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Increasing institutional inclusivity through productive community dialogs

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As relatively older, international PhD student, the process of moving to a new institution in a new country presented me with challenges I have not faced before and motivated me to explore the issue of diversity in academia and beyond. In the summer of 2016, as a third year PhD student, I gathered a small group of women at Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory to discuss actions to increase inclusivity within our department. A few months later we had our first Gender and Diversity Coffee hour. We met monthly, initially with no agenda, to talk about things that bothered us and to explore what could be done both in the short and long-term. What started as a small grass-roots initiative, evolved into a widely attended monthly meeting, where we covered many subjects (some “tabooed”) including family and academia, harassment, impostor syndrome, academia stress culture, mental health stigma, long distance relationships, minorities being penalized for promoting women and minorities issues, non-binary identities and more. Over time a core group formed around these issues, consisting of both higher and lower ranks at Lamont. Some conversations were very hard: the lesson that different people experience reality in different ways is not an easy one. Nevertheless, these meetings provided space for people to express their feelings and frustrations, while also listening, building understanding, and developing actionable solutions. Varied feedback has shown that people have come out of the meetings feeling empowered to make their work environment healthier and more inclusive. In what has since become an inseparable part of the institutional routine, and which is now left to run by other talented hands, I believe this group contributed significantly to cultural changes at Lamont. In this presentation, I will share my personal experience of establishing the group and coordinating the meetings. I will also explore how dialog within the meetings, projected out to the whole community and beyond; promoting a better work environment, especially for students and junior staff at Lamont.