



National Center for Institutional Diversity
610 E. University Avenue
3338 School of Education Building
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48108-1259
(734) 764-6497 / fax (734) 764-6600
ncidinfo@umich.edu

Contact: Valerie Johnson
Tel. 734/764-6550
Email: vnjohnso@umich.edu

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U-M research team receives \$1.4 million grant to study underrepresented students' success in research career interventions

U-M researchers will use funds to study factors that promote the success of underrepresented students in exemplary research opportunity programs that help diversify biomedical and other scientific fields

Ann Arbor, Mich. – Researchers from the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) recently received a \$1.4 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study factors that promote scientific research careers among talented underrepresented students. The NCID study examines how mentoring in research opportunity interventions combines with students' social psychological strengths to increase entry into biomedical/behavioral science careers.

The urgent need to diversify biomedical science fields results from the extremely small number of African American and Latina/o students who enter graduate study and choose related research careers. Major research universities have developed effective undergraduate research opportunity interventions, which include faculty mentoring, hands-on research experience, and enrichment activities, to further diversify biomedical research careers. However, the causes of the students' success or difficulties in these research programs are not clear.

The newly awarded grant will allow the NCID to clarify factors that impede or foster successful program outcomes among underrepresented students. This NCID study focuses on two nationally recognized interventions—the Summer Research Opportunities Program founded by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), and the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Michigan.

“It is wonderful to have received this NIH grant,” says Phillip J. Bowman, Director of NCID. “There is growing national interest in social psychological factors that improve success of underrepresented students in research career interventions and other K-20 pipeline programs that promote higher education. This NIH study is a great example of how the NCID strives to use exemplary interventions to inspire scholarship—and exemplary scholarship to inspire interventions.”

Bowman's team includes Deborah Carter and Angela Ebreo from NCID and a national advisory committee of experts on social psychological factors that promote college and career success.

“In addition to SAT-type test scores, social psychological strengths include sources of resiliency and motivation that enable students to excel despite pressing barriers to success. A better understanding of such strengths can inform innovation in exemplary interventions to help more students benefit from best

practices,” says Bowman. “Strength-based strategies can increase the number of underrepresented students who go on to earn graduate degrees, succeed in research careers, and diversify the professoriate and scientific workforce.”

Administrators of research career intervention programs, such as Yolanda Zepeda, Associate Director of Academic and International Programs at the CIC, are eager to participate in and learn from this study. The CIC—a consortium of the Big Ten universities and the University of Chicago—founded the Summer Research Opportunity Program in 1986 to increase the number of underrepresented students who pursue graduate study and research careers.

“The Summer Research Opportunity Program has been replicated across the country, and empirical studies have demonstrated its effectiveness,” says Zepeda. “But up this point, we haven’t had the resources or expertise to research exactly why our best practices work. In light of the great investments we’ve made in the program and our students, such analysis is critical.”

Ultimately, the NCID team hopes to advance a strength-based agenda to improve comprehensive K-20 pipeline interventions for low income and minority students. “It is especially important to consider critical transition points across the K-20 pipeline, such as middle-to-high school, high school-to-college, undergraduate-to-graduate school, and degree-to-professional career,” explains Bowman.

Toward this end, the NIH study helps to launch a new Diversity Pipeline Research and Policy Program at the NCID, as part of a broader National Consortia for Diversity Research and Policy Initiative.

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MORE INFORMATION:

Launched in 2005 and based in the U-M Provost’s Office, NCID promotes national exemplars that address complex diversity issues within higher education and other major social institutions. It bridges scholarship with social change at the institutional, local, state, national, and international levels. NCID enacts its mission by building strategic partnerships with campus units and external leaders around several core priority areas.

For additional information, visit www.ncid.umich.edu. To schedule an interview with Phillip J. Bowman, NCID Founding Director and Professor, contact Valerie Johnson at (734) 764-6550 or vnjohnso@umich.edu.