

Commentary

Diversity in Neuroscience: How This Moment Is Different

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Anyone familiar with me knows that I have been a tireless advocate for diversity in neuroscience for almost 40 years. As a Black woman neuroscientist and, now, as Trinity College president, I have spoken about the compelling arguments for diversity in science and education: A diverse team is stronger and better at developing creative solutions (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017). A diverse workforce yields better outcomes (Strauss Einhorn, 2019) for an organization. A diverse group of scientists is more likely to pursue a wider variety of important research questions, such as those that fulfill needs in their diverse communities. For example, those who are more familiar with economic structural inequalities and racism may want to study these societal effects on early brain development.

And I've advocated for the urgent need for diversity: If the United States is to remain an international leader in neuroscience, we must develop the diverse talent that exists throughout our country in every zip code and not limit access to science to those in wealthy zip codes. We must increase opportunities for access to more of our talented youth to succeed in scientific discovery. Our continued success as a leader in neuroscience requires nurturing the best talent from all parts of society.

This moment is different

Over these four decades, I have seen a continuum of change toward greater diversity and inclusion; I have seen times of progress, and I have seen times of regression. But I feel that *this* moment is different. Today we are called to go beyond passive measures to actively pursue anti-

racism, equity, and restorative justice. Incremental progress is no longer sufficient; bolder, more sweeping actions are necessary to ensure the quality of our scientific inquiry and as a fundamental principle of the country's economic growth.

The June 2023 decision by the Supreme Court (SCOTUS) restricting the use of race in undergraduate admissions (College Board, 2023) may feel as though it pushes us to retreat on our diversity goals, but nothing is farther from the truth. The SCOTUS decision may restrict how we select classes of undergraduates for admissions to colleges and universities, but it neither erases the country's history of discrimination or the fact that our society has never been "color-blind" nor reduces the compelling arguments for the value of diversity in our society.

This moment is not a time to walk away from our commitment to diversity in neuroscience or in our society more generally. As Martin Luther King Jr. compelled us, "This is not a time for complacency; we must embrace the fierce urgency of now" (Quest, 2023) to move forward our agenda to create the neuroscience community that we wish to be and that we need to be. We are beyond the need for small incremental change.

The scientific community's poignant acknowledgment

Who can forget Kafui Dzirasa's (2020) commentary, "For Black scientists, the sorrow is also personal," in which he shared his experiences as an African American neuroscientist and medical doctor? "I have tried to live in a world that does not see color but have only succeeded in living in a world that does not see me," he wrote.

His personal narrative is underscored by the data: just 1%–2% of scientists awarded major grants by the National Institutes of Health are Black.

It also is clear that systemic racism has demonstrable effects on mind, body, and

spirit and is associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Paradies et al., 2015), an area that remains significantly understudied (Bale and Jovanovic, 2021). The disproportionate impact on Black bodies is real and deadly (Barber, 2020), and has only worsened since the pandemic.

For more than two decades, I have been involved in federally sponsored programs to support training a more diverse workforce of neuroscientists. Wonderful programs, such as the Neuroscience Scholars Programs (Society for Neuroscience, 2023), the Minority Training Grant, and the Summer Program in Neuroscience, Excellence and Success (University of Chicago, 2023), collectively have trained thousands of underrepresented neuroscientists, including those who are Black and Hispanic.

The number of active Black and Hispanic neuroscientists is difficult to obtain; however, if we look (as a proxy) at the overall impact of these programs and other similar programs, such as these on Black and Hispanic instructional faculty nationwide, it appears limited. The most recently available national data show that in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), ~11.2% of full-time faculty at colleges and universities were Black and Hispanic, only a slight increase from 9.0% in 2003 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). It is impossible to call this significant or rapid progress when Blacks and Hispanics make up >30% of the U.S. population. What is clear is that an enormous amount of talent in underrepresented populations is being wasted; we simply can't afford to waste talent.

Incremental change is not sufficient; we must move more swiftly and more deliberately to counter the effects of racism and to create more justice in neuroscience. We need bold actions to redress systemic racism; quiet calls for diversity and inclusion are no longer adequate. This moment must be different.

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More than incremental change

In 2004, I made a bold move to leave the “bench” as a full-time neuroscientist to take up a career as an academic administrator. My decision was steeped in a desire to have a deeper and broader impact on education and on diversity. Now, as the first Black, first woman, and first neuroscientist president at Trinity College (Trinity College, 2023b), I have the opportunity to have a different kind of impact. At my institution, we have taken significant steps forward to create a more diverse and inclusive environment, although, of course, much work remains. Our diversity goals are based on an analysis of our past shortcomings. I believe that the best practices described here are relevant to an individual laboratory, a neuroscience department, an institution of higher education, other nonprofits, and any industry in which members of the neuroscience community work. Below are some of the high-impact practices (Trinity College, 2020) that we have initiated to help make Trinity a more diverse, inclusive, and actively anti-racist community.

• Remembering that numbers and representation matter

We have successfully completed a 3 year faculty hiring initiative to strengthen diversity in our tenure-track faculty. The Special Opportunity Hires initiative aimed to increase faculty diversity through six hires in each of the 3 years; 18 new hires were made without the addition of new tenure-track lines in a tenure-track faculty of 173. At an academic institution, faculty is critical in promoting an inclusive climate. Along with this hiring initiative, we launched a cohort-based faculty mentoring program to ensure support when our new faculty arrived on campus. In 3 years, after a decade of stagnating faculty diversity, we increased tenure-line faculty of color from 21% to 35% and increased tenure-line faculty of color in STEM from 27% to 41%. This program has dramatically hastened the diversification and strengthening of the faculty and will be transformative for our campus. Our students of color look around campus and see faculty who look like them. It makes a difference.

• Seeding the value of diversity from the top

Trinity created a Board of Trustees committee on diversity, equity, and inclusion to focus on these issues and to ensure accountability. The tone of an organization is set from the top. This trustee committee

has engaged meaningfully with multicultural groups on campus to listen to their concerns and their ideas for solutions. This committee organized educational efforts for board members and also is creating a diversity dashboard with which to monitor our progress on campus, on the board, and among our alumni groups.

• Being willing to take uncomfortable actions to uphold your values

We renamed a residence hall on campus (Trinity College, 2022) and developed strong, value-based criteria for renaming buildings, against the protest of some alumni. I have no interest in erasing the rich and complex history of Trinity College, founded in 1823. I do believe that it is essential that we face our history and move toward restorative justice. It was important for our students to see that we were willing to face the problems in our complex past to create a more inclusive future.

• Directing resources to support your values and to measure outcomes

I directed presidential funds (several hundred thousand dollars) to support multicultural activities that had been chronically underfunded and numerous anti-racist education activities, including multiconstituent, community-wide discussions. Our most recent campus climate survey showed demonstrable increases over the last 3 years in students' support of racial equity; we believe that the changes in attitude resulted from these extensive educational efforts on campus.

• Making diversity a community priority, not housed in a single person or office

In addition to having an excellent Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, we made sure to infuse responsibility for diversity throughout the institution. We requested diversity, equity, and inclusion plans from every constituent group in our community, including trustees, alumni, faculty, staff, academic and administrative departments, and student groups. These resulted in our Action Plan for Racial Justice (Trinity College, 2023a), with specific metrics and accountability.

Collectively, these changes are resetting expectations that Trinity should strive to be an anti-racist community in which all members can thrive: scientists and non-scientists alike. We are seizing this moment to embed diversity and inclusion in our work every day.

A call to action

This moment is different because collective action has always been necessary to

make significant change and now seems possible. “Fighting racism demands more than words (Gewin, 2020).” We recognize the problem. Now the demands for change and racial justice are being answered with concrete and meaningful actions.

I invite our readers to share publicly the work that they have done to move the needle beyond incremental diversity to bold anti-racist actions. My challenge to the Society for Neuroscience is to capture this information and to provide a repository for the change that we have created and the change we wish to be. You can make a difference, and you can be a part of how *this* moment is different.

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