

The Mental Health Ambassador Program.

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A Counseling and Psychological Center must be a social justice agent. It has ethical responsibilities of reducing inequalities in education outcomes, decreasing health disparities, providing multiculturally responsive services, and creating social change.

The Mental Health Ambassadors program was created to help San José State University Counseling Services to further actualize its social justice missions.

My students inspired this program. Many of them need to work full time to support their family and be a full time student, do not have equal access to resources, have been mistreated or discriminated against -- even by the current psychological and educational theories and practices. My students reminded me that culturally responsive services must be created and provided to help ensure social justice.

I kept asking myself, what can we do, how to create a win-win solution for students, Counseling Services, and the university? In Fall 2006, the light bulb went on, a grant was written, and after a hundred cups of coffee and several cakes, the Mental Health Ambassadors program obtained supports and officially started in Fall 2007.

Each semester, we interview and select students to become Mental Health Ambassadors. We cultivate them to be the official diplomats of the SJSU Counseling Services by the following mandatory and structured activities: Pre-semester one-day training, weekly training, 4 official Counseling Services activities (e.g., tabling, presentation), one final scholarly project, the "Positive Impacts" log, one educational consultation meeting, and four individual mentoring meetings. In addition, the Ambassadors are encouraged to actively identify themselves to the campus community. A 46-page "Mental Health Ambassador Handbook" was developed as the training manual and reference for the Ambassadors.

The Ambassadors have exercised their Ambassadorship creatively. For example: In a class, a professor said, "I think we might have a Counseling Services..." Two of the Ambassadors raised their hands, identified themselves, and provided their class and the professor information. Students made their first counseling appointment with Ambassador's accompanying them. Ambassadors "reminded" department heads about addressing mental health needs and encouraging students to use Counseling Services. Provided multi-language outreach (most ambassadors are bi-lingual and bicultural). Chalking – writing the workshops on the boards of classrooms.

The numbers of student contacts made by Ambassadors have been stunning. Last semester, the five Ambassadors made more than 400 student contacts and 10 class presentations. All Ambassadors have been invited back to the next semester to give presentations to more classes by professors. Our students seem to prefer to talk to the Ambassadors – during outreach activities, I was often left alone, while students flooded the Ambassadors.

No words can capture the positive influence of this program. However, seeing the Ambassadors grow and knowing how much they are proud of and enjoy what they do are most rewarding. This year, two Ambassadors will present their final projects at the California Psychological Association Annual Conference. They will be among the handful of undergraduate students presenting in that conference. I asked them, "are you nervous?" They both replied, "actually, mostly exciting."

As a past forest ranger, I know that all seeds need water, sun, soil, and air to grow. I believe that, in many ways, social justice is also about giving each person proper and responsive environment for them to grow, and I know that the Mental Health Ambassador program provides us a great nursery for our students.