

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

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As a professor of computer science, I will make it one of my main priorities to take initiatives to actively improve diversity, equity and inclusion at both undergraduate and graduate levels. I am fortunate enough to have had an exposure to the opportunities in mathematics and computer science during high school and undergraduate study, which motivated me to pursue a career in research and teaching. However, such exposure is often not available to everyone, especially students belonging to underrepresented minorities and students from poor socioeconomic status. This naturally causes a skewed demographic in which women and racial minorities are extremely underrepresented. Furthermore, students belonging to families with poor socioeconomic status often refrain from applying to graduate programs due to financial concerns.

Another important effect of lack of diversity is that students from minority communities sometimes lack a sense of belonging and are more likely to suffer from imposter syndrome and related mental issues. Such problems can be magnified for international students due to being far away from their support system, especially for students with restrictive visas (e.g., those from China or Iran) which sometimes prevent them from visiting home and attending academic conferences hosted in other countries. This leads to an inequitable environment which needs to be addressed and accounted for by professors as well as the students.

As an international student from India, I have myself felt misplaced even when participating in events organized by the Indian association at Penn. This was primarily because of the cultural and linguistic differences between the Tamil-speaking minority (which I belong to) and other Indian students. As a first step, I reached out to the other graduate students from this minority and organized social events which led to us forming a community where everyone felt belonged. In the future, I will facilitate forming of such groups for students from other minority communities as well.

During my time at Penn, I mentored a couple of graduate students in research projects. These projects were interdisciplinary, requiring an understanding of formal methods as well as reinforcement learning. My mentees had a strong background in only one of the two areas. In order to help them attain better understanding of the required concepts, I held individual teaching sessions which helped them bridge the gap in their knowledge. Whenever I held office hours as a teaching assistant, I focused on making sure that students from different backgrounds, including those who were not majoring in computer science, understood the concepts really well. In order to facilitate understanding, I would often spend additional time teaching the prerequisites of the course and this was highly beneficial to many students.

Moving forward, I will create and participate in programs that focus on spreading awareness about opportunities in computer science among high-school students, especially in low-income areas. Such efforts would involve writing grants to fund the education of such students, speaking about existing opportunities and organizing campus visits. I will actively try to improve diversity in computer science research by mentoring undergraduate students from underrepresented communities, encouraging them to pursue a career in research and teaching. I aim to inspire such students to perform individual research by giving guest lectures as part of undergraduate courses related to my research. I will incorporate inclusive practices in my teaching including the use of inclusive language, incorporating student feedback, promoting participation of all students (e.g., via anonymous polls) and organizing tutorials to solidify the understanding of various concepts. In order to improve inclusion in research, I will work towards making academic conferences more accessible and easier to attend by advocating for hybrid conferences, multiple locations and active discussions about universal accessibility. Finally, I would encourage all my students to participate in university-wide efforts that promote diversity, equity and inclusion.