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Students Help Launch New Service-Learning Program

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Students Help Launch New Service-Learning Program

Flores, a sophomore [Occupational Therapy](#) major, and Leyva, a junior [Political Science](#) major, were selected to join the first cohort of 20 students from 10 campuses to participate in California Campus Compact's Community Engagement Student Fellowship (CESF) program. California Campus Compact works with colleges, universities, and communities throughout California to advance civic and community engagement.

Flores and Leyva will serve as liaisons between Dominican and several long-standing community partners in order to help deepen and expand partnerships. To help guide them as SL leaders, both Flores and Leyva are participating in a two-semester leadership development workshop at Dominican called EDJE (Education Dedicated to Justice and Equity).

The EDJE program was developed by longtime community educator Michael James to help students deepen their understanding of issues, structures, and systems and then imagine and create cultural action for justice, peace, and environmental sustainability.

“An important compliment to their academic training, EDJE is a leadership process that deepens, sharpens, and inspires the mind, soul, and spirit,” says James. “It is dialogic and democratic, enabling people to organize their knowledge and engage in social change in a critical way.”

In their EDJE meetings, students explore the larger social, political, historical, and economic contexts that shape their own social biography and impact the lives of others.

Leyva notes her involvement with EDJE during fall 2012 has already made a huge impact.

“The work we have done with EDJE definitely has made me more aware. I have learned how to look and my own social, political, and historical story and think about how it relates to the community I am working with,” she says.

Along the way she has learned the importance of branching out, taking calculated risks, and become an individual.

“When I arrived at Dominican, I tried to morph myself into becoming a general student- or what I thought an average student should be. Through EDJE, I have learned that I have a story and that it is OK to tell my story.”

The EDJE program is essential for student taking a leadership role in the service-learning program, notes Julia van der Ryn, director of [Dominican's Service-Learning Program](#).

“Once the students understand the many influences that shape their stories they can also understand their own impact on the lives of the people and communities they work with for social change,” van der Ryn says.

“It is a very powerful experience when students see their own lives in the context of the world, and recognize that they don't exist in a bubble, but exist as part of history and larger social structures,” she adds. “Once students recognize their embeddedness in this larger structure, they are able to question and act to change it. It is empowering.”

The CESF program requires Flores and Leyva to spend at least 50 hours during spring semester overseeing aspects of the work involving Dominican's service-learning students and specific community partner.

“The student leaders will be exposed to how we are developing the relationship, how the organizational pieces work, how to create new initiatives, and how to work with faculty and staff. They will acquire many new skills doing this leadership work,” van der Ryn says.

Flores started working with Marin County Community School (MCCS) last year through the service-learning course “Expository Writing: Literacy and Power,” taught by Caroline Hanssen. MCCS serves students aged 12-18 who have demonstrated the need for a small, highly supportive and closely supervised educational environment by their behavior and/or attendance.

Dominican SL students provide academic mentoring in a structured program designed to raise self-esteem and confidence of the MCCS students. Since the Dominican/MCCS program began in 2007, more than 115 Dominican tutors have devoted some 2370 hours working with close to 380 MCCS students.

As a SL student leader, Flores oversees tutor training, maintaining tutor schedules, tracking data and evaluations, troubleshooting issues with MCCS and Dominican staff, and providing ongoing support to Dominican tutors and MCCS teachers. She also continues to interact with MCCS students in groups and one-on-one sessions focused on improving academic skills and passing the high school exit exam.

Flores describes her work as a student leader at MCCS as a “very humbling experience.”

“I enjoy hearing the students’ stories, and it makes me want to push myself to work towards something greater,” Flores says.

The students, she adds, are interested in hearing about her own experiences as a college student.

“They ask me about college, about how it is to live in the dorms. They ask what I am majoring in and what courses I am taking,” Flores says. “Talking with us definitely makes them more aware that college is a possibility, they get to see it is possible by hearing our stories. I think it helps to motivate them.”

As Flores is the first member of her immediate family to attend college, her own story helps students realize that college is a possibility.

“I am able to relate to the students at MCCS because I am a first generation college student, she says. “When starting college I couldn't really ask my parents or grandparents for advice in choosing what college I should attend or what college courses to take but I was blessed with the greatest support system that I could ever ask for.”

“I was raised in a neighborhood where crime rate and violence was high. The odds were already against me; statistics about college drops outs even insinuate that first-generation students are more likely to not graduate from college. With that being said I knew that I had to prove the stereotype wrong. The students at MCCS do not have families that have gone to college or that

even graduated from high school. I am able to share my stories with them and tell them that it is OK to break that cycle and to go far beyond what is expected of them.”

Leyva is the liaison between Canal Alliance and Dominican’s SL Program. Canal Alliance offers services in San Rafael’s Canal area, a community that consists of mainly Latino immigrant families. Dominican SL students serve as mentors and tutors in Canal Alliance’s after school program.

Her SL experience last year prepared Leyva well for her leadership role. She gained a first-hand understanding of the powerful impact of learning to apply knowledge gained from the classroom and seeing firsthand what it can accomplish in the community.

“At first my service-learning course was just another class,” she recalls. “But once got into it, I saw a change in myself and began to understand the changes that I can help to make in the world.”

Leyva also learned that in order to make change, it is important to first understand community needs.

“For me, my service-learning is about community. One cannot better situations without first educating yourself and understanding the people you are serving. You can’t just go into a community and push your own ideas onto people. You must hear them and listen to them to help figure out what is needed.”

Leyva’s experience with service-learning and her work with EDJE have had a tremendous impact on her own life. The first in her immediate family to attend college, when she arrived at Dominican she took comfort in knowing she was only about an hour away from her family in Newark.

“My mom told me I could only attend a college that was located no more than 90 minutes away from home,” she recalls. “That was fine with me – I really did not want to go away to far from home.” Leyva returned home most weekends to spend time with her family.

Her experiences at Dominican have boosted both her confidence and her passion for politics.

Next fall, Leyva hopes to spend a semester in Washington DC as a Dominican University/Panetta Institute for Public Policy Congressional Intern. Then, Leyva plans to focus on international studies in graduate school before finding work in either U.S. government or with an international aid organization.

Dominican's service learning program began in 2003 after the University received two planning grants from the Marin Community Foundation. Today, Dominican offers over 20 service-learning courses across the disciplines in partnership with more than 30 community partners throughout Marin County. A service-learning course incorporates significant on-site community involvement intentionally linked to the course content. Last year, 370 undergraduates completed 7,200 SL hours with community partners.

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