
Journal of the National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing

An international peer-
reviewed, open access, journal

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Volume 17 Issuer 2, Article 1

December 29, 2022

Short Communication

ISSN 2832-7403

Expanding Workforce Diversity and Health Care Equity in Communication Disorders Research: An NIH Institute Director's Perspective

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Recommended Citation

Tucci, D.L. (2022). Expanding workforce diversity and health care equity in communication disorders research: An NIH institute director's perspective. *Journal of the National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing*, 17(2).

Keywords: NIDCD, grants, workforce diversity, NIH

Expanding Workforce Diversity and Health Care Equity in Communication Disorders Research: An NIH Institute Director's Perspective

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the primary federal agency for conducting and funding medical research. Since NIDCD's establishment in 1988, it has conducted and supported research that has led to critical discoveries in our mission areas: hearing, balance, taste, smell, voice, speech, and language. The institute contributes to biomedical and behavioral research advances through *intramural* research conducted in our facilities in Bethesda, Maryland, and through *extramural* research, funded at universities, laboratories, and institutions throughout the country. These research efforts have improved the lives of millions of people with communication disorders.

NIDCD has long worked to increase the diversity of the research pipeline across our mission areas, and since becoming the institute's director in 2019, I have made [expanding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility within NIDCD and its extramural workforce](#) one of my chief aims. When scientists and trainees from differing backgrounds work together, their unique perspectives and experiences stimulate creativity and innovation, contributing to the excellence of the biomedical research enterprise. Diverse teams are also more likely to ensure that members of underserved populations participate in clinical studies and that the research addresses questions that are meaningful to these communities.

Here are a few examples of recent and ongoing initiatives we have undertaken to diversify the workforce in our scientific research areas and to expand our support of research that addresses health care inequities.

Leveraging Mentorship and Research Experience

Anyone who has benefitted from having a supportive career advisor knows the value of mentorship. In 2021, NIDCD initiated new programs aimed at fostering workforce diversity through the creation of mentoring networks and expanded research opportunities. The programs, which use an [NIH grant mechanism](#) called the R25, are open to a range of experience levels, from undergraduate to early-to-mid-career faculty. Through mentorship from experienced researchers, the program offers mentees the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge and skills and a way to begin building their professional networks.

In addition to mentorship, having a hands-on research experience, even one that lasts just a few months, can spark a lifelong interest in pursuing research. With the goal of setting trainees on a path toward a career in research, the [NIDCD Diversity Scholars Program](#) aims to provide access to

research experiences for qualified applicants from underrepresented groups. The program supplies funding for high school, college, and graduate students; postdoctoral researchers; and eligible faculty members of diverse backgrounds. It is also open to investigators who are or become disabled and who need additional support to continue their research. Our diversity scholars are funded through NIH research supplements, which provide additional funds to an existing grant for a specific purpose.

The NIH R01 Grant: The Foundation for an Independent Research Career

The [NIH R01 grant program](#) is the agency's largest funding mechanism, supporting thousands of researchers across the country and around the world. With funds provided for salaries, equipment, supplies, and travel, an R01 grant can be the foundation of a scientist's research program. In April 2022, we issued an R01 funding opportunity announcement titled [NIDCD Research Opportunities for New Investigators to Promote Workforce Diversity](#). The program is open to early stage and new investigators from diverse backgrounds conducting research in any NIDCD scientific area. Unlike most R01 programs, this one does not require the inclusion of preliminary data in the application. By omitting this requirement, we hope to attract the most innovative proposals from the broadest possible pool of talented scientists.

Advancing Research that Addresses Health Care Disparities and Inequities

Disparities in access to health care and in treatment outcomes occur throughout our health care system, including the area of communication disorders. More research is needed to identify factors that could close the gap in care. To raise awareness of our interest in funding research to level these inequities, NIDCD issued a 2021 Notice of Special Interest titled [NIDCD Health Disparities and Inequities Research](#). These types of notices are designed to alert the broader research community to potential funding within priority areas for the institute.

We have also partnered with another NIH institute, the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, to fund research on structural bias in our mission areas through a funding opportunity titled [Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Structural Racism and Disparities on Minority Health and Health Disparities](#). We recently awarded a grant through this program to a team of scientists studying structural racism and discrimination toward young children with communication disorders. We hope that research findings stemming from these sorts of opportunities contribute to the refinement of health care practices and to policy recommendations that promote equity in care.

Expanding Workforce Diversity and Health Care Disparities Research: An Ongoing Priority at NIDCD

As we prioritize diversity in the communication disorders research workforce, including within our

own institute, and expand our support of health care disparities research, I am pleased to acknowledge our new chief diversity officer, [Cendrine D. Robinson, Ph.D., M.P.H.](#), who joined our leadership team in 2022. Dr. Robinson's role includes directing our ongoing and future diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts and participating in NIH-wide initiatives. Our ultimate goal is to create and maintain a culture of inclusiveness in the communication disorders research community and to erase inequities in health care delivery and treatment outcomes.

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References

Comprehensive Information from NIDCD on Building a Diverse Scientific Workforce.

<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/research/building-diverse-scientific-workforce>

NIDCD Diversity Mentoring Networks and Research Experiences R25 Programs: Frequently Asked Questions. <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/training/R25-diversity-frequently-asked-questions>

Research Supplements to Promote Diversity in Health-Related Research (NIDCD Diversity Scholars). <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-21-071.html>

Funding Opportunity Announcement: NIDCD Research Opportunities for New Investigators to Promote Workforce Diversity. <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-DC-23-001.html>

Notice of Special Interest: NIDCD Health Disparities and Inequities Research.

<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-DC-21-003.html>

Funding Opportunity Announcement: Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Structural Racism and Disparities on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/rfa-md-21-004.html>

Addressing Structural Disparities for Children with Early Communication Disorders.

<https://reporter.nih.gov/search/3YmpPTdfb0WWHidWdpP76A/project-details/10474135>