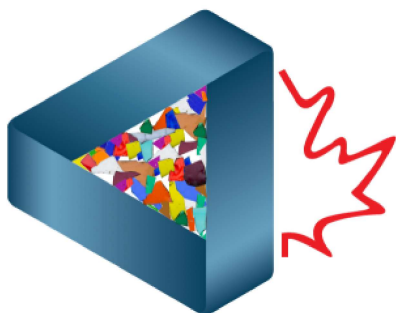


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MOSAIC, Outreach, Society, Accessibility, and Inclusiveness Column is directed by the CMS EDI committee and touches upon issues concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion in mathematics. Comments, suggestions and submissions are welcome.

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It was the summer of 2020, and I was holed up in my flat in my home country of Singapore, sitting out the pandemic. It was the first summer of my PhD studies in mathematics at the University of Toronto, and I was gingerly trying out a research project with a potential research advisor. Isolating myself for fear of the virus, I felt like I was orbiting the Earth from space, with news reports being my only link to civilisation. That was when I learned about the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States that had been ignited by the murder of George Floyd, but which had erupted from longstanding racial injustices. Those protests spread to Canada as well.

The protests sparked more discourse around racism and other forms of discrimination in academia. I was especially intrigued by the #ShutDownSTEM movement, which urges academics to stop doing “business as usual”, to educate themselves about racism in academia, and to take action against racism. After wondering how I could promote racial justice and inclusivity in my own department, I reached out to my Department Chair. Over a call, we discussed the ways in which our department was trying to increase the representation of under-represented groups, and the challenges it was facing along the way.

Little did I know that he would soon invite me to represent graduate students in a newly formed Diversity and Equity Committee in the department. I accepted and served in the committee from September 2020 to August 2021, alongside four faculty members. We discussed accounts of racist and sexist comments, incidents of harassment, feelings of isolation, and unwanted attention. These issues spanned the range of career stages from undergraduates to faculty, and are hardly unique to the University of Toronto. As a committee we studied the diversity and equity issues in the department, educated ourselves and the department on these issues through various initiatives, and made recommendations to the Department Chair.

In this article I hope to “lift the veil” by surveying some of the committee work that I did and by explaining how change can happen, so as to encourage other graduate students to also take up the mantle. In a way, this article is also a letter from one graduate representative to the aspiring graduate representatives out there, to share my personal journey and some suggestions in the hope that it will help them succeed and thrive as a representative. My personal experience has included the highs of achieving some progress with the lows of burnout, and it has forced me to examine some complex questions. These include the questioning of my own role, the challenges of speaking up to faculty, and the responsibilities of those who interview students about potentially traumatic memories. I hope that committees in any department will find my description of successes and challenges useful in calibrating their approach to seeking student input.

What We Did

I am proud of what our brand-new committee achieved over the past year. Much of it was crucial behind-the-scenes work: debating about our mission and role in our department, and building connections in the department and beyond.

Our outward-facing work has had a more visible impact. We engaged an external presenter to conduct diversity training for our department's hiring committee. We also founded a recurring and well-attended seminar series, called the Equity Forum that has regularly engaged external speakers to present on equity-related issues with audience discussion. The topics have included humanizing mathematics departments, the ethics of mathematics research applications, and indigenizing mathematics. Commendably, the department sponsored an honorarium for each speaker; these speakers should be compensated for their emotional labour in presenting about equity issues. One speaker, Prof. Aris Winger, encouraged the nearly 60 students, faculty and postdocs in his audience to anonymously share the challenges that they face as teachers. I vividly recall that experience of collective vulnerability and anonymous mutual encouragement that cut across all career stages.

My own mandate was to “represent graduate student voices to the committee”, which I was free to interpret and elaborate on. I interpreted my role as one that seeks out and listens to the voices of graduate students on diversity and equity issues in order to relay them to departmental leadership. As my job scope was not clearly defined, I followed my own compass and expanded my role whenever I felt that more needed to be done for graduate students. I have laid out the types of work that I did in Table 1, estimating the time I spent on each.

Table 1: Time spent on committee-related work, rounded off to the nearest 5 hours. More detailed descriptions of each category can be found in the Appendix.

Category of Work	Estimated Time Spent (hrs)
Publicity and Communications	25
Succession Planning and Search	25
Committee Discussions	20
Event Organizing and Hosting	10
Interviewing	10
External Liaising	10
Meeting the Department Chair	5
Self-Education	5
Total	110

Looking back, I feel that I had shouldered too much work and responsibility by myself, partly because of the open-ended mandate that I had been handed, and partly due to factors like a sense of isolation and perfectionism. That contributed to my burning out at some point during my year of committee service. I hope that future graduate representatives will be able to share their workload with a broader community of likeminded graduate students, so that the labour can be more equitably distributed.

Who “deserves” to represent the marginalised?

I would like to explain how I situated myself relative to diversity and equity work. The first question I asked myself after being invited to the committee was whether I “deserved” to represent graduate students on diversity and equity issues. Much discourse traces these issues back to a heavy history of discrimination in the US or Canadian context, where I felt out of my depth. Could “Canadian issues” be handled by non-Canadian citizens?

Furthermore, I had grown up as part of the racial majority in Singapore, where I had not been unduly denied opportunities overall. Could I be sensitive enough to those for whom barriers are the norm? My fear of being wrong, of being judged by others, and of inadvertently hurting those who have been marginalised, gave me pause before accepting the invitation from the Department Chair.

In the end, I accepted the role for several reasons. I felt that in principle, marginalised people should not bear the entire burden of righting wrongs by themselves. I also thought that I could amplify the voices of the marginalised using my privilege. This privilege includes a level of comfort with speaking to faculty and senior leadership stemming from committee work during my undergraduate studies.

Furthermore, I predicted—correctly, in hindsight—that much of the work would involve setting up new initiatives, in which my previous leadership experience could prove helpful. I would be satisfied if my groundwork could serve as a template for future generations of graduate representatives, to help them avoid starting from scratch. My final reason to accept was my worry that if I did not, then graduate student voices would not be represented. I could not accept that as the work was necessary and somebody needed to do it.

Over the course of my committee work, I saw ways in which racism extended past national borders into something far exceeding “just a Canadian issue”. Strands of my identity were bound to marginalised groups, and to diversity and equity work, by historical anti-Asian racism—such as the Chinese Exclusion Act in Canada—and current instances of racism like the model minority myth and the stereotypes that fuelled violence against Asians during the pandemic.

In the end, however, I was never able to completely shake my imposter syndrome—my suspicion that someone else would have done a better job in my shoes. What helped me to keep moving forward was the maxim that *something is better than nothing; someone is better than no-one*. I hope that it can help someone else as well.

It Takes a Village

My role as a committee member was to push for change from the “inside” of the departmental system. Over a year’s work, I have concluded that change can happen, but it often happens slowly as information takes time to filter through layers of leadership. As a graduate representative, I accepted that I could not expect most of the advocacy by the committee to bear fruit until after my departure, if at all.

To illustrate how different leaders and advocates in a department can collaborate to make change happen, here are two examples that arose from a forum for graduate students to discuss diversity and equity issues in our department. I co-hosted that forum with Reila Zheng, a graduate student in my department who also serves on the CMS Equity,

Diversity and Inclusiveness Committee.

In the first example, forum attendees highlighted that information and opportunities are often shared by word of mouth, which makes them less accessible to those who are less well-connected in the department, particularly those from under-represented communities. Prior to this forum, the Graduate Administrator, Jemima Merisca, had had an idea for a newsletter for graduate students; the forum prompted her to initiate it and it continues to this day, run by the departmental staff. Every week this newsletter informs graduate students of important announcements, workshops, training opportunities, and recruitment for various initiatives. Occasionally the newsletter even includes wedding announcements, which are always fun to read!

In the second example, graduate students asked for more transparency in the process of assigning teaching assistant roles. They also raised questions about whether graduate students from different backgrounds have equal opportunities to work as a teaching assistant for certain types of courses. I relayed these concerns to the President of the Mathematics Graduate Student Association, who then highlighted them at a roundtable discussion that was organized by our department's Associate Chair, Graduate and attended by faculty, staff and student leaders. These concerns dovetailed into an explicit priority of the Associate Chair, Graduate to improve the experiences of teaching assistants and course instructors.

My experiences in committees during my undergraduate and graduate studies have taught me that advocacy and change happen faster when committee members are more passionate about it. On the other hand, change also requires cooperation and assent from other parts of the leadership in the department or beyond. Leaders and their priorities influence the speed of change. In any case, I'm glad to have played a role in forwarding the concerns of graduate students to departmental leadership.

Levelling the Playing Field

During committee meetings, the four faculty committee members and I would discuss issues that we had noticed in the department, brainstorm countermeasures, plan events and initiatives, and strategize our publicity and communications. I also tabled concerns that I had heard from graduate students, and sometimes even undergraduates. This required a measure of personal courage as I perceived the faculty as having more authority.

The courage to raise my views did not come to me right off the bat. I recall spending most of my first committee meeting quiet as a clam, as I smiled and gently nodded at the others in agreement. In my perception, the faculty members had sound and eye-opening opinions; somehow my own opinions had less value. Thankfully, the welcoming and friendly atmosphere helped me to share my thoughts openly, and even to disagree, by the end of that meeting. The power differential between me and the faculty had intimidated me at the onset, but their openness and trust in me helped to dissolve that barrier.

I had in fact enjoyed a head start in getting comfortable to debate with faculty, as I had spent the third and fourth years of my undergraduate studies representing undergraduates in committees that largely consisted of faculty. It had taken my entire third undergraduate year to open up and feel comfortable speaking my mind. Any other student could potentially take a similarly long time to feel comfortable in their first committee role. The faculty and staff in the committees I was in during my fourth undergraduate year took extra care to include me and treat me as an equal. That experience empowered me and gave me the confidence to speak up in the Diversity and Equity Committee shortly after joining it. Such an environment would nourish any student interaction with faculty, and would be important to help any graduate representative on any committee scale the power differential between them and faculty.

More generally, decisions made by faculty and other departmental leaders are difficult for students to question, because the authority behind those decisions imbues them with an impeccable aura and a sense of finality. This authority can discourage students from raising their concerns, or from persevering in their pursuit of change before those with higher perceived authority. To level the playing field, faculty and leaders bear a responsibility to seek student input on decisions with broad impact, to be welcoming to students and their input, and to treat their input seriously.

The Weight of Trust

When trying to amplify the voices of the marginalised, I had to depend on their difficult and poorly recompensed act of speaking up and revisiting traumatic memories. I conducted confidential interviews with graduate and undergraduate students with the hope of anchoring committee discussions to students' actual lived experiences. I am very grateful for the acts of trust and courage of those who shared their emotionally difficult stories with me and relived those memories, which can be especially trying for those who have faced discrimination or harassment.

This awareness was underscored when one potential respondent politely but firmly turned down my request for an interview. They pointed out that they had already highlighted certain issues and suggested changes to department members. I completely understood their decision; for the interviewee, sharing requires vulnerability and emotional labour, which may or may not be rewarded by change.

In acknowledging and affirming this refusal, I explicitly stated that I did not need a further reply from the student as even replying to my email could be a stressful engagement with bad memories. I am very grateful to the Committee Chair for teaching me this method of accommodation, which was eye-opening and has underscored for me the gravity of interview requests. Interviewers have a great responsibility to prevent interviews from becoming exploitative. This interview refusal also deepened my belief that there will be many issues that I will never get to hear about.

Concluding Reflections

My work as graduate representative has been rewarding. I'm glad to have played a role in bringing about some small changes and setting other changes in motion. I am also deeply grateful for the time, effort, and heart poured into improving the department by other students, staff and faculty. By co-facilitating discussion forums, I felt that I had carved out a small space for students to come together and talk about sensitive equity-related issues more openly—a space that had not usually been available.

I am also heartened to hear diversity and equity mentioned more frequently in conversation. Seeing a consistent set of graduate students attend each Equity Forum has added to a sense of camaraderie. Many individuals have taught me how to listen better, speak more respectfully about diversity and equity issues, and create safer conversation spaces. It

sense of calm. Other many mathematicians have taught me how to listen better, speak more respectfully about diversity and equity issues, and create safer conversation spaces. It gives me a great sense of fulfilment to know that my work can serve as a template for others to expand upon or modify.

On the flipside, a sense of isolation may have combined with my personal tendencies and the open-ended nature of my role to undermine the balance between my committee service and my research work. Healthy boundaries between service work and research are crucial and should be protected by students and supported by the department.

I hope that future graduate representatives on diversity and equity committees seek out stories about challenges faced by other students, while treating them with respect and sensitivity as it is so difficult to share those stories. I also urge those who consider themselves to be privileged against ruling themselves out of equity-related work. The responsibility for advocacy must be shared by all, and all of us have unique strengths that we can bring to the table. Finally, I ask faculty in committees to create a welcoming and nurturing environment for student representatives—to value their perspectives and solicit their opinions often, as it will help to bridge a power differential, freeing them to contribute to their fullest.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the Diversity and Equity Committee for the great experience working together, and for teaching me to be a better advocate. I would also like to thank the Department Chair for giving me the opportunity to represent graduate students on the committee and for his support of the committee. I am grateful to many graduate students for their suggestions and feedback.

I thank the CMS Equity, Diversity and Inclusiveness Committee for the opportunity to write this article, and Reila Zheng for encouraging me to write it. Special thanks go to Reila and Mun Yi Cheng for giving incredibly helpful feedback during my writing process.

Appendix: Committee-related Work by Category

The specific kinds of committee-related work that I did within each category in Table 1 are described as follows.

Publicity and Communications. Helping to draft the mission statement and website text for the committee; helping to design the committee's logo; mass-emailing graduate students to publicize events and to summarize concerns raised at events; summarizing graduate student concerns in an annual report.

Succession Planning and Search. Planning a system to select future graduate representatives to the committee by discussing with the committee and the Mathematics Graduate Student Association (MGSA); implementing the system and selecting two graduate students to succeed me as graduate representatives; giving them an on-boarding briefing; drafting a proposal to financially compensate future graduate representatives for their time; soliciting feedback on that proposal from student leaders, staff, and faculty.

Committee Discussions. Attending committee meetings; discussing over email; forwarding concerns from students; summarizing for the committee the information that I had collected from graduate students and departmental leaders.

Event Organizing and Hosting. Planning, executing, and hosting events for members of the department; recording and summarizing the discussions at the event; soliciting feedback for the event.

Interviewing. Drafting invitations for confidential interviews; conducting the interviews; transcribing notes from each interview.

External Liaising. Contacting other equity-related organizations in the university; attending their meetings; forwarding their resources to the Diversity and Equity Committee; conveying student concerns to the MGSA.

Meeting the Department Chair. Meeting the Department Chair to advocate for various proposals for change.

Self-Education. Attending workshops and reading articles to learn more about how to combat discrimination, and how to organize events centred around diversity and equity in a safer and more respectful way.