

Inclusive Steps for Paving the Path for Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Athletic Training Research

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As identified by the Board of Certification, approximately 20% of athletic trainers (ATs) identify as a race or ethnicity (or both) other than White.¹ Although we have seen an increase in racial and ethnic diversity in athletic training over the past 10 years, candidates who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) still face significant challenges completing the Board of Certification examination and becoming certified ATs.² Furthermore, in a field that is currently advocating to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) in clinicians and how we treat our patients, recruiting and retaining members of marginalized communities as athletic training clinician-scientists are immediate needs. In a push to ensure that our clinicians are engaging in DEIA strategies to enhance patient care, it is also important to make sure that BIPOC individuals are helping to create evidence that is relevant to marginalized communities and taking action to create equitable solutions. In this commentary, we will (1) discuss our personal experiences as women of color in athletic training research and (2) provide a call for action to recruit and retain BIPOC athletic training researchers.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Shelby Baez, PhD, ATC

I went to a predominately Black high school in Fayetteville, North Carolina, that functioned like a mini version of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. My high school motto was “Born of Need, Destined to Serve, and Striving to Excel,” and it was clear that the “need” aspect of the motto reflected the systemic racism that was the impetus for the opening of my high school in 1927. As I transitioned to college, I went from having all of my teachers look like me to not having a single professor of color at the primarily White institution I attended for my undergraduate degree. I was the only person of color in my athletic training class, but I was fortunate to find a community of supportive friends, preceptors, and professors in the athletic training program, and I felt connected to many of the BIPOC athletes and patients who I helped to treat during my professional education. However, although some of my peers were encouraged to engage in research during undergraduate training, I was terrified about that idea because, quite frankly, none of the researchers looked like me. I did not think that I belonged in the research space.

When I began my postprofessional master’s degree in the athletic training program, I realized that completing research

would be necessary to obtain my master’s degree. I was fortunate to have a professor who took an interest in my development as a researcher and challenged me to excel in my research training. She encouraged me to submit a grant to fund my research project, and, fortunately, I was funded through our professional organization! If not for her pushing me to step out of my comfort zone and for her consistently reminding me that I *did* belong in the research space, I might not be writing this commentary right now. She connected me with my future PhD advisor, who would then serve as yet another advocate for me in a space that did not feel designed for people who looked like me. Throughout this process, and even until this day, I struggle with *imposter syndrome* (ie, the condition of not internally experiencing success, despite exhibiting high performance in external, objective ways, and feeling like a “fraud”),³ likely due to the lack of representation of BIPOC researchers in athletic training and the built environment surrounded by dominant White identities. As I began to attend research conferences, it became very evident that very few people of color were conducting research. Platform presentations, keynotes, and prestigious awards often go to White researchers. Most recently, I attended a conference filled with more than 100 national and international researchers, and I was the only Black person in the entire conference. This simply cannot continue to be the norm if we want to progress as a profession and become leaders in DEIA.

I am now starting year 5 as a faculty member at a research-intensive university, and admittedly, I do not claim to be an expert in DEIA, but my personal experiences as a researcher of color in athletic training have led to alterations in my approach to recruiting and mentoring students. First, I recognized that students of color show up at my door, not because they want to do research, but because they are seeking mentorship from a person who looks like them. I always use this as an opportunity to encourage the student to seek research opportunities, even if it is not in my lab. Second, I realized that students of color likely are not showing up at my White colleagues’ doors seeking similar wisdom, so it is imperative that we be intentional with our recruitment of students of color into our labs. We need to attend Black or Hispanic student association meetings and invite students to be research assistants in our labs. Most importantly, it is not enough to just recruit students of color into athletic training research—we must *retain* students and researchers of color. We must be intentional in ensuring that our lab culture is inclusive of

students from all backgrounds. Once we figure this out, I am hopeful that our platform presentations, keynotes, and prestigious awards will be more representative of the patients we treat each day.

Nicolette Harris, DAT, LAT, ATC, CSCS

It was not until after completing my undergraduate education that I was exposed to the field of athletic training. After 2 failed attempts at acceptance to doctor of physical therapy programs, a physical therapist recommended I consider athletic training. Until that time, I had never encountered an AT, and after reading more about ATs and their scope of practice, I immediately applied to a professional master's degree program.

Coming from an undergraduate institution rich in diversity, I was thankful that my professional program offered a classroom of peers who mirrored the cultural diversity to which I had been accustomed. However, although that diversity was represented in the classroom, it did not take much time to notice that it was lacking in our profession. There were no Black role models for me. Attending a diverse program in a diverse geographic area still did not lend itself to exposing me to a single Black professor, preceptor, or other role model in athletic training. Looking back, I did not know how much I needed that representation. Athletic training educators often fail to recognize and understand the imposter syndrome that high-performing Black students may feel during their educational programs. These intrusive thoughts limit their critical thinking, their participation, their collaboration, and ultimately their initiative to pursue some opportunities. Likewise, the overall lack of representation that occurs across professional education limits BIPOC students' access to needed mentorship, networking opportunities, and resources for career advancement.

Perhaps ironically, my first position as a certified AT was at a historically Black high school. Being surrounded by Black students, most with social factors that significantly challenged their academic achievement, I started to understand the critical need for both role models and inclusive teaching practices. This only reinforced a drive for the DEIA work so desperately needed in our profession. However, it has been challenging pursuing and engaging in this domain. As in practice and education, Black role models are scarce in the research world. Although they do exist, many of these individuals conduct research in the clinical space. Forging a research line rooted in DEIA is at times an uphill battle. Whether overtly or implicitly, DEIA research is undervalued, overlooked, and often marginalized compared with other topics. Today, educational policy changes have added an additional layer of unspoken taboo around this work. Thus, it feels like there is a bit of a target on your back. The intersectionality of being a Black female who conducts scholarship in DEIA risks professional exclusion and challenges to career progression. This weight has, without question, negatively affected my psychological well-being, and dealing with these challenges while striving for excellence leads to stress, burnout, and sometimes even dissatisfaction with my career.

On the bright side, I do not think that my efforts are in vain. Over the last decade in this profession, I have seen noticeable changes in our profession—changes that make all avenues, including teaching, learning, practice, service, and research, more inclusive for Black women. More role

models exist in all these avenues. Athletic training curricula are more inclusive than ever and incorporate research that represents diverse culture, history, and experiences. Specifically, more opportunities exist to help nurture young professionals' research interests and abilities. Perhaps most importantly, there is more emphasis on the value of Black women and on diversity research as meaningful and worthy research in our profession.

IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND LACK OF REPRESENTATION IN ATHLETIC TRAINING

Overlap between our experiences is evident in our personal stories. Both of our stories highlight (1) dealing with imposter syndrome and (2) a lack of representation of ATs and researchers of color in athletic training. Unfortunately, these experiences are not unique and are most likely similar to many of the stories of BIPOC athletic training researchers. Regarding imposter syndrome in Black professionals specifically, it has been suggested that Black professionals may experience imposter syndrome in the workplace due to the following concerns: (1) lack of representation in senior leadership roles, (2) prejudicial attitudes (ie, experiencing microaggression and racial prejudice in the working environment), (3) performance expectations (ie, feeling the need to work harder than White counterparts to advance in their career), (4) lack of support (ie, limited access to managers, primary investigators [PIs], and department chairs and reduced support for professional development), and (5) unwelcoming workplace environments (ie, existing in a workplace or laboratory culture with dominant White identities).⁴ Addressing these concerns in athletic training research is critically needed.

Furthermore, as described in our personal experiences and as discussed as a possible reason for the development of imposter syndrome in BIPOC individuals, we are acutely aware of the lack of representation in athletic training research. Consequently, we aim to provide recommendations designed to maintain people of color in athletic training research that must be applied by *all* members of the athletic training research community. It is not enough for the few BIPOC athletic training researchers to be intentional in the recruitment and retention process. Therefore, we call upon our White counterparts for their allyship and increased intentionality in recruiting and retaining athletic training researchers of color. In the absence of this allyship and concerted effort for recruitment and retention, our representation will continue to remain stagnant in the athletic training profession.

PURSuing AND ADVANCING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Profession-wide efforts to increase the number of BIPOC faculty are slowly taking effect. However, we must recognize that equitable representation of faculty in research has not yet been achieved.⁵ All ATs play a role in shifting the culture in academia toward the implementation of equitable and inclusive policies, practices, and opportunities for BIPOC researchers. Thus, we offer several actionable ways to promote DEIA in athletic training research.

Understand the Importance of Student Mentorship in Recruiting and Developing BIPOC Athletic Training Researchers

Research mentors play a critical role in guiding students to develop their research and gain opportunities to present or publish their work and obtain funding or access to professional development.⁶ Students can gain support from faculty members of all racial and ethnic backgrounds when mentors support their identities, research interests, and academic progress. Mentors should be intellectually open and supportive of the research athletic training students want to do without limiting the students based on expectations about their intellectual or research interests.⁶

Create Safe Scholarly Spaces

Administrators and PIs should understand that explicit and implicit acts of racism occur regularly in our classrooms and research laboratories. These acts include but are not limited to microaggressions, tokenism, tone policing, and White savior behaviors.⁷ Administrators and PIs should seek to create safe working spaces where students and faculty conducting research feel safe talking about racism, whether it be individually, institutionally, or systemically.⁷ Leaders should aim to regularly engage in informed and scholarly conversations about race with students, faculty, and members of the research team as a method of signaling to all that discrimination will not be tolerated. Moreover, administrators and PIs should ask BIPOC individuals what they can do to ensure their safety in these scholarly spaces.

Collaborate With BIPOC Colleagues

Publishing and securing grant funding are key elements to tenure, promotion, and career longevity for all researchers in academia. Therefore, providing opportunities for BIPOC faculty to collaborate on manuscripts and grants is one of the best ways to promote career advancement and professional retention in our athletic training researchers of color. However, ensuring that BIPOC members of the research team are solicited equitably for their intellectual contributions, not just their labor, and serve as coinvestigators, not just contributors, is vital.⁷

Acknowledge Service Equity and Overload

Due to their ability to provide diverse perspectives, BIPOC faculty members are often overloaded with a high volume of service requests. Although representation on committees, editorial boards, and task forces is key, researchers of color should be protected from excessive service, particularly early in their careers, and mentored to strategically select opportunities to build their scholarly reputations.⁵

Amplify the Voices of BIPOC Researchers

Professionals in athletic training classrooms and laboratory programs should strive to read and cite the work of BIPOC scholars. Similarly, administrators and colleagues should seek to nominate BIPOC researchers for awards and

highlight their scientific achievements that extend beyond their contributions to DEIA.⁷ Leaders should talk about BIPOC athletic training researchers and their work to improve their chances of securing leadership roles.

Embrace a Flexible Research Agenda

To represent the lived experiences of traditionally marginalized populations, BIPOC investigators may pursue applied research that deviates from mainstream professional topics. Subsequently, their publications may be perceived to lack the traditional rigor associated with high-impact journals and a prestigious h-index.⁵ Departments and PIs should recognize and quantify the societal impact of this work. In addition, departments and PIs should recognize how topics pursued by BIPOC researchers may extend their current foci and lead to more innovative athletic training science.⁵

Although these are just a few recommendations to improve retention in athletic training research, investigating the effectiveness of these strategies is critically important. However, these methods suggest a good place to start in our efforts to enhance diversity in athletic training research.

CONCLUSIONS

Athletic training research will become stagnant without the integration of new thoughts and ideas from BIPOC communities. In the absence of this diversity, our efforts to enhance patient care and clinical practice will be diminished. We are optimistic that we are making the necessary improvements in our profession, but we still have a long way to go. We hope that everyone will join us in this process to enhance diversity and shift the paradigm to create a more inclusive culture in the athletic training research community.

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