

Flavio Hickel Jr. Ph.D. – Diversity Statement

My experiences as a child of Brasilian immigrants and the first in my family to attend college has powerfully influenced my personal and professional approach to issues of diversity and inclusion. I became sensitive to the profound inequalities that exist in social, economic, and political rights and opportunities. I developed a sense of empathy for those who must unfairly confront discrimination and social exclusion because of their identity and background. Most importantly, I feel obligated to make my own small contribution to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable society.

This sense of personal obligation prompted my work as an undergraduate political organizer where I participated in various campaigns to resist racial, religious, gender, sexual, and economic discrimination in my community. I continued this work after graduation as the National Co-Chair of a progressive youth organization where I had the privilege of mentoring a new generation of students as they began their struggles for social justice. Then and now, I have been guided by the belief that social justice requires an appreciation of the unique challenges that individuals from different backgrounds experience and the fostering of an environment in which everyone is empowered to find their own voice and reach their full potential.

I have sought to incorporate this perspective into my work as a teacher and member of the broader academic community. As a graduate student and lecturer at the most diverse university in the country (Rutgers University), I became cognizant of the power of language to influence a student's sense of inclusion/exclusion. I learned to encourage an open dialogue where individual perspectives were validated and students felt comfortable expressing themselves. As a result, my syllabi and introductory lectures emphasize the importance of respectful disagreement and avoidance of terminology that could discourage others from participating in our discussions.

Furthermore, I believe that teachers must recognize that different backgrounds and experiences may generate unique challenges to the way that students achieve their educational goals. With the help of student feedback and professional development, I have sought to diversify the manner in which I present content and conduct assessments so as to more effectively reach non-traditional students and those with different life experiences. I also strive to make myself available as a mentor and supportive ear for students who are struggling with the course material and the college experience. As a first generation college student, I am particularly well positioned to advise those who lack a social and financial network to support their success and/or have taken a non-traditional path to higher education.

As a member of the broader academic community, I think it is important to support cultural and political events that support the university's goals of creating a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable educational environment. I frequently attend such events and encourage my students to do the same. I have also participated in a number of productive discussions and workshops aimed at addressing these issues at the department level and recently served on a working group to develop a Social Justice Minor at the University of Delaware. This minor educates students on the causes/consequences of inequality and incorporates experiential learning with a social justice organization.