

## Developing a Systems-oriented Theory of Change for the Social Mission of Health Professions Education

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**ISSUE:** Prior social mission research identified the need for a theoretical social mission framework that clearly illustrates the pathways health professions education may contribute to health equity.<sup>i</sup> Similar models in the related area of social accountability serve as relevant examples for this work but omit factors central to shaping social mission in a systems context.<sup>ii,iii</sup> The study aimed to develop a consensus-driven, systems-oriented theory of change for the social mission of health professions education.

**METHODS:** We used an iterative and collaborative process to develop this theory of change, recognizing that a consensus-driven approach is important to wider socialization of and responsiveness to the tool. First, we conducted a literature review and content analysis to identify the previous social mission and social accountability frameworks and their common elements. Second, we conducted a workshop at the 2022 Beyond Flexner Alliance Annual Meeting to gather feedback on the systems-level change agents that can influence the social mission and mechanisms by which they can do so. Finally, we hosted a half-day workshop with an advisory committee of social mission stakeholders to present an initial version of the theory of change, gather feedback, and refine the model.

**FINDINGS:** The development process resulted in the Theory of Change for a Systems Approach to the Social Mission of Health Professions Education (social mission TOC). It comprises multiple interrelated elements and emphasizes the role of systems change agents in influencing social mission and the mechanisms by which they do so (i.e., levers of change). The six levers for change are 1) public pressure, 2) competency & curricular guidance, 3) evaluation metrics, 4) funding, 5) accountability, and 6) research. They may act independently or in concert with one another to promote new or improved social mission activities in health professions education institutions. The social mission outcomes build upon one another to advance the goal of improved health equity: health professions education, workforce, and health delivery outcomes. Two critical new components of the social mission TOC include a focus on public accountability and on identifying and rooting out structural racism. Nested tables provide further context for the systems levers of change and institutional social mission activities.

**DISCUSSION:** Establishing greater accountability for the social mission of health professions education begins with defining the multiple systems that influence it and the mechanisms by which they can do so. While health professions schools lie at the center of health professions education and thus play a considerable role in shaping it and the future health workforce, this theory of change is the first attempt to contextualize social mission from a systems perspective. By identifying the roles of systems change agents in social mission, the model implies expanded responsibility for creating a health professions education enterprise focusing on health equity. We consider the social mission TOC to be a living tool that will continue evolving based on ongoing feedback from social mission stakeholders.

**Key Words:** Social mission, theory of change, health professions education

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<sup>i</sup> Erikson C, Ziemann M. Advancing Social Mission Research: A Call to Action. *Acad Med.* 2022 Jan 1;97(1):30-36. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000004427. PMID: 34554947.

<sup>ii</sup> The Training for Health Equity Network. Introduction to the framework. [https:// thenetcommunity.org/frameworkintroduction](https://thenetcommunity.org/frameworkintroduction).

<sup>iii</sup> Barber C, van der Vleuten C, Leppink J, Chahine S. Social Accountability Frameworks and Their Implications for Medical Education and Program Evaluation: A Narrative Review. *Acad Med.* 2020 Dec;95(12):1945-1954. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000003731. PMID: 32910000.