

Final Report

Somali Student Ambassador Project Report: A partnership with the League of Women Voters Minneapolis (LWVMpls) and Somali Family Services (SFS)

Description of the Project

The Somali Student Ambassador Project was a civic education program that trained Somali college students to plan and conduct civic and voter education projects in the Minneapolis Somali Community during the months leading up to the 2008 General Election.

The goal of the project was to create a model civic engagement program that combined non-partisan voter education with long-term community capacity building and youth empowerment. It aimed to build the leadership capacity of the Somali community's post-secondary student population by providing a vehicle through which they can learn about the political process, build relationships within, acquire a deeper knowledge of their community, and acquire and hone their presentation and research skills.

Eight Somali college students were selected to participate in the program,¹ which took place from January – December 2008. During the program, the Ambassadors attended formal workshops where they received training from the project manager (Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) political science instructor Lena Jones), LWVMpls volunteers, and individuals from organizations such as the City of Minneapolis' Elections Department, the City of Minneapolis' Civil Rights Department about the US political system and electoral process

The students also engaged in community-based research as part of their strategy to assess the needs of the Somali community. After receiving training in powermapping their communities and conducting informational interviews, the students (in teams and individually) met with individuals from organizations active in civic engagement activities including (but not limited to) MCTC's Center for Civic Engagement, Minnesota Council of Non-Profits, Wellstone Action, Somali Action Alliance, Confederation of the Somali Community, Take Action Minnesota, Got Voice, Got Power, Minneapolis Highrise Representative Council, the City of Minneapolis, the Somali Youth Network Council, LWVMpls, SFS, Crossing Barriers, and Somali Student Associations on several campuses in the Twin Cities. The students used the knowledge that they gained from the workshops and their research to develop their activities leading up to the 2008 General Election.

Project Goals and Outcomes:

The grant proposal identified five anticipated outcomes of the project and the following pages discuss progress towards each of those outcomes.

Outcome 1

Through our goal of increasing citizen involvement and electoral understanding, we hope to serve:

- a. 2000 to 3000 Minneapolis residents in an outreach program***

¹ One student had to drop out of the program due to family obligations. Seven students participated in the program from beginning to end.

- b. Over 5000 additional residents through website promotion**
- c. 2500 individuals through contact with our office**

The Student Ambassadors played a major role in helping the League reach this goal. The students reached over 300 people by staffing informational tables at MCTC's Civic Engagement week in April and the "Hoop for Hope" event in June, and through presentations on voter registration and how to be an election judge at Somali Student Association meetings at MCTC and the University of Minnesota. The students also reached several thousand television viewers during an appearance on the "Somali Media" television show hosted by Abdimalik Askar on October 3, 2008. They made presentations to more than 150 people who attended the Annual Somali Family Services Conference which took place at MCTC on October 24, 2008. Student Ambassadors have also volunteered at the League's office, participated in League voter registration drives

The program's promotion helped the LWVMpls new website increase sessions from the 2006 elections to 2008 by more than 4,000. There were more than 500 calls to the League office for voter information during October and November alone.

Outcome 2

Development of a comprehensive action, research-based plan that:

- a. Increased voter turnout in targeted precincts***
- b. Identified methods and media that worked best with specific communities***
- c. Improvement in other indicators of public engagement***

Through their meetings with City of Minneapolis Election officials, the Student Ambassadors learned about the need for Somali-speaking election judges. In response to that need, the students developed displays, written materials and a PowerPoint presentation used to recruit election judges. This early project, which primarily focused on the Somali student populations at MCTC and the University of Minnesota, proved to be a great opportunity for the students to test the skills learned in the workshops on a smaller scale and help them prepare for the larger projects that they organized during the late summer and fall months.

Through their community-based research, the students developed an outreach plan that included television and radio appearances, canvassing in the Cedar-Riverside area and at the various Somali malls in Minneapolis, and tabling and presentations at events with high numbers of Somali attendees. A highlight was their morning presentation and afternoon workshop at the Somali Family Services conference on October 24, 2008. (Their activities at the conference are described in more detail later in this report).

Their partnerships with other Somali organizations doing non-partisan canvassing work in the Cedar-Riverside area resulted in the precinct serving this area increasing voter turnout from 53% to 59%.

Outcome 3

Relationship building, plus the evaluation, will determine:

- a. Suggestions for strengthening future relationships***

b. Partner's desire to continue to collaborate with the LWVMpls
c. Partner's satisfaction with overall project outcomes, specific activities and resources

One of the key aims of the Somali Student Ambassador Project was to develop a model of collaboration between the LWVMpls and organizations that more directly serve new American communities. The initial decision to partner with SFS reflects this desire.

An additional project that the League sought to do this was through participating in an initiative of the LWVMpls called the "Cross-Cultural Dialogues" project. The goals of this initiative included "building citizenship" and "facilitating" the development of skills and knowledge so as to engage those who are new to democracy and those who have been disconnected from it."²

Starting in April 2008, a group of Student Ambassadors, members of LWVMpls, and SFS board members met with the goals of building relationships with one another, identifying key questions related to:

- civic engagement
- the changing demographics of the state,
- and developing and facilitating a public discussion of one or more of these key questions.

The group had four meetings, during which the participants shared their stories, identified their common experiences, and discussed what drives their interest and work in civic education. Participants in the project were also required to meet with other project participants outside of the formal meetings to aid the process of building trust between members of the group.

During its fourth meeting in August, the group decided upon the issue of civic engagement and addressing youth violence in the Somali community. As a result of the dialogues, the Somali Student Ambassadors developed a workshop for the SFS Conference on Civic Engagement and Youth Violence. The purpose was to highlight the voices of young people, stress the importance of intergenerational connections, and engaging elected officials when addressing the issue of violence between young people in the Somali Community.

In addition, three Student Ambassadors inspired by and using the skills gained from their work with the Student Ambassador Project, co-founded an organization called SYNC (Somali Youth Network Council) which aims to highlight the voices of young people in finding solutions to the problem of youth violence.

As the Student Ambassador Project advanced, the League and SFS continued to evaluate the means of communication between the two main organizations and the

² Quoted from the Minnesota League of Women Voters' Website:
<http://www.lwvmn.org/EdFund/DiversityProject.asp>

committees within each of these organizations that were doing work relevant to this project.

During the early stages of the project, the Project Manager (Lena Jones) served as the primary liaison between the Student Ambassadors, SFS, and the various individuals and committees within the LWVMpls. In the latter phases of the project, the Student Ambassadors took on greater responsibility for creating and maintaining these links and channels of communication by attending committee meetings and serving as liaisons to key individuals in the League and SFS. This shift not only lessened the burden placed on the project manager but also gave the students the space to directly develop the relationships that helped them successfully achieve their goals.

Outcome 4

Evaluation and recommendations regarding:

- a. Availability of appropriate support from LWVMpls***
- b. Topics that need additional coverage in future trainings***
- c. Additional suggestions for improving the training and implementation process***
- d. Details of their Somali community work which can be used in other communities***

Throughout the project, LWVMpls provided crucial support for the program in the form of volunteers, opportunities for Student Ambassadors to engage in the League's civic engagement work, and administrative support (example: searching for additional sources of funding, handling the budget, student paychecks, etc.) If the League decides to do a similar project in the future, the project leaders could do even more to engage a larger number of League members and use their skills at different points of the project.

A key change that was made during the course of the program to improve the training and implementation process was increasing the frequency of the meetings during the latter months of the project. The original project plan scheduled monthly strategy and report-back meetings from June –October. This was with the assumption that the students and the project manager would use its Yahoo! Group page and its web-based report forms and discussion boards to maintain contact and coordinate activities with one another. Although this web-based tool has been useful, we have found that especially at the latter stages of the project, the group needs to meet *at least* twice a month to ensure proper oversight by the project manager of the students' activities and for the students to gain the appropriate amount of support from the project manager and the partner organizations.

One of the striking outcomes of the project was the incredible interest generated by it inside and outside of the Somali community. There seems to be a real thirst for programs that provide young people, and especially immigrant youth, with the tools to be community leaders. During the course of the program, the project director was asked numerous times about whether or not the program would continue and if it would expand to other communities. If the League decides to repeat this project, it now has a model that it can use to establish relationships with partner organizations in the target communities and a curriculum that can be followed by whomever leads the project in the future.

Outcome 5

- a. Co-sponsorship of a public issues forum**
- b. Somali student public presentation of their work**

LWVMpls and SFS kicked off its collaboration with a Precinct Caucus Training which took place at MCTC on January 28, 2008. The Student Ambassadors helped with logistics on the day of the event and attended the training. In addition, both organizations were committed to providing opportunities for the students to publicly present their work. For example, the Student Ambassadors gave the keynote address at the LWVMpls City Convention on May 22, 2008.

The students also organized two sessions at the Somali Family Services Conference on October 24, 2008. The first program was a presentation about their work followed by a panel discussion on the state of civic engagement in the Somali community. The panel discussion included representatives from several of the organizations that the Student +Ambassadors built relationships with through their work with the program-- Mohamud Galony (Director, Somali Youth Development Center), Yusuf Ahmed (Multicultural Services Office, City of Minneapolis Office of Civil Rights), Abdirahman Mukhtar (Youth Coordinator, Brian Coyle Center), Ladan Yusuf (Executive Director, Crossing Barriers) and Abdiasis Warsame (Youth Program Manager, Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota).

Regarding his work in the project, one of the student ambassadors, Faysal Aban, stated, *"One huge lesson I learned was building a network. This was beneficial to me and if I look at it, it was beneficial to the community. For instance, we met with our community leaders one-by-one and then we met with city officials that rank high especially those who are in power over wards with large numbers of Somalis. I am thankful for all those whose efforts made this program get up and running, from LWVMpls to Somali Family Services to Lena Jones. By networking, I was able to reach out and show some leadership style and boost my confidence that we as Somalis and Americans can work together for the greater cause of our nation. In addition, I was able to meet people I never thought that I would meet*

During the afternoon session, the students and their community partners Crossing Barriers and Somali Youth Development Center facilitated a discussion on youth violence in the Somali community. In the aftermath of the program, the Ambassadors have been continuing these efforts through their work with SYNC (Somali Youth Network Council).

In evaluating the project, the director, Lena Jones stated, *"What's special about the Somali Student Ambassador Program is that it not only offered the students information about the nuts and bolts of the US political system, but it also gave them skills that they will be able to use to be true leaders wherever they end up. One of the most amazing things to see was how their confidence as public speakers, as teachers, as knowledgeable members of their community increased exponentially during the 11 months that I spent with them. I give a lot of credit to the Minneapolis League of Women Voters for taking on this project.*

