Diversity Statement: Evidence-Based De-Corporatization

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Computing is known to have structural barriers that stand in the way of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) [7]. Although some equity gaps for the underrepresented minorities (URM) have been closing [16], significant disparities remain: women still experience biased treatment [5] and are least prevalent in Computer Science degrees among all STEM Fields [16], while Black and Latinx students have substantial enrollment gaps [14], are likely to drop out [6], and subsequently miss out on the employment in the highly paid tech industry [3]. I strongly believe that these inequities must be eliminated as soon as possible by incorporating DEI awareness and action into all university activities: outreach, admissions, hiring, research, teaching, and athletics. Yet, the profound and multifaceted structural inequities may take generations to address [8].

DEI remains challenging to effectively pursue in practice, despite its empirically shown benefits [1] and nearly universal support in academia. I want to focus on two particular factors contributing to that. First, DEI initiatives may result in unintended consequences [17, 10] due to unpredictable sociocultural dynamics: a well-meaned diversity policy may appear effective a priori – but backfire in practice. For example, abundant service on diversity committees may exhaust the few Black participants [9], admissions lotteries may push out disadvantaged students [12], and state incentives may widen racial completion gaps [11]. In my opinion, careful policy design based on scientific evidence is our most sustainable way to limit the unintended consequences [4, 23]. Second, DEI progress is counteracted by the corporatization of universities [18] – an exclusive focus on the easy-to-measure “business” outcomes: revenue, profit, and global rankings. This focus instills the zero-sum, winner-takes-all mentality that contradicts the very spirit of equity and inclusion (as well as integrity, curiosity, and other academic values). This mindset disproportionately affects the students of color by cutting the “unnecessary” spending [2] and dampens the pursuit of diversity goals among affluent schools [19]. Thus, to make academia more equitable and inclusive, I emphasize holistic learning and community [25] as alternatives to corporatization.

My key contribution to equity and inclusion has been the mentoring of junior researchers, which has been shown to be effective at combating inequalities [5, 13] early in the academic “pipeline” [20]. The direct and personal nature of mentoring has helped me minimize unintended side-effects and set aside the aggregate outcome metrics, instead focusing on the individual growth and success of undergraduate and Masters URM students. One of my mentoring avenues has been the Research Experience for Undergraduates in Software Engineering (REUSE) program at Carnegie Mellon. This program gives students underrepresented in computing an immersive research experience for a summer and, for many, starts their research career. Similar to REUSE is the Penn Undergraduate Research Mentoring (PURM) program, which aims at first- or second-year undergraduates who have no research experience (and might not get any otherwise). During my time in the U.S. universities, I have closely mentored 16 research students, approximately half of whom were underrepresented in their race/gender/educational background, and a different half were undergraduates without previous exposure to research. As a mentor, I strive to follow evidence-based practices [21, 22], such as aligning expectations and gradually fostering independence, and frequently solicit feedback from the more experienced colleagues.

While I have little first-hand experience of sexism and racism as a white male (at worst, I get occasional references to vodka and communism), I have been subject to the many anxieties and unknowns of the U.S. immigration system. Building on these experiences, I aimed to help other foreign students during my 4+ years of service as a student member of the Foreign Student Advisory Board at Carnegie Mellon’s Office of International Education. In particular, I regularly communicated the rationale and mechanisms behind some admittedly confusing policies to the students, as well as amplified the voices of ethnic minorities in high-stakes decision-making, e.g., during the Muslim Travel Ban in 2017. Seeing how many immigration rules are arbitrary, I have advocated for specifically supporting students from countries with difficult U.S. relations. I have also raised concerns about yearly increases in living costs on behalf of students from low-income backgrounds. While serving on 4 admissions/hiring committees at the Institute for Software Research, I aimed to prevent conventional biases from reinforcing the existing structural inequalities. For example, I advocated for the lesser-known yet excellent schools in Iran and Pakistan that are typically overshadowed by the famous universities in China and India. Overall, I find it rewarding to help those disadvantaged by large societal structures and institutions.
As an Assistant Professor, I plan to further contribute to DEI in the following ways:

- Continuing my mentoring of URM researchers on a larger scale and ensuring that my lab is welcoming for all intersections of races, genders, orientations, religions, and backgrounds.
- Starting and managing a National Science Foundation-funded REU site to provide research exposure to undergraduates from underrepresented in computing research.
- Advocating for greater accountability and transparency when addressing student complaints and, in due time, serving as an Ombudsperson for equitable resolution of disputes.
- In my committee service, de-emphasizing ranking, profit, publication/citation counts, and other narrow quantitative output measures, and instead focusing on qualitative holistic notions of scholarly success.
- Working to effectively integrate DEI efforts with the university’s core activities – rather than isolate those efforts in an ineffective stovepiped sub-organization within the university.
- Implementing other emerging evidence-based methods to foster diversity and inclusion [23].

I look forward to enhancing diversity, achieving equity, and promoting inclusion at my next institution.

References