

Diversity Statement

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A global university such as UC San Diego consists of students coming from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In my view, diversity encompasses race, gender, socio-economic and various other factors. Each student is unique and has their own story behind their presence in the classroom. As an instructor, I always prioritize practicing inclusive teaching practices to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for all the students.

During my Masters and PhD at UC San Diego, I was very fortunate to be the research mentor and head TA for the Early Research Scholars Program (ERSP) at UC San Diego. ERSP is an initiative to promote research amongst underrepresented minorities in computer science. At ERSP, I learnt a lot of teaching practices to make sure that my classroom is inclusive and welcoming to all. I got to interact with lots of students, understood the diverse situations students faced, and these experiences shaped me into the instructor I am today.

From my experience, I have found that students from underrepresented minorities in STEM often experience Imposter Phenomenon (IP). Studies show that people experiencing IP tend to excessively worry about their mistakes and reject any signs of positive reinforcement. They also suffer a lot from burnout hindering their overall motivation to study the subject. During my tenure as the ERSP mentor, I came across many students who told me they are experiencing IP. Sometimes I found that people experiencing IP also don't ask or hesitate to ask questions to me, when I am explaining a subject. To mitigate IP and also foster a sense of belonging amongst students, I have employed a variety of teaching practices.

- **I am at fault:** In order to make sure students do not hesitate to ask questions, I always begin any discussion with this statement:

”If you do not understand something, it is by no means a reflection of your innate ability, but a failure on my side in properly explaining the concept. Please do not hesitate to ask for any explanation on any concept.”

I found that this practice put a lot of students at ease and also encouraged them to ask for more clarifications or a repeat explanation.

- **Logging and Reflection:** I also encouraged students to log what they thought their accomplishments and challenges were that week. Then, for the first 15 minutes of the meeting, each student shares their reflections with others. This helps in students understanding that all their peers also go through challenges and they are not alone in the learning process. I often find that students tend to diminish their own achievements by reducing everything to luck instead of their skill. I always reinforce the fact that they got the task done purely based on skill and not any luck.
- **Monitoring and Reaching out:** It is also important to monitor such logs to check in on students to identify challenges that students are facing. I make sure to reach out to students who are struggling and also schedule private meetings to help them. This method has worked really well for me, as one student noted in my evaluations:

”Very thorough, very helpful. Always available outside of class and meeting hours. Vignesh puts the most time and energy into being a TA for this class than I’ve ever seen a TA give. He genuinely cares about us and the projects we’re working on.”

Diversity isn’t limited to race and gender; it also encompasses diverse ways of thinking. Every student is unique and have their own characteristics, personality traits and behaviour. I want to provide an inclusive space for all the students to interact, feel respected and contribute meaningfully. However, this is not that easy to accomplish. Interactions between students, often unintentionally end up silencing people’s opinions. People from underrepresented minorities often show introverted behaviour in a classroom and when they are in discussion with someone with a more outgoing personality, they might not get an opportunity to contribute. Across all my teaching experiences, I have included multiple teaching practices to make students feel more inclusive in the classroom/ meetings.

- **Knowing my students:** I give utmost importance to knowing each of my students, memorizing their preferred names and pronouns. During our first meeting, I plan a few ice-breakers to get to know more about my students. This helps them get more familiar with me and their peers, improving future discussions.
- **Think, Pair, Share:** I use this technique a lot, where when I am teaching a topic, I ask students to take a minute to think about the question and then form pairs and make them discuss with each other. I found that this improved students’ sense of belonging in the class and helped them contribute more.
- **Round Robin Leadership:** It is important to make sure every student in the class gets an equal opportunity to voice out their opinions. If I am meeting with a group of 4, I choose a leader from that group in a round robin fashion to discuss the achievements of the group in that particular week. This makes sure that everyone gets to voice out their opinions on the project.

These experiences have taught me a lot and I plan to make an inclusive learning environment for all my students in the future. But by no means can I say that I am perfect. I am still continuing to learn and be more inclusive in my teaching. By reading up on research and frequent interactions/discussions with the Teaching and Learning Commons, I hope to keep improving in making my classroom a place where anyone can learn.