Ankit Shah

Statement on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice

I was born in India and spent most of my formative years there. One of our national mottos is 'Unity in diversity'. Throughout my life, I have found the value of diversity in my broadening my thinking. I have been a part of diverse educational institutions but also had exclusionary structures in place. Through my experiences, I have come to appreciate diversity through the lens of personal identity, culture, religious beliefs, and class.

Growing up in a mostly homogenous neighborhood in Mumbai, the Indian Institute of Technology - Bombay – where I completed my undergrad – felt incredibly diverse. My cohort had representation from nearly every state in India and a diverse financial and educational background. My classmates included students who had designed entire computer games for their high-school CS project to students whose first interaction with a computer was in CS101. Yet the first-year cohort with such an amazing geographic diversity had a shocking gender diversity, with only 10% of the students being women. My grad school cohort at MIT was also extremely diverse in terms of the country of origin, but structural inequities that result in under-representation of women and minorities.

I believe that diversity in STEM fields is a valuable goal in and of itself. Technological solutions impact everyone's lives in the world, and everyone must have a say in how technology evolves. The community must proactively ensure that none of the voices are excluded and that all the voices are sought out. Towards that, I pledge towards nurturing a vibrant and diverse community in my classroom, research group, and the broader community.

At IIT-B, I was involved in an outreach program to popularize aerospace engineering at schools in underserved communities. I developed a lecture on introduction to flight, followed by a hands-on session on constructing a balsa wood glider. I also served as an aerospace department mentor to provide academic support to junior students through tutoring. I also served as the control systems team lead for IIT-B's student satellite project, where one of my duties was to recruit new team members. Through active outreach among IIT-B dorms, the control systems team we recruited included members from academic majors not represented in the older team. The newer team was also close to gender parity compared to the skewed ratio in the campus-wide community. These experiences solidified my belief that exposure and constructive mentorship are crucial in serving a student's learning objectives and outcomes.

In moving to the United States to pursue my graduate studies, I entered an entirely different social environment from the one I grew up in. Still, I did carry over my belief in exposure and constructive mentorship through my Ph.D. I have advised six undergraduate researchers from diverse backgrounds. One of the most fulfilling aspects of my Ph.D. was to see them apply for Ph.D. positions successfully or head towards careers in the industry in machine learning and robotics. I was also actively involved in my group's outreach efforts that included leading lab tours and talks for students ranging from middle school to college. I volunteered to coordinate my lab's participation in the Cambridge Science festival by setting the lab's exhibit theme, recruiting lab members to showcase their research. I also coordinated with the festival's organizers to streamline access to the lab building and transition visitors to the other exhibits.

As a future faculty member, I will also work with the administration to develop and implement strategies to understand and mitigate the systemic inequities at play from admissions through graduation. I will also support the community-led mentorship initiatives like Women in machine learning, Black in AI, and others, by encouraging my research group members to apply for and support them through volunteering roles. I will also volunteer personal and material support to these initiatives as required by them.

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