

Diversity Statement

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I have a strong commitment to improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in STEM fields. I approach this overall goal via three overlapping frameworks, increased education, personal responsibility and action, and advocating for systemic change. As a scholar in Artificial Intelligence (AI), I strongly believe that improving diversity in our field is essential to reducing the growing menace of algorithmic bias. Irresponsible and malicious use of AI threatens to precipitate a new civil rights crisis, and create insurmountable barriers for already marginalized and underrepresented groups. Increased diversity in AI research is an important component in the fight for a more equitable future.

My views on DEI education are strongly influenced by my own experiences. As part of an optional course on Ethics in my undergraduate institution, I was introduced to the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of India's Constitution and one of the most respected figures in the Dalit (marginalized-caste) rights movement. Contemporary Indian school education often glosses over caste based discrimination, analogous to how the school curriculum in the US often avoids a faithful accounting of racism. Dr. Ambedkar's writings helped me recognize that I had internalized the flawed but prevalent belief that equity was equivalent to equality, a view that disguises entrenched privilege unless we learn to deconstruct it. This experience taught me that overcoming a lack of knowledge is the first hurdle in becoming an effective ally for underrepresented and marginalized groups. I strongly believe that ignorance needs to be tackled at both an individual and an institutional level.

I recognize that my education in this area is an ongoing endeavor, and I use multiple resources to improve my ability to create a more diverse and welcoming environment in academia. Inspired by the #ShutDownSTEM movement, I have created a weekly time slot to read the works (technical and non-technical) of authors and researchers from underrepresented groups. To faithfully execute my role as an instructor, I have actively sought out educator focused workshops that address barriers to success (e.g., microaggressions, stereotypes, impostor syndrome, etc.) and strategies that can be used to help support students (e.g., promoting collaboration, eliminating exclusionary language, etc.).

My attempts to educate myself have routinely led to personal action both inside and outside the classroom. For example, as a beginning graduate student I learnt about the concept of "invisible labor", used to describe the unrecognized work required of underrepresented faculty members by virtue of that status. An informal survey of my peers revealed that underrepresented graduate students were also volunteering for significant amounts of invisible labor. As a result of these findings, I was able to convince like-minded students to form a group dedicated to a voluntary commitment to maintaining a positive "Privilege Offset", wherein we budgeted time for actively seeking out invisible labor opportunities and reducing the burden on our peers from underrepresented groups. This experience made me appreciate how individual action can help create a more inclusive and equitable environment.

While DEI focused education and personal service can play a significant role in improving diversity in STEM, it would be naive to believe that we can achieve significant progress without advocating for the dismantling of systemic barriers that deprive students of the tools necessary to succeed. I have pursued positions in student government organi-

zations, with the sole motivation to leverage their influence and visibility to remove such systemic barriers. In my junior year, I successfully ran for election to the Central Council of the Delhi University Students Union (one of the largest student government bodies in the world, with over eighty affiliated colleges and approximately fifty-thousand student members). During my tenure I helped to create and implement a multi-pronged strategy to improve residence hall enforcement of anti-hazing guidelines, and helped deploy robust mechanisms to reduce and report hazing incidents. This hazing was typically weaponized against students from marginalized communities, especially those who were suspected of having availed of the government's affirmative action provisions. Our measures helped create a more inclusive environment and helped create sustained institutional responsibility towards underserved students.

I believe that my commitment to diversity and inclusion is strongly aligned with your department's values and mission. As a faculty member, I look forward to working with both the department, and the university, to help maintain and expand existing programs. I am also passionate about advocating for policies that clearly incentivize graduate student involvement and leadership in DEI programs, for example with targeted service awards. Such changes would help students realize the importance of DEI education, and help distribute the labor of DEI initiatives more equitably among students. The impact of such an effort can be measured via surveys that request students to self-report time spent on DEI initiatives.

I am particularly interested in creating a K-12 interaction day for graduate students, post-docs and faculty, in collaboration with existing outreach programs at the university. The primary aim of such small-group interactions would be to create a structured mechanism for early career researchers to learn about the systemic roadblocks faced by underserved and underrepresented students. The program would also give K-12 students a peek into the lives of early career researchers and trainees. My experience as a volunteer teaching assistant at a minority-serving institution in Delhi, left an indelible impression on me and I strongly believe that such a program would have a similar impact on individuals from privileged backgrounds. Together with policies that incentivize community engagement, such a program could greatly improve awareness of systemic issues among students and faculty. Learning about systemic obstacles via direct interaction can have a very positive impact on an individual and will play a role in bringing about significant societal change.

My experiences have strengthened my belief that education, personal action and advocacy for systemic change are strong contributors to creating a more welcoming environment for all students. As a faculty member, I will continue to use these frameworks to create a more inclusive lab, department and institution.