

Diversity statement

As an international student and a girl, I have a firsthand experience of struggles that the representatives of these two groups might have.

Growing up I was exposed to an extremely homogeneous environment, and I never stood out based on either physical attributes or speech. Hence, for a long time I lacked even the language to talk about diversity and possible discrimination. However, when I first went to Budapest, Hungary to study at the Central European University (CEU), I was astonished by diversity and the sheer number of countries represented: more than 100! I was surprised to find how liberating it is to be in such a diverse environment - the new ideas, cultures and more than anything the new ways of thinking about the same things further enriched my experience during my time at CEU. I had not only gained new knowledge but had also undergone a transformation in my personal life in embracing the similarity or unity as a people in the diversity of our backgrounds. This contributed in part to my decision to move to the US - a country famous for its diversity — for my Ph.D. And from that time, I have always tried to pass this understanding to my friends, and, more recently, to my students as well.

Though my experience at CEU in Budapest was transformative in opening me up to the richness of ideas and thoughts in a diverse environment, my initial period in Saint Louis made me acutely aware of the challenges that a non-native student faces in a new country and a new environment. In my case, it was mainly about the language, and more specifically the accent. I grew up in Russia, speaking in the most “normal” way. In CEU since most of the students were foreigners and the language was English, everyone had a different accent, and almost none spoke “proper” English. Meanwhile, in Missouri, I felt that I stood out. Being originally extremely talkative, I grew shy to speak in order to fit in better with the “locals”. Indeed, when I was silent, I looked local, and since I am fluent in understanding English, unless I opened my mouth, there was hardly a way “to reveal” that I was a foreigner. It took me a lot of time to overcome this impediment.

As a result of my personal experience, I always encourage students shy of their English to speak up as this is the only way to improve. I highlight that I know how they feel and that they should not worry: their accent does not make them sound more stupid or funny. Similarly, since all of us come from a different background and culture, I have always encouraged open discussion (respectfully) among my students as well as my friends to learn from each other and not retreat in our shells.

For instance, this summer, in the Stats class that I taught at Washington University’s University College program, a lot of students were international high schoolers. I could see that many of them faced similar reservations as I did when I first came to this country. Furthermore, I believe that these reservations apply not just to foreign accents, but in general due to the feeling of being different - be it a foreigner, or a woman or some other under-represented group. For example, I had a female Hispanic student, the only one in my class, who was clearly afraid to ask questions. I consistently encouraged her to participate. I would always emphasize that there was no stupid question and that when you asked a question there was likely somebody else wanting to ask it as well. I was lucky to see a clear transformation in many of my students, who became more confident, open and unrestricted over the course of the summer program. I would believe that my

constant encouragement and empathizing with their struggles did contribute at least in some small way to their growth as confident people in a new and sometimes intimidating environment.

I am a girl and I do STEM-research in PolSci. Luckily, I have never felt restricted or discriminated. However, unfortunately, I have met female students who struggled to combine being a girl and doing Math or CompSci. Probably, because of the social pressure, they feel that STEM is not feminine. Despite that I always passionately disagree with such ideas, I understand where they come from. For instance, the underrepresentation of women in STEM-classes can be stressful. I experienced it myself. Meanwhile, since I was passionate about what I was doing, I survived. That is exactly what I say to my students who feel stressed to become “more technical”: *be passionate, be focused, and be good in what you are going, then the rest won't matter.*

I believe I could become a role model for both graduate and undergraduate students. As an international female professor doing STEM in PolSci, I will be happy to share my insights and experiences.