Diversity Statement

Xu Zhang, University of Chicago

Diversity is a key to the development of a larger community: it helps the whole community adopt a multivariate culture that will benefit every community member in a profound and lasting way. In our research community, keeping diversity is a win-win game in which students are exposed to more chances and research programs can recruit more top talents. However, diversity seems not to be embraced in our community. For example, in my research community (computer systems & networks), we rarely see authors from minority groups (e.g., women and African Americans). In this statement, I will describe my understanding of diversity and my plans on improving it.

Lack of diversity is not a natural result but because of the inequity in our society. I had been a volunteer teacher at a middle school in a small village, and I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the students at that time. Although the students were eager to acquire knowledge, they still did not have enough grades to gain the chance of studying in a college. The poor results killed off the students’ confidence in pursuing academic achievements. The reason behind this was very simple: they did not have many resources for learning, such as qualified teachers and exercise books. The parents of those students were working in big cities but cannot bring their children with them due to their low income. I believe if they are exposed to more opportunities, their achievements will be as high as the students who already have many learning resources.

I have been active in improving diversity since I entered the Ph.D. program at UChicago. I was a teaching assistant for a variety of courses, and the students had different backgrounds. When I led student discussions in class or answered the questions during office hours, I strived to build an inclusive culture. I encouraged every student to speak out their viewpoints without interruptions, and I gave them positive feedback on the aspects which they were doing well. It did not only make the underrepresented students have more confidence in learning the courses, but also ensured a wide range of point views entered in class.

Plan on Improving Diversity

In the future, I will make a proactive effort to improve the diversity of my community (e.g., my research community and the department which I will work in). The potential actions include, but are not limited to:

Building a research group with a diverse set of students: The most direct way of improving diversity is to build a diverse research group. Given the demographics of the applicants who apply to graduate programs, it is not easy. Thus, I will make additional efforts to recruit my students. I will reach out to the schools that are not the typical sources of our graduate programs. Through the talks and discussions about my research, I believe it can encourage more students to apply to our graduate program, which expands the pool of applicants.

Providing equal chances to the students: The fundamental way of improving diversity is to provide equal research chances to the students. Today, it is not rare that applicants have rich research experience or even publications in top-tier conferences and journals. Thus, it is necessary to provide research opportunities to a diverse set of students. I will encourage undergraduate students with various backgrounds to participate in my research projects. Also, I will actively join the department’s programs, like summer schools, which offer opportunities to students who lack research experience.