



Spring 2022 Newsletter

Psychology Professionals of Tomorrow

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In our roles as a faculty member in Psychology and dean of our university's graduate school, we witnessed first-hand the impact on our students' mental health as the pandemic unfolded. Like many others, we found ourselves at a pivotal point where we felt compelled to respond to these challenges with a second order change that could address larger systemic issues. Rutgers University—Newark is, proudly, among the nation's most diverse colleges. The institution's unique student composition – Rutgers-Newark is a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution and 59% of our students are Pell-eligible – renders visible many of these overlapping crises in the day-to-day lives of our students. Newark is a city of migrants, with immigrants comprising one-third of all residents in the city. This population experiences persistent barriers to accessing mental health services, either due to language barriers, health care access, or the lack of qualified, competent clinicians (NJCIC, 2022). In collaboration with the Graduate School at Rutgers-Newark, and the university's center for teaching, learning, and publicly-engaged scholarship, together with colleagues from the Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, we set about building a student personal and professional development program that could support our students, providing additional touch points and small-group, cohort-based engagement to support student well-being, while also leveraging their academic interests into rewarding professional career pathways in clinical psychology (and building capacity for care in underserved communities where such needs often go unmet).

The resulting Psychology Professionals of Tomorrow (PPOT) mentoring program—aimed at supporting undergraduates of color who want to pursue clinical psychology—seeks to address the staggering lack of racial diversity amongst clinicians in psychology. According to 2017 estimates, 80% of all US psychologists are white, as are 61% of all mental health counselors (“Psychologists,” 2017).

We launched our pilot cohort with 10 students, together with a current psychology graduate student as program assistant. This initial cohort comprised juniors as well as seniors who were embarking on their “gap year” before beginning graduate study. We wasted no time in developing programming opportunities for the mentees, with an eye towards maximizing impact in the spring / summer before the Fall 2021 grad school application cycle. Here's an overview of our “curriculum”:

- We met with the pilot cohort twice a week to foster community and peer collaboration, in sessions related to the selection of appropriate graduate schools, refining resumes / CVs, crafting personal statements, and developing strong interviewing skills.

- Met with students in targeted one-on-one sessions to craft SMART goals and receive individualized support towards goal attainment.
- Coordinated grad student and practitioner panels to allow students to hear from clinicians with similar backgrounds (including from Rutgers) and to learn about their journeys.
- Organized a financial aid seminar to support students in understanding how to finance graduate school and how to think about money as a graduate student.
- Paired each student with a cohort “buddy” for support and accountability.

As we prepare to recruit our second PPOT cohort, there is much to reflect on in terms of the successes and challenges of the last year. First, it became clear that our students taking a gap year were struggling with getting to a place where they would be prepared to apply to graduate school. Many of the barriers here result from these students pursuing full-time post-graduation work opportunities to support themselves and, in many cases, their families. While reliable and consistent, these work opportunities were unrelated to psychology or mental health care (making it more difficult for mentees to participate in program activities and making it more difficult to demonstrate a professional interest in psychology for grad school applications).

Another barrier was purely financial – namely, the cost of grad school. Unlike PhD programs (which are usually fully funded), most applied psychology programs offer limited funding opportunities and require students to pay out-of-pocket for tuition. This structural barrier, coupled with the ever-present concern over student loan debt, has put many of our students in a position where they are deferring graduate school until they can save additional money.

Another barrier that became apparent was simply the limited program options for applied and clinical psychology in the tri-state area. During this pilot year, we have learned of programs discontinuing or pausing new admissions due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This barrier can directly prevent us from addressing this call to action, as the programs needed to train this next generation of clinicians are dwindling, even in an area as densely populated as the tri-state region.

Despite these challenges, our mentees continue to make meaningful strides on their journeys toward becoming clinicians. And we are celebrating their success! This pilot cohort of 10 already has one student accepted and enrolled in a Masters in Clinical Counseling program. Recently there have been three additional graduate school acceptances, one to a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy program, one to a Masters in Clinical Psychology program, and another to a Clinical Psychology PsyD program. Some of our gap year students have found employment in psychology relevant contexts, to add to their experiences for when they apply. The rest of our mentees are gearing up for the Fall 2022 application cycle, and for taking on a near-peer mentorship role for our next cohort. Here’s what our students have to say about this experience:

“This program has helped me tremendously with the amount of support and guidance in becoming a counselor. I hope other students know how much support there [truly] is from professionals ready to help you, learn and grow with you!” – R.S.

“My favorite part of this program has been being able to connect with other underrepresented students that are going into the psychology field. Everyone has been so welcoming and it brings

me comfort knowing that I am not alone going through this process. This program has helped me” – K.L.

“This program has helped me set attainable, step by step goals through my process of applying to grad programs by holding me accountable along with providing an abundance of resources I wouldn’t have found on my own. . . . I wish other students knew about this opportunity [and] the sense of community and support you will receive throughout your journey!” – A.S.

“It [this program] has helped me to cultivate a foundation of knowledge and tools to utilize as I continue on to my next chapter and I know that this program will be of great help to those who maybe a bit unsure as to where they should or need to begin because you’ll be amongst a family of students and mentors who care about your success, so you won’t have to worry about traveling on this journey alone.” – A.H.

References

New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children, *Confronting NJ’s Student Mental Health Crisis* (2022), available at <http://njcic.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NJCIC-Mental-Health-Issue-Brief-Final-Version-1.pdf>

Psychologists. Data USA. (2017). <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/psychologists>.