The Minnesota Population Center (MPC) is about demographics and numbers and what that data means for people in Minnesota and around the world.

They are also working to increase diversity and inclusion in these fields, as can be seen in the MPC Diversity Fellowship program, co-directed by Mia Riza and David Haynes.

The program was recently proposed as a subject for a DCoP Appreciative Inquiry in the DCoP Communications Subcommittee. Reviewing the details about the introduction of this program in an article written in 2015, it seemed like a good time to check in and see how things have gone so far.

We encourage you to read that earlier story and to learn with us through this Appreciative Inquiry with program co-director, Mia Riza, as we examine the why and how about what’s working well.

MPC serves interdisciplinary audiences of more than 150 faculty members, graduate students and research scientists in various fields from 26 academic units across 10 colleges at the University of Minnesota. Learn more about MPC.

Does MPC have goals towards equity, diversity and inclusion? If so, how does the Diversity Fellows program support those goals?

Yes, the goals are outlined in the diversity statement. The National Science Foundation was pressing the MPC and all other associates to do more outreach to diverse audiences. The MPC was always trying to be diverse but until 2015 there was no written statement.

Riza tells us the statement was actually an outcome of the initiation of this program. They wanted to be able to point to a statement that summed up the goals of the program so they needed to think about that first and craft a statement in the beginning stages of program development.

This has now become ingrained in the center. “We believed we were inclusive, but this takes us a step further. Having a program and naming it as such, puts action where you think your intentions are.”

What’s different/unique about this program?
“The work is very interdisciplinary – that’s unique”. MPC works with academic departments across the U, historians, sociologists, economists, environmentalists, and others.

But it’s really the mentorship model that is very unique. Haynes and Riza developed this model based on their own experiences and their vision of the need. It’s composed of four parts:

1. a research data project
2. 1-2 mentors: PhD staff researcher & faculty member
3. a graduate student
4. an undergrad student

Having the undergraduate student being mentored by someone who is nearly a peer, provides opportunity for insights into what it’s like to be a graduate student.

The graduate student in turn has an opportunity to learn how to be a mentor in a supportive environment.

Riza tells us that graduate students of color are called upon to mentor at a much higher rate than their white peers. Haynes and Riza are able to help them to develop the skills and confidence in their abilities, basically to develop their mentoring style, in a very supportive environment.

Riza shared with us some of the comments collected from participant feedback surveys.

- **Students on mentoring:**
  - Since they were from different educational backgrounds than me, we were able to exchange different outlooks and perspectives on the same thing.
- **Students on would they recommend the program to other students:**
  - I love that it was more than an internship. It provided professional workshops to help students gain more than just a research experience.
  - It was a great experience. I learned a lot both in terms of technical knowledge and non-technical things as well. Also it was a good chance to get to know people outside my academic field, learn about their work, and connect with them. This fellowship is especially for an undergraduate since it let me start thinking about my future planning. Thank you for offering it!
- **Mentors on working in multi-tiered teams:**
  - I think the multiple-level component was helpful. The grad student came away with a very valuable experience and the under graduate was able to learn how to utilize one resource and begin working as a team. My thought was that our team worked very well together. I was so impressed by their efforts.
  - I think it enhances the experience. Everyone is learning new things. If the grad students are not building as many technical skills, they are building mentoring skills no matter what. I also think the set-up alleviates any temptations toward a competitive atmosphere since rolls are well defined.
- **Mentors on what they liked about being a mentor:**
  - I loved seeing the students learn about data, data cleaning, and data processing during the program. It was great to see them understand how hard data work actually is.
I really enjoyed the summer!! Great students, interesting project, awesome experience!

Are there ways you, as program leaders, would like to see the program evolve? If so, how?

For now the program is only open to UMN students. Riza feels it is going well, so someday they would like to expand it out to other students, beyond Minnesota.

What have the outcomes of the program been so far, as it has just concluded its third year?

Undergraduate students have gone into graduate school and chosen paths based on their experiences in the program. Both graduate and undergraduate students have been hired into research fields with the Population Center. Others have chosen work centered on this experience.

Particularly on the undergraduate level, program participants have used this experience to shape their direction. "They maybe don’t know all the options and this program is a way to see some of the options available and to have the confidence in their ability to apply for graduate school."

Riza feels that "from a departmental standpoint, it helps to have a program with the intention to bring in diverse and underrepresented people. It means that as a department, we value this."

For questions about the MPC Diversity Fellowship program, and insights that may inform mentoring programs in your own units, please contact Mia Riza: mriza@umn.edu