

Investing in the Next Generation of Southern Changemakers

Country of Project: United States
Sponsoring College: Yale University
Project Leader: Nicole Li

- (a) United States
- (b) Yale University
- (c) N/A

Context

Particularly in the past three decades, the American South has emerged as a leading exporter of highly educated citizens. According to a 2019 Congressional Joint Economic Committee report, while the east and west coasts have excelled at “retaining and attracting highly educated adults,” Southeastern states disproportionately suffer from “brain drain” as they are “both hemorrhaging their homegrown talent and failing to attract out-of-staters who are highly educated.”¹ This trend has far-reaching consequences on economic, social, and political life. As young, educated Southerners flock to the coasts, the communities that they leave behind risk economic stagnation, worsened social segregation, and heightened political polarization— red areas get redder and blue areas get bluer.² The outflow of young minds impedes sustainable, substantive change and perpetuates harm to minorities living in the South.

For me, the issue of outmigration feels particularly close to home. For the past year and a half, I have served as a director of Collierville Community Justice (CCJ), a grassroots, intergenerational coalition of over 60 residents organizing for racial and economic justice in Collierville, Tennessee. Collierville, for context, is a predominantly white town of 50,000 sitting on the North Mississippi border. A Confederate stronghold during the Civil War and a sundown town thereafter, the town has a long history of racial violence and Jim Crow segregation, leaving a legacy of systemic racism that continues to permeate its political atmosphere today.³ As the only Gen Z member of CCJ’s executive board, I work closely with 30 youth members, many of whom are ambitious and high-achieving high school students who wish to escape the South after graduation. I empathize with their reasons— from the perception of a regressive social culture to the region’s relative dearth of job options compared to the coasts— but I also lament them. Without a sustainable population of civic-oriented and progressive-minded youth, who will fill the seats of local government and how will “Lost Cause” towns like Collierville ever change?

This past summer, I had the opportunity to pitch and workshop a proposed solution to the Southern outmigration problem as a participant in the Delta Scholars Program at Mississippi State University. There, I learned about the worrisome outmigration trends in the Mississippi Delta’s core counties from a presentation by sociology professor John Green of the University of Mississippi. Through conversations with Professor Green and my mentor Dr. Kecia Johnson, I developed the idea of creating a local Gen Z community organizer mentorship network and training program.

My project draws inspiration from the Rethink Mississippi fellowship, an initiative to combat brain drain by investing in millennial Mississippians through financial support and mentorship.⁴ I connected with the fellowship’s director, Jake McGraw, who offered very pragmatic insights, recommending that I keep my cohort small for the pilot program, seek fiscal support from local community foundations, and organize activities to build community among cohort members. I then connected with Aerial Ozuzu, Director of Grants and Initiatives at the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis (CFGM), who informed me that only 501(c)3 nonprofits, not individuals, are eligible for CFGM grants. This poses a barrier because I cannot make CCJ my fiscal sponsor since it is not a 501(c)3; therefore, I am seeking funding from Davis Projects for Peace to support the expenses of my pilot program.

Project Overview

My mission is to invest in Gen Z community organizers as a means of bolstering the public service leadership pipeline and mitigating the long-term social and economic consequences of permanent youth outmigration from the South. My project seeks to tackle this goal by establishing a mentorship and training program that will teach local high school students the fundamentals of grassroots organizing, introduce them to community leaders, educate them on local issues and their community history, and provide opportunities for hands-on experience. My intention is to launch the program in Collierville during the project’s pilot year because it is the community that I know best, but in future years I hope to expand

¹ <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/4/losing-our-minds-brain-drain-across-the-united-states>

² <https://apnews.com/article/business-441602f95c749333e79085a8d7b1e3e9>

³ <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2021/07/21/collierville-community-justice-local-at-large-voting-laws-systemic-racism/7982792002/>

⁴ <https://rethinkms.org/fellowship/>

the program to neighboring areas in West Tennessee and North Mississippi where depopulation is especially severe. Thus, my project proposal, as follows, is structured around a cohort of approximately 10 students in Collierville.

Education: Since it is crucial that student organizers understand the history, landscape, and power structures of the community in which they reside, the program will introduce students to experienced local organizers, historians, and community leaders. Through a series of weekly field trips and luncheons at Collierville's historic town square, students will meet and learn from my colleagues at CCJ, including University of Memphis Professor Emily Fulmer (who has researched Collierville's history of segregation and housing injustice extensively) and staff at the Morton Museum of Collierville History (which contains exhibits and archives of the town's Black history, Native American history, and Confederate history). I also plan to coordinate a field trip with Annette Key, a longtime Collierville resident with whom I have the pleasure of working with on CCJ's executive committee. As one of the first Black students to graduate from Collierville High School (my alma mater) and an officer of Collierville's NAACP chapter, Ms. Key is leading a project to create a documentary film about the Collierville Byhalia Rosenwald School, which served Black children until schools became integrated in 1970. Other individuals whom I plan to organize meet-and-greet luncheons with are Chelsea Glass, a professional anti-carceral organizer and another one of my CCJ colleagues, and Tasha Holmes, executive director of Leadership Collierville, a nonprofit civic development program that essentially functions as a feeder into local establishment politics. Ms. Glass and I will work together to develop advocacy and media training workshops for the students, and Ms. Holmes can shed tremendous light on the local political process and power dynamics. Through these community conversations, students will hear from and foster valuable connections with Collierville residents who have several years of experience in local affairs.

Mentorship and Financial Support: Emphasizing a "learning by doing" approach, my program will cultivate meaningful opportunities for direct youth involvement in local affairs and offer support for the students' own community advocacy campaigns. For example, on top of weekly team meetings and smaller cohort bonding activities throughout the summer, students will gain experience preserving Black histories by working on the documentary film project with Ms. Key, researching affordable housing and organizing eviction aid with Professor Fulmer, and mobilizing voters in the predominantly BIPOC neighborhoods on Collierville's South side ahead of the November 2022 elections with myself and the rest of the CCJ executive team. Understanding that community organizing is often hard and unpaid labor and that many teenagers may forgo it to pursue paid work, the program will provide stipends to support the students' part-time service during the summer. Beyond the summer, students will continue to receive mentorship from myself and my CCJ colleagues. Armed with the organizing tools, tactics, and connections that they honed over the summer, students will be encouraged to pioneer their own passion project addressing inequality in Collierville or continue their involvement with CCJ's existing projects. By paying high school organizers and connecting them with older generations of Collierville leaders, my program commits to sincerely investing resources in the next generation of local policymakers and community advocates.

Program Timeline

March 2022	Make flyers for the program and distribute them around town and on social media; set up application and review process with CCJ executive committee; delegate planning and contributions among CCJ team members
May 2022	Select participants for summer cohort; schedule program logistics (workshops, luncheons, field trips)
June 2022	Launch program; participants undergo weekly training workshops with CCJ executive team members, meet CCJ project leaders during ad hoc field trips and weekly luncheons, and begin mentorship check-ins
July – Aug 2022	Participants break into smaller cohorts and begin working intensively under CCJ project leaders, who rotate throughout the summer to diversify participant experience; participants engage in smaller cohort bonding activities and touch base during team luncheons; field trips and meet-and-greets with guest speakers continue
Sept – Dec 2022	Mentorship for students continues during the school year; students begin thinking about designing their own projects or extending their involvement with CCJ; gather feedback on program and create an impact report

Contribution to Lasting Peace

My project aims to build long-term peace in Collierville by equipping youth with the civic skills and hands-on experience to challenge existing power structures that uphold systemic racism and to imagine a more equitable future for their town. While current outmigration trends predict the outflow of social capital and increased homogenization in the Southern political landscape, efforts to reverse that trend can mitigate social conflicts and promote a culture of tolerance and inclusivity. Ultimately, by enabling youth to develop a stake in their hometown early in life, I hope to encourage my generation to consider fixing, rather than escaping from, the South's problems, hence contributing to lasting community peace.