

Wesley R. Perkins – Diversity Statement

My experience as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at the University of Kansas (KU) has helped me become increasingly aware of, and committed to, diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia. I have come to believe that having a diversity of viewpoints and opinions is important to providing an equitable and inclusive educational environment to all students, especially those from minority groups and those with underprivileged backgrounds. I have sought to actively support diversity, equity, and inclusion in the KU Mathematics Department throughout my time as a GTA; in particular, I have done so through my teaching, research, and role in the larger KU community.

I have twice independently taught an enhanced section of Business Calculus I. The enhanced section of Business Calculus I is geared towards a diverse group of academically at-risk students and meets an additional 100 minutes each week (compared to the regular sections). Teaching requires an equitable and inclusive approach, especially when students are academically at-risk. While I utilized some traditional lecturing, I heavily employed a “guide on the side” approach to teaching the enhanced sections. In other words, rather than lecturing and expecting my students to learn the material on their own, I sought to come alongside my students and guide them through the learning process. I endeavored to accomplish this by fostering an engaged classroom to help students feel included. For example, I routinely asked students if they had questions and validated their questions. I used guided, ungraded group work assignments and gave them realistic praise coupled with constructive feedback. I encouraged students to have a healthy work-life balance, and I tried to make my students feel seen, heard, and known. Since any group of students will have a variety of mathematical backgrounds and diverse ways of thinking/learning, I supplied them with multiple perspectives on how to think through and solve problems. Taken together, I found that this strategy provided my students with an inclusive learning environment where they felt safe to learn and struggle, succeed and fail, participate in class, and take ownership of their own learning.

During the Fall semester of 2020, I had the unique opportunity to be a course coordinator for Precalculus. As course coordinator, I was in charge of managing a diverse group of GTAs and lecturers who served as the instructors of record for 250 students. Additionally, I worked with the KU Student Access Center in order to provide course and testing accommodations to students with disabilities. To prepare myself for this role, I took a course during the summer of 2020 from the KU Center for Teaching Excellence (KU-CTE) that taught me how to design and teach flexible and online courses that are equitable, inclusive, and provide opportunities for engagement and connection. I used the lessons I learned in this course to design my course to accommodate a wide variety of student and instructor needs and to be adaptable and flexible, something that was all the more important due to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. In particular, the course was designed to be a synchronous online course, with a small in-person component, which allowed for virtual student and instructor participation if they had concerns about attending the class in-person. I did not require students to turn their camera on during lectures in order to accommodate those students who were uncomfortable/unable to share their personal work spaces during Zoom lectures. Additionally, I had my instructors record and post their lecture videos to accommodate for students with unreliable internet connections, students who lacked the proper equipment to join live lectures, and/or students who felt uncomfortable attending lectures via Zoom. For the exams that were administered via Zoom, I gave students an option to request an early, private check-in to accommodate students who needed/wanted increased privacy during the examination process, and I worked personally with students who did not have access to a web camera.

As a researcher, I have attended several regional and international conferences, where I have met with a wide variety of people, attended talks given by people with varied interests and backgrounds, and given research talks to diverse groups of people ranging from fellow graduate students to experts. Furthermore, I have worked and continue to work with researchers from myriad backgrounds and from all over the world.

Outside of the classroom, I have participated in several of the Jayhawk Mathematics Sneak Peek events that the KU Mathematics Department hosts each fall semester. This outreach event is designed to introduce promising potential applicants from historically underrepresented groups to the KU Mathematics Department, as well as to introduce them to the opportunities that a graduate education would afford them. My role has included being on a graduate student panel and taking the prospective students out to lunch in order to tell them about my graduate school experience and our department, with the goal of recruiting them to come to KU.

Looking forward to my future career as an educator and researcher, I want to continue to grow in my ability to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Reflecting on my teaching, I believe all students benefit from the active learning techniques I used when I taught the enhanced section of Business Calculus I, so I plan to incorporate that approach into my future classes. Additionally, I intend to take the lessons that I learned from the KU-CTE course beyond my role as course coordinator and into my classroom teaching, my research program, and beyond. I will continue to listen to the experiences of students and colleagues that have different perspectives and identities than my own in order to help my students and colleagues feel heard and included in my classroom and/or my research program. Ideally, this will lead to a more diverse group of people participating in the education system. Overall, I believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion form a vital component of all aspects of academia, and I am committed to supporting them at your institution to the best of my abilities.