

Essay

Vulnerabilities for Marginalized Groups in the United States Forensic Anthropology Education System: Paths to Engagement and Belonging

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Abstract: Implicit and explicit barriers to building a culture of belonging persist in U.S. forensic anthropology. These barriers create and exacerbate vulnerabilities, especially among marginalized groups, that need to be addressed. The lack of diversity in U.S. forensic anthropology is well documented. At the same time, there has been a significant upswing in academic programs focusing on forensic anthropology at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, to be successful and promote retention, these programs must address the pervasive structural barriers that continue to impede diversity. Major impediments include the hierarchical structure, illusion of objectivity, racial and cis-gender-biased methodologies, and belonging uncertainty. At all levels, peer engagement and active, constructive mentorship may both semantically and structurally allow for a bridge between the past and the future. Pedagogy and professional practices in forensic anthropology must be modernized and restructured to promote learning environments that foster belonging and engagement.



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Before exploring this topic further, the authors felt it necessary to include positionality statements to give a context of who we are and the main influences which led us to address this topic. The three positionality statements are interspersed throughout the text to emphasize the relevance of considering diversity, inclusion, and belonging in forensic anthropology education.

Diversity and its representation in higher education have been issues I have contended with personally throughout my career. Being Afro-Latinx, I have encountered the blatant lack of understanding that people have for students of color in academia. There is always a feeling of being “othered” and not belonging in higher education, especially at predominantly white institutions. This was not a space for someone who looked like me nor thought how I did. I have been one of the few, if not, the only man of color in many of my graduate courses, at national conferences, on committees, and in the professional world as a practicing forensic anthropologist. I would have to work twice as hard to achieve the same success, and not question the scholarship I was taught. If I kept my head down and did the work, I would not be questioned about my place in the discipline and broader academia. Despite this, I was. I have been told by my peers and senior colleagues that I was accepted at programs and employed solely because of my ethnic background, despite having strong academic and professional credentials. I have been used as the ‘token’ scholar to emulate. The system in place is not welcoming to systematically

marginalized students and I have tried to be a mentor to as many marginalized students as I can. However, being their primary advocate has been taxing, especially with barriers being put up by institutions and governing bodies. I see the lack of diversity every day and want to change how we teach and mentor our students.—Jesse R. Goliath

1. Introduction: Stating and Clarifying the Problem

Students from marginalized groups are poorly represented throughout higher education in the United States in the forensic sciences [1,2], and forensic anthropology more specifically [3,4]. The Bureau of Labor Statistics [5] predicts an 11% increase in the number of forensic science positions from 2021–2031, and concurrently there have been increases in the number of forensic anthropology programs across the United States [6]. However, systematically excluded groups are not enrolling in these programs, nor are they joining the forensic workforce. From 2010–2020, college enrollment of students from systematically excluded populations has marginally increased [7], but enrollment in the forensic sciences has not. The traditional Western, euro-centric, cis-gendered, and often male-centric approach to practice, research, and teaching cannot be expected to meet the needs and realities of people with non-majority worldviews and experiences [8,9]. Marginalized students lack a sense of belonging in the field of forensic science. A sense of belonging—the feeling and reality of being included, valued, and acknowledged—is associated with many positive school outcomes. However, students are vulnerable when their values and perspectives are not represented in learning and research. What students work on, how they are taught, the types of feedback they receive, and the communities available to them can leave students, particularly students of color, vulnerable to issues of belonging, which can subsequently impact their academic success [10]. Ways to support increased inclusivity, diversity, and retention must include a deeper reflection of the structures that maintain education inequality, decolonizing forensic curricula [11], and acknowledging the vulnerabilities of students and professionals.

Broadly defined, structural vulnerability is an individual or a population's condition of being at risk of adverse outcomes through their interface with institutional systems built on racial hierarchies, income inequality, social history, and other societal forces. Demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and disability) are used to create hierarchical judgments that promote social inequality and potentially limit an individual's opportunities for achievement [12–14]. This paper discusses vulnerabilities contributing to this situation in forensic anthropology and suggests possible avenues for mitigating how these vulnerabilities are exploited/perpetuated. The goal of this commentary is to highlight systemic and institutionally based/reliant barriers to entry in forensic anthropology, including the structural oppression of diverse historical role models who were significant contributors and trailblazers in the development of the field, as well as vulnerabilities in the educational system that preclude the opportunity for academic success. Additionally, we discuss goals for making forensic anthropology more inviting: authentic, engaged, committed mentorship; role models that not only may share a demographic with but a commitment to the mentee personally; a network of peers at varied stages with whom they can share a diverse range of experiences, positive and negative, that will inform and broaden our appreciation of the field.

Entering graduate school, particularly within a PWI (predominately white institution), has provided me with ample experiences during my education that have given me pause and aroused concern for my belonging in a given classroom. I am a bi-racial, queer, cis-gendered woman whose background education is outside of anthropology. Coming to anthropology, I've had to contend with spaces that range from subliminally to overtly detrimental to my sense of belonging in learning and research spaces. Having to sit through other students promote eugenic policies (knowingly or not), exclusively or predominantly reading from authors who would not have considered me a whole person, being purposefully excluded from collaborative learning spaces, and other types of experiences like this have intermittently been present in my first foray into graduate education.

Not to say that all of my classes are like this or that my faculty aren't supportive, but it is important to acknowledge the ways in which this discipline, in particular, still holds onto and perpetuates pedagogical and research practices that are harmful. There have been moments I've thought about leaving or I've contemplated shifting my research/academic focus, but the reasons to stay seem to outweigh the reasons to leave. The peer support that I've found has been a significant component to my developing feeling of safety in these spaces, along with solid and engaged mentorship from an array of faculty and a sense of community amongst other researchers of similar interests. And I understand that the reasons to leave won't change instantly or even quickly, but discussing the ways in which exclusion and harm function in educational spaces is an important early step in mitigating them.—Taylor S. Borgelt

2. Vulnerability in Education

It has been recently discussed how barriers to disciplinary inclusion and success continue to exist and be perpetuated. Barriers to education, disciplinary diversity, and professional success [15] within forensic anthropology, like other professional fields, reflect structural harm and vulnerability for people from and with a variety of marginalized identities. In historical and contemporary society, structures of power, such as racism, classicism, sexism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, have actively prevented equitable treatment of and opportunities for marginalized people [16,17], which has impacted the diversity of professional and academic fields [18]. What it means to be visible and valued in a space is not the same for everyone, and this inequity negatively impacts people's sense of belonging, of being seen as significant and worthwhile, and a space's sense of inclusivity [19]. Perpetuation of structural vulnerability(s) and inequity is concretely demonstrated through several academic mechanisms, such as in how the curriculum is designed and taught [18,20], the kinds of professional access shared [21], how forensic anthropology is practiced [22], and how specific types of knowledge are (more) valued [23,24].

Education and training are vital components to the development of any academic practice. How the theory and methodology of a given discipline are passed on through generations of students is essential for signaling the values of the field and creating knowledgeable practitioners. Thus, barriers to and within education limit the diversity of students and practitioners. These barriers to intellectual spaces compound varying sources of vulnerability that exist differently for different people. By creating and enforcing limiting professional development spaces, people at all levels—particularly students—have to contend with and live through instances of harm and isolation. There are many barriers to diversity and equity within education that include (but are not limited to) exclusive pedagogical models, a lack of organized support for the recruitment and retention of diverse students, and enforced binaries within standardized education [25].

In considering how to address structural vulnerability and its impact on diversity and retention within forensic anthropology, it is essential to explore the importance of what is taught and practiced, along with how it is taught and practiced. The challenges that marginalized students face result from systems in place that celebrate, elevate, and unanimously support power and hierarchy, be it due to race, class, access, etc. It is actionably harmful to assume that the vulnerability(s) that marginalized people experience in educational and professional environments is due to inherent components of their character or personhood when many systems in place are designed to exploit and diminish differences of perspective and experience, which is evident when this issue is engaged from the structural vulnerability perspective. Not acknowledging and actively working to remove barriers and instances of stratification communicates that the circumstances that relate to vulnerability and violence are due to the personal responsibility of those in marginalized positions, which is then reflected in larger social discourse and in practice [26,27].

A clear demonstration of how barriers have existed and how they continue to cause harm can be seen through the history of the discipline. Historically, members of system-

atically excluded and marginalized groups have been largely overlooked in scholarship, with specific examples from biological and forensic anthropology. Scholars of color, such as Dr. William Montague Cobb and Caroline Bond Day, used their expertise in biology and culture to investigate the influence of social inequality on human health. These scholars emphasized the need for practitioners to take social responsibility in their work to combat scientific racist ideology. Specifically, Cobb wanted to provide solutions to eliminating health disparities affecting African Americans as well as other marginalized populations [28–30], and Bond Day [31] pioneered biocultural research and methods to combat misconceptions of mixed-race individuals [32,33]. Charles P. Warren, the longest-serving military forensic anthropologist, identified fallen American soldiers from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, and refuted the negative stereotypes of dark-skinned and Afro-descendant Southeast Asians in his work [34,35]. Warren, along with Japanese scientist Tadao Furue, established novel forensic anthropological techniques to identify fallen American soldiers [34]. In forensic psychology, Black psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark's pivotal work (the "doll test") in segregation influenced the ruling of the U.S. Supreme in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended racial segregation in public schools. The Clarks suggested that segregation directly harms children and, by extension, society because of the negative attitudes it perpetuates [36,37]. These pioneers of color were innovative researchers but also victims of marginalization and have been largely ignored in traditional forensic curricula and training.

Additionally, forensic science's commitment to the myth of objectivity [38–40] has created a bias of neutrality and non-advocacy [41] that scholars have developed from their training and mentorship. How objectivity has been conceived foregrounds specific and exclusionary ways of knowing, perpetuated through how the curriculum is designed and implemented. Creating bounds of how things should be done or thought of perpetuates exclusionary notions of correctness. This can be seen through how biologically conflated social binaries/dichotomies/schemes of characterization are framed and taught as inherent and reflective of a holistic scientific understanding of human variety and diversity [42]. "Objective" forensic scientists are typically not experiencing the effects of systemic oppression, racism, and injustice that marginalized students and practitioners are forced to reconcile with in medicolegal settings [39].

The presence of barriers that further exploit existent vulnerabilities in a discipline so focused on both reflexivity and inclusivity has caused real and tangible harm to individual students, academic and professional networks, and educational structures. A present concern, across the discipline but particular to forensic anthropology, is the recruitment and retention of scholars. Several current mechanisms and realities make academic and professional spaces limit experiences for people of compounding and marginalized identities. Performative measures to increase diversity cannot do the work of mitigating structural harm and strain for marginalized students and scholars. This performativity exists in many forms, such as recruitment, mentorship, professional treatment, institutional messaging around support and diversity, and others [43]. Without tangible action around inclusion and belonging, the discourse is insufficient to maintain people as active members of the professional community because it does little to address and mitigate instances of harm. This impacts who enters and stays within the discipline, impacting the scope of future intellectual and practical work. Tangibly curating and maintaining diverse recruitment and retention spaces is essential in developing our future.

I am a white, cis-female, practicing Jew, who has repeatedly been overtly told and actively treated as if I appear much younger than my chronological age would suggest. I have been subject to sexism, ageism, and religious ignorance and intolerance. None of these experiences or intersectionalities have had as great an effect on me personally compared with an interaction I had with a student in serving as the undergraduate academic adviser for my Anthropology department. This student identifies as a black female studying biological anthropology who I had as a student in many classes. We were meeting to help her find space in her tight, 4th year schedule for a cultural Anthropology class, a desire

I initially found out of place. I asked why she was so drawn to the course content. The student replied that she had little to no interest in the course content itself, however she had to take a class with her before graduation. I realized the faculty member she referred to is the only black (female) faculty member in our department. The student had tears in her eyes realizing the brief time she had to achieve this integral step in her education.

I have never personally, consciously, acknowledged a lack of representation that defined me or my academic trajectory. This student deeply opened my eyes to the power, importance, and necessity of representation in academia. While I pride myself as a passionate, engaged, present, and involved academic advisor I could never replace or model her presence and achievement in this student's eyes.—Erin B. Waxenbaum

3. Mitigating Colonially Informed Harm in Educational Spaces

In thinking about and discussing reform, it is crucial to concretize how structural vulnerabilities are perpetuated and enacted. Particularly within education and professional training, some avenues exist inequitably and continue to impose harm through limited access and performative action. Education plays a crucial role in communicating the value of knowledge production and, in this vein, sharing what sources of knowledge are deemed valuable [23]. Specifically, in forensic anthropology, educators have a role in helping students recognize where colonially informed attitudes permeate understandings of forensic techniques, procedures, and the selection of relevant cases [11]. Producing educational and professional spaces that value and incorporate expanded perspectives on knowledge helps to enact decoloniality within spheres of research and disciplinary discourse. Prioritizing equity and justice within research and education enforces the need for and value of diverse perspectives, diverse methodologies, and diverse forms of knowledge production [24]. By demonstrating intellectual spaces as antithetical to the exclusive and devaluing standard, the barriers that people experience, as professionals and as students, are potentially lessened because of how their experiences and positions are appreciated and acknowledged [11,24]. For example, by recognizing that the histories of forensic science are treated as a definitive linear timeline of continuous Euro-centric progression rather than acknowledging that different societies and non-White scholars that have developed and contributed their methods of forensic observation [11], the ability to 'do' forensic science is only afforded to a particular group of people. To extend theoretical and methodological paradigms, social justice and equity remain crucial aspects of what it means to decolonize and ameliorate the field's literature. Chaussée and colleagues [11] propose a framework of 'cognitive justice'—a term coined by Visvanathan [44]—which promotes the right of different knowledge systems to co-exist not just in terms of representation but also through applied diversification. Cognitive justice requires a rigorous science based on the plurality of perspectives embedded within different cultures and customs [45].

In considering redesigning and restructuring educational spaces as more inclusive, the curriculum is essential because of how taught subject matter perpetuates potential harm and structural violence. Some scholars within and adjacent to the sub-field have published syllabi and syllabi models that address the need for inclusivity in education and the needs of a more diverse array of students [20,46,47]. For example, Spiros and colleagues [48] propose that the desired outcome for pedagogy is to increase equity while offering a more comprehensive education system. Highlighting elements within these models, they prioritize referencing authors and texts from a more diverse canon and that function less within colonially informed paradigms. If institutions are serious about greater diversity within forensic sciences, they need to implement an inclusive structure beyond the traditional white Euro-centric curriculum [11]. In actively not incorporating racism, misogyny, colonial oppression, etc., as curricular foundations, these educators and their syllabi allow for the generation of more inclusive spaces that do not purposefully further marginalize students.

Curriculum design and execution are not the only examples of instances and systems of professional exclusion. Dewidar and colleagues [21] discuss the role of (access

to and within) academic journals in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Given the “nature of academia”, journals may play a significant role in exacerbating cycles of injustice [21]. Research has demonstrated gender bias in the peer review process and other forms of discrimination through higher rejection rates of research from systematically excluded groups [21]. The results of this bias have numerous downstream implications, including overall publication opportunities, a timeline for academic promotion/tenure, overall career progression, and mental health and wellness [21]. To improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within scholarly publishing, the Royal Society of Chemistry defined six “actionable” steps, including adopting an EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) statement, promoting “bias-free” language, appointing a journal’s EDI director, instituting a mentorship approach, monitoring adherence to EDI fundamentals, and publishing reports on EDI achievements [21].

3.1. Fostering Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

To promote equity and inclusivity in the future of this discipline, it is essential to openly discuss the past, look forward, and promote avenues for substantive change. Many disciplines, including forensic anthropology, have acknowledged their historical homogeneity and sought outlets to inform hiring and solicitation practices and improve internal environments, e.g., Ref [33]. Research consistently demonstrates that diverse academic and workplace environments promote creativity, cooperation, innovation, and positive performance [4,33,49]. This diversity has resulted in a growing abundance of literature addressing mechanisms that compound a lack of diversity across gender, race, and socioeconomic status in higher education and their pipeline professions. Historically underutilized tools, such as mentorship, peer engagement, and other horizontally oriented forms of learning and socialization are beginning to receive greater attention as mechanisms for fostering inclusivity and belonging.

Structural barriers to integrating diverse participants in academic spaces have many origins and causes. These may include high financial burden, lack of institutional and collegial support, social isolation, publication pressure, bias, etc., e.g., Refs [15,21,50–53]. For anthropology specifically, barriers may also include the documented history of racism within the field, discrimination (including but not limited to elitism, ageism, ableism, neurodiversity, religious or ethnic discrimination, LGBTQ+ considerations, sexual harassment, immigration, or veteran status), financial stress, limited employment opportunities, perception of the work environment, merit-based professional structure, and concerns of related agencies including (but not limited to) law enforcement [4,15,33].

Despite these obstacles, numerous mechanisms can foster change in the structure of the larger academic system and provide support for forensic professionals and academics, including positive, constructive mentorship and peer support and engagement. Most aspects of disciplinary professionalism standards, overall culture, and the successful navigation of higher education and applied practice are not explicitly taught [53]. Social issues, overt and covert racism, minority representation, conflict resolution, salary concerns, and contract negotiation are not often addressed expressly in graduate training. While these components still serve as particular barriers for marginalized groups in academia, structured and informal support opportunities may work to fill this void [54].

3.2. Effective Mentorship: One Road to Inclusion

Mentorship has been defined as “the person-to-person transmission of knowledge in a domain where one person has more experience than the other” [53], providing guidance in their “personal and professional development” [55]. Undergraduate and graduate mentorship is frequently seen as the role of one’s primary academic advisor. However, many suggest mentorship should be framed as a mode of “social exchange” [53] or a “socialization process” [54] and not an assumed position. Arnesson and Albinsson [55] note a “central factor” to mentorship is the absence of an evaluative or appraising function while providing emotional and psychological support through the transfer of cultural knowledge.

These researchers highlight that mentorship should not solely focus on academic considerations; successful mentorship should include, if not mainly focus on, socioemotional and practical aspects.

Tallman and colleagues [15] note that “without formal mentorships, students are obligated to navigate the complexities of the field on their own”, which can lead to attrition and insecurity [53]. These relationships can offer emotional and structural support at the moment. Still, they may also provide professional alternatives that may not have been previously considered and the breadth of what is available given one’s initial academic interests [52]. Diggs-Andrews and colleagues [54] note that “positive mentoring experiences have been linked to increased productivity, career satisfaction, and research success . . . increase[d] recruitment, retention, and persistence in science careers”. Mentorship is but one of a variety of reliable tools that could substantially assist marginalized groups in academia by supporting retention, developing interest in research and collaboration, and instilling positive research and academic experiences [4,15,50,53].

Mentors and mentorship can arise from a variety of sources. Many academic supervisors may be considered qualified as a mentor; however, mentorship should go beyond an obligatory advisory or institutional role. As Winburn and colleagues [53] note, “mentors are not born. They develop over time”. Mentors should “take the lead in nurturing the pipeline of diversity and inclusion” through the introduction or development of conversations where discussions of underrepresentation are invited and encouraged [50]. The features of a successful mentor are not innate. Still, they can be supported by mimicking solid personal experiences with past mentors or, more formally, through workshops and organizational resources, including those provided by the National Academy of Sciences [56], National Mentoring Resource Center [57], and National Research Mentoring Network [58]. Notably, “in order to be a mentor, and an effective one, one must care. You must care” [51]. Mentors should be strong listeners, “[a] guide rather than an enforcer” [51], who are curious, transparent, able to maintain confidentiality, and who model self-reflection and mutual respect. Mentors should also be resources that are accessible and professionally and emotionally supportive [54,59].

As reflected in a positionality statement (EBW) above, research on mentorship frequently highlights that mentees seek mentors who match certain aspects of their own identity [49,51–53]. Reducing diversity in academia as one proceeds from undergraduate to post-PhD positions [4,15,33,49] may be a significant barrier to engagement in mentorship. This deficit may be exacerbated among historically marginalized individuals within the field, affecting their ability to reap the most important benefits of a mentor match of similar backgrounds and demographics. As Marian Wright Edelman [60], founder and president emerita of the Children’s Defense Fund, notes: “it’s hard to be what you cannot see”. This is an issue within forensic anthropology but is also reflected in the broader forensic and science communities [4,15,33,53]. Davis [52] cautions that failure to match a mentee with a mentor of similar identity may threaten the mentee’s success. However, significant benefits can be appreciated in cross-race mentorship, which may serve as an essential learning experience for both parties.

Winburn and colleagues [53] specifically recommend participation in an organized mentorship program specific to a person’s discipline, both from an academic and practitioner perspective. This mentorship can afford students or early career faculty and practitioners a vital window into the field. Professional organizations are, in recent years, beginning to substantively direct energy to the development of open forums (e.g., American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Anthropology Section, AAFS Anthropology Section’s Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Forum) and committees (e.g., American Association of Biological Anthropologists, Committee on Diversity), inviting participants to engage in dialogue and develop initiatives on mentorship. Unfortunately, in Spring 2020, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) Anthropology Section developed a Mentorship Program which did not proceed because the AAFS Anthropology Diversity and

Inclusion Committee was terminated by AAFS leadership [53]. Challenges to substantive and effective mentorship present barriers to inclusion and belonging, including limited faculty/advisors from systematically excluded backgrounds, the tension between cultural and institutional values, administrative expectations such as requests to engage with diversity committees, and presentations for faculty that may interfere with mentorship opportunities [50].

3.3. Peer Engagement: Normalizing Academia

Academic support is frequently perceived as vertical and hierarchical—one receives advice from someone perceived as older and with more “experience.” However, research has demonstrated that the “mentorship paradigm” does not always consist of “vertical-level interactions, but often includes horizontally oriented relationships” [53,54]. Peer mentoring and engagement have been shown to “accelerate academic and professional development by providing reciprocal support and collaboration” [54]. Peer-based discussions may not always be among individuals with matched identities, ages, or backgrounds. “Mentorship”, whether formal or informal, may evoke anxiety among participants depending on the premise, familiarity, or relationship between mentor/mentee. Semantics are essential, as it has been suggested by Womack and colleagues [61] that terms such as “coach” or “coaching group” may be preferred over “mentor” and “mentoring group” to separate the traditional, academic, hierarchical approach from a system that is more collegiate. Williams and colleagues [62] suggest that the “coaching” peer support model provides a non-competitive social support environment for Ph.D. students, which may be particularly important for systematically excluded groups. The structure and mindset of “peer” vs. “mentor” has been shown to help overcome isolation and foster belonging, camaraderie, and inclusion [54].

It has also been appreciated that much can be garnered when engaging with peers versus those perceived as being responsible for evaluating or overseeing their progress. Brunsmma and colleagues [51] highlight research showing that one-third of graduate students cited not having a faculty member present to guide them through professionalization processes. Many noted a desire for organized opportunities to engage with peers as a support method. Winburn and colleagues [53] note that respondents to their survey concerning mentorship frequently cited the role of peer mentorship, drawing attention to the support and constructive nature of horizontal support systems.

In the aftermath of the disbanding of the AAFS Anthropology Diversity and Inclusion Committee and the termination of their Mentorship Program oriented toward the Forensic Anthropology section, in 2022, individuals removed from AAFS elected to independently launch the DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) Peer Engagement Program oriented toward individuals involved with forensic anthropology. In contrast with the original mentorship program, this initiative intends to foster an inclusive environment for the field of forensic anthropology that deviates from the vertical, hierarchical mentor–mentee structure. Individuals at all academic levels equally engage in three-person, informal groups based on self-identified demographics, research interests, and future pursuits. The goal is to increase exposure to the diversity of academic and professional work, share information on diverse roles within forensic anthropology, obligations, and expectations in the field, and generally engage in dynamic conversations on challenges, successes, and milestones throughout the academic and professional experience in forensic anthropology. This program launched on 5 May 2022, and at the time of this article’s publication, it includes 36 active participants ranging from undergraduate students to ABFA Diplomates.

Antón and colleagues [33] noted that “targeted outreach to undergraduate students . . . may increase the Biological Anthropology pipeline”. The DEIB Peer Engagement Program has sought out advertising to various biological and forensic anthropology programs. A window into the field from a non-hierarchical source may be an essential part of the growth and diversity of forensic and biological anthropology in the future.

4. Belonging: A Path Forward

While many diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives exist, what may be the most crucial aspect in an academic environment to foster success and retention is “belonging”. Terms associated with “belonging” include “partnership”, “acceptance”, “loyalty”, and “attachment”, among others [63]. These terms speak to one finding their “place”, their best “fit”, facilitating learning the proverbial “ropes” of self-advocacy. This is a prime aspiration when seeking one’s future career and should be a discipline-supported foundation. Without fostering belonging, retention initiatives are significantly weakened. Promoting and nurturing spaces of belonging over time will help to inspire and generate retention of diverse students, academics, and professionals. Belonging is fundamental to community building, with the community being a central component of both individual and institutional support, particularly for those from systematically excluded and marginalized groups. Impacting the discipline’s future, in both theory and practice, is/should be intensely reliant on the explicit and purposeful inclusion and retention of scholars from diverse backgrounds and identities because of both the moral imperative and the desire for expanded perspectives in our work.

The field of forensic anthropology’s history is filled, like those of many other disciplines, with a history of marginalization of systematically excluded groups that inevitably spills into the present. Research consistently demonstrates that barriers to entry and underrepresentation of historically and presently excluded groups are multifaceted [15]. A significant obstacle in academia is the lack of representation in the current leadership in the field [4,15,49]. While mentorship and peer engagement may not serve to break down all obstacles to recruitment and retention, how we model behavior and fight for change as a field may help turn the tide for the next generation. “By modeling inclusivity . . . we send a signal to potential scholars that forensic anthropology is a place where people of diverse backgrounds can thrive” [64]. In addition to mentorship (within and across identities) and peer engagement (across all levels of “peer”), grant-writing workshops and inclusion of graduate students as authors, collaborators, and peer reviewers in academic conferences and publications [15] may further promote belonging in the field and further the field’s goals. With greater introspection and self-critique as a discipline, our future will continue to be imbued with a greater understanding of that history that situates our present and informs what is to come.

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