



February 10, 2022

Marie A. Bernard, M.D.
Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

RE: Draft NIH Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity Strategic Plan for FYs 2022-2026

Dear Dr. Bernard:

AcademyHealth welcomes the opportunity to provide the Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity (COSWD) team at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) input on the Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2022-2026. We are the professional home of health services researchers, policy experts, and practitioners, and as the leading organization for a field devoted to improving health outcomes for all, we are devoted to directly addressing systemic barriers to health equity. We share the goals of COSWD in catalyzing cultures of inclusive excellence where the workforce reflects and represents a full range of talent and experience, and fosters creativity and innovation in science.

We are pleased to see that the draft plan is squarely focused on building, disseminating, and acting on the evidence of the value and impact of a diverse scientific workforce, both at NIH and in the broader scientific community. In addition, we concur with the identified strategies to advance the goals of the plan, namely collaboration, accountability, and evaluation.

To further strengthen the plan, we provide the following overarching suggestions:

1. ***Define clear, measurable goals:*** Despite many efforts over past decades by the NIH, our scientific workforce is not diverse. The draft plan makes an important commitment to evaluation and accountability, however it can and should go further. COSWD can help all of NIH and the scientific community by articulating some clear milestones for what progress will have been achieved by the end of this plan in 2026.
2. ***Build capacity to act on the evidence:*** Despite a broad range of existing initiatives to train and fund diverse researchers (listed on pages 21-23), the reality is that our scientific workforce is not diverse. The plan does not make clear how it will expand these investments, either by scaling up existing ones or launching new ones, to accelerate progress and impact. In addition, it is not clear to what extent NIH is currently, or plans to, support efforts to directly change the culture of academic institutions so that diverse investigators can thrive. This will require a concerted effort.
3. ***Address the structures, policies and processes at NIH that reinforce and sustain the current system:*** The plan does not address how COSWD will work with the Office of the Director and the ICO's to critically assess each step in the research lifecycle (from the formulation of solicitations to the scientific review process and the make-up of review groups, to the ultimate funding decisions) that perpetuates systemic bias and impedes the success of diverse scientists.
4. ***Recognize and reward individuals and institutions who are making significant progress on workforce diversity.*** In addition to sharing best practices and programs with demonstrated



effectiveness, COSWD should consider establishing an annual recognition program for exemplar institutions. This reputational incentive would not only enhance the academic institution's standing, but it would also further their ability to recruit and retain more diverse faculty and staff.

5. *Create a dedicated and safe space for doing DEI work:* Our work has shown that there is a need for a dedicated space and trusted community for people who are actively driving or engaged in DEI work in their institutions to problem-solve and learn from each other's experiences.

Background in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

AcademyHealth has long been active in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with our [strategic plan](#) explicitly naming DEI as a core value of our organization, as delivering high value health care for all patients in the health care system is inherently intertwined with advancing health equity, addressing disparities, increasing representation in the workforce, and promoting diversity. We are focused on increasing the diversity of the health services research (HSR) workforce and building a community of practice among researchers of color and their peers and mentors.

On August 11, 2021, AcademyHealth released a [report](#) written by an Advisory Group on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Health Services and Policy Research (DEI in HSR), which sought to create a sustainable, action-oriented strategy for AcademyHealth to address DEI issues in HSR. The Advisory Group discussed how we should catalyze needed changes in our field, working closely with our members and partners in the public and private sectors. The recommendations in this report are grouped in five overarching themes, which call on AcademyHealth to:

1. Be a catalyst for changing the field of HSR to address racism and promote equity by becoming a resource for members and others.
2. Elevate the importance and visibility of health equity research and researchers within HSR.
3. Promote and develop the careers of health equity researchers and improve workforce diversity in HSR.
4. Promote quality, accountability, and transparency of health equity data and research methods.
5. Increase support for health equity research through meaningful partnerships and collaborations.

We are committed to increasing the diversity of the health services research (HSR) workforce and building a community of practice among researchers of color and their peers and mentors. For this reason, we welcome being able to discuss cross-cutting strategies, including collaborations, accountability, and evaluation, that can be leveraged to pursue DEI goals. Additional comments on the DEI workforce needs can be found in our responses to the [NIH on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Biomedical Workforce and Health Disparities Research](#) and the [National Institute of Nursing Research on their Strategic Plan](#).

Demonstrating the Value of DEI in the Workforce

A cutting-edge Paradigm Project innovation that may be exceptionally informative for COSWD is the [Day of Action and Impact](#). This is an experience that was designed to demonstrate the value of DEI in the HSR workforce, spark fundamental shifts in perspectives among participants, catalyze change at individual and institutional levels.

Key components of this concept that have been developed and tested over the last two years have been a) a communal, shared experience around a challenging, personal topic; b) storytelling narratives taking the form of both recorded videos and live talks; c) actionable resources tailored to the audience; d) survey instruments to assess the impact of the experience; and e) a pilot of sustained community for peers to continue to engage with each other beyond the event itself. The program draws people in with storytelling, creates opportunities to practice taking action on DEI in HSR, and recognizes participants for “showing up” to do the work. As opposed to a DEI training that an organization might bring in for their staff, this event is a collaborative, discussion-based experience that catalyzes learning and connection as opposed to receipt of content; it creates an environment conducive to peer-to-peer learning and activates individuals to take action in their own spheres of influence. Furthermore, instead of taking place within one organization, it builds community—and ultimately a larger movement—around DEI in the field.

AcademyHealth hosted six Day of Action and Impact test events of various sizes in 2021, welcoming close to 200 participants total, and learned three key lessons.

- First, participants were motivated to show up and engage with the content and willing to share personal stories with others they did not know previously. They appreciated that the program created a safe space for people to share their fears and obstacles about taking action to address DEI issues in their home institutions or other professional communities.
- Second, we found that participants learned or realized something new during the event—whether about the state of DEI in the field today or about the personal experiences of their peers participating alongside them. Participants engaged in meaningful peer-to-peer learning, actively requesting strategies to address DEI issues from each other and building upon those ideas. Participants also appreciated the tailored action-planning resources AcademyHealth curated for these events, which offered examples of action steps that could be taken at individual, team, institution, or field-wide levels, and asked if they could share them with colleagues.
- Finally, we found that the majority of participants were motivated to take action on DEI in their own spheres of influence following the event. To support them in taking action, participants requested a forum for continued, asynchronous discussion and additional project and program management support.

Summary

Key lessons from the programmatic examples discussed in this letter highlight the importance of developing inclusive and transparent plans based on shared values of the organization, to disseminate it widely and proactively, keep it streamlined, and let people know that it is in development. Plans should be accessible, and stakeholders should be proactively informed about how the organization will hold itself accountable to it. It is also critical to have regular communication plans for updates and reporting, along with channels that allow for stakeholder feedback that is transparently considered for course corrections.

Because each institution is at a different stage of its DEI journey, there is no one-size-fits-all solution or intervention, but sustained support for the people leading these efforts—along with curated resources and tools for taking action—is necessary to drive momentum in the broader movement toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable research workforce.

AcademyHealth appreciates the work that COSWD is undertaking in the FY2022-2026 Strategic Plan, and the opportunity to discuss our experiences in building cross-cutting strategies to promote scientific

workforce diversity. We stand ready and committed to collaborating with COSWD to implement this plan and help drive its success.

For further comment, clarification, or inquiry, please email Josh Caplan at Josh.Caplan@AcademyHealth.org.