

The Importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine: Advocacy Through Art

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By

Justine Adrianna Negrón
Department of Biology
Zoology Major
Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology
Conservation Biology Minor

Dr. Lise Aubry, Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology
Dr. Cristina Blanco, Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology,
Dr. Miranda Sadar, Department of Avian, Exotic, and Zoological Medicine

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Traditionally, veterinary medicine has faced a notable issue: a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in its workforce (Burkard et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Greenhill et al., 2013). For the majority of its 150-plus-year history in the U.S., the profession was dominated by Caucasian males. It was only in the past 30 years that demographic diversity gains were made in recruiting more women; however, most of those women identified as Caucasian (Greenhill et al., 2013). While efforts have been made to increase diversity within the field, such as the first annual AVMA Veterinary Diversity Symposium in 2005 and commitments to recruiting a diverse student body by veterinary schools (e.g. the Ohio State University), 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' (henceforth, 'DEI') continues to be a modern challenge of the profession (Burkard et al., 2022; Greenhill et al., 2013). As of 2013, veterinary medicine was listed as one of the top 33 most 'white jobs' in the U.S by *The Atlantic* (Burkard et al., 2022). As of 2024, U.S. government surveys revealed that 92.6% of practicing veterinarians identified as Caucasian. Only 8.5% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 3.6% as Asian, and 1.2% as Black/African American (United States Department of Labor, 2024). Recent survey work has also investigated demographics within specialty practices, suggesting a similar demographic pattern of continued lack in diversity. For example, a study exploring the demographics and perceptions about DEI within the American College of Veterinary Surgeons found that the majority (89%) of their respondents identified as Caucasian (Gonzalez et al. 2023).

While various lines of evidence reveal DEI as a whole to be an ongoing issue facing veterinary medicine, a more specific question remains: Why does diversity in veterinary medicine matter? As a whole, the significance of veterinary diversity lies in

the need to maintain the profession's long-term relevance alongside shifting U.S. demographics to meet the needs of today's communities and their challenges (Greenhill et al., 2013). More specifically, diversity matters in veterinary medicine because it i) enables better client-provider communication via diverse perspectives and cultural competency, ii) creates greater profitability and thus financial security for veterinary business institutions, and iii) allows for better understanding/problem-solving of complex issues, which could impact society in sectors like public health. Given that visual art can cross cultural and language barriers to convey ideas and mobilize societies (Mbelu, 2020), I created three paintings as a communication tool around these themes.

Foremost, diversity in veterinary medicine matters because it allows for better client-provider communication via cultural competency and diverse perspectives. Having diversity in the profession, especially in leadership, brings with it unique viewpoints that understand cultural nuances in different client interactions and behaviors, allowing for relevant, relatable provision of services. Increased diversity among staff increases the number of perspectives heard and discussed, allowing more opportunities to understand the needs of different groups of people (Cital, 2024). Diversity also provides opportunities for gaining skills in interacting with individuals different from one's self (Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Essentially, diverse staff, including leadership, creates cultural competency within that veterinary practice or institution through the blend of diverse perspectives (Cital, 2024; Shorter-Gooden, 2013).

Cultural competency can be defined as a series of skills or qualities that enable effective interactions across various cultures (Andermann & Lo, 2006, Chapter 4). This idea is considered imperative for fostering an inclusive, welcoming environment that

allows for successful interactions with various clients (Cital, 2024). One study creating a cultural competence evaluation instrument for the Humane Society of the United States' Pets for Life (PFL) program had important preliminary findings: a significant positive correlation between the number of client-provider interactions and the level of competence/confidence perceived by both parties. The researchers also found a significant positive correlation between animal-welfare service interactions and subsequent usage of veterinary services. Ultimately, this preliminary research underscores the importance of cultural competency in effective animal service client-provider interactions, suggesting that expanded use of cultural competence strategies may increase animal service usage among traditionally underserved groups such as people of color (Ganderberger et al., 2021). Although Ganderberger et al. (2021) focused primarily on humane society animal welfare client-provider interactions, these ideas can still apply to similar fields like veterinary medicine, suggesting the importance of increasing diversity as a strategy to foster cultural competency for better client-provider interactions.

Furthermore, another study investigated associations between human physician-patient race concordance and level of patient satisfaction, supporting the need for diversity to improve client-provider interactions in related health fields like veterinary medicine through diverse perspectives. Data highlight that patients who were matched with a doctor of the same race or ethnicity indicated higher satisfaction in their interactions with their physician compared to those who were not. Potentially, this stems from the fact that patients felt they could better trust a provider to act in their best interests if that provider was racially relatable to them. It's suggested that clients prefer

providers who show genuine concern for a client's specific issues, demonstrate excellent interpersonal communication skills, and are knowledgeable about a client's challenges. Often, these attributes that build that trust are ranked highest by clients who partner with a physician of the same race or ethnicity (LaVeist & Nuru-Jeter, 2002). Fundamentally, increasing racial and ethnic diversity in healthcare fields, whether that be in human or veterinary medicine, offers opportunities for diverse perspectives and thus nuanced levels of understanding with clients of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In one respect, increases in various perspectives through diversity can offer more chances of racial and ethnic concordance in the future, which can help build trust by allowing clients to see themselves reflected in their provider. More importantly, however, augmenting the veterinary field with numerous perspectives through diversity fosters cultural competency, allowing for providers to overcome differences and connect with clients of any background. Increases in diversity ultimately enable better client-provider communication and interactions, allowing for opportunities in both concordance and building understanding across differences so that all communities receive equitable veterinary care.

Second, diversity in veterinary medicine matters because it creates greater profitability and thus financial sustainability for veterinary business institutions. A longitudinal McKinsey study gathered ethnicity representation and financial performance data for over 1,000 companies from 15 countries, including the U.S.. Notably, the study found a positive correlation between financial outperformance and companies that had diverse teams, especially in leadership. Specifically, companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity saw greater financial returns compared to those in the lower quartile,

outperforming the lowest quartile by 36%. Furthermore, companies in the lowest quartile for both ethnicity and gender diversity saw the most detrimental profit performance penalty, being 27% more likely to underperform compared to other corporations. These performance differences stem from diverse teams being more likely to make better decisions for institutions such as predicting consumer need changes and offering new ideas (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). Thus, there is strong financial justification for increased diversity. Wide-ranging racial and ethnic representation, especially in executive positions, offers opportunities for innovation. Diverse ideas generate new methods and practices, and allow a better understanding of consumers who use a product or service. While data gathered was not explicitly from veterinary businesses, represented industries included healthcare and pharmaceutical. This makes findings relevant to veterinary medicine, as long-term viability of this profession also depends on financial stability and meeting the evolving needs of clients. Ultimately, diversity matters in veterinary medicine because it maximizes profit, which consequently leads to financial security for the profession.

Lastly, diversity in veterinary medicine matters because it allows for better understanding/problem-solving of complex issues. One study created a fishery management scenario and pooled local knowledge from a variety of stakeholders, testing whether combined knowledge from diverse groups leads to a more accurate, comprehensive understanding of environmental-social system problems compared to homogenous groups (Aminpour et al., 2021). The knowledge was represented by cognitive maps and used to make models of social-ecological interdependencies of the fisheries. Subjective analysis by a scientific review panel and stochastic network

analysis of the models were done, revealing higher capabilities of diverse groups in illustrating intricate social-ecological relationships that need to be accounted for in the management situation. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of diversity in understanding and tackling complex problems such as wildlife management. The article also discusses the possibility of applying these findings to other social-ecological problems like disease spread and social inequalities (Aminpour et al., 2021). Moreover, Swartz et al. (2019) review various research and also conclude that heterogeneous teams outperform homogenous groups in terms of innovation and problem-solving. Thus, there is strong justification for diversity from a problem-solving perspective, as combining knowledge from various viewpoints produces a more comprehensive understanding and effective solutions. Simultaneously, these findings can be applied to a broader range of social-environmental problems, such as public health, making them applicable to veterinary medicine. Combining knowledge from diverse perspectives can strengthen the problem-solving capabilities of veterinary professionals, bolstering the social relevance of the profession in handling One-Health problems to meet community needs.

Because diversity in veterinary medicine matters for the above reasons, communicating these ideas through an appropriate medium is equally important, and visual art provides a compelling way to do so. According to Mbelu (2020), visual art can be a powerful communication tool that bridges cultural and linguistic barriers, serving as a universal communication method that reaches all demographics. Modes of visual art include painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, architecture, and digital art, showing extensive flexibility as a communication tool. Moreover, visual expression has the

unique ability to convert lengthy, complex narratives into concise, more easily digestible presentations of ideas, reinforcing its distinctive universality. Pictorial representation also has the ability of being multifunctional, serving as a means of personal self-expression and even a catalyst for social change and mobilization (Mbelu, 2020). Because of visual art's power as a universal, multifunctional communication tool, paintings were chosen as a supplementary medium to convey the importance of diversity in veterinary medicine.

The first painting represents the benefit of diversity in bolstering client-provider communication in veterinary medicine (fig. 1). To represent the two sides of this benefit - i.e. connecting across different cultures and providing opportunities for background concordance - I drew a two-part veterinary exam room scene. The first half depicts a client-provider interaction between individuals of the same African American background in a small animal clinic. This interaction conveys how diversity allows opportunities for clients to connect with providers who are culturally relatable to them. The second half depicts a client-provider interaction in an exotics clinic between individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, i.e. a Hispanic veterinarian and a Caucasian client. This interaction illustrates how diversity allows bridging across cultures through cultural competency.



Figure 1. Painting 1 of the series titled 'Diversity and Communication: Two Sides, One Goal.' This painting represents benefit 1: better client-provider communication.

Here, speech bubbles depict a heart and paw print, symbolizing a positive, compassionate interaction, alongside effective communication about the patient. Both interactions have these symbols to underscore how diversity allows for respectful, universal communication across different client-provider interactions, leading to equitable veterinary care. Moreover, parts of the paintings have color symbolism to reinforce thematic elements. The veterinarians have turquoise scrubs to represent compassion and communication (Olesen, 2025). Naturally, compassion is foundational to respectful interactions between any individual. The background, including the speech

bubbles, is green and gold for two purposes. First, green represents harmony and growth while gold represents success and prosperity (Olesen, 2025). I wanted green to show cohesiveness built upon diversity, and I wanted gold to emphasize future implications of success for the profession. Second, I chose these colors as a personal tribute to CSU, which has shaped my pre-veterinary undergraduate journey, rooting this project as a core aspect of my veterinary professional development.

The second painting illustrates the benefit of diversity in enabling financial security through increased profitability (fig. 2). A semi-circle of diverse veterinarians, ranging from people of African-American descent to Asian-American descent, stands together, surrounding a Hispanic client with their ferret in a veterinary office.



Figure 2. Painting 2 of the series titled 'Diversity and Profitability: Building a Sustainable Future.' This painting represents benefit 2: creating greater profitability and thus financial security for veterinary business institutions.

The diverse group of veterinarians holds different items in their hands, symbolizing different ideas that ultimately culminate in the main concept of greater profitability. First, the clipboard with a lightbulb icon illustrates how innovation and better decision-making stem from diversity. Second, the syringe represents how that innovation results in better care for clients and their pets. The presence of a client also reinforces this point. Finally, the gold coins underscore the combined effect of the previous two ideas: increased profitability and thus long-term sustainability for veterinary institutions. A hanging sign in the background also illustrates this symbolic flow. Moreover, the green and gold background continues to symbolize harmony, growth, and prosperity, while the turquoise scrubs again illustrate communication and compassion, unifying the series through consistent color symbolism.

Finally, the third painting underscores the benefit of diversity in bolstering team problem-solving capabilities (fig. 3). A diverse group of veterinarians, ranging from people of Native American descent to Middle Eastern descent, stand together within a puzzle piece background. Each veterinarian then holds a smaller puzzle piece, depicting animals, people, research via a microscope, or the environment, symbolizing the One Health concept.



Figure 3. Painting 3 of the series titled 'Diversity and Collaboration: Creating Better Solutions.' This painting represents benefit 3: enabling better understanding/problem-solving of complex issues.

Simultaneously, each veterinarian-held puzzle piece represents a unique perspective. When combined, they form a comprehensive understanding of interrelated health issues. The act of assembling the smaller and larger pieces represents how diverse perspectives bolster collective problem-solving and understanding of complex challenges like One Health issues, an important social-ecological interface where veterinarians are at the forefront. Furthermore, the green and gold background continues to symbolize growth, prosperity, and harmony, while the turquoise scrubs

again represent communication and compassion, unifying the series through uniform color symbolism.

Ultimately, diversity in veterinary medicine matters because it maintains the profession's relevancy in an evolving world in several ways: i) enabling better client-provider communication, ii) creating higher profitability and financial security for veterinary business institutions, and iii) allowing for better understanding and problem-solving of complex social issues. Through cultural competency and diverse perspectives, opportunities for race concordance and bridging across cultures are created, which strengthen communication between providers and clients of all backgrounds so that more communities receive equitable veterinary care.

Simultaneously, varied perspectives from diverse teams promote innovation, better decision-making, and adaptability to meet consumer needs, factors that enhance financial security within the profession. Moreover, heterogeneous teams are more likely to comprehensively understand complex social-ecological problems, such as One Health issues, through combined knowledge from a wide array of perspectives. In turn, this bolsters a team's ability to tackle said challenges. Moreover, visual art's ability to reach all demographics makes it a compelling way to communicate these important ideas, as seen with the three paintings. These works serve as a complementary educational tool alongside research-based evidence with the ultimate aim of broadening awareness about DEI issues and encouraging continued research and efforts towards narrowing the diversity gap within the profession, a crucial step in ensuring the profession's capabilities in serving modern social needs.

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