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Pilot Program Provides Peer Leadership to Students and Faculty

By Savannah Sonia

Community-based learning (CBL) includes Service Learning (SL), which are practices that create meaningful community service experiences and address community-defined needs. In SL classes, students study common academic themes, while addressing needs in collaboration with various community partners. The team at the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL) recognized the need for extra support for both students and faculty involved in these experiences, and took steps to create and implement a peer leadership program for CBL classes. The first step was to meet with several already established peer leadership and mentorship programs at Cal Poly Humboldt to learn best practices and benefit from their experience and expertise.

The value of peer support programs within higher education has been widely researched and document-ed. According to an article from The Global Community for Academic Advising, many studies have found that peer advising is one of the most influential sources of growth and development during a student's undergraduate career. CCBL created a Peer Leadership Program to support students to understand the ben-efits of SL, facilitate reflection activities with students to make connections between classroom learning and community projects, and hold drop-in hours for students to discuss successes and challenges. Thanks to the collaboration from several departments at Cal Poly Humboldt, the CCBL was able to pilot the first semester of the Peer Leadership Program during the spring 2022 semester.

The AmeriCorps STEM Student Success Advocate, Savannah Sonia, alongside the CCBL's Student Sup-port Coordinator, Kelly Fortner, spearheaded the planning and development phases to get the program started. From there, Sonia and Fortner partnered with faculty Sara Hart and Jenn Tartlon in one of each of their Service Learning courses to pilot with two Peer Leaders. The two Peer Leaders were Guillermo Alonzo, a fourth year Psychology major and Michael Benner, a fourth year Criminology major.

Alonzo worked with Tarlton to support Environmental Science and Management 453, a senior capstone class. Students in that class partnered with the Out of the Box After-School Program at the Sequoia Park Zoo in Eureka, the Montana Natural History Center, and the California State Parks (Northcoast) to complete their Service Learning requirements. Tarlton shared that, "The support of our Peer Leader really enhanced the quality of my students' service projects. I appreciated how students reflected more deeply about them-selves, their service, and their community through the Peer Leadership Program."

Benner was paired with Hart to support Religious Studies 393, titled *Death and Dying.* Students in Hart's class partnered with a local cemetery to clean gravesites every Friday afternoon while having conver-sations about the meaning of death in different cultures and religions. Hart, when asked about the benefits of Peer Leader support in her class said, "The Community-based Learning Peer Leadership Program offers students an outstanding opportunity to practice leadership, at the intersection of collegiate and communi-ty-based experiences. The possibilities are endless, because the wealth that is held in these relationships is so great, and so often untapped."

To recognize the hard work of the Peer Leaders, CCBL secured a grant through the LEAD California Campus Compact Community Engagement Student Fellowship (CESF) to compensate the students. This grant awarded Alonzo and Benner a stipend upon the completion of their work as Peer Leaders at the end of the spring semester. As a requirement of the Fellowship, Benner and Alonzo were expected to complete a minimum of 50 hours as Peer Leaders and to create a video highlighting their experiences. To learn more about Alonzo and Benner, read their bios from the LEAD website.

When Benner was asked about why he chose to participate in the Peer Leadership Program he said, "I can't really think of any other option that I could've done as an internship; it really fits with everything that I have in my arsenal of experience…" He expanded on this sentiment by expressing the skills that he hoped to develop as he entered this position: "I wanted to hone in my skills of being a leader and managing time and people. I developed many skills that I didn't think I needed or thought I was going to develop."

Alonzo shared similar aspirations when it came to why he applied to become a Peer Leader with the CCBL; gaining leadership experience and being a part of an organized team working toward similar goals. As for the engagement that he has had with Tarlton's students, Alonzo said, "Everything has been going really well with [Tarlton's] class; the students engage really well with the activities that I have planned. It has helped me gain courage when talking with new people."

The CCBL would like to thank the folx from Youth Educational Services (YES), the Retention through Academic Mentoring Program (RAMP), and the Learning Center, along with Service Learning and Academ-ic Internship faculty, for their collaboration and continued support throughout the development process and during the pilot. The team at CCBL looks forward to watching the program grow over time.