

## **VOICE Report: Civic Engagement Ambassador Program (CEAP)**

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Department: Student Life—Leadership and Service Programs

### **Project Overview:**

The VOICE Grant was used to develop and launch a new program at UC Riverside called the Civic Engagement Ambassador Program (CEAP) focused on addressing real or perceived student apathy toward civic engagement.

According to the 2020 UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), only 16% of students reported having participated in community/service learning. Additionally, only 8% of students reported having had experience participating in a leadership program. Having noted this, students did report that these types of experiences were important to them. Of the roughly 30,000 students who answered questions in this area, 91% reported that connecting their academic work with community-based experience was important to them, 91% reported that developing their leadership skills was important, and 84% reported that opportunities to engage in community service while at the UC was important to them. Students are clearly interested in leadership development and community engagement, but there seems to be a disconnect (or barriers) between their interests and their actions.

Even more telling is the fact that this large survey taken across the University of California fails to dig deeper on civic engagement. The survey does not ask specific questions about students' perceptions of political climate or polarization, voting, advocacy work, joining community organizations, demonstration and protest, free speech, holding political office, or the census—all critical forms of civic engagement. An original pillar of the American university, civic engagement is a critical area all college students must learn about and develop skills in—the vitality of our democracy and development of our communities depends on it.

Survey data is not the only way to assess college student's interest in civic engagement conversations; on-the-ground information is equally insightful. After the 2016 election, there has been a noticeable shift in the way student's approach politically charged/polarized conversations. Not all civic engagement work is political, but it does seem that students may think this is the case. When they see the words "civic engagement", they see the word politics and they steer clear.

The Civic Engagement Ambassador Program (CEAP) is a leadership development experience that guides students through the exploration of civic engagement, its importance for our local communities and our campus, and challenges them to help solve the riddle of civic apathy. Student participants apply to become an ambassador, and agree to commit to two quarters for this program. Ambassadors go through a leadership development workshop series that lays the foundations for the program and creates a base understanding of the concept of civic engagement. Ambassadors then spend an academic quarter developing programs focused on increasing student interest in civic engagement, and finally present their work at a leadership conference. A breakdown of the time commitment for an ambassador follows:

- Fall 2021
  - Ambassadors commit to completing three 2-hour workshops focused on introducing them to civic engagement, creating a shared definition of the term, learning about diversity, equity and inclusion, and begin to outline community topics and issues that are important to them and exploring ways to address said issues.
- Winter 2022
  - Ambassadors are on-boarded as official volunteers to the department and commit to completing two hours a week with the program.
  - Ambassadors work as a team to address a campus challenge—in this iteration of the program, ambassadors are focusing on student apathy toward civic engagement.
  - Ambassadors present their work at the 2022 Inspiring R' Leaders Conference—a separate civic engagement program also funded by a VOICE Grant—scheduled for Friday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Project Objectives**

The Civic Engagement Ambassador Program (CEAP) is an on-going project that will end in March 2022. The objectives of the program include:

1. Gathering applications for students to become civic engagement ambassadors (complete)
2. Student ambassadors complete a leadership development workshop series in fall 2021 that creates foundational knowledge in civic engagement (complete)
3. Helping ambassadors develop a working definition for civic engagement (complete)
4. Ambassadors work for a quarter to develop civic engagement initiatives on campus in winter 2022 with a focus on combating real or perceived student apathy toward civic engagement (in progress)
5. Ambassadors will present their work at the 2022 Inspiring R' Leaders Conference (in progress)

### **Program Participants and Demographics**

- There are a total of six students going through this program
- Five undergraduates
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Business Administration
  - 4<sup>th</sup> year, Creative Writing
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Environmental Sciences
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Creative Writing
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Microbiology
- One graduate/professional student
  - 1<sup>st</sup> year, Masters of Education
- These six students are training to become ambassadors of civic engagement on the UC Riverside campus, and they are charged with developing civic engagement initiatives that might help combat the real or perceived student apathy toward civic engagement that we see on our campus. Through their initiatives, we may capture other members of our campus community who may become involved in our programs and initiatives.
- Applicants identified areas that they are passionate about, among them are:
  - Undocumented student experience
  - LGBTQ+ student experience

- Women in business
- Access to Higher Education for low-income students
- Food and housing insecurity
- Environmental protection
- Accessibility challenges on campus

### **Project Challenges**

There are many challenges with developing and launching a new program while slowly transitioning back into campus. The fall quarter at UCR was a balance of in-person and virtual activities. The students who applied to become civic engagement ambassadors almost unanimously asked for a virtual/hybrid program. Though there are many benefits to a virtual program—of which the most important benefit being the health and safety of everyone involved—there are certainly some challenges that come with helping a group of students dive into the deep and (potentially) complicated world of civic engagement on zoom. The leadership development workshops were filled with activities that required interaction with peers—of course, these are done easier and more effectively in-person, but we made them work.

There is also the added challenge of marketing a new program in the market of program offerings on a campus as active with student engagement opportunities as UC Riverside. Developing marketing items and launching said marketing to the campus was difficult as students were still trying to find their footing. It is important to remember that we are still in the middle of a global pandemic, and students were affected in many ways—not the least of which is mentally/emotionally, especially if they themselves became sick or if they know someone who did. It seems to me that becoming involved in a new program coming into the fall quarter—especially one that has the words “civic engagement” which students may incorrectly interpret to mean “political”—is low on their hierarchy of needs.

### **Project Impact on the Campus Community**

As a new project that has yet complete a full cycle, CEAP certainly has the potential to make a large impact on our campus community. Often times we see student inactivity as apathy. What we may fail to realize is that there may be institutional obstacles in the way of student participation. This program will attempt to explore this by training a group of students to become ambassadors for civic engagement across our campus. These students will help to develop initiatives to encourage other students to think about civic engagement as an important part of their college experience. We hope these initiatives will be the building blocks for future projects on campus focused on increasing student participation in civic engagement activities. If we successfully build this foundation, we may develop other programs in the future that remove barriers and ease access to student participation in this area. These are the steps necessary to making civic engagement a pillar of the Highlander experience. If we can accomplish this, the impact on our campus community will be transformative.

### **Working With the Center**

The center has been very helpful throughout the entire process of applying, receiving funds, and launching our project. I have also enjoyed our meetings and hearing about other awardees’ progress through their projects. Michelle, the Director of the center, has also been especially helpful and I couldn’t be more thankful and appreciative of her humanity-first approach to the work.

If I had to point out an area that needed to change it would have to be the timeline for applications and using funds. I work in Student Affairs at UC Riverside. I develop leadership and service programs for students to engage in outside-the-classroom experiences. Everything that I do is on the academic calendar—my work goes from August to June. Having the applications due in December, to receive awards in February that must be used before June is very difficult. My suggestion is that applications go out in late spring/early summer for the following academic year, and that awardees be notified in mid-summer so that they have time to plan their programs and be ready for fall.

### **Conclusion**

This is an on-going project that is set to end in March 2022. Ambassadors will work closely with a professional staff member and use all of the winter 2022 to develop initiatives for strengthening civic engagement participation on campus. Ambassadors will conclude their participation with this program by presenting their work at the 2022 Inspiring R' Leaders Conference—a program that is also focused on civic engagement and funded by a VOICE Grant. That program is scheduled to take place on Friday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. A report for that program will be provided soon after.