

WWAMI CENTER FOR HEALTH WORKFORCE STUDIES

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Project Summary

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Clearing the Path to Medical School for American Indians and Alaska Natives: New Strategies

Background: American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) remain underrepresented in the medical profession. Two studies* found significant challenges in the pursuit of a medical career by AI/AN students:

- The academic rigor of medical school.
- The needs of their communities and families.
- Financial concerns.
- Feelings that their perspectives on healing and spirituality were excluded from medical school.
- The paucity of role models and mentors, especially those who shared their culture.

Based on these research results and their experience conducting programs to support AI/ANs pursuing health professions, the authors formulated several policy recommendations, including new strategies for improving recruitment and retention of AI/AN medical students.

Findings from this study are more fully described in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #101: Hollow WB, Buckley A, Patterson DG, Olsen P, Dorscher J, Medora R, Morin L, Padilla RS, Tahsequah J, Baldwin LM, Clearing the Path to Medical School for American Indians and Alaska Natives: New Strategies, January 2006.

* Hollow WB, Patterson DG, Olsen PM, Baldwin LM. American Indians and Alaska Natives: how do they find their path to medical school? Working Paper #86. Seattle, WA: WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, 2004.

Buckley A. A search for healthy community: retaining American Indians and Alaska Natives in medical school. Unpublished manuscript. Toppenish, WA: Heritage University.

Recommended Strategies:

The authors recommend improving AI/AN recruitment and retention by:

- ◆ Providing role models, advisors, and mentors. Both AI/AN and non-Native health professionals can provide guidance.
- ◆ Providing early research opportunities by involving AI/AN communities in research on Native health issues. Native research opportunities can stimulate interest in biomedical careers.
- ◆ Anticipating students' traditional Native spiritual practices. Medical faculty can partner with tribal leaders and AI/AN professional organizations to foster awareness and a supportive environment for Native spirituality.
- ◆ Providing professional socialization opportunities for faculty and AI/AN medical students.
- ◆ Creating and implementing rigorous curricula that include indigenous perspectives. Curricula grounded in Native culture can enhance student appreciation of science.
- ◆ Developing a pro-diversity institutional mission statement to inform admissions policies. Institutional change requires an explicit goal of racial and ethnic diversity.

Increasing the numbers of AI/AN physicians is a matter of social equity and basic fairness, but successful collaborations will also enrich the medical community. These recommendations are a call to action not only to medical schools, but to all individuals and institutions that have an interest in increasing the number of minority physicians.

