

UCLA Center for Community Learning

The UCLA Center for Community Learning (CCL) promotes opportunities for community engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning at UCLA in collaboration with communities and organizations in Los Angeles, Washington DC, and beyond. Through its Astin Community Scholars program and the Civic Engagement minor (now known as the Community Engagement and Social Change minor), the center provides and prepares undergraduates committed to civic engagement for service-learning and community-based research opportunities.

Alumni Civic Learning Research Project

In the spring of 2019, CCL, in collaboration with the Center for Educational Assessment (CEA), undertook an alumni civic learning research project to assess the effectiveness of the programs and to document the experiences of students who participated in the programs. The research team conducted 30-40 minute interviews with 16 alumni. The interviews were transcribed and coded. A snapshot of key findings of the most salient themes with representative quotes follows.¹

Snapshot of Key Findings

Academic and Professional Development

The alumni interviewed for this project reflected on their time as Astin Scholars and/or civic engagement minors and discussed several skills they developed as participants in the CCL program(s). In addition to research skills, alumni spoke about various transferrable skills such as collaboration, communication and public speaking, critical thinking, leadership, networking, and writing.

Collaboration

- My cohort, we all focused on one organization, which was MEND. The benefit of doing that is that each of us focused on a different piece so really you're almost working as a team to solve not just one issue but multiple issues that really build into the same general objective, which is how to produce something amazing for this client so they can serve their people in the best way. [CCL02]

Communication and Public Speaking

- I think one of the things that I remember the most was when I had to present my research question and this proposal of the research that I would do. I remember I couldn't even be in a room full of seven other people, maybe it was 10 other people, who were also doing research in the same place as me. I couldn't stand in front of them and present. I just completely blacked out because I was so nervous and I have no recollection of presenting that at all. By the end of the experience, I was in a room full of

¹ Alumni participants are referenced by transcription number

maybe 40, 50 people presenting my research, and I just felt so confident in myself and everything that I had talked about. I think that's the kind of experience you can't trade for anything. That's the kind of experience you don't get just being in a classroom at UCLA. [CCL08]

Critical Thinking

- Our professors were always challenging us. Just because something looks like it's civic engagement or something looks like it's going to benefit a lot of people, is it really? Can we take a deeper look at that? Can we uncover some layers and see what it's really doing? ... It's kind of that way of thinking that I think really stuck with me but even when I'm doing something out of the goodness of my heart I'm always thinking, "Okay, will this come across the wrong way? Is this the best way to handle this? Am I contributing to part of the problem even though I'm trying to help?" [CCL15]

Leadership

- The research that I did was also super helpful. I don't necessarily use it in my day to day job but it helps me communicate to people, it helps me think about are the questions that I'm asking, will people understand what I'm saying. I think it also just helped me with leadership skills, too. [CCL15]

Networking

- I'd say working with the Astin Scholars program, it really helped me learn how to network with people as well and to spark engaging conversations with other people even if I may have to engage into conversations with people I may never [have] spoken before with and to network myself. [CCL08]

Writing

- I think that it made me a more critical writer because I think the writing assignments that we did were very specific and very targeted. Then meeting with [an advisor] after submitting a writing assignment and having to have a discussion about it and defend your ideas or be pushed by her to think about it differently made me write differently. [CCL11]

Research Skills

In describing their research projects, the alumni cited several fundamental research skills they acquired, such as developing research proposals, writing literature reviews, applying theory to research design, generating research questions, collecting data through multiple methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, documents), analyzing data, and presenting findings. More importantly, alumni noted "the role that research can play [in] being able to push forward community-based organizations' missions" [CCL07] and the relevance and strength of being able to "intermingle the research aspect with engaging with the communities directly." [CCL02]

Community Knowledge

Through their service experiences, the alumni in this study learned about and conducted research on a range of social issues including homelessness, poverty relief, veterans' health, food justice, domestic violence, and K-12 education. In addition to gaining knowledge about their service organizations and the people and communities those organizations served, alumni discussed developing greater awareness about structural challenges that exacerbate the issues their organizations were working to mitigate (e.g., public policies, racism, politics, historical injustices). They also grasped the financial challenges organizations faced and the need for fundraising. Furthermore, their experiences illuminated the intersection of academic theories and community settings.

Structural Concerns

- I think the deeper your dive into an issue you kind of always see that there's massive structural elements that lead to it and you talk to an individual but behind every individual and every group there's something larger at play. ... [The Astin program] allows you to dive deep within a community and understand are some of these larger structural components creating obstacles for this community? Are there public policies created 20 years ago still impacting this community inadvertently? ... Why are they providing the services that they are providing? Is it because this community requires it because they're a unique case or is it, once again, a larger structural component that is a vestige of 50 years ago of some policy that's been extremely damaging? [CCL02]

Understanding Fundraising

- I think that when you're working with a non-profit organization you learn a lot about funding and where funding comes from and how that affects the programs that reach people. ... I think [my organization] lost a good amount of funding and it ended up that the program that I worked in got defunded pretty much right after I left. That was really disappointing, but I think that was also really valuable for me to learn and to see because that's kind of the nature of these social services that we work in. I think it's really important to not see it as failure but to see it as a learning opportunity for [the] future.... [CCL08]

Praxis (Theory in Practice)

- Being able to, again, go out into the communities and being able to take these lessons I was learning in the classroom and really see they're valid or they're being challenged out in the actual world Angelino's were living in. The civic engagement minor allowed me to take courses on really just examining service learning and its role and being able to look at critical race theory, being able to look at social injustice, racial injustice, and it allowed me to just really practice it experientially and which for me just stuck better. [CCL07]

Community Values

Most of the alumni had previous volunteer experience with multiple organizations and therefore the values of service and civic and community engagement were not new to them. Indeed, some alumni sought opportunities with CCL because of their predilection for service-oriented work. Alumni also appreciated being able to pursue socially relevant research that could drive positive social change. As a result of participating in the program(s), alumni emphasized the intentionality of research and the reciprocity owed to communities, and the drive for sustainable action.

Program Value

- I was very much interested in the purpose of the program because I think it really reflected UCLA's role as a public research university and my values and having the privilege of higher education at a place like UCLA which was to [transfer] the research expertise and insights and privileges of UCLA toward addressing social problems and disparities, particularly facing the greater LA community, and also using the experiential knowledge and wisdom of populations most impacted by social disparities to really inform the research. [CCL03]

Intentionality and Reciprocity of Research

- I would definitely say the [program] has shaped my view and my perception and really my responsibility to providing critical research but also responsible, actionable research for vulnerable communities. There's a lot of data out there nowadays; there's a lot of research, but I think understanding how to create something that is actionable - I think that's very important because you can produce research all you want but the community engagement of the Astin program is to make sure that it's tangible to know that you do have a responsibility. It's not just to do some research on a paper. It becomes very real, very quick that these are real communities and real families. I don't think I'll ever forget the Astin program for instilling within me that research is a responsibility to someone, conducting the research in a way that has credibility and is valid, making sure that if you want to make positive change for a community, you're taking any considerations [of] who is this community [and] what do they really need. [CCL02]
- [The program] helped me gain real world experience of seeing how my work could actually affect people on the ground, but it also gave me the ability to be understanding of what research is about in general. Before I transferred when I was doing my first couple of years in college, I thought research was sort of just sitting in the background and thinking about things without actually doing anything. Especially as a white person studying vulnerable populations, it's problematic, and I think that what I learned from my civic engagement minor mostly was that that's not how it should be. You need the voices of people who are actually living these experiences. I mean you 100 percent know nothing compared to the people on the ground, which is really I think important for how I do my research now and how I actually go about research projects because I

think engaging people's voices, like my wanting to engage people's voices, largely came from the fact that I did my civic engagement minor. [CCL05]

Continuous Community Action

- You're not supposed to just walk away from things like the Astin Scholars program or the civic engagement minor just with the mindset of I'm going volunteer now. You're going to walk away volunteering and being an active member of your community while also being aware of what caused these social issues, what causes hunger, what causes homelessness, who is my council member, who is my supervisor, who is my congressman or congresswoman, what can I get behind, what can I support them in to prevent other people from needing to go to that food pantry. [CCL01]

Personal Growth and Development

As testament to the significance of having been an Astin Scholar and/or civic engagement minor, 15 of 16 alumni described consistently positive experiences in the program(s). Through coursework, service learning, and research, the alumni highlighted the ways in which their perspectives about themselves and the communities served by the social agencies they worked with changed and/or expanded.

Transformed Perspectives

- I grew up in a working class family, but I'm also white and both my parents have graduate degrees so my social educational status is very privileged. I think going to college and taking those classes one, introduced me to a reality that I didn't fully see until I was in college and had statistics and facts and other people's experiences and diverse perspectives to see, and I understood how I got where I was and it wasn't entirely because I'm great, it's because I have privilege. [CCL04]
- It kind of developed me just to be more open minded and to be understanding of the different social injustices there are in the world so whether it's environmental, societal, [or] what people are about to lose their homes. It made me just understand that people in all walks of life are affected by things and in order to make change the policies need to be changed. [CCL16]
- I will definitely say that it made me understand how freaking complicated politics and the world is in a more holistic way because...I was really into philosophy at the time, too, and civic engagement was the exact opposite of philosophy because it wasn't head in the clouds stuff. It was real world stuff happening that we were looking at, but it was just as complicated because there are so many unintended consequences to anybody doing anything in a community. It really helped me understand how complicated the world is because when I was in high school I used to think, "Well why the hell doesn't the U.S. just tax rich people more money and if they do that then we can solve global hunger and create a utopia." Civic engagement really did help me realize that was not how stuff works. [CCL14]