

Best wishes for the New Year from the Sociology Department



*Merry Christmas!*

**Front: Leslie Wang and Mary Ann Kanieski**

**Back: Hank Borne, Sheryl Switaj, Pam Blair, and Susan Alexander**

Saint Mary's College  
Sociology Department  
Room 262, Spes Unica Hall  
Notre Dame, IN 46556-5001



**Applied Sociology  
Using Sociological Knowledge and Skills to Engage in Mentoring**

In the journal *Sociological Practice*, Bruhn (1999) describes applied sociologists as practitioners, working outside the academic setting, who use sociological theories and methods to “produce positive social change through active intervention” (p. 1). In other words, applied sociologists translate their sociological knowledge and skills into concrete practices for specific clients such as hospitals, the criminal justice system, schools, social service agencies, and corporations. Steele and Price (2007) suggest applied sociologists use their sociological knowledge in answering research questions or problems as defined by specific client (p. 4).

This issue of the Sociology newsletter is devoted to current Sociology students, faculty, and an alumna who have found that their passion in sociology is the field of applied sociology where they use their knowledge to mentor.

**Lorena Miramontes:  
A Sociological Major Who Mentors**

This past summer I, along with three other women from Saint Mary's College and the University of Notre Dame, traveled to Park City, Utah, to intern with Holy Cross Ministries. My job was a camp



counselor for a summer program that primarily served elementary students from low income, Hispanic families in the area. The interns had the task of planning and implementing daily activities that corresponded with a weekly theme, such as science week and international week.

Working with Holy Cross Ministries increased my appreciation of the organization's mission to reach out to the underserved community by providing enrichment activities for the children. As a mentor, I was not only teaching valuable classroom lessons such as following directions and becoming independent learners, but I also strove to better understand those children I was mentoring as individuals, rather than a collective underserved group. Everyone had a distinct story along with unique abilities, and I had the privilege of helping them achieve personal and social growth.

**Emily Rojas:  
Student Research on Mentoring**

Each fall the Sociology majors develop and then conduct original research on a topic of their choice. One of the seniors this year, Emily Rojas, decided to investigate the role of youth mentors. Her senior comprehensive project, titled



“Paying It Forward: An Argument for Single-Sex Youth Mentoring Programs,” analyzed blogs written by youth mentors.

Emily conducted a content analysis of 30 blogs written by mentors on the site massmentors.org. She found that various social factors impact a person's decision to become a mentor; the most significant factor was having had a mentor as a youth. Emily's data also showed variations by race and sex as to current mentors' reason for mentoring. Women were more likely to report the goal of “paying it forward,” while the greatest number of men reported the positive impact of mentoring on youth.

Based upon the gender differences found among the mentors, Emily argues that “single race and sex mentorship creates a space for the reconstruction of gender roles and role modeling.”

## A Faculty-Student Mentoring Team: Dr. Leslie Wang and Senior Katie Woods



### Katie Woods

As a first-year peer mentor for the Sociology Department, I loved the opportunity to be one of the first upper-class students incoming students met when they arrived on campus in August. Remembering my own experiences of move-in, orientation weekend, and my first semester at Saint Mary's, I could relate to the first-years and what they were experiencing, whether that be excitement for the new college environment or doubts and feelings of homesickness.

Even though I have held some "mentoring" positions in the past, this was a new and exciting process for me. Being a peer mentor is more than just serving as an experienced college student; during some points of the program, I had to conduct difficult conversations and learn how to create a welcoming and comfortable environment in which to hold these conversations.

Dr. Wang, who co-facilitated the SPLL class in addition to teaching Race, Ethnicity, and Identity for our first-year group, allowed me to take a more active role in the classroom as well as share my passion for sociology with my mentees. I have had many conversations with the first-years about his class--how it opened their eyes to the way society functions or how it changed the way they examine situations and environments--and I see the curiosity that I remember having as a first year in the same class. Their interests have reinvigorated my own excitement and passion for the discipline.

In my opinion, a mentor should be someone who not only is actively involved with her mentees, but also someone who leads by example. I tried to accomplish this by creating study groups for Dr. Wang's class or by

offering guidance in sociological writing. I also believe it is important to be as welcoming and accessible as possible. This means being willing to sometimes sit down and chat in Cyber Cafe for an hour, occasionally prepare a homemade meal or desserts, or merely serve as a reassuring supporter and calming presence during the craziness of midterms or finals.

One of my goals throughout this process has been to be someone the first years can confide in, relate to, and look forward to being in a few years. While the peer mentoring experience is aimed at the growth of the first year students, I know that I too have grown this semester. I believe mentoring can only be truly successful if personal growth and understanding occurs on both sides of the mentor/mentee relationship.

### Leslie Wang

This is my seventh academic year serving as a first-year faculty advisor for the Cross Currents Program. Since the fall semester of 2009, approximately 140 first-years have enrolled in my Sociology class during their first semester, and I serve as their academic advisor for their entire first year. Since the fall of 2013, all first-year students also take an additional one-credit Sophia Program in Liberal Learning (SPLL 101) course, focused on developing attitudes and perspective to help them become successful students. A section of this course is facilitated by me for my advisees.

A reward of serving as a first-year faculty advisor has been developing a rapport with the peer mentors. The responsibility of the peer mentor is to help the first-year students socially adjust from high school to college life so they may become successful academically. Each year, I have selected a senior Sociology major to work with me: Cristen Dalessandro (2010), Mia VanNostrand Gorrell (2011), Mariela Aguilera Franco (2012), Alyssa Carty Merrill (2013), Abigail (Abby) Madsen Kuehner (2014), and Markie Harrison (2015), and Kaitlin (Katie) Woods, who is currently serving as a peer mentor. Their interactions with the first-year students made my work much easier.

Serving as a first-year faculty advisor is a lot of work. During the summer, each student and I discuss the academic requirements and registration process over the telephone. Some even come to campus to meet with me in person. In addition to my course, I generally participate in at least one social activity organized by the peer mentor during the fall semester.

Wang continued.

I also advise each student about her course schedules for forthcoming spring and fall semesters. As both their course instructor and faculty advisor, we develop a strong rapport. The first-year students themselves develop a close-knit classroom culture as they bond with each other as peers in the same courses (both SOC and SPLL).

I believe that teaching, advising, and mentoring are interconnected skills that are vital in helping students reach their full academic potential. Advising and mentoring helps me to be a better teacher, and I also learn a lot about the various perspectives and experiences of my students. Teaching and working with my first-year students are equally as rewarding for me as working with our senior sociology majors.

## Jessica Binhack '07 A Sociology Alumna Who Mentors Everyday

As a Special Education Teacher in the Chicago Public Schools and serving as a coach for the past several years, most of my daily interaction with other human beings tends to be with people ages 5-17. After completing a M.Ed. in Special Education and Elementary Education in 2008 from DePaul University, I have had the opportunity to work closely with many students and players. While much of my job involves teaching young people how to read or how to run plays, a lot of my success and my students' and players' success is because of the relationships I have built with them. I have worked and continue to work in high need communities where my students and players overcome adversity on a daily basis. Their success comes from their own internal drive, but also from the mentors who believe in them.

My sociology background laid a foundation for my successes in teaching and coaching because I have an understanding of what and how social factors impact my students' and players' everyday life. Being able to create a positive relationship with a young person comes from being able to understand them and their social environment. It is a fine line between being their friend and being a mentor they look to for advice, support, and a person in their corner.

A strong mentoring relationship cannot be built on superficial activity; it must be built on trust, understanding, and knowledge of how to navigate everyday life struggles and successes. Many of my students and players come from a family of generational poverty. Their parents grew up poor and so did their parents. Many of my students and players wish to break the cycle, so a mentor helps them see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Many of their families are struggling to just get by and having someone who can support them, believe in them, understand them, and guide them when no one else close to them is able to do so is important to their own self-efficacy and their drive for success.



Jessica hiking in Peru

Jessica has a long-standing interest in mentoring and sports. A copy of Jessica's Senior Sociology Comprehensive Research Paper, titled "Put Me In Coach!: A Survey of the Impact of Team Sports on Women's Self-Esteem," can be found on the Sociology Department's website at: <https://www.saintmarys.edu/departments/sociology/student-resources/student-projects>.

Find us on Facebook!

**SMC Sociology**

E-mail Susan Alexander at  
[salexand@saintmarys.edu](mailto:salexand@saintmarys.edu)

and let us know what you are up to!

