



# The Necessity of Diverse Leadership in Nursing

Contributing Author: Coretta Jenerette



**YEAR AFTER YEAR**, nursing ranks as the most trusted profession. Many people trust nurses to care for them in ways that improve their condition. Unfortunately, many factors often dampen the experience of individuals with nurses. Individuals may not perceive the caring that characterizes nursing. Several factors influence the ability of nursing to be a caring profession and contribute to equitable care for everyone — especially minoritized populations.

First, note that the demographics of the nursing profession do not represent the demographics of the United States. In the profession of nursing, Whites are overrepresented at all levels of nursing except licensed practical nursing. This fact coincides with a quote from the National Commission to Address Racism in Nursing (2021) that stated, “The power in nursing is primarily held by middle-aged to old-age white women who have just recently begun to consider racism in nursing care. There are racist principles that have been carried down through history and never challenged.” Considering the impact of racism in nursing and the privilege that White nurses have compared to their counterparts may make some uncomfortable in discussions about racism and

inequity in the nursing profession.

We know that growth comes from discomfort. It can lead to the ability of those with power and privilege to use it to benefit others — especially minoritized patients, students, and colleagues. For example, a leader understands the importance of having a diverse team that challenges and informs their thinking in new and different ways. Diverse leaders are needed everywhere— especially in the profession of nursing. Additionally, many use their privilege to be anti-racist and are allies and even co-conspirators for those with less power.

Leaders set the tone for the organization. They can cultivate and co-create a culture of inclusive excellence. Moreover, diverse leaders can facilitate the success of others because they understand the importance of exposing others to opportunities, resources and people. Success is influenced by who knows you more than who you know. Additionally, leaders who represent diversity may better understand, anticipate, and respond to the needs of other underrepresented individuals.

Without diversity in leadership, the nursing profession will continue to suffer from occurrences that hinder its progress,

such as conscious and unconscious bias and homophobia. Ultimately, these same occurrences impact health outcomes.

Although race is often the focus of diversity, it is important to state that diverse leadership should include all types of diversity (e.g., age, culture, disability, gender identity, religion and sexual orientation). Moreover, types of diversity are not mutually exclusive. Diverse leaders and leaders who cultivate and support diverse and inclusive environments have access to different ways of thinking, being and knowing. If you do not work in a diverse, inclusive environment, consider doing your part to change it.

## About the Author

Coretta Jenerette, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the senior health equity scholar at the UCSF School of Nursing and was the inaugural associate dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity at the University of South Carolina’s College of Nursing. A trailblazer of “firsts,” she is a first-generation college graduate, the inaugural chair of the Foundation for Sickle Cell Disease Research Nursing Symposium and a founding member of the Midlands of South Carolina Black Nurses Association. She has been honored for her leadership and contributions through numerous awards including the USC College of Nursing Best Research Mentor, the Healthcare Hero Award from the Sickle Cell Community Consortium, the Voice of Public Health Award from the South Carolina Public Health Association and the 2023 Medical Research Award from the Sickle Cell Consortium. ■