

A Proposal for HMS-wide Support of Black Postdoctoral Trainees: Replying to the HMS Better Together Plan

Dear Dean Joan Reede,

The barrage of racially charged murders suffered by the black community in America has prompted a national discourse around the need to confront, not only the overt institutionalized racism that pervades police departments across this country but also, the institutional biases that perpetuate inequities experienced by black people.

The Harvard Medical School (HMS) community has been a longstanding participant in this national discussion around promoting the representation of Black scholars in biomedical research, as embodied by the HMS Diversity statement¹. Additionally, HMS has made attempts to promote the training of the next generation of Underrepresented Minority (URM) biomedical investigators through a variety of programs and fellowships such as the HMS STARS program and the Dean's Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Despite these laudable efforts, individuals from certain URM groups, particularly African Americans/Blacks remain critically underrepresented among the Harvard and HMS research faculty, with black faculty comprising less than 6%, despite being 13% of the population^{5,6}. Nonetheless, HMS has recently reaffirmed its commitment to creating a more diverse and inclusive environment, as evidenced by the timely efforts to understand and improve HMS-wide diversity and inclusion via the Pulse Wave2 survey, the recent publishing of the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion's landmark Final Report, and the newly proposed Better Together Plan⁹.

The Black Faculty Pipeline: From Barriers to Community

The lack of black research faculty representation is pervasive, afflicting the majority of institutions of higher learning across our nation, including those within the HMS community^{3,4}. While the number of biomedical Ph.D. degrees earned by URM scientists is increasing in the U.S., a corresponding increase of faculty in basic science departments has not occurred^{7,8}, a visible phenomenon that persists across HMS. We contend that the failure to successfully meet important career milestones throughout the course of postdoctoral training significantly contributes to the dearth of new black faculty appointments -- future quantitative and systemic studies that take into account disaggregated demographic data are needed to empirically understand this phenomenon (see Point 3). Moreover, Gibbs et al., (2016) concluded that increasing the pool of postdoctoral fellows entering the research faculty job market, rather than merely expanding the number of graduating PhDs, would be required to increase the number of URMs entering faculty positions⁷. Thus, if we are to adequately address a critical leak in the STEM pipeline we must first identify, and then dismantle systemic obstacles to career advancement that black postdoctoral fellows face throughout the course of their training.

One major impediment to the professional advancement of black postdoctoral fellows within the HMS community is isolation, an issue that Theme 1 and Theme 2 of the Better Together Plan aim to resolve. The majority of the HMS-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows surveyed for this proposal have self-reported being the only black postdoctoral trainees in their research buildings, programs, and/or departments, often for the

entirety of their training here on campus. Not being incorporated into an identity-based community can adversely affect the morale and performance of black postdocs, due to reduced networking opportunities, lack of emotional support, limited opportunities for research collaborations, and the absence of social outlets that are typically conferred by vibrant identity-based communities.

Creation of the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA)

With black postdoctoral fellows effectively being siloed within their respective institutions throughout the HMS campus, there exists a critical need for the establishment of an HMS-wide network capable of unifying the talented pool of black postdoctoral trainees. Importantly, this unifying body should be comprised of postdocs from both the HMS Quad and its 15 affiliate institutions, as no single HMS institution (e.g., the HMS Quad, Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH), etc.) has the critical mass of black postdoctoral fellows needed to create a sustained and robust professional network or supportive community.

To help meet these aforementioned challenges, we established the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA) on March 6, 2020. We intend for this organization to promote a sense of connectedness throughout the HMS black research community, while providing a space for the exchange of information and opportunities that will enhance the social wellbeing, research advancement, and professional development of its members. We have been employing this platform to get to know each other, uplift morale, discuss challenges, and promote professional development.

Meeting the Moment: Six Strategic Steps to Support Black Postdoctoral Trainees

A central mission of Harvard Medical School is to convene and nurture a diverse community of individuals dedicated to promoting excellence and leadership in science and medicine through research, education, service, and clinical care¹. We maintain that meeting these objectives requires providing additional support to the black postdoctoral community here, thereby ultimately facilitating the promotion and advancement of Harvard-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows from the numerous departments and institutions within the HMS ecosystem. Thus, to aid in this initiative we have outlined 6 strategic steps needed for HMS to better support its black postdoctoral talent:

Point 1: Official recognition of the HBPA by HMS

Request that HMS officially recognize the HBPA:

We invite HMS to join us in formalizing the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA) as a self-governing HMS-wide group jointly supported by the Office for Diversity, Inclusion, & Community Partnership (DICP) and HMS affiliates, with intersecting partnerships between the postdoctoral and the diversity offices across all 15 affiliate institutions.

As detailed by numerous scholars^{10,11}, the Department of Education¹², the U.S Chamber of Commerce¹³, and the recent White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans^{14,15}, black scientists and trainees face unique challenges and obstacles that must be specifically addressed in order for them to be successful. As members of the HMS community, we believe that these unique challenges can only be overcome if directly targeted by HMS-wide efforts. While several URM programs exist on campus, they do not specifically address, or work to eradicate, anti-black obstacles in STEM. To resolve this, black scientists have

come together to form affinity groups. At this point, this includes the Black Graduate Student Association and the Association of Black Faculty of HMS. Yet, at this time, there are no HMS-recognized formal networks that provide support systems for HMS-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows, a predicament that, as mentioned previously, has led to widespread feelings of isolation, poor retention, and suboptimal career advancement.

Request for HMS funding:

We request annual funding for the HBPA in possible collaboration with HMS affiliates. These funds would be used to: (1) conduct community outreach activities and (2) support professional development endeavors.

These funds are essential because, in addition to establishing a community amongst ourselves, we are both morally obligated and eager to serve as leaders on campus and in our communities, while also preparing to serve as leaders in academia, industry, and the public sector.

Funded outreach activities: HBPA-sponsored outreach activities will directly engage the communities surrounding the medical campus with large black populations, which is an endeavor consistent with Theme 2 of the Better Together Plan and the HMS Diversity Statement asserting its commitment to “support community engagement and partner with our local, national and global communities to advance the diversity pipeline and eliminate health disparities”¹. Specifically, funded community outreach will serve to (A) enhance scientific literacy and appreciation (e.g., Brain Awareness week, Taste of Science), and (B) provide early exposure opportunities to students with limited access to science. In all, our outreach efforts will attempt to address the systemic inequities in educational access endemic to black communities in and surrounding Boston. We believe that increasing scientific literacy and engagement will encourage more black students to pursue STEM careers, thereby, over time, addressing the need to increase URM representation within the sciences.

Funded professional development activities: To support the professional development of HMS-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows. Professional development support funds would be applied towards hosting events, conference travel, CV and career workshops, mock interviews, and inviting guest speakers. Efforts will be made to ensure that HBPA career development events are complementary, rather than redundant, with those sponsored by the DICP, while catering to the specific needs and concerns of black postdocs. Examples of HBPA events that would be considered non-overlapping with those sponsored by the DICP would be (A) our hosting black research faculty members to talk to postdocs about their unique experiences in academia, (B) workshops on how to deal with anti-black discrimination within the workplace, (C) how to manage the feelings of isolation associated with being “the only one that looks like you”, as well as (D) hosting group meetings that function as safe spaces to discuss matters such as (i) health disparities effecting the black community and (ii) racially charged murders, such the killing of George Floyd.

Point 2: A permanent membership on the HMS Taskforce for Diversity and Inclusion

To ensure that black postdocs at HMS are fully heard and involved in diversity efforts and programming across campus, we recommend that permanent ambassadorship positions in the Office for Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Partnership (DICP) be reserved for some members of the HBPA; ambassadors would function in the capacity of board of director for DICP program planning purposes. One function of the ambassadorships would be to provide feedback regarding DICP programming targeted towards URM postdocs. Additionally,

these ambassadors would be in place to ensure that members of the black postdoctoral community within the HMS Quad and HMS affiliates are aware of resources and programming offered through HMS or the DICP.

We also request that HBPA members be granted seats on the HMS Taskforce for Diversity and Inclusion (TFDI). A permanent ambassadorship position on TFDI would ensure that our voices will always be heard in matters related to Diversity and Inclusion now and into the future.

Since such ambassador positions would likely involve much administrative work on top of that linked to postdoctoral research, we propose that this position be compensated either with a stipend, or professional development funds (conference/workshop travel and registration fees).

Point 3: The creation of a HMS-wide postdoctoral database, with disaggregated demographic information (e.g., race, ethnicity).

In response to Theme 4 of the Better Together Plan, we recommend that HMS creates and maintains a strategy for identifying and tracking HMS-affiliated postdoctoral fellows across all HMS-affiliated departments and institutions, and that this database, comprised of disaggregated demographic data (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, HMS affiliation, research lab), be accessible by groups such as the HBPA, for the sole purpose of recruiting and promoting the professional advancement of these fellows. This will also provide HMS with the opportunity to accumulate data on the career trajectory of black postdocs. This postdoctoral database could be accomplished via the coordinated efforts of the Harvard Medical School Postdoctoral Association and the Human Resources office at all participating HMS institutions.

As black postdoctoral researchers, we have found great difficulty and frustration in our quest to find community, even before recent events. We have had to rely on word of mouth or chance encounters to identify and recruit most of our members. Having access to the demographics and contact information of HMS-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows will greatly improve our ability to sustain our group, making it easier for us to heal and support each other. Moreover, a database would make it possible for black postdocs to be identified and included in any HMS task forces aimed at improving diversity and inclusion in the future.

Point 4: HMS-sponsored black junior faculty recruitment symposium

While we believe supporting the professional development of HMS-affiliated black postdoctoral fellows is crucial, we also believe that now is the time for HMS to take further action in helping to address specific anti-black systemic inequalities. Namely, the underrepresentation of black scientists of all ranks of its faculty. This underrepresentation has effects at several levels, including but not limited to: lack of engagement with and consideration of communities that may be differentially affected by areas of research, lack of voices in developing culturally relevant and sensitive curriculum, and the absence of relatable mentors in academia. For these reasons, we propose the creation of a HMS-sponsored Black Junior Faculty Recruitment Symposium. The symposium would recruit and fund a select number of Black postdoctoral fellows from across the country aspiring to become independent academic researchers. They would visit HMS, present their research, meet with faculty, receive advice on preparing job market application materials, and be notified when departments of interest at HMS will advertise positions. The symposium could also be virtual if necessary.

Sunday, June 7th, 2020 4:00pm

Such symposia exist at several other research institutions and we believe that a HMS sponsored symposium will have a significant impact on representation amongst HMS faculty, and in the broader research community. Examples of symposia at other academic institutions geared toward preparing URM postdocs for transition to faculty include the New England Future Faculty Workshop and The Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Washington, which supports an annual symposium in the name of Dr. Eddie Mendez. Selected postdocs are presented with a scholar award and given the opportunity to present their work and meet with faculty. This event is mutually beneficial for the institution as well as URM postdoctoral fellows preparing for faculty positions. Several academic institutions, such as the University of California, San Francisco have initiated programs that actively encourage applications from URM postdocs with the intention of diversifying their faculty. This particular institution is currently engaged in a multi-year initiative targeted at increasing URM representation at the faculty level.

Point 5: Anti-racism training workshops for HMS-affiliated research faculty.

Funding and avenues of support for black postdocs will not be enough to affect systemic change. Members across the whole HMS community must also play a role, as detailed by Theme 3 of the Better Together Plan. As HMS-affiliated Black postdoctoral fellows, we are directly affected by conscious or unconscious biases, prejudices, and racial insensitivities of our colleagues, PIs and mentors. To address this, we propose that all HMS faculty undergo required sensitivity training, racial bias, and anti-racism training. Such training will be very helpful in making principal investigators more aware of how to support their black trainees and how to foster an environment that sustainably affirms black equality and denounces white supremacy culture in all of its forms in laboratories and across campus.

Point 6: Support of local and national social justice groups fighting against racism and anti-black police violence

Finally, the fight for social justice is one that extends beyond academia. Therefore, it is crucial that HMS joins the Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association and others in supporting organizations that are fighting against racism and injustice at community and national levels. To this aim, we propose that HMS fully support, advocate for, and make a generous donation to the [MatchMe Harvard](#) campaign, which is aimed for the [Massachusetts Bail Fund](#), [Violence in Boston](#), [Black Lives Matter Boston](#), and the [National Black Justice Coalition](#). Supporting this campaign will demonstrate a true commitment on the part of HMS to supporting the issues that directly affect communities that are disproportionately subjected to police violence and social injustices. This is crucial, given that many of these communities are ones that members of HMS such as faculty, postdocs, administrative staff, custodial staff, and students live in and/or belong to. In addition to supporting the MatchMe Harvard campaign, we propose that HMS make a donation pledge annually to the aforementioned organizations to ensure sustained support against racism in general and anti-black violence specifically.

We would like to formally request a “sit-down” meeting with Dr. Joan Reede, Dean for Diversity and Community Partnership, and Dr. George Daley, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, to discuss our request for HMS support.

Sincerely,

Harvard Medical School Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA)

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Citations

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