

# Creating, Implementing, and Experiencing Research Opportunities: A Focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

High-impact educational practices benefit undergraduate students in a variety of ways. These opportunities include student–faculty research, study-abroad and study-away programs, and internships, among others. This study focuses on one type of these high-impact practices: research. Research experiences foster student engagement and success, and they especially matter for marginalized and minoritized students, who all too often are underrepresented in these experiences. This article discusses creating, implementing, and experiencing equity-minded research opportunities for students from three perspectives: department head, faculty mentor, and undergraduate participants.

Universities value diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Changing demographics (Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen, and Stöber 2019), increasingly diverse identities of students entering higher education (Berg 2020), and the racial justice protests of 2020 (Hattery et al. 2022) have given rise to universities making commitments to or expanding their DEI efforts (Huff 2021; Tamtik and Guenter 2019). Practices that reinforce and institutionalize DEI are expected—if not always achieved—throughout academia. Simultaneously, academic institutions increasingly emphasize high-impact educational practices (HIPs). HIPs are those pedagogical practices

that actively engage students and result in significant learning. Yet, it often is left to individual departments to figure out how to put DEI and HIPs into practice (Kuh 2008). Research, a type of HIP, is one such practice that has notable learning outcomes for marginalized and minoritized students (Finley and McNair 2013).<sup>1</sup>

Our study focuses on the impact that research has on student success. Based on our experiences at a predominantly white, research-intensive institution, we discuss how to create and implement high-impact research opportunities for undergraduates that center on DEI. We present insights from an administrator, a faculty mentor, and three students of color who implemented or experienced these opportunities. We conclude with the main takeaways for administrators and faculty members invested in fostering DEI in student research opportunities.

## HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES AND DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

HIPs are equity-minded practices recognized for their effect on student success and for closing achievement gaps created by systemic or institutional inequities (Finley and McNair 2013). They are active-learning practices of different forms that comprise first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual

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experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning, service learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.; Kuh 2008). HIPs are characterized as time-intensive experiences, involving frequent interactions with diverse people, faculty members, and peers; regular feedback on performance; applied learning; and collaboration (Kuh 2008).

These varied experiences offer students deeper learning, practical competence, personal and social development, and general education outcomes (Finley and McNair 2013). Universities observe improvements in student retention and engagement when HIPs are used. Singularly or done in multiples, these practices help “America’s extraordinarily diverse students reap the full benefits—economic, civic, and personal—of their studies in college” (Schneider 2008, 1). These benefits are most pronounced for marginalized and minoritized students (American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.; Finley and McNair 2013). Underrepresented minority students’ grade-point averages increase and retention improves after engaging in HIPs (Kuh 2008). African American and Latino students perceive greater

methods taught in a traditional, passive course setting are less conducive to students’ internalization of learning or for moving from course-specific skills to lifetime, multipurpose skills, whereas experiential research opportunities produce these favorable outcomes (Duncan and Brown 2021). Alas, authentic, hands-on research opportunities are sometimes inaccessible, and it can be challenging for marginalized and minoritized students to surmount barriers to entry.

Intentional institutional action therefore is central for providing students these opportunities. Left to themselves, students (and faculty) may not engage in these activities. Students often are reticent to self-nominate or apply for opportunities due to the underlying “imposter syndrome,” low self-efficacy, or faulty outcome expectations (Carpi et al. 2017; Peteet, Montgomery, and Weekes 2015). Self-efficacy is important in every stage of the research process: from volunteering for or accepting offers to being part of a research team to performing tasks involved in the research process, such as collecting data, summarizing literature, and presenting scholarship. Reticence or low self-confidence can be magnified among marginalized and minoritized students. Moreover, many underrepresented students experience marginal-

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levels of deep learning and general education when they engage in HIPs and even more so when they engage in multiple experiences (Finley and McNair 2013). Yet, participation by underrepresented students in these experiences tends to be low (Murray Brux and Fry 2010), especially for first-generation and African American students (Kuh 2008).

Research is an important form of HIP because it improves student outcomes. We broadly define “research” to include all aspects of the process from initially sparking students’ curiosity and inspiring them to pose interesting research questions, to communicating their research findings to an academic audience as well as the public—and everything in between (Brew 2013). Research affords students technical and analytical skills as well as skills to enact independent learning (Ishiyama 2002). As a HIP, the regular interaction and feedback from faculty members that students receive through their participation in the research process lead to their firsthand understanding of the process of inquiry and discovery, as well as supportive relationships with faculty members (Kuh 2008). Whereas longer immersive research experiences yield tremendous benefits by virtue of the iterative process that more time affords, short-term research experiences—from a few days to a semester—offer many benefits for both students and faculty members (Duncan and Brown 2021; Knoll 2016). According to Wright (2000, 125), short immersive experiences “get the instructor more for less, improving student learning outcomes while easing the transition into a new pedagogical technique.”

Looking across political science programs nationally, research-methods courses are widespread (Duncan and Brown 2021). Research, however, can be daunting to students, and many are apprehensive about taking methods courses (Benson and Blackman 2003; Bernstein and Allen 2013; Murphy 2015). Research

ization and isolation due to discriminatory institutional policies and practices or interpersonal interactions on campus and in classrooms (Hurtado and Alvarado 2015; Rainey et al. 2018). External affirmation and mentoring go a long way toward introducing students to opportunities or boosting their confidence. Administrators and faculty have important roles to play in creating an environment in which marginalized and minoritized students can thrive.

The next section discusses creating and implementing equity-minded research opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds from department-head and faculty-mentor perspectives. We also present insights from three student researchers of color to illustrate the critical role that these opportunities played in their academic development.

#### **CREATING, IMPLEMENTING, AND EXPERIENCING HIPs: THREE PERSPECTIVES**

This section describes three perspectives on creating, implementing, and experiencing HIPs.

##### **Department-Head Perspective: Rosalee Clawson**

As a white department head deeply committed to equity and social justice, I focused significant attention on developing HIPs that attracted a diverse set of students to political science as part of our department’s efforts to grow the number of students in the major. It was critical to work with faculty members to articulate a vision for success and then to provide an institutional framework that incentivized concrete actions to implement it. At Purdue University, the vision was that every political science major would have at least one HIP experience, especially opportunities for immersive experiences that would actively engage students in the research process. In practice, these research experiences most often

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included research with a professor and research trips, but the department was open to supporting research experiences embedded in internships, community-engagement activities, and any other creative research-oriented programming driven by faculty interests. The vision also included a commitment to creating learning environments in which marginalized and minoritized students could thrive. These two goals go hand in hand.

The institutional framework to turn our vision into reality required (1) *support* for faculty members to develop—and for students to take advantage of—high-impact programs; and (2) *rewards and recognition* for faculty members who lead these efforts. Regarding support, faculty had access to staff and teaching assistants to assist with administrative details for research experiences. Additionally, all HIP-related expenses were covered for faculty members and, in some cases, summer support was provided to compensate for their time spent beyond a normal workload.

To ensure that students could take advantage of HIPs regardless of demographic background or financial situation, the department took two steps. First, HIPs were designed to recruit and support students of diverse backgrounds, especially students of color. It was imperative for faculty and staff to reach out to marginalized and minoritized students to make them aware of opportunities and to encourage applications. It also was important for faculty members to develop research opportunities on topics that would appeal to marginalized and minoritized students in particular. Second, we made programs as accessible as possible to students irrespective of their socioeconomic status. The department covered as many of the program costs as possible, often paying all student expenses associated with immersive research experiences.

Given how cash strapped many political science departments are, readers may wonder about the source of these financial resources. We drew funds from four sources. First, we worked with development staff to set up a “GoFundMe”-type campaign to raise money for fieldwork programs. We raised enough money to substantially defray these costs. The average development officer is not willing to spend significant time on this type of fundraising because the dollar amounts are relatively small. To be successful, department heads must reach out to alumni

that faculty efforts were “counted” either as a course or as valued service for the department, depending on the nature of the activity. Second, it was important to provide tangible awards for their efforts. I created a competitive grant program for which faculty members could apply to obtain support to implement a HIP; encouraged our undergraduate committee to nominate faculty members for teaching awards; and wrote strong letters of support for faculty awards and fellowships. Third, during annual reviews of faculty members for tenure and promotion as well as merit raises, I ensured that activities in the high-impact learning space were formally noted and valued in the evaluation process.

This issue of reward and recognition was especially crucial because faculty members and graduate students of color were disproportionately involved in these efforts. Far too often, the labor of faculty members and graduate students of color is invisible (Davis-Reyes et al. 2022). They are called on to carry the normal workload of their peers as well as surpass them in terms of service and mentoring (Brown 2019; Jackson 2019; Nair 2014). Moreover, they are expected to do the work of diversity and inclusion (Simien and Wallace 2022; Sinclair-Chapman 2015). As department head, the first concern is to recognize and openly acknowledge that this is happening. It must go beyond that recognition, however, to actually reward and value the work that is being done—as well as make clear to white faculty members that they are just as responsible for doing DEI work.

#### **Faculty-Mentor Perspective: Natasha Duncan**

Faculty members are encouraged to integrate the twin goals of inclusive pedagogy and enhancing learning experiences. For me, this coupling—defined by inclusive hands-on research—is critical to my approach as a teacher-scholar. I engage in mentoring as well as recruitment and program development to make opportunities for research experiences more equitable for marginalized and minoritized students. As a Black woman faculty member who was a first-generation student, I know firsthand that engaging students from diverse backgrounds in research requires a more expansive view of the research process. This view begins with stimulating students’ awareness to focusing on areas about

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largely on their own; this is feasible, but it requires a time commitment. Second, whenever possible, we collaborated with other units on campus. Pooling resources was an effective way to make research programs viable. Third, we drew from funds that the department received based on undergraduate enrollment in our summer courses. Because those funds came from undergraduate tuition, we believed it was incumbent on us to reinvest a significant amount of those resources in undergraduate education via high-impact learning programs. Fourth, we have an active Pi Sigma Alpha (PSA) chapter that received a chapter activity grant from the national office to support research endeavors for PSA members.<sup>2</sup>

Rewarding and recognizing faculty who used HIPs also was critical to achieving our vision. First, it was important to ensure

which they are excited all the way through to academic and public dissemination of research findings. I make deliberate choices in my recruitment efforts, topics studied, sites visited, and accessibility of opportunities that I create for students in a curricular or extracurricular capacity. Mentoring students, even before they apply for research experiences, is crucial for students’ self-efficacy.

Because marginalized and minoritized students may not apply for research experiences (Kuh 2008), I make announcements in my classes followed by targeted communication. Class announcements alone are inadequate. To signal unequivocally to students who may see themselves as lacking skills or as uncompetitive for research experiences, I use a personalized email invitation identifying the value that they could bring to a project to indicate that I

“see” them. A conversation after class or during office hours also works well. The response of students to these invitations has always been gratitude and eagerness to participate. If an instructor has not had substantive interactions with marginalized and minoritized students, it behooves them to consult with colleagues who have. I receive many requests from other faculty members for recommendations of undergraduate researchers. I make sure to suggest to my colleagues a list of students from diverse backgrounds.

In response to the interests of students and the need for accessibility, I have led and co-led innovative short-term research programs that emphasized timely topics and areas of inquiry with resonance among students of color. The duration of the programs also attended to the demands on my time. One of these programs was a Presidential Inauguration and Women’s March field research trip to Washington, DC, where students collected interview data and were participant observers as part of a qualitative research-methods training experience. Other experiences that incorporated research included my “Crossing Borders” course in which I embedded travel to the US–Mexican border during spring break for which students designed public-opinion surveys on immigration. The department subsidized travel-related costs, making these opportunities accessible to a broad cross section of students. Choosing research sites within the United States—better still, localities closer to home—increases accessibility for a wider pool of students. Together, these components make the research appealing to students, particularly those who are marginalized and minoritized. Embedding research training in a travel program boosts the appeal of methods training (Duncan and Brown 2021).

Recruiting marginalized and minoritized students to participate in research experiences and HIPs overall requires intentionality. On the part of faculty, noticing the underrepresentation or absence of students of color is imperative. What develops from this simple act of outreach is a virtuous cycle wherein students feel empowered to independently seek out other opportunities. They become part of a pool of prospective nominees for future opportunities—thereby improving their general education, deep learning, and personal and social development (Finley and McNair 2013).

Mentoring undergraduate research experiences, however, is labor intensive. So too is DEI work as well as the associated effort required to take extra steps to diversify the student pool engaging

students’ interest and participation in research-based learning (Brew 2013; Schneider 2008).

### **Student Perspective: Pablo Balcazar**

When I arrived at college, I could not have predicted that I would conduct research at a Presidential Inauguration in Washington, DC, the Borderlands between Arizona and Mexico, and the Iowa Caucuses. My goal as a first-generation student was to get good grades and graduate. Maybe I would join a club or even study abroad, but I did not plan on starting a club and did not have a clue about research. Thankfully, I found research opportunities that shaped my undergraduate experience and career path in addition to strengthening my communication, leadership, and teamwork skills—all while increasing my self-confidence. These intensive research opportunities were an outlet for my curiosity and allowed me to build lasting relationships with faculty members and peers interested in answering research questions relevant to my life.

The first opportunity was the Presidential Inauguration Research Program (PIRP). I had just added political science as a major that semester, so I had low confidence that I would be accepted in what was a prestigious program. I was strongly encouraged to apply by a friend who knew the faculty member leading the program, however. Once I was accepted, the thought of actually going to Washington to do research was both exhilarating and terrifying. Around the same time, I signed up for a political science honors course that would take students to Arizona to study immigration policy during spring break. Within a few weeks, my second-semester plans went from nothing to two research programs across the country.

The professors guided the research at every step and upper-division students served as mentors. Once we arrived in Washington and I saw the US Capitol, my anxiety was replaced with an eagerness to make the most of this opportunity. My confidence grew as my research skills strengthened. PIRP was a springboard for me. Because it made research feel less like a foreign concept, I went on to do more field research that summer and fall, each time feeling more comfortable.

After PIRP, I prepared for the Borderlands program. This research involved observing the culture at the US–Mexican border. I was excited to learn about immigration policy at the border but what caught me off guard was the vibrant community of activism that existed there. With every immigrant hardship we

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in research and to provide equitable support of marginalized and minoritized students. Because of this demand on time and the often invisibility or undervaluing of this labor (Davis-Reyes et al. 2022), faculty commonly avoid HIPs and engaged learning altogether (Knoll 2016). Within the reward structure and curriculum of Purdue’s political science department, my pedagogical approach and my personal values were recognized. Thus, I was able to engage in pursuits that I see as critical to educating the next generation of scholars of color, and I was supported in these efforts. The institutional culture “makes or breaks” faculty engagement in equity-minded undergraduate research development and

learned of, we also learned about a group of people trying to help in a unique way. The activism in the Borderlands was the reason that my classmates and I decided to launch an advocacy organization, Purdue Immigrant Allies (PIA), after we returned to campus. Serving as the vice president and president of PIA shaped my leadership and teamwork skills, making me a better student, researcher, and worker.

In 2018, I went to the Iowa Caucuses to participate in my last research program. During this program, I witnessed the same eagerness in the students experiencing their first research program that I felt in Washington, DC. Immersive research programs are

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valuable to young students who may never have thought that they would have an opportunity to attend an inauguration, see the border wall in person, and meet a presidential candidate. As a first-generation student from an immigrant family, the research programs I participated in were essential to fully realizing my academic potential.

### **Student Perspective: Daniella Gonzalez**

Before my freshman year, I had not considered pursuing an advanced degree, and I certainly had no idea how I would go about doing so. The research programs that I participated in during my first year at college, however, shaped me as a student for the rest of my undergraduate career. My participation in the PIRP introduced me to research and helped me to develop relationships with faculty members. In Washington, DC, my peers and I interviewed people attending the inauguration. We then used the data to present at a research symposium and publish an article in the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*.

In my sophomore year, I took two required research courses. I felt I was absorbing certain information with ease due to my previous experience. In class, we discussed what hypothetically would be done, whereas I had firsthand experience on which to draw. Thus, my participation in an immersive, hands-on research program set me up for success in my research-methods coursework.

PIRP was a unique experience and developed my confidence to pursue further opportunities. Because of this research experience and my relationship with one of the program's supervising faculty members, I became aware of a great opportunity to be a summer fellow with the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP). During my time in LSAMP, I conducted research under the guidance of two faculty members while also attending cohort meetings, where I received advice on graduate and professional schools. Through participating in these research projects, I discovered that I wanted to continue conducting research because of the possibility of impacting immigration policies.

My research experiences enhanced my capacity to thrive in a professional setting. My peers and I felt comfortable applying for a research grant to study the accessibility of higher education for undocumented students. We presented our research design at the Pi Sigma Alpha 2019 National Student Research Conference. The conference, along with several other symposia, allowed me to gain experience speaking publicly about my research. Although I was still nervous about class presentations, my experience with academic conferences helped to quell my self-doubt. These opportunities fostered my confidence in presenting to an academic audience. I would not have had these experiences without Dr. Natasha Duncan being a mentor and her encouragement to pursue research projects and presentations.

Overall, I believe my college success can be traced back to my participation in PIRP. As an impressionable freshman, it was both a terrifying and amazing experience that allowed me to develop research skills and close relationships with faculty members in the political science department. It gave me the encouragement and confidence to continue applying for opportunities that I initially believed were out of my league. I had the support of political science faculty members as I pursued my academic interests, and I cannot thank them enough for all they have done.

### **Student Perspective: Meron Tamene**

As I reflect on the last four years as a college student, I frequently find my thoughts landing on my initial expectations of life as an undergraduate. I was keenly aware of the painful truth that my experience would be altered because I am a first-generation student and the daughter of two working-class Ethiopian immigrants. Bracing myself, I hoped that I would overcome the obstacles that were surely ahead. Fast forward four years, and I can say that these past few years have been remarkably influential in the increased level of creativity, freedom of expression, and passion that I have for my research interests and leadership roles. I have been surrounded by faculty and staff who have diligently supported and pushed me to achieve goals that I never could have imagined. I have had the opportunity to study diverse topics within political science through research experiences that have fundamentally changed my life.

The first research experience I participated in was the 2016 Election Night Watch Party for students and community members. The event functioned similarly to a televised broadcast, with regular poll updates and reporting of electoral votes. I served as the cohost of a "hotseat" panel, which analyzed audience opinions regarding a range of important issues. The experience served as a pivotal point in my development as a scholar because it allowed me to gain firsthand experience collecting data, as well as professionally communicating political topics to a live audience.

The second research experience I participated in was PIRP. I attended the Presidential Inauguration and Women's March to investigate the effects that the 2016 election had on cultural and political polarization in the United States. I conducted in-depth interviews with public officials and participants of the Presidential Inauguration and Women's March. I cowrote a research paper with a team of peers that analyzed data obtained during the experience, which was published in the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*. I gained much confidence by conducting research that broadened my knowledge of the world outside of the classroom.

The third research experience I had was taking a "Crossing Borders" course in which we explored the multilayered components of immigration and the human impact it has on those who enter the United States. We took a week-long trip to the US-Mexican border and gathered firsthand accounts of the experiences of undocumented migrants crossing into the United States. The trip was extremely formative. I spoke to people who entered the country in a much different way than my parents had but who shared the same desire for the American Dream. I realized that it was necessary to share their stories with peers back at Purdue in the hope of opening up the dialogue on immigration and defending the rights of these individuals.

Two classmates and I formed a student organization called Purdue Immigrant Allies (PIA). Using knowledge gained from the Borderlands research trip, I helped to organize educational workshops on immigration and community-service projects that connected students with immigrant communities in the local area. PIA engaged in activities to support DREAMERS on campus and to inform students about the hardships faced by immigrant communities.

As I look back at my time in college, I know that these research experiences had a profound impact on my development as a

scholar and as a leader. I investigated research questions of personal importance to me and applied my research skills in real-world settings. These experiences allowed me to feel truly immersed in my field of study and to feel seen, heard, and appreciated as an underrepresented scholar on campus.

## CONCLUSION

Administrators and faculty members who create and implement equity-minded, high-impact research experiences for undergraduates provide critical opportunities for marginalized and minoritized students to realize their potential. This article demonstrates that when department leaders establish supportive institutional frameworks in which faculty members committed to social justice can create research opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, those students thrive and flourish.

As the three students' perspectives make clear, their immersive research experiences were life changing. Student researchers broadened their knowledge and also gained communication, leadership, and teamwork skills. Research opportunities led to skill building, which resulted in greater self-confidence, which ultimately led to the students pursuing more research opportunities—a virtuous circle. Marginalized and minoritized students who initially perceived research to be both exciting and “terrifying” became confident and creative leaders as they drew on their knowledge and research skills to address public-policy problems and benefit communities.

In summary, HIPs in the form of undergraduate research experiences are particularly beneficial to students. Research-based HIPs lead to deep learning as well as professional and personal development that ultimately benefits the entire campus and society more broadly. By consciously keeping DEI as a core element in the development of research programs for students, these HIPs create a learning environment for marginalized and minoritized students that is both challenging and welcoming.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

## NOTES

- In general, we refer to marginalized and minoritized students rather than underrepresented students to (1) emphasize the discrimination and exclusion that certain students face rather than suggest some type of deficit on the part of the students; and (2) consider students who are numerical minorities as well as those who have been systematically excluded regardless of their numeric representation in a population (Allen, Rodriguez, and Esters 2020).
- See <https://pisigmaalpha.org/chapter-grants> for information on how to apply for a Pi Sigma Alpha Chapter Activity Grant.

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