

Jane Im’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement

A while ago, my PhD advisor told me, “*One of your greatest strengths is your strong sense of fairness. More than any PhD student I know, you spend time trying to address injustices in the world around you.*” He then suggested that I should merge that inclination with my research. Throughout my PhD, I have strived to do that, but here, I will comment on my efforts on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion outside of research. Below, I first describe the initiatives I have spearheaded within the academic communities I am part of, especially within the University of Michigan School of Information (UMSI) and the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI) community. Then, I reflect on my identities, including those that give me the privilege, and how I think it is important to continuously learn about equity and justice-related topics one is less aware of. I conclude with some directions I would like to contribute to as a faculty member.

From Fall 2022 to Summer 2023, I was the PhD student representative on the UMSI’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee. There were multiple DEI subcommittees, and I was part of the subcommittee for designing UMSI’s DEI 2.0 Strategic Plan, which is the school’s five-year plan for improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in 2023–2028. I led multiple efforts to ensure PhD students’ perspectives are reflected in the proposal, especially regarding PhD advising relationships, which are oftentimes intertwined with both advisor and advisee’s identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, socio-economic status). As a main example, I proposed the idea of running a series of online discussions on UMSI PhD student’s Slack about various issues around DEI and PhD advising. I set up the Slack channel so that students can participate anonymously, seeded discussion topics, and selected PhD student moderators. Throughout Fall 2022, I was busy conceptualizing the idea, publicizing the Slack channel to PhD students, running the channel, summarizing the discussions, getting feedback from PhD students, and communicating with the DEI committee about the findings.

Among the UMSI PhD students who participated, multiple students said that faculty need to do a better job of respecting students’ identities (e.g., disability, gender, religion, race, culture, global south, worker identities). For example, a few students voiced that they wished the school could develop procedures for how disabled students can make accommodations to their milestones. I also found that PhD students desired more mechanisms of giving regular feedback to faculty, especially to one’s advisors. I later wrote a document summarizing the findings, and circled back to the PhD students to ensure it accurately captured what was discussed in the channel. After getting feedback, I shared the document with the DEI committee, so that they were reflected in the final DEI 2.0 Strategic Plan [1]. The impact did not stop here—thanks to Professor Kentaro Toyama, the DEI committee co-faculty chair, the document was later shared with Professor Beth Yakel, the Interim Dean at the time, and I was invited to present the findings at a faculty retreat in summer 2023. I later learned that it was a rare moment for UMSI faculty to hear about PhD students’ honest perspectives on advising relationships.

Continuing this line of work, I also organized the first panel at ACM CHI on improving PhD advising relationships [2]. As one effort for the panel preparation, I designed and deployed a survey within the CHI community for understanding PhD students and faculty’s experiences regarding PhD advising relationships.¹ Among the many issues that surfaced from the survey responses, one was how students’ identities, such as being an international student, can be a factor in experiencing or navigating mistreatment or abuse from faculty advisors. Based on such findings, as a panelist, I talked about how being an international student can add another layer of stress when switching advisors due to visa-related issues. Among other points, I emphasized that institutions should seriously consider faculty’s mistreatment or abuse of PhD students when making hiring or tenure decisions. For example, what if all institutions were required to take into account how many PhD students left or were dropped by a faculty member for their tenure packet? What if institutions were required to also consider the identities of those students (e.g., women, first generation students)? The reaction to the panel was positive overall, based on the feedback I received from students and even some faculty members. Many expressed that having a public discussion about PhD advising between PhD students and faculty was extremely rare, but valuable. I aim to continue such conversations within the CHI community to create tangible changes in the long run.

Another experience that I feel compelled to write about, happened in March 2021, when a white man killed eight people in Atlanta—six of whom were women of Asian-descendent [3]. After learning about the shooting, I found myself feeling waves of disbelief, sadness, and anger. I wanted to do something to raise awareness regarding anti-Asian racism within the PhD program. I started discussing ideas with three other Asian women PhD students about what we can do. Through Zoom working sessions, we wrote a letter to UMSI, listing what the school should do to protect students who are people of color or/and gender minorities. We also wrote that the school should acknowledge the Atlanta shooting was a hate crime due to racial injustice, *not* because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We researched studies on stereotypes about Asians (e.g., model minorities) and listed tangible action items for faculty and administration, such as properly pronouncing Asians’ names. We shared this letter with students, which led to 69 PhD students co-signing the letter. When we finally sent the letter to the school’s official mailing list, it garnered outpouring attention. Many faculty members thanked us for the constructive action items and the

¹<https://www.phd-advising-hci.com>

letter led the school's DEI committee to hold community gatherings to discuss anti-Asian hate crimes. The letter was also noticed by the Asian Pacific Islander Desi/American Staff Association at the University of Michigan and was published as an op-ed [4] in *The Michigan Daily*. Afterwards, other departments asked if they could borrow the letter's content.

When it comes to my own daily research mentoring of students, I have witnessed various interpersonal dynamics that are deeply intertwined with students' identities. For example, I have frequently observed that male students tend to talk more and appear more confident in meetings compared to women and individuals from gender minorities. When such dynamics persistently arise during collaboration, I carefully ask each mentee about how they perceive the situation, and then intervene if necessary. Once, due to persistent stressful dynamics during collaboration, I ended up carving out a new system-building project that a female undergraduate student could lead independently, while still collaborating with the male student on the original project. My experiences have taught me that not intervening, when a mentor perceives that a student wants an intervention, could negatively impact both the student and the academic community in the long run.

While I have written about my experiences above, which are related to being an Asian woman and an international student, I am also simultaneously aware of other identities that give me privilege. My parents both became professors, which transformed the lives of their low-income families. Unsurprisingly, my parents have always provided the best education to me and my sister. For example, thanks to them, I learned English when I lived in the United States between the ages of 5 and 8. Because of this, I have been frequently told that my English pronunciation "is good compared to other Korean students." Having tenured professors as parents also meant I never had to worry about income, and that I was able to fly back to visit them at least once per year. If anything else, these experiences have taught me that each person's identities can be complex, and it is crucial to consider them holistically.

As a faculty member, I aim to periodically reflect on these experiences and identities. I will also strive to learn about topics related to equity and justice that I am less knowledgeable about. As just one example, as a Korean, I had to educate myself about the struggles that Native American communities face in the United States. I have also realized that I have been less aware about the difficulties that multiracial people experience, until I engaged in discussions with colleagues. I will continue to read, listen, and learn about such topics that I am not familiar with, so that I can be aware of systematic biases and barriers when teaching and mentoring students, as well as interacting with staff members and faculty.

There are some concrete DEI-related directions I hope to pursue as a faculty member. One is creating research opportunities for students from underrepresented groups, coupled with mentoring that amplifies each student's strength. I will strive to actively recruit beyond the "usual" pools, for example, by publicizing summer research opportunities for undergraduate students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). At the same time, research shows that just giving opportunities to underrepresented groups is not enough. I will mentor and support the recruited students so that they can find their unique voice and build on their strengths. Furthermore, continuing my initiatives as a PhD student, I would like to lead or participate in school-wide efforts to support PhD students who are women, people of color, disabled, first-generation students, and have other kinds of underrepresented identities. As just one example, I am interested in designing mechanisms so that PhD students can more easily communicate with faculty who are not their advisors. Such relationships do not necessarily need to be intensive mentoring. They rather serve as a safeguard in cases where a PhD student experiences identity-related mistreatment or abuse by their advisor. Creating change is difficult, but by pursuing these directions, I hope to contribute to gradual yet meaningful progress for diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia.

References

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