

# Training Undergraduate Nursing Students for HEALTH DISPARITY RESEARCH IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

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The elimination of health disparities in the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) is a major goal of Healthy Virgin Islands 2010: Improving Health for All, the territory's response to the nation's health initiatives for the first decade of the 21st century. Intervention strategies that might be used to reduce or eliminate health disparities in the USVI at the individual (patient/client/family), provider of care, or system level must be evidence-based. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research that has focused on factors in the territory that interact to create such disparities. The Division of Nursing Education at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), which offers a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree program, is a stakeholder in the quality of life and the level of health care enjoyed by the residents of the territory.

A number of initiatives were undertaken by the BSN program to stimulate student interest in health disparity research as one means for achieving the goals of Healthy Virgin Islands 2010. One initiative implemented at the junior level focused on analysis of national and territorial data to increase student awareness of health disparities. This resulted in student-designed, face-to-face, data-driven consumer education programs related to major health disparities. Emphasis was also placed on the role of the professional nurse in spearheading initiatives for motivating clients to take responsibility for self-management for risk reduction, early detection, and decreased morbidity and mortality related to health disparities.

Another initiative included strategies to foster student conceptualization of themselves as future researchers in health disparities. Through a competitive grant (R24MD001123), the Division of Nursing Education was funded by the National Institutes of Health/National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities to develop the Caribbean EXPORT Center for Health Disparities. A major outcome of this Center is a developing infrastructure to support research projects aimed at understanding and eventually eliminating disparities in health status in the USVI. Through the EXPORT Center, students received additional training in frameworks for evidence-based nursing practice, health disparities in cancer, protection of human research participants, and practice in data collection with interview schedules that were used in exploratory studies funded by the Caribbean EXPORT Center. The training sessions included active and candid critique of the training process and the data collec-

tion tools by the students. Incorporation of student ideas in the final tools was a critical component of the stated goal of helping students to envision themselves as future researchers. Upon completion of the training, interested students were employed as Research Assistants in exploratory studies on diabetes and breast cancer risk.

Further socialization of students for the role of future researchers included their active participation in the activities of the EXPORT Center. These activities were designed to increase their knowledge base in health disparities and to foster networking with nationally recognized researchers and program and policy experts. For example, students authored poster presentations and contributed to faculty poster presentations at the EXPORT Center's annual Health Disparities Institutes. Another empowering activity was the citation of students as contributors in Underwood, S., Ramsay-Johnson, E.M., Callwood, G., Evans, E.E., et al. (2007). Promoting Breast Health Among Women in the U.S. Virgin Islands: A Focused Study of the Needs of Caribbean Women. *The Journal of the National Black Nurses Association* 18 (2): 53-62. Attendance at the 36th Annual Institute and Conference of the National Black Nurses Association in Las Vegas in 2008 was a capstone event for these undergraduate student Research Assistants. This provided additional opportunities for networking with nurse researchers and other nurse leaders.

The success of this approach to promoting undergraduate student interest in health disparity research is reflected in the following comments from graduates of the BSN program at UVI who were trained and employed as Research Assistants for exploratory research studies in health disparities in the United States Virgin Islands. "I have made a significant contribution to my community in the area of nursing research while broadening my horizons and making more people aware of the importance of nursing research" (D. Williams). "I am happy that we participated in the research because ... (it) taught me ... how I, as a Registered Nurse, can make a difference by participating" (C. Scotland-Brooks). "...I realized how vital nursing research really is and that there is a profound need for more research to be done locally" (C. Hanley-Caban).

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