Response to NIH Request for Information: Institutional Accountability to Promote Inclusive Excellence

Submitted on behalf of the ISB EDI Committee: https://www.biocuration.org/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-committee/

At the Biocuration 2019 conference (https://www.biocuration2019.org/), members of the International Society for Biocuration (ISB) Executive Committee held a workshop on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (https://www.biocuration.org/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-edi-at-biocuration-2019/). Biocuration provides a career track within academia and research broadly construed, but without the same constraints as a classical principal investigator (PI) track. And maybe not by chance it is quite female-biased. There are several examples of people who have used biocuration as a spring towards a more conventional "PI" career. It could be argued that overall it might provide new career opportunities which can contribute to overall biomedical faculty diversity.

At the conference workshop, we discussed issues which affect our community and the ways in which we could address these issues. Some primary points that were discussed, which may be broadly relevant to the NIH's efforts to increase diversity in biomedical research, are outlined below.

Equity across the career trajectory: recruitment, retention and career progression
While pay equality among men and women in every designation is a desirable goal in every biomedical institution, the long-term commitment of an institution towards gender equity is reflected in how similar the career trajectories of men and women are. A recent study (1) looked at institutional records for retention and promotion of women and underrepresented minorities (URM) in STEM disciplines from four land grant institutions categorized as 'highest research activity doctoral granting institutions'. The study found that while there is an overall increasing trend of the hiring and retention of women, their numbers still lag behind those of men. The difference in numbers is starker for URMs. There is also variability in these trends among different disciplines. For example, women assistant professors were more likely than their male counterparts to leave the institution and leave without tenure in engineering. On the other hand, the median time taken for women to progress from associate professor to full professor is one to two years longer than for men, in the agricultural, biological and biomedical sciences and natural resources.

The take-home from studies like the one quoted above is that there is much more to be done to achieve equity goals for women and URMs. An important step towards this goal is to make recruitment, retention and career progression transparent at the institutional level and to make this data available to the general public.

Unequal pay across genders or groups is seen as one measure of inequality. One way to address this is by promoting pay transparency amongst organizations, where the salary information for different positions is made available to all the members of the organization.

Creating EDI awareness

An important aspect of achieving EDI goals is to clearly define them. Towards this end, every institution must have a clear EDI policy that is available to all employees (and future employees), along with protocols for the redressal of grievances and complaints in a timely and compassionate manner. Institutions should also conduct regular employee training/education about EDI issues via seminars from EDI professionals as well as online training modules. Training for unconscious bias is useful to make all staff aware of potentially discriminating behavior, and should be compulsory for hiring managers/chairs of hiring committees etc., if not for every member of staff (some institutions have already implemented this, such as the University College London).

Mentoring programs for URMs could help ensure success of researchers at all stages of their career.

Academic leave for healthcare/maternity/paternity

Institutions can work to improve leave policies for maternity, paternity, childcare and healthcare (including caring for family members or dependents). Leave policies for child birth should apply to non-traditional families and adoption.

Promote healthy work/life balance

In an academic work environment, at times there is the conceived pressure to work constantly in order to succeed. This provides challenges for employees who have caring responsibilities, or who simply wish to pursue outside interests and maintain a healthy/work life balance. It can also be discouraging for people with certain physical or mental conditions.

Reports have shown workers who work longer days are more inefficient (2-4). Indeed, working shorter days and taking more breaks has been shown in some cases to be more efficient and productive. (5). Overworking may also lead to burnout and health issues.

Some ways in which we could promote a healthy work/life balance would be for managers and colleagues to not expect their employees/colleagues to work outside of business hours, or to enable flexible working practices, such as flexible working hours or allowing remote work. One simple approach is to add an email tagline, "I don't expect a reply outside of usual working hours."

Increased accessibility and inclusivity

Efforts to address accessibility should be considered. For example, work facilities and conference facilities should ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities, including mobility issues and hearing or visual impairments. Beyond major issues, be mindful of other restrictions, such as people with dietary restrictions, in alcohol recovery, or limiting the use of personal scents to be inclusive of people with chemical sensitivities.

Code of conduct

While most conferences create and post a Code of Conduct, this is not done across all conferences. A Code of Conduct is intended to establish a set of rules of expected behavior

amongst members of a community. Ensuring that a Code of Conduct is established and enforced at community conferences and meetings can ensure that participants will be guarded against issues of discrimination and prejudice and there is an avenue for reporting and enforcing violations.

Name Badges and Name Tags
To be inclusive of all gender and non-conforming people, preferred pronouns should be included on name badges and name tags (at institutions and conferences). Conference organizers are starting to collect preferred gender pronouns on registration forms, to include on name badges (6).

Cherish the future scientific faculty
In the scheme of research career trajectory, particularly in biological and biomedical sciences, most candidates for faculty positions are expected to have postdoctoral experience. Postdoctoral researchers are typically on a limited tenure and on 'soft funding' and may not have access to all the benefits and institutional support that is available to the faculty. Therefore, it is incumbent upon every research institution to provide the necessary support and self-development opportunities to postdoctoral researchers. In this crucial juncture of their lives, these researchers are not just making important career decisions, but also important life decisions. Hence, institutional support should include things like affordable housing, day-care for children, adequate leave and accommodations to ensure a healthy work/life balance. Some universities have established a "postdoctoral scholars' office" which coordinates support for postdoctoral researchers and serves as a forum for them to meet and talk about their experiences. Institutional support in improving the professional and personal lives of postdoctoral researchers is a necessary precursor to achieving NIH's goal of fostering career advancement for early-career faculty.

References
1. *Gumpertz M, Durodoye R, Griffith E, Wilson A (2017) Retention and promotion of women and underrepresented minority faculty in science and engineering at four large land grant institutions. PLoS ONE 12(11): e0187285.*
2. https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies
3. https://hbr.org/2014/12/working-too-hard-makes-leading-more-difficult
4. https://www.cnbc.com/2015/01/26/working-more-than-50-hours-makes-you-less-productive.html
5. https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2016/06/07/why-the-8-hour-workday-doesnt-work/
6. http://www.amiaconference.net/why-gender-pronouns-are-important/