Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Emigrating for access to better education has been a repeating trend in my family for multiple generations. Both my mother's parents and my father's parents are from extremely rural villages in Anatolia which were settled by Alevis trying to isolate themselves from the cruelty of some other groups at the time [6]. Those villages had no educational institutions at all and still lack utility infrastructure today. Challenged by the difficulty in access to developed life, my grandparents migrated to Istanbul in 1950's[1] which enabled my father to be the first member of his family with a university degree. Similarly, my mother was the only daughter in her family to receive a degree. One generation later, I was privileged to be admitted to Stanford University for a graduate program and ended up migrating to a completely new continent.

It is truly inspiring to see how the thoughts and habits of people from various backgrounds can co-exist in an extremely diverse environment like Stanford. With the celebration of differences, every single member of the community is invited to utilize their unique creative ways to build an even stronger community in terms of science and technology. However, establishing a celebrated diversity remains to be an ongoing challenge that shall be constantly worked towards, especially during cultural, racial, and religious conflicts around the world. My first encounter with this challenge was during one of the community projects I was leading during high school. Our project involved providing summer camps to underprivileged primary school students in various small towns of Anatolia, covering topics such as human rights, equality, critical thinking, and cultural heritage. When talking to a student who was previously constrained that "girls can not play soccer", I permanently learned stereotype threats were more common than perceived. At that point, mutual respect along with empathy was the best tool I had in order to have that student care about what I was sincerely offering while fighting against this threat.

After the interaction with the student mentioned above, I started feeling that my experiences and education confer a responsibility. I am inclined to actively take a role within society and bring people from different backgrounds together while helping them establish an inclusive environment. As an academic faculty candidate, this responsibility will be the most visible when teaching in the classroom and while engaging with the academic community in general. In this regard, I focus on two main fronts of diversity, equity, and inclusion:

The very first step to tackling a challenge is to measurably identify the dynamics that are creating this challenge in the first place. Therefore, we should constantly observe, identify, measure, and understand threats to diversity or any progress made against those threats. There are multiple scientific research projects that collect data and shine a light on how and why increasing diversity enables more productive research in academic institutions [1]. With a similar goal, I have analyzed the Google Search data and published the Computer Science Literacy Index (CSLI) that approximates the depth and breadth of computer science education in every country based on the Internet searches made in that region [4]. The project aimed to detect computer science topics that are less studied in different cultures and identify underrepresented groups around these topics without running expensive in-person surveys around the world. This expectantly leads to the development of new policies, teaching methods, and curricula for a more inclusive and proficient computer science community.

Once the underrepresented groups and the issues that are creating barriers for them are identified, the next focus is to keep an active communication channel with those groups to make sure

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[1]An interview with my grandfather about his migration stories (in Turkish) is published in [2]

collaboration, creativity, and a sense of peaceful belonging can flourish. I realized how challenging this can get when I first came to the United States from Türkiye. Still trying to adjust to the classroom culture, I was too shy to ask questions during class and was hardly going to the office hours to avoid long conversations on already difficult graduate-level curricula. It quickly became a pattern and negatively affected the pace at which I could learn for about a year. When I became a teaching assistant myself, I did my best to individually approach every student in class, establish a friendly relationship, and honestly share my imperfect thought process on the class topics, motivating them to share theirs. I insisted that there was no right or wrong, but just inspiring ideas. Soon, it became an extremely comfortable act to participate in class because everybody knew that their voice would be heard even when there are disagreements. One of the students even praised this non-judgemental attitude in their end-of-quarter evaluation forms.

In addition to making sure enthusiasm and collaboration persist in the classroom, maintaining ties with the members of the community outside the classroom is also crucial for complete inclusiveness. This is especially important during times of increased societal stress such as the pandemic where members of the community are more prone to personal hardships. In this regard, I have been mentoring undergraduate students from both Stanford University and my undergraduate institution, Koç University, since 2020. These mentorship programs allowed me to share my experiences with the novice members of our community who are also having similar difficulties with me in adjusting to the culture of research and university life. The self-confidence of these mentees rose notably over time as they learned that they were not alone in what they were going through.

To further serve the community, I have published a tutorial video for one of the most popular tools used in my field of research [3] and organized a public panel to discuss how to give a memorable talk [5]. The panelists of the latter event were from 4 different countries and discussed cultural nuances they learned over the course of their international careers that helped them deliver their messages more effectively to audiences from various backgrounds. The videos of these events were watched thousands of times on YouTube collectively and proved to be an effective platform for establishing open communication with the community members that I am not able to individually reach out to. Since then, researchers from all around the world with different backgrounds have been reaching out to ask questions or simply to connect.

In summary, establishing a respectful and empathetic communication channel with the members of the community has been my priority since the first time I realized how our different backgrounds impact the way we learn and grow. These channels allow us to observe our differences and celebrate them. They can be established with interactive classrooms, community projects, town hall meetings, or friendly conversations. As an academic faculty, I will keep building these channels throughout my career for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community where every single individual can feel welcome, amplifying creativity and joy!

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