

Project Title: Near-Peer Mentoring for Academic Excellence, Inclusion and Service Learning

Contacts:	Abbie Reade	Liz Hysen
	Academic Success Coordinator	Lead Academic Success Coordinator
	College of Natural Sciences	College of Natural Sciences
	Department of Biology	Department of Biology
	970-491-8578	970-491-8309
	abbie.reade@colostate.edu	liz.hysen@colostate.edu

Fall 2019 VPD Institutional Diversity Strategic Plan Mini-Grant Project Report (Department of Biology)

The primary goal of this project is to establish connections between underrepresented, incoming first-year biology/zoology students and other members of the Biology Department - including students who are beyond their first year in our majors, Biology Department faculty, and staff. Through building a sense of belonging and community within the Biology Department this project aims to improve retention and academic success of the first-year student participants (mentees), provides professional development and leadership opportunities for the junior and senior participants (mentors), and supports our faculty and staff participants in developing cultural competency and an appreciation for the unique perspectives that each member of the community lends to the university community.

Summary of Activities and Accomplishments:

We began by recruiting four junior and senior Biology Department students who served as mentors throughout the fall semester. Mentors signed a contract acknowledging their responsibilities which included attending a training during the summer, assisting with initial outreach and recruitment of mentees, attendance at bi-weekly Biology Leadership Council (BLC) dinners, one-on-one meetings with their mentees, and participation in an off-campus hike.

During orientation we targeted historically marginalized students (67) and included an invitation to participate letter in their advising packet. We often spoke personally about the opportunity with students and encouraged them to participate in the BLC. Over the summer mentors called potential mentees to follow up on the invitation, welcome them to the Biology Department, and answer any questions. About 20 students indicated that they wanted to participate and 18 attended the first meeting.

Seven dinner meetings were held in the Biology Building from 5:30 - 7:30pm on Wednesday evenings throughout the semester. During the first meeting we introduced the program and expectations and all participants introduced themselves with background information and why they chose the major/educational goals. 11 mentees committed to the program (signed the participation agreement) and by the end of the semester 9 mentees (3 males & 6 females) remained. Mentees were able to choose their mentor by ranking their top 3 choices, then we assigned 3 – 4 mentees to each mentor. Mentors maintained contact with their mentees throughout the semester, acting as an information resource and offering support and encouragement. Mentors were required to meet with each mentee one-on-one and then email a brief report to the project leads (Liz and Abbie).

Meetings were structured to build community within the group (among mentees and mentors), build community within the Biology Department (faculty and graduate student guests), then build community within the greater Fort Collins community (invited professional biologist/zoologists).

- The first two meetings focused on building connections and getting to know each other. At one of these meetings the mentors presented campus resources and opportunities for involvement and shared their personal experience with the curriculum as well as some tips for success. On the morning of September 28th, the entire group met at the Biology Building and together we climbed to the top of Horsetooth Rock! This was a novel experience for many of the BLC members – it was challenging and rewarding, and people really started getting to know each other.
- At the next three meetings the BLC hosted different faculty members and graduate students. The guests told the story of their path through college, how they discovered their research interests and talked about what their work routine is like. All members of the BLC were able to ask questions and engaged in casual conversation with the guests. Most of the graduate students gave tours of the research labs and talked about how they are working to answer their research questions. These experiences gave the BLC members behind the scenes experience within the department and helped them get to know professors and teaching assistants (graduate students) on a personal and informal level.
- Originally, we had planned a second off-campus excursion to tour a local business where people with degrees in Biology or Zoology might work, but due to scheduling considerations we invited scientists from the Fort Collins area to join us for dinner and conversation. We hosted the lead microbiologist from New Belgium, an executive from Audubon of the Rockies, a fish and wildlife biologist who works with the USFW Service, and an independent contract biologist who conducts environmental impact studies! Each of these guests had amazing stories to share on their path through college, volunteering, internships, and the real-life challenges that led them to their current positions. This dinner was a smaller group and there was a lot of opportunity for BLC members to ask questions and many exchanged contact information with our guests.

Impacts, Outcomes, and Feedback:

All Biology Department affiliated participants (mentors, mentees, faculty, and graduate students) completed a survey before and after their experience with the program. The number of participants was not large enough to produce statistically significant quantitative results, however the answers to the qualitative questions demonstrate that this program did address the University Diversity Goals 2 and 3, as intended.

Students enjoyed meeting with people working as scientists, whether in the Biology Department or in different fields. Students particularly enjoyed touring labs and learning about research. Students reported that they feel welcome and comfortable interacting with people in the Biology Department and built a strong sense of community. Mentors felt strongly that meeting one-on-one with their mentees throughout the semester was valuable and enjoyed seeing their mentees grow.

Q: Please share what aspects of this program you have enjoyed the most:

A: "I enjoy scheduled and organized clubs, but I never expected to meet so many people and that was the most valuable." (Mentee)

A: "Meeting scientists from different fields outside medical. Touring the labs." (Mentee)

A: "I loved the hike and getting to talk with all the advisors." (Mentee)

A: "Getting to look at other aspects of biology. Meeting mentees that were in the same position I was in." (Mentor)

A: "I enjoyed seeing the growth that occurred with us, the mentees, and our community." (Mentor)

A: "I have really loved getting to share my experiences with the mentees. Also, I really loved getting the opportunity to meet w/professors and professionals within the biology field." (Mentor)

A: "Interacting with the students outside of the classroom." (Bio Dept faculty/grad)

A: "I really enjoyed talking with incoming students, particularly from 1st gen backgrounds. As a first gen student, I can relate to the overwhelming experience of starting an undergrad program. I really enjoyed hearing their stories and answering their questions, as well as having the opportunity to show them around our lab space. The food was great too!" (Bio Dept faculty/grad)

A: "I enjoyed getting to know undergraduates that are new to the program and finding out what kind of research and aspects of biology they are excited about. It was also fun sharing my research and getting enthusiastic feedback and questions from students." (Bio Dept faculty/grad)

Q: Do you feel more comfortable interacting with members of the Biology Department as a result of this program?

A: All mentees and mentors responded with "YES!"

More elaborate answers:

"Yes! I'm so glad to have this connection because I heard other students have trouble with not connecting with their advisors and it was nice to be able to have this close relationship with mine!"

"Yes, I feel like this was a good icebreaker to the bio department."

"Yes. I feel like my confidence grew and I can have good contributions with my interactions."

Q: Do you feel like you have a better appreciation for the perspectives, backgrounds and experiences of incoming Bio Dept students as a result of this program?

A: Most responded with "Yes," one department member said "Sure."

More elaborate answers:

"Yes and no... I already have a good appreciation/understanding of the perspectives of incoming students as a TA for intro courses. I make a point to get to know as many students as I can for the courses that I teach by asking about their backgrounds and interests. However, it is great to dedicate some time for those who do not have much interaction with incoming students to see what our students here at CSU are like."

"I do feel like I have a better idea of what incoming students are interested in, however, I think I would need to spend more time with the students in order to get a better understanding of their backgrounds and experiences."

Q: Please provide any feedback about the experiences that you had with your mentor/mentee – what interactions were most helpful and positive and are there any things that you think would have improved the mentor-mentee connection/experience for you?

A: "My mentor was very informative, kind, and caring. I know if I need help or have concerns, I can go to my mentor anytime."

A: "I absolutely LOVE (my mentor). She checked in on me all the time to make sure I was doing alright. She's super kind and supportive and she wanted to see me be successful. This experience was a wonderful one for me!"

A: "Everyone was super kind and positive, I think that next semester will be even better."

A: "The most helpful and positive interactions I had came from 1:1 interactions and giving insight to the mentees."

A: "I would like more structure for our meetings cause sometimes it felt like I was running out of things to discuss."

A: "I think the 1:1 interactions were super helpful because I got to talk to mentees on a more in-depth level and help give them more specific/personally helpful advice."

A: "Getting them to go to other clubs. Opening up on struggles, comedy. Getting them connections."

Future Direction and Improvements:

All participants (except one mentee) indicated that they are interested in continued involvement with the BLC and the Near-Peer Mentoring for Academic Excellence, Inclusion and Service-Learning Project. We completed the semester under our projected budget. This is likely due to the smaller group size than anticipated and because we opted out of the second off-campus excursion, instead inviting scientists from the Fort Collins community to join us here on campus. With the remaining \$765.00 we are planning at least one BLC dinner this spring and there is interest in riding the bus to downtown Fort Collins as a group for ice cream and perhaps a visit to the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery!

We would like to continue this project, expanding recruitment throughout the year. The primary source of candidate mentees will come through advising interactions. We have met with many of the students that we initially identified as good candidates for the program. Students did not join the BLC this fall for a variety of reasons - some had schedule conflicts, some did not receive/retrieve their messages, and for others they were just feeling overwhelmed at the beginning of the first semester. Many of these students could still benefit from involvement with the BLC. Most of the current mentees are interested in sharing their experience and wisdom with future incoming freshmen as well.

Some of the feedback that we received from mentees and mentors requested more off-campus excursions, more lab tours, and continued dinners with different faculty and grad students. During our last dinner this semester students worked together to design a BLC logo/symbol to increase a sense of identity and recognition for the group. We (with the assistance and initiative of two of the current mentors) are in the process of applying for additional funding for this project through the Race, Bias, and Equity Initiative.

Thank you for your support!

Biology Leadership Council - Hiking up Horsetooth Mountain September 28, 2019



Biology Leadership Council – Mission accomplished heading down from Horsetooth September 28, 2019



BLC Logo – Top Pick December 4, 2019



BLC Big Take-aways December 4, 2019

