

## Beyond Checking Off Boxes: Realizing Transformational Change in Diversity Work

By Ashley Inji Wang



By day two of my first-year orientation at PennVet, I already found myself feeling like an outsider in a place where I had expected to fit right in. Surrounded by my predominately white peers, many of whom come from privileged backgrounds, I felt acutely aware of my own identity. No one was explicitly racist or classist towards me; no one yelled, “Go back to your country!” or shamed me for having parents who didn’t attend a four-year university. Yet, I still felt like “the other.” Racism, classism, sexism -- no “-ism” needs to be overt in order to cause harm; in a community where difference is so rare, the most subtle and even well-intentioned remarks can accomplish the task just as effectively.

Now in my second year at PennVet, I am deeply dedicated to reforming our historically homogenous institution through my work as Co-President of VOICE and SAVMA Diversity Chair. Through attending Diversity Council meetings and navigating these leadership roles, I have noticed both the gaps in PennVet’s diversity work and the changes our institution has implemented to bridge those gaps. These meetings are open to the public: any member of the community is free to address any diversity-related issue. I have found this space to be open and honest – a space where faculty, students, and administrators come together to share meaningful dialogue regarding diversity.

In these meetings, students have pushed for one reform in particular: hiring a point person for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We are now in the final steps of our hiring process for the first ever DEI Officer at PennVet. While sitting in on these interviews, I quickly realized that this position is one that will be transformational. The DEI Officer will act as a conduit between students and administration, advocate for underrepresented minority (URM) students, and help propagate an environment that both recognizes and celebrates diversity.

Along with hiring a DEI Officer, PennVet is considering designing a mandatory cultural competency course for first-year students. The purpose would be to instill an awareness of implicit biases, anti-racism practices, and much more; this is an important start to training culturally aware and competent future veterinarians. However, this goal cannot be achieved through one course alone, especially if that course, like many diversity trainings, is just a one-and-done affair. To ensure long-term progress, I believe the program should be split into two parts – one in the first year, the other in the third year during clinics. And because the topic of diversity can oftentimes seem nebulous – conceptual rather than concrete – the course should include research-based content exploring topics like implicit bias or stereotype threat. It should include specific tools that students can apply to best serve their future clientele. Through implementing this course, I am hopeful that we can provide a designated time and space for students to reflect on and challenge their own biases. Diversity is a core value that ought to be carefully cultivated, repeatedly checked upon, and tended to. Our curriculum must reflect this notion, make space for this type of learning, and value diversity just as highly as physiology or anatomy.

As veterinary medicine is one of the least diverse health professions<sup>1</sup>, I believe PennVet can benefit from establishing stronger connections with other health professional graduate schools at Penn. Exchanging ideas can broaden our scope, equipping us with more effective tools to champion diversity. Additionally, I believe we should provide more resources to first-generation college students (FGCS) at PennVet in the form of a mentorship program pairing FGCS with first-generation faculty or alumni. Admissions teams can and should make a concerted effort to recruit more URMs and provide financial assistance when needed. And while these goals are important, it is just as imperative that we reevaluate our foundational understanding of diversity work.

When discussing DEI, it isn’t uncommon for people to throw around the words “diversity, equity, and inclusion” and use them interchangeably. The specific meanings of these words get lost, and rarely do people differentiate them. I believe PennVet should operationalize these definitions; in doing so, we

<sup>1</sup> “Task Force on Diversity Final Report.” *American Veterinary Medical Association, AVMA*, 15 Sept. 2008. [www.avma.org/sites/default/files/resources/diversity\\_report.pdf](http://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/resources/diversity_report.pdf).



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necessitate social accountability. Without first establishing a common understanding of core concepts, diversity work can ultimately be ineffective. One working definition of inclusion that I am drawn to is “creating a space where people feel not only welcomed but also *valued*”<sup>2</sup>. Value is the key word, and I believe PennVet can improve not only on increasing diversity, but also on making its URM students feel *valued*.

Recently, I was introduced to the concept of transactional versus transformational change<sup>3</sup>. Transactional reform is like checking off boxes on a list. Hired a DEI Officer? Check. Attended Diversity Council meetings? Check. Donated to the local Philly community? Check. These steps are important but cannot be sufficient on their own; to ensure long-term, sustainable progress, we must focus on transformational change.

Transformational change comes from a culture shift that is bred within the community itself; it must be personalized, thoroughly integrated within the community, and wholly internalized. This is undoubtedly a beautiful concept but challenging to achieve. PennVet has the capacity to realize *transformational* change by utilizing the *transactional* work we've already started as a jumping-off point. For example: looking at the matriculation data, we see that just 1% of PennVet's student body is Black<sup>4</sup>. Transformational change begins with asking the right questions: not only “How can we increase this percentage?”, but also, “Why is it so low?”; not just, “How can we make Black students feel included at PennVet?”, but also, “What systemic barriers do Black students face in veterinary medicine?” This model of thinking can be profoundly useful in tackling diversity issues that have long been put on the back burner at PennVet.

Through actionable, sustainable change, I envision URM students feeling valued and proud to be here and aspiring veterinarians equipped to effectively practice medicine and serve all clientele. I envision a PennVet community that approaches diversity work with resolve, intention, and care – one that not only recognizes, but truly celebrates diversity.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Brené. “Brené with Aiko Bethea on Inclusivity at Work: The Heart of Hard Conversations.” Dare to Lead with Brené Brown, 9 November 2020, <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-aiko-bethea-on-inclusivity-at-work-the-heart-of-hard-conversations/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Annual Data Report: 2019-2020.” *Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, AAVMC*, 2020, [www.aavmc.org/about-aavmc/public-data/](http://www.aavmc.org/about-aavmc/public-data/).