

2019 PREP/IMSD Midwest Regional Symposium



The 2019 Midwest Regional PREP & IMSD Symposium was held May 10-11, 2019 and was hosted by the University of Chicago and Northwestern University PREP and IMSD programs. Eighty-five participants attended the Symposium which was held at the Big Ten Conference Center near Chicago's O'Hare Airport. The Symposium attendees included 29 PREP Scholars, 38 graduate students, 7 guest speakers and panelists, and 11 PREP/IMSD program directors, from 7 Midwestern institutions: University of Chicago, Northwestern University, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Iowa, Indiana University, Rush University Medical Center, and Mayo Clinic Graduate School. The event was sponsored by the University of Chicago BSD Office of Diversity & Inclusion, the NIH, and the UChicago and Northwestern PREP and IMSD Programs.



The theme of the 2019 Symposium was “From Here to There: My Science, Our Community, Our Stories” and was organized by a student-led committee of PREP Scholars and IMSD graduate students from the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, and included scientific research sessions, professional development, and networking opportunities. The Symposium was designed to highlight the stories and journeys of individuals from underrepresented groups pursuing scientific careers, and how students and professionals alike overcame adversity to be where they are today. Programming highlighted what efforts have been made in each institution's community that has affected change toward advancing the experience of underrepresented groups in science. Lastly, as all stories have an end, a special emphasis on the future

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was addressed as well, in the form of professional development, career exploration, unaddressed issues/solutions, networking, and collaboration. In sum, the goal of this conference was to create a dialogue about who we are by virtue of where we came from, where we currently are, and where we are going, with a sub focus on what we've done and what still needs to be done.



The Symposium opened on Friday evening, May 10, 2019, with welcome remarks from Jimmy Elias, a PhD student from UChicago and the student planning committee, followed by a networking reception and icebreaker activities that were designed to initiate conversations among the attendees. After the networking session, the opening “Values” presentation was led by UChicago PhD students Mathew Perez-Neut and Cody Hernandez, who highlighted the successes and approach of the UChicago Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team (GRIT) in recruiting and retaining underrepresented students in the sciences.



The Symposium continued on Saturday, May 11, 2019 with a full day of activities at the Big Ten Conference Center. After a networking breakfast, Dr. Evan Scott, Assistant Professor at Northwestern University, kicked off the day with the opening keynote address, “Diverse Perspectives: Sharing our Journey.” Dr. Scott was introduced by current UChicago PREP Scholars, Katiannah Moise and Christopher Ware, and he presented an inspiring talk that covered his career path and successes in his academic research career and personal life, and provided an overview of his laboratory’s research. He also shared the exciting news that he just received tenure at Northwestern University.

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Following the keynote address, the first round of breakout sessions were offered, and attendees were able to choose from three workshops to attend. “Communicating your Science” was led by Sadie Witkowski and Weston Twardowski, PhD students and science communication gurus at Northwestern University. This session covered techniques on how to tell a scientific story for diverse audiences and gave the participants an opportunity to practice delivery of an “elevator pitch” describing their research to different assigned audiences while receiving live group feedback.



The second concurrent session, “Real Talk: The Graduate Student Experience” featured a panel discussion with graduate students from Northwestern, Rush, and UChicago about their experiences in graduate school, and was primarily targeted to the PREP Scholar attendees.



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The third breakout session, “Action Potential: Security in Self” was led by Christina Roman and Mathew Perez-Neut, PhD students at the University of Chicago. The goal of this session was to help students to overcome insecurities and challenges in their careers, by introspectively empowering themselves through reassurance of their progress and achievements.



Following the breakout sessions, the 24 students who submitted an abstract to present a poster were invited to present a “Lightning Talk”. These short talks were designed to give the students an opportunity to briefly introduce themselves and their research, in order to promote their poster and to practice presenting in front of an audience. Following a break for lunch, the Symposium continued with the Poster Session which gave the students more time to discuss their research and network with other attendees.



Next, a second round of breakout sessions was held. The first session was a “Career and Professional Development Panel” which featured panelists from diverse backgrounds in different career tracks: Dr. Toni Gutierrez is a graduate program administrator at Northwestern University, who advises students, leads career and professional development sessions, and manages training programs; Dr. Marcelo Vincas is a College Advisor and Assistant Professor of Instruction in Biology at Northwestern University, and is involved in science outreach and education, public policy and SACNAS; Dr. Shauna Price is a Scientific Affiliate at the Field Museum and an Instructor of Biology at Loyola University at Chicago where she conducts research and teaches; Dr. Danjuma Quarless is a senior scientist in the computational genomics division of Abbvie Pharmaceuticals and a former IMSD student from UCSD, and is passionate about diversity initiatives which support workforce inclusion and is invested in providing higher education opportunities to individuals from all backgrounds. The panelists shared their stories and the path that led them to their current career, and led an open and motivating discussion with the group. The panel discussion was moderated by Stacey Jones, UChicago PREP Scholar.

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Concurrently, “Navigating Difficult Conversations” was led by Cody Hernandez, PhD student at UChicago. This session focused on techniques to effectively communicate with administrators, faculty members and others on campus when attempting to advocate for positive changes to policies and culture in graduate programs, as well as how to approach other difficult conversations in academia. The session provided a safe space for the participants to discuss current issues they were experiencing and get useful advice from their peers on how to approach these situations. The final breakout session was a meeting of the PREP and IMSD program directors, where current challenges and program plans were discussed, including future Midwest Regional Symposia (picture not shown).



The directors meeting continued while the PREP and IMSD students came back together for an interactive workshop, “Operation Redefinition”, which was led by Yemko Pyror, a UChicago PREP Scholar. In this exercise, participants use sticky notes to write out phrases/brief responses that come to mind when confronted with specific prompts. Then, in small groups, the participants discussed the origins of those phrases, how they impact them as individuals and how they can approach redefining these phrases.



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For the final session of the day, Dr. Regina Dixon-Reeves, Assistant Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Chicago, presented an inspiring keynote address. Dr. Dixon-Reeves provides leadership for diversity and inclusion programs, initiatives, and strategic planning across the University. She was introduced by Juan Apiz Saab, former UChicago PREP Scholar and current PhD student. Dr. Dixon-Reeves discussed her career path and challenges along her way to success, and provided valuable advice and resource handouts to the audience. Dr. Dixon-Reeves attended the entire Symposium, so was able to tie together many of the themes from the conference to provide a motivating presentation and a wonderful capstone to the Symposium.



The PREP/IMSD Midwest Regional Symposium concluded with closing remarks from Dr. Nancy Schwartz UChicago PREP and IMSD Director, who thanked the guest speakers and student planning committee and all those who supported the event. The evening was capped with a networking dinner reception and social outings before the students headed back to their campuses. Participant feedback about the Symposium was very positive overall and over 93% of attendees indicated that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the experience as a whole. Notes from attendees mentioned that the Symposium was “very inspiring”; “an encouraging experience that helped me reflect on the important aspects of this current point in my journey”; and “I’m grateful for opportunity to verbalize our strengths and receive positive reassurance.”

Symposium Student Planning Committee

Juan Apiz	Stacey Jones	Mat Perez-Neut
Carolina Castro	Sarah Ann King	Yemko Pryor
Elena Cortes	Victor Mendoza	Christina Roman
Carlos Cortez	Madaline Mocchi	Toneisha Stubbs
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