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Decreasing health disparities through improved mentoring of college students,

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Achieved Project goals:

1) Discuss how higher education institutions can better equip students entering healthcare fields to understand equity to provide equitable care as they move into their professions.

2) Develop a plan of action for improvement of mentoring of college students and a plan for decreasing barriers to obtaining the IBCLC for underrepresented minority students.

Brief project description:

I arranged a full-day workshop at NCSU led by Kimberly Seals Allers, author of “The Big Letdown,” which is an in-depth analysis of the social, economic and political influences of the American breastfeeding culture. She led a workshop about how to improve health outcomes and decrease health disparities through institutional change.

Kimberly led a lunch discussion, and afterwards she spoke to both of my classes, including Maternal and Infant Nutrition, and the CALS Honors Class. I invited my entire department, including faculty, staff, and graduate students to all of the events throughout the day. I also personally invited the graduate students in all of my classes to attend the lunch discussion and I invited professionals within our state to attend.

Attendees to the lunch discussion included: three faculty members, two staff members, about fifteen graduate students and three undergraduate students. We began the lunch discussion with everyone getting started with their food and introducing themselves. It was a nice, intimate group, which allowed for us to get to know one another. It was interesting that most of the students that came to the event were people of color (out of 18 students, I believe three were white). The three faculty members were white. I believe the diversity in this discussion is incredibly important because the students of color were able to relate to Kimberly and were inspired by her. They were able to have their voice heard in a space where their peers could relate to them as well. We had a great discussion about how universities could better mentor underrepresented students. Points that came out of this discussion include: 1) Underrepresented students need to be provided with support from people to whom they can relate. In other words, no matter how good I think I am as a mentor (using myself as an example); I need to understand that there is a limit to how effective I can be as a mentor to students of color. 2) Professors need to recognize and address their biases. We all have certain biases, and we need to understand what they are so that we can educate ourselves and be effective mentors to all students. 3) If you want to make a positive change in someone’s life, you need to take care of his or her basic needs first. We can recruit underrepresented students, but we need to provide them with the support to be successful, including social and financial support.

Kimberly also spoke to my class, Maternal and Infant Nutrition, and this discussion was more specifically related to breastfeeding disparities. Many of the same themes discussed in the lunch discussion were also discussed in the classroom setting, but it was more focused on breastfeeding disparities and how the students as future health care providers could make a positive impact on public health. Ninety students attended this class.

The last event of the day was a discussion with my CALS honors class, which included all undergraduate students and some health care professionals from the community.

Performance indicators:

The faculty members did not seem to gain much from the experience. The staff members, and especially the graduate students loved it and they reported that it made a difference in their lives and future career.

Budget summary: DMF provided $1000, and CALS provided $500. I used funds from my 7-account to pay for the lunch and cupcakes.