

President's Message

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Diversity in the Environmental Health Workforce

Even though there are numerous definitions for environmental health, I think it is safe to say that they all recognize the interaction between people and the environment. The focus on people is what makes environmental health practice a community-based discipline. Thus, the way that environmental health is practiced and the specific areas addressed are based upon the nature and characteristics of the community served. If, for example, a community relies primarily on wells and septic tanks for drinking water and wastewater treatment, respectively, then the environmental health practitioners who support that community need to be well versed on such systems and know about proper siting and how to do and interpret percolation tests. In areas where mosquito-borne diseases are endemic, environmental health practitioners need to know how to do trapping and surveillance to monitor vector levels and species in order to recommend control measures.

My thesis for this column is that diversity in the environmental health workforce is important to the success of environmental health services in the community, similar to the way that specific environmental health skills are important as shown in the examples above. Also, the environmental health workforce should be a reflection of the community that it supports.

I have the task of developing a diversity position paper for NEHA; therefore, I have been reflecting on the meaning of diversity and its associated concepts. I also have been reviewing literature on the subject in order

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to capture a proper context for our organization and profession. In this article, the “community” I address is the United States, but the concepts are applicable on larger (e.g., global) or smaller (e.g., local community) scales. I want to share with you some thoughts that I have and am developing concerning diversity as it may apply to NEHA and our profession.

We need a diverse environmental health workforce for several reasons. Our colleague and preeminent environmental health scientist, Professor Bailus Walker (Walker & Spann, 2008), identifies many of them in a treatise of the subject in which he identifies environmental health impacts in minority and lower-income communities. Some examples of these impacts include the association between major health problems and environmental factors; disproportion-

ate exposure and vulnerability to environmental threats in poor and under-resourced communities; changing demographics with related social and economic influences; and culturally based beliefs and attitudes. Walker also describes some benefits of having a diverse environmental health workforce that can help counter adverse health impacts. Diverse environmental health practitioners, for example, can bring cultural understanding and sensitivity when communities are engaged and involved in planning for and resolving environmental issues. They can help increase communication, understanding, and, ultimately, community acceptance of interventions to eliminate or mitigate environmental impacts. Also, a diverse environmental health workforce enhances the prospect that communities may be more sensitive to environmental issues that affect diverse neighborhoods disproportionately. They may be motivated differently when it comes to working in and for communities that look like the places where they live or lived.

So far, I have discussed diversity primarily from a race and ethnicity perspective. In the modern use of the word, however, diversity is not a synonym for race, ethnicity, or minority. As I researched literature concerning diversity, I came upon an article by Shackelford (2005) that describes a modern context for its concept, one that I think is applicable to NEHA and the environmental health workforce. He notes that diversity now is being defined as bringing “unique perspectives or outlooks to the organization.” This is a concept for diversity

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that I think will be a healthy and progressive position for NEHA and our profession. Based on this definition, I then consider an expanded approach to diversity to include factors such as gender, religion, socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, and others. Equal access to the profession (as a career choice), job positions, career progression, and leadership positions are characteristics that I think also are important concepts for diversity in the environmental health workforce. Given this modern definition of diversity, however, I do not intend for race and ethnicity to be less emphasized, but merely to recognize that they are not the only dynamics associated with the concept of diversity.

Since 2003, I have had the distinct pleasure of working with devoted faculty at Eastern Kentucky University and a team of environmental health professionals from various facets of the profession (academia; industry; and federal, state, and local government agencies) on a very successful initiative to increase minority student enrollment in the environmental health major and hire minority environmental health

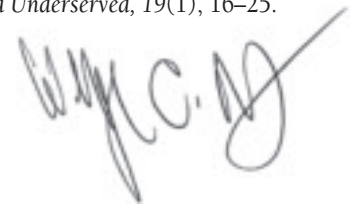
faculty. Details about this initiative were highlighted in a Managing Editor/Executive Director column in a previous issue of the *JEH* (see vol. 68, no. 1). Subsequently, I chaired a committee to explore how this initiative could be expanded to a national effort, which led to the development of a concept titled the **National Council on Diversity in Environmental Health** (N-CODE Health). The platform for N-CODE Health is diversity based and includes concepts that also may apply to NEHA and the environmental health profession. These concepts are as follows: diversity will foster stronger environmental health leadership; we are dedicated to improving the field of environmental health; diversity is critical to the future of environmental health, public health, and the economic health of the nation; diverse student bodies and faculties must be created in educational institutions to produce a diverse workforce; a diverse workforce in environmental health is essential to bring “emerging professionals” into the field; effectiveness in resolving environmental health concerns in a community is related to the degree that the en-

vironmental health workforce is representative of the population it serves; and solutions and innovations to enhance diversity must be incorporated in all sectors of the environmental health workforce within local, state, and federal programs.

As we seek ways to strengthen environmental health and better serve the communities that we support, let us all embrace diversity as one of the necessary tools to improve our profession. **LEAN FORWARD!** 🐾

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