

DC Chapter of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (DC-AAPOR) Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Panel

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

October 16, 2024

- Hello, everyone. I'm Robert Santos, director of the U.S. Census Bureau, and its first Latino director.
- Thank you to DC-AAPOR for inviting me to open today's panel discussion. It's a pleasure to be with you today to share my thoughts on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.
- It's a topic I'm excited to speak about. I think my roots as a statistician, a policy researcher, a fellow stakeholder, and a person of color offer me a unique perspective.
- I think everyone who knows me, knows that I'm a champion of integrating DEIA into the workplace. You don't even have to use those three words or the acronym to embrace DEIA in the workplace. It's about basic respect, valuing diverse perspectives in decision-making, having an open mind, and of course, helping others.
- I've found that our values along with our DEIA principles can amplify excellence. They can promote the development of a more talented workforce. They motivate innovation, critical thinking, and creativity.
- And over my professional career, I have learned that those things—innovation, creativity, and critical thinking—are central to maintaining excellence in any field of work.
- You should absolutely learn the technical content and methods of research and analysis. But when it comes to research, technical knowledge and applying methods alone can lead to misleading results.
- Because I've also learned that diversity and inclusion are often unrecognized, potent catalysts for achieving excellence and advancing equity.
- As a scientist and a person of color, the value of including marginalized voices has always been clear to me.
- From the earliest days of my professional life, I came to cherish the moments when I saw how my presence and others highlighted the value of diversity and inclusion for my more privileged colleagues.
- You need to develop your critical thinking skills and infuse them with your life experience, your culture, and your values. They are a rich reservoir we all possess, yet seldom leverage as a resource at work or in life.
- There have been too many times over a 40-year career where I have used my life experience and culture (in my case, being a Latino from San Antonio) to help researchers realize that they were defining a problem in a biased fashion or were incorrectly interpreting data analyses that really required community member perspectives to fully understand.
- You need such enhanced critical thinking to really appreciate and uncover truly effective, culturally relevant, actionable insights from research.

- I'd like to tell a story that illustrates how we can use our culture and life experience to think differently about a research problem. This, in turn can promote innovation, creativity, and critical thinking in the pursuit of excellence in any field of work.
- Back in the late 1990s, I served on a health services research grant review committee where I was the only statistician as well as the sole person of color. We'd meet periodically to review and score grant application for funding. You know the setting.
- At these review sessions, everyone would be allocated a few grant applications for a primary review, but we were obliged to assess the whole lot. There was this one session I attended where a specific proposal not assigned to me happened to pique my interest. It featured a rigorous randomized control trial to test an inexpensive, alternative health care treatment specifically aimed at uninsured patients suffering a chronic health condition.
- The experimental treatment was novel because it avoided the standard, expensive pharmaceutical therapy. This was before the Affordable Care Act, so the idea was to mitigate the cost burden of the health care facility while providing care to indigent patients. This was posed as a win-win solution.
- Well, the proposal was well-received for its innovation and superb scientific, rigorous design. And everyone loved it, except for me.
- With all these renowned health researchers sitting around the table ready to vote affirmatively, I dared to raise my hand and speak. I saw what no one else there saw. To me it was obvious. I felt deeply that this project should not be funded as proposed. You see, because of my lived experience growing up as a Latino in a lower income barrio, I understood that no one deserved a lower quality of healthcare as a matter of protocol.
- If this study were granted as proposed, it would only serve to reinforce a two-tiered health care system. If you are insured, then step over to door number 1 and receive conventional, high-quality care. But if you are uninsured, step over to the door number 2 where you would be relegated to a cheaper, potentially less-effective alternative.
- I voiced this concern and strongly suggested that the proposal be declined. I suggested that the application be revised and resubmitted so that the alternative therapy was offered to all patients with the chronic condition, regardless of insurance status. If the therapy is effective, why shouldn't it be available to everyone? After all, many insured people would gladly avoid prescription drugs if an alternative was available, even if it proved somewhat less effective than standard care.
- To my relief, the review committee agreed. Turns out my perspective simply had not occurred to them. My inclusion in this group and my diverse voice led to what I believe was better science, one that advanced equity.
- Had I restricted myself to a statistical assessment of the design, I would have had no qualms—it was scientifically sound. But what's the use of implementing a rigorous scientific study if the framing of the research question is flawed?
- This experience and others like it reinforced in me the value that comes when project team members use their "whole self"—not only their technical expertise but their life experience, culture, and critical thinking—in their research practice. This promotes research excellence that can transcend a silo that adheres to conventional practice.
- Finding and hearing a diversity of voices is important. I encourage you to think about how you can bring your unique voice to your professional endeavors, and use it to solve problems with creativity, innovation, and critical thinking.
- Thank you. I look forward to hearing from today's panelists.