NIH Renews Faculty-Led Program Aimed at Diversifying Pediatric Research Workforce

In 2012, the National Institutes of Health funded the Research in Academic Pediatrics Initiative on Diversity (RAPID) to address the lack of racial/ethnic minorities in the field of pediatrics. Now, 11 years later and under the leadership of Glenn Flores, M.D., chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, RAPID has been renewed for a second time as the program enters its next phase.

Glenn Flores, M.D.

RAPID’s renewal by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the NIH, consists of five additional years of support, for a total of 15 years and $2.2 million in federal aid.

“This renewal is tremendously important to ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion in academic pediatrics,” Dr. Flores said. “I’m incredibly proud of RAPID’s achievements over the past 11 years, especially because RAPID is changing the face of American pediatrics.”

Diversifying the Pediatric Workforce

Despite 52% of the population of U.S. children being racial/ethnic minorities, there continues to be an urgent need
for RAPID because only 11% of U.S. pediatricians, 8% of medical-school faculty and 6% of medical school professors are from underrepresented minority (URM) groups, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. RAPID has made a major impact through mentorship, leadership training and career support not only for RAPID Scholars — who are URM junior faculty or fellows in the final year of training — but also for URM residents, fellows and junior faculty from across the country who participate by invitation in the annual RAPID Conference.

Dr. Flores (front left) with members of the RAPID National Advisory Committee, RAPID Scholars and invited RAPID Conference attendees at the 2023 annual RAPID Meeting in D.C.

Each year, RAPID selects up to nine RAPID Scholars, who receive $15,000 each to conduct research in any subspecialty area of pediatrics and are paired with an accomplished senior mentor in pediatrics on the RAPID National Advisory Committee. RAPID also selects up to eight additional URM residents, fellows and junior faculty from across the country to participate in the conference, which includes interactive panels, speed and one-on-one mentoring, a leadership seminar and a keynote address by a major pediatric physician-scientist or leader of a federal agency.

“After being in the program, I have switched my trajectory to pursue a research career in academic medicine,” said Rochelle
Cason-Wilkerson, M.D., M.P.H., a RAPID ’20 scholar. “I’m truly grateful to the program for allowing me the opportunity to expand my horizons, and for showing me the opportunities in academic medicine.”

To date, the program’s effectiveness under Dr. Flores includes 27 scholars achieving success, along with an 86% percent increase in the Academic Pediatric Association’s (APA) societal diversity. RAPID has had a substantial impact on scholars’ research career development, with 83% of scholars in the first nine cohorts delivering a platform or poster presentation on their RAPID project at national meetings, and a combined 189 articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

“The first ten years of RAPID were highly successful, with the program achieving or exceeding all original aims,” Dr. Flores said. “We have significantly increased diversity in academic pediatrics, and our RAPID alumni have earned major awards and honors, been promoted, received NIH K awards and R01 grants, published many articles in major medical journals and delivered multiple presentations at prestigious national conferences. Last year, we added our first RAPID alumna to our National Advisory Committee. Because of RAPID’s success, we now have partnerships with three national pediatric organizations to expand the program.”

New Partnerships and National Expansion

After a successful ten years, Dr. Flores aims to continue to focus on expanding RAPID nationally. In the past two years, RAPID launched four new partnerships, with the Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society, the American Pediatric Society, the American Board of Pediatrics and Mead Johnson. These
partnerships add seven scholar positions to the two original slots funded by NIDDK and APA.

“The ultimate goals are to expand RAPID through partnerships with every pediatric subspecialty society interested in advancing diversity in academic pediatrics,” Dr. Flores said. “In addition, we want to encourage an increasing number of RAPID alumni to mentor future cohorts of new RAPID Scholars.”

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