Diversity in Cancer Research Internship Program Launches

The American Cancer Society (ACS) helped fund the Sylvester program for undergraduate college students from underrepresented communities.

University of Miami premed student and DICR intern Dylan Thompson.

Dylan Thompson is used to feeling out of place. In his hometown of Brandon, Miss., he was one of the only Black students in his advanced high school classes. When he started at the University of Miami in 2021 with dreams of becoming a doctor, he again found himself as one of the only Black students in his premed classes.

“I feel like every person I talk to that is white, they’re like, ‘My mom is a surgeon, my dad is this, my grandfather is that,’” Thompson said. “To them it’s almost like a birthright, whereas I don’t know any of this stuff. I’m trying to figure this out day by day — I’m trying to get as much help as I can from people who look like me who are older than me and have done this.”

Relief came for Thompson in the form of the Diversity in Cancer Research (DICR) Internship Program, which is funded by the ACS and run by Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, part of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. Launched in 2023, the program is designed to give undergraduate college
students from underrepresented communities exposure and experience, in the hopes of increasing diversity among cancer researchers.

Interns from Diverse Backgrounds

Sylvester received funding from the ACS to train eight interns from institutions throughout Florida. At first, Sylvester officials wondered if they’d get enough applicants to fill those slots. Then they received so many — more than 80 — that the center decided to fund four additional interns, bringing the inaugural class of DICR interns to 12.

“Our experience with this first application cycle demonstrated the incredible need and demand for this type of program,” said Sophia George, Ph.D., an associate professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive services and the first associate director of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at Sylvester. “Until health equity is achieved, there will always be a need for more programs like this.”

Joseph Rosenblatt, M.D., professor of medicine and microbiology and immunology and the principal investigator overseeing the DICR program, hopes the program will push more minority students into cancer specialties because they can most directly help their communities. “Physicians and researchers from underrepresented groups are more likely to
practice in and investigate issues that affect underserved communities,” he said.

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Thompson is proof of that. The 20-year-old rising junior said his goal is to become a urologist, after seeing so many Black men and women in Mississippi suffer from urinary tract diseases but not seek out medical care due to fear or financial limitations.

“They’re scared to go in because nobody looks like them,” Thompson said. “If I can be that face and treat these things that could easily be fixed, I feel like it’ll make a good impact on my community.”

Yocelis Valerio, another DICR intern, feels the same way. Growing up in Jersey City, N.J., she didn’t know anybody in the medical field. Her parents immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic, and neither speaks English. But now as a rising junior at the University of Central Florida, Valerio is spending her summer in Miami as part of the DICR program and said it’s already giving her insights she could never have gotten alone.

Yocelis Valerio, rising junior at the University of Central
Florida and DICR intern.

“To be able to come into an environment where you get opportunities, where you get to network with people that are in positions that you hope to one day be in, it’s big,” Valerio said.

“Diverse perspectives are an essential component of driving innovative problem-solving that accelerates new approaches to the prevention and treatment of cancers,” said Ellie Daniels, M.D., M.P.H., the senior vice president of the American Cancer Society Center for Diversity in Cancer Research Training. “Ensuring everyone has the opportunity to prevent cancer and receive high-quality treatment and support for cancer is the foundation of our work, but significant disparities in incidence and mortality rates still exist across diverse populations.

“We’re proud to offer the Diversity in Cancer Research Internship program to schools to support the development of well-qualified researchers who have a unique connection to the communities we need to impact,” she said.

**DICR Program Components**

The DICR program has three main components:

- Interns gather each morning for a professional development session to get career advice from experts in the medical field, physicians and researchers from Sylvester and the Miller School, and others. These comprehensive professional and academic development sessions are offered by the longstanding Miller School Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship program and its
Interns do research under the guidance of faculty mentors, postdocs and graduate students. Interns shadow practicing physicians to see first-hand the impacts of innovative oncology patient care and treatment.

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Thompson said the research work has fast-forwarded his education because in his regular undergraduate labs, he conducts textbook experiments by simply following along steps to try to replicate known results. As part of the DICR program, he’s helping to develop brand-new experiments and coming up with the steps and protocols for each. “It’s real-world experience, it’s working with real cancer cells,” he said.

Valerio has already spent time shadowing a geriatric oncologist treating patients with prostate cancer, and she’s also hoping to shadow a dermatological oncologist, since that’s the field she wants to study.

The DICR program is the latest addition to the summer programs offered by the Sylvester Office of Education and Training. Learn more about DICR and other programs here.