American Journal of Rising Scholar Activities

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Opening Thoughts

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The 2022 Nations Report Card, issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed the impact of COVID-19 on academic performance. Gains in academic performance dropped below performance levels recorded in 1999. We lost 23 years of progress! According to the 2022 World Population Review, the United States has the best surveyed educational system in the world, but its students consistently score lower in math and science than students from other countries. Lower scores are more apparent when performance metrics are disaggregated across ethnicity and gender. As we continue to grapple with the construct of race, racism, and a history of exclusion and minoritization of people of color and women, focus on social justice and institutional barriers to student access and success in STEM fields has become a priority throughout K-12 learning pathways. Although there are many efforts to retrofit existing educational systems to mitigate academic disparities and policies that restrict student access and success, the recent pandemic exposed the deeper roots that perpetuate this disparity across social, economic, academic, technical, and healthcare platforms. During and after the pandemic, the experience of increased academic isolation, loss of community, diminished access to technology, disconnect from faculty and staff support, and a disproportionate experience of sickness and death in immediate family members and friends contributed to the disparate decline in academic performance for students of color.

Why are these points important to this Journal? Although not by design, the Rising Scholar Program was launched just before the pandemic hit. The student participants in this program provide a unique opportunity to understand pre and post COVID coping strategies, survival stories, and their perspective about existing and other support systems needed in predominantly white institutions. This inaugural issue of the American Journal of Rising Scholar Activities has the potential to inform faculty, staff, and other students about the lived ‘truth’ of student participants who were denied direct admissions to the College of Engineering and chose to pursue engineering through the Rising Scholars Program support system.

The body of scholarship developed by Mr. Derek Peterson of the Institute for Community & Adolescent Resiliency – Unifying Solutions (ICAR-US) and partnership with the Minority Engineering Program at Purdue University supplied fertile ground for students to excel in this program. The intentionality of the School of Agricultural and Biological Engineering under the leadership of Dr. Robert Stwalley supplied unprecedented faculty engagement, mentoring, research, and internship opportunities that reveal the difference between making students ‘feel’ that they belong to fostering an environment where students ‘know’ they belong and are value-added members of an academic community that appreciates their ‘whole self’ contributions.

What can we learn from student experiences presented in this journal to inform our efforts to make the educational process more ‘student friendly’ and inclusive? Can we infuse the current curriculum with cultural capital relevant to the students we serve? I am excited to be a part of this effort and learn from the exchange between these students, faculty, staff, and administrators! Certainly, there is academic disparity in our country, but we can close the gap here at Purdue.