



The High School to Higher Education Pipeline Program: A focus on Black male representation in nursing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Increasing the number of Black men in nursing can enhance racial, ethnic, and gender diversity within the nursing workforce. However, there is a lack of nursing pipeline programs that specifically focus on Black men.

Purpose: The purposes of this article are to describe the High School to Higher Education (H2H) Pipeline Program as an approach to increasing representation of Black men in nursing and to describe H2H Program participants' perspectives of the program after the first year.

Methods: A descriptive qualitative approach was used to explore Black males' perceptions of the H2H Program. Twelve of the 17 program participants completed questionnaires. Data collected were analyzed to identify themes.

Findings: Four themes emerged during data analysis regarding the participants' perspectives of the H2H Program: 1) Coming to realize, 2) Managing stereotypes, stigma, and social norms, 3) Making connections, and 4) Expressing gratitude.

Conclusion: Results indicated that the H2H Program provided participants with a support network that fostered a sense of belonging. The H2H Program was beneficial for program participants in their development and engagement in nursing.

Men, particularly Black men, are severely underrepresented in the registered nurse (RN) workforce. According to the 2020 National Nursing Workforce Survey, RNs who identify as Black or African American make up just 6.7 % of the nursing workforce (Smiley et al., 2021). The number of students from racial and ethnic minority groups who are enrolled in pre-licensure BSN programs is increasing overall, however, the number of Black students enrolled in pre-licensure programs has remained relatively stagnant between 2010 and 2020 (National League for Nursing (NLN), 2020a). Graduation rates for Black or African American students from pre-licensure nursing programs have also been stagnant over the last ten years (AACN, 2021). Although men have practiced nursing for >2000 years and have been integral in helping to establish nursing as a profession (Thompson et al., 2020), they comprise only 9.4 % of the nursing workforce (Smiley et al., 2021). And, just 13 % of pre-licensure BSN students identify as men (National

League for Nursing (NLN), 2020b).

With nursing leaders calling for a more diverse nursing workforce (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021), increasing the number of Black male RNs can enhance racial, ethnic, and gender diversity within the nursing workforce and can have positive benefits for addressing health inequities experienced by racial and ethnic minority groups and underserved patient populations. Pipeline programs have been used as a strategy to recruit and retain students from racial and ethnic minority groups in healthcare professions (Fontenot & McMurray, 2020). The purposes of this article are to describe the High School to Higher Education (H2H) Pipeline Program as an approach to increasing representation of Black men in the nursing profession and to describe H2H Program participants' perspectives of the program.

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Background

A diverse nursing workforce is essential to meeting the healthcare needs of an increasingly diverse population. Diversifying the healthcare workforce can help improve health equity by positively affecting access to and quality of care for patient populations (Pittman et al., 2021). For example, some patients from ethnic and racial minority groups prefer to receive healthcare from a provider who shares the same ethnic and/or racial background (Dawkins, 2021); and nurses from ethnic and racial minority groups are more likely to practice in medically underserved communities, which positively impacts access to healthcare for these populations (Pittman et al., 2021). Further, Dawkins (2021) noted that Black nurses often share the lived experiences of patients from the same racial or cultural background, and these nurses can draw from their own lived experiences to better understand the perspectives that influence these patients' health and healthcare decision making, which helps build trust between the patient and the healthcare professional. Similarly, Sullivan (2020) suggested that cultural congruence between patients and healthcare providers facilitates the development of trusting patient-provider relationships, which can increase patient compliance with treatment plans.

Black men have been described as a “vulnerable” and “under supported” patient population (Bradley, 2022, p.1; Eniya et al., 2016, p. 75). Black men experience poorer health outcomes related to assault, cancer, cardiovascular disease, COVID-19, diabetes, end stage renal disease, HIV/AIDS, homicide, and physical injuries when compared to other ethnic and racial groups in the U.S. (Bradley, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2016; Office of Minority Health, 2021; Woolf et al., 2021). Additionally, Black men have a shorter life expectancy when compared to their non-Black counterparts - a statistic that was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Office of Minority Health, 2021; Woolf et al., 2021).

The health status of Black men and their encounters within the American healthcare system are intimately tied to the psycho-socio-historical experiences of Black men in the U.S. (Eniya et al., 2016). Scholars have attributed the poor health outcomes experienced by Black men to a “persistent devaluation of Black men in U.S. society” (Anderson, 2021, May 18, para. 5). To mitigate health inequities for this group, understanding the perspectives and experiences that influence health, health-related decision making, and health behaviors among Black men is imperative and may require that healthcare professionals possess an internal view of the experiences of Black men in the U.S. (Eniya et al., 2016; Griffith, 2015). Eniya et al. (2016) proposed that a facet of healthcare reform should focus on “innovative, substantive, and meaningful evidence-based interventions that poignantly address the health concerns of African American men” (p. 77). Black male nurses possess keen insights into how being Black and being male influence health and health experiences. Therefore, Black male RNs are uniquely positioned to challenge systematic barriers, respond to and advocate for the health needs of Black men, and implement interventions that benefit overall health for Black men. Given this, ensuring a diverse nursing workforce that reflects increased representation of Black men is paramount.

The nursing pipeline: recruitment and retention of male students and students from ethnic and racial minority groups

Underpinning the lack of diversity in the nursing workforce is the difficulty in recruiting students from underrepresented groups to academic programs and retaining them (Matthews et al., 2021; Relf, 2016), yet this work is critical to cultivating a diverse nursing workforce (Lin, 2018). Woods-Giscombe et al. (2020) highlighted multiple difficulties in recruiting ethnic minority students to nursing, including misconceptions about the profession and lack of social support from friends and family members. In a sample of 164 baccalaureate nursing students, Barbé et al. (2018) found that students from racial and ethnic minority groups were more likely than other students to be unsuccessful during their first semester in a nursing program. Similarly, Bennett et al. (2021) noted that

attrition among pre-nursing students at one university was greatest among African American students, and Thompson et al. (2020) acknowledged that male students might have more difficulty in completing academic nursing programs than their peers.

Pipeline programs are supported in the nursing education literature as a strategy for bolstering student diversity with the ultimate goal of increasing workforce diversity (Fontenot & McMurray, 2020). Pipeline programs are designed to attract students from underrepresented groups to health professions and provide them with the resources needed to help them navigate academic, financial, and social obstacles (Carter, 2020). Some pipeline programs focus on recruitment of high-school students, offering them financial support and mentoring and engaging them in special activities to attract them to health professions (Katz et al., 2016; Metcalfe et al., 2017). Other pipeline programs focus on retaining students in pre-nursing or accelerated nursing programs by providing financial assistance, academic support, and mentoring (Carter et al., 2015; Rowsey et al., 2013).

While these pipeline programs experienced success in reaching outcomes, there were limitations to the program design. Some of these pipeline programs have low participation by men (e.g., Carter et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2016; Metcalfe et al., 2017). Others were limited in scope because they were implemented in only one institution or program (e.g., Carter et al., 2015; Metcalfe et al., 2017), while other pipeline programs ran for a short period of time during the summer (i.e., Hudson et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2016).

Noting the relative absence of Black men in medicine, medical schools have implemented pipeline programs to increase representation of Black men in medicine (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Although Black men are underrepresented in nursing as well, there is currently little evidence that nursing is tailoring pipeline programs to focus on the support Black men need to successfully navigate the pathway to becoming RNs. This gap demonstrates a need to re-envision existing pipeline programs or implement new programs that address the needs of Black men and to examine the systemic barriers that contribute to the lack of Black men in nursing. As such, the High School to Higher Education Pipeline Program was developed to support Black men in navigating the nursing pipeline.

The High School to Higher Education Pipeline program

The High School to Higher Education Pipeline (H2H) Program was developed to facilitate entry into the nursing profession for Black men. It was designed to raise awareness of nursing as a career choice among Black male high school students and to support Black male college students already in the nursing pipeline. The title “High School to Higher Education” reflects the intent of the program to support the progression of Black males through the nursing pipeline from point of entry, which may include high school or a later point in their academic and professional journeys, until they enter the nursing profession. The overarching goal of the H2H Program is to provide guidance, mentoring, and financial resources needed to put Black male high school and college students on a trajectory to attaining a successful nursing career. The program was developed and implemented by nursing faculty (L.P. and G.D.) as a component of their professional service with the Georgia Nursing Leadership Coalition (GNLC).

The literature supports a focus on culturally congruent mentoring and financial support to bolster success for nursing students from racial and ethnic minority groups (Johnson et al., 2020; McNally et al., 2019). While academic readiness and career preparation are the cornerstones of many pipeline programs in nursing, Matthews et al. (2022) proposed that pipeline programs should also focus on “extra-academic” factors such as belonging that also influence success for students from racial and ethnic minority groups (p. 97). This supports the purpose for developing the H2H Program. The program was developed to provide mentoring and financial support for participants and address non-academic barriers to student success such as lack of social support, discrimination, and

isolation that Black men often face when pursuing a nursing career (Patterson, 2020).

The co-Project Directors (co-PDs) (L.P. and G.D.) built the H2H Program through partnerships with community organizations, professional nursing organizations, and nursing programs including the Atlanta Black Nurses Association (ABNA), Clayton County Fire and Emergency Services, Clayton County Public School System, Clayton State University School of Nursing, Emory Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, Georgia Nurses Association/Georgia Nurses Foundation, GNLC, and the United Advanced Practice Nurses of Georgia. These partnerships were established through the co-PD's membership in professional organization and contacts secured through leaders in GNLC.

An overview of the H2H Program components including eligibility of mentees and mentors is provided in Table 1. During the first year of the H2H Program, which lasted from October 2020 to July 2021, nine self-identifying Black male RNs served as mentors to eight self-identifying Black male college students. The RN mentors worked in a variety of settings and specialty areas including bedside nursing, advanced practice nursing, and administration. Mentors were volunteers and were either colleagues of the co-PDs, former students of the co-PDs, or referred to the co-PDs by a community partner. The co-PDs oriented the mentors to their role in the H2H Program using the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation New Careers in Nursing Mentoring Toolkit (AACN, 2017).

The student mentees were pre-nursing students or nursing students enrolled in post-secondary institutions of higher education. Since the H2H Program operated under the umbrella of a state-wide professional nursing organization (GNLC), Black male pre-nursing or nursing students enrolled in any nursing program in the state were eligible to apply to the program. Through advertising and networking, students from four

different academic institutions located in Georgia applied for the H2H Program. All students were pursuing baccalaureate degrees in nursing. While all the H2H participants identified as Black males, they represented varied backgrounds with regard to ethnicity, culture, and nation/region of origin. Their diverse identities and life experiences contributed to the rich interpersonal exchanges that occurred among them.

Mentors and mentees participated in virtual personal and professional development workshops planned by the co-PDs. These 90-minute monthly workshops featured speakers who addressed topics to help the mentees persist along their paths in nursing (Table 1). The monthly workshops also provided the opportunity for sharing of information and experiences between mentors and mentees, which strengthened cohesion among the program participants.

H2H mentees received a monthly stipend and the opportunity to apply for a scholarship (see Table 1). Since the program workshops were delivered virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the stipend ensured that students could afford data packages needed to access the meetings. Mentors were offered an honorarium for their time. The H2H Program also paid professional organization membership fees for mentors and mentees (see Table 1). Funding for H2H Program costs was supported by the Center to Champion Nursing in America, a joint initiative of AARP Foundation, AARP, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Atlanta Black Nurses Association, Clayton County Fire and Emergency Services, Clayton State University School of Nursing, Emory University Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, and Georgia Nurses Association/Georgia Nurses Foundation.

Methods for program evaluation

General program outcomes were documented during the program. For the end of year program evaluation, a descriptive qualitative

Table 1
Components of the High School to Higher Education Pipeline (H2H) Program

Component	Description
Eligibility	<u>Eligibility criteria for mentors</u> Self-identified Black male licensed registered nurse and/or advanced practice nurse working in any setting residing in the state of Georgia with at least one year of nursing experience; completion of mentor orientation with co-PDs; and documentation of a negative criminal background check. <u>Eligibility criteria for mentees</u> Self-identified Black males enrolled in a nursing program or enrolled in college with an interest in pursuing nursing in Georgia and completion of mentee orientation with co-PDs.
Mentoring Sessions	Self-identified Black male registered nurses (9) served as mentors for Black male H2H student mentees (8). Mentors and student mentees assigned to mentoring groups (2 mentors and 2–3 mentees) according to professional interests and career goals. Two hours of mentoring per month based on their availability. Mentoring sessions could occur in the mentoring group, or one-on-one. Mentoring sessions were conducted virtually via a videoconferencing platform, telephone, or text messaging. Mentors identified topics to discuss based on the needs and interests of the mentees.
Personal and Professional Development Workshops	Occurred monthly. Hosted virtually via Zoom (a video conferencing platform) Lasted 90 min. Examples of Workshop Topics ● Understanding Different Career Paths in Nursing ● Navigating Institutions of Higher Education as Black Males ● Leadership and Networking for Success in Nursing ● Financial Wellness for College Students
Component	Description
Financial Support	● Mentee stipend: \$25/month to supplement cost of data packages needed to participate in virtual personal and professional development workshops and mentoring sessions. ● Mentor honorarium - \$250 for participation ● Academic scholarships of \$1000 to cover the cost of tuition, books, laptops, or related academic expenses. ● Seven paid memberships for mentors and mentees to the Atlanta Black Nurses Association ● 17 paid memberships for the American Association for Men in Nursing.
Outreach to High School Students	Virtual question and answer sessions for high school students about nursing career options and pathways to nursing hosted via Zoom.

Note. PDs = Project Directors.

approach was used to explore the perceptions of Black men regarding their experiences participating in the H2H Program. A descriptive qualitative design is appropriate to use when the focus is on describing a phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2021; Sandelowski, 2000). The aim of this evaluation was to develop a rich description of the experiences of the Black males who participated in the program. The questions that guided this evaluation were: 1) What perceptions do Black males have about the High School to Higher Education Program, and 2) How do Black males describe their experiences participating in the High School to Higher Education Program?

Participants

Purposive sampling was used. The sample was limited to Black males who participated in the H2H Program as mentors or student mentees. The co-PDs emailed a letter inviting the eight mentees and nine mentors in the H2H Program to respond to the questionnaire. Of the 17 eligible participants, twelve provided informed consent and responded to the online questions.

The ages of all respondents ranged from 21 to 59 years, with a mean age of 33 ± 10.93 years and a median age of 30 years. The age range for the mentees was 21–41 years old, while that of the mentors was 28–59 years old. The mean and median ages for mentees were 28 ± 7.15 years and 26 years respectively. The mean age for the mentors was 39 ± 11.62 years and the median age was 36 years.

Data collection

Program data such as the number of participants, workshops, high school engagement sessions were documented by the PDs during the year. Additional data were collected using structured and open-ended questions. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the participants' experiences and

perceptions. This evaluation was determined to be exempt from IRB approval through a local university. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

The co-PDs developed a 13-item anonymous questionnaire to collect demographic data and mentors' and mentees' perceptions of the H2H Program (see Table 2). Questionnaire items were based on a review of the literature (i.e., Bennett et al., 2021; Carter, 2020; Harding et al., 2018; Harper, 2015; Katz et al., 2016; Metcalfe et al., 2017; Patterson, 2020; Patterson, 2021; Woods-Giscombe et al., 2020). The questionnaire included open-ended questions where participants were able to type in their responses. Open-ended questions were used to elicit participants' authentic and unhindered responses about their experiences in the H2H program.

H2H Program participants were sent an email with information about the data collection and a link to the online questionnaire. Participating in data collection was not mandatory for H2H Program participants. H2H mentors and mentees could decide whether to complete the questionnaire. The co-PDs administered the questionnaires electronically, and results were stored using SurveyMonkey®, a secure, web-based, password protected platform. Names and IP addresses were not collected to ensure anonymity of responses.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were given the option to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interviews provided the opportunity for co-PDs to gain deeper insight into the experiences of H2H Program participants. Co-PDs conducted interviews via a secure, password protected, web-based video conferencing platform. Using a web-based platform allowed the interviewees to join the interview from a location that was confidential and comfortable for them. The co-PDs used an interview protocol to maintain consistency and ensure that each interviewee was asked the same interview questions and to ensure that interviewers were consistent with the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To maintain confidentiality, names were not used to identify the interviewees. Open-ended questions were

Table 2
Questionnaire and interview questions

Electronic questionnaire items
1. I have read and understand the informed consent document and consent to participating. 2. What is your age? 3. Which of the following describes you? -I am a pre-nursing student -I am a nursing student -I am an RN 4. Is nursing your second career? 5. Did you earn a bachelor's degree in another field prior to pursuing a degree in nursing? 6. Reflect on your experience as a high school student. What information was shared with you as a high school student that helped you learn about nursing as a career? 7. For Registered Nurses: reflect on your experience as a nursing student in a prelicensure nursing program, what factors were the most important to your success in the prelicensure nursing program? 8. For students enrolled in a prelicensure nursing program: what factors have been the most important in helping you be successful in the BSN program? 9. What have you learned along your journey to becoming a nurse that you wish you would have known sooner? 10. What aspects of the High School to Higher Education Pipeline Program were the most beneficial to you? 11. How has participating in the High School to Higher Education Pipeline Program helped to support you in reaching your goals in nursing? 12. In your opinion, what barriers prevent Black men from pursuing nursing as a career? 13. How can the High School to Higher Education Pipeline Program help support other Black men in reaching their goals in nursing?
Interview questions
1. Please describe your experience participating in the High School to Higher Education Pipeline program. - o What was it like for you? 2. In your opinion, what is needed to increase representation of Black men in nursing? - o How can this program help Black men be successful in achieving a career in nursing? 3. What is important for nurses or nursing faculty to know about your experience as a Black man in nursing? 4. Is there anything else you'd like to share?
Examples of probes
1. Can you share more about... 2. Can you tell me more about... 3. Could you explain your response more? 4. What does _____ mean?

used during the interview (see Table 2) with follow-up probing questions to encourage more detailed responses from the interviewees and to clarify statements made. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although data collection in qualitative methods typically continues until data saturation is reached, the co-PDs aimed to collect data from as many H2H Programs participants as possible. As such, data collection continued until no new questionnaires were submitted.

The co-PDs (L.P. and G.D.) are Black women and doctorally prepared RNs with experience in qualitative research methods. As such, both PDs had established rapport with the participants and interviewees via frequent interactions over an eight-month period prior to conducting the interviews, which may have helped the interviewees feel comfortable with openly sharing their experiences in the H2H Program.

Data analysis

Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The procedure for analysis of the qualitative data followed that which has been set forth by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The data analysis process began with the co-PDs exploring the open-ended questionnaire responses and interview data separately to gain a general sense of the data and to identify initial thoughts or meanings that emerged from the data. After the initial data exploration, the co-PDs determined that it was necessary to reach out to one of the interviewees for follow-up communication to clarify points from the initial interview.

Following initial data exploration, the data were organized by data source to facilitate further analysis. Interview and questionnaire data were organized by question such that all responses to the same question were grouped together. Interview data was explored separately from questionnaire data. Initial findings from each data source were recorded and compared to identify similarities and differences in the responses. Data were then further organized according to participants where responses from mentors were explored separately from responses from mentees and initial insights were gleaned.

Once organized, data were coded using in-vivo coding. Each PD generated a list of codes from the interview and questionnaire data. Codes from interview and questionnaire data and from mentor and mentee data were compared. Similar and related codes were condensed into themes. The PDs compared the results of their independent data analysis. Codes and themes were discussed and revised until themes were finalized. Contrary explanations for themes were explored. Quotes from participants were identified to support the themes.

Validity and reliability of findings

Several strategies were employed during data collection and analysis to promote qualitative validity and reliability of the findings. Strategies used to promote qualitative validity, or trustworthiness, of findings were triangulation of data sources, member checking, and the use of a peer debriefer (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For triangulation, interview data were used to corroborate findings from questionnaire responses. Member checking was completed by having one of the interviewees review the themes and descriptions for accuracy.

To ensure qualitative reliability the co-PDs carefully reviewed interview transcripts and compared them to audio recordings to ensure that there were no major errors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although the co-PDs conducted the initial data analysis separately, codes were cross-checked to establish intercoder agreement and definitions for codes were developed collaboratively to support reliability of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Results

General H2H program outcomes

All eight of the student mentees who participated in the H2H

Program were retained in their nursing programs. Two H2H mentees were completing their last year of nursing school. Both mentees graduated from their respective programs, passed the NCLEX-RN on the first attempt, and are currently working as RNs. At the end of Year 1 (July 2021), all the remaining mentees were on track to completing their nursing program by spring 2023.

Mentors and mentees engaged in approximately 250 mentoring hours and the co-PDs successfully implemented seven professional/personal workshops during Year 1 of the H2H Program. In reviewing program evaluation data, 85 % of respondents indicated that participating in mentoring groups was one of the most beneficial aspects of the H2H Program.

Of the six H2H mentees who applied for scholarships, all six received \$1,000 scholarships to cover academic related expenses. Graduating seniors were allowed to use the scholarship funds to cover the cost of an NCLEX prep course and the fee for NCLEX-RN.

Lastly, the H2H co-PDs along with two mentors, two mentees, and the president of the Atlanta Black Nurses Association were involved with outreach to high school students via virtual question and answer sessions to raise awareness of nursing as a career choice. Two virtual question and answer sessions were conducted with sophomore and junior level high school students enrolled in a health science course at a public high school in Clayton County, Georgia. Approximately 73 % of Clayton County residents identify as Black/African American and 13 % identify as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Twenty-five students attended each session, and these students were from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in nursing. The virtual question and answer sessions were open to all students enrolled in the health science course to minimize the stigma that is often associated with Black men being interested in nursing. Also, by including the entire health sciences class, information about nursing could be beneficial to students with other gender identities. These discussions focused on nursing career options, how to navigate pathways to achieve a nursing career, and the need to increase racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in nursing.

Program evaluation questionnaire and interviews

The online program questionnaire was completed by 12 respondents, six mentees (75 % of H2H Program mentees) and six mentors (66 % of H2H Program mentors). Thirty-three percent of all respondents earned a bachelor's degree in another field prior to pursuing a degree in nursing and 25 % indicated that nursing was a second career. Of the 12 respondents who completed the questionnaire, two - one mentor and one student mentee - completed the interview. The mentee interview lasted for 45 min, and the mentor interview lasted for 60 min.

Qualitative data from mentors aligned with the findings that emerged from the mentee data. Similarly, data collected via interviews confirmed responses from open-ended questions on the questionnaire. This convergence of data facilitated the identification of themes that were consistent with the experiences of the mentors and mentees who participated in the H2H Program.

Four themes emerged from the data regarding the participants' experiences in the H2H Program: 1) Coming to realize, 2) Managing stereotypes, stigma, and social norms, 3) Making connections, and 4) Expressing gratitude. The themes also spoke to the participants' experiences as being Black men in nursing. Themes with supportive quotes are summarized in Table 3.

Theme 1. Coming to realize

The theme of "Coming to Realize" emerged when participants described how they recognized what they did not know about the nursing profession before entering a nursing program and how much they learned or "realized" along their path to where they are now. Although one participant gained early exposure to nursing due to his mother's career as an RN and another had completed a high school non-

Table 3
Themes with supportive quotes from questionnaire and interview data

Themes	Supportive data
Coming to realize	“In high school I didn’t receive much information about nursing because of the field being female dominant.” - Mentee questionnaire “Had I had this program when I was in high school, the route that I went, which was not your traditional route, I would have definitely had more confidence, I would have had a guide, and I think that’s what a lot of Black men need especially in today’s society.” - Mentee interview “[I wish I had known sooner] the importance of exposure to the profession prior to nursing school;... [that I should] develop relationship[s] with young men in nursing including men of color to get insight into their experiences, challenges, and successes; [that] relationship building is really important in nursing programs; [and that I should] take advantage of internships and other programs that expose you to different areas of nursing, build relationships with providers, and ensure you have a seat at the table.” - Mentor interview
Managing stereotypes, stigma, and social norms	“I really want people to understand and just kind of be sensitive to so many things: not all Black men look alike; not all Black men sound alike. And I think if we’re able to really push that narrative out there, I’m hoping that it will be something different just for other non-African American nurses to truly understand our experience.” - Mentee interview “As young Black men they continue to hand us footballs and encourage sports from the time we can walk.” - Mentee questionnaire “I think people automatically assumed that I was a certain way because I was a Black male. ... We have feelings and emotions ...But I also think that it is important for nurses to understand - or have some perspective to where we come from and why we might be the way that we are or why we may think the way that we think. And you know, try to have - ask questions about it and try to understand it as opposed to maybe jumping to conclusions. Because we’re not going to think the way that you think. We’re going to think different; we’re going to react differently.” - Mentor interview
Themes	Supportive data
Making connections	“[The H2H Program reassured] me that I’m never alone on this journey and I’ll always have people in my corner supporting me.” - Mentee questionnaire “Just hearing other people’s stories, it really built kind of like a brotherhood in a sense.” - Mentee interview “The H2H Program has helped me feel a sense of belonging by just being around more people with the same goals as myself. Also having access to people who have lots of nursing experience allows me to feel comfortable asking any questions that I have.” - Mentee questionnaire “It definitely provided the platform or the space - a safe space - to be able to kind of talk through stereotypes and other barriers so that people can learn and grow in the profession...having that space is really important. Because to an extent, it makes me feel more confident when I go out into the world. You know, they say, ‘Go out and conquer’. It makes me feel more comfortable knowing that there are others in the profession who have experienced like things. And it makes me want to work harder to get a seat at the table at executive types of levels or other positions so that I can be a change in a different way.” - Mentor interview
Expressing Gratitude	“[My] mentors helped me improve my way of studying material and my way of thinking critically.” - Mentee questionnaire “I have been able to take on leadership roles and grow both professionally & personally.” - Mentor questionnaire “It has deepened my interest in mentoring young men interested in pursuing a career in nursing.” - Mentor questionnaire

nursing healthcare program, most of the participants were unaware of nursing as a career choice early on and unaware of how to pursue a nursing career. Nursing was not presented to them as a career option when they were in high school.

Theme 2. Managing stereotypes, stigma, and social norms

The participants identified stereotypes, stigma, and societal norms as a major contributor to the lack of representation of Black men in nursing. This refers to the stereotypical ways that Black men are perceived in American culture as well as societal norms that indicate that nursing is a career only for females. Some of the participants described their experiences in nursing as “frustrating” and “daunting”. Participants suggested that the H2H Program could contribute to addressing stereotypes, stigmas, and societal norms by opening the way for more Black males to pursue nursing, which could change how nursing is perceived.

During their interviews, a mentee and a mentor offered two strategies for how non-Black nurses can reduce or prevent the perpetuation of stereotypes, stigma, and social norms that impede Black males from pursuing nursing: 1) recognizing and mitigating their own biases, and 2) actively seeking to understand the lived experiences of Black men.

Theme 3. Making connections

The participants noted that being able to make personal connections with other Black men in nursing while participating in the H2H Program fostered a “sense of belonging” and “created a safe place.” This safe

space allowed mentees to discuss topics they may not have previously felt comfortable discussing with others.

Theme 4. Expressing gratitude

Participants expressed gratitude to the co-PDs for developing the H2H Program. The participants were appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this “positive” and “beneficial” experience and expressed their desire to see the program grow to benefit more Black males. H2H mentees were grateful for the H2H Program financial support. In their responses, mentors expressed gratitude for the personal and professional growth they experienced in the program and found having the opportunity to give back to be personally rewarding.

Discussion

Based on the data from this program evaluation, those who responded to the questionnaire perceived that the H2H Program could be one approach to exposing Black male high school students to nursing careers and supporting Black male college students in completing nursing programs by providing support and mentoring. Early exposure to nursing can influence males’ decision to pursue nursing as a career (Powers et al., 2018; Yi & Keogh, 2016). However, in a study of African American men’s perspectives of the nursing profession, Todd and Ackerman-Barger (2019) found that African American men were not clear on how to achieve a career in nursing. Their lack of knowledge could be attributed to a lack of exposure to the profession as evidenced in the Coming to Realize theme (Table 3). A lack of exposure to nursing can perpetuate

stereotypes and misperceptions about the profession (Woods-Giscombe et al., 2020). By promoting early exposure to the nursing profession, the H2H Program has potential for helping Black males circumvent this barrier.

Although Pfund (2019) suggested that Black male nurses may experience power in healthcare settings due to their gender, and Smith et al. (2020) suggested that male nurses may benefit from privilege afforded by their gender, the participants spoke about the biases they encountered as nursing students and RNs due to their intersecting identities as Black men. Men in nursing encounter gender discrimination (Hodges et al., 2017); and Harper (2015) indicated that baccalaureate students who are Black males “are often among the most stereotyped populations in higher education and society” (p. 646). Experiencing discrimination in the academic setting can prevent the development of a sense of belonging (Metzger et al., 2020).

Participants perceived that the H2H Program could help to combat the negative stereotypes and stigmas that deter Black males from entering nursing by contributing to the development of a cadre of Black male nurses to serve as role models and mentors for other Black men. Additionally, centering and amplifying Black male voices, as in this article, serves as an impetus for critical discussions that are needed to disrupt beliefs and practices that perpetuate societal stereotypes and stigmas of Black males.

The participants expressed having positive and beneficial experiences in the H2H Program. The program design facilitated participants' personal and professional growth, helped participants meet financial needs, and fostered a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging can be described as feeling included and valued within a group for who you authentically are (Brown, 2021). When a sense of belonging is achieved, individuals do not feel the need to assimilate or change who they are to fit in (Brown, 2021). Discrimination and lack of belonging can cause nursing students from ethnic and racial minority groups to withdraw in the learning environment, which could adversely affect their academic success (Green, 2020; Metzger et al., 2020). Black and African American students in nursing programs often report experiencing isolation (Patterson, 2020; Thompson, 2021; White & Fulton, 2015). Feelings of isolation and lack of social support can hinder nursing students from ethnic and racial minority groups (Green, 2020) and cause these students to experience emotional stress (Everett, 2022). Thus, a program such as H2H, that helps to establish a sense of belonging for Black male nursing students can play a critical role in promoting their success in nursing programs. For H2H student participants, having this type of support network helped to build confidence in their ability to succeed on this career path.

An unintended finding was that mentors found participating in the H2H Program to be as beneficial as well. This finding is noteworthy because Black nurses continue to experience racism and discrimination in the workplace (Brodhead, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson, 2021), which can adversely impact the mental and emotional well-being of Black nurses. Furthermore, when considering Black men's health, attaining higher education can have an adverse effect on health (Anderson, 2021) compared to other racial groups whose health outcomes improve with greater educational attainment. As Black males pursue higher education, they can experience stress, depression, and feelings of isolation; all of which can have a negative impact on their health (Anderson, 2021). In the most recent Future of Nursing report, nurse leaders highlighted the need to implement efforts that promote health and wellbeing for nurses (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). H2H has the potential to serve as a support network that helps facilitate wellbeing for Black males who are already nurses and those who are pursuing graduate or doctoral degrees by fostering a sense of belonging and diminishing feelings of isolation for both mentors and mentees.

Lastly, age may have had an unexpected impact on the H2H Program. In examining the factors that influence males to enter the nursing profession, Munnich and Wozniak (2020) found that the rate of men entering nursing was greater among 20- to 30-year-olds. With an

average age in their late 20's, the H2H mentees were slightly older than the average college student (Hanson, 2022) and older than most pre-licensure RN students, as most pre-licensure RN students are younger than 25 years old (National League for Nursing (NLN), 2020c). While it is widely accepted that recruitment of students from ethnic and racial minority groups into health professions should begin during high school or earlier, it is common for male high school students to be more interested in careers other than nursing (McGee et al., 2019; Palazzo & Erickson, 2022). This could be due, in part, to the developmental stage of adolescent high school students. Adolescents are exploring their self-identity and rely on acceptance from their peers to help form this identity (Jarvis, 2016). In this stage, adolescents do not want to be perceived as different. Thus, adolescent males may not express interest in nursing because such a decision might not gain the approval of their peers given the perceptions of nursing as a socially unacceptable career choice for males.

As a case in point, recall that one H2H participant completed a non-nursing healthcare program in high school. This participant had the choice of choosing a nursing track as a component of this healthcare program but chose the emergency medical technician (EMT) route instead. Although this participant did not indicate why he pursued the EMT track over the nursing track, it would be reasonable to conclude that he chose the EMT track because it is perceived as a socially acceptable career choice for males. High school may remain an important place to raise awareness of nursing as a profession, but targeted recruitment efforts may be more successful at other entry points along the nursing pipeline. For example, males may be more inclined to enter the nursing pipeline via second degree graduate entry programs (Harding et al., 2018; McKenna et al., 2016; Nerges et al., 2022). This may also be true for Black males. Several H2H participants reported having earned a bachelor's degree in another field or even having another career prior to pursuing nursing degree. Second degree accelerated pre-licensure nursing programs may also serve as a key point along the nursing pipeline to recruit more men of color (Schmidt & Macwilliams, 2015). For example, Hudson et al. (2021) partnered with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to recruit students to participate in a 6-week summer immersion educational program that exposed Black college students to nursing as a career choice. These findings have important implications for the current H2H Program design. Further investigation is needed to determine if there is an association between developmental stage and intent to pursue nursing as a career among Black males. At the same time, nursing professionals must work to transform the image of nursing so that it is viewed as a socially acceptable career choice regardless of gender or gender identity.

Limitations

Although use of the electronic questionnaire facilitated the data collection process by making it more convenient for individuals to participate in the evaluation, use of anonymous questionnaires to collect qualitative data did not allow the co-PDs to follow up with respondents to gain clarification or further insight into certain responses.

Interview data were helpful in corroborating findings from the questionnaire data. However, only two of the twelve participants who completed the questionnaire elected to be interviewed. Interviewing more participants may have yielded different or additional insights. Naturally, the perceptions of the Black males who participated in our project cannot represent the perceptions that other Black males might have about the H2H Program.

Lastly, the co-PDs had built great rapport and were well-known to H2H Program participants. Therefore, participant responses could have been influenced by the relationship they had with the PDs.

Implications for nursing education and practice

One of the greatest challenges of implementing the H2H Program

was the voluntary time commitment by the PDs and mentors. However, although the H2H Program was time intensive, the program shows promise for supporting Black men along the pathway to a nursing career. One benefit of the H2H Program is that it reaches Black males beyond one academic institution. Going forward, the virtual format of the program will allow Black males in other regions of the U.S. to participate in the program. Additionally, the H2H Program offered support to mentees over the academic year instead of for a brief summer session.

The H2H Program contributed to a sense of belonging for mentees. Fostering a sense of belonging for Black men can prove difficult in individual nursing programs because often there are few Black men in one program. H2H mentors and mentees frequently commented on how they had not ever been a part of a program like H2H and that no similar programs were offered through their nursing programs. Thus, nurse educators and nursing programs may want to partner with H2H to offer their Black male students the opportunity to experience belonging in a space uniquely designed for them.

Furthermore, a larger initiative focused on recruiting more Black males and other males of color to nursing is needed. For example, the Action Collaborative for Black Men in Medicine was established by the [American Association of Medical Colleges \(n.d.\)](#) to improve representation of Black men in medicine. In the same way, professional nursing organizations and nursing education programs must support the initiative that the co-PDs have started with H2H as a way of inviting Black males into the profession and creating a space for them to thrive. To accomplish this, healthcare leaders must be proactive in identifying policies and practices that adversely affect recruitment and retention of Black males in nursing. Nursing leaders must ensure that policies and practices are equitable and just and employ strategies that promote diversity and inclusion. All nursing professionals can support this effort by cultivating environments that promote success for Black males in nursing.

Future program evaluation

The second H2H cohort of nine mentees started in October 2022. Thus, the co-PDs plan to engage in further program evaluation. Data from the new H2H cohort may yield additional insight and provide more context for the results from this initial evaluation.

The findings from this initial evaluation provide valuable insight into how a program such as the H2H Program can be effective. However, further evaluation is needed to completely understand the role that the H2H Program plays in attracting Black male high school students, or other Black males who have not expressed an interest in nursing, to the profession.

While the co-PDs created the H2H Program for Black males in nursing, the program model can be adapted to benefit any student group. Thus, future evaluations could also focus on the utility of the H2H Program in promoting success and belonging among other student groups in nursing.

Conclusion

There is a need for targeted efforts to increase representation of Black men in nursing. Black men contribute to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity within the nursing workforce and can provide unique insights to help address the complex problems that adversely affect Black male patient populations and underserved communities. The H2H Program is a targeted approach designed to increase awareness of nursing as a career choice among Black males and to facilitate their entry into the nursing profession. Our insights also have implications for similar work on pipeline programs by highlighting the relevance of age when strategizing the best time to actively recruit males into the nursing profession.

The H2H Program provided Black male students and RNs with a support network. This support network fostered a sense of belonging for

the Black males involved in the program and was advantageous to student mentees and experienced mentors. By helping to build connections between Black males in nursing and serving as a model for mentoring Black males into the nursing profession and potentially retaining them, the H2H Program can bolster efforts to increase representation of Black males in nursing.

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Declarations of competing interest

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