Diversity Statement

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"Diversity there certainly is in the world, but it means neither inequality nor untouchability". This quote by Mahatma Gandhi accurately resonates with my definition of diversity and inclusion. I strive for the upliftment of the underprivileged and thrive to provide equal opportunity to the deserving. As a person of color who lived most of his childhood in the lower echelons of Indian society, I have first-hand experience of how extremely hard it is for the underprivileged to carve their path. I have traveled in the shoes of students who just desired to be included in the groups of their peers. For me, diversity is more than a word; it is an expression of human consciousness.

My tryst to achieve equality and diversity stems from my childhood experiences where my family had to live under extreme monetary crunch. For instance, until the end of my middle school, my parents rented a single room in a three-bed, one-bath apartment where we shared the apartment with two other families. Fortunately, things improved a little during my middle school when my parents rented a small studio apartment. As with any other child in my shoes, I often felt out of place and envied my classmates whose families owned houses and cars. These students were part of cliques where they invited each other to various birthday parties and events. I could never join these groups as we neither had space nor money to throw such parties. However, these experiences humbled me as a human and taught me how to make every person feel included.

During my academic journey, I have worked with students of various backgrounds, races, and gender identities. Throughout this journey, I have advocated for diversity and inclusion. Improving diversity to me centers around providing an inclusive environment to all, a philosophy that I apply to both teaching and mentorship. In the context of teaching, two sets of experiences inform my current philosophy 1) my experience mentoring students at UC Davis, and 2) my experience with Mentors without Borders.

At Davis, I mentored two international women of color pursuing master's degrees. Although these students were brilliant in their studies, they found it hard to discuss their ideas in a male-dominated class; one such student was Muslim, and she preferred to wear a hijab. During our interactions, she told me it was unexpectedly difficult for her to form a team for the class project. She feared that her appearance may have induced unfavorable notions in her classmates. Though the course project required each team to have four students, we made an exception for her. I helped her two-student team to establish a concrete research problem and created a safe space where they could have weekly meetings with me to complete the class project. I observed that with adequate safe space, this girl outperformed the rest of her classmates. I plan to use this experience to create an inclusive environment for all the students I teach and mentor. Although the CS community has made tremendous strides in improving the learning and working environment for women, I believe there is still some disparity and lack of representation, and we as a community should strive to ameliorate this environment. As a professor, I need to ensure the following: (1) My students are comfortable wearing whatever clothes represent them the best. (2) My students do not impose their beliefs or prejudices on other students. (3) My students have sufficient resources to succeed in their course/degree.

As an academic, I also consider teaching students from underrepresented communities my responsibility. In Fall 2022, I connected with "Mentors without Borders" and volunteered to teach students from several African nations, such as Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Initially, I was teaching sporadic classes to these students. But, in July 2023, I offered an "Introduction to Databases" course. During this process, once again, I observed the abject reality of our society. Although the classes were virtual, almost all students lacked sufficient internet connection to turn on their videos or lacked good laptops/computers to run extensive software. Additionally, these students often faced a language barrier. To overcome these barriers, I did the following: (1) I used simple English words during my lectures. (2) I used ample figures and illustrations and added animations wherever necessary. (3) I ensured that students could relate to all the examples used in the lectures; for example, during assignments, I asked students to create a database table of students studying in Kenya. I believe these teaching techniques made students comfortable as they illustrated extreme enthusiasm to learn new concepts, ask questions, and demand new assignments and course projects to work on. I plan to use similar principles in each course I teach so that each student, irrespective of their background, feels included and has access to resources to excel in their courses.

Finally, I am aware that a good mentor not only guides their students toward an intriguing research problem but also acknowledges the difficulties they face on a personal front. Before my postdoc at Berkeley, in Fall 2021, I mentored an undergraduate student at Berkeley. This student was keen on research in the blockchain space and was involved with the student-run blockchain organization at Berkeley. However, it soon became evident to me that this student was undergoing severe emotional distress in his personal life as he always looked stressed and could not complete most of the assigned research tasks. I tried my best to accommodate the needs of this student and had several meetings with him to understand his situation. Soon, I realized that this student was facing a gender identity crisis and an emotionally abusive environment at home. Following our meetings a couple of weeks later, this student

took the necessary help and came out as transgender. Although he was no longer interested in blockchain space, he seemed much more cheerful towards life and stayed in touch with me for the next couple of months. This and the past experiences have helped me to observe different spectrums of our society and the steps I need to take to support students around me. I would continue pursuing the goal of uplifting the marginalized, underrepresented, and underprivileged students around me by creating ample opportunities for their undeterred growth.