# Ethan Cecchetti – Diversity Statement

A core problem in the computer science community is retention of diverse scientists. Historically, companies and institutions have mostly focused on so-called "pipeline problems" and tried to get more diverse groups of children interested in computing. While useful, this focus ignored the important challenge of retaining diverse students and professionals. Since I became aware of these concerns as an undergraduate, I have frequently witnessed those around me feel as though they do not belong: women afraid of speaking up, first-generation students unfamiliar with academic expectations, international students unable to take full advantage of travel and internship opportunities. For years, I have worked to level the playing field and establish more effective support structures for those around me.

The bulk of my work has focused on advocacy within my department and university. In my department, I spent two years as president of my department's graduate student organization, and later joined Graduate Students for Gender Inclusion in Computing, a local student advocacy organization. During this time, I continuously listened to the concerns of others. Once I better understood their difficulties, I worked to improve the well-being of graduate students across the department. Many of these efforts appeared to impact all students—such as better support for overworked teaching assistants and better equipment for incoming graduate students—but they served more to bring everyone to the same level. Students who already feel at home in the community are far more likely than underrepresented and minoritized students to raise concerns about unusual expectations, ask for better equipment, and push to get the support everyone should have. By lending my voice to these efforts, I was able to raise the profile of these struggles within the department and have them addressed for everyone.

My advocacy at the university level centered on mental health, one of the largest challenges for all graduate students [2–4]. The difficulties can be particularly stark for students who do not have strong external support networks or already feel like outsiders. I believe that addressing the pervasive mental challenges problems in graduate schools is one of the most important and impactful ways to create a more welcoming environment. While the university previously focused on treatment, I pushed hard to target prevention as well. Many graduate student mental health problems stem from students' relationships with their advisors and fear over how their work will be perceived by the community [1, 2]. As a member of the Graduate and Professional Student Mental Health Advisory Council and the Graduate and Professional Student Leadership Council, I successfully pressed Cornell to expand a program providing information and training to faculty in multiple departments. These discussions included data on the scale and scope of the problem as well as tools and techniques for high quality mentorship, like helping students set specific goals, setting and holding clear expectations, and frequently providing effective feedback. While there are no quick fixes to these problems, I continue to believe that they pose a serious barrier to inclusion and retention of diverse students.

I am excited to continue this work with the larger platform that comes with a faculty position. I plan to organize and attend programs to support myself, my students, and my colleagues in individual efforts, like becoming a more inclusive and better mentor or instructor. I also want to contribute to department and university initiatives, particularly those aimed at student mental health. As in my past work, I will start by taking the time to listen to those people who need support the most. The resulting information will allow me to better focus my energies on the programs with the most impact.

In addition to my advocacy, I have also tried to reach out to other communities. As a software engineer in 2013, I encouraged my colleagues to volunteer to teach underprivileged middle school students math and computer science using the Bootstrap curriculum.[1] We had 10 volunteers over two consecutive terms, and thanks to our efforts, TripAdvisor donated $150,000 to Bootstrap. I continued similar efforts as a graduate

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[1] The organization is now more focused on providing materials to middle school teachers directly, but the current version of the curriculum we used is available at `https://www.bootstrapworld.org/materials/algebra/`.

student, volunteering annually with Cornell's Expanding Your Horizons conference.[2] The conference brings in 7th – 9th grade girls from around the area to spend a day learning math and science from Cornell students and faculty. For my first four years at Cornell—until COVID-19 cancelled the event twice—I helped organize a workshop with other graduate students. As I move forward, I plan to continue this support of local outreach programs.

## References

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[2] T. M. Evans, L. Bira, J. B. Gastelum, L. T. Weiss, and N. L. Vanderford. Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3):282–284, Mar. 2018. doi: 10.1038/nbt.4089.

[3] K. Levecque, F. Anseel, A. De Beuckelaer, J. Van der Heyden, and L. Gisle. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4):868–879, May 2017. doi: 10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008.

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[2] `https://www.eyh.cornell.edu/`