GRADUATE EDUCATION IN PHARMACY SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Diversity Will Fuel Excellence in Pharmacy Education. . .If We Let It Flourish

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The authors of the three manuscripts found within this theme issue regarding the status of graduate education in schools and colleges of pharmacy asked me to address the following questions: *Are universities doing enough to attract a diverse pool of students, and what mechanisms would you recommend in light of your highly successful Meyerhoff program? Regarding the dozen or so schools of pharmacy that receive the largest proportion of federal research funding and produce the greatest numbers of PhDs in the sciences, what specific action steps would you call upon them to take to improve the experiences and success of underrepresented minorities (URMs) in their programs? In our studies, we report having found little to no improvement has been made in the number/percentage of URMs, particularly Black and Hispanic students, in pharmacy graduate schools. What do you think are some of the underlying reasons for this phenomenon, and how do you think schools and universities can improve URM enrollment? What are some strategies you think would work? What does not work?*

These manuscripts reveal significant challenges related to the representation of minorities in schools and colleges of pharmacy. We can surmise what might be the underlying reasons, but within the structure of what we have, we must think of steps we can take. For example, how do we attract, how do we support, and how do we mentor these students? Importantly, this is about everyone taking ownership: it is our challenge, not the URM student's challenge, and not the female faculty member's challenge. It is about culture change.

What helped at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) is that I asked some of the most senior professors to take the lead as ambassadors. Data show that the Academy is still predominantly White and male, and yet there are really outstanding individuals who ask: "Do you think I can make a difference?" And the response should be: "Yes, because people believe in you

and they know what you say is important." It makes an important difference when these professors become champions of diversity and say: "this is our problem, we can solve this." Below are some important actions that I recommend based on lessons we have learned at UMBC.

Pharmacy schools should look at their internal data and be honest about what has been happening. Do not rely on anecdotal information about progress. Instead have conversations about implicit bias and about the common assumption that somebody's quality is based on where they got their PhD. It takes a level of trust to avoid causing embarrassment and instead see this as a structural problem: we all tend to select people who are like us, in whatever group. The point of all of these efforts is to get us to step back for a minute and look at ourselves honestly.

Pharmacy schools should create new faculty positions or a combination of new and old faculty lines with new money. Set aside a certain amount of money for that purpose and invite the deans and then departments to compete for the positions. Go out of the comfort zone to bring in more women and people of color, and specifically candidates who are Black and Latinx. We need at least some presence of URMs in every department. Women and URM candidates who interview with all male or predominantly White science departments may ultimately decline a job offer if one is made. Know when to ask candidates if they would like to talk to somebody like themselves. We cannot assume that everyone feels the same way, but giving a female candidate the chance to have a woman-to-woman conversation might help dispel negative ideas about a department. Then the focus can be on real questions about the work she would be doing.

Pharmacy schools should form inclusive, supportive communities. Having a special program for women and minorities is not enough. The Academy must also be mindful of the power structures within departments. We must allow for flexibility and different approaches because colleges are different and their cultures are different. Scientists of color rarely have the kinds of champions that others may have. When they are turned down for funding the first time, they need a community, and they

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also need a champion in the form of a senior scientist (not necessarily someone of the same race/ethnicity or gender) to say, “this happens to a lot of people, and you’re not going to give up. You can just be a little better because these evaluations say you’re excellent. Let’s look at it very carefully and critique it and strengthen it the next time. And maybe even the third time.” There is a way to communicate caring and that you understand that obtaining funding is extremely hard, and not just convey that the faculty member needs to “suck it up.” And if the person does well with support from a particular faculty champion in that department, then the person can move into a tenured position. All of that works to diversify a department. Then the question becomes, how do you retain URM faculty members? When you really support people and they do well, the reality is that they get many offers. Yet even when URM faculty members choose to leave for personal or professional reasons, their having had a successful experience in the school makes it easier to attract future URM candidates.

So, in terms of developing URM faculty members, let us look at the campuses that have had some success with Black and Hispanic students in PhD programs and build on that, because it means they have faculty members there who really care about this need already. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other national agencies often focus on new initiatives, and yet there is great value in supporting the programs that already are having success to make sure they take it to the next level. Therefore, let us challenge research universities to replicate successful PhD support initiatives, such as the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, as faculty and administrators

at Penn State and the University of North Carolina are doing, and build on that success.

Pharmacy schools must realize that all students need champions, communities, and confidence. Faculty members have to have high expectations of their students and themselves in thinking about how to make sure their students are succeeding in the workplace. It is important to create a community and sustain a culture in which young people know that they are valued and not just numbers. These communities help build the confidence of URM students to compete and perform at the same level as much more privileged graduates of Ivy League schools. The students can support each other and gain strength from being part of a true community.

Programs tend to spend too little time thinking about next steps for alumni who have just earned their PhD. Before these students complete their dissertations and graduate, they should be talking to people about possible career paths. For example, educators can ask students: “Do you want a research career, or do you want to be in a liberal arts college where you get training grants and focus more on teaching?” For URM students, in particular, we cannot assume that if they get a PhD, all doors will open and everything will be fine. It takes having a champion or advocate who can push and support them and open doors, and challenge others to do so as well. This is where continuous mentoring is important, even years after students have obtained their PhD. It is still the case that URM students going into these fields are often establishing a path as pioneers. Given this reality, it is important to prepare them and build their confidence so that when they encounter obstacles, they have the resilience to get back up, and seek and accept help.