Overview
Launched by UCSC Founding Director Michelle Obama in 1997, Summer Links is a 10-week social justice education and internship program for undergraduate students committed to public service, community-building, and social change. Students receive a $4,000 stipend for working at local nonprofits, foundations, corporations, government agencies, or community organizing collectives. This year, UCSC ran its twentieth year of Summer Links with a cohort of 20 students selected from 73 applicants. Summer Links internships are supported by our community partners, the Institute of Politics, the Odyssey Scholars Program, and the Office of Civic Engagement.

Program Goals
To deepen students’ knowledge of the social justice issues that impact Chicago communities
To broaden students’ experience of Chicago’s diverse neighborhoods
To provide students with exposure to a wider variety of approaches to social justice work

“Summer Links is a great model for how students can be empowered to pursue positive connections beyond the university and expand their idea of community service beyond what civic engagement as a university student typically entails.”
- Student program participant

Pictured here: Students at Young Chicago Authors in Wicker Park learn how activism groups push for policy reform.
Community Engagement

Working full-time Monday through Thursday each week, Summer Links interns learn professional skills, community and civic engagement strategies, shift their thinking about urban planning and equity in access or opportunity, and engage critical thinking skills to understand how communities are built and harmed by individual and systemic actions. Their capacity for innovation and action increase exponentially across the ten weeks, and many change their academic major or career plans to reflect a social focus. These host sites are spread across the city, including North Lawndale, the Little Village, and Auburn-Gresham.

Internship Sites

- Arts & Public Life (UChicago)
- BUILD, Inc.
- Chicago Commission on Human Relations
- CPD Office of the Superintendent, Community Affairs
- Chicago United
- College Possible
- DuSable Museum of African American History
- Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation
- Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago
- Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities
- National Public Housing Museum
- North Lawndale Employment Network
- OAI, Inc. – High Bridge Social Enterprise, L3C
- SkyART
- Southside Together Organizing for Power (STOP)
- Taller de José
- The Obama Foundation - Office of Civic Engagement
- Uber
- United Way of Metropolitan Chicago
- UChicago Collegiate Scholars Program

“Summer Links helps us understand our place in the world far more than a traditional internship ever could. Normal jobs teach students how they fit into a company; Summer Links teaches students how they fit into the world, and how the world fits together.”

- Student program participant

Pictured here: Students meet with Deborah Kasemeyer, Senior VP at Northern Trust, to learn how the Community Reinvestment Act leverages bank funds to drive economic solutions in low-to-moderate income communities.
Program Model

To frame their internship experiences, Summer Links participants engage in experiences designed to help them reflect on and learn from the city. In the first week of the program, participants spend time building rapport and understanding between them—solidifying the importance of intentional community-building, brave space agreements, and open critical discourse, while also learning about how nonprofits, organizers, corporate social responsibility and social enterprise units, government programs, and the University itself effect social change.

Throughout the summer, the entire cohort comes together on Wednesday evenings to share internship reflections and participate in deeper group discussions about social issues. On Fridays, the cohort participates in neighborhood-based “Focus Friday” sessions to broaden their understanding of Chicago and social justice issues. Topics include housing, education, LGBTQIA+ Identity, immigration, activism, community violence, and health. Friday activities include site visits, community explorations, panel discussions with prominent Chicago-based social change leaders, volunteering, and group discussions.

In the final week of the program, the cohort hosted a Teachback Luncheon at the UChicago Arts Incubator with over 75 attendees. The students reflected on what they’d learned about social change. They also facilitated dialogues on the social justice issues explored over the summer with the event guests, including some of their internship supervisors.

“...I was expecting that I would hear some kind of ‘calling’ for a particular issue or a special anger towards one thing, and instead every week I felt pulled every different direction—in really powerful and informative ways.”

- Student program participant

Pictured here: Eduardo Arocho, Executive Director of the Division Street Business Development Association, explains the importance of Paseo Boricua in Humboldt Park—one of Chicago’s largest Puerto Rican communities.
“...left Summer Links with so much more than I came for. I learned more in ten weeks than I have probably in my entire life. It has significantly impacted how I see the world, how I see myself, what I envision doing in my future, and how I see other people. It has made me a more thoughtful and conscious person.”

- Student program participant

Student Learning Outcomes

100% of students said that Summer Links helped them to gain greater insight into how the nonprofit, government, and private sectors intersect to address various social justice issues;

90% of students said that Summer Links increased their understanding of what social justice is;

100% of students reported that Summer Links has had an impact on their academic, personal, and/or professional plans.

Community Organization Impacts

100% of participating supervisors reported that they were Satisfied or Very Satisfied with the quality of work done by their Summer Links intern;

100% of participating supervisors reported that they would choose to host another Summer Links intern in the future, as well as recommend Summer Links to their partner organizations and companies;

92% of participating supervisors reported that they learned more about how to work best with students and youth workers through their experience with Summer Links;

100% of participating supervisors reported that their Summer Links intern provided insights that were beneficial to workplace operations.

Report prepared by Chris Skrable, UCSC Associate Director, and Xavier Ramey, UCSC Senior Associate Director. All photos by Xavier Ramey.