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 Published on November 01, 2023

Success Scholars program fosters 'STEM identity'

University students see themselves many ways based on different things they do. This idea sparked a research interest in Laura Rodriguez, assistant professor of education at Eastern Connecticut State University. Rodriguez's continuing research evaluates STEM identity, or how students see themselves in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

Rodriguez's interest in STEM identity stems from her observation, "we all have lots of different identities; we think of ourselves in different ways." For example, when Rodriguez is at work, her identity is "university professor," while her identity is "grandma" when her grandchildren visit her.

"STEM identity is the idea that in certain situations, you see yourself as being a scientist or a mathematician, that you feel that is part of who you are," said Rodriguez.

To conduct her research, Rodriguez interviewed students in Eastern's Success Scholars program, which is part of a larger initiative to diversify STEM fields. The Success Scholars are small group of students from underrepresented backgrounds who are pursuing STEM majors. The program is supported by a \$650,000 grant from the National Science Foundation.

The Success Scholars program is set up to create a learning community where STEM identity can be formulated, said Rodriguez. This community helps students first to feel "competent" in their field, then to be able to "engage in (key) practices" in advancing them toward future studies or careers, all the while affording opportunities for recognition and social interaction.

In all, the program currently consists of 10 Success Scholars. Biology major Habigaelle Jean, who has been a member of the program since 2022, has seen her identity evolve because of "being connected with like-minded individuals and faculty."

"This program has given me a space full of support from people who I know want to see me thrive," said Jean. "This is reassuring because the STEM field can be very challenging and having people who not only understand but can help you as well makes things easier."

Through financial support, mentorship and opportunities for friendship, Eastern's Success Scholars program has maintained an environment in which students can cultivate authentic identities within their chosen fields of study while nurturing their development in other areas of life.

Five faculty members play key roles in the continuing development of the program: Rodriguez; biology Professor Barbara Murdoch; mathematics Professor Kim Ward; biology Professor Elizabeth Cowles; and Carmen Cid, dean emerita of arts and sciences.



Laura Rodriguez, assistant professor of education and lead researcher in Eastern's Success Scholars program



Success Scholars students and faculty gather for a photo in spring 2023.

Each faculty member plays a distinct role in the program. "My role is to do the research," said Rodriguez. She meets with Success Scholars as part of an ongoing research study to evaluate their experience in the program and their sense of identity within their chosen STEM field.

Murdoch is the principal investigator (PI) of the program, so she has "more on her plate," said Rodriguez. "The rest of us are co-PIs; we're all responsible for trying to make the program successful." Cid serves as a consultant, communicating with other universities with similar programs to provide insight and make Eastern's program better.

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Ward plays a leading role in the mentorship component of the program, along with Murdoch and Cowles. Students meet with these faculty mentors every other week; in the remaining weeks, they meet with peer mentors, students who can provide their own guidance.

Billi Kozak '24 is a peer mentor. "Being able to help people find their rhythm inside or outside of classes is really gratifying," they said.

Despite being a mentor rather than a Success Scholar, Kozak, who wants to be a microbiologist and researcher, has found an enhanced sense of STEM identity from their involvement. "Being a part of this program not only helps me help STEM scholars but also feel much more involved in an academically focused STEM community at Eastern," they said.

The program provides benefits beyond fostering STEM identity and providing mentorship. "The scholarship has enabled me to stop worrying about finances so much, and to focus more on my schoolwork," said first-year student Mason Fox.

"The program helps to hold me accountable for my education/future, as well as providing mentors to guide me along the way."

Written by Noel Teter

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