

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

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A common response when I tell people that I study math is “Wow! I’m terrible at math”. All too often students, particularly girls/women and students of color, are told subtly or out-right that “people like you are not good at math”. We see the ramifications of these statements reflected in the demographics of our own classrooms as well as attitudes that permeate our departments. I try to draw on my own experiences to empathize with students from a variety of backgrounds. I always bear in mind my frustrations as a woman in math coupled with, having attended a women’s college, the power of seeing someone who shares your identity as a leader both in and outside the classroom.

I recognize that I will likely never be able to fully understand my student’s experiences and how their various identities interplay with their educational and career aspirations. However, I make it clear to all of my students that they are welcome in my classroom and do my best to work to be aware of what outside factors could be affecting their performance and make equitable accommodations. As I write about in my teaching statement, my implementation of mastery grading into my courses is intimately tied to my commitment to equity. It is vital that my course design reflects my belief in Dr. Federico Ardila-Mantilla’s axioms of mathematics [1], including the first axiom which states “mathematical talent is distributed equally among different groups, irrespective of geographic, demographic, and economic boundaries,” while also acknowledging the unequal experiences of students in their past mathematical coursework. I work consistently to emphasize this to my students and design my courses to allow students of all backgrounds many paths towards success.

Outside of the classroom, I have been actively involved in the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM) chapters at both Rutgers and Nebraska. Currently, I serve as the faculty mentor for the Nebraska AWM chapter, organizing events and mentoring students as they explore their identities as mathematicians. I find more often students are willing to voice their frustrations, particularly regarding interactions with male classmates, during the more informal and supportive environment of the AWM meetings. While I work to support the students involved in the AWM chapter, I am also not naive enough to believe these interactions never take place in my own classes, and I am firmly committed to supporting and individually checking in with my student’s even when they may not come to me directly. This summer, during Project NExT, I was involved in a session on various challenging classroom scenarios. This was an incredibly helpful experience that allowed me to better understand the realities of how particular situations can impact students. For instance, we discussed a situation wherein students are asked to choose their own partners during class, and the only immediately unpaired students are the two black students sitting across from each other in the room. When allowing complete freedom for students to pick their partners this damaging situation is unavoidable. Thus my standard approach is to assign students to work with specific neighbors. This still leaves students with the option of choosing who to sit next to while guaranteeing all students have immediate partners.

I recognize that my journey to creating an anti-racist environment in my classrooms is only in its infancy. I admit that I have not done enough in the past to acknowledge the ways in which systemic racism plays a role in our mathematical communities and students’ experiences in my classes. One concrete step I took recently was to join the Math Alliance as a faculty mentor. The Math Alliance serves to support and mentor underrepresented students with the ultimate goal of creating a mathematical community where all are wholly welcome. As I take my next steps as a mathematician I am committed to increasing my involvement in diversity and equity initiatives both within the campus and broader community, learning more about how to create more equitable academic experiences, and implementing this knowledge into my classes and campus community.

References

- [1] Federico Ardila-Mantilla. “Todos Cuentan: Cultivating Diversity in Combinatorics”. In: *Notices of the AMS* 63.10 (2016), pp. 1164–1170.