Name Key:
Ki: Kiloni Quiles-Franco
Kh: Khadija El-Karfi
M: Monica Wang
L: Luis Ramirez

[intro plays]

[0:35] Kh: Today my co-host Kiloni and I investigate what allyship looks like for the BIPOC community at BU. We are joined by Dr. Monica Wang, the associate professor of narrative at the BU Center for Anti-Racist Research, and we're also joined by Luis Ramirez, a first-generation Afro-Latino PhD student in the grad program for neuroscience and the president for the Underrepresented Graduate Students Organization, also known as UGSO.

[1:01] Ki: Welcome Dr. Wang. Welcome Luis.

M: Thank you for having me.

L: Pleasure to be here.

[1:08] Ki: So tell us a little bit about your organization, what you do and how you're associated with the social justice movement.

[1:14] L: So UGSO, which stands for underrepresented graduate student organization, you know our core mission or a large part of our mission is to, you know, actively build a community across BU for underrepresented graduate students. Um, and a lot of that is, you know, making sure we build safe spaces where students can speak freely and honestly, you know about their experiences. And beyond that, you know, just see other people that look like them and identities overlap, you know, at the very least. Um, and we've done a lot of that, mostly through organizing socials and study sessions and workshops throughout the year. Sometimes we'll celebrate holidays if we can, um, Halloween, and another large part of our mission is we also want to recognize and celebrate the work of underrepresented graduate students, um, across BU ,right? Across disciplines, um, which is why we put a lot of effort into organizing our academic research symposium. We did our first one last year. Um, we're planning the next one, which will happen in, uh, April 20th and 21st, I think. We're putting a lot of effort in making sure the- the process of planning for that, you know, ensuring that that symposium happens every year. So building a strong foundation for future iterations of that, you know, so beyond when I'm, when I'm done with BU as a PhD student, making sure wherever I pass down the mantle to.

[3:00] M: I am first and foremost, a public health researcher and academic, and I'm in the department of community health sciences. So my work really focuses on health equity, and how do we do that through community-engaged and cross-sector partnerships? And I have a particular focus on racial health equity and building interventions and conducting research that advances health equity because of, uh, problems and ongoing issues such as systemic racism. So a lot of my work focuses on racial, ethnic minority populations and communities of color as well as low socioeconomic status populations. And one of my ongoing projects is with boys and girls clubs on targeting childhood obesity through youth narratives. Uh, so the other types of work that I do are really around research translation. So academics are experts in their field and produce a plethora of research, but oftentimes it stays within academia.

[4:01] And, you know, it takes a long time to publish peer reviewed manuscripts. They are often read by other academics, but what can we do as academics to really build partnerships with other key decision makers and stakeholders like policy makers, like the public, uh, like philanthropy or industry who can also move the needle on many of these issues. And, um, that's what drew me to science communication. So at the national level, I served on the Civic and Public Engagement Committee of the Society of Behavioral Medicine as their chair. And that was really around how do we take the research that we produce and amplify it so that we disseminate it and we accelerate the impact so that the people who make decisions and who need to make decisions based on data, how can we get our research to them more effectively and efficiently? And sometimes that means not simply stopping at publishing manuscripts, but also producing op-eds that explain our research in lay terms.

[4:59] It means creating position statements. It means partnering with people who have the skill-sets to write policy briefs and recommendations. So that love of translation is what led me to the BU Center for Anti-Racist Research with Dr. Ibram X Kendi as its founding director. So earlier in the summer, they put out a call for applications, for associate directors of policy and narratives. And I applied for the position exactly because it was intended to do what I had already been doing, which is our research. And for this particular research center, it's around advancing racial equity and not just within health, but in a whole host of outcomes, ranging from education to housing, to the environment, to wealth. And because of my work in public health and social determinants, uh, there's so much that expands beyond the health realm. So I don't want health to be the only goal of the work that I do. And so there was an opportunity to scale up what I had already been doing.

[6:03] Ki: That's amazing. So, I mean, I got to ask how, what type of advice would you give to someone who is trying to translate, uh, health or clinical information, or even just public knowledge, uh, to a lay person or someone who's not really that interested because I think that's one of the biggest obstacles we're having is trying to translate a message that doesn't necessarily apply to the person that we're trying to relay it to. So what advice would you have for us?

[6:30] M: Uh, I can point you to a resource that is hot off the press. I was senior author on an article called 'Science Communication in an Age of Misinformation', and it just came out, uh, earlier last week, it's published in The Annals of Behavioral Medicine. There we have very specific tips and techniques for researchers and scientists to communicate [to] their public. And a couple of them are first, tailor your message. You can't use the same blanket message to different audiences because different values, different belief systems, different motivations, resonate with different audiences. And another tip is really, um, use stories to build connection[s]. And I think as academics and as researchers, we tend to focus on graphs and the data. But when we are communicating in an information saturated environment, it's easy to not see people in the numbers that are in the table.

[7:24] It's easy to say, well, that statistic doesn't apply to me, or I don't see how that's relevant to me. And ultimately we're all human beings. And what really resonates with us is our human connection with one another. And that comes from emotion and the way that we can really make that bridge and that connection is to really give the data, a story and a voice and a soul, and that what's happening to people, what's happening to their livelihoods, their lives, there's a face to that. There's a story to that. And almost pretty much everyone has been touched in some way-way by the COVID 19 pandemic. And so how do we, you know, go beyond the data and really connect with people and help them understand that this is, this is the stories that unfold behind the data. Uh, so those are some tools and tips and techniques.

[8:18] We have a lot more that are evidence-based strategies for connecting with audiences. But I think the big takeaway is that we have to get outside the circle of academia and we have to start engaging with the public and engaging with policy makers and engaging with media because, um, while they might have access to the data, they don't necessarily have the expertise or the context of how to know how to interpret the data accurately. So an example of this is, uh, everybody or many people have access to the data on racial inequities and COVID-19 whether it's incidence rates or hospitalizations or death rates. What people don't necessarily have or on the same page on is why those inequities exist and how they came about. And that can vary widely depending on what your assumptions are. Um, so some people's assumptions are, is because there's something inherently wrong with Black and Brown people, or it it's because of education or is because, um, you know, these are people coming from low income communities, but then if you have the expertise and you have the context to really start to unpack, well, why is that?

[9:30] And is it really something about the Black and Brown communities, or is it the environments in which they were placed in, is that the systems that were set up that perpetuated inequities in this way? And not everybody has training in the historical context of systemic racism. Not everybody knows what systemic racism is or why it exists and how it operates today. And so the, um, the ability of academics to step in and help interpret that data is really critical so that people know now that we have these racial inequities, let's understand what's driving them and that can facilitate the discussion for innovative solutions to address them.

[10:12] Ki: Would you consider UGSO an ally for students of color or marginalized folks?

[10:18] L: Definitely. Yeah. Building, building a sense of community is, is something that's- you do every day. It's like an active thing. And what that looks like from day to day varies.

[10:30] Ki: So let me ask you a question, um, UGSO, so I'm familiar with some of your events. I think we collaborated on at least one or two, um, in terms of being there for the student population that you represent, what are some ways in which you feel like UGSO is stepping up or filling a gap that doesn't already exist? Like, are there other organizations doing what you do, if not, uh, what, what can we do to be there and be a better ally as BU students and as a BU community, uh, for the marginalized folks on the medical campus?

[11:09] L: Yeah, we think about this question all the time. Um, and it's, that question has been- this kind of spotlight on that question right now, too. Um, in terms of thinking about what can we do within academia? You know, what's already being done. How do we kind of work towards this thing? Or how do we work within DEI without being, um, for lack of a better word redundant, right? Because a lot of this work isn't new, people have been advocating for what to do. People have been suggesting what to do for decades. So in a lot of these meetings, you hear about a concern about reinventing the wheel, right? So I think one of the, one of the most important things we can do right now is basically uplift and support organizers in DEI. Um, but when it comes to UGSO, so we, you know, we're having these conversations right now about who do we want to create these spaces for, right? 'Cause "underrepresented" is so broad, right? That's, you know, depending on the certain conditions, you know, wh- white woman might be underrepresented in STEM, right? The answer is complex, but I think at the end of the day, we want to keep, you know, uplifting other organizations, wherever there's overlap. You know, we kind of tap into that overlap and work together. This way, I think we build a better understanding of what other organizations are doing, you know, helping each other. Because a lot of this work is taxing, takes away from our studies, right? And we don't get compensated for this work. It's pretty much a sacrifice for making, um, I mean, I love doing it. Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining, but that's still the reality, right? We are going out of our way to do this. Um, and sometimes it feels like things that should already be in place. It feels like in many cases where let's say administration could be the catalyst for these things, we're doing that.

[13:11] Kh: Can you talk to us a little bit about your experience managing both? What was the most challenging part?

[13:18] L: The most challenging part, beyond, you know, the obvious one was just time management. Sometimes you, the, sometimes my priorities shift, or sometimes I feel like the

work I do through UGSO feels more important than the work I do in the lab. And sometimes that creates, you know, conflict and like- it, it takes away from my progress in my research, for example. Um, so that can be challenging. Another challenging part is you, there's, I dunno, there's something about advocating for yourself and people that like you, that it feels a little, I don't want to say degrading. It feels almost like in one sense, it's, it's motivating and it's inspiring, but in another sense, it, it kind of makes you feel even more like an other, it's like, I'm going out of my way to say, "Hey, like I want to make these spaces. Why don't they already exist?" Then, in another sense, in doing tha, um, and I guess this is also a challenge. It's challenging to kind of look for other people that look like you within a community that doesn't have that many already. And you're kind of like, okay, so who else is also working on this? You know, there's already barriers on the way that institutions are organized and kind of like departments and programs and campuses are kind of siloed. So it's kind of hard to build bridges of communication to make this process even easier. So you don't feel alone, um, in this work.

[14:59] Ki: As of late, I would say it's becoming a little bit more incendiary to call people out in this day and age on the spot, because now you can have the, "Oh, you're a snowflake" and things go back and forth. Somehow just common decency got wrapped up in politics and sent us a package and we don't want it. So how would you suggest that individuals handle difficult situations? Where, if they would like to discuss something with a person, maybe not on the spot, but maybe to the side or afterwards, but they're afraid of how the person is going to react or respond to them, what are some avenues that they have, should they bring another person? What would you suggest?

[15:42] M: So there's a lot of, there's a lot of different options that one could consider, and it depends on the relationship and, and a number of other factors, but one option is, and it could be, you know, better than in the moment is to have an offline conversation. So it kind of takes the pressure off of having it be kind of a public forum. Uh, it can also be that you bring another person to that conversation that you feel comfortable, uh, having present there, if you need help facilitating that conversation. I think both of those are, are good options. And again, it depends on your relationship with that person. It depends on, uh, you know, different kinds of dynamics. So I would say, um, another option would be if you have a good mentor or someone that you can trust to ask them for their feedback or their insights. And sometimes it's not always the leader of the group. Sometimes it could be somebody external, um, and or it could be, you know, somebody who's perhaps not within your department, but a different department or somebody who's at a different institution who doesn't necessarily, or isn't necessarily wrapped up in the same sort of politics and asked for their feedback and insights on, you know, what your potential options are.

[16:58] Ki: What sort of support, either emotional, financial, training wise, how can administration and the places that we work and go to school, be there for us?

[17:12] L: I think at a fundamental level you know, there's, there's a statistics and demographics component to this, or it's like, does the room look like as it should? That's the obvious answer, ensuring the room is at least representative of the population. Seeing yourself all around you, that kind of mitigates those worries a little bit. And then I think the next step would be to have a strong system in place that measures kind of the climate in the room. Once people are here, what are you doing to make the spaces, you know, feel like "I belong here" or feel like "I deserve to be here"? What that looks like? It's probably different from department to department or campus to campus. Um, but I think at the very least, you know, there's probably, you know, anti-racism training in there somewhere. So then it starts getting into what is effective training. That's, that's a complicated answer, but I think that's definitely a component, and also kind of like zero tolerance policies within these spaces. Um, and also, you know, mechanisms that acknowledge the struggles we go through, you know, it's something akin to not necessarily like reparations, but you know, something along those lines. For example, you know, moving, like moving to Boston is pretty expensive, right? So already that's, you know, kind of a gate for a lot of people. So maybe if, you know, a program or department goes out of their way to say, "okay, we acknowledge that, you know, here are funds to help you transition," I think that's, that's something. Um, another part to that I think would probably be, maybe a little more monumental would, you know, putting underrepresented folks in positions where they're not just consultants, but actually doing the decision-making. If I'm as a student, if I saw more like looking up and like seeing more people I can look up to or look up to as a mentor for advice, I think that would definitely help me feel like "I have more value being here because I'm actually wanted, I'm not just a statistic", so to speak.

[19:51] Ki: Well, that would give you ownership over your experience here, right? It wouldn't just be a place where you go to school, it would be like, it would be your BU, like you would be invested in the experience that you have here.

[20:03] L: Ah yeah. Right, right. I feel like it's sometimes representation, like what, how that affects someone. It's hard to put into words, but you can't just say, you know, we care about diversity, equity and inclusion when, you know, the people that basically are the catalyst for change and make all the decisions at an administration level aren't representative, right?

[20:33] Kh: So our next big question for you Luis, from all the experience that you've had, um, with UGSO and also being at BU, um, where did you see the possibility for, you know, cultural

change in academia in general and maybe also at BU? Yeah, where can it happen? Has it been happening?

[20:56] L: It makes me think about, it kind of taps into this question about like who- who was responsible for the change or like who's accountable and the obvious answer's everyone? To some degree though. Right now it almost feels like this it's leaning more towards the students are the ones advocating for the change and like providing the suggestions and you know, what to do. I mean, that might be, um, you know, my answer- that might be biased because I am a student, so I'm living through that. Um, but I feel like looking up, it does kind of feel like the people in more administrative roles are the ones that have more of a catalyst, can serve as the catalyst for some of the bigger changes to change, um, the culture view and who represents BU. Like I said, at least in my little bubble of BU there's an understanding that, you know, a lot of work needs to be done and people are, you know, they'll, they'll, they'll go out of their way to come together and do that work. Um, and there's, there's been a lot of empathy this year. I feel between students and also between students and faculty. Um, so it's been nice to see.

[22:25] Ki: I just want to, like, answer that question myself a little bit too, because I feel so strongly about needing change in the pedagogy of classes in higher education. The structure of the curriculum is not geared towards people who have different, uh, levels of expertise with the English language sometimes, or, you know, the language in which they are taking your courses. I feel like there's a very real expectation that everyone needs to perform- that everyone is taught how to take certain exams and answer certain questions in the same way. And so the only variable is your preparedness to take said exam or answer said questions. I don't feel like there's much understanding at least in the departments that I've been privy to that even something as simple as a multiple choice exam is incredibly difficult for some people who maybe did their learning in another country and may not have taken a multiple choice exam and is used to seeing almost identical questions back to back. And I'd love to say that GPA doesn't matter once you're in graduate school, but personally, I still have to put my GPA down when I apply for grants. That's going to continue until I get my PhD. So to say that, "Oh, well, as long as you pass, that's really all that matters." Well, no, I'd like the same fighting chance of having a decent GPA as the person next to me. But I'd also like to be able to understand the questions I'm being asked. So for me, I think a cultural change in academia could start with the way the curriculum is formatted to make sure that the questions are clearly understandable. And if they are not, that there is a means of alternative test taking for students who struggle with understanding the way that the pedagogy is set up as it stands today.

[24:29] L: Yeah. I love that answer. Yeah, there's a whole other level to the way we kind of disseminate and teach information and pass down knowledge and also how do we test for that knowledge given that this is basically like an international, um, institution, like you have people

coming in from all over the place, you know, how do you create a system that, you know, is, is fair? I guess if I were to distill it, um, and sometimes I wonder, like, maybe that's just not possible. You, you know, creating like a "one size fits all" right, That's, that's what I mean. Um, I, I definitely believe it's possible to be considerate of where someone comes from and adjusting things to account for that. Like, I, I think that's definitely possible, but this idea of like, uh, I don't know, education to me is not, or should not be like a "one size fits all," same meal sort of experience.

[25:45] Kh: Yeah. And as we were talking about international students, being an international student myself, I would say one of my suggestions is to have more staff members and more resources for international students to succeed in their studies and just feel like their needs are being met. So definitely investing more in, you know, having more staff members and more resources available for those students.

[26:07] L: This, this convers- this last topic, think about how do you go about transforming the system that is very, you know, exclusionary and it's trying to, like. fit every student into a mold, you know, the answers to that are, they're, I don't know. They're, they're, they're kind of hard to find one answer to it, but that makes sense, right, 'cause we're dealing with something so complex. Um, so I guess I want to say that for anyone listening, like don't let the complexity of the issue kind of dissuade you, um, right? Because this, a lot of the problems we're dealing with are- they span centuries. So the idea that we're going to find a solution that will resolve things in a year is not going to happen. Right? This deserves the level of commitment that'll span, you know, decades.

[27:11] Ki: So on the topic of cultural change in academia, um, you and I have both sat on a number of panels, right? Only one together, but I think between us- dozens, if I'm not mistaken. One of our guests brought up a really interesting point that I have not been able to let go. And that's the idea of trauma porn or grief porn within, uh, students of color or marginalized persons being asked to share often negative, sometimes traumatic, almost always personal stories. Um, as a way of, you know, kind of telling people what it's like to be in, in, in their shoes and something that really stuck out to me is the idea that I don't hate being a woman of color. I don't hate being a Latino woman. My struggles are one thing, but I'm beyond that. I love being who I am. Why can't we talk about all the positives of being who we are? So I feel like there might be room for a cultural change in academia in terms of having us share what we think our strengths about who we are, having us share how these strengths translate to our fields, maybe how it provides us a new, insightful way of looking at our work. Um, what do you think about this Luis, could you see some room for cultural change in that field?

[28:41] L: Yeah, for sure. I think that's one of the, you know, and I, in the early stages in planning for the symposium,, that's one of the core goals, creating the space where we're uplifting each other and celebrating our strengths. Right. And putting people in a room that typically don't have a lot of opportunities to look at themselves in a positive light. Right? Because when we come together, it's like, you know ,damn, just speak about, like, you're saying our traumas and to basically list, "Oh, this, this happened to me in my department the other week", or, you know, "my supervisor said this and that." Right. So I agree a hundred percent like in terms of the balance between creating these spaces and what happens within those spaces, like they should lean more towards positive and celebration rather than reiterating what we already know.

[29:44] Ki: I think that, um, one of the biggest issues with trying to implement a culture change in academic settings is that sometimes individuals don't know how to express the exact actionable goals, the exact, tangible steps that need to be taken to make that culture change. How do you see the departments at BU creating a culture change in academia that's better suited for this multitude of pandemics, but most importantly, this, this racial pandemic that we're dealing with?

[30:15] M: So I can think of a couple of examples, both internal to BU, and also external. Uh, so internal within BU, we at the School of Public Health, we have Racial Justice Talking Circles that were in existence prior to 2019. And, um, you know, as the pandemic unfolded and as the social unrest unfolded over the summer, um, more attention and more demand was called for, um, a more systemic effort. So we have a, a committee of faculty that are specifically dedicated to, you know, health equity and racial justice and social justice related issues. And they get together and they invite feedback for ways in which we can work together to address this. The other ways that healthcare systems have done this is that they've invited, uh, experts and educators, including myself to come host, um, virtual town halls. And they range from topics to, you know, racism and healthcare to, um, you know, moving the needle on health inequities to social determinants.

[31:22] nd I think the first step for leaders is to recognize that you don't know everything that there is to know, and that, um, you may need some outside help to help navigate these conversations. And so what's happened in those conversations is, uh, I typically provide a foundation and, uh, you know, the basics of anti-racism training or social justice or racial health inequities training, whatever the specific topic is, and then open it up for discussion from there, because as you said, each organization is different and it's really up to them, kind of the, the work that they want to do moving forward. And for some of them it's around, we haven't dedicated time and space to this at all, but we'd like to, and so where do we start? And so some of it is, you know, have we collected data on inequities among our patients?

[32:13] Have we done that? And if not, that's an opportunity to kind of think through "Well we have that data let's go back and the electronic medical health records and go forward". Another opportunity is, um, pretty much every single conversation. There has been at least one example of someone experiencing some form of discrimination, whether that's, uh, you know, a patient, you know, uh, behaving in a way towards a provider, a calling to a colleague, uh, you know, a mentor or superior to their trainee. Um, and people don't know how to navigate those conversations. And so some of, some of what I helped direct them is do you have protocols in place? Um, do you actually have a, a set of criteria for determining, you know, how do I know when to escalate this? And to what extent, um, is this something that I can address on my own, to what extent that other people can address it, either in the form of an ally, or if they're in a leadership position and what are the reporting policies in place?

[33:20] And so, uh, it's having conversations about that. And some institutions have- have protocols in place. Others have not, and it's more of an ad hoc process, but it opens the door for, you know, if we are really to create a more inclusive environment, that's supportive of, um, you know, diverse populations of diverse trainees, you know, this is what we really have to do. And in those conversations, I really call on the leaders. You know, um, everyone can participate in contributing to the culture of a community or workplace, [but] leaders have the most responsibility. And the culture of an organization is set by the worst behavior a leader will tolerate. And so if there isn't any accountability on that lens, if people aren't willing to step forward, then that makes it difficult. I've been, um, you know, glad that, you know, when people invite me to these conversations, it's because they're looking to change and they're looking to do better. So that already opens the door. Um, so most of the time people are very open to different ideas, to different suggestions.

[34:25] L: I think part of the answer lies in while we're doing this work, also putting a lot of effort into making sure there is a system, a support system in the future that, um, you know, gets out those problems. Like, you know, so let's take the, uh, department, for example. Does that department, are departments right now making an effort to put a system in place where let's say you have, you know, you have an effective zero tolerance policy for racism, right? And also if you do have that policy and you have some sort of committee kind of taking in concerns or comments, are there underrepresented people within that committee? Right? Like, that's kind of like, you know, initial steps we can take towards ensuring something like that. So the burden isn't so much on the students, um, to kind of formulate the concern or to raise their voice, right. Just knowing there's a system there in place I think might help a bit. Um, and having that level of support definitely will help. Um, but yeah, I think a lot of it will come down to actively making sure there are support systems that listen to students and not only listen, but you know, actively do something to make sure, you know, those students feel like they were listened to and something was done about what they said.

[36:07] Ki: We have three people here from three different departments, the ways that they handle situations like this, right, are non-contiguous. Not every department is the same. So some departments or schools within the BU family may be more "zero tolerance" than others. Um, or I guess the better way to put it is more departments might- some departments might be more tolerant of this sort of behavior than others. They might say such things as well, "Oh, they came from a different time" or, "Oh, but you know what they meant," right? And so I feel as though a standardized sensitivity training across the board for anyone involved in our education and experience at BU is not just helping us, uh, people who might be subject to that sort of behavior and then have to go about the emotional traumatic experience of reporting it.

[37:05] Regarding one of the things that you were saying earlier about how important it is to look around a room and see people represented. What advice would you give, uh, administration who is trying to be an ally and these stakeholders who are trying to be on the right side of history, who currently are working in departments or in divisions of the EU that are not diverse at all, and are trying to encourage diversity in their department. Because as it stands right now, I've been hearing a lot, or I've been, I've been talking to a lot of people who are trying to be, um, who are on the admissions committees of both faculty, students of different departments. And what's happening is they have a lot of individuals who are applying from diverse groups. They're inviting them in for interviews, but once they offer them the job or the position they're going elsewhere. So what advice would you give to people who are trying to be allies who are trying to diversify their departments, who haven't done it, and right now it's looking very homogeneous and they're trying to change it, but they're struggling.

[38:15] L: Again, I feel like that's one of those things that probably that the answer fluctuates a bit, you know, depending on, um, the depart- department or the program or the school. But I know, you know, some of the, some of the potential ways to get at that would be to do, like, cold hiring. It's not just that singular person. Cause I know sometimes in the thought process it's like "damn, you know, if I come here, I'll literally be the only black faculty or black student in the program." Um, already that's something to think about, right? But no, maybe there's something about, you know, recruiting in bulk that might make that transition easier. Um, it's one thing to think about. Within, like, the neuroscience community of BU we've been thinking about, or at least the students have been thinking about advocating for, and also, I wonder, you know, beyond just students, um, you know, recruiting students, I mean, you know, recruiting faculty or staff. Uh, a big part of this process, I think, is having the students be involved, uh, within that, you know, having whoever you want to join BU as a community, um, interact with the students, you know, what, what are the students feeling?

[39:40] Part of why I came to BU was seeing that, you know, how, you know, that sense of community at BU, at least within the neuroscience community. It felt like a really strong sense of community between the students and every year, it's kind of proven to me that, you know, I made the right choice in the sense that, um, at least with my own little bubble of friends and

colleagues, like we, we come together and if we want to say something, we'll say it, you know. We'll put our heads together, um, and write it out if we have to write and send it up and say, you know, this is what we're thinking. This is how we're feeling, here are possible solutions. Um, so if I were coming into BU and considering it, just knowing something like that, you know, there's a community of people like that, that work like that. Like that's something I would definitely appreciate.

[40:38] Ki: What would you say to those individuals who students need to be their allies, but don't currently have that in their mindset as like a priority, or maybe think that this topic has been talked about enough at this point. What sorts of things could a student say to these individuals - a Dean, a staff member - to get them to understand how important it is that they, that they be their ally.

[41:03] M: So first of all, um, I would say, you know, look for opportunities where that kind of feedback is already given space. And so at the School of Public Health, for example, uh, our, our Dean has monthly, um, chats for faculty- one for faculty, one for staff, and one for students. And that's where anybody from any one of those groups can bring up questions, concerns, insights, and have those discussions. Um, so I would say first look for the opportunities where, you know, your feedback would be, uh, is already solicited. Uh, other examples to other ways to do that are, you know, look for ways in which, um, there's a specific example that you can point to where things either went well or things didn't go well. And I think, um, this is true for anybody no matter where you are, but, uh, I always ask for feedback, you know, what went well, what didn't go well? I ask that of people I report to, I also asked that from my trainees and for my students. And I think that's a really great way for people to build progress and to kind of move forward. And the more specific you can get, the better it is to address the actual behavior. And so I would say one way to frame it would be, um, w- it really depends on the specific individual. So if it's that, um, I feel that the discussions to date have been surface level, or, uh, I see that we've had more ongoing discussions, I'd like to take it further because of XYZ. And, and give a rationale why, and give some examples of, of why, of suggestions that you think would be helpful and why you think it would be needed. I think the important thing to take away and what you could potentially communicate, um - and it doesn't have to be specific to your own institution or your own working group - it could be that you can point to other examples in other industries that "I've seen leadership at other companies, uh, make public statements, but it, in reality, it's only lip service and it's only in response and in reaction, and there's no follow through." And in reality, to actually move the needle and to generate impact really requires ongoing effort, uh, protected time and space to do the following. So I would say, be, be very, very specific about what your ask is. And it could be that, you know, you want to have an ongoing conversation or you want to, you know, connect with other individuals and create a working group where people can explore it, or it could be that, um, you know, I didn't necessarily agree with the way that a

specific scenario played out. Uh, I think we need to have, you know, more protocols in place. And the reason for doing that is because, um, for example, it could be related to retention. Um, people are not going to stay in environments if they're toxic. People are not going to stay in, um, you know, their job or a field if they don't feel supported or valued or invested in. Um, and so I think being- tying that to the why, and then being specific about your ask is a great way to kind of get started.

[44:26] Ki: So I'm wondering if this is yet another way that BU could be an ally to students, which is keeping in mind that we don't all have the same resources going in. How can they check that? How can they stay in check and make sure that they're doing well by us?

[44:42] L: Yeah. I think part of the answer is making sure that there are underrepresented individuals who have those lived experiences within the decision-making process. Right? Cause sometimes, you know, these decisions are sometimes baffling when you have emails being sent out from the university about, you know, "we're being cognizant of everything going around in terms of racial tension, you know, we, we sympathize and empathize with students," but then on the other hand, the decisions for, you know, that they did for the pandemic are just kind of completely counter to that. So it's like what, you know, it's one of those things where your actions do not match up with your words. Um, so you as a student or as a faculty or, you know, whatever your role is at BU, sometimes you as an underrepresented person, you begin to question, you know, are they really looking out for me if they're doing these things that are actually just counter to, to me and my community? It's confusing, right? Part of the answer is making sure there are people in the decision making process, um, that can speak to those experiences. And another thing too is, um, I guess, transparency, right? Like what, what goes on in that decision making process? You know, what was the thought process there? It'd be cool to get transparency.

[46:11] Kh: One thing that we hear a lot from students or from faculty and staff members is "I really do want to be an ally. I really do want to help. I really do care, but I also don't know where to start, or maybe I've, you know, tried to speak up, but then it didn't end up being, you know, a good conversation. It was stressful." So they just like, kind of like don't want to do anything anymore. So what would you say to those people and specifically when it comes to academia, when it comes to professors, to staff members, and just the BU community in general.

[46:41] M: First of all, it depends on, you know, what your position is. And I would say that the responsibility for, you know, a senior leadership person, uh, for example, a president or a chair or a Dean, um, that's much greater. And the power that they have to enact change is much greater than, for example, a student. So I first want to acknowledge that there is that kind of power

dynamic there, and that, uh, it wouldn't be feasible for me to ask the same thing of a Dean that it would be for me to ask the same thing of a student. What I can say is that, um, for everyone, no matter what your position, I think it's helpful to start with the question of, um, "what kind of culture would I like to build in the organization that I work in and the community that I belong to and how can I be a part of creating that culture?"

[47:37] And sometimes that can come from asking questions, uh, sometimes that can come from, uh, encouraging others to speak up. Sometimes that can come from being supportive of other people who tell their stories and, um, giving people space to share and being respectful. Um, in terms of being an ally, I think there are many ways that different people can do that. And I think it, again, varies depending on what your position is. If you're a mentor, there are a lot more things that you can do then if, for example, you're a trainee, but, um, one thing that everyone can do is first of all, name it. So whatever it is, if it's, if it's racism, if it's racist, if it's sexist, if it's any kind of xenophobia, the first thing to do is to, you know, start being more comfortable with using the word, to describe what actually, and accurately is happening.

[48:31] I think when we dance around the term - and sometimes people do that because it makes them uncomfortable - that doesn't give weight to what is actually happening. So the first thing to do is to really, you know, use the correct term to name it, uh, and acknowledge that it exists. Uh, another one is, uh, you know, learn about your own biases and everyone has them. And I think be, you know, be open to have challenging and difficult conversations. Um, and it's helpful to kind of check our own assumptions and understandings in the process. And sometimes that can happen, you know, routinely or, or naturally, for example, if, if a professor is talking about, um, this during a class discussion and invites others to participate, or, you know, the course's on, uh, racism or it's around, you know, health inequities, there's kind of a natural way for that to happen.

[49:28] Um, other ways for people to build that in is to have, you know, ongoing conversations during department meetings or working group meetings that allow people to actually reflect on what happened. Uh, I think especially over the last year, it's, it's really difficult to kind of go about life as normal because it's not, none of it is normal for many ways. And some of the best conversations I've had are when the first 10 minutes of a discussion just really allow people to reflect and to, um, if anybody wanted to share about anything related to the pandemic, to social justice issues, to political unrest, to allow people to share what their feelings are, what their questions are, because that opens up the other room for other people to also share. And it creates a safe space for people to continue to do that over time.

[50:23] One of the, uh, points that you brought up through email was that, you know, a lot, a lot of people say "I don't feel comfortable having these conversations, so I'd rather stay out of it", uh, or "I'm not sure that I can, you know, anything I can do will make much of a difference." And I would say the latter is exactly the kind of mentality that can, that can be a barrier to progress. You know, if, if everybody collectively thinks, I'm not sure that I can do anything to make a difference than that means collectively we've all made the choice to not speak up or to

not do anything or to essentially be okay with the status quo. And so if we're, if we're moving and we want to move towards making progress, then I think it's, it's shifting that mindset. That first of all, um, you actually never know what kind of impact you will have on somebody's life.

[51:15] Um, you actually won't know until you try. And sometimes it's as simple as opening up the door for other people to feel safe, to, um, make their voices heard. And so an example of this is, um, you know, after my conversations with different physicians, uh, I'm not talking about students, I'm not talking about trainees, I'm talking about, you know, executive level physicians or, um, people who are providers. Um, oftentimes that's when individual stories come out and have their own personal experiences, some of them excruciatingly painful. And you can tell that up until this point, they've never shared that story with anybody else. And, you know, that was the catalyst and the impetus for people saying, we need to change our hiring practices, or we really need to, you know, um, do some soul searching and really think through what kind of a culture we would want to build as a community moving forward.

[52:11] Um, other examples are, um, when sometimes people are unsure, you know, well, well, what would happen if, you know, why is it that people don't necessarily speak up and what would, you know, how bad could the retaliation be? And so the good thing about me as an external person is that I can step in and I can say at other institutions here is what happened. And so I don't have to make anybody feel uncomfortable with sharing things from a privacy standpoint. And, um, that opens up the other door for other people to say, that has actually been my experience, or, um, that is something that very close colleagues do go through. And after I had one particular town hall conversation, I think a couple of other people stepped forward and, and actually, um, you know, submitted reports of, of inappropriate behavior for specific individuals at their institution.

[53:11] And to me, um, I think the example of what happened was that I opened the door for people to feel that their experiences were valid, that it was a safe space and that they could move forward with that. So, um, I think my takeaway is, is that yes, it's uncomfortable, but when, if the alternative is to be comfortable with half-truths or, uh, ignoring the truths, then, um, that's a price that we pay. And the more, the more you go outside your comfort zone, the larger your comfort zones get, and the more adept we can become at navigating these kinds of conversations, and it's not going to be perfect or easy, uh, and we all will make mistakes, but that's okay. And at least we will have been true. So that's kind of my takeaway and, and don't discount, um, you know, speaking up or asking hard questions because, um, you know, you never know who you're going to open the door for today, and it could be, you know, a 10 year old student, it could be somebody in high school or somebody in college. Uh, it could be somebody who's very senior who never felt that it was an okay time to speak up until now. So don't discount your own ability to, um, change the narrative and to change the culture, because I think everyone has the potential to lead in different ways and in different spaces.

[54:43] Kh: So I know from personal experience in my department, um, when this, uh, last fall semester started, we had training about anti-racism and how to create an inclusive classroom. And so I guess my question is if departments ha- need help or need someone to kind of like guide- guide them through these conversations, can they reach out to your center? Is there a process for them?

[55:05] M: So we're in the process of building our center, which you can imagine is, is difficult in the middle of a pandemic in, uh, amidst everything going on. We're in the process of hiring staff to fulfill that need. So, um, hiring a training manager and also building out a faculty affiliates program and support system where we can, you know, help train people, um, to do exactly this skillset. So you can imagine that the demand is very, very high right now, both internally, as well as externally. So I will say that as we build and develop that infrastructure, we'll be able to point to specific individuals to help navigate that.

[55:44] Other thing that I wanted to mention, um, because people ask a lot about being an ally and I think the best way to do this is just, uh, give some best practices or examples of what doesn't work well. And so what doesn't work well is some, you know, for example, somebody makes, uh, an off-color remark or, you know, uh, a remark that's really racist or behaves in a way that's, you know, very discriminatory. Often what happens is that nobody says anything, you know, during that meeting, if it's a group meeting and then afterwards, you know, somebody will stop by someone else's office and say, “I'm so sorry about that comment.” Or “I didn't agree with what that person said.” And so I think, you know, to move the needle the best way to address it is really in the moment and to empower people, to call it out and, and, and you can do it in a professional way if you, if you feel safe to do so.

[56:47] And I'm not asking anybody to, um, do something that would put them in a space that they feel like would jeopardize their, their safety or their professional security, because that's also a very real circumstance, but, you know, if you are in a position to be an ally and to speak up, um, you know, that's an, that's a perfect opportunity to say, “I'm not sure, I, I'm not sure if this was your intent, but this is how it landed with me.” And you can say,” as an ally, I feel uncomfortable by that comment because of XYZ” and “I'm sure, or I'm, I'm almost positive that this was not your intent, but that comment made me uncomfortable because of these reasons.” And in that way, you're opening up the door for other people to also voice their concerns. And it takes the pressure off of the person whom that comment was directed at.

[57:43] Um, so speaking of right in the moment versus, you know, waiting until later when nobody else is around, um, there are other ways that you can do that, even when, you know, um, nobody was around to stay anything. Let's say, for example, you know, nobody did anything directly. Uh, other ways you can be an ally, especially if you're a mentor or a faculty member is, um, you know, be a sponsor for somebody and, you know, think through, is there someone I would like to nominate for award or for another internship or, um, professional opportunity that, uh, I might've otherwise overlooked, uh, are there, are there faculty that I typically don't think

about when I'm writing publications or writing grants that, you know, uh, would really appreciate the opportunity to be invited to do that? Um, so really thinking through carefully about being a mentor and sponsor for people who are underrepresented in your field, that's another way to, to be an ally.

[58:46] Kh: That's awesome. And you just mentioned that you just joined the center. So I was wondering for a lot of people they're really excited that, you know, it started at BU and they're wondering how can they, you know, join the effort and how can they help. So what would you tell those people?

[59:00] M: Great. Well, first of all, uh, excited to, to hear of all of your interests. We are hosting graduate and undergraduate student internship opportunities, and we're posting up- they're actually open right now. So if you're interested in an internship opportunity, you can apply. Um, there are some that are specific to different offices of the center. So our center has a narrative office, a policy office, a research office, and an advocacy office. We also have project-specific, uh, internship opportunities. So those are ways in which students can be involved in our mission, which is really to create, uh, an equitable and more just society for all.

[59:40] Kh: Thank you so much. We really appreciate you for coming and talking to us and thanks to our listeners for tuning in for this week's episode.

M: Great. Thank you for having me.

[outro plays]