

Does Prior Community College Attendance Predict Diversity in Health Professions Schools?

The Case of Physician Assistants

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ISSUE

Community college (CC) students are an important port of entry to post-secondary education for minority and rural students and those with limited family incomes. Yet, previous studies have found that CC students applying for health professions programs face discrimination in the admissions process: CC students had lower acceptance rates to medical school than those with no CC, even after controlling for race/ethnicity, MCAT, and GPA scores. This study explores whether applicants with a CC background contribute to the diversity of matriculants in Physician Assistant (PA) programs and if CC applicants are less likely to matriculate in PA programs.

METHODS

We used data from Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) for the 2016-2017 application cycle. The CASPA admission system is hosted by the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) and is used by 95% of PA programs. CASPA collects detailed information on demographics, prior education, and socioeconomic status. We used four different versions of Carnegie Classification to define five CC pathways depending on the year of graduation from the higher education institutions: HS-CC (attended CC while in high school), First-CC (attended a CC prior to a 4-year university), 4Y-CC (attended a CC while in 4 year college), Post-CC (attended a CC after graduating from 4-year university), and No-CC (never attended a CC). Race/ethnicity, gender, rurality, and socioeconomic status were compared using Pearson’s Chi-squared test and adjusted residuals to assess whether applicants and matriculants from CC pathways are more diverse. Binary logistic regressions were used to assess the relationship between CC pathways and matriculation in PA programs.

FINDINGS

Among the 8,577 matriculants in the 2016-2017 application cycle, 75% attended CC at some point along their college pathway. Four percent of the matriculants were Black and nine percent were Hispanic. One out of four indicated they were from an isolated rural area or small town and 12% reported their family income was economically disadvantaged. First CC matriculants and those with Post CC pathways are more likely to be Black or Hispanic and come from a disadvantaged background compared to those with no CC experience. When controlling for applicant demographics, academic performance, and application strategy, applicants with a First-CC background are less likely to matriculate to a PA program.

DISCUSSION

Community colleges are an important pathway to the PA profession with three out of four matriculants having one or more forms of CC experiences. However, PA programs are potentially missing opportunities for increasing the diversity of their student body (and thereby the PA profession) by having lower admission rates for otherwise similarly qualified applicants who transferred from a community college to a four-year college.

Key Words: Community College, Physician Assistant Education, Diversity