



Advancing Racial Equity in Academic Nursing

Each year, the AACN Board of Directors holds a generative thinking session to engage in a process of reflection and discussion about critical issues facing academic nursing. The purpose of the generative thinking session is not to develop an immediate “plan of action” but rather to deepen our understanding about an issue and explore ways to imbed our learning into AACN’s existing work.

The focus of the January 2021 generative thinking session was advancing racial equity in academic nursing.

Advancing Racial Equity in Health Professions Education

The session began with a presentation and discussion with Leon McDougle, MD, MPH, President of the National Medical Association and Chief Diversity Officer and Professor of Family Medicine at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. Dr. McDougle’s presentation addressed the factors contributing to systemic racism in higher education and the health professions and actions leaders can take to counter systemic racism in academic nursing. The presentation included information about:

- Framing racism as a public health crisis
- The evolving definitions and levels of racism
- Tools for learning about and combating racism including the 21-Day Anti-Racism Challenge
- Bias experienced by health professionals and patients and strategies for responding to prejudice (note: the presentation has been updated to include data on nurses, nurse practitioners and physician assistants)
- Strategies deans can use to support anti-racism campaigns and efforts in their institutions

Board Member Reflections and Discussion

Board members shared their own experiences related to racism and unconscious bias in nursing and nursing education. Some of the themes that cut across multiple comments included:

- The work is never done. Each of us is on a personal and continuous journey in terms of our learning and efforts to be anti-racist. Providing opportunities for people to engage in self-directed learning or having a choice in how they navigate their own journey is important.
- There is a need to update our definitions, expectations, and understanding of what it means to be racist and anti-racist. We need to understand the concepts of bias, prejudice, racism, and power. As Ibram X. Kendi described in *How to Be an Antiracist*, “Racist is not... a pejorative. It is not the worst word in the English language; it is not the equivalent of a slur. It is descriptive, and the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it — and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive term into an almost unusable slur, is, of course, designed to do the opposite: to freeze us into inaction.”

- There is a need for both awareness and action. Many schools have undertaken efforts to increase awareness, particularly of unconscious bias, which is a critical step in the journey. But we also need to find ways to convert awareness into action to end systemic racism.
- Displaying authentic leadership is critical. As nurses, there is an opportunity to speak – and listen – from both the “head and the heart.”
- Deans are being challenged to provide leadership in highly divisive times (politically, socially, culturally). Additional support and guidance for deans on how to navigate this moment in history may be needed.

Potential Opportunities for AACN

The board discussed opportunities for AACN to support “system level” actions that could assist member schools in advancing change within their own institutions. This conversation was based on the learnings from Dr. McDougle’s presentation, ideas shared in the [Gallery of Leadership video](#), and board members’ own insights and experiences. Among the ideas shared were:

- Sharing definitions of racism and what it means to be anti-racist, including the concept of racism as a public health crisis, that member institutions can use to move beyond the good/evil binary of the term racist and continue the continual journey to be anti-racist.
- Sharing a menu of curated resources that deans can use in their own institution for increasing awareness and taking action to combat racism (e.g., 21-Day Challenge, University of Iowa Toolkit for Responding to Patient-Initiated Verbal Harassment, sample Rights and Responsibilities that set expectations for both health professionals and patients, Active Bystander Training, implicit bias training modules).
- Providing learning opportunities and discussion forums for deans on “leadership in divisive times” and how to navigate discussions and action on critical issues among a highly divided population (on campus and in society).
- Explore opportunities to work jointly with practice partners (such as AONL) to identify opportunities for nursing, as a trusted professional community, to take a leadership role in combating racism.