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Organization: Collective Voices for Undocumented Students (2101)

In your own words, explain what your project was, and what you hoped to accomplish.

Collective Voices for Undocumented Students was a coalition/student group that came out of the necessity for undocumented students to be fully acknowledged and included within San Jose State University. The group was formed after hearing some concerns from undocumented students who tried to get some Associated Students-run resources and was denied of such because of their status. For example, if a student tried to rent out a laptop, he/she was denied because of lack of a California drivers license. Furthermore, the scholarships Associated Students offered were off-limits to undocumented students because they couldn't apply for FAFSA, which was a requirement for AS scholarships, book rentals, etc. Hearing these concerns made some members of the group very disappointed and upset, because undocumented students still were required to pay for these resources in their tuition but could not access them even if they gained them.

Members of Collective Voices for Undocumented Students included members of Student Advocates for Higher Education (SAHE), an advocacy student group for immigrant rights, members of SOCI 164 class and other concerned/sympathetic students from the campus. Since the group had a mixed of documented and undocumented members, all decided to be very conscious of letting undocumented students be the first to speak their minds and even lead some of the projects within the group. The group was very open to having leadership from all members and no one dominated the conversations of such. Even though this meant that we took longer to make decisions, I believe this structure was very beneficial to maintaining the group united and cohesive and making sure that those who were most affected were at the forefront of the issue.

What motivated you to become involved in this project?

As an undocumented student myself, I was already very motivated to be involved in the group to begin with. I had myself gone through some of the barriers described above to access some laptops from the university, but was too ashamed to be questioned about my lack of drivers license to speak out about it. Since I didn't hear from other undocumented friends about the issue, I quickly forgot about it and decided to stay away from any university-ran resources that seemed to require documents I couldn't provide. However, once I heard about this group actually taking action about it and having documented allies who were ready to take on the issue, I was empowered to speak up and do something so that future undocumented students would have access to the resources they paid and deserved.

What did you learn from working on your issue? What did you learn about social change? about power? leadership? yourself? community, etc.

The first and most important thing that I learned was never to stay quiet about some issues I encounter because I am not the only one that is going through these. I also learned a lot about group dynamics, making sure people who are most affected are at the forefront and using my own power to push for legislative agenda that is beneficial to my community.

As a board member of Associated Students, I had the honor of presenting the resolution that changed AS policies to be more accessible to undocumented students. I also had the honor of introducing this policy publicly and speaking to other board members individually to increase their knowledge on the topic. Although being a member of Associated Students was very intimidating for me at the beginning, I was able to use this position to push for something that benefited students like me, and this makes me feel proud even today.

How did your background research help prepare you?

Having members of the group who were experienced organizers really helped us prepare for the battle we were going to face. We were able to find the specific policies that kept undocumented students out of the resources needed and were able to analyze them and present ways to improve such. We also measured the amount of support we would have with AS board members and were able to meet with not only board members to make them aware of our proposed resolution, but also some members of the committee the resolution had to go through first. We came up with talking points, messaging and were able to collect support from professors, administrators and fellow students. This led to the first packed AS board meeting and a unanimous support for the resolution. We were also able to get media attention for the policy, which was also something not seen before for AS board.

How did you recruit people for your issue? What worked?

Collective Voices for Undocumented Students was able to recruit many allies and supporters by raising awareness about the issue. I still remember the meeting we had in which we discussed a list of potential allies for a petition we were going to circulate in favor of our resolution. Since we were from a range of majors and involved in different campus groups, we were able to come up with a wide range of potential supporters. We then divided this list to collect the signatures we were looking for. In addition to asking for signatures, however, we would ask for the names and contact information of other potential supporters as well as signatures from university supporters. This led us to having a room full of people the day of the voting of the resolution, with people waiting outside of the room as well. In addition, we had a wide range of media coverage from Latino newspapers to NBC and Fox local news stations.

How did your group make decisions? How did your group work together? What was your group dynamic? What did your group do to work together better?

Our group was very intentional about how decisions were taken. It was discussed in one of our first meetings that we all had to be in agreement in order to move something forward. At first, this seemed to me like an impossible task, but I was surprised to see how much agreement we all had. We ended up having no problems making decisions and we were all very happy with the end product of our campaign.

A second portion of our decision making was making sure that the voices of the undocumented members were the most heard. If a discussion was in a place in one of our meetings and there was a disagreement, members of the group would also ask undocumented students for their opinions. Also, if the discussion was dominated by documented members, others would be very conscious and highlighted the need for undocumented members to speak up. As one of the undocumented members of the group, this process made me feel empowered and that my needs were being represented. Remembering these moments still

make me feel happy and proud to be a part of such a beautifully working group.

Did your group use technology? If so, please explain.

No, the only technology we used were computers to do our research and write our resolution.

What advice would you give current Soci. 164 Social Action students?

First and most of all, I would recommend the chose an issue they are really passionate about because they will spend a lot of time and energy on the issue, so you want to make sure you are not burnt out in the middle of the campaign. The second advice I would give is to make sure that people who are most affected by the issue are at the forefront of the campaign. This would ensure that the issue is really authentic and that the changes proposed will really improve the lives of the people they are trying to help. Lastly, I would advice to start planning as soon as they can at the beginning of the semester and to plan a campaign that is very local and that they can actually change. As organizers, we have a tendency to want to change the world in one campaign, and that is just not possible. For the best of group in general and to get measurable, achievable results, I would recommend for the campaign to stay at a local level and to make sure they have all the necessary background to begin the campaign at the beginning of the semester.

What are you doing now? Looking back, how does your involvement in this project influence you today...in your life, your job?

Currently, I am working as a Community Organizer for Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (SIREN). My job consists of recruiting immigrant community members, educating them about our campaigns, and making sure they have the tools necessary to be at the forefront of these campaigns. This involves trainings and workshops around leadership development and political education. Being a part of Collective Voices for Undocumented Students definitely helped me get my job, as it highlighted by background in working around immigrant rights issues.