Debunking Myths About Applying to Medical School Could Help Attract More Hispanics

by Marilyn Gilroy

More recruiting of underrepresented minorities, especially Hispanics, is needed by U.S. medical schools in order to train physicians to treat the nation’s increasingly diverse population. Demystifying the process of applying to medical school might be one of the keys to expanding the diversity of applicants.

“We are deeply committed to increasing the number of minorities in medical schools,” said Dr. Darrell Kirch, president and chief executive officer of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). “You don’t improve the health of communities without having a work force that reflects the diversity of those communities.”

Kirch’s comments are reinforced by research from the American Medical Association (AMA) showing that minority patients prefer minority physicians, thus making it especially critical to attract and retain more minority applicants to medical school. For example, Hispanics make up 38 percent of California’s population, but only 5 percent of the state’s physicians are Hispanic. An AMA report titled Minorities in Medicine states that by 2050 racial and ethnic minorities will comprise half of the U.S. population.

“Diversity in the work force will increase access to health care for the underserved and will help narrow the healthcare disparities gap disproportionately experienced by racial and ethnic minorities and individuals of low socioeconomic status,” states the report from the AMA Medical Student Selection Minority Issues Committee.

Both the AMA and the AAMC have launched aggressive campaigns to pursue minority applicants and help them overcome some of the financial and academic obstacles to enrolling in medical school. Although there have been gains, analysts say there is still much work to be done to train the next generation of physicians.

Minority Enrollment Increasing but Not Fast Enough

The good news is that more minorities enrolled in medical schools in 2010, which the AAMC says is a sign that more African-American, Hispanic and Native American students are interested in pursuing careers in medicine. Hispanic men represented the most significant change, with an increase of 17.1 percent over 2009, while overall enrollment by Hispanic men and women rose 9 percent. The number of new African-American medical students increased about 3 percent, according to figures released in an AAMC study. Native American enrollment increased by nearly 25 percent over last year, but the actual numbers were small compared with other minority groups.

Overall, the number of students who enrolled in medical school was up by 1.5 percent from last year.

Although those trends are promising, they are not enough. The association projects that the nation will have a shortage of 90,000 doctors by 2019. The health care overhaul, which in its current form will provide insurance to 32 million Americans currently uninsured, creates an even higher demand for physicians. On a positive note, a study done by researchers at the University of Massachusetts Medical School found that the opportunity to help traditionally underserved populations is motivating more minorities to be interested in medical school.

Some medical schools nationwide are targeting minorities, often as
early as grade school, by offering programs designed to foster an interest in science and medicine among children. Other programs, such as those at Texas A&M and the University of Rochester’s Early Medical Scholars program, guarantee medical school admission to college undergraduates who meet program requirements, which include maintaining a certain grade point average and participating in educational summer programs. The goal is to make medical school seem attainable to students who might think it is out of their reach and to strengthen their position as medical school candidates.

Myths and Missteps in Applying to Medical Schools

Unless students are part of an automatic admissions program, most individuals who aspire to medical school must deal with the hurdles of applying. Some have called the medical school application process among the most competitive tasks in all of higher education, with admissions being more competitive than law or business school. The application process and the cost of medical school have been identified as two factors that often drive away would-be minority physicians.

Experts say that with planning and professional advice, applicants can boost their chances of acceptance and follow their passion for a career in medicine.

“Candidates need to be proactive, taking control of their admissions destiny by highlighting their unique backgrounds and skills,” reports Veritas Prep, an admissions consulting firm. Veritas reports that a series of myths about the medical school admissions process, which consists of standardized multiple-choice items and an essay section. The six-hour test is designed to measure knowledge in the biological and physical sciences to assess verbal reasoning.

Like many other standardized tests, such as the SAT, the strict use of MCAT cut-off scores in admissions has been challenged by those who say it can be disadvantageous to students of color. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, known as FairTest, has said that MCAT limits educational equity and blocks access to higher education for Latinos, African-Americans and Native Americans and low-income applicants who generally score lower on the tests and therefore receive disproportionately fewer scholarships. Hispanics often lack the necessary academic background to prepare them for the MCATs and the rigors of medical school. They are less likely to take AP and honors courses and major in science.

To overcome some of these deficiencies, Hispanics should take advantage of MCAT preparatory courses offered by many colleges and organizations, says Busnaina. These courses usually include sessions on chemistry, biology and physics. The courses provide access to practice tests.

The AAMC also encourages preparation and suggests that all students need to spend a substantial amount of time preparing to take the MCATs. More than 50 percent of applicants end up taking the test twice because they mistakenly believed that just having good grades in science courses was enough.

First-Year Enrollees To U.S. Medical Schools, 2003-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Asians</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Hispanics</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3,460</td>
<td>1,205</td>
<td>1,091</td>
<td>1,127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3,460</td>
<td>1,263</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>3,756</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>1,272</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3,682</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>1,288</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3,932</td>
<td>1,288</td>
<td>1,281</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3,941</td>
<td>1,293</td>
<td>1,416</td>
<td>699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4,114</td>
<td>1,312</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4,214</td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td>1,539</td>
<td>891</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Assn. of American Medical Colleges Data Warehouse, Applicant Matriculant File
Admissions committees also look at GPAs, including the difficulty of courses taken and the type of school that the applicant attended. Extracurricular activities, such as volunteer work and some type of clinical or research experience, is usually viewed as an indication of a candidate’s interest in the field of medicine.

**Myth No. 3:** Majoring in science is a must for getting into medical school.

Although the majority of med school applicants do major in biology or other natural sciences, students from all academic majors are admitted to medical schools. All students must satisfy some prerequisites, but institutions such as the State University of New York-Geneseo Medical School encourages applicants who have a broad-based, varied education. Drexel University says that because the medical profession is changing, its admissions officers are placing a greater emphasis on critical thinking, analytical and problem-solving ability.

Several admissions directors indicated on their medical school websites that they give no preference to either science or nonscience majors but would rather see well-rounded students who immersed themselves in a nontraditional undergraduate program.

Fluency in a second language is a big plus, says Busnaina, noting that Hispanic applicants should not overlook the strength that their language skills might bring to the applicant profile. He urges Hispanics to emphasize their versatility because it is an important capability, as he has learned while completing his residency in psychiatry in Los Angeles.

“There are days that I don’t speak a word of English on the job,” he said, adding that although he is not a native speaker of Spanish, he has become fluent in the language.

**Boosting Minority Chances**

There are several resources available to minorities who want to increase their chances of obtaining a slot in medical school.

The AAMC maintains a medical minority applicant registry (Med-MAR) to enhance admission opportunities for groups who are underrepresented in medicine.

“The registry is just one more way that the AAMC is trying to reach out to minorities,” said Angela Moses, AAMC program specialist. “I get lots of calls from students who want to participate in Med-MAR.”

Students may elect to participate in the registry by self-identifying when they take the MCAT exams, which are given 25 times per year. Once the list is compiled, it is sent to medical schools, which use the registry to contact students directly and encourage them to apply.

“The list usually includes more than a thousand participants,” said Moses. “It’s a wonderful way for schools to learn about these students and see how well they have done on the MCATs.”

Busnaina recommends that minorities take advantage of mentoring opportunities, such as those offered by the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the oldest and largest organization serving medical students of color. There are more than 100 chapters at U.S. colleges and universities with “pipeline programs” designed to strengthen minority preparation for medical school at the undergraduate level.

SNMA, he says, has a “great record of helping minorities get into medical school.”