HELPING HANDS 2015-2016

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Rufina Ning Andrew Au-Yeung Hope Aquino-Chien
Volunteers In Progress (VIP) is a volunteer program created by the Student Development Centre in 1983 to complement students’ academic experience with relevant career-related learning opportunities. Our goal is to help students develop valuable skills and learn from Western professionals. Additionally, our VIPs are a vital part of the operations of Student Development Centre, Student Experience, and Western International. These services offer them the opportunity to make an impact on the community while learning about the available services on campus.
Describe your VIP experience in five words.

Leadership. Working with a diverse team of 7 people with different schedules and opinions is challenging. It was interesting to learn from more experienced people last year and now guiding others who joined after me is definitely fun.

Event management. That was key for me. I like to take up things that I enjoy. The Niagara Falls event (100 students with 2-3 volunteers), Western Goes Global (400-500 people circulating in an out over the course of the show) and other were all huge feats of planning and those skills have transferred over to my other endeavors.

Perspective. Meeting people with various backgrounds has made me appreciate the similarities and differences across different cultures and geographical bounds. I feel happy for what I have but it makes me long for more, which drives me to think of new things I want to pursue.

Team-bonding. Working with a team effectively is an important skill that I've developed with this position. You get opposing opinions but being able to truly respect the differences is the key to be able to work past that. We all have something wonderful to offer, and sharing that makes each of us better as individuals as we learn things from the other people on the team.

Overwhelming. Overwhelming, because you meet people who love Western but there are people who are struggling to adapt. With those people, the role expands from being an activity coordinator to trying to support them in different ways.

How did you find out about the VIP program and why did you decide to join?

A friend on the Hindu Students Association team was involved with the International and Exchange Student Centre. At the time, I was in my second year and she had asked me to perform at the Western Goes Global Cultural showcase. I started going to all the events and saw how many people would come and how exciting it was, so I asked her if there were any opportunities to get involved. She told me about VIP and encouraged me to submit an application.

If you had to encourage someone to be a part of the VIP program in a few words or sentences, what would say?

I can just think of one word, awesome. Just one word but there’s so many things it encompasses.

You are going to have fun and you are going to have amazing experiences. It’s impossible to summarize the entire experience in two sentences but I will say that here is a lot to be gained. VIP is something that not a lot of my friends are a part of. It’s something very different because I’m put in a role that is different from other roles I hold. I like that I get to be almost like another person, learn new things and meet new people.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of your position and what part do you enjoy the most?

I get to interact with international students who have recently moved here and haven’t adapted to the culture and have an extremely different outlook. They have a lot of things to learn but we also have a lot to learn from them. That’s super exciting for me. When I meet them, their different experiences, especially with travelling, are advantageous for me because I get to learn a lot from those experiences. On top of that, what’s also very exciting for me is the prospect of making something better than it was before. I constantly think about what international students expect or want to see from Western International and IESC. I find myself driven by the desire to make their experience better because we have so much fun trying to make sure they are having fun. It’s definitely a give and take!

What’s influenced you to continue volunteering with VIP?

It’s been four semesters with IESC. One thing that’s pushed me, apart from the experiences I’ve directly involved with, is how different it is each term. There’s always change due to things being added, changed, and taken out. If we just did the same things over and over I don’t think I would want to continue because I would want to do new things. Adding new trips and events and the changes we see in our roles and ideas as activity coordinators is really good and keeps me coming back. Also, the team is dynamic and changes every year. You can make the experience so much more than the basic role you are assigned to. There’s a lot of room to grow, to do things differently and to improve the way services run.

“Understanding those around you is the first step in making the world a better place.”

Why do you think volunteerism is important?

Because it helps you grow and evolve so much. Putting yourself out there in as many roles and experiences as possible helps you grow immensely. Once you put yourself out there you learn so much even if you don’t realize it. One thing I learnt from my time at IESC was that I could be an entertaining and somewhat decent MC. It’s only by putting yourself out of your comfort zone that you discover things you excel at and ways to improve at other things.

How has VIP helped you give back to the Western community?

There are so many things I’ve had my foot in with this position. The event management, team bonding, leadership and interactions with international students have all not only helped me become a better activity coordinator. They have helped me become a better president for another club, amongst other positions. The skills I’ve gained have helped me become a better person. Interacting with students who may be undergoing difficult times helped me understand their perspective and think of ways to make them feel better. It also helped me understand the people around me. Understanding those around you is the first step in making the world a better place. Those personal interactions are what I would put at the top of the list of VIP experiences that have helped me give back to the community.

Name: Kavita Musty
Honors Double Major in Physiology & Pharmacology, Undergraduate Yr 4

Position: International Student Activity Coordinator

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How did you find out about the VIP program and why did you decide to join?

I found out about it through a poster put up at Weldon Library in late August. The reason I signed up for it is because the English Conversation Program is important. It’s not just for learning English but also for learning about Canada and gaining friends. University can be a tough transition for everyone, especially international students. I wanted to do it because it’s really not good for anyone to feel alone, and it’s too often that happens in university. It’s easy to end up lacking a support network so I wanted to make sure people in my program who are native English speakers to become ECP leaders or some other positions, such as the ones offered by the Writing Support Centre. I want to help with essay writing because it’s something that I have a lot of experience doing. For a lot of students, they haven’t received adequate instruction for it, so I think that’s another interesting position. I’m sure there’s others too, so I’ll probably look into them as well. I’m also hoping to convince the other people in my program who are native English speakers to become ECP leaders or some other roles in the VIP program.

Describe your VIP experience in five words.


One of the students was having a hard time and missed a week. No one really noticed him in his classes so that one hour, where the five of us knew him by name, meant a lot to him. He had a witness. He had someone that knew him and missed him when he wasn’t there. I think that meant a lot to him. It can be validating when it’s easy to feel like no one knows you in university, a painful feeling especially when you are far from home.

How has VIP helped you give back to the Western community?

I don’t like to think about it as something I’m giving because it’s something that I really want to do. I would love to do it anyways. I’m glad it’s free and I’m glad it’s a volunteering opportunity, because I think if someone was an ECP leader to be paid, they might be motivated by the wrong reasons. This isn’t supposed to be a structured language class. I’m not qualified as a teacher. I’m just there to be their friend. That’s how I see my job. So, it’s not giving back so much as it’s just being a part of the group and being here. Part of being here involves meeting people form other departments. I wanted to do it because I’ve been an international student, and I know what feels like, but also to meet people who are from very different backgrounds. It’s good to force yourself out of your comfort zone and normal social groups.

If you had to encourage someone to be a part of the VIP program in a few words or sentences, what would say?

Encouraging someone to be an ECP Leader would be easy. Come and meet people from all over the world. Represent Canada to people who aren’t from here and show them why this country is a welcoming and multicultural place. You have the chance to be proud of Canada and share that with them. One of our best discussions was about why they picked Canada for their studies when they could have picked anywhere else. I had the impression that they had all picked America while Canada was a backup plan. Yet for all of them, Canada was their first choice and even now that means a lot to hear as a Canadian. Most importantly, try to be a true friend. That’s how I would summarize my experience and that’s my view of what I am. Join the program to be a friend to people who could really use one. Go be a friend and represent Canada.

Why do you think volunteerism is important?

Volunteering in general is important because people need help. Sometimes it’s you who needs help and you hope someone’s there in whatever volunteer capacity you can help. I don’t like the term giving back because I’m not in any way paying back a debt. If you have any skills, you should use them. Whatever it is you are good at, you should be willing to share it with people who need it. A negative trend I’ve come across is people tend to hold onto what they’re good at and don’t like to share it with anyone who isn’t also good at it, and that’s selfish. With ECP, I’m the native English speaker and I’m sharing my conversation skills with participants. Volunteering in general is supposed to be about sharing. Anything you learn could be valuable to someone else and you should be willing to share it.
Mental health is an issue that is gaining the spotlight at a lot of universities. Western University is no different. Western’s psychological services provide students with access to counselors and lecture series. Psychological Services have started opening up more drop-in days during exam period when students are highly stressed.

This year for the newsletter I had the pleasure of interviewing a Learning Skills counsellor and one of VIP’s supervisors. Meet Tracey Ropp. Tracey enjoys spending time with her family, reading, writing, and home decorating; but more than that, she offers a vital service at Western University.

From test preparation to notetaking skills to maximizing lecture learning, there are many things that someone could learn through Learning Skills to enhance their university experience. “I mainly meet with students and talk to them about what their goals are in the area of learning, and I work together with them to develop a plan on how they can meet their goals or work with them to develop a plan,” Tracey explains. The services that she provides are absolutely invaluable to the Western community, no matter where you come from or what you do. Come to think of it, the more I learned about the Learning Skills services, the more I realized how beneficial it is just learn how to learn! My discussion with Tracey was very pleasant as I got to learn about Learning Skills Services and get to know Tracey as a person.

As an undergraduate herself, Tracey had no idea that she would end up being a Learning Skills counsellor, or that it even existed. In fact, she majored in psychology and geography, although her undergraduate had little to do with her job now, she has always enjoyed helping her peers in academics throughout her life. Tracey identified that she enjoyed doing these things, but she did not know where her passion of helping others in academics would lead her. It was not until she started her Masters of Education, when she started interning at the Student Development Centre, that she discovered her future position.

Having now worked as Learning Skills counsellor for over 15 years, Tracey has seen numerous changes in her field and experienced the development of the Learning Skills Services. One of the most notable changes is that there is a greater emphasis on peer support in service delivery. Learning Skills is also currently heightened by the online services which ultimately results in more awareness and people making use of the service. When asked about what she would change about her job, Tracey believes that having more space for her service would allow Learning Skills to be more creative in how services are offered to students, and to increase variety. Whether you are looking to maintain a high average or are looking to make changes to your academics, Learning Skills is a vital asset to Western, and I would recommend everyone to use it.

Meet Kelly Binder. She works for Psychological Services at the Student Development Centre as a registered psychotherapist.

What does Western Psychological Services at provide?
We provide confidential, free, individual, brief, change-oriented counselling to students with issues such as (but not limited to): anxiety, depression, adjustment to university, relationships, grief, trauma and abuse, sexuality, gender identity, sexual assault, etc. We also offer psychological groups that largely use skills-based approaches to help participants develop increased awareness and understanding of the challenges they are facing.

Are there any additional unique aspects about Psychological Services?
There’s a series of lectures, named Laura Evans Lecture Series to provide students with the opportunity to increase their knowledge, understanding and awareness of a variety of mental health issues as well as tips and strategies for coping. At the end of the lectures, there is time for discussion and interaction among peers and facilitators.

What do you think is the most important aspect that this service provides?
I think there are many important aspects to our service from being a source of safe, non-judgmental support to being responsive to student needs, especially in times of crisis, as well as helping to connect students to additional resources for support either on campus or in the community. However, I would also like to think that what we offer is hope in times of distress and that we are a place where students feel heard and valued as we work collaboratively with them on a path of self-exploration, healing and growth so that they may reach their personal, academic and professional goals.
If you could send yourself a message during your undergrad, what would you say?

During my first year of university, I started out as a Science (Biology) major and found myself on academic probation by the end of the year realizing that the program just wasn’t a good fit for me and, as you can imagine, not something I was enjoying. It was really difficult for me to come to terms with this at first and overcome the disappointment I felt in myself for failing and making what I believed were “bad” or “poor” choices, wasting time and money, letting my parents down as my father has his PhD in Physics, and feeling lost without direction and purpose.

I think a lot of students could relate to that, the feeling of displacement and detachment from their program. What happens next?

It took me a while to discover what I wanted to pursue but, along the way, I chose to reach out to others and with the support from many people including professors, mentors and counselors, I discovered a new path and increased awareness about myself which allowed me to connect to my own inner wisdom. So I guess I would tell myself that each of us has the capacity to overcome adversity and persevere. Human beings have an amazing instinct to survive and an enduring reservoir of resilience. When life throws you a curve ball, you can either duck or catch it – either way that’s being adaptive. When we learn to create space for our emotional pain, no matter how difficult, with a sense of acceptance and self-compassion and let go of how we wanted things to be, we can get unstuck from things that prolong our emotional suffering, have peace from within and move forward with our lives. It’s ok to make mistakes. Decisions and outcomes may sometimes feel irreversible but it doesn’t mean that they are. If we remain open to change… if we are present to each moment, we may discover the extraordinary in the ordinary, and opening us up further to greater options and possibilities of being.

On behalf of the SDC and as a Western student, I truly appreciate the safe spaces that Psychological Services can provide to us. Be sure to head online to learn more about services available for you.

What’s your most memorable experience with the service?

Well, there have been so many for me since I joined Student Development Centre. Besides the incredibly dedicated and supportive people I work with, for me the things that have meant the most have been the work itself and my therapeutic relationships with my clients. I absolutely love my job and consider it a privilege to serve the Western community. Everything I’ve done for the program has been so rewarding and I’ve found great joy in being able to help others.

I know that Psychological Services require a team effort to get everything in order and to provide the best counseling experience for a student. How do volunteers play a role in your daily work life?

Having VIPs in Psychological Services is new for us this year and very much appreciated. Due to confidentiality issues, VIPs are not able to sit in on counseling sessions; however, they work closely with our interns and residents to help run the Laura Evans Lecture Series (LELS). They help behind the scenes by promoting the LELS, doing research for the presentations and preparing handouts, as needed, and then actively participating in the day of the lecture(s) by helping set up the presentation equipment, greeting participants and providing them with feedback surveys, and may also contribute to the discussions, in some cases, offering perspectives from a peer-student point of view.

What kind of skills have your volunteers learned?

Well, in addition to any of the skills they may have learned about in the lectures (e.g., how to manage stress, regulating their emotions, etc.), hopefully, they will have increased their communication, organization, research and written skills.

Are there any future plans for you?

To keep doing what I’m doing and continue to develop as a psychotherapist.

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VIP has prided itself on the contributions its students make to improve the Western community. In an initiative to extend the volunteering spirit, VIP ventured off-campus to bake at the Ronald McDonald House. It is quickly becoming a tradition. VIPS submitted many great community volunteering ideas, and from those, baking at the Ronald McDonald House London (RMH) was by far the most popular choice - by over 70 votes!

The first trip to the Ronald McDonald House took place on November 5th. Our VIPs’ enthusiasm and willingness to help others filled the available spots for our trip during the first 10 minutes of registration. Our volunteers had a great time baking brownies and chocolate chip cookies for the families staying at the house. They showed commitment and surprised us with their fine baking skills.

Volunteers who did not get to participate in the first trip showed initiative and asked about getting the chance to take part in the event. Inspired by our volunteers’ enthusiasm and commitment, the VIP program looked to partner with RMH for two additional visits during the winter semester. Our second visit to the Ronald McDonald House on January 20th, 2016 was as successful as the first one. Our volunteers had fun shopping for groceries and baking at the house. This time, oatmeal chocolate chip cookies and apple oatmeal muffins were on the menu.

Our final visit to RMH for the 2015-2016 year took place on February 10th. Our volunteers had a great time baking oatmeal chocolate chip cookies and honey oatmeal muffins. This last visit was a great experience for our volunteers, and we look forward to partnering up with RMH next year!