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.


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.