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Finding Community on Campus: ¡Échale Ganas!

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Finding Community on Campus: *¡Échale Ganas!*

By Mireille Roman



¡Échale Ganas!, a grant written by professors Matt Johnson (Wildlife) and Rafael Cuevas-Urbe (Fisheries) with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is helping to bridge the equity gap for Hispanic/Latinx students with a strong focus on mentorship and community. *¡Échale Ganas!* and *El Centro* are coordinating to create a lasting sense of community for underrepresented students within Natural Resources Management. HSU's Cultural Centers for Academic Excellence provide opportunities and connections, often hosting students for their internships and Service Learning projects. The goals of their grant are to give minoritized students an opportunity to work directly in the field and help increase the amounts of equitable opportunity available to our students from other minoritized communities.

¡Échale Ganas! will work to address disparities and create opportunities for people of color at HSU and beyond. The grant will fund focused events, provide key internships with partners in related STEM fields, and support master's students from marginalized

communities with a small stipend. In addition, these graduate students will mentor undergraduate minoritized students in natural resource sciences majors and build programming on professional development, mentoring, and internships.

As part of their project, Professors Cuevas-Urbe and Johnson have worked with local community partners, and the Center for Community Based Learning staff, to develop internships for minoritized students to earn academic credit while doing wildlife and fisheries work with local organizations. Currently, HSU's Fisheries department is working with Hog Island Oyster Farms to hire additional interns. Hog Island Oyster Farm is paying these interns, which allows funding from the grant to support internships with other organizations. Although the realities of COVID-19 have slowed the growth of the program, other organizations are getting ready to work with HSU students. Future host sites include: The U.S.D.A. National Resources Conservation Office, North Coast Regional Land Trust, and Coast Seafood Oysters.

These internship opportunities provide equity and a deeper connection for our students with on-campus and off-campus communities and involves community organizations in helping to create those connections. By combining opportunities for a sense of belonging, mentorship and professional development, these internships address the equity gaps minoritized students face in a powerful way. *¡Échale Ganas!* is a place where culture and career combine to bring comfort, familiarity, and superior student support.

¡Échale Ganas! mentors Laura Echávez and Samantha Chavez are reworking the way students are informed about the critical issues they will face, including unpacking and discussing challenges like sexism, othering, and machismo. Available to HSU students via phone and email, mentors can review a course of action for their programs, discuss undergrad experiences, and provide career resources. Laura, Samantha and Career Advisors from the Academic and Career Advising Center (ACAC), share information with each other to enhance career capital and learn about the experiences of minoritized employees in STEM fields. In the future, mentors plan to have guest speakers who will explore career pathways within the major and to create a panel presentation covering the experience of being a person of color in STEM fields.

This important work does not end with mentors. Professors in the Wildlife and Fisheries departments have undergone equity training to explore the different

challenges students of color experience, because it is hard to address inequalities without knowing how it exists. Equity training highlights different approaches professors can incorporate into their pedagogy, to provide a culturally inclusive and safe learning environment to meet the needs of their students. As a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI), HSU is eligible to receive additional funding. The funding can help HSU efficiently meet the needs of these students and provide a stronger support system as they navigate HSU and prepare for their future careers.

Humboldt is known for outstanding programs in natural resources and sciences, as well as leadership in sustainability. This program helps them enhance their support for minoritized students by showing that natural resource sciences are for *everyone*. *¡Échale Ganas!* encourages professors and students to spread the word for freshman, transfers, and anyone curious about the natural resources sciences. *¡Échale Ganas!* provides a space for students to talk about work and relate to each other academically; providing support to students who may feel like they do not belong and see the possibilities available to them to engage in their chosen field.

Through *¡Échale Ganas!*, students can learn how to incorporate conservation into agriculture and cultural community into learning. To contact mentors Laura and Samantha or to help *¡Échale Ganas!*, visit the [website](#).



¡Échale Ganas! Peer Mentor: Samantha Chavez

By Mireille Roman

Samantha Chavez is completing her first semester at HSU as a master's student in Wildlife; she is also one of two mentors for the *¡Échale Ganas!* program. Originally from Downey, California, she attended community college and then transferred to U.C. Santa Cruz, earning a bachelor's in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology in 2016. She spent the past four years working seasonal wildlife jobs, then came to Humboldt State to learn new skills and apply her background knowledge in the programs at HSU.

She remembers the moment she knew she was interested in studying science, "My parents took us camping and I felt like it was a privilege. We were invited to my dad's coworker's family trip to Yosemite. Park Ranger programs, like taking care of the earth, are what got me interested in this field." Samantha explained that she began studying Biology, then Ecology and eventually transferred to Wildlife. She described her path to find the right fit for her. "At first I didn't believe in myself because I wasn't good at Math." She felt more comfortable with History and English, stating, "they were subjects that were a friend to me." However, she felt she had to at least try, "I would be disappointed in myself if I didn't try to be a research scientist."

Professors Johnson and Cuevas-Urbe, along with Fernando Paz, the *El Centro* coordinator, set up an interview to see if Samantha would be a good choice to mentor undergraduate students through *¡Échale Ganas!*. "I talked to a friend of mine and this friend had someone question if they felt obligated to mentor hispanic undergraduates. Of course there's an obligation because of our passion for our community! It is a combination of obligation and passion for our work because giving back is ingrained in our community; it's rooted in how we grew up. We don't want to be the only ones, it isn't a bad thing to help your community rise up with you if you have made it."

Samantha discussed the cultural gap many students experience moving far from home and how one can feel othered in their courses. "You have to hide parts of yourself to appear more professional and you need to navigate spaces that require a different behavior. Things are strange and nothing familiar is around."

Samantha supports mentorship programs because she knows they are essential to growth; connecting graduate students with undergraduates creates a community where they can feel supported. "I'm the only person in my family who isn't in L.A. or Orange County and I'm out here on my own. If I'm going to get a master's then I'm definitely going to do some mentoring for people in undergrad because I know that there are a lot of unanswered questions." Wildlife is different from a 9-to-5 job. In Samantha's experience a lot of students don't know where to look for work in wildlife or how to make the most of their undergraduate career. She explains that having graduate students as mentors is helpful because they are familiar with the workforce and there can be a level of intimidation between a student and their professor. "We are their peers because we are all students, I hope they don't feel like I am above them, because one day we will be coworkers."

Samantha says her overall goal is to share her knowledge of wildlife and fisheries jobs. She and Laura cover what this pathway looks like in-depth so that students can decide if they want this unique lifestyle. In the future they want to host resume and job application workshops because they want to prepare students to regularly apply to these oftentimes seasonal jobs. "We want to mentor wildlife undergrads to understand what will happen to them after graduation and get them ready for the workforce. I think it's important to hear from people who have the lived experience of being a minority in the workforce or being a minority who went through the same kind of courses that they're taking right now." Samantha admits that they are new to mentoring and that being online has brought some challenges, fortunately, there are campus departments offering support, "ACAC, *El Centro* and INRSEP have been invested to help us grow; having people who know the ins and outs is helpful to our mentorship."

When asked about her dream project she chuckled and replied, "I would pay all of the wildlife technicians way more and I want internships to pay more. I want to encourage people to lobby Congress to pay their wildlife field workers a living wage because when people think of STEM they immediately think about doctors. Ecology students need more support."