

Jorge A. Méndez
Diversity Statement

As a Latino scholar, I am sensitive to the issues of diversity and inclusion in academia. I am committed to providing the support and tools for success to members of underrepresented groups in computer science and in academia as a whole. During my time as an undergraduate student at Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB) in Venezuela, I was surrounded by people from a breadth of socioeconomic backgrounds, from the sons and daughters of businesspeople and politicians, to people that relied on food programs for their meals. This gives rise to a vibrant community of diverse students that has played a key role in making USB stand as a beacon of excellence in education in Venezuela for decades. My vision for academia in the future is a space for people of **all socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and genders** to work hand-in-hand to address scientific and societal issues.

In order for students of all backgrounds to be successful in such a diverse environment, USB put in place a variety of programs to level the playing field. My commitment to such efforts throughout my time at USB was to act as a (practically) voluntary teaching assistant (TA) for ten academic quarters. As a TA, I witnessed many struggles from my students: some did not own personal laptops for programming courses, others missed recitations due to transportation shutdowns, and still others dropped out to focus on their full-time jobs. I encouraged students to inform me of such issues and provided them with every flexibility within my power. As a community, we hold the responsibility of ensuring that every student is given a fair chance at success, and so as a professor I will continue to dedicate special efforts to those who have historically been neglected in academia.

Adjusting to the academic environment is often difficult. At Penn, I regularly meet with new Ph.D. students in our lab to act as a mentor in their adjustment. This adjustment is particularly hard for underrepresented minority students, which is why as a professor I will have an open-door policy for students who face those barriers. To ensure that students feel comfortable leveraging this policy, I will hold weekly mentoring hours. I hope to create a safe space for them to voice their frustrations, as well as to act as a role model by leveraging my own background when appropriate.

Beyond helping students already in the university, I believe we as academics must work towards breaking the cycle of underrepresentation in STEM. Children from underrepresented groups typically do not have access to STEM role models. At USB, I volunteered at *Didactrón*, an interactive science and technology museum that introduced children from underserved schools to the world of STEM. In a similar spirit, I will organize robot demonstrations for nearby schools to incentivize children to pursue careers in STEM. I also would hope to contribute to lessening the disadvantages of students at USB and other Venezuelan universities by fostering research collaborations.

In my research group, I will take serious measures to ensure that my selection process for Ph.D. admissions is fair. While I would love to be able to say that I have no biases towards any group, this is unfortunately not realistic: we all have implicit biases. I have experienced first-hand the effects of these biases during my own search for Ph.D. programs, when I was (unofficially) told that I was not considered for admission because USB was an unknown school. Ideas for how to remove the effects of these biases in the admissions process include anonymizing applications (names, ethnic backgrounds, undergraduate institutions) and explicitly selecting students from underrepresented minorities. While I do not have the answer for how to end discrimination in academia as a whole, I will work towards addressing it in my immediate environment.

I am committed to fighting discrimination in academia. Diverse backgrounds bring to light different insights, new technical or societal problems, and novel ways of thinking about solutions. Diversity will be at the heart of my academic group as a means for giving a fair opportunity to underrepresented groups and for producing research of higher quality and of more value to society.