

# Diversity Statement

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Diversity and inclusion are fundamental to our collective prosperity. Maintaining these values require significant effort and diligence, as they are often in danger by many factors. Over time, unconscious stereotypes create institutional under-representation and form barriers to opportunities for certain groups. It is for these reasons that we must actively reexamine our approach to advocating for diversity and inclusion. This is of extra importance within computer science departments, where there is a clear diversity problem: women, African-Americans, Hispanics, etc — each facing their unique barriers in both exposure and access to computer science.

In this brief document, I address different ways I have faced and dealt with issues related to inclusion, and end with a few notes on how I would like to incorporate these ideas in the future.

## *Background*

My passion for higher education was cultivated by my family at a very young age. However, getting into top colleges is an incredibly difficult process in Iran. Major educational institutions are concentrated in big cities, hundreds of miles away from where I lived. Since I was born and raised in a small town, I had fairly limited access to quality education. The process was further aggravated by discriminatory legislation which prioritized local applicants over those applying from distant locations.

I was lucky to have a supportive family which helped me overcome the discrimination and get into one of the best national institutes. However, not everyone had access to such support systems; I witnessed many of my talented classmates losing their motivation in the face of these unfair barriers. The journey to college was one of the initial incidents in my lifetime that proved to me the importance of fair opportunities for different layers of society.

## *Diversity and inclusion, in action*

After moving to the United States, I was exposed to different forms of prejudice. On one hand, I often experience bias based on my immigrant identity ([Kteily et al., 2016](#)); for instance, I have usually had to aim for domestic conferences due to the restrictions on my travel abroad (the travel ban and other VISA issues). On the other hand, I acknowledge my new privileges, such as having light skin in a society suffering from racial discrimination.

Barriers to inclusion are sometimes the *unconscious* biases we carry. Therefore, it is important to examine our internal biases and acknowledge our limitations. One of the most rewarding experiences in graduate school was my involvement with [SCRWP](#) (Students Confronting Racism and White Privilege), a coalition of students examining race-related issues. The group provides a safe space to engage in conversations surrounding racism and improve our *internal* understanding of our unconscious biases related to race and identity. Participation in the discussions of this group has significantly helped me see through myself and let me grow.

Giving back to our community is an important aspect of our communal life. This is of extra importance in cities like Philadelphia which suffer from vast societal and economic inequality. A few semesters ago, I joined forces with [Tech it Out](#), a student-run group dedicated to teaching elementary computer science to high school students. My hope is that these students will build upon what they have learned in these classes to help create a prosperous future for themselves and their communities.

Within my research projects I have worked to incorporate inclusion. For instance, for a recent workshop proposal we gathered a diverse group of program committee members and speakers. We created a team from >10 institutes, both academia and industry. In addition, >40% of our confirmed committee members are women. Such experiences have prepared me to work towards the advancement of inclusion in our professional environments.

### *The Road Ahead*

I'm encouraged to see that our collective awareness around diversity and inclusion is growing. In the coming years, I would like to demonstrate my commitment to this goal by incorporating it into different aspects of my work:

- *Research.* Willingness to incorporate diversity is an essential component to a research group. I would like to form a research environment where we can have talent with a wide range of racial, ethnic, gender, national, etc, identities.

I would like to continue connecting my research to issues of diversity. I have an ongoing project that focuses on helping individuals deal with the *diversity of ideas*: Many controversial issues have different aspects, and societies will not be able to resolve their internal divides if they can't see other facets to contentious issues ([Chen et al.](#), [under review](#)). With the increasing divide in our society, technology—and especially NLP—has a crucial role in helping our societies see the big picture. My hope is that we will be able to build upon this thread to positively impact society.

- *Teaching.* Teaching environments should provide safe spaces for minorities and under-represented groups to express themselves. An encouraging environment for exchanging ideas and sharing experiences is imperative for a system that motivates burgeoning talents.

Individuals, regardless of their background or financial status, should have a fair shot in accessing education (especially AI and NLP education). In the past, I have tried to create online tutorials (videos, short blogs, etc) about subjects around my area of focus and made them available to the world; some of them have received hundreds of views. I would like to continue this work more seriously and use online courses to help democratize access to education.

### *References*

- S. Chen, D. Khashabi, W. Yin, C. Callison-Burch, and D. Roth. See things from a different angle: Formalizing diverse perspectives about queries, under review.
- N. Kteily, G. Hodson, and E. Bruneau. They see us as less than human: Metadehumanization predicts intergroup conflict via reciprocal dehumanization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110(3):343, 2016.