Study Buddies/EstudiAmigos:  
Building Community and Resilience with Low-Income Students in Northern California  
Elena Lev, Scripps College ’22  
Location and Dates: Sonoma County, CA, USA. May-August 2021

Purpose Statement
Sonoma County is a rural area in Northern California where low-income families, predominantly farm workers and other essential workers, are enduring the impact of three simultaneous crises: climate change and resulting fires; racial injustice and anti-immigrant xenophobia; and a global public health crisis. Across Sonoma County, as throughout the U.S., wealthy families are paying private tutors to supplement their children’s virtual education with one-on-one tutoring and extracurricular activities. These students will return to in-person school more prepared than their lower-income counterparts. But many of the families in this bucolic county cannot afford these private-sector solutions — 45% of the county’s nearly 70,000 school kids qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch.¹ Thousands of these students don’t have Wi-Fi, computers, an English-speaking parent, or a quiet space to focus.² Study Buddies (EstudiAmigos in Spanish) serves to reduce this education gap through free one-on-one tutoring.

Project Description
Study Buddies is a bilingual Spanish/English, free, all-volunteer tutoring program, in which volunteer tutors meet individually with students for weekly tutoring and mentorship. I co-founded and launched Study Buddies in August 2020, along with two friends (Miranda Dickerman and Liora Jacob). We now have 20 participating students, and 17 tutors, all currently meeting weekly. (Another 25 high school students have inquired about volunteering as tutors within the past few weeks!) Sessions are conducted virtually via Zoom in compliance with county shelter-in-place orders. They may eventually be conducted in person (socially distanced and masked) as county requirements (and, if awarded this grant, Scripps College and Davis Project for Peace rules) permit.

Study Buddies’ success is built on the values of accessibility and personal connection, which are key to reducing educational inequity and promoting peace. No formal application is required to receive tutoring: families can call, text, or email us – in English or Spanish – to explain their need, and we match them with a tutor. My co-organizers and I are always on call to advise tutors and families, be it with technical, academic, or interpersonal issues. We schedule meetings with teachers, translate between tutors and parents, and supervise all first sessions. Each of these actions is intentionally designed to make it as easy as possible for families to access targeted support for their students. Tutoring sessions are free, and each tutor meets weekly with the same one or two students. This low barrier to entry allows for families of all income levels, both English- and Spanish-speaking, to participate, and the one-on-one sessions facilitate an intimate connection between tutor and student.

Project Objectives
A Davis Project for Peace grant would enable us to scale up and recruit more tutors and students; decrease barriers to entry for tutors and participating families; facilitate more personal connection within this teaching/learning community; and ensure the tenure of this program.

A. Growth: By the end of 2021, we expect to double the number of participants from 37 to 70. We are conducting outreach into local high schools to recruit new tutors to shift our tutor demographic. Presently, the majority of tutors are white and middle-class, and most of the students are low-income and Latinx. We will experiment with financial incentives (such as honoraria and, if in-person meeting is permitted, transportation reimbursements) to help support low-income high schoolers to participate as tutors.

B. Decreasing barriers to entry: We will provide portable Wi-Fi routers to tutors and students with slow Wi-Fi, to allow them to participate in their sessions more successfully. We also will provide necessary school supplies like notebooks, mini-whiteboards, and planners to students and tutors, to make it easier for them to participate in both tutoring and school activities.

C. **Extracurricular engagement:** Some of the grant funding would go toward sports equipment, art supplies, and books. We want the tutors to be able to engage their students in extracurricular activities, like many paid tutors do. This will enable tutors and students to connect over shared hobbies, either doing sports, crafts, or reading independently or together online. When it’s safe to return to in-person tutoring, they will have these supplies handy.

D. **Administrative consistency:** This grant would invest in a stipend for myself during a critical phase of our program’s development, so that I can expand it with consistency and dedication, and would provide a reasonable stipend for a bilingual tutor who has stepped up this semester to help me translate between tutors and families.

**Project Outcomes and Long-Term Impacts**

Through Study Buddies, school-age children and young adults form enduring relationships with one another. Tutors support their students to find the joy in learning and to discover new hobbies while fostering academic success. Connections such as these are the foundation of a strong community – one that prioritizes empathy and cultivates justice. Ben L., a Study Buddies tutor, said, “My student is an English language learner who lives in a Spanish-speaking household where there is little possibility of help with reading or writing…The barriers he faces are significant. I enjoy giving this young man two hours of my time each week, to help him better face his challenges. I have learned from him in turn about what it’s like to grow up in a family of farmworkers.”

I know that even the most ambitious peace and conflict resolution projects require grassroots foundations, and I want to build these foundations in my county. Although the Study Buddies tutor/student sessions are local, many of these relationships are cross-cultural; connecting across culture and language barriers fosters a more tolerant local – and ultimately global – community.

We intend to continue Study Buddies for as long as it is needed, modeling an accessible and equity-oriented tutoring service to other volunteer organizations. This program, and others like it, will be needed long past the end of COVID-19. The learning loss for most students, and for low-income students of color in particular, will be severe, necessitating long-term support. The struggle for marginalized students to receive quality education is not a new one, and it will not be solved by remedial tutoring alone. My long-term interests include participating in a radical reimagining of intersectional, anti-racist, peace-oriented education. Accessible and connective educational programs like Study Buddies serve as a small but crucial component of this reimagining.

**Sustainability**

By the end of this calendar year, Study Buddies is expected to have at least 20 new tutors, most of whom are high schoolers. We expect that the personal connection between tutors and students, combined with the low 1-4 hour a week time commitment, will inspire tutors to continue to volunteer with Study Buddies for years. We are currently seeking tutors interested in taking leadership roles in the program – one bilingual tutor will be helping as a translator for the rest of the year, and we will recruit others into our organizing team as the program expands. With summer funding provided by this award, the project will be set up to continue into the Spring 2022 semester. Families who no longer want to participate in the program will be asked to donate their portable Wi-Fi routers and extracurricular supplies back to Study Buddies so we can re-use them with incoming participants.

**Timeline:** Our organizing work will take place in May and June (before the end of the high school year) and in August (during the high schools’ first month back). We will buy all of our materials over the summer, spending the entire $10,000, and distribute supplies and honoraria in August. This expanded timeline includes work prior to and after the summer months; that work is independent of Davis Project for Peace funding.

- **Jan-Early May 2021:** Recruit tutors from local high schools and participating families, connect tutors and families, mentor tutors
- **Late May-Mid-August 2021:** Purchase and distribute supplies, distribute honoraria to tutors, reflect on the past school year, meet with tutors and families to get input for the coming year, resume outreach to local high schools and families
- **Late August-December 2021:** Distribute supplies already purchased, recruit from local high schools, connect tutors and families, mentor tutors, prepare for Spring 2022 semester