Making Panels More Inclusive

Inclusivity starts with design. Decisions about the structure and composition of conferences and other speaking events can inadvertently leave BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) individuals out of science and policy conversations. Whether you are organizing a panel discussion or invited to participate in one yourself, you have an opportunity to elevate historically marginalized voices and reject all-White, all-male panels to the extent possible.

Organizing Panels

Consider the possible equity dimensions of the topic, scope, and choice of panelists early in the planning process. Whenever possible, develop these details jointly with scientists of color, community groups, or others directly involved in or affected by the topic. This helps ensure your own background and perspective are not setting the terms and scope of how others can participate.

Intentionally invite speakers who will ensure a diverse array of voices at your session. Here are some tips:

- Share your commitment to elevating underrepresented voices and to ensuring that environmental justice communities are able to participate in panels addressing topics that affect them.

- Send invitations early and include all relevant details and expectations in the invite. Plan to follow up with people.

- Think outside the box. Consider speakers who are relevant to the topic in a way that may not be typical for science conferences or science-focused events (e.g., communities affected by a policy decision, people outside academia).

- When developing a call for participants, include optional demographic questions that can help ensure inclusivity. Sample open-ended questions might include:

  1. What gender do you identify as?

  2. Please describe your ethnic/cultural background.

- Check your unconscious biases. Ensure you aren't defaulting to people already in your network, or those suggested by prominent White men.

- Some potential participants may have limited access or less incentive to attend a scientific meeting or event. See if financial assistance for registration, hotel, travel, and other costs can be made available, and let your invitees know about options for remote participation, travel grants, fee waivers, or other support that could incentivize their involvement. If the sponsoring organization has funding, providing honoraria that compensate speakers for their time is also important, especially for speakers who hold historically marginalized identities and whose expertise has often been undervalued.

- Consider offering online attendance for the event to enable wider participation.

Avoid tokenism. Do not expect or ask any women, LGBTQ+, or BIPOC speakers to represent or speak for everyone sharing their gender or race. Your panelists should all be able to speak about issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to the topic.

Participating in Panels

If you are invited to speak on a panel, ask the organizers to identify the other scheduled speakers.

Suggested language: "I strive to make sure the panels I participate on include a diverse set of voices. Could you please share the expected racial/ethnic and gender makeup of the panel with me?"

If the panel appears to be an all- or mostly White space, an all- or mostly male panel, or otherwise lacks a needed perspective, consider the following steps:

- Ask the organizers how they intend to ensure their space is inclusive. If the situation seems tokenizing or potentially uncomfortable for a BIPOC participant, consider asking for more diversity among speakers.

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Suggested language: "I am committed to elevating under-represented voices in public conversations about this topic. I'd like to suggest adding a(n additional) speaker of color to the lineup and would be happy to provide some recommendations."

- If the panel is meant to address specific matters of equity and justice or specific communities, ensure that members of the affected communities are actively participating and able to speak for themselves, while recognizing that environmental justice communities are not monolithic. Find out how these perspectives will be incorporated.
  Suggested language: "I strive to make sure that environmental justice communities are able to participate in panels addressing topics that affect them. Could you please share how you plan to include these perspectives?"

- If you are in a relative position of power (e.g., your presence at the event is highly sought and you are willing to decline if your requests are not met), consider one of the following:

  – Recommend BIPOC speakers to add to the panel or speak in your stead if you are White.
    Suggested language: "This sounds like a great event. I'm hoping you'd be open to [X]'s participation in my stead OR adding [X] to the panel. They have done relevant work and would bring a unique and critical perspective."

  – Say you will only participate on the condition that the panel is diversified (be as specific as possible about what this means).
    Suggested language: "In general, I choose to avoid all-White/all-male panels. I'd be happy to participate if the panel can be diversified—and would be happy to help identify a diverse set of potential speakers—but will otherwise have to decline."

- If you are not in a relative position of power compared with the event organizers (e.g., you've been invited to testify before Congress), politely express your concern about the lack of diversity on the panel and ask if there is anything that can be done.
  Suggested language: "I'm looking forward to participating in this panel but am concerned about its lack of racial/ethnic/gender diversity, [especially given its topic]. Is there anything

the organizers or I could do to create a more inclusive lineup? I'd be happy to identify panelists that are more representative on this issue."

- Find a way to publicly acknowledge the lack of diversity during your remarks, or on social media.
  Suggested language: "I'd like to take a moment to highlight the fact that the burdens associated with the issues we're discussing today fall disproportionately on the shoulders of people of color, whose voices I cannot represent and who are regrettably absent from today's panel. Without the input of a diverse set of stakeholders, we risk perpetuating or exacerbating the very burdens we're trying to alleviate."

While the aim of this guidance is to diversify as many panels as possible, there may be extenuating circumstances in which doing so would be particularly challenging. When considering your participation, talk with a mentor or colleague if you need support. Try to determine whether good-faith efforts were made to include a diverse range of voices. For example, did the organizers reach out to potential BIPOC speakers thoughtfully and give them sufficient time to respond? Did they contact people of color you recommended from your network or your colleagues' networks? Is there adequate representation of diverse views in the context of the event as a whole? Does the topic and/or location limit the number of potential speakers of color—and is that assumption accurate? If so, is there a way to broaden the focus of the panel so a more diverse range of voices can be represented?

Many resources exist to help event organizers identify diverse speakers; here are just a few to get you started:

- Database of Databases of Diverse Speakers in STEM

- Diversify STEM Conferences Speakers List

- Gage (from 500 Women Scientists)

This guide is based on recommendations developed by Kristy Dahl and Gretchen Goldman at the Union of Concerned Scientists, and updated with input from Rachel Licker, Joy McNally, and Erick Velez at the Union of Concerned Scientists.