Center for Diversity

When ENGenious profiled the Caltech Center for Diversity six years ago, it was housed in the Student Affairs department and had crystallized 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 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 with people emotionally. The growing attendance at our topical programming is great evidence that we are helping when people need it most.

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 are 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 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 are 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 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 are 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 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 are 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 in a way that blurs the lines between Caltech and the rest of the world.
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 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 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.

For information, visit diversitycenter.caltech.edu.