

Diversity Statement

Angela Hanson

University of Kentucky

I pride myself in advocating for social justice in my classroom and my community. My efforts to improve the doctoral regalia at the University of Kentucky is one example that exemplifies my values and how I have developed as an advocate for marginalized groups. Several graduate students in my department had expressed concerns for years about the doctoral regalia. The UK logos were poorly placed, bringing unwanted attention to the chest. It distracted from the celebration of intellect, resilience, and academic achievement by making people uncomfortable on a day that should be filled with pride. Since this regalia was required in order to attend commencement, it put people in a difficult situation. We wanted the university to update the design to be more gender inclusive, so I started a petition. Through this process, I have broadened my perspective, experienced the power of community, learned how to be a better ally, and amplified underrepresented voices.

As I collected signatures, several people shared their personal anxieties and concerns about the regalia. One person even shared this:

“I’m trans and a PhD student. It is isolating being queer in graduate school and I can’t afford top surgery. I want to be a source for change and hope this can happen because it’ll help me.” - Anonymous

I admittedly started the petition with cisgender women in mind, but the transgender population was also affected by this issue. This broadened my perspective. We can relate to others in ways we may not expect. Knowing this can help us feel less alone and more supported, so I like to remind my students that there is more to their classmates than they can see.

One of my responsibilities as a teacher is to support students and help them support each other. To help build a supportive community in my classroom, I first make an effort to learn students’ names and pronouns. Students have shared in surveys that they felt seen and supported by this gesture. I also like to incorporate flexibility in assessment when I have input in course design. This helps prevent unconscious bias in grading because there are multiple avenues to succeed. For instance, I define class participation as anything from taking notes to asking questions or active listening. Some students have learning disabilities or social anxiety that make traditional participation standards difficult. I have also designed a course, Matrix Algebra, with specifications-based grading and revisions. This assigns a “pass” or “incomplete” to each problem submitted rather than a point value. Any “incomplete” problems are eligible for revision so students can learn from their mistakes or have more time to think about the concept. This way, there are multiple opportunities to ask questions and explore the content. I recognize that I can’t know all of the ways my students are diverse, but I can do my best to leave room for students to succeed in their own way.

The regalia petition was signed by more than those directly affected by the regalia design. There were many allies who also signed. Some identified as male, others were professors, and still others were from different universities. It was not solely reliant on the marginalized to effect change. There will be instances where I am not directly affected by an issue, but I want to be an ally.

This is why I have been a member of the University of Kentucky working group on Ethics, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in the Mathematical Sciences (EEIJMS). We have held discussion groups and book clubs to explore topics like inclusive teaching practices. I have also attended workshops on implementing care ethics in course design and student-focused assessment. Overall, EEIJMS provides a platform to learn about social justice issues and how we can support positive change. For example, this is where I learned that in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) double negatives reinforce the negative rather than canceling it. When we teach subtracting negatives, it is common to teach this with grammatical examples. Now I know that this can disadvantage people who speak AAVE. Similarly, languages like Spanish grammatically require double negatives. In response, I am more thoughtful about my examples in an effort to minimize cultural bias. I plan to continue learning ways that I can be an ally to my students and colleagues.

When I sent the signatures and comments from the petition to the diversity, equity, and inclusion office and the commencement committee, they had not heard concerns about the regalia before. Despite this, I was pleased to hear that all parties were interested in making positive changes. Change isn't possible until the issue is known. It was empowering to hear from all of the people who could relate to the concerns about the doctoral regalia. It was satisfying to know that I had a part in bringing those voices to the attention of the right people to bring change. It can be hard to speak up as a single person, but these signatures united our voices and helped at least a few people to see an issue from our perspective. That is a victory. Each person that learns to see from a different perspective is one more potential ally. I was an officer of the University of Kentucky Department of Mathematics Graduate Student Council (GSC) for four years. My favorite part of being an officer of GSC was creating an environment where graduate students were comfortable voicing their concerns. Then the officers were responsible for representing the graduate student body to the faculty. This allowed students to remain anonymous while bringing important issues to the attention of the department. GSC also partnered with other organizations like the Association for Women in Mathematics and Spectra, an organization for LGBTQ+ mathematicians and their allies, to build a supportive community.

I have followed up with the administration about updating the regalia, but so far there have been no changes. I may not see the fruit of my efforts. My hope is that change will come, whether through new regalia or a better understanding of gender inequity in higher education. I was honored in 2022 with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Award by my department at the University of Kentucky for my efforts with the regalia petition, my inclusive teaching, and my role as a GSC officer. While the award is encouraging, it also is a symbol of support from the department. It showed me that the department wants to see more efforts towards DEI, and I am proud to help realize that mission.