

The 15 White Coats, a Group of Black Med Students, Aims for Racial Reform in Medicine

The group of 15 medical students promotes medicine as a career choice for Black people.

July 20, 2020 By Emily Barnett

In 2019, 15 Black medical students from Tulane University's School of Medicine formed the nonprofit [The 15 White Coats](#) to promote racial diversity in the medical field.

Now, they are turning their attention to cancer.

Underrepresentation of people of color in the ranks of oncology is a serious issue, which may play a role in [racial disparities](#) in cancer care.

According to the most recent census, 13% of the U.S. population identified as Black or African American. However, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) reported that only 2.3% of practicing oncologists self-identified as Black or African American. (Find more information from ASCO on diversity in oncology [here](#).) In addition, the Association of American Medical colleges reported that only about 11% of medical students are Black/African American or Hispanic

The 15 White Coats formed in December 2019 in response to the lack of racial diversity in oncology and other medical fields. The organization launched when a group of Black medical students from Tulane University's School of Medicine gathered for a group photo outside a former slave plantation in Louisiana. The purpose of this striking photograph, in which everyone posed with a raised fist, was to show the progress made by Black and African Americans in the United States since the days of slavery and to promote unity between Black medical students. The photo went viral and sparked a discussion about racial equality and representation in medicine, which has only intensified during the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May.

The 15 White Coats represents a group of medical students determined to reinforce positive imagery in

schools around the world by continuing a legacy of resilience. Our cause is to enrich accessible cultural storytelling, inspiration, and mentorship to the youth of tomorrow. pic.twitter.com/XqXby1CYfO
— The 15 White Coats (@the15whitecoats) [December 27, 2019](#)

“Our mission is to reimagine cultural imagery in learning spaces, lessen the financial burden of applying to medical school for applicants of color and to influence cultural literacy in learning spaces,” states The 15 White Coats [website](#). The organization plans to use funds from donations and merchandise to pay for scholarships for medical school for Black students. They also aim to create literature and media for classrooms across the country that specifically highlights the academic excellence of people of color. Finally, The 15 White Coats hopes to place photographs of its organization in schools and other learning spaces in order to inspire students of color to pursue careers in medicine.

“We don’t need allies; we need disruptors,” said Russell Ledet, PhD, a medical student at Tulane University and a cofounder of The 15 White Coats, at this year’s American Association of Cancer Research Annual Meeting, which was held virtually in June. “The people being marginalized cannot be the ones who solve the problem.” (Full coverage of this meeting can be found [here](#).)

For related coverage, read [“Institutional Racism Affects COVID-19’s Impact on African-Americans”](#) and [“Racial Cancer-Health Disparities Take a Huge Economic Toll on Blacks.”](#)