STATEMENT ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

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Diversity in academic environments enriches educational experiences and strengthens research communities. Unfortunately, STEM fields in general, and computer science in particular, suffer a gap when it comes to diversity. Although I myself belong to a well-represented group in computing (brown male), it distresses me that others from underrepresented minority groups suffer due to the lack of inclusion. The sense of belonging has been instrumental to my academic success. Thus, I understood the importance of building and maintaining inclusive environments for all of those who aspire to join the STEM fields, and computing in particular.

During my Ph.D. career, I have taken every possible step to improve my understanding of what constitutes inclusive environments, and to understand the best practices to promote and establish such environments. I have, for example, attended the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Graduate Summit”, which provided me with the knowledge needed to operate in diverse research and classroom environments. Furthermore, I made a conscious effort to promote inclusion and equity in my classrooms during my labs and guest lectures. For example, when I observed that some underrepresented minority students were hesitant to ask questions in front of others, I started offering one-on-one meetings. Such meetings proved to be helpful as students started expressing their confusions and misunderstandings more openly. One positive, fulfilling incident I recall is when a female student in the Software Engineering class (who was one of few female students in a class of around 40 students) was feeling uncomfortable asking questions in front of the class. The one-on-one meetings I had with this student allowed her to improve her understanding of the material to the point that she was able to build the confidence needed to even participate in the class discussions.

Motivated by the success of the one-on-one meetings I have used in the past, I plan to continue to develop similar strategies to address issues that underrepresented minority students may face. One strategy I plan to implement is to highlight successful students from all groups so that students from each group get to see successful examples among those who ‘look like’ them, and get the confidence that they can also do it. I strongly believe that such encouragement can boost the confidence of underrepresented minority students. Furthermore, I have participated in the Programming Languages Mentoring Workshop (PLMW) several times as a student mentee, and it has been an insightful experience. Inspired by PLMW mentorship programs, I plan to establish (or join) underrepresented minorities-focused mentorship programs in future.

Higher education comes at a later stage in a student’s life. Therefore, outreach efforts must target K-12 level students and influence them in a positive way towards pursuing computer science. Such programs are especially needed in areas where the predominant population constitutes an underrepresented one in computer science. Such early stage efforts would result in an increase of enrollment of students from underrepresented minorities in computer science. I have been fortunate enough to be part of an outreach program at the Moreno Valley School District, which is a Hispanic majority school district. In this program, I helped design a course on “Mobile App Development”. More importantly, I took part in preparing the school teachers to teach this course by delivering some of the lectures in the teachers-training program. My participation in this program has been a fulfilling experience, and I plan to continue to participate in similar outreach programs in the future.

In terms of teaching, I am determined to apply the findings of validated pedagogical research on avoiding implicit bias in the classroom and course syllabi as well. I will continue to make conscious efforts to provide comfortable class and discussion environments for all of my students by appreciating their diverse opinions. I will also make sure to use gender-neutral, value-neutral, and non-confrontational language in my lectures to ensure that underrepresented minority students do not get discouraged.

On a personal level, I will continue to learn about cultural and personality differences, and I will be open to adjust my mentoring style to address any special needs of my students. I will also actively recruit and work to retain underrepresented minority students. I plan to utilize channels such as high school outreach programs and minority club meetings to reach out to aspiring underrepresented minority students and encourage them to join higher education in general, and graduate school in particular.