

WWAMI CENTER FOR HEALTH WORKFORCE STUDIES

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Project Summary

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American Indians and Alaska Natives: How Do They Find their Path to Medical School?

"It's hard to leave because it's a different world. That was a big obstacle. I didn't only go through culture shock moving off the reservation into a big city. I went through culture shock...from who I was there into this whole professional role, being a young new doctor, it's been a challenge to accept it...It's been a challenge in my community to accept it too."

— Native medical student

Background: American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) remain underrepresented in the medical profession. This study sought to understand the supports and barriers that AI/AN students encountered on their path to successful medical school entry.

Methods: This study content-analyzed qualitative semistructured, one-on-one, confidential interviews with 10 AI/AN students at the University of Washington School of Medicine to identify salient support and barrier themes.

Major Findings:

✕ Educational experiences from elementary school to college were the most frequently mentioned supports, but poor educational experiences also hindered students on their path to medical school.

✕ Both positive and negative health care experiences motivated students to pursue a health career. Negative experiences sometimes created an image of physicians that students had to overcome.

✕ Ties to family, friends, and Native communities both supported students and created conflict between Native culture and the culture of modern Western medicine.

✕ Students reported financial barriers severe enough to constrain participation in the medical school application process.

✕ Spirituality played an important role in the lives of these students as they pursued a medical career.

✕ Half the students described either direct or indirect racial discrimination.

Policy Implications: Promoting greater AI/AN participation in medical careers can be facilitated with strategies appropriate to the academic, financial, and cultural needs of AI/AN students. Strategies based on this study's findings and on the authors' experience conducting programs to support AI/ANs pursuing health professions are documented in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #101.*

Findings from this study are more fully described in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #86: Hollow WB, Patterson DG, Olsen PM, Baldwin LM, American Indians and Alaska Natives: How Do They Find their Path to Medical School? January 2004.

* 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. Working Paper #101. Seattle, WA: WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, 2006.

