

## Building a Social Mission Research Agenda: Reviewing the Literature, Identifying Gaps, & Planning Ahead

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### ISSUE

Social mission research (SMR) is research focused on health professions training programs' contribution to advancing health equity and addressing health disparities. While there is a developing body of research on social mission, outstanding questions remain that limit the ability of educators, academic leaders, and policymakers to develop evidence-based programs to advance social mission, address health workforce challenges, and advance health equity. The purpose of this study was to summarize the research on social mission in health professions education, identify evidence gaps and areas for additional inquiry, and discuss the resources and strategies needed to catalyze the advancement of a social mission research agenda and infrastructure.

### METHODS

We conducted a literature review of scholarly and grey literature publications on social mission in medicine, nursing, and dentistry. Academic searches were conducted in PubMed, CINAHL, and ERIC to identify peer-reviewed articles, which we also reviewed for relevant references. We identified grey literature via Google Scholar and the websites of health professions education associations. U.S.-based articles and reports published between 2009 and spring 2020 were eligible for inclusion. Publications were indexed in Excel by health profession and synthesized by the study authors based on inputs/intervention, outcome, research design, and study author-identified areas requiring further research.

### FINDINGS

Social mission research is heavily concentrated in the discipline of medicine, based mainly on single-site program evaluations or weak study designs, frequently presents short-term or intermediate outcomes, lacks standardized measurements, tools, and instruments to gauge and compare results, and relies heavily on analysis at the individual level. Rigorous study designs, research examining social mission outcomes like community health, standardized outcome measures and validated tools, analysis of diversity outcomes beyond enrollment numbers, and examination of social mission levers that operate outside of the institutional setting were identified as areas warranting further research.

### DISCUSSION

Despite a large body of published research on social mission, gaps exist, and direct links between social mission inputs and health equity remain theoretical. Strategic collaboration between multiple stakeholder groups is needed to support and advance social mission research, including data collection and sharing, cross-sector partnerships, funding, and targeted expertise. Findings from this foundational research can inform actionable next steps that will strengthen the social mission research infrastructure and contribute to a research agenda that will inform researchers, organizations, and policymakers.

**Key Words:** Social mission, health professions education, research agenda, literature review