

Centering diversity, equity, and inclusion in a regional professional nursing organization



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ABSTRACT

Background: Professional nursing organizations can respond to threats to social justice by strengthening structures to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Purpose: Describe implementation strategies and outcomes to advance DEI from the Western Institute of Nursing (WIN).

Methods: In 2019, WIN committed to prioritizing DEI by updating its vision and mission. A taskforce was assembled to conduct member surveys, focus groups, and open forums to generate recommendations on developing and implementing organizational change.

Discussion: These initiatives culminated in centralized efforts that include the formation of a standing committee, ongoing member surveys, selection of diverse conference topics and speakers, adoption of inclusive practices, and ongoing assessments to make recommendations to the Board to advance DEI.

Conclusion: The work of the Committee ensures the organization remains committed to DEI. These strategies inform other nursing organizations as they advance DEI to impact research, education, policy, and practice.

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The Western Institute of Nursing (WIN) is one of four regional nursing research organizations in the United States and “strives to improve the health of the public through visionary leadership in nursing research, practice, and education” (WIN, 2023). The tripartite mission recognizes the interconnectedness of these three core areas and their collective impact on society’s overall health, underscoring WIN’s commitment to creating positive and lasting effects on individuals and communities through its initiatives. WIN recognized the need to formally integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices into its organizational processes to strengthen its commitment to this mission. Founding the

WIN DEI committee was a paramount response for the organization to contribute to advancing health equity. This paper describes the process, impact, and sustainability of embedding DEI in a regional professional nursing organization.

Background

Nursing has a critical role in providing holistic health services to diverse populations. A commitment to advancing health equity is essential to effectively address the needs of patients and health care professionals from different backgrounds (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2017). By establishing the WIN DEI committee, the organization ensures that the voices and perspectives of nurses from diverse and historically marginalized backgrounds are heard

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and drive decision-making processes. This representation creates an inclusive environment that reflects the realities and needs of WIN members and the populations they serve. WIN members include researchers, clinicians, educators, students, academic institutions, and health care organizations. WIN is committed to promoting a truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture as a change agent in nursing education, research, and practice.

Sociopolitical events from the Spring and Summer of 2020 significantly shed light on the longstanding injustices and inequities in the United States. These events include the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. In addition, many communities of color were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Black, Latinx, and Native American people had higher hospitalization and mortality rates than White persons, likely attributed to existing gaps in wealth, employment, housing, and access to health care services (Tai et al., 2022). These events prompted the leadership of WIN to create the DEI taskforce in 2020 and formalize it as a standing committee the following year. Since 2021, the DEI committee has been vital in organizing workshops, listening sessions, and providing recommendations for conference programming topics from diverse speakers with DEI expertise. These activities focused on raising awareness, educating, and ushering in opportunities for nurses to feel empowered and advocate for change in their workplaces and communities.

Advocacy for change in structural racism and inequities within health care and academic environments is critical to achieving health equity (Shahram, 2023). Considering the recommendations of *The Future of Nursing* report and *AACN Essentials*, nursing education has an opportunity to integrate DEI into the nursing curriculum and promote an inclusive culture. This work can begin with DEI committees embedded in all institutions, specifically nursing schools and departments (Zappas et al., 2021). Overall, the work of the DEI committee is vital for promoting fair and equitable health care practices, fostering an inclusive organizational environment, and advancing the nursing profession. It is essential to ensure that nursing practice, education, and research reflect the diverse populations it serves and uphold ethical and compassionate care principles. Although many nursing organizations, such as WIN, are focused on advancing DEI, there is opposition to this work, which may impede progress (Camargo, 2023). This opposition to DEI efforts manifests across political, institutional, and personal realms. Within organizations and institutions, internal resistance to DEI initiatives poses a significant challenge that nursing leaders must address (Kearney et al., 2024). At the state level, current political ideologies and forces are actively obstructing DEI work (Carter et al., 2023). These events provide opportunities to adopt a collective approach to support faculty and leaders in those states and advance DEI across nursing institutions and organizations.

There were several past efforts to increase diversity within the WIN organization. However, enduring systemic change and improvements had yet to be recognized. In December 2019, the WIN organization embraced a commitment to DEI by updating its Vision and Mission statements. The WIN organization held a crucial

conversation session in September 2020 to discuss the organization's opportunities for advancing health equity by embedding DEI into the structure and practices. During that session, concerns and questions were raised, and the WIN board mobilized a taskforce to generate recommendations on developing and implementing meaningful, impactful change within the organization. The taskforce reviewed WIN's goals/strategic plan, discussed how WIN can be a more inclusive organization, and identified areas where bias exists.

Methods

The taskforce comprised 10 WIN members from diverse backgrounds with experience and expertise in DEI. The initial WIN DEI taskforce identified the need to collect baseline assessments, such as member demographics and obtaining member perceptions about what WIN does well related to DEI and the areas needed for improvement. A focus group with interested WIN members was held at the 2021 virtual conference to present the initial DEI taskforce recommendations, solicit member feedback, and discuss strategies to foster DEI across the organization. The DEI Chair and Governor of Education led this session, and a committee member captured notes and recommendations. Based on the feedback, the taskforce made recommendations for a DEI standing committee approved by the WIN board. The taskforce became a permanent standing committee in the Spring of 2021, and the next step was to ascertain member feedback by administering a Qualtrics (Qualtrics International Corporation) survey to members.

The survey collected information on demographics using the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2020 Demographics survey (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020), ensuring the questions captured diversity within nursing and the WIN organization. The survey also included open-ended questions such as "What does WIN do well related to DEI?" and "What are areas of improvement for WIN related to DEI?" The survey was emailed in October 2021 and remained open for 4 weeks. Based on the survey results, the taskforce made recommendations for the annual Spring conference, held virtually in April 2021.

In April 2022, the 55th Annual WIN Conference was held in person in Portland, OR, with the theme "Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI): Creating a Nursing Force for Change." Based on the DEI committee recommendations, the State of the Science speakers on education, research, and practice were nurses of color with expertise in microaggressions, racism, and health equity. During this conference, the DEI committee held a listening session to review survey findings and engage WIN community members in the continued mission of embedding DEI into the organization. The Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results (SOAR) model (Stavros et al., 2014) was utilized to identify the organizational DEI strengths and opportunities using an appreciative inquiry approach (see Table 1). The session was led by the Chair and Chair-Elect of the WIN DEI committee, and committee members facilitated group dialog.

Data from the SOAR analysis was used to develop initiatives for the following year. In April 2023, the 56th Annual WIN Conference

Table 1
Group Discussion Questions

SOAR Model	Questions
Strengths	What can we build on? How can we use our strengths to get results?
Opportunities	What are the top three opportunities on which we should focus our efforts? How can we reframe challenges to be seen as exciting opportunities?
Aspirations	What do we care deeply about? What is our most compelling aspiration?
Results	How do we know we are succeeding? How do we best communicate results to members?
Final outcomes after report out	Are there any final comments to capture now that you have heard the report?

Note. SOAR, Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results.

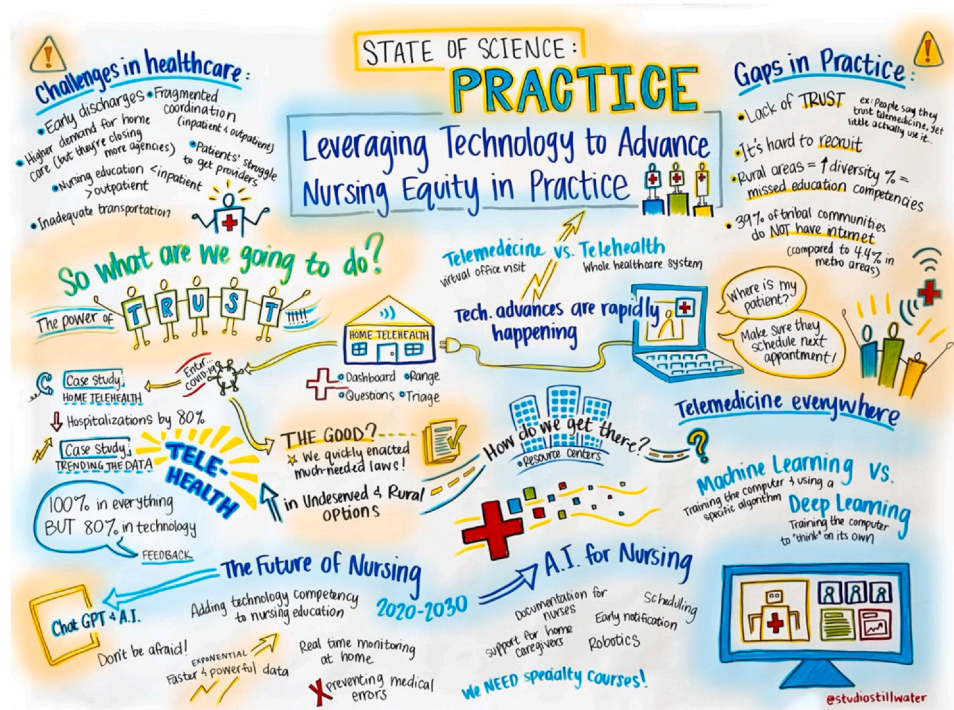


Figure 1. State of the Science address in practice.

held in Tucson, AZ, was about advancing equity in research, practice, and education by leveraging technology with a pre-conference presentation from the DEI committee titled *Achieving Health Equity by Leveraging Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Educational Practice*. Additionally, the DEI committee developed an innovative approach to elevate indigenous voices from Arizona by implementing a panel discussion titled *How Can Nurses Better Engage with Indigenous Communities?* A panel of three Tribal health leaders shared their experiences and expertise in advancing equity in practice, education, and research. Following the panel discussion, audience members were divided into three groups (i.e., Talking Circles), wherein the Tribal leaders led discussions and active deep-dive dialog with the audience members. The SOAR framework was used in three breakout discussions and report-outs, with committee members capturing the themes using Jamboard (Google Workspace) during the discussions, which were electronically displayed on large screens in real time.

To expand inclusive learning, a graphic note artist documented the highlights during the Tribal Health Leader panel and each State of the Science address in research and practice (see Figures 1 and 2). The DEI committee sponsored the graphic artistry for conference attendees with learning differences and neurodiversity with a propensity toward visual representation of information. Graphic note-taking enhances active listening and critical thinking about critical topics such as health equity. The benefit of expanding learning modalities like this is that the messages communicated become more inclusive. Inclusive thinking enhances creativity and the ability to generate more ideas and better comprehension (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011).

Results

Sixteen WIN members participated in the 2021 focus group and endorsed the initial recommendations made by the DEI committee. Members recommended collaborations with diverse regional nursing organizations and increased engagement with students. They

also recommended providing DEI resources on the organization's website. Outcomes from these recommendations included the creation of a DEI-related website with sublinks for resources and related member publications. Additionally, the WIN board approved supporting the conference registration fee for one student and one practicing nurse from a historically underrepresented group in nursing to attend the annual conference.

In the WIN demographic survey collected in Fall 2021, 130 out of 450 members (29%) responded to the survey. The survey results presented the respondents' baseline demographics. Regarding age, 29.8% were born between 1950 and 1959, and 19.1% were born between 1960 and 1969. Most of the respondents identified as White (68.6%), followed by Hispanics/Latino/a/s and Asian or Asia Americans (both at 7.2%). Most respondents identified as heterosexual. Detailed information about the survey results can be found at the WIN Member Demographic Survey (WIN, 2021). Based on the qualitative data analysis, the most frequent response about WIN's area of improvement was the need for more awareness of WIN DEI-related efforts. One respondent stated, "... I don't know what WIN is doing...I suggest they start with awareness."

The following were the areas that WIN did well in related to DEI. The summary of these efforts is presented in Table 2.

Respondents recommended the following areas for improvement:

1. Increase diversity in membership, organizational structure and leadership, conference locations, and awards.
2. Encourage bias-free language and gender-neutral pronouns in materials/websites.
3. Address inclusion/exclusion microaggressions within organizations and conferences.
4. Consider creating special interest groups related to DEI or minority populations.
5. Form collaborations with minority nursing organizations and minority-serving institutions.

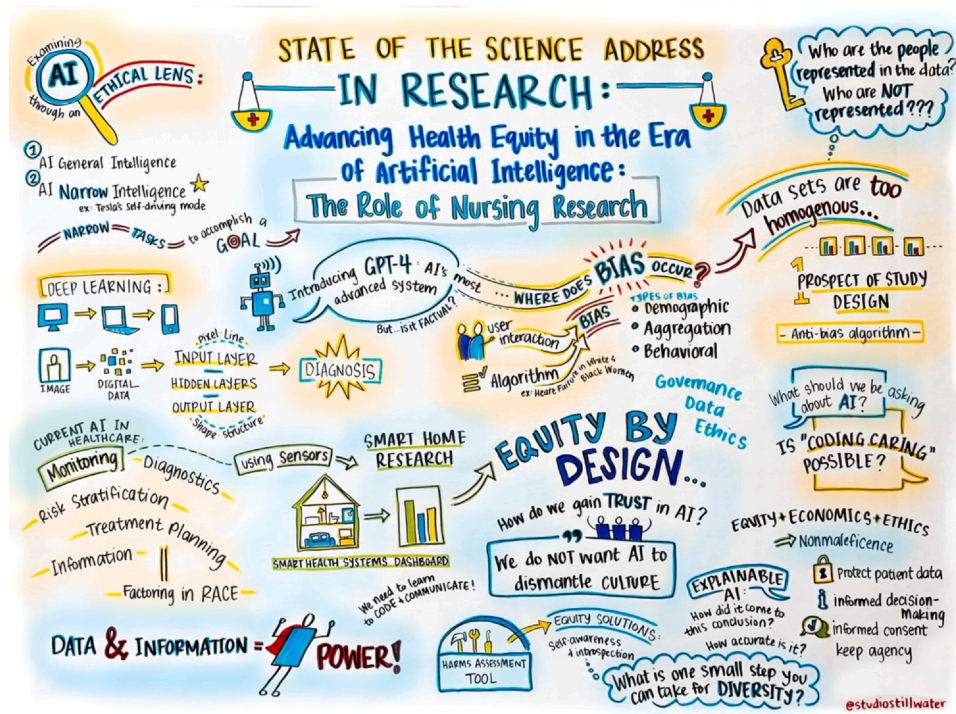


Figure 2. State of the Science address in research.

Table 2
Summary of WIN DEI Efforts

WIN DEI Efforts
• Taking action through the formation of the DEI committee • Implementing a member demographic survey, and conference themes related to DEI • Holding conferences at venues with accommodations • Blind review of abstracts • Promoting research with vulnerable populations

Note. DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; WIN, Western Institute of Nursing.

The DEI committee collated the responses from the Spring 2021 focus group and the Fall 2021 survey and created specific recommendations to the Board and the conference program committee, delineated in Table 3.

Similarly, responses to the 2022 listening session and 2023 dialog with indigenous leaders were summarized and analyzed by DEI

committee members, and recommendations were forwarded to the board and program committee. Highlights and recommendations from the indigenous leaders were documented using a graphic note artist and shared on the WIN website (see Figure 3). The image of the Jamboard containing the panelists and audience discussions during the talking circles using the SOAR framework was also shared (see Appendix).

Other DEI committee initiatives include developing two additional special interest groups: one for WIN members interested in raising awareness of the needs of LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender) communities and a second for members interested in Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) initiatives, including raising awareness of the invisibility, health disparities, and needs of MENA communities. Recommendations about the timing and placement of DEI-focused discussion on the conference schedule were forwarded to the program committee. WIN DEI outcomes from 2020 to 2023 are presented in Table 4.

Table 3
Recommendations from 2021 Focus Group and Survey Results

To the Board of Governors	To the Program Committee
• Consider inclusivity and accessibility when selecting cities and venues for the annual conference and underscore why sites are selected • Diversify WIN awards and leadership • Establish awards related to DEI—a research award focused on DEI, for example • Consider a WIN DEI booth in the conference exhibit hall and consider collecting stories from conference participants • Consider booths of minority nursing associations in the exhibit hall • Host DEI-focused webinars and include DEI content in newsletters • Post member publications related to DEI on the website • Include image descriptions on the website for those with limited or low vision	• Identify 1 hour on the conference program, preferably a time that does not conflict with other sessions, for the DEI committee to conduct a SOAR analysis with conference participants, including those from minority nursing associations • Highlight conference sessions that are DEI-focused • Include land acknowledgment in the conference program and during the opening session of the conference • Include accommodations in the conference program • Collect phonetic name pronunciation information from all speakers and share it with moderators • Include a moderator's statement related to different perspectives prior to conference presentations, present a DEI question during each session, engage and collect feedback through an equity lens—this could be incorporated through the mobile app • Include a message related to WIN DEI work and the SOAR analysis in the conference opening session

Note. DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; SOAR, Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results; WIN, Western Institute of Nursing.



Figure 3. Highlights and recommendations from indigenous leaders during Tribal Health Panel presentation.

Discussion and Recommendations

This paper examined the scope of the integration of DEI into a regional professional nursing organization established through the work of a committee. The WIN board has supported the DEI committee recommendations by enacting and promoting initiatives to ensure the organization remains committed to DEI. Through the years, organizations have made efforts around DEI. However, many complexities exist around implementing authentic DEI initiatives that will make an impact. One primary action made by the WIN organization was embedding DEI into its core mission and vision even before the events of the pandemic accelerated DEI efforts widely. According to Jackson (2014), a best practice for strategic organizational change is to clearly communicate the vision and institutional mission to create an inclusive, socially just organization that demonstrates a shared responsibility for all members.

Due to the pandemic's health, economic, and societal impact, communities of color experienced racism and xenophobia and the recognition that throughout history, especially in times of crisis,

when one group is unfairly targeted, other racial, ethnic, and religious groups suffer collateral victimization and discrimination. During the pandemic, there was a sharp increase in hate incidents (this term encompasses crimes) against Asian Americans directly tied to the COVID-19 virus, and we also saw elevated hate incidents in other racial and ethnic groups (Fan et al., 2022). It was, therefore, of dire importance and relevance that WIN provided a safe place with various opportunities for its members to share their comments and feedback through focus groups, listening sessions, and surveys. Most respondents to the survey identified as non-Hispanic White. However, the focus groups and listening session participants were primarily from racial and ethnic minority groups. It is important to note that the WIN organization comprises mainly White members, which reflects the homogeneity in racial/ethnic demographics of the nursing profession as a whole. Often, in organizations and systems that lack diversity, people from underrepresented groups can feel ignored, undervalued, and excluded (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020). Historically, nursing has not been a diverse or welcoming profession for ethnic minority groups. It is recommended that organizations address the concerns of

Table 4
2020 to 2023 WIN DEI Outcomes

Change	Action	Sustain
DEI committee formation	Implement member demographic survey	Conference venues provide accommodations
	Conference scholarship for one student and one practicing nurse from a historically underrepresented group in nursing	Blind review of abstracts
	DEI speakers and themes embedded in the conference	Promote research with vulnerable populations
	Added land acknowledgment	
	Phonetic name pronunciation of speakers	
	Added two new special interest groups related to LGBTQIA and Middle Eastern North African communities	

Note. DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; LGBTQIA, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender; WIN, Western Institute of Nursing.

members who feel unwelcome and experience bias, discrimination, and racism. There is an increased risk for moral suffering and perpetuation of health injustices and inequities when organizations, intentionally or unintentionally, exclude certain groups of people. Therefore, it was critical for the nursing organization to intentionally begin to rectify the wrongdoings of the past through mindful infrastructure, programming, and creating safe and brave spaces for diverse members (i.e., the DEI committee) to lead group discussions, such as focus groups and listening sessions, that were more likely to engage nurses from diverse backgrounds. Diversity within an organization should be framed around continuous learning and an openness to change, and mistakes are perceived as opportunities for improvement (Fletcher & Beauregard, 2022).

There were areas in which WIN did well concerning DEI. The organization was open to respondents' recommendations for improvements. Some of these recommendations include increasing the diversity of its membership and leadership, developing DEI special interest groups, encouraging bias-free language and gender-neutral pronouns in materials and websites, and collaborating with other ethnic minority nursing organizations. These recommendations were consistent with similar professional nursing initiatives, such as the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing DEI Taskforce (Regis et al., 2023). Furthermore, mentorship should be available to new members, nurses, and students from diverse backgrounds. The DEI mentorship aims to provide interested members with guidance and support from experienced members and leaders. It can be a way for organizations to maintain the sustainability and scalability of their DEI programs.

Our results suggest that the ongoing efforts described are necessary and consistent with the need for more diversity within professional nursing group membership and leadership. However, our findings indicate that WIN members request more awareness, DEI development opportunities, and collaboration with diverse organizations. These practices are necessary for organizations to avoid being exclusionary. Our results also provide insights into organization-level diversity initiatives and efforts to engage members in dialog that promotes equity and inclusion. As professional organizations consider strategies to improve the diversity of their members and leaders, an overall assessment of recruitment and retention efforts must be considered. These assessments can serve as tools to track diversity within the organization and increase membership. Policies to improve diversity in membership and leadership will need to focus on ongoing efforts to engage all nurses and students. These policies should include diversifying leadership qualifications focusing on the candidate's professional and personal experiences. The organization can consider individual-centric approaches, such as a holistic review of leadership applications, instead of emphasizing the applicant's professional achievements. The recruitment strategies can be purposeful in diversifying the organization by advancing the accessibility and transparency of their diversity data.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the opportunity to be healthy is not yet equal, and nurses are well-positioned to address existing health inequities through practice, education, research, policy, and leadership. Preparing a diverse nursing workforce representative of the communities we serve is imperative. To do so, the WIN organization is uniquely positioned to impact the continuum of nursing through intentional efforts to centralize DEI in its institutional processes. Establishing the WIN DEI committee has led to efforts that offer coordinated understanding and best practices by providing a feedback loop on how initiatives work. The DEI committee's ongoing efforts include engaging all members and community leaders in dialogs to support inclusive and equitable spaces. The WIN organization can positively impact other professional organizations by endorsing WIN member engagement, which can promote an accepting, respectful, and safe culture of inclusion within WIN. Continued efforts in member surveys, including demographics and collecting ongoing feedback from members and leaders, can provide data that will help cultivate DEI initiatives. Online engagement, such as webinars, meetings, and surveys, can provide an online community accessible to all WIN members.

Listening sessions and dialog with community leaders provide data that support initiatives for special interest groups. Technology such as Jamboard during meetings and conferences allows everyone to share their ideas openly without worrying about speaking up or fearing retribution. These DEI-focused meetings provide a safe environment for members. We acknowledge that DEI is an ongoing effort where members and leaders actively evaluate and refine DEI projects. In addition, the sustainability of the DEI committee requires additional resources and support from members, organizations, and community leaders. The DEI committee recognizes that ongoing work is required and encourages members interested in DEI to be part of future endeavors. The WIN board has supported the DEI committee recommendations by furthering initiatives to ensure the organization remains committed to DEI. Our organization's journey may help to inform other nursing organizations as they advance DEI to impact research, education, policy, and practice.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

HOW CAN NURSES BETTER ENGAGE WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES?



Jamboard notes from Tribal health talking circles discussions.

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