

Diversity Personal Statements — What Makes for a Compelling Essay?

by *Jaya Saxena and Kia Scipio*

At this time of year, employers are launching their diversity-related scholarship and fellowship opportunities, which are predominantly for first-year law students. Fellowships and scholarships can come in the form of monetary awards, or monetary awards and a paid summer position at a law firm, corporate legal department, government agency, or with a judge. As part of the application process for these programs, employers often require that applicants submit a diversity personal statement. This requirement can cause angst amongst interested law students and their career advisors because it's not always clear what employers are looking for in a compelling diversity personal statement.

Personal Statements vs. Cover Letters

An important point to note with students is that there is a difference between diversity personal statements and cover letters. It may be helpful to liken a diversity personal statement to the personal statement they submitted with their law school application, and to remind students that these essays should be narrative in form and should tell a story connecting their personal and professional experiences.

According to a resource produced by the University of Minnesota Law School's Career Center, "[P]ersonal statements for diversity applications describe personal obstacles, challenges, or other factors encountered in advancing career objectives; life experiences that have shaped values and professional goals; and a commitment to promot-

ing inclusion and diversity in the community." Cover letters focus on the skills the applicant will be able to contribute to the employer. Diversity personal statements should still include relevant and transferable skills, but in a way that makes a connection between the personal and professional. Both documents should address an applicant's interest in the employer and opportunity, but the general tone and focus of the documents are different.

What Does "Diversity" Mean?

Employers define "diversity" differently. Some limit their definition of diversity to race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Others have a broader definition encompassing religion, disability, and veteran status. An increasing number of employers consider socioeconomic status in their definition of diversity. If students fit any of the criteria above, they may be eligible for a diversity-related scholarship or opportunity. But, there is more to the application process, and students may still be reluctant to apply.

What Should Students Write?

Even if "eligible" to apply, law students may be hesitant to submit an application and/or may find the application process and, specifically, the diversity personal statement portion to be challenging. They may undermine themselves by thinking their background or experience isn't particularly unique or interesting. Students may incorrectly assume that their story must be about overcoming an

obstacle, or they may spend too much time thinking about what the employer wants to read as opposed to telling their own, genuine story. Students also often struggle with how much information to reveal about their personal background, particularly if it is directly related to aspects of their diversity, such as sexual orientation or disability.

As law school career advisors, it is our responsibility to help students address these challenges and advise them about how to write a compelling diversity personal statement. Even though diversity personal statements are intended to reveal at least some information about a personal life story, students should only disclose as much as they are comfortable sharing (and possibly discussing in an interview) that still communicates their story. As one law school career advisor stated, “I encourage [students] to share as much as they are willing to disclose in the most compelling manner.” Another advisor suggested talking to students about how to frame the information. She suggested that if a student is uncomfortable discussing their financial struggles, for instance, it may be easier to write about supporting themselves during college or working full-time while also being a full-time undergraduate student.

What Do Employers Suggest?

In working on this article, we obtained input directly from employers who offer diversity-related scholarships and opportunities. We asked them to share their thoughts about what makes for a “stand-out” diversity personal statement. The most common responses included personal experience, a demonstrated commitment to diversity and inclusion, and having overcome an obstacle. Other responses were related to prior work experience and activism. One employer stated, “The best personal statements are those that demonstrate authenticity, self-awareness ... and an interest in working with and learning about the uniqueness of others [with]in the [legal] profession.” Another employer said that they look “beyond a student’s circumstances” and want to see what that student is doing now and how they are involved in pushing diversity and inclusion in the legal profession

forward — noting, “We want someone who will be an ‘ambassador’ for the firm” within the law school community.

Advice and Guidance for Students

Law school career professionals also shared tips and suggestions for advising law students about drafting diversity personal statements. We incorporated this advice into the checklist below to share with students.

- First and foremost, review the employer’s definition of diversity to make sure you are eligible for the opportunity.
- Before sitting down to write, be sure to read the employer’s job posting/description to determine what, specifically, the employer wants applicants to address. The description will likely also address other requirements, such as page length or word count.
- As with any job application, remember who your audience is — are you applying for a job at a big law firm, in a corporate legal department, with a judge, etc.? For instance, while a commitment to public service is valuable, a student would not want to make that the sole focus of a diversity personal statement if applying to a private sector employer.
- Allocate adequate time to draft, edit, and polish a diversity personal statement.
- Seek guidance and obtain feedback from a law school career advisor before submission.
- As one employer stated, “Be sure that you write well... Poor grammar, spelling mistakes, and awkward writing stand out, and not in a good way.”
- Be consistent with your choice of font style and size. In other words, use the same font style and size as used for your résumé and other application documents.

- Identify and reach out to upper-class students and/or alumni who were recipients of the diversity-related scholarship or opportunity for which you are applying. These individuals may have a wealth of information to share about the application process and their experience.
- Don't simply repeat the various experiences you've had that are listed on your résumé. When referring to prior work experience in a diversity personal statement, make sure the experience fits into your overall narrative.
- Write with authenticity instead of focusing on what you think the employer wants to read.

employer and draft authentic diversity personal statements based on their life experience. These applications will be the first impression students may make on an employer, so it should be a positive and lasting one!

Jaya Saxena is the Director of Dean's Diversity and Inclusion Initiative, Assistant Director with the Center for Professional Development and Career Strategy at The George Washington University Law School. Kia Scipio is an Associate Director, Diversity and Inclusion Liaison in the Office of Career Strategy at Georgetown Law. This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Diversity and Inclusion Section.

One Size Does Not Fit All

As with any job application, there is not a one-size-fits-all formula when applying for a diversity scholarship or fellowship opportunity. It is imperative that students do their homework about the