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Jernigan attended medical school at Vanderbilt University, where he also completed his internship and residency in Internal Medicine, and served as Chief Medical Resident. Following his residency, he spent a year practicing medicine in East Africa. He later returned to the United States to complete his fellowship in Infectious Diseases at the University of Virginia, where he also earned a Masters Degree in Epidemiology.

He joined the faculty of Emory University in 1994, and became Hospital Epidemiologist at Emory University Hospital in 1995. In Spring 2000, he joined the Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion at the CDC, but maintains his faculty appointment in the Emory Division of Infectious Diseases. He has served on the Board of Directors for both the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) and the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA). He was named the SHEA Investigator awardee in 2005.

His editorial activities have included service on the Editorial Board of *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology* and Hospital Epidemiology Section Editor for *Current Infectious Disease Reports*. He has authored/coauthored numerous peer-reviewed publications and textbook chapters dealing with the epidemiology of healthcare-associated infections and antimicrobial resistance, and has a particular interest in the epidemiology of drug-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.