In the summer of 2020, I received what I felt at the time was some very disappointing advice. As was the case at so many departments and universities across the country, trainees in our department had started a DEI committee. As a member of that committee, I helped set up a meeting with a professor in our department who had a long-standing commitment to justice and inclusivity, in both her research and her service. We wanted her to tell us what to do, to tell us whose door we should knock on to demand systemic change, to tell us how we could instantly and permanently change our department at the structural level. Her advice? Think small. The kinds of systemic changes we were demanding were beyond our abilities as trainees to control, she said. Instead, we should focus on the individual and discrete spaces where we did have power: our classrooms and our labs. The silver bullet we were looking for didn't exist.

We all came away from this meeting dejected and frustrated, feeling like we'd lost a potential powerful ally in the fight to make meaningful and immediate change within our department. But as I've progressed and grown in graduate school, I've come to realize that this professor had a point. Of course, I can be vocally supportive of systemic changes, but at the end of the day, creating diverse and inclusive spaces in academia isn't as easy as tinkering with some policies or adjusting some incentives. Real, visible change can only come about when all of us work, constantly, to produce change within our own personal spheres. My contributions to diversity and inclusivity at Columbia have come about in precisely this way, whether it's through the students who I mentor on research projects, the practices I employ in my classroom, or the extra time I commit to scientific outreach.

DEI in the lab

Making change happen in my own sphere means taking an active role in deciding who is provided with particular opportunities, and letting people know what opportunities are available to them. In the fall of 2021, I began working with a group called the Psychological Science Accelerator on a massive, multi-site study working to replicate and clarify the stereotype threat effect in Black college students. This project wasn't directly related to my dissertation research, but I thought it was an important and interesting project to contribute to.

I approached a sophomore we had interviewed for a different project to ask if she would be interested in helping with data collection. I thought that this project would be uniquely relevant to her: She was double majoring in Psychology and African American studies, and would likely have a personal connection to the research topic as a Black college student. She enthusiastically said yes, kicking off an incredibly meaningful mentor-mentee relationship. Her work on the stereotype threat project led to her conducting her own senior thesis project in the lab on how social support helps Black students deal with racial stress. She graduated in the spring of 2024, and we plan to publish her work. She plans to attend medical school, and because of her experience in our lab, intends to pursue medical/clinical research as well. By actively seeking out a research project that focused on an underrepresented group, and by including a member of that underrepresented group on the project, I created circumstances, in my individual sphere of influence, in which an underrepresented student was able to thrive in academia. These circumstances alone don't constitute change, but actively working to create them over and over again just might.

DEI in the classroom

With this mentee, I took an active role in bringing her into a space in which she might not have otherwise seen herself. I take a similar approach in my role as an instructor, where I help students see themselves as members of our class and our field. For example, nearly every class has to deal with the issue that some students feel more comfortable participating than others. I try to mitigate this imbalance

in my lab sections using small group discussions, where students typically feel more comfortable speaking up. If I hear a student who doesn't usually participate make an interesting point in their group, I will encourage them to share that comment with the full class when I ask groups to report back. This strategy proves effective because it actively signals to students that they and their ideas belong in our classroom. The fact that this strategy works so well demonstrates that when students don't participate, it's because they aren't sure if their ideas are worthwhile contributions, not because they don't have any ideas to begin with.

Similarly, I work to make sure students can see themselves in my course material. In my Research Methods lab sections, I spend extra time on research ethics, and focus on prior harms psychology research has imposed on people of color, and in particular the Black community. I also encouraged the instructor to update his list of assigned research articles to include more articles directly relevant to the experiences of today's student body. In all of these examples, I don't wait for students to demonstrate that they feel ready to be part of our class or our field. Instead, I actively and preemptively work to show them that they are welcome in the individual spaces that I have control over. In so doing, I hope to create new norms that can be adopted by the individual spaces of others, and over time, elicit real, lasting change in our classrooms.

DEI beyond undergraduates

Beyond undergraduate education, I have made a point of devoting significant amounts of time in graduate school to science outreach for high school students from underrepresented backgrounds. I spent three years as an instructor and a curriculum developer for a program run through Columbia's Zuckerman Institute that gives minoritized high school students the opportunity to learn about neuroscience and complete a paid summer internship in a neuroscience lab. I also developed a science communication course for Columbia's Double Discovery Center, and I've served as a mentor for a Women in STEM program run through a science outreach nonprofit called BioBus. These programs serve to introduce students to science early, particularly those students who might not have as many opportunities to get hands-on research experience. When I work with these programs, I strive to show students what it might look like if they were to pursue an academic career in the sciences. I demonstrate to them that they have a place in our discipline, and I present myself as warm and welcoming, as someone they can come to for life advice. I make time within my own individual universe to work with students in these programs because I believe that they are a crucial component in making scientific spaces more diverse and inclusive. While I cannot create these programs from scratch on my own, I have the power to uplift, support, and inspire the individual students within them.

No matter how vocal and passionate I am about systemic issues in academia, I alone cannot solve those problems immediately. So, what can I do in the meantime? I can make diversity and inclusion integral to the spaces I have control over. I can be intentional about the research opportunities I make available to undergraduate students. I can make sure my classroom is a place where students know that they belong. I can devote time to science outreach programs for students outside of the university system. Each of these actions alone will not produce lasting change. But with concerted effort – over long periods of time and across contexts – I can help create an academic community that is welcoming to those who aren't always sure if academia is for them. I am committed to putting this concerted effort at the forefront of all that I do.