Promises and Pitfalls of Diversity Statements: Proceed with Caution

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Abstract

As part of their efforts to increase the diversity of their workforce and student body, medical schools, academic medical centers, and individual departments are increasingly crafting public statements about their value for and commitment to diversity. In order for these statements to effectively enhance diversity, however, care must be taken, as research shows that some diversity-related messages can backfire. To avoid the pitfalls and realize the promise of diversity statements, this article presents recommendations based on experimental studies that investigate the impact of diversity messages. These studies suggest that diversity statements be aspirational, emphasize autonomy, and express a value for difference. Aspirational statements avoid creating the impression that equity has been achieved, thus preventing the "illusion of fairness" and the "paradox of meritocracy," wherein espousing egalitarian values and the existence of a meritocracy can increase biased outcomes and workplace disparities. Statements that emphasize autonomy avoid the backlash that can occur when organizational members feel coerced into adopting pro-diversity actions. Statements that emphasize the value of human differences convey a multicultural message that has shown positive outcomes when compared to "colorblind" statements that acknowledge our common humanity. Although there are no studies specific to academic medicine, current research on a variety of organizations, including some in the health care industry, suggests that relying on these recommendations to craft a diversity statement may help contribute to academic medical centers' larger efforts to promote diversity and inclusion and may help them avoid some deleterious effects.

Academic medicine is committed to advancing diversity at all levels in response to compelling evidence that inclusion of talented individuals from different backgrounds benefits medical education, patient care, population health, and scientific discovery.[1] Since Title IX[2] became law in 1972, medical schools are near gender parity at the student level, but women physicians remain woefully underrepresented in certain specialties and subspecialties,[3] and their underrepresentation increases in all fields at successive academic career stages.[4] Diversity goals for underrepresented ethnic and racial minority[5,6] and lower socioeconomic status[7] groups remain unfulfilled among students and faculty. In addition, members of diverse groups (women; members of ethnic, racial, and religious minority groups; people with lower socioeconomic status; with disabilities; or who identify as LGBTQ; and others) typically experience a more negative educational and workplace environment than do members of majority groups.[1]

As divisions, departments, and academic health centers strive to increase diversity and inclusion, creating an organizational diversity statement is often a first step. The promise of such statements is that they will help attract and retain diverse faculty, staff, and students; establish a basis for developing policies and practices that promote a welcoming, inclusive environment; and provide a rationale for considering applicants' abilities to foster diversity or work with diverse populations when hiring faculty and staff, or selecting residents and fellows. Although as physicians we value, teach, and attempt to engage in evidence-based practice, well-intended individuals are likely unaware of relevant research to draw on in developing a diversity statement. To our knowledge, there has been no research studying diversity statements in academic medical settings. However, several studies with randomized controlled designs have investigated the impact of diversity statements on participants' perceptions of various organizations, including some in the health care industry. This research indicates that to achieve desired outcomes and minimize the risk of undesirable and unintended consequences, we must take considerable care in the language used and the messages conveyed when crafting diversity statements. With the caveats that diversity statements alone will not expand diversity but are just one part of a larger strategic plan, and that any research study is limited in generalizability to other settings and conditions, we present recommendations for developing organizational diversity statements that are based on experimental evidence and related research.

Declarative vs. Aspirational Statements

Pitfall: Organization members believe diversity goals have been achieved

If our organizations strive to treat everyone fairly and equally and rely solely on merit or performance in decisions about hiring, promotion, salaries, and bonuses, it seems intuitive to declare these ideals and our commitment to them in our diversity statements. However, several research studies demonstrate that diversity statements that promise to not discriminate, to treat all people equally, and to base evaluations solely on merit can have counterproductive effects. Statements such as "Medical School X does not discriminate" create an impression that the institution has achieved equity and fairness, when in fact, non-discrimination is an ideal state that may not yet be realized. In addition to feeling disingenuous to those whose experiences are otherwise, research suggests that such

statements may promote discriminatory behavior. In a series of randomized experiments with national samples of White adults, Kaiser and colleagues found that research participants were significantly less likely to detect and more likely to excuse discriminatory employment practices when a company had a "Diversity Statement" claiming not to discriminate rather than a "Mission Statement" without such language.[8] In one of these experiments, researchers randomly assigned participants to read about a company with either the "Diversity Statement" or the "Mission Statement." The statements had minor differences in wording. For example, the diversity statement encouraged "collaboration among employees from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities," while the mission statement encouraged "collaboration among employees with different work and learning styles." The major difference between the two statements was that the diversity statement included an additional paragraph stating that the company "does not discriminate against any employee because of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, age, or covered veteran status." When Kaiser and colleagues provided research participants with clear evidence of discrimination in promotion rates (28% of White and 10% of racial minority employees received promotions), participants who read the diversity statement rated the company as more procedurally fair toward racial minority employees than did participants who read the mission statement. In other words, participants who read the diversity statement did not recognize the discrepancy in promotion rates between White and minority employees as inequitable, while those who read the mission statement did. In another experiment, Kaiser and colleagues found that compared to participants who read the mission statement, participants who read the diversity statement were less sympathetic to a Black employee who sued the company for discriminatory promotion practices and less likely to regard his suit as valid. Similarly, in a third experiment using an actual case of sex discrimination, participants read about the class action lawsuit of Velez et al. v. Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation in which plaintiffs claimed that Novartis paid women less than men and denied promotions to women—especially those with children. Participants who were told that *Working Mother* magazine cited Novartis as "one of the 100 best companies in the nation for 10 years in a row" regarded the company as significantly more equitable to women and judged the plaintiffs' case as less valid than did participants who did not receive this information. Taken together, Kaiser and colleagues concluded that these studies provide strong evidence that when organizations' diversity statements make claims about not discriminating, they create an "illusion of fairness" that prevents recognition of bias and unwittingly subverts sincere intentions to avoid race and gender bias in hiring, salary, and promotion.[8]

In related research, Castilla and Benard found that emphasizing meritocratic values at the organizational level introduced gender bias in awarding annual bonuses to men and women with equal job performance.[9] In their studies, Castilla and Benard asked research participants, all of whom had managerial experience, to assume the role of manager at a large corporation and to assign bonuses to employees on the basis of their performance evaluations. They randomly assigned participants to read a list of "Core Company Values" that either emphasized meritocracy (e.g., "all employees are to be rewarded fairly") or did not emphasize meritocracy (e.g., "all employees are evaluated regularly") before reviewing performance evaluations and assigning bonuses. Participants who read company statements

endorsing meritocracy believed the company would be more fair in its performance-reward decisions than did those who did not read meritocratic statements. Yet, despite the fact that the annual performance reviews showed equivalent performance for male and female employees, participants who read the meritocratic statements gave male employees larger bonuses than female employees with equivalent performance ratings. Castilla and Benard refer to this as the "paradox of meritocracy"—the finding that emphasizing meritocracy can increase biased outcomes and workplace disparities. They suggest that meritocratic statements promoted by a corporation may increase its members' confidence in their ability to be fair and objective or may prime them to see themselves as non-sexist or non-racist.[9] Recent research suggests that these conditions make individuals more vulnerable to the influence of cultural stereotypes because they are less likely to question their judgments.[10,11]

Promise: Create aspirational statements

If messages proclaiming "we do not discriminate" can backfire, how can an organization express its commitment to being equitable, fair, and meritocratic? We recommend framing these values as *aspirations.* Emphasize that the organization and its members recognize and are working hard to overcome stereotype-based bias and that the institution is striving to provide a non-discriminatory, fair, and equitable work and learning environment for all its members. Duguid and Thomas-Hunt showed the power of aspirational messages in a study comparing the effectiveness of various messages aimed at reducing stereotype-based bias.[12] In a series of experiments, they demonstrated that conveying messages about the high prevalence of stereotyping increased reliance on stereotypes, but that conveying the message that most people try to overcome the influence of stereotypic preconceptions effectively minimized biased responses. In one experiment, for example, research participants who held MBA degrees and had managerial experience were less willing to work with a female job candidate who aggressively negotiated for a higher salary and rated her as less warm than a comparable male candidate. This finding was not surprising since research demonstrates that women who behave counter to gender stereotypes (e.g., that women are timid, passive, nurturing) face social penalties.[13,14] When research participants received messages about the high prevalence of such stereotyping, negative reactions to this counter-stereotypic woman increased. However, participants who received the message that "the vast majority of people try to overcome their stereotypic preconceptions" rated her as being more warm, and were more willing to work with her.[12]

Another way to provide aspirational messages in a diversity statement is to rely on Dweck's research on "growth mindsets"—the concept that attributes such as intelligence and personality are malleable and subject to change rather than fixed and immutable.[15] Dweck and colleagues investigated whether a growth mindset approach could alter stereotype-based bias. In a series of experiments, they demonstrated that when people are informed that racial bias is a malleable (rather than fixed) trait, they were more willing to engage in interracial interactions and more comfortable doing so.[16] This work on growth mindsets together with Duguid and Thomas-Hunt's findings lead us to recommend a diversity statement incorporating some version of a statement that "the vast majority of people in our organization are working hard to achieve a welcoming, diverse, and inclusive environment."

Controlling vs. Autonomous Messages

Pitfall: Controlling messages provoke backlash

Diversity statements are crafted, in part, to promote an organizational culture that values diversity and inclusion. Explicitly stating this goal in the statement, however, can have counterintuitive effects if individuals perceive that the institution is trying to "force" this behavior. Legault and colleagues randomly assigned non-Black undergraduate students to read brochures framed as part of a new campus initiative to reduce race bias that emphasized either personal choice (autonomous) or complying with social norms (controlling).[17] Students who read the autonomous message showed less bias against Blacks and greater motivation to be non-biased than those who read the controlling message or no message. In a second study, Legault and colleagues primed students with autonomous or controlling messages by asking them to complete surveys about their level of agreement with 8 pro-diversity statements that were either autonomous (e.g., "I enjoy relating to people of different groups," "It's fun to meet people from other cultures") or controlling (e.g., "It is socially unacceptable to discriminate based on cultural background," "I should avoid being racist"). They reinforced this priming by asking students in the "autonomous" condition to write three sentences about why it was "personally satisfying," "enjoyable," and "important" to be non-biased, while asking students in the "controlling" condition to describe the "obligation" or "social expectations" to be non-biased. Compared to a control group that responded only to filler questions, students primed with the autonomous messages showed greater motivation to be non-biased and lower explicit bias, as well as lower implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias on an Implicit Association Test[18] requiring rapid pairing of pictures of Black or White faces with positive or negative words, Those primed with controlling messages showed the opposite results on all three measures.[17]

Promise: Emphasize personal autonomy when promoting diversity

Legault and colleagues' research indicates the potential pitfalls of controlling and authoritarian phrases such as "zero-tolerance" or "stop racism" in diversity statements.[17] Instead, we recommend using phrases that emphasize personal choice and autonomy in acting without bias. Incorporating messages such as "Our faculty, staff, and students say they value diversity, enjoy relating to people from different groups, have fun meeting people from other cultures, and think issues of diversity are interesting" into a statement or webpage can promote positive personal choices of individuals in the organization, without coercive messages indicating that the institution will force pro-diversity actions on its members.

Multicultural vs. Colorblind Messages

Pitfall: Colorblind messages appeal to some groups and repel others

Diversity statements often emphasize either that the organization values differences (multicultural approach) or that it values equality (colorblind approach). Wilton and colleagues randomly assigned a diverse group of undergraduate students to examine brochures describing a university with either a colorblind ("we encourage our student body to embrace their similarities") or multicultural ("we believe that embracing our diversity

enriches our campus") message.[19] When asked to imagine themselves as a student at this university, participants who read the brochure espousing the colorblind message expected less student diversity and more instances of bias than those who read the multicultural message. Women of color responded most negatively to the colorblind message. They expected less diversity and performed less well on a math exam than their counterparts who read the multicultural statement.[19] Several other research studies similarly find colorblind messaging to be counterproductive.[20,21] For example, in a study of workplace climate in a large U.S. health care organization, Plaut and colleagues showed that racial minority employees were more engaged in the workplace and perceived less bias when White employees valued multiculturalism rather than colorblindness.[22] However, multicultural messaging can also have unintended consequences. One such consequence is that multicultural messages may cause White people to feel excluded. In the study by Wilton and colleagues, for example, White women did worse on the math test under the multicultural condition than they did in the colorblind condition.[19] Multicultural messaging also risks implying that people are only valued for their group identity, which can have negative effects for all groups.[22] Emphasizing the need for further scrutiny of the impact of valuing difference or valuing equality in organizational diversity statements, Apfelbaum and colleagues found contradictory effects of these messages depending the context and audience.[23]

Promise: Define diversity broadly

Despite the somewhat mixed findings regarding multicultural vs. colorblind messaging, our recommendation is to use multicultural approaches in diversity statements and augment them with an inclusive definition of what constitutes diversity. This enables all members of the community to see themselves as diverse members of the organization. We recommend statements that include both a message such as "we believe that achieving greater diversity will enhance our organization" and one stating that "we strive to embrace diversity in all its forms—identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinions."

Issuing Diversity Statements vs. Taking Action

Pitfall: Non-White members or potential members of an organization are disadvantaged

A general pitfall of publishing any organizational diversity statement is the degree to which is does or does not reflect the experiences of current and potential members of the organization. In a series of studies, Kang and colleagues examined Black and Asian students' engagement in "resume whitening"—the practice of concealing or downplaying their racial/ethnic identity.[24] Interviews with Black and Asian undergraduate students actively searching for jobs or internships in a range of fields including science and medicine revealed that 31% of Black and 40% of Asian participants reported engaging in resume whitening, and 67% reported knowing others who had done so. Qualitative analysis of the interview text revealed two major types of "whitening": presentation of one's name (e.g., a Chinese student using an English nickname and a Black student using a middle name if it was less racially identifying than the first name) and presentation of one's experience (e.g., omitting the experience or leaving out the racial/ethnic identifier in an organization's title). The students' main motivation was to avoid anticipated discrimination at the initial stage of

the application process. In a follow-up experiment, Kang and colleagues demonstrated that 50% fewer job-seeking students whitened their resumes when applying for a job at a company that presented itself as pro-diversity by using diversity affirming messages (e.g., "we strongly value fairness, diversity, and justice") and images (e.g., a photograph of four people of difference race and gender). To assess the consequences of resume whitening, the authors conducted an audit study to examine the probability of an applicant being contacted for a job interview. Using two of the largest online national job-search websites in 16 geographically dispersed U.S. metropolitan areas, the researchers randomly sent whitened and not whitened resumes to 1,600 job postings, 800 of which included explicit pro-diversity messages. Whitened resumes led to significantly more callbacks than non-whitened resumes, with no difference in call back rates between organizations with or without explicit pro-diversity messages in their postings, regardless of location, job type, or industry. Taken together, Kang and colleagues' studies indicate that non-White applicants are more likely to abandon the practice of resume whitening when reading statements that potential employers valued diversity and that this false assurance disadvantages them in the labor market.[24]

Promise: Take action to implement practices and procedure that align with diversity goals and statements

If underrepresented applicants are more likely to represent themselves authentically when applying to an organization because that organization espouses egalitarian values in a public diversity statement, then the institution must ensure that the statement is backed up by real action to prevent bias and discrimination within the organization. Demonstrating the importance of going beyond statements about diversity and meritocracy to actually implementing processes that can mitigate gender and race bias in organizational decision-making, Castilla conducted a field study with an actual company. In this study the company successfully reduced gender and race bias in annual performance rewards by introducing transparency and accountability into the process.[25] A growing body of research that includes academic medicine suggests that additional evidence-based practices institutions can adopt to align their practices with their stated commitments to diversity and equity.[1,26–29]

Conclusions

Current research supports the following recommendations for developing institutional diversity messages:

- Create aspirational statements, rather than declarative statements implying the organization is already equitable and diverse;

- Emphasize personal autonomy to promote diversity, rather than promoting controlling messages;

- Use multicultural messages, rather than colorblind statements, combined with broad definitions of diversity.

Although developing a diversity statement is an important exercise for an organization on its journey toward a diverse and inclusive workforce and student body, it is only a beginning. If the goals of an organizational diversity statement are to be realized, this statement is merely

one small part of what must be a multi-level strategic plan that attends to non-verbal messaging, hiring practices, evaluative and performance procedures, and fostering evidence-based strategies to improve interpersonal interactions and department climate.

Acknowledgments

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