Alex L. Wang
cs.cmu.edu/∼alw1
alw1@cs.cmu.edu

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

I am a staunch advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within higher education, academia and society. Within a university setting, I believe that learning and research are best performed in inclusive environments where a diverse set of voices are actively sought out and listened to. Creating and maintaining such an academic environment requires active and coordinated effort at all levels: in classrooms, around campus and in research interactions. Below, I outline three efforts to which I have contributed to promote DEI at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU).

Course design for *DEI in Computer Science and Society*. In fall 2020, I worked within a group of ten Ph.D. students to design course materials for the pilot of a new course titled *DEI in Computer Science and Society*. The goal of this course is to equip incoming Computer Science (CS) Ph.D. students with the tools for them to be more inclusive members of academia. Topics covered in the pilot included: how to engage in inclusive discussions; impostor syndrome and its connections to diversity, equity and privilege; bias, technology, and systemic inequality; stereotypes and microagressions; allyship; and reporting mechanisms at CMU. As part of this working group, I consulted with experts, collected readings, and designed classroom materials for the modules on inclusive discussion and impostor syndrome. Following very positive feedback on the pilot course, an expanded version of this course is now part of the mandatory curriculum for CMU's first year CS Ph.D. students.

Listening to and supporting fellow Ph.D. students. Since the fall of 2019, I have served as one of my department's graduate student ombudspersons. In this capacity, I meet confidentially with, listen to, and provide advice/resources to other CS Ph.D. students with graduate-school-related concerns and issues. For example, a common concern I hear among younger students is the feeling of being an impostor, or general insecurity within academia. This is more pronounced, unsurprisingly, among those in underrepresented groups within STEM. In addition to going over university resources and brainstorming next steps they can take to manage these feelings, I often connect these students with older Ph.D. students who have all had similar doubts to let people know that they are not alone. It is very important for me to show each of these students that I care by responding to their emails promptly, making time to meet either virtually or in person, and checking-in routinely even after the initial concerns or issues get resolved.

During my time as a graduate student ombudsperson, I have worked to revise this role in a number of ways to better serve our students. Specifically, we have added a second Ph.D. student to this now-shared role so that we may provide perspectives and advice drawn from a more diverse pool of experiences. We have also expanded the role to serve Master's students as well, many of whom struggle with the same issues that Ph.D. students face.

Promoting inclusive classroom environments. As an instructor, I strive to create and maintain inclusive classroom environments where each of my students feel that they belong. One concrete way in which I attempt to make classrooms more inclusive is by modeling and normalizing confusion, failure, and "not knowing." While everyone goes through a period of uptake and confusion when learning new concepts, course material is, unfortunately, at times presented as being "obvious" or "easy." Such a stigma, whether intentional or not, can trigger stereotype threat in students who are simply going through natural learning processes. As a teaching assistant (TA) for *Optimization*, I routinely stopped to ask for questions during my recitations and presented my personal confusions or misconceptions I had when I was first presented the same material. As a TA in *Advanced Algorithms*, I readily admitted to "not knowing" an answer if a student came to my office hours with a particularly tough question. I would then work with the student to tackle their questions, highlighting throughout the process any parts of the problem that were confusing to me. It is my hope that by modeling and normalizing confusion, I instill upon my students that confusion is a natural part of the learning process and not to be misconstrued with not belonging.

Looking forward. While I have taken first steps towards recognizing and contributing to DEI efforts in academia, I realize that there is much more work to be done and for me to learn. I am excited to explore additional ways that my teaching, service and research may promote diversity, equity and inclusion.