

The Oakes CARA Program: A Legacy of Expanding Strategies—UC Santa Cruz

Leslie López February 2019

The Oakes College CARA Program (Community-based Action Research and Advocacy) is a small program established in 2013 as part of the efforts at UC Santa Cruz to maximize the benefits of its unique decentralized interdisciplinary residential college system, and to renew its cutting-edge tradition in field studies and situated learning. Guided by the Oakes College mission to pursue change for social justice, and to celebrate and understand diversity, the CARA Program centers the strengths and needs of first-generation students and students of color in California. The program works to create opportunities for experiential education, and transformative social justice, and for recognition for students' existing work that might not otherwise exist. The CARA Program emphasizes communication, collaboration, and leadership, and the development of institutional spaces, academic and professional pathways, and mentoring at each stage of students' formation. Courses, internships, and student staff positions in programs combine hands-on work in the community with community-building approaches, communication and research techniques and critical frameworks that build confidence and support student-led projects and justice initiatives. Finally, the CARA Program is committed to developing and modeling sustainable, equitable, and useful relationships with community partners, and investing in our region's process of change toward justice.

Changing Student Demographics at UCSC and at Oakes, and Perception of Climate

In 1991, there were about 9,000 undergraduates enrolled at UCSC, and almost 70% were White (Martin 1994). In 2006-07, of 13,519 undergraduates, 51.7% were White; in 2017-18, of 17,000 undergraduates, the percentage of White students overall had dropped to 31.3%, with 27.7% identifying as Asian, 27.7% as Latinx, and 4.2% as African American/Black (IRAP 11.5.18). As throughout the UC system, UCSC's student body has become much more ethnically diverse since it was founded, and especially in the last 20 years its proportions have improved, representing more closely the population of California. At the same time, student numbers have doubled while faculty and staff hiring was frozen during bad budget years; this has reduced opportunities for low-ratio student contact with faculty and staff, and created new challenges for community-building at a campus whose infrastructure and reputation were created around a small-scale approach to education.

In some ways, Oakes College reflects these trends; in some ways, it continues to be distinctive—to hold space for social justice legacies, especially for California communities that have been under-represented in the University of California and its benefits. Especially during UCSC's first 30 years, when the university as well as the surrounding community was overwhelmingly White, the college was a safe and welcoming place for first-generation students of color to live and study. Generations of students have reached back to their hometowns and high schools, hosting field trips and carving channels to this place as a friendly destination.

In 2014 the incoming UCSC class of 16,277 students had the following proportions:

African/ American Black: 4%; Asian/ Pacific Islander: 25.6%; Latinx: 29.5%;
Native American: 1%; White: 36.8%.

The same year, of those students, the 448 first-year students who affiliated with Oakes were:

African American/Black 8.3%; Asian/Pacific Islander 26%; Latinx: 50%; Native American: 1%; White: 13.6%.

A total of 86% of Oakes first-years were students of color. Those who listed English as their only first language constituted 37% of the class, while 33% listed English in addition to another language. Thirty percent spoke a different language before learning English. Seventy-two percent of the students were first-generation.

Today, those representational proportions are similar, although the university's number of international students has grown, and representation of African America/Black and Asian students has improved overall. Meanwhile, the constitution of Oakes as a people-place, with a mission and a collective memory, make it one of the focal points and pockets of resources for low-income students of color on campus—a place that the community appropriates as “home,” and where they build “an Oakes family” at UCSC.

CARA Certificate: One example of the CARA Program's development of institutional pathways for students was the establishment of the CARA Certificate in 2016. Oakes students can earn a certificate at graduation by taking a total of 19-20 units that demonstrate their investment in social justice and community engagement. The pathway begins with the Oakes College Core course (a critical reading course required of all Oakes students); 4-5 units must be completed in lower-division social justice courses coded as PR-S (the university's General Education code for Practice/Service Learning); 5 units must be completed in a social field research course or any experiential course related to social justice; and 5 units must be completed from the menu of upper-division CARA courses (currently, the 150 series).

CARA Program Learning Outcomes: The development of the CARA Program—including frameworks for new courses, adoption of policies and best practices, and parameters for advising and completion of the CARA certificate for students—is guided by our Program Learning Outcomes:

- 1) Develop a sense of belonging and community
- 2) Develop a politics of solidarity across differences
- 3) Develop methodologies, advocacies, and other modes of production that are community-based for social justice
- 4) Understand and situate the self within local communities through self-reflexive praxis grounded in historical and material conditions

Two Interdisciplinary Course Themes: Oakes-affiliated students pursue academic majors across the curriculum, from STEM fields to Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. The CARA program therefore is designed to be a platform on which students from any discipline could develop tools and relationships useful to work at the service of social justice. At the moment, because the program is small, CARA courses are clustered into two overlapping interdisciplinary themes that emphasize critical communication and social analysis skills, although placements, projects, and applications may be diverse. One theme is “Critical Geographies” (e.g., “Social Geography and Justice in Santa Cruz;” “Community Mapping”) and the other is

“Critical Literacies” (“Slugs Speak: Our Stories, Our Selves;” “Community Literacies: Curriculum Design, Observation, and Team Teaching” (Corre la Voz); “Transformative Literacies”).

Current Annual Program Structure and Bridge-Building: Currently, the CARA Program is strongly characterized by our flagship program, Corre la Voz, and by strong representation of Latinx student leaders, Social Science majors, and investment in local Latinx communities. 2019 is one of transition and growth, as we are investing in emergent community engagement programs with other units on campus, and building new programming within Oakes. While CLV combines research, service, and professional development, the new Puentes program seeks to focus more closely on professional development and service in the area of law and community organization; the Community Mapping project links Oakes to community engaged research for justice; and the Slugs Speak Storytelling for Justice project works with Oakes’ strong residential programming, campus resource programs and off-campus organizations to build skills and public discourse spaces.

The Corre la Voz Program (CLV) is externally funded by the UC Links Program, with the CARA/CLV director managing the grant. In 2019, CLV will complete its 10th year of linking UCSC undergraduate mentors and local middle-grade students from Spanish-speaking families. UC Links funds programs researching innovative approaches to multi-modal literacy, and CLV works with translanguaging approaches, including movie-making, to celebrate and leverage students’ communication resources for holistic confidence, pride, and community development. CLV is an intensive twice weekly after-school program, with on-site faculty mentoring in the classroom, and very low ratios of mentors and children (1:2 or 1:1) to make very close observation and relationship-building possible.

CLV operates throughout the academic year, with a 2-unit seminar for new mentors and a 3-unit field study for new and ongoing mentors, each quarter (Fall, Winter, Spring), called “Community Literacies.” CLV also funds three to four part-time positions for a student leadership team, comprised of enrolled mentors who are continuing in the program and learn program co-management and co-leadership skills. Almost all of CLV’s enrolled mentors are Latinx. About 50% currently are Oakes affiliates. It is common for CLV mentors to stay in the program for more than one quarter; sometimes they stay for up to two years or more. CLV mentors petition to have their first quarter’s course work (a total of 5 units) count toward their major requirements, which allows them time to continue working in the community. Most students in the program are majors or minors in these programs: Latin American/Latino Studies, Education, Psychology, Legal Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics, Critical Race and Ethnic Studies.

CLV is the strongest, most consistent component of the Critical Literacies strand of the program. In addition, the CARA Program offers another two five-unit courses per year. One of these is “Community Mapping,” an upper-division Participatory Action Research course, which is the foundation of the Critical Geographies strand. The other course has varied (“Transformative Literacies,” “Social Geography and Justice in Santa Cruz”); the intention has been to use this course to develop placement-type relationships with the community. “Community Mapping” is cross-listed in the

Community Studies Program, and half the seats are available for Community Studies students; half are Oakes affiliates. The other courses have prioritized Oakes enrollment, but are open to interested students. Each of these courses is a small seminar that emphasizes group work and close feedback.

Institutional Development & Constraints

It has been exciting to build programming during a time of rapid change and expansion at UCSC, and this process continues, in very positive directions. Several factors that have worked to constrain the development of the CARA Program seem indicative of more systemic issues that the university is working to overcome. The primary theme of these constraints is the *programmatic and personal isolation* that is a natural feature of decentralization, something that works against community engagement programming on all levels.

The most obvious constraint has been a soft-money funding strategy for innovation that created a program with only one staff member (an 87%-time Instructor/Director) and no additional administrative support or operating budget with which to develop programming, build institutional bridges, community partnerships, or new revenue strategies. The CLV program has been highly successful--for the university, for UCSC/Oakes students, and for the community-- because the CARA/CLV instructor takes responsibility for obtaining the funds, administering the program, and for working directly with UCSC students and with the children on-site, throughout the year. In this sense, the program provides a valuable and reliable service to all parties, as well as helping to promote a generation of critically trained leaders going into the education and counseling.

Emergent courses and programs in the CARA Program have taken these factors into account—it is clear that for the foreseeable future, our programs cannot depend on community partnerships or on placements for temporary success or development, and will need to heavily leverage already strained instructor resources. At the current juncture, the University has not yet *invested* in a system; community partners do not have the means to *donate* the time for development, training, supervision, or transactions, or take risks on start-ups; and students are more stressed than any of the other actors, with less and less time, transportation, and personal resources to mediate gaps. This is especially the case given the social justice focus of the program, and the vulnerable populations and sensitive issues that focus implies. Although the early-version placement courses did initially work to develop a first round of community contacts, curriculum materials and analysis of community issues, the ten-week courses have only begun the long-term process of building enduring partner relationships or engagement programs. However, the mandate to create and implement expanded community engagement opportunities without the active buy-in and leadership of university funders or networked community partners is not a sustainable or wise development model.

Students' experiences during our startup years and pilot courses showed that resource constraints on campus also need to be addressed. Our first five years were especially difficult, as students from strictly traditional academic backgrounds faced new learning environments. Today, although there is more general awareness and of experiential learning and its value, our experiences at Oakes have shown that more "student

engagement” resources overall are still needed at the university. We need to create a strong *platform* of constructive communication skills and a *culture* of involvement that would allow students and programs to thrive. As the university develops more courses with experiential and engagement components, this platform and culture will strengthen, but investment in similar resources should occur simultaneously throughout the university, to create a more engaged student body overall with a more favorable and more representative student:staff ratio. Necessary resources and dedicated skill development include: meeting spaces, communication technology, transportation, and the instructional/mentoring staff to support development in culturally sensitive, constructive communication skills, collaborative project leadership skills, documentary and creative tech skills; off-campus work-world navigation. The most outstanding need is for staff, both instructional and programming/coordinating. Intentional development in this area would especially benefit first-generation students; students whose first language is not English; and students who are struggling to find ways to belong in a predominantly White and affluent context, in on- and off-campus communities.

Less obvious constraint factors are more closely related to the decentralized development of the university. First, most of the residential colleges—including Oakes—are located within the Division of Undergraduate Education (DUE), which is institutionally separate from all the “regular” academic divisions (i.e., Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts, the Sciences). Although the colleges develop and deliver some academic programming (courses), typical academic funding and other administrative circuits of the university do not support this programming; DUE programs do not have faculty representation in the Senate; there are few systematic ways in which college courses are integrated into students’ majors. For decades, some of the university’s innovative and enduring local community engagement programming has been housed at the colleges, but it has not been coordinated, leveraged into other academic programming, or otherwise developed. In the most recent phase of re-investment in college-based community engagement, attempts to channel new threads of revenue and programming through the DUE as a new “academic” division has proved administratively challenging.

Finally, the recent phase of college investment has not benefited from the kind of campus-wide investment in coordination and cost-sharing that would make community engagement programming thrive. UCSC’s traditions of decentralized programming have historically resulted in very innovative, high-quality programs in field study, and excellent, personalized advising throughout students’ college career (for students who seek it proactively). On the other hand, the absence of central infrastructure for coordination, and the lack of institutional engagement commitments to the local and regional community has resulted in high transaction costs to individual faculty, students, and community partners. In years of budget drought, high-speed work, and a general environment of “unaffordability,” the lack of central investment was a disincentive for individuals to take risks. Disincentive was especially strong among exactly the type of low-paid, part-time workers in social service sectors that we needed to make new programs work (usually women working in schools, youth programs, juvenile justice, community clinics; and Lecturers or Graduate Student Instructors who might develop new courses to fit start-up programs). As of this year (2019), UCSC is currently developing institutional infrastructure to address these issues: a new Institute

for Social Transformation will house some faculty-based programming, while a long-awaited Community Engagement Center would coordinate resources and partnerships on and off campus.

Mapping and Traversing a Changing Community

Along with UCSC, the city and county of Santa Cruz are undergoing processes of demographic, economic, and social-political change. As the population of the university and the region continues to grow, residents and planners will need to confront difficult resource conditions and social changes in new ways. Mapping and analyzing these changes is a good fit for the re-emergent community engagement programs at UCSC; they are not only generating the local and regional data needed to make informed policy decisions and plans, but are demonstrating the usefulness of researchers, educators, and students who belong to the region.

Santa Cruz County stretches along beautiful central California coastline, and contains agricultural land as well as dense redwoods in the hills. The county is polarized between the North--the wealthier, whiter City of Santa Cruz, with the university (at the far northern end), tourism, and retail—and the City of Watsonville, currently about 90% Latinx, mostly Mexican and Mexican American, with seasonal agricultural work and canneries that were abandoned by companies in the 80s. Between the two main cities are a string of smaller cities and communities in unincorporated county land that are becoming more densely populated. The narrow highway that connects North and South County has become congested, and commuting has become less feasible. Throughout the county, housing is among the most unaffordable in the country; the gap between income and cost of living make the county among the least affordable in general, with stark inequality and high rates of poverty, displacement, and homelessness.

Despite ongoing gentrification, the proportion of Latinx people in North County continues to rise; currently 20-30% of Santa Cruz identifies as Latinx, but some public schools have consistently enrolled 45-65% Latinx students. In mid-county, public elementary schools are 75% Latinx—with mostly White teaching staff. One of the challenges in the last few years of program start-up has been that the professional social service agencies most dedicated to low-income residents, immigrants, and families of color have moved more decisively to South County.

Within this panorama, university community engagement programs interested in social change have some logistical and narrative challenges. One of the first challenges still to overcome is to effectively document the community as it is, which is to contradict vested interest in real estate and tourism portrayals. With central investment in transportation solutions (e.g., dedicated shuttle buses), UCSC students could work more effectively in Mid- or South County, or just get off-campus to some of the more remote locations around Santa Cruz.

Community Mapping as Asset-based Development

The Oakes CARA Program has developed in this environment of constraints and barriers, along with the students it serves. Because the program consists entirely in the real-time unfolding of each course, the work that students do in each course has had to serve multiple purposes: each course helps to develop the program as well as to their

own understanding and tool kit. An excellent example of this is the Community Mapping course. While CLV has been the stable foundation of the CARA Program, Community Mapping has worked more as an engine of development, using asset-based tools and action-oriented research. Each year, the course has partnered with a different group and has taken on a different action-research question; each year, we have moved a little further. A chronology of projects shows how this course has worked as a development method:

2015: the course launched with Oakes College as the partner. The aim was to help Oakes College better understand itself as an “energy system,” and to identify specific projects the college could take on (possibly with community engagement programming) to maximize its assets and address barriers or “drains” on collective energy.

2016: the overall action-research questions were much the same, but partners were specific groups within Oakes College, like Advising and Student Senate; questions drew on the results from the previous year and became more focused, to advance projects. For instance, Advising wanted to know, “How can the College communicate more effectively with students?” and Student Senate wanted to know, “How could we make a representative mural?”

2017: the course took on four areas of development that had been identified as being of interest to Oakes students and community partners on and off-campus. Each of the four research groups sought to identify existing resources, barriers, and next steps in the different area of project development. The areas were: Community Gardening; Improving Housing Organization; Improving Mentoring Network; What does Sanctuary Mean?

2018: the course partnered with two student organizations for housing justice. There were three main questions: How do housing resources and decision-making “flow” through the power structure at the university? Who really holds power in the housing economy in town? And, in both on- and off-campus contexts: How do we build more effective coalitions (assets/barriers)?

Now, in 2019, the course is partnering with two campus programs for student research on a multi-year research project called “We Belong: Community-Engaged Research and Immigrant Justice.” Campus partners are the Community-Initiated Student-Engaged Research program sponsored by the Center for Labor Studies, and the Pathways to Research Program sponsored by the Educational Opportunities Program.

Interestingly, two of the community research partners in Santa Cruz are alumni of the 2016 Community Mapping course, now working with immigrant communities and Latinx youth in Santa Cruz.

Emergent Areas

The opportunity to participate with other campus units and researchers in the multi-year “We Belong” research project is a breakthrough for the CARA Program. The project design we are creating and seeking funding for centers undergraduate researchers who have the cultural and linguistic skills needed for this research—and are

most likely students from immigrant communities themselves. This multi-year model has been used successfully by the CISER (Community-Initiated Student Engaged Research) Program, housed in Sociology; this program links the college-based engagement programs with the centrally-funded EOP mentor programs as well, for a campus-wide approach. In terms of content and an agenda for justice, this project has the potential to center many of the issues and people in our community who tend to get brushed over.

Along those lines, this year CARA is also partnering with Legal Studies to develop a new program called Puentes (Bridges): Immigrant Legal Assistance and Community Resources. This program has two year-round paid interns, and additional occasional interns from Legal Studies courses. Currently, in the context of policy crisis, North County is working on developing free and low-cost legal services for immigrants. We are partnered with two agencies in South County, and are working to develop enduring systems to create training courses and placements for students interested in doing legal work in agencies serving immigrant communities; on developing free comprehensive immigration clinics several times a year with visiting attorneys; and on organizing, outreach, and know-your-rights training. Currently, this program has no funding beyond the two interns.

We also developed a new course, Storytelling for Justice (Slugs Speak: Our Stories, Our Selves) within Oakes College, which we hope will be articulated with Resource Centers on and off campus, to have panels and councils of student storytellers come visit an arranged venue to share a moment of realization or identity formation with the audience. Currently, we have no coordination staff.

Finally, we had a small amount of funding and hired a Graduate Researcher to “map” the CARA Program and its possible relationship to the Hispanic Serving Institution initiatives and upcoming grant opportunities this year. The HSI Programs are housed in the Student Success Division, along with the Educational Opportunity Program.

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