

## Broadening Participation Reflections on Black in Computing

*Seeking to improve systemic fairness in the computing realm.*

**I**N JUNE 2020, a community of Black people in computing from around the world published an open letter,<sup>a</sup> initiated by the authors, and a call for action<sup>b</sup> to the global computing community. The letter began with, “The recent killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police has sparked a movement that began at the birth of our nation. Though George Floyd may have been the most recent instance, we should not forget the lives of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Philando Castille, Tanisha Anderson, Atatiana Jefferson, Eric Garner, Charleena Lyles, Eula Love, Michael Brown, Khalif Browder, Botham Jean, Tamir Rice, Latasha Harlins, Amadou Diallo, Mary Turner, Emmett Till, and too many other Black people who have been murdered ...”

At the time, we reflected on this history of the killing of Black people in the U.S. and noted that these killings not only show the ultimate outcomes and harms that racist systems and institutions have on Black people, but they also spotlight the constant emotional and psychological strain that Black Americans endure. The accumulated experience of the Black computer science community highlights the magnitude of injustices that countless members of our community experience. During the course of performing our



jobs, we endure general mistreatment and we face a lack of support, demonization, and erasure of our (Black) academic and professional expertise. We know it is important that we persist in raising concerns about discrimination and prejudices that Black professionals experience, which are often common practice in the field. Further, we are acutely aware that organizational policies are currently optimized to exclude non-white males.

After our call to action, more than 700 signatures from individuals representing the breadth and depth of the computing and technology communities were received. People from academia, industry, government, and non-profit sectors signed, in solidarity, with the sentiment that we must do more. Accompanying the letter and call to ac-

tion was a definitive list of actionable steps individuals and organizations can take to redress systemic racism that exists in our profession, and beyond.

### Months Later

As we all grappled with the compounding and collective grief of the pandemic and institutional harm done to Black people in the U.S. and in other majority white countries, there were a plethora of statements made in support of Black employees, students, business owners, and founders, as well as the broader Black Lives Matter movement. Months later, as we reflect on those statements (and their promises), we are curious about the action, the follow-up, and the changes in policy and practice that will institutionalize the commitments, catalyze the change needed, support Black

a See <https://blackincomputing.org>

b See <https://blackincomputing.org/action-item-list>

lives, and create an environment that is equitable and fair for all. To date, there has been little real action beyond initial statements.

As students, teachers, mathematicians, scientists, technologists, and engineers, we learn there is no need for “culture” in our field. Ones and zeros, the scientific method, and meritocracy form the basis of our discipline. Computing is “neutral.” We know this is not true, which means that computing, as an institution, is still a long way from realizing its promise to make the world a better place. We also know that our field does not exist in a vacuum. The structural and institutional racism that has brought the nation to this point is also rooted in our discipline. We see AI and big data used to target the historically disadvantaged. The technologies we help create to benefit society are also disrupting Black communities through the embodiment of systemic bias, prejudice, and the proliferation of racial profiling. We see machine learning algorithms—rather, those who are developing the algorithms—routinely identify Black people as animals and criminals. Technology that we develop is used to further intergenerational inequality by systematizing segregation in housing, lending, admissions, policymaking, healthcare, and hiring practices.

We know better. We are not fooled by the doublespeak, the pleas of ignorance, and the excuses for the technological systems that are deployed into the world. We know that the advances in computing are transforming the way we all live, work, and learn. We also know that we cannot ask for equal opportunity for anyone without demanding equal opportunity for everyone. We know that in the same way computing can be used to stack the deck against Black people, it can also be used to stack the deck against anyone.

### Call To Action

Today, we are issuing another call to action to the individuals, organizations, educational institutions, and companies in the computing ecosystem to address the systemic and structural inequities that Black people experience. In issuing this call we ask the community to:

- ▶ Create unbiased and welcoming learning and work environments that

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allow Black people to be their authentic and whole selves, learning and working without experiencing racism and bias.

- ▶ Commit to addressing the systemic and institutional racism that has led Black people in computing to be pushed out of the field or to exit the field to pursue alternative careers.

- ▶ Address issues related to corporate, organizational, and educational culture and climate to create welcoming and comfortable spaces for Black people and prioritize the health and well-being of all computing students, employees, faculty, volunteers, and entrepreneurs.

There is a role for each of us to build stronger, more creative, and more inclusive communities, as described here.

**Individuals** can acknowledge the presence of Black colleagues, be open to new ideas and perspectives, and be their advocate or ally in times of discrimination and otherwise. Everyone can reflect on privileges they might have such that we can move toward eliminating double standards.

**Educational Institutions** can ensure that perpetrators of a toxic environment face consequences for their actions and that the injured parties are supported, not blamed, ostracized, and forced out. They also can reset their procedures and systems to be equitable and just, ensuring institutional power does not enable the subjective mistreatment of Black students, employees, postdocs, and faculty. They can integrate an equitable, fair, and just racial lens to every major milestone along the academic path to ensure that bias, prejudice, and discrimi-

nation do not play a part in anyone’s journey.

**Organizations** that receive public funding can ensure they are providing equal opportunity in compliance with existing civil rights statutes, including but not limited to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Education Amendments Act of 1972, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. They must also go beyond compliance and lip service to implementing systems and policies that realize actual outcomes that demonstrate progress on attracting, supporting, keeping, and promoting Blacks.

**Corporations** can start taking meaningful actions toward solving the racism problem that permeates their culture, leadership, staff, and tools. Publishing diversity metrics and issuing statements of performative progressiveness have not yielded progress or improved the lives of Black employees and entrepreneurs. Corporations need to change, positively, and/or eliminate policies and procedures that are weaponized against Blacks. They also need to consistently and fairly hold those that cause harm accountable.

**Communities** can establish equal opportunity review structures that are responsible for collecting and analyzing data to certify equitable outcomes by institutions, companies, and organizations in computing. These communities must also offer support and be strong voices for change and agents of actions for those who are harmed.

As we did in June 2020, we ask that you translate the public statements<sup>c</sup> into public action to support the Black professional communities toward achieving systemic fairness in computing. ■

c See <https://bit.ly/3s3nDsV>

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