

Diversity Statement

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My research is focused on understanding individual differences in human biology and behavior. This approach requires a large number of variables (sex, age, genetics) be considered when interpreting results and studying a more diverse research population allows for these individual differences to become apparent. Historically, psychological research has focused on predominantly Caucasian college-aged (18-25ish) populations and studies of genetics have tried to minimize ethnic differences in their samples. In addition, PET imaging studies of the neurotransmitter dopamine often restrict their recruitment to male participants who show less variation in dopamine signaling over time that could be attributable to the effects of female hormones (particularly estradiol and progesterone) on the dopaminergic system. My and other research suggests that age, sex, and genetic variation all modulate dopamine signaling and the processes it controls (reward, motivation, valuation). In order to better characterize the effects of these variables on biology and behavior, my research program will actively seek to recruit a diverse, representative cross-section of the US population.

Teaching a diverse (ethnically, socioeconomically) group of students with inclusivity in mind is a challenge. Often, assumptions about information and cultural access (“everyone has a smartphone, just have them text in responses during class polling”) are untrue. As such, it is imperative for professors to create a class environment where all are encouraged and able to voice their opinions and viewpoints. I think one way to do this with less pressure on the student is to encourage him or her to send in questions they have on a particular reading/lecture topic to you via email. If the point they bring up could be pertinent for the entire class, you can address it by working it into your lecture during the next class session. Meeting one-on-one with students to help clarify their understanding of material and offering resources to aid studying, time management, or emotional health may also be needed.

Encouraging a diverse collection of students to pursue scientific careers serves to enrich future ideas/innovations. I have personally mentored 20 undergraduate students across 2 universities (UNC and Vanderbilt), working with 10 female, 3 hispanic, and 4 Asian students. I know at least one student mentee was the first in his family to attend college. Furthermore, in 2016 I was a research mentor to my first “older” college student who was not in the 18-25 age range of most traditional undergraduates and she was one of the most driven and productive researchers we have had work in the lab. These experiences have reinforced my belief in the need for science to be an inclusive environment where all feel welcome. People should not be dismissed or discouraged to pursue it because of their sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or age. My interactions with this diverse group of individuals enhances my own learning as I come to discover different views on scientific topics, analyses, and findings from listening to their varied thoughts and opinions. It is also a joy to know that many of these individuals get inspired to pursue graduate training in neuroscience or biomedical research after working with me. Working with students from a variety of backgrounds has given me the insight to tailor my communication style in a way that best reaches who I am talking to. This allows me to best inspire and motivate each student to pursue whatever academic and career path interests them including: working to obtain an MD from Vanderbilt, a PhD (one is at UCLA & another at Northwestern), or a DVM-PhD from Minnesota. Others have moved on to satisfying careers in clinical trial management, nursing, strategy consulting, and IT/research support.

Finally, recruiting, (which I [have taken part in](#) as part of the [Vanderbilt Postdoctoral Association](#)), inspiring, and retaining a diverse group of people interested in science is important for the continued vitality of the field. At your institution, I will strive to instill an excitement for science, the scientific method, and the power/importance of studying individual variation/differences in courses I teach and students I mentor. I will also be committed to learning about how each student’s unique life experiences and background shapes their view of the world and motivates their individual scholarly/research interests. Only by understanding where they have come from can I help them get where they want to go.