

**[00:00:53] Santa Ono:** I'm Santa Ono, the President & Vice-Chancellor of UBC. On this season of The Blue and Gold cast I'm speaking with the people who are helping to shape UBC's next century.

On each episode, I'll be joined by one of my senior faculty advisors, and we'll hear how they're contributing to our strategic plan. Like all of us during this COVID-19 pandemic, we've had to adjust, for The Blue and Goldcast, that means recording remotely. I've been recording from my home and my guests have been recording themselves at home as well. You might notice things sound a little different, but that's just one of the ways that UBC has found to adapt.

**[00:01:50] Santa:** Karen Ragoonaden is one of my senior advisors at our Okanagan campus in Kelowna. She's also a professor of teaching and the Director of the Centre of Mindful Engagement and the co-chair of the Indigenous Education Council. Karen, thank you so much for coming on the show.

**[00:02:08] Karen Ragoonaden:** You're very welcome Santa. I'm looking forward to our chat.

**[00:02:11] Santa:** You really hit the ground running. You're doing some wonderful things. You have outstanding reputation as a member of the faculty there at UBCO. We're really looking forward to this conversation. Can you tell us just a little bit about yourself and your work outside of your role as a senior advisor?

**[00:02:30] Karen:** I've lived in Kelowna for the last 15 years. Prior to that I was in Montreal and Winnipeg. I've lived all over the world as well. Those experiences in Europe and Africa now in North America have really shaped the person who I am, in terms of my own personal but also professional and academic interests.

**[00:02:56] Santa:** Tell me about how all those different places shaped you. They're very different places. It's a fascinating career.

**[00:03:02] Karen:** Yes. I'll begin with a little bit of my personal history. My dad was Mercian and my mom is Irish and they met when he was studying in Ireland. I lived in Ireland at a very early age, the UK as well, and then moved to a tropical island Mauritius to start my schooling. That's where I learned French and I also learned about the importance of living and being with different people.

The Island of Mauritius has been recognized by Stephen Covey as being an example of the seven best habits. Part of it has to do with the focus on collaboration and learning and dealing with people of different languages, different religious backgrounds.

I really do feel that experience, a very formative experience really supported, not just me, but my family as well when we immigrated to Canada. I was 10-years-old when we immigrated to Canada and have, over the course of the last year, really seen a change in the country in terms of its own approach, to equity, to diversity inclusion, to multilingualism, to plurilingualism as well.

**[00:04:11] Santa:** Your formation and all these different environments really shaped you. Was it part of your passion to get involved in EDI?

**[00:04:18] Karen:** Very much so. I would say the experiences that I had as a child growing up in Europe and Africa and then in North America, also coupled with the schooling that I did, because I did do my university education in North America and in Europe, really did shape the way that I wanted to move forward with my own academic life.

I came to the realization of how important it is to not fear difference to learn as much as you can about others languages or cultures or religions. The importance, of course, of personal connection of go moving past sort of that very universal approach to difference, but really getting to connect with people on a very individualized level.

**[00:05:11] Santa:** When you became a faculty member, or even before that, tell me how equity, diversity and inclusion worked into your scholarship.

**[00:05:21] Karen:** It worked into my scholarship right at the beginning. I joined the Okanagan campus in 2005, so during its first year as it became part of the UBC campus. As you can imagine there were many issues regarding equity and inclusion particularly coming from a smaller campus that was joining a bigger campus.

One of the first courses I remember that I taught as a faculty member was a graduate course about education and diversity. I found that the graduate students in that course were very much ready and very willing to participate in discussions, relating, for example, to racism, to different aspects of classism, to gender identity.

In 2007, we still hadn't embraced the whole concept of SOGI, for example, so Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, but it was at least at the forefront or a pathway towards those discussions. Another very interesting element was students were really willing to explore the world, the universe in different ways. A lot of the graduate students back then were really embracing and thrilled with the fact that a graduate program had finally arrived in the interior of British Columbia through the UBC Okanagan campus.

**[00:06:43] Santa:** Now, tell me how you were actually welcomed on the campus by other faculty members. How did they react to you and your area of scholarship? Was it all enthusiasm and all welcoming? People who didn't quite understand what you were doing.

**[00:07:00] Karen:** I would say that definitely the faculty members that I worked within education were very welcoming and did their very best to make me feel comfortable. I would have to admit that coming into a new university and working with individuals who were very uncertain and fearful of their future was a challenge, not just for me, but for a number of us who started during that period.

I think together, I'm very proud with the work that we have all done together to come to this point, 15 years later, where we really have moved and forward and progress and made the campus what it is today. Truly a research-intensive campus focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning, a wonderful international cohort of students. Also, our ability to attract first-class faculty members who are willing to share their experiences with us.

**[00:08:02] Santa:** You've been certainly a very big part of that transition for that new campus and making it really much more inclusive. We congratulate you. We celebrate what you've done. At the same time with all that progress being made, you can't help but notice that we still have challenges as a society, as a world, in terms of equity and inclusion. Could you talk a little bit about that? How do you think we're doing as a society? Have things gotten better? Are they regressing? What's your take on what's happening outside of the UBCO bubble?

**[00:08:37] Karen:** I think especially now in the midst of the situation we're in with a pandemic, with COVID-19, we are seeing a lot of fear, a lot of phobia, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of economic uncertainty as well. What history has shown us in the past is that uncertainty and that fearfulness often leads to behaviors that are not necessarily representative of a civil and democratic society.

I think that our work ahead of us as university professors and even our students and staff will be to clear the ground, so to speak, to alleviate some of these fears, to push aside discriminatory practices, discriminatory ways of being. To really come back to a more sustainable, in the words of Dr. Henry, a more kind and compassion society, where we are looking after one another. Truly, in this situation we really are looking after one another in order to survive, in order for all of us to get to a better place.

**[00:09:47] Santa:** As you pointed out, in these periods of stress and fear that the ugly side of the head of racism rears its head, and that people start to behave in ways that really counter to what you've been trying to achieve through your courses and through all of your work over the years at UBCO. I'm wondering why do you think that's the case? Why is it when people are afraid or feeling threatened that they lash out at different kinds of people?

**[00:10:19] Karen:** I think what we're seeing now, in particular, is really a backlash against Asian populations, Asian students. We're going to be seeing this more and more, I think, as we are moving forward and progressing with the measures that have been put in place to protect us. A lot of this has to do with fear.

I think when we are as professors, as instructors, as we are dealing with issues relating to racism, our focus would be in particular looking at anti-racist stances. I come back to Ibram X. Kendi's book, he talks about how to be an antiracist first and foremost, and he asks each and every one of us to look at ourselves first. I would think that, that is an approach.

Those are conceptions or discussions that we would be having on a very regular basis and particularly I teach in the Faculty of Education with our BEd students. Also, when we're out and about in society, to be aware of what is going on and to not be afraid to stand up and maybe stop certain practices or certain comments, certain ways of being.

**[00:11:36] Santa:** All of us have our biases, anyone who says they don't have their biases is probably not being honest. When you go into a class of, let's say, the youngest students that you teach, how do you get them to first realize that they have their own biases?

**[00:11:53] Karen:** There are very many different approaches, taken, for example, one of the first things that we do know that research has shown us that children as young as preschool or kindergarten, they are very, very aware of differences. A very visible differences, so whether it be skin color, whether it be hair color, or eye color, whether it be size, those are differences that they notice. An approach is to be comfortable with those differences. To not move away from discussing how we are all different, but really focusing on our collective humanity with each and every one of them.

Even if we speak different languages, if we practice different spiritual or religious practices, regardless of these differences, we all come back together within our collective humanity. In the case of a kindergarten or elementary school classroom, it would be the community that is formed within.

**[00:12:53] Santa:** Can you tell us how you would take the principles and practices that you've brought your class and try to bring them into the outside world, outside of the bubble? Because, as you've said, that's where a lot of the challenges lie.

**[00:13:05] Karen:** Very much so. That is part of the challenges of universities as well, is going beyond our campuses and coming out into our communities and creating areas where we can talk, where we can share, where we can create pathways towards understanding one another.

We found, over the last year in my role as faculty advisor, that holding community focused speaker series or forums, for example, right in downtown Kelowna, the Innovation Center has been very helpful in gathering. Not just our former students or BEd students or graduate students, but also, members of the community who come together and who asked questions at the end of our presentations, or who are invited to participate in dialogue.

The university despite the physical distancing mandates that are in place, that our role truly is going to be leaders in this area, in developing anti-racist stances as we move through a society, which is dealing with a number of uncertainties, economic challenges, in particular.

**[00:14:24] Santa:** Karen, I can just imagine in these sorts of open settings, where you're talking about differences that if you don't scream, the participants that every now then you will have somebody that has a lot of hate inside them for whatever issue or difference you are focusing on in that conversation. I've certainly experienced that myself when we've had speakers that have controversial views that often, those are quite tense and there can even be demonstrations and violence that occurs. Have you experienced that in any of your open dialogues?

**[00:15:03] Karen:** Very much so. We have experienced a couple of times. I say, we, because we usually do it in community with either guest speakers or co-hosts, have experienced people who will stand upright and completely disagree with a message with what we are talking about.

I can remember, one example, on a forum on racism where I spoke about, race being a social construct, and right away someone standing up and saying, "That's not true. What do you mean? How can it be a social construct?" Understanding that

this was a forum and that this was a learning environment, it takes time to-- people don't have to agree with you right away.

I think the important thing is you notice, is just settling strong emotions, ensuring that the person's voice has been heard, but not to the detriment of others. Then coming back and finding a way to let the person know that this conversation has ended, but that it can continue at another time, after the discussion. That has been my experience dealing in particular people who completely disagree, trying to stay away from the strong emotions, if you can.

**[00:16:26] Santa:** Very good for you in being able to control that situation. I can tell you that many universities and other organizations that host these speakers are not successful in controlling the situation and they actually have to stop the dialogue. Kudos to you for being able to manage that situation.

Let me ask you, you've worked on beyond those kinds of open sessions. You've worked on a number of other projects at UBCO, would you like to speak about any of the other EDI projects you've worked over the years?

**[00:17:01] Karen:** My favorite projects were, collected, edited books that I have worked with, with colleagues across the country and across the world and bringing together voices, whether it be from China, Hawaii, the US and Canada. Voices together to talk about their experiences with EDI, with equity, diversity and inclusion, and the challenges that we have faced, whether it be as female academics, whether it be as academics just generally trying to not change but trying to bring just new ways of being and doing into academia, which is truly a very traditional sphere.

I would say that has been one of my favorite projects, working on edited collections. I would also say that we developed, and this is away from EDI, but a curriculum on mindfulness about stress management and resiliency techniques. That curriculum is being used in our BEd program, but also across the country. It really is a curriculum that focus on wellness and well-being. I would say that that has been a project, truly a community-based project. Both projects that I've been very, very happy to work with.

**[00:18:27] Santa:** Your work on wellness and inclusion is really pioneering and we're very proud of your role in seeing that not only at UBCO campus but really to see it spread around the world. Can I just ask you this question?

We're in the midst of a pandemic. I can tell you that many people say that the next pandemic isn't going to be so much a resurgence of COVID-19, but the pandemic of mental health challenges that will affect every age. As you have pioneered wellness with respect to inclusion and we've talked about what happens in threatening and challenging times in terms of racism wearing its head, can you talk about how important wellness will be in the months and years ahead in this kind of situation?

**[00:19:20] Karen:** I think as you have rightly identified, it's going to be a seminal importance, as we all adapt to working remotely, to physical distancing, which is something that I don't think none of us have ever experienced. That lack of social contact, of physical contact, is going to be very challenging as we're seeing now. I think as a society, one of the things that we would have to do, first and foremost

within our communities, is looking out for one another. Coming together as a community, instead of leading our very isolated, very work focused lives, just casting a glance around, who is in our neighborhoods? Who is alone? Who needs help? Then bringing that kind of an approach and those kinds of values, and new ways of looking after one another with kindness and empathy to our workplace and seeing how we can reach out to one another.

One of the things I'm definitely noticing, Santa, as I'm out and about while respecting physical distancing is the real sense of, not camaraderie, but the desire to exchange information with people on the street, if I'm out hiking here or away, on the city streets here in Kelowna. People are really willing to make connections. I think that for us would be important. How do we make connections in the situation where we're not really supposed to be together and where we are relying on technology?

**[00:21:02] Santa:** Karen, that was a separate question, and over the years, you've probably noticed that British Columbia and our universities, in fact, all of Canada, has become much more global. Can you comment on your view on how that globalization or internationalization has changed the UBC Okanagan campus?

**[00:21:23] Karen:** I can honestly say that I've had the privilege of witnessing how the university has grown and has embraced internationalization. Just from seeing the different faces on campus, hearing different languages, having students and faculty and staff come, as you say, from all the different continents of the world has really provided a very rich community for this campus.

Especially considering the very important role of the Okanagan campus and the interior of the BC, I feel that it serves as a hub to bring together these different voices, different ways of being but also sharing so many different narratives, sharing so many different discourses and ways of teaching and learning. It truly does.

I would have to say students who do come to UBC Okanagan can be assured an experience that is representative of the world. That within the scope of the interior British Columbia, we have managed to bring the world to this truly beautiful location and on onto this campus.

**[00:22:41] Santa:** That's really wonderful. It's must be very gratifying for you to have seen that evolution of the campus and of the region. Like I said, you've had a lot to do with it, with your programs and your work as Special Advisor. Karen, I want to thank you so much for being on The Blue and Gold cast today.

**[00:23:00] Karen:** Thank you very much, Santa. It's been a pleasure talking to you. I would say that there's still a lot of work to do. I look forward to working with you and with our community of colleagues in the Okanagan, including faculty, staff and students to move forward. Thank you.

**[00:23:17] Santa:** Thank you very much. As I said, Karen is one of my senior advisors at our Okanagan campus in Kelowna. She's a professor of teaching, the Director of the Centre of Mindful Engagement, and the co-chair of the Indigenous Education Council.

**[00:23:42] Santa:** That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guests work, as well as previous editions of the show at [blueandgoldcast.com](http://blueandgoldcast.com) You can also find us on your favorite podcast app. You can tweet me [@ubcprez](https://twitter.com/ubcprez). That's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono, thanks for listening.