

# The Diversity-Hire Narrative in CS: Sources, Impacts, and Mitigation Strategies

Christopher Perdriau<sup>1</sup>, Vidushi Ojha '17<sup>1</sup>, Kaitlynn Gray '25<sup>2</sup>, Brent Largesse<sup>3</sup>, and Colleen Lewis<sup>1</sup>

1: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), 2: Harvey Mudd College, and 3: University of Washington Bothell

Students report hearing from family members and peers that women receive jobs because of their gender and not their merit. Women provided arguments against this “diversity-hire” narrative that educators can share with their students.

definition:

## Diversity-Hire Narrative:

The idea that a person was selected for a position due to one of their identities, such as their gender or race/ethnicity, rather than their merit.

### Background:

The goal of affirmative action programs (AAPs) is to increase the representation of people from historically underrepresented groups (HUGs) in the workforce. AAPs can unintentionally signal that a person from a HUG was selected for a position based on their gender or race/ethnicity rather than their merit. We call this signal the **diversity-hire narrative**. In computing, prior work has found that women hear the diversity-hire narrative during their computer science (CS) internships [1], but **women’s experiences surrounding the narrative have not been thoroughly explored**.

### Objectives:

We seek to understand the:

- (1) **sources** of the narrative
- (2) **impacts** of the narrative
- (3) **mitigation strategies** women use to **challenge** the diversity-hire narrative.

### Methods:

We conducted **23 semi-structured interviews** with third and fourth year undergraduate CS students:

- 16 of whom self-identified as women,
- 1 as non-binary, and
- 6 as men.

We analyzed these interviews qualitatively using descriptive and values coding.

### Results:

Participants reported hearing the diversity-hire narrative from **family members** and **peers**. Our work illustrates that **undergraduate women in CS appear to be affected by the diversity-hire narrative in many ways**. In particular, our participants reported:

- (a) questioning their preparation,
- (b) ignoring the narrative, and
- (c) working harder in order to prove themselves.

Participants appeared to mitigate the diversity-hire narrative by stating that:

- (a) their peers are jealous,
- (b) diversity-programs address gaps in privilege
- (c) CS is a meritocracy: people are selected based on their abilities

#### RQ1: From whom do undergraduate women in CS hear the diversity-hire narrative?

“[The diversity-hire narrative] comes from **family members and people that you're close to**. And they don't, like, explicitly say it, but they're like ... **all these tech companies they're hiring for diversity**.” (Anya)

“[A **classmate**] told me, like, **oh, you only got into this company because you're a girl**.” (Diane)

#### RQ2: How does the diversity-hire narrative impact undergraduate women in CS?

“[The diversity-hire narrative] kind of **motivated me to work harder** ... I don't wanna be the person who, kind of, gets targeted at by that.” (Tisha)

“I actually got my [company] internship because I went to, uh, the Grace Hopper conference and they found my resume through there ... **I had some doubt or it was like, did they just like, give me a really easy interview process because I'm a girl**” (Idris)

“sort of been better about, um, sort of **tuning out the negativity**.” (Ruchika)

“I think it comes from a lot of like men, honestly, who are **salty that they didn't get [an internship]**.” (Esha)

#### RQ3: How do undergraduate women in CS challenge the diversity-hire narrative?

“[the diversity-hire narrative] comes from people with a certain amount of privilege and [they] don't understand that just because they have a certain identity, um, means that they have an amount of privilege that exists because of society and **what these programs are trying to do is fix it**” (Diane)

“maybe affirmative action allows, like, people with certain identities to have **more opportunities to interview**, maybe, but **at the end of the day, everyone has to pass the interview**.” (Belle)

### Implications:

Our results:

- **Expand our understanding** of the experiences that may **negatively impact** women in undergraduate CS programs.
- **Provide examples** of how **women mitigate the impacts** of the diversity-hire narrative by **challenging it**.

And thus:

- **Illustrates** how educators can **help students challenge the diversity-hire narrative**.

### Summer of CS Contribution: HMC Student Researcher: Kaitlynn Gray '25

Kaitlynn reads through the interview transcripts and **identifies codes** using SaturateApp, an online qualitative analysis tool.

After reading, Kaitlynn:

- **Cross-references quotes** used in the paper and **provides feedback** on their interpretations and uses.
- **Determines connections** between themes shared by interviewees.
- **Writes** about how the themes shared add insight to how the diversity-hire narrative is challenged.

### Reference:

[1] Julia C Lapan and Katie N Smith. 2022. “No Girls on the Software Team”: Internship Experiences of Women in Computer Science. Journal of Career Development (2022), 08948453211070842

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A collaboration between

