

Addressing Health Disparities by Engaging Institutions

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Few issues cry out for remediation louder than the issue of racial and ethnic disparities in health. The magnitude of these disparities is so great that it has been called the “civil rights issue of the day” – an issue that public health has an obligation to address and remedy (Roach 2003). Schools and programs of public health can and should be a centerpiece in efforts to mobilize communities that can effectively combat racial and ethnic health disparities. When fully engaged, academic public health institutions are primed to provide the leadership necessary to make a difference.

Health is comprised of such a complex set of variables that it is impossible for any one institution alone to adequately address the needs of the public. Therefore, in order to address these disparities, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is encouraging and supporting schools of public health to take on the armor of true engagement and forge partnerships within their communities in the hopes of understanding and addressing racial and ethnic health disparities’ root causes.

In February 2005, the foundation launched a major effort to engage schools of public health on this critical issue, bringing together grantmakers, community leaders, and faculty and recent graduates of schools and programs of public health to begin an open and honest dialogue on how to engage institutions in the work of closing the very real gaps embodied in health disparities. The forum, *Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities: Schools of Public Health Respond as Engaged Institutions* – one of six seminars the foundation sponsored to celebrate its 75th anniversary, drew 163 participants.

THE ENGAGED INSTITUTION

The Kellogg Foundation has long championed the concept of “engaged institutions.” Engaged institutions are those (such as universities and hospitals) that invest in lasting relationships with communities and are viewed by those communities as key partners in building a healthy environment. Relationships between these institutions and their communities create the opportunity to influence, shape, and promote the success of both partners. They are characterized by the sharing of wisdom, power, and accountability, and the investment of each

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stakeholder in the other’s welfare. Engaged institutions reflect these commitments in all aspects of their operations from training to research to service to mission.

The idea of engagement is not a new one. Over its history, the foundation’s work has shown that engaged institutions can be successful in creating sustainable change in the populations that they serve. Through scores of funding initiatives and the development of the model of an engaged institution, the foundation has continually demonstrated its commitment to involving all stakeholders in a community in creating change and promoting social justice.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is a give and take process. Two-way exchanges of information between all community stakeholders are necessary to the achievement of even modest gains in health status. All partners and stakeholders must work together to reach cooperative goals and outcomes, and provide insight and understanding that might not be available in a top-down or authoritarian relationship. Everyone must have a shared sense of urgency for action, and a shared vision of what is possible. Full and true engagement in an issue as deep-seeded as racial and ethnic disparities in health does not happen overnight. It must be nurtured and sustained.

Together with communities, engaged institutions must:

- See their present and future well-being as inextricably linked, with their engagement based on mutual interest and mutual gain.

- Collaboratively plan and design mutually beneficial programs and outcomes, engaging in an intentional process to build a shared vision, design a plan for implementation, hold each other accountable, and determine ways in which all will benefit.
- Engage in reciprocal learning where the community and institution exchange knowledge and wisdom.
- Respect the history, culture, knowledge, and wisdom of the other, recognizing that both are rich repositories of wisdom and experiences, and working together to develop opportunities to gain mutual understanding and trust.
- Create structures that promote open communication and equity with one another, developing mechanisms for effective listening and learning, and allowing both to pay attention to the impact each has on the other's ability to thrive.
- Have high expectations for their performance and involvement with each other. The higher education institution must consider promoting the vitality of its neighborhood and community an essential part of its mission. Community organizations and residents must believe that they have a responsibility to engage with the institution in pursuit of a strong community.
- Value and promote diversity and its role in enhancing learning experiences and social interactions.
- Regularly conduct a joint assessment of their partnership and report results, opening themselves to a shared, formal examination of their progress, and demonstrating a willingness to deal with contentious issues.

ELIMINATING RACIAL AND ETHNIC HEALTH DISPARITIES THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation is looking to the nation's schools and programs of public health to impart the mission of engagement through training, practice, and research, in order to enable students to merge the concern about physical health status with social justice.

The foundation's seminar provided an opportunity to create a shared vision and offered these characteristics of engagement as a roadmap for changes in practice at schools and programs of public health, outlining the conditions of partnership with other community stakeholders and enabling them to employ strategies that recognize the importance of multiple determinants of health in addressing public health issues. The curriculum and expectations for students can be integrated with the mission of engagement, including for those studying health policy and management, international health, epidemiology, child and family health, and environmental health. Adopting these characteristics should create the institutional capacity to engage communities, a process from which the foundation hopes all stakeholders emerge stronger and with a shared vision. In this process, schools and programs of public health may have to make major changes in their own ideas and practices in order to empower communities to help solve problems, create an infrastructure for organized responses, and increase resiliency in the face of future challenges.

The seminar put a spotlight on the process by which community members will become empowered and engaged to tell the public health community what their priority health concerns are, the leverage points for addressing them, and the impacts that they feel most affect their health. Stakeholders, including community members, in an engaged community would have a responsibility to use this information to design interventions and obtain funding directed toward the community-identified issues.

GRANTS THAT SUPPORT ENGAGED INSTITUTIONS

The foundation is also expressing its commitment to addressing disparities through its grantmaking. The foundation has made two major grants to support academic public health efforts to join with communities towards eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities, and to continue the momentum begun at the seminar.

- **Association of Schools of Public Health** – Funding supports the organization's activities geared toward eliminating racial and ethnic disparities by engaging academic leadership (deans and directors) in public health in continued dialogue and action. Leaders are encouraged and equipped to achieve specific goals and benchmarks to reduce these disparities (\$199,999 over 2 years).
- **Community Campus Partnerships for Health** – This technical assistance grant focuses on activities that build the capacity of schools and programs in public health, as well as community partners, to engage in authentic partnerships with the ultimate goal of eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities (\$199,998 over 2 years).

Since the foundation began this specific work in engaged institutions, much has been accomplished. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation will continue to encourage and support engaged institutions on the issues of health and social justice. The foundation also encourages its colleagues – other grantmakers in health – to continue to create a community of engaged institutions and communities, partnered together to make a difference for the people we all hope to serve.

SOURCES

Roach, Ronald, "History's Burden: After decades of neglect, an academic research agenda is being built around health disparities," *Black Issues in Higher Education*, May 8, 2003.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Anne Schwartz, GIH's vice president, at 202.452.8331 or aschwartz@gih.org.