

## UCLA IN THE COMMUNITY

## Power to the young people: UCLA students and others help educate California youth about voting

The California Freedom Summer united UC campuses, community colleges and community groups



California Freedom Summer

The California Freedom Summer "We Belong" event at UC Riverside on Oct. 1 brought more than 100 high school students from San

Jessica Wolf | November 7, 2022

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While voter turnout is typically low during midterm election years, a group of UCLA and other students spent summer and fall fanning out across California to help young people from low-income communities understand their political power.

The grassroots work with non-partisan groups throughout the state resulted in educational and community events that were all part of the California Freedom Summer.

"People of color are seven out of 10 young people in the state of California and in some of your communities you are eight out of 10, nine out of 10, 10 out of 10," Veronica Terriquez, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, told 100-plus high school students at a recent event at UC Riverside.

As soon as she joined the UCLA faculty in 2021, Terriquez began organizing the California Freedom Summer, a collaboration across the University of California system, several community colleges and dozens of community groups — all centered on a non-partisan effort to inspire young people understand the issues, register to vote and get active in their communities. It's modeled after the original Freedom Summer — a 1964 push in Mississippi to register voters of color and follows on a similar 2018 project Terriquez led as a professor at UC Santa Cruz.

The high school students at UC Riverside came from Calexico, San Bernardino, Riverside, Pomona and the Coachella Valley to think about what their communities need and be confident in their voices.

"The future depends on not only my generation but on your generation too, to envision something different," Terriquez said. "And it's possible. Because you've got the numbers. ... You know what's wrong in your communities and you also have ideas of how to improve [them]."

### The future is at stake

At this event co-sponsored with the UCR Center for Social Innovation, the students raised concerns about funding for roads and schools in their neighborhoods, the effects of climate change and environmental contamination, access to jobs and higher education. They talked about the unfair and harmful labor practices of agriculture and warehouses, which have come to dominate the landscape of the Inland Empire, bringing jobs, but not high-paying ones, not ones that lift already struggling communities into financial or intergenerational wealth.

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Hearing Terriquez, or “Dr. T,” as she is fondly called by her students, talk frequently about that seven out of 10 number really hit home for California Freedom Summer Fellow Aaliyah Farias, a third-year UCLA student studying sociology and Chicano studies.

“It made me think about how strong we are when we are able to vote or soon to be able to vote,” they said.

Farias’ role at a recent California Freedom Summer event was to share an engaging presentation that helped high schoolers understand voting rights. She also helped explain how to register to vote and encouraged them to reject narratives that might make them believe their votes don’t matter.

Farias pointed out some important statistics, including the fact that at 39% of the California population, Latinos are the largest racial and ethnic group in the state.

### **Latinos are not proportionately represented on the voter rolls**

The California Freedom Summer mission is an urgent one for voter representation given recent data from UCLA’s Latino Politics and Policy Institute. Researchers found that Latino voters had the lowest registration rate of all voters in California. Only slightly more than 60% of eligible Latino voters registered statewide compared to the overall 69.4% registration rate. This is similar to national trends.

By rough estimates, California Freedom Summer was able to make some progress. Terriquez said they likely registered or pre-registered more than 5,000 new voters. Pre-registering is getting 16- and 17-year-olds to fill out the necessary forms so that when they turn 18 they’ll be eligible to vote.

The project kicked off in Spring 2022 through community organizing coursework that prepared the students go out into communities.

All told, California Freedom Summer involved students from all of the UCs, College of the Desert, College of the Sequoias, Oxnard College and Allan Hancock College, and included concurrently enrolled high school students. They partnered with and worked alongside leaders from more than 30 community organizations from Sacramento, the Bay Area, the Central Coast, Central Valley, Inland Empire, Orange County, Los Angeles and San Diego.

The early-October UC Riverside event was the eighth of its kind, all of which were programmed and run by the UC, community college and high school students.

“We’re here as advisors and support, but the students are the architects of everything and we really just get out of their way and let them run the show,” said Eder Gaona-Macedo, the first senior officer of community-engaged research for UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center. “We’re trying to create future leaders and mentors.”

Gaona-Macedo knows firsthand just how empowering that can be — and the impact it can have. As a UCLA undergraduate he served on a committee that advised the state and shared ideas that eventually resulted in the California Dream Act.

### **Undergraduate research opportunities**

Gaona-Macedo and Terriquez will continue to guide UCLA students as they further engage students in data-collection and analytics projects.

California Freedom Summer Fellow Alex Valdivia, is eager to dig into the next phase of the work, collecting and analyzing data for the “Thriving Youth Survey,” which will draw in perspectives from thousands of young adults from across California. Valdivia is a fourth-year student studying political science and labor studies.

“We really want to show that the ideas young people have are important and informed,” he said. “We want people in power to pay attention to our voices.”

And they already know that it’s possible. Some of these UCLA students have been community organizing since high school — like second-year public affairs major Omar Mondragon. He was part of a group of high school students in southeast San Diego County in 2020 to push for a ballot proposition that would create a civilian oversight group. The proposition to create the Commission on Police Practices passed with 75% of the vote.

“California Freedom Summer is all about people of color returning to serve communities of color,” Mondragon said. “We’re learning important strategies that we know can work to make our communities healthier and safer.”

Institutions like UCLA and UC bear a responsibility to keep inspiring informed civic engagement like this, Terriquez said.

“The future is bright if we keep on investing in youth and give them opportunities to develop their talents,” she said.

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