

Winning Letter Spring 2016 written by Chris Davila, Office of Diversity and Inclusion

The Center for Just Living Coordinator supports the clubs, programs and services that address the diverse needs of underrepresented students so as to continually improve academic success and the overall student experience. The CJL Coordinator works in conjunction with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to support, implement and provide on-going assessment for the Peer Mentor Program, Student Ambassador Program and the week-long summer Multicultural Leadership Orientation Program.

As the CJL coordinator Michael experienced much adversity in his role organizing the Multicultural Leadership Orientation summer program. His supervisor was transitioning into a new job and I, his new supervisor, was just starting at St. Scholastica at the end of July 2015. The one constant during this transition was Michael and due to the extenuating circumstances this required him to take on much more responsibility and the need to work more independently on the Multicultural Leadership Orientation (MLO) summer program which he readily accepted and did so outstandingly.

MLO provides incoming students the opportunity to strengthen their leadership skills, explore and expand their understanding of numerous social justice topics and improve the college transition process by allowing students to get familiar with the campus and building relationships with their peers.

The unique challenge of planning such an event such as MLO is that it requires a strong understanding and ability to be inclusive in all aspects of the planning process. You can't host a student orientation focused on social justice when you aren't able to live out those values in the planning, structure and activities. Michael's vast knowledge of systems, oppression, privilege and current events aided in his ability to seamlessly weave together relevant and challenging workshops, inclusive activities and a safe environment conducive to challenging one's own biases and freely expressing one's ideas and views. He did this by recruiting a diverse and talented group of 13 student mentors, providing training opportunities for these students and vetting their topics and presentations prior to the orientation week.

Michael sets very high expectations for himself, but one of the qualities I truly value about Michael is his ability to be flexible. Michael realizes that as part of his own personal development that he needs to have a keen sense of self-awareness and be open minded about ideas and different ways of doing things. Michael had expressed to me that one of the areas he felt he needed improvement was in timely communication and overall organization skills.

I saw Michael using a variety of strategies to improve communication between him and the MLO mentors and between the MLO mentors and the new incoming students. He provided mentors with a list of tasks and due dates and followed up with them regularly to monitor progress and offer support where needed. He encouraged the use of social media and created Facebook groups where students could begin to interact with peers and mentors months before actually arriving on campus.

Michael began developing a greater sense of vision for the program and took great care in saving documents, plans and budgets by organizing them electronically so as to provide a manual to be used in the future. He implemented an assessment for both the mentors and incoming students so that improvements and adjustments could be made to improve the overall experience. Now as Michael begins planning for the next cohort of MLO, he continues to exceed expectations by constructing an operating manual of the MLO program to include best practices, research and retention data which will aid in providing sustainability for MLO.

Michael's leadership style is to lead by example and to rely on his ability to create and maintain strong relationships with others. He is a strong collaborator and seeks to listen to others prior to taking action.

Michael had organized a 2 day training and practice session during the summer prior to the MLO week where mentors practiced giving their social justice presentations and got feedback for improvements. As the new director, this was the first time that I had met any of the student mentors. As I observed some of the presentations and saw how students interacted with Michael it was evident that they looked to him for leadership. He was very intentional about asking for input from the mentors in how they wanted to proceed with the agenda and would make decisions after gathering all of their input.

After each presentation the mentors would offer constructive criticism to each other and I realized quickly that my constructive criticism appeared to be very difficult for them to accept. I imagined it was because I was new. It wasn't until Michael did his presentation that I saw a difference in student's attitudes and behaviors. After Michael's presentation he was very open to my criticisms by asking me to clarify and to offer alternatives and examples and through his body language. It was through his example of demonstrating how to be open that changed how all of the following presenters responded.

The impact that Michael has had through his position as a CJL coordinator is quite extensive, but he will be the first to downplay his role.

Looking at the cohort of students that attend MLO last summer and who are currently in their second semester at St. Scholastica, it is very easy to see the impact of MLO and the hard work and dedication that Michael put into the planning and success of the program. Many of the students who attend MLO are first generation, students of color and/or students from low income families. The strong relationships and friendships that were created with that cohort of 35 students and 13 mentors can be seen all around campus. As a group they can be seen having meals together taking up several tables in the center of the dining hall. Most of the students are actively involved in social justice organizations and many have already taken on leadership roles. Students in this cohort have also been more likely to seek out resources and support services compared to the general student population.

In terms of sustaining this type of success, Michael's work in establishing an operating program manual for future CJL coordinators will ensure that future St. Scholastica students will benefit from being able to build upon an established well-organized program.