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CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the *Career and Academic Research Center Podcast*. I am your host, Chris Davis, associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here, at Harvard Extension School. And today, it is my great pleasure to be speaking to Dr. Mona Sue Weissmark.

Dr. Weissmark is an instructor at Harvard Extension School. And today, we're going to be talking about a couple of things, one of which is the Faculty Aide program. So the Faculty Aide program has been around since 2001. It is an honors level research opportunity for eligible undergraduate and graduate degree students here, at Harvard Extension School, to do paid research work for instructors teaching at Extension School or around the university.

And Dr. Weissmark-- I was looking today to refresh my memory. She has used 14 Faculty Aide appointments over the last several years. And she has had eight unique Faculty Aide students. So she is one of, I'm happy to say, the champions of this program. She has used it in aiding to compile research for a book that is going to be published shortly called *The Science of Diversity*, published by Oxford University Press.

So I just wanted to have a brief conversation with Dr. Weissmark about her thoughts about the Faculty Aide program, how she has used it, how she's benefited from it, and also to talk a little bit about the research that she has been doing over the last several years and which is resulting in this forthcoming book. Dr. Weissmark, thank you so much for joining me today.

MONA WEISSMARK: Thank you very much for inviting me, Chris. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm very grateful to the program. So it gives me enormous pleasure to talk about it. It's truly an excellent program that has helped me a great deal.

As you mentioned, I've had several Faculty Aide students working on the project. And they've been indispensable. It's really facilitated me completing the textbook *The Science of Diversity*. And it's just a great program, both for students and for faculty.

And yesterday, actually, I was meeting with the team, the students who were working with me. I never actually asked them what they thought about the program. So it was interesting to hear their perspective. But let me talk a little bit about it from my perspective, and then I'll share.

What's been so useful to me is, first of all, we work in an interesting way. The students, I

usually have two or three at the same time. So we work as a team often. And we also work online on Zoom. So it's not only that they are getting an individual research experience, they're also getting an experience working as a team.

And they've said-- and I think it reflects what they're hoping they're going to carry out as a skill when they're working in other places, this ability to work as a research team. And that's been really important. So we do things as a team like brainstorming, figuring out who's going to do what. And it's actually extremely exciting.

Sometimes I don't have this-- we don't have the specific task in mind. But we actually create as we're talking. So for example, if we're working on a PowerPoint slide for one of the chapters, we may do that together. And it actually is a creative process.

And then the student that tends to be good and do visual will do the visual. The student who likes to do more of the online research will do that. And so it organically develops.

So I think it really helps me. It helped me finish the textbook. The other really good benefit for me is, since *The Science of Diversity* is a college textbook-- although we hope the general public will be interested in it, too-- it's good to have students working on it, because I have their perspective.

And I'll often find myself saying, well, what do you think of this? Is this boring? Is this intriguing? So getting that feedback as you're working on it, it's fantastic.

CHRIS DAVIS: One thing I wanted to ask you as well-- so as I mentioned earlier, several of the students that you have worked with, both currently and the past, have worked as faculty aides for you for more than one semester. In working with them several times, has that helps to build a relationship? Has that made it easier to do some of the work in the brainstorming and the creative ideas sharing that you were talking about?

MONA WEISSMARK: That's a great question. Chris, I actually didn't think about that until you just asked it. But definitely. I think the continuity is very important.

I've had a few students who are, like, just one semester. And I find the students who've stayed on, I think they've grown a lot in the project. They're able to contribute more, because they're much more familiar with it. And also, at this point now, we really have a team that we know each other well. So we're much more productive.

And then there's the human aspects when you're doing research and working as a team-- building trust with each other, getting along with each other, feeling we're all contributing fairly in terms of amount of time. And that takes time, as any team, to develop. So it saves time, too, in the sense that now we're a team. Now we know we can do things quickly. And I think we communicate well with each other.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mhm. Now correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that the students that you've worked with, some of them have been students that you have had in former classes. And some of them are folks who have applied to your Faculty Aide listings. Is that correct?

MONA WEISSMARK: Excellent question again, Chris. Yes. At first I thought I'd rather only have students who were students in my class, because then they're familiar with what I'm doing. But both are true.

Actually, it's interesting. Definitely the students who've been-- I mean, the assistants I've had who've been students have been great. Those who haven't taken my class, interestingly, they really were very good, too, even though they weren't familiar with the work.

Because I would have them read a chapter of the book, let's say, just as an example, and maybe they were doing the references or so forth. But because they did not know the material at all, they might ask questions, where students who are familiar with the work might not have. So in short, I actually think both are excellent for different reasons.

Initially, when I started getting my first, I guess, the first year that I had a Faculty Aide student, I did not have online meetings as a team. I think I had two, and we worked individually. And then I would meet with each one separately. But as the students who've taken my class also applied, I started the team.

And the answer is they do both. At this very minute, they are doing some individual things. And then we come on, and then we just check what's been done individually. But at other times, we actually create and brainstorm.

And when I asked, as I mentioned when we started this, I was asking the students, what do you think about the program? All of them said to me yesterday that they really liked the brainstorming. They really liked the teamwork. And that just, again, developed by itself there.

And I'm very glad that they feel comfortable enough to contribute, to say that's not a good idea. Let's do this. I've encouraged that. For example, we did one PowerPoint. And I sent a

slide. And they were like, no, this is awful. [LAUGHS]

CHRIS DAVIS: It sounds like, in essence, a research partnership. Or you bounce ideas off of them, and they also contribute work. But there's a sense of people are able to give input and say this is something that I think wouldn't work so well. And it sounds like there's a real give and take dynamic to your work with the students.

MONA WEISSMARK: Yeah. I've been teaching a long time and doing research a long time. And learning is much more fun, exciting, when it's not just entering information into somebody's head, so to speak, where there really is an interaction. And I think what I love about research and teaching is that I'm learning all the time.

I think that's part of the process. That's what science is. The name of the book is *The Science of Diversity*. And I think science, as a worldview, means that you're always open to being wrong and thinking hypothetically, to being disproved. You're not really attached. So that's something I try to practice, not only teach.

And the research is very much like that. I may be thinking this is a great idea for the book. And they're saying, I don't think so. And likewise, I may have come up with some data that showed that what we were thinking about, this is completely incorrect. And that's great.

So I really emphasize-- that's what makes-- you ask about the course that I teach. People often assume, when you say the word diversity, that you have some agenda. But there's always some assumption that there's a belief attached.

And the whole of course, the Psychology of Diversity and the textbook, really takes the point of view of not having any agenda. I do not promote an agenda, neither a liberal one nor a conservative one. Science, at its ideal self, is exactly that. Science means you're discovering. There's no agenda. You're not set to prove something. You're set to learn something.

And so that's what the book and the course is all about. And interestingly, the students that I have, just like the course I teach, we are a diverse team, both in ethnicity, in gender preferences. So what we're working on is not disconnected to ourselves, so to speak. It relates to us.

We are a really diverse team. And that's really excellent in terms of bringing different views to the book, to our team, and so forth. So I guess what I'm saying is the course, the book, the

team are all integrated in the sense of they have a common theme.

CHRIS DAVIS: So yeah, I would love to talk a little bit more about the book. As you had mentioned earlier, I think it is due for publication very shortly, it sounds like. It's coming from Oxford University Press.

So I read it described as, it uses a multidisciplinary approach to excavate the theories, principles, and paradigms that illuminate our understanding of the issues surrounding human diversity, social equality. Is that a good top line overview of the book's content?

MONA WEISSMARK: Yeah. You know, it's interesting, because my editor at Oxford liked that description. I always think it's a mouthful. But she has convinced me it isn't. I like to put things simply, and that doesn't seem as simple.

The book is about the biological underpinnings based on all the research of how we develop our identities. So it looks at diversity, first of all, developmentally. How do we literally, in the womb, before the womb, develop an identity from the data that we know about? I won't get into the details.

And then it moves from that, from the developmental process biologically and also interpersonally of how we come out being who we are. What does that mean in terms of our interactions with other people? So I look a lot at that, interpersonal relationships, and then literally at the societal level, political level, international level.

The research shows that programs aimed at outlawing bias and prejudice are not going to work. Generally, most of the programs that are used so-call encourage people to value and appreciate diversity. Most diversity programs have some agenda to promote.

They have the answer. They begin with the assumption that there is a solution, like we need to reduce bias. Take it away. Or we need to get rid of prejudice or whatever. So they begin with an agenda.

And the studies-- and yes, it is based on research. And studies suggest that trying to command people to adopt some kind of belief or behavior usually trigger oppositional behavior. People don't like being told what to think and how to behave.

There are the academicians and researchers who study bias and prejudice, or maybe they develop scales for measuring it. They're not practitioners in the sense that they don't really

use these. They haven't used these measures and interventions. They're not out there in the field. And so people hired to do these things come not from an academic program.

That's not to say one or the other is necessarily better. But the field, you have the scholarly field doing the studies, maybe trying to, as I said, devise measurements. And then you have the practitioners.

It's very similar in clinical psychology. Often in clinical psychology, you have clinicians out there doing the psychotherapy. And then you have an other group of people doing the research, so this split between practice and theory.

And that's what we have in most of these diversity training programs and intervention programs. They're practitioners who may never have done any research. And again, the researchers may never have done anything in practice.

Looking carefully at the research and the findings, it's not just my opinion, what's being done-- again, trying to go in there and say you've got to remove your biases or whatever. We think, in fact, we know that sometimes not only do people's resent it, it actually makes it worse.

And so the book talks about that. And that's what I do in the class, the Psychology of Diversity. It's a process. And that's the other really important thing, I think. It's great. We live in a society where in a half a second we want the solution. And here it is. Take this 10-minute thing.

Or for example, we know that Starbucks, when they did their anti-bias training. Like, OK, we have a 10-minute-- we have a be biased thing. We're done.

CHRIS DAVIS: Now that was held in one day, right?

MONA WEISSMARK: In one day, I think. Right. Exactly. And I think it would be great if we could do that that. But removing biases is not a surgical procedure.

And that's what the book shows. It's not a surgical procedure, because very often, biologically, it's tied into our very identity. So often you're asking people to become someone they're not. And that is biologically not possible. It's the constraints we have. And so the book describes that whole process in detail.

There has to be some training, because this is such an emotional-- and I don't say that as a negative thing. There are people who think that we all need to aspire to be rational. There's

research to show that you really cannot divide our rational selves from our emotional selves. And the emotional is not something bad we need to get rid of.

So talking about our identities, who we are, our beliefs, those are very emotional subjects. And so therefore, belongingness, inclusion, these are so tied to us as human beings. You need people who are trained to facilitate this process. Otherwise, it could actually make it worse.

It's as if you went-- you had marital therapy. It's an analogy I often use in class-- or couples therapy or what have you. And you go to the therapist. And you both want to present a point of view. And the therapist says, you, sir, or you, this is wrong, what you're thinking.

I mean, you need a therapist who has some training to help you guide this process, who is able to step back and take what we call in clinical psychology a neutral position. And that takes training. And so if we want to facilitate dialogues, conversations on campus, there has to be people who are trained to do that.

CHRIS DAVIS: I'm so thankful that you came to talk about this with me, Dr. Weissmark. Not only do I find it so valuable to hear from the faculty side of the Faculty Aide program how the program can benefit both students and also instructors and faculty who are doing research outside of the classroom, but I can't imagine a more timely subject that you've been researching. So I'm really grateful for your time and your thoughtful remarks.

MONA WEISSMARK: Thank you so much, Chris, for inviting me. And again, I'm grateful to the program. It's helped enormously. So thank you.

CHRIS DAVIS: I'm very, very glad to hear that.

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You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. Now, this is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here, at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.