Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Webinar Hosted by ASP

By Nadja Cech, PhD

On Thursday, November 12, 2020 the American Society of Pharmacognosy hosted a webinar titled "Fostering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Scientific Research Groups." The recording is freely available at this link: vimeo.com/483614103. There were 127 participants from 33 countries. The heart of the event was the thoughtful, careful, and personal contributions provided by a panel of scientists with a range of experiences in academia.

Panel members included Luis Mejia Cruz, recent graduate from the MSc program at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, Dr. Katherine Duncan, associate professor in Marine Microbial Drug Discovery at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, Mabel Gonzalez, PhD candidate at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Elizabeth Kaweesa, PhD candidate at the Whitney Laboratory at the University of Florida, Dr. Brian Murphy, associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, Sophia Powells, clinical laboratory technologist at Aerotek, Dr. Renã Robinson, associate professor and Dorothy J. Wingfield Chancellor's Fellow at Vanderbilt University, and Dr. Sabah Ul-Hasan, bioinformatics postdoctoral scholar and lecturer at the Scripps Research Institute.

Dr. Nadja Cech, Patricia A. Sullivan Professor of Chemistry at UNC Greensboro, moderated the discussion, which began with the simple question, "What does an inclusive environment look like to you?"

Mejia Cruz set the tone for the discussion by pointing out the importance of our willingness to listen to each other, so that everyone has the chance to be heard. Duncan built on this idea by pointing out that there is a need not just to listen, but also to reflect and adapt. This idea of openness to reflecting, listening, checking in, adapting, and modifying our practices to become even more inclusive became a theme for the entire conversation.

As Kaweesa put it, "Inclusivity involves creating a sense of belonging…where everyone feels valued and part of a team."

Murphy added that it is essential to create an environment where people feel that they can learn safely and that differences will be respected.

The panel suggested that we have much to gain from creating inclusive environments in our laboratories. Gonzalez captured this idea eloquently. "I was born in one of the most megadiverse countries in the world, which is Colombia," she said. "I think that in the same way that diversity is important for life, it is also important to have cultural diversity in human communities."

Adding to this, Gonzalez pointed out that it is not enough, though, to bring people from diverse backgrounds into our laboratories. She suggested that we must truly take advantage of that diversity. Towards this goal, the panel provided a number of helpful suggestions for how to create a thriving, inclusive, creative environment in a research laboratory. Robinson started off by saying, "A true sense of belonging starts on day one by something as simple as getting people's names right. How do you pronounce your name? Is it an emphasis on the 'Mo'? Or is an emphasis on the 'Ma'?"

A few other helpful suggestions compiled from the conversation with the panel are as follows:

- Make sure that it is not just about science; reach out to get to know each other as fellow humans and to make time to talk about both life and science.
- Listen and let go of ego.
- Use our position of privilege (recognizing that all of us are privileged in various ways) to help

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—Mejia Cruz

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others, by speaking up for others or providing a space for their voices.

- Invite others to participate in laboratory discussions, as presenters at events, or in celebrations/happy hours, social activities, etc.
- Take the time to learn people's names, and practice until we get them right.
- Be vulnerable (as the PI), break down barriers, and admit we do not have all the answers.
- Check up on people and make sure they are doing okay.
- Be public and vocal about anti-racism and anti-ethnocentrism, especially as a principal investigator or senior lab member.
- Be aware of campus resources (such as mental health, counseling, crisis response) and take the time to make members of the group/department aware of them. If the institution does not have these resources, encourage those in power to establish them.
- Whether you are starting out or a seasoned investigator, be intentional about the environment you are creating in your laboratory.
- Create the space for learning about topics that extend beyond the details of the scientific research, for example learning about and celebrating cultures and traditions outside the US, breaking the hegemony of English, or discussing topics related to diversity, equity and inclusion.
- In laboratory discussions, create space where everyone has a chance to speak. Sometimes this is best accomplished by going around the room (or Zoom) and giving all participants a chance to comment one by one.

The webinar concluded with a discussion about how important it is to continually check in and work towards creating a better environment for our students and colleagues, to be intentional and not get complacent. The panel acknowledged that sometimes conversations around topics like ethnocentrism, racism and sexism can be difficult, particularly for individuals who are not in a position of privilege, i.e., individuals from groups underrepresented in the sciences. These conversations are also an opportunity to build community and make the environment better for everyone.

Ul-Hasan pointed out that we as scientists should be well equipped to question the practices we employ when setting up and managing research laboratories. "An irony here is that as scientists we're constantly encouraging each other to critique each other's work," she said, "so, why is this subject so difficult for us to confront and consider? If anything, we should be some of the most equipped people in terms of the work we do to take criticism."

One of the listeners asked the panel how to address the problem that the work of creating change at academic institutions is often done by those who are already underprivileged by the structure of the system. Mejia Cruz and Powell responded to this question by turning it around, pointing out that we are all in posi-

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In Powell's words, "Kids are going to be very important for our future... we have to encourage them at a younger age to be interested in science."

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tions of some privilege and that we can give that to others, particularly the young generation of scientists. In Powell's words, "Kids are going to be very important for our future…we have to encourage them at a younger age to be interested in science."

Many who listened in on the panel expressed great appreciation for the time taken to have this conversation and commented that they left feeling encouraged by the insights shared by all of the panelists. Kaweesa summed up the conversation perfectly. "This is a journey, not a destination," she said. "Keep working on your craft, just as a musician would. It does not stop at just one video."

Many thanks to all those who took the time to participate in the webinar. We appreciate having all of our members of the American Society of Pharmacognosy on this journey with us. ■

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—Elizabeth Kaweesa

SOME ADDITIONAL READING ON THIS TOPIC CAN BE FOUND IN THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

1. Hofstra, B.; Kulkarni, V. V.; Munoz-Najar Galvez, S.; He, B.; Jurafsky, D.; McFarland, D. A. The Diversity–Innovation Paradox in Science. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.* **2020**, *117* (17), 9284. www.pnas.org/content/117/17/9284
2. Landis, B. Y.; Bajak, A.; de la Hoz, J. F.; González, J. G.; Gose, R.; Tibbs, C. P; Oskin, B. CómoSciWri: Resources to Help Science Writers Engage Bicultural and Bilingual Audiences in the United States. **2020**, *5* (10). www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00010/full
3. Larson, E. New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making at Work. *Forbes*. **2017**. www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/?sh=5e32f24d4cbf
4. Márquez, M. C.; Porras, A. M. Science Communication in Multiple Languages Is Critical to Its Effectiveness. **2020,** *5* (31). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00031/full
5. Prescod-Weinstein, C. Decolonising Science Reading List: It's the End of Science as We Know It. https://medium.com/@chanda/decolonising-science-reading-list-339fb773d51f.
6. Sanford, M. S. Equity and Inclusion in the Chemical Sciences Requires Actions Not Just Words. *ACS Central Science*. **2020,** *6* (7), 1010-1011. https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acscentsci.0c00784