

This statement was submitted by an MIT EECS PhD student as part of a faculty application package in 2020-2021. The candidate received multiple faculty job offers.

Reproduced here with permission of the author. All rights reserved by original author.

# Jonathan Frankle Diversity Statement

## My Experience with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Statement is divided chronologically: Page 1: past experience Page 2: future plans

In the fall of 2019, I was appointed to a working group to address the fate of a long-standing, controversy-inciting email list at CSAIL. At many points in the past, including that fall, conversations on the email list had created an unwelcoming and intimidating environment for underrepresented groups and those with less organizational power. As the only current student in the working group, I was tasked with speaking on behalf of the hundreds of students in the lab as a member of the most privileged and least impacted demographic. The process of serving on that working group and collecting the stories of students affected by events on the email list shattered my complacency, honed my convictions, and made me into an advocate for addressing the underlying cultural challenges that had made such events possible. In addition to my efforts on the working group, I lobbied for the creation of a lab-wide student advisory committee and joined when it was created this fall; among our stated objectives is to “foster community and promote DEI,” advocacy that has already been rewarded with a new slate of funded postdocs intended to increase diversity.

Author acknowledges their own privilege

Specific and concrete past experience with advancing DEI

The experience began in the fall of 2019, when it was revealed that convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein had secretly provided funding to MIT and, in the course of doing so, had made several visits to the university. This prompted discussion and soul-searching throughout campus, including on the aforementioned lab-wide email list. As I later found out, the subscribers to this list were an assortment of more than 5,000 people that included the thousand or so current members of the lab, alumni of the lab and its decades-old predecessors, and various others who may never have had an affiliation at all.

The email list had a reputation for flame-wars, and any person bold enough to post to the list risked repudiation for one reason or another. The Epstein episode precipitated a particularly severe exchange in which a famous member of the lab (and frequent interlocutor on the list) appeared to question the definitions of “statutory rape” and “sexual assault.” The uproar and bad press (after the thread became public) compelled the lab community to address the incident and a history of tolerating similar behavior.

This person alone had a lengthy track record: he was known for making advances on female students, and accounts described other incidents over the decades that had created, at a minimum, an unwelcoming environment for many members of our community. Each of us had to reckon with our part in overlooking his behavior as “quirky,” accepting it as a regrettable tradeoff of retaining a living legend in our midst, or treating it as someone else’s responsibility.

Among the measures taken to address the incident was the formation of a working group to determine the fate of the list. After speaking out about my concerns at a town hall meeting, I was invited to join the working group. In that capacity, I gathered feedback from other students that opened my eyes to an enormous depth of pain. Female students who felt anxious about working from the office and who were struggling to accomplish research. Many who were concerned that shutting down the email list would hide the most visible symptom of toxicity without addressing the underlying problems. Others who described the terrifying power-dynamics and fear of career repercussions if they were unlucky enough to be publicly repudiated by a faculty member on the email list.

Specific and concrete past experience

Demonstrates how knowledge was gained by listening to diverse voices

To address the challenge immediately at hand, our working group guided the shutdown of the email list and established a new, internal-only forum with an explicit code of conduct. I am now working as part of the new student advisory committee to address the deeper cultural challenges that made these circumstances possible. While my impact at MIT is limited by my impending graduation, I am glad to have played a part in setting us on a new course. More importantly, this is a mission that I will take with me wherever I go next: to keep my eyes open, to listen to the experiences of every member of the community, and to use my voice and my privilege to identify and constructively address ways that we fail to live up to our values.

Lesson learned serves as transition to future plans section

## My Plans for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Introductory paragraph provides a general overview about how the candidate views their role as faculty

As a junior faculty member, my most direct role in advancing DEI is through my group. My philosophy is that—beyond the fact that it is the right thing to do—putting effort into DEI is a long-term investment that will pay for itself many times over: it is a win-win for the wellbeing of students of all backgrounds and the success of my research program. As a professor, I will have the time horizon to see these investments through and share the benefits with my students over many years to come.

### Recruiting a diverse group of students

Advancing DEI requires building a diverse research group. Considering the demographics of the pool of candidates applying to PhD programs in computer science, this is no easy task. I cannot simply rely on the applicant pool as it is today. Instead, I will need to conduct additional legwork throughout the year to expand the size and diversity of the group of candidates from which I will hire my students.

I intend to take two concrete measures to do so. First, I plan to conduct outreach through the many affinity groups dedicated to advancing DEI in the machine learning community (e.g., Black in AI, WiML, LatinX in AI, and Queer in AI). This means continuing to support these communities as an ally, attending poster sessions and workshops at major conferences, and advertising opportunities in my group to participants in these communities. Second, I plan to visit colleges and universities that are not typical feeder schools for PhD programs in computer science, giving talks about my research, discussing the value of research in general, and advertising opportunities to join my research group.

Names specific groups and concrete actions

### Diversifying the pipeline of future PhD applicants

As a faculty member, I also have the ability to improve the diversity of the pipeline of future PhD applicants. This begins with teaching. As I mentioned in my teaching statement, I have a particular affinity for teaching introductory classes. In my experience, these classes are among the most diverse in the department, and they provide a crucial opportunity to encourage students to remain in computer science and eventually pursue research.

Today, it is typical for machine learning PhD applicants to have substantial research experience prior to applying, and it is not unusual for applicants to already have one or more top-tier machine learning publications. To diversify the pipeline, it is essential that I provide meaningful research opportunities to a diverse group of undergraduates, putting them in a strong position to apply to PhD programs should they choose to do so. Doing so will require outreach, especially to support and encourage those students who do not see their backgrounds well-represented among the faculty and researchers in the department.

Specific actions proposed to advance a specified goal

More broadly, the arms race among PhD applicants has exacerbated the already-significant advantage of students attending universities with strong undergraduate research programs. It is therefore important that I share my resources, providing summer research experiences to undergraduates at other universities that lack similar research opportunities. Doing so advances equity, expands the pool of PhD candidates, and gives me and the department the inside track on recruiting excellent students who might not otherwise have considered pursuing a PhD at all.

### Building a culture of inclusion within my research group

Simply diversifying my group is not enough. It is my responsibility as the leader of the group to build a culture of inclusion. I need to model the behaviors that I expect everyone to practice. I need to earn the trust of my students so that they feel comfortable sharing their DEI concerns with me (even when those concerns relate to my shortcomings). I need to be willing to initiate the oftentimes difficult conversations about DEI that make it possible to maintain an inclusive environment. In doing so, I hope to create a group culture where every student feels empowered and uninhibited to bring their whole selves to our research community, regardless of background. Doing so creates a virtuous cycle, making my group a more attractive research home for students who have experienced exclusion in the past.

Specific action

Writing is organized logically - clear and easy to follow

Subheadings describe specific, high-level goals

Demonstrates understanding of DEI work to be done and responsibility as faculty member