



Pathway to a Health Care Career : A Qualitative Study of Underrepresented Minority and First-Gen Pre-Med Students Undergraduate Experiences

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Background

Racial and ethnic diversity in the physician workforce continues to remain a challenge to achieve despite decades of institutional and national efforts to address this disparity.

Objective

To explore formal and informal pre-med experiences of underrepresented minority (URM) and first-generation students and how their experiences influence persistence in the pre-med career path.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews of medical and pre-med students at the University of Michigan were conducted from 11/2015 to 05/2016 to elicit perceptions of: climate, course work, academic advising, research, mentorship, student organizations, and how these experiences affected their motivation to pursue a career in medicine path.

Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed using systematic and iterative coding methods.

Demographic data such age, gender, race, ethnicity, year in school and first-generation status were collected for all participants.

Results

Five University of Michigan medical students and 23 pre-med students (91% Ann Arbor and 9% Dearborn campus) were interviewed.

Medical and pre-med students indicated that their persistence to pursue pre-med was related to positive interactions with peers and their research mentors/advisors, and informative shadowing experiences.

Students reported strategies for success that reflected proactive help-seeking behaviors, tenacity/resilience, and intrinsic motivation related to having a clear vision/insight into why they felt a career in medicine was an appropriate fit.

Students attributed their feelings of discouragement to experiences with rigid/negative/authoritarian advisors, difficulty obtaining shadowing or research opportunities, or poor performance in pre-med courses.

Proactive help-seeking behaviors: *“I think it’s also very much sink or swim. You need to actually be really proactive when you look for help. People are always willing to help you, but nobody’s gonna ask, “Do you need some help?” Do you know what I mean?”*

Positive near-peer interactions: *“I mean I just hung out with a very positive group of peoplethe pre-med people I hung out with were very competitive, and that was really fun. That motivated me a lot.”*

Clear vision of why medicine was an appropriate fit: *“I’ve always seen myself as a physician...., I’ve never felt that it wasn’t going to be a reality. If someone did, then I’d dismiss them really quickly and forgot about it.”*

Positive research mentors/advisor interactions: *“... I think his mentorship, and not just giving me the answers, but guiding me, and also willing to be challenged, and willing to challenge me, cuz there were a few arguments we had about how things should be done. I thought that was great.”*

Informative shadowing experiences: *“It really helped me wrap my head around what I might really love about the field. Later, I talked with other providers and other specialties, and it gave me an idea of just how many different specialties there are, but also how many different opinions there are.”*

Conclusion

Developing a better understanding of the collegiate learning environment can illuminate factors promoting and precluding pre-med student achievement, particularly among at-risk student populations.

These findings can inform the development of pre-medical undergraduate curriculum in targeted ways that promote inclusive strategies to improve URM and first-generation student persistence.

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