A more diverse biomedical and healthcare workforce is within our reach
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Providers and healthcare companies are more aware than ever of the value of having a diverse and inclusive workforce. But they cannot simply post a job opening and hope applicants from underrepresented groups show up at their doorstep, especially at a time when skilled workers are in high demand and in short supply. Leaders need to go further upstream and play an active role in encouraging people from all backgrounds to pursue careers in biomedicine and healthcare.

Colleges and universities like ours have been working hard to expand the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) pipeline to include students who have traditionally been underrepresented in these fields. But we cannot do it alone. We need industry partners.

Less than 15% of Americans graduating with a Ph.D. in biological and biomedical sciences and about 19% of Americans graduating with an M.D. are Black, Hispanic or Native American, even though those groups together make up more than 30% of the U.S. population. Many of these graduates go into biomedical research, a field where only 2% of the scientists are Black and 6% are Hispanic or another (non-Asian) race.

Biomedical research often reflects the people who conduct it, fund it and set the agenda for it. Genetic studies and reference genomes are dominated by DNA from people with European ancestry. More than three-quarters of participants in clinical trials for new drugs are white. The entrenched biases in the research landscape contribute to a healthcare system that doesn't always work as well for people of color as it does for white people. For example, some medications tested primarily on white patients have later been found to be less effective or even harmful for people of color.

If we want medical innovations that work for everyone, we must expand the talent pool of researchers shaping the healthcare advances of tomorrow. As our population diversifies and markets grow ever more global, American companies will struggle to compete without a diverse STEM workforce.

We need biomedical and healthcare leaders to partner with colleges and universities, where their future workforce is being trained. Corporations can lend their scientists for guest lectures or visiting professor positions to educate and excite a wide range of students about opportunities in care delivery and research. Internships and training programs help companies develop strong relationships with underrepresented students before they go on the job market. On-campus job fairs and site visits to companies can expose future scientists to career opportunities beyond their existing networks.

At North Carolina Central University, a predominantly Black university, industry partnerships have been essential to efforts to channel Black students into biomedical careers. The university's Clinical Research Sciences Program prepares undergraduates for jobs conducting research in labs and coordinating clinical trials. Partnerships with local pharma and biotech companies

ensure the curriculum is relevant to industry needs, facilitate mentoring for students and create a pipeline of opportunities when students graduate.

Companies should evaluate existing engagements with nearby colleges and universities to incorporate a strategic focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. They should seek out additional opportunities to collaborate with historically Black colleges and universities and similar institutions. For example, pharmaceutical company Bristol Myers Squibb partners with the United Negro College Fund to provide post-doctoral fellowships to promising students in the life sciences.

Industry groups and local economic development agencies also play an important role. They can build infrastructure linking industry and higher education and make investments in the local workforce that go beyond what any single organization can do. For example, the North Carolina Biotechnology Center spearheads initiatives like OpenDoors, an outreach program launched by a collective of local biotech companies to recruit Black, Latino and Native American scientists to the area.

Healthcare leaders must recognize higher education and the next generation of scientists as resources worth investing in. Cultivating a diverse and inclusive workforce is increasingly critical to any organization's success and to the overall health and prosperity of our nation.

Universities and sports franchises spend a lot of resources scouting for and cultivating the best athletes. What if we spent the same amount of energy seeking out the most promising clinicians, scientists and engineers from all backgrounds and supported them into careers that can transform the nation's future? It's within our reach.

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