

ADVANTAGES OF IDENTITY-CONSCIOUS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO IMPROVING HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

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BACKGROUND

In California, the demand for counselors and social workers, health educators, and physical therapists is projected to grow by 16.7%, 19.4%, and 26.9%, respectively, from 2014 to 2024.¹ Untreated PTSD, late-stage cancer diagnoses, cardiovascular death rates, and other health disparities within Southeast Asian (SEA) and Pacific Islander (PI) communities persist.² However, few health career pathways intentionally support SEA and PI students to overcome educational challenges, like poverty and limited social capital.^{2,3}

Intersectionality can provide a student-responsive perspective to health workforce development. Identity-conscious student programs focus on students' multiple identities (e.g., low-income, first-generation college student of color) with student success as the intended outcome.⁴ Educational equity programs that center intersectional identities have been shown to influence under-represented groups to pursue graduate-level careers in health.⁵

PURPOSE

The purpose of the North Orange County Allied and other Health Careers Opportunity Program (NOCA HCOP) partnership is to increase the pipeline of low-income, first-generation students into mental, public, and allied health careers in Orange County, California. Led by California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), NOCA HCOP provides educational and financial support to SEA (e.g., Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, Lao), PI (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan), Latinx, and other students interested in pursuing health careers (e.g., counseling, social work, public health, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy).

METHODS

NOCA HCOP has recruited five cohorts of students ranging from high school to college during the 2015-2017 academic years. Recruitment materials featured graduate students' stories and health disparities from SEA, PI, and Latinx communities. Students who spent 120+ hours on activities received a stipend.

Through academic-year and summer programs, NOCA HCOP provided holistic content grounded in students' identities. Activities addressed the following categories:

- Career exploration
- Community-building
- Academic enrichment
- Navigation (e.g., wellness, financial)

Evaluation for this program included pre-test surveys, event post-tests, focus groups, and document review (e.g., time sheets, monthly mentoring reports).

RESULTS

Across the three education levels, 207 students were recruited. Most are first-generation college students. Household incomes for all four-year university participants (n = 99) were at or below 200% of the 2015 Federal Poverty Level.

Figure 1. All students by education level and sex

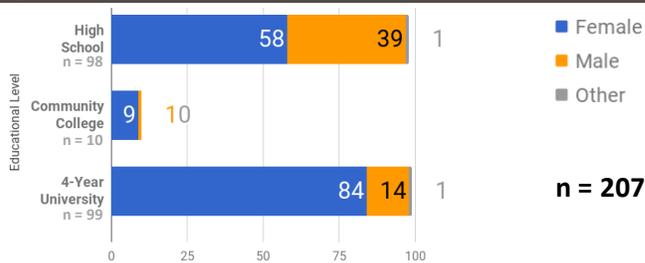


Figure 2. All students by race / ethnicity

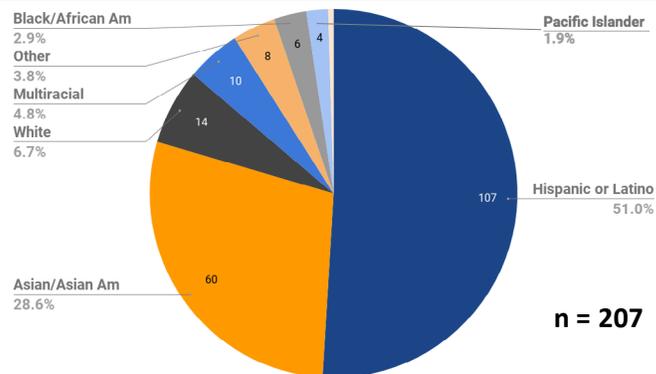


Figure 3. Process measures at the university level

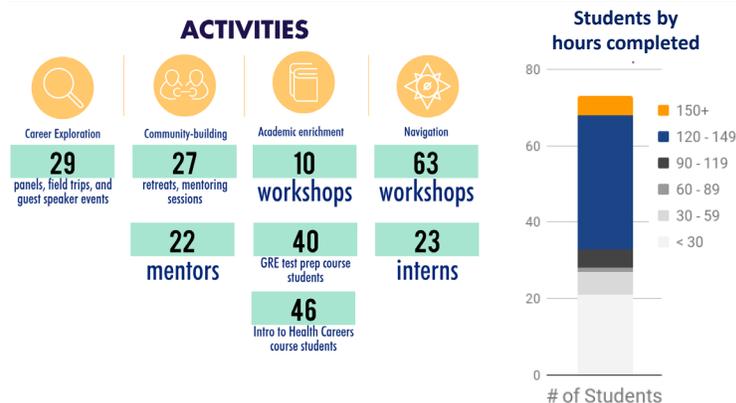


Figure 4. University-level educational progress

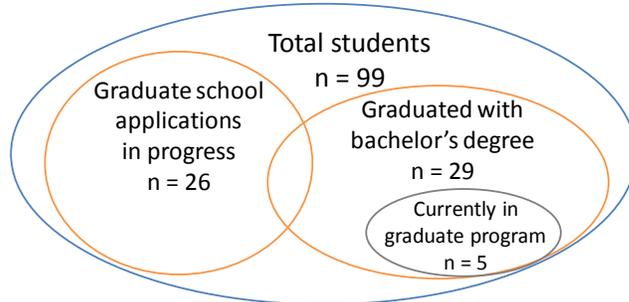


Table. Identity-conscious activities and corresponding participant feedback at the university level

Category: Activity	Intersectionality-focused enhancement	Student feedback
Career Exploration: Field trips	Visits to community-based organizations expose first-generation students to potential work environments while raising awareness about health disparities within communities of color.	"At the Cambodian Family center I was informed about the Cambodian genocide that had occurred. Previous to attending this event, I have never even heard much about Cambodian people."
Career Exploration: Panels and guest speakers	Guest speakers serve as role models and discuss how identity and culture influence their work. For example, a Speech-Language Pathologist who is the daughter of Asian immigrants connected the challenge of growing up without a voice in her family to her interest in students' speech.	"Learned the importance of accommodating plans to the culture and education level of each patient. It was a great story of how she went into the field." "This motivated me to pursue my master's in my field to help communities of low SES."
Community-building: Faculty-led workshops	In small groups, students dialogue about how their identities (e.g., first-generation college student, ethnic background, gender), communities, and gifts relate to their intended career.	"I learned and expanded my thoughts on other cultures." "I learned connecting with other students pursuing related fields is very beneficial to help motivate yourself and others as well as networking to build bridges."
Community-building: Mentoring	Since first-generation college students typically receive limited guidance to navigate college and career decisions, returning students with similar backgrounds, interests, and challenges provide social support to students in the newer cohorts.	"This was definitely the motivation and push I needed to better myself. I was so lost these past semesters, and I didn't really know where to go to for answers. My mentor helped make my path a little clearer."
Academic enrichment: Mock graduate classes	Professors from partner graduate programs connect culture to content. For example, an Occupational Therapy professor illustrated occupational injustice using her ethnography of Overseas Filipino Workers.	"From this event I learned about how occupational therapy is not just about movement, but also about culture and identity."
Navigation: Wellness workshops	Students may not seek out wellness resources due to cultural norms, stigma, or lack of awareness. Self-care workshops are promoted as graduate school preparation.	"I always ignore myself and my health to take care of others. From this event I have learned that I shouldn't do that."
Navigation: Financial workshops	Workshops on budgeting, scholarships, and available resources ease students' financial burdens.	"I learned about budgeting, ways to save, and free resources."

CONCLUSIONS

Through NOCA HCOP, students benefited from identity-based health career programming in multiple domains:

- **Career exploration:** Connecting culture and identity to career goals;
- **Community-building:** Finding role models, peer support, and motivation;
- **Academic enrichment:** Progressing along the educational pipeline;
- **Navigation:** Accessing resources for various dimensions of well-being.

Health workforce development that encourages trainees from low-income, under-served communities to reflect on their intersectional identities and lived experiences may instill a desire to pursue careers addressing health disparities. Further, increasing access to resources, opportunities, and community begins to dismantle systemic barriers to higher education among students of color. Increased investment in identity-conscious programs can mobilize a health equity workforce.

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