

My Voice Matters: Program for Underrepresented Students to Serve as Mentors and Leaders in the Office of Pre-Health Advising

Project Abstract: The Office of Pre-Health Advising is a newly established/relocated office in the College of Arts and Sciences. We work with students and alumni interested in a variety of health professions, most of which are known for being highly selective. We piloted a volunteer peer mentoring program during Fall 2022. Mentoring programs provide both mentors and mentees with an important opportunity to connect with one another, their communities, and develop important skills. Leadership, teamwork, and collaboration are highly valued in the healthcare admissions processes and working as a mentor develops these skills, providing valuable experiences for future professional school applications. In learning from the pilot program, the new program seeks to recruit diverse, historically underrepresented minoritized students as mentors, providing them a paid opportunity to utilize their strengths, social capital and knowledge of CU Boulder to help the next generation of pre-health students.

Background and Project Description:

The Office of Pre-Health Advising (OPHA) serves all CU Boulder degree-seeking undergraduate students, regardless of major, and recent undergraduate alumni who intend to enroll in a variety of health professional schools including dentistry, medicine, nursing, physical therapy, pharmacy, physician assistant, and veterinary medicine. OPHA provides counsel on how to prepare to become a strong applicant for these schools, and helps students navigate the application process. In order to be a competitive applicant, students need to maintain high GPAs, gain direct patient experience through work or volunteering, study intensively for entrance exams and showcase leadership. OPHA's Peer Mentor Program aims to better prepare our mentors for these applications by giving them valuable leadership experience and help our mentees become aware early on of the expectations of strong applicants.

Starting in Fall 2022, OPHA launched a volunteer peer mentoring program where sophomores, juniors and seniors mentored a group of five first-year students each. The goal of this program is to build a sense of community and belonging amongst pre-health students, foster the ability to learn from each other, and give mentors and mentees a meaningful experience they can share on future professional school applications. Mentor programs such as this promote increased self-confidence, access to a support system, enhanced understanding, exposure to diverse perspectives, and greater knowledge of career success factors in mentees.

The benefits of mentoring extend beyond the mentee. Mentors gain communication and leadership skills, increased self-awareness, and increased empathy, and cultural competency (Hastings, 2016). Additionally, many health professions schools look for applicants demonstrating leadership experience (Ghajar and Lofti, 2021; Kowarski, 2020) and this can be a way for students to stand out .

In our current program, mentors volunteer for approximately 35 hours over the course semester. These 35 hours consist of training, email communications with mentees, one-on-one

and group meetings with mentees, and working with OPHA staff. Through these interactions, mentors gain experience in written and verbal communication, leadership, cultural competence, and reliability; all of which are characteristics that health professional schools value. It can be challenging, though, for mentors to continuously engage in a volunteer-only position, without financial compensation. While our mentors are gaining valuable experiences, volunteering and unpaid opportunities are rooted in privilege, favoring those with time and money, which further supports a system of inequity (Cruz, 2020).

Our current program is based on a volunteer model and our mentors do come from diverse backgrounds. Of our fourteen mentors, ten identify as BIPOC, three are first generation college students and eight are women. Almost 80% are working a paid job this semester, in addition to volunteering with us, showing that paid positions are important to our mentors.

Mentor Recruitment and Selection:

With support from the A&S Dean's Innovation Fund, the Program Coordinator can focus on recruiting mentors who are historically and currently underrepresented in the more selective health professions, with a focus on women, BIPOC students, first-generation students and low-income/Pell Eligible students. We will recruit mentees from all demographics, but prioritize placement with mentors of similar backgrounds and health professions interests to the mentees. This tactic is important for representation in the healthcare fields.

Recent data shows disparities in minoritized students who matriculated to medical school in 2021 (AAMC, 2022) and in showing our students that their personal experience, as well as their voice as a leader, are valued at CU Boulder, we can inspire them to pursue career fields that are lacking these voices. To illustrate an example with medical school, the most popular area of interest among our students for those who matriculated in 2021, approximately 0.7% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 10.3% identified as Black or African American, 11.5% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, and 0.05% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (AAMC, 2022).

Mentorship programs focusing on women and underrepresented minorities illustrate the value placed on them to further their future profession. Programs like this may improve confidence levels among participants which may help combat long-term issues. For example, the number of female physicians has increased over the past several decades (AAMC, 2022), but gender inequities exist and persist (Newman et al., 2020).

Additionally, CU Boulder's IDEA Plan discusses the need to better retain underrepresented groups who often report an unwelcoming campus climate, which can impact their sense of belonging and retention (CU Boulder Idea Plan, 2019). Funding for this program could better align the efforts of OPHA with the campus IDEA Plan. By placing underrepresented minoritized students in a mentorship role, we utilize an asset-based model of DEI work where students have the opportunity to network and build relationships amongst themselves, showcasing to their mentees the power and strengths they hold in regards to preparation for

healthcare professionals schools. They can share their knowledge gained as a student at CU Boulder, such as how to navigate campus and community resources in successful ways.

Evaluation and Timeframe:

This program is designed to have two significant impacts. Firstly, we anticipate our mentors to have an increased chance of acceptance into the health professional schools due to the leadership experience gained and the additional help they received from OPHA in regards to shaping this experience into a written statement for their professional school applications. Second, we anticipate an increased retention rate among mentees through an increased sense of belonging to the OPHA community and campus.

Our mentors are sophomores, juniors and seniors and their plans for applying to professional schools will vary, with some opting for a gap year or two before entering a secondary program. However, we will track retention of their pre-health designation and whether or not they are accepted to the schools of their choosing and compare those rates to other CU Boulder applicants who have not participated in a significant leadership role. We anticipate having preliminary data on this by Fall 2024.

We will monitor retention rates between a mentee's first and second semester, first and second academic year, and overall retention rate at CU Boulder with initial results on one-year retention rates in Fall 2024. We also anticipate an increase in mentees' GPAs compared to peers due to the role of mentorship in developing knowledge of campus resources and academic skills.

Budget and Justification:

Our current model is based on mentors volunteering their time, but volunteer roles favor non-first-generation students and students with higher socioeconomic status who can afford to take an unpaid opportunity. White families, in general, have higher median wealth levels and students from higher wealth levels have an advantage in being able to take unpaid opportunities (Lucey & Saguil, 2020). A study from the Center for First-Generation Success during the 2015-2016 year shows that, excluding work study jobs, only 6% of first-generation students held on-campus jobs while 12% of continuing-generation students held on-campus jobs. First-generation students also typically worked 20 hours per week while continuing-generation students worked an average of 12 hours per week (RTI International, 2019).

The request of \$6,000.00 helps us offer a stipend of \$600 for 10 mentors for the Fall 2023 semester, which would be an hourly rate of \$17.14. With each mentor helping five students, 50 new pre-health students gain additional support during their first semester at CU Boulder. Funding from this grant will help OPHA show the value of this program and make it easier to show the need for future funding from the College of Arts & Sciences, which sponsors the office.

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