

The Role of Community Colleges in Health Professions Diversity

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ISSUE: Community colleges (CCs) have long been noted as an important pathway for increasing the diversity of health professions as a major entry point to post-secondary education for low-income, minority, and rural students. Recent studies find CCs are an important pipeline for diversifying nursing, medicine, and physician assistant matriculants. Despite their importance as a workforce development tool for states and communities, state funding of community colleges has declined since the 2008-2009 recession, with especially severe impacts on Black and Hispanic students' enrollment and degree completion. Tuition increases are also associated with student diversity at CCs. This study builds on prior work to examine the contribution of CCs to the diversity of other health professions that require advanced degrees, including dentistry, pharmacy, occupational therapy (OT), and physical therapy (PT). The study also examines associations between state-level investments in community colleges, the cost of attending CCs, and the diversity of health professions graduates.

METHODS: We used data from the National Student Clearinghouse to quantify how many dentistry, pharmacy, OT, and PT graduates in the most recent two graduating cohorts (2018-2019 and 2019-2020) had community college backgrounds by race/ethnicity and state. We used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to obtain data on enrollment, funding & tuition/fees for all CCs, which we aggregated as totals (enrollment and funding) and averages (tuition/fees) by state from 2010 to the most recent available. We constructed a Black/Hispanic diversity index of CC background graduates by profession and state using population data from the 2020 American Community Survey. We used linear regression models to examine associations between state-level CC metrics and the diversity of graduates for each profession (% CC, % Black/Hispanic CC, Black/Hispanic diversity index of CC).

FINDINGS: The prevalence of CC background among health professions graduates was between 24.8% (dentistry) and 34.7% (pharmacy). CC background graduates were more likely to be Black and/or Hispanic than all graduates for every profession but underrepresented compared to the population. Diversity metrics varied widely by profession and state. State-level CC factors were positively associated with the percentage of graduates with a CC background, percentage of Black/Hispanic CC background graduates, and Black/Hispanic diversity index in one or more professions ($p < .05$).

DISCUSSION: The numbers of Black and Hispanic health professions graduates are small and vary widely by profession and state. These findings suggest CCs may contribute to modest increases in the diversity of dentistry, pharmacy, OT, and PT programs. So do state-level availability/enrollment and funding of CCs, suggesting that more generous investments by states in CCs can help diversify health professions programs. Health professions programs can also help to recruit more minority students who start their education at CCs through well-publicized articulation agreements, personal engagement, and information sharing with community college advisors.

Key Words: Health profession diversity, community colleges, workforce