Diversity Statement

I have both experienced and observed wide disparities while growing up in India, where I volunteered for community improvement through a range of causes from earthquake relief to tutoring underprivileged children. My move from India to the United States then deepened my understanding of challenges surrounding diversity and inclusion. Although the overarching themes of economic disparity and access to opportunities are present in both countries, the underlying mechanisms and contexts are different. At UW, I have had many opportunities to learn about issues which prevent people from different socio-economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds from competing on an even playing field. I have learned how people with different physical and mental abilities face different challenges in daily tasks. By engaging in discussions with diversity advocates, reading, and listening to experiences of people, I have come to realize my privileged position and my responsibility to do more toward reducing such barriers. During my Ph.D., I have supported diversity through mentoring, service, and research.

Mentoring
Effective mentoring requires an ongoing process to understand what kind of biases are in play and how to correct or reduce them. I have mentored 13 students during my Ph.D., more than half of whom were women or from other underrepresented groups in STEM. In taking on new mentees, I do not require any prerequisite experience in engineering or research. I view my role as a mentor to support them in acquiring the skills they need to achieve their goal. I am mindful of the power discrepancy in a mentor–mentee relationship, and that it may inhibit mentees from speaking up or could prompt them to continue work in which they are no longer interested. To alleviate such a scenario, I ensure that my mentees know that they can reach out to my advisor or their program advisor to discuss matters they are not comfortable discussing with me. I also have regular check-ins with the mentees to ensure they are still excited about the project and want to continue working on it.

Service
With a goal of reducing bias and assisting in a fair evaluation of applications, I have served twice as a member of the Ph.D. admissions committee in UW Computer Science & Engineering (CSE). In addition to reviewing students interested in HCI/UbiComp research, I was specifically responsible for reviewing applications from South Asian countries, which might be difficult to calibrate for someone unfamiliar with the region. I have also served in various capacities in organizing CSE visit days for prospective Ph.D. admits (e.g., scheduling a two-day visit for HCI/UbiComp prospective students, coordinating accommodations for prospective students who want to stay with a current student). My emphasis in carrying out these responsibilities has been to create a welcoming environment for students from diverse backgrounds and showcasing our commitment to maintaining a vibrant culture.

Through DUB (a cross-campus interdisciplinary initiative for HCI research and education), I have engaged in several activities to make the community more inclusive. During a DUB event, we had an unfortunate circumstance where, although the venue was accessible, the area where people were socializing was covered in gravel making it difficult for a colleague who uses a wheelchair to participate. I took this as a learning opportunity to work with DUB coordinators to ensure we check future venues more thoroughly for accessibility needs. Additionally, we have developed guidelines to ensure activities we organize and food we provide addresses to the diverse needs of the DUB community.

Highlighting diverse role models is a key component in maintaining a vibrant community such as DUB. I have been mindful in recruiting volunteers to lead various DUB activities to ensure the volunteers themselves bring in a range of backgrounds and experiences. Similarly, while organizing the DUB Doctoral Consortiums and job panels, I have worked with my fellow coordinators to present panels which reflect the diversity of DUB.

Research
In my research, I am mindful of sampling biases and particularly strive to recruit beyond the WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) population. In addition, I have engaged with different communities to disseminate my research. For example, I organized a discussion at the Quantified Self Conference 2018 to get input from non-academics who are interested in self-tracking on how to build better tools. I also organized an Open Session at Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD conference) 2019 to engage with experts in global health on how to scale my work with Beacon to reach people outside of major cities.

Future Plans
As a faculty member, I seek to actively contribute to existing efforts and design new initiatives that promote an inclusive culture within and beyond the department. I plan to work with the local community to create opportunities for secondary school students to learn about and get involved with research. Toward shaping well-rounded students, I plan to include readings and discussions on diversity and wellness in the technology industry in my classes and seminars. I look forward to working with the admissions and outreach committees to reduce biases and set up structures to encourage students with non-traditional backgrounds to consider, pursue, and excel in STEM.