

**Race REALLY Matters**  
**Follow-up discussion**  
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We received more than 40 questions and comments after my talk on August 27. Rather than try to answer them all, I chose to expand on 5 questions. In addition, I listed several other questions which I did not try to answer but, instead, share with you in the hope that they might serve as themes for future discussions and study.

1. **Zero-sum game.** In my talk, I stated that many scientists view diversity as a zero-sum game—i.e., if we add racial/ethnic diversity, we necessarily reduce scientific excellence.

Question: What is the origin of this belief?

My response: While I don't know the origins, there are several aspects of the way we do science that contribute to and perpetuate the false notion of a zero-sum game between diversity and excellence. Here are aspects of the culture of U.S. science that might contribute to this attitude:

- We glorify the individual. There is something about the way we portray brilliant scientists that creates the false impression that important scientific breakthroughs often depend wholly on an individual born to be a hero, a person who is innately gifted and destined for greatness.
- We like winners. The Nobel Prizes—which unfortunately all too often substitute for a syllabus—are intended to recognize discoveries but have been reduced by the media and textbooks to the elevation of a few (no more than three in science!) persons who got there first. Important publications and research grants go to they who claim to be first.

- By valuing competition and individuals, our culture emphasizes hierarchy and devalues collaboration. Every grant has a PI. We often don't know how to "count" collaborative work when evaluating a person for promotion or tenure. We (un)consciously look down on persons who collaborate as being weaker and less desired.
- We brag on professional lineages. Because U.S. science was almost exclusively the domain of white males for decades, the most prominent lineages will likely comprise white men of distinction.

A sidebar: According to Merriam-Webster, "excellence" is "the quality of being excellent." "Excellent" means "very good of its kind: eminently good: first-class: superior." Thus, "excellence" is a relative quality and not an absolute quantity, and, because it cannot be quantified, it makes little sense to talk about it as if we can measure it.

2. **PEER.** A number of people expressed concern about using the term "PEER"—Persons Excluded because of Ethnicity or Race.

Questions: "What about other groups, like LGBTQ+ or women?" Others asked: "What's wrong with acronyms like BIPOC?"

My response: The term PEER does not mean that we should not value other groups. PEER is simply intended to replace "URM." "URM" has become shorthand for race, even though race or ethnicity is not part of the term (the "R" stands for represented and not race). In my experience, when we try to create "umbrella" programs so that every group is included, we dilute the impact and end up doing little. And we find it easy to leave out race if given the opportunity.

Acronyms for specific racial/ethnic groups (e.g., BIPOC, AALANA, AANAPI, etc.) can be useful, but they do not convey why we should focus on those racial/ethnic groups. Both "URM" and "PEER" refer to particular persons of

color because they are underrepresented—i.e., their representation in the scientific workforce is significantly less than their representation in the U.S. population. The difference is that PEER uses “excluded” rather than “underrepresented.” Underrepresentation is a consequence, but not the cause. Exclusion is the cause.

Some interesting essays: Cato Laurencin

(<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/366/6468/929.abstract>) and

Estela Bensimon ([https://cue.usc.edu/files/2016/01/Bensimon\\_The-Misbegotten-URM-as-a-Data-Point.pdf](https://cue.usc.edu/files/2016/01/Bensimon_The-Misbegotten-URM-as-a-Data-Point.pdf))

3. **3 R’s.** In my talk, I argued that we who teach biology should focus on the 3 R’s to improve the introductory science experience.

Question: What are the 3 R’s?

My response: The 3 R’s are: (i) Re-imagine the syllabus, (ii) Reform the laboratory courses, and (iii) Re-center science education on belonging. The first two R’s are mainly about revising the content of our courses and laboratories, moving away from mountains of “facts” and “right answers” and moving towards exercising the process of science—embracing uncertainty and ambiguity, practicing the acquisition and examination of evidence to make decisions, and discovering answers to meaningful questions.

The third R—Re-centering on belonging—is less about content and more about philosophy and attitude. Thus, the third R is the most challenging to achieve. How do we shift from a “weed out” mentality to one that sincerely engages students in learning even though most of them will not become scientists? I think there are ways we can signal belonging, including a careful examination of co- and pre-requisites and putting an end to grading on the curve.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor's dissent in *Schuette v. BAMN* (2014) is a clear statement of the constant signals we emit that tell PEERs that they do not belong. In particular, see her comments on why Race Matters (pages 45-46: [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/12-682\\_8759.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/12-682_8759.pdf)).

4. **Persuasion.** Many persons asked about strategies to persuade colleagues and administrators to join in the work of dismantling systemic racism in higher education and science.

Question: How?

My response: It is important to find allies in the work of becoming anti-racist. I don't know of any single fool-proof strategy, but I can make a few observations:

- I believe that there are many colleagues who are potential allies, and we have to find ways to encourage them. We might feel stuck because we don't know how to begin, are worried about saying the wrong thing, and don't want to be alone in the effort. Finding ways to engage colleagues in safe conversations can be effective.
- There are also some of our colleagues who seem to be ahead of the rest of us....they have the rhetoric down and love to make speeches, telling the rest of us what we need to do. While well-meaning, these "woke" folks can inadvertently shut down learning by others. It is important to have one-on-one conversations with these enlightened folks to listen to them and to find ways to collaborate with them to find ways to encourage (and not scold) others.
- It might be helpful to conduct a campus-wide self-study or climate survey in which the questions are crafted to reveal attitudes and feelings by faculty, staff, and students. The results of such surveys should be shared with everyone as soon as practical.

- I believe that progress is made when we have opportunities to have facilitated conversations about race and racism in a safe environment. These can be delivered in various formats—I refer to them here as “workshops” although I don’t have a particular format in mind. It is important that institutional leaders engage in these conversations and that others know that they are doing so....it is usually a good idea for the leaders to participate in the workshop first and separated from the rest of the faculty and staff, then explain to the rest what they learned and whether they recommend the activity for others.
  - It might make sense to develop a sequential approach, in which different parts of our faculty/staff/administrators engage separately in these workshops.
    - The first workshop can be for the choir—the folks who already get it. It is important to discourage hubris and encourage humility, emphasizing that even the choir needs to work on and contribute to finding ways by which non-choir members can safely talk about race.
    - The second workshop can be for the curious—the folks who want to learn but haven’t had the opportunity. In my view, this second group is key to effecting change.
    - The third workshop can be for the reluctant. Hopefully, by the time the third workshop happens, enough people have heard enough good things about the conversations that they, too, want to join in.
    - And it is important to build in follow-up activities a few months after the workshops for participants to reflect on how the conversations affected their beliefs and behaviors.
5. **Facilitators.** I believe in the value of facilitated discussions/workshops on race and racism.

Question: Who are the groups that lead these sorts of activities?

My response: The culturally aware mentor training for the Gilliam program advisers is the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) at the University of Wisconsin (<https://cimerproject.org>). Other organizations conduct workshops on race...for example, Crossroads (<http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org>), Beyond Diversity (<https://courageousconversation.com>), and Visions, Inc (<https://www.visions-inc.org>). And there are others.

### **Other themes**

Many of the questions raised themes that deserve further consideration. Rather than trying to respond to the questions, I list a few here in the hope that they will prompt further discussion and study.

1. What do we mean by “scientific excellence” and how does racial diversity and inclusion lead to excellence?
2. How is the “weed out” mentality manifested, and how does that mentality reflect institutional racism?
3. What can the system do to reward and incentivize anti-racism work by faculty?
4. What is the “diversity tax” we place on PEER faculty and staff? In other words, what are the added burdens placed on PEERs (e.g., to serve on diversity committees, to mentor PEER students) and what can we do to better distribute the burden?
5. What are the stressors, the mental and emotional health burdens we place on PEERs?

6. How can we gain better awareness and connection with the ethical, moral, and spiritual side of well-being when we engage in anti-racist work?
7. What are examples of when PEERs have to shed aspects of their identity in order to feel safe in our classrooms and laboratories? What are the subtle ways we exclude PEERs?