

CREATING WELCOMING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING

WHY DO DIVERSE TEAMS MATTER?

An important factor that contributes to the advancement of cancer health equity is an increasingly diverse cancer research and healthcare workforce (AACR 2022; Alcaraz et al. 2019). Diverse research teams often bring new perspectives and creative and culturally competent solutions to address cancer health disparities (AACR 2022). However, feelings of isolation from peers/community, disconnection from research field, and lack of mentors can contribute to researchers of color leaving biomedical sciences and not pursuing careers in cancer research (Clark and Hurd 2020). Creating a welcoming and inclusive work environment, where all researchers feel they belong, is necessary to retain a diverse biomedical research workforce with the goal of eliminating cancer disparities.

HOW CAN A SENSE OF BELONGING HELP?

Research has shown that a more holistic approach is needed to retain researchers of color and others underrepresented in the biomedical workforce (Vaccaro et al 2019). Along with support for research projects and professional development, it is important for researchers to also feel that they belong at research institutions and in research environments. Our Partnership defines sense of belonging as the experience of positive involvement in a system or community so that one feels personally and professionally accepted, connected, affirmed, and validated as an integral part of that system or community. Creating inclusive and welcoming research environments, particularly for researchers with identities that have been historically excluded from institutions in society, is important for retaining a diverse workforce that will continue to work together to achieve cancer health equity.

WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A MENTOR/ADVISOR?

- Reflect on the current social environment and power dynamics of your research lab, team and/or setting.
- Be transparent about your expectations.
- Build in time for kudos, big and small.
- Ask for feedback regularly and implement positive changes.

See infographic for further suggestions.

RHEMA FERNANDES

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UMass Boston, 2022

"I remember having absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do at my research site. But I had such a cool support system. When I got to the site I was supposed to work at for the summer, I had never heard of the organization before because I was an international student. It was not a place that was familiar to me. But any time I would get stuck, the [entire research team] would have my back. We had a check-in every Thursday. We would play games and share about our different experiences with our research sites. Our research mentors would constantly ask 'Is there something that we could do to support you?' Or 'Is there something that we could do to help you through the process?' Whenever we felt overwhelmed, we would do meditation exercises and just take a moment to breathe and be thankful for what we were doing. We would reflect on how much our work really impacts the lives of others."



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2. Clark US, Hurd YL. Addressing racism and disparities in the biomedical sciences. *Nature Human Behavior* 2020;4:774-777.

3. Ruedas-Garcia N, Botham CM, Moore AR, Peña C. Ten simple rules for creating a sense of belonging in your research group. *PLoS Comput Bio* 2022;18(2):e1010688.

4. Vaccaro A, Swanson HJ, Marcotte MA, Newman BM. Insights into the sense of belonging from women of color. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* 2019;5(2):33-65.

5. Wright-Mair R. Longing to belong: mentoring relationships as a pathway to fostering a sense of belonging for racially minoritized faculty at predominantly white institutions. *JSCORE* 2020;6(2):1-35.

Creating Welcoming Research Environments

Six Practices to Foster Sense of Belonging



1 Reflect (and repeat)

Reflect on how you communicate and engage with folks in your lab/on your research team. What do you do to show you are invested in their success? How do you give feedback? Who speaks most during team meetings? What power dynamics are present in your research environment?

2 Discuss, document, model lab values

Have an open discussion about the guiding values of your shared research environment. Ask: What do you value as a scientist? What do you value in this lab community? Document established group values. As a leader, model the group's values to create a more inviting and inclusive space.



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3 Be transparent about expectations

When expectations lack transparency, researchers new to your lab, or new to research in general, may feel left behind or left out. Set clear guidelines for steps lab members should take to find answers as they work. Post guidelines in accessible areas (around the lab, email, mailboxes) and update when needed.



4 Provide opportunities to share and learn

Learning more about each other provides opportunities to find connection and build a sense of belonging as a group. Ask members if they are comfortable sharing information, food, or stories that reflect their cultural backgrounds, traditions, and values. (Respect the privacy of those who do not want to share!)



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5 Make time for kudos

Build in a practice of recognizing individuals for their contributions and accomplishments during group meetings. Be sure to recognize both commonly acknowledged milestones and accomplishments (i.e., publications in high impact journals, receiving large grants, etc.) and those that may typically go unacknowledged (op-ed publications, submitting grant applications, efforts in lab work, etc.).



6 Ask for feedback regularly

Asking for feedback signals to research members that their experiences are valued and you are interested in understanding them. You can gather feedback through anonymous surveys, informal check-ins, or external evaluation using institution-specific resources (i.e., faculty development and teaching centers).

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