

Diversity in the health professions

Our country is becoming more diverse. It is predicted that 24 years from now, we will not have a majority group. When combined, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans will be the majority group. Since these groups are already underrepresented in health careers, there is the risk of a worsening shortage of health care workers in some communities, especially where people of color live. We see increasing diversity in North Carolina, where people of color make up a third of the population, but less than a fourth of them are health professionals.

There are reasons to be concerned about the imbalance of health professionals. People of color are more likely to work in communities where people look like them. Without adequate representation of these professionals, people living in these communities may have fewer providers to care for them, which may lead to worse health outcomes. As result, the cost of health care could increase even more without early care and treatment.

Certain steps can be taken to address the problem. First, we can reach out to students of color in middle and high schools who are interested in health careers. Through matching interested students with working professional mentors, students can learn important life stories about preparing for college, and the types of knowledge and skills needed to enroll in a health career. A mentor can share words of wisdom on how to pay for college, and provide assistance in completing an application for admission and financial aid.

It is also important to connect students of color with resources, such as the North Carolina Area Health Center which provides summer camps, job shadowing and workshop opportunities for students who are interested in health careers. The North Carolina Alliance for Health Professions Diversity is also an important resource that connects colleges, universities, health organizations and governmental agencies to share successful models and strategize ways to improve diversity state-wide.

Once a student of color has been successfully admitted to a health program, careful attention must be paid to keeping them enrolled. The university or college should be a place where these students can receive assistance to improve their chances of success. Winston-Salem State University is great example of how tutoring, supplemental instruction, use of writing and learning centers help students in completing their educational program of studies. As more graduates of these programs remain in North Carolina, the health professions work force will become more diverse.

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