

Diversity Equity and Inclusion Statement: Dr. Clara M. Spatafore

On October 1, 2014 it was my great honor to join the faculty at VCU School of Dentistry. August of 2015 I started attending classes on the Monroe Park campus at VCU. This was a major turning point in my tenure at VCU SOD. Up until that time I was unsure that I had made the right decision selling my practice and going into academics. That undergrad course changed the direction of my life. The first thing I noticed while attending the course, Italian Language 101, was the diversity in the classroom. The students and professor were all from varied backgrounds. Countries of origin ranged from Italy to Somalia. I have taken courses almost every semester since that time. Over time what I came to appreciate was the unique opportunity VCU allows students from every background, giving them the chance to excel, and a path toward excellence. Many of the students at VCU are from non-traditional backgrounds, the first in their families to attend college, originate from countries all over the world, bring together different cultures and experiences, yet form a harmonious, productive environment where they mesh together to have great educational and social experiences. The adjectives that best describe our Monroe Park campus are *inclusive, productive* and *diverse*.

My goal as Dean of the VCU School of Dentistry would be to follow the core values expressed in the mission statement of VCU:

“Deeply engrained core values of diversity, inclusion and equity that provide a safe, trusting and supportive environment to explore, create, learn and serve.”

When reviewing the guidelines set forth by VCU for this diversity equity and inclusion statement it becomes necessary to briefly address each one.

1. **Commitment:** The Dean and faculty of the dental school, as well as the Admissions Committee must commit time, effort and finances to enlightening students from all backgrounds, especially those whose situation may not provide the opportunities for educational enlightenment, the benefits of a career in dentistry or dental hygiene. This needs to start at the grade school

level and continue through their college career. One my first endeavors as Interim Dean was to establish and identify funding the “Superstars Endowment” for the Admissions Committee. This fund allows the committee to offer tuition assistance to a “diverse” deserving student who is applying to our dental school. So far we have over a million dollars in the fund.

2. **Creation:** At this point in time the Admissions Committee participates in the Pipeline programs through VCU. However creating novel ideas, utilizing students, junior faculty, and alumni as a think tank and developing new pathways to attract a diverse student population as well as diverse candidates for faculty positions would be something I feel would be a first step.
3. **Enriching:** As the interim Dean, and at the SOD before I became dean, we have encouraged participation in clubs, social events, written blogs, celebrated diverse cultures and schools of thought. I feel this is an area where we can continue to improve, continuing to practice “*inclusivity in a pluralistic society*”
4. **Exposure/Production:** At the SOD we continue to expand our Public Health research component. We are developing programs to educate students on the specific needs of all populations including adding a degree programs and classes in public health and awareness of the needs of all individuals inclusive of their age, race, background, and orientation.
5. **Leadership:** We currently have a Director of DEI, we participate in all campus activities related to DEI. The leadership team is composed of a diverse group of individuals from all walks of life, each of whom bring a different perspective from their past experiences. Leading by example is in my opinion the best method of showing the students and faculty how important diversity, equity and inclusion is to the SOD.
6. **Mentoring:** At the SOD we are lucky to have a diverse faculty who mentor our students, we have pathways for students to discuss issues with a faculty member or a Dean regardless of the problem. Since I became interim Dean we are putting into place a mentoring program for faculty. The program is in

the infancy stages, but should prove to be valuable for all young faculty. I personally have mentored female dental students and faculty from all backgrounds, especially those interested in the military, teaching or alternative careers in dentistry.

- 7. Outreach/Service:** Our school including faculty and students participate in several outreach programs including CARITAS and Missions of Mercy, as well as Homeless Connect. This is an area that is dear to my heart and I have participated in Homeless Connect and CARITAS here at VCU. I have also been involved with Operation Safety Net, treating the homeless population of Pittsburgh along with Catholic Charities, as well as being a mentor to children whose parents were incarcerated.
- 8. Recognition:** Since becoming interim dean I have established the Dean's Staff Awards, but have also nominated several faculty and staff for awards at the school over the years. I feel it is important for women and others who are deserving from all backgrounds to be promoted for career or academic achievements. I also established a biweekly newsletter recognizing small and large achievements by faculty and staff.

My parents are first generation in this country, my sisters and I were brought up in a very diverse, inclusive neighborhood and environment. One of my dad's favorite saying was "a little respect goes a long way". That is how I live my life, I have always given back to the community with my time, my expertise and my money. But since coming to VCU I realize as an educational facility we need to do more. As a school we need to identify, enable and empower certain populations. It is no longer enough to throw money at programs and have endless rhetoric, a plan of action is required. We are embarking on a new Strategic Plan at the SOD. Each section of that plan will address issues of diversity equity and inclusion. We are on the right path, but much more needs to be done.