

Examining the Potential for Implementation of a Research Staff Workforce Career Pathway

Nancy Pandhi, MD, MPH, PhD, Director, Clinical Translational Sciences Center, Professor and Associate Chair, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of New Mexico

Mentor: Tassy Parker, PhD, RN, Director, Center for Native American Health, Professor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of New Mexico

Sponsor: Dean Patricia Finn, University of New Mexico School of Medicine

Background/Significance: The University of New Mexico Clinical Translational Sciences Center (CTSC) has experienced difficulty filling entry-level research staff positions. Discussions with other nodes in our consortium indicates this problem is common, and was exacerbated during the pandemic. A potential solution is to increase exposure to this career trajectory among novel student audiences including those at community colleges. As an added benefit, this approach could potentially expand scientific awareness in diverse communities.

Purpose: To understand the potential for building a research staff pathway program at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center. This pathway would be constructed through partnerships with external educational entities, particularly community colleges.

Methods: The Practical Implementation and Sustainability Model (PRISM), an implementation science approach for intervention development and evaluation, was used as a framework. A semi-structured interview guide was developed in order to query about environmental factors such as financial incentives or disincentives, policies and regulations, and necessary infrastructure and resources. Individual and group key information interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholders internal and external to the institution. A snowball sampling technique were employed to identify participants. Interviews were sought with workforce specialists, economic developers, external CTSC leaders, internal research center leaders, faculty education leaders and research staff managers. Notes were taken and reviewed in an iterative fashion to extract potential implementation factors for further consideration.

Results: Based on 16 interviews, the list of barriers included: a lack of clear mapping between Associate Degree types and research workforce positions; perceived reluctance of local leadership to develop new programs; a need for virtual participation; a need for financial remuneration to offset the ability for part time work; perceived competition between the goals of the university and community colleges; difficulties with identifying individuals who will be successful; program development fatigue in the face of limited resources; and regulatory restrictions on observing research interactions. Facilitators included: Unanimous buy in and support for the need to diversity the research workforce; several staff indicating willingness to participate in developing and implementing this program, even if added to their existing workload. If resources were obtained, community college faculty indicated willingness to partner at a grassroots level as a demonstration project. Several additional opportunities that were suggested included expanding the focus to include high school students, partnership with nursing to consider this as a pathway for those denied admission, and legislative funding given alignment with state workforce goals.

Discussion and conclusions: At the UNM there is significant enthusiasm for a research workforce pathway and multiple staff and faculty are interested the design and implementation process. However, structural and environmental factors will need to be addressed to ensure success, including modification of the type of participants and procuring additional resources.