

Scholarships Targeting Diversity and Inclusion: A Student's Experience at Plastic Surgery the Meeting 2021

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There is increasing evidence that communication and shared decision-making is improved for minority patients when they receive treatment from a provider of a similar cultural background.¹ Despite this growing evidence, most surgical specialties lack sufficient ethnic and racial diversity among their providers.

The AAMC defined those physicians that self-identify as Black, Latino, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander as ethnically under-represented in medicine (UIM).² Although the aforementioned groups comprise more than 40% of the US population, UIM surgeons comprise just 8.6% of academic plastic surgery faculty, combined.³ Of heightened concern is that UIM representation has been near stagnant over the last decade, with no appreciable progress made.³ These alarming statistics combined with increasing match competitiveness leaves UIM students with disproportionately staggering odds of entering the field.

Although a tremendous amount of programmatic efforts will be necessary to create a plastic surgery workforce more reflective of the patient population, several organizations within the field have initiated tangible efforts. One such organization is the Arthur L. Garnes Society. This society, named in honor of the first board-certified Black plastic surgeon, has been endorsed by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and was created to foster mentorship, collaboration, and fellowship among Black and other UIM plastic surgeons. This year the Garnes Society, with financial support from Mentor Worldwide LLC and Allergan Aesthetics, an Abbvie company, selected eight students for their inaugural class of scholarship recipients to attend the 2021 ASPS Plastic Surgery the Meeting in Atlanta. The scholarship aimed to offset the financial burden experienced by students when attending national conferences.

As one of the medical students fortunate enough to be chosen for this honor, the opportunity to represent UIM students at the largest international plastic surgery meeting was both exciting and humbling. The scholarship made possible the ability to present research, participate in hands-on workshops such as facial sculpting and cleft lip repairs, and gain exposure to and learn from well-respected leaders within the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) space. The latter composed of a one-on-one networking reception followed by a diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused panel discussion titled Opening the Pipeline for Diversity in Plastic Surgery. At sessions like these, panelists emphasized that the biggest bottleneck for UIM learners existed between medical school and residency. A recurring theme was the importance of early specialty exposure and expansion of educational opportunities. The literature reflects the development of meaningful mentor-mentee relationships as often not occurring until third or fourth year of medical school.⁴ Unfortunately for some, that may be too late. Implementing early hands-on workshops and mentorship pipeline programs are two possible mechanisms to help mitigate misinformation, raise awareness, and prepare confident learners at an early stage.

By 2045, non-Hispanic whites are no longer projected to comprise the majority of the US population as predicted by the US Census Bureau.⁵ As a result, scholarships and initiatives like these are vital to increasing visibility of UIM students, helping remedy historical inequities, and diversifying our workforce toward a cohort more reflective of our patient population.

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Received for publication November 20, 2021; accepted December 3, 2021.

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Plast Reconstr Surg Glob Open 2022;10:e4091; doi: 10.1097/GOX.0000000000004091; Published online 9 February 2022.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is endorsed jointly by the Arthur L. Garnes Society and the ASPS D&I committee.

DISCLOSURE

Dr. Butler is chair of the American Society of Plastic Surgery's (ASPS) Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Committee. Dr. Butler is also a consultant for Mentor Worldwide LLC. The other authors have no financial interest or otherwise to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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