Diversity Statement

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As a Muslim Iranian living in the US, I have always felt that I am an outsider. After the 2016’s presidential election, I started to feel that I am not welcome, a feeling that is hurtful and discouraging. I have experienced first hand what it feels like to be marginalized. This makes me determined to do whatever I can to support and protect those who are going through similar experiences.

Importance of Diversity. An academic community thrives on attracting and nurturing a diverse pool of talent. Intuitively, lack of diversity represents a missed opportunity. Research seems to support this. McKinsey [1] reports that ethnically diverse teams are more likely to outperform non-diverse ones by 35%, and gender-diverse teams are 15% more likely to have a revenue above the national industry median.

Diversity Problem. Computer science in general, and my home community of computer architecture in particular, have suffered greatly from a diversity problem. By looking into data from major computer architecture conferences, Natalie Enright Jerger and Kim Hazelwood [2] highlighted the community’s lack of gender diversity at different levels, from conference speakers to steering committee members. As an example, at this year’s MICRO, a top conference in computer architecture, an all-white-male panel entitled “Legends of MICRO” provoked a sharp reaction. In a diversity statement [3] that was read at the beginning of the panel, Margaret Martonosi, a legend in computer architecture and a professor from Princeton University, pointed out that the lack of diversity in the pool of computer architects poses serious challenges to the community.

Root Causes. A community has a diversity problem when some untapped talents are discarded merely because they do not fit the unconsciously conceived definition of talent. When a wide pool of talent is ignored in a community, over time, the community’s culture changes, and when the culture changes, it negatively impacts the proliferation of that talent. The culture creates stereotypes, and in a predicament, many who are exposed to negative stereotypes end up conforming to those stereotypes. That is one of the main reasons that just between 2000 and 2012, there was a 64% decline in the number of first-year female students interested in majoring in computer science [4]. This example shows that the computer science community is ignoring minority talents, and the culture is discouraging those same minorities from pursuing degree in computer science. This is a vicious cycle which we have to break if we want to solve the diversity problem.

Solutions. To break the cycle, we should either change the culture or change the system that allows discrimination. Research shows that the former might actually have an inverse effect, a phenomenon called “paradox of meritocracy” [5]. Managers in a company that emphasizes meritocracy tend to discriminate more against women in their performance evaluations. Therefore, rather than try to change the community’s unconscious biases, we need to change the system to solve the diversity problem.

My Approach. In many of computer science conferences, the system has been successfully changed to eliminate discrimination by using a double-blind review procedure. As a professor, I will adopt a similar approach to evaluate students’ homeworks, assignments, and exams without knowing their identity. I will also design a blind review procedure to recruit graduate and undergraduate students for my lab. I will talk openly about the importance of diversity if I am appointed to serve in a program committee, steering committee, or faculty hiring committee. I am sure that there are other effective solutions to the diversity problem. To find about those solutions, as a member of the computer science community, I will be actively engaged in the discussion on how we all could tackle challenges we face. I am committed to be part of the discussion, and I hope a day comes when everyone feels that they are welcome in the field regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or academic lineage.

References


