

2021 VOICE Report: Inspiring R' Leaders Conference

Project Lead: Gerry Medina
Campus: University of California, Riverside
Department: Student Life—Leadership and Service Programs

Project Overview:

The Inspiring R' Leaders Conference is a free annual conference organized by the Office of Student Life at UC Riverside. The conference is open to all students (undergraduate and graduate) and focuses on helping students enhance their leadership skills, network with campus and community leaders, and expand their knowledge and definition of what leadership means to them. The Inspiring R' Leaders conference is the anchor of our program offerings and its theme is typically reflected across a number of other programs throughout the school year.

Over the last six years, this conference has gone through an evolution, and its goals have been refined. The first few years, the conference was about “Excellence in Leadership” and provided students with workshops that taught general skills like public speaking and conflict management. Over the last few years, we have refined the goals of this conference and have intentionally utilized themes focused on social justice and community engagement. With the help of the 2021 VOICE Grant, the theme for the 7th annual Inspiring R' Leaders Conference was *Community Action* and all of its workshops and activities were heavily focused on civic engagement.

The conference brings together UCR students, staff, faculty, and community partners to explore the topic of leadership through the lens of that year's specific theme. This year's conference invited participants to examine leadership through the lens of community action and civic engagement. Participants learned about the importance of identifying challenges in their communities and they learned strategies for addressing those challenges through both political and non-political means. The conference included two key components: workshops and collaborative group work.

At the start of the conference, students were given an opportunity to network and meet the folks around them. They were put into groups of 5-10 participants—they would stick with this group for the rest of the day. The groups were guided through activities that challenged them to think about social issues that they are passionate about. As a group, they identified one issue that they were particularly interested in and throughout the rest of the conference they were given time to meet with their teams as they developed recommendations and strategies for addressing said community challenges.

There were three workshops offered throughout the day that all students attended. These three workshops not only presented important information on civic engagement that stands alone, but they also provided information that the groups would need to help them develop their recommendations/strategies as the day went on.

Among the topics that the groups identified as challenges and developed solutions for are:

- Pathways to Citizenship
- Women's Reproductive Rights

- Women in STEM
- Inaccessible Parking at UCR
- Houseless Problem in Riverside
- Negligence of Infrastructure
- Language Barrier for International Students
- Language Barrier Within Civic Engagement
- Lack of Financial Literacy
- Access to Quality and Affordable Health Products and Care

All participants attended three unique workshops that all covered topics related to civic engagement:

- Story Telling and Fundraising
- #CampusClimateGoals: Identify and Intersectionality
- Leadership and Coalition Building

Each of these workshops represents important aspects of civic engagement that are often overlooked—the ability to tell your story and get people to buy in to your cause, the importance of exploring your identity and learning how it shapes your worldview, and the importance of building coalitions.

Conference Agenda:

- **8:30am: Check-in (SSC—1st floor lobby)**
 - Nametags
 - Supplies (pen, notepad, etc.)
 - T-shirt
 - Continental Breakfast
 - Pre-Conference Survey (QR Code on Screens)
- **9:00am-9:50am: Welcome (SSC—MPR)**
 - Students finish up pre-conference survey
 - Welcome by Gerry
 - Housekeeping
 - Overview of schedule
 - Learning Outcomes
 - Presentation on Civic Engagement by Gerry
 - Group work and activities
- **10:00am-10:50am: FIRST WORKSHOP SESSION**
 - Story Telling and Fundraising (SSC—GAC 229)
 - Kate Beach and Arturo Rodriguez, UC Riverside
 - Identity and Community Action (SSC—GAC 235)
 - Ed E-Nunu, UC Irvine
- **10:50am-11:00am: SWITCH**
- **11:00am-11:50am: SECOND WORKSHOP SESSION**
 - Story Telling and Fundraising (SSC—GAC 229)
 - Kate Beach and Arturo Rodriguez, UC Riverside
 - Identity and Community Action (SSC—GAC 235)

- Ed E-Nunu, UC Irvine
- **12:00pm-12:50pm: Lunch**
 - SSC 1st floor lobby
 - Students encouraged to eat around the Student Success Center—outside seating is OK
- **1:00-1:15pm: GROUP WORK**
- **1:15-2:05pm: THIRD WORKSHOP SESSION**
 - Leadership and Coalition Building (SSC-MPR)
 - Vincent Rasso, UC Berkeley
- **2:15pm-3:00pm: GROUP WORK**
- **3:00-3:10pm: CLOSING**
 - Post Conference Survey
 - Gerry Goodbye

Project Objectives

The main objective of the conference was to provide students with a professional conference experience and expand their knowledge and understanding of civic engagement. The conference had two main learning outcomes:

1. As a result of attending the Inspiring R' Leaders Conference, students will be able to succinctly describe what civic engagement is.
2. As a result of attending the Inspiring R' Leaders Conference, students will be able to define what leadership means to them in the context of civic engagement.

For the purposes of this report, I will provide some information on the assessment done (pre and post) to measure the growth showcased by students for the first learning outcome. Below is a qualitative analysis of that assessment:

Civic engagement is a foundational component of the American higher education system. This being said, many universities have forgotten their responsibility to developing civic minded leaders. At UCR - while there may be departments who provide a community/civic engagement component to their program offerings - there is no civic engagement center that brings together initiatives and/or advocates for civic engagement to rise to the level of a campus priority. One of the goals of the Leadership and Service Programs area within Student Life is to make civic engagement (in all its forms) a pillar of the Highlander experience. This process is in its beginning stages and we are only planting the seed for the civic engagement conversation on campus. With this in mind, this assessment is attempting to gauge where the current level of understanding of what civic engagement entails is among students. The Inspiring R' Leaders Conference is one program that is looking to expand this understanding and present new language for students to more accurately describe the whole of what civic engagement is.

Students were asked a pre-conference and a post-conference survey question for this particular learning outcome prompting them to describe what civic engagement means to them. A qualitative analysis of their responses to the pre and post-conference surveys was done to examine the language they used and see if they showed any deeper understanding after attending the conference. Civic engagement is a very broad and all-encompassing umbrella term, but it describes a very specific behavior - the identification of community challenges and the sense of responsibility to address them.

The questions for this particular learning outcome is as follows:

- *Pre-conference survey:* Without searching online or doing any research, please tell us what civic engagement means to you. There is no right or wrong answer.
- *Post-conference survey:* Having attend the Inspiring R¹ Leaders Conference, and without searching online or doing any research, please tell us what civic engagement means to you. There is no right or wrong answer.

Quantitative Data:

Counts/Totals: The pre-conference question had 54 responses. The post-conference question had 37 responses.

Qualitative Data:

Pre-conference quotes:

1. "Civic engagement means to collaborative with others."
2. "The ability to engage with ones community and help it for the better."
3. "Being involved in your community."
4. "Organizing and working with a team to improve a community."
5. "It is something that happens when individuals in a community come together to build the community up together."
6. "Doing your civic duty and collaborating with your community to bring about positive change."
7. "To me, civic engagement means being an active member of the community."
8. "To me, civic engagement means being involved with the community around oneself."
9. "I think it means engaging with your local community to better the community as a whole."
10. "Civic engagement means being active in your community."

Post-Conference quotes:

1. "Civic engagement is recognizing problems in our community and working towards their solution."
2. "Establishing plans and policies as a community for public issues and working towards a common goal."
3. "Civic engagement is public problem solving done through both political and non-political means."
4. "Inspiring, collaborating, and forming collectives to address local community problems."
5. "Civic engagement is public problem solving through a community."
6. "Civic engagement is about coming together as a coalition in which a group of individuals who are already on the same "boat" come together and share their ideas, their skills, and their overall knowledge about said topic to create change at different levels. Some of these can be political and social, or even locally such as engaging with the surrounding community."
7. "Civic engagement means taking a proactive stance towards the issues facing your local community and speaking up against the injustices that both directly and indirectly affect you."
8. "Civic engagement means being involved in the all community support systems and systems of law. It means knowing what issues affect the community and providing support for which you feel strongly about or feel like impact you or other members of the community."

9. "Civic engagement means connecting with the different communities around you to overcome the challenges that affect those within the communities. This can be through voting, protesting and so much more."
10. "Solving public community problems."

It is very clear from the responses provided by participants that their understanding of civic engagement greatly increased and became much more nuanced after attending the Inspiring R' Leaders Conference. As you can see in the 10 quotes pulled from the pre-conference survey, most of the responses students provided when describing civic engagement focused on collaborating with others, becoming involved, and improving your community. While these are certainly critical components of civic engagement, they do not showcase a refined understanding of what civic engagement really means. It appears that students had only a superficial or cursory understanding of the term before they attended the conference.

The responses that were provided in the post-conference survey were much more detailed and communicated a much more nuanced understanding of civic engagement. Students used terms like problem solving, plans and policies, political/non-political, coalitions, support systems, and injustice. Students showcased an understanding of civic engagement a process that includes understanding the communities you belong to, identifying the challenges facing your community, and developing actionable strategies (both political and non-political) to address said challenges. This is a much deeper understanding of civic engagement and showcases a strong level of learning done through their participation in the Inspiring R' Leaders Conference.

The aim of this year's Inspiring R' Leaders Conference was to assess where students were in terms of their understanding of what civic engagement entails. The hope was that through their involvement in the conference they may increase their competence in this area. This learning outcome and its pre and post questions certainly accomplished this goal. The pre-conference question gave us a solid glimpse into the knowledge that students had on civic engagement prior to attending the conference. It is clear from their responses that they had only a surface level understanding of the term, and had never been challenged to scrutinize the concept more closely. The post-conference question made it clear that students learned a lot from their involvement in the conference and they picked up new language to help describe this broad term.

This learning outcome was only part of the overall assessment done for this program. There was one other learning outcome attempting to gain insight into student's perspectives of what leadership means in the context of civic engagement. The pre and post-conference questions for this learning outcomes showed similar results in increased understanding. There were also four Likert scale questions that asked students about their ability to articulate their roles as leaders, assess the current landscape of their local communities to identify challenges, develop plans to address said challenges, and collaborate with peers. These questions showcased a major jump in student's agreement with statements about their ability to accomplish the four areas mentioned above. The four Likert scale questions showed an improvement of 38, 44, 44, and 28 percentage points, respectively.

Overall, this learning outcome and the rest of the assessment done for the Inspiring R' Leaders Conference showcased that students did a lot of learning and they picked up new language to describe said learning. There is still more that we want to explore and assess when it comes to civic engagement.

Program Participants and Demographics

There were a total of just over 70 students who attended the conference. These students include undergraduate and graduate students, and their majors and years showcase a broad range of perspectives. Unfortunately, not all students completed the surveys. In total, 54 students completed the pre-conference survey, and only 37 completed the post-conference survey.

Project Challenges

Although this is an annual flagship program for our department, there were many challenges this year. The biggest challenge faced was, of course, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This program was originally scheduled to take place during the Winter 2022 quarter, but was pushed to the Spring due to COVID-19 and, more specifically, the spike in case due to the Omicron variant. There were also challenges with deciding whether the program should be in person, virtual, or hybrid. The conference ended up being completely in person.

This conference has also benefited from much more funding in the past. COVID-19 greatly affected budgets, and if it were not for this VOICE Grant, this conference would not have taken place at all.

Project Impact on the Campus Community

The Inspiring R' Leaders Conference—and its theme of community action and civic engagement—was very well received by students. Moving forward, the conference will likely continue to focus on civic engagement and we attempt to advance the conversation about civic engagement on our campus. Many students left the conference excited and motivated, and many shared that they felt encouraged to go out and tackle some of the issues they explored during their group work. Many students also followed up with staff to learn more about other programs offered through the department.

Civic engagement is a foundational part of the higher education experience—at UCR, we hope to make it a pillar of the Highlander experience. Every student at UCR should be involved in the conversation. It is clear, from the feedback we received from students and from the learning they showcased in the assessment, that the conference and other programs organized by Student Life should continue to focus on civic engagement.

Working With the Center

The Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement as always been incredibly supportive and helpful throughout the entire process. They are very understanding about the barriers that COVID-19 has created and provide as much grace as possible. When one receives that much support and understanding, it makes one focus on delivering as good a program as possible.

Conclusion

The Inspiring R' Leaders Conference could not have happened without the VOICE Grant. There was simply no funding for the program to even take place, let alone for it to have a focus on civic

engagement that was so well received by students. This was the success we needed to justify our continued focus on civic engagement on campus, and it was all made possible by this grant.

It is clear that students are interested in learning about community action. As the leaders of tomorrow, students are the ones with the answers to societies challenges. We must continue to provide them opportunities to share their solutions with the world.