Responding to the American Academy of Forensic Sciences vision, mission, and values statements: Comments, revisions, and proposed actions

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1. Introduction

We wish to begin a dialogue within the forensic science community surrounding the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) vision, mission, and values statements, recently updated by the AAFS Board of Directors (BoD), Academy staff, and Springboard International. Summaries of the statements are available on the AAFS website, and more detailed information was emailed to members as an AAFS News Alert on March 31, 2021 from the AAFS president Carl McClary. We believe that the statements, as currently written, do not provide meaningful guidance about the Academy’s vision and mission, nor do they adequately describe the values of the forensic scientists the Academy serves.

Our authorship includes Anthropology Section student affiliates, trainee affiliates, and fellows, with AAFS membership ranging from years to decades. We are active participants in this organization, and we are committed to serving and improving it. It is our hope that the current AAFS leadership, in keeping with President McClary’s theme of “A Responsive Academy,” considers our critique in the productive spirit in which it is intended, potentially responding by making positive changes to these statements that will enable them to better serve as guiding principles for our practitioner community.

We address aspects of the vision, mission, and values statements in turn. The text of these statements is presented in italicized quotes below [1].

1.1. Vision

“To promote integrity for all and justice through forensic science.”

In applying a standardly accepted definition of integrity, we can assume that the AAFS vision stresses adherence to a collective moral code of conduct in the forensic sciences. Morals, or more appropriately, ethics, are important in any scientific endeavor; however, the reference to morals via “integrity” requires the organization to explicitly define which behaviors and actions are, in fact, moral. Not all codes of conduct are inherently moral or promote personal integrity [2]. While the AAFS [3] maintains a Code of Ethics and Conduct, its four tenets—in short, a) refrain from behavior adverse to the Academy; b) do not misrepresent education/expertise; c) do not misrepresent scientific data; and d) do not issue public statements that appear to represent the Academy—do not all share the same moral weight. In an interdisciplinary organization such as the AAFS, which represents 11 distinct scientific disciplines, moral values surely differ between fields and individuals; therefore, “integrity” has little unifying significance or even shared meaning. Which morals or integrities are the AAFS promoting, and why? The lack of clarity and absence of explicitly articulated values shared across the disciplines result in a statement with little resonance. Instead, the AAFS vision statement would better serve membership in stressing the development of professional skills, promoting high standards, facilitating research and publishing, bringing members together, and promoting disciplinary collaborations [4].

In the second half of the vision statement, the Academy commits to promoting justice through forensic science. This is indeed an essential tenet of forensic-science practice. However, just as we are obligated to promote justice, we must also be empowered to speak out about injustices that exist within U.S. society as a whole and the criminal justice system in particular—which many of us witness daily through our duties as forensic scientists. As such, any discussion of justice should also include the explicit goal of combating injustice. Within the practitioner community, promoting justice through forensic science should also entail an approach to recruitment and retention that is not equal (i.e., all practitioners treated the same) but equitable (i.e., practitioners who need the most support are given access to it). Importantly, the BoD has formed the AAFS Diversity Outreach Committee. Beyond this action, however, the Academy has yet to make substantive changes that are truly equitable. Equitable practices that result in recruiting and retaining members with diverse perspectives, identities, and lived experiences will enable the Academy to more meaningfully promote justice while concurrently combating injustices.

To further the pursuit of justice for its members, the AAFS could work to develop a more robust ethical code with clear reporting guidelines, outlines to adjudicate complaints, and consequences for misconduct. The language and order of the current Code of Ethics and Conduct gives the impression that the AAFS is primarily concerned with maintaining...
the interests of the BoD and the overarching Academy and not in creating a space where practitioners are capable of forwarding personal or collaborative interests, concerns, or initiatives. It is also unclear how the current Code of Ethics and Conduct functions to prevent truly unethical behavior. The Code does not specify the ways in which practitioners should conduct ourselves with respect to those we serve, how we treat each other, or how we represent our science, aside from vague references to “professionalism,” “competency,” and “integrity,” all of which are undefined. A strong ethical code is critical to professional practice, and professional organizations like the AAFS should lead the effort to develop and enforce such codes [5].

1.2. Mission

“The American Academy of Forensic Sciences is a global, multidisciplinary membership community that provides collaborative research, quality education, and recognized leadership to advance forensic science and to inform its application to the law.”

Despite its title, this statement lacks a clearly defined mission, but instead states what the AAFS minimally does for the forensic sciences: that is, to advance forensic science. At its most elemental, a mission statement should convey why an organization exists, the organization’s goals, the product(s) or service(s) provided, who the organization serves, and the geographical region of service [6–8]. Thus, in looking at the AAFS mission, several critical questions arise. To whom does the AAFS provide “collaborative research, quality education, and recognized leadership,” and who is providing these services [9]? What are the goals of the AAFS? What constitutes “recognized leadership,” and who defines it? How are the forensic sciences advanced within the Academy? How does the Academy facilitate collaborative research? Where are these research, educational, and leadership services provided?

From the stated mission to “advance forensic science and its application to the law,” it might be assumed that the people being served by the AAFS are, simply, forensic scientists and persons involved with the law or its enforcement. Yet, this conflicts with the Academy’s vision of providing integrity and justice “for all”—a vision which seems equally oriented toward the non-practitioner public. If the Academy is serving the public, how is this being accomplished beyond “promoting justice”? Even if the mission of the Academy is strictly to serve the practitioner community, simply providing a space for 11 disparate scientific disciplines that share forensic-oriented research aims does little to facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations. It is also unclear which practitioners are included in this community. Since the AAFS is a U.S.-based organization, it can be assumed that the foci of its services are within the U.S.; however, as the mission statement notes, membership is global, and laws and criminal justice systems differ significantly between countries. It is unrealistic to assume that the AAFS could advance forensic science equally in all world regions. Therefore, at present, the AAFS does not have the ability to fully advance forensic science globally, with the public, and among all practitioners. Revisions to clarify the above-identified questions and ambiguities would strengthen the ability of the AAFS mission statement to truly structure and inspire forensic science research, education, leadership, and practice.

1.3. Values

“Integrity: The Academy places objectivity, honesty, transparency, honor, ethics, and unity at the center of all its policies and operations.

Leadership and Public Awareness: The Academy is the leader in representing, serving, and advocating for forensic science, as well as a resource for providing reliable and sought-after information to the forensic science community, other partners, and the general public.

Scientific Rigor: The Academy promotes quality research of scientific methods to ensure robust and unbiased experimental design, methodology, analysis, interpretation and reporting of results.

Collaboration and Excellence: The Academy provides services and support of the highest quality to its members through its world-renowned Journal of Forensic Sciences, its professional scientific education and career development, its accreditation and consensus-based standards programs, and other initiatives that fulfill its members’ evolving needs.

Diversity and Inclusion: The Academy serves all and is committed to providing an objective, unbiased framework for individuals through forensic science application, teaching, and research.

Engagement and Connectivity: The Academy fosters a sense of community and responsiveness that facilitates engagement and networking through leadership and volunteer opportunities; activities; and outreach and professional educational programming.”

Some of the values put forth by the AAFS are unimpeachable. For example, the Academy’s commitment to Collaboration and Excellence, particularly through publication in the Journal of Forensic Sciences, participation in the annual scientific meetings, and the creation of collaborative, discipline-specific consensus standards, are laudable. We maintain, however, that other values could go further to hold up an example of what the forensic sciences could achieve.

The value of Scientific Rigor, for example, importantly emphasizes that “experimental design, methodology, analysis, interpretation, and reporting” should be “robust and unbiased,” but does not actually deal with the concept of cognitive bias and the importance of striving to mitigate its effects. We urge the Academy to revise this value statement to promote the idea that implicit biases exist and must be examined, recorded, and mitigated in order to pave a path forward for more standardized forensic science practice [10,11]. This revision would also help to bolster the goals of “transparency” and “ethics” highlighted in the Integrity value statement.

Other aspects of the Academy values require additional scrutiny. In particular, it is unclear how the stated Diversity and Inclusion value—“The Academy serves all and is committed to providing an objective, unbiased framework for individuals through forensic science application, teaching, and research”—would actually serve practitioners with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. As worded, the statement lacks proactive, actionable steps and ignores diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)-related issues or concerns entirely. The superficial treatment of this value is exemplified by the paucity of language that recognizes the current lack of, and challenges to increasing, DEI in the forensic sciences [12,13]. The value also lacks aspirational language that strives to promote a truly inclusive organization. On the contrary, the value problematically states that the Academy “serves all,” which is not only erroneous but also reminiscent of the sentiment that “all lives matter”—a perspective that is, in actuality, in diametrical opposition to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion [14,15]. At present, the Academy, like any professional organization, does not “serve all” due to the inequitable structures that limit the participation of underrepresented individuals in the forensic sciences. Using this language in the Diversity and Inclusion value, as well as in the mission statement, further marginalizes and belittles the lived experiences of underrepresented individuals. Moreover, there is growing evidence demonstrating that “all” are not well served within broader context of the U.S. criminal justice system, given well-documented issues of bias, structural racism, and white privilege [16–21]. Any value statement that addresses diversity and inclusion should explicitly recognize the inequities, racism, and biases that hinder the inclusion of underrepresented individuals and offer aspirations (i.e., actionable goals) to remedy such deeply embedded structures maintained by the status quo and adherence to meritocratic processes.
Moreover, the rhetoric of “serving all” implies a one-size-fits-all approach to the recruitment and retention of forensic science practitioners from 11 distinct disciplines. It also ignores the fact that systems that “objectively” assess individuals’ skills and accomplishments without considering the obstacles to achievement placed on individuals who experience social marginalization merely recreate a meritocracy in which those in power stay in power, and those on the margins stay marginalized. This sentiment maintains the current power structures, rather than advancing the field toward a point where practitioners with identities currently underrepresented in the forensic sciences are actually valued, promoted, and celebrated.

Further, while the perceived necessity of “objectivity” by the BoD is clear due to the extent in which that word appears in both the Integrity and the Diversity and Inclusion value statements, none of the AAFS value statements meaningfully engage with this concept. The values could be bolstered by revising all sentiments that reinforce the idea that “objectivity” is the foremost goal of the AAFS. Foregrounding “objectivity” in these statements promotes the idea that pure scientific objectivity is even possible, let alone desirable, to attain [22]. A more critical examination of this concept is necessary, as the current stance does not acknowledge that there is a difference between conducting sound science and remaining “neutral” in the face of inequity; address the reality that there is merit to positionality and subjective research; examine the ways in which position acknowledgment breaks down barriers in research (e.g., community access, academic/scientific gatekeeping); or allow for true intersectional research to be conducted [23–25].

Striving for the “unbiased framework” mentioned in the Diversity and Inclusion value statement is of course important. Yet, mitigating implicit bias does not equate to or even necessarily promote diversity and inclusion. Further, the explicit statement that this unbiased framework should be “objective” inherently undermines its power and ultimately renders it meaningless. For example, how are we to commit to equity and inclusion in the forensic sciences if we must remain “objective” in our interactions with BIPOC, disabled, neurodivergent, and other underrepresented practitioners, rather than hearing their perspectives on issues of socio-cultural inequity, recognizing those perspectives, and acting to change the systems that have caused and maintained that inequity? How would such a stance allow us to maintain the first stated Academy value of Integrity—its principle emphasized even above “justice” in the AAFS vision statement? There is no such thing as a neutral policy or value. All policies in every institution or community create or maintain either inequity or equity. Therefore, if the Academy wishes to promote true Diversity and Inclusion values, they must choose equity. An “objective,” equal (as opposed to equitable), one-size-fits-all approach to Diversity and Inclusion fosters an environment that alienates particular members, directly contradicting the Engagement and Connectivity value of fostering “a sense of community.” If the Academy is truly committed to fostering a sense of community for each of its members, then the purely objective narrative put forth must be corrected. The Academy’s Diversity and Inclusion value could instead emphasize the people, behaviors, processes, and perspectives necessary to effect change and increase inclusion.

A final AAFS value that requires examination is Leadership and Public Awareness. The manner in which this value is written—“The Academy is the leader in representing, serving, and advocating for forensic science, as well as a resource for providing reliable and sought-after information to the forensic science community, other partners, and the general public”—is significant. The formulation perpetuates a self-serving and self-advocating culture, and the BoD has provided no Position Statements to its membership or the public concerning racism, inequity, diversity, or anything pertaining to the civil rights and humanitarian foci that have been surging in the last decade, and which for many of us have served as motivating factors for participating in the forensic sciences. This stance is not symbolic of Leadership or Public Awareness. Instead, it is a stance of violent silence, depriving service to the community of forensic science, its collaborators, and the general public.

2. Conclusions

As currently written, the AAFS vision, mission, and values statements emphasize superficially positive sentiments like “justice,” “unbiased,” “diversity and inclusion,” “for all”, and “objective,” but do not realistically or meaningfully engage with the goals, actions, and perspectives of the Academy’s diverse membership. This approach is dangerous from a public-facing perspective, as it misrepresents the forensic sciences and contributes to the public’s ongoing misunderstanding of the roles, responsibilities, and abilities of the forensic sciences. From a practitioner perspective, such sentiments further justify historic and ongoing attempts to distance our sciences from the socio-cultural issues and injustices that we witness and experience in our professional and personal spheres. These issues and injustices are only exacerbated by the appearance that the Academy has not critically examined the participation of forensic science disciplines in historically and currently inequitable social systems.

Contrary to this appearance, many forensic scientists are aiming to engage with this history and resolve the problems that persist today. The Academy should celebrate these efforts. We have work to do: no single section in the AAFS is immune from these issues, and no single voice is the arbiter of how these issues should be handled. Further, the process of crafting solutions will be ongoing, as promoting values that create and maintain equity requires continuous awareness and regular examination. Membership perspectives, identities, and goals are changing, and we call upon the BoD to follow its Collaboration and Excellence value to “fulfill its members’ evolving needs.”

As written, many of the Academy’s statements ring hollow—or worse, uphold concepts that will actually do more harm than good to the people the AAFS should aspire to serve, recruit, and retain. Based on these observations, we strongly urge the Academy to form committees of diverse membership to revise and redraft its existing vision, code of ethics, mission statement, and values to represent more clearly, meaningfully, and accurately what the Academy actually stands for—and what it could strive to be. We maintain that the Academy should stand for more than itself, its BoD, and its current members. If our goal is to serve the public, then the public is who we must serve—with meaningful statements, and actions, relevant to civil rights, diversity, and ethics, rather than repeated commitments to a false, potentially damaging ideal of neutrality.

Once these statements are revised to provide a truly aspirational stance, the Academy must then work to align itself with those values. Simply providing mission, vision, and value statements does not ensure collective change or adherence to such statements, particularly if they are unrealistic or unachievable. For the future of those we serve, and for ourselves as forensic science practitioners, the Academy must evolve if it hopes to maintain its relevance as a leader within the forensic sciences in this time and place where social inequity can no longer be tolerated.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.
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