



UMB News

CURE's First Cohort Turns the Tassel

May 17, 2022 | By [Jena Frick](#)

As Ayishat Yussuf slipped on her graduation gown and adjusted her cap in the mirror, she reflected on the last six years. In 2015, she entered the [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) (UMB) [CURE Scholars Program](#) as a wide-eyed sixth-grade student unsure of the path she would take and whether higher education was in her future.

While participating in the UMB CURE program, Yussuf was exposed to hands-on STEM education, conducted complex academic research, self-published a book, and gained a network of mentors, teachers, and peers ready to support her. The CURE program illuminated a path for Yussuf that she never thought would be possible. Now, she plans to attend Spelman College in fall 2022 as a [Bonner Scholar](#) who will study biology on a pre-med track to become a pediatrician.

"The CURE program has been very eye-opening to many STEM careers," Yussuf said. "It has challenged me to be the best person I can be and to give back to my community so I can leave a positive mark on the world."

On May 6, Yussuf and 16 other students in the UMB CURE program made history as the first cohort of scholars to graduate from this groundbreaking pipeline program. A graduation ceremony was held to commemorate the accomplishments of these exceptional students in [Westminster Hall](#) to celebrate the bright futures ahead of them.

"West Baltimore children can be successful," said **Gia Grier McGinnis, DrPH, MS**, executive director of the CURE program and a West Baltimore native. "It doesn't matter where you come from — if you have the drive and ambition and the resources, you can succeed."

The CURE Scholars are living proof of this sentiment. Their individual drive and ambition coupled with the support of their mentors has resulted in the scholars collectively receiving more than 140 college acceptance letters.

The UMB CURE Scholars Program began as a groundbreaking STEM mentoring program as a partnership with the National Cancer Institute (NCI). It was the first program of its kind to begin academic enrichment for students as young as sixth grade. The program creates a mentorship pipeline that follows the students from middle school through high school to ensure that they have the resources to pursue lucrative careers in STEM, health care, and cancer research with the end goal of increasing the number of STEM and health care professionals from underrepresented populations and reducing racial health disparities.

"You [mentors] gave us the power to succeed and change the world," Shakeer Franklin, a graduating scholar who is pursuing a career in osteopathic medicine, said during the ceremony. "This whole journey began in sixth grade, and now we'll show future generations how to make the impossible possible"



Shakeer Franklin, a Cohort 1 graduate, delivers a student address to the graduating CURE Scholars.

Along the aisles of Westminster Hall stood life-sized posters of the graduating scholars, each with a quote about their experience in the CURE program. The poster for Courtney Jacobs III, a scholar who will be pursuing a trade/apprenticeship program, stood out. It read:

“The UMB CURE Scholars Program has impacted my life in many ways. It has exposed me to things that the average student in Baltimore wouldn't see — things that have prepared me for the real world of education and working. While attending UMB CURE, I have been molded to be a professional, act with energy, understand my worth, and know that when I walk into a room, I belong there.”

This was the theme that carried through the graduation ceremony and was emphasized by the keynote speaker, **Rodney J. Taylor, MD, MSPH**, a professor of otorhinolaryngology at the [University of Maryland School of Medicine](#). In his address, he told the scholars about his experience growing up in an underserved area and how random verbal assaults often made him question his sense of belonging as he pursued a career in medicine.

“Be comfortable with the question ‘Do you belong?’ but always remember that you DO belong,” he told the scholars. “Your grit and uniqueness to your journey creates a belonging, and you absolutely belong.”

In addition to the CURE graduation, the scholars were looking forward to their individual high school graduation ceremonies. Though they will be headed in different directions in the fall, the scholars will remain connected through the UMB CURE Scholars Alumni Network. This will allow them to remain in touch with their mentors and have access to other resources to ensure a smooth transition into college or life as a working professional. It also keep them informed of opportunities that can further their career interests, and will allow them to be active role models for the younger students in the program.

There are currently 115 scholars participating in the CURE program spread over seven cohorts. This first cohort of students may be the first to graduate from the UMB CURE Scholars Program, but they will not be the last.

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