

STATEMENT ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

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“Everyone deserves to understand completely.” This deceptively simple statement struck me deeply during my graduate school orientation. It excellently summarizes the way my experiences as a student and an instructor have shaped one of my major goals: to foster accessibility and belonging in mathematics.

I once took a computer science course on data structures and algorithms. At the time, I was new to exploring computer science, and I felt out of place in a room where everyone seemed very comfortable with technical resources and jargon. I quietly convinced myself I shouldn’t need to ask for help. I finished that semester with a good grade and a feeling that I had survived the content, not learned it. This story is not unique. We have seen and will continue to see that having primary and secondary school experiences interrupted by a global pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities of access and widened gaps in (often unspoken) “background” knowledge regarding both content and how to be a student. These gaps can be isolating even, as in my case, with instructors who in no way mean to exclude.

We explore new material more confidently and productively when we know someone wants us to succeed. I have worked hard to be such a someone to students, to meet them where they are, and to be on their team. I have volunteered to teach and help develop courses have co-requisite support (‘co-reqs’). These are taken largely by first-year students and are designed to serve those who would not succeed in a standard section. I have worked both independently and closely with faculty lecturers to teach co-req versions of both college algebra and general education math courses over the past two years. Our extra time together is used not only to strengthen students’ skills with the content but also to discuss study skills and habits that will serve them as students beyond the scope of my course.

Through these co-reqs, I’ve learned that a big part of creating an accessible and comfortable environment is an inclusive participation policy. Encouraging active engagement and effort is important. We learn math by doing math. However, tying one’s grade to their physical presence in a room or the number of times they speak can make students feel like they’ve failed if other matters require their attention or they aren’t yet comfortable being vocal in class. I look for engagement opportunities that can be made asynchronous, using resources like Desmos or a learning management system. I also have students write reflections throughout the semester about their experiences, their goals and habits, and the outside circumstances helping and hindering them. Students have said they appreciate having space to talk about what was holding them back, and they have felt cared for in my class.

Moving forward, I want to expand my involvement with initiatives that seek to fill gaps in background and allow space for discussion of matters of hidden curriculum that can disproportionately impact the success of first-generation students. Building on my experience as a peer mentor and an officer of student organizations, I will seek to magnify underrepresented voices in mathematics, in particular through organizations like the Association for Women in Mathematics and Spectra. In doing so, I hope to better understand inequities and learn how to work to correct them. Overall, in every interaction I have, I will continue my efforts to show my students that they belong in mathematics and they deserve to understand completely.