

Diversity Statement

I firmly believe that a hallmark of a successful university and math department is making sure that differences in the backgrounds and in the experiences of their members, be it of students or of faculty, are never a hindrance but an asset. Achieving this requires an ongoing effort that I have engaged in throughout my career.

At 16 I was attending high school in Milan, Italy. To complete my studies there I had to arrange to stay with a foster family after my parents' job contracts ended and they had to return to Russia. I made the decision not to join them since the following year in Russia I would have been subject to the mandatory military draft, and that was against my personal moral stance and my dream of studying math. I decided to apply to the Scuola Normale Superiore for my undergraduate study; after significant preparation and a competitive entry exam I made it. Once I arrived I discovered that among the 300 undergraduate students of the Natural Sciences and of the Humanities classes I was the only foreigner. I encountered sporadic conflicts, that often had implicit or explicit xenophobic tones, during my life in Italy, a country both welcoming but also just coming to terms with how to deal with immigrants. Each year I had to spend several days in line at immigration offices to renew my documents. Often, due to a dysfunctional bureaucracy, the renewed documents arrived late and I lost opportunities to travel to workshops and conferences. But all of this did not dissuade me: I graduated successfully with top grades and enrolled in a PhD program in Germany. I still have very fond memories of my life in Italy.

It would be an unappreciative gesture of utmost arrogance for me to think that I was able to do so on my own. I owe my success to an incredibly supportive environment. My foster family was very warm and welcoming while I was coping with living far from my family at 16. In undergrad, my peers were also my closest friends and provided support and mutual encouragement. The older students were always ready to help. Finally, my institution, the Scuola Normale Superiore, always had my back in all my bureaucratic misadventures and provided a relaxed and stimulating learning environment. It is my personal goal to do my best to foster an environment in which every student would feel as appreciated and supported as I felt throughout my career.

I am firm believer in mentorship programs. I always enrolled in and provided my availability to these initiatives. When none were available I tried to use my own network to connect with students. On many occasions, as an undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate, I have talked to younger students and shared my experience. I had occasions to talk with high school students that came from underrepresented backgrounds: often their local environments did not have qualified sources of information of what it meant to pursue a degree in higher education, especially a field that can be as abstract as math. The interaction was always very fruitful for the students, but it also allowed me to better understand and subsequently improve my approach to teaching and mentoring people with diverse backgrounds.

Valorizing diversity impacts my teaching style. I have often noticed that students, especially ones of underrepresented backgrounds (e.g. women in mathematics, African-Americans) can be hindered by lack of confidence when approaching new material that also reflects in a hesitation in asking for help or clarification. I try to encourage office hours attendance, developing confidence, and maintaining engagement in classrooms with students with varied backgrounds. One way I do this is by assigning "challenge problems" on homework: these problems have a small weight grade-wise, but provide a challenge that students do not feel bad about not managing to overcome by themselves. I provide hints and assistance during multiple scheduled office hours to make sure everyone has an opportunity to solve these problems. I found that this approach significantly increased attendance and student satisfaction with their accomplishment. Student feedback shows that they enjoy such problems and many felt comfortable to subsequently approach me with requests for advice on more general issues like career choices, study methods etc. One student wrote:

[Graduate Real Analysis] "Prof. Uraltsev is a great teacher and I really loved attending the classes. It was initially difficult for me to cope up since I wasn't used to the kind of ideas used in the course but he was helpful and by the end course I am really comfortable with them."

Encouraging and promoting students of all backgrounds is a constant effort. Every lesson I teach I observe, listen, and think about ways to be more effective in bringing out the best from everyone. I also know that this should also be a communal, not only an individual effort. For this reason I am also enthusiastic to learn more and to actively participate in activities and programs that encourage diversity promoted by my place of employment.

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