

Stories of Engagement

Health and Public Service

Engaging students, alumni & faculty with communities since 1991

Ewing Awards Support Biology Service Leaders



Local community garden, courtesy of HFFA

By Grace Burgin and Princess Gordon

When finding an organization to become involved in, many students want to bridge their academic interests with service. For students passionate about the community implications of biology, the Biology Service Leader (BSL) program is a popular option. Under the guidance of faculty advisors in the department of undergraduate biology, the students admitted into the program are grouped by interest and work to find a community partner with a coinciding mission.

One group of students became connected through their similar interest in nutrition. Because of her own passion for service and previous connections, one of their faculty advisors, Colleen Kearns, was able to lead them to the local non-profit Healthy Food for All (HFFA). HFFA addresses the issue of food insecurity in the Tompkins County area. They currently subsidize CSA farm shares for around

200 local families. These are partnerships with local farms which supply families with local, healthy produce that is subsidized by HFFA.

On-campus programs exist to help students that deal with food insecurity but these are not enough to bridge the campus-community gap. Because of this, the campus community remains fairly unaware of the amount of food insecurity there is in the area.

One member of the group, Brady Bunkelman '19, recalled "it honestly shocked me... just finding out about the amount of food insecurity there is in Tompkins County versus how lucky we are on campus."

Tompkins county's food issues stem from the unusually high level of poverty. One startling statistic is that nearly 100 percent of single mothers in the city of Ithaca are living below the poverty line. These conditions make access to

campus. Healthy Food for All fundraises primarily through “harvest dinners,” multicourse meals served at local farms. These dinners are usually priced at fifty to one hundred dollars. The students with BSL are working with HFFA to adapt these harvest dinners for an on-campus setting and plan on holding one next semester which will be more accessible and affordable for students.

Another set of students chose to focus on the overlap between biology and public health. Their faculty leaders helped them get in touch with Cornell Health. There, they are working on initiatives to promote the different health services available.

One part of their project helps target an issue that is specifically impactful to college students, the over prescription of antibiotics for upper respiratory infections. These common colds are viral infections and cannot be treated with antibiotics. Over prescription of the drug does nothing to improve the condition and can lead to problems with bacterial resistance. The other side of the project deals with the stigma of health and accessing care, specifically for students that struggle with mental health issues.

Matt Jirsa '19, Biology & Society major, developed his passion for public health through his involvement with this project. Matt states that in working with this project, he and his partners hope to “improve campus health by 1) educating students about personal best care practices with regards to antibiotic use and the physical and mental resources available at their disposal and 2) creating a healthier, stronger relationship between the student body and our health services.” Matt’s ardent passion for biology, health and service led him to Biology Service Leaders where he is able to work collaboratively with students that share the same passion. Matt feels that this experience has

given him a purpose on campus and helped him make an impact on the community.

Both groups chose different aspects of community health to become involved with and were able to develop the overlap between healthcare and biology. The projects both received funding through the Public Service Center in the form of the Ewing Award, which aims to support active, community-engaged learning. With the support from their faculty, the students have been able to become a link between the Ithaca community and the Cornell campus. For many students, Biology Service Leaders has become a valuable addition to their academic interests.

To learn more about the Ewing Award, [visit https://psc.cornell.edu/awards-funding/ewing-family-service-awards](https://psc.cornell.edu/awards-funding/ewing-family-service-awards)

