

Commentary

Why we need everyone at the diversity table

As an experienced consultant, I have learned that when I want to address homophobia and heteronormativity, I work with straight people. When I want to address sexism, I work directly with men. And when I want to dismantle racism, then I work directly with white people.

Members of empowered groups have the ability to create either just or unjust conditions. At the urging of those who are marginalized, empowered people have played integral roles in the struggles for social justice—be it the push for women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, or the fight for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights.

Right now, as we continue to live through the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to remember that marginalized groups still face the effects of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism in society. We must also remember that we live in an age of political extremism—and in a time where racially motivated violence represents a serious threat to our nation.¹

If members of the scientific community do not collectively seize the opportunity to stand in solidarity with one another and truly fulfill their roles as allies in struggles for equity and social justice, they stand to lose a great deal more than students in their courses and graduates from their programs. If we are all in agreement that human brilliance is spread evenly across all races, genders, classes, and abilities, shouldn't the community then do its part to ensure that students in the sciences in general—and physics in particular—experience its best efforts to include them?

Student groups, affinity groups, and employee resource groups and networks are crucial to the work of diversity, inclusion, and belonging. But they are not enough.

In my career, I have too often noticed that the very people marginalized groups need support from feel as if they have no place to turn to understand their role in



WHEN TAHAREE JACKSON, author of this commentary, taught at the University of Maryland in College Park, she invited students to discuss issues occurring inside and outside of the classroom during a check-in at the beginning of each class.

the struggle for equity and social justice. Men will often tell me that they do not engage with women's issues because they are afraid to "say the wrong thing" or "make matters worse." Straight people will often share that they don't understand what all the letters in LGBT mean, and cisgender people will ask why everyone is putting pronouns in parentheses. Most dishearteningly, white people often have no idea where they fit into the racial dialog.²

Early in the pandemic, my spunky white personal trainer could not understand why I would risk my life to renew my vehicle registration. It befuddled her that I couldn't just "let it expire and

ride." I realized that someone who cannot relate to the fear of being stopped for a routine traffic violation and possibly not living to talk about it needs a place to learn about that concept without consequence. Solidarity groups are needed for white people who are curious, concerned, or passionate about understanding racism and becoming anti-racist but have no idea where to begin.

Excellent diversity, equity, and inclusion programming does not condemn people who have underdeveloped understandings of race, sex, class, and ability. Rather, it invites, welcomes, affirms, and supports people who recognize that something is amiss but too

often feel clueless about how to help.

As you move forward in your quests to render physics a welcoming, inclusive, diverse, and equitable field, I urge you to turn away from spending time trying to change the groups you want to welcome and instead focus on trying to transform yourself. How can you alter your admissions practices, program norms, funding equations, and assessment practices? How can you modify your syllabi, courses, and learning opportunities? What can you do to ensure that opportunity is spread evenly across the racial, gender, class, and ability groups in your institution? And most importantly, how can your institution maintain its “core” while simultaneously becoming an equity-minded organization?

In what follows, I offer a few starting points for members of the physics community who are ready to do the work.

First, if you are a leader of any kind, ask yourself where you stand on issues of diversity. The tone you set as a leader will reverberate outward in ways you do not know.

The last research I conducted as a professor at the University of Maryland in College Park was a study of what motivated the teachers who do the best jobs at challenging oppression and supporting cultural differences to remain in classrooms. I found that the single most salient factor was the teacher’s relationship with the highest-ranking leader in their building. Those leaders single-handedly set the tone for how their subordinate faculty either embraced or eschewed the importance of diversity and equity.

The best leaders had varying levels of knowledge about diversity, equity, and inclusion, but they were all in full support of what their faculty wanted or needed to do to prioritize efforts to

achieve them. They often vowed to “take the hit” in meetings with superiors, external stakeholders, and others who might push back.

Second, make sure that you are showing up to the diversity and equity dialog in the right identity. I have found that we encounter difficulty when white people who have experienced hardships such as poverty or discrimination because of their religion or parents’ birthplace show up to the racial dialog not as white people but as *marginalized* white people. But when people who are white or pass as white enter conversations about race in one of those other identities, they miss the opportunity to take advantage of the power that their whiteness provides in the fight to dismantle racism.

It’s the same for men. Are there men who face challenges of injustice and inequity? Yes. But when women need male allies to advocate for their presence as tenured faculty, to be the first authors on their papers, or to negotiate fair salaries for them, they need men to show up as *men* who are aware of the power their gender confers.

Third, make space for your students to share their stories. Some members of the scientific community possess a deeply dangerous sentiment that their work is somehow objectively outside the purview of social-justice issues, racism, inequity, and unfairness. I’ve noticed a serious hesitation among educators to discuss such topics in their classrooms.

But when I was attending Harvard University as a low-income student from a rural area, the biggest challenges I had to surmount had nothing to do with the one my peers found the most difficult: the curriculum. I found it much harder to deal with racist, sexist, classist classmates and faculty members than with my Moral Reasoning course.

When I was a student, the academics themselves were never the challenge for me. It was the sociopolitical context of my learning that always battered me, hampered me, and made my time in school far more arduous than it ever had to be. If professors, teachers, and scientists are actively shying away from discussing with students the issues that affect their lives in real time, then what kind of educating are they doing?

As a college professor, I began every class with a check-in. If students wanted to discuss racial tensions in and out of

the classroom, the latest verdict of a high-profile case, or news from the White House, I made space for that. For them. For their stories.

I implore you to listen to your students whose voices long to be heard in class. I invite you to study your syllabi meticulously to see where people from different types of backgrounds are erased or fully present. I challenge you to look around your classroom and in your presentation slides for representations of not only the students who are in the room but also the students you say you so desperately want to attract. And most importantly, I encourage you to learn the history of yourself, your family, and your identities so you can juxtapose your stories with the new ones you absorb. We all have quite a lot to learn from one another’s stories, and that’s OK.

I have seen the value of welcoming all people to the struggle for diversity, equity, and inclusion, regardless of their identities or their hesitations about joining.

We need *everyone* at the table. Thank you for showing up.

References

1. M. C. McGarrity, *Confronting Violent White Supremacy (Part II): Adequacy of the Federal Response*, statement before the US House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, 116th Congress, 4 June 2019, p. 8.
2. L. Zheng, “How to show white men that diversity and inclusion efforts need them,” *Harvard Business Review*, 28 October 2019.

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LETTERS

Contributions to computed tomography

As I started reading the article on computed tomography (CT) by John Boone and Cynthia McCollough (PHYSICS TODAY, September 2021, page 34), I expected to see Allan Cormack