Department of Physics & Astronomy joins network to bolster inclusion efforts

The network is helping the department to better foster inclusion, diversity and equity.

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All are welcome at the UCI School of Physical Sciences.

Picture Credit:
Tiffany Kuo

There are the things you can control, and the things you can’t. No one had control over the pandemic, and very few had direct control over the murder of George Floyd — as well as innumerable other Black people — at the hands of our nation’s law enforcement. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t small steps to take toward change that can, in small and big ways, echo out into in the world around you. In May, the UC Irvine Department of Physics & Astronomy submitted an application, which was successful, to join the Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity Alliance (IDEA) — an initiative officially launched by the American Physical Society in July that aims to help physics departments become more inclusive, diverse and equitable places.

The idea behind IDEA, explained Mu-Chun Chen, a professor of particle physics in Physics & Astronomy, is to connect departments like hers to a network of other physics departments, and to give them a forum within which they can share ideas about how to foster things like inclusivity and diversity.

“We get to see what other departments are doing,” said Chen, who’s leading her department’s IDEA-related efforts.

The initiative is brand new, and her department, Chen explained, is still working on its IDEA-inspired road map. But action is already underway; with insights and guidance from the network, her department recently decided to permanently drop the Graduate Record Exam as a requirement for entry into its graduate programs, and it plans to start forming ties with historically black colleges and universities in its recruitment and collaboration efforts. And beyond IDEA, women — an historically underrepresented group in physics — now comprise 33 percent of graduate student body in Physics & Astronomy. That’s a figure that, just five years ago, might’ve sounded like wishful thinking, Chen explained, and it’s a result of increased efforts to support the physics graduate community.

“I think the momentum is there, and it will continue,” Chen said. “The biggest challenge is going to be taking theory and putting it into practice.”

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