

**Santa Ono:** I'm Santa Ono, the President and Vice-Chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are helping to shape UBC's next century.

Today, I'm joined by the Associate Dean of UBC's Faculty of Applied Science to discuss the faculty's equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies. Here at UBC, we're committed to doing better by all of our students, faculty, and staff. That means advancing and prioritizing our understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion, or EDI, not just to make our campuses better learning environments for everyone, but also to look at ways we can transform systems of oppression in the wider world.

Today, I'm joined by Sheryl Staub-French. She's a Professor of Civil Engineering and the Associate Dean of the Faculty of Applied Science. Thanks so much for joining me on today's *Blue and Goldcast*. Thank you very much for joining me today to talk about the Faculty of Applied Science. I know that you're very involved in equity, diversity, and inclusion. Could you tell us a little bit about the approach being taken in the faculty in terms of EDI?

**Sheryl Staub-French:** Sure, and thank you for having me. The faculty, over the past year and a half, went through a whole strategic planning process, and it was a really engaged and collaborative process. One of the six priorities that came out of that process was inclusive leadership and respectful engagement. I think that really captures a lot about how we're thinking about EDI. Within that priority area, we're addressing several aspects of that. One is around, obviously, advancing diversity, and that has a lot to do with outreach that we do, as well as thinking about metrics and accountability and data and that whole side of things.

We also have made an authentic commitment to truth and reconciliation and leading the way within the faculty to addressing the harms done by residential schools and our terrible history around that. Then another thing is around developing EDI competencies, and building capacity internally, so that we are comfortable leading EDI initiatives.

**Santa:** That's really quite ambitious.

**Sheryl:** Yes. [chuckles]

**Santa:** I'm very excited to hear about all that and that it's in the strategic plan. There are basic tools that you'll need to succeed to measure your success. I'm sure you've been defining what success will look like in terms of those EDI goals and priorities. One of the critical things is to understand the diversity of representation at each of the ranks, whether it's faculty, staff, or students. Now, a lot of that's not centrally available yet.

The investments we're making in workday will give us that capacity. We're not there yet with workday student, as you know, and so there are faculties within the institution, for example, science, that are developing that using a survey tool within the faculty. Can you speak a little bit about what the approach will be in actually measuring improvement in terms of representation in the Faculty of Applied Science?

**Sheryl:** Sure. Within Applied Science, it's a broad faculty, so it includes nursing, community planning, architecture, and landscape architecture, as well as 14 different engineering departments and programs, so quite a diverse range of professional programs. In terms of data, we're actually working-- I have someone from the Equity Office working half time with us, and we're spending a lot of time thinking about metrics, data, and how we develop the infrastructure, so that when workday comes online, and we have much more of that built-in, we'll be ready to act on that.

I will say that we work with the Faculty of Science a bit. Dr Ninan Abraham, he's amazing. We have implemented some of what he has implemented in science to collect data about hiring in an anonymous way so that we can at least get some sense for the diversity of our applicant pool when it comes to faculty hiring.

**Santa:** That's wonderful. You've seen the success-

**Sheryl:** Incredible success.

**Santa:** -that they've achieved, not only by measuring what's happening and where other areas for improvement, but also in terms of how they constitute a search committee and all that. It's really great to hear that you're implementing those strategies as well. The Equity Office is piloting this year a survey to be able to measure progress in terms of the student body. Can you talk a little bit about that? Are you part of that conversation?

**Sheryl:** We are looking at surveys. We're actually developing internally our own surveys working with the Equity Office as well. We have several units that really want to do an equity audit, and so we're working at that scale. I believe that a lot of that knowledge will be transferable, in terms of how we're going to move forward as a faculty to have all of the infrastructure in place. The other thing I would add is about what you said before about constituting search committees, and I will say that we spend a lot of time right now around faculty training.

We've revised how we train our committees, our search committees so that they are better able to consider EDI and really take ownership as a committee. That includes bias training and that kind of thing, which is really more at the individual level. We're trying to get the committee engaged around EDI and understanding how barriers might impact how people might look on paper.

**Santa:** How's that conversation going? Culture change is the hardest thing to accomplish at any organization, whether it's a company or a university. Tell me how it's going, those conversations, as we're launching academic renewal in a major way, you're going to have many more opportunities to have those conversations. I haven't yet been at an institution where everyone can make that transition to a new way of thinking about and building an applicant pool. Tell me how it's going.

**Sheryl:** It's hard to say, but I would say I think it's going well, in that we have a lot of people engaged in having those conversations and looking at our systems and structures. I see those as, in a way, both sides of the coin, that you have to start having that conversation, having a dialogue about these issues, and then you also have to be looking at your systems and structures. Our approach is actually, I've

really adopted the language of your strategic plan, UBC strategic plan to embed inclusion in all of our academic systems and structures.

I actually use that in all of my presentations that this is what we're trying to do is embedded. There are structural components, and then there are these dialogue components. Structurally, we created an EDI and engineering committee, and that actually has seven subcommittees that are all looking at different aspects of those systems and structures, so curriculum, faculty training, metrics, and data and policies. This year, we now have, within every unit, an EDI lead, an EDI designate, and most of them have EDI committees.

We're developing those structures, and then what's happening is, we're facilitating a lot of conversation to have that. For example, one of the subcommittees this year is a leadership subcommittee, and that has four department heads, engineering department heads, as well as three other faculty who are leading EDI initiatives. This morning, we had this really engaging conversation about how to have these difficult conversations in your departments. A lot of them are engineers. We didn't grow up learning about this stuff, and so getting comfortable being uncomfortable.

**Santa:** That's really wonderful to hear. Now, sometimes when I talk about EDI at an institutional level, or talk about, or share information about what we're trying to do here, and listen to what's happening elsewhere, often you'll hear the question or the response that the pipeline doesn't exist. We can try to move the needle, try to increase representation, but the supply isn't there. What's your response to that, thinking about both students and faculty?

**Sheryl:** Yes. My response is that we have to remove barriers so that everyone has equal access and opportunity. This is why we have really committed to outreach. Within engineering, in particular, we have a significant under-representation of women in engineering, indigenous peoples in engineering. With our engineering outreach program gearing up, we have significantly grown and expanded our reach. Over the past four or five years, we've really brought it into the faculty and it's quadrupled its reach. So, it's now up to almost 30,000 kids and youth across the province that we reach every year, and almost 2,500 of those are indigenous youth. We're looking at how to reach black students. We're trying to address the pipeline issue.

**Santa:** I know you are.

**Sheryl:** Yes.

**Santa:** I'm proud of everything that you're doing, and it's quite well known, and a lot of people are trying to model what's happening. Here's the question. I know that James the Dean and also his predecessor, Marc Parlange, were very committed to this. Can you tell me whether within the Faculty of Applied Sciences as large as it is and as diverse as it is in terms of areas of specialization--? Do you think it's a top-down effort or do you think it's ground up, or do you think it's a combination in terms of the commitment to EDI?

**Sheryl:** I fully believe you need both. This is what we've seen. This is why I think we've gotten some traction, because we have leadership from the top. We have a

dean that's committed, who stands up for it, who shows up. We do dialogue series, he shows up, he prioritizes it, he resources it, and that goes a long way. If we don't work from the bottom-up, it's so hard to make change happen, and that's why, this year, we're really focusing on how do we support the ground-up. We're like, how do we work with a department and help them to develop the capacity internally and own it internally so that they can be on their way?

**Santa:** Like I said, the progress I've seen just in five years is very impressive and I hope that everyone in the faculty and in the departments know that I'm very appreciative of the work that's being done. I do believe removing barriers and giving the opportunity of a first-class education from your faculty is a responsibility to the province, but also a gift to talented youth everywhere and young faculty members.

I think, ultimately, it's for the betterment of society, because having a diverse set of engineers in whatever discipline will really, I think, strengthen that discipline and the diversity of thought that it brings and the impact that will have when students graduate and go back to their communities and tell the story that UBC wants you. It is very, very powerful. Now, we've talked about the faculty being very large and quite diverse with nursing and aspects of architecture and design, as well as all the disciplines of engineering. Can you tell me whether the EDI challenge is the same across all those, or are there differences?

**Sheryl:** I would say there's pretty significant differences. The school of nursing is very far ahead of us. They've had an indigenous cultural safety committee for years. They now have an anti-racism task force. They have been leading the way in many ways in terms of equity and health. Our school of community and regional planning has the indigenous community planning program, as you know, really a model for how to work with indigenous communities.

Each discipline is quite unique in that sense. Engineering, it's been very technical, and only within the last five or so years has equity been a part of the graduate attributes that are expected of engineers. We're still trying to figure out how do we help engineers to understand their responsibility and role in leading to create a more equitable and just society.

**Santa:** I suppose that requires internal conversations, as well as conversations at the level of accreditation. I've often heard in the engineering disciplines that there is very little flexibility in the curriculum that gives you those opportunities to have those conversations. Do you think that to make transformational change, that there needs to be a relook on what's expected from a creditor's point of view to build in a time in the curriculum for those conversations?

**Sheryl:** Yes, I think it's a real challenge with the engineering curriculum, given the workload. The number of credits that engineers have to take is far greater than I think any other discipline and workload and mental health are big issues that we're concerned about. We continually try to look at what else do we need to add, but we don't spend enough time thinking about what can we take out. I think we need to start having more of those conversations.

**Santa:** This might put you on the spot, but do you have ideas about how things might be made more efficient, or where there might be some redundancy in the

curriculum so that you could make room for those? I seem to recall that at MIT that did an experiment in terms of asking the question what impact would the liberal arts, our breadth of knowledge courses have on the success, the graduation rate retention of their students, and also their future long-term success once they move into a workplace where they might need to have soft skills that allow them to communicate, for example, in the field of design with the end user or the customer.

They found paradoxically that when they made room in the schedule for those more breadth of knowledge courses, that they actually first year retention and graduation was significantly impacted for the better. Then if you looked longitudinally over longer periods of time, that introducing that space in the curriculum for that breadth of knowledge had a positive impact on their future success. It's a similar question. It must be possible if they were able to do that, and it's not easy because it's hard to change an entire field's expectations at the accreditation level, but do you think there's opportunity here?

**Sheryl:** I definitely think there's opportunity. I know that the deans' council of Canada are having those conversations in the context of the grand challenges that we faced. We need to have more breadth to be able to come together, to collaborate in multicultural, diverse teams, to address these significant issues that society is facing. I think those conversations are happening. It is slow to change, and anything to do with accreditation is always really slow, but I know that there's a lot of interest and attention being brought to bear on this.

**Santa:** Now you can hold people like me accountable, because you're doing all these wonderful things at the faculty level. We've met quite a strong commitment in June to addressing barriers to inclusion, and we should be held accountable to providing support to the faculties, and we are working on it. This is not about the central administration or about me at all. I do recognize that it's incumbent upon the provost and certainly myself and others and the board of governors to find the resources to help you because success requires resources. It requires bursaries, it requires programming. It requires mentoring things that we can do even better. Wouldn't you say?

**Sheryl:** I completely agree with you. This is what I'm hearing from our units, too. A big challenge isn't the lack of interest or intent. It's just finding the capacity to make it happen, especially with COVID right now and the tremendous burden that faculty, staff and students are under. Many of them- I have like 25 or 30 people engaged in my EDI and engineering committee alone, and many of them- it's not in their job description. They're leading within their units because they have an interest in changing the culture.

**Santa:** I'm appreciative of that. That's certainly something that I'll be having conversations with my executive team about how we can be more supportive. We certainly do know that this has been a challenging several months verging on the year. The wellness of our faculty and staff that are making these things possible have to and deserve our attention, and so we will be thinking about that. Let me ask you this. You did mention that people are doing this because of their passion. Tell me personally, what attracted you to working on this file?

**Sheryl:** I've always been interested in social justice. Really, it's personal. I grew up and I had three older brothers and I played a lot of sports and I was the only girl in the sports teams. Then I went into engineering and I was just one of a handful. Then I almost left engineering to go do gender studies, because I was so surprised how much my gender affected how I was being treated. Thankfully, I persisted, and so it's actually a tremendous privilege to get to do this as part of my job, because I've always had such an interest to try to make change around this so that other people don't have to experience those things. Also being a lesbian, I should say, being a lesbian has also been given me perspective that maybe not everyone has in terms of barriers that people face. Being a woman in engineering and a lesbian, I think I've seen some of the barriers that people can face.

**Santa:** Thank you for doing that and for your passion, you're making a difference. I want to end with a question. I don't know if you're a Ruth Bader Ginsburg fan, but she's certainly a role model to many because, as you know, when she was going through law school and finishing at the top of her class and not being able to get a job in Manhattan, but that she was able to overcome all of those barriers and go to the very top. Her legacy will be everlasting, I think.

Now, one thing, when you listen to her talk to different groups of law students or even practicing lawyers, they would often ask her for advice. In many ways, your life story is similar. You were the only one in many situations or one, a few.

She and others who have been role models or pioneers, if you will, trendsetters, often say part of it is grit. It's not letting the barriers or the odds that seem stacked against you get to you and just showing up every day. I have mixed feelings about that kind of response, because in a way that's an excuse for systems not changing and addressing systemic barriers.

On the other hand, I also am a very rare bird. There are very few Asian university presidents. It's actually the most underrepresented group of university presidents, believe it or not. I've often felt like the only one. What's your personal feeling about that kind of a response? In a way it's true, but in a way the danger is it's an excuse. What do you think?

**Sheryl:** Yes, when I reflect on my own journey, I would say that perseverance was, I would say, the number one characteristic that enabled me to get through. I also think there's a cost when you have to persevere so much, it takes a toll. The thing that I think is different now, and I give you a lot of credit for the changes you're making at UBC. There's something about persevering in silence and when you're alone versus persevering when you feel like you have a community of support that you have access to.

I think what I'm noticing now about UBC is that there is more of a community of support. My hardest time at UBC as a faculty member was when I felt so alone and nobody was talking about it. Now, we're having those conversations, and that's a huge step in the right direction. I don't have an answer, but I think if you're persevering and you feel like things are changing, you can see glimmers of hope along the way as you persevere, that makes it so much more tolerable and possible for you to achieve in that context.

**Santa:** Thanks for being key part of paving the way for a better future for those that come after us. I really, really appreciate you and I appreciate what's happening at the Faculty of Applied Science. Thank you so much.

**Sheryl:** Thank you so much for having me here.

**Santa:** Sheryl Staub-French is the Associate Dean of the Faculty of Applied Science and a Professor of Civil Engineering. That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guest work, as well as previous additions to the show at [blueandgoldcast.com](http://blueandgoldcast.com). You can also find us on your favorite podcast app, like iTunes or Stitcher. Our email is [blueandgoldcast@ubc.ca](mailto:blueandgoldcast@ubc.ca), and you can tweet me @ubcprez, that's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thank you so much for listening.