

Infusing Critical Conversations about Cultural Awareness, Identity, and Mental Health into a Research-Intensive Program for Hispanic/Latinx Undergraduates in STEM

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Growing concern exists about the prevalence of mental illness in graduate education, which has been associated with a lack of mentorship from graduate students' advisors combined with significant levels of fiscal and emotional stress commonly associated with the pursuit of a graduate degree. This prevalence is often further exacerbated in minoritized graduate student populations due to the constructs of racism, sexism, and microaggressions in academic contexts. In response to this concern, we offered a four-part Critical Conversations workshop aimed at undergraduate students ($n = 17$) in the ACSScellence program at our institution, a research-intensive experience designed to prepare Hispanic/Latinx students for graduate studies in STEM. Specifically, through an interactive journal club, we discussed the importance of: (1) cultural awareness; (2) the advisor selection process; (3) identity-constructs and mental health; and (4) how to deal with microaggressions in academia. Data obtained from student responses to one-minute paper prompts and open-ended questionnaires were used to evaluate the impact of the intervention. Content analyses indicated that students (76% or more per category) developed an increased awareness of what constitutes a healthy mentoring relationship, strategies to maintain work-life balance in research positions, and socio-cultural competence as a result of participating in the workshop.

Keywords: Hispanic/Latinx student mentorship, Critical Conversations, ACSScellence program, cultural awareness

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