

The groundbreaking progress and widespread adoption of AI-based technologies places a significant responsibility on us, as computer scientists, to ensure that our innovations align with human values and that their benefits are broadly equitable. In my view, fostering equity within any intellectual pursuit can only be achieved when the composition of those developing the tools mirrors the diverse range of stakeholders, encompassing gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. While my work is technical, it anchors itself in democratizing intelligent systems for equitable access and usage. However, computer science has a diversity problem, albeit gradually improving. To break free from the cycle of “bias laundering”, we must actively seek out and address practices that perpetuate these harmful prejudices and foster an inclusive environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds can thrive.

With the goal of increasing diversity at the Allen School, I co-founded the pre-application mentorship service (PAMS) in 2020 to assist and mentor prospective PhD applicants from historically marginalized groups and I also led the student side of the graduate admissions in ML/AI during 2020–22 to advocate for students with non-traditional backgrounds. Till now, PAMS has assisted over 200 students from underrepresented and historically marginalized groups resulting in over 20 students getting a UW CSE PhD admit alongside kick-starting PAMS programs across UW. While PAMS was one part, as a student area chair for PhD admissions, I ensured applications – by reading over 2000 in the past 3 years – with a non-traditional background did not fall through the cracks. This helped us recruit our first couple of PhD students from both Africa and South America. Furthermore, with the help of the Allen School leadership, we succeeded in removing expensive GRE from the PhD application requirements while supporting application fee waivers in order to make the process more equitable for students from the global south and weak economic backgrounds.

My most direct contribution to improve diversity has been through active recruitment of students from varied backgrounds and being accessible for students at and beyond UW CSE. Among my students have been three Indian women, a group that has historically faced marginalization and, despite a positive trend towards STEM education in India, remains severely underrepresented in all aspects of computer science education and careers. Akin to many of my other students, they are now pursuing PhD in top computer science departments. I try to build my students’ confidence by asking them to lead the research discussions and collaborations. At the same time, I connect them to people with similar interests and trajectories both in industry and academia to further facilitate their exploration. I actively try and create a welcoming atmosphere for junior students who want to meet me during conferences and also invite them to present their research in our lab lunches. Though my immediate contributions may seem modest, I see them accumulating over time, empowering my students to flourish as researchers and future leaders, who will ultimately make a far more profound impact on diversity and inclusion.

Future Plans A diverse academic community is essential for fostering a stimulating and intellectually enriching environment. While universities may not have direct control over all societal barriers and inequalities, they play a crucial role in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

Improving diversity in computer science requires injecting equitable considerations for applicants at all levels of the pipeline. All of my efforts so far have focused on active college students in computer science or in liaising with the academic search committee during faculty hiring, but I identify and acknowledge that the root of lack of diversity stems from schooling. As a faculty member, I shall volunteer and reach out to organizations like AI4All to promote

computer science education at the high-school level across demographics both within the US and globally. Within the department, I will work to promote a welcoming culture and initiate open-table discussions to make computer science accessible. Across the university, I will support or develop initiatives that promote disciplinary diversity in tackling problems of technology and society. Finally, within the wider community, I will continue my record of engagement and support student-led volunteer outreach initiatives. As a professor, I will help strengthen connections between the university and the communities we serve.