



You've Had Your First Diversity and Inclusion Meeting – Now What?: A Model for Sustaining Meaningful Conversations on Diversity and Inclusion Within STEM Training Environments

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Short Summary of Presentation: In the wake of nationwide movements for racial and social justice, scientists are more aware than ever of the problem of building and sustaining diverse research and training environments. In this presentation, we report on an intervention intended to foster ongoing dialogue about diversity and marginalization in biomedical research science. The data come from the intervention arm of a randomized-controlled trial of a novel coaching intervention consisting of small groups of trainees and faculty coaches. The data reveal how this model was effective in sustaining meaningful dialogue on diversity and building capacity for inclusion practices in biomedical research science.

Abstract

The events of 2020, including the growing visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd, catalyzed a movement for racial justice unlike any since the Civil Rights Movement. Across academia, students, faculty, and leaders are increasingly engaging with issues of racial equity and justice. Within the context of STEM training, there has been a dramatic shift in awareness of these issues. Questions like, "Should we talk about race, gender and other differences within mentoring relationships?" evolved into more actionable questions, like: "How do we make these conversations possible?" "How do we accomplish something we have failed to do for decades?" "What is the most effective way to build and sustain dialogue about diversity?" Interventions targeting these questions of diversity and inclusion have developed over the past few years. For example, the Culturally Aware Mentoring program (CAM) is a workshop-based approach for teaching faculty and trainees to engage in diversity dialogues in academic science. Studies of CAM have demonstrated its immediate impacts on faculty and administrators, as well as longer-lived impacts on some (1,2). As comprehensive and effective as CAM is in the short-term, it is unlikely that a single-event intervention will be sufficient to initiate the ongoing dialogue required to foster sustainable changes in inclusive insights and practices to eradicate barriers to equity and inclusion in academic science.

Beginning in 2011, our research team at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine began an experiment involving faculty-led coaching groups, with the long-term goal of



increasing and sustaining diversity in biomedical faculty ranks (3,4). The Academy for Future Science Faculty (the Academy) paired groups of ten PhD students with trained faculty coaches from outside of the students' home institutions. Annual in-person meetings occurred over a period of two to three years and coaching groups continued to meet virtually for about three years following the initial meetings. Coaching groups were heterogeneous, and equally balanced by gender and race/ethnicity to foster conversations across identity groups. The intervention employed a novel, intensive introduction to: 1) social science theories that underpin progression and barriers within social systems, including STEM; and 2) the history of and ongoing realities of how racism and privilege result in differential treatment of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and other minoritized groups. The frameworks introduced to students, and activities of the Academy, allowed them to engage in deep and meaningful discussions of diversity. The study team continues to follow participants through annual in-depth interviews; these interviews have revealed how the Academy affected their perceptions of diversity, discrimination, and the importance of building and sustaining diverse research environments.

This presentation draws on interviews with Academy participants conducted at least four years after the end of the coaching group virtual meetings. The interviews have captured participants' lasting memories of and reactions to group-based exposure and dialogue related to diversity and inclusion. In particular, the data reveal how participants continue to apply the social theories introduced in the intervention, such as microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and cultural capital, to make sense of and navigate science as a social system. Similarly, participants continue to recall the group discussions on the meaning and importance of diversity and inclusion. The data reveal strong and lasting impacts for many participants. Some participants reported drawing on their experiences in the Academy to engage in or lead diversity efforts in their current positions. Others have reflected on perspective changes and the importance of sustaining diverse research environments. These impacts occurred among participants from across gender and racial/ethnic groups, and were notable among traditionally well-represented students. Among the many examples of transformative perspective changes are new strategies for navigating and responding to racism, increased engagement in proactive diversity and inclusion efforts, and the ability to observe and name instances of marginalization. For those who elected to continue in academic research science, the impacts of the intervention are likely to be felt in the long-term and allow increased capacity to build and sustain diverse research environments.

As part of the Deeper Dive discussions, we will explore a number of different designs and approaches groups could adopt, and offer guidance on how to facilitate these groups. Done effectively, such efforts could be effective in reshaping the norms and expectations for cross-cultural understanding so essential for effective mentoring.

References

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