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Bridges to Belonging: Merging Community Partnerships with CSD Curriculum

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Authentic connections and organic experiences are critical facilitators of DEIB that require engagement beyond the walls of a classroom or clinic. It requires intentionality and collaboration across partners who are willing to engage in mutually beneficial experiences. As communication sciences and disorders (CSD) faculty and clinical educators, finding opportunities for these immersive experiences for our students (and ourselves) can be challenging. By establishing community partnerships, CSD programs can develop relationships that help to prepare students beyond textbooks and sterile treatment rooms.

Community Partners as Co-Educators

Community organizations and agencies can serve as strong support systems to help achieve learning outcomes through real-world experiences. International centers, advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations, support centers, and other local agencies can help to expose students and clinicians to invaluable perspectives and lived experiences. When strategically merged with course content, these partnerships can help to enrich the CSD curriculum. For example, partnerships between CSD programs and community-based organizations make fertile ground for insights into serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations in ways that are not available in the traditional classroom setting. These partnerships can lend themselves to opportunities for guest speakers, expanding externship sites, and identifying advocates who can serve as liaisons between the program and community. Establishing these partnerships in-turn creates a pathway to raising awareness in communities about the role of CSD professionals across populations and settings.

Access and Representation in Clinical Education

Who best to teach us about the communities we are to serve than members of those communities themselves? Establishing community partnerships can be one way to help diversify student experiences and thus readiness to serve those communities in the future. Through intentional partnerships with local agencies, CSD programs may be able to capture a more diverse base for learning opportunities while simultaneously creating a sustainable path for access and equity of services. When coupled with ethical practices, these relationships can provide a platform for students to observe the intersection of culturally responsive care and social determinants of health.

Establishing Sustainable and Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Preserving the integrity of DEIB in community-based partnerships requires reciprocity. For all parties to best benefit from the relationship, programs can seek to first understand the group, or organization's goals and look for commonalities between the two where resources can be best utilized in an equitable way. Sustainable relationships require an investment between all parties involved. To help ensure success, CSD programs should seek to build rapport with partners, which includes maintaining communication with point-people in the organization. This is of particular significance to do so when working with highly vulnerable or marginalized communities. In the process, students should be taught not only how to establish these relationships, but ways in which they can be maintained and

even repaired if/when needed. Again, this is of great importance as key players in programs and universities are subject to change more readily than community members.

Empowering Students

When students are encouraged to collaborate with organizations to enhance their personal growth and learning, they are often introduced to environments and people they may not typically encounter in their day-to-day experiences. When coupled with ongoing learning, these experiences can empower students to gain a deeper appreciation for their own communities. As community-based activities are synthesized with classroom coursework, students can be empowered with ways to responsibly seek opportunities for engagement on their own. Unique experiences that bring the world to our students helps them to see themselves as active contributors to inclusive systems and purposeful partnerships that support DEIB in the continuum of care.

As we seek ways to enrich learning in the CSD curriculum, establishing and maintaining community partners can be a sustainable way to advance shared goals through a reciprocal relationship. By infusing partnerships into our program structure, we can create spaces which actively engage with and affirm the populations we serve. These collaborations can give way to students' better understanding the importance of access, equity, and inclusion within the profession.