Letter to the Editor

Dermatology’s dearth of diversity: Considerations in providing support to students underrepresented in medicine at home and away

Dear Editor,

We read with interest the response to our original letter, entitled “An under-recognized barrier to the dermatology residency match: Lack of a home program” (Villa et al., 2021), and appreciate the authors’ underscoring the importance of home dermatology programs, which help provide applicants with mentorship, research opportunities, and clinical exposure to the field. The authors bring attention to the current challenges faced by students without a home program and make important recommendations to mitigate these barriers. We concur with these suggestions and would like to highlight how these recommendations could be adapted to support students underrepresented in medicine (UIM) who do not have a home institution and to offer additional resources to those that do.

The American Academy of Dermatology just launched a new initiative focused on improving diversity and equity in our specialty. This is an excellent step, but we must also consider how we can make changes at our own institutions, on a micro level, where important decisions that affect individual learners occur.

First, mentorship in dermatology is a critical component of an applicant’s academic career. However, having a mentor with whom a minority student can culturally identify is of particular importance. Lack of access to clinicians with such characteristics has been identified by UIM students as a major barrier to pursuing the specialty (Soliman et al., 2019). Proximal partnerships with nearby institutions that are home to a dermatology program can increase the probability of connecting students with such a mentor. Given the increase in the number of virtual platforms now available, long-distance mentoring is more feasible and can be done simply and effectively.

Additionally, individualized professional development programs for UIM students are of increased importance. Scholarly writing is an acquired skill fundamentally important in research opportunities. UIM applicants are more likely to have faced socioeconomic barriers than their peers (Soliman et al., 2019), and financial obstacles historically limit access to preparatory materials. Noting the upsurge in the average number of publications for matched dermatology applicants (from 5.7 to 14.5 between 2007 and 2018; Ezekor et al., 2020), steps to increase UIM student exposure to activities that bolster scientific writing skills and research methodology early in their career can provide an important foundation for scholarly growth (Okeye, 2019). Disseminating information about mentoring programs that provide such opportunities, including but not limited to the National Medical Association, Skin of Color Society, American Academy of Dermatology, and Women’s Dermatologic Society, by faculty advisors (at home and proximal programs) early in the medical careers of UIM students can help narrow this deficit.

Last, ethnic and racial diversity among applicants is influenced by diverse representation within the training environment, including at one’s home institution. Oyesanya et al.’s analysis of UIM representation at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine’s dermatology residency program revealed that, from 2008 to 2017, UIM physician recruitment and retention efforts were prioritized, leading to a 20% increase in multicultural faculty. During the same time frame, there was a surge in resident physician diversity (18%) due, in part, to the increased visibility of UIM house staff (Oyesanya et al., 2018). Although affected by a variety of factors, this observation highlights the notion that diversity often begets diversity. To account for the time it may take to increase UIM faculty presence, consideration should be taken by host institutions to reserve and fund positions that provide visiting UIM students with unique experiences, such as an ethnically and racially heterogeneous clinical experience, especially for students without a home program or with fewer home UIM faculty.

We agree that addressing the disadvantage of not having a home dermatology program is essential. Additional steps, as outlined here, applicable to institutions both with and without a home program, should be considered to optimize diversity efforts and minimize the sequelae that occur when said diversity is lacking.

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