

My commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is rooted in my personal journey as a Middle Eastern woman in computer science. My transition from being a hardware engineering undergraduate in Iran to pursuing a PhD in Natural Language Processing (NLP) in the United States exposed me to new challenges that I overcame with the substantial support of the community, both directly from peers and advisors and through programs and social events.

This support has instilled in me a passion to give back to the community and shaped my understanding of diversity and inclusion. To me, this concept extends beyond gender identity and ethnicity, encompassing cultural backgrounds, academic trajectories, and personal histories. It is about ensuring that every newcomer feels welcome and safe to express themselves, whether they are new to the field or the country. I am committed to easing this transition for others, aiming to create an environment where diverse individuals can thrive and enjoy their academic pursuits, knowing they are not alone.

I strongly believe that diversity fosters creativity. It challenges us to think outside the familiar frameworks that we are accustomed to and broadens our vision beyond the narrow confines of our own experiences. My commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive environment has manifested in three main directions: (1) mentoring and teaching, (2) leadership and systemic change, and (3) community building and fostering collaboration. Throughout my research career, I have: mentored 22 students, over 75% of whom were from underrepresented backgrounds; served as the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) co-chair for NAACL 2022; and will be the D&I chair for NAACL 2025. I have also co-organized over 15 interdisciplinary workshops at top ML, NLP, and privacy venues, connecting these communities and encouraging the exchange of diverse ideas. These efforts, recognized by the UCSD CSE Excellence in Leadership and Service Award in 2022, aim to create an environment where diverse perspectives are celebrated. Below, I expand on my past efforts in each direction and describe my plans to implement diverse, inclusive workplaces in the future as a faculty member.

1 Mentorship and Teaching

I started mentoring students on research projects in 2020 through OpenMined’s volunteer research program,¹ which connects global privacy enthusiasts regardless of their affiliations. Through this program, I mentored four students on projects I defined, focusing on differential privacy, fairness, and interpretability. These projects produced impactful publications at major conferences,² highlighting the importance of creating opportunities for individuals passionate about research but not necessarily affiliated with top research institutions. Throughout my PhD and postdoc, I have expanded these efforts, advising 22 students on long-term research projects from a wide range of institutions, both nationally and internationally. Five of the undergraduates I mentored have since pursued PhDs at universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Georgia Tech, and MIT.

Beyond long-term research projects, I have also advised students on PhD application content and offered guidance on often-overlooked aspects of PhD life, such as mental health and work-life balance. In 2021, I initiated a Twitter-based program that paired students with mentors for feedback on Statements of Purpose and PhD applications. Additionally, I have actively volunteered in various mentorship programs, including roles at ICLR 2021, the Women in Machine Learning workshop at NeurIPS 2020, and the UC San Diego Women Organization for Research Mentoring in STEM. Even before my graduate studies, I committed to making education accessible to everyone by teaching high school students from less-developed areas in my hometown. During my PhD, I continued this effort by developing tutorials and lectures aimed at broader audiences. These include a module for OpenMined’s privacy course,³ a Private NLP Tutorial at EACL 2023, and guest lectures on Safety in LLMs, all of which are publicly available.

These experiences provided valuable insights into the shared challenges faced by PhD students and have shaped my approach to mentorship. As a future faculty member, I plan to leverage these experiences to establish a formal mentorship program that connects undergraduate students with research opportunities and makes advanced concepts accessible to a wider student population. My goal is to

¹<https://blog.openmined.org/introducing-openmined-research/>

²One paper was published at the International Conference on Image Processing (ICIP 2021), and the other at a workshop at the Conference on Computer and Communications Security (CCS 2020).

³<https://courses.openmined.org/courses/foundations-of-private-computation>

create a supportive research ecosystem that prioritizes student well-being and addresses both their academic and personal growth.

2 Leadership and Systemic Change

I intend to create systemic change and build inclusive environments by assuming leadership roles within the LLM community and transferring successful practices across different fields. For instance, as a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) co-chair for NAACL 2022, I implemented guided, structured discussions as part of our inclusion activities. This well-received event was inspired by a similar format I had experienced at a Women in Machine Learning (WiML) workshop. By adopting this practice from the ML community and transferring it to NLP, we created a safe space for participants to engage in research and DEI-related discourse. Discussion leaders and mediators ensured that every perspective was heard, resulting in overwhelmingly positive feedback. I am excited to expand these initiatives in my upcoming role as the D&I chair for NAACL 2025.

Another significant leadership role I held was co-chair for the Widening NLP (WiNLP) affinity group. In this capacity, my co-chairs and I organized mentorship programs, social events, and fire-side chats, aiming to create supportive networks and provide role models for underrepresented groups in NLP. One of my main goals was to offer a platform and visibility to less-known researchers doing excellent work, thereby not only supporting individual careers but enriching the field with diverse perspectives and ideas. Additionally, during my PhD at UC San Diego, I actively addressed systemic barriers faced by international students. I successfully advocated for deadline extensions for PhD applicants from countries affected by global crises and assisted students facing challenges with funding. These initiatives ensure that talented students are not excluded from opportunities due to circumstances beyond their control, further promoting diversity in our academic community. As faculty, I intend to continue these efforts, taking on leadership roles within the department and helping to implement such initiatives.

3 Community Building and Fostering Collaborations

I strongly believe in creating low barriers to entry in scientific fields and bridging different disciplines to foster diverse and innovative collaborations. This belief has driven my efforts to co-organize over 15 workshops at top ML and NLP venues between 2020 and 2024, including the Private NLP workshop at NAACL 2022 and ACL 2024, and the Broadening Collaborations in ML workshop at NeurIPS 2022. These events bring experts from various fields together, facilitating the exchange of ideas and promoting diverse scientific advances.

For example, co-organizing the Generative AI and Law workshop at ICML 2023 facilitated valuable connections among lawyers, policymakers, and AI researchers. These interactions led to new collaborations, resulting in papers presented at the workshop's 2024 edition. To promote inclusivity at our events, my co-organizers and I implement various initiatives, e.g., targeted outreach to marginalized groups, mentoring sessions for underrepresented attendees, fundraising efforts to waive registration fees, showcasing diverse research, and establishing visa-friendly deadlines. As a faculty member, I will foster interdepartmental collaborations by hosting social events and networking sessions. These gatherings will help researchers connect, explore new research directions, and provide students with diverse perspectives from different fields.