

The American Urogynecologic Society Action Plan on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Developed by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force

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Abstract: The American Urogynecologic Society (AUGS) identified diversity, equity, and inclusion as the cornerstone of excellence in governance and operations. Although efforts to increase diversity of our membership have been ongoing for years, there had not previously been an adequate investment to ensure an inclusive climate that emphasizes equity across our volunteers and programs. In June 2020, the AUGS President, Dr Shawn Menefee, and Board of Directors called for a Presidential Task Force on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to study the current state of our society and make recommendations for future directions. The charge was intentionally broad. In review of the literature, there was little to inform the best means to proceed aside from administering climate surveys to gauge the current culture of inclusion and bias. The task force believed that the challenge was not only to describe the problem but also to articulate solutions. We ultimately moved to rewrite the Diversity and Inclusion and Code of Conduct Statements and develop an Action Plan that would accelerate the efforts of AUGS to foster inclusion and improve equity through the existing governance structure. In this document, we describe how the task force was organized and conducted the work to develop strategies that were aligned with the AUGS mission: “As the leader in female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery, AUGS drives excellence in care for women through education, research, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration.”

Key Words: diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery, AUGS, climate survey, code of conduct

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In the summer of 2020, several racially motivated events in the United States became a catalyst for change, forcing everyone to examine this country’s past and current racial injustices. The American Urogynecologic Society (AUGS) struggled to confront

how the honoring of past innovators in gynecology was alienating many of our current members. In June 2020, Dr Shawn Menefee emailed the AUGS membership his Presidential Perspective, which called for the AUGS community “to identify disparities and chart a path forward.”¹ One month later, Dr Menefee commissioned the AUGS Presidential Task Force for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and placed a call for volunteers.² In August 2020, to highlight the history of racism in obstetrics and gynecology and acknowledge that racism persists today, the AUGS, in collaboration with ACOG and other women’s health care societies, published the “Joint Statement: Collective Action Addressing Racism.”³

The goals of the AUGS DEI Task Force (referred to as “task force” in this document) were to examine the organization’s history and mission and to assess its current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The task force sought to apply this knowledge to areas of membership, leadership, education, research, and patient care to devise an Action Plan to move the organization forward. The goal was to improve equity and inclusiveness for AUGS members, address the need for greater diversity in our research,⁴ and provide a useful roadmap for other health care societies as we collectively seek to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. This report describes the process for how the task force was assembled, gathered data from the membership, and developed an action plan that was ultimately adopted by the AUGS Board of Directors (“Board”).

Creating the Task Force

The AUGS Executive Committee appointed a chair and board liaison; in addition to the AUGS Chief Executive Officer, this comprised the task force leadership group. The task force leaders reviewed several applications for membership and 12 members were selected based on a statement of interest, good standing with AUGS, and previous DEI experience. Members represented a diverse group in age, sex, geographic location, and race/ethnicity. The task force was publicly introduced to the AUGS membership during the 2020 PFD Week Presidential Address.

Our initial process proceeded as follows: the task force first reviewed the history of racial disparities in the field of female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery and how systemic racism affects patient care. Members were encouraged to participate in open and honest communications about their work and personal experiences through several virtual meetings. All meetings were recorded to ensure that ideas were captured accurately. The task force then identified potential areas for improvement related to DEI among the members, leadership, programs, research programs, and patient advocacy within AUGS. Subsequently, the task force embarked on an iterative process that incorporated the guiding principles of DEI—removing barriers to equality, raising awareness about the benefits of diversity for all, and integrating diversity and inclusion into the existing governance of the organization—into the Action Plan that would be presented to AUGS leadership. The goal was to

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create a multiyear strategy that incorporated membership feedback for actionable and lasting change.

The Task Force in Action

The first task force meeting took place in August 2020 and continued every 2 to 4 weeks for 6 months. The initial strategy of the task force was to identify its goals and objectives. The overarching objective was to develop an Action Plan that aligned with the AUGS mission, which states “As the leader in female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery, AUGS drives excellence in care for women through education, research, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration.” From this mission, the focus of the group was to create an Action Plan with short- and long-term goals that were categorized in the following areas: leadership and engagement, knowledge and education, research, advocacy, and recognition. The members of the task force agreed that to create comprehensive longstanding and durable change, the Action Plan needed to be easily incorporated into existing society governance, councils, and committees.

After identifying the goals and objectives, the task force members reflected on their own personal experiences as volunteers within the organization. This process allowed the task force to identify DEI strengths and weaknesses within AUGS. Group members identified multiple issues related to perceived inequities in volunteer opportunities, lack of diverse leadership, and concern that some members felt alienated or excluded from making a meaningful impact in the organization. Ideas for addressing these issues were captured in a shared document. Through group deliberation, these ideas were categorized and prioritized. In addition, task force members believed that a climate survey (described in a later section) was needed to better understand the broad perspectives of our members.

The task force was also charged with rewriting the AUGS Member Code of Conduct and the AUGS Diversity Statement. This was important to ensure that the society is consistent in its policies and procedures. The task force was subdivided into 2 separate working groups—one to develop the Climate Survey and the other to rewrite the AUGS Member Code of Conduct and the 2 AUGS statements. The working groups developed drafts of the statements and survey, which were further edited by the entire group. The final version of the Member Code of Conduct, the draft version of the Diversity and Inclusion Statement, and the final Climate Survey questions were presented to the Board in November 2020 and approved with minor edits.

The AUGS Diversity and Inclusion and Member Code of Conduct Statements

The AUGS Board adopted the previous Diversity Statement in March 2015 (see Appendix A, Supplemental Digital Content 1, <http://links.lww.com/FPMRS/A301>). This statement emphasized geography, years of practice, training background, and practice type. Although race and gender diversity were mentioned, the consensus among the task force members was that equal emphasis should be placed on other marginalized communities. The decision was made to completely rewrite the statement to be more comprehensive. The aim of this document was to align AUGS’ governing principles to support an inclusive culture.

The AUGS Diversity and Inclusion Position Statement working group, created three sections: (1) background, (2) vision, and (3) commitment. The meetings for this working group became a safe space for uncomfortable conversations about race and ethnicity, systemic injustices, and how to best implement DEI initiatives within AUGS. An important discussion for task force members was how to acknowledge the role that AUGS may have played in perpetuating past and present systemic injustices. After challenging and candid

discussions, the task force agreed that the goal was to bring forth a historical background, while also providing an action-forward vision of DEI. These goals were then presented to the Board who agreed that some form of acknowledgment was important.

In the final diversity statement, the task force proposed a series of aspirational aims. The group acknowledged how racism and bias exist in our society as well as in obstetrics and gynecology and accepted the responsibility to eliminate their detrimental effects in our communities. The task force proposed that AUGS should commit to the following: (1) creating an environment and experience for its members that is diverse, safe, and representative, (2) maintain a leadership that is diverse and inclusive, and (3) promote equity in research and in the care of our patients. The Board approved the final AUGS Diversity and Inclusion Statement on January 30, 2021⁵ (see Appendix B, Supplemental Digital Content 2, <http://links.lww.com/FPMRS/A302>).

The task force also revised the Member Code of Conduct; however, the edits were less comprehensive compared with the Diversity and Inclusion Statement. Members of the task force agreed that the Member Code of Conduct already included those commitments to a behavior that, if followed, would contribute to an open and inclusive culture. The only edit made was to include an item that encourages members to “actively promote diversity, equity, and inclusion while engaged in AUGS-sponsored activities”⁶ (see Appendix C, Supplemental Digital Content 3, <http://links.lww.com/FPMRS/A303>).

The AUGS Membership Climate Survey and Action Plan

In a PubMed search including the terms “diversity,” “inclusion,” “race,” “medical society,” “organization,” “equity,” “physicians,” “climate survey,” and “task force,” we identified few relevant abstracts that helped inform our process for developing an action plan. In a climate survey administered to committee members of the Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons, few respondents (6.4%) had experienced bias based on sex, race, or sexual orientation among a pool of majority male (73%), White (63%), and heterosexual respondents (95.5%).⁷ In this self-selective group of Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons committee members, survey responses indicated a desire for improvement in advancement opportunities and membership diversity. Furthermore, the results found that discrimination and bias extended to differences in specialty, practice model, age, and geography. The Society of Thoracic Surgeons Diversity and Inclusion Workforce administered a climate survey and found that members who identify as female or Black experienced high rates of bias.^{8,9} Conversely, this survey also showed that 90% of respondents reported high rates of self-assessed cultural competency. These contradictory findings led the Society of Thoracic Surgeons Workforce to urge greater self-reflection and training in implicit bias within their society and focus on diversifying the pool of trainees, especially, in sex and race.

Although these published climate survey results were helpful to understand member concerns and needs related to DEI, it was unclear how these results were used to direct future strategies to improve the culture of inclusion. The AUGS Task Force set forth to develop a climate survey to better understand the perceptions of the membership-at-large and to inform the task force on how to proceed further with the DEI Action Plan. The climate survey working group convened to construct a survey modeled after the University of Michigan Campus Climate Survey on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.¹⁰ The following domains were assessed: demographics, cultural climate/environment, direct experiences at annual meetings, and volunteering on committees. The survey

consisted of 30 questions, with many questions being multiple choice response options with a “Prefer not to answer” option and Likert-scale responses. Two open-ended questions with a free-text response asked members to “share any other thoughts, comments, or suggestions that you may have about the topics covered in this survey” as well as to “describe any other discriminatory events you have experienced as an AUGS member.”

The survey working group revised the questions and then presented the proposed questionnaire to the entire task force for further review and comment. The AUGS Board approved the voluntary and anonymous 10-minute survey, which was emailed to AUGS members in October 2020. The email contained a unique link to SurveyMonkey such that only one survey could be completed per member. Reminders were sent twice. The results of the climate survey will be reported separately; however, the totality of responses was used to create the Action Plan. The response rate for the survey was 24% of the general membership, and the results were used to adjust priorities where needed.

The process of creating the action plan followed a thorough analysis of the survey results, including free-text answers to open-ended questions. One of the most helpful aspects of our task force was the inclusion of the AUGS CEO during our group discussions. She was able to provide a realistic understanding of AUGS resource allocations and the impact of proposed interventions. This allowed the task force to develop pragmatic recommendations that could be used within the existing structure of the organization. We developed an action plan that includes a multiyear strategy focusing on 5 major areas in AUGS: (1) leadership and engagement, (2) knowledge and education, (3) research, (4) recognition, and (5) advocacy. Specific goals and objectives were proposed for each of the 5 major areas. It consists of a framework of short-, mid-, and long-term goals that were central to the issues identified by the task force and the membership-at-large. The findings from the climate survey and the Action Plan were presented to the Board and approved on January 30, 2021 (see Appendix D, Supplemental Digital Content 4, <http://links.lww.com/FPMRS/A304>).¹¹

SUMMARY

This document serves to inform AUGS members of the task force’s deliberate process to evaluate the society’s current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion and develop a strategy to strengthen the existing societal paradigm. Notably, the task force administered a climate survey, created a Diversity and Inclusion Position Statement, updated the Member Code of Conduct, and developed an Action Plan. The governance committee could incorporate recommendations within the action plan to ensure DEI permeates all AUGS-sponsored initiatives. When embarking on the mission, the task force noted a paucity of literature available for guidance. Many society membership surveys assess the needs, opinions, and even diversity of its members, but few deeply examine issues with equity and inclusion beyond characterizing the current climate and calling for change.¹²⁻¹⁴ The task force was challenged to develop our own process and procedure to enact DEI culture and programmatic change.

In addition to this procedural roadmap the task force developed, other lessons were harder to quantify. Three lessons learned are worth mentioning. First, we learned that diversity and inclusion mean different things to different constituent groups. Although we plan to present the findings of the climate survey separately, we noted that our members had many ideas about improving the culture of inclusion. Importantly, we found that although these ideas focused on different groups, they were not mutually exclusive or in opposition to other groups. Therefore, the task force needed to generate recommendations that would, ultimately, benefit all

members and patients. Second, we learned that to make any substantive improvements in DEI, we must be prepared to participate in uncomfortable conversations where we acknowledge how each of us may have contributed to a culture of exclusion and racism. This was especially hard given that everyone is not always ready to admit the role they have played in perpetuating harm against marginalized groups. Third, we learned that organizational change will not happen without involving key leaders (eg, the AUGS Board and CEO) in the process from the start. Inclusion of the AUGS CEO not only helped us develop recommendations that could be easily integrated within the existing governance but would also help with buy-in from the various constituent groups throughout the society.

The current task force report adds to the literature by providing a guide to help groups create a comprehensive action plan aligned with their mission and a specific process toward a solution. Although limited by a 24% response rate, the AUGS climate survey represented voices from individuals of not only different races, ethnicities, nationalities, gender identities, and sexual orientation but also different ages, abilities, educational backgrounds, and practice settings. The responses also demonstrated that a broad consideration of needs and perspectives must include the full diversity of the membership. The AUGS members include allied health professionals, physicians, medical students, trainees, and researchers. By using the AUGS survey responses to inform the revised Diversity and Inclusion Position Statement, Code of Conduct, and DEI Action Plan, the task force underscores that inclusion and equity require a more intentional strategy to incorporate all perspectives. The survey findings emphasize the wisdom that when the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed, everyone will benefit. The task force endeavored to ensure that the resulting product fully aligned with the AUGS mission “to drive excellence in the care of women.” These recommendations were designed to enhance member experience, education, research, and patient care.

Through sharing our work and process, the task force hopes to provide a transparent way forward for our society; in addition, this report may benefit others who endeavor to improve their own DEI culture. One of the most important accomplishments is the newly established AUGS Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee. This permanent committee will be charged with setting strategies to ensure equity across all groups, monitoring AUGS’ progress in the areas of diversity and inclusion, and disseminating results to members.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the difference between equality and equity. Equality overlooks systems of bias and injustice. Equity recognizes that special efforts are required to ensure representation and participation from groups who have been affected by historic and systemic injustices. If the events of 2020 served as a catalyst to examine and change longstanding inequities, this subspecialty’s celebration of the annual J. Marion Sims lectureship exemplified one of many symptoms of present-day systemic racism born out of our collective history. It is an example of how past abuses live beyond their time and continue to perpetuate harm. Therefore, the task force concludes by acknowledging the past and recognizing the importance of remembering it, even when unfavorable, so that our collective future may be brighter, fairer, and more inclusive for all.

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