



Channeling Our Legacy into Our Future: The Importance of the MCH Pipeline Training Program

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Abstract

The MCH Pipeline Program, created in 2006, creates an important opportunity to identify and encourage undergraduate students from underrepresented populations to consider career paths in maternal and child health. These programs provide didactic instruction, experiential learning, and mentorship to a diverse group of young scholars in order to both enhance their opportunities to pursue graduate or professional degree training in the myriad professions that make up the MCH workforce and to provide them with essential grounding in the history, context and mission of MCH. The leaders of the funded programs meet periodically to exchange ideas; on this occasion, the author was asked to address the group responding to the question “what knowledge or skills are critical for emerging undergraduate scholars?”. Placing these programs squarely in their historical context, her remarks are provided here to encourage others to consider developing programs for undergraduate students who may be enlisted to join the MCH profession.

Keywords Pipeline programs · MCH workforce development

Significance

These programs identify and encourage undergraduates from diverse backgrounds to join the MCH profession and prepare them through classroom and experiential learning coupled with intense mentoring. Many trainees pursue graduate or professional training and contribute to the MCH workforce. Other programs could adopt similar strategies to reach more emerging scholars and instill them with MCH knowledge, skills and values.

Introduction

Like many elements of the modern maternal and child health effort in the United States, MCH workforce development has deep historical roots. The pioneering women who championed the creation of an organized federal response to the needs of children during the Progressive Era recognized that they also needed to create training opportunities to support

the development of a cadre of professionals to be deployed across the nation in pursuit of their vision. Some of the earliest educational programs in child welfare and public health nursing were supported by the Children’s Bureau in the US Department of Labor (US Department of Health and Human Services n.d.; Maternal and Child Health Bureau n.d.) In subsequent years, what eventually became the Maternal and Child Health Bureau in the US Department of Health and Human Services expanded the scope of funded training programs in support of maternal and child health initiatives to include pediatric subspecialties, adolescent medicine, nutrition and public health (Health Resources and Services Administration n.d.). The Bureau has also sought to stimulate interest in these advanced training opportunities by supporting post-secondary programs including, most recently, an MCH Pipeline Training Program. Created in 2006, the MCH Pipeline Training Program not only seeks to inspire undergraduate students to consider careers in maternal and child health but it also “promotes a culturally diverse health care workforce by recruiting undergraduate students from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds into MCH professions” (Kuo et al. 2015; Reddy 2016). These programs are characterized by their attention to didactic and experiential learning coupled with mentorship and appear to be successful in promoting the program goals of

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encouraging undergraduate students from underrepresented groups to pursue MCH careers (Pizur-Varnekow et al. 2010; Guerrero et al. 2015). In 2016 (the last year for which data are available) 463 individuals were prepared through pipeline programs, to enter the workforce or to further their education in professional or graduate programs, in maternal and child health (Reddy 2016). Currently, six universities host MCH Pipeline Training Programs including the University of South Florida.

The following observations were shared by the author at a gathering of the representatives of these programs in response to the question “what knowledge or skills are critical for emerging undergraduate scholars?” They are offered here for others interested in encouraging ever-younger people to consider joining this cadre of professionals and giving them the means to pursue the vision of Maternal and Child Health.

Columbia Restaurant, Tampa, Florida: January 31, 2019

I am glad to be with you tonight, to welcome you to Tampa and to encourage you to continue the important work you are doing in nourishing young scholars in what are called “pipeline programs”. I love words, so I looked up the definition of the word “pipeline”. Beyond being a “line of pipe with pumps, valves and control devices for conveying liquids, gases or finely divided solids”, the word also refers to “a direct channel of communication; a process or channel of supply; a state of development, preparation of production, also, the system for such processes; a course of individual advancement or development, especially to fill organizational needs” (Merriam-Webster n.d.)

Contemplating these definitions, it occurs to me that we are, all of us, engaged in channeling information and channeling a supply, which is itself in a state of development or preparation toward advancement or development to fill organizational needs, in this case, the needs of the system that exists to promote and protect the future of the nation—maternal and child health.

Many of you have heard me speak before so you know I love to reflect on our origins and I seem to get worse as I get older because every year, more and more of our history was lived by me—so I’m now a witness to history in addition to being a scholar of it, which makes me a sort of pipeline myself, traversing the past and bringing it to new life in the future.

I’m speaking of course about the founders and the leaders of the movement that resulted in the creation of the Children’s Bureau in 1912, the first cabinet level agency devoted to children’s interests in the world (Department of Health and Human Services 2012 n.d.). It will forever be amazing to me that a group of women—motivated by

the same conditions in the various urban centers in which they found themselves—saw a movement growing and jumped on it. I believe they were the original pipelines! They observed, they connected, they listened, and they acted. They conveyed as information to decision-makers the wisdom of the families and the communities they experienced and encountered. They offered a supply channel of processes that could address the conditions these families faced and make the nation stronger. They created a pipeline for the nation’s children and families direct to the seat of power and used it to create the longest-lasting publicly funded program in our nation’s history (Maternal and Child Health Bureau n.d.).

They intuitively knew the power of data, what we now call the evidence-base, and used it to create a steady drip of information that could not be ignored. They embarked on an incredible array of studies on a vast array of topics and when they couldn’t find the data they needed to do the studies, they created the data bases themselves, many of which are still in place today. They put in motion the idea that the federal government needed to partner with the states to realize the aspirations they had for the nation’s families: that there would be a locus of responsibility in every state, with a watchful eye, making sure the interests of the nation in raising healthy, strong and productive children would be realized. They produced wildly popular educational materials and they received letters from people all over the country asking for information or for help and they channeled that pipeline back to the halls of Congress and demanded that a permanent response capability be built.

And, just as they did in all their endeavors, when they realized there was insufficient person-power in each state to do these jobs, they created training programs—initially for public health nurses and child welfare workers but later, for a vast network of pipelines preparing the social workers, the nutritionists, the physical therapists, the obstetricians and the pediatricians and even public health experts who would provide the care, organize the communities, connect the systems and provide the leadership that was critical to this nascent effort.

In short, they created pipelines of information, pipelines of ideas, pipelines of solutions, pipelines of professionals.

And as the programs grew and our collective experience grew, we learned we needed other kinds of professionals as well—therapists and case managers, data analysts and epidemiologists, health economists and policy experts, and, later, doula and community health workers and navigators and coaches. And always, always, we go back to the original pipeline, the one that begins within the community and our responsibility to observe, connect, listen and act.

Now, ultimately, it is in how we inspire the next generation to engage in this work that we will truly fulfill the promise of the pipeline.

Thanks to the foresight and creativity of the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau, we now have available the resources to provide specific and intense focus to undergraduates who have expressed some interest in or curiosity about this field we call maternal and child health. The young students I have had the pleasure to meet over the years come from many different pipelines and have many pathways from which they could choose. Many are still exploring while some know exactly what they (think) they want to do.

We help guide them of course, but more importantly, we give them a grounding, a perspective, a context so that they know their work will matter. That it will be part of something much bigger, much bolder and grander, something along the great arc of our history that began in the tenement houses of New York and Chicago and today still seeks to create a better world and a better future for our children.

So, what does all of this mean for those of us who are working with bright talented people, with all the urgent passions of youth, who seek the opportunity to take on these challenges and make the world a better place? Beyond foundational knowledge, basic skills and a sense of the possibilities, what should our programs be instilling in our students to promote their success?

- First, passion for the work and compassion for how hard it is.
- Second, mastery in design thinking, systems thinking and critical thinking.
- Third, self-sufficiency, self-motivation and an intrinsic expectation to be engaged in life-long learning.
- Fourth, a deep appreciation for the role of leadership as change management and a courageous willingness to change.
- Fifth, a strategic, tactical and fearless approach to advocacy.
- Sixth, respect for other professions and the communities we serve, and humility—coupled with the ability to step aside when other’s needs are more pressing than our own.
- Last, exquisite communication skills, ideally in multiple languages, but practically in the ability to modulate language and tone to suit the topic and the audience in a way that is accessible, authentic and not patronizing.

I would add in closing, that I believe those of us who are privileged to house the MCH Pipeline Training Programs, which provide intense learning opportunities to a few motivated students, need also to view ourselves as conduits to a much larger pipeline—the pipeline of future citizens

represented in the populations of undergraduate students. All of us in public health but especially those of us in maternal and child health should seek every opportunity to educate these future consumers. Think about it—at the undergraduate level but especially at the K-12 level the more educated consumers we can produce, the easier it should be to work on social determinants and critical infrastructure at the highest levels of policy. We shouldn’t have to explain why systems need to work together, we shouldn’t have to defend science and we shouldn’t have to march in the streets for health equity and basic human rights. These things should just be understood. We have enough hard work to keep all of us busy and provide job security for generations. Pipeline programs are an important innovation in our training portfolio and one that would make our foremothers proud. Congratulations and best wishes for your continued success.

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