

Diversity Statement

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I remember attending my first conference as an undergraduate student and being surprised at the lack of diversity in the room relative to my research group at the time. From that time, it has been impossible for me to ignore the lack of diversity in our academic community.

Enabling students with less access to research experience to gain it is an important aspect of allyship as we work to make our research community more inclusive. While our academic community, including the DEI efforts I have participated in, tends to focus on (at this point) widely discussed types of diversity (individuals with gender minority, URM, low-income, and/or LGBT+ backgrounds), there are other forms of DEI efforts that receive less attention. For example, after I joined the leadership team of MIT's student-led Graduate Application Assistance Program (GAAP), I successfully argued for the inclusion of an additional mentee acceptance criteria: under-represented academic backgrounds. Relatively few students who come to MIT as PhD students do so from universities with less research activity (exact data is not available for legal reasons); these students benefit from extra mentorship with the application process, just as other students with DEI backgrounds do. In fact, one third of 2021 mentees came from under-represented academic backgrounds, similar to the number of mentees who were the first generation in their family to attend college, and close to the number of mentees (40%) who identified as a gender minority.

There are other similar (often correlated) demographic backgrounds which go under-discussed. For example, my identity as an Indian-American has exposed me to familiarity with caste discrimination, and how this affects our academic community. Our community generally recruits PhD students from India from top schools such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and upper caste individuals have greater access to such schools, notwithstanding their caste-based affirmative action programs. Taking more such identity components into account in our DEI efforts will help make our community stronger.

I am excited about the potential of programs with broader scope to aid DEI goals, e.g., hiring visiting students or interns from nontraditional backgrounds. These programs help students gain research experience they might otherwise struggle to find as a first step towards joining the research community.