

Breaking Ceilings, Building Communities: A Young Women in Politics Summer Program

Context:

Women consistently vote in higher numbers than their male peers. Yet, the representation of women in the U.S. political system is abysmal. Even though a record-number of women were elected to office in the 2018 midterm elections, only 18.5% of executive branch employees and 23.4% of United States Congressmembers are womenⁱ. Out of the twenty-three cabinet-level positions in the current administration, only five positionsⁱⁱ are held by women. Those numbers are even lower for women of color and queer women. Furthermore, the representation of women in politics decreases in low-income communities, such as my hometown of San Bernardino, CA. Only two of the seven seatsⁱⁱⁱ on the San Bernardino City Council are filled by women. Out of the six districts representing San Bernardino County in the State Assembly, only one is led by a woman.

Project Purpose:

The sexual harassment claims against Congressmen and Supreme Court Justices, the dismissal of female Senators' opinions at judiciary hearings, and the objectification of female candidates in the media are constant reminders that the political arena continues to be a male-dominated space.

The lack of representation of female politicians can be a discouraging factor for young girls and women interested in pursuing a career in politics. However, women's inclusion in politics has direct benefits for women and society at large. The presence of female politicians has the potential to decrease discrimination and violence against women. Multiple scholars have found that women tend to center their legislative priorities^{iv} on healthcare and education and are more successful in proposing and passing legislation^v regarding women's rights. Moreover, civic engagement in women increases as a greater number of women hold representative positions in various levels of the U.S. government.

In order to increase the representation of women in politics, young women must be mentored and encouraged to enter the field of politics. The purpose of this project is to provide female high school students in San Bernardino with a supportive and welcoming environment where they can explore academic and career possibilities in government, create a supportive network of friends and mentors, and engage in local politics.

Project Description:

The Projects for Peace funding would establish two sessions of a summer program for high school girls interested in politics. The goals of the summer program are threefold: to educate, to engage, and to empower.

The first week of the summer program will focus on educating young women on the basics of the U.S. political system, the merits of civic engagement, and the current state of women in politics. We will begin with lessons on national government structures, proceed to state governments, and conclude with San Bernardino's local government. These lessons will be interactive and multi-faceted. Policy issues that specifically impact women –such as social welfare, sexual harassment, and maternity leave– will be discussed and students will have the opportunity to propose amendments to current legislation. Students will also be informed about current political issues in San Bernardino –such as voter apathy, city charter reform, and youth homelessness– and will propose solutions to those issues. These solutions to local issues and amendments to national legislation will be manifested into mini-projects during the following weeks of the program.

The second and third week of the program will implement various community outreach strategies to engage young women in their local and state governments. Students will attend city council meetings, meet with city council candidates and state representatives, and ask their representative questions about policy issues they are passionate about. Students old enough to register to vote will be registered, and a registration drive will be organized and promoted by the students in the program. Students will also receive a lesson from local journalists on how to write op-eds and letters to the editor and will have the opportunity to submit these op-eds and letters to local news publications.

The final week of the program will empower these young women to take action in their communities and their futures. A crash-course will be given on the college application process, the SAT/ACT, and scholarship opportunities. In the beginning of the program, students choose a policy issue that they will center their mini-projects on. Throughout the program, students will plan the format of their mini-projects. These projects can take the form of a photo project, a research paper, a news article, a proposal for a school club, an art mural. During the final week, students will be able to present their projects to their families, teachers, friends, and local representatives.

Before the summer program begins, artists, writers, college student volunteers and community organizers will be recruited to assist in the summer program. Applications will be a necessary component for the summer program and will be distributed to the local public high schools in early March. Juniors and seniors are especially encouraged to apply due to the time-sensitive nature of college applications and the college mentorship component of the summer program. A total of forty high school girls will be chosen to attend either session of the summer program. Additional consideration will be given to applications

from students of color, LGTBQ students, low-income students, and foster care students. The location of the program will depend on the accepted students' home addresses. If the majority of the students live in the north-end of San Bernardino, we will host the program at Cajon High School. If the majority of the students live in downtown San Bernardino, we will host the program at the Garcia Center for the Arts. A midpoint location will be found to make it easier for students to attend the program.

Timeline of Project Activities:

March: High schools are provided with online applications and physical copies of the application. *April:* Local and state politicians are contacted for workshop sessions, meet-and-greets, and lectures. *May:* Applications are reviewed and chosen applicants are contacted. Parent permission is obtained for those under 18. Lesson plans for the first two weeks of the summer program are concluded.

June-July: First session of the summer program takes place.

July-August: Second session of the summer program takes place.

Peace Objectives:

An objective of this project is to make summer enrichment programs accessible to low-income students. Tuition costs of summer programs range anywhere from \$1,400 to \$5,000 per student. In 2017, San Bernardino's median household income was \$38,774. More than half of San Bernardino households consist of three or more people. Around 88% of the students enrolled in the San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD) receive free or reduced lunch. As of 2018, SBCUSD has 467 students^{vi} in the foster care system. Even if summer programs offer scholarships, access to information that would make a student a competitive applicant is not readily available in San Bernardino. The summer program I am proposing would provide low-income students with an opportunity that would otherwise not be available to them. In addition to an education on the importance of politics, the summer program would provide students with food security, a safe environment, and college application guidance.

Local Partnerships:

In the summer of 2017, I worked as a Community Relations Intern for San Bernardino Generation Now (SBGN). In the past, SBGN has organized events centered on community involvement and citizen education, as well as hosted social justice fairs, community fine art nights, and local politician meet-and-greets. As an intern for SBGN, I helped brainstorm, program, and implement similar events that encouraged residents to become active members in their community. SBGN has partnerships with the League of Women Voters, Inland Empire Congregation United for Change (ICUC), the San Bernardino Valley Arts Association, and the Youth Action Project. By partnering with SBGN, I will receive guidance, support, and a network of local politicians, community organizers and volunteers.

Candidate Qualifications:

My academic, extracurricular, and personal experiences will pave the way for a successful implementation of this project. Through independent projects, one-on-one conversations with brilliant faculty, and courses centered on gender inequality and the U.S. political system, I have gained significant knowledge about the current state of women in the U.S. government and various public policy topics that impact women and specifically undermine women of color, undocumented women and queer women. As a Community Builder at the Davis Center, I have experience facilitating discussions on social identity, diversity, and privilege. As a resident of San Bernardino, I am passionate and invested in seeing my community succeed.

Sustainability:

Not only will SBGN have the structure and resources necessary to implement a similar summer program in the future, but the city of San Bernardino will also be home to forty young women with the knowledge, confidence, and desire to create change in their schools, neighborhoods, and governments.

ⁱ Kurtzleben, Danielle. 7 November, 2018. "A Record Number of Women Will Serve In Congress (With Potentially More To Come)." *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/07/665019211/a-record-number-of-women-will-serve-in-congress-with-potentially-more-to-come>

ⁱⁱ The White House. "The Cabinet." *The White House*. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-trump-administration/the-cabinet/>

ⁱⁱⁱ San Bernardino City. "City Council. *SB City*. Retrieved from http://www.sbcity.org/cityhall/city_council/default.asp

^{iv} Swers, Michele. 2001. "Understanding the Policy Impact of Electing Women." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (June 2001): 217-20.

^v S. Laurel Weldon. 2006. "Women's Movements, Identity Politics, and Policy Impacts: A Study of Policies on Violence Against Women in the 50 United States." *Political Research Quarterly* 59(1): 111-122.

^{vi} "San Bernardino City Unified School District Demographics." *Education Data Partnership*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Bernardino/San-Bernardino-City-Unified>