

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commitment Statement

# Powen Yao's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commitment Statement

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As an expatriate, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are what I strive for, not just in my teaching, but in my life.

I first came to the United States during my K-12 education and attended American schools from fifth through tenth grade. My mother had the opportunity to work in the US to promote tourism in Taiwan. My parents decided to follow through so that my brother and I would have the opportunity to be educated in the US. My father became a stay-at-home dad to take care of us kids and the house, which was unusual compared to the gender norms in my home country at that time. At first, I spoke very little English and was naturally alienated by my childhood peers. From the foods I ate to how I dressed, anything that seemed different could be subject to unwanted attention and lead to feelings of exclusion.

When my mother's job ended, I returned to my home country and studied in a bilingual school. What followed was my career as an international student, first my bachelor's degree at the University of California Irvine, then my master's at the University of Southern California, and then continuation at USC for my Ph.D. All this time, I often felt like an outsider. For example, I am an international student, but not completely new to the culture like most of my international peers. If anything, I feel like I am back home where I grew up, but I am treated as an outsider. I was an electrical engineer who found computer science to be more expressive. Then, as a computer science student at USC, I found my passion in

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game design. However, I was a general computer science student and not a student in interactive media and game design.

I have spent the years of my Ph.D. career as a teaching assistant in 5 different classes and 4 different professors. I went from someone being educated to someone with increasingly greater role in educating others. My position has allowed me to see from the perspective of the students as well as the educators. Often, I have to advocate for and defend one side, then subsequently switch positions and do the same for the other side.

These life experiences have shaped my attitude toward celebrating diversity. They have also taught me how much it can matter to be inclusive and to make others feel included. Perhaps most importantly, they have shown me that diversity, equity, and inclusion often go beyond legally protected characteristics. Any part of your identity can make you feel excluded and unwelcome. It could be your status as an international student, the media you consume, the games you play, your level of mastery of a language, and so on.

It is to this end that I strive to be inclusive in my teaching and in my life.

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Below are some ways I plan to create an inclusive environment to foster and celebrate diversity.

## Celebrate Diversity in All Matters

Throughout my life, I have made friends not only through shared cultural background and language, but also through shared interests and passions. Often,

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the best ideas come from the most unlikely places. Further, this often occurs at the intersection of diversity. The book “The Medici Effect”[1] characterizes this as “breakthrough ideas often occur when we bring concepts from one field into a new, unfamiliar territory.” This is evident in my work in Extended Reality, which draws heavily from my experience with games, game design, magic tricks, fantasy literature, etc.

As a faculty member, I will celebrate diversity in all matters. I will ensure that students reach the competency required per school policy, but more importantly, I believe it’s essential to inspire students to go beyond by accommodating students’ individuality and interests. I will establish a communication channel for students to share their needs privately. Lastly, I will encourage students to highlight and make use of their diversity whenever possible.

## Inclusion through action, not words

Diversity is not just about political correctness, it’s a goal that you need to constantly work toward. I have witnessed a professor who celebrates indie games, innovation, and diversity rejecting a student group’s idea of making a real-time strategy game with innovative mechanics because “it is a dead genre.” Meanwhile, a mechanically simple walking simulator game featuring a diverse set of characters was accepted. Diversity was celebrated in one scenario, but not in the other. It is challenging to recognize and avoid shutting down the diversity of thoughts, even for an expert. In this case, I believe true inclusion would have been to work with, mentor, and guide students on finding ways to innovate and revive the genre.

As an educator, I will help students understand the challenges they may face in the path they choose. If they understand the challenges and decide to continue, I will guide them the best I can.

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### Equality and Equity

The infamous meme on Equality and Equity has spawned many variations[2]. This complex topic can not be fully explained and solved in a simple image, but it can certainly illustrate examples and problems. In the Equity example below, everyone gets the support they need, including no support. In the classes I help teach, we often spend so much time helping student teams with issues that we have little time for the teams that are doing well.

My goal as an educator is to balance equality and equity so that all students can not only have the resources they need for success in the class but also feel confident that they are well-equipped to achieve their own goals.

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### CITATION

[1] Johansson, Frans. *The Medici Effect, with a new preface and discussion guide: what elephants and epidemics can teach us about innovation*. Harvard Business Review Press, 2017.

[2] Reality, Equality, Equity, Justice, and Inclusion meme. Twitter, 21 Jun 2021, [twitter.com/ClinPsychDavid/status/1407103431718969345](https://twitter.com/ClinPsychDavid/status/1407103431718969345)

