

Final Report
UC VOICE grant 2020-21

We Belong Project
Steve McKay
Associate Professor of Sociology

Derrick Jones
Community-based Action Research and Advocacy (CARA) Program Director, Oakes College
UC Santa Cruz

Were your project's objectives met?

Our larger [We Belong project](#) aims to understand how documentation status impacts immigrant families' abilities to access services, create community, and thrive. Through 6 focus groups and over 100 interviews conducted by over 250 undergraduates in collaboration with local high school youth, *We Belong* gathered and makes publicly accessible rich portraits of how undocumented and mixed-status families experience a sense of belonging (or a lack thereof). *We Belong* also trained and mentored undergraduates and high-school youth who are first-generation, immigrant, and/or from mixed-status families to understand the power of community-initiated research as a method of civic engagement for social justice.

Our objectives for the UC VOICE grant were to “to support the research and [hold] a large off-campus community event (300 attendees) to be organized, facilitated, and led by our undergraduates and youth researchers...the goal of this event is to engage our community members, students, elected leaders and service providers in a collective dialogue and analysis of findings.” The event was to be organized primarily through two undergraduate classes, *OAKS 152: Transformative Literacies*, an upper-division community-engaged research course in the Oakes College Community-based Action Research and Advocacy (CARA) program, and *Sociology 139t: Community-Engaged Research Practicum*, taught by Professor Steve McKay. The event was held in the Watsonville town plaza, on Friday, May 13, 2022 during the weekly farmers market from 5-9:30pm. By all accounts, the event exceeded our expectation and more than met the project goals and objectives. The event was officially co-sponsored by the City of Watsonville, co-hosted by former mayor and current Councilperson Rebecca Garcia, and involved an opening performance by the children's ballet folklorico group Estrella de Esperanza, a resource fair featuring 22 community organizations, 6 research-themed tents in which students presented research findings and organized interactive games around research themes, and the first public screening in Watsonville of the award-winning documentary (shot in Watsonville) *Fruits of Labor*, including a panel discussion with the filmmaker, student researchers from *We Belong*, the principal protagonist of the film, and several of her family members.

Who attended, listened, etc. and how many?

Participants in research report-back and resource fair included: the 47 undergraduate students enrolled in the *Transformative Literacies* class and the *Community-Engaged Research Practicum* course; 10 additional undergraduate participants from the larger We Belong research project; 22 community organizations which tabled at the large public event alongside the undergraduate

participants, including: City of Watsonville Planning Office, Pajaro Valley Unified School District, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, Community Action Board (CAB) – Santa Cruz Immigration Project, Watsonville Law Center, United We Dream, Community Bridges – Family Resource Centers, Housing Santa Cruz County, CAB- Day Worker Center, CAB-Davenport Resource Center, CAB- Luna y Sol, UCSC Gear Up, Migrant Head Start, Health Service Agency of Santa Cruz County, Salud para la Gente, Cabrillo Community College, Youth Action Network (United Way), Jovenes Sanos, Regeneration - Climate Action PV, and Estrella de Esperanza. Attendees of the events (including the dance performance, the research report-back and resource fair, and the free outdoor film screening) were primarily local Watsonville residents. Over the course of the four and a half our event, we estimate that attendance was between 400-500 people.

What demographics did attendees represent (students, staff etc.)?

Students that participated in the 2 courses and the *We Belong* research project were a majority students of color and first gen, with a large percentage (approx. 40%) bi-lingual Spanish speakers. Watsonville has a predominantly Latinx population (over 81%), and all presentations, signage, and text at the event were in both Spanish and English.

What were your actual expenses?

\$4,790 (see budget details below)

What was challenging about completing your project?

It was extremely challenging pulling off a very large public event including so many students, 22 community partners, city requirements, cultural performances, an outdoor film screening etc... all during an ongoing pandemic. We also had to create bi-lingual event materials from the research findings in a publicly-accessible and visual way. One of the challenging aspects of completing the project was coordination of the two classes SOCY 139t and OAKS 152, and getting students to understand the division of responsibilities for the community outreach component of the project undertaken by those in OAKS 152. We found that while teaching OAKS 152, students needed to get caught up to speed on the status of the overall project, immerse themselves in literature and research methodologies exploring the theme of *belonging*, while working to promote the event to the public and make connections with community partners. In the future, it may be that a course such as *Transformative Literacies* should be offered the quarter prior to the event in order to mitigate some of the challenges encountered during the event planning and promotion process.

What impact do you think your work had on the campus community?

The event and the 2 courses had strong impact on undergraduate students involved. In reflecting on the quarter and what they took away from the course, many students shared that initial readings on the history, as well as the current landscape of the county in which they live, as something that they had not been exposed to previously. Students also made connections with local organizations to engage in pressing topics identified in the research like access to education and immigrant legal services, and later applied this experience to their interactions and engagement with the community at the *We Belong* event. Students discussed how the *Transformative Literacies* course taught them about the importance of taking an active role in local politics. In reflecting on the impact of this community work, one student reported:

“My appreciation for this class stems from the fact that it allowed me to gain more of an outside experience, forcing me to become more aware of and create relationships within my community. In this class, I was a part of the Access to Education & Academic Support [team] ,more specifically conducting my work with the Davenport Resource Service Center...By actively participating in an environment that allowed me to help students and give back to the community, it makes me very optimistic and hopeful for my future endeavors within the education field, and has initiated my future and continued work with the DRSC in the fall.”

Students identified the ability to build professional relationships with community organizations as a key asset of the course. In addition, these organizations worked on issues that matter to students themselves. Some students described how their experience in the class supported them to deepen their understanding of their own experiences through their ability to work with communities like their own.

Students honed their communication skills by learning how to effectively interpret and transform knowledge created in a university setting and share that information in a new way to connect it to the community. In addressing the Spaces and Places of Belonging theme, one student explains how the coursework and readings on differing approaches to literacy were important and foundational for meaningful interactions with families at the event:

“Fostering an environment of interactive, critical discourse at the We Belong Resource Fair was at the forefront of my goals. At the Spaces and Places of Belonging Booth we were able to help facilitate participants placing pins on maps of Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Many children and parents had the opportunity to write down a feeling and pin it on the maps to a place where they associate that feeling. This allowed for a striking visualization of the concentrations of interaction with the cities, which a research paper simply would not have been able to do. It was clear that the goal of the maps wasn’t functional and simply task-oriented, the thought-provoking nature of having to reflect on the memories or feelings a place brings about seemed to strengthen an environment of cultural awareness.”

Finally, the course supported our students to work against the theory-practice divide by identifying meaningful career pathways that reflect their commitments to community and social justice, and to develop tangible skills that can be applied to various professional contexts including grassroots community-organizing, the nonprofit sector, public agencies, graduate-level research and beyond.

“Knowing people are so committed to helping underprivileged communities created a sense of hope for the future and also impacted the sense of belonging that I feel in the Santa Cruz area.”

“For me, CARA has been a way to connect with Latinx communities in Santa Cruz and that has made college a fulfilling experience for me. As a Corre La Voz mentor, I learned that there are many ways for me to continue to work for children. I have also learned that I want to dedicate my life to public policy and non profits because of

programs like these. I now know that my passion for Latinx and immigrant rights is what I want to commit to in my field of work, and for that I'm very grateful."

How might the Center change the process moving forward to further support VOICE Initiative awardees' efforts?

The Center was extremely accommodating in allowing us to adjust our schedule for the large public event postponed from a year earlier due to the pandemic. We receive strong support from the Center and maybe, moving forward, those who are awarded the opportunity to participate can be given similar flexibility due to ever-changing situations such as the pandemic.