Diversity Statement Katy Ilonka Gero

In my experience, making lasting change is difficult and takes sustained effort. In this statement I describe the work I undertook as a Ph.D. student to make lasting change in my department, what I learned from these efforts, and what I intend to pursue as faculty.

Making Change as Ph.D. Student

Entering graduate school after four years of working in small, women-led start-ups was an eye-opener. At all my campus visits I noticed the distinct lack of racial diversity in the student and faculty body, as well as the under-representation of women. As a Ph.D. student I engaged in various efforts to improve the diversity of the Ph.D. population in my department.

Understanding the problem. Understanding the structural barriers to improving the diversity of the Ph.D. population in my department was a huge effort unto itself, but was key to knowing how to tackle the problem. First I tried to gather information on the make-up of a) the applicants to the program, b) those who were accepted into the program, and c) those who decided to attend. Accessing this information proved difficult as it was not aggregated in a single location. After meetings with various faculty and staff, I was able to view this information for several past years. Through a combination of seeing the numbers and talking with faculty and staff about the application process, I learned about some key problems. First, the department accepted students on a faculty-by-faculty basis. Because faculty often accept just one or two students a year, it is hard for any one faculty to see bias in the process.[1] Second, because faculty must fund their own students, they are often hesitant to take on a student from a lesser-known university or with an imperfect resume. Finally, many faculty had never seen this data before, and therefore did not appreciate the extent of the problem.

Advocating for the release of historical acceptance data. I strongly advocated for greater distribution of the data about the demographic make-up of who applied, was accepted, and ultimately entered the program. I saw firsthand how this information could instigate change: there was one professor who, after seeing this data, noticed that despite making offers to many women the previous year, very few of them accepted the offer. This motivated the professor to take the problem more seriously, and resulted in a change to the way our campus visit day was run: a new session was added where underrepresented acceptees could meet in a closed-room session with current underrepresented students to ask hard questions about the department. This data is now much more widely viewed within the department, and allows the department to track the effectiveness of other interventions.

Founding our Pre-Application Review program. Another avenue I pursued was starting a Pre-Application Review (PAR) Program, which provides feedback on application materials to underrepresented students before they apply to the program. Many applicants do not have access to mentors within academia, which can result in a lack of understanding of unspoken norms about the application process. We modeled our program after other schools which already had such programs in place. We met with many other schools as part of a consortium of mostly graduate student-run initiatives to share best practices. This program, which I founded with Chris Kedzie in 2020, continues to be run by current Ph.D. students today in 2023, and many current graduate students took advantage of this program to improve their materials prior to their application.

Lessons in Making Change

Leverage existing solutions. Many people have thought about these problems before me. Leveraging their knowledge, and in particular existing programs, can be more effective than inventing new solutions. I encouraged my department to join existing programs with demonstrated success, and modeled the PAR Program after similar programs at other schools which had demonstrated success.

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[1] The exception was the Theory group, which accepted students as a cohort. As expected, their student pool was more diverse as they could more easily see diversity issues during the process.

Encourage a sense of agency. Large systems are hard to change. Part of the difficulty is that everyone in the system can feel a lack of agency. I saw this happen not just to the Ph.D. students but to faculty and even department chairs who felt their hands were tied. Building up the belief that everyone has the ability to make change is key to sustained effort. This includes those in positions of power, who have a responsibility to enact change, as well as those with less power or those who are oppressed by a system, who should have agency to lead change themselves.

Planned DEI Work as Faculty

Support and join existing efforts. Leveraging existing programs is an effective way to make change. As a graduate student I was involved with the undergraduate groups Women in Computer Science (WiCS) and Women in Science at Columbia (WiSC). Many schools have a "Bridge to Ph.D. Program" which are designed to increase the participation of students from underrepresented groups in Ph.D. programs. There are also national programs, such as NSF's REU program, which provide funding to support underrepresented students. I would support undergraduate efforts as well as existing university and national initiatives, which have demonstrated success in improving the diversity and experience of the student body.

Support students in finding meaningful careers. As a mentor for undergraduates, I repeatedly heard students complain that while they wanted to pursue Computer Science, they struggled to find socially responsible job opportunities. I saw this as a structural problem: while large technology or finance companies regularly visited campus to hold informational events, it was rare to see smaller companies, not-for-profit organizations, or government organizations on campus. I would advocate for diversifying career fairs and having the department invite a broader range of organizations such that students are exposed to more career options.

Conclusion

My theory of change is this. Work hard to improve the communities you are in and that you understand the best. Don't assume you're the first person to ever discover or think deeply about a problem; acknowledge and support existing solutions. But remember that everyone can have an impact, and get excited about new energy and new ideas. Finally, the old camping rule seems to apply everywhere I go: leave places better than how you found them.