

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Medical School Pathway Programs

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ISSUE

Diversifying the physician workforce is desirable for patients and medicine as it reduces health care disparities, increases access to health care services, and improves quality of care to patients.^{1,2} Medical schools have designed and implemented pathway programs to increase the representation of underrepresented minorities in medical school with the ultimate goal of diversifying the physician workforce. In 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic caused a mass disruption for schools and educational activities. Certain extracurricular and “non-core” activities, including pathways programs, may have been cancelled or scaled down during the uncertain transition to the virtual environment.

The aim of this study was to investigate how pathway programs at medical schools were impacted by COVID-19. This study sought to 1) identify common components of diversity pathway programs across a national survey of medical schools, 2) determine the effects of COVID-19 on these programs, and 3) understand the methods for sustaining and supporting these programs during and after the pandemic.

METHODS

This study utilized a cross-sectional mixed-method approach, which was conducted in two phases sequentially. The first phase consisted of identifying key themes and changes to pathway programs in 2020, through semi-structured interviews with a sample of medical school pathway programs’ administrators and academic leaders. The second phase consisted of a survey disseminated to all U.S. medical schools to further quantify the impact of COVID-19 on their programs.

FINDINGS

Forty-two percent (n=42) of surveyed medical schools reported that they cancelled their pathway programs because of COVID-19. Pathway programs targeted at the primary (elementary school) and secondary (middle school) education levels were mostly affected with no significant difference in closure between public/private (p=0.165), MD/DO (p=0.637), region (p=0.191), community-based (p=0.645), and HBCU/HSI (p=0.480); 52% (n=13) and 35% (n=16). The most common components associated with diversity pathway programs included academic support, mentoring, research, and shadowing/internship opportunities. Less common components included test prep, distance learning support, psychosocial support, and financial support. Of the program components, distance learning support increased (19%—38%), and shadowing/internship opportunities decreased (79%—42%) as a result of COVID-19. Despite continued psychosocial support (91%) during COVID-19, the social and emotional well-being (55%) and engagement (53%) of pathway student participants were negatively impacted. Sixty-nine percent of medical schools (n=71) reported no funding changes, while 22% (n=23) of medical schools reported a decrease in funding, including funding being held or diverted to subsequent years. A majority of medical schools agreed or strongly agreed that funding should be increased for psychosocial support (34% agree, 54% strongly agree) and distance learning (31% agree, 57% strongly agree). A plurality of medical schools disagreed that virtual recruitment was better than in-person recruitment (39% Disagree, 9% Strongly Disagree), and 42% neither disagreed nor agreed.

¹ Smedley BD, Butler AS, Bristow LR. In the nation’s compelling interest: Ensuring diversity in the health-care workforce. National Academies Press; 2004.

² Sullivan Commission on Diversity in the Healthcare Workforce. Missing persons: Minorities in the health professions. <https://campaignforaction.org/resource/sullivan-report-diversity/>. 2003.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study emphasize the importance of pathway programs in serving underrepresented minorities. This study highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic beyond the traditional classroom as extracurricular programs were also affected and the social needs of students were heightened, especially for minority students who face a disproportionate share of the burden. The time limitation of the study only shows the results of one year into the pandemic, but the findings still emphasize the impacts of the pandemic, which can only progress as time goes on. The authors tried to be as purposeful as possible when selecting the schools for the qualitative component, however, schools that expressed an interest in improving diversity and pathway programs, may be more likely to have participated. While the findings of the study cannot be generalized across all health professions, the findings can lead other health professions to think about their own pathway programs. Pathway programs are critical to improving diversity in the medical profession. The impacts of COVID-19 may have disrupted efforts to bolster pathway programs, however, programs are starting to identify lessons learned and best practices to inform future programmatic years, with the hope of contributing to a more diverse health care workforce.

Key Words: Pipeline programs, pathway programs, underrepresented minorities, COVID-19, medical school, medicine