



Cornell University

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6 September 2020

Dear EAS community,

Last month, Dept. Chair Geoff Abers formed the Diversity Equity Inclusion and Anti-Racism (DEIAR) planning committee in EAS. I was very honored that Geoff asked me to chair this committee, although I fully acknowledge that as a tenured white male professor I am not a person whose identity has been underrepresented in academia. Nevertheless, I am deeply committed to doing what I can to make sure the first phase of this important initiative is successful. And, like all of you, I am also highly motivated to make sure our department is ranked as one of the top Earth & Atmospheric science programs in the country. As most of you probably know, I believe that these two goals complement each other: in the future, the strongest departments will be diverse.

Natalie Mahowald and Matt Pritchard are also serving on this committee; Carolyn Headlam has been helping us orient ourselves in the landscape of new and existing resources and initiatives across campus. We are working on the logistics and details of partnering IDEEAS as well as with non-faculty members in our EAS community (including students, alumni, staff and post-docs).

Although we have not yet had our first official committee meeting, my primary objectives at this point are to listen, to be transparent, and to communicate progress. To that end, the paragraphs below summarize my own thinking about what the DEIAR first steps should be, as well as some initial progress we have made.

Inventory. Right now, I believe the most important task is to develop an understanding of existing initiatives that might be useful in formulating a broader, long-term strategy for DEIAR. Carolyn and I have begun this list, but I would highly appreciate your help. I know everyone is redefining what it means to be “exceptionally busy” right now, so I am not asking for much of your time. I've put together a very brief (two-question) survey that we hope you will complete to give us a better picture of what resources are already available.

[\[DEAIR EAS: Quick Survey on Inventory\]](#)

Partnering with IDEEAS. We are committed to listening to IDEEAS and learning from the work they have already done. I plan to attend the IDEEAS general meetings as often as possible, and I look forward to continuing to work with the IDEEAS Mentorship Action Team on our graduate student SEA (shared expectation agreements) pilot program this year as well as other mentorship initiatives.

Mentorship. Mentorship is essential for the recruitment and retention of underserved and underrepresented identities in STEM at all levels (undergrads, grads, postdocs, staff, and faculty). Recently, I spoke with almost all faculty who are taking on new graduate students about what mentorship means to them and what we should be doing as a department to facilitate more of it. Everyone I spoke to values mentorship, but many of us are struggling to figure out how to find resources to do it well. I plan to continue these one-on-one conversations in the coming weeks. One interesting idea that came out of this dialogue so far is that informal mentorship already occurs in EAS between all career stages comprising our department (e.g., from undergrads mentoring freshmen to emeritus faculty mentoring senior faculty and everything in between).

AGU Bridge Program. Matt and I are planning to re-submit a proposal to the AGU Bridge Program (along with, I am sure, almost every other science department in the country). To be as competitive as possible, we welcome any ideas you may have about how to frame our graduate program and our commitments.

Action & Accountability. While we are still in the preliminary phase of collecting information, listening, and identifying relevant resources, we must pivot within the next few months to start codifying our goals and commitments into a more formal plan of action. I do not have a strong opinion about what this plan of action should be; it could be part of our strategic plan or it could be something else entirely. It will, of course, require faculty consensus and it should reflect the attitudes and beliefs of our EAS community. However, given the many different perspectives comprising our department—as well as the myriad efforts already underway—it is important that our plan of action be inclusive.

Listening. Although I have listed it last here, my primary goal for the next few months is to just listen to what others have to say about DEIAR. This, I admit, can be challenging for me because, as an instructor, I am a professional "speaker." So, as with everything else, I welcome any feedback you can provide on how to be a better listener—especially in the era of Zoom!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Toby R. Ault', written in black ink.

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