

Letters to the U.S. President: An Urban Youth Literary Civic Engagement Project
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Significance of Project:

The recent events resulting in the shooting death of 15-year old Kiwane Carrington high lights the national tragedy of youth victims of violence. The national trend is increasing across U.S. urban centers. Recent national exposure of youth victim Derrion Albert in Chicago caused President Obama to send Representative Arne Duncan to help facilitate solutions. The significance of this project is that it provides a way for youth to take advantage of this historical moment in a very unique way. That is, the moment where a Black U.S. President is considering issues and making statements about youth victims of violence in Midwest cities. This moment can be profoundly affected by empowering youth to offer their unique, experienced, and informed perspectives in formal letters written to U.S. President Barak Obama, for consideration.

Primary Audience

The targeted participants are local high school-age and college-age youth affected by the killing of their peer and the violence in Chicago.

Expanding Campus Public Engagement Capability

Exposing affected youth to the cultural history, public officials and expert information, around youth victims of violence, as well as building responsive writing skills to further their civic engagement on this issue; is how this project puts learning into service of a just society. This project further expands our campus's public engagement capabilities by building partnerships between (DAAS) and Champaign local community institutions from which youth participants may be drawn. These include local barbershops, beauty shops, boys and girls club, church, school and alternative school officials, The African American Cultural Center (AACC), and the YMCA. These partnerships will continue through the youth participants who form relationships with DAAS faculty over the year long project. The effect of this project extends beyond the boundaries of campus and Illinois by offering a written volume of all 100 letters to The President authored by affected youth participants. This volume can be showcased outside the state and connect with other affected youth across the country. In addition, once complete, this project can provide expert consultation on urban youth literacy civic engagement projects that can be provided by investigators.

Project

Bi-weekly workshop sessions will be organized to produce four letters from each youth participant, written to the U.S. President. These letters will address four concerns around youth victims of violence. Speaker presentations and small group exercises will be used to promote team building, and peer-learning between high school-age and college youth. This will also help to facilitate writing skill acquisition. Each participant will complete three drafts of each of the four letters for a total of 12 documents over the year long course of the project. The goal of the sessions is for each participant to complete one draft every month. Each of the 20 to 25 participants will contribute their final four letters to a written volume. This written volume will include all 100 letters written to the President of The United States by urban youth enrolled in the project. These letters will be carbon copied/sent to Champaign city council members, state senators and congressional representatives.

In order to help educate youth participants of the significance of their writing endeavor and further inform their letters, six outside speakers will be solicited to provide expert information on several topics. These include: 1) A review of the cultural history of letters written to U.S. Presidents as well as, other appeals to government officials by Black notables (e.g. Douglass-Lincoln debates, David Walkers Appeal, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Martin L. King etc.); 2) Cultural history of official statements on youth victims of violence by Black Organizations; 3) Cultural history of youth political protests, marches and mass demonstrations in the U.S. by Blacks (e.g. Million Man March, Million Youth March

etc.). 4) Legal account of youth rights of engagement, especially in confrontation with police; 5) A recent history of police brutality and black on black violence cases with urban youth victims. Lastly, local, city, state and public officials will be invited to answer questions from these youth, in public roundtable discussions, in order to further inform their letters to The President.

A banner will be constructed that includes each of the participant's picture and a quote from their letter to the President. DAAS affiliate Prof. John Jennings will be solicited for banner construction, given his excellent work producing banners for the History Makers project. The university will be propositioned to display this banner at the Illini Union for limited time public viewing.

Lastly, the general public will be invited to a ceremony at the end of the project, commemorating the written accomplishments of these youth. A copy of their final four letters along with the eight drafts that chronicle their writing development over the course of the project; will be bound and presented to each participant. In addition they will be given a certificate of completion plaque with a picture of them with their banner display.

Summary of Objectives:

1) To inspire further civic engagement by high school-age youth affected by the recent shooting death of their peer Kiwane Carrington as well as University students affected by the recent shooting death of their peer; 2) To help youth address public officials and communicate with government leaders to effect change on this issue; 3) To improve youth literary and leadership skills; 4) To expose youth participants to a rich cultural history of literary civic engagement, protest and struggle by African Americans, around issues of youth violence victims; 5) To introduce youth participants to a variety of professionals, and experts on these issues; 6) To foster relationships between the Department of African American Studies (DAAS) faculty and University of Illinois students, local high school-age youth residents, local community institutions and leaders. 7) To engage the general public on the issue of youth victims of violence by presenting the unique perspective of urban youth

Products

1) A bound volume of all 100 final letters entitled, "Letters to The President": Urban Youth Affected by Violence. 2) Banner display depicting selected youth and quotes from their letters. A cadre of 20 -25 Youth participants empowered and informed by the project process.

Sustained Impact

Making available to the general public a bound volume of all the letters from the affected youth participants, written to the President of the United States, will help to sustain the impact of this project. In addition, the public display of the banner constructed from pictures of the youth authors, and quotes from their letters will also help to sustain the impact of the project.

Evaluation:

Writing evaluation tools used by the University Writing Center will be incorporated by facilitators. Written feedback on each of the drafts will be used to gauge the progress of each participant. In addition, session evaluations will be solicited from youth participants and used similarly for evaluations.