



NIH National Heart, Lung,
and Blood Institute



NHLBI Research and Training Highlights from the
Jackson Heart Study

Training Highlights from the Jackson Heart Study

The Jackson Heart Study (JHS) began in 1997 and is the largest, longest-running study of cardiovascular disease in African Americans. Based in Jackson, MS, it is sponsored by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The study, involving more than 5,300 men and women, seeks to better understand heart disease and its risk factors—and, ultimately, to prevent disease, prolong life, and promote heart health—in the African American community.



The JHS also prepares students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, especially African Americans, to pursue biomedical careers. Students can participate as JHS Scholars at the undergraduate and graduate level, and also at the high school level through the SLAM (Science, Language Arts, and Mathematics) program. High school, college undergraduate-, and graduate-level trainees can benefit from additional research opportunities through Diversity Supplement awards, which enable principal investigators who hold NHLBI grants or contracts to fund and mentor the trainees on a variety of projects.

See how past and current trainees have benefited from JHS career training and education.

Paying It Forward

Marshala Lee, M.D., M.P.H.

Marshala Lee, M.D., M.P.H., became a JHS Scholar in 2003. At the time, she was a pre-med student at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, alarmed at how early in life the risk factors for heart disease develop. Lee decided to spend her time as a JHS Scholar studying the impact of heart disease and awareness on Mississippi adolescents who were overweight or obese.

Lee learned to talk with parents and teens about the importance of lowering their risk of heart disease through healthy eating and lifestyle changes. Analyzing and comparing the data with that of other youth across the United States was “eye opening and very informative,” Lee says.

Today, Lee continues to work with youth as a family medicine physician at Christiana Care Health System in New Castle County, DE. She spends time in schools predominately serving students from underrepresented backgrounds, where she strives to keep students healthy and absenteeism low. Lee also directs an internship program at Christiana Care Health System, where she mentors students from underrepresented backgrounds looking to make the most of their gap year before attending medical school. She considers this the most important aspect of her job—a way to pay forward the caring she says her mentors showed her. “What I learned as a scholar really enhanced my clinical knowledge and added skills and tools to my tool belt,” Lee says.





Jackson Heart Study Scholars

Learning Cultural Competency

Jared Taylor, M.D.

Jared Taylor, M.D., became a JHS Scholar while studying biology at Tougaloo College. He spent two summers at the Harvard School of Public Health looking at how ethnic differences influence body mass indices. After graduating in 2006, he completed a 1-year fellowship at NHLBI's Prevention and Population Sciences Program, where he worked with a small team to summarize the study's early findings, gaining a firsthand knowledge of statistics.

Taylor continued his research with the Jackson Heart Study during his medical training and residency at the University of Mississippi. Through diversity supplements, he investigated heart disease risk factors that affect the size, shape, structure, and function of the heart.

Today, Taylor works as a psychiatrist at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Jackson, where many of his patients hold beliefs about mental health that can hinder treatment. "I've noticed that mental health is not taken very seriously in our community—that there's a stigma about it," Taylor says. "So part of my aim as a psychiatrist is to decrease and ultimately eliminate this stigma."

The Jackson Heart Study helped Taylor prepare for this work, he says. "It taught me a lot about health disparities, which helps me to be culturally sensitive and competent when working with people of different ethnicities or who hold varying religious beliefs."



Igniting a Love for Health

Faren White

Long before graduating high school, Faren White had been thinking about a career in health, thanks to the SLAM program through the Jackson Heart Study. The summer workshop exposed her to investigators doing interesting research as well as all kinds of possible biomedical sciences careers.

As an undergraduate at Tougaloo College, White became a JHS Scholar, first studying the impact of biomarkers on cardiac structure in the JHS cohort at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. She went on to spend two summers at Jackson State University, investigating garlic supplementation to manage acute promyelocytic leukemia—an aggressive cancer where there are too many immature blood-forming cells in the blood and bone marrow.

Ultimately, White plans to become a pediatric dentist. And although her research did not focus on oral health, she says it did point to a profound connection between heart health and oral health. As she begins applying to dental schools, she hopes her work as a JHS Scholar gives her a competitive edge. “My research experiences put me a step closer to reaching my goals and improving the health and well-being for the youth in my community,” White says.



For program information, see:



www.jacksonheartstudy.org/education



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www.nhlbi.nih.gov