

Inclusive Excellence Activities

Adam Blank

At the core of every faculty member, staff member, and student is a person with their own feelings, identity, and beliefs. We can't begin to solve problems for anyone until we understand both how strikingly similar and different we are from each other. All of my work in so-called "diversity, equity, and inclusion" efforts fundamentally centers around making space for people to be themselves without fear of rejection or retribution.

Because of my own identity as a neurodivergent, queer, disabled, non-binary person, I am better equipped to act as a leader in some dimensions and an ally/listener in others. Knowing the difference between types of advocacy is imperative to make informed decisions about how to proceed, and I've spent a significant amount of time listening to others to practice the ability to know what type of energy to put into a situation.

Inclusivity Leadership Roles

I have primarily taken a "leadership" role in efforts involving three populations:

- (1) Queer (particularly transgender) students and upcoming faculty
- (2) Disabled and/or Neurodivergent students
- (3) Students going through mental health crises (either due to mental illness or any circumstances outside of their control such as lack of housing stability or family crises)

I believe these populations are particularly important specifically because they are often ignored by mainstream DEI efforts. For example, the widely popular Grace Hopper Conference focuses on women in Computer Science (which, to be clear, is good!), but there isn't really an equivalent for neurodivergent students who would like to find "people like them". I support day-to-day student needs as they arise with these populations (and others), but I've also worked on several larger scale interventions. These interventions include (but are not limited to) the examples below.

Deadnaming On Rosters

This past summer, I worked with a (fantastic) undergraduate student, Abby Jiang, and, together, we wrote a petition and gathered signatures to elevate the priority of fixing deadnaming in rosters. This was particularly timely because the current class of freshmen has a significant transgender population, and we felt it was important to push for this to happen now rather than later. The petition was successful, and there is now a separate field for lived name on Caltech's registration/roster system. Though this is a timely problem that others were already starting to think about, our contribution was to help gather awareness and understanding of the *urgency* of the issue.

Student Club Leadership

I also started two new student clubs (which I serve as the advisor for) this summer: an affinity space for "students who do not identify as cisgendered" and one for "students who either identify as neurodivergent or are an ally". Both of these clubs now have regular meetings to create a community of more than 15 students each. Additionally, I am the faculty advisor for the Caltech Disability Coalition this year.

Committee Service

I am a member of both the CMS (department-level) and EAS (division/college-level) diversity, equity, and inclusion committees where I fight for the undergraduates who often get left behind.

National Talks

I have been invited to give several panels and special sessions on mental health, mental illness, and allyship in academia at the SIGCSE Technical Symposium and the Tapia Conference over the past three years. More details about these panels and special sessions can be found in my CV.

“Bridge” Teaching Between CS 1 and CS 2

Because Caltech’s CS 1 is a pass/fail course for everyone, students sometimes come into CS 2 underprepared. Because of stereotype threat, students in disadvantaged or minority groups are doubly struck by this condition. This year, we created a special “bridge” section of CS 2 to provide extra (optional!) support to students who struggled in the first week of the course. The head TAs and I reviewed grades, comments, and testimonials from TAs who saw students at office hours to determine which students to invite to the bridge group. We felt it was important to classify this group as a “bridge” rather than a “remedial” section because this framing does not further discourage students. We got great feedback on this (see testimonial below), and hopefully it will expand next year.

“ Coming into CS 2, I was very intimidated as I heard from many people (including Prof Adam Blank) that CS 2 is significantly more difficult than CS 1. But because of the bridge group, I was able to grow at a relatively fast pace. So much so that CS 2 has been a noticeably less struggle for me than CS 1, and more fun as well. ”

Anonymous CS 2 student in the bridge program

Mentorship of Teaching Faculty Pipeline

One aspect of service I am extremely passionate about is mentoring masters and Ph.D. students who might want to go into teaching. I seek out and provide context and help for whomever I can, but the ones I spend the most time on are non-binary mentees who don’t see much representation (and are often even erased as existing). One such mentee says:

“ It has been affirming, and frankly necessary, for me to foster a relationship with a mentor who not only supports me in my identity (for all its facets) but also understands the complexities and realities I face. Knowing someone in the role I aspire towards who reflects my live experience is representation I hope for everyone. Your mentorship is one of the two only things keeping me in my program and towards my ultimate goal of a career in teaching. ”

Anonymous non-binary mentee

These mentees are at a variety of places, large and small, and I am currently working with around 5-8 depending on how you count.

Trend in CS Major Declarations @ Caltech

Pre-College CS Course for Underrepresented Students

This summer, I will be teaching a pre-college program for admitted students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have already been admitted to Caltech. Specifically, I will be teaching a pre-CS course that requires no prior background. This course is *not* a typical CS 1—the idea is to give students tools (one of which is programming) to be able to do research early on such as data analysis in other fields.

Academic Support for Underrepresented Students

A colleague and I created a 1 credit course for students who continued the pre-college program (mentioned above) in which we provided guest speakers to talk about mental health, organization, internship and research searching, etc. The most important part of this program, in my opinion, was continuing to give the students a sense of community throughout the year.

Awards and Recognition

I am honored to have won one of the inaugural **Gradient for Change** awards in my department last year. A description of the award is below:

The CMS and IST Gradient for Change Awards honor students, postdocs, staff, and faculty in the Caltech community who demonstrate exceptional efforts to make Caltech and/or the broader scientific community a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment. The awards recognize and highlight individual contributors or small teams who are considered agents of change, community leaders, and/or allies to historically marginalized group(s) in the information sciences, including computer science, applied mathematics, and beyond.

Inclusivity Allyship Roles

There are a significant number of students who are not covered by the activities and work I have done thus far. To that end, I feel it is important to commit to the following principles in guiding my teaching, service, and life:

- I acknowledge that there are many areas in which I have extreme privilege.
- I use my privilege to dismantle structures and policies that reinforce existing inequities.
- I advocate for and elevate the voices of those who are drowned out or silenced.
- I provide long-term access and mentorship for diverse populations.