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In Oil Spill's Wake, Columbia University's "SHOREline" Youth Empowerment Project Launches in Selected Gulf Coast High Schools

An innovative new youth development and disaster recovery program, which grew out of research on the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, debuts in five Gulf Coast high schools this week. The SHOREline Project is spearheaded by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, in partnership with Colorado State University and the Children's Health Fund, and with funding from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. High school students at the five participating schools – Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans, Louisiana; Bryant High School in South Mobile County, Alabama; Grand Isle School in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana; Gulfport High School in Gulfport, Mississippi; and South LaFourche High School in Cut Off, Louisiana – can begin applying to join SHOREline on August 19, 2013.

"The 'SHORE' in SHOREline stands for Skills, Hope, Opportunity, Recovery, and Engagement," said David Abramson, PhD, who is one of the project directors and also is Deputy Director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness at the Earth Institute. "That's what we hope the students gain as a result of their participation in the project," noted Abramson.

A Columbia University research team led by Abramson surveyed 1,437 parents from Florida to Louisiana last year about their children's exposure and health impacts from the oil spill. The team also conducted group interviews with parents, health care providers, teachers, and others in a number of "oiled communities" along the coast. In the survey, over half the parents reported that their children had some type of exposure to the oil spill, and over 40% said their children experienced either physical or mental health effects. The interviews revealed that parents and community leaders worried about eroding safety nets for children, about the loss of local opportunities, and about their children's potential life chances in the face of extreme environmental change. [The initial study report can be found at <http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/item/ac:156715>]

In response to these concerns, the research team developed SHOREline. With its combination of project-based learning, community service, and opportunities for youth to build connections with local and national innovators and leaders, SHOREline is intended to help youth within their own communities even as they strive to help others. "These five chapters," said Abramson, "are the initial building blocks in what we hope will become a national network of youth helping youth recover from disaster."

Abramson co-directs the SHOREline project with Lori Peek, PhD. Peek, a sociology professor and co-director of the Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis at Colorado State University, has collaborated with Abramson on research on the impacts of disasters on children and families since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. “As a group,” Peek pointed out, “the children and youth of the Gulf Coast region have been exposed to more disasters over the past decade than any other young people in the United States. In many ways, they have become experts at absorbing and adapting to the consequences of these extreme events.” Peek observed, however, that the youth the team has interviewed “are not helpless. They are eager to assist other children and youth who have experienced disaster losses in other communities.”

Abramson and Peek are both national experts on the impacts of disasters on children. Abramson is the lead author of a sentinel article, “Children as Bellwethers of Recovery” [accessible at Columbia University’s Academic Commons, <http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac%3A154468>], and Peek is co-author of the forthcoming book, *Children of Katrina*, to be published by the University of Texas Press in 2014.

In each of the SHOREline chapters, the students will first focus on what they and their communities needed – or still need – to recover from a disaster, and the particular assets and skills that youth can bring to the task. The projects they develop are intended to inform, inspire, and directly engage youth in other communities affected by disaster. The work the youth may do could range from writing a book that captures young people’s stories of disaster, to creating a website that serves as a platform for family reunification or resource exchange, to developing sustainable agriculture and aquaculture projects that can be scaled up in post-disaster settings. Each chapter will identify a particular problem that affected youth in their community post-disaster, and then will identify and create their own solution.

Although the SHOREline chapters at each high school will work through a common curriculum, each chapter will also be customized to fit the culture of the local community and high school. In Gulfport and Bryant high schools, for example, SHOREline will be adapted to their new school curricula, operating as a project-based multi-disciplinary course in their science and technology academies. At Benjamin Franklin, Grand Isle, and South LaFourche high schools, SHOREline will be offered as an after-school activity. Each chapter has a dedicated teacher-sponsor, and the students from all the chapters will convene together at two weekend Youth Summits on regional university campuses. The first one will be held at the University of Southern Mississippi in Long Beach in mid-October.

Graduating seniors who participated in focus groups led by Abramson and Peek last May were enthusiastic about the SHOREline Project. They spoke of the excitement of meeting youth from other communities, helping others out during times of need, gaining organizational and project management skills, and making connections with faculty and students at Columbia and Colorado State universities. The project team has also worked with local youth to help launch the project. Maria Do, a recent graduate of New Orleans’ Benjamin Franklin High School,

directed the group's first recruitment video. It can be seen at the SHOREline website, which is also where students at the five participating high schools can learn more about SHOREline and apply online, www.shoreline.ncdp.columbia.edu.

"For me, there's nothing more exciting than getting the chance to meet new people and make new connections," remarked Ms. Do, who is an entering communication major at Louisiana State University this fall, "and that's exactly what SHOREline is presenting to the youth in our communities. Coupling that with projects that can help youth make a difference after a disaster makes it even more powerful."

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Gulf Coast High Schools

Benjamin Franklin High School, New Orleans LA
Principal: Dr. Timothy Rusnack, EdD
SHOREline Teacher-Sponsor: Mr. John Parauka

Bryant High School, Irvington AL
Principal: Mr. Doug Estle
Assistant Principal: Ms. Samantha Smith
SHOREline Teacher-Sponsors: Ms. Debbi Harris and Ms. Heather Summey

Grand Isle School, Grand Isle LA
Principal: Mr. Richard Augustine
SHOREline Teacher-Sponsor: Mr. Nathan Stanford

Gulfport High School, Gulfport MS
Principal: Mr. Michael Lindsey
SHOREline Teacher-Sponsor: Mr. Hardy Thames

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South LaFourche High School, Cut Off LA
Principal: Ms. Gaye Cheramie
SHOREline Teacher-Sponsor: Ms. Lilah Landry

Youth contact

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