Center for Diversity

Taso Dimitriadis, Hanna Song, Marlene Moncada, Erin-Kate Escobar, and Monique Thomas

When *ENGenious* profiled the Caltech Center for Diversity six years ago, it was housed in the Student Affairs department and had crystalized around a common notion of diversity to maximize impact, having historically been organized according to the separate needs of specific interest groups. Today that common notion of an inclusive community continues to advance and evolve, and the center's home is now the Provost's Office. As Cindy Weinstein, Vice Provost and Chief Diversity Officer, explains, "The Center for Diversity has become an instrumental part of the Caltech academic program by facilitating an environment where everyone can flourish socially and academically."

ENGenious sat down with the people behind these efforts, who are building on the foundations of the center to offer practical and meaningful skills-delivery programs. The team includes Hanna Song, the Senior Director for Diversity, and two assistant directors: Taso Dimitriadis and Erin-Kate Escobar.

ENGenious: How is the Caltech diversity effort unique?

Song: We make diversity a science, in a way. We translate our work into terms Caltech already understands and engages with regularly. Issues of social justice can really be academic in that there is good research and lots of data to support the importance and

relevance of diversity and inclusion in everyday life. We also keep it topical and relevant. We have established many structured spaces that are facilitated and moderated by experts who can engage intellectually with our community on current questions and flashpoint issues in the culture. This information–lecture–debrief model works well at Caltech. It also engages people emotionally. The growing attendance at our topical programming is great evidence that we are helping when people need it most. Some of our largest gatherings this past year included processing the Pulse nightclub shooting and a post-election debrief. We filled our space and had people outside our doors wanting to find a space to discuss current events. We speak in a lan-

guage specific to Caltech, but we do it in a way that blurs the lines between Caltech and the rest of the world.

ENGenious: What challenges do you encounter at Caltech?

Escobar: Our job is to manage challenges in this unique Caltech environment. It is really important to acknowledge that the act of unpacking emotions in our fact-based reality has value and importance. This reality is a two-way street of empathy and emotional intelligence. We cannot continue to work in spaces where we're not allowed to have emotions about what is going on in the larger world. We also must create spaces where scientists can process how their work intersects with the communities

it affects. Closing the door on emotions trickling in or trying to get out doesn't work. We have to be thoughtful about taking care of the people who are the brilliance of Caltech.

ENGenious: Why does Caltech need a diversity center?

Song: As soon as respect is deemed important to a community, you need a place where members can cultivate basic skills for understanding one another. Caltech is driven by outcomes. People here care deeply about their work. The best work can only happen when communication and productivity are beneficial for everyone.

Dimitriadis: We help lay the groundwork for collaboration and engage-

ment, which are important to success in our global STEM village. Caltech is a collection of unique, singular, stellar individuals, and, especially for that reason, the Center for Diversity strives to cultivate an environment where everyone wins.

Escobar: This means meeting every need for every community member and creating spaces where every member can be their whole self at Caltech. No one should have to leave any part of their identity at the lab door or the office door.

ENGenious: How have the center and its activities changed?

Song: The move from Student Affairs to the Provost's Office was a

recognition that addressing diversity issues isn't just important for students but for every member of the Caltech community. We are now broader and more strategic in our programming. With working groups and conversations at the macro level, with administration and faculty all the way to the more immediate needs expressed by students, faculty, and staff at Caltech, we now have a structure that allows us to drill down and scale up depending on the audience and the need. This also broadens the effect of our work.

Dimitriadis: We advise faculty on searches and big statistical realities, but we also are equipped to help every member develop their voice and empower themselves to do

their best work. With the shift to the Provost's Office, there can be no question as to who, how, or why integrating every identity is important: the answer is everyone, in every context, all the time.

ENGenious: Why is it important that members of underrepresented groups enter established networks when they first come to Caltech?

Song: Caltech is small and it is excellent. When students come here, they can struggle with a baseline buzz of anxiety over the rigor and brilliance surrounding them. Many wonder if they even belong here. They'll ask themselves, "How did I get in?" Now layer on the fact that they are in a subpopulation. Not only are they questioning their self-worth as a student at Caltech, but they're suddenly the sole representative of their cultural group or sexual orientation group, or they're the first-generation student from the smallest town on the map.

Dimitriadis: That implies a lot of identity development. When we provide students with an affinity group and physical space to meet, it grants them important validation of their individual experience and the realization that they are not alone. That kind of framework can make all the difference to their experience. We also value the intersectionality of all identities and how that is so important in developing our perspectives and values as scientists and unique human beings.

ENGenious: How do you help members of the Caltech community who aren't underrepresented?

Song: No matter what you do, either as a current student or employee of Caltech or after you leave here, you will be interacting with people who are not like you. If you don't have experience working with people who

aren't like you, if you have no skills to manage the challenges that come with what happens when people rub up against the majority culture, you will only go so far. We offer training that will have real-world impact on your career. If you want to achieve in a global economy, navigating space with someone who is nothing like you isn't an optional skill. Our workshops and programs raise basic cultural competency for all constituents across the campus, which in turn improves the campus climate for everyone, including those in the majority. There is no "us versus them" in developing a person or belonging to a community.

Escobar: On a practical level, this can mean unlearning. We help people develop the ability to take one extra moment for that first reaction to people who are different from themselves to pass. We teach people to ask themselves how they can allow people to be who they are, without asserting what is their "normal."

Dimitriadis: Our goal is to offer the skills and the benefits of cultivating interactions for every member of the Caltech community. This is why we have allyship training. For example, the second day of our safe-zone training lays out how you, as a member of the majority population, can provide support and lead with your inherent status to make sure everyone is included. These are real-world skills in managing harassment, ensuring physical safety, managing poor humor, and learning how to diffuse conflict. Mastering these simple but activating skills is of value to companies and will make you more attractive for employment.

ENGenious: How can alumni get involved?

Song: Come back and play a part! There is great power in engaging with our current students. The most important thing we can do is show

our current students that resources like mentorship, sponsorship, and role modeling exist. There is a tendency for students to think that there is a straight line from A to B. In fact, we all know that there are many roads to success, and the more exposure they have to all of the ways people move forward in their lives, the better. We have all levels of engagement opportunities, from committee work to CV reviews to conducting mock interviews to speaking opportunities.

Dimitriadis: We would love to hear from our Caltech alums about how their identity and their expertise combined and unfolded in the world. This speaks to the last little-known fact about diversity: it breeds creativity. Caltech is brilliantly unique, but it doesn't have a lot of philosophy majors or film students roaming around and interacting with the science-minded. Communities that engage people who inherently see problems from different angles because of their experience are a real-world benefit to the science at Caltech. We would love to hear how they've been able to contribute to science, communities, and the world.

Escobar: Alums can help serve as examples as to how their experiences have launched their professional scientific ship. That is a powerful and rewarding gift to give back to Caltech. ∎ **E N G**

Hanna Song is Senior Director for Diversity. Taso Dimitriadis is Assistant Director. Erin-Kate Escobar is Assistant Director.

Visit diversitycenter.caltech.edu.

The Center for Autonomous Systems Technologies (CAST) was established by Caltech to promote interdisciplinary research and the exchange of ideas in the exploding area of autonomous systems. The soon-to-be-completed 5,056-square-foot home of the Center will be a living experiment that promotes a synergic environment where machines and humans share the workplace. The centerpiece of the facility is the three-story-tall, enclosed, 75,064-cubic-foot aerodrome to test flying drones—the largest of its kind. The aerodrome will include a 100-square-foot wall of 2,000 fans that can be individually controlled to create a nearly infinite variety of wind conditions for drones to learn to react to—everything from a light gust of wind to the vortex of a tornado.

Rendering created by CO Architects.

For information, visit *cast.caltech.edu*.