

The world is a richer place when people feel safe and can express themselves without being disrespected for their background or identity. Computer science academia is no different. I come from a “traditional” computer science background: I’m a white man from a well-off family with a liberal arts education. I recognize that privilege, and I see it as my responsibility to extend the same respect I’ve been given in CS to those from less privileged backgrounds.

Graduate admissions is a place where those from less privileged backgrounds are often afforded less respect. In grad school, I’ve had more exposure to admissions than most grad students. A few of UW’s senior PhD students do a “first read” to select the subset of applications that the faculty will read. This will be my third year as a reader, and my second as the “student area chair” for programming languages and software engineering. In this role, I am responsible for coordinating reading by PhD students for applicants in my area and discussing decisions with the faculty.

Some faculty are conservative in the students that they choose to recruit: disproportionately we recruit the same “low-risk” students from the same “trusted advisors” at the same set of institutions. Lots of advisors will take on such “low-risk” students from traditional backgrounds, so it won’t hurt them much if I do not admit them. On the other hand, if I admit a student with a less traditional background, it might be transformative for them: many other potential advisors will pass over them. I believe that the potential risk to me and my research career (or tenure case, etc.) of admitting a “risky” student is not worth the tragedy of excluding a potentially excellent researcher from the system entirely.

One particular applicant stands out in my mind. An applicant from a nation with a weak CS education system was working as a lecturer at the school where she did her BS and MS. She had a single publication at a second-tier conference. Her letters were from professors who do not publish in top venues, but one line stood out: this professor had wanted to send that paper to a local venue in their native language. She had insisted on figuring out how to get the paper into an international venue. I read the paper; the technical work was good (maybe good enough for a top venue), but the English was poor, which I suspect held the paper back. I tried to convince the relevant professors in our department to admit this person, but they refused: she was too risky. I would have admitted her. As a professor, one of my priorities in recruiting students will be to look for people like her: with a background that doesn’t suggest obvious excellence, but that shows a lot of promise. The only way we can change the makeup of our field is by taking a chance on people who aren’t so privileged.

I’ve also been involved in the pre-application mentoring program at UW. I help students, usually from less-privileged backgrounds prepare their grad-school applications. I also participate in SIGPLAN-M as a mentor; my work there has been similar. When I was applying to grad school, a professor helped me prepare my materials so that they met the expectations of an admissions committee. Folks who don’t have that privilege sometimes do not know what the admissions committee needs to make its decision, and this program helps fix that. As faculty, I will start a similar pre-application mentoring program or support it if it already exists.