

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Akshat Tarun Das (atdas@math.uh.edu)

In this statement, I will summarize my experiences and thoughts related to discrimination on various levels, and my efforts to improve my own and other people's understanding of these issues. I am very glad that a conscious effort is being made by your institution towards betterment of the work environment by addressing issues related to discriminatory behaviour on the basis of social or physical components of a person's identity. Hiring new employees that possess an understanding of these issues and have ideas about rectifying them is a crucial step towards a more inclusive, equitable and diverse workplace. I feel that in addition to taking steps towards addressing these issues directly, equal amount of importance should also be given to creating more awareness about these difficulties in the work environment among the existing employees.

It is important to understand and acknowledge that social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity create interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. For example, people of colour belonging to gender minorities face even greater discrimination as opposed to men of colour. These issues extend to employment patterns; women of color find it harder to get employment than men of color. It is only through an awareness of this intersectionality that we can better address the issues of prejudice and discrimination.

In my journey so far, I have been very fortunate to interact with people from various cultures and backgrounds. This has made me more cognizant of the steps that I could take to make others have a sense of belonging. Patience is required because promoting inclusiveness requires deliberate, intentional and consistent effort. A conscious effort is required to understand and remember that at any given time, not everyone around us is as comfortable as we are. It is our responsibility to try to identify situations where there is a lack of inclusiveness in the surrounding. If there is a scenario where someone feels alienated, we need to make the environment more friendly. Small gestures like taking the time to make sure that everyone you are addressing is actually able to understand everything that you said can be very helpful to make everyone feel included.

Since my first semester here at UH in Fall 2017, I have had at least one TA assignment that has involved teaching, every semester. This has enabled me to interact with students coming from diverse backgrounds and ethnicity. I understand that due to reasons such as unfamiliarity with the language of instruction, many students are unable to grasp the content being taught. Patience, the willingness to repeat what one says while teaching and having multiple ways of explaining any given concept is extremely important to ensure that no student falls behind. The majority of the students who feel shy to ask questions in a class come from underrepresented groups. I hold regular office hours where students can meet me in a less formal setting to discuss questions and concepts. This gives them an opportunity to get help with all questions they have. It also gives me the chance to appreciate their efforts and to inspire and encourage them to ask their questions.

As the Lead TA since Fall 2018, I have coordinated with a team of 15 or more Calculus 1 TAs every semester. I also serve as a liaison between the team of TAs and the team of instructors for the course. Some of the challenges that I face in class while teaching are similar to those

that I face in this administrative work. It is always my endeavour to promote a respectful and inclusive work environment. I try to ensure that fellow TAs who do not use English as their preferred language or who come from different backgrounds are never sidelined. As I mentioned before, patience and the ability to identify scenarios where a colleague is facing such discomfort is essential.

I have also been serving as the President of the University of Houston student chapter of the American Mathematical Society (UH-AMS) since Fall 2020. We have organized panel discussions about various important topics and I have always tried to ensure that we have a diverse panel with respect to gender and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to that, we also try to have diversity in our team of officers. I feel that it is very important to have women and people from other underrepresented groups in leadership roles to give them a platform through which they can make an impact. This not only instills a sense of confidence and belonging in other people from similar backgrounds, but also helps to showcase and appreciate their achievements.

The mathematics department at UH also has an active student chapter of the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM). I regularly attend the events they organize, especially their Women in Math seminar series. I have gained a deeper understanding of the difficulties women face in male dominated work environments. Such events also allow us to better appreciate the achievements of women mathematicians and their contributions to the field. In the past I have also volunteered in their outreach activities like the Girls Exploring Math and Science event at the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences, where we interacted with young girls to encourage them to pursue mathematics.

I believe that my experiences have given me a deeper sense of understanding on issues that people from underrepresented groups face. I wish to dedicate my time and effort to help and encourage students and colleagues coming from different backgrounds. I hope to use what I have learned so far to contribute in creating a diverse, inclusive, respectful and supportive mathematics community, and to also continue to learn and grow myself.