

# Students discuss personal journey

Brandi Peters  
Staff Writer

The Terrence E. Deal Leadership conference brings new light to students in search of bridging differences and finding new ways to include a salon culture to management styles. Four students that had been selected from the Terrence E. Deal Leadership Institute were given the opportunity to present their leadership research in front of an audience of mentors and peers on Friday in the Ludwick Center’s Sacred Space.

The program, which launched during the 2021-2022 academic year, was put in place to allow the students at the University of La Verne an opportunity to submit proposals on specific topics that were related to leadership roles. Selected students would be given an award of \$500 upon completion of the fellowship projects.

Violette Castellanos, senior political science major, shared her story of bridging self-doubt and dissociation. She used her experience as a young student in grade school intertwined with the sudden cancer diagnosis of her mother, and the lack of understanding and support from her family during a time when she found herself struggling to keep up in school and process her home life.

Castellanos spoke about how not being able to express herself and the feeling of being alone made it hard for her to focus on school. Which led to poor grades, disappointment

from family members, teachers, and self-doubt. Through her trials and tribulations, she overcame some of her struggles and graduated high school. She still struggles with her own personal acceptance of feeling like her accomplishments are enough. She contributes her emotions to her childhood and realizes how this has affected her progress through the years.

Castellanos shared that due to the pressures of not feeling adequate, she recently tried to take her own life and urges people that are dealing with not feeling accomplished and the weight of family pressure, should not be afraid to speak up and get help.

“The self-reflection that I was able to do with this fellowship helped me immensely,” Castellanos said. “Giving me the opportunity to open up, I also have the ability to feel like I have accomplished something when I’m done.”

Castellanos is thriving, but is aware of her personal experiences and was encouraged by her mentors to share her story.

Bridging Gaps via storytelling was presented by Isabella Sebastiani, alumna with a masters in adolescent and child development. Sebastiani used her experience as an early childhood professional and high school teacher to talk about the importance of using books within the classroom that the students can self-identify with.

Through Sebastiani’s PowerPoint presentation she showcased a book that she had written to illustrate her point of kids



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*Elizabeth Wellins, lead instructional designer at the Center for Teaching and Learning, reveals one of her paintings at the Terrence E. Deal Leadership Conference on Friday in the Ludwick Cen-*

needing to see themselves being represented in books to visualize what possibilities they may have in the future or their belongingness. Through her research and surveys, she has found that students that see themselves as leaders in books can see themselves as leaders in the future.

Sebastiani advocates for books of all sorts to be discussed. The recent banning of books and how it affects over 4 million children was a support to her discussion. Sebastiani claims 40% of the books banned were LGBTQ and 41% included a protagonist of color.

“This is a problem because when books that promote di-

*ter Sacred Space. She said the painting is meant to show how to maintain structure and still allow for the wiggles, chaos and colorfulness that life and experiences bring.*

versity and representation are banned, it sends the message that those who share similarities with the characters in the book, do not belong” Sebastiani said. “It also sends the message that they are outsiders, and that the world will not work with them, the world will work against them.”

Through her leadership efforts, creating this book was meant to include everyone in subjects and through her teachings allows students to dream bigger.

“I have been really enjoying the discussion of what makes a positive and authentic leader, and how it ties back to education,” Jesse Espinoza, political science major, said. “Children are our future and setting a good example by being positive role models and encouraging leaders goes a long way in shaping the trajectory of a young person’s life.”

Daniel Rodriguez, bachelors in organizational management spoke about “Uncovering My Soul: My Personal Journey.”

Rodriguez used his experiences with his father and playing little league baseball to show how it has shaped him as an operations manager. His experiences through self-discovery and acceptance of himself as a introvert, compassionate and empathic personality played a part when it came to him finding himself, and how he was able to use that to become the leader and support system his employees need and not just someone who is telling them what to do.

“I have really learned about myself a lot and empathy and how that really drives connec-

tions and relationships,” Chinulkem Aqwamba, a graduate student in leadership and management program fellow, said.

Elizabeth Wellins, leadership and management graduate student and interim director of the center for teaching and learning, shared about authentic leaders bridging differences. Taking diversity, equity, and inclusion to another level with self-reflection and really getting to know yourself in the process.

“In order to be true to those things, you have to be able to define those things and know those things about yourself (true to self, character, spirit, soul),” Wellins said.

Wellins, who identifies as a visual and colorful person, unveiled a painting that described her thoughts on leadership. The painting shows how to maintain the structure and allow for wiggles and chaos and colorfulness that life and experiences bring.

This event brought light and understanding to the path of becoming a leader through personal experiences and storytelling.

“I learned there are different pathways to become a leader, there’s just not one way, there’s multiple ways and there are hardships along the way,” Brenda Cruz, junior biology and sociology major, said.

The Terrence E. Deal leadership conference also opened the minds of students and how becoming a leader and your actions through leadership might look different and give a place to all should they choose it.

“The thing that hit me is including empathy in leadership... leaders can also show empathy and don’t have to be upright all the time,” Anette Skekanio, senior biology major, said.

ULV has resources available to you or anyone you might know that is struggling with self-doubt, or harm. Additional resources can be viewed by visiting [laverne.edu/step-up](http://laverne.edu/step-up) or by calling 1-800-suicide.

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*The Campus Times is published weekly by the Communications Department, except during examination and vacation periods, by journalism students of the University of La Verne, 1950 Third Street, La Verne, California, 91750. The Campus Times is a laboratory publication for Newspaper Production classes Journalism 220, Journalism 320 and Journalism 408. Signed columns are the opinion of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Campus Times. For advertising information, call 909-448-4761 or email [ctimesad@laverne.edu](mailto:ctimesad@laverne.edu).*

### ON THE COVER

Senior theater arts major Julieta Del Toro, as Roxanne, and senior business administration and theater arts major Nickolas Mclean, as Cyrano, rehearse the play “Cyrano de Bergerac” in Dailey Theatre. The production runs through Sunday. / photo by Kim Toth