



Executive Summary

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholars®

Since 2001, the *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholars*® (*Health & Society Scholars*) program has been working to improve the nation's health by creating the evidence base to improve understanding of the full spectrum of factors that affect health and by translating that evidence for policy-makers and leaders to promote health. *Health & Society Scholars* is based on the principle that progress in population health depends upon collaboration and exchange across disciplines and sectors, producing leaders who will change the questions asked, the methods used to analyze problems, and the range of solutions offered. Its goal is to improve health by training scholars to:

- Investigate the connections among biological, behavioral, environmental, economic, and social determinants of health
- Develop, evaluate, and disseminate knowledge and interventions based upon these determinants

As of January 2014, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has provided more than \$97.4 million for the program out of the Board of Trustees' authorization of nearly \$106.1 million through August 2016.

Some 156 scholars had completed the program and 24 were enrolled as of April 2014. They represent a variety of fields in the behavioral, social, biological, and natural sciences. The 12 scholars in the class of 2016, starting the program in the fall of 2014, will be the last ones to participate in the program.

Read the full [Program Results Report](#).

Learn more about the program [here](#).

CONTEXT

Although the United States spends more for medical care than any other country in the world, it ranks poorly on many indicators of health and well-being. Experts know that medical care has a limited impact on the health of populations,¹ and that other factors that affect health (determinants of health), such as genetics, personal behavior (e.g., diet and physical activity), social circumstances (e.g., education and poverty), and environmental conditions (e.g., pollution, crowding, and unsafe workplaces), play a major role in health.

A Shortage of Population Health Expertise

The field of population health began to emerge later in the United States than in the rest of the world. But by 2001, there were new funding sources in this country and a growing demand for experts who could research, develop, and implement interventions to improve the health of populations (groups of people sharing common characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or membership in an HMO, or common geography such as a city, a county, or a prison). However, experts with such knowledge and skills were in critically short supply.

RWJF's Interest in This Area

By early 2001, at the time it started *Health & Society Scholars*, RWJF had a long history of supporting training programs for physicians, nurses, and public health professionals—some of them focused on health services research and some on health policy—and training programs for economists, political scientists, and sociologists in the field of health policy research.

But none of these programs focused on population health, or fostered understanding of the interconnections between the multiple determinants of health; and none of them trained leaders who could design, implement, and evaluate population-wide interventions to improve health and reduce disparities in health. Staff wanted a program that would support interdisciplinary scholarship, which is fundamental to population health.

THE PROGRAM

The *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholars*[®] (*Health & Society Scholars*) accepts up to 12 scholars per year—three at each of four participating

¹ e.g., Bunker et al. “The Role of Medical Care in Determining Health: Creating an Inventory of Benefits,” in *Society and Health*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

universities: Columbia University; Harvard University; University of California, San Francisco/Berkeley; and University of Wisconsin. The class of 2016, who will begin the program in September 2014, will be the last cohort to participate in the program.

Two other universities—University of Michigan and University of Pennsylvania—are participating in the program through August 2014 but are not accepting new scholars. Due to the 2008 economic downturn, RWJF had to reduce costs by reducing *Health & Society Scholars* from six to four sites. These universities will no longer be part of the program after the 2012-2014 scholars complete their programs.

Specific offerings vary by site, but include two years of intensive seminars, scholar-directed research, and analysis conducted with the guidance or collaboration of faculty mentors and focused training in the skills necessary for effective leadership, program implementation, and policy change.

Collaboration by scholars and faculty from different disciplines fosters cross-disciplinary thinking and dialogue. This also expands the intellectual scope, collaborative competence, shared language, and scientific creativity of both scholars and faculty.

Scholars also have access to competitive grants for small seed research projects.

Health & Society Scholars supports postdoctoral scholars at all stages of their careers who have a doctorate in one of a variety of fields, such as the behavioral, social, biological, and natural sciences.

This report covers *Health & Society Scholars* from April 2001 through April 2014. It will be updated when the program ends in 2016.

KEY PROGRAM RESULTS

- 156 scholars have completed *Health & Society Scholars*. The program has 24 current scholars.² Twelve more will participate in the final cohort (2014-2016).

Scholars have represented a variety of fields and research interests. Notable alumni include:

- Gerontologist **Dawn Alley, PhD**, is Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of the Surgeon General and an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Her research combines biological mechanisms of frailty and demographics and focuses on two important determinants of disability at older ages: socioeconomic status and obesity. See [Grantee Story](#).

² In addition, Michelle McMurry, MD, PhD, left after the first year because of a job opportunity. As of December 2011, she is the director of the Health, Biomedical and Society Policy Program at the Aspen Institute.

- **Jason Coburn, PhD**, an urban planner and an associate professor at the University of California, Berkeley, is author of the award-winning³ book, *Street Science: Community Knowledge and Environmental Health Justice* (MIT Press, 2005). He is also co-leader of the Richmond Health Equity Partnership in Richmond, Calif., which aims to integrate health equity into local government decisions and county health and school district planning. See [Program Results Report](#) on an RWJF-funded project in which he presented the case for “healthy city planning” in a book, journal articles, and book chapters.
- **Wizdom Powell Hammond, PhD, MPH, MS**, assistant professor of health behavior and health education at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, was a White House Fellow (2011–2012). She studies individual and psychological factors that affect health behavior in minority populations, and how sociological and environmental issues affect health status, health behavior, and the use of health care. See [Grantee Story](#).
- Primary care physician, filmmaker, and interdisciplinary scholar **Mehret Mandefro, MD, MSc, AB**, developed TruthAid.org, which uses social media to promote action on HIV in the United States and Africa. She was also a White House Fellow (2009–2010).
- The scholars have broadened their research and career perspectives and choices. They understand the interdisciplinary nature of population health.

Kate McLaughlin, PhD, is one example. “I have become a completely different type of academic ... My research is able to tackle bigger problems that almost by definition require interdisciplinary approaches and solutions,” she said. McLaughlin is now an instructor in the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School.

Many scholars have accepted positions that they would not have chosen had they not participated in the program. For example:

- Demographer **Margaret M. Weden, PhD, MHS**, joined the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit organization that works to improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis
- Social epidemiologist **David Rehkopf, ScD, MPH**, a scholar at the University of California, San Francisco/Berkeley (2006–2008), joined the medical school faculty at Stanford University.
- The work of the program’s faculty and scholars is informing and influencing public policy and public opinion. For example:

³ Winner of the 2007 Paul Davidoff best book award from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning

- Research by clinical psychologist **Mark L. Hatzenbuehler, PhD**, a scholar at the University of Pennsylvania (2010–2012), was cited in the 2010 resolution by the American Psychological Association reaffirming support for marriage equality for same-sex couples.
- The Chicago Police Department is using the work of **Andrew Papachristos, PhD**, a scholar at Harvard University (2010-2012), to develop a strategy to prevent gun violence.
- The participating universities have built their population health infrastructure and developed extensive interdisciplinary networks for research in population health by creating linkages across departments and campuses—including joint faculty appointments—and by establishing new initiatives, departments, and centers. For example:
 - Columbia University established the **Center for the Study of Social Inequalities and Health** and the **Columbia Population Research Center**.
 - The University of California, San Francisco/Berkeley established a **Division of Community Health and Human Development**.
 - The University of Pennsylvania received National Institutes of Health funding to establish the **Center for Population Health and Health Disparities**.
- Recognition of the field of population health—both within the participating universities and more broadly—is growing. Evidence of this recognition includes:
 - Placement of scholar alumni in prominent positions. For example, **Dawn Alley, PhD**, is senior policy advisor in the Office of the Surgeon General.
 - The **2010 Health & Society Scholars** annual meeting in Washington, which included visits to key officials at the White House and the National Institutes of Health.

WINDING DOWN THE PROGRAM

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholars will end in August 2016.

Program Management

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Program Directors: Jo Ivey Boufford, MD, and Christine Bachrach, PhD
