

Community, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement

A university has a duty to serve its students and community, to provide equal opportunities to its members, and to foster an inclusive open-minded environment that respects differences in experience, culture, and opinion. I act on these values as a teacher, mentor, and leader.

I work hard as an individual to learn about and serve the south side of Chicago. I regularly volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, which builds houses in south Chicago for first-time homeowners, and work as a volunteer coach at the local high school. Kenwood Academy is Hyde Park's public high school. Serving at Kenwood is an inspiring experience. Kenwood serves a predominantly low-income student body, boasts a 93% graduation rate, and many of its students are the first in their families to attend college. I have worked as an assistant coach on Kenwood's track and cross-country programs for two seasons. Coaching demands a long-term, in-depth commitment to the community that hosts UC — a community that is often kept separate from the university. I plan practice, run workouts, and serve as a mentor and advocate for the students. I work closely with both the boys and girls. As an assistant coach, I have the opportunity to run with the students, and to learn about their values, hurdles, and goals. I have enjoyed the challenge a different student body presents. I have also enjoyed the chance to learn the value and difficulties of working in a diverse environment through immersion in a culture different than my own and the call to grow as a mentor and role model. The experience as a coach has taught me the immense worth of community. It is one thing to be in a place. It is entirely different to be a part of it.

I bring these same values and effort to my role as an instructor. I serve as the postdoctoral representative to the department's committee on community, equity, diversity, and inclusion (CCEDI). The committee includes student members at all levels, as well as faculty. I started with CCEDI in 2020, its inaugural year. Our mission was especially important during the pandemic, when isolated students reported a strong need for community. In response, I created the committee on outreach and engagement (COE).

COE organizes volunteer events that build department community via service. We plan events that bring together students, staff, and faculty via a positive, socially-minded effort. We help students communicate with faculty, especially those who are nervous to do so. We also broadcast long-term engagement opportunities for students and faculty, including consulting partnerships with southside non-profits. In the last two quarters, COE has hosted ten outreach events. As committee chair, I oversee event planning and build partnerships with local non-profits. We partner with the Ronald McDonald House (Comer Children's Hospital) where we regularly plan, prep, and serve meals to families in need. We also partner with the Cook County Forest Preserves to maintain local parks, and with the Greater Chicago Food Depository; the leading provider of Chicago food banks. These opportunities encourage a friendly, inclusive department atmosphere.

In recognition of these efforts, I have served as the department representative at public facing open-houses. This summer, UC hosted the first annual South Side Science Festival. The festival opened the university to the south side community to encourage curiosity about science. I hosted a booth demonstrating student projects from my graduate course on learning in games. It was a great pleasure to talk to visitors of all ages, from small children to their parents. Older visitors could play against AI's my students designed while younger visitors participated in a card game demonstration of probability. Over the course of the festival, I gathered data on the results of the card game to help describe the multi-armed bandit problem addressed by the AI. Through the afternoon, we built a small crowd of volunteers working together to try and beat the AI. It was exciting to see visitors' curiosity grow as they played and to see their surprise that math could be fun. Several high school students expressed interest in the course and asked for my email to learn about the department. I have since maintained communication with them, as well as college students at UC from other departments who visited the booth.

I will continue to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion through concrete action in the next stages of my career.

Sincerely,



Alexander Strang
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