DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Alexandra Schofield Cornell University

As a computer science educator and community member, I want to develop practices and explicit, advocacy-based mentorship for other under-represented groups. When I was a computer science undergraduate, I did not identify myself as someone negatively affected by any kind of discrimination due to my relative privilege. While I championed many initiatives in my school, including co-founding the Claremont Colleges’ Women in Computing group and teaching UNIX skills to help combat impostor syndrome, it wasn’t until after I left my undergraduate institution that I personally began to experience some of the discrimination that often causes technologists in underrepresented groups to leave computer science. I ascribe my success in pursuing a PhD in computer science to a host of supportive mentors, including faculty, fellow students, and friends. As a mentor, an advocate, and a teacher, I relish the many opportunities I have to pay this service forward and to continue to push for inclusion in my intellectual community.

Mentor  One of the happiest parts of my job as an increasingly visible member of my department and my academic community is as a mentor. Individual support in navigating how to be a technical professional has helped me push through challenges both as a software engineer and as a researcher. I run practice interviews and give job negotiation advice for undergraduates, attend practice talks for junior PhD students, and help review everything from introduction emails to fellowship applications. I unabashedly take the opportunity to use my own growing social network to help my mentees, including walking them around and introducing them to people at poster sessions and conference receptions when their advisors aren’t there. I also try to encourage these mentorship programs, including coordinating our department-wide peer mentorship program and coffee hours for graduate women. I hope to be able to continue as a mentor and supporter through outreach and on-campus women in computing organizations.

Teacher  As an instructor in a large lecture course, I try to develop assessments and structures that ensure students who don’t match the stereotypes of computer science students may still succeed. Some of these techniques are standard pedagogical tools that benefit everyone: I use anonymous participation-only polling questions and online participation to encourage students who might feel singled out in a large room to be able to engage fully with the class in their own space and on their own terms. However, I also leverage the teachable moments offered by the task of managing a class as a community, in which small incidents can help teach students and myself how to be more inclusive. This semester, when a student responded disrespectfully to a classmate’s question that he had seen as too basic, I used it as an opportunity to teach the responder about the hazards of online communication and the diversity of experience he should expect from his classmates, leading him to choose to write a public apology himself. I find it important to provide a foundation of support both publicly and privately for students handling impostor syndrome. This semester, when I have found students dismissing the expertise of one of my female TAs, I both publicly applauded the good answers she gave and privately reached out to assure her I’d been through similar things and was free to talk. Both the student in the first story and the TA in the second went on to be some of the most helpful and frequent participants on our course Piazza page. These individual interventions don’t just resolve conflict: they produce better models for future behavior in the course and build student confidence.

Advocate  I consider one-on-one interactions not only to be effective for supporting junior colleagues and students, but also in engaging with my larger academic community. Instead of trying to ignore or publicly shaming researchers who I see have made inadvertently discriminatory remarks, I often privately go to them afterwards to compassionately inform them of the mistake and positive language choices for the future. I often find them very receptive to feedback and grateful for the opportunity to improve slide decks and change their speech. I have also worked to open this up to the scale of my department, including advocating for our underrepresented students on our department’s Diversity Committee, organizing the first department town hall to discuss and collect feedback on how to improve inclusion for graduate students in computer science, and several years helping to organize meetings for the Graduate Women in Computing group. On a larger scale, I focus much of my research service as a reviewer and volunteer on supporting workshops that promote diversity in my field, such as Women in NLP, Women in ML, and Black in AI.