Diversity Statement

Caleb Stanford

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A commitment to diversity is critical for the future of academia. I have pursued diversity and inclusion efforts at Penn through my leadership role as co-chair of the Computer Science Doctoral Association (CISDA) and as CIS faculty representative since Fall 2018, and through other volunteering efforts. I believe that **a primary driving force behind encouraging diversity is healthy department culture and climate.** Maintaining a welcoming and desirable environment is likely to have huge impacts for talented students who face barriers in academia. First-generation and underrepresented students are more likely to be uncertain about their prospects as they may be in a different career path than their peers and family pursued.

Commitment to diversity: responding to scientific evidence. Research has clearly demonstrated numerous inequalities that threaten our institutions and interactions: these include phenomena such as sub-conscious bias, in-group favoritism, linguistic inequalities, and harassment which disproportionately affect underrepresented community members. These once uncomfortable, now widely understood findings should drive diversity efforts and adoption. I believe in an evidence-based and progressive stance on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Leadership. Since 2018, I have been a chair of CISDA, a student-run advocacy organization at Penn for facilitating social support and community in the CIS department. Its primary goal is to provide a medium for student issues to be brought to the department and addressed. For example, in weekly meetings with the department this semester, I have worked to address the following issues: students not feeling comfortable to order equipment through their advisors (addressed by an announcement in faculty meeting); students not having access to department spaces (addressed by communicating with building management to fix); department vacation policies (addressed by working with the department to develop a formal recess policy); and students being unnecessarily held responsible for administrative tasks (currently working to address through hiring another administrator). At least once a semester, I have run open meetings with the student body to discuss what issues to focus on. We also have a web form for anonymous suggestions. Many of these issues particularly with respect to access to department resources are especially crucial for students who face barriers to inclusion. In addition to handling student issues, CISDA focuses on improving department climate through weekly social hours and "tea & cookies" events. *As a student leader for 3 years, I have especially valued the opportunity to learn about student concerns and act as a liaison between CIS students and the department.*

I view this advocating work as especially important to equity and inclusion because many students can face barriers to speaking up about departmental issues. To help break the silence, I regularly send out student surveys to gauge what issues students are facing on a larger scale. for example, I sent out a survey about mental health issues students have faced related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I followed up with a few specific students and by organizing inclusive in-person walks outside starting in Fall 2020. In a different semester, I sent out a survey about student's feelings on proposed modifications to the written and oral qualifying exam component, and presented the results to faculty; these survey results directly impacted the adoption of the latest revised requirements.

Advocating for women. At a department where most students and faculty are men, sexism and harassment pose an especially brutal threat for women and non-binary students and faculty. I deeply care about my friends, colleagues, and mentors in the department and I advocate for women in computer science in my teaching, through my involvement with CISDA, and in personal interactions. For a perhaps small example, in organizing events with CISDA I met with the women's doctoral association representatives and the director of diversity efforts at Penn to discuss ways to improve the climate for women. One thing the other CISDA volunteers and I have identified is that having social events without alcohol and in a more laid back setting can make some students feel more included.

In addition to in departmental events, addressing sexism is especially important in the classroom. When I was a TA during my undergraduate years at Brown in 2015 for a theory of computation course, I was

responsible for a weekly lab where students were assigned to work in groups of three on a set of problems. I noticed a recurring pattern where a woman would be paired with two men, and the men would speak to each other or exclude the woman; this was especially bad for a few repeat offenders. To address this, I sent an email to the Women in Computer Science group at Brown detailing the problem and asking what I should do to correct it. While today, I would probably go directly to the professor and implement a solution, I did receive very helpful advice. The solution was to *explicitly* talk about the issue of inclusivity with everyone at the start of each lab, before breaking into groups, with a specific example of good behavior (including everyone in the conversation) and bad behavior (ignoring a suggestion from a group member or only talking between two of the three group members). I implemented this suggestion and it led to definite and noticeable improvements. Too often, these issues go unnoticed by those in charge and subconscious inequalities and biases leave lasting damage on members of our community.

On multiple occasions, students have confided in me individually with a more serious concern on the level of harassment from another student, staff member, or faculty member. It is a huge responsibility to treat these confidential concerns seriously and to act in support in accordance with the student's wishes (whether that means respecting their request for confidentiality or bringing the concern to someone else). I have also identified and gained a deep respect for faculty in the department at Penn who I know have acted in a role of support. These personal conversations, as well as the positive feedback about CISDA over the years convince me that my efforts have been worthwhile.

Additional volunteering. I served as a volunteer on the Penn Applicant-Support Program (for under-served or under-represented communities in the admissions process), in Fall 2020. The Penn Applicant Support Program was a pioneering effort to provide feedback for minority and underrepresented students applying to PhD programs. I was one of a dozen PhD student volunteers, and was paired with an applicant to the Penn CIS PhD program with limited access to other mentors to help with their application. I met with them several times throughout the semester and gave multiple rounds of feedback on their application materials. I was delighted to hear that the student that I mentored through the process was admitted to Penn! I found this to be a useful experience in improving my own ability to function as an effective mentor.

At the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) level, I was involved in the early stages of organization of the SEAS Dean's Doctoral Advisory Board, which was set up to address student issues across the department, including issues of diversity and climate, especially advisor-student issues. The Dean of SEAS additionally held a series of events to determine, as Penn Engineering, what our core values are and to release this in a public "Our Values" statement. The selected values were (1) scholarship, creativity and curiosity (2) integrity and character (3) diverse people and perspectives. One thing I took away from these meetings was that a principled and respectful approach (neither antagonistic nor divisive) is absolutely essential in order to *listen to all parties involved,* get faculty on board, and ultimately instigate change.

Future plans. As a professor, my opportunities to have an impact on department climate and equity would be magnified. I would hope to represent climate and equity concerns in department faculty meetings, including carrying out student and faculty surveys where appropriate. For example, I am interested in being responsible for starting a URM applicant-support program similar to the program that was offered at Penn. I would also pursue other programs to connect people to mentors and peers at the cross-institution level. In particular, I have been in contact with the organizers of an event called PLTea which hosts programming languages community events on Zoom, about an idea to form small peer groups of PhD students. I would also be interested in being involved in department visit days, where I would work to ensure fairness and inclusion in those events and proceedings. In the longer term, I am interested in volunteering for chair roles in which I can interact directly with PhD and undergraduate student leadership: i.e. department chair, graduate chair, or undergraduate program chair. Faculty in these positions have a unique opportunity to be available to students as a point of trust and support, and to mitigate student issues (e.g. administrative such as access to spaces, funding; equity-related including inequalities, harassment, and access to mentors).

Conclusion. Leadership organizations and student climate issues play a key role in enacting diversity and equity changes. Through all of these experiences and as a department leader, I have been fortunate to grow as a person and to bring student issues to the table. I believe that it is imperative that we exercise intellectual humility in listening to and addressing the issues of disadvantaged communities, just as we do in scientific research.