Diversity Statement

Maksim Bolonkin

David Hilbert is attributed with a quote: "Mathematics knows no races or geographic boundaries; for mathematics, the cultural world is one country.[1]" And indeed, the idea that mathematics and computer science do not care about color, gender, political or socioeconomic differences is usually promoted when it comes to diversity topics in the context of science and education. And while the science itself could be universally fair, learning and teaching are far from being immune to all forms of inequality. And understanding that is the first and the most critical step towards improving that.

One of the most impactful events in my life that affected my attitude towards diversity happened in my last year of high school. My mathematics teacher in high school tutored me for college entrance exams for a whole year for free because I was from an underprivileged family and could not afford a paid tutor. And when later I received my first stipend and came to repay her, she refused to take the money and told me that instead, she wants me to pay it forward by helping someone who needs that. During my years of teaching as a tutor, mentor, teacher, or TA, I never refused to help anyone who asked for help, not hesitating to teach for free, especially if I saw sincere interest in mathematics or computer science. I am proud of all of my students. Still, two female students stand out among them: one was the first to achieve the perfect score at the entrance exams in my alma mater, the other became the first student from Uzbekistan to participate in ACM ICPC finals. I saw a spark of interest in programming in both of them that I believe I did my best at turning into a fire of passion for computer science. This makes me even more proud since the common misconception in Uzbekistan is that girls cannot be good at math, and as a result, an IT-related career is not typical for women and sometimes even frowned upon. With the same goal of promoting mathematics and computer science to high-school students from Tashkent and increasing access to higher education for talented students from underprivileged families, my fellow students and I at the Tashkent Branch of Moscow State University started a Math and Computer Science Competition that later transformed into a number of free extracurricular classes in math and programming for middle and high school students.

I realize that coming from a different culture and different country can bring some blind spots regarding diversity and inequality specific for the United States. I try, however, to educate myself on this topic. For example, the diversity and importance of promoting it was part of the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning's Future Faculty Teaching Series I attended in Spring 2017.

I firmly believe that the educational environment to be effective must be welcoming, encouraging, and free from prejudice. In my classes, I tried to create an atmosphere of acceptance and respect by encouraging students to voice their opinions, celebrating their achievements, and highlighting their best qualities regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or social status. At the same time, I believe in the equity approach when it comes to teaching. I recognize that all students are different; they come to my class with diverse educational, cultural, and personal backgrounds, which can significantly affect their learning rate and performance. I try addressing this by designing a curriculum that would be comfortable for students that are less prepared for the course while keeping everyone engaged. I also try to distribute my time and attention with respect to students' needs.

In conclusion, I believe that supporting diversity is essential for growth, both for students as future professionals and for me as an educator. I always did my best to create an environment where my students can become better versions of themselves and learn without worries of being judged or disrespected, and I will keep doing that in my future classes.

[1] Eves, H. (1969). In mathematical circles: a selection of mathematical stories and anecdotes. Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt.