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How a new American Cancer Society program is giving underrepresented learners exposure to cancer research

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2022 DICR Intern, Emory University

By Laura Newpoff - Contributor
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RECOMMENDED

IN THIS ARTICLE

Before the creation of a new program of the [American Cancer Society \(ACS\)](#), Carmela Sambells dreamt of becoming a doctor, but never truly believed it could be possible.

“It was merely that - a dream; the center of my vision boards, the topic in my journals,” she recently wrote in a letter to ACS. “However, through the doors opened, the peers introduced, and the guidance of new mentors, my future career in medicine transformed from an insurmountable idea to an approachable goal. It is an understatement to say that this program has expanded my world beyond what I could imagine.”

The [premedical student](#) at the University of Maryland is referring to a pilot program that predated the [launch of the Center for Diversity in Cancer Research Training \(DICR\)](#) in February.

The new center will supplement the traditional academic journey, focusing on meeting potential researchers where they are and helping them overcome barriers to future success. Initial programming will support underrepresented high school, college and post-baccalaureate students and include exposure to oncology and cancer research as a career; mentorship; hands-on research experiences; and career development. The aim is to increase efforts to recruit and nurture individuals from diverse backgrounds within scientific and clinical training environments.

As a 2022 intern, Sambells received her first exposure to biochemical laboratory techniques and was able to shadow and be mentored by physicians at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

“By working in the laboratory setting, completing rounds at UMMC and even just sharing meals and attending seminars with other undergraduate students and MD/MD Ph.D. candidates, my community in the field expanded beyond what I thought could be possible,” Sambells wrote. “I continue to speak with these wonderful mentors and medical students today; and this could not have been possible without the ACS-DICR program allowing me to enter these spaces.”

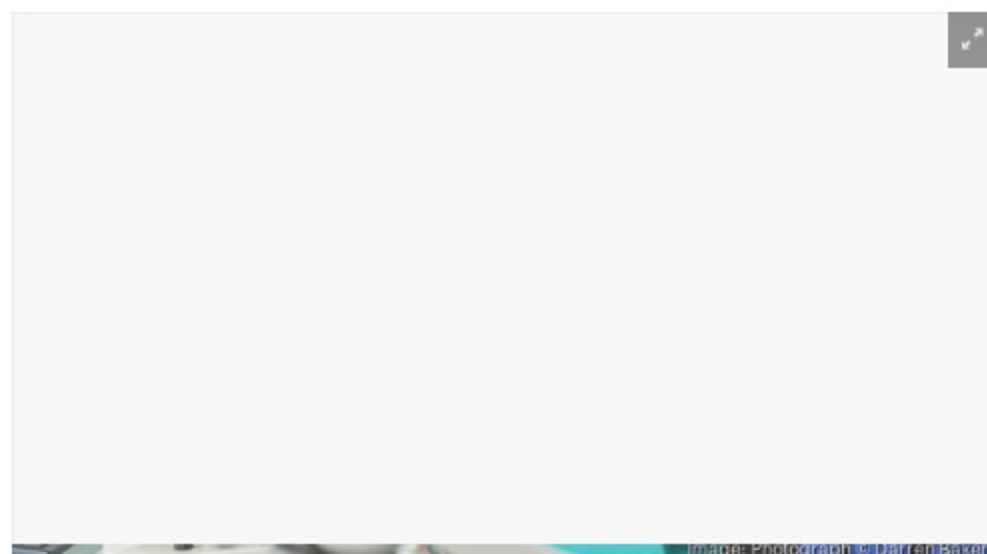
A need for diverse representation

The new initiative demonstrates how the American Cancer Society is working to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. The organization’s mission is to improve the lives of people with cancer and their families through advocacy, research, and patient support to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. Over the last 110 years, ACS has become a leading cancer-fighting organization, touching 55 million lives each year and contributing to 3.8 million fewer cancer deaths since 1991.

The thinking behind the new center dates to 2019, when the American Cancer Society recognized a [documented disparity](#) in National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant application pools. The number of [grant applications](#), which serve as a catalyzing milestone in the careers of many research scientists, was just 2% and 4%, respectively, for Black and Latino scientists.

At the same time, communities that bear a disproportionate burden of cancer diagnoses continue to be underrepresented in the cancer research workforce. ACS believes diversity in science is critical because it invigorates problem-solving, drives innovation, and better equips the scientific community to address inequities that exist in cancer prevention, treatment and care.

The spectrum of programs within The Center include the Summer Health Experience (SHE) available to high school female students to learn about cancer careers and develop leadership skills, the DICR Internship Program hosting undergrad interns for a hands-on research experience, and the Post-Baccalaureate Fellows Program helping post-baccalaureate students prepare to apply for their PhD. Specifics for all three programs can be found [here](#).



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“We want students to feel like they belong at the table,” said Dr. Ellie Daniels, senior vice president for the ACS Center for Diversity in Cancer Research Training. “In addition to interacting with investigators as the research is carried out, participants also are exposed to what it takes to move that science forward in terms of presentations, publications and how findings from research are utilized for subsequent research.”

Innovative partnerships and growing the program

Over the next 10 years, ACS plans to continue growing the program, both in the number of institutions that host the programs and the number of students who can participate. By inspiring young people to pursue careers in the sciences, their goal is to cultivate a pipeline of talent and diversity for the next generation of cancer researchers.

To achieve this, ACS counts on philanthropic support and innovative corporate partnerships to continue what Daniels calls “not a moment, but a movement” to sustain and grow these types of programs.

One partner working with the organization to address barriers and help improve outcomes is Merck, a global health care company that delivers health solutions through prescription medicines, vaccines, biologic therapies and animal health products.

[Merck partners with ACS](#) on various initiatives and supports the new training program.

“Our company’s core mission is to discover and develop medicines and vaccines that improve and prolong the lives of individuals around the world,” said Dr. Sean Curtis, Merck’s senior vice president, global regulatory affairs and clinical safety and quality assurance. “A key therapeutic area of focus for this mission is oncology, where we have significant and sustained efforts in cancer research, diagnosis, treatment, and to ensure equitable access to our cancer treatments. Another key focus for Merck is developing scientific talent, both for our own laboratories and for the broader scientific community.”

Merck believes the new program has many benefits, he said.

“Its focus on supporting career development for cancer researchers, and specifically on underrepresented groups, will help ensure the scientific workforce of the future is increasingly diverse, which can drive more innovative thinking and equity in the workplace, and hopefully help address disparities in access to treatment,” Curtis said. “ACS, specifically through this career development program, is helping drive change and Merck applauds these efforts.”

Partnerships with companies like Merck that employ scientists, data scientists, informatics specialists and other professionals can help the new program broaden its diversity of disciplines and “allow students to see in the staff at Merck what they could aspire to be,” Daniels said.

“These innovative partnerships open up the doors to larger possibilities,” she said. “Our interns may be able to take the second year of their internship to see a different segment of the research base in industry. It also exposes the corporate partner to future talent at a time when the talent pool is limited. And access to underrepresented minorities helps with their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. For the interns and the company, it’s a win-win.”

As exposure to the field of cancer research grows, it is hoped more people like Sambells will come into its workforce continuum as cancer researchers; clinicians; laboratory workers; and data, behavior and population scientists.

“I am more motivated than ever to dream bigger - to explore options of surgery, research, or public health studies - and work even harder to reach them,” Sambells wrote. “A sector that I once believed I had to change myself to fit into, I have now realized has had a spot for me all along.”

Business leaders who want to learn more about partnering with the trusted leader in saving lives from cancer to create a community impact and drive the bottom line can visit [cancer.org/about-us/our-partners/become-a-partner.html](#).

Laura Newpoff is a freelance writer with The Business Journals Content Studio.

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