

Madi Babaiasl – Diversity Statement

Since I was a child, I have lived, studied, and worked in environments where I constantly felt that I do not belong. From being born into an Iranian family with values different from mine, to studying electrical engineering, where I constantly heard that it's a masculine field, to being an immigrant trying to fit into a new society. Sadly, in academia, every book is judged by its cover just as it is in the real world. People are instantaneously judged by their external factors, such as their race and gender, that have nothing to do with their intelligence, potential, or self-worth. Having different values in a religiously dominated society and my position as a woman in engineering and academia, I have had many instances of intimidation, rejection, and victimization. Because of this, I have often felt compelled to hide my true values, feelings, and concerns in order not to be subject to bias or reprimanded for being myself and speaking the truth. As a result, I am extremely sensitive to issues related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) and strive to create safe environments that ensure every person feels a sense of belonging and dignity.

During my doctorate studies, I helped my Ph.D. advisor to organize a presentation about smart materials and soft robotics for Native American high school students, where they built a flexible inchworm using shape-memory alloy and a flexible 3D-printed part. During the courses I TA'd, I was always vigilant about students who were shy to ask questions or ask for help. My usual approach was to go to them, listen to them, encourage them and make them feel comfortable. They began participating in discussions and projects after a few sessions. During my Ph.D., our lab was comprised of people of different genders and nationalities, so I had the opportunity to experience a diverse, inclusive environment and learn how to accept and work with people of different backgrounds. My other volunteer work included serving as an eMentor for IEEE TryEngineering Together Outreach Program, where I helped middle school students from deprived regions of the US gain an understanding of engineering design processes by reading articles and building models. Furthermore, I volunteered as a mentor through the Society of Women Engineers (SWE)' mentoring program, giving guidance to undergraduates and graduate students.

As a professor, I will continue to support and participate in academic associations and programs that address diversity issues. My primary goal is to create a lab community and culture that facilitates the flourishing of science and novel ideas. I will do this by making sure that all people are respected, included, and treated equally. To put it another way, I will strive to create a lab where all members feel welcome and valued and where their voices are heard and appreciated. When discrimination, harassment, and bullying occur, they create hostile environments that can hinder science's advancement by marginalizing individuals and communities, reducing productivity, and preventing the healthy exchange of ideas. My lab will not tolerate any form of discrimination or harassment (based on ethnic or national origin, race, religion, citizenship, language, political views, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, age, or economic class). In such cases, the members involved will be evaluated. Bullying or inappropriate behavior among lab members will also be evaluated and externally mediated, including by myself. It is my ultimate goal to train students and researchers who will make a positive impact on our society. In that regard, I will encourage my lab members to participate in community development and engagement programs of their choosing. It will be an integral part of my lab's scientific upbringing to engage in such community development activities.