

The Underrepresented Researchers Mentoring Program is a training project of the Research and Training Center at Portland State University. The program offers undergraduate and graduate students research opportunities in the field of children's mental health. The project coordinates and evaluates a mentoring program targeted toward students of color, first generation college students, and students with disabilities. It is designed to encourage students to pursue an interest in research and to acquire a variety of research skills and experiences. Mentees work directly with at least one existing research project. In addition to learning about the field of children's mental health at academic and

practice-based levels, participants gain an understanding of the expectations, demands, role requirements, and necessary strategies within research as an academic profession.

Since its inception, the project has had a high level of success in providing mentees with an entrée into research. All students who have participated in the program have continued to pursue research activities, with several planning careers in research. As of May, 2004, six students have participated in the mentoring program. Of the six students, three were undergraduates and three were graduate students, four were students of color, and three were first generation college students.

UNDERREPRESENTED RESEARCHERS MENTORING PROGRAM: ONE MENTEE'S STORY

I became a mentee in the Underrepresented Researchers Mentoring Program in April 2000, during my first year in the Masters of Social Work program at Portland State University. I learned about the mentoring program after mentioning to one of my professors that I was very interested in research. At the time, I had almost no previous research experience, save for an undergraduate class in basic methodology. So when I said, "I love doing research," what I meant was that I loved looking stuff up and finding things out. I had no idea of the intricacies or rigor involved in doing large-scale, collaborative, government-funded research.

When I started the program, I was introduced to the basics; most basic of all, learning to run the copy machine. This may sound insignificant, but looking up academic literature through our library databases was a much simpler task than trying to make multiple copies of articles to share with my research teams. I'll never forget how intimidated I felt. Using the fax machine was another anxiety-producing event, one which I'm not sure I am yet immune to—it has now been four years. Then there was the issue of being around "all these academics," attending professional conferences, and the unavoidable meeting and mingling with other academics from across the country. To say "anxious" does not really convey the depth of my fear; terror was more like it.

After participating in the mentoring program, I finished my MSW in 2001, and started the Ph.D. program in Social Work and Social Science at Portland State. During that time I was able to secure a federally-funded fellowship through the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which now supports me financially and emotionally as I make my way through the doctoral program. Currently, I am nearing completion of



my first solo-authored journal article, entitled "Racism in mental health." This accomplishment represents a tribute to my mentor from the Reserach

and Training Center, Jennifer S. Simpson, and to the Director of CSWE's Minority Fellowship Program, Dr. E. Aracelis Francis, both of whom have provided ongoing and un-failing support.

Four and one-half years ago, I entered graduate school grudgingly, and never imagined why in my lifetime I would ever want to pursue a doctorate, and yet, here I am. It is true that I gained valuable research knowledge and skills, but I think the most important thing for me as a mentee, and later a graduate research assistant, was gaining confidence. Of course, gaining knowledge and research skills is important to gaining confidence, but for me it was a matter of learning to negotiate through the daily rigors of academic research. Because those who mentored me were patient and also very good teachers, I was able to learn that asking for help did not mean I was incompetent, that I have something valuable to contribute the research endeavor, and that the people working with me were people just like me.

If I can do it, anyone can.

—María L. García Gettman

Focal Point: A national bulletin on family support and children's mental health: Partnering with Families, 18(1), Summer 2004.