Transcript: Episode 4
Stoking the Fire of Equity:
Kindness, Humanity, and Science
A Conversation with Dr. Lara Perez-Felkner

Elcin Haskollar: Welcome to Diversity Talks. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar and I am your host. Support for this podcast comes from Florida State University's Center for Global Engagement and the President's Diversity and Inclusion Mini-Grant Program. Diversity Talks is a collection of conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion that impact our campus, our communities and beyond. Get ready to hear from leaders, from professors, from lawyers, and diversity officers as we uncover their stories and journeys. Each week, we're going to have a special guest and we'll share their unique experiences about how to create change.

Lara Perez-Felkner: It just must be that people aren't interested, girls just not like science. But we often don't really have evidence to back that up, and in fact, the increasing evidence over the past 30 years has been that in fact, those skill level disparities aren't there. And if girls, and if underrepresented groups like Black and Latino students, have access to advanced coursework, and quality teaching, and courses that are gonna prepare them or enable them to jump in at the college level, and they didn't have those courses in their high schools, that they do well.

Elcin Haskollar: Today's guest is Dr. Lara Perez Felkner. Lara is an Associate Professor of Higher Education and Sociology within the College of Education at Florida State University. She is also an affiliated faculty member in the Department of Sociology, and Senior Research Associate with FSU's Center for Postsecondary Success. Her research focuses on investigating the impact of underrepresentation on racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic disparities. It also looks at its impacts on student success and their entry into scientific fields. Hi, Lara!

Lara Perez-Felkner: Hi, how are you doing?

Elcin Haskollar: I'm doing great. Welcome to Diversity Talks.

Lara Perez-Felkner: Great to be here.

Elcin Haskollar: I am so excited to have you here today. I think that your research sheds light on a lot of the issues that we've been discussing with our guests, and I cannot wait for our audience to benefit from your wealth of knowledge. But before we get into the details, I was wondering if we can talk about you. It caught attention right away that you went to graduate school at the University of Chicago. I, myself, spent five dreading long years in Chicago when I went to college there.

Lara Perez-Felkner: Oh, no way!

Elcin Haskollar: Yes, and I learned very practical things like your hair can freeze if you do not properly dry it. And... so, I was just wondering if you would like to tell me a little bit about

yourself. Who is Lara? What is her cultural identity? What are some of the things that you would like to share with our audience?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure. Well, that's great. I have moved around a lot. I have lived in Cambodia, I've lived in big cities, like New York, and Chicago, and smaller places. And right now, I live on the very outskirts of Tallahassee. I think it's helpful to see different places and get to know other people and listen and learn and travel. My simplest answer on who I am: I'm a transplanted New Yorkian right now; I'm a third generation Puerto Rican. But that in itself is complicated and there's lots of reasons to watch and learn about Puerto Rico right now, and what's happening there. I am aware that I'm multiracial, but at the same time, I grew up with a very specific ethnic identity, and grew up mostly in the suburbs, and mostly in middle class, and so I don't have the typical Puerto Rican experience, and have a very large and complicated extended family. And so, in some ways it's a very neat answer, but in other ways I had a big, complicated family with an Italian American stepfamily. I was a hairy-faced adolescent in a mostly Irish Catholic school. It was a fun time being a kid in the 90s during times when speaking Spanish was not seen very well at all. And so I think about all those things now that I'm a faculty member on a college campus, that I'm a parent and a member of a community and trying to bring people along and create opportunity for others. So, I think no matter what people's background is, I think it's really helpful for them to listen and learn from each other, like the kind of work that you're doing here and the equity work that we're trying to do on campus, because we all have stories and back stories and layers, and sometimes you really don't understand... You don't understand the world unless you listen and observe and talk with folks, and so... That's a little bit about me.

Elcin Haskollar: That's absolutely true. I have this huge Turkish family, and we always joke around 'cause when you're talking about what families do with each other, a lot of them have different activities that they do. My family always ate. And we just eat, and that's something that we do. So, it's really, really interesting that you identify as a transplanted New Yorkian, right, and you're Puerto Rican, you're a Latinx woman, so you have all of these really, really fascinating experiences and backgrounds, and you lived in so many places. I know that you went to college at Wesleyan in Connecticut, then you went to graduate school in Chicago. Right, and you've been at FSU for nearly a decade now?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Oh my gosh, yes.

Elcin Haskollar: That's a really long time. And you are the first generation in your family to not qualify for food and housing assistance. So, can you think of any specific examples of how all of these experiences shaped your perspectives on diversity, inclusion, and equity?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure. And even that definition, I try to think about, and even preparing for today, and some of the work that I do on the President's Council for diversity and inclusion, and other spaces around campus and nationally; there are some categories that we at least understand that we're supposed to report, and capture, and understand, and do well, like race and ethnicity, sometimes one, sometimes both, sometimes looking at intersections of those, and gender, but they're both very complicated categories themselves. And also, there's a lot underneath that, and

so I've been increasingly paying attention to socioeconomic status in my work, and now have some work I've been doing for a few years on basic needs and security, and students who are in college, driving, working really hard, but even if they're not necessarily the first generation in their family to go to college, they may be housing insecure, or not have enough money to eat. And not in a joking way, many people just expect that people have to struggle to pay their laundry or ramen noodles, and you just tough it out, and this is part of the thing. But for some it's really quite serious, and their challenges in school are very much intrinsically related to the work that they need to do to pay for their rent and to be able to eat enough and not skipping meals. And so, I think that work on diversity and inclusion has been going on for a long time, has been multiple decades of investment, but at the same time, there are... We have more work to do on the key categories of race, ethnicity, and gender. We've certainly learned a lot about how much work we had to do in the last few years, but there's also a lot of nuances and intersections in those categories. So, I've been in my research, and service, and teaching, working on some of those categories, and they do inform each other in lots of ways in my daily work, which is sometimes tiring, but it's also really rewarding.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely, and when we're talking about things like food insecurity, homelessness, these are real issues impacting college students, also graduate students too, so I think that that's what makes your research, your work really, really special and especially valuable for these types of things. I've been asking this question to all of my guests, and I've been getting a variety of different responses... So, when you're thinking about the term "diversity, equity and inclusion," what does it mean to you?

Lara Perez-Felkner: I wrote about this back in graduate school too. So, I was actually in Paris when the Supreme Court decisions came out, and I was about to go into graduate school in Chicago, and I was really following the 2003 decisions about Affirmative Action and Diversity. In general, those cases and the past judicial years of the past couple of decades, have left diversity as a safe, remaining defense, like justifiable defense, for doing the kind of work on campus to attend to quite a number of things. Diversity is really loose, it's very broad, it's flexible, and that has a lot of advantages because there was a lot of research evidence to support the amount of learning that students gain, especially students from not minoritized populations, stand to gain a lot from having international students in their classrooms, from having students who've encountered socioeconomic disadvantages, come from different backgrounds. So, there's a lot of value in diversity and that having multiple minds, and ideas, and experiences together fosters creativity, in innovation, in science, in the workforce, in a number of different areas. But that's different than intentional inclusion work to bring people in and really create a space for them, and even that distinct from equity work and social justice that's trying to not just bring people together and have them be present in the same space but have everyone have true equality of opportunity to pursue education, to have the opportunity to do a prestigious internship, to travel abroad, whatever it is. And so, they are distinct things, and I think that I try to strive... I'm striving in my work to do more equity and social justice work and know that a lot of the work that we do, and still by pins and needles and with very limited budgets, tends to be more focused on diversity and they have different rewards. They're valuable, but diversity does feel safer than

equity, it's a little different and a little bit more vague, and in some ways that's an asset, and in other ways it can diffuse our priorities a bit.

Elcin Haskollar: It's interesting that you brought up the point of Paris, France, 'cause I've been following the most recent French legislation that outlawed all girls under the age of 18 wearing the hijab, the headscarf. So what diversity, equity, and inclusion can mean for a group of people in a place like France can be very, very different for what those issues can be seen and interpreted, and also implemented in a place like here in the United States, but I think that's why your research is really, really important when we're talking about underrepresentation, and how some of those issues are impacting our students. So, I'd like to talk a little bit about your research now, 'cause your research specifically focuses on how a student's social background can influence their college and their career choices, right, especially when it comes to STEM fields, science, technology, education, and math. And you specifically examine the challenges of under-representation on racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic disparities, and basically how these disparities can impact a student's future. Right? So, what are some of these disparities? Would you like to elaborate on them for our audience, and do you have any perhaps case studies or real life examples that you can talk about just to make these issues a little bit simpler to digest for general audience?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure. In terms of examples of disparities, I would say as a big theme, we tend to see still, in 2021, very consistent images of what a scientist, an engineer, etcetera, looks like, and they tend to... Like you can go to Google Images, I've done this before, and some presentations to physicists and engineering folks. You Google physicist, or engineer, or scientist, or something like that, and you tend to still see overwhelmingly white European featured older men, often in lab coats, and that's changing... the intentional images that are created, and who's featured on websites, and how recruiting is done, all of that is changing, and there's a lot of nuance beyond that. But at the same time, the reason why an image or an invitation to do something is so powerful is because we see these stereotypes being reinforced in so many different ways, in terms of who the teaching assistants are, who the leaders of the classroom might be, in terms of who's participating, who the faculty are, who the leaders of the discipline and who's winning the awards, there are all of these different ways, including in the curricular materials, that we see often negative images of women and minoritized groups. And it tends to be true that folks who are under-represented, whether by gender, race, ethnicity, their national background, their socioeconomic status, they may really need more intentional invitation and inclusion to feel like they are really, truly wanted as someone who's a scholarship applicant, or someone to follow up after class and stay to talk with the faculty member about content and ideas, and be brought into a lab, or be encouraged, considered pursuing graduate school, or a career, or to have those conversations that lead to a recommendation letter. There are just so many ways that folks don't see themselves in those spaces as legitimate, and there's this problematic term out there that a lot of people use, and I understand the reason for it, but "impostor syndrome." And it's something that I feel like I hear more in the STEM fields than in other spaces, although I do hear it a lot from my graduate students also, this idea of not feeling legitimate in that space and questioning yourself and always trying to hold yourself to a higher standard to legitimize yourself, and your merits, and value, and kind of not trusting that people

really do believe that you should be there, like you got in for an accident. So, in some of my work, my research, as well as in my teaching, and practice, and service roles around the university and in the profession, I try to do very intentional work validating people and their skills, how they're showing up in the classroom, encouragement, reminders, and sharing information that is sometimes part of a hidden curriculum of how you can move forward, and be advanced, and have been trying, and I'm now in a better place than I have been before as a tenure faculty member who gets research grants and things like that. I feel like I have been fortunate to be able to have a little bit more of a voice in making a case to other faculty and other spaces here and nationally around. Communicating case studies and research evidence to faculty members, and chairs, and administrators around what kinds of very practical work they can do to change the narrative, and to change the numbers, because these disparities have existed for so long across the spectrum in most, not in all fields, and there's some nuance in STEM, but these disparities have been there for so long that a lot of people across different levels, students, faculty, department chairs and deans sometimes feel like they just can't move the needle. It's just too hard. People have made these investments for 30 years, and it just must be that people aren't interested, girls just not like science. But we often don't really have evidence to back that up, and in fact, the increasing evidence over the past 30 years has been that in fact, those skill level disparities aren't there. And if girls, and underrepresented groups like Black and Latino students, have access to advanced coursework, and quality teaching, and courses that are gonna prepare them or enable them to jump in at the college level, if they didn't have those courses in their high schools, that they do well. That actually grades, and skill, and interest don't seem to be the gatekeeper that folks think they have been. And interest, and ability beliefs can actually be changed, they're malleable. There's opportunities to intervene, and there's been a lot of really exciting experimental studies, and observational studies, about this over the past couple of decades, in particular. And so, I think that there's a lot of opportunity for innovation, even though a lot of people just feel like that's someone else's job, but like a lot of diversity and equity work, it has to be somebody's job, and if you don't make space for it and be really intentional, it tends to not happen. So, I think that's been where I've been trying to intervene.

Elcin Haskollar: And it's so, so, so important. And I could, I think... One of the things that you just said, and that really stood out to me, is your thoughts on impostor syndrome. 'Cause when I was in graduate school pursuing a PhD in International Relations, I remember that a lot of the graduate students felt the same way that they weren't good enough, they were not good enough to be there because you are surrounded by a sense of excellence. High-achieving students who've already accomplished so many great things, and you constantly feel like you're not good enough, maybe you shouldn't be here, maybe you don't deserve it. And it's funny, because I see the same thing among own undergraduate students right now. I have so many seniors who are graduating and because of the pandemic that we're in right now, and limited job and internship opportunities, they are crammed under the stress of, "What am I gonna do? Maybe I'm not good enough, maybe I'm worthless." Right, and so when you are especially talking about students who come from a very different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic backgrounds, how do you feel like it impacts their success in terms of this space of mental health and mental being? Do you have any observations on that?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure, there's been...To me, at first surprisingly clear and striking evidence on affirmation, and the value of affirmation. This isn't so much something that I do in my research, although it's something that I've brought into some of my intervention work with engineering students. This summer too, I'm leading entire NGO resilience training exercise with students that I also did the last... In 2019, the last time we had face-to-face summer lab groups. And, these are small affirmation exercises that were done with experimental designs in these big introductory weed out type classes, Organic Chemistry, Introduction to Chemistry, that are large 200-person classes. I also do this in some of my smaller graduate school classes in my teaching too, 'cause I definitely agree with you that graduate school, and certainly PhD programs, but I think master's programs as well, can break people down. Academia is very harsh. I was a theater kid growing up, and I remember feeling like acting and singing, those are harsh areas that there's so much rejection, and that's so much a part of the narrative, is that you're unlikely to get it. In academia, and being a professor, is so much more practical or profession, but there's also a ton of rejection. You're constantly submitting grant proposals, and conference manuscripts, and journal articles, and trying to get into the top places, and getting rejected, and we sometimes carry that over into the classroom, and into more informal, social, and mentoring socialization spaces. And so, students can often feel like they're not good enough, they can hack it, they weren't really cut out to be here. And when you couple that with other forms of underrepresentation, and students also don't see themselves in that space, or in that profession, sometimes these very little interventions... There's been work on light touch interventions, has gotten a lot of traction in higher education research across the board the last couple of decades, and affirmation exercises are kind of an example of that. Where you have people reflect on how they fit in a field, and share their strengths and attributes on something that would align with their success in material science, for example, and it seems like a very powerful opportunity for them to see themselves fitting and having a sense of belonging with their field and writing themselves into the story. And you wouldn't think that something so small would be impactful, but because there's so much negativity out there, small interventions to share information, and to create positivity, and supportive culture that is more intentionally inclusive, seem like they have a lot of potential for impact and possibility for scale up. But I think that there's a lot of possibility for creating a more inclusive and kind workforce. I think that we're not very nice to ourselves, and to each other oftentimes, in academia and in these competitive weed-out fields that are so focused on scarcity, and 300 people come into the classroom, but only 100 are gonna make it out at a scientist, or gonna make it out into the top med schools, or whatever. I don't know that that does that much for us or our students who are really creating talent, that's not necessarily my area of research, but one of the areas that I have been trying to intervene and follow the research has been implementing some of the best practices in inclusion and seeing where it goes. And is it possible to close gender and racial ethnic gaps when you put these things into practice? And I've been really enjoying it and have some findings already, and have some more that are coming in the next few years.

Elcin Haskollar: In your opinion, is it possible to close that gap? Are you optimistic?

Lara Perez-Felkner: I am optimistic if people wanna join in on that bandwagon. I think that a lot of things that are persistent, and complex, and reinforcing, there are so many pressure points

that are making it difficult for women to see themselves, and for example, in Computer Science, that if there are also multiple ways of intervening in that process. Creating curricular opportunities that, for example, in college classrooms, reducing some of the... creating gateway courses that don't require that you have taken a certain amount of things in your high school when you may be from a more rural or less socioeconomically advantaged high school. And so, you may not have had a chance to take programming. I, for example, in the 90s, somehow ended up taking Computer Science, and I was one of two girls. I am not a computer scientist, I don't know if the other girl ended up becoming a computer scientist or a programmer. I know that at least the last time I saw her, she was still involved in STEM a bit, but... These are rare opportunities, but if we make opportunities more available, or lower the points of entry and have more systemic rewards for mentorship and inclusion, I think there is a possibility. But it takes a lot of work, and the reason why I flagged impostor syndrome as problematic is I think like a lot of things, it puts the onus on the individual, rather than on the system. And I'm an interdisciplinary scholar, I have a psych background. Initially, I was a pre-med student. I saw myself as a STEM kid, but at the same time, I'm primarily a sociologist, at this point in time, a sociologist of education. And I focus on and I teach, work on systems. And most of my work on diversity, and inclusion, and equity in higher ed. The overwhelming evidence, and the real energy in the field, is focused on systems change that we've been doing this and trying things over time for decades. I'm a diversity baby, my parents did not stay married, but they met protesting for black and brown programs at Columbia University in 1974, and that was 1974 when they met... And we still don't have many of those things, we're still fighting for some of those things here at FSU. We wrote a proposal for an institute for Latinx studies. Ao these fights have been going on, these struggles, these ambitions, have been happening for so long that I think many times people feel defeated, but we can't burn out the individuals who are trying to do their job and be excellent as a researcher, as a student, and also contribute to the collective struggle. We have to build in resources and mechanisms to help people shine in systemically as a nation, as an institution, as a state. If we don't do that, we're really shooting ourselves in the foot because diversity is the present and the future, so if we are continuing to allow people to be excluded and allow the status quo to exist... There isn't a lot of hope for us, so we have decades of research evidence and how to do this better so... Listen to the science, follow the science.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely. The work must be done, and we must approach as intentionally. So I'm very excited right now, this is such interesting stuff, and I love your energy, and I know that your team recently received the grant from the FSU Office of Research Development. Congratulations!

Lara Perez-Felkner: Thank you!

Elcin Haskollar: And I am dying to hear about the details of this research, 'cause your goal with this project is to investigate racial micro-aggressions, and how bystanders can step in to disarm a situation. In case anybody is wondering, "What is a micro-aggression?"

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure, and I should say too, I'm the third person on the team, so I will give credit to the leaders on the project and the principal investigator, Laura Reed Marks, who's also a faculty member here. And I've been excited to be a part of this project that's just getting started,

we've been doing writing the instruments, and developing the protocol ,and getting ready to go into the field. But a micro-regression is... It's like a small cut, but that you receive repeatedly over time. So it may be that someone asked you... We were talking at the beginning about mis-pronouncing names, or people looking at you and saying, "Where are you from? Where you from, really?" Just all these little things that in and of themselves may even be small accidents, or teachable moments, or just a small thing that happens that may even be very well-intentioned where someone is trying to learn more about you, or try to align something in their minds. But when you receive so many questions about your legitimacy over, and over, and over... Like we're talking about before, it reinforces that idea of you're an impostor in the space. I've done a lot of work on ability beliefs, and when you receive negative feedback from people, even if it's small, but it's repeated, and it may happen from your peers, it may happen from your faculty members, it may happen across the board from a number of different actors. When you feel that repeatedly, it can make you feel very small, and like "This isn't gonna work out for you." And those kinds of practices can affect mental health, and one of our colleagues is doing that work looking at the relationship between micro-aggressions, and substance use, and mental health for students of color who are the receiving end of microaggressions a lot, and it can also affect your academic and professional ambitions. If you see yourself as being questioned all the time, then it can reinforce these stereotypes that are pervasive and make it feel like maybe this isn't right for you. And you know that you have skills, for example, you know that you have strong math skills, maybe you can do that kind of work in sociology instead of in economics or in physics, because you see other people who look like you in that space and they spend time thinking about questions of inequality, and so maybe that's just another place where you can apply your talents where you're not being questioned. So there's a lot of evidence that microaggressions exist, and that they have impact, and we're really excited about intervention research, and ways to see possibilities of having impact for, and training students to have an impact, whether they identify as an ally or they're just someone who observes a pattern. We tend to not give people training certainly beyond orientation to college, we sort of snow people with information and assume that they're gonna be good citizens of the world, and good adults. And that may be especially in STEM fields where you may not have to have as many courses in the humanities and social sciences to compassionately and emphatically see yourselves in the lives of others. But we are hoping that this work will inform next steps for schools, for high ride institutions, for programs to reduce these kinds of microaggressions that we see in the news, and we know that we feel and experience in our own lives.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely, and in addition to everything that you said about the impact of micro-aggressions on someone's mental health, to their performance, I think that it could also feel somebody like the other... Right, especially when you're dealing with a person who was born and raised in the US, maybe their parents were born in the US, but they might look different, but by asking them, "Where are you from? But where are you really from?" You could make them feel like they don't belong here. Right, and they are the others... So unfortunately, we've seen the attacks on the Asian community, and especially on the elderly, and I know that a lot of us wanna do something about it, and can step in, and can intervene, but when I was thinking about micro-aggressions and how the bystanders can intervene when I saw your research, I was thinking...

This question popped up in my mind... When a person who is doing the attack is seen dangerous, right? What are some of the ways that bystanders can actually safely intervene?

Lara Perez-Felkner: I think that it is easier, and this is something that we're hypothesizing in the project and are hoping to be able to see more directly as we do the work the summer and fall, is that when folks feel empowered, they feel more able to intervene in a situation. And when they don't know what to do to be successful in that space, or they themselves feel weak, or challenged, or afraid of whatever the situation is that they are potentially observing, they are in a more vulnerable position. And so, one of the things we're hoping to see is opportunities to train people successfully and learn more about when they feel empowered or when they feel like they don't know how to step in. Whether they feel like they're afraid of doing something wrong, or they're afraid of the consequences socially or physically, and that's an area of real potential for future research that we're hoping to contribute to, and I think it's really important. Similar to the othering that we were talking about with respect and names and ethnicity of who are you really... We often see things that are stereotyped behaviors and microaggressions that can fade into the background, and it takes work, and courage, and risk to step into those spaces. And so, I understand why folks who may especially feel themselves vulnerable might not feel like they can step in, but if we don't have that capacity and we don't create a space for that, then it's just easier for more of that kind of social and physical violence to feel like it has a space and to take over.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely, I do a lot of diversity and inclusion-related training here at FSU, and one of the things that I have observed, especially with STEM fields, is that their curriculum is so packed with their major classes, it leaves them little room for these types of trainings, but it's very, very important to have a training, like bystander training, right? These are the steps that you can take when you're in this particular situation, so I really look forward to the findings of your research, and then how it can inform us, and other researchers, and scholars in the field. But I wanted to go back to what we were talking about underrepresentation, because there are so many things that I wanna learn more about the STEM fields, and especially how we can make these spaces more inclusive. When you are looking at the structures and the support mechanisms, they can foster student success and under-represented students, we talked about female students, we talk about black and Latino students, we talked about students who come from underprivileged backgrounds. Right. So, what are some of the structures that hold them back? And what are some of the support mechanisms that can really help these students achieve?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Something that I have been paying increasing attention to in my work with large data sets, as well as my smaller scale work with practitioners and case studies, and in the field, and with some departments locally, as well as in other spaces, is mentoring, but mentoring from an equity perspective. Including when students are being mentored as in research. I've also been starting to... As my service, as it connects with my research work, start looking more at staff and faculty, and their training and mentoring as well, and actually one of the recent trainings I completed with a few other colleagues here at FSU, I'm a part of the Aspire I Change Alliance, doing institutional change work, diversity and inclusion, that's especially focused on faculty diversity, but it's also doing other institutional diversity work here. And we did a train the trainers training, and I'm going to be implementing some of that with engineering students this

summer, and with their faculty... So, we are trying to make sure that faculty themselves feel empowered to learn how to prepare students, I think that... And that students know what to look for and expect out of mentoring relationships as well. Bystander intervention is actually a tiny part of that training system, it's one of the modules, which I've forgotten about when we were asking, but it was something that we had worked through and are expecting to carry over and implement, but it was focused on a lab space. For example, instead of in a broader community. I think that your point is really well taken about the jam-packed curriculum. I think that's especially true at institutions that are more career, and profession, and degree-driven, as compared to liberal arts colleges that have more distribution expectations, that expect that you take a certain number of humanities courses, and courses that are relating to equity and inclusion areas in the social sciences, for example. And that students who are non-STEM students are taking courses in STEM areas. I think it's so common that there's a sense of trying to jam in a ton of information to students, and these fields that have a lot of cumulative knowledge that is supposed to be building on each other and very tightly sequenced. That even when we're talking about summer lab trainings, or other laboratory research work that happens during the academic year, we don't necessarily build in a pause to check in about their relationship and make sure that folks have an expectation and understanding of how they're expected to learn ,and what their roles are on a project, and making sure that they feel like they have a voice, and being able to ask questions, and not be seen in a negative manner. There's a lot of stigma out there that folks can carry with them and feel like they can't be human in that space, and ask for help, and ask for help from the experts and people who know it. There's a very hierarchical culture in STEM fields, and sometimes it's for very pragmatic reasons that the undergraduates learn from the graduate students who learn from the postdocs, and then the junior and senior faculty. But that community is very important. And that community space and learning has been... That laboratory model has been torn apart by COVID and moving everyone remotely, and taking everyone outside of that space, and being in two-dimensional screens, and I've been across a number of different projects, have been talking with students who are in STEM, and talking with some of the faculty and research mentors as well, and I think creating space for understanding about people's identities and the challenges that they're going through can be perhaps a very small thing, but can create greater opportunities for the more research and scientific questions about knowledge, and about trying to problem-solve, and work through things that are inherently a part of doing scientific and engineering work, of engineers and problem solvers. You will sometimes literally break things, and then rebuild them, and try to rebuild them better, and so if you don't have trust in connection in those relationships, it can actually harm the science. And so, those humanistic pieces are some of the areas of intervention that we're working on in trying to make sure that folks really can see themselves in the work, and kind of find ways to author their own projects and collaborate effectively, and to do that while you really need to have trust, and understanding, and that relationship, and we tend to not teach that as much in STEM, but I think that these fields would benefit and would also see their under-representation shrink if there's more of a space for humanity, and I hope that that's one thing that COVID has taught us is that we have a lot that we carry, and we should give people space to be, and to listen to each other, and kind of reform a better community as we come together after this.

Elcin Haskollar: I love that point that there is space for humanity, I think it's just really beautiful. And you made a great point when you were talking about creating spaces for students' identities in order to make opportunities for scientific discoveries. So, these are one of the things that we can do. You also brought up another point about mentoring students from an equity perspective. What are some of the other things that we can do in order to make sure that STEM fields are diverse, and inclusive, and they are equitable?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Sure, a lot of people have focused on... There's been interest and energy around culturally responsive teaching and evaluation of STEM fields and projects. But culturally responsive work in STEM, meaning that when we have examples in class about how something works, or people are writing course texts, or are explaining a process to their research or classroom mentees, that even if they don't share the same identity as the students, and in a large group of students, you will certainly not share identities with all of them. But if you are intentional about having a rich set of identities, and examples, and connecting folks who may not feel as included in that kind of work and enterprise, into that space, it seems like there is a greater opportunity to learn and succeed for the students. And that can be curricular, that can be re-orienting the syllabus, so that way you are intentionally citing scholars from diverse backgrounds, and having them show up in the work and readings that students do and the laboratory practices that students engage in. Something that really spoke to me was a few years ago, in some of the undergraduate research lab opportunities I work with, students were giving presentations and a student talked about the project that they were doing with material science and additive manufacturing, which doesn't necessarily feel specifically any ethnicity, but talked about how her grandfather was an airmen, and she is a woman who has a number of military members in her family, and she and some of her family members do not have a typical body type that fits in the standard issue military uniforms, and that this is a risk for them when they go out into the field and they're out on the battlefield, and so it also... There are other kinds of interventions around the materials that folks in the military might wear in terms of readability and customizable fit, but her project was focused on creating a more customizable chest plate for women to use, for people from larger body types, for different musculature, different sizes, to be better protected, and better be able to serve the country when they serve in the military. That's wonderful for so many reasons, but she brought herself into that space and her mentor, who was previewing and helping her prepare for this competitive poster session with these external experts from Exxon and all these other industries, as well as academic leaders in the field, created a space for that to be relevant, and seen, and the kick off in a very powerful way for that presentation. And so, there are just a lot of ways that we can more inclusively think about the motivations for doing these kinds of projects in Computer Science, in creating code, for example, that is going to solve a real problem that you know about because of your background, because you come from a more rural community, because you understand the problems of water shortages, whatever it might be. And being more culturally responsive in the design of the mentorship, and in the curricular training of students, who's in the classroom, the faculty that are hired, the interest in having diverse faculty, and staff hires, and retaining those faculty and staff and helping them succeed, and have community and space for themselves as well, because we continue to develop and continue to have micro-aggressions and challenges after we're college students. Like adulthood is life-long, and there are all sorts of ways where a university

community, and a social community, needs to care for an attentive identities of everyone who's in it, including all sorts of staff. And so, those small practices can be real change makers for students to see themselves as being able to then see themselves and write themselves into their projects, or to have a new brainstorm about something that they had thought about for a while, but they didn't think anyone would care about, and now we have a new innovation that's gonna change thousands of lives. So, there are lots of ways that equity matters for STEM, but we have tended to think about equity as an add-on, rather than thinking about equity as an asset, and motivation, and entry point for doing STEM work.

Elcin Haskollar: That's really great, and everything that you just said makes the point that you cannot have diversity without the inclusion, and then the equity part. Right, you can't recruit students, scholars, scientists from diverse perspectives, and different places in life, and tell them to assimilate into the organizational culture, and then shove aside their ideas, and their thoughts and reflections. So just taking these intentional points about how we can incorporate these folks into our culture can actually make us greater. I think that's just such a simple idea, but it's such a grand idea!

Lara Perez-Felkner: Yeah, and it's so rare. I have never had... That's not entirely true. In K-12, I never had a Latino teacher, or African-American teacher, just anyone who was not broadly identified as white. People may have had a clear ethnic identity that they brought to the classroom, and shared, and then in college, in a graduate school, that was generally also the case. I had one adjunct faculty member who was Latina, and then I later had, in my PhD program, a faculty member who was Latino and then was on my committee, but it's rare. Most of us go through our whole educational life course without having a faculty of color, and the one Latina professor I had, who I think I emailed recently, actually, as just a thank you, I was thinking about her a year or two ago, and she talked about something that really resonated with me at the time as an early graduate student, and that a number of my graduate and undergraduate students here have talked about as well... You will see people of color who look like you cleaning, but not in the classroom or in... Having their names up on the board. It's 2021, we've done a lot of diversity work. There have been some fabulous hires at the university, there are all sorts of ways in which we're innovating, and leading, and starting to more directly reflect the state of Florida, as well as the United States, here at FSU and beyond, but still there's a real disparity between who folks see as having privilege and voice as faculty, as department chairs, as people who are directing centers, as people who are authoring textbooks, and getting awards, and being on the front page of news as FSU. There's a lot of work still to do, and it's not surprising in part because it tends to not be, again, the motivation or the priority for the work, but also given how much of our higher education system is public and supposed to serve the broader community. Why isn't equity something that we're leading with? Why isn't it equality of opportunity, which was ruled as a clear value and central point for education in the 1950s? Why are we not there yet?

Elcin Haskollar: So then, what would you recommend to newcomers who wanna incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work? What would you tell them?

Lara Perez-Felkner: That's a great question. I thought about this earlier, and I think it's a couple of things that may not necessarily seem like they fit together, but the first thing that comes to

mind is patience, and then health... Like take care of yourself, take care of your local community, and do your work well, because you may not be here to continue doing this work if you burn out and are not retained to the next year, or able to be promoted. So those are some cautionary tales because we know that there is greater risk for not being promoted, and for not being retained for faculty and staff of color, and for women in STEM, because they do oftentimes get tasked with doing the equity work. In part because they care, in part because they know, and they are experts, even if they haven't necessarily trained in it, had lived those experiences, they often have a lot of expertise that they carry in, and students want to talk to them. And it is a value and an asset. I know that I'm an asset to students who may not have other people who are on their faculty, who have young children, and are still faculty members doing the work, or who are Latina, or who have experienced or seen certain kinds of struggles, that the ones that they're doing, and they feel like it's safe to come in and talk. And I certainly don't wanna turn people away. In a number of people who are in those who are trying to do equity work, and wanna do it for all the genuine reasons, really do generally wanna do it. And they shouldn't be entirely protected away from it, or discouraged from doing it, and I worry about being jaded, so I always say... I reflect often to my students and to my colleagues of, we don't want to make the work or the journey seem too long or too hard, that people stop caring and then just sort of turn off that part of themselves that is the fire, that has gotten them here, and is motivating them to do this work and be a public servant. State faculty member serving the State of Florida and trying to innovate, and create new things in the profession, and change the world in their local space of control. So, on the one hand, caution to take care of yourself, and not burn out, and sort of work in the spaces where you have the most expertise and possibility for influence, and then scale up from there. While also doing the things that you need to do to be successful in the role that you're hired to do, or doing as a service activity, but then also remember the fire. And so, whether that's through connections with others, making time to socialize and reconnect with your community, building and cultivating and asking for help, creating a network of community members and network members to give you strength and energy to keep you going and help inform and shape the work because none of us are perfect and we make mistakes in this all the time, I certainly have. But then, keep scaling up and remember that there is possibility, and that when people say it's too hard or that this isn't possible, to bring their expertise, and their intent, and knowledge into that space to try to keep turning because the worst thing we can do is say, it's too hard, I give up. But bringing people along with you, I'm a big matchmaker of people. I feel like that's my asset enroll right now that I do probably the best of all the things... I see people.... I know my limitations, I don't always stay well within them, but I try to connect people to each other and say, "You may not need me to meet with you, but I know you, and you are doing great things, and you should talk to each other, and you should connect to each other, and help give each other energy and then like, let's get together and work on this thing, and I can't necessarily do this right now with you or I can... And I would love to, but you should also talk to this other person and let people how to do this." And so, I've been really energized to be a part of some exciting equity-oriented movements at FSU, in the Latinx community, as well as on faculty diversity initiatives, and I don't know, I feel like it gives me joy and has brought some energy to my work, even though it takes time and is seen as extra, not necessarily seen as valuable, or as valuable as some other

things I can do. I think that having that connection is really useful, and I think it's hard for folks to stay and feel sustained if they don't feel like they have a community of connection.

Elcin Haskollar: It sounds like you've found a fire.

Lara Perez-Felkner: I've tried to keep it going, and connect with people to help it go, and have done that with the help of others. There are some close colleagues and friends who have been really invaluable in that process, so I try to keep stoking that fire for other people and pass it along so it doesn't burn out.

Elcin Haskollar: Any final thoughts?

Lara Perez-Felkner: Kindness? I was taking notes and I had some typed and handwritten notes with me this morning... When I think about my own identity, and my own pathways, and journey and struggles over... I'm just over 40, and so I've had a good amount of life and trying to consolidate some of my story into the notes for today was hard. I had all these tangents and things that I was thinking about, but I think what... I think about the most in this year of disconnection is how much people have been carrying silently for so long, and I think that this year has taught us, hopefully... It certainly taught me, and a number of others, that the struggles that people carry are real, we may not necessarily have answers for how to do truly socially just equitable inclusion work. And how to do it without burning people out. That's one of the reasons why I kept thinking about fire and burning out, I hear about burn out so much in this work and have often felt it and observed it. But I think that people carry a lot, and we don't always know people's stories, including people who don't identify or show up as being from minoritized or underserved communities. A lot of people carry quite a bit with them, and I think if we give people the benefit of the doubt, and try to learn from each other, and listen, and try to quiet our biases and our hurt feelings, and turn to each other with kindness and openness, we're probably gonna feel more well-being ourselves, and also put more out into the world, so... My work isn't necessarily super touch or feely, and certainly STEM work is not identified as being super touchy-feely, but I think that we could all use more kindness, and that kindness is sort of a gateway to how we heal... A lot of people have been struggling with quite a lot, and I think that there's a real opportunity to turn forward, and to really move the needle. This is a crunch point in our social history, and so I hope that people will be more generous in putting equity and each other first and are kind to themselves as well as they go through this.

Elcin Haskollar: Thank you so much for being here today and talking to us about all of these wonderful things, and I wholeheartedly agree with you about your point on being kind to one another and being kind to ourselves. I always tell my students, you have to give yourself grace, especially during these tough times when most of us are struggling mentally, and some of us are struggling with so many other obstacles, especially families trying to manage their work and families and children in the same space. So I think, and again, it's such a simple but important message in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And our audience can hopefully relate to this, that we learn so much today about under-representation on ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, gender disparities in need STEM fields. We learn about the importance of creating space for

other identities, and how it's connected to improving scientific discoveries, and what it means for STEM fields, so... And again, thanks a lot, I really appreciate it and have a wonderful day.

Lara Perez-Felkner: Thank you, for you too, it was a pleasure.