Diversity and Inclusion Statement

Venkat Arun

Diversity is an important aspect of academia at all levels. It helps to bring about social change by providing access to resources for under-represented communities, and it also improves our teaching and research by bringing in diverse perspectives.

As a part of the Graduate Admission Assistance Program (GAAP) at MIT EECS, I helped connect diverse graduate school applicants with mentors to improve graduate student diversity. The program served approximately 200 mentees and provided fee waivers using external donations and internal funding. A post-program survey indicated that mentees found the program valuable.

As a GAAP organizer, I was responsible for recruiting mentors and organizing mentoring sessions. I also worked with the department and legal team to expand our definition of "diversity" to include students who have not attended a university from which the department regularly receives applications. This expansion has allowed us to better serve underrepresented international students, since definitions of income and ethnicity only apply to US citizens and permanent residents.

While GAAP helps applicants to showcase their work, it is only able to provide mentoring in the months leading up to the application deadline, so it is too late for mentees to complete new work. We were unable to expand the program to include this dimension due to staffing constraints. As a faculty member, I plan to work to organize such a program.

I will strive to be inclusive in my roles as a teacher and advisor. For instance, not all students may feel comfortable asking for resources, or even know what resources are available. One way to equalize access is to announce these resources broadly. For example, my advisors announced that each student is entitled to attend one conference per year without having published a paper there. We were also given generous allowances to purchase equipment. In addition, I will guarantee my advisees a minimum meeting frequency of once per week, with the option to increase or decrease this based on their needs. In my courses, I will implement a staff-run system for forming project groups to help students who may otherwise be isolated. Additionally, students will be able to ask questions anonymously through platforms like Piazza.

I always have a side project where I work for a cause that is not related to my research. During the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, I volunteered with the PathCheck Foundation where we created a source of curated, reliable information that was used by around 50-100 people per day. I am currently volunteering with the Sankara Eye Foundation to help them measure their impact. In the future, I plan to focus much of this effort on promoting diversity, as I will be in a position to make a positive impact as a faculty member.

Universities can impact diversity beyond the campus. For example, I plan to help with improving machine translation. I believe this will be an important driver of social change since information, opportunities, and high-paying jobs are often locked behind the need to know English. Only a very small fraction of the world currently speaks English. I do not plan to work on the fundamental algorithms themselves. Instead, I will focus on the non-research aspects, such as connecting with policymakers and donors to invest in expanding training datasets.