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Interprofessional near-peer mentoring teams offer a sustainable approach for enhancing cancer research training of historically underrepresented students

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Abstract

Mentorship is frequently included in biomedical research training plans, typically involving a combination of faculty, staff, and/or near-peers. Positive trainee outcomes are often reported in the context of overall training programs, but the specific roles and impacts of near-peer mentors are not always described. Peer mentors can help to diversify the biomedical workforce by enhancing recruitment and retention of students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our cancer research training program explored different approaches for staffing in-person and virtual programs for high school and undergraduate students, ultimately developing a federally-funded â€œLeadership Program in Cancer Research Mentoringâ€. The inclusion of near-peer mentoring teams had a universal benefit when implemented across in-person and virtual training programs of one- and ten-week durations, as well as when peer mentors were integrated into planning efforts during the academic year. Benefits were observed for four stakeholder groups: trainees, program staff, scientist partners, and peer mentors themselves. Our results demonstrate that interprofessional near-peer mentoring teams provide culturally-relevant psychosocial and professional development support that can improve research training while developing transferable skills associated with professional communication, team-based problem-solving, and leadership. Engaging in near-peer mentoring teams, even in research areas different from oneâ€™s own field of study, crystalised the professional identities and paths of peer mentors in ways that underscore the high value of incorporating near-peer mentoring teams in training programs across biomedical disciplines and training levels. Team-based near-peer mentoring shows strong potential for scalability and sustainability, as it offers new avenues for engaging historically underrepresented students and program alumni in the culturally-relevant training of themselves and others. Peer mentors serve as liaisons to programs and institutions, creating robust feedback loops that can inform programmatic areas for growth and identify inequities that may exist within training structures, thereby improving universal design of biomedical workforce training.

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1. Compare approaches used to integrate interprofessional near-peer mentoring teams in biomedical research training programs across scientific disciplines and educational levels (e.g., K-12, undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, graduate, and faculty)
2. Identify potential benefits of engaging near-peer mentoring teams across stakeholder groups (i.e., trainees, staff, faculty, and peer mentors)
3. Reflect how diverse near-peer mentoring teams could enhance historically underrepresented studentsâ€™ interpersonal and academic growth essential for professional development and scientific identity
4. Consider opportunities for peer mentor-driven feedback loops that enhance recruitment and retention of historically underrepresented students