

# Statement on the Selection of Jeffrey Ullman for a Turing Award

## An Open Letter to Committee of the ACM A.M. Turing Award and ACM:

**Date: 04/16/2021**

Professor Jeffrey D. Ullman of Stanford University has been chosen to receive the 2020 ACM A.M. Turing Award, generally regarded as the highest distinction in computing.

While we agree that the technical and educational contributions of Professor Ullman could meet the bar for a “Nobel Prize of Computing”, we condemn the selection as one that directly goes against the Diversity and Inclusion (D & I) values that the Computer Science community, and the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) in particular, aim to uphold. While we recognize Professor Ullman’s freedom of speech and freedom to hold and express his political views, we are concerned by his sustained discriminatory behavior against students and by ACM bestowing upon such a person an award named after Alan Turing, someone who suffered much discrimination in his tragic life [1].

ACM defines its mission as follows: “ACM is a global scientific and educational organization dedicated to advancing the art, science, engineering, and application of computing, serving both professional and public interests by fostering the open exchange of information and by promoting the *highest professional and ethical standards.*” Furthermore, ACM explicitly defines “Diversity and Inclusion” as one of its four core values [2].

We assert, based on documented evidence, that not only has Professor Ullman willfully violated the “highest professional and ethical standards” that ACM has the mission to uphold, but also that he has demonstrated a pattern of actively turning against the values of D & I for decades. History may judge this award as an indelible blot on the entire computing profession.

### Ullman’s Repeated Discrimination against Iranian Students

Among the existing evidence is a web page maintained by Professor Ullman that contains discriminatory and inflammatory statements regarding Iranians [3]. According to the data on the Internet Archive [4], he maintained this web page from as early as 2006 until late 2020, when he removed it following years of public outcry and pushback [5]. In 2011, the National Iranian American Council issued a formal complaint to Stanford University centered on his webpage [6–12], with no action taken by Stanford, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education [9], and seemingly no impact on Professor Ullman’s views or behavior.

There are indeed numerous documented instances of him corresponding, over the years, many to aspiring young Iranian students, with anti-Iranian sentiments as well as explicit discrimination based on presumptions on their political views [3,6–12,13]. In one instance, among countless others, Professor Ullman responded to an email from an Iranian student who had inquired about admission at Stanford saying [6–12]: *“And even if I were in a position to help, I will not help Iranian students until Iran recognizes and respects Israel as the land of the Jewish people. I know that you may not hold the same insane position as the mullahs that run your country, but it is a*

*matter of principle. If Iranians want the benefits of Stanford and other institutions in the US, they have to respect the values we hold in the US, including freedom of religion and respect for human rights.”*

As another example of his correspondence, in support of the University of Massachusetts’s soon-to-be-reverted decision to ban Iranian students from certain engineering programs, Professor Ullman wrote in 2015 [13]: *“I think we need to distinguish between Americans of Iranian descent, who have chosen to cast their lot with the United States, and Iranians who did not leave Iran when the religious fanatics took over, and who may well be sympathetic to Iran’s desires to build a nuclear weapon and to Iran’s support for terrorists throughout the world. While I’m sure there are some students living in Iran, who would like nothing better than to leave that country for as long as it is run by Islamic fundamentalists, can we afford to take that risk of educating them and then having them turn that education against us? Especially, can we afford the risk given all the bright students from other countries that share US values who would love to be accepted to a US school?”*

Thus, Professor Ullman has explicitly advocated to distinguish between Iranians who left Iran before the 1979 revolution and those who did not. It is worthwhile to reflect that many of today’s key academic players of Iranian descent were once aspiring students in Iran. Perhaps the most prominent example is the late Maryam Mirzakhani, Professor of Mathematics at Stanford University and the only woman to ever win the Fields medal, who studied in Iran before pursuing graduate studies in the US. Professor Ullman is simply calling for a categorical ban against such talents. That said, we emphasize that people should not need to have exceptional talents or make significant academic contributions to be treated with dignity and respect.

### **Ullman’s Rationalization of Crimes Against Native Americans**

Professor Ullman’s insensitive opinions extend beyond individuals of a specific national origin. For example, he rationalizes the taking away of land from Native Americans, which included several acts recognized by scholars as genocide against such populations [14], as “Technologically more advanced civilizations replace less advanced civilizations” [3].

### **Bigger Picture on the Implications of ACM’s Action and Silence**

At a time when the tremendous costs of discriminatory and inhumane behavior against minority groups, such as African Americans and Asians, among others, is being broadly recognized in the computing community and beyond, ACM should not ignore such explicit and repeated xenophobic language and behavior by the person they are bestowing their highest award upon. Furthermore, discrimination against students based on their national origin and their presumed political views is in direct violation of the academic and D & I values that ACM aims to uphold as a core value. Generations to come may see this action by ACM and their silence on how this award negatively impacts D & I in computing as defiling the very respectability of the Turing Award and as an insult to the memory of Alan Turing himself.

We ask ACM, and particularly the ACM A.M. Turing Award Committee, the following:

1. Report on the specifics surrounding this nomination, especially the extent of checks and balances that are in place to ensure that the process of awarding the highest distinction in computing is protected against violations of the ACM mission and its core values.
2. Clarity from ACM on establishing compliance with its core values, particularly on D & I standards, as an *explicit* criterion for receiving this award. If not, *transparently* state that behaviors that directly damage inclusivity and diversity in the computing field are not relevant in the criteria listed by ACM for this award.

**Note From ACM:** *The list of signatories we received included both public and private individuals. We are not including the list here at the request of CSforInclusion. Current public signatories can be found at the CSforInclusion website [www.CSforInclusion.wordpress.com](http://www.CSforInclusion.wordpress.com)*

**References:**

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- [14] <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/24/world/europe/alan-turing-enigma-code-breaker-and-computer-pioneer-wins-royal-pardon.html>