

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 and engaging the next generation of leaders on issues that are of import to our campus and the surrounding communities. Each year, we strengthen alliances with leaders and organizations in these communities to provide students with opportunities to develop their leadership and organizing skills and to affect measurable, positive change.

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 including Michelle Deutchman, Executive Director, UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement; who lead students in conversations 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, among others.

In the winter and spring, students work in groups to create initiatives on social issues that affect the community, with the intent of advancing social 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 four years, CESP has provided important avenues for furthering students' involvement in the civic life of both the campus and our local communities by developing initiatives that foster an environment of inquiry, civil debate, democratic participation, and access to resources to advance social change. Our students actively participate in community projects that strengthen collaboration and address unmet or urgent community needs. Class content and activities help students develop skills of reasoning and persuasion through engaging in constructive dialogue and leadership development.

The curriculum is based on the belief that encouraging students to engage locally first, where they see tangible results of their participation, promotes a long-lasting commitment to community and civic engagement at the state and national levels in the future. Therefore, CESP requires engagement in experiential activities like attending meetings of the Goleta and Santa Barbara City Councils, school district boards, the Isla Vista Community Services District, and the Isla Vista Recreation and Park District, to name a few. Students also learn 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.

Group projects this year included outreach and mentoring to high school students in underserved schools on how apply to and pursue higher education, an internship in the DA's office to support survivors of sexual assault, an educational campaign on the devastating effects fentanyl and the administration of Narcan to save lives in college campuses, the creation of a student-faculty coalition, approaches to the housing crisis for UCSB students, the launching of a website to address mis and disinformation, and the design and delivery of a civic engagement curriculum for pre-teens.

We believe our project objectives were not only met, but in some cases, exceeded. Amazing guest speakers sparked student engagement more actively than in previous years. Students addressed pressing needs in on and off-campus communities, which drove the selection of their group projects to implement solutions to these issues. The projects housed in community non-profits developing or expanding new components of their organization did not necessarily have an in-person event component, so it is hard to assess an audience. These 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. The in-person projects had audiences composed of UCSB students, sectors our local community, first-generation, low-income high school students, and elementary school students.

CESP has two different audiences: the students attending the class and the audience in in-person events 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, teenagers, and local community members of different ethnic backgrounds.

The UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement provided funding for the Civic Engagement Scholars Program for four years; and we are extremely thankful for this wonderful opportunity. Although this funding will not continue this coming academic year, the program is already well-established and will hopefully continue in future years with other sources of funding. This academic year, we received funding from a donor, a UCSB alumnus, that provided stipends for each student in the class for their class projects. This donor has offered funding for the 2025-2026 academic year for a collaboration between CEPS and a Film Studies class he also funds. One possibility is to have the film studies students document the community projects developed in our class. In addition, several groups in this year's class are planning to continue their programs outside of the class next academic year and institutionalize them by either creating a Registered Campus Organization to continue the work or by training other students to expand their work.