

2021 medical school class sees enrollment diversity grow

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First-year medical student enrollment saw significant gains among those from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Enrollment jumped more than 20% among Black medical students and 7% among students “who are Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin,” data released by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) indicated.

“It is gratifying to see this growth in the diversity and number of students interested in a career in medicine, particularly during such a unique time in history as a result of the global pandemic and the growing recognition of the effects of health disparities in our country,” said David J. Skorton, MD, AAMC president and CEO.

“For nearly two years, Americans have watched the heroism and dedication of physicians on the front lines,” Dr. Skorton added. “As the nation faces a real and significant projected shortage of physicians, I am inspired by how many individuals want to follow in the footsteps of those before them to serve their communities.”

Work left to be done

The encouraging numbers for Hispanic and Black students among first-year medical students are a positive note, but it would need to be the beginning of a large trend to reverse a problem in physician representation that has existed for generations.

Black or African American students made up 11.3% of matriculants (first-year students) in 2021, up from 9.5% in 2020. Of particular note are the increases among Black men; first-year students from this group increased by 20.8%.

Hispanic students represented 12.7% of matriculants, up from 12.0% in 2020. However, American Indian or Alaska Native first-year students declined by 8.5%, to 227, making up 1% of matriculants.

This is alarming for a group that makes up roughly 3% of the U.S. population as programs for Native students aimed at addressing this inequity have been implemented on many levels.

“The gains in medical school enrollment of students from underrepresented groups are encouraging, but there is still much more work to be done—including increasing the representation of American Indian and Alaska Native communities—to ensure that our nation’s diversity is reflected in the future physician workforce,” said Geoffrey Young, PhD, AAMC senior director, transforming health care workforce. “The AAMC and our member medical schools are deeply committed to significantly increasing the number of applicants and students from underrepresented groups.”

Making physician diversity a priority

The AMA is looking to address physician diversity on several fronts. The AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium has worked with Morehouse and other member medical schools to share strategies for enhancing recruitment, fostering viable pathways into medicine, promoting holistic admissions processes and creating inclusive learning environments, as outlined in a recent paper published in the journal *Medical Teacher*. The ultimate goal is to generate a physician workforce that more closely resembles that of the nation.

The group has shared a process of institutional diversity-and-inclusion self-study, and issued a statement to protect diverse learners during educational disruptions related to COVID-19.

The AMA Doctors Back to School™ program, meanwhile, introduces children to professional role models and shows kids of all ages from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups that a career in medicine is attainable for everyone. Learn more about the AMA Minority Affairs Section, which gives voice to and advocates on issues that affect minoritized physicians and medical students.

Launched last year, the AMA Center for Health Equity has a mandate to embed health equity across the organization so that health equity becomes part of the practice, process, action, innovation and organizational performance and outcomes.