

## Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Bethany Wood, MSW, CSW

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Steve Hicks School of Social Work | The University of Texas at Austin | 801- 433-8544 | bethanymwood@utexas.edu

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are fundamental to racial and economic justice. In higher education, DEI is essential to impactful learning, innovative scholarship, and effective practice. My own undergraduate experiences in social work were deeply liberating for me in understanding the poverty I navigated as a child. At the same time, as a queer undergraduate woman enrolled in a religious university, coming out may have resulted in rejection from peers, mentors, and possible expulsion from the school. This juxtaposition of higher education both removing and creating barriers taught me the importance of intersectionality in an academic environment. I recognize the immense privileges that I hold as a cisgender, White, able-bodied, U.S. citizen, and consider it my responsibility to understand and dismantle systems of power, such as White supremacy, in communities and higher education. I consider the overwhelming presence of structural racism and economic inequality that is deeply embedded in the U.S. as forms of violence that must be addressed, especially in neighborhoods, housing, and mental health systems. Founded on both my experiences and understanding of structural inequality across micro, mezzo, and macro levels, my desire to be actively anti-oppressive in my approach as a scholar, practitioner, and educator fits well with the values of social work.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to collaborate with many minoritized groups. As the program director for Cyber-Seniors, I mentored BIPOC youth volunteers from a multicultural center as they assisted older adults with technology. This was deeply meaningful to me as the youth came to see themselves as leaders with invaluable knowledge and skills. As a therapist, I worked with adults on the autism spectrum; many sessions with my clients focused on their experiences of marginalization and a lack of neurodivergent representation. These experiences have made me mindful when designing my syllabus in order to make learning accessible for neurodivergent students. I have also found great purpose in engaging with my LGBTQIA+ community. For example, I co-created a therapy handbook for Encircle, a queer-affirming community center. Following my MSW, in my therapy practice, I specialized in reducing suicidality with LGBTQIA+ youth. These experiences will continue to inform my mentoring and education practices.

My research centers an intersectional approach. I examine physical and mental health disparities in health due to individual and neighborhood poverty. My dissertation measures the impact of neighborhood poverty and gentrification on psychological distress over time; I specifically test for racial disparities in this relationship given the history of structural racism (e.g., redlining) and current exclusionary practices (e.g., zoning) in neighborhoods. One of my current projects examines how neighborhood racial segregation impacts birth outcomes for Black, Latina, and White womxn in Texas and how the intersection of poverty impacts this relationship. Additionally, as a scholar, I highlight racial disparities in health as a byproduct of structural racism. For example, as a finalist in my university's Three Minute Thesis, I presented data on racial wealth gaps and their effects on psychological distress over time and discussed strategies to decrease racial wealth gaps for Black families in order to ultimately decrease psychological distress. As a scholar, I am accountable to the communities I study and am active in the community, such as my projects with an Austin non-profit highlighting barriers to housing for low-income BIPOC adults.

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My teaching and mentorship are grounded in anti-oppressive approaches such as Critical Race Theory, to help my students examine health disparities through critical lenses. My course syllabi feature BIPOC, disabled, queer, and other minoritized scholars and I use exercises where students can begin to deconstruct their biases and consider how their own intersecting identities affect their lives. I also present information on how social science is still used as a tool of marginalization and lead class discussions on addressing current biases in social sciences. Earning an Inclusive Teaching Preparation Certificate through UT Austin's Faculty Innovation Center helped me apply universal design principles to increase course accessibility for students with disabilities (e.g., providing multiple ways to participate in group activities). I seek to make my classroom a space where people from all backgrounds can have transformative learning experiences by first sharing my own intersecting identity, pronouns, and positionality and by second being available outside of class to support and discuss with students. I am especially available outside of class to first-generation, international, and other minoritized students and have mentored these students beyond the classroom in a variety of ways, including applying to graduate school or conducting research. I look forward to continuing to incorporate these practices as an educator and mentor in the future.

At the University setting, I will engage in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as both a scholar and educator, including being available to serve as an advisor on LGBTQ+ student committees, hosting writing groups for minoritized graduate students, offering to collaborate with the innovative and anti-oppressive work of University research centers, assisting in organizing anti-racist workshops where invited BIPOC scholars are paid for their emotional and social labor, and collaborating in research with local community organizations. As a scholar, I aim to conduct research that will provide the foundation for my promotion of policies to mitigate racial and economic disparities in mental health. Ultimately, I hope that my work would serve to promote policy changes that will decrease individual and neighborhood poverty and subsequently decrease health disparities. As an educator, I will continue to reduce barriers and accentuate strengths for students with intersecting identities as they prepare to dismantle systems of oppression in our society and world.

My legacy will be one of promoting economic and racial justice through DEI in my personal and professional endeavors. To meet this goal, I lean into the idea of dismantling my own racism and biases as a continual practice; I seek to be humble in recognizing how I benefit from systems of power and surround myself with colleagues who hold differing viewpoints to keep me accountable. I am not afraid to sit in uncomfortable spaces, academic or otherwise, to promote equity. I seek opportunities to join community-led movements as activists, organizers, and disrupters push back against systems of power. I will continue to actively engage in DEI as an educator, scholar, and community member for the ultimate purpose of mitigating childhood poverty, promoting environmental and neighborhood justice, and supporting equity for marginalized communities.