

Health Equity Research Focus Area (HERFA) Progress Report

Introduction

The Health Equity Research Focus Area (HERFA) at the Heersink School of Medicine is dedicated to addressing the research portfolio and opportunities in women's health across the lifespan, global and rural health, sexual gender and minority health, chronic disease management in health systems, and the health of persons with disabilities. This progress report outlines the key themes, priorities, and advancements made in the Health Equity Research Focus Area (HERFA) over the past quarter. It also highlights the ongoing efforts and future to drive the agenda of health equity within the Heersink School of Medicine.

Key Themes and Priorities

The Collaborative Health Equity Council (CHEC) has prioritized several themes crucial for advancing health equity research. These priorities were shaped by the feedback from the HSOM Research Retreat on March 8, 2024, and are foundational to the strategic direction of HERFA.

I. Definition and Scope of Health Equity

During the Health Equity White Board summer retreat session on July 31, 2024, the objective was to establish a clear and institution-specific research definition of health equity. Another aim was to create institutional ownership of a shared research health equity vision at UAB. This definition reflects a collective effort drawing from major institutions like the CDC, NIH, Healthy People 2030, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Central to this definition are the pillars of addressing both historical and contemporary barriers in healthcare systems, communities, and populations.

Goal: Finalize the Health Equity definition to guide ongoing research and community initiatives.

II. Navigating the Socio-Political Climate

A focus on addressing external socio-political factors that influence health equity research, such as local policies and societal attitudes, through the following efforts:

- Aligning health equity research with evolving events that support institutional and political climates.
Bronze sponsor of the LEARNd conference Sept 30th – Oct1st, where the primary session focuses on navigating the socio-political climate.
- Strengthening the translation of research into actionable policy.
- Proactively engaging with stakeholders across various UAB departments to create a unified front on health equity issues.

III. Institutional Optimization

An essential theme that emerged during the retreat was optimizing UAB systems to better support health equity research. Prioritized strategies include:

- Enhancing recruitment and retention efforts for faculty and staff involved in health equity research.
- Streamlining internal regulatory and communication operations to ensure that health equity remains a focus across research projects.
- Aligning research portfolios with the institution's health equity priorities.

IV. Strategic recruitment; Co-chairs: Irf Asif & Andrea Cherrington

Since October 2023, significant progress has been made in recruiting candidates for health equity positions:

- **44 Candidates applied.**
- **5 Offers accepted**, strengthening the research team.
- **Challenges:** Limited funding and mismatch with the research sphere delayed the hiring process for some candidate

V. Community Engagement and Data-Driven Initiatives

The Community Engagement Council (CEC) established a robust plan for utilizing Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to map untapped community opportunities. This project, known as "Heat Mapping," aims to identify current community projects and areas needing intervention. This data-driven approach allows HERFA to:

- Discover geographical and community gaps in health equity research efforts.
- Facilitate community-level interventions that are informed by comprehensive, localized data.

As of the most recent update, 27 responses have been collected from various community projects, providing a strong foundation for future interventions.

VI. Shared Vision and Communication:

HERFA has committed to raising awareness and support for health equity research through strategic communication efforts. A promotional video highlighting the impact of health equity research is currently in production. Approved themes and messaging align with the mission to attract more faculty and staff, as well as to bolster community engagement.

The communications strategy also includes:

- **Testimonial Video:** A promotional video has been storyboarded and scripted, aimed at sharing personal narratives to enhance recruitment efforts and institutional visibility. Filming is the next step.
- **Landing Page:** The HERFA landing page is being updated to include a bio book to further aid recruitment and retention efforts.

Future Directions and Ongoing Projects

As HERFA continues to evolve, several key projects and goals are slated for the next quarter:

1. **Finalize Health Equity Definition:** Ensuring alignment across UAB and partner institutions.
2. **Advance the Health Equity PRIME Program:** Continue developing the framework and allocating funding for a post-doctoral fellowship program modeled after the HSOM Brain PRIME.
3. **Complete Filming for Health Equity Testimonials:** To enhance recruitment and community engagement efforts.
4. **Heat Mapping Report Finalization:** Completing the data summary and identifying actionable next steps.
5. **Explore Faculty Retention Programs:** Designing initiatives to retain top talent in health equity research.

Conclusion

The HERFA is making substantial efforts in defining, promoting, and advancing health equity through collaborative research, community engagement, and strategic institutional alignment. By addressing the socio-political challenges, enhancing recruitment efforts, and optimizing institutional operations, HERFA is poised to make a lasting impact in reducing health disparities and improving health outcomes for vulnerable populations. The ongoing commitment to data-driven research and community engagement will ensure that HERFA remains at the forefront of health equity efforts, both within the UAB community and beyond.