



SOUTHWEST FREEDOM SUMMER

Investing in Youth to Strengthen Our Democracy



The Moment to Act Is Now

Young people today stand at an unprecedented crossroads — facing climate change, economic inequality, and threats to democracy. As low-income, immigrant, and racially diverse communities experience compounded stress and hardships, it's critical to equip young people with the tools to take civic actions that advance their collective self-determination and safeguard democratic institutions.

Southwest Freedom Summer (SWFS) 2026 is a bold initiative designed to meet this moment. By training and empowering young leaders to mobilize their peers, SWFS will increase nonpartisan civic actions in their communities, drive voter participation, and create lasting democratic change in historically underserved communities.

Why Southwest Freedom Summer?

SWFS builds on the success of California Freedom Summer, which has trained hundreds of students and conducted extensive nonpartisan voter education in low-income communities. Now, we are expanding our impact across the American Southwest — a region with rapidly growing youth populations and critical electoral significance.

Inspired by the 1964 Freedom Summer, where college students joined grassroots organizers to expand Black voter registration in the South, and modeled after successful UC-based internship and research programs, SWFS will equip young people with the skills and tools to take civic actions that advance their collective self-determination and safeguard democratic institutions.

The SWFS Approach: Empowering Young Scholars and Leaders

SWFS will train high school and college students through a participatory action research model integrating academic coursework with hands-on experience, civic engagement, and mentorship. In partnership with university-community organizations in regions most impacted by social inequities, students will examine youth concerns — remaining attentive to evolving gender dynamics — while conducting nonpartisan civic actions, supporting voter education, mentoring young leaders, and contributing to grassroots campaigns that promote well-being and democratic participation.

Program Components

Training & Coursework –Students gain instruction in data collection, participatory action research, grassroots organizing, voter outreach, and media engagement through coursework at UCLA and participating universities and community colleges.

Paid Internships –Students work with civic organizations for 10 weeks, earning a stipend up to \$7,000 while gaining hands-on experience in nonpartisan community-based organizations.

Community-Engaged Research –Interns collect and analyze data on youth's local concerns to inform policy discussions, narratives, and best practices, with special attention to gender dynamics in their local communities.

Strengthening Community Ties –Research and programming deepen connections among UCs, community colleges, and nonpartisan civic organizations.

Leadership & Outreach –Students participate in the CFS Leadership Institute, organize voter education events in historically under-mobilized communities.

Partnership Grants –SWFS will provide small grants of \$10,000–\$25,000 to partner organizations that mentor students, host cultural programs, and strengthen youth civic leadership.



What Success Looks Like

By investing in young leaders, SWFS will deliver measurable impacts:



Increased voter participation

Mobilizing tens of thousands of young voters through peer-led education and outreach.



Stronger community capacity

Supporting partner organizations with dedicated student interns who enhance civic engagement efforts.



Expanded educational and career pathways

Bridging educational and community institutions to enhance higher education access and workforce development.



Elevated youth voices

Amplifying youths' narratives through the arts and digital media.



Research-driven solutions

Generating insights to policy priorities, community well-being, and future civic engagement efforts.

Join Us in Building the Next Generation of Civic Leaders

The time is now to invest in young people as the community-action researchers who help define our democratic future. With your partnership, we can contribute to a more informed and engaged young electorate, ensuring that voices from low-income and diverse communities are represented in government decision-making processes.

Led by Veronica Terriquez, Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, SWFS involves the UCLA ethnic studies research centers, other university and community college faculty, and non-profit youth organizations across the American Southwest.