Diversity Statement
Marinka Zitnik

I am committed to designing programs and implementing evidence-based solutions that advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in my research group, my classes, and more broadly in the academic community. I will do so by developing interventions in my group and classrooms that ensure equity, tolerance, and safety for all members; by continuing to effectively mentor students who are from underrepresented groups and ensuring they have access to support structures designed to help them with various career advancement barriers; and by continuing to engage in outreach initiatives that promote Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) across the world.

Women and underrepresented groups in computer science

As a female engineer and computer scientist, I have initiated and led numerous programs that encourage women and underrepresented groups to excel in computing and technology and become active leaders and role models in the field. My research work was recognized by the Google Anita Borg Scholarship—an academic scholarship, awarded based on academic performance, leadership, and impact on the STEM community—and that experience has encouraged me to engage in initiatives that promote computing. For example, together with a group of 33 Google Anita Borg Scholars from across the world we launched The Google Anita Borg Alumni Community in March 2014. In the first year, our community reached more than 23,500 people (K-12 and university students, and industry professionals globally) at more than 160 events around the world and we partnered with Google on numerous innovative projects.

Some of our highlights and key results include establishing a flagship event series, the Anita Borg Birthday Celebration Event Series—in Spring 2015, we held 53 outreach events globally, reaching more than 2,900 people, 80% of which were female—and organizing the first and largest all-female hackathon in all of Latin America, which was featured on a Mexican TV station. Our community has established itself as a real community, with significant support from Google as a diversity core project, Anita Borg scholarship alumni community, and more than 80 external partner organizations.

I also volunteered in Django Girls and Rails Girls, two different global, non-profit organizations, and helped organize local Rails Girls and Django Girls workshops that reached over 250 women of age 20-60. These were one-day programming workshops held at a local university in Ljubljana, and we provided open-sourced online tutorials, resources, and support. I was responsible for teaching students the fundamental programming concepts, such as conditions, variables, functions, and loops.

Finally, I have demonstrated my commitment to mentoring students from underrepresented groups in computer science. At Stanford, I have had the opportunity to mentor many talented students from diverse backgrounds. For example, I mentored Monica Agrawal as she conducted statistical analysis of biological networks, which led to a publication in a top-tier bioinformatics conference (PSB) with Monica as a first co-author. Monica was also my co-author on another paper about graph neural networks and has since joined MIT EECS as a Ph.D. student. I believe it is essential that all students have access to high-quality mentoring and I look forward to continuing to help students from underrepresented groups develop their careers. To that end, I will encourage students to engage in opportunities, such as conferences like Women in Machine Learning (WiML) and university programs like Stanford’s Women in AI, and will allocate dedicated funding for students to do so.

Science outreach, outreach to high-school and undergraduate students

I am passionate about science outreach, and I firmly believe that the public needs to understand more about science. To that end, I presented my research at a TEDx event in Slovenia, I talked about the importance of computing for biomedical research at an outreach workshop at a top university in Taiwan, and I discussed frameworks for an inclusive future of AI in healthcare at the Stanford AI in Medicine Symposium.

I believe that outreach activities can pay off professionally as these activities inherently involve organizing my thinking and working on my communication skills. Developing these skills can lead to better papers and teaching. To that end, I was a Department Lead and Editor of XRDS Crossroads between 2012 and 2016. XRDS Crossroads is the flagship academic magazine for students published by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). The magazine focuses on computer science and is distributed to over 40,000 students worldwide. I was responsible for managing the Hello World department and wrote 14 technical columns covering diverse topics from clustering in data mining to zero-knowledge proofs in cryptography. I also mentored student writers from different backgrounds (three undergraduate CS students from India, one high-school student from Slovenia) on how to write about technical content in a style that is accessible to the broad XRDS readership. My columns have excited students about studying computer science—the Hello World department was the best-rated XRDS department during my leadership.

To encourage high-school students to study computer science and engineering, I have co-organized Computer Science Summer School programs (over 50 participants) at University of Ljubljana. At Stanford, I mentored three undergraduate students in Stanford Summer Research in Computer Science (CURIS) program. Through these programs, I encouraged students to get involved in computer science research early in their careers.
I look forward to the opportunities to inspire and support all students to seek their place in the STEM fields and make them believe that they can become scientists and engineers in the future if they want to.

**Plans and goals for advancing equity, inclusion, and diversity**

I see equity, inclusion, and diversity as important elements of my teaching and advising. I am looking forward to continuing to advance these essential aspects in my future career.

**Building diverse communities by bridging scientific disciplines and cultures**

I will organize my research group so that students from diverse backgrounds will feel welcomed and safe. I believe that vibrant and diverse research teams that incorporate different backgrounds and cultures play a critical role in developing research ideas. The interdisciplinary nature of my research gives me the unique ability to build such teams and attract students from outside of computer science. Therefore, I will strive to build research teams that will continually work towards a "common good," *i.e.*, beneficial for all members, that include a climate of inclusivity, collegiality, respect, equity, transparency, honesty, and trust. For example, I will discuss my department's code of conduct together with my research group at least once a year. Here are five other simple things I will do: (1) I will balance the time I spend supporting others to make sure I offer help to those who may be reluctant to ask for it and to not inadvertently dedicate more of my time to specific groups of people; (2) I will spread responsibilities and visibility evenly across the team to make sure everyone feels they belong; (3) I will listen to all complaints about bias or discrimination and make sure I follow up and take action as appropriate; (4) I will take a stand against inappropriate behavior even without someone voicing a complaint; and (5) I will educate myself about unconscious biases to spot my own weak points and be aware of the potential pitfalls.

My record of activities to date (described above) made me realize that I thrive on activities akin to those that promote inclusion and diversity. I will use these past experiences and, for example, organize some advice-oriented events for underrepresented groups in computer science, such as how to get a job/internship or tips from faculty on various academic tracks. I had the opportunity to participate in Rising Stars, an academic career workshop for women in electrical engineering and computer science, and I would like to help organize similar events at my future university.

I will participate in training programs offered at my future university that teach faculty how to be better mentors and allies to all students, as well as those that provide ways to demonstrate that my office is a place where students are treated with respect regardless of their personal identity. Moving forward, I will continue to take steps to advance equity and inclusion in my research group and in my classes.

**Creating diverse, inclusive, and respectful academic environments**

I believe that we need to go above and beyond just ethnicity and gender to truly embrace diversity and look at our differences in other dimensions as well, such as economic status and many other characteristics that are not visible. I want to continue to contribute to more diversity on campus (*e.g.*, develop a code of conduct with concrete examples of what is acceptable and what is the cultural norm), and I will strive to implement successful diversity interventions, such as those that follow from the NIH’s Perspective on Science of Diversity. On campus, I would like to participate in the Women in AI’s group to provide advice on career development and to encourage female students to set high goals for themselves. On a personal level, I will carry on learning about individual cultural and personality differences and will remain open to adjusting my mentoring and teaching to the individual needs of my students.

Finally, I would also like to continue contributing to high-school and undergraduate summer research programs to get students excited for a technical career early on. Among many other things, I would also like to implement evidence-based support programs that promote anti-harassment, civility, and that embed values of diversity and inclusion into the infrastructure of the university. I will build on recommendations, such as those provided by the Consensus Study from the National Academy of Sciences, to progress toward this goal in a timely manner.

---

**Marinka Zitnik · Diversity Statement**