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PASSION TO PATHWAY: MEET CCBL'S STUDENT SUPPORT COORDINATOR KELLY FORTNER

By Kai Cooper

What does it mean to support students in their community-based learning? For Kelly Fortner it means taking a relational and values-based approach; it means centering students' interests, perspectives, values, needs, and their personal and professional goals; it means meeting students where they are. Fortner is the Student Support Coordinator with the HSU Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL), and she is passionate about doing work that aligns with her values—values that call for social and environmental justice, critical self-examination, developing meaningful relationships, openness, and compassion towards others. As Student Support Coordinator, Fortner does exactly that.

Fortner explains the Student Support Coordinator

position and the main ways that she supports students at HSU. “The primary function of my role is to provide direct and programmatic support for students in community-based learning classes at HSU,” Fortner said. “I give class presentations and meet one-on-one with students to connect them with community partners, listen and help to provide solutions if they are having any issues with their community partner such as discrimination or microaggressions, or help them with their risk placement paperwork. I love having one-on-one meetings with students. It’s so wonderful to get to know them and their interests, passions, and to have the opportunity to be the person to provide that support. Programmatically, I am in the process of building a student support program that will improve our support services and processes for students who are taking

community-based learning classes. I also lead coordination of Redwood Roots digital magazine.”

Some examples of the community-based learning classes that Fortner supports are Academic Internships and Service Learning classes. Often these classes bring with them a number of considerations for students, as they involve branching beyond the classroom and working with folks in the community. With well over a thousand students a year serving in the community, having a person to support the student side of these hands-on experiences has proven both necessary and valuable.

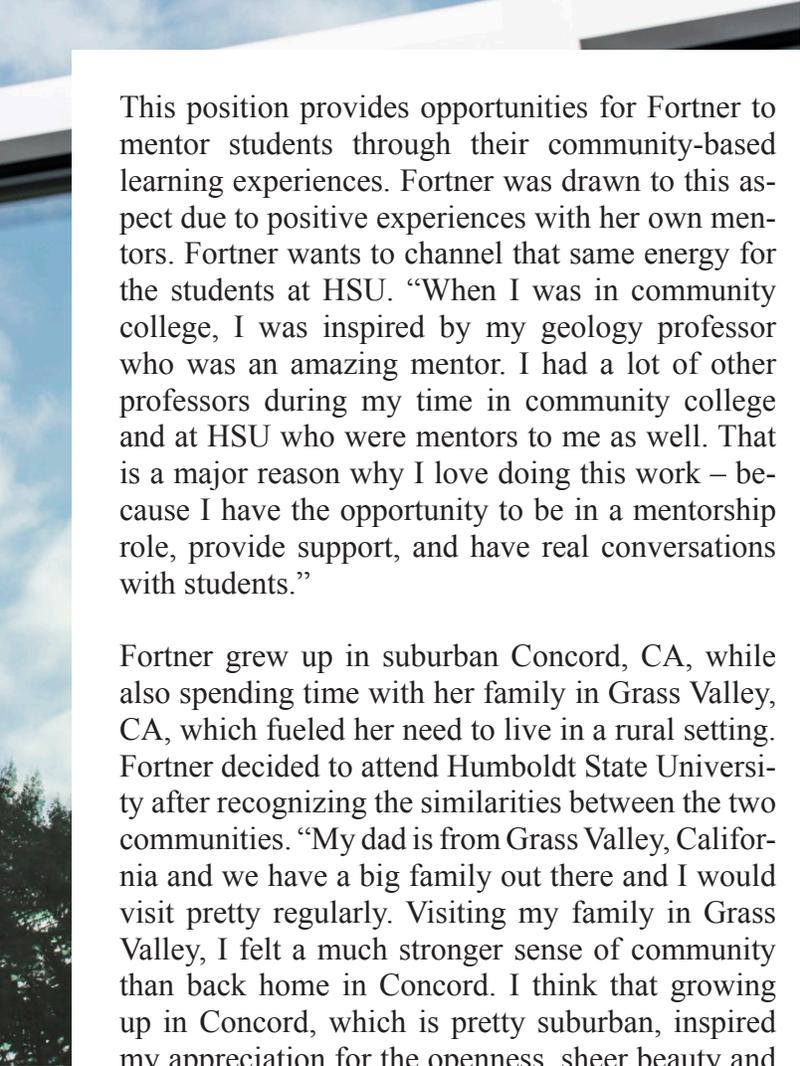
Fortner is an alumni of HSU who has always loved working with people. This passion, along with her experience as a Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.) director and AmeriCorps VISTA with the Center for Community Based Learning, led her to apply for this position. Fortner explained, “Ruby Joy was CCBL’s first AmeriCorps VISTA and then I became the AmeriCorps VISTA the following year. The cool thing about the Student Support Coordinator position is that the work that I do now grew out of the work that Ruby Joy and I did as VISTA’s.”

Funded through Graduation Initiative (GI) 2025, this position primarily provides support for the student side of CCBL’s three main constituencies that CCBL supports—students, faculty, and com-

munity partners. Providing support for students is critical to CCBL and its presence and impact in the community; these constituencies are interconnected and relational, much like a Venn diagram of community. Without the Student Coordinator position, there was a missing piece to the CCBL team and duties were distributed among staff. Fortner discussed how the Student Support Coordinator position filled a missing need through an analogy of a stool. “One way to picture the three different positions is like a stool. So we had two legs of a stool—the Community Partner Coordinator and the Faculty Support Coordinator—but we didn’t have a third leg.”

Fortner shared her ideas about building the student support program, saying, “Part of building the student support program will also be looking at what are some of the needs of students who are in these classes, and meeting those needs by creating specific programming. So I think we still have more to figure out and discover in that realm, but one example of something that our team has talked about is creating some type of peer classroom support program for students in community-based learning classes. I’m still in the initial stages of building this program. I’d like to send out a survey to students in community-based learning classes to ask what kind of support they would like to have if there was a community-based learning peer classroom support program.”





This position provides opportunities for Fortner to mentor students through their community-based learning experiences. Fortner was drawn to this aspect due to positive experiences with her own mentors. Fortner wants to channel that same energy for the students at HSU. “When I was in community college, I was inspired by my geology professor who was an amazing mentor. I had a lot of other professors during my time in community college and at HSU who were mentors to me as well. That is a major reason why I love doing this work – because I have the opportunity to be in a mentorship role, provide support, and have real conversations with students.”

Fortner grew up in suburban Concord, CA, while also spending time with her family in Grass Valley, CA, which fueled her need to live in a rural setting. Fortner decided to attend Humboldt State University after recognizing the similarities between the two communities. “My dad is from Grass Valley, California and we have a big family out there and I would visit pretty regularly. Visiting my family in Grass Valley, I felt a much stronger sense of community than back home in Concord. I think that growing up in Concord, which is pretty suburban, inspired my appreciation for the openness, sheer beauty and sense of community that I felt Grass Valley has and similarly can be found in Humboldt as well.”

With a double major in Geology and Religious Studies, Fortner’s time at HSU led her on a unique and comprehensive path to this position. As an undergraduate at HSU, she became involved in Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.), another community-based learning program HSU offers. “When I was in my third to last semester as an undergrad at HSU, I started volunteering with Y.E.S. because I knew I wanted to work with people, and I was thinking about going into teaching at the K-12 level after I graduated. I wanted to get some experience working with local youth, and Y.E.S. seemed like a great opportunity,” Fortner reflected.

Fortner talked about the impact of her experience as a co-director with YES on her entire career path. “Near the end of that semester, I was encouraged by the Y.E.S. leader for the program I was in—the Leadership Education Adventure Program [LEAP] to apply to be a director of LEAP that next year. I learned so much in that role. I learned a little bit about community-based learning and Service Learning and some

of the foundational pedagogies of those practices. I also learned how to plan weekly meetings, facilitate those meetings, and plan a retreat. The Y.E.S. director experience then led me to apply for the AmeriCorps VISTA position, and I don’t think I would have had the volunteer experience or the leadership experience if I hadn’t been a Y.E.S. director.”

Regarding the Student Support Coordinator position, “It’s a very dynamic job,” Fortner said. “In this position, I get the wonderful opportunities to work with students one-on-one, present to classes, collaborate on projects with students, staff, faculty, and community partners, and develop programming that will improve support and equitable practices for students taking community-based learning classes at HSU.” It is clear that Fortner loves creating these connections between others and the community, and this passion explains why she fits the Student Support Coordinator position so well.

On top of immersing herself into the HSU community, Fortner also spends time throughout the Humboldt County community. Whether it be spending time at the local beaches with her partner Aaron and their dogs Rhea and Doobie, reading outside, or connecting with family and friends, Fortner has a sense of duty regarding the connections that come from being present in one’s community. She spends time volunteering with the local nonprofit, Zero Waste Humboldt as the Vice President of their board of directors. “It is a really wonderful opportunity to be involved with Zero Waste Humboldt. I love taking part in this cause that I am deeply passionate about on a local level,” Fortner said. “I have also gotten to do work as a community partner—I’ve supervised HSU Service Learners and collaborated with HSU Academic Interns. One of my favorite things about working with Zero Waste Humboldt is getting to work with HSU students, just in a different capacity from the work I do as Student Support Coordinator.”

Fortner is also pursuing a graduate degree in the Environment and Community Program at HSU. This program blends her passions. She described her thesis, “[It is about] seeing how we can improve and support virtual community based learning practices for students, and more generally, about Humboldt in the time of COVID,” Fortner explained.

Fortner sees the Student Support Coordinator role

as an invaluable piece of the CCBL puzzle. “The reason we are all here is to benefit students,” Fortner said enthusiastically. Her belief in fostering strong relationships has transferred into her workplace dubbing it a “relational approach to work.” If you know Kelly Fortner, then you *know* Kelly Fortner. Either as a presence on HSU’s campus or within the surrounding community, Fortner’s positive attitude radiates throughout all she does. Fortner’s dedication to the success of the students, communities, and programs she serves is vital to the success of the Student Support Coordinator role and community-based learning practices at HSU.

If you are interested in learning more about community-based learning opportunities at HSU or you are currently taking a community-based learning class, you can schedule a meeting with Kelly to talk in a one-on-one setting.

Email: kelly.fortner@humboldt.edu

Book a meeting: kellyfortner.youcanbook.me.

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