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Departmental seminar speakers should better reflect trainee diversity

By [Michael Price](#) | Nov. 5, 2019 , 3:20 PM

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as an underrepresented racial and ethnic minority is even lower.

Researchers following these trends have suggested numerous strategies for reducing these disparities at all points in the pipeline, including boosting the visibility and standing of women and minorities by taking steps to ensure they are represented among prestigious conference panels and invited speaker series.

Many large national conferences and federal science agencies appear to be taking those suggestions to heart, but there's a lot more work to be done at an even more basic, granular level: the departmental invited speaker series. Ada Hagan, a postdoctoral research fellow studying microbiology at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor, came to that conclusion after she and two postdoc colleagues published a preprint on bioRxiv last month, reporting that her department had for years been inviting **overwhelmingly white and male lecturers to its departmental speaker series**.

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Science Careers spoke with Hagan about her findings and what can be done to boost the diversity of this fixture of academic life. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: What inspired you to look at your own department's invited speakers?

A: I was sitting in a departmental seminar one day and it was starting to get boring for me, and I was curious why I felt that way. I had recently been looking into diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in my field, and I started thinking back to the last 5 years' worth of invited talks I've gone to in my department, stretching back to when I was a Ph.D. student there: What did those speakers look like? Was it largely people from the same background? I suspected so, but I wanted to verify it before discussing it as a possible issue.

So that started the whole project. My co-authors were also interested in these issues, so we teamed up to look at the diversity of past speakers.

Q: What did you find?

A: We found that compared with our department's population of postdocs and students, the speakers were disproportionately white and male. Our department has slightly more women

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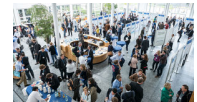
three of those scientists were men.

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Q: How do disparities like that affect young scientists and trainees?

A: I don't think there's been a lot of research in the biomedical field specifically addressing this question, especially for racial and ethnic minorities. But researchers have found that when women who are trainees see women who are experts in their field, there's a greater sense of belonging—a feeling that they can succeed in their field, too.

It fits nicely with a social science concept known as social role theory, which talks about how people take cues from their environment—for instance, the kinds of jobs women tend to fill—and how these cues influence the careers they choose and how they view themselves in society. So I think it can have a very strong impact, whether it's recognized or not.

In my department, we don't have very many faculty members who are underrepresented racial or ethnic minorities, so it can be difficult for some trainees of color to see themselves reflected on the faculty. I think we can really take advantage of these invited speaker positions to fix that. We're spending the money to bring in great scientists, so I think we need to make sure that we can bring in great scientists who are also not Caucasian and not men to really boost that "I can do it too" feeling in people of color and women.

Q: Did your findings have any effects in your department?

A: I think it's a little too soon to tell. We presented our data at a faculty meeting in February of this year, but that was after they had already invited speakers for the next academic year. The faculty were largely supportive. Even though they hadn't been actively tracking invited speaker data before

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department might come up with some more out-of-the-box candidates.

Q: How can departments come up with more diverse ideas about who to nominate?

A: That’s really the last prong of our paper. We created two public databases on the open source platform GitHub called **Diversify Microbiology** and **Diversify Immunology**, similar to **other lists** that have been developed. If you are an underrepresented minority—based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, or LGBTQ identity—in one of those fields who wants to boost your visibility, you can put yourself on the list along with your scientific expertise, and then you’ll be there when someone comes along to look for somebody to speak in their department. We’ve also created a **template for these resources** so that other fields can adopt similar lists of their own.

We’ve received a pretty big response for Diversify Microbiology so far, with our self-nomination list containing more than 100 individuals. Diversify Immunology has been a little bit slower to grow. We hope that more scientists add their names to these lists because invited talks are great things to include on your resume—and we need more diverse speakers.

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