Improving Scientific Workforce Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion by Listening

By Ashley Pratt

The Scientific Workforce Diversity (SWD) Committee, a part of the STRIVE initiative, recently held listening sessions to better understand what steps can be taken to promote diversity among the NICHD-supported workforce. Researchers from within NICHD and the broader scientific community attended. The listening sessions included open-ended questions that sparked conversation about what best contributes to diversity in research for early-career (listening session one) through senior level (listening session two) scientists.

Participants in both sessions discussed many barriers, as well as supports, that greatly impact one’s ability to succeed in the scientific workforce. This article will summarize the broader themes that were echoed across these sessions, specifically focusing on solutions proposed by attendees to combat these challenges and promote diversity. The SWD committee will use the input from these sessions to inform NICHD’s strategic plan implementation, as well as an upcoming workshop titled, “A Pathway to Enhance Workforce Diversity.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING

Sincere, supportive mentorship was repeatedly mentioned throughout the sessions as one of the most important predictors of success in research. Attendees pointed to mentorship as being particularly vital during early-career development but also noted that opportunities for mentorship should be available at all stages in scientific careers. Many attendees cited a mentor’s cultural insensitivity and poor teaching skills as common characteristics that create significant challenges for trainees. Individuals from underrepresented groups tend to be particularly vulnerable to these traits.

Across all sessions, participants repeatedly voiced that institutional support of mentorship training could help to address these concerns. Training could specifically help mentors develop cultural sensitivity and teaching skills. Finally, any efforts that could lead to the establishment of more mentor-mentee relationships, both within and across institutions, would be particularly beneficial for underrepresented groups in science.

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Letter from the Editor

I have an 11-year-old son who frequently approaches me with requests that I deem outlandish. Right now he wants a medieval sword for his birthday. When I say “no” without hesitation to his appeals, I’m promptly met with an exasperated “You’re not listening to me!” And he’s right. Sometimes I respond too quickly and fail to explore his perspective. I cement in my mind that I already know the right answer. But this time, my failure to talk about his birthday wish led to a frustrated, defeated child who felt unheard. I relay this story to remind everyone that sometimes we need to stop “knowing” and start listening.

Our feature article this month reports on the recent STRIVE initiative listening sessions, an interactive forum designed to garner input from the biomedical community on ways to improve the diversity of NICHD-supported scientists. Postbac fellow Ashley Pratt summarizes the listening sessions’ key themes so that we can all gain a better understanding of the obstacles facing underrepresented groups in science. These themes will inform a virtual workshop, “Path to Enhancing Scientific Workforce Diversity,” to be held this month on May 18, from 12 noon to 5 p.m. Check your emails for the invite.

Continuing with the theme of listening, we encourage all NICHD trainees to attend the new Tenure-Track Investigator Symposium Series kicking off this month on May 12, at 1 p.m. Early career scientists offer fresh ideas and perspectives to their fields of study. Don’t miss this opportunity to hear about cutting-edge research during these once-a-month mini-symposia organized by our intramural tenure-track investigators. Other informative events this month can be found in the Rep Report and May announcements and events.

So, all that said, will I buy my son a medieval sword for his birthday? No. But I eventually listened to his reasons for wanting one—and maybe a few fencing lessons are in his future.

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

This is a newsletter for NICHD fellows, by NICHD fellows. We want to hear from you! Please send your questions, comments, and ideas to our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov.
Improving Scientific Workforce Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion by Listening
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ACCOMMODATING FOR DIFFERENT NEEDS
One participant put it quite eloquently when they said that scientific institutions need “diverse policies to support diverse people.” This participant, along with many others, highlighted the importance of accommodating diverse needs among researchers and cited policies that restrict the accessibility of a career in science for many groups. Examples of such policies included restrictions upon additional work outside of research, the inability of undocumented immigrants to apply for certain positions, and inflexible work schedules. Greater accommodations and flexible policies to address these barriers would be beneficial for parents and caretakers, undocumented immigrants, and individuals who need a second income, for example.

Lack of support for mental health was also noted as a common barrier that should be addressed across institutions. Some participants said that a greater consideration for work-life balance could increase the desirability of a career in science and make such occupations more accessible to diverse groups.

PURPOSEFUL AND CONTINUAL OUTREACH
Attendees emphasized that access to and visibility of scientific careers needs to be bolstered to successfully recruit diverse populations. This exposure to programs in science needs to happen early in education and continuously during training. One commenter even noted that there can never be too many “invitations” sent out to communities and that there is no such thing as too much outreach in trying to promote diversity early in the science pipeline. Additionally, it was noted that administrations can do more to ensure the visibility of opportunities for researchers to develop their careers.

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Participants emphasized that researchers and organizers should “meet communities where they are” and utilize local leaders to vouch for the needs of the communities they aim to serve. Such outreach could allow for greater understanding of the needs of diverse communities that are being supported through research, as well as the diverse communities that participate in research.

ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION AND BIASES IN THE WORKFORCE

Many participants cited discrimination, biases, and cultural insensitivity/ignorance as major barriers that still plague the scientific community. This was openly discussed as being true at both the individual and institutional levels.

Suggestions to address these ongoing concerns included greater education on diversity, inclusion, and equity across institutions, as well as direct training in allyship and biases for investigators. Some participants noted the importance of considering how discrimination and inequity can create unique challenges for investigators from different groups. For example, a “minority tax” was mentioned as a common challenge faced by individuals from underrepresented groups, in which uncompensated demands and roles are placed upon these individuals to address diversity.

Finally, many attendees noted that NICHD has a responsibility to use its institutional platform to further promote education in topics of discrimination and biases, as well as to practice the use of inclusive policies and language when communicating with the public.

FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Participants across sessions discussed financial burdens that create obstacles for researchers who are trying to establish themselves as investigators. These obstacles include hidden costs of traveling to conferences, the additional cost to hire a team for one’s lab, as well as high costs of living in some regions of the country. Participants pointed to financial support for such expenses as a direct solution to many of these barriers. Additionally, many attendees expressed a desire to receive more direct institutional support in the grant writing process.

Using financial incentives to encourage specific practices and policies across institutions is one route NICHD can use to combat many obstacles for diverse groups. Financial programs and grants that directly benefit underrepresented groups can greatly promote diversity. One participant described a previous program that specifically provided funding to African American researchers as being a successful example of this type of support.

CONCLUSION

Participants provided a hefty amount of honest and constructive feedback during these listening sessions. Receiving feedback from the scientific community on the barriers they face can inform NICHD in future steps to provide support for the workforce. Additionally, this information will help the institute understand how underrepresented groups are uniquely impacted by such barriers and what steps would be most fruitful for promoting diversity.
The new NICHD Division of Intramural Research (DIR) Tenure-Track Investigator Symposium Series, beginning this month, is an important opportunity for NICHD fellows to gain exposure to cutting-edge areas of science. Each month, a tenure-track investigator within NICHD DIR will have the opportunity to organize a virtual mini-symposium showcasing their field of research. These symposia are open to all faculty, trainees, and staff at the NIH.

We encourage all NICHD trainees to attend these mini-symposia to welcome new tenure-track investigators, expand your breadth of knowledge, and form strong networks and collaborations within the community. Symposia will be held one Thursday a month beginning at 1 p.m. Dates and topics are listed on page 6.

NICHD Launches the Tenure-Track Investigator Symposium Series

Utilizing Single Cell Technologies to Understand Brain Development

May 12, 2022 • 1:00–4:00 PM • https://nih.zoomgov.com/j/1605758868

HOSTED BY DR. TIMOTHY PETROS

“A comprehensive spatial epigenome atlas of the embryonic mouse brain”
TIMOTHY J. PETROS, PhD
Investigator, Unit on Cellular and Molecular Neurodevelopment
Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, National Institutes of Health

“Signals making a splash: Choroid plexus—cerebrospinal fluid contributions to brain development”
MARIA K. LEHTINEN, PhD
Hannah C. Kinney, MD, Chair in Pediatric Pathology Research, Boston Children’s Hospital
Associate Professor, Harvard Medical School

“Organoid modeling of gene regulatory events during forebrain development”
FLORA M. VACCARINO, MD
Professor, Child Study Center and Department of Neuroscience, Yale School of Medicine

“Single cell epigenome atlases of the brain”
BING REN, PhD
Member of the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research (LICR)
Director of the Center for Epigenomics, Professor of Cellular and Molecular Medicine, University of California, San Diego

“Development and evolution of the human brain revealed by single cell transcriptomics”
ARNOLD KRIEGSTEIN, MD, PhD
Professor of Neurobiology, University of California, San Francisco

This event is for NIH staff and trainees only.

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## Tenure-Track Investigator Symposium Series
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<td>Utilizing single cell technologies to understand brain development</td>
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<td>Regulation of genome structure and expression: Untangling functions and mechanisms</td>
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The Rep Report
By Lauren Walling, PhD

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the NIH Fellows Committee (FelCom) meeting every month and share the latest news with you here. Do you have a concern or question that you want brought up at the next meeting? Contact me at lauren.walling@nih.gov!

Good news for trainees! The Office of Intramural Research announced that starting May 1st all trainees will be getting a raise! Postdocs will receive a 4.5% increase, and graduate students and postbacs will also receive a raise. This will likely not be seen until your June stipend payment.

Registration is open for the OITE Career Symposium, taking place May 11–13. Register at the OITE website. There are currently ~250 invited speakers and OITE will be working with the Health and Recreation subcommittee (Committee Chair: Dr. Tiffany Zarella (tiffany.zarrella@nih.gov), postdoctoral PRAT fellow) to coordinate in person meet-ups.

The Visiting Fellows Committee has five open positions for any interested fellows. They have one vacancy for the secretary position, two vacancies in the social subcommittee, and two for the country rep & visibility subcommittee. Please send a statement of interest and CV to harrison.daly@nih.gov and aditi.chaurasia@nih.gov.

The second half of the April FelCom meeting was a presentation by guest speakers Dr. Shai Silberberg (Director of the Office of Research Quality, NINDS) and Dr. Devon Crawford (Program Director, Office of Research Quality, NINDS). Their excellent talk focused on scientific rigor and transparency and how to address unconscious bias in our research. Check out the NINDS Office of Research Quality website for more resources on the topic.
May Announcements

DO YOU HAVE AN OUTSTANDING MENTOR?

The time has come for you to nominate your fellow or PI for the 2022 NICHD Mentor of the Year Awards. This is your chance to recognize an individual in the Division of Intramural Research (DIR) or Division of Intramural Population Health Research (DIPHR) whose mentoring has made a difference in your life at the NIH!

Below is the link to obtain information about the NICHD’s two annual intramural Mentor of the Year Awards, one for a fellow and one for an investigator. Please submit your nomination form and a 500-word (maximum) narrative electronically to Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov).

The submission deadline is Friday, July 29, 2022.

Please contact the Office of Education if you have any questions about the nomination instructions or selection process. Information available at: Mentor of the Year Awards.

JAPAN SOCIETY FOR PROMOTION OF SCIENCE ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR NIH INTRAMURAL FELLOWSHIP

This NIH Intramural Fellowship was created in 1995 to promote bilateral cooperation between NIH and the JSPS Foundation. This partnership-based program is primarily funded by the JSPS Foundation with co-funding from the NIH host institute or center. JSPS is the largest government-supported foundation in Japan that provides fellowships to Japanese scientists.

The NIH-JSPS Intramural Fellowship provides a two-year stipend to Japanese postdocs to work at NIH intramural labs. This fellowship is awarded to about 10 postdocs annually. For more information about the fellowship and application documents, please visit https://jpsusa.org/wp/fellowship/kaitoku-nih. The application due date is 5:00 p.m. on Friday, May 27.

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FREE SERVICE TO DOUBLE CHECK MISSED CITATIONS OR POTENTIAL PLAGIARISM

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**INSTRUCTIONS**

_Request an iThenticate report_ through the Library’s Editing Service. Upon receiving your request, an NIH Library editor will run your unpublished manuscript in iThenticate and send you the report. Reports are usually delivered within three business days.

The plagiarism checking service is part of the **NIH Library’s Editing Service**. For more information, contact Yolanda Jones, yolanda.jones@nih.gov.

**SAVE THE DATE: 2022 THREE-MINUTE-TALK (TMT) PROGRAM FINAL COMPETITION**

_Thursday, June 30, 10 a.m.–12 noon_

Imagine describing your research in less than three minutes. See how it’s done!

We would like to invite everyone to our final TmT Virtual event for 2022, where our NICHD finalists will present their research stories with others from NHGRI, NIDCR, NIAMS, NEI, NCATS, NIDCD, NIAID, NIDDK, NINDS, NIEHS and NLM.

A Zoom link will be circulated to NICHD trainees and staff a few days prior to the event.

**NIH UNITE: ENDING STRUCTURAL RACISM (ESR) ACTIVITIES**

The **NIH UNITE initiative** was established to identify and address structural racism within the NIH-supported and the greater scientific community.

The **ESR Intranet** includes various resources like the **Toolkit, Newsletter, FAQs**, and other information.

**UNITE Milestones and Progress** and the **Co-Chairs Corner** (public ESR webpages) are other avenues to stay informed on UNITE efforts.
May Events

WEDNESDAY–FRIDAY, MAY 11–13, 11 AM–5:45 PM
15th Annual NIH Career Symposium
Virtual Only

The NIH Career Symposium is an annual event for all fellows who are interested in what career options are available to biomedical researchers. Please visit the 15th Annual Career Symposium website for more information.

THURSDAY, MAY 12, 1–4 PM
NICHD DIR Tenure-Track Investigator Virtual Symposia Series
“Utilizing Single Cell Technologies to Understand Brain Development”
Hosted by Dr. Timothy Petros

This event is for NIH staff and trainees only.

This series provides tenure-track investigators within NICHD the opportunity to organize a virtual mini-symposium to showcase their area of science to the NICHD DIR and larger NIH intramural community. These symposia are open to all faculty, trainees, and staff at the NIH. See page 5 for speaker information.


MONDAY–WEDNESDAY, MAY 16–18, 1–4:30 PM
Virtual Three-Day Grant Writing Workshop for All NICHD & NINDS Fellows
“Write Winning NIH Grant Proposals”
Virtual Only

This event is for NIH staff and trainees only.

The workshop will address both practical and conceptual aspects that are important to the proposal-writing process. Attendees will receive the “Grant Writer’s Workbook”—an invaluable, up-to-date reference tool for those who intend to write NIH grants in the future.

This event requires pre-registration. Please contact Ms. Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov) for availability.

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May Events
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WEDNESDAY, MAY 18, 12–5 PM
STRIVE Scientific Workforce Diversity (SWD) Committee Virtual Workshop
“Path to Enhancing Scientific Workforce Diversity”

During this workshop, members of the scientific community will discuss strategies for fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) among NICHD's grantees and trainees, as well as in the broader scientific workforce.

Workshop discussions will build on lessons learned from last month's listening sessions, which were hosted by the SWD Committee to better understand how NICHD can improve DEIA among its investigators and trainees, including those from groups typically underrepresented in health, biomedical, and biobehavioral research.

Click here to register.

Individuals who need reasonable accommodations to participate in the workshop should contact Carly Sullivan at csullivan@palladianpartners.com at least 5 business days before the event.

We hope you will join us for this important conversation. If you have any questions, please email us at STRIVE_NICHD@nih.gov.

THURSDAY, MAY 26, 3–4 PM
Fellows Advisory Committee Meeting
Virtual Only

The committee meets monthly to help develop and provide input on career development programs to support NICHD fellows. The Advisory Committee will also steer the annual NICHD Fellows' Retreat, which will be held in fall 2022. This includes developing the program, reviewing abstracts, selecting speakers, and moderating sessions. This is a great opportunity to serve your NICHD community and have an impact on the programs and career development opportunities available to fellows!

If you are interested in joining the committee, please email Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov). The Zoom link will be circulated a few days in advance.

ONGOING EVENTS AROUND CAMPUS
NIH-Wide Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) Events
For more information and registration, please visit Upcoming OITE Events.

NIH Library Training and Events
For more information and registration, please visit the NIH Library Calendar.