



Letter from the Guest Editor for Issue 4.1

The opportunity to engage in high-quality experiential learning is essential to current and future success in both academic and non-academic settings. For students who are involved in undergraduate research, the critical thinking, problem solving, and methodological skills developed are second only to the curiosity and passion for asking innovative questions. The ability to ask questions of the previous literature, their faculty mentor, and themselves creates opportunities for significant reflection and growth.

Undergraduate research serves as a pivotal experience for both students and faculty mentors. Much like the graduate research assistantship model, undergraduates should be expected to engage in high-level performance while continuously learning and working towards the ultimate goal: becoming a partial owner of the research and co-facilitator in the dissemination of the findings. As an undergraduate I had the privilege of collaborating on research with a faculty member. Each week we would meet in my professor's office and discuss our work; starting with theories and previous research, then eventually transitioning to study design, and finally analysis and implications. Throughout this year-long process I never felt like I was the assistant, instead I felt like was a collaborator. It was through this collaboration that I began to develop a tangible image of myself as an academic researcher. This experience inspired me to conduct my own senior honors thesis the following year and apply for doctoral programs.

It was not until my final years in graduate school that I worked with people who shared the same lived experiences as I did. As an undergraduate my psychology department had no one like me - a Black American woman, from a low-income family who was a first-generation college student. Furthermore, most of the research I had been exposed to at that time often made little mention of non-majority racial or socioeconomic minority experiences. I often wondered if there was space and an audience for my interests. I consider it one of my greatest achievements that I have helped cultivate that space for other emergent minority scholars.

The benefits of undergraduate research participation have been widely studied. However, there is a scarcity of research that examines how patterns of participation and entry into undergraduate research opportunities may vary based on students' minority or non-minority status. In this special issue you will read about Haeger, BrkaLorenz, and Webber's (2015) findings that differences in the participation rates of undergraduate research for Latino and first generation students in comparison to White students is in fact lower. However, minority students participating in undergraduate research at minority-serving institutions reported benefits that echoed previous and widely accepted findings from predominately white samples of undergraduate researchers. These findings also align with other research that found that students who identified as racial minorities were more likely to graduate college when they had engaged in undergraduate research with a faculty mentor.

Previous research has suggested that students, who not only received mentoring through undergraduate research opportunities, but also served as mentors to younger undergraduate research students, were more likely to go to graduate school. This current *PURM* issue highlights the research conducted by Riggs et al. (2015), who found that reciprocal benefits emerged from the pairing of student mentors to student mentees when he and his collaborators instituted a near-peer mentorship model to support minority students in STEM majors.

In launching the call for this issue I asked for authors to consider who our undergraduate researchers are? Are the methods we use to recruit students into our labs or research groups giving all students who could benefit from the experience access? When mentoring students from underrepresented groups are there certain factors, supports, levels of awareness we must have? What if you are in a discipline that traditionally does not have students from underrepresented groups as majors or minors, does this issue still apply to you? Finally, who are historically underrepresented groups in your discipline and how is it essential to include this perspective in your research process?

The dynamic articles that make up this issue have addressed these questions. The autobiographical and critical reflection by Ochoa et al. (2015) challenges the accepted notion of the undergraduate researcher as only a traditional student and urges us to consider the implications of a growing population of non-white students juxtaposed next to a still overwhelmingly White faculty. Finally, the dialogue from Louis, Phillips, and Louis (2015), discusses the role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) over time in the production of Black undergraduate researchers and eventual doctoral candidates. They call for additional collaboration between predominately White institutions and HBCUs to address the need for more opportunities to engage in high-quality mentorship and generate sustained interest in research.

Seven critically conscious manuscripts can be found in this special issue. As institutional administrators are urged to examine the practices, policies, and social climates that are sustaining inequities on the college campus, faculty should consider if the historical pathways to engaging undergraduates in research and mentorship are truly accessible to all.

Sincerely,

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