Diversifying the Integrated Behavioral Health Workforce: Minority Student Perspectives on Effective Recruitment and Retention Strategies
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Background
In the United States, significant behavioral health disparities continue to disproportionately impact minority communities. Minority groups are more likely to suffer from certain behavioral health conditions and encounter more access barriers to quality behavioral health services. Individuals from these minority groups are also underrepresented in the healthcare workforce, both in medical and behavioral health sectors; specifically Latinos (of any race), African Americans/Blacks, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders. Many have argued that in order to reduce barriers to access for minority communities, steps need to be taken to diversify the behavioral health workforce and increase behavioral health providers (BHP) trained to work in integrated primary care.

Both initiatives require specific attention to the workforce pipeline point of entry (e.g. graduate school programs), specifically the active recruitment and retention of underrepresented minority (URM) students and specialized training in integrated behavioral health (IBH). The present study seeks to better understand URM student perspectives about IBH careers in the hopes of developing more effective recruitment and retention strategies.

Methods
Participants: Thirty-two URM undergraduate students from five universities in the Southwest region—including four designated Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)—attended a one-hour presentation on current behavioral health workforce needs, IBH, and the graduate school admissions process.

Procedures: After attending the presentation, students completed a short survey assessing perceived benefits and barriers to behavioral health graduate programs, desired supports for the successful completion of graduate programs, and knowledge about and interest in IBH careers. The survey consisted of 8 items, each with a range of 1-4 sub-items. For the items related to potential benefits, obstacles and program attributes, respondents were asked to identify how much each sub-item would impact their decision to apply to graduate school. For the items related to supports and recruitment strategies, respondents were asked to indicate how helpful each sub-item would be. For the items related to prior knowledge in IBH, behavioral workforce needs, and bilingual BHP needs, respondents were asked to rate the extent of their previous awareness of each sub-item. For the items related to interest in careers in IBH and working with vulnerable populations, respondents were asked to evaluate their level of interest in considering a career in each sub-category.

Analysis: Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics on all demographic items and Likert scale items. A series of T-tests were performed for sub-items assessing pre- and post-event career interests.

Results
Students rated perceived benefits (Figure 2) of attending a graduate school, perceived obstacles (Figure 3), and other factors affecting their decision to pursue further education, such as provided supports, recruitment methods, and program attributes. Assistance in applying for financial aid and scholarships (M=4.59, SD=0.71), preparing application materials (M=4.28, SD=0.99) and preparing for interviews (M=4.31, SD=0.78) were identified as valuable supports. Students identified post-graduation employment assistance (M=4.72, SD=0.46), financial assistance (M=4.66, SD=0.65), and faculty mentorship (M=4.53, SD=0.62) as highly important factors when considering graduate programs, while diverse administration (M=3.81, SD=1.28), a diverse student body (M=3.56, SD=1.37), and an active alumni community (M=3.41, SD=1.27) as only moderately important program attributes. Application fee waivers (M=4.69, SD=0.60), in-person visits to university classrooms/clubs (M=4.41, SD=0.80), and informative program websites (M=4.38, SD=0.83) were identified as the most effective recruitment strategies.

Conclusions
URM students’ lack of awareness of IBH at baseline and increased desire of working in IBH-related careers suggests that targeted outreach and education is an effective way of bringing URM individuals into the IBH workforce. URM students reported a significant interest in working with vulnerable populations at baseline. Emphasizing IBH as a field that addresses underserved communities’ needs may increase URM interest in IBH careers. Students reported financial barriers as the primary obstacles to graduate school. Attitudinal barriers, such as perceived ability to succeed in a graduate program and perceived proficiency in English, were not identified as significant obstacles. This finding suggests that programs can effectively recruit URM students by addressing practical barriers such as finances. URM students endorsed application fee waivers and financial aid application assistance as useful strategies to mitigate financial burden. Students also identified informative program websites and in-person program visits as highly effective recruitment strategies. Retention strategies should include faculty mentorship and post-graduation employment assistance.

Limitations include an over-representation of Latinx students in the population sample, signifying an inability to generalize results for other URMs. Survey items assessing prior knowledge of IBH and BHP workforce and prior interest in related careers were presented to students after the presentation, which could have affected the accuracy of students’ responses. Based on these preliminary findings, investigators will continue sampling as outreach efforts expand. This and future research will assist in cultivating an IBH workforce prepared to provide quality care for vulnerable and underserved communities.

References

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