

Country of Project: United States
Nominating College: Yale University
Project Leader: Nicole Li (USA, Yale)

Investing in the Next Generation of Southern Changemakers

Summary

I designed and launched a 10-week fellowship program to educate and train high school students in my hometown in community organizing and advocacy. My project was developed in collaboration with Collierville Community Justice (CCJ), a grassroots intergenerational coalition of residents working to advance racial and economic justice in Collierville, Tennessee.

Project Description

The Issue: Through the creation of a youth civic training program, my project seeks to address political disillusionment and youth outmigration in my hometown. Growing up in Collierville, I noticed that many students, including myself, felt a sense of systemic exclusion in a town that was formerly a Confederate stronghold and the site of unspeakable acts of racial terrorism. This sentiment remains prevalent today among Collierville's communities of color, which continue to experience systemic racism through the town's discriminatory electoral institutions and general atmosphere of hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities. Because of the town's ideological composition and power structures, the perception that the South is a "lost cause" unworthy of progressive investment is alarmingly widespread. Such resentment is exacerbated by the absence of formal civic education in Collierville public schools and lack of meaningful opportunities to get involved in community affairs. These conditions contribute to the net outmigration of Gen Z and millennials, impeding long-term change in the region.

My Approach: The CCJ Youth Organizing Fellowship aims to invest in Gen Z's changemaking potential and establish a pipeline of civic leaders. Ten students representing three schools ages 16-20 were selected for the first cohort. Running from September through November, the program introduces students to the fundamentals of electoral organizing, grassroots coalition-building, and Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) advocacy. Fellows participate in workshops, mentorship meetings, community luncheons, and field trips in which they learn the vocabulary, skills, and local history to become effective advocates. Examples of workshop topics include collective values, community power mapping, tactics for change, and public speaking. Through meetings with community elders and field trips to the Morton Museum of Collierville History and other historic sites, fellows learn about Collierville's rich Black and Indigenous history and contribute to its preservation firsthand by working on an oral history project. Another critical element of the program is mentorship; each fellow participates in biweekly check-ins with a member of the fellowship management team and one other fellow to reflect on their growth together and discuss public service goals. More importantly, fellows apply the skills and knowledge obtained in the workshops to substantive projects. These include a social media campaign to educate classmates on voting information and the importance of local elections, an oral history project to document the experiences of residents in Collierville's historically Black neighborhoods, and outreach initiatives to register and engage minority and first-time voters. Tasks for the fellows include attending and reporting on alderman and school board candidate forums, recruiting classmates for text banking parties, and conducting interviews for the oral history project. Ultimately, by cultivating a passion for civic engagement and equipping them with skills and connections, the fellowship encourages students to imagine a more equitable, peaceful future for Collierville and directly contribute to its actualization.

Local Relationships: In executing this project, I worked in close collaboration with CCJ, an organization that I have strong ties to as a member of its steering committee. The fellowship's successful launch was thanks in large part to the support of my colleagues on the steering committee: Emily Fulmer, Annette Key, Brook Young, Leroy Triplett, and Chelsea Glass. These individuals offered a wealth of resources and guidance, from simply sharing their experiences and expertise with the fellows during community luncheons to providing the fellows with contact lists to use when text banking and canvassing. Furthermore, the fellowship's implementation would not have been possible without my co-organizers on the fellowship management team: Salina Shamsuddin, Sydney Morris, Alina Sikandar, and Parnika Pagadala. These students, most of whom attend Collierville High School, helped immensely with recruiting the fellows and facilitating the workshops and activities.

Adjustments to Original Plans: While I had initially planned to run the fellowship between June and December, I decided to condense it to September through November. The primary reason for the timeline shift was to align the program timeline more closely with the election season timeline since electoral organizing constitutes a large component of the fellows' work. I spent most of the summer months

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formulating the structure and logistics of the program alongside my fellowship management team and the CCJ steering committee.

Another significant change to original plans was the allocation of funding, thanks to an additional grant that I secured for CCJ from the We Are Family Foundation (WAFF). While I had initially planned to divide \$5,000 into \$500 stipends for ten fellows, the WAFF grant enabled me to double the fellow stipend amount to \$1,000 and offer \$1,000 stipends to my four co-organizers as well. The additional funds also allowed my fellowship management team to organize more community luncheons and in-person activities as meals and snacks could be covered by the grant.

Opportunities for Continued Work: Although the fellowship is set to close at the end of the November, I can imagine avenues to expand the program in the future. Learning from the successes and experiences of the first cohort, my team and I can tailor the curriculum and activities to the interests of cohorts in future iterations of the fellowship. During non-election years, we will likely make significant adjustments to the programming, focusing more on school-based DEI advocacy, minority history preservation, and mutual aid rather than electoral organizing. As CCJ continues to seek new approaches to youth engagement, we will take lessons learned from 2022 to inform our long-term intergenerational outreach strategy.

Reflection

To me, a peaceful community is one in which all residents uphold values of equity, inclusion, belonging, and harmony. My project strives to contribute to peace in Collierville by formalizing a civic education and training program that pushes students to envision a future in which all Collierville residents feel like they belong. Through completing the curriculum and fellowship tasks, fellows develop a strong understanding of the power dynamics and history of their community and engage in activities that fundamentally challenge an exclusionary status quo. By exposing youth to tactics for social change and possibilities for collective empowerment, I aim to address the issue of youth disillusionment with towns like Collierville and encourage Gen Z to solve, rather than escape from, the South's problems. In doing so, I hope to inspire students to pursue advocacy and public service long-term and ultimately contribute to lasting community peace.

Personal Statement

For me, this project represents the culmination of my passion for youth leadership and changemaking potential and my dedication to my hometown community. By creating the Collierville Community Justice Youth Organizing Fellowship, I sought to equip Collierville students with the tools, knowledge, and connections to become effective advocates for equity, inclusivity, and peace in a town and region of the country that desperately needs more progressive investment. While helping younger students grow as community organizers, I feel that I have grown too. Overall, this experience has undoubtedly strengthened my leadership and project management skills while affirming and intensifying my passion for civic education and social change.