



The Massachusetts Psychological Association
2023 Annual Conference

Raising the Next Generation: Innovation to Address the Evolving Needs of Youth and the Profession

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Norwood, MA



Culturally Responsive & Innovative Behavioral Health Workforce Development Programs for Youth & Families in Underserved Communities (1.5CE)

Presented by Gemima St. Louis, PhD; Gina Benjamin, LICSW; Shani Turner, PhD; Bori Mahr, MEd, MA; and Alexandra Alden, PhD

Youth from historically marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by mental illness and experience significant disparities in accessing adequate and culturally responsive mental health services. According to the National Survey of Children's Health (2022), between 2016 and 2020, the number of youth ages 3 to 17 with a mental illness rose from 5.8 million to 7.3 million. The CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2022) revealed that 24.1% of adolescent girls, 16% of Native American youth, 14% of Black youth, and 46.8% of LGBTQ+ youth reported having seriously considered suicide. While millions of children and adolescents are suffering from the debilitating effects of mental disorders, fewer than half receive the care they need. According to a survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (2022), only 50.6% of children ages 8-15 and 26.6% of youth ages 8-11 with a mental disorder receive any treatment. Access to mental health services for ethnic, racial, and sexual minority youth is even more scarce (Murthy, 2022).

There are numerous systemic barriers that contribute to the mental health disparities experienced by children and adolescents. Chief among them is the paucity of providers from culturally diverse backgrounds who have the requisite knowledge and skills to address the complex social, emotional, and psychological needs of youth in underserved communities. While ethnic and racial minority individuals represent 30% of the U.S. population, about 85% of behavioral health professionals identify as non-Latino White (American Psychological Association, 2018). The dearth of behavioral health providers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has led to increased disparities and inequities in access to, and utilization of, behavioral health services among vulnerable populations and marginalized groups across the nation.

To address the significant shortage of practitioners from underrepresented communities, William James College has been on the forefront of educating clinicians to meet the growing mental health needs of an increasingly diverse society. Through its Center for Workforce Development, the College has taken bold and strategic steps to assess the training needs of the behavioral health workforce; design career ladder programs for individuals and groups underrepresented in the field; and build sustainable partnerships with local, state, federal, and community-based agencies. These efforts have

led to the creation of several workforce development initiatives that focus on recruiting, educating, mentoring, and retaining individuals from underserved communities (e.g., first-generation college students, individuals from low-income backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ groups, people with disabilities, military/veteran personnel, and ethnic/linguistic/racial minority groups).

This panel presentation will describe four workforce development programs that have been implemented at the college to expand and diversify the behavioral health workforce. These include the Behavioral Health Workforce Education & Training Program for Professionals, the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, the Community Health Workers Training Program, and the PATHWAYS Program. The panelists will provide an overview of the program participants; describe some best practices and lessons learned in implementing the programs; and share recommendations for designing innovative career ladder initiatives to recruit, train, mentor and retain individuals who are underrepresented in the field of child and adolescent behavioral health.

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will describe best practices for implementing behavioral health workforce development programs to address the mental health needs of youth in underserved communities.
- Participants will explain some key strategies for developing career ladder programs for providers who are underrepresented in the field of behavioral health (e.g., first-generation students, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic/linguistic/racial/sexual minority groups).
- Participants will discuss innovative training and mentorship initiatives to recruit and retain child and adolescent clinicians from historically excluded communities.
- Participants will list effective community engagement and outreach efforts for building sustainable partnerships and diversifying the youth behavioral health workforce.

Dr. Gemima St. Louis is Vice President for Workforce Initiatives & Specialty Training and Associate Professor in the Clinical Psychology Department at William James College. She is the Director of three federal grants—i.e., the Behavioral Health Workforce Education & Training (BHWET) Programs for Professionals and Paraprofessionals, and the Specialized Training & Academic Retention (STAR) Fellowship—funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration. Dr. St. Louis is also the Director of the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, a workforce development program supported by Boston Children’s Collaborative for Community Health, whose main objective is to expand and diversify the child and adolescent behavioral health pipeline by offering scholarships, academic training, and field education experiences to students from historically excluded and underrepresented communities.

Dr. St. Louis is the Founder and former Co-Director of the Center for Multicultural & Global Mental Health and former Director of the African & Caribbean Mental Health Concentration at William James College. For more than seven years, she directed the PATHWAYS Program, which provides culturally-responsive and trauma-informed mental health services to youths in urban school districts. Her primary clinical focus is on the impacts of trauma on children, adolescents, and families. Her research and program development initiatives have been funded by grants received from the City of Boston Mayor’s Office; the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Ethnic Minority Recruitment, Retention, and Training Taskforce; the American Psychiatric Foundation; and the Hearst Foundations.

Dr. St. Louis has presented at local, national, and international conferences on trauma, disaster mental health, health disparities, and behavioral health workforce development. She has authored and co-authored articles and book chapters on her areas of expertise. Dr. St. Louis is the recipient of several awards, including two Community Appreciation Awards, the Massachusetts Service Recognition Award, and the City of Boston Mayor’s Office’s Award for Leadership and Dedicated Services to the Haitian Community. She is an alumna of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Leadership Institute for Women in Psychology, and a Member of APA’s Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity and Race (Division 42); International Psychology (Division 52); and Clinical Child Psychology (Division 53). Dr. St. Louis is a Licensed Psychologist and a Certified Health Service Provider in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Gina Dessources Benjamin, LICSW, is a Clinical Social Worker, by training, with over 15 years of experience as a direct care clinician. She is now serving as the Associate Director of Clinical and Community Services in the Center for Workforce Development at William James College. She is the Director of the Community Health Workers Training Program, Co-Director of the Haiti Service Learning and Immersion Experience in the Center for Multicultural and Global Mental Health, and Adjunct Faculty in the Counseling and Behavioral Health Department. Ms. Benjamin is also the Social Services Director at Mount Olives Community Center and a Board Member of Functional Literacy Ministry-Haiti. Ms. Benjamin received her Bachelor of Arts in psychology and sociology at Simmons University in Boston. She furthered her education at the Simmons University School of Social Work where she earned her Master of Social Work and Certificate in Urban Leadership. Currently, she is a seminary student at the Campus for Urban Ministerial Education, the Boston campus of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Her studies focus on urban ministry leadership, partnership development, global missions, and the intersection between spirituality and global mental health. As a bicultural and bilingual immigrant leader, Ms. Benjamin is committed to the recruitment, training, and retention of a diverse behavioral health workforce to serve historically marginalized and underserved communities.

Dr. Shani Turner is an Assistant Professor in the Clinical Psychology Department, the Director of the PATHWAYS Program, and the Director of the African & Caribbean Mental Health Concentration at William James College. She earned her Ph.D. in Clinical-Community Psychology program from Wichita State University. Dr. Turner completed her pre-doctoral internship at Community Healthlink Youth and Family Services in Worcester, MA and received training in Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. In 2011, she completed her post-doctoral training at Boston Children's Hospital where she was a psychology fellow within the Leadership Training in Adolescent Health (LEAH) Program in Adolescent Medicine. Additionally, Dr. Turner held a Harvard Medical School appointment as a Clinical Fellow in Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry. After completing her post-doctoral training, Dr. Turner worked at South End Community Health Center in the Behavioral Health Department providing individual, group, and school-based therapy. From 2017 to August 2020, Dr. Turner worked as the Assistant Professor of Psychology and the Director of Clinical Training at Stonehill College. In her current role at William James College, she is the Associate Director of a HRSA-funded grant, the Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) Program for Professionals that aims to develop and expand experiential training opportunities for students. Dr. Turner's current research interests involve examining the barriers that clinicians, specifically clinicians of color, experience with delivering therapeutic treatment in communities of color. Dr. Turner has published several articles and has presented at many local and national conferences.