ACM CCS 2024 DEI Workshop: Lessons Learned

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For the first time, ACM CCS 2024 appointed chairs specifically dedicated to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) to actively promote these values within the community. With the risk of sounding platitudinous, this significant step highlights ACM's commitment to DEI, aiming to create an environment where everyone feels heard, and where DEI principles are integral to our ethos.

DEI perspectives vary based on background, experience, culture, and values, as well as legal and ethical considerations. Rather than defining DEI, we aim to showcase key changes needed for the community to thrive and grow healthily. We want to be as clear, precise and respectful as possible without hiding behind inefficient statements. Our mission is to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals, ensuring opportunities for everyone to contribute, learn, grow, and benefit from the community. We advocate for dialogue, constructive conversations, and creating career opportunities for everyone who shows interest and capability. We view this initiative as a way to learn and practice essential soft skills, which are crucial for success in any work environment. This year, we focused on the following principles:

1. *Challenge Assumptions*: Understand the importance of not making judgments based on assumptions or prejudice through learning.

2. *Prevent Misunderstandings*: Recognize that we all come from different backgrounds, cultures, values, and ways of expressing ourselves. Misunderstandings and misjudgments are common but can be prevented by practicing how to ask for clarifications and explanations before judging or concluding.

3. *Encourage Open Dialogue*: Engage in conversations that help break down barriers and build bridges. Challenge ourselves and others to consider different points of view with respect, even if they do not serve us directly.

We recognize the need for smaller, foundational steps to achieve these goals. This report outlines our DEI efforts at ACM CCS and reports on the lessons we learned during the workshop organization process in 2024.

Forming the team. We first formed a team of chairs based on various factors. The most important was to create a team with people who could commit the time to make this effort a success. Our definition of success was simple: to reach as many students as possible and provide them with the tools they need to pursue a successful research career; and learn from them to build a strong community. We wanted them to see alternative environments to what they already know within their advisors' labs. Equally important was to include people with different expertise in terms of research fields and seniority. For example, having a Ph.D. student on the team while making decisions ensured representation of student and junior's voices. Similarly, having senior academics helped us leverage their networks and avoid mistakes during the preparation process. Finally, chairs took on different responsibilities by consensus, enhancing efficiency.

For an efficient kickoff, we conducted discussions with community members who have successfully served in DEI. We gathered diverse perspectives on best serving the students and the community. Mentoring and networking events emerged as crucial components, providing the safe spaces for students to voice their concerns. This prevents isolation and silence among junior community members. We also heard that there is more these communities want to do beyond mentoring and networking. We wanted to do the "more."

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[*] The opinions expressed in this document are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of their employers.

Planning. During our initial DEI chairs meetings, we brainstormed several ideas. Although we did not implement all the ideas, we hope future volunteers might find them useful. One idea was to create a cheat-sheet for practicing inclusive conversations and display it as a poster or on lunch tables. The sheet would include suggestions like,"If you have a strong reaction to someone, please pause and check your assumptions," or "Ensure everyone in the conversation has had a chance to contribute to the discussion, ask, or answer questions." We did not pursue this idea because we were unsure how it would be perceived by CCS participants. We thought senior academics might not be comfortable reading a poster, and students might not find it actionable without a moderator.

Another idea was to create a Wiki for DEI, serving as a hub to collect all the events, announcements, and the instances of discord for DEI-focused groups. This would include initiatives like Women (and Allies) in Cryptography/Cybersecurity/Computer Networks or LGBTQ+ communities in various domains. Our aim was to bring all efforts into one place for easy search, participation, and inquiries. We deferred this idea for the future, seeking help from those who can allocate time to it.

Formatting the events. We then needed to decide on a format for the DEI workshop. We opted for a full-day event, inviting students by either financially sponsoring them or taking registrations during the main conference registration. We opened an application process on EasyChair and received approximately 30 applications, from which we accepted around 8 students from this pool. We funded 13 students in total including the students who applied for the CCS Student Grant. The decision was based on several factors: limited budget, the relevance of the applicants' study domains to cryptography, security, or privacy, their academic potential and strengths. We focused on sponsoring women, minorities, and less privileged students, even if they did not have accepted papers at CCS 2024.

Program. Our program included a series of talks, breakout sessions for discussions, a panel discussion, and a networking dinner *. We wanted speakers from many possible experiences in academia, industry, and governmental organizations, all involved in DEI efforts. We invited Yoshi Kohno, a very experienced mentor and advocate for students; Jessica Staddon, who has extensive industry experience and recently transitioned to academia; and Jennifer Cheung, a long-time member of the Women in Cybersecurity community. Finally, we hosted Qiaoyan Yu from NSF to share the process of NSF Grant Proposal Preparation with helpful hints. Each speaker structured their talks to benefit students.

The panel session, moderated by Sophie Stephenson, featured several early-career researchers who engaged in insightful discussions. The panelists included Katharina Boudghoust from CNRS Research, Lana Ramjit from Cornell Tech's Clinic to End Tech Abuse (now at AEquitas), Pardis Emami-Naeini from Duke University, and Sofía Celi from Brave. All the panelists, except Sofía, participated remotely. Despite the remote setup, the session was highly successful and received positive feedback from participants. The discussion topics were informed by a survey conducted with the grantees prior to the panel session. The panelists shared the highlights of their careers so far, discussing the barriers and challenges they have faced, and how they managed to overcome them. Katharina and Sofía also shared their efforts leading the Women in Cryptography community.

Our suggestions for future DEI events. Our workshop was a step forward for DEI efforts at ACM CCS. However, during the process, some hiccups unavoidably occurred. We hope that our experiences organizing this workshop can help future iterations become even more successful. Below, we list our takeaways from this workshop and suggestions for future DEI events at ACM CCS and beyond.

1. ***Our Strongest Takeaway: Integrate DEI Events Into the Main Program.*** We struggled to attract many participants (outside of the sponsored students) because the workshop coincided with several technical workshops with great agendas. It was very difficult for sponsored students to choose between the DEI workshop and technical sessions, and we received emails from students who couldn't attend the DEI workshop because their advisors prioritized the technical program. To address this, we recommend integrating DEI into the main program, such as making it a series of sessions instead of a one-day event, so that conference attendees don't have to choose between technical content and inclusive events. We emphasize that DEI events such as our workshop help participants to improve their soft skills which are essential for landing a job in any competitive workplace.

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*Our program is available at `https://www.sigsac.org/ccs/CCS2024/attending/DEI.html`

2. *Announce the Process for Student Financial Support Earlier*: Announce the financial support process much earlier to give students and their advisors ample time to write letters explaining why the student is a good fit for the support. In this inaugural workshop, we prioritized program excellence before announcing financial support. This impacted some students, especially those needing visas. In the future, as soon as the budget is available, we recommend announcing the application process and using larger social network platforms for visibility.

3. *Ensure Appropriate Room Selection for DEI Events*: Select rooms for DEI events that are suitable for round tables and provide enough space for speedy breakout chats.

4. *Enable Approximation of the Number of Attendees*: Estimating the number of participants for workshop room selection and food ordering was challenging without completing the funding process and inviting students. Explicitly soliciting participation decisions from registrants with "full registration" would provide useful input for estimating the number of potential participants.

5. *Announce the Women's Networking Dinner as "Women and Allies"*: This will involve men in understanding issues around safe workplaces for women, underrepresented communities, and less privileged minorities. While women supporting women is essential, broader support is needed. However, this approach requires sensitivity and care.

In the end, we wanted participants to be fully present in the workshop, ask questions, learn new ways to improve their work environments, meet new people, and stay connected to the support community. Based on participant feedback, we believe we succeeded.