

CREATING COMMUNITY: BY STUDENTS, FOR STUDENTS

CLA's Underrepresented Students Network and Multicultural Scholars Program are transforming the college experience.



Students Angelo Lozano, Silvia Alvarez, Esmeralda Vasquez, Mylissa Weymer and Iman Laique enjoy fellowship with Multicultural Scholarship Program Advisor Alejandra Cebberos on Dexter Lawn.

JOE JOHNSTON

Christine Lam knew Cal Poly would be challenging when she began her studies as a political science major in 2017. However, as the first person from her family to attend college, she did not know exactly how to find the resources she needed. “I didn’t know basic terms like ‘room and board’ or ‘rushing,’” she said, “and I never had clear expectations about what college would be like, so all the new information at once was pretty overwhelming.”

While Lam described her early Cal Poly days as feeling “isolated,” many students were experiencing similar struggles. She would eventually find community within a small group of friends, also from underrepresented backgrounds, who banded together to share resources and support each other. Some from the group would later join the CLA’s Student Diversity Committee and pitch the idea of a formal peer mentoring program for underrepresented students to Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti, associate dean for diversity and curriculum.

“It was a fantastic idea, and at the same time we had been noticing that a lot of the students from underrepresented groups were members of numerous campus clubs,” Teramoto Pedrotti said. “It looked to me like these students were trying hard to find community wherever they could. They would keep joining student groups until many of them were spread really thin. I thought that if we brought that sense of belonging to an academic setting and built community in the classroom right off the bat through peer mentors, those students wouldn’t have to look everywhere just to find community. Combining social support and academic support leads them to community right away, and then they’re set up to succeed in their studies as well.”

Once the Underrepresented Students Network’s (USN) first student mentors were trained and paired with mentees, the group continued to grow naturally through word of mouth. Victoria Siaumau, a third-year student at the time, was invited to a mentor training in 2019 by a friend and quickly realized the USN’s potential. “Cal Poly is difficult for many students to navigate, and I saw how I could pass along some of the things I struggled to figure out on my own so that others wouldn’t have to learn the hard way,” she said. “The program ensures students can talk to other students who have experience with the specific issues they’re facing. My experiences were validated by hearing others’ stories, and knowing I wasn’t alone made a really big difference for me.”

The success of the USN, along with additional student input, informed the college’s creation of a new multicultural advising role within the CLA’s Academic Advising Department. When Alejandra Ceballos was hired in 2018, she helped create the Multicultural Scholars Program (MSP). Through MSP’s programs, students can find academic support, career planning tools, and activities to connect with other students and faculty.

MSP joined forces with the USN in 2019 to pair as many first-year and transfer students with mentors as possible. Both programs have had small-scale yet very encouraging effects in a few short years.

“We’re always going to be here for you. There will always be a community here for you, whether you join now or later. Sometimes we just need someone to talk to, and a mentor helps you do things outside your comfort zone, which could be anything from any area of life.”

—CHRISTINE LAM



Political science student Christine Lam was one of the first mentors in the Underrepresented Students Network.

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Recently sampled USN students had GPAs significantly higher than their counterpart CLA students not in the program. Additionally, out of the 10 USN graduates this year, all graduated within four or two years respectively, depending on their entry to Cal Poly as first-time freshmen or transfer students.

Looking beyond the numbers, prospective student mentees often share that they are looking for community with students and faculty they can relate to, supplemental knowledge to navigate their academic career, and emotional support to overcome impostor syndrome. Student mentors are trained to provide flexible support based on individual needs, so they can help their mentees with any of these challenges.

Siaumau learned a great deal about overcoming her own personal challenges through mentoring others. “Understanding that different folks need different types of support has made me much more empathetic, understanding and communicative,” Siaumau said. “Through these programs, I learned that I belonged at Cal Poly. In

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—VICTORIA SIAUMAU

all honesty, if I hadn't found those places of community and support, it would have been much more difficult to graduate and do well. Lots of students find different support systems and communities. This was mine."

Siaumau would go on to mentor multiple students and take on a student assistant role within the program, coordinating mentor trainings and expanding its reach to more students. With encouragement from the USN and MSP, Siaumau applied to Cal Poly's BEACoN Faculty Research Project program and was paired with a faculty mentor. She is still a part of that research lab, which has connected her with her passion. "Both the support and the information I received were critical. I didn't know I could study science and technology through an ethnic studies lens, but now it's my goal to get into a Ph.D. program for science and technology studies," Siaumau said.

As one of the first USN student mentors, Christine Lam learned confidence through her relationships with other student mentors and through watching USN alumni succeed. "When I first joined, I struggled with impostor syndrome," Lam said. "Seeing others from similar backgrounds succeed made me believe I could succeed as well. This program has made me into a much more confident person, unafraid to pursue opportunities. I know that I will be welcomed there and feel a sense of belonging." Lam was awarded the Panetta Congressional Internship in 2019, became a BEACoN research scholar in 2020, and is currently launching her own business. She said, "I knew it was time to push myself more."

For further information, contact Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti at jpedit@calpoly.edu or Alejandra Cebreros at alcebrer@calpoly.edu.



Victoria Siaumau finds community, support and academic inspiration through her USN and MSP mentorships.

HOW CAN STUDENTS GET INVOLVED?

Students can sign up for MSP and/or the USN by filling out an interest form on the CLA website:

- cla.calpoly.edu/msp
- cla.calpoly.edu/usn

