

UT Southwestern Department of Microbiology Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Action Plan

Fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion has been a core value of the Microbiology Department for years. However, recent events have raised our awareness of continued disparities that exist in biomedical research. To help address this problem, the Microbiology Department has organized a committee of faculty and staff that will centralize departmental efforts to promote recruitment and inclusion of underrepresented groups, with a specific emphasis on BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) communities at UT Southwestern Medical Center and within the larger microbiology community. The DEI Committee has constructed a plan to specifically address actionable steps to be taken by the department based on recommendations outlined in 2020 by The Association of African American Scientists (TAAAS) and the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), with support of additional student organizations and faculty. Our overarching goal is to develop policies that produce a supportive and inclusive environment that leads to improvements in the recruitment and retention of underrepresented individuals.

The Department of Microbiology established a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee in the spring of 2020. Current DEI Committee members are Drs. Neal Alto, Nick Conrad, and Julie Pfeiffer. In addition, the DEI Committee has an Advisory Council composed of students, postdocs, and staff who will provide feedback and participate in the implementation of the departmental action plan. Currently, those members include Dr. Arielle Woznica (postdoc), Keyera Randolph (graduate student), Nestor Ruiz (graduate student), and Maribel Alonso (staff).

We welcome anyone in the Microbiology to join this committee. Please notify any of the current members if you would like to be considered for this role.

Overall Goals and Action Plan

Over its first two years, the DEI Committee developed a list of goals and priorities. We agreed that the Committee should focus primarily on actionable steps that can be implemented by the faculty and members of the department. We also determined that while the action items we propose should be applied to all underrepresented groups, the primary focus of the DEI Committee will be on promoting BIPOC. We specifically identified recommendations that the Department of Microbiology DEI Committee could address directly in a timely manner.

After achieving some of the initial goals (forming a committee, developing a Microbiology DEI statement, getting input from stakeholders*, et al.), we now hope to build on our initial progress. Several overarching goals listed below were raised by the aforementioned TAAAS recommendations that we continue to address. Importantly, we consider this an evolving Action Plan and continuously look for new ways to foster diversity and inclusion within the Microbiology department. Our goals include:

- **To increase the recruitment of underrepresented students, postdocs, staff, and faculty.**
- **To enhance the training and mentorship of current students and postdocs.**
- **To promote departmental outreach and service.**
- **To promote faculty training and involvement in DEI initiatives.**
- **To ensure transparency and ongoing assessment of effectiveness.**

*Stakeholders include the Department of Microbiology, UTSW Office of Diversity, TAAAS, SACNAS, STEM, Graduate Student Organization, Postdoctoral Association.

Goal: Increase the recruitment of underrepresented students, postdocs, staff, and faculty.

Action Item 1: The Microbiology Department hosts a weekly seminar series highlighting the best research science in the United States. While we regularly host faculty, we will extend 1-2 invitations per year to rising star postdoctoral fellows from underrepresented groups. In doing so, we hope to highlight diversity among scientists that will simultaneously benefit the postdoctoral fellow and the Microbiology Department.

We have several goals for this initiative. Most importantly, the program provides an opportunity to advance the careers of postdocs from underrepresented groups by increasing their exposure in the field, providing insightful scientific feedback, and networking with faculty leaders in the field of Microbiology. In addition, these visits will support our current trainees, particularly those from underrepresented groups, through expanded peer networking and mentoring opportunities. Finally, even though these are not faculty recruitment seminars, they also will increase the exposure of UT Southwestern to a pool of talented postdoctoral fellows from underrepresented groups.

We strongly encourage any member of the Microbiology Department to nominate postdocs for this opportunity.

Action Item 2: The DEI Committee will encourage one or more faculty members to attend conferences including, but not limited to, the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students (ABRCMS), Emerging Researchers National Conference in STEM (ERN-NSF), and the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) Conference. These activities will be coordinated with the ongoing actions of the Graduate School to also promote Molecular Microbiology trainee attendance. We will further seek to obtain financial support for these efforts from the Microbiology Department, training grants, and/or other sources.

Action Item 3: Faculty visits to other universities and conferences provide an opportunity to recruit students, postdocs, and faculty from underrepresented groups to UTSW. The DEI Committee will generate a series of suggestions for the faculty to aid in such efforts. For example, we will recommend that all faculty members proactively interact with and support Black and other trainees from underrepresented groups at conferences and during seminar trips, including email follow up.

Action Item 4: We strongly encourage faculty members to participate in the UT Southwestern Postbaccalaureate to PhD (PB2PHD) Program. This program provides scholars with a year-long, faculty-mentored research experience and an academic and professional development plan to strengthen their skills and to prepare them for the rigors of PhD training and a successful transition to the STEM workplace. Currently two faculty members of the department (Drs. Alto and Schoggins) mentor PB2PHD fellows.

Goal: Enhance the training and mentorship of current students and postdocs.

Action Item 5: The NIH encourages recruitment of trainees from underrepresented groups to be supported by institutional T32 Training Grants. Not only does the DEI Committee support this goal, but Microbiology has put in place criteria aimed at assuring the individuals selected for the T32 training grants obtain quality mentorship. It is the Department of Microbiology's policy that

selection of trainees for training grant positions is partly informed by proof of quality mentoring which we expect to include bias training for faculty in the future (see below). The mentor assessment includes factors such as average time to Ph.D. for their students, publication records for trainees, participation in career development panels, and other activities. Thus, we seek to simultaneously support the inclusion of trainees from underrepresented groups on NIH T32 grants and provide a commitment to high-quality mentoring of those trainees.

Action Item 6: The DEI Committee will seek information on training from the offices of postdoctoral and graduate student affairs, and other departments at UTSW. This information will be provided to all department members. The DEI Committee will increase efforts to disseminate knowledge of available diversity fellowships, conferences and programs and ensure that mentors and their trainees from underrepresented groups in all departments are provided with adequate information.

Action Item 7: The DEI Committee has generated a “Postdoctoral Welcome Packet” that includes necessary department-specific information for incoming postdocs. The document includes administrative contacts, lab PIs and lab members, departmental equipment, and other practical information. Postdocs generally are integrated into their own lab, but the goal for this initiative is to be inclusive of all new postdocs to the entire Microbiology department.

Goal: Promote departmental outreach and service.

Action Item 8: The DEI Committee will inform faculty and trainees of outreach and service opportunities such as STARS, SURF, K-12 school events, science fairs, events at the Perot Museum, etc., with a particular emphasis on activities for DISD, city schools, and schools that lack resources to expose their students to STEM. We will also identify existing outreach programs to determine how Microbiology Department members can provide support to those who are front-line participants.

Goal: Promote faculty training and involvement in DEI initiatives.

Action Item 9: The DEI Committee will encourage the continued nomination by the Department of faculty members to participate in the LEAD program which includes diversity and inclusion training. In addition, the DEI Committee will support the development and implementation of culturally aware mentorship programs that specifically address the PI-trainee relationships. We feel that development of such a program is best done at the university level, but the Committee regards this as a priority.

Action Item 10: One member of the DEI committee will serve in the UT Southwestern campus-wide Departmental Diversity Leaders Collaborative led by Dr. Quinn Capers. Dr. Conrad currently serves as the Microbiology Departmental Diversity Leader. Leaders meet regularly with each other to share ideas and expertise and promote best practices to advance DEI at UT Southwestern.

Action Item 11: The DEI Committee will request that faculty include a section on their CVs and Biosketches titled “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Activities”. This will hold each faculty member accountable for their activities, motivate further activities, and publicize these efforts to all who read these documents within UTSW and beyond.

Goal: Ensure transparency and ongoing assessment of effectiveness.

Action Item 12: DEI Committee is open to all in the Microbiology Department. Each October the committee will report on the progress on the action plan made that year. Feedback will be sought on these efforts from any member of the Microbiology Department.