
GIERAD LAPUT | DIVERSITY STATEMENT

BACKGROUND

People use Form I-130 of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to petition for a close relative to immigrate to the United States. My uncle filed Form I-130 in 1978 for my mother. Twenty-five years later, she received news from the USCIS that it was approved. At 52, she left her job in the Philippines and gambled on starting a new life in the hopes of finding better opportunities for the family. As a practical choice, she brought only one child out of seven with her: me. We had a plan to work hard and save enough so that the rest of the family could follow us. I held jobs as a waiter, a landscaper, a catering staff member, a fast food employee, and a factory worker. Together, we saved enough to move my father and younger brothers to the U.S.

I often revisit these memories because they remind me of my mother's inspiring story and my own humble start. As a first-generation Filipino immigrant, I was the first in my family to attend college in the US, and I have had quite the trajectory: from attending a community college, to a regional state school, to a flagship state school, and eventually gaining admission to every computer science graduate school to which I applied, including top-ranked institutions, resulting in my attendance at one of the top computer science universities. I am proud of my accomplishments, which I achieved while working at least 20 hours per week to support my family and attending school full-time throughout my undergraduate and masters degrees. I am grateful for programs that have assisted my education: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Federal Work-Study (FWS), Teaching Assistantships (TA), and Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU).

ROLES AND PERSPECTIVES

Drawing from my personal experience, I sought to become a role model for my own community. With limited knowledge about the American educational system (and no immediate guidance to draw from), I had to navigate everything myself. As I began to understand the system, I took it upon myself to teach what I learned to over 50 Filipino immigrant students in the metro Detroit community who have had similar life experiences. For example, I held several one-on-one sessions to help students and their immigrant parents complete intimidating FAFSA applications. For students who were ineligible for the FAFSA due to their Visa status, I referred them to special grants and programs (*e.g.*, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) to ensure that they had resources and options to attend college. I also mentored many students on how to acquire FWS jobs, paid internships, and access to networking opportunities.

I have also taught and mentored at all of the diverse educational institutions that I attended, giving me unique perspectives on student life across different learning environments. For example, in my personal experience teaching classes, the students who paid the most attention, worked the hardest, and were the best at time management were often non-traditional adult students or those with military experience. They made class more interesting and engaging, especially when they shared personal experiences that challenged the viewpoints of their much younger peers. I have also learned that in my institutions, exposure to research experience was not equally distributed. That is why I am extremely grateful for the REU program, which served as my gateway to academic research. The REU experience honed my technical interests and dramatically improved my graduate school applications. My experience with the REU program made me realize the importance of undergraduate research opportunities. As a Ph.D. student, I have formally mentored two undergraduates (including one woman) and collaborated with several more. As a faculty member, I hope to provide REU experiences to more students who might not otherwise have research opportunities.

FUTURE GOALS

My unique experiences have given me a better appreciation for the lasting benefits of mentorship and the indispensable value of diversity. As I build my own research group, I am motivated by personal experience to foster a diverse lab environment. I believe students bring with them different skills, academic trajectories, and life backgrounds that will influence **what** they invent in my lab and **who** their intended users will be. A diverse team generates diverse ideas that help diverse people. I have already begun pursuing research directions that target diverse populations, especially in the field of accessibility. For example, I collaborated with Patrick Carrington and Jeffrey Bigham on SpokeSense, a low-cost sensor for capturing real-time analytics for wheelchair basketball athletes, garnering a Best Paper Nomination at ASSETS 2018. As I transition to faculty, I look forward to leading a diverse research group and providing educational opportunities for students, who like myself, come from unconventional backgrounds.