Diversity Statement

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I know exactly how it feels to not belong. We members of the AAPI (Asian-American and Pacific Islander) community often feel like perpetual foreigners in our own home country. Growing up as an Asian-American in the United States, I endured constant microaggressions and occasionally overt racism from my peers, felt invisible due to the lack of AAPI representation in popular media, and was tormented by overbearing pressure to live up to the “model minority” stereotype. Simply put, there were many occasions during my childhood and teenage years when I wished I was not Asian-American. On the other hand, my status as an Asian-American man affords me privilege in the mathematics community because I fit the “typical image” of a mathematician, but no one should have to fit this image in order to be successful at mathematics. I am dedicated to harnessing the privilege that I have in this setting to empower those without it.

It was not until I entered Goucher College as an undergraduate student that I truly began to understand and appreciate my Asian-American identity, and I began working to help my Asian and AAPI peers understand and appreciate that aspect of their identities as well. Throughout my time at Goucher, I was an active member of Lotus—the Asian and AAPI student union—and served as president of the organization during my junior year. In this role, I worked closely with the Office of Multicultural Student Services to organize events and activities in celebration of Asian and AAPI culture. I was also a role model and unofficial mentor for first-year Asian international students and AAPI first-generation college students. I met weekly—usually over coffee or a meal—with some of these students to discuss cultural matters related to the transition to college life, and in the case of international students, life in the United States.

As a Ph.D. student at Brandeis University, I have had the pleasure of teaching students of a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. Some of the brightest and hardest-working of my students belong to groups underrepresented in the STEM fields—including women, students of color, first-generation college students, and students with learning differences—and it saddens me to hear some of them say that they are not “math people”, that they feel like they do not belong in a math class. I cultivate a growth mindset by emphasizing that mathematics is a skill that can be learned by anyone rather than an innate talent possessed by a few, and I create a welcoming space in my office where I offer individual attention to all of my students. I have implemented elements of flipped classrooms to give students the chance to see that they are capable of learning the basic material on their own, thus helping to develop self-confidence and a sense of agency. In my current cryptology course, I use a team learning structure so that struggling students are able to realize that they are not the only one who is struggling and can work together with their peers to better understand the material, thus fostering a sense of belonging. All of these teaching practices are known to counter the widespread phenomenon of stereotype threat—the fear of conforming to stereotypes about one’s social group—which has detrimental effects on the academic performance of students from historically underrepresented groups. I have facilitated a workshop for graduate student instructors at Brandeis on countering stereotype threat, and I plan to organize similar outreach efforts in the future.

Finally, I am deeply committed to mental health advocacy. The issue of mental health is important to diversity and inclusion not only because people struggling with mental health are marginalized in our society, but also because it is a growing problem on college campuses and is amplified in communities that are already marginalized in other ways. In three of the past four years, I have spoken on the introductory panel for first-year mathematics Ph.D. students; I use this opportunity to talk about mental health and self-care, and to encourage the discussion of these topics among the graduate student community. I emphasize to first-year students the importance of sleeping well, eating healthily, exercising regularly, and making friends, and I share personal experiences of managing my own mental health as a Ph.D. student. I plan to increase the scope of my work in this domain to include outreach for undergraduates and especially students of color.