



Supporting a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Nursing Workforce

Emerging Insights from a Study of Pathway Programs



Kimá Joy Taylor, LesLeigh Ford, Eva H. Allen, Faith Mitchell, Clara Alvarez Caraveo, and Matt Eldridge
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Background

Study Context

- Most nurses, nursing students, and nursing faculty in this country are white.¹
- Many factors, including past and current racism, contribute to this.
- Racism in nursing is widespread, with 9 in 10 Black/African nurses and 7 in 10 Hispanic/Latinx nurses reporting experiencing racism in the workplace.²
- Increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in health care can provide many benefits,³ including
 - improved access to high-quality care;
 - greater patient choice and satisfaction;
 - improved patient-clinician trust; and
 - more diverse leadership, policymaking, and research pools.

¹ “National Nursing Workforce Study,” National Council of State Boards of Nursing, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.ncsbn.org/workforce.htm>; “Latest Data on Diversity,” American Association of Colleges of Nursing, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.aacnnursing.org/Diversity-Inclusion/Latest-Data>; and American Association of Colleges of Nursing, “[Nursing Faculty: A Spotlight on Diversity](#)” (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2017).

² Shannon McClendon, “New Survey Data: Racism within the Nursing Profession Is a Substantial Problem,” news release, American Nurses Association, January 25, 2022, <https://www.nursingworld.org/news/news-releases/2021/new-survey-data-racism-in-nursing/>.

³ HHS Advisory Committee on Minority Health, [Reflecting America’s Population: Diversifying a Competent Health Care Workforce for the 21st Century](#) (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, 2011).

Study Purpose and Methods

- In 2021, the Urban Institute conducted a comprehensive study, with support from the California Health Care Foundation, to identify and examine promising practices for sustainably increasing the representation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx people in the physician and nursing workforces.
- The **study focused on pathway programs**, also known as pipeline programs, designed to recruit and support students, early-career professionals, and established professionals in nursing and medicine.
- The study included
 - a scan of peer-reviewed literature on nursing and medical pathway programs and their efficacy,
 - 35 semistructured interviews with pathway program stakeholders, and
 - 8 focus groups with 41 Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx health professionals and students.

Limitations

The study focused on centering and lifting up voices of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and health professionals. Because we interviewed and held focus groups with a relatively small number of stakeholders, some perspectives may be overrepresented, and others may not be adequately captured. The review of the literature is not exhaustive and is limited to studies that examined the impacts of diversity pathway programs.

Terminology

- We use the phrase “**systemically and structurally excluded**” to call attention to the ways Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and professionals have been locked out of equitable educational and professional opportunities.
- We chose to use the terms “Black/African American” and “Hispanic/Latinx.” We recognize these terms do not resonate with all people in these groups, and we remain committed to using respectful, inclusive language.
- We recognize the importance of intersectionality, or the reality that people have multiple identities that intersect in ways that affect how they are viewed, understood, and treated. Here, intersectionality helps account for the whole of a person’s experiences in school, training, pathway programs, and professional contexts.

What Is a Pathway Program?

- We define this as a program or intervention designed to recruit and support students, early-career professionals, and established professionals throughout their careers.
- Programs can include one or more of the following:
 - academic support
 - mentorship
 - financial aid and scholarships
 - training and internships
 - social supports
 - institutional supports
- This study focuses on programs that intend explicitly or implicitly to increase the diversity of the health care workforce, particularly the representation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx medical and nursing professionals.
- While the study focuses on postsecondary programs, we recognize that sustainable pathways to health care professions ought to begin earlier; some programs are designed to inspire, engage, and encourage K–12 youth.

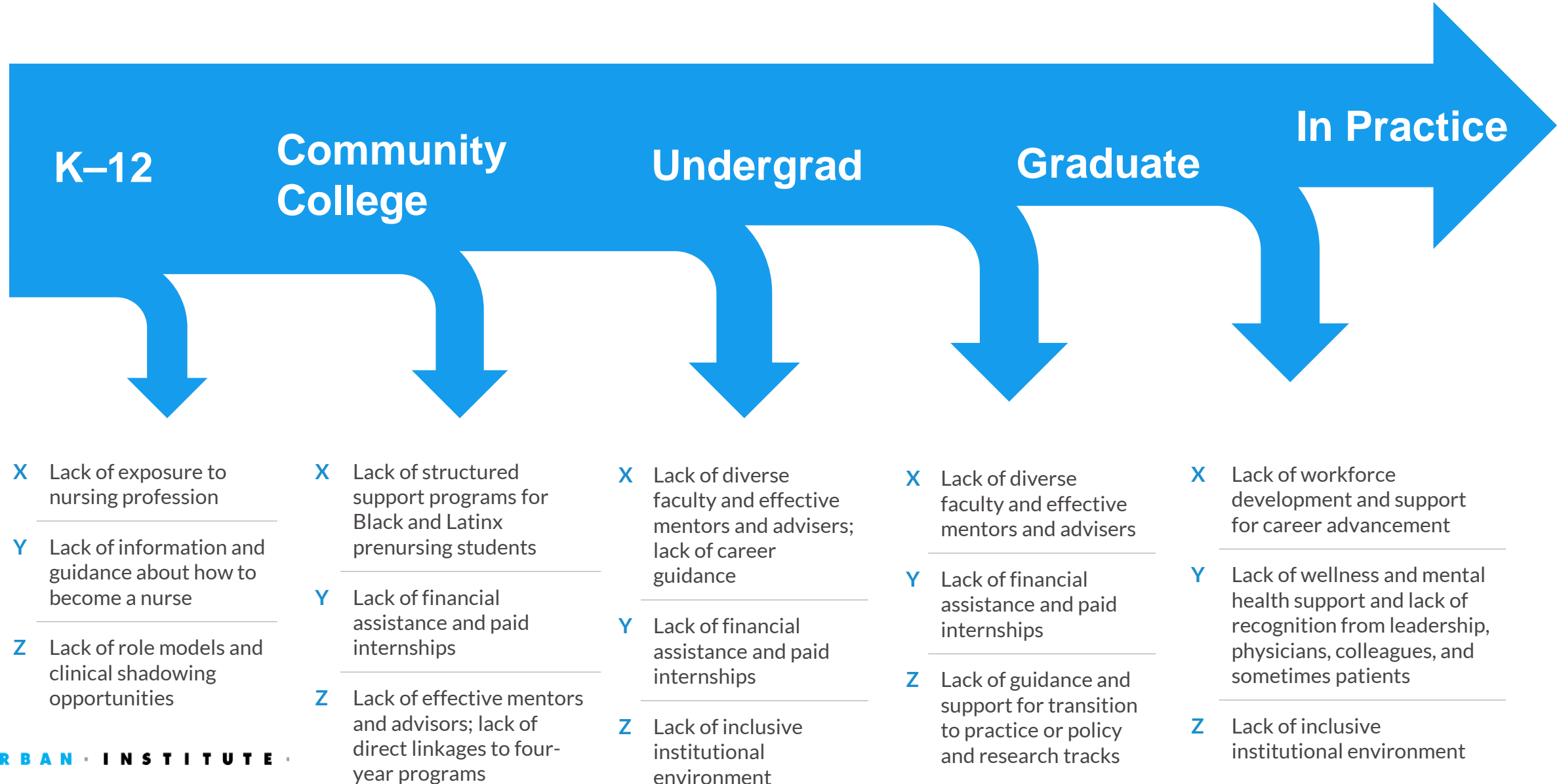
Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings

- **Pathway programs are instrumental to the diversification of the health care workforce**, because they provide systemically and structurally excluded students with skills, resources, and supports to mitigate academic, financial, and other barriers to success.
- Though considerable efforts and investments have been made to recruit Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students into medical professions, **comparable pathway programs are lacking for nursing students and professionals from systemically and structurally excluded groups.**
 - The literature describing or evaluating nursing pathway programs is limited; most studies examine the components or outcomes associated with programs for medical students.
 - Unlike the medical students and professionals we spoke with, none of the nursing students or professionals we spoke with reported participating in diversity pathway programs.
 - Our findings are supported by the literature, which suggests that only about 20 percent of nursing schools have targeted interventions designed to increase the participation of Black/African American people and other people of color in nursing.¹

¹ J. Margo Brooks Carthon, Thai-Huy Nguyen, Jesse Chittams, Elizabeth Park, and James Guevara, “Measuring Success: Results from a National Survey of Recruitment and Retention Initiatives in the Nursing Workforce,” *Nursing Outlook* 62, no. 4 (July–August 2014): 259–67, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.outlook.2014.04.006>.

Many Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx Nurses Exist at Every Step



Implications for Policy and Practice

- A tremendous need and opportunity exist to strategically **invest in and work with nursing students and professionals to design, implement, and sustain comprehensive pathway programs** to recruit and support nursing students, faculty, and nurses from systemically and structurally excluded racial and ethnic groups.
- The following slides organize findings around four primary **types of support** provided by programs:
 1. Academic and career
 2. Financial
 3. Social
 4. Institutional
- In each section, we offer **recommendations** on creating and supporting thoughtful interventions tailored to three key stakeholder groups:
 - Higher education, including nursing schools
 - Philanthropy
 - State and federal governments

1. Academic and Career Supports

Why Academic and Career Supports Are Important

- Academic enrichment is a fundamental component of pre-medical school pathway programs and should be considered when developing nursing pathway programs.
- Academic supports could include
 - science, technology, engineering, and medicine programs;
 - summer enrichment programs focused on preparing students for academic and social life in health professions schools;
 - internships;
 - research and conference opportunities;
 - academic and career advising;
 - study tips and exam preparation (e.g., how to take notes, write application essays, or prepare for exams); and
 - assistance with job search.
- Study participants (and evidence from available research) suggested additional coursework, clinical training, targeted guidance, and other forms of academic support before and after entering professional school are effective ways to help students develop the skills necessary to succeed.
- Example: [Summer Health Professions Education Program](#)

Academic Supports for Nurses

“A lot of people want to do nursing, but they don't know how to even get there.” —Nursing professional

- Nursing professionals reported that they had **no exposure to or advising on nursing in their colleges and universities**, and that they had to figure out on their own how to become a nurse.
- Many interviewees noted that **even when academically prepared, they were discouraged from pursuing health careers by advisers**, were made to feel inferior by educators, or were otherwise made to feel they had to “prove” they were competent and knowledgeable.
- When asked, nursing professionals said they would have found the following academic and career supports useful:
 - mentorship and more information about possible nursing careers
 - shadowing and career supports to feel comfortable in the nursing field they want to pursue
 - exposure to or advice about different pathways to nursing while attending their colleges and universities

Recommendations for Higher Education, Including Nursing School

- With input and collaboration from existing and prospective nursing students and professionals, **develop comprehensive academic enrichment programs for high school and college students** from systemically and structurally excluded racial and ethnic groups who are interested in pursuing nursing professions.
- **Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate student-centered resources and training for high school and college academic advisers** to use when advising prospective nursing students from systemically and structurally excluded groups. Add accountability mechanisms for academic advisers to receive regular, anonymous feedback to help refine their advising approaches.
- Consider **investing in linkages across programs at each educational level** to ensure students progress along their desired career pathways in nursing.
- **Establish direct transfer agreements between nursing associate's degree programs and baccalaureate nursing programs** to facilitate admission into and completion of bachelor's degree in nursing programs among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recommendations for Philanthropy

- **Invest in K–12 programs to increase exposure to nursing and other health professions** and nurture students interested in pursuing these professions across the full educational continuum. Coordinate and collaborate with K–12 education leaders, education-focused funders, and workforce development policymakers to ensure the next generation of prenursing students is aware of postsecondary education and professional program opportunities.
- **Support programs that strengthen the academic skills of prospective and enrolled nursing students** from systemically and structurally excluded groups who have the potential to succeed with additional support.
- **Develop programming and career supports for students who experience racism and bias** while in training so they can succeed.
- **Redefine how program success is measured.** For instance, improvements in grades or graduation rates are a success, even if pathway participants ultimately choose a different field of study.
- **Increase investments in unbiased, effective nursing career development and advising** in public schools.

Recommendations for Federal and State Governments

- Continue to support and increase **funding for programs known to increase opportunities for students from systemically and structurally excluded groups**, like the Health Resources and Services Administration’s Health Careers Opportunity Program and Centers of Excellence, which have various pathway programs.
- Develop and provide **guidance to states on how to prioritize K–12 educational resources and supports for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds**, including targeted investments in community schools and low-performing schools.
 - Example: [The Comer School Development Program](#)
- State governments should provide **funding to community colleges and public four-year colleges and universities to support comprehensive pathway programs** to recruit and retain undergraduates from systemically and structurally excluded groups.¹

¹ CJ Libassi, [The Neglected College Race Gap: Racial Disparities among College Completers](#) (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2018); and Andrew Howard Nichols and J. Oliver Schak, “Broken Mirrors,” Education Trust, March 6, 2019, <https://edtrust.org/resource/broken-mirrors-black-representation>.

2. Financial Supports

Why Financial Support for Students Is Important

“We've had students that were living in the car going to nursing school, so obviously that wouldn't be [an] ideal situation for somebody to learn.” —Nursing program administrator

- Educational and other related costs are primary factors in the decision to pursue higher education.¹ Nursing students from systemically and structurally excluded groups often must juggle work, family responsibilities, and school and/or have a high debt burden.
- Example: [Health Resources and Services Administration Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students](#)

¹ Neil Bhutta, Andrew C. Chang, Lisa J. Dettling, and Joanne W. Hsu, “Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances,” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, September 28, 2020, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-20200928.htm>.

Why Financial Support for Diversity Pathway Programming Is Needed

- Funding for pathway programs is often unstable and short of the level needed.
 - Federal funding, the largest source of funding for diversity pathway programs, can fluctuate depending on the politics and priorities of changing administrations.
 - Private funding has its own challenges and unique agendas; it can often be short term and require the demonstration of concrete results in just a few years.
- Funding is seldom available for evaluating program effectiveness; many informants recognized that limited evidence on the impacts of pathway programs on participants' achievements and progression was hurting further investments in health care workforce diversity initiatives.

Recommendations for Higher Education, Including Nursing School

- Provide **tuition assistance, including grants, scholarships, and tuition waivers**, for students from disadvantaged financial backgrounds.
- Earmark wraparound funding for nursing students from disadvantaged financial backgrounds to **support nonacademic needs**, such as food and housing, transportation, child care, fees for high-quality exam preparation courses and materials, and application fees.
- Secure **paid internship and clinical training opportunities** for nursing students with financial needs.
- Provide **financial literacy education and guidance** to students to help them navigate and manage finances and debt.
- **Allocate adequate and sustainable internal funding for diversity pathway programs**, including funding for staff, operations, and evaluation in addition to funding for social supports for students and faculty from systemically and structurally excluded groups (e.g., paid mentorships).

Recommendations for Philanthropy

- Invest in **diversity pathway programs** that provide a comprehensive range of supports, including financial assistance, across the educational continuum.
- **Create scholarship programs for prospective nursing students** from systemically and structurally excluded racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Structure **supports to build diversity pathway program capacity and ensure long-term sustainability**, such as requiring institutional matching to sustain programs past seed funding and building program capacity to fundraise and apply for public grants.
- **Financially incentivize nursing schools to use emerging best practices** for the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students.
- Advocate for increased and sustained **state and federal funding for health professions scholarship programs** for nursing students from systemically and structurally excluded groups, including advanced registered nurse practitioners and certified nurse midwives, who have a longer educational pathway and therefore are exposed to more debt.

Recommendations for Federal and State Governments

- Expand **programming and funding for initiatives specifically designed to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the nursing workforce**, including incentives and programming that focus on support for nurse practitioners. This may require using broader definitions for “underrepresentation” in states with bans on affirmative action.
- Expand **direct financial support to students**, including unconditional grants, scholarships, and stipends to give students a freedom of choice in specialty and geographic area of practice and funding to defray the cost of living and other nonacademic costs.
- Structure funding opportunities and grant requirements to **incentivize and support investments in program data and evaluation infrastructure and capacity**. Governments should provide funding incentives for rigorous impact evaluations that not only collect short-term data on program completion and impact but also follow participants’ clinical careers to assess practice retention.
- **Remove financial barriers to higher education** with policies such as free college or sliding-scale tuition for students, depending on financial need.

3. Social Supports

Why Social Supports Are Important

“I was always the only Hispanic. I was. I never felt like I belonged in school...I felt like I wasn't good enough to be there with other students, and I think that's probably why it took me so long to finish school, but I didn't feel supported or encouraged or even know what I was doing.” —Nursing professional

- The demands of academic preparation and clinical practice can be stressful regardless of racial identity. In addition, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students and professionals often face discrimination and racism in schools and the workplace, underscoring the need for targeted emotional and social support.
- The most common forms of social support that pathway programs provide include structured mentorship programs and social activities, such as affinity groups. Some participants noted the importance of ethnic nursing associations in providing support.
- Example: [The National Black Nurses Association Collaborative Mentorship Program](#)

Why Mentoring Is Important

“It would have been helpful to have a formal mentor because [of] the isolation I experienced in nursing school, being the only African American in a large group.” —Nursing professional

- Evidence points to a positive association between having a mentor or a role model and sustaining interest and/or succeeding in health professions schools.
 - Study participants deemed mentors, ideally throughout one’s educational development and clinical practice, as the most vital support.
 - Most nursing students noted they had to find their own mentors; mentorships often grew out of preceptor relationships.
 - Most interviewees preferred a mentor who understood their personal and professional aspirations and were open to help students if their professional goals shifted.
- Interviewees identified a lack of faculty diversity as an overall barrier to finding mentors, feeling welcome, and having a sense of belonging at a school.

Recommendations for Nursing Schools and Health Care Employers

- Prioritize the **development of nurse mentorship programming** from college through professional experiences.
- Create **mentoring matches based on concordance and interests** where possible.
- **Compensate mentors and provide dedicated time** for mentees and mentors to meet.
- **Develop and implement mentor and mentee trainings** that articulate roles, responsibilities, and opportunities. Trainings should also help mentors center mentees' needs and goals.
- **Create an online training program** with essential content for mentees and mentors that must be completed before the start of the mentorship to improve selection processes.
- **Diversify the universe of mentors** without contributing to faculty and staff burnout.
- **Implement evaluation metrics** for mentors and advisers.
- **Document and disseminate best practices** for structuring and operating mentorship programs.
- Improve the representation and retention of school and hospital faculty and staff from systemically and structurally excluded groups by offering opportunities for **research and professional development that count toward compensation, promotion, and tenure considerations.**

Recommendations for Philanthropy

- Support the **development, implementation, and maintenance of formal nurse mentorship programming**, including for nursing students and practicing nurses.
- Support the development and dissemination of **mentorship training, guidance, and technical assistance**.
- Provide financial compensation and other support so that Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students can **shadow nursing professionals in college**.
- **Provide resources to support social gatherings outside school** and/or time and opportunities for students to enjoy themselves in nonacademic social settings.
- Support the development of a **resource website that identifies nursing pathway programs** for people from systemically and structurally excluded backgrounds.
- **Host cohort conversations and trainings** so staff and students of specific national and state-level pathway programs can share and learn from one another's best practices.
- Support **Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx nursing school faculty's development** in partnership with other foundations.

Recommendations for Federal and State Governments

- Develop and fund nursing programs like [the National Hispanic Medical Association's Health Scholars Program](#), of which **mentoring** is a key component.
- Continue support for **federal programming** like the Health Careers Opportunity Program and Centers of Excellence.
- Financially incentivize nursing and medical schools to **create formal mentoring programs** and to **diversify their faculties and student bodies**.

4. Institutional Supports

Why Institutional Supports Are Important

“Nursing is not fun. In hospitals, nursing sucks. You can love what you do, but the way the hospital system treats you is like a task rabbit.” —Nursing professional

- Institutional culture plays an important role in efforts to diversify the nation’s health care workforce. Both educational institutions and health care employers can **promote or hinder Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx people’s entry into and retention in health professions** by the extent to which their institutional environments do or do not welcome them.
- Broad institutional buy-in and support for diversity, equity, and inclusion in an organization’s policies and practices, curricula, and operations (including recruitment practices, line items in budgets, staffing, and faculty performance reviews) and accountability for adhering to these practices are critical to creating and maintaining an inclusive environment.
- Nursing students noted that some schools just want to meet basic minimum requirements, rather than authentically and systemically working on increasing diversity among students, faculty, and staff.
- Example: [Center for Antiracism in Nursing](#)

How the Institutional Environment Affects Students and Clinicians

“I feel like they either didn't like me because I was a woman that was a nurse practitioner, or because I was brown...I had a doctor who threw papers at me. I had people dismiss me. People told me they didn't have time to do a consult....It was actually pretty tough not just learning how to manage these patients but dealing with the people that I worked with.” —Nursing professional

- Participants who attended historically Black colleges and universities generally had better experiences in educational programs, felt more supported, and had more diverse faculty members than participants who attended predominantly white institutions.
- Nursing students at predominantly white institutions felt unsupported and even threatened; they experienced hostility, heard direct or indirect discriminatory statements from white faculty and peers, were discouraged from pursuing desired career tracks, and felt they did not belong or did not deserve to be enrolled in a particular school.
- Nursing professionals noted **toxic nursing culture** was as a huge challenge to overcome once they entered the health care workforce:
 - Some participants reported that preceptors and supervisors were burned out by the demands of a hospital setting.
 - Some preceptors, supervisors, and coworkers were explicitly racist.¹
 - Some participants felt patients, physicians, and hospital administrators devalue the nursing profession.

¹ Shannon McClendon, “New Survey Data: Racism within the Nursing Profession Is a Substantial Problem,” news release, American Nurses Association, January 25, 2022, <https://www.nursingworld.org/news/news-releases/2021/new-survey-data-racism-in-nursing/>.

Untapped Strategies for Greater Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nursing

- **Holistic admissions practices.** These practices consider qualities such as commitment, resilience, work ethic, and interest in service in underserved communities to be as important as grades and exam scores. These practices have shown promise in increasing the number of students from structurally and systemically excluded racial and ethnic groups in health professions schools.
 - Less than half (47 percent) of nursing schools have adopted holistic reviews.¹
- **Recruiting locally.** Health professions schools can invest in “growing their own” pool of qualified candidates by providing and advocating for resources and support in local communities. Nursing schools can invest in science partnerships between academic centers and elementary and middle schools that encourage nursing students and professionals to introduce K–12 students to concepts of and opportunities for health professions internships.
- **Pathways to nursing for the ancillary health care workforce.** The ancillary workforce, such as nursing aides and medical assistants, is often more diverse than the nursing workforce.² Currently, no clear pathway exists for ancillary professionals to enter and complete nursing school. More baccalaureate and postbaccalaureate programs and increased recognition of foreign-awarded degrees are needed.

¹“New Study Finds Holistic Admissions Benefit Health Professions Schools,” National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/news-events/features/training-workforce-dev/holistic-admissions.html>.

²US Department of Health and Human Services and Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, [Sex, Race, and Ethnic Diversity of U.S. Health Occupations \(2011-2015\)](#) (Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services and Health Resources and Services Administration, 2017).

Recommendations for Higher Education, Nursing Schools, and Health Care Employers

- Articulate and embed a focus on **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across race, ethnicity, and other intersectional identities in the mission, structure, and operations of the institution.** This includes actionable policies and processes to institutionalize DEI throughout all levels of administration and in curricula and operations, including accounting, facilities, financing, governance, financial aid, and performance evaluations.
- Meaningfully **change institutional culture** to achieve equity and encourage inclusion.
- Create anonymous ways for trainees to **report racism and microaggressions and institute appropriate accountability strategies** for faculty and staff who are reported.
- Develop, embed, and publicly report **standardized metrics** to measure progress on DEI initiatives.
- **Recruit locally**; this may include investing in early pathway programs to identify and support people in a school's community.
- **Adopt holistic admissions policies** and practices and train recruiters, admissions staff, and clinical placement staff on implicit bias and antiracism.
- **Develop strategies for recruiting incumbent members of the ancillary health care workforce** and provide dedicated funding to support people upskilling from the allied health care workforce.

Recommendations for Philanthropy

- Encourage local pathway investments by tying colleges' and health professions schools' grant funding to requirements to admit a certain share of students from community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and areas with larger numbers of people from systemically and structurally excluded groups.
- Invest in early interventions and better transitions or longer-term pathway interventions and supports throughout the educational continuum, including for incumbent ancillary health care workers.
- Invest in building the data collection and tracking capacities of organizations like the American Nurses Association.
- Coordinate across local, state, and national funders with a demonstrated commitment to diversifying the health care workforce to advocate for the elimination of racism in health professions schools and workplaces.

Recommendations for Federal and State Governments

- Create legislative mandates for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); allocate funding to support them; and develop accountability metrics to enforce the mandates.
- Financially incentivize educational institutions to meet or exceed DEI metrics.
- Remove financial barriers to higher education with policies such as free college and sliding-scale tuition for students, depending on financial need.
- To demonstrate ongoing disparities, fund the development of state maps that identify where and in what settings Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx nurses practice and similar maps for providers not from underrepresented backgrounds.
- Convene public schools annually to share data on, progress toward, and strategies for successful DEI initiatives.

Concluding Thoughts

Conclusion

- Considering how American society systemically marginalizes, disadvantages, and punishes people of color, **pathway programs are perhaps the only reason we have some, albeit insufficient, diversity in health professions today.**
 - The deep dedication and perseverance of pathway program leaders and the uncompromising determination of the students we talked to ensure their success.
- **Students and professionals achieved success, but at a cost.**
 - Nursing students and professionals have little rest, support, and recognition in the face of persistent systemic racism.
 - Creating and maintaining more pathways to health professions for people of color is not enough; to ensure equitable and inclusive representation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx people in health professions, the additional burdens faced by these students and professionals relative to their white and Asian peers must be reduced.
- **Comprehensive pathway programs that offer well-designed academic, financial, social, and institutional supports are instrumental to diversifying the health care workforce.**
 - Such programs should be funded fully, strengthened, and evaluated robustly.
 - At the institutional level, it is important to also create **diverse, equitable, and inclusive** learning and work environments that support the sustained success of nurses of color and to compensate them for the unique skills and perspectives they bring in the service of enriching the health care system.

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A condensed version of this presentation is available at <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/health-policy-center/projects/diversifying-health-care-workforce>.

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