Transcript for Melissa Burt, Assistant Professor and Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion at Colorado State University

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond

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Kelly Savoie:

Hello, Clear Skies Ahead listeners. This is Kelly Savoie and I'm hoping you can take a moment of your time to rate and review our show wherever you listen to podcasts. We have produced over 60 episodes, and you can help us reach even more individuals that will benefit from the diverse experiences shared by our guests. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you enjoy this new episode.

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society's podcast series, Clear Skies Ahead, conversations about careers in meteorology and beyond. I'm Kelly Savoie and I'm here with Matt Moll and we'll be your hosts. We're excited to give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

Matt Moll:

We're happy to introduce today's guest, Melissa Burt, assistant professor and assistant dean for diversity and inclusion at Colorado State University. Welcome Melissa, and thanks so much for joining us today.

Melissa Burt:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Kelly Savoie:

Melissa, could you tell us a little bit about what sparked your interest in science and how it influenced your educational path?

Melissa Burt:

Sure. I guess I'll start with as a kid, I grew up in Maryland, so outside of DC, and I was terrified of tornadoes. And so those of you out there know that we don't really get tornadoes in Maryland that often, but it really was this fear that sparked curiosity in me to really want to understand more how does the weather work, why do storms happen the way that they do? And I think that really fueled me to want to go to do work, to look at weather. So in high school, everything that I did science-wise was focused around weather. Then when I learned that you could go to college and actually study meteorology, I was like, "I'm in. I'm down." And so I think it started from this fear and really struck a curiosity, I guess, nerve in me, and I guess I propelled on from there.

Kelly Savoie:

So did you do your own research and you found out for yourself that there were actually majors in college for meteorology, or did you have some guidance or a mentor in school that helped you figure that out?

Melissa Burt:

Actually, it was two things. So my biology teacher in high school was like, "You really are fond of earth science." And because we didn't have that as an option, she really just helped, encouraged me to do some research. Then my band teacher in high school was from Pennsylvania, and she told me one day that at her university that there was people majoring in meteorology. And I think that that's what just kind of started it for me. So I'd say twofold. I did a little bit of research myself and then from others who helped guide me there.

Kelly Savoie:

It's so interesting that your music teacher was the one who gave you that leg up on a meteorology degree. That's awesome.

Matt Moll:

So can you tell us a little bit about what opportunities you pursued both inside and outside of school that you thought would be beneficial to securing a job in the profession?

Melissa Burt:

I think the biggest thing that I found, and I guess it kind of started from a moment where I thought that the field wasn't for me. I absolutely loved weather, but when I was in undergrad, I was starting to kind of struggle in different ways. And I think a lot of it was I wasn't in the right kind of head space to truly do the work that I was doing. One of my advisors at the time suggested that I try out this internship opportunity where I could really fully dive in to learning more about the research enterprise, I'll say in that way.

So by participating in this internship program in Boulder, Colorado, I think it really changed my viewpoint. One from getting fully enthralled into doing research and what the research process was like, but also seeing other undergrad students who were just as fascinated by the weather as I was, but people who also looked like me. So just seeing a diversity of people who were truly interested in the field kind of brought me into this community space. So I think by seeking out other opportunities like this research program, I was able to develop in that way, but also get these community of people around me to help push me forward.

Kelly Savoie:

So what was your first job in the field and how did you end up where you are today?

Melissa Burt:

So my first job was after I finished my master's degree in atmospheric science, I was really interested in doing more education and outreach work within the weather, water climate space, and I took a job with National Science Foundation's Science and Technology Center where my role was really developing new educational programs around weather and also focused around helping students from a variety of different backgrounds kind of enter into the field. So by developing these education and diversity programs, one, it was exciting for me as a way to give back into the community, but also to open up the doors for so many other students because I knew my time doing an internship really helped me. So if I could provide that same type of opportunity for other students, that was a really cool thing for me to do. And also, it was just a really cool first job that I had.

Kelly Savoie:

And so were there many jobs in between or did you move from that to where you are now? I

Melissa Burt:

I feel like I've been here at Colorado State for a very long time. So my first job was here at Colorado State, and then after finishing my PhD, I moved into a research scientist position. So from there, I then took on another job focused around education and diversity here at CSU, which essentially brought me to where I am today.

Matt Moll:

So can you tell us a little bit about what is a typical day in the role of assistant professor or assistant dean of diversity and inclusion in Colorado State? What comes across your desk? What are you seeing during the course of a day?

Melissa Burt:

You mean outside of a lot of emails? I'll say, I think when I look specifically at my role related to the assistant dean for diversity and inclusion, and that role is within our college, and so within the College of Engineering here, and I do a lot of things from supporting students, having conversations with them specifically around equity and inclusion issues that they may be faced with here in the university. I'll say other parts of my day are sitting in a lot of leadership meetings and having conversations and strategy around, are we meeting our goals? What are some experiences that are happening? How can we be more strategic from a diversity, equity and inclusion lens about what we're doing?

I say oftentimes, every single week, I am either doing a training for faculty or staff here in our college or leading some sort of programming for our students. So that's from the lens of the dean role. And as a faculty member in atmospheric science, I would say it's probably a little bit of the same thing, still, having conversations with students. If I'm teaching my class, a typical, you teach a class, you talk to students afterwards, that sort of thing.

Kelly Savoie:

So what is it about your job that you like the most where you're like, "Oh, I'm so glad I get to do this today. This is what really excites me."

Melissa Burt:

Two things. The first I'll say is being a resource for students here on our campus. So I have the opportunity because I work in the college space that I get to interact with students from all of our departments within our college, and many of them haven't had many opportunities to connect with faculty members of color. So many times I'm that resource for them as a person just to talk with, share some experiences with ask for advice in that way. I think the other thing is that I love working with our college staff and also our faculty and just having the opportunities to collaborate to work on proposals. I know a lot of people don't like writing proposals, but I have an amazing group of people that I just really love to collaborate with, spark out different ideas and be able to connect in that way.

Kelly Savoie:

And so what's the work-life balance? Do you have pretty set hours or is it Monday through Friday or is it more varied?

Melissa Burt:

I would say I try to do the best that I can with that. I feel like yes, there's the Monday through the Friday, the nine to five sort of job, but sometimes other things do kind of permeate up to the top. So I really try to take... I don't like to always use the word balance. I really like to say to do the best that I can with whatever is at hand at the moment, and really strive to be there in those ways. So when I'm not working, I try to really separate myself out from that workspace and do lots of crafts or do things like that, hang out with my husband or my daughter in that way.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, somebody was just telling me about some television show, I can't remember what it's called, but where it's some kind of dystopian thing that when you go into work, all your thoughts and memories for home go away. And when you leave the office, all your office memories and thoughts go away. And I was thinking, "Oh man, I think a lot of us need that."

Melissa Burt:

I think that would be amazing. Sometimes you're like, "I wish I could leave the job at the job." But I don't know if that actually exists.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, I don't know unless you're on that television show. But, anyway.

Matt Moll:

So could you tell us, is there anything that you would've done differently in your career?

Melissa Burt:

Probably not, right? Because then I wouldn't be where I am right now. So I would say no, but I think I feel like I am a, what is it, extroverted introvert? And so I really hate talking to people sometimes. I mean, I love being here and talking with you on this, but I think if I would've done that a bit more, especially as an undergrad student, then I wouldn't have reached points where I felt like I couldn't continue. The more that I could have had conversations with people or to share a little bit more about what I was feeling or experiencing, I think that would've been probably more beneficial, and is one of the strategies or pieces of advice that I give all students, don't wait until you're at the final point before you say something about it. So I think if I would've looked back at myself and said, "Have more conversations with your advisor, with your peers, or someone," I think that would've helped maybe alleviate some of the challenges, but likely not all of them.

Kelly Savoie:

Well, it sounds like you had enough experience that you can advise students well. So can you tell us about some of the challenges and opportunities that exist with engaging, inspiring, and empowering young professionals in the field?

Melissa Burt:

Yeah, so I say one opportunity. This is a AMS podcast, and I think my world opened up for me when I attended my first AMS meeting. So I would really encourage students, no matter what field you're in, is to seek out that professional society that is connected to your community and go there, bring a buddy,

chat with people in that way to have that conversation. I would say other things is to ask people who may have jobs that you may be interested in a little bit about what is their life like? What is their day-to-day like, to learn about what could be useful for you or to learn about what opportunities are available. I think also, especially when you're either from high school going into college or finishing up your undergrad and growing into whatever may be next for you, you only do what you know.

So if you don't connect with people, even outside of that typical box or that typical window that you're interested in, you don't have a great view of what really is available to you. So I try to get students, especially students that I either advise through the traditional routes or just students that I work with through our student organizations here at Colorado State, is to really try to step out of your box or to widen that box just a little bit, because you never know what's on the other side. So seeking out those opportunities or trying something that you're like, "It sort of sounds interesting," and just kind of dive in it a little bit more.

Matt Moll:

So what are some of the biggest challenges that you see facing diversity, equity inclusion in the weather, water climate enterprise right now?

Melissa Burt:

Ooh, that's a hard one. I guess the first, and I would say this is even broader than the weather, water climate community, is people thinking that diversity, equity and inclusion is an add-on component. I feel as though if more people can see that it's a central or a foundational component to everything that they do, that it would be more tangible. It's something that you can better grasp, and it's not just this piece that's over here on the side. So that's number one, is that it's not a siloed activity, it's an integrated activity. I think the other piece is just the climate and cultures of organizations, and that's from the lens of oftentimes we just do things the way that they have always been done and are not-

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah. I hate that.

Melissa Burt:

Yeah, right?

Kelly Savoie:

Really don't like that.

Melissa Burt:

... Always open to what else there could be, right? Or we're not open because, really, change is hard. So we're not open to those things, and I think that's a difficult piece. And I find that people, you never know what people are going through. You never know what happened to them before they got into their interaction with you. So I find a challenging piece is just people are trying to be who they are, and they want to show up in the places as they are. But oftentimes, people are told that you have to hide those pieces, or you don't talk about that. You don't talk about being a mother and a faculty member. You don't talk about all of those other duties of things that you have to do.

Si if we can get to a place within our community, within the greater community that people can be who they are and the places that they're in, I think that's how we can get over some of those challenges,

especially so that people feel that they're included, that they're able to show up as their whole selves in their work environments, or whatever environment it may be.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, I was thinking that lots of times people in organizations, they're not thinking about what you're saying before about other people's maybe challenges or things that might be difficult for them in terms of even as simple as scheduling a faculty meeting, or scheduling some type of activity where maybe if you have older children or you're single, you don't think, "Oh, well, I can do this at six o'clock. I don't have to make dinner for anybody or whatever." And I think if more people just are cognizant of, "Okay, let's look at all the different people here," and maybe even ask, "Okay, before we set a meeting date, why don't we ask some people on staff what's best?" So yeah, I think a lot of these things are just, when it's finally brought to somebody's attention, they're like, ah, the light bulb goes off. But I think there just needs to be more of that.

Melissa Burt:

Yeah, and I think if there was one thing... Well, there was a lot of things that came out of the Covid experience, I'll say that because it's still going, is that it really made people pause. I think specifically at the early stages of Covid, we really were thinking about people as people cause there were so many other things that were happening around the world, happening around us at that time, that people had to truly pause and take a breath and sit with the specific moment.

I found specifically in the work environment or workplaces that I am in, that people were really cognizant about how people were doing, how people were feeling, how they were experiencing things. Could they show up in a specific way in that day? And I hope that those conversations or those experiences don't go away because we're returning back to that normal or whatever normal may be, situation. So your question was really around the challenges faced within the weather, water, climate community, and I think that that is one of the greatest challenges, is to really see people for who they are in the spaces that they are in and what they are bringing to the table, and ask questions. Truly ask questions, because that's where people will feel more included. They'll feel valued, they'll feel affirmed in the things that they do. And I think it leads to greater equity as well.

Kelly Savoie:

And you're the chair of the AMS Culture and Inclusion Cabinet. Could you tell us a little bit about the cabinet and why it was established?

Melissa Burt:

Yeah. So a few years ago now, within the AMS Council, we really wanted to ensure that our diversity, equity, inclusion work was not sitting just in one committee or one board and to really work towards spreading across the whole society, so to really think about equity and inclusion as a central foundational component of this society. So the Culture and Inclusion Cabinet was created in this way to help, one, strategize and also to help work with everyone within our space, if it's the staff, it's the volunteers, it's all of the members to ensure that equity and inclusion was central and spread across the society so that everybody sees what their role is, and to see the importance and the value of thinking about diversity and inclusion in that way, and also to help the society really take to heart the importance of these issues.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah. I was happy to see that get established. And how is that going so far? I know it's still kind of in the early stages, but is it doing what you hoped it would?

Melissa Burt:

It's been three years. And starting anything from scratch is number one hard, but I think we're progressing in the right direction. I think it's been a lot of work having conversations to describe what we are and how that may be different than other entities within the society. But I think we're pushing along well, and in a few years maybe ask me that question again to see where we're at. But I think it's going in the right direction, and there's always more work to do.

Kelly Savoie:

Great.

Matt Moll:

Well, we're so grateful for everything you've told us about your career. However, before you go, we'd like to ask our guests one fun question at the end of our show. So if you could meet one famous person alive or dead, who would it be?

Melissa Burt:

Okay. I'll say I've already met this person, or at least one of the people, and anyone who knows me since I was probably eight years old knows that I love Mariah Carey. And I won this contest a few years ago where I won a trip to spend a few days with her in New York City.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh my gosh.

Melissa Burt:

And it was the most amazing experience of my life.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh my gosh. I got to hear a little bit more about this, Melissa.

Melissa Burt:

Okay.

Kelly Savoie:

All right. So what happened?

Melissa Burt:

Okay, so number one... See, I got really excited about this. But number one, I was in grad school. It was my first year of grad school, and I have been entering Mariah Carey contests for forever, since 1990. And this time I just had to download this song from iTunes, mail in my receipt, and apparently there was going to be a winner. And I thought these contests happen, there's probably a few winners. I was the

only winner. And essentially they were like, "You won this contest. We're going to fly you and a friend to New York. You're going to have three days with her, and you'll go to some of her TV interviews and then the trip will end with a big dinner with her." And I assumed that there was going to be 30 people at this dinner, but I was wrong. It was Mariah Carey, me and my mom and one of her dancers.

Matt Moll:

Oh, wow.

Melissa Burt:

And it was amazing. So when you think about meeting someone that you have dreamed about for your whole life, number one, you're like, I hope... Well, one, what questions do you ask?

Kelly Savoie:

Right?

Melissa Burt:

I was like, what questions do I ask?

Kelly Savoie:

I'd be just frozen and like in awe.

Melissa Burt:

I was like, should I have a script? Should I have a list of prepared questions? But I was super nervous too, because I really just didn't want to be let down. And I have to tell you, she was so amazing. She was so down to earth. She asked me all of these questions about the weather, and I was loving it. It was amazing.

Kelly Savoie:

That is absolutely amazing, because you never know, right? You're so afraid that this person that you respected and you just love so much is going to be just awful, and you're going to be like, "Oh, no, all my dreams are crushed." But that is awesome that it was... First of all, it was awesome that it was just a couple of you.

Melissa Burt:

It was amazing.

Kelly Savoie:

So you got her undivided attention.

Melissa Burt:

Undivided attention, the dinner was four hours long. She brought so much memorabilia. She was like, "Who do you want me to write things to?" She has this persona of being this diva.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah. Exactly. I didn't want to say it. I was going to wait for you to bring it up, because she does have a little bit of a reputation of that, but it sounds like she's not really like that.

Melissa Burt:

I think it's just a character. In real life, she was just amazing. And the last thing I'll say is that I sort of tortured my mom with her music for my whole life. And so I was like, "Here's my gift back to you. Now we get to go meet her." And my mom was an absolute fan, and she will be a fan forever now after that experience.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh, that sounds so incredible.

Matt Moll:

That's great.

Kelly Savoie:

Well, thanks so much for joining us, Melissa, and sharing your work experiences with us.

Melissa Burt:

Thanks for having me.

Matt Moll:

Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, rain or shine. Clear Skies Ahead, conversations about careers in meteorology and beyond is a podcast by the American Meteorological Society. Our show is edited by Peter Trepke. Technical direction is provided by Peter Killilea. Our theme music is composed and performed by Steve Savoie, and the show is hosted by Matt Moll and Kelly Savoie. You can learn more about the show online at www.anetsoc.org/clearskies, and you can contact us at skypodcast@anetsoc.org if you have any feedback or would like to become a future guest.