Community Service Award: Faculty

Dr. Gary Hytrek
Sociology

For the past several years, Dr. Gary Hytrek has worked with community-based organizations to fight for socio-economic justice and nurture closer community-university relations.

Since 2004, Dr. Hytrek has worked with the Greater Long Beach Interfaith Community Organization (ICO), collaborating on a number of projects related to air quality, housing and civic engagement. As a founding member of the Long Beach Coalition for Good Jobs and a Healthy Community, Dr. Hytrek has led discussions and forums about responsible and sustainable development, living wages and workers’ rights. As a member of the Coalition’s steering committee, he organized and participated in the Coalition’s successful town hall forum at CSULB that brought together nearly 200 people from the Long Beach community and campus.

He has also worked on several civic engagement campaigns, including “Get Out the Vote 2010,” and more recently, “Long Beach Rising,” a four-day intensive leadership training program focused on civic engagement and voter education. Dr. Hytrek has also organized a variety of workshops and conference panels such as “Poverty is way of life in Long Beach” at MLK Park, and “Revisioning Long Beach: Creating an Equitable, Participatory and Sustainable City” at the Long Beach Historical Society.

Throughout his career at CSULB, he has created significant opportunities for student community engagement in his courses and by establishing a number of campus-community collaborations.

Dr. Hytrek also serves as an empowerment evaluator for the Long Beach Building Healthy Communities Youth Organizing Working Group and was previously the Evaluation and Learning Specialist for The California Endowment. Additionally, he is a member of the Policy Advisory Committee for Long Beach City Council District 9, and a member of the Community Advisory Committee for the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

His work in the community is even more impressive given his leadership role in the Sociology Department, which includes implementing the new applied master’s Program in Health and Community Development. He has served as the program’s interim director since 2011.

Outstanding Graduate Research Student

Rhiannon Vaughan
Psychology

Rhiannon Vaughan wants to learn more about how the brain can repair itself after injury.

Vaughan is earning her master’s degree in Psychology with a focus on cognitive neuroscience and comparative cognition. She earned first place in the CSULB Student Research Competition in May for her presentation “Post-Injury Neurogenesis in Spring-Caught Food-Storing Chickadees: A Species-Specific Suppression Effect.” As a result, she will go on to compete in the CSU Statewide competition being held at CSULB in May.

Working with Bowdoin College in Maine, she and faculty mentor Diane Lee expanded upon the work of other researchers and students. They looked at whether new neurons developed in chickadees, which store their food in the fall to prepare for winter, with brain injuries.

Previous research has shown that there is no cell proliferation after a brain injury in chickadees that are caught during the fall food-storing season. But Vaughan’s research found there was an increase in cells in spring-caught chickadees with a brain injury. Her theory? Since birds don’t have to remember where they stored their food in the spring, there is less stress on their hippocampus; increased cell proliferation occurs because it doesn’t threaten the chickadees’ survival.

The study provides valuable information on stem cell activity in wild, food storing birds and helps determine that chickadees’ response to brain injury in the fall occurs because they need to hold on to what little spatial functioning remains. It also builds upon scientists’ understanding of how neurogenesis, the creation of new neurons, helps the adult brain repair itself.

Vaughan holds a master’s degree in Psychology with a focus on child development and statistics from Cal State Fullerton. When she isn’t studying or conducting research, she enjoys sports, reading and running.

She plans to apply to doctoral programs in stem cell research this fall. She hopes to contribute research toward the development of stem cell treatment that would help brain-damaged patients recover function.