

Diversity Statement for Neil Klingensmith

For as long as I can remember I have felt that access to quality higher education was a basic human right. As an engineer I have always valued critical thoughts, new ideas, and different perspectives. In my research I look to foster new ideas and innovations. I have always felt that the beauty of a community can be found in the diversity of its people. I have always felt it was important to advocate for and support a more just and inclusive society, where all have the opportunity to prosper. However, growing up a middle-class, white male my contributions diversity and inclusion had been somewhat passive, until recently.

In the winter of 2018, my wife and I adopted two Hmong toddlers who came from a very poor family in northern Wisconsin. Their birth mother had been 16 at the time the oldest was born, and she was not able to provide for them. Overnight we went from being a white couple to a multiracial family. It was jarring to experience. Not only did we adopt the boys, but we also did something unconventional in that we have an open adoption with their biological parents. We had read much research on the impacts of adoption on the family unit and the trauma often associated with it. We felt strongly about nurturing the bond they had with their biological parents and wanted to ensure all involved had the opportunity to thrive. Many people have opinions related to our adoption, to us raising Hmong boys in a white household, to our open contact with their parents, and the assistance we have provided to the two young people that have shared their beautiful children with us. However, in our house we are a family and we are committed to doing what is best for our boys.

In addition to hurdles of adopting two toddlers, one of our sons has some developmental delays. The delays that are likely the result of lead poisoning, as he spent the first two years of his life in a home that was not fit for living. In searching for resources and advocating for a small boy with disabilities we have watched our son be treated based on outward perceptions of who he is, not what his abilities are. Before the adoption we blended in. I did not think about simple things like does the dentist accept Medicaid or is Speech Therapy covered? Now, I think about these things daily. Now I think about what it will be like for my son as he progresses through his education. Will his teachers recognize his strengths and build on his assets? Will he have the opportunity to attend college? Will he have the same opportunities that were so freely given to me? As a multiracial family we get a lot of staring and impolite comments—reactions that I like to think come from a place of curiosity or interest. But there also some comments that are clearly the product of implicit bias or outright racism. I've often thought that our experience as just a taste of what people of color deal with starting from birth. Now, though, I have a real stake in making sure that diversity is embraced and that people of color have the opportunity to get an education and succeed in our society.

As a faculty member, I will foster an environment where students feel comfortable working together on projects and homework assignments. Historically, the classroom has been a competitive environment. The “curve” grading system encourages an every-man-for-himself attitude which is not productive for learning, and it is not experience that translates well to the workplace. It also tends to isolate people, making it easier to not show up to class or skip homework assignments. I would design classes around team-based homework assignments and projects in order to foster a community of students within the engineering school. Of course, team-based assignments may be more difficult to grade, but the outcomes we should be focused on are graduation rates and learning. If we have to sacrifice grade inflation in the process of producing better students, I think it is clearly worth it.

I think one of the best ways to keep students from dropping out of a program is to ensure that they are surrounded by a community. Particularly for undergraduates, staying accountable when no one is watching can be very difficult. First-generation college students likely have an even harder burden since they may not have as much family support as students from middle or upper middle class backgrounds. I saw my wife, who is a first generation college student, struggle with learning how to navigate the higher education system as she finished her bachelor's degree and applied to grad school. Unlike me, she did not have parents or other relatives to help her navigate the system, learn how to study, or deal with the psychological turmoil that comes with being a student. When we first met, she would start working on her homework late at night the day before it was due. She was brought up to understand that she should get something tangible (like a paycheck) for her work. But in college, we get nothing tangible for doing well on our assignments. Higher education teaches students how to work on something without getting tangible results in exchange for a future payoff. It is a concept that my wife—and I suspect many other first-generation college students—had not grown up with. But as my wife did, first-generation college students

can learn good study habits from faculty and their peers if they are in the right environment.

The best way to stay accountable is to stay at the center of the community. This means participating in student groups, collaborating on class projects and assignments, and working on research projects. By linking up with groups of their peers, students can build a network that they can lean on if they run in to personal or academic trouble. Collaborative learning teaches lifelong skills that go beyond the classroom and will pay dividends when students transition to working in a professional setting.

Another strategy to cultivate a community of diverse academic success comes from involving undergraduates in research projects. First-generation college students likely have less exposure to what engineers actually do, and getting some experience by working on research projects would be very helpful. Participating in research is also a good way to broaden the students' network within the engineering school and expose them to new ideas that they might not have seen in class. Students who are involved in research as undergraduates are (at least in my experience) more likely to go on to graduate school. I firmly believe that as a faculty member it is my responsibility to ensure I am creating an environment we built on strengths, that promotes change, encourages growth, and fosters new ideas that will empower students to succeed.