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Dr. Marie A. Bernard shares
**Leadership
Lessons** Page 2

Also in this issue:
**Women in the
Driver's Seat** Page 26

**To PhD or Not to PhD:
That is the question** Page 36

**Four Essential
Leadership Skills
for Scientists** Page 20

Harnessing the Science of Diversity: A Conversation with Dr. Marie A. Bernard

By Jenna Jablonski, Guest Writer

Marie A. Bernard, MD, is the National Institutes of Health (NIH) [Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity \(COSWD\)](#). As COSWD, she leads the NIH's program to build the science of workforce diversity, to disseminate that science, and to act on the evidence. Dr. Bernard also co-leads NIH's UNITE Initiative to end structural racism. I spoke with Dr. Bernard about her vision for diversity, equity, and inclusion in science and about how she's using her unique role to catalyze institutional culture change.



Before becoming the NIH's Acting COSWD in October 2020, and then being formally selected for the position in May 2021, you spent your academic career working in geriatric medicine. What about your previous experiences compelled you to take on your current role?

Having a diverse group of people around me has always been important. I know that I have a different point of view as a result of my personal experiences as a woman and as a woman of color. The literature shows, and my own experience confirms, that having diverse perspectives is important. That's what I have been about my whole career, quite honestly.

In geriatrics, diverse viewpoints and perspectives are built in, because you work in an interdisciplinary fashion. It is a field of medicine that probably has more than average racial/ethnic and gender diversity. So, supporting and enhancing diversity has been natural for me. Making sure that there are more people at the table has been at the core of my work throughout my career.

What do you see as the most urgent issue facing the biomedical research enterprise today, in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion?

I think the most urgent issue is making sure we take advantage of the full spectrum of talent that's out there. When you look at the demographics of this country, the people who are getting their associate's and bachelor's degrees are really diverse. There are as many women as men, and more women than men in some fields and institutions; and there is strong racial/ethnic group diversity. But once you climb the academic ranks, that diversity is not reflected at the top. And the people at the top craft the agenda going forward. Therefore, we need to pay attention to the things that lead people to leave scientific careers. If our country is going to maintain its leadership in science, we need the creativity and innovation that comes from having diverse perspectives.

How does this urgent issue fit into your vision as COSWD?

It fits perfectly. This is a unique role —the Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity reports directly to the NIH Director. The team that I lead is in a science organization, so we have to be very evidence based. We also know that



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we need a comprehensive approach to be successful—you can't just bring more people from underrepresented groups to the table and not do anything to support them.

Our job is to build the science of scientific workforce diversity, to disseminate that science, and to act on the evidence. We're building the science by using the NIH as the test bed for various initiatives. As for dissemination, we're developing a seminar series on scientific workforce diversity and developing workshops that the scientific community will be invited to.

Quite frankly, the business sector is way ahead of us in gathering data to demonstrate the benefits of workforce diversity. In the biomedical sciences, we have some data, and we can clearly see opportunities lost when you don't take advantage of everyone who's out there. But under my leadership, I hope that we will be able to build further data.

We are also going to pilot a variety of new approaches, both within my office and in my role as co-chair of the NIH [UNITE Initiative](#), which was established to identify and address structural racism within NIH-supported programs and within the greater scientific community.

Racial disparities in NIH grant funding are a persistent issue, first documented in the groundbreaking 2011 report by economist Dr. Donna K. Ginther and her research team. The NIH created the COSWD position in 2014 in the wake of this report. What progress has been made since then, in terms of these funding disparities?

The NIH has launched a variety of initiatives to address these funding disparities. In 2014, as it was establishing the COSWD position, the NIH created the Diversity Program Consortium (DPC) to help fill the ranks of future scientists through outreach to settings that served under-resourced communities, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and other minority-serving institutions. A component of the DPC, the NIH's National Research Mentoring Network, has helped scientists from underrepresented groups successfully apply for R01 grants. Additionally, the NIH has developed numerous other initiatives aimed at fostering success of scientists from underrepresented groups.

The data show a slow but progressive narrowing of the funding gap reported by Ginther and colleagues.

From 2013 through 2020, we can see that the numbers of African American and Black applicants have almost doubled, and the success rates have also increased by almost double. But there's still a gap. The thing that is of greatest concern is that the overall numbers are still very small. This is an issue not only for African Americans and Blacks but also for American Indians and Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. There is a higher success rate among Hispanics/Latinos, but their representation among funded scientists is not proportional to their representation in the general population. So, there's a lot of work for us still to do.

Although we are making progress, it is not occurring as rapidly as I would like. We need to make sure that the pathway for future scientists is robust, that we have removed barriers and put in as many facilitators as possible. That is part of the reason I am energized to not only serve as COSWD but also co-chair of the NIH UNITE Initiative, which is focusing on what we can do to remove racial/ethnic barriers.

You led the NIH's Women of Color Committee for almost a decade, working to increase the visibility of women scientists at the NIH and beyond. What is your biggest takeaway from this experience?

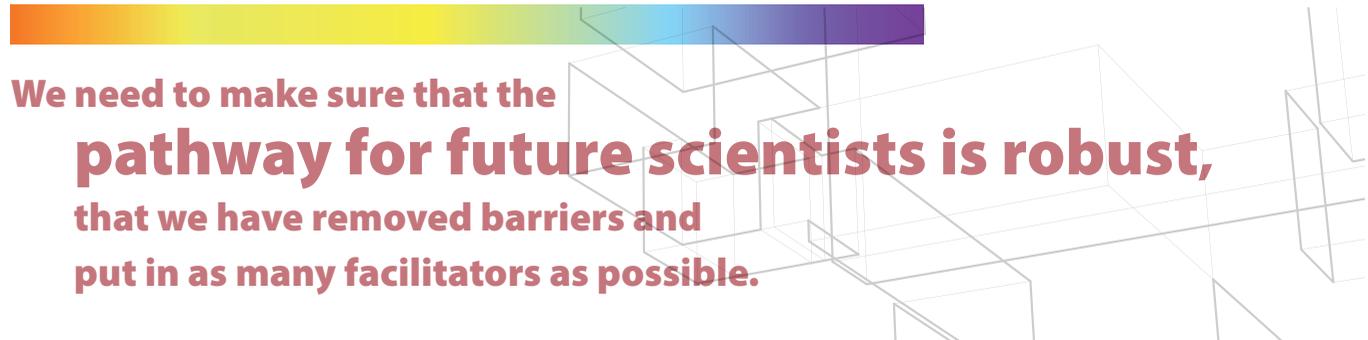
Yes, under my leadership we worked to systematically identify and nominate women of color scientists for prestigious awards and lectureships. It was wonderful meeting so many highly qualified women and hearing of their career journeys. There were some recurring patterns: every one of these women had a really vibrant foundation—they had support from a mother, a father, or an entire family, telling them, "You can do it." Every one of them had mentors and sponsors, who believed in them early on and who gave them opportunities. These successful women scientists all did the same sort of thing my mother used to tell me to do: "Put your head down and get your work done. Don't let other things be distractions."

One of the honors for which we nominated these women was the NIH Wednesday Afternoon Lecture Series, our premier lecture series. They would come and talk to the Women of Color Committee that morning, meet with various leaders at NIH throughout the day, and then give their lecture in the afternoon. They were just outstanding. It was a wonderful experience.

A 2018 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and the 2020 film *Picture a Scientist* illuminated the devastating impact of sexual harassment on the careers of women scientists. Is there anything that makes you feel hopeful that we can change the culture of STEM?

Absolutely. Let me start with what we have done within the NIH, led by the COSWD office. There was an [NIH-wide survey](#) of the climate to get a sense of what was happening, and it gave us valuable data about how frequently people were experiencing sexual harassment and bullying. This led to a campaign called "Harassment Doesn't Work Here." Looking outward, NIH now has a mechanism in place through which issues of harassment can be reported. This process has led to cessation of support for several scientists who had been well funded by the NIH following investigations and determinations by their institutions that there were issues of harassment. So people are taking this seriously.

Going forward, I think NIH initiatives that promote better environments—those that address and prevent both sexual harassment and racial inequity—are going to be really impactful. For instance, last December the NIH announced a funding opportunity called [FIRST](#) (Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation). FIRST's goal is to have academic and research institutions outside of the NIH bring in cohorts of scientists to enhance diversity at those institutions. These early-career faculty will have diverse perspectives, come from diverse backgrounds, become a self-reinforcing network,



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get extra mentoring, and receive support in becoming successful scientists. The program will focus on the culture at those institutions, because it is their responsibility to provide warm and welcoming environments. The NIH UNITE Initiative is also going to be looking at other sorts of programs to help with institutional culture.

In addition, I'm very excited about the [prize competition](#) recently created by the NIH's Office of Research on Women's Health to encourage academic institutions to demonstrate their accomplishments in gender equity. The first set of awards was [recently announced](#). So, I think that these programs, the things that are happening in the overall culture, and the initiatives to incentivize organizations and institutions to do the right thing are all going to make for a much better environment for all.

The themes of this issue of *AWIS Magazine* are innovation and leadership. What is the most important leadership lesson you've learned that you would like to pass along to other women in STEM?

When I was at the start of my career, so-called "male" characteristics were put forward as reflective of good leadership; for example, being decisive or taking a "my way or the highway" approach. I'm very happy to have seen, reinforced repeatedly, that these characteristics do not actually define good leadership. In contrast, effective leadership calls for working in an open, supportive, and collaborative fashion. You need to be clear regarding your vision, and then you need to be able to listen. You need to engage and to activate people, and you also need to make sure that they have the resources they need to facilitate moving things forward. These leadership behaviors result in more highly performing organizations than those where one person at the top dictates things to everyone. Ultimately, facilitating full inclusion of diverse perspectives enhances creativity and innovation. That is what we are all about in science.

How can individuals in STEM contribute to the transformative institutional change that you're working toward?

I think that we all have a role. We need to recognize that we all have our biases about things—it's a means of survival. When we encounter something frequently enough, we categorize it so that we do not have to reevaluate it. This can lead to only seeing a certain type



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of person fitting into a team, for instance. And that is something that we as individuals need to recognize. It does not mean we are bad—it's just the natural way our brains work. This is what is called implicit bias.

Recognizing that implicit bias exists is the first step. Then you can take steps to overcome it. Be very clear and explicit about the objective criteria needed in a collaborator whom you want to hire, and base your decisions on those objective criteria in a thoughtful and unhurried fashion, rather than making snap judgments. And when you see colleagues making their own snap judgments and exhibiting implicit bias, remind them of the steps they can take to overcome it.

I also think that there is an opportunity for all AWIS members to be aware of the initiatives coming forward from the NIH—like the UNITE Initiative—to help make this a more equitable environment.

Finally, this is a unique time of openness and interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion. I think that AWIS members should be cognizant of that and take advantage of it. Hopefully, this momentum will last for a long time. ✨

Jenna Jablonski is a marketing communications consultant and founder of *sisterstem.org*, a website amplifying the voices of gender minorities in STEM.