

Best Practices for Maintaining Diverse Laboratories

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Explain why it is important to encourage workplace diversity.
2. Describe programs offered by various organizations that focus on workplace diversity.
3. List three examples of resources suggested by the National Education Association that encourage diversity in education.
4. Describe three examples of 5Ks that are organized annually by groups interested in promoting diversity.
5. Discuss the impact that traveling to various workshops in a variety of regions can have on understanding diverse groups.

ABSTRACT

Civil rights laws have been enacted and updated for over a half century to protect workers of diverse groups. However, rather than relying on laws to force employers and academic leaders to choose fairness, workplaces can take steps to proactively encourage diversity and thereby increase workplace satisfaction and productivity. They can begin by clearly outlining in company handbooks the plan to enforce laws that establish and maintain inclusivity. Universities and employers can take further steps to instill a positive environment by including all employees and students when recognizing holidays and important commemorative occasions. Employers and academic institutions can organize or encourage participation in celebratory walks or runs and it can recommend or require diversity training by its employees or students. Health care facilities, above all, should lead efforts to support diversity in the workplace since health is about humanity as a whole and not about select groups. There are numerous organizations, websites, events, and other ideas that can help universities and employers seeking to better understand diverse populations and to encourage understanding among students and employees.

ABBREVIATIONS: CE - Continuing education, NEA - National Education Association

INDEX TERMS: Diversity training, cultural sensitivity, continuing education

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INTRODUCTION

Despite protective laws designed to ensure fairness, there are still occasions when students and employees are not treated equitably with respect to their diversities. A large number of complaints and lawsuits occur each year, many of which are handled by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. These various lawsuits suggest that there remains a group of “others” that need protecting, including older workers, people with disabilities, those with minority religious identities, workers of various ethnicities, women, and lesbians and gay men.¹ It is important for laboratories and universities to promote these laws by stating clear expectations in handbooks, which in some states may serve as a contract for employees.² In addition to strictly following laws that are stated in the company handbook, laboratory employers and program administrators can go a step further and acknowledge individual differences in a variety of ways that make everyone feel recognized. After all, there are few environments where appreciating and encouraging diversity is more important than in health care where the obligation is to all fellow human beings,

not just one select group.³ Encouraging diversity in a working environment begins in the admission or employment selection process and can continue by utilizing an array of ideas that help people from various backgrounds feel included and respected.

Inclusion in Hiring and Training

In order to establish an inclusive and accepting environment, diversity must be encouraged in the hiring process and in the selection of students for laboratory education programs.⁴ Plans that are designed to hire workers or recruit students who match the general population of the surrounding community can be facilitated by speaking to community organizations or existing employees and students for referrals. In addition, the position must be described with cultural sensitivity in mind so as to encourage a variety of people to apply without hesitation. Working and teaching environments that support a diverse and inclusive group of employees and students respectively, leads to the sharing of ideas and strategies. In turn, this open communication encourages competitiveness, from a global standpoint, that benefits laboratories, college programs, and professional organizations.

Once employees are hired or students are selected for an educational program, diversity training in the workplace is important.⁴ This type of training can encourage laboratorians from various backgrounds to better understand those that are different from themselves, which they may not have interacted with before. Managers and supervisors must also understand the importance of having a diverse working environment. Diversity training can be incorporated through the use of continuing education (CE) programs and workshops. MediaLab offers several beneficial online CE courses, one of which is entitled "Introduction to Workplace Diversity," which recognizes the importance of creating laboratories with inclusive cultures.⁵ Another CE offered by MediaLab is "Benefits of Workplace Diversity," which offers positive reasons for recruiting employees to form a diverse laboratory, such as increasing morale, welcoming innovative ideas, increasing employee retention, reducing coworker clashes, and other outcomes. Other CE courses that this company offers are entitled "Dimensions of Diversity" and "Ignoring the Importance of Diversity Doesn't Work."

Several colleges offer diversity training like the one available at the University of Texas at Austin. They offer

a "Diversity in Education Initiative and Cultural Awareness Workshop," which mostly focuses on racial awareness and creating an inclusive workplace.^{6,7} The workshop discusses myths of American history, how we learn to stereotype, and understanding people who have experienced discrimination. Another diversity workshop for a wide variety of customers is offered through the Diversity Awareness Partnership.⁸ Their vision is for communities to respect and embrace diversity by focusing on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and religion. The Diversity Awareness Partnership is a nonprofit organization in Missouri that provides training for numerous corporations, other nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and more. They offer an "Unconscious Bias Training Session," a "Listen, Talk, and Learn," focus groups, and more. Finally, the Association of American Medical Colleges hosts a one-day workshop aimed specifically for health care professionals and biomedical researchers, entitled "Unconscious Bias Training for the Health Professionals."⁹ This hands-on workshop aims to scrutinize how assumptions impact many parts of the working world, such as hiring, promotion, communication, marketing, and more.

Inclusion in Celebrations and Holidays

Progroup is an organization whose goal is to encourage inclusion in order to increase performance and productivity.¹⁰ They offer a number of useful suggestions in a brochure that depicts 88 ways to celebrate "Appreciate Diversity Month."¹¹ A wide range of ideas include holding logo contests, multicultural job fairs, cultural conversations, hobby fairs, scavenger hunts, and linguistic exercises. Laboratories or educational programs could even designate a week specifically for the purpose of appreciating and celebrating diversity.¹² A designated diversity officer could be selected to organize these activities. This special week could include a block party with multicultural vendors, music, dancing, food, stories, and art with all members of the lab or academic program contributing.

Continuing personal education with the goal of understanding a variety of social backgrounds will lead to a better utilization of these ideas in the workplace. There are an endless number of resources, listed by the National Education Association (NEA), which are available for addressing diversity in education. These include children's books from various cultural backgrounds

aimed at a wide variety of age groups, books specifically for educators intended to increase awareness of cultural competence and increase social justice, and websites that aim to teach tolerance.¹³ Books for educators include “Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators” and “Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook.” These books can be read by interested individuals or be part of book studies that might be supported by laboratories or academic institutions. In addition, the NEA supports the National Association for Multicultural Education, which has their own website with ideas on encouraging diversity.¹⁴ This organization holds annual conferences and has a publication called “Multicultural Perspectives,” aimed at promoting inclusion, social justice, and equity. The website of another group that is listed by the NEA is entitled “Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.”¹⁵ This group has their own newsletter as well as links to important issues on tolerance and inclusion.

A fun, active, and healthy way to promote and celebrate diversity is to hold a 5K run or walk. There are several of these annually throughout the U.S., including the Diversity Stride 5K Walk-a-thon sponsored by the American Conference on Diversity at Liberty State Park in New Jersey.¹⁶ This scenic stroll includes games, face painting, and cultural entertainment and involves fraternities, corporations, educators, faith leaders, and nonprofit organizations. The YWCA of Knoxville, TN holds a Celebrate Diversity 5K in order to encourage the community to come together “to honor diversity, wellness, and dignity for all people.”¹⁷ For 15 years, the Easterseals of Southern California have held a 5K to celebrate diversity at a Strides for Disability walk.¹⁸ While it does not appear that there are any walks or runs sponsored by laboratories or hospitals that specifically celebrate diversity at the present time, laboratories or laboratory education programs could sponsor its employees or students in those that are offered around the community designed to honor individual differences.

People of many backgrounds could be working in the laboratory together. It is important not to single out the beliefs of one particular system to celebrate. Bonnier Corporation offers a list of holidays for all months of the year from a variety of cultures.¹⁹ Religions included on this calendar include Hindu, Judaism, Bahai, Christian, Muslim, and more. Historical holidays include those for

Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, South Africans, Ethiopians, and others. There are other celebratory days listed such as National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Day, and World AIDS day, for example. Acknowledging these commemorations and holidays would be a great way to include every member of the laboratory as well as use these as opportunities to expose workers and students to the food, beliefs, music, and history of a number of new cultures.

Diversity Training Outside of the Workplace

A step above celebrating various cultures from our own work facilities is traveling to other locations for workshops. Employers and laboratory education programs can encourage attendance by sending their workers and students. If they cannot fund this for employees, they may consider offering employees pay while they are away. There are numerous national and international workshops with themes related to the medical laboratory. The American Society for Clinical Pathology, the American Society of Clinical Laboratory Science, and the American Medical Technologists all hold national conferences each year in locations all over the U.S.²⁰⁻²² In 2017, these conferences will be held in Chicago, San Diego, and Kansas City, MO, respectively. All of these would be great opportunities for employers and academic institutions to send laboratorians to learn about new methods as well as meet new people from the conference or from the region where the conference is held. These organizations also hold state meetings at various cities, offering members the chance to travel around their particular state to share ideas. There is also the annual Clinical Laboratory Educators' Conference, designed to share strategies or innovative teaching techniques for faculty, directors, and administrators in education of clinical laboratorians.²³ For those interested in traveling abroad, the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine holds international conferences each year in locations such as Athens, Milan, and Paris.²⁴ More open-minded employees can return from any of these conferences with ideas to share with fellow workers and contribute to their continuing education as well.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of establishing and accepting diversity should be taught to employees of medical laboratories, as part of laboratory education, and as part of memberships

of professional organizations. There are countless ways to introduce and maintain ideas of tolerance and inclusion for the benefit of employees and students in the laboratory field. Training in cultural sensitivity and diversity issues is as important as annual safety training in the laboratory. The goal is to create an environment where people are not afraid to talk to one another about differences. By increasing communication, laboratory workers can understand that we all have the same desire for acceptance and for creating a more productive environment.

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