

Civic Engagement Scholars Program

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Project Summary

Created in 2021, the Civic Engagement Scholars Program (CESP) is a joint effort by four entities at UC Santa Barbara: the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life; the Dean of Students Office; Civic and Community Engagement, and the Office of Student Engagement and Leadership (SEAL). CESP fosters ideals of active citizenship, engaging the next generation of leaders on issues that are of import to our campus and the surrounding communities.

In the Fall, CESP addresses issues related to civic engagement, including the history and foundational principles of free speech in the United States and the principles of civil discourse. The class features guest speakers, nationally and locally recognized experts and leaders who lead students in conversation on related topics, local officials like councilmembers, county supervisors, and board of directors of the Isla Vista Community Services District, and experts on student activism, sustained dialogue, voluntarism, youth mental health, sexual assault, and basic needs.

In the winter and spring, students work in groups to create initiatives on social issues that affect the community, with the intent of advancing change. To that end, we connect students to local non-profits and agencies that need support in the expansion and/or addition of initiatives that would significantly advance their mission or programs.

Impact

In its third year, CESP has had a significant impact on the campus and local communities at least in three ways. First, by allowing UCSB students to actively participate in community projects, we break down the barrier that exists between the campus and the community and increase trust and collaboration between them. The class content and activities helped students develop skills of reasoning and persuasion through engaging in constructive dialogue and leadership development. The class requires engagement in experiential activities by attending meetings of the Goleta City Council, Santa Barbara City Council, the Unified School District board, the Isla Vista Community Services District, and the Isla Vista Recreation and Park District, to name a few. Students also learned to engage in civil dialogue about often sensitive or contentious topics and to work through differences across political and social divides while building consensus and cooperation in our communities. Third, the program empowered students to reach out to our local community to work together to solve the most pressing social issues of our time. Some group projects with local non-profits included educational and organizing campaigns on immigrant defense, farm workers labor rights, awareness of the effects of pesticides on pregnant farm workers, and the devastating effects of the use of fentanyl and the administration of Narcan to save lives in college campuses.

From everything mentioned above, we believe our project objectives were met and, in some cases, exceeded. First, the variety and depth of issues addressed by our amazing speakers sparked student engagement more deeply than in previous years. Students actively participated in the discussions, bringing up pressing needs of different communities and suggesting solutions they could work on as engaged citizens. Second, students embraced the importance of working through differences across political and social divides and requested additional exercises to learn how to build consensus and cooperation in our communities. Third, students' community projects addressed far more urgent and overarching social issues than in the previous year, with a greater impact both on campus and the communities affected.

This year, more students worked with community non-profits developing or expanding new components of their organization. Therefore, in some cases there was not necessarily an in-person event, except in a few cases with three groups presenting constructive dialogue workshops or focus groups. For the rest of the projects, although there was not a physical audience, the projects reached a more diverse and larger audience than a one-time event, considering that many of them are long-term services and/or programs offered to hundreds of individuals. These groups included UCSB students and several sectors of our local community.

Since CESP has two components, an academic course plus programs developed in local non-profits, there actually were two types of audiences: the students attending the class and the audience or beneficiaries of the projects and services offered, developed or expanded by the students. The students taking the class were all undergraduates of varied backgrounds: Latinx, White, Black, Asian, and international students. The general audience that participated in the projects included undergraduates, staff, some faculty, farm workers, teenagers, and local community members of different ethnic backgrounds including, Latinx, White, Black, Asian, and Mixteco.