



## Promoting Undergraduate Student Engagement in the SCRA Biennial Conference

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**Promoting Undergraduate Student Engagement in the SCRA Biennial Conference****Abstract**

There are many benefits for undergraduate students who attend professional conferences, such as having increased confidence for conducting research, gaining a better understanding of a field, developing a professional identity, and improving abilities to network. Professional organizations also benefit from undergraduate student attendance by improving field recognition and promoting the growth of the field through the development of future professionals. It is important to mentor students for professional conference attendance to decrease anxiety and provide a context in which they can benefit from conference attendance. The project described includes a systematic reflection from six undergraduate students from SUNY Old Westbury and their faculty mentor about the group's attendance at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. Logistics of getting to the conference and other preparation for the conference are also discussed. Recommendations are provided for faculty mentors to effectively mentor students before, during, and after conference attendance. Recommendations to conference organizers are provided to improve integration of undergraduate students in professional conferences.

Providing meaningful opportunities to facilitate professional identity development is an ongoing challenge for mentors of undergraduate students. Many faculty members hope to influence a student's intention to enroll in graduate school and form a strong professional identity, and mentoring (formal or informal) is key to this process. Student interaction with professionals in the field is an important component for launching a successful career (Patitu & Terrell, 1997), and can be accomplished through professional conference attendance. Encouraging conference attendance from undergraduate student mentees who are interested in graduate programs must become a priority for mentors and administrators at undergraduate-serving colleges.

Interacting with professionals may be an important way to expose students to fields that are not well-known, like community psychology, and may also benefit the growth of the field. The Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA), Community

Psychology's division of the American Psychological Association (Division 27), has been actively working to promote field recognition. Expanding upon these efforts by more intentionally integrating undergraduate students into SCRA is a logical next step. Specifically, encouraging undergraduate student attendance at the SCRA Biennial Conference may be an important way to expand interest and identification with community psychology among future practitioners. This project provides an in-depth look at the experience of undergraduate students and their faculty mentor while attending the SCRA Biennial Conference.

**Undergraduate Student Involvement in Professional Conferences**

Engaging undergraduate students in research and conference presentations has many known benefits (Caprio & Hackey, 2014). Student involvement in research introduces them to a new field of study, stimulates interest in the discipline, confirms career

choices, and promotes the development of a professional identity (Hunter, Laursen, & Seymour, 2006; Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, & Deantoni, 2004; Lopatto, 2004). Adding conference attendance and participation compounds the benefits of undergraduate research experience by providing additional skill development and increasing self-efficacy (Mabrouk, 2009). After participating in research that culminated in a conference presentation, Kardash (2000) found that students improved in tangible research skills as well as a general understanding of the field, according to student self-report data and mentor rating of the student. Additionally, the Survey of Undergraduate Research Experiences noted that students in the sciences who participated in research and conference presentations reported increased motivation to learn and attend graduate school (Lopatto, 2007). Beyond just motivation to learn, Hathaway and colleagues found that students who engage in research as undergraduates are more likely to continue their education by attending graduate school (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). The benefits of participating in research presentations are clear and include skill development, increased confidence in ability, motivation to learn, development of professional identity, and increased likelihood of attending graduate school.

Undergraduates typically attend two types of conferences: university-based undergraduate research conferences and professional conferences. Undergraduate-oriented conferences typically focus on research poster sessions and short verbal presentations to audiences of other undergraduate students and research advisors. These conferences may be more comfortable for students as they are similar to classroom-style presentations in a familiar university setting. They engage students and provide an important introduction to research conferences. While university-based, undergraduate-oriented conferences provide

a strong introduction to research conferences, they are unable to provide students with a sense of the breadth and depth of a specific field or the opportunity to network with individuals in their chosen profession. Attending professional conferences beyond the local campus, therefore, provides these additional benefits that promote professional identity development (Flaherty et al., 2018; Patitu & Terrell, 1997; Helm & Bailey, 2013). Professional conference attendance provides the additional benefits of increased enjoyment of conference participation and increased confidence in the ability to conduct and interpret research (Helm & Bailey, 2013). Undergraduate students also receive the benefit of enhancing their curriculum vitae by adding professional presentations, which contributes to a stronger graduate school application.

Although attending a professional conference provides substantial benefits for undergraduate students, high levels of anxiety may interfere with desire to attend a conference (Flaherty et al., 2018) or prevent full integration into the conference environment (Mabrouk, 2009) while attending. Flaherty and colleagues (2018) discovered that much of this anxiety decreases with structured support and mentoring before, during, and after the conference. In other words, it is not enough for faculty mentors to encourage undergraduate students to submit a poster or other presentation; we must also support them in preparing for, understanding, and participating in the professional conference context in order for all the benefits of conference participation to materialize.

#### *Mentoring for Professional Conference Participation*

There is little consensus regarding the definition of mentoring or the essential components of mentoring to provide optimal benefits for students. Crisp and Cruz (2009)

conducted a thorough analysis of all empirical studies about mentoring undergraduate or graduate students, and identified only 42 empirical journal articles published between 1990 and 2007. While the importance of mentoring in academia is emphasized and formal mentoring has become a common practice, the shortage of empirical literature may contribute to confusion about the role of a mentor and a lack of clarity on best practices for mentoring. Articles that included the keyword of mentoring and made reference to mentoring undergraduate students for conference attendance are reviewed below.

Nora and Crisp (2007) describe the role of a mentor to include four major domains: “1) psychological or emotional support, 2) support for setting goals and choosing a career path, 3) academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing a student’s knowledge relevant to their chosen field, and 4) specification of a role model” (Nora & Crisp, 2007, p. 342). Each of these four domains are important considerations for supporting students as they navigate professional conference experiences. For example, it is important to assess a student’s strengths, weaknesses, and abilities as a starting point when preparing for a research presentation and identifying professional goals. Academic subject knowledge for the specific conference is important for students to feel prepared for their own presentations and for participation in other sessions. In addition, students may require emotional support from their faculty advisor as they process the experience, identify problems or concerns, and require encouragement. Therefore, it is important for mentors to go beyond academic preparation to help students identify sessions related to their interests, assist with envisioning professional potential, and engage students in a reflective process based on experiences at the conference.

Prior to attending a professional conference,

guidance is needed to prepare for not only the presentation but also for the conference atmosphere. Helm and Bailey (2013) designed a curriculum to support students attending conferences. Students were required to develop a schedule for preferred sessions to be approved by the faculty member in advance of the conference and complete literature reviews for several session topics of interest. This level of conference preparation ensured more effective time management and confidence in order to actively participate in sessions.

Flaherty and colleagues (2018) developed a highly-structured model for mentoring undergraduate students in preparation for conference attendance in order to decrease student anxiety and enhance the conference experience. Through multiple courses at several different undergraduate institutions, instructors provided a series of assignments meant to familiarize students with session formats, conference structure, and to develop skills for professional socialization. Students also identified personal goals for the conference and met with the faculty member for guidance for a number of topics related to professional engagement (e.g., appropriate attire, how to engage in professional conversations, safety while traveling).

In addition to structured preparation before the conference, Flaherty and colleagues (2018) offered formalized mentoring for students during and after the conference. During the conference, students completed formal checklists requiring specific experiences and attended daily meetings with the faculty member and other students. After the conference, students met as a group with the faculty mentor and wrote a reflection essay about their conference experience. Students reported increased confidence through the experience and identified benefits including a sense of belonging, affirmation of career choice, and an increased desire to attend graduate school. These benefits were consistent with literature

identifying general benefits of undergraduate conference participation (e.g., Helm & Bailey, 2013; Mabrouk, 2009) and addressed the anxiety that impacts undergraduate student engagement in professional conferences (Flaherty et al., 2018).

### *Current Project*

Beyond the technical aspects of mentoring, it is important to understand mentoring as the development of a strong and supportive relationship that requires ongoing reflection by both students and faculty members (Roberts, 2000). There is a lack of research that explores how students and faculty members experience mentoring associated with professional conferences and what supports successful conference attendance. This project attempts to bridge this gap by providing a reflection on undergraduate student engagement in a professional community psychology conference. Undergraduate students who attended the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference completed a process of systematic qualitative reflection through conversations. The primary goal of these reflections was to gain a meaningful assessment of experiences that could improve the process/experience of mentoring undergraduate students for conference attendance. An additional goal was to collect information that may assist with the integration of undergraduate students in professional conferences. Student reflections about their experience at the conference along with reflections of the faculty member on the mentoring process are included.

### **Undergraduate Student Attendance at 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference**

The present project involves a systematic reflection of six student members of a research team from SUNY Old Westbury who attended the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference in Ottawa, Ontario along with their faculty mentor. Each student attended sessions, presented at the conference, and reflected on

their experiences engaging in their first international, professional conference. The faculty mentor also reflected on the effectiveness of mentoring and preparation for professional conference attendance through conversations with students and reviewing their written reflections.

To contextualize student and mentor reflections on the conference experience, this project will first describe the college setting and structure of the team. The systematic reflection process that the team engaged in will be described along with goals of the reflection and the steps taken to complete the process. Finally, reflections will be presented—preserving the words of the team members where possible—and recommendations for faculty mentors and conference organizers will be provided.

### *Setting*

SUNY Old Westbury is a liberal arts college on Long Island, New York, that primarily serves undergraduate students. It has been ranked as the fourth most diverse liberal arts college in the United States (U.S. News & World Report, 2015), and many of the students come from traditionally underserved backgrounds. The psychology department has long emphasized the college mission of civic engagement and social justice through requiring courses focused on diversity and social justice, many of which have a specific emphasis on community psychology. In this setting, many students express interest in learning more about these areas and finding ways to work in their communities to bring about empowerment and social change.

### *Research Team*

During the 2016-2017 academic year, undergraduate research team members engaged in research surrounding first-generation college student issues through survey administration and qualitative interviews. Six undergraduate students were



part of the research team and divided into teams working on surveys or thematic analysis according to self-identified interest. Regular team meetings included discussions about applied careers and graduate programs in psychology, including discussions about student interest in community psychology. Some students were unfamiliar with the field, but all were interested in learning more about it and expressed interest in attending the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference in Ottawa, Ontario. Team members submitted two proposals that were accepted for presentation. The faculty mentor worked within the university to identify sources of funding and make travel arrangements for all six team members to attend the conference with full funding.

*Documenting and Reflecting on Student Experiences*

The members of the 2016-2017 research team engaged in a process of systematic qualitative reflection to explore the impact of attending the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. As a method, systematic reflection is an effective way of learning from both successes and failures by evaluating the contributions of one’s own behavior to positive and negative outcomes (Ellis, Carette, Anseel, & Lievens, 2014). This is accomplished through a three-step process of

1) self-explanation, or analysis of behavior, 2) data verification, or being confronted with a different perception, and 3) feedback, which includes a self-evaluation of performance. New team members who did not attend the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference assisted with the systematic reflection by conducting semi-structured conversations with the students who attended the conference. The team members’ individual perspectives provide a better understanding of the research team experiences at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. Human subjects approval was obtained through the Institutional Review Board at SUNY Old Westbury for this process.

All members of the 2016-2017 research team participated in a conversation about their experiences. All participants identified as cisgender women, ages ranging from 20 to 31. Three participants identified as white, two as black, and one as Asian. During the academic year, two were unemployed and the remaining four worked between 25 and 40 hours weekly. One team member graduated the semester prior to the research and another graduated halfway through the year, but both returned to engage in research throughout the 2016-2017 academic year. Complete demographics are displayed in Table 1. Names are excluded to provide anonymity.

Table 1. 2016-2017 FGCS Research Team Member Demographics

Age	Gender	Race	Employment	Graduation	Career Interest
27	Female	Asian	Part-time	Spring 2016	Clinical Psychology
21	Female	White	Unemployed	Fall 2016	Forensic Psychology
25	Female	Black	Unemployed	Spring 2017	I/O Psychology
31	Female	White	Part-time	Spring 2017	Community Psychology
25	Female	Black	Part-time	Spring 2017	Community Psychology
20	Female	White	Full-time	Fall 2017	I/O Psychology

During the systematic reflection, conference attendees were partnered with a new team member who did not attend the conference. Each pair had a conversation about their experiences using a list of questions as a general guide to facilitate the conversation. Prior to participating in the conversations, individuals provided written consent to share and analyze their experiences. After participants signed the consent form, the conversation was held, and audio recorded in a private setting. Each conversation lasted approximately one hour.

The semi-structured protocol displayed in Table 2 was used during discussions to identify experiences at the SCRA Biennial Conference. Systematic reflection was accomplished by directly asking about individual contributions (self-explanation), the impact of the experience on future plans (feedback), and by probing/ asking follow-up questions comparing their experiences between the different settings or exploring the reasons for identified struggles (data verification).

Table 2. *Guiding Questions for Systemic Reflection*

Questions
1. Describe your experience at the SCRA conference in Canada.
2. Describe your experience as an undergraduate student presenting at the conference.
3. Was the conference "friendly" for undergraduate students to attend? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would make the conference more accessible for undergraduate students?</li> </ol>
4. Discuss your experience networking with others at the conference.
5. What did you learn from the conference? How did it impact your future plans?
6. What did you like the most about attending the conference?
7. What was the most difficult thing about the conference?

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was utilized to identify emerging themes. The new research team members worked on each step of the analysis. Two of the former research team members who were attendees at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference assisted in the analysis of all conversations except their own. During the process of thematic analysis, all meetings consisted of at least three team members and the faculty mentor. Research team members independently noted any statements that stood out in the context of the conference experience and then reached consensus as a group. Meetings were used to discuss the data, extrapolate meaning, and discuss which trends were apparent in individual reflections and across the entire team. The team then reached consensus on themes that emerged from the data and noted where each theme

was present. After identifying themes and discussing implications, the faculty mentor had individual conversations with team members who attended the Biennial Conference. Follow-up questions were asked regarding the implications and conference experiences.

Reflections from the faculty mentor were also noted. The reflection process was less formal for the faculty mentor and included informal reflections written in a journal. Engaging students in discussions about their experiences triggered insights that were then recorded in writing. None of the faculty mentor's reflections were included in thematic analysis but are included in general reflections of the themes that emerged from the systematic reflection.

To build a coherent narrative of the conference mentoring experience, themes that emerged from the reflections are organized into two distinct sections. Preparing for the Conference and Undergraduate Experience at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. This is followed by a recommendations section. Brief descriptions introduce each section. To bring together the technical aspects of mentoring with reflections on the experience, specific activities by the mentor and team members are described where relevant. Quotes are included where possible to highlight the themes associated with each topic. Each research team member selected a pseudonym for the purpose of sharing information publicly, and all names mentioned reflect the selected pseudonyms of "Alice", "Dorothy", "Henny", "Jane", "Lucille", and "Tula".

### **Preparing for the Conference**

Preparing for the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference was a motivator for the team throughout the academic year, resulting in excitement while preparing the initial abstract submissions, conducting research, and preparing presentations. While students worked diligently on conducting research and preparing for the conference, the faculty mentor also focused on finding a way to fund the travel and make arrangements for the team.

#### *Getting to the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference*

Logistically, attending any conference with six undergraduate students can be a challenge. Necessary arrangements include transportation, lodging, registration fees, and planning for food expenses. For international conferences, documentation is required and is an important consideration for students with special circumstances, including international students, undocumented students, or those with felony offenses.

**Funding.** None of the six research team

members were able to fund their own trip given financial responsibilities at home. Through various funding sources, four members of the team (current students) were fully funded for their trip. The remaining two members who had graduated in the previous year were partially funded and were only responsible for their conference registration fee.

Obtaining full funding for all students required persistence from the faculty mentor over a period of three months. Partial funding was available from multiple sources including the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP), School of Arts and Sciences, a university-sponsored faculty development grant, and a university-sponsored diversity grant. Each funding source was limited, so the faculty mentor negotiated for each source to cover a different portion of the expenses. For example, one source paid for transportation costs up to the amount of one airline ticket. To stay within this budget, team members agreed to travel together in a large rented vehicle that was rented with a discount code. Lodging was covered through a grant which allowed for team members to share an apartment, which enabled the alumni members of the team to receive lodging at no additional cost. Fortunately, registration fees were paid by the College and two members were provided with a stipend for food and other travel-related expenses through CSTEP engagement. For the two team members who had graduated and were unable to have conference registration fees covered, one took advantage of the SCRA volunteer program and another was able to pay the fee independently. While it was difficult to work out the funding for each component of the conference separately, persistence in this endeavor paid off as all six team members were able to attend the conference.

Funding request status updates were provided to the team during every team meeting, which enabled the students to feel



more involved in the process. During meetings, successful funding was reported, and discussions centered around how to make the remaining expenses fit into potential funding source restrictions. For example, one source had limited funds that would pay more for transportation but was also the only source that was allowed to cover an AirBNB. The team decided that the AirBNB was the most valuable cost-saving method for lodging, so the faculty mentor used that funding source exclusively for lodging. The success of these efforts was evident in the low anxiety reported by team members regarding funding. Jane explained that “accessibility was not a concern for financial concerns [sic] since the funding from the school made it easy to attend.” Henny agreed that the funding helped her attend. She said, “*I had been working and was able to pay for my passport. If Dr. Lien hadn’t scrambled to cover the rest of the expenses, it would have been hard.*” It was clear that without full funding

or the support of the mentor to identify funds, not every student would have the financial stability to attend the conference.

Border crossing. While students expressed low anxiety surrounding the expenses of attending the conference, the international focus created issues for one student. Tula, a student possessing a green card, found the experience to be anxiety-provoking. Team members were aware of Tula’s anxiety and everyone was on edge while crossing the border. At the border, federal agents asked a series of questions of Tula, including the purpose of going to Canada. It was worse upon return, however, as the United States border agents questioned why Tula had shown both her green card and passport, insinuating she had done something wrong, and requested detailed information about the conference we attended. Tula’s account of the experience is included as a full narrative (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Tula’s Border Crossing Experience*

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It was my first time going to Canada and, apart from my visit back home to Guinea in 2011, I had not traveled out of the country since I came to the United States. The closer we got to the border my nerves heightened, my anxiety increased, and I tried to conceal it the best way I could. The fear that took over me was one that I did not want to project onto the others in the car, and I tried even harder to mask the fear once we got to the border.

I’ll never forget what happened. I had a turban on for the drive and remember taking it off and putting on my school hat. I feared that if the agent had seen my turban and my travel document, he would reject my entrance. After looking at several of my peers’ passports it was now my turn, border patrol looked at my Refugee Travel Document (not being able to pronounce my name) and looked out his booth window toward the inside of the car looking for me. I was asked why I had this type of document and I explained that I was a permanent resident and provided my green card as well. In just a few seconds there were two men at the window both looking at me then back at my travel document as if they had not seen this form of “passport” before. As my travel document was handed back to my professor, I felt a sense of relief because what may have been a total of four minutes at the border felt like hours to me. I was afraid that my status as a permanent resident would make the experience at the border very uncomfortable for everyone in the car, although I knew all of my documents were up to date and there were no errors or faults with it, I couldn’t help but fear what would come. After crossing the Canadian border, I remained quiet and reserved for a few more minutes. I needed the time to process what had happened and I observed others in the car to see if they have been affected by my immigration issues.

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The extent of Tula’s anxiety only became

apparent after crossing into Canada. As a

faculty mentor, this experience was stressful. After crossing the first border, the faculty mentor secretly prepared for returning to the United States by gathering phone numbers for Deans and the university's legal department. Upon reflecting, multiple team members said they had also been silently planning ways to help Tula if things went poorly. Thankfully no assistance was needed, but the stress of crossing a border was in stark contrast to the low anxiety experienced by team members in relation to the other logistics. The faculty mentor used the opportunity to open a discussion about social justice issues related to the freedom to travel and the differential treatment of individuals based on their country of origin.

#### *Preparing Students for a Professional Conference*

In preparation for the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference, the research team members worked closely to complete the research and to prepare their presentations. This section describes two themes related to this period of work: Intensity of Workload and Unexpected Collaboration Challenges. The section is concluded with a description of the structured activities completed to prepare students for the conference environment.

Intensity of Workload. It is difficult to fully understand the amount of work required to prepare for a professional conference without experiencing one. In spite of discussing the amount of work required as a team, several students felt unprepared for the magnitude of the commitment. Team members had experienced research methods courses, preparing them for short research projects with a semester-long timeline, but they had not experienced a more intense project with an abbreviated timeline. Dorthy and Alice both specifically mentioned the workload as a source of stress, but all team members were able to cope with the amount of work by relying on their team members to share responsibilities.

Unexpected Collaboration Challenges. During the research process Dorthy became very ill and her team members had to cope with an unplanned increase in the workload in order to support their team member. The anxiety experienced by the students became a source of discussion during team meetings, and the faculty mentor attempted to discuss ways to deal with the anxiety through reframing and structuring their time. While the illness created a stressful situation for the entire team, it provided a learning opportunity about preparing under pressure.

Structured Conference Attendance Preparation. Prior to the conference, research team conversations focused on preparing for the scope of an international professional conference. Team members discussed differences between professional conferences and student conferences. Topics included format of sessions, time management, speaking about research and career interests, and goals for attendance (additional detail included in Table 4). Alice noted that this level of preparation was helpful. She said, "*the elevator speech was helpful in terms of preparation, and it was beneficial to have our professor guide us to certain sessions.*" During this time, discussions were held as a team so that students could support each other and provide models for structuring their conference schedule around interests.

#### **Undergraduate Experience at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference**

While a lot of effort went into preparing students for the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference, students reported that the most meaningful aspect of engaging with the team was the time attending the conference. During the conference, the entire team met with the faculty mentor regularly to reflect upon sessions, plan engagement in the conference, and rehearse research presentations. Based on the systematic reflection, team members identified the most

important aspects as the conference environment and integration of values, session engagement, learning opportunities, networking opportunities, shaping of career ambitions, and gaining new cultural experiences. Experiences also varied based on social class and race.

#### *Conference Environment & Integration of Values*

The conference environment was perceived positively by all team members, although one member noted that in spite of a generally positive experience, one exchange stood out as inconsistent with the values of Community Psychology. Most of the team members had positive recollections about their experience. Jane said, *“the conference itself was more than I expected. It was well-organized, there were plenty of people to talk to, there were plenty of networking opportunities, and the location itself was astounding.”* Lucille mentioned that the sense of community, which left a positive impression, stood out as being her favorite aspect of the conference. Dorothy described her experience as *“intimidating, but encouraging”* and explained that everyone was welcoming during the entire conference. Jane described a general feeling of acceptance and said *“they definitely made students and teachers and professors of all rankings feel welcome.”*

Alice expressed excitement to learn more about the field throughout the conference, and felt that the environment was a reflection of the core values of community psychology. She explained that the topics of sessions indicated genuine concern about social issues, which led to excitement when selecting sessions to attend. She added that the respect for diversity that was apparent in sessions made her feel comfortable expressing her own passion for working with LGBTQ populations.

Henny, however, felt that the environment was complicated when it came to a reflection

of community psychology values. Through her personal interactions, she felt that *“some of the actual principles or values that the Society for Community Research and Action uphold are not necessarily practiced by some of the practitioners or bigger names in community psychology.”* In specific, Henny experienced an exchange with a community psychologist who made assumptions about her identity based on her physical appearance. During the exchange, Henny was encouraged to become involved in a group that did not fit her expressed interests. Upon reflecting, she realized that the individual made assumptions about her identity that shaped the interaction. As the team member who was most interested in pursuing community psychology, this interaction was a *“disappointing”* realization that individual behavior is not always perfectly aligned with the values of social justice and respect for diversity that most excited her about the field.

In addition, Henny felt that her status as an undergraduate hindered the way others viewed her work. She explained that *“there wasn’t a large presence [of undergrads] at the conference.”* She added, *“there could be more done to be more inviting or welcoming of undergrads, or making it more visible.”*

#### *Session Engagement*

At the Biennial, research team members were excited about the topics represented at the conference, but did not always participate in topics outside their comfort zone. Both Dorothy and Jane expressed appreciation for the fact that the conference included a variety of different events and meetings throughout each day, so that they could explore several of their interest areas while attending. Henny, Alice, Tula, and Lucille each stated that they had specific interests that dictated the meetings that they chose to attend. While this helped the students narrow their focus, it may have prevented full participation by limiting their scope of involvement to certain topics. For all team members, deciding which

sessions they should attend became challenging. For example, Alice identified a number of sessions related to her interest in working with LGBTQ communities but discovered that many of the sessions were held concurrently. This resulted in an overall feeling that they did not participate as much as they could have.

Despite the conference environment feeling generally welcoming toward undergraduates, certain sessions intimidated students due to the use of advanced statistical analyses or the number of professionals present with expertise in an area. Other team members felt underprepared to attend certain sessions due to their undergraduate status, since they could not contribute in what they felt was a meaningful way. Dorthy and Jane both explained that they felt a sense of intimidation due to their lack of knowledge. Jane confessed that this prevented her from attending some sessions and rationalized by saying, *"There was no way I'm going to this...there was no way that I could be able to grasp what they were talking about."*

Henny, on the other hand, felt that she needed to attend as many events as possible during the conference. This challenge may be familiar to many first-time conference attendees who frequently attend so many sessions and have little time for networking, reflection, or relaxation. In spite of receiving advice from the faculty mentor to take breaks throughout the conference, Henny learned this lesson the hard way. She explained that she thought it would be fine, as she would just be *"sitting and learning."* Ultimately, this resulted in exhaustion. She explained, *"I was going to everything. I even had a breakdown at one point. If I had taken the time to just chill, it would have been prevented."*

#### *Learning Opportunities*

Throughout the conference, team members gained new perspectives about the field of community psychology. Lucille expressed

appreciation for learning about the infrastructure and organization of the conference through volunteering. Henny mentioned multiple benefits of the conference, including learning more about the process of conducting research in community settings and the importance of recognizing failures in research. She said, *"I learned things on a science level, to human social dynamics, to networking, to having an epiphany in the bathroom of what I wanted to do with my grad work."*

All team members left the conference with a greater appreciation for the diverse applications of community psychology. Lucille was able to see herself in a new professional setting through her conference experience. She said, *"You got to see what these people are doing, and it gives you an insight as to what you could be doing in a few years."* Dorthy felt empowered by learning more about community psychology, and said *"just because we don't wear white coats doesn't mean our research isn't valid."* Dorthy had experienced obstacles in college defending her interest in community research and felt a sense of belonging at the Biennial. She continued to explain that she believes community research should be highlighted, and that it was refreshing for her to see this happen in a conference.

Barriers to learning. Lucille, however, felt that her involvement in volunteering throughout the conference actually hindered her ability to learn about community psychology. She volunteered approximately 10 hours during the conference, frequently serving as a technology support during sessions. She felt that she left the conference with ambiguity about the field, which she attributed to being too busy with volunteering.

#### *Networking Opportunities*

Research team members agreed that the conference provided numerous networking opportunities. Prior to the conference, the

faculty mentor spoke with the team about how to take advantage of networking opportunities appropriate for their levels of interest. At first, they were uncertain about engaging in networking opportunities and were hesitant to participate. With continued encouragement, however, students became more relaxed in their approach and began to speak with more individuals. Specifically, Dorthy stated that she was able to utilize the networking opportunities by making connections with individuals engaged in consulting, which was her career ambition.

Dorthy and Lucille both identified the women's social as one of the highlights of their conference experiences. This social presented many networking opportunities and connections that persisted throughout the duration of the conference. After this event, Dorthy explained that she felt encouraged during the conference due to seeing women obtain empowered positions of employment within community psychology. Other members, such as Henny, preferred more informal opportunities to connect with others in the field and felt more relaxed without feeling the pressure to connect. Henny spoke positively about several such connections that she made while at the conference.

Networking also provided team members with the opportunity to gain insights into graduate school. Alice felt that the networking opportunities at the conference contributed to her future in terms of gaining insight into potential graduate schools. She explained,

*"I met a few people from colleges that I want to attend. Even though I don't plan on going into the field of community psychology in particular, I met people from schools that I was interested in applying to and they would tell me about the program that I'm interested in, which is Industrial-Organizational Psychology. They*

*would tell me about the professors there and who to talk to, who to reach out to, and how well-known they are at that school for that program."*

Other meaningful connections were made with people who offered opportunities for students to join other professional organizations or being invited to contact them about graduate programs or even encouraged to apply to work with them as an advisor. Team members left the conference feeling empowered by the connections they made. Overall, networking experiences generally had a positive influence on the research team members' conference experience but had to be repeatedly encouraged by the faculty mentor to prevent withdrawal from settings that were perceived as intimidating.

#### *Career Ambitions*

Attending the Biennial had a positive influence on student plans to integrate community psychology into their careers. Lucille and Alice both stated that attending a conference centered on community psychology helped them learn about how they can utilize community psychology ideas and values in their future career paths, even though they may not have been initially interested in pursuing a career in community psychology. The conference helped Dorthy identify that there are different areas of community psychology, including consulting. This helped her realize that she could pursue her interests in consulting in either industrial psychology or in community psychology, and that multiple options existed for graduate education. Alice explained that the conference *"made me realize my interest in helping LGBT individuals in the workplace to face less discrimination."* The experience of the conference even led Lucille, who was in strict pursuit of a clinical psychology degree, to apply to a community psychology program. Henny, who expressed that she would like to continue her education in community



psychology, mentioned that the conference helped her gain insight about the type of community psychology research that she would like to focus on in graduate school. She experienced an epiphany during a conversation with a conference attendee, where she realized that she needs to acknowledge her social privilege when working within certain communities, ultimately shifting her focus. Henny appreciated this discussion about how to apply Community Psychology's respect for diversity and mentioned that it was a highlight of her conference experience.

#### *New Cultural Experiences*

The team collectively agreed that they gained a new cultural experience visiting the University of Ottawa, which granted some students the opportunity to travel internationally for the first time. "*It was my first time being out of the United States,*" said Alice. "*It was nice to see a different area.*" Dorothy appreciated the experience of visiting a new, unfamiliar culture, as she had seldom left New York. When asked about the experience, she focused on the new experiences exclaiming, "*They speak French in that area, and there were different French and English signs. The food was good; I found out about poutine, so that was lovely.*" Dorothy was especially excited about the opportunity to visit another culture and seemed most excited about this aspect of the experience.

#### *Experiences Related to Social Identity*

Social identity played an important role for the conference experience of multiple team members. The impact of social identity was an important consideration for the research team as team members engaged in an exercise to explore their assumptions related to various social groups prior to engaging in research. The faculty mentor promoted ongoing discussions about the impact of race, gender, and social class on their life experiences. Many team members embraced

this and continued to hold discussions about how their backgrounds impacted their experiences at the conference. Specifically, students expressed issues of inclusivity related to race and social class.

Racial Bias. Race was important in the perception of inclusivity of SCRA. Lucille specifically mentioned that the racial diversity of the conference stood out to her, as she had not seen this type of diversity at undergraduate conferences she had attended outside her own college. Team members of color described an overall welcoming environment, but also debriefed with the faculty mentor that they occasionally felt tokenized or alienated in the environment through individual interactions. For example, Tula explained that while people were friendly, they seemed more interested in what she had to say after they found out she was from Guinea. She said, "*I had a lot to say but struggled with how to word things in order to not bring a lot of attention to myself and my status [as an immigrant].*" While there wasn't a specific event that she could pinpoint, she explained that the experience contributed to an overall feeling of alienation.

Social Class. During the short duration of the conference, the team began to divide around the ability to engage in different cultural experiences (e.g., type of food purchased, theater, paid tours, souvenir purchases). As a result, conflict centered on social class surfaced and was highlighted by disagreements regarding the perceived ability to afford graduate education (a concept that became prominent in the analysis of qualitative data and in discussing professional goals) and gain cultural experiences while in Canada for the conference. The faculty mentor provided emotional support in one-on-one meetings with students, but did not discuss this issue as a large group. In retrospect, a group conversation may have resolved some of the conflict experienced by team members.

**Recommendations**

Engaging in a systematic reflection of experiences preparing for and attending the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference revealed a number of themes related to the values of community psychology, undergraduate engagement in the conference, networking opportunities, and the importance of social identity. Recommendations follow the insights and are presented through recommendations to faculty mentors and recommendations for SCRA conference organizers.

*Undergraduate Students*

The logistics of attending a professional conference with undergraduate students may create more work for the faculty mentor than for the students. It is important to be mindful of standard logistics, such as transportation and lodging, while attending to other important considerations such as documentation and accommodations (Table 3). Hold space for addressing anticipated challenges, emotions, and building solidarity plans to support students with logistical considerations, such as the border stress felt acutely by this team.

*Recommendations for Faculty Mentors of*

Table 3. *Logistics for Professional Conference Attendance*

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- ✓ Secure funding
  - Determine limitations associated with funding source(s)
- ✓ Secure lodging
- ✓ Register for conference and pay associated fees
- ✓ Secure transportation
  - Determine airfare, train, or vehicle mileage rates
  - Secure transit to and from airport/ train station
  - Gather information on public transportation options for destination
- ✓ Determine documentation needs (e.g., passport, immigrant travel documents, visa)
  - Identify potential barriers (e.g., documentation status, restrictions for country of origin or history of criminal offense) and secure needed support.
- ✓ Identify accommodations for dis/ability status
- ✓ Secure language support for non-native speakers or for international travel
- ✓ Prepare list of emergency contacts, University contacts, US embassy, medical emergency procedures

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Importantly, faculty mentors must create space to discuss the aspects of a professional conference with which students may be less familiar. In lieu of creating a formal assignment due to the absence of a structured class, it is critical to engage with students before, during, and after the conference

experience following an informal structure (refer to Table 4). Frequent engagement as a team should be a goal to create a strong working relationship and build rapport, increasing sense of community while decreasing anxiety experienced among students.

Table 4. *Strategies for Preparing Students for a Professional Conference*

Activity	Purpose	Example strategies for supporting students
<b>Before the Conference</b>		
Review the Conference Schedule	Explore the structure and content of the conference. Discuss strategies for effective participation, like pacing and session selection.	Define general session formats and kinds of learning opportunities, expectations of participants for each session. Explain symposiums, roundtables, poster sessions, “concurrent sessions”, and keynote sessions. Discuss expectations for attending sessions while encouraging to take breaks or disengage from conference events.
Prepare to Network	Increase comfort level with personal interactions and prepare for questions from other conference attendees.	Assign creation of elevator talks about current research, general research interests, and graduate school and career ambitions.
Create Individual Plans	Explore themes of conference congruent with student interests. Discuss strategies for cultivating social connections with professionals in interest areas.	Assist students in aligning future career interests with conference themes. Explain how to explore the conference guide, highlighting sessions consistent with interest area. Discuss strategies to connect with professionals working in interest. Encourage emails to graduate programs to schedule meetings during the conference.
<b>During the Conference</b>		
Hold Regular Team Meetings	Discuss experiences and create a plan for the remainder of the conference.	Request information from sessions attended and assessment of session formats. Use information to revise individual plans for session attendance.
Promote Personal Reflection	Explore the impact of the conference on career ambitions and understanding of the field. Provide space to explore social identity as related to inclusiveness of the field.	Create space for personal reflection on sessions in team meetings and through technology (e.g., Google docs), including a session’s impact on understanding of field. Model social group identity reflection by discussing inclusion and power dynamics during sessions and interactions. Provide emotional support to create a safe space for sharing.

<b>After the Conference</b>		
Final Team Meeting	Debrief the conference experience. Follow up with connections made at the conference.	Meet as a team to discuss the conference experience, techniques and etiquette for following up with contacts. Ask students to write a short reflection to send with a thank you note to all funding sources.

Prior to the conference. Several mentoring strategies were successful in preparing team members for engaging individuals on a professional level. Discussions about networking, asking informed questions, and preparing short talks (“elevator talks”) about research and career interests may help with professional engagement. Students struggled with time management, however. Before attending a conference, it is important to work with students to review the conference schedule. Discuss the types of sessions available and create individualized plans for conference attendance that include specific formats or topics that align with their goals. While the research team discussed these topics, individual plans were not created and may have resulted in conference fatigue for some and low levels of engagement for others.

During the conference. Throughout the conference, it is important to create space for mentors to meet with students to debrief about the sessions, experiences, and create a plan for the remainder of the conference. This time can be formal or informal so long as students are asked to reflect on content and process information from sessions. The reflection can include tangible information the students learned in each session, and their assessment and comfort of the type of session attended (e.g., symposium, roundtable) including the extent of presenter-audience interaction and their comfort level during the interaction. Students may also reflect on how their experience with each session contributes to their understanding of the field and their own future careers, what

questions were raised, and whether it impacts the type of session they will attend during the remainder of the conference. To formalize this process, it may be useful to use technology (e.g., shared Google doc) to provide space for immediate written reflections.

While conference schedules are generally full of sessions throughout the day and networking opportunities in the evening, early mornings are often reserved for a casual start to the day. We found that mornings were the optimal time to meet as a team to begin the day with a review of the previous day and planning conference activities for the upcoming day. During team meetings, it is necessary to encourage independent behavior while providing necessary guidance for professional presentation and self-reflection.

During in-person check-ins, we found that it was beneficial to discuss interpersonal interactions with professionals in the field. Students were able to reflect on how the interactions contributed to their understanding of the field, including their assessment of whether the values of Community Psychology were consistent with the actions of professionals. This provided a unique opportunity to discuss social identity, which should be discussed both individually and as a group. For members of our team, this included reflections on social class, racial identity, and inclusiveness. The faculty mentor allowed students to express their excitement and frustrations without judgment, while providing much needed

reflection and emotional support. It is also important to discuss burnout with students, who may be feeling overwhelmed with the experience and need permission to take breaks from the conference.

After the conference. After the conference, it is crucial to debrief the entire experience. Meeting as a team provides the opportunity to reflect on the experience while understanding how others processed similar experiences. In addition, conflict within the team can be debriefed at this time. Students should be encouraged to provide reflections, follow-up with connections, and discuss plans for the future.

For the research team, we were able to spend most of the road trip back by taking turns to discuss highlights, challenges, and reflecting upon the overall experience. Students seemed engaged in the conversation and were candid about their experiences, surprises, and the impact of the conference on their future career goals. Overall, the conference provided a rich experience for the students. For the faculty mentor, it provided an opportunity to reflect on ways to provide a positive learning experience for undergraduates interested in community psychology.

#### *Recommendations for SCRA*

The experiences of the research team were primarily positive when it came to participating in the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. Based on the experiences of the team, we offer several recommendations for conference organizers for engaging undergraduate students in SCRA.

Increase accessibility of conference. Some team members did not feel comfortable attending specific events at the conference due to their undergraduate status. Emphasis should be placed on creating a more welcoming atmosphere for undergraduate students and those new to the field. It is important to create an accepting environment

by integrating the values of the field, while providing opportunities to learn about the foundations of the field.

Introduction to the field. Attending the conference provided a lot of information about community psychology, but not every member left with a clear understanding of the field. Encouraging the submission of events that provide an overview of the field and an orientation to SCRA may be beneficial for engaging newcomers. Increasing the visibility of graduate programs through a graduate program meet-and-greet may also be appropriate for enhancing the experience of undergraduates at the Biennial. In addition, providing information to newcomers about professional jargon would be beneficial for full integration.

Conference design. As discussed by Mabrouk (2009), undergraduates tend to select more technical components of a conference to attend, as they may not understand the benefits of other conference formats. The research team members attending the Biennial Conference followed this trend, as they did not fully understand the structure of the conference. This tendency may occur with individuals who are unfamiliar with professional conferences or are new to SCRA. Thus, providing a brief description of the format and purpose of each type of session (i.e., symposium, roundtable, innovative other) and learning outcomes in the conference guidebook would be beneficial. Distributing sessions with similar topics throughout the conference rather than offering them concurrently may increase interest in the conference by individuals hoping to gain information in specific content areas.

Networking and mentoring opportunities. A benefit of attending a conference as an undergraduate student is the ability to network with individuals in a field of study. Research team members identified networking opportunities as some of the



highlights of their experience at the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. Meeting with other undergraduate students is important for attaining social support throughout the conference. For faculty mentors, it is important to meet other SCRA professionals with undergrads attending. Collaborations might include joint sessions or orientations. The recent development of the Undergraduate Interest Group will support these endeavors.

To further promote mentoring, it may be necessary to provide guidance and encouragement through more formal structures. Incorporating events that provide informal networking opportunities would be advantageous for this reason. It may also be beneficial to build in more breaks between sessions to encourage individuals to pace themselves and use breaks for networking. In addition, creating more formal mentoring structures (i.e., pairing more advanced graduate student mentors with undergraduate student attendees) would provide guidance and formalize connections that may be intimidating for undergraduate students to obtain on their own.

Resource allocation. SCRA has done a good job of providing opportunities to fund graduate student conference attendance. It would be ideal to provide similar opportunities for undergraduate students, specifically those who intend to pursue a career in the field and are facing economic hardships. Continuing the student volunteer program, while improving opportunities for volunteers to be involved during sessions, will assist students with the financial hardship of conference attendance while enhancing interactions at the conference.

Promote inclusivity. When planning events, such as social gatherings at local restaurants or ticketed events, it is important to recognize differences in the ability to afford the event. For example, explore options such as tickets that do and do not include food/drinks, or to

hold social events at locations with low-cost options or student discounts.

Beyond financial considerations, it is important to recognize power dynamics and social group identity, especially in a field that values inclusivity and respect for diversity. Understand that identities—in respect to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, country of origin, and other social group identities—impact the experiences of individuals. While highlighting identities may be intended to promote inclusiveness, it may quickly become tokenizing. SCRA should consider integrating regular conversations and trainings about inclusiveness and social group identity in interest groups, conferences, and written publications.

Undergraduate students often feel a power differential in terms of social group identity and in their lack of a professional identity. The members of the research team identified several suggestions for welcome undergraduates in the conference. First, provide opportunities for involvement in roundtables and session by including prompts/directions for people without direct experience. Second, ask about undergraduate experiences and graduate school plans as it demonstrates interest in their experience. Third, understand that students may not have direct experience but do have valuable contributions based on life experience. Finally, avoid labeling individuals as undergraduate students in introductions unless it is relevant to the conversation.

Undergraduate institution engagement. As community psychologists continue to gain recognition, it is important to support the role of community psychologists working in primarily undergraduate-serving institutions to raise awareness of the field to future scholars and practitioners. In order to make SCRA more accessible and engaging to undergraduate students, SCRA must engage with undergraduate institutions by providing resources for undergraduate teaching of

community psychology courses, preparing presentations about the field, supporting undergraduate students engaging in community psychology practice, and offering opportunities to network. Continued support for the newly formed Undergraduate Interest Group is vital for promoting interest in community psychology among undergraduate students.

### Limitations & Future Research

The current project included a systematic reflection on undergraduate research team member experiences preparing for and attending the 2017 SCRA Biennial Conference. The inclusion of reflections by research team members and the faculty mentor provide more specific recommendations for mentorship before, during, and after the conference. These recommendations complement those by Flaherty and colleagues (2018) while providing tangible examples. In addition, recommendations for the organizers of professional conferences include multiple low-cost recommendations that could be implemented in future conferences.

Limitations of the project included the timing of the conversations, which occurred several months after returning from the Biennial. Holding the conversations immediately after the conference may be beneficial at better identifying the impacts of the conference, and the importance of some events may have been lost due to the lag in time. In addition, the involvement of new research team members in the conversations may have contributed to social desirability, as the students who attended the conference may have perceived themselves as informal mentors for the new team members.

Future studies should attempt to understand undergraduate professional development and the impact of engaging in professional conferences and organizations on future engagement and career choice. In addition,

the needs of undergraduate students participating in professional conferences and impact of support strategies should continue to be formally assessed. Finally, examining how the undergraduate student experience is impacted by variables such as race and social class is important in determining the accessibility of conferences, professional experiences, and graduate programs.

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