

Episode 53: What Can I Do to Make a Difference?- On Academia, DEI, and Culture with Dr. Avery August

Released on September 24, 2021

[00:00:00.67] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.

[00:00:09.88] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:12.16] Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. We're excited to bring Avery August on today's show. Avery is a Professor of Immunology in the College of Veterinary Medicine and the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

[00:00:25.53] He's also a member of the Presidential Advisors for Diversity and Equity. Toral and I talked to him about his journey into academia and get a glimpse into his perspective as to why issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion should matter to faculty here at Cornell. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:44.49] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:45.84] ANTHONY SIS: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:49.20] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:01:00.10] Avery, super excited to have you on the podcast today. So before we get started on anything else, if you just want to share your name, your pronouns, where you work at Cornell, and maybe share how long you've been working here.

[00:01:12.49] AVERY AUGUST: Well, I'm really happy to be here, Anthony and Toral. My name is Avery August. My pronouns are he, him, and his. I'm a professor of immunology here at Cornell, and I'm also vice provost for academic affairs. And I'm one of the Presidential Advisors on Diversity and Equity.

[00:01:29.11] ANTHONY SIS: Yes, which we're going to get to later on in the show. And so before we get started with these questions, as always, we have a question of the day. And so this question is one that-- obviously, just given everything that's going on, all of us are tapped into this diversity, equity, inclusion topics, issues.

[00:01:48.23] And so just to kick us off, maybe you can share maybe just one topic that's been at the forefront of your mind in more recent times, given just so many things that are happening, in terms of the world, even things that are happening here at Cornell. And so what's one that you've been sitting with, resonating with?

[00:02:05.26] And I can share first and say that one, for me, has been around disability and just access and inclusion, and what does that look like for the disabled community? And so just really staying in tune and in touch with not only things that are happening here within Cornell, but also nationally, internationally. What are some of the best practices in this area?

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[00:02:23.38] And it's something that, for me, I've just really honed in on in this role over the past 2 and 1/2 years that I've been here. And so just continue to expand my awareness and my understanding of the needs. And also, what does it mean to lead with inclusion, from a disability lens, from an inclusion lens? And so that's just one thing. It's very broad, very vague, but just something that I'm continuing to educate myself on, especially now, just given just so many relevant topics that are affecting the community.

[00:02:49.37] AVERY AUGUST: I really appreciate that because I think about many stories. And when you look back at your journey, you're a product of all of those stories and experiences that you build on to be who you are. And when I think about that question, I think about what you just talked about, with regards to disability.

[00:03:05.65] When I first started in academia, I didn't think about inclusion. And when I say started out, I mean when I was a graduate student. I was just learning to be a scientist, but then I quickly realized that there were people missing from those rooms that I was in. And that has been-- if I look at the thread of my journey, it's always been, there are people missing in these rooms.

[00:03:28.27] And who are those people? And how can we get those people into these rooms to get their perspectives? Because it's really, really important.

[00:03:34.36] Your example of disability, one of the programs that I started here at Cornell is the initiative to maximize student development. And this is a program that seeks to increase the proportion of those who are usually underrepresented in the life sciences to increase that proportion. And one of our goals is to increase the proportion of deaf and hard-of-hearing students and scientists. And that experience of thinking about those experiences of those students and what those students need to be included, from a structural perspective, has really continued to open my eyes.

[00:04:07.63] And it's like the story of the curb cuts. The curb cuts, you don't normally think about them if they aren't there, if you don't need them. But even when you don't need them and they're there, they're really very helpful. So they help everyone.

[00:04:19.40] And so all the things that we've done to try to change the structure of a program here to ensure that those individuals feel welcome here at Cornell and can thrive have also helped others. And so I think when we think about inclusion and belonging and diversity, I think this is the theme. You know, we're not excluding everyone, we're trying to increase inclusion.

[00:04:39.34] TORAL PATEL: So for me, I appreciate everything that both of you said. And I think something that it's just been a big part of my learning over the last 2 and 1/2 years in this role has really been-- outside of the individual topics of diversity and individual areas-- it's been this concept of intersectionality and really honing in on the fact that when we focus on trainings or conversations, we might focus on one component of an individual's identity. But really, that person is so much more than just that one identity itself.

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[00:05:08.17] They were made up of multiple different identities, and they hold them all at the same time. And so I think for me that's been probably the biggest learning and the biggest concept. So trying to approach all of my conversations, all of the programs that we have with that in mind, that though we might be focusing on one area, the identities that one individual holds are so much more than that one concept.

[00:05:28.51] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. Really good answers. And we can talk about this forever and ever, but that's not what we're here to talk about. We're here to talk about you, Avery, and your journey. And so what's interesting about this-- so this show is very much heavily focused on staff at Cornell in terms of their experiences related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

[00:05:46.30] And we've had maybe one or two faculty who have spoken about their experience here at Cornell. But in terms of your role and also your role on the PADE team, as you mentioned, The Presidential Advisors for Diversity and Equity, I think this perspective and just learning about you and your journey and how you viewed this work here at Cornell is so important to bring to the show. And so to get us started, our first question really is, if you want to share a little bit more about your journey into academia and into this space of talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion and in particular thinking about what experiences have influenced or inspired you to pursue the career that you currently have?

[00:06:23.46] AVERY AUGUST: Well, I initially started out as an undergraduate student interested in biology. And, of course, my understanding-- very, very limited understanding-- of what that meant is that you become a physician. But then I quickly realized, I really don't like hospitals, and I really am much more interested in how things work. So I struggled for a bit. At one point my GPA was 1.8, I think.

[00:06:45.66] But one of my professors actually asked me what I wanted to do. And this was really the first time I really seriously considered that. And, fortunately, he was part of a program that was aimed at increasing the proportion of students who look like me in science. And that was my first exposure to what that meant.

[00:07:05.73] And that has influenced my career all the way through is thinking about how can I do that for others? He did that for me, and he made a huge difference in what I ended up doing. And so this idea of looking around the rooms and seeing who's there and seeing who's missing and trying to increase-- trying to broaden who's in that room is one that I really started when I was a graduate student at Weill Cornell.

[00:07:30.00] We're in the middle of, probably, one of the most diverse cities in the country. But when I look around the rooms, it wasn't. And I thought that there were voices missing. And this is a time when the genetic revolution was just starting, and I started getting really concerned that there were people who needed to have a voice about how they were treated, how their genes are thought about that weren't in those rooms.

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[00:07:51.60] And so I started working with middle school students. It was a high school just across the street from where I was. And that was really the first time I think I consciously thought about it and started to do something about it. And so I've always taken that route of looking around and seeing what can I do that can make a difference? Even if it's just one person that ends up going forward, then that can make a difference.

[00:08:11.02] And that is really being interested in the science, but also interested in who does the science has allowed me to pursue what others might look at as two different things. I've worked as an academic, I've worked as a scientist, published. But also, I've worked to try to increase who gets into those rooms. And that's been satisfying for me. There are many who do one or the other, and that's satisfying for them. But that's the part that satisfies me, is that I can do-- Toral talked about the multiple identities we bring to our spaces, and those are my identities, and those are how I actually felt happy doing.

[00:08:47.31] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And so keeping those multiple identities in mind, so we know that you hold you-- mentioned earlier in your introduction that you are a professor of immunology, you're also the Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs, and you're a member of the PADE team, The Presidential Advisors on Diversity and Equity. So how do you keep the momentum moving forward in all of those spaces, so the academic space as well as the DEI space?

[00:09:10.59] AVERY AUGUST: That's a great question. And I've been thinking about that question because others have asked me similar questions. And the way I think about it is I can't see myself doing anything different because one of the reasons I became an academic, and one of the things that we're really privileged to do as academics and working in academic spaces is being able to work on the things that interest us. And so I've taken advantage of that privilege, and have worked on multiple things that have interested me both scientifically but also being able to expand what it means to work in these spaces and work as well in the DEI space.

[00:09:48.15] But what it means is that there's an analogy of spinning plates on a pole, and you have to go from one plate to the other so that they're kept spinning. That can be stressful if it's not something that you enjoy. But if it's something that you enjoy, you feel very satisfied that those plates are spinning, and you feel like you're making some progress in all of these different areas. And so that's how I've actually tried to do this.

[00:10:11.23] And sometimes a plate gets close to falling off the pole because you haven't been able to spend as much time on it. And I've had to be satisfied with that. But in the end, I keep coming back to these things that I feel I have to do and these things that I enjoy doing. And they interconnect, and so I keep it going.

[00:10:29.94] ANTHONY SIS: Wow. I mean, it's a lot. It's a lot to keep it going in all of those spaces. So I'm processing what you're saying because-- yeah, it's just inspiring to hear it.

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[00:10:38.79] TORAL PATEL: And I'm just imagining the plates that are spinning for you.

[00:10:41.91] ANTHONY SIS: Oh, goodness. Yeah, so many. Well, one of those plates is being involved on the PADE team. So we've talked about it a few times already, but if you just want to maybe give a little bit more additional context and information around what are the PADEs. What's the purpose of the PADEs and their role really here at Cornell when it comes to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion?

[00:11:02.07] AVERY AUGUST: Yeah. So the PADEs, the Presidential Advisors in Diversity and Equity, is part of our structure for advancing belonging, equity, diversity, and inclusion here at Cornell. It's a team, which I think I really appreciate. There are some institutions and organizations that have a chief officer, which I think is a fine structure. However, I think our community is so diverse that it really-- having multiple voices in the room really helps to advance the community here and what we would like to do with regards to making sure that everyone here at Cornell feels like they belong here, they feel included, and they feel like their voices are being heard.

[00:11:38.35] And so this team is one from the academic side, so myself as a faculty member, one from the staff side, and one from the student side. And it brings together what our community is, which is faculty, staff, and students. But it also means that we can hear what the other members of our community are experiencing, and we have that two-way communication. But it also means that I can comment on the student experience or hear more from the student experience and learn more. And therefore, we have this interconnectedness in terms of how we do our work, because all of us are part of the same community.

[00:12:09.67] So the presidential advisors advise the president and her cabinet on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We think about how can we advance belonging and inclusion here at Cornell. We think about how can we work across our diverse structures, the different units, the different colleges that are all doing very different things, but all doing a lot of things so that we're all doing the work that leads us to feel belonging. So our main goal is to advise and oversee the Belonging at Cornell Initiative, which are these matrices that we use to determine, are we making progress in these areas with regards to climate and with regards to representation here on the campus?

[00:12:48.06] ANTHONY SIS: I love what you shared about that team aspect, because I think other folks who might be listening to this might also be thinking about something similar in terms of structure. So I like that team focus. And Toral and I have stepped in the interim role for the employee side of things, and yeah, I really do appreciate just hearing how the different members of our communities are being affected by some of these initiatives that are happening at an institutional level. So I really appreciate that and think that that will be a good takeaway for folks who might be listening.

[00:13:15.03] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And I appreciate the fact that we do have this three prong model where all the constituencies are considered in anything that might be

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happening on campus. So I really appreciate that. So, Avery, I'm just going to switch gears a little bit in terms of some of the terms that we use. So we've heard diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. And we've heard that across the board multiple times. And obviously this is what we focus on in this podcast.

[00:13:39.00] And so when it comes to staff, we've had this conversation with almost every single staff member that we've interviewed, we've identified the terms, and we've talked about what it means for staff. So let's switch that focus a little bit. And so why, in your opinion, should faculty care about these terms and how they affect the Cornell community?

[00:13:55.65] AVERY AUGUST: This is a great question. And I think of all the entire time that I've been in higher education, first starting in college, this is probably the most attention I've seen being paid to these particular issues. And different people look at these words and they take something different from them.

[00:14:13.41] For me, I think about our students. This is the reason why we're here. This is why universities-- certainly in the US-- exist is to educate students. And our students are increasingly diverse. Our country is increasingly a plurality of multiple identities and multiple individuals.

[00:14:30.57] When we think about what our students do when they leave Cornell, they become leaders. And if our faculty aren't thinking about how our students are being educated to lead a diverse country, a diverse world, then we aren't really doing our job. And so we need to think about this in multiple ways. How can we ensure that the student experience here is one that when they leave Cornell they say, you know, I really felt that this was an institution that cared about me, cared about why I was there, and made sure that I belonged. This was an institution that thought about my contributions and the group that I come from on our contributions to the knowledge that's being produced, and the knowledge that's been disseminated, our role in doing that.

[00:15:09.25] And I saw my role. I saw myself in the education that I was receiving. And I think when faculty think about that, then we think about how we teach. We think about what our curriculum looks like. We think about who we bring into our laboratories, and how we treat those individuals when we bring them into our laboratories and studios and classrooms.

[00:15:26.61] And so it's more than just these terms of well, we need to see more diverse space, diverse students in our classrooms, but also what are those students taking away from what we're doing here? And so that means we have to think about it deeply so that we now ensure that they feel all of those things. So that's why I think faculty should care about these terms. It's about what we do. And if we aren't doing it for the students, then we're failing, I think.

[00:15:51.96] ANTHONY SIS: So, Avery, Toral and I are well versed in issues related to DEI as it pertains to staff on a number of different topics. But we're not really as well

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versed when it comes to faculty needs and relevant topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. And so could you share a little bit more insight onto what some of those topics might be? And I assume they probably overlap a little bit with staff, but are there any that stand out as particularly specific as it pertains to faculty?

[00:16:19.18] AVERY AUGUST: Yeah. It's a good question. I look at this, and I may be an N of 1, but I look at this as we're all part of the same community, and we live in the community, we see each other on the stores and restaurants, and we also interact with each other on the campus. And so I think that this is all interrelated.

[00:16:37.78] When I think about what I hear from staff, I think about the department culture. How do I interact with my colleague? These are, in some cases, relationships that will last 30, 40 years for some individuals. So these are unusual for most workplaces, at least these days. And so these are faculty who have privilege in that their relationships with each other also influence the relationships that their students have with each other.

[00:17:07.66] And in this example I speak of graduate students, where if I'm a faculty member and I have a challenging interaction with a fellow faculty member, that spills over into the members of my laboratory who then feel some tension in that relationship. And if they take the faculty member classes are there going to be retaliation? So there are all of these small things that ends up happening in an academic space that we normally don't think about when we think about other types of environments. And so that relationship in departments is really key.

[00:17:37.85] And so when I hear faculty think about and talk about these issues, the department culture is one that's at top, and that also spills over into whether faculty feel like they belong here. Their interactions with their colleagues really, really color and shape whether they want to stay here or whether they want to go somewhere else and teach somewhere else. And then more recently, I think, this issue that I alluded to earlier, which is what are we teaching? How are we teaching? Who are we including when we teach is one that the faculty are increasingly turning their attention to.

[00:18:08.05] And in some cases, it's easy for some faculty. If you work in Latino studies program this is something that you've thought about for some time, but if you're an engineer, you never thought about this. And so thinking about how to think about that, I think, is one that's starting to challenge faculty.

[00:18:23.44] But I'm actually optimistic about these conversations. We're actually having the conversations now as compared to never having the conversation. So I think these are really, really important things for us to keep on the front burner.

[00:18:35.35] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, that's great. I love the fact that just even saying that we're having the conversations that we've never had before, that to me just says we've come a lot further, or we're moving in the right direction.

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[00:18:46.12] AVERY AUGUST: Yeah, yeah. And I think, as I said earlier, I've never seen a time like this where these are actually conversations that are actually happening.

[00:18:56.34] ANTHONY SIS: Avery, I have a follow-up question to that. So do you think that the attention from faculty is due to issues that have happened outside of Cornell, or do you think it's come from a place of, we're just recognizing that the times are different, student demographics are changing and their needs are also evolving as well. So what do you attribute that change to? Is it entirely based on issues outside of Cornell or is it other factors?

[00:19:21.67] AVERY AUGUST: My sense is that this was largely triggered by issues outside of Cornell. I think the racial reckoning of last year really brought this topic to the attention of many who had never thought about this, and started to engage and started to educate themselves. And I'll be honest, I think we've always made steady progress over the years.

[00:19:43.24] We've always tried to think about how can we better educate our students. But if the last year had not happened, then I do not think that the heightened conversation that have happened over many rooms and among many faculty would have happened in the way that it had, or ever. So I really think that I was catalyzing with regards to the types of conversations that we're having now.

[00:20:06.85] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I appreciate the response. I only ask that because I feel like on the staff side of things, it's yes, due to the issues of racial reckoning that happened last summer. But I also think on the staff side there were a number of things that were lingering.

[00:20:20.87] So you talked a little bit about that culture within certain departments, certain units, so all of these issues that were brewing, for lack of a better way to explain it, came to the forefront as a result of that too. And so I think it's a combination of the two that I personally see on the staff side of things, and I just wondered if that was similar with faculty as well. So I appreciate your response with that.

[00:20:41.71] AVERY AUGUST: Yeah. And I would agree with that. I think, again, for some faculty these are our lives. This is what we lived.

[00:20:49.27] For other faculty, it was not something that was ever thought about. It was not something that was ever reflected. And so I think what last year did was catalyzed, for one group of faculty, that these are issues for another group of faculty. And it sounds like a similar thing happened among the staff.

[00:21:06.14] TORAL PATEL: So, Avery, in terms of your career-- I think I want to ask in terms of your career as a whole, and then specifically in the DE&I space. What is something that you are the most proud of? So let's talk about your career as a researcher, as a scientist, as well as your time in the DE&I space. What are maybe one or two things that you're the most proud of?

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[00:21:24.08] AVERY AUGUST: I'll give two examples. The first is my career. And when I first-- I told the story about being an undergraduate and being rescued by one of my faculty members. And at that time I said I wanted to be able to get the highest degree one can possibly get. And for many, that's the PhD.

[00:21:42.47] And so there were struggles when I was a graduate student. But when I got the PhD, I said to myself, I don't care if I get a job sweeping the streets. I have accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. And so I've done a number of things since then, but each time I think about whenever I came to a fork in the road where it could be very stressful, right, tenure, am I going to get tenure or am I going to not get tenure?

[00:22:05.45] I kept coming back to 15 years ago or 10 years ago or five years ago you said this is what you wanted to do, and you've done it. Everything else is icing on the cake. And so that's how I've looked at all these things. And it's partly a distressing mechanism for myself. And it's, like, high stress situations, if I fail here I still have this PhD. I accomplished that.

[00:22:27.64] As I've thought about what I can do, as I said earlier about broadening who is included in these spaces, are there things that I can do that changes an institution? And one of the first things I did, along those lines, is a program that I started when I was a faculty member at Penn State called The Bridges To the Doctorate Program. And it was something that came out of my experiences working with graduate students who we were recruiting from HBCU, some Hispanic serving institutions, and others, who came to Penn State and who felt that they had no place at the institution. And so they came to my offices. I was their informal advisor.

[00:23:04.94] And that experience of talking to those students led me to develop this program where I focused on culture that these students were being brought into. Because, academically, there was not a problem. The culture was so different.

[00:23:18.09] And I think many of my colleagues didn't recognize that there were such huge differences in the cultures of where these students were and where they were coming into. They just felt, well, these are students. Students come from all over the place. They come here, they're successful. But these students really struggled with that abrupt change in culture from undergraduate to graduate.

[00:23:34.94] And that program lasted until I left Penn State to come to Cornell, and then it was taken over, and then it was absorbed by the institution. But those first students that we recruited, I'm looking at their careers, and I'm seeing them moving through their careers, and they're blossoming. They're becoming faculty members, they become leaders in their field, and I feel very proud of being able to start something that led those students to be successful.

[00:24:01.10] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. Having worked in student affairs prior to coming to Cornell I think that's still what I would say is my biggest achievement, is not so much the what I did, but the relationships I built. And I think a lot of this work, as we're talking

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about diversity, equity, and inclusion is about maintaining those relationships and leveraging them to be able to create change and to be able to influence people's mindsets and be able to influence the way they navigate decision making processes from an inclusive lens, from an equitable lens.

[00:24:28.77] And so totally resonate with you there. I think it's nice to see that and to be, like, wow, OK, this former student of mine is now prospering and I could see them as my counterpart, as my colleague in this work. So I love that.

[00:24:41.51] AVERY AUGUST: And one of the most favorite things of everything that I do is when I visit an institution and someone walks up to me and says, I was one of your students. And I think back, and I vaguely recognize the face. And it's great. And they tell me how much they enjoyed a class or something that I did. That's one of the favorite things that I did that I always love experiencing whenever I visit somewhere else.

[00:25:05.00] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And then you're surprised because it's one of those students that probably wasn't the top performer, right? They probably weren't the best academically?

[00:25:10.97] AVERY AUGUST: Oh, yeah. There are a quite a few of those.

[00:25:13.13] ANTHONY SIS: And they were really quiet, but then they come up to you and said, yeah, remember when you said that one thing? And I'm, like, wait, what? You remember that?

[00:25:20.00] TORAL PATEL: So I obviously have not been in the student space, but I occasionally have a similar feeling from my recruiting background when people say, you were the first person I ever spoke to at Cornell, and then here they are in this amazing career that they've been able to have here. So similar types of feelings in a different format.

[00:25:36.04] AVERY AUGUST: Mhm.

[00:25:36.97] ANTHONY SIS: And there's the connection here too, which we haven't even talked about. Both of you worked at the Vet college at one point as well here at Cornell.

[00:25:42.79] TORAL PATEL: We did. At the same time for a little while.

[00:25:46.82] AVERY AUGUST: That's right. When I was chair of the Department I worked with Toral for a bit. And then she got recruited centrally.

[00:25:52.43] TORAL PATEL: Right, and so did you. I think right around the same time we both got recruited centrally.

[00:25:58.90] ANTHONY SIS: It was around the same time?

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[00:26:00.07] TORAL PATEL: I think maybe Avery was recruited--

[00:26:02.06] AVERY AUGUST: No, I think you went first, Toral, because I remember thinking, oh.

[00:26:04.37] TORAL PATEL: Really? I thought you went first. See? Hmm. Yeah. Actually, I remember distinctly at the vet school that one of my last hires actually was for Avery. Yeah, so it must have been you left first because I remember one of my last hires was for you.

[00:26:19.60] AVERY AUGUST: We both ended up continuing to do the things that we enjoy doing.

[00:26:22.87] TORAL PATEL: Exactly.

[00:26:24.07] ANTHONY SIS: So, Avery, as we wrap up our time together, thank you so much, first of all, for just all the information and all the gems you've dropped so far. And just hearing a little bit more about you and your experience and your career has been really insightful for me, so I just want to thank you and appreciate you for that. And so as we wrap up our time, if you could just give one piece of advice to anyone here at Cornell within their department, units looking to get involved in DE&I efforts, what would you suggest to them?

[00:26:52.40] AVERY AUGUST: Oh. Yeah, that's a great question because sometimes I think about it, and I'm sure others do as well. And we look at what we would like to do. We look at where we would like to go. And it seems daunting. It seems like there's so many different things that have to change, and what has to change for those things to change.

[00:27:09.62] And so it seems, like, oh, God, there's nothing I can do. But then I think about something that I heard President Pollack talk about more recently, which is, you look at it and you break it down into small pieces. And now it becomes a little bit easier to think about doing those things.

[00:27:23.48] And so I look at what I've done. And I've said, in my little part of the universe, I've tried to do this. I feel like that's been helpful in some small way. And all of us can look at our small pieces of the world and see what it is that we can do that can continue to make change. And if everyone does that, then we start collectively moving forward.

[00:27:45.19] I think I mentioned this to someone having a conversation over the last year and saying, we've never been in a space where anything that we want to do has ever existed. We've always been moving forward and improving and improving, but we've never been in a space where we want to go. And so on the one hand, that can seem daunting, as I said earlier, but on the other, I think we can all do whatever small work in our own spaces to help us move towards that goal.

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[00:28:15.51] ANTHONY SIS: I love that. I do have one more question. To just get a sense of what it is that you do to take care of yourself when you're not juggling, as you described, all of these different wheels, or even maybe when you do.

[00:28:27.22] TORAL PATEL: When you have a little bit of time left over.

[00:28:29.33] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. What does that space look like for you to be able to take off some of those hats and then be able to really focus on what's good for Avery. Like, what's good for me? So what are some of those things you think about?

[00:28:41.77] AVERY AUGUST: I mean, there are two things that I end up doing. Sometimes I'm in the middle of a really intense grant or paper or thinking about something that we need to do or trying to reflect, and I just say, I can't. I can't anymore. And I whip out my mixer, and I hook up my speakers, and I spend an hour, two hours, sometimes 2 and 1/2 hours just mixing electronic music trying to be creative there. And then that really-- I think about wasabi for the mind. It cleanses. And then I can go back.

[00:29:14.87] The other thing that I do, if the weather is nice, is I take my kayak out, and I go out in [INAUDIBLE] lake. And I just sit there. It's quiet. You can see the city, you can see cars, people, but you're out in the lake, and it's just peaceful. And it's wasabi for the mind.

[00:29:31.63] ANTHONY SIS: Wasabi for the mind. That's going to stick with me now.

[00:29:34.36] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, it is. Yeah.

[00:29:35.06] ANTHONY SIS: I'm going to ask, what is your wasabi for the mind?

[00:29:37.87] TORAL PATEL: Yes.

[00:29:39.48] ANTHONY SIS: Toral, do you have anything else?

[00:29:40.91] TORAL PATEL: No. No, I do not. I think this is a great way to end it. Wasabi for the mind. That's it.

[00:29:45.79] ANTHONY SIS: Wasabi for the mind. Thank you so much, Avery. It's been a pleasure having this conversation with you.

[00:29:50.69] AVERY AUGUST: Thanks, Anthony. Thanks, Toral.

[00:29:51.65] TORAL PATEL: Thank you.

[00:29:52.18] AVERY AUGUST: This was fun.

[00:29:59.15] ANTHONY SIS: Toral, what a fascinating conversation with Avery.

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[00:30:03.16] TORAL PATEL: It really was.

[00:30:04.39] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. What did you think? What were some gems that-- I have to say, we all know wasabi for the mind was the gem of the episode.

[00:30:12.76] TORAL PATEL: That's true. Wasabi for the mind.

[00:30:14.68] ANTHONY SIS: Yes. So what else. What else did you take away from our conversation with Avery?

[00:30:18.94] TORAL PATEL: So, again, because you said there are so many gems, wasabi for the mind definitely sticks out. But I think the one thing that really kind of stood out to me is him as a professor of immunology very early in his career realizing that there are voices that were missing. And then he actually took it upon himself to do something about that. I thought that was just something profound. And then he asked himself a question. He mentioned this in the episode where he says, what can I do to make a difference? And for him it was just including these voices that were missing and bringing them into the room.

[00:30:53.09] And I thought just what an amazing concept, what a great question that we can all ask ourselves. What can I do to make a difference? And I think what I took away from that, it doesn't have to be something huge, right? It could just be something like realizing that hey this voice is missing, and let me go invite that individual into this space so that their voices can be heard. So I thought that was just something that was just very powerful for me. How about you, Anthony? What were some of the many gems? Maybe one of the many gems.

[00:31:21.38] ANTHONY SIS: I really appreciated Avery's stories that he shared, where you talked about the concepts that he introduced around who's missing in the room. And I loved the examples that further emphasized that point that he was trying to make around increasing access into the different rooms that he was in. I loved just hearing about his time at Weill Cornell, and being, like, I'm in one of the most diverse cities in the world and yet the people around me don't reflect that.

[00:31:49.91] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:31:50.24] ANTHONY SIS: And so I just think for me, similarly, when I think back to my own experience and my own career, I also think about those times where I felt like I was the one and only. And I used that as a catalyst to motivate me in the direction that I currently am in now in terms of the work that I do. So it was just nice to hear those examples.

[00:32:11.60] I really appreciated the example he shared of the program that he started at Penn State as well, and just the connection to students, and when he goes to campus now and sees all of these former students of his being leaders in their field.

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Because I know what that feeling is like when you work with students in an academic environment. And I just really-- I don't know why.

[00:32:34.97] I didn't know we had that connection or, like, we had some similarity in that, and kind of being able to thrive and be inspired by the success of students that we worked closely with. And I'm very much, in a similar way, view my work with students when I used to work with them more regularly in that same way. And I loved hearing about that from his perspective and his experience.

[00:32:57.56] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And I know we've talked about the concept of being the "only" before in our episode with Jamal and Fanesse from Weill Cornell Medical. And then we also turned that concept around to say, instead of being the "only", let's think about it as being the first, right? And I think, Avery, in his examples, really reflects that these students that he brought into the spaces were the first, but now look at their careers, and look how much they have thrived. So they were the first, but definitely not the last, and no longer the only. So I thought that was kind of a great way to tie it all together.

[00:33:30.38] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, absolutely. I also really appreciated his approach, really, his perspective into how he talks about DE&I as it relates to faculty. And I really appreciated him talking about the culture piece because I do think that culture really does matter, and faculty do have a unique position and privilege, as he called it, to be able to influence what a culture looks like in a particular unit or in a particular department.

[00:33:59.69] And so I appreciated his insight and hearing his perspective on that, and also just hearing how that could then trickle down to not just other staff and other faculty, but also graduate students in terms of their experience, getting their PhDs or being a postdoc, and so on and so forth. And so I just appreciated that perspective too in his focus on really talking about culture and how faculty can play a role in influencing that and shaping that.

[00:34:26.27] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and I really like the concept that you just mentioned about it trickling down. So not only it following the student in their career, but I think it can trickle even further than that when they start their own labs or when they start their own careers that they then would work on creating that culture that they had while they were working on Avery's team or other teams that are similar. So if they had the culture where they thrived, they're more likely to create that for others.

[00:34:51.12] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And I mean, paying it forward, right? I think if there's anything that I can extract from all of the stories and everything that Avery shared it's this constant theme of paying it forward, of being inspired. And all it really takes is that one person or that one colleague or that one individual to be able to really help shape and influence the rest of your life.

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[00:35:15.03] And I think in his life he's experienced that, and now he is doing that for other students and other people that he works with here at the University. And so I just feel just so inspired. And this whole notion of paying it forward, I think, really came across in what he shared and his stories.

[00:35:31.26] TORAL PATEL: I mean, I also like that we got to know him a little bit better at a personal level in terms of the fact that I never knew that he mixes electric music, right? And so that was kind of a neat--

[00:35:41.12] ANTHONY SIS: Yes, wasabi for the mind.

[00:35:43.67] TORAL PATEL: The wasabi for the mind philosophy is amazing. I think you and I probably have said that multiple times since we've recorded that episode. So we'll continue to use that.

[00:35:52.52] ANTHONY SIS: Wasabi for the mind. And I asked that question-- it was something that, I don't know if you can tell in the recording, but it was something I came up with last minute because I kept thinking, I'm, like, this work is heavy work, and yes, Avery has-- he's a professor, he has also the vice provost.

[00:36:12.34] But also I wanted to know what does he do to take his mind off of this stuff when he's not doing it. And so, like you said, I just thought it was so fascinating to know that he mixes electronic music, that he goes kayaking. And these are things that I would have never guessed, right?

[00:36:28.85] But it's one of those things where you have to always be open. You never know what people might do for fun, and that's OK. And so I thought it was super interesting. But like you said, to kind of see him in that different light and to just understand him a little bit more in terms of what he does outside of work was awesome.

[00:36:47.51] Thank you for listening. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts, and rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:37:07.36] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:37:13.03] ANTHONY SIS: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Belonging in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio. We would like to thank our co-producer and sound engineer, Bert Odom-Reed, as always, for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:37:36.32] EVERYONE: Thanks, Bert.