

Comic Relief: Punching Up in a World That Keeps Knocking Us Down

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Project Summary

The VOICE Initiative award supported the inaugural UC Merced Stand-Up Comedy Showcase, expanding the Writing 122: Stand-Up Comedy Seriously course into a public campus event celebrating free expression, creativity, and community dialogue.

The showcase elevated what had traditionally been an end-of-semester class performance into a professionally produced public event that welcomed the broader campus and local community. Eight comedians—seven current UC Merced students and one alumnus—performed original stand-up comedy developed throughout the semester. Students shared deeply personal stories about family, identity, mental health, relationships, culture, higher education, masculinity, and resilience, demonstrating how comedy can serve as a meaningful form of self-expression and civic engagement.

The evening also featured a community reception prior to the performance and distributed copies of Judy Gold's *Yes, I Can Say That: When They Come for the Comedians, We Are All in Trouble* to audience members, encouraging continued conversations about comedy and free expression beyond the event itself.

Impact

The showcase demonstrated that stand-up comedy can be much more than entertainment—it can create meaningful opportunities for dialogue, vulnerability, and connection.

Many students performed personal stories they had never publicly shared before, transforming difficult experiences into moments of laughter, reflection, and empathy. Audience members experienced firsthand how humor can foster conversations across differences while creating a welcoming environment where people felt seen and heard.

The event also increased visibility for Writing 122 and illustrated how creative pedagogy can strengthen student engagement while promoting the values of free expression championed by the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement.

The project successfully:

- Expanded the class showcase into a campus-wide public event.
- Created opportunities for students to exercise free expression through original stand-up comedy.
- Encouraged respectful dialogue through humor.
- Strengthened connections between students, faculty, alumni, staff, and community members.
- Demonstrated the educational value of comedy as both an artistic and civic practice.

The VOICE Initiative funding significantly elevated the scale and impact of the event beyond what would have otherwise been possible.

Participants and attendees included:

- Undergraduate students
- Graduate students
- Faculty
- Staff
- UC Merced alumni
- Community members
- Friends and family of performers

The performers themselves represented diverse academic disciplines, identities, and lived experiences.

Approximately **70 attendees** participated in the inaugural showcase, including eight performers (seven current students and one UC Merced alumnus), with additional engagement occurring through campus promotion and event publicity.

The success of the inaugural showcase has established a model for future stand-up comedy showcases connected to Writing 122. The event demonstrated the value of creating public spaces where students can share their voices through humor and storytelling.

The project continues to inform my doctoral research on stand-up comedy pedagogy and serves as a foundation for future programming exploring humor, civic dialogue, and student engagement at UC Merced. I have already presented this work at literature and humanities conferences, where it has generated meaningful conversations about comedy as a pedagogical and civic practice. Looking ahead, I plan to publish on the development of the showcase and its educational impact, contributing to the growing scholarship on humor, free expression, and innovative teaching in higher education.