CDCB Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Council

Interview with Grace McCarthy, Graduate student in the Brody lab

Grace is a 5th year PhD candidate passionate about science communication and a strong advocate for cultivating diverse, equitable, and safe environments in research. Outside the lab, Grace has worked on social media campaigns for Thomas Jefferson University and Thermo Fisher Scientific, in addition to being an active member of AVDS.

(1) As a PhD student studying the molecular aspects of cancer, what got you so interested in scientific policy and getting involved in DEI related activities?

I am very fortunate to be a part of a lab that is not only supportive of me as an individual, regardless of my career ambitions, but also so grounded in the idea of who we really work for: the patients. I started my graduate career wanting to dedicate my work to making a difference for patients. This still holds true, I am just leaving with a different version of what this looks like for me than the one I had at the beginning of graduate school. From talking directly to patients in our community, I came to realize that making a difference in their lives doesn't just come from my work at the bench. It can also come from changing how things are done, including creating policies that will ultimately lead to improved patient outcomes. This how I first became interested in science policy. As I became more involved in the field, attending seminars and workshops, and educating myself on the major issues for patients, it is clear that many of these issues are DEI-related. And they are not unique to patients, many of these issues are shared within academia. I may not be at the point in my career where I can make changes at the clinical level, but I am hopeful that the work I am doing during grad school, alongside with some amazing colleagues, will be the start of some needed changes within our institution.

(2) Outside of your work in the laboratory, what activities are you involved in related to DEI (both inside and outside OHSU)?

At OHSU, I have become an active member of Alliance for Visible Diversity in Science (AVDS). I am a member of the communications committee and am responsible for creating the monthly newsletter (*coy plug for people to subscribe if you don't already!*). I am also on the policy committee, where I aid in assembling recommendations for policy action we want OHSU to take on to improve diversity, equity, inclusion and retainment. I am also a part of the CDCB Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Steering Committee. In this committee, I have worked with other members to design a curriculum that provides trainees, faculty, and staff opportunities to engage in anti-discrimination work. Our curriculum includes workshops that engage speakers who discuss challenges faced by communities affected by systems of oppression, as well as follow-up round tables to identify possible action items to address.

Outside of OHSU, I partake in lobbying days. On behalf of both AFSCME and AACR, I have met with many staffers in congress about both working condition for graduate students and the need to increase funding for biomedical research. I specifically talk about the need to increase funding so that we can invest in the recruitment, training, support and safety of next generation scientist that reflect the diversity of our society, in addition to the funding needed to reduce barriers to clinical trial participation.

(3) As you plan to graduate in 2022, how do you plan to continue your passion towards this work as you launch into the workforce?

Post-graduation I plan to participate in a science policy fellowship or start a job in science policy. I am still trying to determine which direction in science policy I want to go, whether that be "science for policy" or "policy for science". "Science for policy" interests me because I would like to use my communication skills to translate the science to a team of policy makers, economists, lawyers, etc., to make effective healthcare policies. "Policy for science" also interests me, however, as I am very passionate about writing guidelines for conduct in academia, as a way to ensure equal opportunity across diverse backgrounds and career ambitions. For either direction I end up taking in science policy, DEI issues will always be an area that I invest my efforts in.

(4) What do you see is the biggest DEI-related issue in academic medicine/biomedical research today?

The lack of diversity and equity we see in both academia and medicine is extremely detrimental to research progress. It proven and published that increasing diversity leads to improved rigor and quality research. Yet, we still see staggeringly low percentages of enrolled PEER (Persons Excluded because of their Ethnicity and Race) students in graduate programs.

There are so many existing road blocks for PEER students, some of which can be attributed to poor funding dedicated to the issue. There are few paid internship opportunities to gain laboratory experience required for admission into graduate programs. Many institutions are reforming their admission processes to remove biases that lead to decreased admission of PEER students, but there is still much work that needs to be done to increase the retention of PEER students. For instance, once accepted to a program, few cover relocation costs or offer mental health providers who work from anti-oppressive models.

When it comes to clinical research, most would agree that in order to achieve the best results, the patient population in clinical trials must reflect those who will receive the treatment. Yet once again, clinical trials have staggeringly low percentages of enrolled Black and Hispanic individuals. This is due to many compounding factors— needing frequent transportation to facilities, no research cancer center in the vicinity, and high costs of therapies paired with time away from work. One way to combat this is to increase availability of trials by covering costs and bringing the trials to patients, instead of forcing patients to travel to the trial. Making clinical trials "patient-centered" rather than "location-centered" is a concept gaining more attraction, but we still lack policies in place to enforce this idea.