Uncomposed, edited manuscript published online ahead of print.

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Author: Greene Morgan E.; Badrani Jana
Title: Trainees as Catalysts for Change: Three Calls to Action
DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004481
Trainees as Catalysts for Change: Three Calls to Action

Morgan E. Greene

Immunology graduate student and MD-PhD trainee, Department of Pathology, Graduate Biomedical Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama; email: meg3@uab.edu; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2959-8128.

Jana Badrani

Medical student and MD-PhD trainee, Heersink School of Medicine, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6479-7969.

First published online

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the MSTP leadership team for their guidance throughout this process.

Funding/Support: None reported.

Other disclosures: None reported.

Ethical approval: Reported as not applicable.
To the Editor: The death of George Floyd, a Black American murdered by Minneapolis police in May 2020, became a catalyst for worldwide protests, personal introspection, and renewed conversations to address systemic racial inequities. As trainees in the Medical Scientist Training Program (MSTP) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Heersink School of Medicine, we are encouraged to develop as leaders of biomedical research and academic medicine. In reflecting on 2020 as a year of transformation, we feel uniquely positioned to inspire all health care trainees to act as agents of change with 3 calls to action.

First, trainees should recognize who within their institution has a voice to make tangible changes in policies of recruitment and promotion. To this end, we created a student-led Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Committee within our MSTP to amplify diverse voices. D&I Committee members evaluate institutional initiatives and are welcomed as stakeholders in creating a diverse and socially conscious curriculum. We have also added D&I highlights to our student newsletter and as updates to our MSTP website to demonstrate the importance of inclusion and conversations around equity. Such efforts improve the recruitment and retention of individuals from different backgrounds, as well as form the foundation for cultivating a diverse learning community.

Second, trainees should be empowered to recognize and voice institutional deficits. Within the medical school, we stress the importance of inclusive excellence.1 For that reason, the D&I Committee has adopted cultural humility2 as a guiding principle and hosts workshops to allow all voices to be heard within our MSTP. Enhancements to our MSTP are tailored to strengthen our engagement with the local community. In recognition that trainees are best situated to encourage early (K-12 and undergraduate) passion for medicine, we have collaborated with the UAB’s Center for Community Outreach Development to mentor students throughout Birmingham.
Third, trainees and leaders both should be held accountable for change by setting standards for behavior. Challenging the status quo can seem overwhelming, but future health care leaders must embrace self-reflection to ensure they model inclusive behavior. As a result of D&I Committee recommendations, UAB’s MTSP leaders have enhanced the Student Conduct Code to ensure clarity about acceptable interactions and procedures for reporting violations without fear of retaliation.

We hope that our D&I Committee’s initiatives and these calls for action will encourage others to advocate for equity and inclusive excellence at their own institutions.

References
