



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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**ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION AWARDS PROJECT L/EARN
\$2.95 MILLION TO INCREASE DIVERSITY IN FUTURE HEALTH RESEARCH**

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has awarded a six-year, \$2.95 million grant to continue support for Rutgers University’s Project L/EARN, an intensive summer research training internship for undergraduate students from groups that have been under-represented in graduate schools and health research careers. With the new funding, Bloustein School Professor Jane Miller will assume the Faculty Directorship from Professor Peter Guarnaccia, serving as co-director starting in 2009.

Project L/EARN is housed at the Rutgers Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research (IHHCPAR), an interdisciplinary health research institute that has provided faculty mentors for the program, including health policy expert Joel Cantor, eminent health psychologist Howard Leventhal, and health economist Louise Russell (an early co-director of the program.)

According to Project L/EARN Director Diane Davis, the share of low-income students, first generation college-attendees, and members of certain ethnic and cultural groups in health research is far below their representation in the general population.

“The project aims to broaden the range of ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic perspectives,” she said. “Members of disadvantaged communities experience higher rates of health problems and worse access to health care, and it is important to include their viewpoints in research and policy about health and health disparities.”

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For instance, a recent intern had health insurance through the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which provides coverage for children in low- to moderate-income families, until she "aged-out" on her 19th birthday. That experience gave her important insight into the rising lack of health insurance among young adults, which she studied for her summer project, and which gave other interns a better understanding and appreciation of the importance of SCHIP.

In the 17 years since its founding, Project L/EARN has helped dozens of students enroll in graduate schools and launch successful careers in health research and academia in fields such as public health, psychology, social work, medical sociology, health law, and medicine. To date, 52 Project L/EARN interns have earned or are working on master's degrees, and 37 are completing or are working on doctorates.

Many students enter the program unaware of the career possibilities in health research or lacking the skills to undertake such careers. During Project L/EARN, they work closely with top-ranked faculty, conducting hands-on work on their mentor's research while receiving rigorous training in research methods, statistics, ethics, and writing.

Until Jeffrey Gonzalez participated in Project L/EARN in 1997, he had worked low wage jobs to help pay his way through Rutgers and did not have a clear idea about how to pursue his interests in psychology and health beyond college. For his internship project with faculty mentors Gretchen Chapman and Howard Leventhal, he studied how patient expectations and preferences related to their health decisions. Thus began a collaborative research relationship with Dr. Leventhal that continues today.

The first in his family to attend college, Gonzalez went on to earn a doctoral degree from the University of Miami, completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard Medical School, and is now an Instructor at Harvard and a staff psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital. With two dozen research publications to his name, he will begin a tenure track faculty position at Yeshiva University in their Graduate School of Psychology and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the fall. He credits Project L/EARN as the single most important experience in college for getting him where he is today.

“The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to increasing the diversity of individuals and perspectives in health services research to better serve the health needs of our country,” said Lori Melichar, Senior Program Officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Project L/EARN is helping us meet this goal.”

Project L/EARN recruits interns from a range of disciplines including economics, political science, psychology, public health, public policy, social work and sociology. Interns’ research topics have included such areas as chronic illness, mental health, access to health care, children’s health, and obesity.

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