Diversity Statement – Huaicheng Li

A diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment is critical to the continued success of the computer science community. Diversity contributes to various creative perspectives and sparks innovative endeavors to advance computer science research and teaching. And it requires a constant and robust commitment to battle the longstanding diversity challenges exacerbated by the systemic barriers and global pandemic. To this end, we need to provide equal opportunities and cultivate an inclusive culture to attract people from diverse backgrounds to join our community.

Past Experience to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Grounded in my personal experience as a first-generation college student from a low-income family, I have firsthand knowledge and understanding of the systemic barriers which make diversity challenging to achieve. Further, over the years, the numerous help I received from many in our community essentially shaped who I am today. I have always been grateful, and this has motivated me to be a champion to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the past 12 years, covering all stages of my pre-faculty period.

As an under-represented group that is not paid enough attention to, first-generation college students like me usually come from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. As a result, they don’t have access to good educational resources, and their family couldn’t provide much helpful guidance. This barrier has made it extremely difficult for the students to fulfill their potentials and achieve big goals in their life (e.g., getting admitted into good universities).

I strived to help under-represented groups such as female students in my past endeavors. I contributed to a diverse, equitable, and inclusive academic community via research collaborations and various services. For example, I tutored K-12 students and mentored two female students during my undergraduate, Ph.D., and postdoctoral periods. When I was in college, I volunteered to help other students with the technical issues with their personal computers (e.g., reinstalling OS, fixing software configurations, diagnosing networking issues, system tuning, etc.). It helped promote the general interest of non-CS majors in computer science. Beyond that, I provided weekly tutoring service to a 2nd-year high school female student on Chemistry. After identifying the blind spots, I carefully designed practice questions to strengthen her understanding of some core concepts. Rewardingly, her grades improved a lot. I mentored Sujin Park for a research project remotely when she was in South Korea before starting her Ph.D. at Georgia Tech. We held weekly Skype meetings to discuss her research progress, and I assigned small tasks accordingly to ensure progress. Due to her contributions, we will co-author a paper together. At CMU, I collaborated with Sara McAllister, a CS Ph.D. student, on memory disaggregation research. During the process, I helped her formulate and tackle the technical challenges and brainstormed together for innovative ideas to tackle the data tiering challenges. To make our academic community more equitable and inclusive, I have served as a mentor for the SOSP’21 mentoring program, discussing research with junior Ph.D. students and providing feedback. I also helped organize a Bird-of-Feather (BoF) session at FAST’20 to promote Chameleon Cloud, a configurable experimental environment for large-scale edge-to-cloud research, enabling students with diverse backgrounds to access powerful computing resources for their study and research.

Future Plans to Advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: The power imbalance between faculty and students places more opportunities and responsibilities on faculty members for an improved diversity climate. As a faculty member, I plan to follow the following principles in my future student advising, teaching, and academic service to promote diversity: (1). Play a “role model” role to embrace diversity and combat biases, and (2). Provide proactive support to underrepresented students for them to succeed. More specifically, I plan to incorporate these principles into many aspects of my research group management, teaching, and outreach/service. Building a team of students with diverse backgrounds is the first step, and I aim to cultivate a fair, caring culture in my group and class to provide them with the necessary help for success. Considering the uniqueness of diverse students, I will set different expectations for students with different backgrounds based on deep discussions with the students and then gradually adjust them as the students “grow.” At the department and university level, I plan to spearhead some initiatives, such as organizing workshops/seminars to increase diversity awareness and identify opportunities for improvement. At the research community level, I would encourage and support underrepresented students to attend academic conferences. Further, I also plan to integrate these initiatives over casual chats, research meetings, and office hours with students.