

Sharp drop in African-American male enrollment in med schools

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondents
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Fewer African-American males were enrolled in the first year of medical schools last year than 32 years ago, a trend that, if left uncorrected, could hamper efforts to provide quality health care to underserved communities, according to a top officer in the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

Marc Nivet, chief diversity officer at the AAMC, made that startling disclosure at the recent Howard University Symposium on United States Healthcare.

"We don't have the luxury of waiting 10 years, 15 years, 20 years to intervene in effective ways to ensure that we have the talent necessary to come to our institutions," Nivet said. "If we don't effectively intervene in this pipeline and hold our institutions and ourselves accountable for finding the talent that we know exists then we have failed those 32 million people soon to be disenfranchised and we have failed ourselves."

The conference brought together health professionals, students and educators to develop strategies to improving the pipeline for people of color in healthcare.

According to a diversity study by the AAMC, African-American women account for nearly two-thirds of the students entering the first year of medical school.

"This positive trend for racial and ethnic minority women is not mirrored in their male counterparts. African-American males are applying to, being accepted to, and matriculating into medical school in diminishing numbers, which speaks to the increasing need for medical schools to institute plans and initiatives aimed at strengthening the pipeline," stated the report.

Kendra McDow, 28, entered one of those pipeline programs, Minority Access to Research Careers, the summer after her freshman year at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in Washington, D.C.

"I knew that I wanted to be a doctor and felt like that program would provide me the opportunity to achieve my goal," said McDow, who is currently a pediatric resident at the University of Maryland Children's Hospital in Baltimore.

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The Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program was offered through a partnership with Temple University in Philadelphia. High school students who participated in MARC were given the opportunity to perform research and present their findings in professional journals and science conferences. MARC also put those students on a track to earn a Ph.D. or M.D.

"It was an amazing experience for me, and honestly changed my life," said McDow.



According to McDow, the MARC program at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School lost its funding, and now she wonders what will happen to students like her that want to pursue science or medical careers and don't have the same opportunity she had.

With states and the federal government planning deeper cuts in higher education, more of those pipelines may get shutdown permanently.

Without access to pipeline programs, African-American enrollment at medical schools may continue to decline. In 2011, Blacks accounted for 7.3 percent of medical school applicants, compared to 54.6 percent for Whites. Despite comprising 5.6 percent of the U.S. population, Asians accounted for 20.4 percent of medical school applicants that year.

Applying is only the first step.

The number of African-Americans accepted to medical schools fell from 40 percent in 2010 to 38.3 percent in 2011. Meanwhile, the percentage of whites accepted to medical schools increased from 47.9 percent in 2010 to 48.3 percent in 2011.

The numbers show that once African-Americans were accepted to medical schools, they struggled to earn degrees. The percentage of African-American medical students who matriculated fell from 6.3 percent in 2010 to 6.1 percent in 2011.

The percentage of white students grew from 57.1 percent to 57.5 percent.

Even as researchers continue to address pipeline issues, the cost of medical school continues

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to be prohibitive for African-American students who often show up at medical school already burdened with thousands of dollars in debt.

"Black or African-American matriculants have higher rates of premedical debt than other racial or ethnic groups and among all students carrying premedical debt, most of it exceeds \$25,000," noted the AAMC report.

That is nothing compared to the cost of earning a medical degree.

The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates that the average cost of four years at a public medical school, including living expenses and books, is \$207,868. That bill balloons to \$278,455 for private institutions.

"There is increasing recognition that we need to look at new ways to deliver that education in a more costs benefit way," said Mark Johnson, dean of the College of Medicine at Howard University. "There's a lot of initiatives being looked at right now; expansion of technology and using more resources in the community to see if we can bring some of these costs down."

Johnson said that ultimately it is up to parents and students to look at the education as a long-term investment. Johnson said that he tells students who are weighing their options, that they are worth it.

In 2012, Medscape, an online resource for physicians produced by WebMD, reported that doctors earn between \$156,000 and \$315,000 on average. Pediatricians reported the lowest earnings for specialists and radiologists and orthopedic surgeons topped the list at \$315,000.

Johnson said, "The cost is an issue. Though it is expensive, it's worth it, because if you are going to make an investment in yourself and that investment is going to allow you to double or even triple your earnings over the next 20 or 30 years, you're making an investment in yourself. So, I would tell students not to be deterred by the costs, because they are worth it."