Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Did a Summer Health Careers Program Have an Impact?

Conducting a longitudinal study of the Harvard Health Careers Summer Program for minority and disadvantaged students

SUMMARY

From 2009 to 2012, researchers at Harvard Medical School, in Boston, assessed the impact of the Harvard Health Careers Summer Program (HCSP) on the careers of pre-medical and pre-dental minority students.

Under the program, which ran from 1969 to 1977, Black, Hispanic, and tribal students—most from universities where minorities typically enroll—took an eight-week undergraduate science or mathematics course for credit at Harvard Summer School. The students also received tutoring and mentoring from faculty members; visited Boston-area hospitals and health care centers; and interviewed with admissions officers from medical and dental schools across the United States.

The research team used the Internet and public records to search for career and contact information on the 887 students who participated in the program. They found that information for 525 of those students (or 59%)—of whom 151 responded to an online or mail survey (a 17% response rate of the full group and 28.8% of those they located). The survey aimed to determine:

- The former students' career choices and paths
- Their perceptions of the program's impact on their lives and careers
- How the former students would modify the program if it existed today

The researchers also conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 30 of the former students to help shed light on those questions.

Findings

In a report and an interview conducted for this Program Results, the research team provided these findings to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF):

- Of the 525 former students whose careers the researchers tracked, 375 (71.4%) went on to complete a medical or dental degree, and 329 (62.6%) continued to practice in those professions as of 2012. Specifically:
  - Seventy-one percent entered medicine.
  - Eight percent became dentists.
  - The remaining 21 percent entered various other professions, including law, veterinary medicine, state and federal government, and finance.
- Most of the 151 former students surveyed attested that their road to success rested on academic and personal confidence, which they built by proving themselves in a competitive atmosphere at a respected institution. Specifically:
  - Ninety-three percent found the program's academic challenge very or extremely useful.
  - Eighty-one percent found the program extremely useful in helping them choose a career.
  - Seventy-nine percent felt the program was extremely useful in introducing them to the world of medicine or dentistry.
  - Sixty-nine percent felt the program was very useful socially, and helped them make many friends.

  According to a Black female physician from the classes of 1973 and 1974 who is currently in academic medicine and administration, the program:

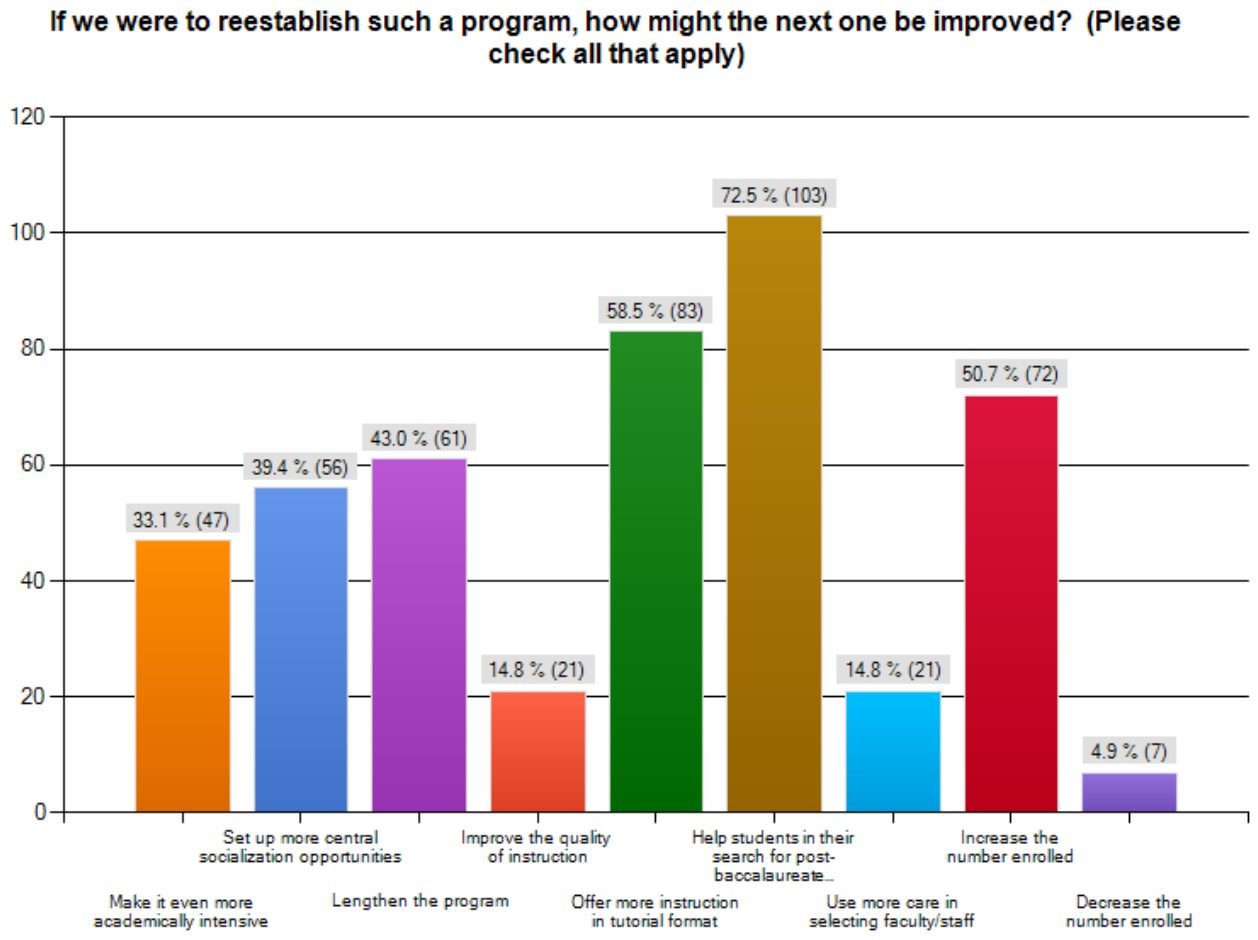
  > *…was one of the most successful, unwritten stories, about grooming and gathering students for a common cause, for a common journey, and having success at the end of that journey. And that success perpetuates—it has reverberated around the United States, in terms of the lives that we affect for years to come.*

  According to a Latino pediatrician from the class of 1971, the program:

  > *…woke me up academically; it was like I was reborn … I got to the point where I was never going to take 'no' for an answer when I wanted to pursue anything.*

- Respondents also suggested how to improve the program if it were reinstituted at Harvard Medical and Dental schools:
  - Seventy-two percent suggested that the program provide more help to students in their search for postbaccalaureate opportunities.
  - Fifty-Eight percent suggested that more tutoring would be helpful.
  - Fifty point seven percent thought more students should be enrolled.
  - Forty-three percent felt that the program should last longer.

Responses on How to Improve the Program



Lessons Learned

1. **Collecting accurate and complete data on students enrolled in preparatory programs for medical and dental school is essential to measuring their effectiveness.** Many of the available files on participants in the HCSP had misspelled names and missing birthdates, and lacked follow-up information.

   Collecting data from an era before computers were in common use proved particularly challenging. Because of those gaps, the researchers are unlikely to track down the remaining 362 former students, according to Project Director Robert Blacklow, MD.

2. **Surveys of older medical and dental professionals may require multiple contacts.** In this study, researchers' requests that former students complete an online survey yielded low response rates. The researchers ended up mailing the survey multiple times to convince more people to complete it. (Project Director/Blacklow)

3. **Based on the surveys and interviews, the researchers identified the following best practices for summer preparatory programs for medical and dental schools:**

   — Academic and social siloing is far less useful than enabling and encouraging prep students to mix with other students. More than a third of respondents said their immersion in the Harvard summer school scene planted confidence that lasted throughout their careers.

   — Serious, in-depth coursework completed for a grade—rather than an ungraded survey course typical of many current summer prep programs—is critical to fostering academic confidence. A grade from a respected institution also made these students more attractive to medical school recruiters.

   — Providing committed faculty and administrative mentors as well as strong tutoring support enhances students' academic success.

   — Short-term evaluation (e.g., one-year and five-year follow-up) allows staff to make formative program changes. Longer-term evaluation, such as this, is essential to assess overall program impact.

Communications

The researchers made a presentation on the study to the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in New York City in May 2012.

Funding

RWJF provided $49,662 for this project from August 2009 to July 2012. The Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation contributed $35,000.

Afterward

The researchers made a presentation on the study at the annual conference on Research in Medical Education in November 2012. They are also developing a paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Prepared by: Robert Crum
Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Molly McKaughan
Program Officer: David M. Krol
Program area: Human Capital
Grant ID # 66123
Principal Investigators: Robert Blacklow, MD (617) 432-6342; robert_blacklow@hms.harvard.edu
Dean K. Whitla, PhD (617) 496-6080; whitla@fas.harvard.edu