Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Statement

For many, a commitment to diversity and inclusion stems from an intellectual adherence to the values instilled in our American legal system. For others, it is a professional acknowledgement that diverse and inclusive workplaces invite a broader population of employees, encourage a plethora of disparate and often creative ideas, and consequently bring about highly performing and innovative organizations. The commitment to inclusion and diversity within the organization also creates a sense of workplace community where employees are tied by universal values that transcend race, color, religion, national origin, and gender identity and ultimately serves to retain an organization’s best employees. These ethical, legal, and professional reasons are undeniably true and are backed up by years of social science research.

To go beyond an intellectual commitment to diversity and inclusion, each individual must make it “real” and come to appreciate its value as an integral part of their personal life experience. And so the only way that I can meaningfully describe my unwavering commitment to inclusion and diversity is by sharing some of these real life personal experiences beginning from a young age.

Growing up in the “sticks” of Connecticut as an Egyptian-American-Muslim, understanding diversity and inclusion was hardly an optional pursuit for a reflective young person like myself. It was an essential activity that wrestled with the human fundamentals of identity, community, and values that underpin so much of a healthy and well-balanced disposition. I became aware that although the American government considers Egyptian-American-Muslims part of the white majority1, the ethnicities from the Middle East and North Africa bring a set of such fundamentally different historical, social, and personal experiences that they very much represent a new tile in the American ethnic and religious mosaic. Naturally, from a young age, inclusion and diversity became an integrated bundle of threads woven into the fabric of my personal and professional life; be it in the United States or later as my career developed internationally.

Probably, the first of my formative professional experiences on inclusion & diversity was at the high school level. As a student member to the CT Region #19 Board of Education, we had become aware that the school district was set to expand both in overall size as well as in racial, ethnic, and economic composition. After a number of strategic planning activities, the school district set up a number of “Race-Culture Retreats” that invited administrators, teachers, parents, and students to discuss the existing as well as nascent challenges faced by minorities in our school district. We came to realize that “Experience is Value”. And so to maximize the richness of our community, address its ills, and grow its strengths, we must foster, appreciate, and learn from the experiences of each member in our community. In an educational community, everyone must learn from the other, in recognition that each person is a vessel of valuable experiences coming from near and far. These volunteer community service activities brought me national recognition in the form of a certificate of merit from the United States Congress and a meeting with President Bill Clinton.

This ethical commitment to inclusion and diversity deepened as I moved from the rural “small pond” of Storrs, CT to MIT. There, my extra-curricular activities provided the richest experiences. Far from the popular stereotypes, my fraternity-living-group was not just an inclusive environment of 40 young men that accepted my religious observation, but also a group committed to a nationally recognized community service program. As the years passed at MIT, my values continued to express themselves to bright-eyed first-years as an orientation leader. MIT first-years are a diverse bunch, and yet their MIT experience showed me the commonality of our aspirations. Later on, I became a Nightline counselor to heavy-hearted members of the MIT community. This was a student-run, student-staffed, MIT-sponsored, telephone-based, emotional support service similar to the Samaritans crisis hotline. It is difficult to be a part of so many phone calls, so many diverse human stories, and especially in their time of individual need, without the experience becoming ingrained in one’s human life; be it in the United States or later as my career developed internationally.

1This is a reference to the typical and often rigid taxonomy of race found in federal and state diversity surveys. While it is anthropologically true that ethnicities from the Middle East and North Africa are members of the white race, the ethnic reality of these regions is far more diverse. Furthermore, many studies have shown that the psychology of diversity & inclusion is at least equally tied to color, ethnicity, religion, and gender identity. From a social science perspective, by using the single category, the typical diversity surveys assume that ethnicities from the Middle East and North Africa experience similar conditions to white race ethnicities originating from Europe. In the meantime, some authorities in the field believe that race-centric taxonomies reinforce pre-existing divides. Naturally, there remains much debate as to the most appropriate social taxonomy so that surveys best address diversity and inclusion.
identity. The central theme in all these experiences was a sincere desire to appreciate individual experiences; potentially very different from my own.

Later on, as my career took on an international turn, this inclusive ethic continued to manifest itself. As a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, I was nominated to be the public relations officer of the University’s Islamic society. My mission was to organize interfaith dialogue events that fostered community-wide commitments to social justice and cohesion. I hardly expected that this ethic would be brought front and center in an interview with the BBC News after the tragic events of July 7 2005.

At the Masdar Institute in Abu Dhabi, UAE, now as a professor, the conversation around inclusion and diversity took on a different tone. Sitting at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa, Masdar attracted quite the diverse palette of international students. However, as a new university, student groups were still nascent. The natural attraction towards one’s own culture was most prevalent in social networks at the expense of inclusivity. Here, faculty members can subtly set the right tone. As a speaker of Arabic, Spanish, and French, I might deploy these languages in social interactions. Its amazing how a few words outside the “international language of business” can go a long way to stepping out from a “business-mindset” to one that is more collegial, hospitable, and friendly.

Upon returning to the United States in 2015 and joining the Dartmouth faculty, I found a completely different and often poignant conversation around diversity and inclusion.

- First, the result of the 2016 presidential election and the ensuing “Muslim-ban” was troubling, un-nerving and worrisome for many of our Muslim students. As one of less than a handful of Muslim faculty on campus, a persistent and reassuring presence was required through consistent attendance in Muslim students’ bi-weekly potluck dinners. I recall one dinner conversation, in particular, in which a Muslim female faculty and I relayed our September 11th experiences as university students and comforted them with the knowledge that the pendulum of history, although it has extremes, also has a way of swinging back to normalcy. The two of us would later advocate for the presence of a dedicated Muslim student chaplain/advisor – a role that had been cut several years earlier.

- Second, my efforts with our Latin-American students required a lighter touch. Here, again, as a fluent hispanohablante, unas buenas palabras, timely delivered, can serve to say “te reconozco” and signal my support of a multi-lingual America. When word got around shortly thereafter, I found many Latin-American students confiding in me about the campus climate and their efforts to be seen with the entirety of their identity.

- Third, as a professor who teaches complex engineering systems, the classroom presents ample opportunity to address structural inequity head-on. As we discuss, the decentralization of energy infrastructure towards renewable energy resources comes with a commensurate decentralization of political power and economic wealth and presents new opportunities for energy equity. Similarly, the benefits of a shift to multi-modal electrified transportation can be shared by a broad population or unfortunately directed to populations with greatest political influence. In both cases, our curriculum on decision-making in infrastructure must explicitly address social structures.

- Finally, two of my graduate students, an Indian woman and a Kenyan woman, sought my advice about creating a new student group at Dartmouth Engineering: “Promoting Respect Inclusion and Diversity amongst Engineers (PRIDE)”. Beyond stating my full support for the initiative, and expressing my confidence in their abilities, I encouraged them to look beyond the ongoing quantitative surveys. I recall saying (paraphrased): “A university is not an illuminated house on a hill to which many aspire and few attain, its a stage that provides the platform for a diversity of characters to fluidly, and at times chaotically, come, go, interact, assemble, disassemble, and most of all find the best version of themselves. If we achieve that feeling for everyone, then we know that we are doing something right.”

And now after having lived and worked in seven countries and interacted with citizens of dozens more, I very much see inclusion and diversity as the norm rather than the exception. It is interwoven with the “Empowering Your Network” mantra at the heart of my teaching philosophy. It is evidenced by the diversity of undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral researchers in the LIINES. I’m happy to say and very deeply fulfilled that the majority of LIINES researchers are women; and the majority also identify as minority races and ethnicities. Seeking others, working with them and listening to their experiences is the norm, in the normative sense, of our humanity. We are individually poorer if we do anything less. I am grateful to the individuals from all walks of life that have shared with me jewels from their life, and I look forward to continuing such experiences as a professor.