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Junior English Teaching Major Alexandra Vergara on Semester in the City: “You have power to help people”

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by *Laura Smith, UNH Senior Lecturer in English*

Junior Alexandra Vergara is finding her voice in education—not only through her



work as an intern this fall with UNH’s [Semester](#)

[in the City](#), but through her questions and

conversations about its future. “You have agency, and you have power to help people and help yourself,” Vergara said during a Zoom interview.

As a UNH Changemaker fellow and member of UNH’s Semester in the City program, Vergara now serves as an intern and writing tutor in 826 Boston Writers Room, a writing program housed in Boston International

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Newcomers Academy high school (BINcA), which hosts interns from Semester in the City. Vergara described her work with BINcA students: “We're working with them to cultivate a joy for writing and a love for writing as a process and writing as a collaborative effort.”

As a Social Innovation Fellow with Semester in the City, the flagship program of the College for Social Innovation, Vergara continued her enrollment with UNH, earning 16 UNH credits. She was matched to a host organization based on questions and interviews. Because of her English Teaching major and minors in Spanish and TESL, Vergara was a perfect fit for 826 Boston Writers Room: “their whole mission is promoting literacy.”

Faina Bukher, Director of the [Changemaker Collaborative at UNH](#), explained that Semester in the City is a fully-credited fellowship program that gives undergraduate students the opportunity to spend a semester in Boston learning hands-on through well-supported internships in the social sector, as well as opportunities to work with UNH departments on various sustainability initiatives (via SITC@UNH). “SITC@UNH students can work with departments that range widely, from the Energy Office to Health and Wellness to the UNH Foundation. And all of the projects have some element of outreach to other students,” Bukher explained.

Semester in the City fellows participate in a transformative 15-week program that allows them to address current social issues while developing essential skills and networks that prepare them for life and work after graduation. Their work is guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including “quality education.”

Vergara works 8:00–4:30 to provide in-class writing support as well as drop-in tutoring for BINcA students, many of whom are English language learners.

“It's been wonderful because I get to watch teachers do their thing. And I also get to have a little bit of classroom experience. Even though I'm

not teaching, I'm learning how to connect the students with what works for them.” Vergara’s focus is providing college essay support and resources for students, her “legacy initiative” for her Semester in the City experience.

Working one afternoon in the 826 Boston Writers Room, Vergara met with a student who struggled to capture his experience in writing. She shared a favorite Mary Oliver poem, which opened a conversation. Talking about the poem’s powerful details showed the student new ways to write. “We're really trying to help students expand their way of seeing the world and being able to put that into words and being specific and detail oriented.”

Vergara attributes these moments and literacy break-throughs to the individual attention of the 826 Writers Room and Semester in the City program. “One of the tenets of the Writers Room is that students really function the best when they can have one-on-one interactions with educators.”

In fact, Vergara’s experiences have led her to think about how to translate this one-on-one approach to classrooms. “It has brought up questions for me as I continue my education of, ‘how do you have that same energy when you have a classroom of 20 kids?’” she said. “And I don't really know the answer to that problem, but it's definitely something I think about a lot.”

Semester in the City, in fact, encourages interns to think big about seemingly unsolvable problems. “If you think it's unsolvable, we just have not been innovative enough or thought about it enough or collaborated enough. Every problem has a solution. You just have to think creatively to get there.”

Vergara has already begun to share her thinking about her Semester in the City experience. She recently participated in a national conference panel as part of [“American Cities Rebuilding 2021 – A Virtual Conversation Series,”](#) to describe her college readiness work at BINcA. She was interviewed by Hari Sreenivisan from *PBS NewsHour*.

“I love education. I love learning, asking questions, and it's just really exciting to be part of different communities that think similarly that are really excited about difficult questions and how do we answer them and being innovative about solving the problems in the world,” Vergara said.

Vergara looks forward to returning to campus—after a [UNH study abroad program in Granada, Spain](#)—and continuing her work at UNH.

“I think bringing that energy back to campus can be really revitalizing and exciting.”

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