

# Mark A. Merrick, PhD, AT, ATC, FNATA, FNAP

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## **Contribution to Diversity and Inclusion Statement**

The application instructions for this position asks candidates to “provide a Contribution to Diversity and Inclusion statement” but does not provide specific guidance on desired elements. As such, should the following omit topics the committee was seeking, I would be happy to append my statement to address them.

“Diversity and inclusion” (and typically “equity” and sometimes “belonging”) are values almost universally expressed across American institutions of higher education and they are values to which the vast majority of faculty and administrators ascribe, me included. It’s easy to make the case that they have become the most prized of a university’s values as they are often the only values for which candidates are asked to provide a statement as part of the hiring process. I think it important that leaders align with ALL the university’s core values, and I am happy to share my views and experiences specific to DEI, including Cincinnati’s stated value of inclusion as “intentionally engaging people and the contribution of diverse ideas”.

Historically, when universities spoke of DEI initiatives, they focused on structural barriers related to race/ethnicity and gender, sometimes to the exclusion of other aspects of diversity. Increasingly, views of diversity have included disability status and LGBTQIA+. Now, we are starting to see even more widely expanded focus on other areas of diversity including viewpoint, first-generation, urban/rural, socioeconomic status, religion/beliefs, and more, as well as how multiple intersecting characteristics influence opportunity, experience, success, and contribution. I welcome this broadening view as I have always embraced the uniqueness of each individual and valued how their individual combination of characteristics, viewpoints, backgrounds, and experiences enrich the contributions they make. As a physiologist, I note that heterogeneity has the same effect on a university as it has on a gene pool; it makes us stronger and better able to adapt to and positively impact the changing world around us. I think Cincinnati’s focus on engaging people and diverse ideas is vital in this regard.

To date, my involvement in diversity and inclusion initiatives has largely fallen into three areas where I have worked to effect structural change; expanding access to programs where it was previously limited, improving the experiences of diverse students and faculty, and improving engagement with a diverse local community. On the access side, while at Ohio State my program, school and college committed to an enrollment strategy that included a holistic approach to admissions. This involved developing admissions vision statements and related values focused on desired program outcomes, aligning processes and criteria to match them, implementing these, and evaluating their outcomes on student success. I led this initiative in my own program where we recognized that our outsized reliance on GPA and standardized testing skewed the make-up of our cohorts toward those with high testing ability. We identified additional elements that we valued in our students but that we were not previously considering in our admissions, such as specific attributes and experiences that contribute to academic and professional success as a healthcare provider. We incorporated these into a redesigned process where we worked to evaluate them through directed observations and a personal interview. Our outcome was not only students who were better aligned with their role as care givers, but also an increase in the proportion of underrepresented students in our cohort, going from a consistent 10-12% over the 5 years prior to our revised process to 20% after.

On the improving experience side, I was heavily involved in Ohio State's Office of First-Year Experience (FYE) initiatives where I engaged directly with pre-major students as an orientation speaker and in more personal interactions in survey classes and engagement activities. Through these initiatives, I proactively reached out, forming individual mentoring relationships with a variety of first-generation and underrepresented students. Many said they would have been too intimidated to approach me if I had not specifically sought them out and invited them to engage. Flattening hierarchy, creating the right environment, and directly connecting with and engaging people is vital for overcoming the barriers that arise from our perceived differences. As a low-income first-generation college graduate myself, I encountered hardships borne of my ignorance of the university environment, processes, and expectations, of the availability of resources, and being intimidated to ask for help. As Dean at Toledo, I've worked to build an inclusive culture by partnering with the college's diversity committee and empowering our Assistant Dean for Diversity. I introduced the phrase "You Belong Here" as the motto of our college and we have made it our ethos. We now have an annual "Diversity Day" in our college where I recognize winners of our Dean's Awards for supporting diversity. This support is not only for student, but for faculty and staff too. Far too often we are blind to the barriers that our diverse faculty face to be successful. These often include integrating into academic culture, finding professional mentors, having their work be valued on its own merits rather than through the lens of tokenism, and the ever-present burden of "invisible labor" that often falls to those who are underrepresented.

Beyond interactions with students, I have also been an advocate for community outreach in several ways. I've enjoyed engaging with students in the Columbus and Toledo Public Schools through speaking in classes, career fairs, and summer programs. These aim to increase access to college and more importantly, establish the self-belief that these students both belong and can succeed. Relationship building continues to be key. My current institution prides itself on its access mission and serving a large population of Pell eligible students. While I certainly cannot take credit for this institution-wide mission, I actively work to contribute to it by encouraging, facilitating, and in some cases directly forging relationships with local schools in our urban community. I also worked to create a pre-professional health sciences major in my college that has a strong focus on the quintuple aim and the impact of social determinants on health inequity. Additionally, for many years I served in a leadership role for Ohio State's IRB's where I became invested in the Belmont Report principles of Justice and Respect for Persons. I helped author the University's biospecimens / biorepository policy requiring full disclosure to research participants about the use and sale of their specimens. This work was borne from my deep appreciation of the book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. The book chronicled the medical research community's taking advantage of Mrs. Lacks, a disadvantaged poor woman whose tissue samples transformed medicine and enriched many, but not her or family. I have lectured on this book, and it heavily influenced my work in making structural change by developing this policy to protect the disadvantaged while allowing for ethical use of samples.

I note that the diversity and inclusion space is rapidly transforming. The recent SFFA Supreme Court decisions are forcing universities to examine their practices in selective admissions, but also more broadly to examine anything that would be impacted by the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. Each institution is taking their own approach, with some narrowly focusing on admissions alone and others also examining recruitment, scholarships, employment, support mechanisms, and anything else that might not be equally available to all. This transformation also impacts the numerous accreditors in the health professions space as many of them have adopted their own DEI standards that impact the programs we offer. Further, in Ohio, this is coupled with the potential impact of Senate Bill 83 which, while currently uncertain, may disrupt existing approaches to DEI even more. While the outcome of these forces will not be clear for multiple years, we must begin preparing for the potential outcomes now. It will be particularly important to avoid practices such as the hiring issues that put the University of Washington's psychology department in the [headlines](#) over the past two weeks. We will likely need to focus on the core elements of DEI such as opportunity, access, inclusion, support, and outcomes and less on elements such as preference and representation.