

Diversity Statement

Xiao Wang

1 What Diversity Means to Me

Our mission as educators is to teach and guide a diverse body of students, regardless of students' ethnic, cultural, racial, and sexual identities. For such an end, a commitment to diversity means that we, the educators, must be inclusive of all students, welcome them, and support them. At the same time, we need to help minority students keep their unique identities. Unfortunately, students with a background different from the mainstream are often caught off-guard by the extent and nature of the obstacles they encounter, both on campus and off campus. Therefore, we need to cater to the unique needs and challenges of the diverse body of students, and help them overcome their obstacles. My vision of diversity is based upon two principles: (1) We need to be sensitive to the differences in students' diverse background as well as any obstacle that might stem from those differences; At the same time, (2) We need to promote oneness as a collective community for all university students, and close the cultural gap between the majority and the minority students. A sense of collective community can significantly improve students' college experience. At the same time, we need to achieve a delicate balance between promoting sensitivity to students' diverse background and keeping a collective community, as polarizing on either side breaks down a true diversity.

Among the diverse student population on campus, international students are perhaps the most diverse group, as international students not only share nationality identity different from domestic students, but also have different identity in terms of race, culture, ethnicity and language. According to a Quartz survey, 40% of international students find it hard to integrate with domestic students and feel that they are foreigners, even after many years of living in the United States. Such a feeling of loneliness and feeling of "I don't belong here" can definitely make college experience more negative than what it should be. Therefore, my previous and current diversity efforts primarily focus on the international students population.

2 Previous Service to Diversity

One of these efforts that worth mentioning is the Purdue University international student temporary housing program I co-organized. At Purdue University, new international graduate students are often required to be on campus in early August for school and department orientations. However, most of the leases for off-campus student apartments do not start until late August when the new semester begins. Therefore, there is a time period that many incoming international graduate students have no place to live other than hotels. This is further complicated by the fact that many international students are new to this country and don't know whom to turn to for help. Seeing this challenge, a group of my friends and I co-organized a temporary housing program for new international students. Supported by Purdue International Student Service (ISS), we reached out to local churches and residents volunteers who can provide a two week temporary housing for free for international students. Many churches and local residents responded to our requests. Out of their love for international students, they not only provided temporary housing, but also transportation and food for students. Some of them also help international students with getting a cell phone service and opening bank accounts. From the start of this temporary housing program in 2013 until 2017 I graduated from Purdue University, this temporary housing program hosted more than 800 international students every year, and are supported by hundreds of local residents and churches. Even though a temporary housing only last two weeks, the message from this temporary housing program can go a long way for those international students. It is the message that we welcome and love them. And whenever help is most needed, we will make ourselves available.

Another worth-mentioning effort is the Sunday one-on-one English classes. Among international students, the English proficiency level is drastically different for different countries of origin. For Indian students and some of the European students, they are often educated in English since their childhood and they have little or no language barrier in the United States. But for other students such as Chinese and Japanese students, living in a country far from home, where everyone speaks a language they didn't grow up with, can be a big challenge. In such a case, the English language can be a barrier that makes international students feel lonely and excluded. In response to the language barrier, my wife and I were among many other volunteers that taught English to international students and visiting scholars from 2014 till 2019. On every Sunday, I taught English one-on-one classes to adult students and my wife taught English to young children that visiting scholars bring with them. The students and visiting scholars that have been studying English with us for long time tell us that our Sunday English classes help them better communicate with native speakers and they find it easier to get along with the domestic students than before.

3 Plan

For my future diversity efforts, I plan on continuing the temporary housing program and English one-on-one classes, as both programs prove to be beneficial for international students and help them integrate with others in the university community. In addition to the above mentioned efforts, I plan on further my diversity efforts in the following ways:

Make classroom materials available after class.

Many international students struggle with understanding lectures and interacting with professors. Basic skills such as taking notes, writing essays and coping with the quantity of reading for class can be big issues because of their language barrier. One way to help students from abroad is to record my lectures and send the lecture videos to international students after class, alongside my powerpoint presentation slides and other lecture materials. Thus, students who have trouble understanding the lectures can watch and repeat lecture videos whenever necessary.

Host lab group dinners frequently.

Reports from Inside Higher Ed show that 80% to 90% engineering and computer science PhD students are international. To develop relationship with students in my research lab, who are mostly international, and support them in all aspects of life, I want to encourage my lab group students to spend time with me and other faculty outside of the classroom setting. A good opportunity would be to invite them for a meal together in my house. This event can provide us a chance to get to know each other in a more social setting. In addition, special occasions such as thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner can be a wonderful way to help international students understand American culture.

Open-door and flexible office hours.

Some students don't come to office hours because they are busy, others because they are intimidated or don't feel their questions are sufficiently important. For many international students, even though they might not have questions for class materials, they often have plenty questions for their academic programs and college life in general. I want to implement an open-door and flexible office hours policy and it is flexible in two ways. First, the nature of the conversations can be flexible and open. Students can come to office hours for questions about classes, but also for questions about their struggles in academic study, as well as other life struggles that weigh them down. Even if students don't have any question but want to develop a friendly relationship, they can just come by to say hello. Second, the location for the office hours can be flexible. There is a psychological barrier for students to overcome to come to a professor's office, as many faculty make their office look like their own personal domain. This psychological barrier can be even greater for international students who may not feel welcome on campus. Therefore, instead of hosting office hours in my own office, I will go to tutor center or university library to use the open office spaces there, in hopes of promoting more interaction between faculty and students.