



GOAL: Central Valley Civic Leadership Program A Field-Based Model for Identifying and Developing Emerging Leaders

Overview

The Central Valley Civic Leadership Program (GOAL) was developed and implemented in California to cultivate civic leadership through direct engagement with public lands, community issues, and democratic processes. Designed as an immersive, field-based experience, the program combined outdoor education, group leadership, and civic learning to help participants better understand their role in shaping their communities.

Program Design

Participants engaged in a structured series of activities that integrated:

- Outdoor experiential learning on public lands
- Group-based leadership development
- Civic education focused on how public decisions are made

The program emphasized real-world application, requiring participants to navigate challenges, collaborate with peers, and engage with complex environmental and social issues.

Key Insight

A central finding of the program was that leadership cannot be created through instruction alone. While many participants benefited from exposure and experience, the most meaningful growth occurred among individuals who were already motivated to lead and take responsibility. This insight led to a refined approach:

- Identify participants who demonstrate initiative and curiosity
- Focus time and mentorship on those individuals
- Provide the structure and tools needed to translate motivation into effective leadership

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

- Experiential learning is a powerful tool for developing confidence and awareness
- Leadership development is most effective when it builds on existing motivation
- Small-group engagement allows for deeper learning and stronger outcomes
- Programs that combine personal development with real-world context are more impactful than classroom-based instruction alone

Relevance to Current Work

This program serves as the foundation for Unite for Parks' broader civic leadership model. While the current work focuses on adult leaders and policy engagement at the federal level, it builds directly on the insight that effective civic participation depends on identifying and supporting individuals who are already motivated to engage.

Conclusion

The Central Valley Civic Leadership Program demonstrated that meaningful leadership development requires both experiential learning and targeted investment in emerging leaders. This approach now informs a scalable model designed to strengthen civic participation and support long-term conservation and public decision-making.