





Finding the Right Fit:

Programs Foster Student Interest in Health Care, Diversify Future Workforce

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Dr. Stacy Garrett-Ray will always remember the look of joy and wonder on a young girl's face the first time she heard the human heart through a stethoscope. "To let a child listen to your heart, it's a very touching experience," said Garrett-Ray, senior vice president and chief community impact officer for Ascension. The health system's Foundation for Health Equity connects middle schoolers with a day of hands-on health care-related activities through its #GOALS (Go Out and Love Science) program.

The program's hope is simple: to allow more kids from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds to imagine themselves from an early age pursuing careers as doctors, nurses or other health care professionals.

As a Black woman physician, Garrett-Ray is keenly aware that she is an underrepresented demographic in medicine — currently just under 6% of U.S. doctors are Black,¹ even though nearly 14% of the U.S. population is Black.² Similarly, only 7% of American doctors and nurses are Latino, while Hispanic Americans account for roughly 19% of the U.S. population.³

Closing these representation gaps in medicine matters. Studies have repeatedly proven the value of a diverse health care workforce: Patients of color typically report greater trust and satisfac-

tion in their care — as well as better overall health outcomes — when matched with care providers who look like they do.⁴

But waiting to achieve better balance by tracking medical and nursing school enrollment numbers is too late. To effectively fill open jobs with qualified, diversified candidates, hospital administrators are increasingly realizing that they must start reaching kids from a broad range of backgrounds even earlier.

As a result, many Catholic health care systems, like Ascension, now sponsor or host programs aimed at fostering middle and high school students' excitement about medicine as well as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), allowing them ample time to explore career pathways and find the right fit.



Photo by Peter Forest

Dr. Stacy Garrett-Ray, senior vice president and chief community impact officer for Ascension, watches a young girl's face light up as she hears the human heart for the first time through a stethoscope. The health system's #GOALS program connects middle schoolers with a day of hands-on health care-related activities.

“You’ve got to think not just short-term, but also long-term, about how to really address the disparities,” Garrett-Ray said. “It’s got to be an investment that all organizations do together. It’s not just one of us that needs to be doing this in the community. It takes partners to be able to create this and invest in our future ... to ensure that we have sustainable and high-quality care that is reflective of the communities in which we serve.”

JOB SHADOWING

Leaders say one key value of targeted outreach programming lies in its ability to open doors of

possibility — both in terms of higher education and career paths — that students otherwise might not have considered for themselves.

For example, Mercy Health has successfully partnered with Junior Achievement of Northwestern Ohio to offer high school students one-day job shadowing opportunities across its Toledo system footprint.

Students spend the morning following a Mercy staff member in their selected job track, from physicians, nurses, lab or imaging techs, and physical, occupational or speech therapists to administrative and support roles like social work, law



enforcement, facilities maintenance or information technology.

Then, during the afternoon, students visit Mercy College of Ohio in Toledo to learn about educational pathways and potential scholarship opportunities to pursue their fields of interest. Launched in 2022, the program has grown quickly and now serves more than 150 students over four event days each school year.

“One huge upside that we did not anticipate was the energy that these events bring to the employee side,” said Matt Sapara, vice president of business development and advocacy for Bon Secours Mercy Health. “Our employees see how hungry these kids are to learn about opportunities in health care, and it’s a real boost to our staff. We have never had an issue with getting enough volunteers to take these kids in and work a shift with them.”

In Buffalo, New York, Catholic Health offers a similar one-day exploration experience for high school students called Volunteer to Career. Offered two times each school year, the event lets a small group of six to eight students tour multiple hospital units, from the cath lab and radiology unit to surgery and physical therapy.

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“I arrange the tour ahead of time with the various department managers,” explained Lisa Carey, supervisor of volunteer services for Catholic Health. “Each area gets about half an hour with the students, where they will go over the department, what role it plays in our hospital, and how it helps our patients.” At the end of the day, Carey shares information about volunteering or other training opportunities so students can pursue their health care interests.

Sapara believes that exploratory days are critically important, whether they solidify students’ excitement about health care careers or redirect

it elsewhere.

“We have some students who realize from this [job shadowing] event that they actually don’t like the sight of blood. From my perspective, I consider that an equal success,” he said. “In those cases, we’ve eliminated that student running down a path where they may spend a couple of years in college, otherwise, before getting to their clinicals and realizing this isn’t for them.”

CAREER EXPLORATION

In Ripon, Wisconsin, high school senior and certified nursing assistant Payton Ronson starts her day at 6:15 a.m. at SSM Health Ripon Community Hospital, where she works a three-hour shift before completing a full school day at nearby Laconia High School.

“I really like the environment in the emergency department, and the people are great to work with,” Ronson said. “If I don’t feel comfortable doing something, I’m not afraid to say, ‘I don’t know how to do this. Can you help me?’”

Ronson is just one of 60 Wisconsin high school students completing on-site health care training at SSM Health through its partnership with the Wisconsin Youth Apprenticeship Program. Supported by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, the youth apprenticeship allows qualified juniors and seniors to earn high school course credit while completing a paid internship in their chosen career path.

“They’re getting employability skills while they’re getting those academic and classroom skills,” explained

Roderick Nunn, SSM Health’s vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion. “Students end up working 10 to 15 hours per week in our health ministries making \$18 or more per hour. They have the opportunity to learn and earn, and, in the process, consider health care as a long-term career.”

“It’s a refreshing change of pace, in the ER especially, to get these young people on board, to show them what ER medicine is about, and to help them to use those skills,” said Ashley Kolberg, RN, emergency department nurse manager at Ripon Community Hospital.

Emma Hersey, a senior at Lincoln Academy in

Beloit, Wisconsin, is currently serving as an imaging intern with SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital — Janesville. In that role, she spends every other school day at the hospital, where she transports patients for scans, sees their images and gains hands-on experience that has furthered her interest in a radiology career.

"It's been fun to see how everything comes together to get a proper image," Hersey said. "It requires a lot more work than I knew before."

SPARKING EXCITEMENT

According to organizers, part of these programs' power is their ability to tap into students' innate curiosity about science and medicine.

In St. Louis, Mercy's Teens Learning in the Community program offers 50 high school students the chance to spend seven weeks in the summer exploring at least four different health care sectors. Students attend twice-a-week, full-day experiences that include on-site visits and lunch-and-learn sessions with various departments at Mercy Hospital St. Louis. In the process, they come away with a deeper understanding of niche health care careers they may not have heard about before.

During past summers, for example, students have visited the hospital's cancer center and learned about its new proton therapy machine, which uses precise, high-energy proton beams to treat cancer. They have learned about the surgical center's CyberKnife and da Vinci surgical tools, and they've seen firsthand how teams at Mercy Hospital St. Louis' Virtual Care Center use technology to provide telehealth services.

"During another session, we went to our helipad and met with a pilot and a couple of the nurses that work on the life flights [which transport critically ill or injured patients]. The students are always really inspired by getting to hear from people about what they do. It's so great to see these experiences spark something within them about their own plans for their future career," said Sarah Funairole, manager of volunteer and guest services for Mercy Hospital St. Louis.

Ascension's teams work to play up the fun aspects of STEM and health care careers during each #GOALS day, too. Every year, middle school students rotate through hands-on workshops where they experience lessons beyond those possible in a regular school classroom. During recent sessions, kids learned how to close a wound using



Photo courtesy of SSM Health

High school senior Emma Hersey spends every other school day at SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital — Janesville serving as an imaging intern in training offered through the health system's partnered effort with the Wisconsin Youth Apprenticeship Program.

suture practice kits, simulated surgery using a 6-foot Operation game, and performed CPR to the beat of the famous Bee Gees song "Stayin' Alive."

Each year, the #GOALS program buses students from Nashville's Haynes Middle School to Meharry Medical College, also in Nashville, where medical school staff and students, along with Ascension team members, help lead activities.

As a historically Black college, Meharry is responsible for training a large percentage of America's Black doctors and dentists, and organizers with #GOALS say the opportunity for minority students to interact with medical students from similar backgrounds is what sets the program apart.

"It's not that these students have never thought about health care. It is often that someone has actively told them it's not something they should consider [perhaps due to doubts about access or



affordability]. ... And we just want to reverse that narrative,” said Robyn Kress, senior vice president of Ascension Foundation.

Following the success of the annual program in Nashville, Ascension Foundation has partnered with other medical schools to bring #GOALS to other cities on a traveling basis, including Detroit and New Orleans. Before and after each #GOALS session, students are polled to determine how many may want to go into health care. The number always goes up after the event.

At a recent #GOALS session, a seventh-grade boy leaned over to Kress and said, “I’m really good at sutures. I’m going to be a PA [physician assistant] one day.” Kress asked if he had known what a PA was before that day.

“And he said, ‘No, but I’m going to do it.’ And it was just so cool,” Kress recalled.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

Of course, youth outreach programming is just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to filling open jobs across the U.S. health care system. Initiatives to offer job training and placement incen-

tives for college-aged students and working adults are key as well.

Rather than operating such programs independently, most health care systems offer a combination of them.

For example, in addition to its long-standing student outreach, Catholic Health recently launched a new, formal internship focused on nonclinical roles at multiple hospitals throughout its system. The program gives participants a chance to hone marketable job skills during an eight-week, paid internship in areas such as hospital communications, legal support or finance.

“We developed this program to bridge the gap between finding talent for these nonclinical positions, but also the gap that students experience when they graduate of always needing experience in order to land that first job,” said Daniel Castelli, human resources corporate recruiter for Catholic Health.

With funding from a grant through the City of Buffalo, Catholic Health also recently launched a new apprenticeship program for existing employees. Through it, current staff members from



Photo by Matt Andrews

Middle school students learn how to close a wound using suture practice kits during a day of learning through Ascension’s #GOALS program.

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historically underserved ZIP codes can receive paid training toward new, higher-paying career trajectories within the hospital.

“In a paid, controlled environment, we’re letting them actively shadow departments that they have an interest in, such as nursing or radiology, and from there, they’re also doing professional leadership training classes so that they’re learning how to be an effective leader once they start to pursue their new career,” Castelli explained.

Since 2017, CommonSpirit Health has partnered with area community and vocational colleges to offer a range of health apprenticeships open to participants with at least a GED or high school diploma. These positions offer paid, on-the-job training in specialties for which CommonSpirit routinely has open positions, including certified medical assistants, sterile processing technicians and pharmacy technicians.

“Positions were sitting open for months on end, and it was easier for us to expand the population we could recruit from, bring people in, train them and get them certified in six months. In some cases, that was faster than sitting and waiting for someone with that certification to apply,” said Jaime Pearson, CommonSpirit Health’s senior recruiter for workforce development and talent acquisition.

Participants in the program typically attend classes one day a week and spend the other four workdays training in clinic. Their work time is paid, and they receive tuition support to offset the cost of their certification program.

The upside for CommonSpirit: Many apprentices stay on as full-time staff after they complete their training.

“They want to stay with our organization because they see that investment in them and

their growth,” Pearson said. “And the win for us is that once they’re certified, they hit the ground running because they’ve spent six months getting to know our processes and procedures.”

Collectively, hospital systems’ various outreach and training programs recognize that tomorrow’s health care workforce will be stronger — and more diverse — when people of all backgrounds can access a variety of pathways to explore health care as a career.

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NOTES

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