

# The context of diversity

The term “diversity,” which came about in connection with the passage of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, has been expanding to include an ever-growing list of identities—from race, gender, and sexual orientation to physical appearance, belief systems, thought styles, socioeconomic status, and rural/urban geographic location, among others. This is a welcome extension of representation, but this added texture has a downside—it threatens to muddle targets and obscure actions when achieving diversity is the goal. This consequence is particularly serious in the context of addressing equity for specific underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Next week, the U.S. National Academies will convene the Roundtable on Black Men and Black Women in Science, Engineering and Medicine to focus on confronting issues that threaten the future of Blacks broadly in science. Forging systemic changes that bring Black diversity at all education and career levels will hopefully bring racial equity to practices in these fields and in doing so, expand the benefits of science, engineering, and medicine to society.

There are unintended negative consequences of the expanded definition of diversity. With so many groups, success in achieving diversity is increasingly measured in a pick-and-choose manner, where progress is defined through any lens that shows success. Also, with so many groups, diversity is often described through the lens of gender, leaving other groups as seemingly less important, or unimportant. And with so many groups, it has become easier for diversity efforts to disregard the historical and present drivers of discrimination that concepts of diversity began with. In other words, the greater context of inclusion and equity can get lost, making strides to diversify meaningless. The latter point is particularly relevant to Blacks in the United States who have experienced slavery, legally enforced segregation and discrimination, and now battle conscious and unconscious racism, and mass incarceration. Institutionalized racism, past and present, has resulted in the disregard, disrespect, and dismissal of Black people from all walks of life, and this is true in science, engineering, and medicine.

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These may be factors in the crisis-level changes seen across the academic landscape of Blacks in science, engineering, and medicine. For example, the number of Black males entering medical school between 2013 and 2014 in the United States was only 500, a historic low. Black men represented only 37.7% of Blacks entering medical school, which represented only 2.5% of all students entering medical school. This occurred during a historic increase in the number of medical schools in the nation. While this was happening at the trainee level, the U.S. National Academy of Medicine’s most recent election in 2019 had no Black men in a class that recently increased by over 30% in size. Thus, there is a crisis taking place at all points in the medical educational and career spectrum for this particular group.

In response to this downward trend of Blacks in science and medicine, a number of individuals, including me, convened a U.S. National Academies workshop in 2017 that focused specifically on the growing absence of Black men in medicine in the United States. The ideas became a blueprint for actions that address not only Black men in medicine, but also the trajectory for Black women, and issues in engineering and science overall.

Embracing the expanding definition of diversity is easy, but using the word with focus so as not to weaken the paths for achieving diversity will take great attention. Next week, as leaders from academia, industry, government, foundations, and other nonprofits gather at the U.S. National Academy for this historic first meeting, the goal will be to begin to understand the barriers, explore opportunities, and develop actionable plans to increase the number of Blacks pursuing science, engineering, and medicine. The Roundtable will have a laser focus on racism and bias, early to graduate education, financing, public advocacy, mentorship, and mental health/behavioral factors. We’re at the starting point of a roadmap that could potentially break cycles so rooted in the past for Blacks, and perhaps also help other groups navigate their pursuit of success in science too.

—Cato T. Laurencin



**Cato T. Laurencin**

is the Albert and Wilda Van Dusen Distinguished Endowed Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery, and the chief executive officer of the Connecticut Convergence Institute for Translation in Regenerative Engineering at UConn Health, Farmington, Connecticut, USA. He is the University Professor at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA. laurencin@uchc.edu