

My identity and past life experiences inform my aesthetic and way I experience the world. I acknowledge there is a great work ahead in eliminating racism, establishing equity, and embracing diversity. I am committed to this work and to my students as they define their own identities throughout their academic career.