

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are essentially a way to unite people, giving those who were historically underrepresented a seat at the table where critical conversations relevant to their wellbeing take place. They are also imperative to my pursuits as a clinical social worker, scholar, and educator. I have a strong belief in DEI because of my own lived experience of growing up in poverty as a queer youth, who later became the first college graduate making his way into graduate school in my extended family in China. I understand from experience the infinite possibilities when people are offered a place where they can shine fearlessly. I am mindful of the fact that I hold immense privileges which come with my education, knowledge, and other resources. I told myself the day I became a social worker that I would do whatever I can to dismantle systems of power that marginalize and oppress people. I feel deeply that my clinical and scholarly work so far is grounded in my passion for fulfilling such a vow.

For more than four years before entering the PhD program at UT Austin, I was a clinical social worker working with people with intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities in Hong Kong. The medical system there, like those in other countries/regions, oftentimes prioritizes pathologizing and treating “symptoms” or “illnesses” rather than people. People with disabilities (PWD) and their families who seek assistance from the healthcare system are often dehumanized because of the common belief that they are to be “cured” through medicines and/or therapies. I was fortunate that my clients with disabilities and my colleagues entrusted me with integrating humanism-based, person-centered practices into the usual medical and residential care routines. My biggest sense of achievement while in clinical practice came when many of my clients were able to reintegrate into their usual family and community lives without being subject to excessive physical restraints and/or psychotropic treatments. Examples of person-centered care we provided included integrated services like supported employment, home-based behavioral counseling, respite care, and multi-professional care coordination. These successes gave me a fresh perspective on how social work can positively transform the lives of so many individuals and families. I decided to pursue a PhD degree because I believe that what truly liberates those who are marginalized like PWD must involve the humanization of individuals, and from there, the transformation of oppressive systems of power.

I have continued my work in uplifting marginalized populations like minoritized families of individuals with disabilities throughout my time as a doctoral student at UT Austin Steve Hicks School of Social Work. I serve as a core member in the developmental disability research lab and the Texas Center for Disability Studies led by Dr. Sandy Magaña. We work on the ground with individuals with disabilities and their families who also identify as racial/ethnic minorities such as Latinx, Black, and Asian American. The double bind of disability and minority makes them one of the most vulnerable and yet underserved populations in the United States. Our research has highlighted stark physical and mental health disparities these families face due to the overwhelming presence of socioeconomic inequality, racism, and ableist culture. We seek to disrupt these inequities by developing evidence-based interventions. For instance, one of our current research projects is to develop a culturally relevant intervention to address the high prevalence of obesity and related health issues among Latinx children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Additionally, I am leading a community-based study that aims to promote COVID-19 vaccination among Texans with disabilities. By working with statewide government and community partners, we collected voluntary data from 2,134 adult PWDs and their caregivers across Texas. This study revealed both widespread barriers in

vaccine access (e.g., the lack of accessible facilities) and stark racial/ethnic disparities (e.g., Latinx PWDs reported higher vaccination rates, but they were also more likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19 infection). We proposed solutions based on the data and disseminated the information through various social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook), podcasts, and academic conferences (e.g., the American Public Health Association's annual meeting). These experiences reinforced my resolution to continue disability research, practice, and advocacy. There is so much more to do to promote DEI, especially for disability communities. I am accountable to these communities as a scholar because of the trust and privileges I have been given.

My teaching and mentorship of students center on similar DEI values and principles. In 2020, I earned an Advanced Inclusive Teaching Certificate through UT Austin's Center for Teaching and Learning, where I learned to use universal design principles to increase accessibility for students with disabilities and/or other special needs. I taught two social work practice and research foundation courses as the primary instructor during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I quickly adapted the course to allow for virtual access while supplementing all course materials with visual and auditory tools for students who needed language, visual, and/or hearing aids. I sought to widen students' knowledge of social justice and DEI-related issues by inviting guest speakers who identify as BIPOC, disabled, and/or scholars with other minoritized backgrounds. I ensured that my classroom was a safe space that valued diversity by mixing students with varying backgrounds in discussion groups, classroom exercises, and presentations. I made myself available to students who needed support outside of the classroom by offering online office hours, individual consultation sessions, assignment feedback, and academic advising. I provided references for more than 20 students applying for entry to the BSW major practice sequence at UT Austin and advanced studies at other institutions. All these efforts paid out in various ways: Two students of color I mentored were accepted into competitive training programs that focused on health equity – one at UCLA and the other at UT Austin; both courses I taught received high instructor and overall course evaluation ratings; I received UT Austin's *Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) Faculty/Staff Appreciation Award* for offering support and guidance to students with disabilities during the Spring 2021 semester.

As I continue my practice, research, teaching, and mentorship with individuals with disabilities and/or other minoritized backgrounds, embracing DEI will remain at the heart of my work. Social work pushes me to continually examine my own biases and privileges, and to welcome opportunities to learn from those who are different from me. I am indebted to the social work profession because of the opportunities I have been given over the years. I vow to do everything I can to dismantle oppressive systems and to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. To achieve this, I will champion people with disabilities and/or other minoritized backgrounds by collaborating with them in my practice, research, teaching, and mentorship. I will strategically engage with diverse stakeholders and allies doing critical work in DEI research and practice. I will embed DEI values and principles in my teaching and mentorship to train the next generation of social work practitioners. I am eager to embark on this challenging and rewarding lifelong journey.