Fostering diversity and talent: A Pfizer case study

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The Pfizer Global Regulatory Affairs (GRA) – Howard University College of Pharmacy (HUCOP) Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience (APPE) program fulfills a requirement of the Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) curriculum and helps students explore biopharmaceutical industry career options and prepare for their career after graduation, such as pursuing postgraduate training and seeking employment. The HUCOP Preceptorship Program at Pfizer was designed to broadly increase awareness of pharmaceutical industry careers in regulatory science and enhance diversity within Pfizer GRA.

Introduction
Equity is a core value that defines Pfizer’s company culture. It speaks to the fundamental truth that every person deserves to be seen, heard, and cared for. This core value and its meaning were reassessed by colleagues in summer 2020.
as people from diverse backgrounds worldwide raised their voices against racism, injustice, and inequality suffered by Black Americans. These events were the catalyst that moved Pfizer’s GRA community to lead candid conversations, foster a greater understanding of equity, and drive actions toward meaningful change.

Following a GRA Leadership Team (LT) equity panel discussion in which senior-level leaders candidly shared their feelings and personal experiences on race and inequity, rank-and-file colleagues expressed the need to learn and do more. This sparked a volunteer-led movement by GRA colleagues around the globe who took a grassroots approach to form the Global Regulatory Affairs Equity in Action team (GREAt) under GRA LT sponsorship and in partnership with Pfizer’s human resources and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) groups. In an effort to first examine the pulse of the organization and colleague perceptions of DEI, a GRA-wide equity survey was conducted. In an overwhelming response, GRA colleagues reported the value of equity as being a high priority within the organization. The key message was that efforts should advance to nurture diversity internally and outreach externally to develop high-potential, diverse talent.

**Equity in action: Community, content, and collaboration**

GREAt is composed of GRA colleague volunteers, ranging from the administrator to senior leader level management. Colleagues represent numerous functions within GRA – such as strategy, operations, policy, and intelligence – and come from more than six countries and multiple Pfizer sites worldwide. The team focuses on educating colleagues on the value of DEI and launching programs to improve equity and talent development across GRA. This is implemented through three pillars – Community, Content, and Collaboration:

- **The Community pillar** seeks to strengthen the GRA community by building an enduring foundation of communication and trust.
- **The Content pillar** strives to enhance GRA-owned tools (e.g., Label as Driver) to promote equity, awareness, and inclusion.
- **The objective of the Collaboration pillar**, which is the focus of this article, is to grow and maintain a diverse regulatory talent pipeline.

A fundamental goal of GREAt’s Collaboration pillar is to take a more focused approach to being a sought-after employer for diverse talent globally, reflective of the patients and communities that Pfizer serves. In the US, there is noticeable underrepresentation of high-potential Black colleagues within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)—related professions overall, and in the biotechnology industry in particular. Existing literature on the lack of diversity in these professions emphasizes the impact that inclusion of Black colleagues could have in closing the economic and health disparities gap by enhancing healthcare system interactions, and furthering respect for cultural sensitivity. In an effort to address that gap, GREAt built relationships with pharmacy school leaders and students at Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs) to foster greater inclusion of Black talent in the regulatory profession. HBCUs are US-based institutions formed to support high-potential Black
students by providing an educational learning environment that caters to their unique challenges and cultural understandings. HBCUs, particularly Howard University in Washington DC, have been noteworthy in preparing minority students for STEM professions. Since 1867, Howard University, has awarded more than 100,000 degrees in the arts, sciences, and humanities and ranks among the highest producers of the nation's Black professionals in medicine and pharmacy.³

Inclusion and access
Of the many talent pipeline efforts initiated, the Pfizer GRA APPE preceptorship was a pilot program in partnership with HUCOP. The experience provided the opportunity for talented, rising fourth-year PharmD candidates to gain valuable hands-on, industry experience through integration within Pfizer cross-functional teams while attaining credit toward degree completion. The program promoted student understanding of the regulatory profession, allowed for student participation in the many activities associated with gaining health authority product approval, and, most important, raised awareness of the many opportunities to address unmet healthcare needs and improve patient outcomes. Despite challenges owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were successfully integrated into the APPE preceptorship program in a fully virtual format, which led to enhanced inclusion and access. This virtual format option was particularly appealing to many of the HUCOP students, given economic burdens, such as travel and lodging costs, that are associated with onsite opportunities. The timeline and stages for the development of the pilot program and the active student program are shown in the Figure (p. 4). The key challenge associated with this novel program was the time and effort required to set-up and finalize the Pfizer-HUCOP education affiliation agreement/contract. This process took about 3 months to complete. However, lead times for renewal of the contract will be more efficient moving forward now that the process has been established.

HUCOP issued a call for applicants from Pfizer for the GRA-HUCOP APPE preceptorship pilot program. Candidates who expressed interest in applying were required to be in good academic standing with the university, to have demonstrated strong leadership skills, and to have a robust track record that reflected their interest in pharma careers – particularly regulatory science. Selected students had previously gained experience through internships in industry and/or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Following their onboarding at Pfizer, they were integrated into the GRA Internal Medicine (IM) and Global Regulatory Policy and Intelligence (GRPI) groups. Pfizer GRA colleagues who served as preceptors and mentors showed great willingness to provide meaningful, real-world experiences driven by their passion to teach and advance equitable change within the organization. Each preceptor had significant prior experience managing students at different educational levels. To support program expansion in future, GREAT is currently outlining plans to ensure subsequent preceptors have the appropriate training and tools to provide the best experience for students.
The students displayed exceptionally strong work ethic, analytical performance, curiosity, leadership, and teamwork. As fully incorporated team members, students worked alongside regulatory professionals at all levels to gain hands-on experience across global regulatory divisions, in strategy, operations, labeling, intelligence, and so on. They participated in networking and professional development opportunities, such as Pfizer’s centralized summer student worker (SSW) events and executive leadership team fireside chats. They advanced their drug development and regulatory knowledge by engaging in, and applying their learnings from, the inaugural 2021 Regulatory 101 curriculum series, which provided an overview of various regulatory lines and their key stakeholder functions across the drug development continuum. Students had the opportunity to showcase their learnings, which spanned patient-focused drug development initiatives and early- to late-stage drug development strategy, across various forums, including GRA LT members, Pfizer matrix/cross-functional drug development teams, and fellow SSWs. The culmination of these efforts highlighted the talent pool that resides within HBCUs, such as HUCOP, and increased student pharmacist interest in regulatory affairs as a potential career.

**Student feedback**
Qualitative student feedback suggests that the selected HUCOP students likewise deemed the Pfizer-GRA APPE useful and in alignment with their professional aspirations and passion for innovative patient care ([Table](#), p. 5).
Conclusion
The Pfizer GRA APPE pilot program has been a right first step in fostering a diverse pipeline into the biopharmaceutical industry for highly talented, yet underrepresented, HBCU students interested in the regulatory science profession. Following successful completion of the pilot program, GREAt is actively working to establish meaningful metrics to progress toward the overall goal of growing and maintaining a diverse regulatory science talent pipeline. In addition to the activities initiated in 2021, Pfizer GRA and GREAt are considering the following next steps:

- Expanding the APPE program to include additional colleges and universities, including HBCUs,
- Assessing the feasibility of expanding the program globally, and
- Creating additional Pfizer GRA postgraduate student training opportunities, such as fellowships.

Abbreviations
APPE, advanced pharmacy practice experience; DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; FDA, [US] Food and Drug Administration; GRA, [Pfizer] Global Regulatory Affairs; GREAt, Global Regulatory Affairs Equity in Action team; GRPI, Global Regulatory Policy and Intelligence; HBCU, Historically Black College/University; HUCOP, Howard University College of Pharmacy; IM, internal medicine;
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**References**

All references last accessed 14 September 2021.


**Additional reading and resources**
