DIVERSITY STATEMENT
Zhuo "April" Fu, PhD

In the academic settings, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) means fostering an environment where every student, faculty, and staff member feels valued, respected, and fully included, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances. Embracing and respecting the unique tapestry of each individual's conditions and experiences transcends my role as an educator; it is a principle intricately interwoven into my everyday life. Because I experienced and witnessed the unfair treatment in the past.

During my college years, despite excelling in a challenging C language programming class and my passion for coding, I refrained from switching my major to computer science due to the gender bias prevalent in the field in China at that time. While pursuing my PhD, I encountered a professor who would read the newspaper in a strong southern accent during every class, without providing copies for us, and then ask us to comment on the news afterwards, grading us based on our comments. As a first-year international student, I struggled in that class but didn't dare to ask for a copy of the newspaper. During my postdoctoral work, I observed a hard-working colleague hesitate to advance to the next stage of his career because, whenever he presented in our group meetings, he was reminded by our mentor that his English was so poor he was deemed incapable of pursuing any job outside of our lab.

Bias and inequality permeate every aspect of our lives, often leaving me feeling powerless in my desire to enact change. Yet, I firmly believe that even the smallest effort counts. From the moment I first stepped into a classroom as an instructor, I made a solemn vow to myself to strive tirelessly to foster an environment that is open, inclusive, and equitable. Not only to provide a great learning environment but also to serve as a role model for all my students.

The statement below will discuss ways that I have been and will contribute to diversity, equity and inclusion within the School of Neuroscience and Virginia Tech.

A. *Equitable Teaching*

When designing and refining my courses, I apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to create accessible learning environments and materials for all students, including those with disabilities. In the past, I have had a student with severe traumatic brain injury safely take my lab. While teaching at a community college, I also accommodated a student in a wheelchair to take my biology lab.
I also make an effort to reach out and converse with students to learn their need at individual level frequently. Whether they are underperforming or excelling, regardless of the situation, I always approach these conversations as if I am speaking with a friend. These informal discussions have been helping me understand the diverse support needs of our student population. For example, in the semester right before the pandemic, a minority student in my lab asked me if she could borrow our lab computer to finish the simulation homework because she could not afford a laptop and her Chromebook did not support our software. I was not able to loan her the lab computer but I helped her to get a loaned computer from the library. From then on, I always include this library-loan information in the module introduction.

Additionally, my interactions with students at individual level have deepened my respect for them, as I recognize the hidden struggles behind their composed exteriors. Over the past five years at Virginia Tech, I have written over 60 reference letters for TAs and students, predominantly are international students or minorities, reflecting my commitment to supporting and valuing each student's journey.

B. Foster a no-judgment mutually respectful environment

At the outset of each semester, I lay the foundation of my course with a non-judgment statement. I share statistics from our pre-course survey to illuminate the varied struggles students face, whether they are financial, mental, or physical. This exercise helps the class recognize that a peer's underperformance could be rooted in challenges as severe as not knowing where their next meal comes from or where they will sleep that night. During lab sessions, I closely observe student behavior, particularly noting any signs of frustration or distress. Acknowledging their feelings often provides them with a sense of being heard, opening the door to offer additional support. I proactively reach out to students who are lagging, always mindful not to prejudge their circumstances as laziness or lack of interest. This approach has been instrumental in uncovering underlying issues affecting their performance and in providing the necessary interventions to support their success.

And what's worth noting is that among the forty-five course sections that I taught at Virginia Tech so far, my average SPOT evaluation for the question of fostering a mutually respectful atmosphere is 5.85 out of six.

C. Mentoring TAs

Each semester, I mentor a diverse group of 20-25 grad and undergrad TAs. I made effort to recruit a portion of undergrad TA from underrepresented groups, such as minority students, students from remote areas, international students, and those who are shy or lack self-confidence. On average, about a third of my undergrad TAs come from these groups. And about third of my Grad Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are international students, and half are first year grad students.

Before they begin assisting students, I always ensured that they receive appropriate trainings. I also consider it my responsibility to treat them with fairness and respect, setting an example for how they should interact with students. For instance, when a first-year international GTA inquired about setting up a Zoom meeting, I refrained from passing judgment. Instead, I provided her with a helpful YouTube tutorial and lightened the mood by joking about the YouTuber's funny hair style, aiming to make her feel at ease. This approach helped, especially considering she had recently arrived from a region experiencing turmoil, adding layers of challenge to her adjustment period. In another instance, when an international GTA, whose background was in computer science, struggled with a laboratory task involving pipettes—a tool he was unfamiliar with—I resisted the urge to react negatively. After understanding his background, I offered a sincere apology for assuming his familiarity with the task and provided him with the guidance he needed. However, this GTA excelled in tasks related to his field, and landed me a good hand when setting up computers, demonstrating the importance of recognizing and leveraging individual strengths.

D. Keep the training update

My first training for inclusive teaching was a 2-day workshop, in 2014, to obtain my Data Instructor Certification. It was then that I first learned the concept about an expertise's blind spot. In 2019, I finished one-semester long online training teaching excellence course offered by Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) and local community college. It covers a wide range of topics such as: Preparing an Effective Syllabus, Embracing Diversity in Classroom, Developing Fair, Consistent, and Transparent Grading Practices etc.. It provided me a frame work of my DEI practice in higher education system. In the following years at Virginia Tech, I engaged in seminars on diversity and inclusive teaching offered by both the university and non-profit data science organizations.

E. Be an understanding and respecting co-worker

While teaching is my primary responsibility, I also prioritize creating a welcoming environment for everyone at work. I demonstrate respect for all faculty and staff members, understanding that each person's contribution is essential to our collective success. For instance, there was a time when I had to drive from Roanoke to Virginia Tech, only to wait for an hour before being informed that the fixed asset labeling event had been canceled without any explanation. Consequently, I drove back to Roanoke having accomplished nothing. And it was right before Christmas. Instead of reacting with frustration, I chose to respond with empathy and kindness. Later, when I rescheduled another labeling session, I was greeted by a young minority woman with a lovely little girl who came to the classroom to label the equipment; at that moment, I knew choosing to practice compassion was the right decision. This situation reinforced the importance of understanding and compassion in the workplace, acknowledging personal challenges, and supporting colleagues through their responsibilities.

In summary, my dedication to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) goes beyond just creating more opportunities for underrepresented groups. It's about being a positive role model for all our students, inspiring them to make a meaningful impact in society to embrace diversity. Neuroscience is a unique discipline with the ability to bridge diverse fields. Our students have the potential to excel in various sectors such as medicine, engineering, computing, the arts, and business. Therefore, I feel a deep responsibility to leave a positive imprint on all our students, encouraging them to spread this influence in their respective fields.