Comment

Working together to build strong scientific communities

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The scientific enterprise depends on attracting and retaining the very best talent, yet barriers persist that perpetuate inequities in the scientific workforce. Here I discuss the efforts of the ALBA Network to help anyone to work effectively to maximize scientific progress by making their communities more equitable and inclusive.

If we agree that science is a crucial cornerstone of modern society, then we must also agree that it should be conducted by the very best researchers. Some difficulty arises, of course, in establishing the best ways to assess scientific excellence, with important ongoing discussions about this taking place throughout the scientific community[1]. Beyond this challenge, however, lies an even more fundamental one – ensuring that these legitimate debates aren't shut down before they've even begun.

Even the language we use to describe a scientific workforce consisting of the very best scientists depends on our particular circumstances, lived experiences and worldview. To many, it seems obvious that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts are needed in order to overcome hundreds of years of structural racism and sexism and their lingering effects[2] on talent recruitment, assessment and retainment. From this perspective, efforts to foster diversity and excellence go hand in hand. To others, calls for diversity are seen as contradicting the idea of a 'meritocracy'. Although these opposing worldviews have come into stark contrast recently, the underlying tension has been lurking for as long as DEI initiatives have been in effect.

As a neuroscientist who is also a woman, my work in this space started in earnest when I became a principal investigator. I found that I was frequently asked to weigh in, informally at first, on issues pertaining to 'women in science'. Somehow, I suddenly seemed to be viewed as an expert on a topic on which I had had no training nor special knowledge. My discomfort with this new role prompted me to educate myself. This in turn kicked off a vicious cycle, and gradually I was asked to take on leadership positions for which my growing reputation as an 'expert' on 'women in science' was often baked in. This then conferred responsibility onto me, for example as a conference organizer, for ensuring balanced speaker lineups, monitoring acceptance rates for unintended biases, and sometimes, educating my colleagues about why all of that was necessary and important.

As anyone who has ever done it can attest, this kind of work can be incredibly draining[3,4]. It takes a lot of time and energy to engage with highly charged topics, particularly when they affect you personally. Moreover, not only is this work often not explicitly recognized or rewarded, but it can also bring substantial risk to one's reputation, in the form of both explicit and covert backlash. And yet, we persist, because we feel that we owe it to our fellow scientists, and to science itself, to advocate for evidence-based approaches to maximizing talent and building healthy scientific communities.

Sharing the burden: the ALBA Network

In 2018, Carmen Sandi, then-President of the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS), approached me about joining the original steering committee of the ALBA Network, for which she secured crucial support from FENS, the Society for Neuroscience and the International Brain Research Organization. Although ALBA was originally envisioned as focusing on issues faced by women in brain sciences within Europe, by the time of its launch in 2019 we had expanded its mission into fostering equity and diversity more broadly[5]. Today, ALBA is a European-based organization with a global reach, and about 2,400 members (and counting). It supports a range of initiatives including webinars, prizes, white papers and networking events to promote awareness and advocacy and provide resources on challenges faced by underrepresented groups in neuroscience.

A central feature of ALBA is its status as a network. Through its very structure, it acknowledges that so many of us are being asked to do DEI work, often feeling like we are individually re-inventing the wheel. ALBA, which comprises people with shared goals, provides centralized resources and support networks to help lighten the load. Equally fundamental to ALBA's mission is its inclusive approach to inclusion – it is open to everyone, including members of various underrepresented groups, and also allies who join to learn more about the problems and how they can contribute to overcoming them. Too often the burden falls upon members of underrepresented groups themselves; ALBA brings crucial allies into the fold to share the burden.

The ALBA Declaration

The ALBA Declaration on Equity and Inclusion, originally published in 2021, serves as a backbone of sorts for many of ALBA's initiatives, articulating and crystallizing ideas that have become part of mainstream thinking in many places but are still controversial in others. Focusing on counteracting cognitive biases and promoting positive workplace environments, it aims to serve as a resource for concrete, evidence-based actions that individuals and organizations at any level can take to build strong scientific communities that are open to all.

A key goal of the Declaration is to be both impactful and broadly relevant for a global audience, recognizing that although there are important differences underlying specific kinds of underrepresentation in different subfields and around the world, shared barriers often need to be overcome[6]. Towards that end, the Declaration takes a positive, constructive stance, focusing on 'what to do', rather than 'what not to do'.

Implicit within the ALBA Declaration is the principle that adopting the recommended actions will benefit the entire research community and the scientific enterprise at large. For instance, an evidence-based approach to monitoring and counteracting the effects of cognitive biases can help ensure the establishment and maintenance of a true meritocracy. Similarly, it is not a contradiction to recognize that although unhealthy work environments often disproportionately harm marginalized groups[4], creating healthy workplace cultures benefits everyone. Many of us also believe that following through with actions like those suggested in the ALBA Declaration will ultimately enhance the diversity of the scientific workforce, which will further enhance scientific progress, but that is far from the only benefit.

Outlook

Underrepresentation in science is a complex issue that deserves the same treatment that we as scientists would apply to any complex problem — to be broken down and analysed systematically. That means collecting, analysing and understanding data from a variety of sources[7], both to identify problems where they exist[8] and to form an evidence base for effective solutions[9]. It also means acknowledging the distinction between having evidence that there is no problem and having no evidence of a problem. Study after study shows that we are all biased[10], and it's time to update our null hypotheses accordingly. The stakes are high; we're already losing tremendous amounts of talent[7].

The good news is that although underrepresentation in science is a societal issue, we can all act within our own spheres of influence. The ALBA Network and the resources it provides can empower individuals to educate themselves and each other, to better understand the problems and to implement evidence-based solutions.

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The ALBA Declaration: https://www.alba.network/declaration
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