



A new model for postdoctoral training: The Nursing Postdoctoral Program in Cancer and Health Disparities

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ABSTRACT

The University of Massachusetts Boston and Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center joined forces in 2009 to create a Postdoctoral Nursing Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities. In combining the resources of a large university and a research-intensive service institution, the postdoctoral program provides a new model for preparing nurse scientists to conduct independent research that advances nursing knowledge and interdisciplinary understanding of complex health issues. The multifaceted program consists of educational programming, research training, and career planning components. Additionally, each fellow is assigned a nurse scientist mentor and interdisciplinary co-mentor. The mentors support the fellows with scholarly activities and research training and help the fellows craft individualized career plans, including proposals for postfellowship career development research. In this article, the postdoctoral program leaders describe the program structure, strategies used to recruit minority and nonminority candidates, and data describing program outcomes and share lessons learned and recommendations for organizations that may be interested in establishing similar postdoctoral fellowships at their institutions.

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Nursing research is critical to advancing nursing knowledge and practice and enhancing multidisciplinary understanding of health, wellness, and care across the continuum of disease ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing \[AACN\], 2006](#); [Sigmon & Grady, 2001](#)). For nursing to remain at the forefront of new knowledge development, the ranks of

nurse scientists capable of conducting independent research must be continually developed and expanded. One key to this expansion is the postdoctoral fellowship. Effective postdoctoral programs build on foundational skills and knowledge acquired through doctoral studies and provide new nurse scientists with concentrated time, resources, and support required to

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advance research skills and launch and sustain independent research careers (Conn, 2005; Wood, 2002; Wysocki, 1998). Evidence of the effectiveness of postdoctoral training is provided by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute for Nursing Research (NINR). In 2001, NINR, the major funder of nursing postdoctoral training in the United States, reported that nurses who complete an NINR-supported postdoctoral program are more successful in obtaining future research grant funding than peers who apply but do not complete such training (Sigmon & Grady, 2001). Similarly, researchers examining successful and unsuccessful applications for NIH postdoctoral training grants determined that receiving an NIH postdoctoral fellowship leads to approximately one additional publication over the next 5 years and noted that this reflected a 20% increase in research productivity (Jacob & Lefgren, 2011).

Recognizing the importance of postdoctoral programs, the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB) and the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center (DF/HCC) joined forces in 2009 to develop a postdoctoral nursing fellowship to prepare nurses to conduct independent research in cancer and health disparities. Supported in part by a U54 grant from the National Cancer Institute (grant number 1 U54CA156732), the postdoctoral program provides nurse fellows with a comprehensive training experience that includes educational, research training, and career planning components and individualized mentoring by nurse scientist and interdisciplinary research mentors. To accommodate junior nursing faculty and other recent graduates who may have competing obligations, the program offers two options for completion: a traditional option in which fellows participate in the fellowship full-time and complete all requirements in 1 to 2 years and a nontraditional option that allows completion over three consecutive summers.

The Postdoctoral Nursing Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities was designed to address several critical gaps in nursing research and research training. These include the shortfall in available nursing postdoctoral fellowships (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011; Sigmon & Grady, 2001), minority underrepresentation among nurse researchers (AACN, 2010), and the need for more nursing research and knowledge development in cancer and health disparities (Underwood, Powe, Canales, Meade, & Im, 2004). Over the years, nurse leaders, faculty, and scientists have repeatedly cited the need for increasing nursing postdoctoral opportunities (Conn, 2005; IOM, 2011; Sigmon & Grady, 2001; Wood, 2002) and the number of nurse researchers from minority backgrounds (AACN Task Force on the Research-Focused Doctorate in Nursing, 2010; Johnson Rowsey, Kneipp, & Woods-Giscombe, 2013; Wallen, Rivera-Goba, Hastings, Peragallo, & DeLeon Siantz, 2005). In 2008, when UMB and DF/HCC proposed developing the program, there were only 60 NINR-funded postdoctoral training positions available

to nurses, 17 fewer than in 2003 (National Research Council, 2011). Additionally, in 2010, Blacks accounted for only 3.0% of postdoctoral fellows in health, science, and engineering fields, and Latinos accounted for only 3.9% (Einaudi, Heuer, & Green, 2013). The Postdoctoral Nursing Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities sought to improve the statistics in both of these areas by supporting up to four postdoctoral fellows in the program's first 3 years and filling at least half the available positions with nurses from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.

Understanding and eliminating disparities related to health care access, cancer, and other diseases is a primary goal of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011), the National Cancer Institute (NCI, n.d.), and NINR (2011). The opportunity for nurse researchers to play a larger role in identifying and understanding factors associated with cancer disparities was highlighted by a review of nursing research published in 2004 in which the authors acknowledged the contributions of nurse researchers but concluded that nurses needed to "further expand and strengthen the knowledge base" in this area (Underwood et al., 2004, p. 217). By harnessing the resources available at UMB and DF/HCC, the Postdoctoral Nursing Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities offers nurses with a research doctorate a unique opportunity to obtain the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to help lead research efforts in this important area.

Background

The Postdoctoral Nursing Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities builds on a number of distinctive assets and strengths offered by the founding institutions. UMB is the only public university in New England that is recognized by the NIH as a minority-serving institution. The diversity of its student body is evident in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences (CNHS) where 30% of the approximately 1,600 students enrolled in the college's nursing programs are from racial or ethnic minority groups. Among the college's strengths is the PhD program in nursing, which offers concentrations in population health and health policy that prepare graduates to play leadership roles in addressing population health concerns as policy analysts, researchers, and educators.

DF/HCC is an NCI-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center that includes Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI) and four other hospitals affiliated with Harvard Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health. Representing more than 1,000 researchers and \$600 million in annual cancer-related grants, the institutions that make up DF/HCC offer an unparalleled breadth and depth of cancer research and training opportunities for developing nurse scientists. Of particular note is the Phyllis F. Cantor Center for Research in Nursing and Patient Care Services (Cantor

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