Moderator: Welcome to the VA HSR&D Investigator Insights Podcast Series. In this episode, Center for Information, Dissemination, and Education Resources staff member Karen Jamrog interviews Cindie Slightam of the Center for Innovation to Implementation about a 2021 pilot of a virtual paid internship for community college students from historically excluded groups. The project's goals were to expose students to research at VA and inspire them to advance their own research careers.

Karen Jamrog: Cindie, could you tell us a bit of background? What prompted the project and how it was designed?

Cindie Slightam: Of course, happy to. The idea for the program was raised during the summer of 2020. This was the first summer of the COVID pandemic and a summer of great, remarkable social unrest, in part due to the response of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor by, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. Members of our community at Ci2i and HERC really discussed what we could do to help change.

The internship was one response that really aligned with increasing the number of historically excluded groups in health services research. Our center also held several DEI workshops. This program was one of many mechanisms that aims to diversify the workforce early in a potential research trajectory.

We know that there's a lot of opportunities to diversify at the master's and the PhD level, but we really identified a gap at the community college level, which is a really critical period where students are considering majors four-year universities. And it's an opportunity to really intervene so students can get a chance to experience research as a potential career path.

Our committee developed the internship in 2020, and many of us came from backgrounds in which we wish we could have had a program like this, or we did benefit from a program like this in our undergraduate career. We knew we really wanted to start there.

We knew that if students enjoyed research early on, then when they transferred to a four-year degree from community college, they would really be prepared to seek out, and identify more opportunities to support their growth. We also hope that they'll continue to keep the VA on their mind and find career opportunities while in school or after graduation.

Karen Jamrog: Okay. Did you want to say anything specific about the results? How things turned out?

Cindie Slightam: Yeah, sure. We surveyed the students before, and at the end of the program, and really found they gained a great deal of confidence, and several important research skills. They learned how to talk to others about research, perform a literature review, which is a critical skill in research. Understand how to read a research article, was also another skill that the students really felt a lot more confident with after the internship.

Most importantly, though, were really two key metrics. One, that they felt interested in potentially working at the VA in the future. And second, that someone with their background and life experiences would feel welcomed in the research community.

We also surveyed the students, and collected data from staff, and mentors who worked with or met with the students during the summer. The staff at our Center really appreciated the program, and being able to meet with a younger generation, and offer opportunities to talk about their work, and their profession. They highlighted us being great value to them.

All of the speakers and presenters really appreciated the opportunity to work with our interns. Knowing that not only did the interns benefit, but that the staff in our Center really enjoyed it and felt value was a huge plus for us.

Karen Jamrog: Yes, yes. How meaningful do you think the pilot program was to the students who participated?

Cindie Slightam: We're excited to say that I think it was of great value. We recently completed a one-year survey with the interns. And many of them have transferred on to four-year colleges. And they commented on using the internship as a guide to help them identify new opportunities to participate in research.

It was really exciting to see that our program not only sparked their interest, but that they helped them identify ways to actively pursue other programs to continue supporting their growth.

Karen Jamrog: Did any of the students' comments in particular stand out to you?

Cindie Slightam: Yeah. We did have, in one survey a student mentioned, "I'm always surprised to see people who seem so far ahead of anything I could achieve, having similar backgrounds to mine." I think this just really solidifies that what we had developed for students was being supported by staff with similar experiences. And as one of the fellows in our committee always says, "It's like reaching out behind you to grab the hand of somebody else and lift them up." And that's exactly, this quote just exemplifies that kind of experience that we were hoping to bring to the program.

Karen Jamrog: Can you talk a bit about why this is important? What are some of the consequences of a lack of diversity in a health system?

Cindie Slightam: Yes, happy to. Our world has become more diverse. And the Veterans we serve in the VA reflect that population. Having staff that reflect the diversity of our Veteran population, including bringing more Veterans into the VA, is important to ensure we're building an equitable health system, and that patients can trust that the system reflects their values, their needs, and their experiences.

We hope that programs like ours to increase the diversity in the VA workforce, by one, exposing students to the VA health care system, and the work that we're trying to do to improve care for them, and for Veterans; and two, introducing them to research career pathways by hopefully then supporting opportunities to come back to the VA, and work with us or to continue to think about the VA as they're embarking on their academic future.

Karen Jamrog: And investing in the pipeline and creating that more diverse workforce, I mean, you've talked about it. I really helps both sides, and it leads to better health outcomes for the patients, for underrepresented, and marginalized communities. And you're also creating these opportunities for people to join the field who otherwise might not have seen a place for themselves. There's a lot of benefit, I think. And are there next steps, plans to follow this pilot with related projects or research?

Cindie Slightam: Yeah, we are excited to say we're launching a summer 2023 cohort. And we'll be hosting more interns this summer. We're also making some revisions to the program based on feedback from the interns and staff in our first cohort, and engaging a wider pool of staff in our local VA to bring more participation from other potential pathways.

Making sure students know that you don't have to just become a PI or an investigator, there are also really great opportunities in research as working in healthcare communications, working in mobile apps, working as a data analyst. There are many ways that you can support research, support VA healthcare; and in the end, support better healthcare for veterans.

Karen Jamrog: That's nice.

Cindie Slightam: Yes.

Karen Jamrog: You're presenting a lot of different options. They can choose the path that appeals most to them.

Cindie Slightam: Yeah.

Karen Jamrog: Yes.

Cindie Slightam: And making sure that you just know that there are many ways to get there.

Karen Jamrog: Yes.

Cindie Slightam: You don't have to just go to doctorate or master's level graduate school. If that's not for you, there are other ways that you can continue to support research and support healthcare.

Karen Jamrog: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

Cindie Slightam: No. We're really excited about this program. This conference has been a really good opportunity to meet, and find opportunities to collaborate, and continue to, kind of, grow it.

Karen Jamrog: The national meeting?

Cindie Slightam: Yes.

Karen Jamrog: Yeah, yeah.

Cindie Slightam: If we go.

Karen Jamrog: Finally in-person after –

Cindie Slightam: Yes.

Karen Jamrog: – Some time, yes, yes. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. It's been a real pleasure.

Cindie Slightam: Thank you so much.

Karen Jamrog: And you keep up the excellent work.

Cindie Slightam: I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

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