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Equity-Centered Mentoring

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Wellbeing is increasingly recognized as a critical concern in higher education, yet prevailing definitions and strategies often overlook the needs of marginalized groups. This paper explores equity-centered mentoring by reimagining wellbeing through an inclusive and intersectional lens. Drawing on the work of scholars the paper introduces the concept of equity-minded wellbeing and demonstrates its relevance to both mentors and mentees. Methodologies include developing inclusive definitions of wellbeing, understanding the role of intersectionality, and applying an equity-minded mentoring toolkit. Using ethnographic interviews with five participants from a Scientific Learning Community (SLC), the study examines their lived experiences and mentoring support. Findings reveal the critical role of equity-centered mentoring in promoting identity development, sense of belonging, and holistic wellbeing. Implications suggest institutional commitments to equity-minded mentoring are essential for supporting diverse student success. In this work I aim to deepen understanding of equity-mindedness and intersectionality, empowering readers to embed these principles into mentoring relationships that foster inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Keywords: Equity-mindedness, wellbeing, equity-centered, mentoring, intersectionality

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Introduction

Wellbeing has emerged as a crucial priority in higher education. While significant efforts have been made to define and promote wellbeing, prevailing narratives on resilience, mental health, professionalism, and productivity often marginalize specific communities by implicitly assuming a universal experience. This disparity raises a fundamental question: Who is considered deserving of wellbeing? Or, said another way, Wellbeing for whom?

This paper defines inclusive wellbeing and explores how it can be promoted for both mentors and mentees. The concept of equity-minded wellbeing is introduced as a framework for addressing the systemic inequities that impact the academic and professional growth of marginalized populations. This concept promotes inclusive wellbeing practices. Inclusive wellbeing refers to developing systems and approaches that recognize and respond to the diverse needs and identities of individuals, ensuring that all people regardless of background, identity, or ability have the opportunity to thrive. It moves beyond general definitions of wellness by explicitly addressing the social, economic, and institutional factors that hinder access to wellbeing for underrepresented groups (Nishi, 2023; Nishi, et al., 2025). Mentoring advances inclusive wellbeing by embedding support structures that recognize identity-based barriers, promote access to opportunity, and cultivate environments where all students can thrive. One example of this approach is the Scientific Learning Community (SLC), a structured residential and academic program that integrates equity-centered mentoring and inclusive wellbeing by intentionally fostering belonging, identity development, and social justice exploration for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Recent scholarship in higher education highlights the importance of mentoring as a key mechanism for fostering student success and wellbeing, especially for historically underrepresented students in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) fields (Wynn & Brown, 2024). Mentoring relationships that incorporate equity-mindedness, a critical awareness of structural inequities (Bensimon, 2007) and intersectionality, the interlocking nature of social identities and oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991) offer promising support for student development. These approaches help foster students' holistic growth by addressing both systemic barriers and individual experiences. This paper presents findings from an ethnographic study investigating how equity-centered mentoring practices within a STEMM learning community in a public university promote inclusive wellbeing and scientific identity

among participants.

Literature Review

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how the experiences of Black women were rendered invisible within legal frameworks that failed to account for the overlapping nature of race and gender discrimination. Crenshaw based the concept of intersectionality in part on DeGraffenreid v. General Motors (1976). In this case, Emma DeGraffenreid, a Black woman, brought a discrimination case against General Motors. The court rejected the plaintiff's claim of discrimination, reasoning that Black men and white women were both employed by GM, thereby ignoring the unique position of Black women who experienced compounded marginalization. Crenshaw (1991, 2013) used this case to illustrate how legal and institutional frameworks can erase the experiences of people with multiple marginalized identities.

Intersectionality is broadly defined as a framework that examines how overlapping social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability interact with systems of oppression and privilege. According to Nishi et al. (2024), intersectionality helps illuminate how individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities experience amplified barriers to wellbeing, equity, and inclusion. These insights are crucial in the context of higher education, where structural inequities often shape mentoring dynamics and access to resources.

Equity-mindedness, a concept introduced by Estela Bensimon (2007), is defined as a critically conscious approach that draws attention to racial disparities in higher education and promotes institutional accountability. Equity-minded practitioners recognize that inequities are not random or individual failings but are rooted in structural forces. Bensimon's work has been instrumental in challenging higher education institutions to take active roles in dismantling these inequities.

Nishi (2023) extended this framework by arguing for an "equity-centered wellbeing" approach, one that intentionally addresses how systemic barriers impede wellbeing for marginalized communities. This framework integrates principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice to reshape mentoring practices. Wellness, by definition, becomes unattainable for individuals who experience isolation, exclusion, or lack of access to basic support structures.

When inclusive wellbeing is prioritized, and mentoring systems intentionally adopt equity-minded and intersectional practices, institutions can create environments in which all individuals, regardless of identity or background, have the opportunity to thrive. Mentors and mentees alike benefit from relationships that are psychologically safe, inclusive, and guided by continuous feedback. Understanding the interplay of intersectionality and equity-mindedness is vital to building such supportive mentoring ecosystems in higher education.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative ethnographic design approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Five participants were recruited from a Scientific Learning Community (SLC) at a large public university. Participants, representing diverse intersecting identities, were invited to voluntarily participate via email and offered in-person or Zoom interviews.

Procedure

This inquiry was designed to examine the impact of the program and related courses on students' experiences. Semi-structured interviews focused on participants' experiences with identity development, and wellbeing within the learning community and the Institution. Pseudonyms (Taylor, Morgan, Alex, Sydney, and Jordan) were assigned to protect confidentiality. The participants identified as, Latina/female, white/female, Hispanic/female, Hispanic/Latino/ male and Black/female. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding informed by intersectionality and equity-mindedness frameworks. This research is currently ongoing.

Results

Findings from five semi-structured interviews reveal that participants' development of scientific identity is deeply shaped by intersectional experiences, including race, gender, first-generation status, and prior exposure to science. While all expressed strong motivation to pursue STEMM careers often linked to personal or family health experiences, their sense of belonging and confidence in identifying as scientists varied. The SLC emerged as a key site of both support and exclusion, influencing participants' engagement with science and each other. Mentorship, whether institutional, peer-based, or absent, played a critical role in shaping access to opportunity and affirmation. Participants emphasized the importance of support systems that are inclusive and culturally responsive, and that prioritize lived experiences and a strong sense of community. Figure 1 presents a summary of the results of the SLC interviews and its equity-centered implications.

Scientific Identity: Building Confidence through Experience

Participants' identification as scientists was deeply tied to their practical experiences and personal definitions of science. Jordan (P1), an aspiring psychiatrist, expressed hesitancy in claiming a scientific identity, citing the need for deeper academic engagement and hands-on research. In contrast, Avery (P2), who aims

to become a pediatric cardiologist, confidently identified as a scientist, attributing it to their logical mindset and experiences in biology and chemistry labs. Miles (P3), Riley (P4), and Zoe (P5) described feeling most like scientists during lab work, teaching peers, or when engaged in research activities. As Miles put it, "When I'm in the lab or teaching others, that's when I really feel like a scientist, it's when the work feels real." However, each also recounted moments of doubt, ranging from stereotypical perceptions of who qualifies as a scientist to limitations in course structure or societal stereotypes.

These reflections suggest that while lab-based and communal academic activities reinforce scientific identity, feelings of scientific legitimacy are also shaped by self-perception, representation in the field, and exposure to diverse pathways in science.

Intersectionality and Lived Experience: Navigating Identity in Academic Spaces

All participants articulated ways in which race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status intersected in relation to their educational experiences. Jordan noted that while the neuroscience field excited them, they felt underrepresented in their field of study and encountered institutional barriers around accommodations. Zoe, despite feeling welcomed overall, experienced hate speech that tested their sense of inclusion. Riley shared feelings of surprise and adjustment upon entering a predominantly white institution after a diverse high school background, navigating both new friendships and persistent stereotypes.

These narratives highlight the complex interplay between personal identity and institutional culture. Participants underscored the importance of intersectional awareness, especially for first-generation and racially minoritized students, to navigate systems that were not always designed with their identities in mind.

Sense of Belonging: Learning Communities as Anchors

The SLC emerged as a crucial factor in fostering belonging. For many, such as Avery and Miles, sharing physical space and engaging in communal academic activities helped them find support systems, even when initial integration challenges occurred. Riley and Zoe both attributed their closest friendships to SLC, noting that intentional engagement was essential to forming those bonds. As Zoe described, "We study together, eat together, and remind each other why we're here, it makes everything feel less overwhelming."

Despite occasional moments of exclusion, such as initial group formation dynamics or social missteps due to communication style, participants overwhelmingly described the SLC as instrumental in providing a sense of community, shared goals, and mutual academic motivation.

The structure and intentional design of the Scientific Learning Community (SLC) itself embodies the principles of equity-centered mentoring and inclusive wellbeing. Designed as a residential cohort model, the SLC brings together first-year students who live and learn in community. Students take two academic courses together that explore scientific identity and social justice in healthcare, promoting both intellectual growth and self-awareness. Through this co-curricular integration, students examine their values, develop leadership skills, and create a personalized academic roadmap. This structure intentionally fosters a sense of belonging, shared identity, and purpose among students from historically marginalized backgrounds. By centering identity exploration, community living, and social justice pedagogy, the SLC acts as a site where mentoring, inclusion, and wellbeing are institutionally scaffolded.

Mentoring and Support: Gaps and Opportunities

Mentoring experiences varied. While some participants noted informal peer support or guest speaker guidance, structured mentorship, especially from faculty or professionals sharing their identity was largely absent. Jordan emphasized the need for more pre-medical support and culturally responsive mentoring, while Riley advocated for financial and social support specifically for first-generation students. Zoe, who navigated hate speech, suggested improvements to conflict resolution systems and highlighted the value of diverse mentoring networks.

Participants recognized the power of mentoring in affirming identity, offering guidance, and modeling successful science careers. They expressed a need for mentoring programs that are equity-centered, sensitive to intersectional challenges, and embedded within the college's academic culture.

Discussion

The narratives shared by the five participants in this study underscore the complex, layered realities of scientific identity development, intersectionality, and sense of belonging within a learning community. Each participant articulated a unique trajectory toward science influenced by personal experiences, cultural background, mentorship, and institutional climate. Together, these findings highlight the significance of inclusive mentoring practices, especially in STEMM learning communities, for underrepresented and first-generation college students.

The analysis can contribute to the growing evidence that equity-centered mentoring practices grounded in intersectionality and equity-mindedness are essential for fostering inclusive wellbeing and scientific identity among underrepresented STEMM students. The findings affirm Bensimon's (2007) call for institutional equity-mindedness and Crenshaw's (1991) framework as critical tools for understanding students' complex experiences.

Mentoring approaches that recognize students' intersecting identities and promote belonging can mitigate structural barriers and create more inclusive STEMM environments. Institutions should support training for mentors on equity and intersectionality, develop peer mentoring programs, and embed wellbeing as a core component of student support.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study is ongoing, the current sample is limited to five participants from a single institution. Future data collection should expand the group. Expanding the sample to include immigrant and other marginalized identities would enhance the depth and diversity of the findings. Future research should explore these dimensions more fully to deepen understanding of how equity-centered mentoring can support diverse student populations across multiple contexts.

Conclusion

The case study illuminates how inclusive learning communities and mentoring relationships shape the scientific identity and sense of belonging for diverse students pursuing STEMM degrees. Evidence suggests that hands-on research, peer teaching, and community engagement are effective practices in supporting identity development. These strategies are especially impactful for first-generation college students, students of color, and those navigating intersectional identities during early stages of their academic journey.

Equity-centered mentoring, research exposure, and culturally responsive learning environments are promising approaches for students, especially those with minoritized identities, ensuring that once they are covered, everyone is protected, and no one falls through the cracks in our systems. Such efforts also contribute meaningfully to students' overall mental, emotional, and academic wellbeing.

To advance equity in STEMM, institutions should embed student voice and lived experience into the design of mentoring systems. As Jordan shared, 'I want to help people, but I need a system that actually helps me feel like I belong here too.' This is more than a reflection, it's a call to action for leaders, educators, and researchers to create structures where every student can thrive."

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Appendix

Figure 1.
Data derived from qualitative interviews with five participants in a STEMM-focused learning community.

Theme	Participant Insights	Equity-Centered Implications
Scientific Identity	Confidence developed through lab work, peer teaching, and hands-on experiences. Some hesitated to self-identify as scientists due to limited exposure or internalized stereotypes.	Inclusive, experiential learning and increased representation strengthen scientific self-concept.
Intersectionality and Identity	Participants' race, gender, socioeconomic status, ability, and first-generation status shaped their academic experiences. Many navigated stereotyping, systemic barriers, and a lack of cultural representation.	Mentoring and support programs should consider how overlapping identities impact access and inclusion.
Sense of Belonging	The Scientific Learning Community (SLC) fostered friendships, academic motivation, and shared goals. Belonging was formed through intentional engagement and communal experiences.	Equity-centered learning communities serve as key sites of inclusion and identity affirmation.
Mentoring and Support	Informal peer support existed, but structured mentoring, particularly from faculty or identity-similar role models was not mentioned. Participants sought culturally responsive, affirming mentors.	Institutions should embed equity-minded mentoring that supports students' lived experiences and aspirations.
Challenges to Inclusion	Students experienced microaggressions, identity-based exclusion, and inconsistent support. These experiences impacted wellbeing and academic confidence.	Institutions are encouraged to improve reporting structures, cultural competency, and support for marginalized students.