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A Diverse and Inclusive Academic Membership for All

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ABSTRACT

With the growing recognition that diversity and inclusion are essential for the improvement of science and innovation, this commentary provides some perspectives on three findings in the DeVilbiss et al. (2020)'s article and provide points of discussion on factors and strategies to consider when drafting diversity and inclusion programs for the Society for Epidemiologic Research.

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Cultural Diversity.

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We read with great interest the article by DeVilbiss et al. (1) and commend the authors for their effort in creating a baseline assessment of the society's diversity and inclusion experiences among its members. We offer the following comments and observations regarding the results.

A first observation is that members more often selected multiple racial/ethnic categories in replying to the anonymous survey than when registering for membership. How can we interpret this discrepancy? One option is that when registering to become members, epidemiologists of underrepresented groups are reluctant to share their race in order not to be discriminated against because of their race and only be assessed by their excellency. This issue is irrelevant in an anonymous survey. Another option is that by preserving race anonymity, minority-SER members want to prevent being picked up to participate and contribute to initiatives for increasing diversity and inclusion. These tasks, requested from a group already overwhelmed with research and teaching responsibilities, come without credit or compensation. However, this is to the detriment of SER, since it increases the chances of implementing ineffective diversity and inclusion initiatives. In any case, this suggests that to monitor the progress in diversity, SER should remove the race/ethnicity question from its membership application, run periodic anonymous surveys among its members, and find different ways to motivate minority members while providing support and recognition for their involvement.

This leads to the second observation: minority members, regardless of gender, were least likely to feel very welcomed in the Society, despite the commitment of the

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Society's leadership to improve diversity and inclusion. This result highlights the need to revisit current SER diversity programs and evaluate why these programs are not producing the expected "welcoming environment free from discrimination." And note that among the 22 non-responding individuals with missing race/ethnicity information, only 13.1% of felt very welcomed, suggesting again that these were mostly minority respondents. It might be the case that current diversity programs are affected by the persistence of power imbalances within participating members, overdependency of minority on non-minority members, and conflicting goals between minority and non-minority members, which might undermine long-term plans for sustainability. A few lessons from global health on equitable partnerships could help improve SER diversity and inclusion programs (2). In essence, selection of contributors based on skills and knowledge, determine essential resources for success, adhere to a predetermined set of collaboration terms, create common goals addressing significant obstacles, and develop plans for sustainability and performance evaluations.

Third, as expected, members who felt welcome by the society were 13% more likely to engage in the Society. The next waves of this survey may ask what made members feel very welcome or be engaged with the society's activities, what made other members not feel welcome, what changes can make the unwelcome more engaged with the Society, and what features of current diversity programs are perceived as coercion or imposition on minority members. Questions that help uncover myths and assumptions about diversity and inclusion will inform actions needed to implement programs based on

evidence and with lasting results, but more importantly, promote a culture of personal responsibility for diversity and inclusion within the Society (3, 4).

Overall, these three observations from the article by DeVilbiss et al. (1) suggest that to improve its diversity, the SER needs to be proactive, have a scientific attitude when experimenting with different programs, be open to structural changes based on proven interventions, and create an environment that favors and welcomes diversity and inclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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