

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

JEAN YANG

People have told me that computer science is “not the path for a girl.” I have watched female friends struggle with confidence issues and leave the field. Had I not become aware of the cultural issues that made me feel that I did not belong, I may also have abandoned my passion. This experience made me realize that culture presents a major obstacle to diversity in computing. Fortunately, culture is amenable to influence.

My background drives me to improve diversity in STEM fields through understanding and influencing the culture. After reading about topics such as implicit bias and “cultural” differences in communication between men and women, I began creating awareness around gender issues. Through examining gender, I came to realize that all issues of diversity—gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, and class—are intertwined. My goal has become to create equal opportunities for everyone to pursue a career in computing, regardless of background.

My diversity activities began when I discovered that MIT needed a student-run women’s group. In 2009, during my second year of graduate school, I wanted to invite writers from the *Feministing* blog for an MIT panel but could find no relevant group to host and fund the event. I became determined to create infrastructure that would allow MIT students to organize events around gender issues. Later that fall, I co-founded Graduate Women at MIT (GWAMIT) [6, 2] with two other students. We were interested not only in building community and providing professional development, but also in starting rational discussions about difficult topics—and with the goal of effecting positive change. Our kick-off conference included a panel on collaborating as women and a panel on work-life balance that included several other kinds of lifestyles besides the husband-and-two-kids path held up as the elusive ideal. Over the years, we have had events covering topics from assertive communication to online personal branding to dual-career couples. Our group has helped people realize that these are not women’s issues, but community issues. My male Ph.D. friends who initially expressed skepticism of the group have found themselves not only going to events, but also talking about the lessons for months afterward.

Founding GWAMIT gave me a platform for branching out into more general diversity issues. GWAMIT conference keynotes by Latoya Peterson, founder and editor of *Racialicious*, and Ruha Benjamin, professor of African American Studies at Princeton, addressed issues in the intersection of gender and race. This helped me realize that rather than examining gender issues in isolation, we should be thinking about systemic issues that affect all underrepresented groups. Towards building an inclusive environment, I started GWAMIT’s Positivity@MIT project with the goal of creating community understanding of how to build a work environment where people felt comfortable regardless of gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, and class. This was our more inclusive take on the standard sexual harassment training. We called it “Positivity” because we wanted to emphasize what people could do rather than what they were not allowed to do. As part of this project, we successfully integrated a Positivity@MIT event into fall 2012 graduate student orientation. In addition to students, interested professors, administrators, and other community members also attended.

In addition to my activities in the MIT community, I have been raising awareness of diversity issues among the public. In addition to writing about gender issues [3, 1, 4], I guest edited the “Diversity” issue of the ACM’s student magazine *XRDS* [5]. My goal was to show that computing has many people who do not fit the “boy hacker” stereotype, to show how these people may be excluded, and to provide suggestions for creating a more inclusive environment. I invited Sarah

Jeong and Colin McSwiggen to explain how the “boy hacker” stereotype is harmful to diversity. I invited Ana Diaz-Hernandez of Kapor Capital and entrepreneur Freada Kapor Klein to write about how implicit bias keeps out those who look different. I invited software engineer Jesse Beach to write about her experience as a transgender member of the community. I invited computer science Ph.D. student Omoju Miller to write about teaching computational thinking through analyzing hip-hop lyrics. I invited community member Aliza Aufrichtig to write about teaching herself to program with a background in literature—and what it would mean to democratize computing education. XRDS editor Erin Carson and I interviewed writer and activist Ashe Dryden about how to improve diversity in open source software. Through raising awareness, I hope to encourage people to be more thoughtful about the way they teach, the way they interview, and the way they interact may impact inclusiveness.

Because I cannot imagine a more fulfilling career than the one I currently have, my highest priority outside of research is to make sure everyone has access to a similar career. In the past couple of years, graduate and undergraduate students at MIT and elsewhere have been reaching out to me for advice about how to organize groups, events, and campaigns towards their own diversity efforts. I have enjoyed advising these students and look forward to doing more of this. As a professor, I also want to continue speaking on panels about gender and diversity as I have been doing, most recently at MIT’s “Challenging Technical Privilege” panel about how to make computing more inclusive. Finally, I want to continue taking what opportunities I can to make computing more supportive of diverse backgrounds. For instance, I have a talk on the history of programming in which I emphasize early, sometimes forgotten, contributions women made to computing. I also value encouraging people of all backgrounds to pursue computing: I was recently a resident at Hacker School, a free, full-time, immersive program for those seeking to improve their programming skills. I enjoyed talking to and working with the students, who arrived at programming through wildly different paths. I want to accommodate this kind of diversity of background and interest in my own teaching and communication about computer science. My goal is to give people of all backgrounds the opportunity to feel comfortable, supported, and happy pursuing a career in computing.

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