# Health and Human Science Matters Season 4, Episode 8: Michelle Foster

Michelle Foster: A large part of my job is listening to individuals, but also sharing my stories as a diverse individual. So people in our college see me as a PhD and a researcher, but they don't realize that when I leave out the college, people see me for being a woman and being a Black woman. And so I have to tell them that I'm viewed differently depending on spaces that I'm in. So allowing me to share my story opens, we know her this way, but not everybody does, and not everybody appreciates that I think or that I do these things and that I have certain stereotypes that are out there, just how someone looks at me and then they extrapolate who I am. That goes to show you that you might be doing this towards other people who might not be academics or who you might have not developed a relationship with. And so helping to share my story, to have eye-opening experiences where people have that moment like, "Oh my goodness, I never really thought, but now I'm a little bit more aware."

Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm your co-host and digital media strategist, Avery Martin.

Matt Hickey: And I'm Matt Hickey, associate dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In our college, we make it our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. Don't just take our word for it. Each episode, we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff. And today, we've got one of my favorite people on planet Earth, and beyond, actually.

Avery Martin: One of mine as well, in the universe.

Matt Hickey: Michelle Foster. Michelle's a professor in Food Science and Human Nutrition and serves as the assistant dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in the college. Michelle, welcome.

Michelle Foster: Yes, thank you for having me.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: It's our pleasure. We've been looking forward to this for quite a while now. So we want stories, we want to hear your story. This is going to be both a personal journey and an academic or professional journey. But we like to start with your scholarly home, Food Science and Human Nutrition, and we want you to share with our listeners in your years as a PI and leading the Foster Lab, what big questions do you pursue as a scholar?

Michelle Foster: So the area that I came from actually, in being in Food Science Human Nutrition, my PhD is in Neuroscience and Behavior, but it all stems from the love of fat. And so with nutrition, that's one of the things that we're trying to control, is how we accumulate our fat, but I studied how our brain talked to our fat before. So it happened to be that I was in a wonderful position being an adipose tissue researcher, that my expertise was in, that I then came to the nutrition department.

So within that group, we have researchers that look at cardiovascular disease or they look at intestines and gut microbiota. I was linking together with a mentor, Mike Pagliasati, who looked at liver function, and specifically with the fat that I was investigating, it was how our fat affected the liver when I first entered into Food Science Human Nutrition. So I came in with a KO1 and I found this really cool guy who had a research topic that I could link with but also could teach me a lot, and so I decided that Food Science, Human Nutrition and Colorado State University was the place that I was going to end up at.

Matt Hickey: And KO1, for listeners, is an NIH Career Development Award, right?

Michelle Foster: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Of course, I know and love Mike, I have for years, I think he's a fantastic mentor, so it's always nice to give a plug to some of our friends who've moved on to greener pastures, as they say. So hi Mike, if you're listening. And of course, a longstanding teasing joust with the Mike. I'm a skeletal muscle guy, Mike's a liver guy, so I've got the real [inaudible 00:03:35]-

Michelle Foster: Yeah, which one is more important? I was going between the two, so I was cheating on Mike a little bit.

Matt Hickey: But the fascinating thing, I've always been interested about adipose tissue because the historical textbook pictures of this inert fuel depot in some ways, little red gas cans that we carry around for when we need fuel for the body.

Michelle Foster: We need to burn that fuel burn.

Matt Hickey: But of course, that story is far more complex and so-

Michelle Foster: Correct.

Matt Hickey: .... tell us a little bit more about all the wonderful and occasionally problematic things that fat cells do.

Michelle Foster: Yes, I can. And it's one of those things that I really enjoy sharing with early learners. Because we sell it as this is a really nice source of ATP, our form of energy for the body. So it's like our battery. ATP is the full battery and it goes between full and not full. So that's why we use nutrients to fill it up. And ATP, as far as fat is concerned, is like a big bang for our buck. It gives us a lot of energy when we need it. So evolutionary wise, it's a great thing to have. But since food is so accessible and highly palatable and we have comfort foods, when we're stressed out, we tend to store too much of this form of ATP. And so I like to tell students that this is linking too, and it even goes to my 150 class, which is a survey of human nutrition, that this directly links to our health.

And I tell them it's not just because aesthetically we don't want to have fat, but it's also because there is a form of disease that comes along with the way that we store our fat and how we store our fat and what our fat releases. And so I like to tell them there's over 600 things that our fat is capable of releasing. It goes from hormones so it can make estrogen and testosterone, to inflammatory factors, leptin, so many things. It started with leptin was the part of the story that it first originated on and then people just kept finding and are still finding till today, many factors, exosomes, all these things that link to our fat. And so our fat is an organ that's releasing all these signals that communicate with our body. And it's a really neat thing. And so I open students' eyes up to this.

There's still many questions to be answered about it. But don't just think it's there for fuel and it's there for insulation, it can help the body in letting it know when you need more food, it can help the body in letting you know when you don't. But we don't listen to that signal too well. If we have Thanksgiving, we still want that dessert despite knowing we're full, and so we have things that overwrite that system. But it can get out of control and it can exacerbate almost every disease out there, so it's something that we have to be careful about. Which brings us to the point of nutrition, what type of fat do we want in our fat? And then how much fat should we store and where should we store it, are all questions that are linked to nutrition.

Matt Hickey: So quick summary now, you're a neuroscientist?

Michelle Foster: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Whose a fat cell biologist.

Michelle Foster: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Whose academic home is Food Science and Human Nutrition.

Michelle Foster: Yes.

Matt Hickey: So the lesson here for some of our listeners is labels don't set fences for you, or boundaries. You can-

Michelle Foster: Absolutely not.

Matt Hickey: ... move quite a bit beyond even labels that might appear on diplomas or transcripts or something like this. There's quite a bit of flexibility, and I think in many academic homes that's true. But I think CSU's really been great about not being rigid with academic boundaries and disciplinary, that's your home and this isn't your home kind of silly business. We've been lucky enough to have flexible borders here at CSU.

Avery Martin: Absolutely.

Michelle Foster: It's the way that you tell the story and how you link to the individuals in the department that really matters. A fun fact that I now tell people 11 years later is the first class that I taught in nutrition was the first class that I took in nutrition.

Matt Hickey: Really?

Michelle Foster: It was. I'd never taken a nutrition class before I taught one, so yes. And then I became an expert. I was like, "But now I know how to teach it." I swear I know how to teach it. But it was a lot of learning and going to taking it from the aspect of fat storage, then looking at the broad aspect. So I'm also learning new things as I'm teaching students. And it was a very hard and a very knowledgeable process in doing so.

Avery Martin: That's incredible.

Matt Hickey: That's quite a first prep. First preps are in hard period, let alone...

Avery Martin: First learning and first prep.

Matt Hickey: Fantastic. So we want to wind the clock back and talk about your family, your educational pathway, when and how did the idea of a PhD get on your radar screen. But talk about where'd you grow up, talk about family, siblings, parents, et cetera, and then we'll get to your undergraduate degree eventually.

Michelle Foster: Yes, we will. So we moved around quite a bit. So I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and then we moved to Los Angeles, California, which is where I learned to basically walk and talk. And then from Los Angeles was Boulder, Colorado. So I've actually lived in Colorado before.

Matt Hickey: I did not know that.

Michelle Foster: Yeah, I did maybe about first and second grade here. And then we moved to Houston, Texas, and then Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and then Atlanta, Georgia. And that's where I got my undergrad and grad. Then I moved on back to California, but San Francisco. And then I moved to back to Ohio, but Cincinnati, and then from Cincinnati, it's back to Colorado.

Matt Hickey: Frequent flyer.

Avery Martin: That's quite the journey.

Michelle Foster: Yes. I've lived a lot of different places and picked up little bits and pieces of dialect. So my accent doesn't really place one place or the other.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. It's not a Georgia accent. That's true.

Michelle Foster: I don't say Colorado.

Matt Hickey: Well, talk to us about your folks. What something must have made them move a family multiple times when we were little.

Michelle Foster: So my dad worked for Miller Brewing Company, and he took promotion opportunities when he could, to give us the best life that we could have. And so with each one of those promotions, it was one of those, well, now you have to move to another place, but you'll move up. And so his jobs placed us in the different places that we lived.

Matt Hickey: How about that? And your mom?

Michelle Foster: My mom was a stay at home mom, so she made sure that we were well taken care of, the house was well taken care of, that our education, she placed us in education programs, writing and stuff like that, when we were kids to make sure that we had the privilege of making sure that our grades were good stuff.

Avery Martin: Wow. That's great.

Matt Hickey: A lot to be thankful for.

Michelle Foster: Yes, definitely so.

Matt Hickey: Siblings?

Michelle Foster: I have a brother and a sister. I am the middle child of the first group. And then my dad remarried and we have a half sister and a step sister.

Matt Hickey: Nice. Big family, huh? How often do you get to see them?

Michelle Foster: After? Well, it was a pause during COVID, and I try to get out there to see them probably every two years or so. I recently went back home to Ohio. But every two years or so, because during this whole time as I was moved away from Georgia, we had two children and man, to carry all the baggage, the actual car seats and stuff like that, we were like, "We're not doing this." And you have to have special vehicles to drive them around in.

Matt Hickey: It's not easy.

Michelle Foster: It was quite difficult during that time because the kids are three years apart so their car seats were huge. But actually, they're going to spend some time back home this next summer.

Matt Hickey: Now, when you say home, are you talking Ohio or Indiana?

Michelle Foster: Ohio, Kentucky area ish, Georgia.

Matt Hickey: Okay. Multiple home places.

Michelle Foster: Yes. So when we do go home, the thing is that we have my dad in La Grange, Kentucky, we have Adam's parents and Goshen, Ohio, and we have my mom in Cleveland, Ohio. One point is an hour apart. And then once you leave, and that's the La Grange and Goshen, and then Goshen and Cleveland are two hours apart. And so that's part of the thing when we go home with all the seats, it's a long travel that we have to go through all three spots, and it is exhausting when we're done.

Matt Hickey: So tell us about Adam and your children, if I may ask.

Michelle Foster: Yes. So I tell people I picked up Adam along the way when I was in Ohio. And he's originated from Goshen, so he's traveled quite a bit. He was a teamster. I don't know if you all know what that was, but it helped people to unionize for certain companies, when I met him. And man, he's bright, he's really smart, and he knew that he wanted to pursue his education further. So he had completed undergrad. And when I met him, he was traveling a lot being a teamster, and he wanted to go back to school. So at that point, I was doing my postdoc at University of Cincinnati, and he decided to get his masters while we were there.

And he knew that at some point I'm going to have to get up and move and go someplace else and so if he was to dedicate a relationship with me, then he would have to move with me basically. So I'm tough, you want to be with me, then you've got to move. And so from that point, when I was at University of Cincinnati, I worked in their medical school in psychiatry of all places. We were oddly placed. But I was at the Obesity Research Center, which was absolutely buzzing back in the day before the pharmaceutical companies started to tank. That was probably after the first recession.

Matt Hickey: Was Randy Sealy there at the time?

Michelle Foster: Randy Sealy, Steve Woods, Randall Saquai, the whole group of...

Matt Hickey: Superstars.

Michelle Foster: It was a very interesting, fun, tough, competitive group. And so that type of group really helped to mentally prepare for what it would be like to compete as a faculty member. And at that point, they're just like, "Go ahead and try for a K01." And it's the Obesity Research Center. It was one of the best places that if I'm looking at, and it was that association between the liver and fat, fat that we store in the abdominals. And so I wrote it and the first one I wrote got funded. And so I'm like, "Oh, wow, this is awesome." And then shortly after that, they're like, "You should interview for jobs." I'm like, "No, I'm not ready. I don't want to." And they're like, "Okay, just try and see see what happens, and then you can repeat next year if you don't land anything." And so my first time out for jobs, I got three of them. I was just like, so I got jobs, what am I supposed to do now?

Matt Hickey: The night is tough here.

Michelle Foster: Yes. And so that's what led me to Fort Collins. Two were Virginia Tech, two different departments, and one was Fort Collins. And with Fort Collins, I'm like, "Well, Virginia Tech is offering me these things." And with the department I'm in now, I was like, "So you would have to at least minimally come with these things that I'm offered here." So I didn't have a preference one way or the other. Not that Fort Collins wasn't great, but back then it felt expensive to live in. And boy, is it expensive now. So I was like, there's no preference. I think I can have the same experience either place that I go.

Mike Pagliasati was a little bit better of a match for a mentor. And so I came back with, I have to have these things here. And they're like, "Man, someone taught you how to negotiate pretty well." I was like, "Well, I was under Steve Woods and Randy Sealy, so they're not going to have me come out of here not being able to negotiate well." And they met that match and were like, "Man, we're going to start our life off together in Fort Collins." So it wasn't long after we got married that I was interviewing. And then as we were prepping to move, that I got pregnant with my first.

Matt Hickey: So I want to push the family thing a little bit. We'll come back to more of this later on, but you and Adam both compete.

Michelle Foster: Compete as in our [inaudible 00:15:10]

Matt Hickey: ... that open for you, not with each other.

Michelle Foster: No, we don't compete with each other. The reference is to strong man. Yes, we do compete in strong man together. So this was something that occurred during the pandemic. I actually started to run quite a bit during the pandemic because it was the only time that I got to myself where I could really think clearly getting outdoors, because we were all heavily quarantined at that time. And so one day it was this many miles and this many miles more and this many miles more. And then I was like, I should probably also lift weights with it because it was muscle wasting running so far and so fast. And so I started to lift weights and he was like, "You're actually strong." Because he was interested in lifting the really heavy weights well before I was. And he's like, "You should honestly give it a try."

And I was like, "I'll try. I'll lift weights because my gym is closed and I have no place to lift weights, so I'll lift weights in the garage with you." And so I started to steadily gain strength, and he's like, Really, with where you are with your weight and with competition, you can make some of these. All you have to do is train a little bit harder and you'll actually be able to lift some of these weights that are listed for competition." So I was like, "Fine, if it's something you're interested in and it gives us time together where it's a positive and happy space, then I'll do it." And so I trained for my first strong man with him, which we did together in Nebraska. And we had friends that were so excited about seeing me gain strength to do it that they went with us to Nebraska. So two other moms and children, and we all went to Nebraska together.

So it was cool to have my fans on the side cheering me on at my first competition. Which is even unlike teaching, you never realize when you're in these competitions that you're lifting weights and the whole audience is just sitting there quietly waiting for you to lift the weights. And so the first one, I think I did, I felt the first one. My nerves got hold of me and it was lifting over the head. And so when your arms start to shake and your heart starts to beat, I'm like, ""I can't do this. I can public talk, I can write grants, I can interview for jobs, but I can't lift the weight over my head. So I fell out on the first event, and I think Adam actually fell out on his first event too. And I was like, "We didn't come all the way to Nebraska too to fell out on our events. We have to do something about this in this competition." And so it was basically the nerves and figuring out how to function our breathe through them.

And it turned out to be one of the most supportive crowds to perform in front of, because they're not there to necessarily compete, it's almost like a place where the weird go, which is why we fit in so well. It's just an eclectic group of individuals. And so then people, once they learn your name, they're super supportive with shouting your name and cheering you on. And so through the rest of my events, I utilized that endorphin release and it was because it wasn't over my head. I'm very strong with my legs that I pulled through with the other events, and Adam and I placed in the competition together.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Michelle Foster: So we've got matching medals and it's awesome. Yes. And so I've gone on to do several more. And then friends are like, we just want to train with you, we want to be strong too. And then Adam gets in their head, he's like, "You know can do a competition, because you're getting stronger every day." So we've actually recruited two more of my friends, and we did that competition in Wyoming together. So we all did the competition together. Four of us went.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Michelle Foster: Until this day, he draws in more people. So every Sunday he has groups of men come through, like Ricky Frierson and Dwayne Ruff, who is the director of The Back Center. Ricky is in Warner College. And then he has Sergeant Nick come over too. And they will come in the snow, fully with their gloves and their hats on, and they'll come do strongman with him because they like getting out there and talking about raising kids and lifting heavy weights. And it's also a great endorphin release. So he's spreading in that strongman... Don't look him in his eyes, do not look him in his eyes.

Matt Hickey: Don't make eye contact.

Michelle Foster: Because he will get you in our gym. Yes.

Avery Martin: I want to join now.

Michelle Foster: There you go. See, it's happening. It's like when you can just lift heavy stuff, you're like, did you see that stone I just lifted on my shoulder? You're like, yes. And you're like, I can do this every Sunday now. And then before you know, it you'll be competing, so be careful.

Avery Martin: I'll tread lightly, I'll start slowly, but that sounds awesome.

Michelle Foster: It is fun.

Avery Martin: So take us back a little bit back to undergrad. So somewhere along the way you knew that you wanted to be a scientist. What exactly was the start? I know you're a HBCU grad, I know that you're a first gen student. So tell us a little bit about that.

Michelle Foster: So this stems well before I was even in college, is that I just always had a curiosity about the human body. And so I was one of those kids if we went to a toy store, I wanted the models of the human body that you would paint, you would put together, or the human skull or bones, or anything like that would keep me really engaged for a really long time. And as a kid, you see how we function on the outside, but it's just like, but we have a whole inside and inside does all these things. And so-

Avery Martin: Yeah, what's going on in there?

Michelle Foster: ... it's always been in there. My parents were really big advocates for my education, but my grandparents were always just, "What do you need? Do you need this model? What do you want? What books do you want?" And so they were always big advocates towards, we're going to have a doctor in this family. At that age, the doctor you know of is a medical doctor. And so it was my original goal to be a medical doctor. And so if they had friends that were doctors, they would introduce me to those friends. My grandmother was also really pivotal when I was in undergrad at Spelman and getting me an internship. She knew everybody and she just had friends where she's just like, "I've got a granddaughter and she wants in any program that you have here." It's also partially because I would be staying the summer with them too.

And she found a really good one. So it wasn't even the school, it was her at Case Western Reserve in their medical school. So this is as an undergrad that I'm working in their research unit in their medical school. And the topic that I originally worked on back then was glucose uptake following chronic alcohol consumption. And they were looking at glucose absorption across the muscle cells. And so I just thought, and that's the thinking of this is what I want to do, my first introduction to basic research. And I didn't even really know what it was called that. We did some projects together. It was culturing cells. And man, I was killing. I was killing those cells so bad. I was just like, they're fuzzy.

They're not supposed to be fuzzy. But they would take the cells, muscle cells, they would culture these cells, and then they would look in the dish at how they would absorb glucose. And so I did a poster presentation on that, and that was just a really neat experience in a place with people who love me. And so that's how I got into, man, there's this other world here. And I think also before that, because that was the time I was staying in that dorm, and I remember studying for both the GRE and the MCAT that summer. So before that summer occurred, I had a chemistry lab. So my undergrad was in chemistry. And the only reason I chose chemistry is because it's the one class that I struggled with in high school. And I was like, "I'm not going to let you defeat me. So I want to make chemistry my major." And I loved-

Matt Hickey: That's Michelle on a microphone.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: How many people would say the one I struggled with in high school is the one I-

Avery Martin: That's what I want to major in. Yes.

Michelle Foster: That's the Taurus in me. I can't help it. You will not take me down, chemistry, I will take you down. And physical chemistry, man, that was...

Matt Hickey: P Chem is something else.

Michelle Foster: But it's one of those when you survive it, you're like, I took P Chem and I survived it. You get to know the professors and have a relationship with them, even though they might be intimidating in the beginning, then you develop a special bond with them where they're like, "Well, I want to help you and I want to expose you to these things." And so it was me talking to professors and looking at their research and asking questions that really helped with the connection to the teacher, but also the connection to the subject and the understanding of the subject, at least to the best of my ability with P Chem. It was at the end where I got my grade, I was like, "Holy crap, I passed P Chem with a B." It was awesome because it was teetering that...

See the whole time I was like, now P Chem is going to have to be my direction because it's given me such a hard time. So yes, it was chemistry that I was in, and at one point in one of our chemistry labs, and I love labs, I love laboratories. And so that's part of the bond that kept me in classes that were difficult, is that I got to go play in the laboratory with the chemicals and titrations and the color changing. I thought all that stuff was so... I'm such a nerd. It was so cool. I loved it so much. And so we had a graduate student from another place come talk to us, and they knew that most of us were focused on that MD track, and they're like, "I just want you to know this, that there's a place where you can go to school, you can go get that next degree, and they'll pay you to go and they'll pay for your tuition." And they're like, "It's called grad school." And I was like, "What? Tell me more about this place."

So that my first introduction, was pretty early on into my undergrad introduction that there was medical school, but there was also the side of the PhD. Later when I had already finished my PhD, I started to learn about, I think it really just started was the MD PhDs. And I was like, "Man, I'm too late. But that would've been so cool to be an MD PhD." But that was too late for that one. But also, I like to save money, I don't like to be in debt. And the option of going to medical school and being in debt versus going to graduate school and not being in debt, I was like, "I want that one that's not a debt." So then I started to look at options. Was still doing the MCAT and stuff like that, but I started to look more heavily at doing a PhD than doing an MD. And so moving on from that transition to undergrad, I think I applied to five different graduate programs.

I got into four of the graduate programs, and at that time it was still the GRE and even specialized areas. And so I graduated chemistry, but I was maybe two or three credits short of biochemistry, which is what I wanted. I wanted to see the chemistry of what cells of the body did just like that internship demonstrated to me. I was like, "That's what I want to do." But when I graduated chemistry, I applied for bio... so this is a funny part, we're a biochemistry program. So my PhD is neuroscience and behavior, but I applied for only biochemistry program. So it was a serendipity opportunity that I got into the track, I think, I got into. And so I went to interview and the place that I ended up at Georgia State University, I'll know it was, I'm just going to apply here just because it's not the school that I want to go to. I want to go to one of these other schools, I want to move away and not be in Georgia anymore.

And so all the schools that had accepted me were biochemistry programs. And I went to do the interviews. One of my last interviews was to go back to Georgia State University. I had been in Georgia for several years at this point. I wanted to go off and be on my own, but I was just like, "All right, let me see this program." And then I got a call, I don't know if Tim Bartness in the field. I got a call from Tim Bartness who is the adipose tissue person. He worked in seasonal hibernators. And so they have a pattern of filling up and getting fluffy before the winter, and then during the winter going into torpor where they slowly burn their fat. And so he wanted to utilize this model to see how can we help with humans going between shifting body weight so they can go from a high BMI with large amounts of adipose tissue to a low BMI. And so that was his subject. And so he called, he's like, "Okay, hear me out. I know you applied for biochemistry." And I can't believe this person in biochemistry gave me up.

But he's like, "But we just got funded for a new program by the National Institute of Health to bring minoritized individuals and women into the world of neuroscience." And I was like, "Okay, I'm listening." And so he's like, "Well, come see what we have, and you can make a decision. We know you want biochemistry, but they handed your application to us. So they must have known, there must have been some sort of connection that we know you have this program and this person might be of interest." Because I had a chemistry background. I was a strong candidate for any of the positions I was going in because they're like, if you can do chemistry, you can do anything. And half of it is making up these solutions that are based on chemistry models. And so the work they were doing within this center, and it was still in Atlanta. And so Atlanta, it's the mecca of black people. I'll just throw that out there. And so the percent of black and brown individuals in this program was really high.

And so coming from Spelman, I was like, I really feel comfortable. I feel like my mentor has worked with people like me before in diverse populations. I think there was more diversity than there were white people in our laboratory. Because they were also recruiting that way. And so I was like, "This would be an excellent opportunity." I really like the program, what it stands for. And other people were looking at circadian rhythms. So I got to learn about circadian rhythms side by side and then also how we might be functioning with our food to change circadian rhythms. They were looking at social defeat, dominance and subordinates, which took me into looking at comfort food eating and visceral fat accumulation because the ones that were subordinate were getting fat. And I was like, "Well, why is that happening?" And then someone's like, "Would you like to collaborate to find out?" And so that also took me into nutrition was comfort food eating and visceral adipose tissue, and that also linking to the liver.

So all these things are coming together with different collaborations where I'm now slowly I'm moving towards a destiny I didn't even know it was predetermined for me, basically. So it was neat. And I was just like the people, I like the subjects, I like the potential for collaboration. So it was just a click. And I tell students, you never know where that click is going to happen for you. You're going to always have forks in the road where you think you're going to go one direction and you're going to say that that interests me all the way over there, and it's going to start to take you on a brand new trajectory. And that started one of my new trajectories and then they continued to change because I also have a new trajectory right now as well. But it was super cool. And so that's what took me into the area from biochemistry, switched to chemistry because I wanted to graduate on time. Chemistry took me to neuroscience at this point. So neuroscience and behavior.

Matt Hickey: So when did you arrive in the fort?

Michelle Foster: Fort Collins was 11 years ago. Man, that time goes by so fast.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. And of course, married two kids. And you've progressed from assistant to associate to full professor, mentors lots students.

Michelle Foster: I think it'll be official by the time that this is launched.

Matt Hickey: Learned how to teach nutrition classes.

Michelle Foster: I did.

Matt Hickey: Tell us what you're doing now, what consumes much of your time these days.

Michelle Foster: Yes. And that goes back to the conversation of that fork in the road, never knowing where destiny takes you. At some point down the line, I got a taste for administration. And so right now I am 75% administration and I still want to have a pulse on students in the classroom because I work in the area of DEIJ. So I am still teaching, so I'm 25% in my department as well, food science human nutrition.

Matt Hickey: So tell me about your administrative duties. What do you do? What things come across your radar screen? What demands your attention? I know this is not the same every day, but give us an example of what an assistant dean that's charged with this really critical part of our community...

Michelle Foster: What they do. And so I'm the first person in this position. Maybe around three years ago, the university started to really see the importance of having someone that focuses predominantly on DEIJ efforts. And so I think we were among one of the first colleges to create the position, but soon after that... And we're spread at different levels. Not all of us are assistant deans, some might just be directors for the school as well, but we all play some sort of role. And all our roles are different. So we're still trying to figure out how can we be similar or how can we be different.

But specifically for the school, what I do like about this position is that I still have that academic freedom that you would have with research, and that I gather what it is going to be that vision for our college is going to be for our DEIJ work. And so it's been one of those things that you come in with. I want a vision of at least making sure that everybody understands what we're doing and some sort of way to standardize. And so what I thought I could do in the beginning of the job was to at least bring everybody to some sort of common level of standardization. And then you get out and you develop relationships with individuals, relationships with department heads.

We also have a college committee where each one of the departments has a representative that sits on there, so they speak for that department. Within that time, we also developed subcommittees within the department so that person who is on the college level then also has a committee within that department too. And it has a representation or people are working towards a representation of faculty, staff, undergrad and graduate and postdoc students. So you can hear the voice of everybody. We're trying to tap into a small artery of each one of the departments so that it can go into a larger vein and then it can come up to the college so that we can hear all the information that we need to.

And I will start by saying that we have a wonderful design because a lot of people who are doing my position don't have the support that I have. So they say, you have one person, you have one limited budget, you have this whole college that you have to do this with, go make a change. And you can't make change like that. You have to have people buy into what it is you're doing, have enthusiasm for it and want to do the work. And so I'm very thankful for the structure that's been built during the time that I've been here. And what I've realized from the structure and listening, and so I'm going to say a large part of my job is listening to individuals, but also sharing my stories as a diverse individual.

So people I think, in our college see me as a PhD and a researcher, but they don't realize that when I leave out the college, people see me for being a woman and being a black woman. And so I have to tell them that I'm viewed differently depending on spaces that I'm in. So allowing me to share my story opens, we know her this way, but then there's other people who see her this way. Even if I go to different parts of that, a lot of people know me on campus because I'm always talking to people, but what perception is of other individuals and why we might not all feel a sense of equity and inclusion. And I do that by telling my story to help people understand that you know me as this position, but not everybody does and not everybody appreciates that I do these things.

And that I have certain stereotypes that are out there, just how someone looks at me and then they extrapolate who I am. And I was just like, and that goes to show you that you might be doing this towards other people who might not be academics or who you might have not developed a relationship with. And so just helping to share my story, to have eye-opening experiences where people have that moment like, oh my goodness, I never really thought but now I'm a little bit more aware. And working with individuals, I found from department to department, I can't go and standardize things because everybody's different as far as what their goals are, and the only way that I'm going to know their goals is to personally get in there and know them better.

And that comes from that aspect of appreciation from the retreat we did, that in order for me to truly appreciate anybody, I have to grow a relationship with them or the relationship with their group and really hear and understand what it is they need, what it is that they are doing, in order for me to find where are those holes where I can help, where can I bring resources, education, training, or just be a cheerleader in general, or share that this department's doing this real good, let me help you figure it out for each one of you so that we're not repeating the will consistently.

And so a lot of my time is spent right now in doing this relationship building, talking to each one of the department heads about, what are your concerns? What does your data look like? Where can I help you? So what that unit heads plans are. And then to say, does it link with your committee or your faculty and what they want to do? So now I'm spending this semester talking to the DEIJ committees and sitting down. Because some of these people know of me, but they haven't met me yet. And sometimes it's hard to want to do things if you haven't had a personal touch placed on it.

Matt Hickey: I totally agree.

Michelle Foster: So why do I have to do this? What is this for? But when I'm there and I'm sharing my story and I'm making connections and say, I want to make this place better, and they can see my face and they can read that I really care, then I don't think that that resistance stays there anymore and that they are more adaptable to be like, she's cool, maybe she has a point and I'll work with her a little bit. And so it's trust building that I'm working on at this point. And so now going back to the departments. And then going to the departments, I've been to a few already, to find out that they're doing so many great things, we are just not hearing them at the college level, they're not getting to the repository that was developed.

And now I'm like, well, give me all the goodness and I'm going to create files. I'm going to create files where I can then share back in totality, because one office to the other in a department, sometimes you don't know what your next door neighbor's doing. But I want to make sure that I can create something where people can begin to see that this is what exists, this is what's being done. Well, this is what happened but didn't happen so well, this is where we need help. And so it's information gathering, listening and creating trust. That is the biggest part of my job at this point.

Matt Hickey: Again, this is a beautiful distillation of why we're so thankful to have you as part of our team.

Michelle Foster: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: We are lucky. And I want to lift up a couple of things that have always moved me about you. Why when we opened this, we said favorite person in the world kind of thing. We have a running joke about who's your bestie? It depends on who's [inaudible 00:38:06]

Michelle Foster: I have best besties.

Avery Martin: It's a competition.

Matt Hickey: And it's a healthy competition. So the first thing that comes to mind for me when I think about you is you're winsome. It's an old word that I've always loved, but it means that you're impossible not to like.

Michelle Foster: I like this.

Matt Hickey: I defy somebody to spend five minutes with Michelle and not move into her sphere of, I want to get to know her better, I want to listen. That's a real gift, and I've always enjoyed it. So thank you for that, number one.

Michelle Foster: Well, thank you.

Matt Hickey: Number two, when you go to these groups that often are... Because again, our listeners can yeah, yeah, yeah. But these can be very touchy, emotional, sore points for people. They may be hurt in a variety of different ways. And often, as I think you've alluded to, because there's a lack of willingness to listen or to understand different perspectives, whatever it might be. But you've got a real gift to, as you said, go and listen. So you don't trot into room and say, this is the way it's going to be. You've hinted at this notion that there isn't a one size fits all solution to this, which is characteristic of eminent good sense as far as I'm concerned.

Then the other thing that I've always appreciated about you is your ability to share your own personal experience and journeys, because we build better teams and better departments and better micro communities and campuses by having a little bit of a better sense of, that I haven't walked to mile own that person's shoes. And I haven't done the same in mine admittedly, but how about we stop the hustle and bustle or the name calling or whatever it might be and say, so what has it been like for you?

Avery Martin: Get an understanding.

Matt Hickey: So you are talented in so many ways and I'm glad I get to hang out with you and watch you do your stuff.

Michelle Foster: I like hanging out with you too. And you as well.

Avery Martin: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: We've got a couple more things we want to touch on, and I think there's a natural transition. So you've talked about this really important work across the college. I want you to share some reflections on what you like best about being a faculty member and an administrator in the College of Health and Human Sciences.

Michelle Foster: All right. So faculty member first. When I've sat in spaces before, I was a full-blown administrator, just sitting in spaces talking about my department, I realize that I'm in a very good, healthy department. Not everybody's department is created like my department is, and so listening sometimes. And this is as a person of color. I've been in people of color spaces where we talk about what is it that we need? Why don't we belong? I'm like, my group is great. I don't mean to brag about them, but I was like, they've had a healthy attitude. As I was having children, we all had our children hidden under our desk. We would find a babysitter, just take the kids in one office or another.

So we call them our lab babies because they were literally all raised around one another. And it might be the type of department. Being nutrition, we were home economics at some point. So we just have a healthier attitude towards having that connection towards children, they pattern our nutrition and all those things. And so it could have just been that all of our kids were boom, boom, boom, one right after the other. And so I've always had really close friendships and collaborations and just really healthy friends that I work with. And it was actually really sad when we went out on COVID. I was like, "I spend more time with you all than I do my family. I miss you. I don't get to see you. And I'm so tired of these meetings online." So it was a really big shocker of that connection I grew with these individuals.

I came in with Christian Tile and Tiffany Ware, and each one of our promotions we've done together basically, except for when Chris went for department head, we're like, "You've threw us off our track, man." But I was like, "But you're the one who then gets to do our packages." And I was like, "I would have nobody else do my package." And so we've been work besties. We go out together, we have lunch together, and we have a really great collaboratory friendship in that department. So I really love it because you get to do the fun of the science, but you also get to do it with friends. So when you have friends at work, it doesn't make it feel like it's work. So that's the faculty side, always really great friendships. And now Sarah Johnson, it's four of us who are just tied at the hip together in that group.

And then to my administrative position, one thing that I'm so, so thankful for, from the moment that I first sat at the table, I'm like, "No, we should change it and we do this." And then Lisa, you were like, "Okay." And I'm like, "They listen to me." They're actually taking my opinion. I have a seat at the table where things matter. And when I say that I don't think that that's equitable or I don't think that's a good option, or we're talking about strategy or code, I'm like, my opinion now matters. I'm changing things for the school and that's a really huge thing to me. So I absolutely love that aspect of the administrative job is that we have that diversity and opinions now, and I can see it happening. And I'm opinionated, I just do it in a friendly way with a smile. But I really do feel that I'm making a difference at this point.

Matt Hickey: You are.

Avery Martin: You definitely are.

Matt Hickey: We not only you, we respect you.

Michelle Foster: Yes. And that's awesome.

Matt Hickey: The next layer up is this institution that really puts at the forefront this land grant mission. It's not just lip service, we take it seriously. And I want you to share some reflections on what it means to be a land grant institution.

Michelle Foster: And this is an important aspect that I take very seriously. So being faculty administration at a land grant, it goes with that sense of belonging in that we have this understanding of who we all are on campus, which we're working on those connections. And then we have the life that we live that's outside of campus too. And that goes to the extension, the outreach, making sure that the moment we walk off campus, that we don't have a different feeling of how we belong or that we don't feel that we belong, and that we're creating a community that's just as up to date as the university is. And so in being part of that, wanting to belong outside in my community, I've joined communities, programs, institutes that help develop spaces for people of color. So BIPOC Alliance is one of the groups that I work very closely with as a grant writer.

And it was an awesome opportunity then to join forces to say, we have a responsibility at Colorado State University to make sure that we have a community that we are educating or that we're linking with, that we hear your interest as far as what the university should be doing, but we're also paying it forward in the community as a university as well. So I was like, so give me anything, anything you want me to write a grant on, anything that we can collaborate with. How can I make it a better place for our faculty, staff, students, but also for our community? And so we wrote a program, the Dandelions Rising Program, together, which empowers our children and also gives them resilience in the BIPOC community. And so now we're linking and we're working together to show that we want to help create educational spaces where we can have sense of belonging or have students that are resilient and can speak up to who they are or how they belong.

If the school district is falling short or they don't have time to teach these things, to give them a space to really feel empowered. Because we have allies of all sorts. We have a wonderful grant writing team that consists of maybe eight white women who just keep it together, writing grants, filing grants, doing reports for grants. And they're okay to be like, we're not trying to take anything away, we're the silent group, you don't have to put us anywhere. We want to make sure that our kids are growing up in a space where they respect diversity. And so to see that CSU is moving in with our community and that we have moms and fathers that want to make sure that their students are respecting diversity and understand diversity and different cultures and ethnicities and LBGT community, is what that land grant really means to me, and how I work moving in those spaces.

Avery Martin: Isn't this powerful?

Michelle Foster: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Yes. So chemist, neuroscientist, fat cell biologist, teacher of nutrition, administrator, but above all things, the way you wrap this up is perfect. You're a builder. All those other things, notwithstanding a builder. A builder of people, a builder of relationships, families, community. We should give you an honorary appointment and construction management.

Michelle Foster: You know what, I'm going to take it and be like, where's my hat for graduation?

Matt Hickey: But what better academic home for someone like that than the College of Health and Human Sciences?

Michelle Foster: Yes. Putting it all together.

Matt Hickey: Thanks for joining us.

Michelle Foster: Oh, thank you for having me.

Matt Hickey: What a blast.

Avery Martin: Thank you, Dr. Foster. This was great.

Michelle Foster: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Another great interview is in the books. Thank you for listening to this episode of Health and Human Science Matters.

Avery Martin: Stay tuned for the next episode, it's on the way. In the meantime, go listen to our episodes from seasons one, two, and three. And if you want to learn more about our CSU College of Health and Human Sciences, go to www.chhs.colostate.edu.