

# Nurse Engagement: A Diversity and Inclusion Imperative

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**Introduction:** Researchers predict that, by as early as 2045, the US will have a majority non-white population (Vespa et al., 2018). However, in 2020, 80% of all US nurses, 85% of TN nurses, and 77% of Nashville (Davidson County) registered nurses were white (TNMap: Nursing Statistics 2021). This growing difference between the demographic shift in the US population and the current racial makeup of US nurses is cause for concern and highlights the imperative for diversity and inclusion in nursing.

In spite of current trends in non-diversity, nurse workforce diversity supports culturally competent care (Premji et al., 2016). Evidence demonstrates that when nurse demographics mirror those of patients, the culturally competent care provided positively affects patient outcomes (Phillips, & Malone, 2014; Premji et al., 2016). It improves patient satisfaction and increases patient adherence to treatments (Ailinger et al., 2010).

As a result, there is both a moral and fiscal rationale for the profession to improve workforce diversity, and nurse leaders across the country are grappling with how to actively address it. Leaders are learning that it will take different strategies and resources to motivate racial and ethnic minorities to enter the profession. Given the limited amount of diversity within nursing pools, significant efforts to retain racial and ethnic minority nurses are also necessary. There are hospital systems that, despite the limited pool, have been able to attract, recruit, and retain a larger percentage of diverse nurses than their counterparts (AHA, 2004). One key platform used by nurse leadership within VUMC is to engage current nursing staff in its initiative. The VUMC entity-wide interprofessional Racial Equity Taskforce was created in July 2020 to deliver recommendations that would help dismantle historic injustices and structural racism. It was co-led by a nurse and included staff nurses among the committee members. Since its inception, the task force has delivered recommendations around eight themes that are aimed at, among other elements, recruiting, retaining, and promoting a more diverse workforce.

The work to encourage racial and ethnic minority nurses into the profession will only occur when existing nurses are engaged in similar nurse diversity initiatives. Below is further discussion of how nurses, nurse administrators, and healthcare leadership can use workforce engagement to improve the numbers of racial and ethnic minority nurses within US healthcare.

**Engagement:** Nurses have invaluable knowledge of workforce needs such as hospital staffing, cultural needs, and the barriers to diversity present in their units. Nurses who are actively engaged in their practice environments and who are able to share their knowledge about these needs can powerfully impact environment keys such as job satisfaction, burnout, and retention (Cho, 2006; Dempsey et al., 2016). Dempsey et al. (2016) found that nurses who are engaged are more likely to have favorable job outcomes compared to those with less engagement.

**Engaged Nurses:** Engaged nurses participate on organizational committees with power to influence institutional policies and decisions that affect the practice environment. Engaged nurses are also committed to their profession and to what is supported as best practices. Their commitments are demonstrated in the following areas:

- 1) commitment to the hospital/healthcare organization where they practice.
- 2) commitment to social change which improves their community's health.
- 3) Advocacy for health equity.
- 4) Advocacy for the inclusion of diverse staff.

Indeed, improving nurse engagement is a system-level approach that addresses nurse workforce environment issues, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). As such, nurse leaders must ensure that engaged nurses have an opportunity to participate in diversity and inclusion initiatives at all levels of their respective organizations. The development of a nursing workforce that reflects the diversity of its patients can only be achieved by accommodating nurses' desires to fully engage their work practices.

**How to Engage Nurses:** Active listening is an effective way for nurse leaders to increase nurses' involvement with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Leaders demonstrate their commitment through the following actions:

1. Outline the nurse leader's and the organization's commitment to nurse workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Role model diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices.
3. Clearly articulate and set expectations for staff and other leaders around diversity, equity, and inclusion metrics.
4. Ensure that nurse staff have resources (e.g., time release) needed to positively impact nurse workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion.
5. Actively work to instill trust in diverse nurses' abilities, skills, and work.
6. Discuss DE&I benefits and actively listen to nurses about barriers to DE&I within the nurse workforce.
7. Consider an anonymous way for nurses to express their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations.



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As an example, active listening may look something like this: A nurse leader engages nurses during a diversity, equity, and inclusion listening session in which staff nurses of color freely and openly discuss their experiences with microaggressions, including being ignored by senior staff (such as charge nurses) or feeling excluded from social interactions on the unit for racially motivated reasons. Staff nurses might also take that time to recount patients' uses of racially inappropriate terms and management's dismissal of the offense and/or their failure to investigate the claims. Taking a moment to pause and reflect, the nurse leader listening to such accounts can acknowledge both the nurses' perspectives and her own discomfort with the topic, but vow to investigate and learn the best approach to these instances of workplace violence. The leader can ultimately decide to work with other leaders and nurses to address racial and ethnic microaggressions and develop a program to prevent reoccurrences.

Another example of active engagement is to create a diversity committee that is representative of staff nurses and gives them a venue to discuss their emotions and make space for leader empathy. Allowing staff nurses to express their perceptions and perspectives can lead to the development of creative pathways for ensuring a more diverse nursing workforce. Nurse leaders must allow these discussions to be active and allow nurses to discuss their thoughts on nurse diversity both truthfully and comprehensively. In turn, leaders must empathize with nurses concerning their feelings toward nurse diversity.

## Key Takeaways for Fostering Nurse Engagement

To engage nurses, nurse leaders must work to emotionally connect the constructs of diversity, equity, and inclusion with nurses. Nurse leaders must also make clear to current staff that they are a welcome part of significant changes to a more diverse workforce.

Nurse leaders must also work to promote trust among diverse coworkers. For instance, they should practice the telling and selling phases of situational leadership, including explicitly stating (telling) why diversity and inclusion are important and explaining the negative implications of a non-diverse workforce (e.g., poorer patient outcomes, higher staff turnover, and decreased recruitment). Then, by using the evidence that work environments and patient outcomes improve with diversity, equity, and inclusion, these leaders could sell the benefits thereof.

Giving staff nurses an opportunity to identify factors that may influence diversity and inclusion initiatives and suggesting solutions to improving these factors bolsters a positive nurse workforce environment. Nurse leaders must prioritize staff nurses in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion so that they fully understand its goals and initiatives and take an active interest in workforce outcomes (Brooks, 2019). We have much work to do to ensure a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive nurse workforce. Nurse engagement is a key element to achieving our collective desire to provide the best patient care by aligning the demographics of our workforce with those of our patients.

Ms. Williams Bio- Mamie Williams, MPH, MSN, FNP-BC, is Senior Director for Nurse Diversity and Inclusion, at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. In January 2022, Ms. Williams recently completed the Cornell University Diversity and Inclusion Certificate Program. Ms. Williams is responsible for fostering collaborative partnerships with nurse leaders, nurses, staff, and faculty to ensure VUMC's nurse work environment exemplifies diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices. She is the Executive Sponsor of the VUMC Nurse Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee. Her professional responsibilities over the past 15 years have centered on improving the nurse work environment.

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