



H E A L T H
PROFESSIONALS
FOR DIVERSITY

Michigan Civil Rights Initiative: Poor Prognosis for Michigan's Health

October 2006

The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative

During this November's election, the citizens of Michigan will decide on the future of affirmative action for all of Michigan's public programs. The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative is a ballot initiative to change Michigan's constitution and put an end to affirmative action in state government, local governments, public colleges and universities, community colleges and school districts.¹ Passage of this ballot initiative may undo the progress made thus far to meet the health needs of our multicultural society in Michigan and across the United States in the following ways by:

- Compromising quality health care for all
- Short changing academic environments
- Ignoring health care workforce needs

I. Compromising Quality Health Care for All

The passage of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative will prevent hospitals, clinics, and other health care settings from implementing innovative strategies to increase diversity. Similar to other states, Michigan needs to support a variety of diversity initiatives, such as affirmative action, to ensure that qualified health professionals are available to meet everyone's health care needs.

While several gaps in health care quality and access are narrowing, health disparities persist for racial and ethnic minorities and individuals of low socioeconomic status. The *2005 National Healthcare Disparities Report* shows that specific groups, such as families of low socioeconomic status and Latinos, experienced the most pervasive disparities.² The *Healthy Michigan 2010* report shows that these same disparities are experienced by racial and ethnic minorities and citizens of rural areas in Michigan.³

The national call to help remedy such disparities includes increasing diversity in the health professions.⁴⁻⁶ Research shows that

- Racial and ethnic minority and female physicians and dentists are more likely to treat patients of low socioeconomic status, patients with Medicaid, and those who are uninsured.⁷⁻⁹ The presence of racial and ethnic minority health professionals also improves access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, who are disproportionately affected by health care disparities.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

- A recent study commissioned by the Commonwealth Fund documenting promising practices for patient-centered communication with vulnerable populations underscored the need for workforce diversity as a strategy to overcome linguistic, health literacy, and cultural barriers and improve health care outcomes.¹⁵
- The benefits of diversity extend beyond the clinical encounter to innovations in medical, dental, and public health research.^{16,17} Women and racial and ethnic minority faculty are more likely to conduct research addressing racial, ethnic, and gender issues.¹⁸ Research is an essential component for understanding the causes and developing solutions to eliminate health care disparities.

II. Short Changing Academic Environments

The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative may potentially stifle efforts in higher education to create environments that reflect our multicultural society. This is evident in the notable decline of minority applicants to dental and medical schools from 1997 to 2002, subsequent to anti-affirmative action court rulings and state ballot initiatives (e.g., *Hopwood v. University of Texas* in 1995 and California Proposition 209 in 1996).^{10,19} Ending affirmative action will prevent Michigan's public higher education institutions from proactively working toward providing enriched and challenging academic environments and preparing a diverse health care workforce.

Within educational settings, research has substantiated that multicultural environments serve as catalysts for civic participation and idea generation, testing assumptions, and expanding perceptions regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.²⁰⁻²⁴ There is evidence that both diverse faculty and student bodies foster educational environments that contribute to improved intellectual and social outcomes for all in academe.²⁵

- Students with higher levels of interaction with diverse peers tend to exhibit increased cognitive ability to identify, distinguish and integrate various perspectives.²³ Diversity is valued amongst health professions students because it adds to the educational experience, particularly in clinical settings where competency in treating diverse patients is often enhanced.²⁶
- A diverse faculty contributes to an enriched learning environment. Research shows that racial and ethnic minority and female faculty are more likely to incorporate readings on race, ethnicity, or gender in the curriculum in comparison to their White, male counterparts. They are more likely to conduct research focusing on race, ethnicity, or gender.¹⁸
- The absence or limited access to diverse health professions faculty presents obstacles for both junior faculty and students.²⁷⁻³¹ Diversity in faculty provides opportunities to develop "allies and mentors" that help to minimize isolation, provide assistance with acclimating to the new environment, serve as role models, and defy stereotypes.³² This issue is significant for women and men in the health professions. In nursing, males identify the paucity of male nurses in clinical settings and no male faculty as a barrier in their professional development.^{30,33} Also, in a study of medical students, all students considered diversity in clinical faculty and basic science faculty an important element in their education.²⁶

Research consistently demonstrates that diversity begets diversity. The presence of a diverse faculty and opportunities for research in ethnic minority and gender issues help to facilitate recruitment and retention of a diverse student body.³³⁻³⁵

- In psychology doctoral programs, admissions directors noted that existing minority student representation was a factor in successful recruitment.³⁴ This was also evident in dental hygiene programs.³⁵

III. Ignoring Health Care Workforce Needs

In Michigan, there are workforce shortages in nursing, medicine, pharmacy, therapists, emergency medical technicians and paramedics.³⁶ Ever-changing demographics in the United States require workforce development strategies to draw qualified health care professionals from all segments of society. Affirmative action is a tool to facilitate the development of a workforce that can address all of Michigan's health care needs.

By the year 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will represent half of the US population.³⁷ However, this diversity is not reflected in our health care workforce.³⁸ Diversity in the health professions provides all consumers of health care services with increased access to and options for health care.³⁹

- Studies show that, for all racial and ethnic groups, when patients have the option, they are more likely to choose a health professional of their own racial and ethnic background.⁴⁰⁻⁴⁷
- In race-concordant patient-practitioner relationships, patients report better interactions with their health care provider and satisfaction with care.^{41, 48} Research also shows that patients report higher levels of respect⁴⁹ and trust,⁴² and they are more likely to recommend their practitioner to others when they have a health professional of the same racial or ethnic background.⁴⁹

Both men and women will be affected by the termination of affirmative action programs. Diversity initiatives in nursing to address the under-representation of males in the profession will be in jeopardy. Health care workforce needs are real. Nationally, nursing and dentistry shortages persist, and there is a need to increase the national physician workforce by 30%.^{30,31,51,52} Across the health professions, including veterinary medicine, increasing diversity in the student body is recognized as strategy to address projected workforce shortages.^{13,27,31,32,53}

The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative will end affirmative action and thwart efforts by employers and educators to recruit and retain a qualified diverse health care workforce for Michigan. Support for diversity initiatives, like affirmative action, expands opportunities for all.

For more information about the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, visit <http://www.civilrights.org/issues/affirmative/>

For more information about the HPD Coalition, email hpd@aamc.org, or contact Norma Poll, Ph.D. at (202) 862-6115.

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