

Activating a Neural Network

Admission Strategies to Increase Diverse Neuroscience Trainees R25/T32 Diversity Workshop Summary

April 10-11, 2017

Bethesda, Maryland

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Overview

On April 10-11, 2017, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) held a workshop in which R25 and T32 grantees discussed admission strategies to increase diversity among neuroscience trainees. The workshop began with welcoming remarks by Dr. Walter Koroshetz, MD, NINDS Director, who emphasized the importance of increasing diversity among the neuroscience research workforce. Following his remarks, Dr. Michelle Jones-London, Director of Diversity Training and Workforce Development at NINDS, provided an overview of workshop goals. The remainder of Day 1 involved feature lectures and panel discussions focused on recruitment, admission, and retention of individuals from underrepresented (UR) populations. On Day 2, workshop participants engaged first in training on mentoring, and then in breakout discussions on addressing challenges in recruitment, admissions, retention, and career transitions.

Key Themes and Highlights

Recruitment

- Institutions should include in their mission statements a data-based affirmation of the importance of diversity.
- Representatives of graduate programs should attend conferences and poster sessions, especially those with strong representation from students from UR backgrounds. Personal outreach is more effective than passive outreach.
- Current graduate students can be powerful ambassadors in recruitment.
- Graduate programs can improve prospective student perceptions by discussing their efforts to increase diversity and by using summer research and other research experiences as recruiting tools.
- Students apply to programs that their advisors trust. Graduate programs should build bridges and trust networks with institutions and advisors serving students from UR backgrounds.
- Demonstrating a desire to help students reach their goals and find the school best matched for them sends a powerful positive message.

Admissions

- Although many institutions promote diversity, their admissions screening practices may lead them to select from less diverse applicant pools. This, rather than a lack of talented applicants from diverse backgrounds, is a more likely contributor to the small candidate pools that admissions committees see.
- Undergraduate research experiences are important predictors of success in and beyond graduate school. Admissions committees might benefit from focusing more on these experiences than on credentials such as grade point averages and Graduate Record Examination scores. At the same time, lack of research experience should not necessarily bar a candidate from admission.

- Often admissions committees will consider issues of diversity after they have considered a student's achievement and risk for attrition.
- Admissions committees should define clearly what they mean when they deny a candidate admission because they are "too risky." Too often "risky" means "not like us."
- Efforts to increase diversity should focus more on asset models and leadership opportunities, rather than deficit models and remediation.

Retention

- School climate is an important influence in retention, student productivity, degree completion, and career choice. Surveys can be valuable in obtaining information about school climate.
- Identity and how it aligns with communities of practice play a pivotal role in decisions to pursue scientific careers, even more than confidence in one's ability.
- Face-to-face meetings with other UR graduate students can help combat feelings of isolation.
- Graduate programs should develop positive exit strategies for students who do not complete their PhD. Models could be found in other NIH programs.

Mentoring

- Mentoring should be a bidirectional, collaborative relationship with shared responsibility.
- Mentors can share personal stories, including challenges they faced when they were starting out.

General

- NIH should hold institutions more accountable for improving diversity among their graduate students. Institutional commitment to diversity should involve more than simply "checking a box."
- NIH and institutions should explore ways to improve metrics of success and to distinguish them from metrics of productivity.
- The NIH funding climate and perceptions of principal investigators' stress present a considerable challenge to recruitment and retention in general.
- Data-based approaches should be used to increase understanding among faculty about the need for increased diversity and the challenges associated with overcoming implicit bias.
- Maintaining a sense of community is important, especially for advanced graduate students.
- Additional funding is needed to support training for faculty and students.