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Putting Action Behind Words: A Journey of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the AGA Journals

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In the wake of the 2020 public outcry around the continued systemic racism in the United States, the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA), where we work, embarked on a multi-year, multifaceted effort to address the yawning health outcomes disparities in People of Color. Titled “The AGA Equity Project,” the endeavor focuses on six

domains: justice, equity, and education; research and funding; workforce and leadership; recognition; unconscious bias; and engagement of the next generation (Figure 1). In a commentary published in 2020, the co-creators of the AGA Equity Project described the current state and the desired future state for each domain.[\[1\]](#)

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) Equity Task Force's Assessment of the Current State of the AGA and Vision for the Future. Original graphic © 2020 by the AGA; reproduced with permission of the copyright holder.

The AGA Equity Project founders tasked us—editorial staff who oversee the publication of five peer-reviewed journals—with determining how our portfolio fits into this large-scale effort, asking us to consider how our journals can effect change in the various domains. This request triggered a several-month discovery period in which we held discussions with our journals' editors-in-chief (EICs) and other key volunteer members and staff; researched the work of other journals around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); read as much as we could about the subject; and attended webinars and seminars. In this article we share with you the culmination of those efforts, detailing the DEI journey our portfolio has undertaken.

There is a lot to consider when attempting to weave measures of DEI into your journals. Admittedly, we felt somewhat overwhelmed by the number of actions we could take and were uncertain as to where to focus our efforts—to make sense of where our journey should start, our first step was to add a DEI editor to our flagship journal, *Gastroenterology*. To recruit for the role, we crafted a position description, based on research we conducted of similar positions at other journals. We then worked with the EICs of *Gastroenterology*, as well as the leaders of the AGA Equity Project, to fine-tune the description. Some of the salient responsibilities of the position description are:

- Develop a monthly column that features content related to DEI in research, publishing, and health care.
- Work with the EICs and publications staff to develop and implement initiatives to advance the DEI goals of the journal and of the AGA.
- Occasionally serve as a reviewer for original research submissions that need a DEI perspective.
- Occasionally contribute to invited editorials to review them through a DEI lens.

With the monthly column, we didn't want to simply include navel-gazing topics and be purely reactive, but instead publish intentional and thought-provoking content. The purpose of the column is to draw attention to topics within the DEI scope that wouldn't necessarily be included in an original research paper, such as how the field of gastroenterology can create diversity in the physician pipeline, why inclusive language matters, and how racism affects health outcomes.

After appointing the DEI section editor, we were able to identify several other initiatives, which are already underway at *Gastroenterology* and our other journals. They include:

- **Improving the diversity of our boards of editors** across race, ethnicity, sex, geographical location, and institution to ensure we have a robust set of perspectives when evaluating research.
- **Implementing the SAGER guidelines** to ensure equity in reporting for sex and gender (<https://www.ease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Sager-for-web.pdf>).
- **Asking authors to consider including DEI keywords** with their manuscripts so that their research can be discoverable by other researchers interested in disparities and equity studies.
- **Developing an online collection of DEI-related research** to showcase our commitment to advancing the field of gastroenterology in these areas.

We don't intend to stop with just the above efforts. Our vision includes several future initiatives including:

- **Analyzing race/ethnicity and sex data of our authors and reviewers** to establish a baseline and then set targets to ensure we have a diverse reviewer and author base. A note to others who wish to do so, it's critical to be thoughtful in how you develop this process. Within the United States, asking for such demographic information is often viewed as normal, but in Europe, it can be perceived as offensive. Our solution is to match our author/reviewer database against our

membership database, which includes much of the demographic information we're looking for, for both members and non-members alike. Also, if you choose to collect demographic data from your authors and reviewers, it's good to explain to them why you're collecting the data, how you'll store it, and how you intend to use it. Also, think carefully about when in the peer-review process you'll collect it—and who will have access to the data. You don't want to risk introducing bias into the process by having reviewers and editors see the information associated with a particular manuscript.

- **Creating a diversity statement** for our journals to publicly state our commitment to DEI within our portfolio.
- **Asking authors to use inclusive language**, according to the *AMA Manual of Style*.
- **Asking authors to follow research disparities guidelines** so that the research we publish is consistent with best practices around the scientific work on racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes.

Although we've made considerable progress in addressing matters of DEI in our portfolio, we still have a long way to go. Our hope is that as we implement the above initiatives, we'll start to measure their outcomes to determine if we are successful in our efforts. Our goal is to put action behind our words and show the gastroenterology and scholarly publishing communities that the time for change is now and we're committed to making it happen.

Disclosure Statement

The authors are employed by the AGA.

Citations

1. Carr RM, Quezada SM, Gangarosa SM, et al; Governing Board of the American Gastroenterological Association. From intention to action: operationalizing AGA diversity policy to combat racism and health disparities in gastroenterology. *Gastroenterology*. 2020;159(5):1637-1647. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2020.07.044 [↗](#)