

Robert J.S. McDonald - Diversity Statement
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Studies have shown that productivity increases when people from varying backgrounds and perspectives are brought together to share ideas. Regular exposure to different cultures and traditions can also help to develop communication skills, and enrich our life experience. Diversity is important, and that is why in and out of my classroom, I am committed to building a community in which diverse learners of all backgrounds feel respected and valued. This community is one where all students, regardless of where they are coming from, are able to reach their full potential. More than just being accessible, the classroom and learning environment should be actively inclusive of students from all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual preferences, socio-economic statuses, religions, and disabilities.

The University of Connecticut has an above-average ethnically diverse student population. I try to encourage diversity through group work in my classroom, and often pick the groups myself. Otherwise, they lose the opportunity to see things from a different point of view or experience. At first, students may be uncomfortable working with someone who doesn't look or think like them. Soon, however, they are able to share information and ideas freely and learn from each other. In 2015, I had the pleasure of being an instructor and mentor with BRIDGE, a summer program for underrepresented students in surrounding communities who want to become engineers. To date, it has been one of the most rewarding teaching experiences I have had. In this program, students are taught that attitude and effort are the keys to success. Compared to my typical students, I found their motivation and enthusiasm refreshing.

Unfortunately, individuals with disability, women, and minorities are still largely underrepresented in science, technology, and mathematics (STEM). This is an issue that I am personally sensitized to because of my family's Native American heritage. My wife is a teacher at East Hartford High School, a community with a hugely diverse population of students from many races, classes, and backgrounds. She actively encourages them to pursue higher education, and can attest to the fact that the issue of underrepresentation starts much younger than college age. It is only through active recruitment and involvement in these communities that we can hope to find a resolution for this issue. This is something I am very interested in becoming involved with at my next institution.

More notably, in the last two years, I have had an increasing interest in the Deaf community, and have spent this time learning American Sign Language (ASL). My good friend and colleague is a Deaf Ph.D. student in mathematics, one of only a few in the country. I've learned a lot from him during this transition. Even now, the Deaf are still very much oppressed. Every day, Deaf individuals are denied basic access to communication with authorities, first responders, and organizations which operate under the assumption that everyone can hear. Especially in mathematics, Deaf students are underrepresented. Helping to bridge this divide is the driving force behind my learning the language and becoming more involved. In Hartford, Connecticut, we have what was the first school for the education of Deaf children in America, The American School for the Deaf. In the future, I hope to use my experiences for outreach and recruitment of students in schools like this into STEM related education.

I have been coordinator for the Peer Mentoring Program since 2015, and have mentored many first-year graduate students. I assign each first year a veteran TA, placing special care on making sure that women, minorities, and international students are paired with someone who can sympathize with the unique challenges presented to them in our field. I also make myself an "unofficial mentor" to every incoming student. I have learned that supportive community programs like this are essential for retention.

My experience teaching a diverse student body, ties to the surrounding communities, and interest in underrepresented groups has offered me a unique perspective on diversity. Moreover, my involvement with student mentor and retention programs has prepared and inspired me to continue to be involved in this effort. I am excited for the opportunity to work with recruitment and retention programs at my next institution, and hope to use my experiences make a difference.