

**AYASAKANTA ROUT, PH.D.**  
**CONTRIBUTION TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION STATEMENT**

I strongly believe that higher education has a transformative role to play in the upliftment of society through justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The lack of diversity in the broad area of healthcare professions resonates at a personal level with me. As an immigrant, a person of color, and a male in a female-majority field, I am in a unique position to provide perspectives and experiences from a multitude of viewpoints. As a naturalized citizen of the United States and a global traveler, I have gained deep appreciation for cultural practices at societal and individual levels.

The number of allied health professionals who identify as persons of color are disproportionately low compared to the general population demographics of the United States. In my own profession, Audiologists and SLPs of color are significantly underrepresented in the United States. The American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA, 2021) reports that more than 82% of its members self-identify as white, only 2% are Black/African American and another 2% are of Asian origin. The statistics in the undergraduate and graduate programs across the nation reflect a similar trend. I have made considerable efforts to recruit students of color to JMU through partnerships with the National Black Association of Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists and the HBCUs in Virginia. International students in the field of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) also play an important role in increasing the diversity in the profession by introducing us to different languages, cultures, and practices. I am passionate about international education, and work closely with JMU's Center for Global Engagement in recruitment and retention of international students, as well as in developing study abroad programs. I have been instrumental in creating a pipeline for the PhD program in CSD by recruiting strong international students. As a department we have noticed the richness of cultural diversity the international students bring to the classroom, research labs, and social events. We have as much to learn from them as they have to learn from us.

While these are important changes in the right direction, a clear vacuum remains in the number of minority students in the CSD field (as well as all allied healthcare fields). The University of Cincinnati College of Allied Health Sciences' achievement in receiving the 2023 HEED award is impressive. I am fully aware of the importance of this recognition as my own University was also a recipient of the HEED award. I also keenly followed the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3320) in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress by contacting elected representatives and educating professionals about the importance of this law. While it was passed in 2022, there still no funding allocated for achieving the stated objectives. It is crucial to engage in advocacy efforts for allied health professions.

During the past five years, I have taken deep interest in understanding the complex issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion through readings, workshops and seminars. As a strong believer in and proponent of inclusive excellence, I have committed significant time to update my knowledge and skills related to DEI. I was as the inaugural College of Health and Behavioral Studies (CHBS) L.E.A.D. Fellow to develop leadership skills with a DEI lens. As a part of this year-long program, I met with upper

administration leaders from around JMU campus in bi-weekly meetings with a goal to develop my leadership skills. I have also served on the JMU College of Health and Behavioral Studies DEI task force for faculty issues and crafted goals to incorporate in the larger college level plan. I participated in a CHBS leadership training on DEI by the Washington Consulting Group (facilitated by Dr. Jamie Washington). The training workshop equipped me with tools to advocate for diversity at micro and macro levels. As a result of the immersive experience, I have launched new areas of scholarship related to justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The increased violence and hatred against people of Asian and Indian origin during the past five years has inspired me to become an advocate for racial tolerance and community engagement. I joined with several faculty members on JMU campus to launch the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) faculty caucus in 2021. The purpose of this caucus was to raise awareness about the hatred towards APIDA people and show the diversity of cultures represented by these groups in a positive light. As a founding member of this caucus, I regularly lead meetings and events including meetings with JMU senior leadership.

I am excited and optimistic about the positive direction of the College of Allied Health Sciences initiatives related to diversity and inclusion. If I am offered the opportunity to lead the college, it will be my privilege to draw on the above-described knowledge and experiences to achieve a truly inclusive organization that can be a model for others.