



The STEP UP Program

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The STEP UP Program

Abstract

The Short-Term Research Experience Program for Underrepresented Persons (STEP-UP) was established as part of the NIDDK Strategic Plan on Minority Health Disparities. This article provides an overview and introduction of this program. All of the articles that are included in this special issue reflect the work of our coordinating centers, the mentors and their staff, as well as the students.

Keywords

Workforce; Diversity; Health Disparities



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INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) is one of the 27 Institutes and Centers that comprise the National Institutes of Health (NIH), an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). NIH's mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability. The mission of the NIDDK is to support and conduct research to combat diabetes and other endocrine and metabolic diseases, liver and other digestive diseases, nutritional disorders, obesity, and kidney, urologic and hematologic diseases.

The Short-Term Research Experience Program for Underrepresented Persons (STEP-UP) was established as part of the NIDDK Strategic Plan on Minority Health Disparities. Many of the diseases in the NIDDK mission area are chronic, costly, consequential, and common. The most striking disparities in the burden of disease in the United States are experienced by African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, and Asians. In addition to these ethnic and racial minorities, health disparities exist among population groups segregated by gender, education or income, disability, geographic location, and sexual orientation. The goals of the Strategic Plan are to reduce and eliminate health disparities, expand research and training opportunities for minority scientists, and to provide information to racial and ethnic minority groups about treatment, prevention, and self-management of disease.

In order to carry out the missions of the NIH and NIDDK successfully, it is essential to diversify the biomedical and healthcare workforce with research scientists who are culturally competent and responsive to the multiple cultural and social needs of underserved minority and socio-economically deprived populations. Unfortunately, the academic faculty and researchers in the institutions where most of the biomedical research enterprise takes place have lower representation of individuals from the communities most impacted by these diseases.^{1, 2}

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The STEP-UP program is designed to provide short-term research education and training for high school and undergraduate students from racial/ethnic groups underrepresented in biomedical and behavioral research and students from disadvantaged backgrounds to expose them to research in the NIDDK mission areas. The goal of the program is to increase the number of underrepresented minority and disadvantaged students “in the pipeline” who are committed to a career in biomedical, behavioral, clinical, or social science research.

To accomplish this goal, the NIDDK awards research grants to institutions for the development and support of a high school or an undergraduate program to provide underrepresented minority and disadvantaged students with a research training opportunity that will develop both their research capabilities and their interest in pursuing careers in biomedical research.

This research training opportunity program has been very successful and the NIDDK has been proud of the participants over the past 20 years. Many of the alumni of the STEP UP have successfully transitioned into biomedical careers. In this journal are manuscripts from high school student participants in the summer 2015 program. We congratulate all of them, and look forward to helping them further to fulfil their wishes and career goals.

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