

Diversity Statement

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I grew up in Rome, Italy, from a middle-class family. I could attend good public schools, and I received encouragement from family members and school teachers: They told me I could follow my dreams and that I had a chance to realize them by working hard. Later in my life, when talking with my fellow grad students and post-docs, I realized that I was lucky. Unfortunately, not everybody has a chance to attend good schools, not everybody gets encouragement, not everybody is allowed to dream and to follow their dreams. Our world and our society is mean to some people in a selective way. A clear example is given by people who grew up in an economically disadvantaged environment, but economics is not the only factor; this may depend on biological, ethnic, or social factors. For example, independent of the economic situation, many young women are told from the beginning that their life path is already written, and that they are not allowed to dream.

The statistical data confirm the feeling I just expressed. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2019 close to 90% of White high school graduates enrolled in a college or university, to be compared with a 67% of the Asian students, 63% of the Hispanic/Latinx students, and 51% of the Black students. Other statistics show similar gaps at the higher levels of education.

We need to pay attention to these data and to the situation they describe. This conflicts with our ideas of social justice, but it is interesting to underline that it has also a negative impact on the academic system itself. For example, research discussed in a 2020 Forbes article shows that diversity benefits innovation and financial results in businesses. Academia will experience the same benefits. For example, in a diverse environment everybody has the opportunity to interact with people from different backgrounds. Such experiences teach respect for different nationalities and to be more thoughtful of each other. This is seen to improve collaboration skills, productivity and innovation, and prepares for the multicultural work environments we have today.

As an instructor, I always had diverse classes. Therefore, I strive to make my courses accessible to everybody; see also my teaching statement, where I explain my methods for teaching in an inclusive way. During office hours, if only a few students are present, I try to chat with them and ask them about their studies. This gives them an opportunity to talk to me about themselves and possibly to tell me if they have any particular needs. Giving students an opportunity to ask for help is one of the most important things to support students belonging to under-represented groups. During my courses, I encourage students to work on their homework in small groups. This benefits all the students, but it is especially beneficial for students belonging to under-represented groups: by joining a study group, they build a feeling of “belonging” and of “community,” and they have a chance to see what the other students do to succeed in their studies. The students seem to trust me, and at the end of every semester, several students belonging to under-represented groups ask me for letters of recommendation for applying to summer programs and grad schools.

As instructors, we need to be ready to adapt to the needs of the students. When I was in Germany, a student who did not speak English wrote his Master's Thesis with me: initially, we had difficulty communicating because my German was bad. Still, I kept speaking German to him, and with time we both understood how to adapt to this strange situation, and in the end, he could write an outstanding Thesis. This student continued and did a PhD with me, and we are still collaborating.

With my research, I had many opportunities to contribute to the success of students and researchers who belong to under-represented groups. I collaborated for many years with Chinese researchers, especially Weixu Su and Qionglin Li (I am not mentioning Lixin Liu here because he is a senior professor). With them, I learned how cultural differences could be overcome if handled with reciprocal respect and could become a resource. Weixu Su and Qionglin Li were students when we started our collaborations, and I could see them growing and becoming established professors in their own country.

I also collaborated with several young women: Qionglin Li, Sara Maloni, and Valentina Disarlo. They all were students when I met them for the first time. When Anna Wienhard invited me to join her research group in Heidelberg, I was so excited by the opportunity to work with such a great mathematician. The group was initially small, with Anna, me, and two other people. I did my best to contribute to the research group, and over the years, it grew to a research group of 15-20 people and was always gender balanced. I have learned so much being part of this research group, and this is my model of how Academia should look.

I was a member of two hiring committees at Heidelberg University (for a junior professorship and a tenure track). Both times, a woman got the job. We did not compromise; both times, she was the best candidate. Both times I supported her from the beginning, but I noticed that it took some work to convince all the committee members.

In my private life I keep supporting women in Academia, since my wife is an Assistant Professor in biology. By observing my wife's career from so close by, I become aware of all the additional difficulties women meet in Academia. I always encouraged her to continue her career because I knew she was very good at it. I always told her that we could have a child and she could continue to do her job. Now that we indeed have a child, we are sharing this responsibility, and we are both accepting some compromise.

In my future role as a Professor (possibly in your department), I would keep supporting members of under-represented groups and trying to build an environment where everyone feels welcome and represented. I know that with my teaching, my research, and with my role as a member of the various university committees, I can make a difference, and I will give my contribution.

As a first step, I would check if the university has an adequate system in place for monitoring the presence and the success of the members of under-represented groups. This is important to measure the evolution of the situation over the years and evaluate the progress. I would then check the quality of the individual mentoring that is offered. Members of under-represented groups often need specific advices that depend on their particular situation. I would also check if the way the curriculum is structured offers the flexibility needed by students who may have a different background, or lack some kind of prerequisites.