



Coming Full Circle on NOLS

By Matthew Hoffman '21

Matthew Hoffman ('21) excitedly prepares for an expedition in the great outdoors, utilizing his skills from NOLS and Venture.

Like many Levine Scholars, I had never gone backpacking before NOLS. Growing up, I hiked and camped, and I was interested in geology, ecology, and all of the other -ologies related to the Earth, but I had never done anything that big before. NOLS was a challenge in many ways, but I felt right at home. Wading through frigid alpine rivers and contouring steep mountain slopes in the rain became highlights of my day. There was a healthy dose of stress too, but it felt natural to embrace it. I had never seen stress as a tool for growth, only as a necessary side effect of pressuring myself to do exhausting things I didn't enjoy in high school. I felt an overwhelming sense of calm excitement throughout NOLS—a proper engagement with myself—especially in those seemingly miserable moments we call “Type 2 Fun.” I wasn't expecting NOLS to be much more than a fun time in the mountains where I learned some cool leadership skills. Luckily, that experience set the stage for a whole lot more.

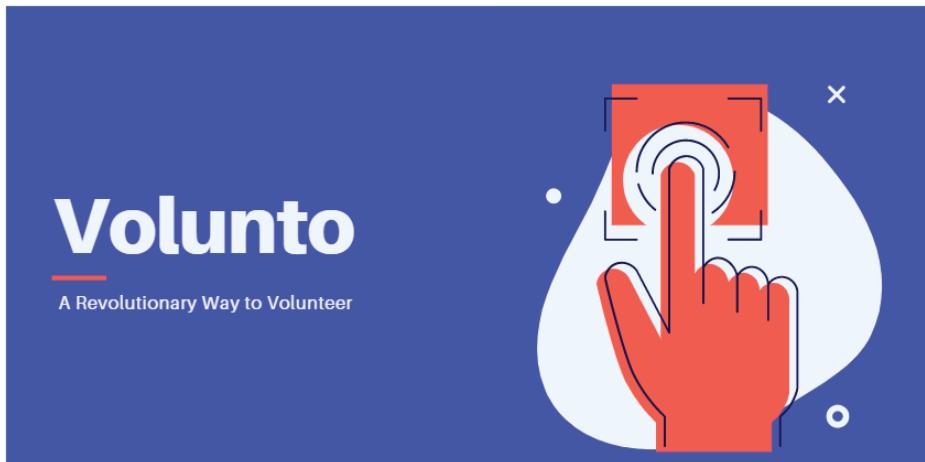
I spent the early stages of my college career feeling lost. Not the “where am I on this topographic map” type of lost, but the directionless lost of having many interests yet few passions. I started as an International Studies major intending to work in the nonprofit sector. I was interested in human rights issues and it was a path that made sense. I took many classes I enjoyed, but slowly realized I simply couldn't see myself working in the field—it just wasn't the right fit for me.

Feeling tired and demoralized as I entered sophomore year, I took a backpacking course with Venture, UNC Charlotte's outdoor education department, hoping for a mental break from everything

else. Ultimately, it brought back that same sense of calmness and purpose—a welcome reminder of NOLS. This was when I first considered pursuing a career in outdoor education, but I was terrified. Everyone I knew was going towards more traditional paths such as medicine, engineering, politics, academia, or business. It felt selfish to want to break out of the mold of “scholarly” career fields, so I didn't commit to a radical change just yet. I switched to Earth and Environmental Sciences with the plan of being a climate researcher. I could be closer to nature, while still sticking to a path that felt familiar and comfortable. What I learned from NOLS, though—and what I continue to learn—is that it's better to push past what's comfortable, because it can lead to something bigger. I couldn't shake that desire to explore other possibilities with the outdoors. I decided to take more classes with Venture and eventually started leading caving, rock climbing, and hiking trips for them. The more I worked with Venture, the more I could tell it was the right place for me; I felt connected to the community, and the work made sense. I could look back at my time on NOLS and realize exactly how every piece of that experience was facilitating personal growth and fostering ideas of leadership, teamwork, and character. During my final summer before graduation, I decided not to worry about an internship, but commit to something much more off the beaten path. I spent my summer planning, preparing, and ultimately hiking over a hundred miles through the Colorado Rockies. Now, I'm finishing up my time at UNC Charlotte and preparing myself for a career as an outdoor educator. It's all coming full circle back to my experience with NOLS, a development I would have never imagined as a freshman, and one I could not be more grateful for now.

Entrepreneurship is About the Journey, Not Just the Destination

By Samra Kanwal '23



Samra Kanwal ('23) matches her creativity and energy with the needs of local nonprofit organizations.



I never set off to become an entrepreneur. I still hesitate to utilize this word when describing myself. I see myself first and foremost as a problem solver. When I began college, the biggest problems I encountered centered around gaining work experience, figuring out what I wanted to do in life, and attempting to make a meaningful impact in my community. Though there were ample volunteer opportunities available in Charlotte, there were none that really allowed me to practice the skills I was learning as a business major. Neither were there volunteer opportunities that allowed me to utilize the social media and marketing skills I had amassed by virtue of being part of a generation reared in the age of technology. After talking to my friends, I realized that many of them were encountering similar challenges, and I was motivated to research the extent of this problem. What my research revealed was startling. According to the Taproot Foundation, 68 percent of nonprofit professionals do not have enough resources to do their work. Existing attempts to solve this problem center on getting young professionals to donate their expertise to nonprofits, something that is called skill based volunteering. The need to access these valuable skill based volunteer hours is very high and is currently an unmet need, as it is difficult to readily access these individuals.

Through my research, I had identified an intersection between both of these problems. On the one hand, nonprofits were struggling to find skill based volunteers who could bridge the resource gap that they are suffering from. On the other hand, students were struggling to find meaningful activities that would allow them to put their learning into practice, gain relevant professional experiences, and make impacts on their communities. These divergent groups had not been brought together in a way that both of their unique needs were being met. Nonprofits were not utilizing

college students as skill based volunteers, and college students were not seeking out nonprofits to build their professional experiences, practice existing skills, and acquire new ones. So, I set off to create a product that would do so, and that led to the creation of Volunto, a multifaceted digital platform facilitating diverse channels of skill based volunteering for college students.

My journey creating Volunto would not have been possible without the amazing support of the UNC-Charlotte community. Through the Office of Entrepreneurship, I was able to partake in an accelerator program and win a competitive \$5,000 grant from the National Science Foundation. Laura Smailes, my mentor and the Assistant Director of Ventureprise, helped me make connections across different departments on campus, particularly the Career Center, where I was able to speak with Jay Skipwith and gain his valuable insights on how I should orient and pivot my project. In addition to these on campus resources, Laura also introduced me to Josh Jacobson, the founder of Next Stage Consulting, a nonprofit consultancy in Charlotte. Josh has become invaluable to Volunto's success, assisting us as we make inroads with the Charlotte nonprofit community.

Since May, when I started developing Volunto, I have recruited and trained a talented team of three female computer scientists students and alumni with significant nonprofit experience. We are currently working on developing the prototype and are projected to launch Volunto next Fall. In the meantime, I have been recognized as one of Charlotte Inno's Under 25 most innovative tech leaders and entrepreneurs. I could not be more excited and grateful for these opportunities, and I know that the Levine Scholarship and the UNC-Charlotte Community have been instrumental in our success!

Google A TOOL FOR SELF-DISCOVERY

By Niyathi Sulkunte '22

Ever since I was a small kid, I liked to explore many different interests rather than stick to the same activities for a while. I may have been slightly jealous of the kid who had been playing piano since they were three, but I was (and still am) just trying to figure out what I love. After a rather tumultuous freshman year of trying to find my one niche, I made a list of all the things that I enjoyed and could start to incorporate into my life. Some of the things on my list included personal fitness, yoga, helping others, spending time with friends, and creative art projects. Then, I tried to make sure I followed through on creating a reality for each of those bullet points.

I started tackling the yoga and fitness bullet points first. Through some quick searches online, I obtained my yoga instructor certification and figured out how to become a group fitness instructor on campus. I absolutely loved the job and over time, it spiraled from just teaching yoga to getting other certifications to teach triple threat, aqua fit, core, and power yoga. Not only did I enjoy helping other people to enjoy exercising and improve my health, but it also encouraged me to keep up with my own fitness goals as well.

When COVID hit, everyone's life changed drastically. Personally, I was no longer able to go to my in-person classes, work at the gym, hang out with friends, work as a photographer for the school's newspaper, or go to my various volunteering activities. In all honesty, I spent the first month of quarantine moping in my parent's house. Eventually, I decided it was time to regain control over my life. There was so much that none of us could control but I decided to focus on what I could change to keep me grounded. I started looking around for jobs or internships that I could do while in a pandemic. I applied to more places than I could count and eventually, I was hired on with Alternative Behavior Strategies in Charlotte. I was hired to be a behavior technician and implement applied behavioral analysis therapy to children with autism. I fell in love with the job and the amazing clients that I work with.

My personal life significantly improved, but I knew that the pandemic had affected people in much more devastating ways than it had affected me. I reached out to my advisers in the Levine Scholars program and asked them what steps we could take as Levine Scholars to set up a relief initiative that could help people suffering from the effects of the pandemic. I recruited another scholar to help me in this endeavor and we worked closely with the Niner Food Pantry to help ensure that food security needs are met on our campus.



(Top) Niyathi Sulkunte '22, stands poised to lead fellow Niners in their own fitness journey through Power Yoga. (Bottom) Fellow Levine Scholar Cooper Manley '22 and LSP Director Dr. Zablotsky are prepared to collect donations for the Niner Food Pantry in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

The thing that has helped me the most in navigating this pandemic is knowing myself. Taking the time to explore and figure out what I enjoy, whether it was knowing that I like having a schedule to follow or knowing that I do not enjoy sitting at a desk all the time, was instrumental in helping me to decide how to reclaim my life. It just took a little bit of tenacity and a desire to do something. And maybe a lot of Googling.

DEMOCRACY 49ER

By Ariah Brown '23 and Galen Miller '24



Galen Miller ('24) and Ariah Brown ('23) want to share the message with everyone to "Vote, Vote, Vote," in the November 2020 election.

In November of 2016, leadership in America changed direction.....again. This was not the first time America changed direction. Many presidents have brought new approaches to leadership. The one consistent feature of the historical changes is that they all brought out large numbers of voters. Whether or not one is a fan of President Trump, no one can argue that his rhetoric shook the voters of the nation. The same style and substance which roused the midwest in 2016 brought protesters to the streets and deeply widened the political divide in the nation. For this reason, it is no surprise that the November 2020 election also brought record numbers of people to the polls.

The 2016 election looked different than many of those from the past. Donald Trump pulled off a victory that looked different than many Republicans in the past. Many of his critical wins in previously impermeable Blue states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania relied on fractions of a percent. This election has been no different. It begs the question: Does my vote matter?. The tight margins of both 2016 and 2020 make it clear that every vote matters. Even just the act of voting is symbolically critical to our democracy. Friends or acquaintances on social media list reasons to not vote. "It'll never change". "Both candidates are the same". "The two-party system is broken." Claiming that things will never change however, ignores the vast numbers of people who are directly affected by the policy differences between the candidates. History shows that things do change, just not overnight. Refusing to vote because "both candidates are the same" is a dramatically oversimplified approach. If the past four years have shown nothing else, it has proven that there is always a difference.

So how does one vote matter? If you are a Republican voting in California or a Democrat voting in Montana, it would seem that one vote means nothing as you are lost like a drop of rain in the ocean. People get lost in the big elections and forget about the state and local races that often impact their lives more directly and continuously than voting for those at the federal level. Does your single vote matter in the Presidential election? Ask the mere 11,000 votes which separated the two candidates on Monday, November the 9th in the state of Georgia. Ask the county commissioners, city council members, judges, or Sheriffs who can win or lose elections by tens or hundreds of votes.

Using your own voice to cast your vote is more important than you might think, but it is only the first step. Each person within our democracy has a voice and an opinion that matters in the context of political discourse and conversation. This election has been especially divisive, as general party/voting issues have largely evolved into clear categories of issues which directly impact the daily lives of voters. This makes the conversations between opposing sides not only difficult, but often downright volatile. Somewhere along the line, it seems that some think it is more important to talk than to listen. Despite this, said conversations are more important than ever. Encouraging those around you to use their voice, be it through social media or individual conversations has become a responsibility, just as important as voting itself. The notion that finding common ground is even possible on some voting issues can be very strenuous or even impossible, as it can be difficult to respect beliefs that seem to attack others. Because of this, there comes a time when we must evaluate our own beliefs and why we hold onto them. In doing this self-evaluation we should encourage others to do the same. We are past the point of holding onto ideologies



Your vote, your voice. Aria Brown ('23) shares the importance and power of the pen, in making your voice heard in the 2020 Election.

simply because "that's all we've ever known." We have the responsibility to educate ourselves on the values of the candidates running. Values without reasons are meaningless. Being a responsible citizen takes effort. This effort is worth it to preserve our democracy and protect life as we know it.

We get it. This election has been stressful. Multiple days without results, conflicting calls, reports, and declarations of victory have all contributed to a more turbulent-than-normal season. However, it's critically important that we remember that delays and hiccups are proof our democracy is still functioning. In the last few days, weeks, and months, an unprecedented wave of young people have turned out to vote, canvas, work polls, phonebank, and sacrifice hours of their time to contribute to our shared expression. This effort has not been futile. This election is on track to have the highest voter turnout in history. Much of this turnout can be attributed to people between the ages of 18 and 30. We've successfully shown that our generation will be the one that revitalizes our democratic institutions, drives progress and doesn't stop pushing for lasting, positive change. Through protests, discourse, organizing, and, most importantly, the ballot box we will be the change our country needs. Today once again reminds us that America, such as it is, is not so much a destination as it is a journey. Your vote and voice keep us moving down the road.

DIGITIZING THE LSP EXPERIENCE: BRINGING THE PROGRAM TO INSTAGRAM

By Cole Jones '23

Thinking of a word to describe the Levine Scholars Program (LSP), one would be hard pressed to find a term to better describe the LSP than “transformative”. Among these possible other terms, perhaps, are “inspiring”, “intense”, or, my favorite: “weird”. Describing the program that is funding and supporting my undergraduate experience as “weird” may seem somewhat jarring - so allow me to explain.

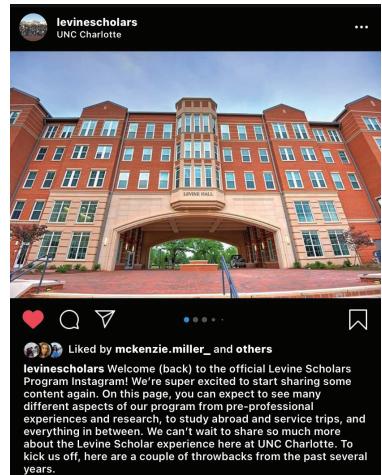
I've spent a great deal of time pondering on what the LSP is and the reality of what it entails through both a personal lens and a collective, group lens. What happens when you bring together dozens of accomplished, dynamic people from across the state and country attempting to find their fit in the world and say: “Study what you want to study and we'll fund it. Find what you want to do and do it. Internships, co-ops, research - we will help it all happen for you.” It's a liberating feeling - to feel like you can do anything. With the extensive programmatic support (both financial and social), accompanied with the unique vivacity, curiosity, and ambition of each Scholar working in tandem, what happens? What happens when you arm droves of bright young minds with the mindset and capacity to do... almost anything they want? The short answer: some really fascinating, impressive things. And here I circle back to the term “weird” as it relates to the Levine Scholars Program - where else in my life will I have so much backing, support, and availability to completely traject my life in the direction I want to take it? Why trust me, an inexperienced 19 year old, with such a hardy investment?

Every Scholar grapples with these questions to varying degrees. What's interesting, though, is the realization that our undergraduate careers can look almost exactly how we want to tailor it. What then? Well, you have Scholars that traipse the world working on conservation projects or studying urban development. Scholars that bungee jump in South Africa or Scholars that backpack across Patagonia. Domestically, Scholars found and head nonprofits, work as advocates, and do research across all disciplines that is both fascinating and pragmatic in its implications. The perhaps most quintessential thread that weaves all of these together, though, is a deep sense of devotion and connection to the communities that each Scholar inhabits. Upon reflecting on the great dynamism that is the Levine Scholars Program, I found myself asking - why don't more people know about what we're doing? And how can we get more people to hear about the compelling stories each Scholar offers? These questions had a straightforward answer that occurred almost organically considering the digital age in which we find ourselves - an LSP Instagram page.

Interestingly enough, these reflections were not unique to just my own seemingly esoteric thoughts - they were echoed by my fellow Scholars (and cohort mates in the class of 2023), Kira, Cooper, and Allison. We approached the office with the idea of getting the Program on Instagram and how we felt it would be a great way of displaying our image, as well as connecting with current, future, and past Scholars. Unsurprisingly, the office was more than happy to support us on this journey of bringing the Program to life on the platform. It required a little grunt work - some spreadsheets, figuring out our individual roles and duties when it comes to formulating posts, a centralized organizational platform, etc. - but we have been able to successfully re-launch (the LSP Instagram had been inactive since 2016) the Program to the world of Instagram. Since our launch we have gained about 200 followers within the span of 3 months (better than I can say for my own Instagram in the same time period), as well as publishing about 13 posts. At the beginning of projects like these, of course, there are kinks that must be ironed out and growing pains to be experienced, but overall I think we are going strong to be in our first semester of re-launching, coupled with balancing our own busy individual schedules simultaneously. We have some interesting and exciting plans moving forward that include Scholar Takeovers, Scholar Spotlights, and Q & A sessions that we're eager to bring to fruition.

Through the LSP Instagram we have a few goals: to keep Levine alumni looped in with the life of the Program as it continues to evolve, to keep current Scholars (and their family/friends) up to date on what's happening internally, and to offer a voice to those who want to share their LSP stories with the larger public. Engaging with prospective Scholars, as well, has been at the utmost concern of ours as we're trying to allow Instagram to be an avenue through which high schoolers can begin to understand what the Program offers and so they can begin to visualize themselves here at UNC Charlotte with LSP. The nature of the Program and the Scholars that populate it make the work easy - all I have to do is highlight the work that Scholars past and present do and everyone is fascinated once again. Do 4x6 panels and a few hashtags do justice to the sometimes life-altering, career-actualizing experiences that we experience in the Program? Absolutely not. Is it possible to capture all of the smaller moments with friends or the lightbulb moments that snowball into incredible things? Not really. Whether you see it as “transformative” or “weird”, it is difficult to capture life within LSP under the confines of an Instagram post, but we still post, upload, and hashtag all in hopes of allowing the outside world to understand the strange and awe-inspiring nature of who we are.

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Cole Jones ('23) shares snapshots of content and stories he and the LSP Instagram Team have created and shared with the world through the LSP Instagram account @levinescholars.

FUN TIMES WITH A FUNGI

By Xavier Gomez '23

Listen to your mom, she's probably right. Three years ago, during spring break of my Junior year of high school, my mother signed me up for a camp about space called "Go For Launch" at the South Durham Regional Library. Needless to say I was not thrilled - as I was 17 and on Spring break - but I obliged and gave it a try. Thanks to this push from my mother I am now on a team that is (hopefully) about to publish a peer-reviewed paper on absorption-shielding fungus in microgravity.

Go For Launch, part of the Higher Orbits non-profit, tours the nation, exposing high school students to how science is done in space. Higher Orbits is run by Michelle Lucas, a dynamo of energy with years of experience working with NASA. The camp offers students a chance to learn about life on the International Space Station from actual astronauts and then holds an experiment design competition with only one parameter: the hypothetical experiment would be run on the ISS. We later found out that the winner of the experiment design competition for our region would get the chance to actually carry out their experiment on the ISS. We formed teams and got to work. My team - called Team Orion - combined two ideas of radiation blockage and fungus growth in microgravity to design an experiment testing how well a certain type of fungus found in Chernobyl called *C. sphaerospermum* could block radiation on the International Space Station. The idea was that we would send a split petri dish with a dosimeter underneath each side to the ISS and grow our fungus on one half of the dish. This way we could track what radiation was truly being blocked by the fungus and what was being blocked by the petri dish. If there was a significant reduction in the amount of radiation registered by the fungus-covered dosimeter compared to the uncovered one over the 30 day trial, then a correlation between radiation reduction and the fungus could be proved.

Team Orion was fortunate enough to win the competition and were given a huge opportunity to run our experiment on the ISS. A research and development firm called Space Tango helped us make our experiment space-proof and finish up the design (a lack of gravity complicates things). By the time fall came, we were flying to Cape Canaveral to present our experiment at Kennedy Space Center and watch our project be sent up in a SpaceX rocket.

Two months after our trip to Florida we finally got our results back - and they seemed promising. However, everyone on the team was super busy with college applications and school and the data was very complicated and difficult for high schoolers to interpret, so it fell off of our radar for a while. The following year Graham, one of my teammates, wrote a research manuscript for a school project that I helped edit but it was not sent anywhere but the high school's journal. Almost a full year later, towards the end of my freshman year of college, Graham texted me about working on getting the paper published with the help of a Stanford Postdoc, Dr. Nils Averesch. It seemed intriguing, so we started editing Graham's original manuscript and with assistance from Dr. Averesch managed to



Xavier Gomez '23 (Center) stands with Team Orion in high school, as they receive an award at Go For Launch, and prepare to continue their work and preparation to launch fungi into space and onto the International Space Station.



Work continues as the preparation for launching *C. sphaerospermum* onto the International Space Station, and studying radiation blocking capabilities.

analyze the data with a number of physics and statistics formulas as well as write a clear and concise 11 page paper. There really was a correlation between fungus growth and decreased radiation! We sent the paper to bioRxiv, a preprint server for research on biology, and apparently enough news organizations saw it that we were interviewed and wrote about several times by media outlets in the U.S., Australia, and Russia. My favorite of these was interviewing for a podcast called Mushroom Revival that was run by a medicinal mushroom company. This experience was very humbling but once again felt out of the blue. It still seems wild that some journalists somehow found our paper on bioRxiv and decided to share it with the world.

Dr. Averesch is now working to run final ground control experiments with the fungus in a lab in California. If he can get repeatable results, we will be able to add his new data to our paper and will be trying to get it peer-reviewed with a reputable journal, the last step to truly publishing a research paper. When I reflect on my time spent working with *C. sphaerospermum*, the thing that stands out most to me is how serendipitous and collaborative life can be. Don't be afraid to try out a new hobby, start a student organization, or research a question that you might have. I guarantee that you will meet people who will be more than happy to help you reach your goals. I am always grateful for the numerous people who have helped me in this process, from my mom Andreya Gomez, to Michelle Lucas to Dr. Averesch, and many more. Besides, you never know where trying new things might take you.

EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LATINOS

By Carlos Chavez Ramirez '21



(Left) Carlos Chavez Ramirez '21 stands with members of the Latinx Student Union (LXSU) as they begin their launch at UNC Charlotte and prepare to work with the Latinx community on campus, within the community, and across the country. (Right) Carlos and Miranda Cuellar (Current SHPE president at UNC Charlotte) stand together at the 2019 SHPE National Convention as they prepare to bring innovative and transformational ideas to the Latino community.

As I enter my Senior Year at UNC Charlotte and reflect on my time both as a student at UNC Charlotte and in the Levine Scholars Program, it seems surreal to think about the things I have been able to accomplish. When I entered the program as a freshman, I was overwhelmed with all the things that past scholars had accomplished, and I wondered how I would ever meet the bar previous scholars had set before me. Now, in my senior year, when I look back over my time here, I know for certain that there was no bar to reach. Simply put, my undergrad experience was my own unique journey, and I am incredibly grateful to the LSP, for allowing me to grow and succeed in my own way.

As a freshman I was overwhelmed at the number of seemingly endless opportunities and paths that had been created and forged by previous Scholars. As a newly minted first generation, Latinx, college student, it seemed like everyone else had their life figured out, while I was just trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. The only thing I was sure of, was that I wanted to help those with a similar background as me and help empower the Latinx community. With the help of two older Levine Scholars and four UNC Charlotte Latinx students we founded the Latinx Honors Society with the mission to empower and support Latinx Students throughout their undergraduate experience. This

was the first big milestone in my undergrad journey that I believe helped shape me into a better leader and member of the Latinx Community.

My sophomore year of college, I had the opportunity to co-op with a Fortune 500 company, Bosch. While this was a non-traditional experience, I took the offer and became the first Levine Scholar to participate in a co-op during their sophomore year of college. Immediately following my co-op, I participated in a faculty led Study Abroad in Jerusalem with several other Levine Scholars and friends. Studying abroad was an eye-opening experience that taught me both how different and how similar the world is. More importantly perhaps, is the support system that I had available throughout the study abroad, which truly inspired me to become more confident and strive to be the best version of myself, every day.

With newfound motivation coming into the Fall semester of my junior year, I joined the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers and participated in their National convention. The convention featured 10,000 other Hispanic Engineering students and provided me with exposure to networking opportunities with both my fellow peers and Engineering firms. This resulted in several internships

Carlos shares his love and involvement with the Latino community on campus through participation in national conventions, the creation of the Latinx Student Union, and sharing skill, expertise, and time together through civic engagement, community service, and a love for culture.

offers from Fortune 500 companies, including the company I ultimately accepted to work with, Rockwell Automation. After the convention, I was drawn to join the executive board of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers and was able to serve as the Academic Development Chair. Through this position, I became responsible for organizing study sessions, learning opportunities, and activities for our members to participate in.

Throughout my internship with Rockwell Automation, I was able to work remotely with their global manufacturing team through three different locations in two different countries, and better understand how a large manufacturer operates on a global scale. While the internship would have previously been in person (pre-Covid), being in a remote environment helped pave the road for new opportunities and self-discoveries. Along with interning this past summer, I had the opportunity to work with six amazing UNC Charlotte students, and create the Latinx Student Union. The Latinx Student Union focuses primarily on community outreach and providing opportunities for members. The Latinx Student Union has been an incredible step for Latinx students to have a sense of community and support at UNC Charlotte. When I think about how much I have enjoyed my undergraduate experience, I think about how much this group has meant to me and the things we have accomplished. Since our founding in September, the LXSU team has taken the initiative to provide voter registration drives, tutoring opportunities for elementary school students, and educational cultural events.

You may ask, why did I join so many Latinx and Hispanic orgs? Truth is, there is a great need to support members of our community. Navigating college as a first-generation student, as a transfer student, or as a student where your parents do not understand the college process can be very difficult. Many times, you don't know where to start or who you can reach out to. My goal by participating in Latinx orgs is to pay homage to the wonderful mentors that I have had come before me and pave the road for the next generation of students to come. I am also extremely grateful for the community of support that I have built and the love I share for the culture and people.

As I approach my graduation, I think about how my experiences have shaped my career trajectory and I am extremely grateful. I acknowledge that when I began my journey, I was overwhelmed, and I had no idea what direction my life would take. With the help of many mentors, friends, and opportunities, I have grown into a person that I am proud of. Today, I am President of the Latinx Honors Society, The Academic Development Chair of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the Community Outreach Chair for the Latinx Student Union, an SGA senator, and a student. I have grown to be extremely prideful and thankful of my heritage and as I look back now, I realize that the legacy I would like to leave behind lies in lending a helping hand to the next generation of Latinos. I am excited for what the future has in store, and as I navigate the next chapter in my life, one message I would like to pass on to my fellow classmates is "ponte las pilas, tu puedes", or "Get it together, you can do it."



FOOD *for the* BODY AND MIND

By Cameron Mercer '23

Covid-19. Just saying the word probably brings up a lot of feelings of angst and anxiety, because for all of us Covid-19 has meant change. Prior to March 2020, we were all living our lives with plans for the rest of the semester, summer, year, and even beyond. For me, and other students at UNC Charlotte, we were enjoying Spring semester with the excitement of just coming back from Spring Break, and then continuing on for the end of the term. Little did we know Spring Break would be the last time things went to plan in 2020; but typing this eight months later, I've learned that while what you initially planned for might not be what you were able to do, in the end, you need to learn to adjust and adapt.

Learning to adjust and adapt took front and center stage for me after Spring Break, starting with how classes were delivered and completed, but perhaps most significantly for me, was the rapid change in my summer plans. I initially had my non-profit internship lined up from the start of the year, and was really excited about my work for the summer, but as was the case with many organizations, the non-profit wasn't sure how to operate in a Covid era, especially with their direct face-to-face interaction with children on a daily basis. So I went back to the drawing board...four times. Four times it seemed the stars would align, and I would be excited to have my plan, just to have it all fall apart. I kept wondering if I was going to be able to complete the internship and felt really frustrated and at a loss.

However, once I was settled back home for the remainder of the Spring semester, I was researching potential non-profit partners outside of Charlotte, and discovered a local food bank, Greater Things Outreach Center, in my hometown, and apparently, the fifth time was the charm. As all of my previous internship opportunities had been directly involved with children - whether through academics, sports, or the great outdoors- I wasn't sure what to expect in interning with a food bank, but was struck by the mission and vision of the organization and their involvement with the community.

At the start of my internship at Greater Things, I honestly felt the only thing I was bringing to the table was the ability to move heavy boxes, and my willingness to learn. But after a few weeks, I was learning the ropes and felt like I was actually contributing to the process of stocking and distributing food independently, and I was starting to learn about the population Greater Things served.

Greater Things had to alter their structure and operation systems significantly during Covid, and this is where I spent the greatest time during the internship. For example, prior to Covid, clients would come through and self-select needed and desired items themselves, but during Covid, staff would take the client's itemized lists and select and pack food for them, take it to their cars, and complete the entire exchange mostly without interaction. Another change that Greater Things faced were fewer volunteers and donations from people in the community. However, after the first few weeks of quarantine (when the state was in our initial Phase 1), we started to receive a surplus of food from the grocery stores. Everything that came

into Greater Things had to be sorted and weighed, but with the surplus of food, there was a significant amount of waste. My problem-solving mindset quickly went to work and thought of a system to create less waste by organizing the food (in particular fresh fruit and produce) in a more systematic manner. While the system was a fairly simple fix that only took a few weeks to fully implement, it greatly reduced the produce we had to throw out and therefore increased the amount of fresh food we could provide to clients, increasing Greater Things outreach capabilities.

During the internship, I learned just how big my community was. I also realized how much I care about efficiency and improving systems to benefit others. I have taken away invaluable skills that I observed and learned from those around me, such as how to fix inefficiencies, be creative, and to always keep the clientele and services provided in perspective. When things go sideways or plans need to be evaluated or reevaluated, the key is to stay calm, take the time to assess the entire situation, reflect, develop a plan, and put that plan into action.

My unexpected turn in internship turned out to be incredibly beneficial, and moving forward I am continuing to volunteer with Greater Things, when I am home. As someone who had little to no exposure to food banks before this internship, I really encourage everyone to spend some time volunteering at a local food bank and seeing the impact and importance these centers have on the community. It's a great opportunity to both feed the community and feed your mind at the same time.



Cameron Mercer ('23) prepares food boxes at Greater Things outreach. From start to finish, Cameron ensures the clients receive everything they need to feed themselves and their families.

NOLS: BUILDING CAMARADERIE IN A COVID WORLD

By Brenda Morales-Flores and Zoe Ziegler '24

This year's NOLS expedition was certainly one for the Levine Program history books. It honestly wasn't until about five days before departure that we started to actually believe we would be going to NOLS at all. But, before we knew it we were on a plane next to people we had only seen briefly or through a computer screen. And it was weird to look at these people we would spend the next four years with and only see half of their faces, the rest covered by a mask. There was no handshaking or hugging at the airport, just awkward standing and short conversations. Any other year, we imagine the bonding experience would begin sometime during the three-and-a-half hour plane ride or on the six-hour long bus ride from the airport in Colorado to Lander, Wyoming, but we were sitting socially distanced in separate rows the whole way there.

There was this sort of excitement in the air at the prospect of actually seeing people after spending four months in the confinement of our homes. Quarantine certainly had a significant impact on our attitude towards the trip and in the end, brought us all closer together. One of the aspects of NOLS we feared would be altered by COVID was, of course, the tradition of building companionship on such a unifying expedition. Going in, we knew taking memorable pictures without wearing masks or even comforting each other on tough days with warm hugs would be impossible. We were still able to make it work, though, considering the circumstances.

Although our expeditions started in a pretty unusual way, with many precautions in place on the trail and in the tents, we were still able to have fun and bond with each other. Our sense of community still developed well along with our leadership skills and we found ways to connect even without being physically close to one another. Despite not being able to bond in the traditional sense, such as sharing food between cook groups or sleeping four to a tent, we found ourselves building a sense of camaraderie in different ways. One rather peculiar way we bonded was during our daily late-night meetings in which we shared our temperatures and any symptoms we had experienced. This probably would have been a little uncomfortable in any other situation, but out in a NOLS expedition, was there really ever a time we weren't uncomfortable? From the unpleasant bodily smells to the infamous trowel, basically, every second of our day was another moment in which we were pushed outside of our comfort zone. But being forced to be vulnerable in a completely unfamiliar setting ultimately pushed us into developing several deep and meaningful friendships. So instead of being an awkward time of our day, these evening meetings were actually a chance for us to check-in on how we were doing physically and to understand how to better help each other. Recalling these late-night sessions now only brings back fond memories of laughter over ridiculously broken thermometers and the word "expectoration" (a common symptom of COVID).

Then, once 14 days had passed, we were considered a family unit and could finally interact with each other normally, the excitement was palpable. We cheered and had big group hugs, which felt even more special since they were two weeks overdue. We came to appreciate each other's company in a completely new way, especially when we were unable to actually be close. On hard days we couldn't give hugs, but found solace in pep talks and singing Justin Bieber on trail to get through the tough days. After we could be close, these new traditions never went away, but were coupled with tent parties and cinnamon roll hugs. We never envisioned ourselves forming life-long friendships in the middle of the Wind River Range of Wyoming, much less in the COVID era, but that is ultimately what came out of 23 grueling days.



Brenda Morales-Flores and Zoe Ziegler ('24) share photos from their NOLS expedition in a COVID era. From building snowmen and cooking in masks, hiking up mountains and through valleys, to graduation day- complete with cap, gown, and tassels- a true team and cohesive cohort emerged.



The Levine Scholars Program

The Levine Scholars Program is a four-year scholarship that includes full tuition, room, board and four summer experiences, including study abroad, which will develop leadership skills and social awareness. In 2010, the inaugural class of Levine Scholars

enrolled at UNC Charlotte and approximately 20 scholarships are awarded to high school seniors every year. The Levine Scholarship is valued at \$105,000 for in-state students and \$155,000 for out-of-state students over four years.

Levine Scholars are talented high school seniors from across the United States whose accomplishments epitomize the values of philanthropists Sandra and Leon Levine, including a demonstrated commitment to community service, intellectual curiosity and the capacity for ethical leadership. Through community engagement, mentoring relationships with civic and business leaders in Charlotte, and a rigorous academic program, Levine Scholars develop the characteristics necessary to produce positive change in the communities in which they live and work. Scholars are able to turn their community service interest into actions with community service grants of \$8,000 to support their work in the community.

It is this unique connection to Charlotte – its resources, leaders and challenges – that differentiates this program from other scholarships of its kind. The program is specifically designed to expose Levine Scholars to the urban culture of a thriving city and to engage them in service to address needs of the citizens of Charlotte.



Levine Scholars Group Photo Fall 2019. Classes of '20, '21, '22, and '23.