

Deepika Sharma

Reflection Questions for USSA LegCon 2015

1. What I learned from USSA congress is skills to effectively lobby. Through the workshops I was able to not only learn in depth a lot about the three topics for our lobby meeting but how to lobby to different types of people. How I will apply it to my campus is to use my skills and knowledge to lobby and make a difference in the community.
2. Ideas I have moving forward is in regards to the ESC (Ethnic Student Center) and SASA (South Asian Student Association). As I was able to meet and talk to many people at LegCon, I noticed that the ESC and specifically my club SASA were lacking in either space or members. Our ESC is good now but it could be much better if given the proper necessities like space or like a new building so that all ESC clubs can enter a space where they can bond with each other. I've noticed in SASA that there is a lack of members maybe because we haven't reached out far enough for people to join but that is something I want to change and will work for that in the future as well as improving the ESC one step at a time.
3. Some strengths of USSA I've noticed was the training for the lobbying and action. Since this was my first year attending LegCon, I wasn't sure how to lobby and what exactly lobbying was. But with the workshops I feel as if I'm ready to lobby more confidently the following year at USSA. Having that said, although workshops were very helpful and I learned a lot from them, I think that the schedule of the workshops was a little too crowded. There were breaks between workshops but I think it'd be better if there were more breaks and if the workshops were a little more spaced apart.
4. Overall, I had an amazing experience at USSA and I can't wait to continue my learning and make a difference within my community!

Heather Heffelmire

Reflection Questions for USSA LegCon 2015

USSA Reflection Questions:

1. What did you learn at USSA LegCon and how will you apply it to your work on campus?

I learned so much from my time at USSA LegCon and I'm excited to bring all that I learned back to Western's community. I'm really inspired by the love, community, and healing that I experienced in the People of Afrikan Descent of POAD space at LegCon. I am already working to implement what I got from that space onto Western's campus through our BSU by making our meetings closed only to those who identify as POAD. Additionally, myself and other BSU board members who also attended LegCon are putting a presentation together about USSA and LegCon to be given at our first BSU meeting on Tuesday 4/7. I also was able to learn a lot more about USSA's State of Emergency campaign and the work that is going on throughout the country to increase representation of Students of Color on college

campuses. I am looking forward to working on that campaign here at Western and organizing actions during spring quarter like walk-outs and sit-ins to in conjunction with the campaign.

2. *What ideas do you have moving forward?*

As I mentioned above, I really want to bring what I learned from the POAD space to Western through either our BSU or another organization specifically for Black students. I also want to organize a walk-out and potential rally in conjunction with the State of Emergency campaign on our campus where we give our list of campus demands to our administration. I am also excited to organize actions focusing on Black womxn on our campus like silent demonstrations where we all march through campus together. I am also hoping to use what I learned from members of the Oregon Students of Color Coalition to start a similar coalition in Washington state. I also want to bring the State of Emergency campaign to WSA to start to organize that on a state-wide level and hopefully work to start taking action to overturn 1-200 which banned Affirmative Action in our state and has led to record lows for the representation of Students of Color in Washington State colleges and universities.

3. *What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of USSA? How do you think WWU can best utilize direct membership with USSA in the upcoming year?*

I think USSA's greatest strength is its membership. Some of the most inspiring, amazing, beautiful, and empowering students I've met at USSA conferences. I also think it has a great strength in its ability to do grassroots organizing. Over the course of the conference, we took two separate actions each with a completely different focus. I want to bring this motivation for grassroots work and organizing onto our campus. However, I did see some of USSA's weaknesses over LegCon and that was that sometimes the organization takes actions without clear intentions and purposes which can end up being really harmful to the communities they are trying to benefit. On Monday, our last day at the conference, we took an action where we marched to a local youth detention center. This was very harmful, as the demographics of the center were never mentioned and the people who should have been leading the action (POAD students) were largely marginalized. This action really disappointed me and while I love USSA, I was personally very hurt and triggered by the action. I think another weakness is that their President and Vice President seems to have very little interaction with membership. Rarely did either of them try to talk or interact with me and I think it's their job to interact with members. Aside from the President and VP, however, USSA staff is amazing and so dedicated to working for the student movement. This is another great strength of the organization.

4. *Other thoughts, comments, questions, concerns, etc?*

I am really happy I got to attend another LegCon, but it is bittersweet, as this will probably be my last USSA conference. Most of the delegation seemed to really enjoy and get a lot out of

the conference. I enjoyed being a delegation leader and getting to introduce a whole new generation to an organization that I've learned so much from.

Zach Dove

Reflection Questions for USSA LegCon 2015

USSA Reflection Questions:

1. What did you learn at USSA Congress and how will you apply it to your work on campus?

I learned a great deal about the USSA's vision for social change, which utilizes nonviolent direct action as well as formal legislative lobbying. The USSA prescribes an interesting fusion of both of these avenues to build grassroots power to win victories for students. The USSA program emphasizes a long-term approach that features stages of escalation designed to increase pressure on certain targets in order to achieve the desired goal. It also emphasizes thinking strategically about the tactics used, as well as thinking critically about how aspects of the students' organization can hinder or achieve progress. According to the theory of action, it is also important to build a strong consistency of groups that actively support the cause, in opposition to inactive support.

I also learned a great deal about the crisis of higher education in a neoliberal world, and the work that students are doing on campuses across the US to fight the privatization of higher education and the increasing burden of debt on Americans. More specifically, I learned about how institutions of higher education have been receiving high-risk loans to make up operating costs, which contribute to unchecked corporate influence on campus. I also learned more details about how financial institutions repackage and resell student debt, in much the same way as home loans were repurposed prior to the financial collapse.

I greatly enjoyed learning about how students were helping staff and faculty fight for fair wages, working conditions, and union rights on campus.

2. What ideas do you have moving forward?

My first idea is to strengthen the capacities of the Student Labor Action Project on campus, so that it can simultaneously engage students in the fight for lower tuition and social/economic justice on campus. The UFWW will be participating in collective bargaining soon, and it will be up to student groups to mobilize students in support of the faculty. Furthermore, I was inspired by the life that collective direct action can breath into students- it is apparent that if more students are to be engaged and mobilized on campus, they must be exposed to collective direct action. They must also be educated on the many issues facing students today, and importantly they must believe that change is possible and desired. The 3 campaigns the USSA is undertaking- Fund the Future, State of Emergency, and Ending Sexual Violence on our Campuses- can provide the impetus necessary to engage Western students. It will be up to students who have experiences with the USSA to organize on campus in support of these campaigns.

3. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of USSA? How do you think WWU can best utilize direct membership with USSA in the upcoming year?

One strength of the USSA is that it is a progressive organization committed to progress on a wide range of issues that extend beyond what is typically thought of as 'student issues'. This allows for the experienced activists of our generation to have a space to organize and network on a multitude of issues, as well as train other students as activists. While this should be desired, because the student movement has historically achieved the most success when it allies itself with other progressive movements and causes, it does lead to difficulties mobilizing students for the USSA who unfortunately do not share the same commitment to social justice. This results in an unfortunate ideological chasm within the broad student community, which might have to be addressed if a mass of students is to be mobilized.

I greatly value the USSA's commitment to direct action, but the organization would benefit greatly if it took a page out of the Quebec student movement (originally inspired by French syndicalism), which utilizes the strike and the unlimited general strike to place the maximum amount of pressure on public officials by disrupting the functioning of the economic system. Students need to be able to vote on strike mandates in democratic unions so that strikes can have legitimacy, and so that students in one location can join striking students in another. Currently it does not appear as if the USSA or statewide student associations have the infrastructure to support/organize a mass mobilization of students on a large scale. Whether the USSA should be aiming for mass mobilization and disruption is debatable, but I would argue that nothing less would allow students to achieve their demands, as in the case of Quebec or Chile. Certain scholars of social movement theory would agree with me.

Western can best utilize membership in the USSA by bringing as many GROW trainings to campus as possible, as many speakers/activists to campus as possible, and use student government infrastructure and resources to support USSA campaigns and the groups and activists who lead those campaigns.

4. Other thoughts, comments, questions, concerns, etc?

Thanks to Sarah Kohout for all the work she did to make this trip run smoothly!

Marya

1. What did you learn at USSA LegCon and how will you apply it to your work on campus?

I learned a ton of diverse things so I hardly know where to start. I learned a lot of facts in workshops about issues surrounding students of color in college, sexual assault concerns, allyship, higher education funding, and other specific lessons. Further I learned a variety of personal things from the 1-on-1 conversations I had with students from different schools and in the various (I participated in 3) caucus spaces. I also learned specialized lobby training which makes me feel more empowered to use my voice to speak up at WWU! Mostly

I've been trying to bring the inclusivity and everything I learned about accessibility back to the Black Student Union which is my main club.

2. What ideas do you have moving forward?

Right now my two main ideas are to continue reshaping the BSU to include black identities that have been marginalized (starting with Queer POC who we will be collaborating with soon), and to help generate participation for causes like the State of Emergency Campaign and ASURT's watch on the Raid on Student Aid.

3. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of USSA? How do you think WWU can best utilize direct membership with USSA in the upcoming year?

USSA is still very new to me, but from my experience at LegCon I would say their biggest strengths are their really great, inspiring, kind and genuine staff, and that they think of everything. By that I mean they attempt to address and mention every identity/qualifier they can to be inclusive which is great. But as for weaknesses I would say that some of the attempts weren't deep enough, such as the delayed and then poorly taught workshop on how to be an ally to people of color/lack of thoughtfulness behind certain actions that had potential but were too surface level. More planning will likely fix many of their problems. I think WWU should definitely use the information and campaigns they gather about important student issues and put them on our agenda to work with. They have a great vision! It sounds like students will be attending Congress in the Summer so I hope that happens.

4. Other thoughts, comments, questions, concerns, etc?

I definitely enjoyed the conference and wish that more people could attend and feel as empowered as an activist as I do, but I also realize that the reason there aren't more is due to cost. The conference is far away and expensive and I feel like maybe it would be more beneficial to send a larger number of students to local conferences. That being said I don't know what the availability of similar conferences is like on the West Coast but it's just a thought. I'm super grateful for the experience!

Elva Nitereka

Reflection Questions for USSA LegCon 2015 USSA Reflection Questions:

1. What did you learn at USSA Congress and how will you apply it to your work on campus?

Since attending USSA Congress, I have become transformed as an individual. I was first introduced to USSA campaigns back in the fall of 2014, I was still not eager to join the State of Emergency campaign back then. It was until I got to experience the conference first hand that I gained new interest and deeper passion for understanding and navigating social policies. I am currently a junior at Western Washington University, and my entire education this year and the next year will be financed on government loans. I also come from an immigrant household, I am first generation Burundian-Canadian, and a recent American citizen. Although socially Canada and the U.S don't seem that different, there have been some changes since moving here including access to health care, and financial aid. My parents are still unfamiliar with the American system of higher education, because they both attended college outside of the continent. After attending USSA I learned how much I lacked in knowledge about who financed my education. I did not truly understand the severity of these social policies, until I realized how much debt I had already gathered. I had the opportunity to learn the importance of being collective when trying to enact change. As students we really do need to prioritize social policies which affect us. Democracy should be people centered, just as education should be centered by the needs and resources for students. I have learned through USSA not to overlook the importance of my finances and they will affect the housing, and educational opportunities for my children in the future.

2. What ideas do you have moving forward?

Moving forward I would like to continue working on the State of Emergency campaign working on the retention of students of color in higher education. Currently there are 224 out of 15,000 students on Western Washington's campus who identify as black, and only 25% of them will graduate in four years. I can recall over my three years here how difficult and still how difficult it is to graduate. Not only are there a lack of resources for students of color on this campus, but there are not enough students of color or Black identified students on our campus. I believe that it is my responsibility as a third year Black woman to help facilitate change to fight for the education of brown and black bodies on this campus. I am not only demanding increased support on campus, but also support for seniors to transition into graduation, and to employment.

3. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of USSA? How do you think WWU can best utilize direct membership with USSA in the upcoming year?

I believe that overall the conference was interesting I am still trying to wrap my head around all of my experiences including my stay in DC. I liked the varieties of workshops, including Beyoncé Feminism to Policy analysis. I enjoyed that the campaign to End Sexual Violence on Campuses, supported the Carry the Weight project. I appreciated that we had the opportunity to meet with politicians first hand, and the realism.

There is always room for improvement when organizing a movement. I believe that people often believe that a movement ends once the physical space has disappeared. I wish there could have been work towards continuing these movements beyond being in DC and at Leg Con, because for some students including myself resistance has never been a choice, it is the only means I have to becoming free. My best time at the conference would have to be the People of African Descent caucus space, it was the only place I have ever had organic healing in my life. I have never felt so freed, and like I could breathe. The room was always

full of good energy which has not only uplifted my soul but I feel more empowered as a human being. I feel that WWU can best utilize USSA by being more involved and inclusive in their campaigns. USSA represents over 1.5 million students around the nation gain more equity in education. This importance needs to be stressed more on this campus, because we all represent those students, and all of our lives need to be taken into account for when USSA students and staff are lobbying in DC.

4. Other thoughts, comments, questions, concerns, etc?

Overall I am forever grateful for this opportunity which I believe could not have happened without the support of the Associated Students, The AS Representation and Engagement Programs(REP) office, and also the VP of Governmental Affairs, Sarah Kohout, US Student Association USSA) and many more. I don't believe that I would have ever had the opportunity to independently finance myself to this conference, if it wasn't for the support of all these organizations and people. I hope to return in the future if not I hope that at least a good amount of women of color at Western Washington University continue being involved and attending USSA events

Belina Seare

1. What did you learn at USSA LegCon and how will you apply it to your work on campus?

I truly appreciated and have been so grateful for the opportunity to attend USSA LegCon and to get a chance to engage with student activists and organizers across the country. I think above all else, I was looking forward to reconnecting with people at USSA and strengthening relationships with them. At USSA LegCon I've learned the value of investing in these relationships and the knowledge that in this struggle for education justice, we are not alone. I think one of the key things that I took away was the importance of staying active and being vocal. Often time, as young people, we are silenced and told that we should accept the status quo. All

throughout LegCon, we were challenged to push back against this ideal. As such, I feel what I will be taking back to campus is the fearlessness to be vocal and keep pushing for the change that other students and myself want to see.

2. What ideas do you have moving forward?

After coming back from LegCon, I really want to see the State of Emergency campaign take off. It was truly amazing to work on this campaign prior to leaving to LegCon and have some people from Western's delegation already involved. Once we got to LegCon, there were even more people who took part in the SOE training's and briefings, and expressed their passion to help organize on this campaign. There are already ideas flourishing and tactics adopted from USSA that will be implemented to help escalate this campaign. Also, we had the opportunity to lobby on the two pieces of legislation connected to the State of Emergency campaign, the Voting Empowerment Act and the End Racial Profiling Act! Having this experience helped us understand how important it is to be organizing on a grassroots level, but also legislatively.

3. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of USSA? How do you think WWU can best utilize direct membership with USSA in the upcoming year?

There are a lot strengths to USSA as far as being able to lend some tools to students who are looking to organize and create change on a campus, local, state, and federal level. Also , students are able to connect with students which ultimately strengthens the student movement. However, because USSA conferences usually only last 4-5 days, it doesn't allow for much time to go deep into issues or address problems within the spas that can be implemented and really understood. Im not sure what the solution to this particular weakness as far as hastiness in some aspects of the organization, but I am very open to collectively brainstorming with folks who felt the same way as well. I think WWU can best utilize its direct membership with USSA by continuing to send larger groups in it's delegation, because the more students who participate, the stronger Western's campus will be in facilitating the change that they want to see.

Losa Berhane

USSA Reflection

At the Legislative Convention, I learned how to become more involved in activism, whether that be lobbying, analyzing senate and house bills, other campaigns or actions students were taking on their campus. I'll apply it to my work on campus by putting more effort in the campaigns brought by USSA along with making information and opportunities for leadership more accessible to students.

Moving forward I want to build a collective of students who are critical are want to learn to be critical and start putting those words into action about how institutions can better serve us as students, students who hold marginalized identities and students with a vision for social change.

The strengths of USSA was the collaboration between so many campuses and the encouragement to learn from each other (in which we did) was honestly the best to connect with other student activists and organizers. I enjoyed acting in the rallies however I believe many participant were entering the space from a privileged perspective such as the dis-acknowledgement of privilege in negotiated with police as well as the second action where I felt people weren't taking the fact that young black girls and boys were locked up in a juvenile detention and couldn't or didn't realize that. I really appreciated the vibe checkers we had to check whether we were act usually creating a space that was safe for the members. My greatest take away was the people of African descent caucus, I was able to connect and grow just in the little time I was with them and wish we had more time. There were many microaggressions, appropriation and lack of context present. Wish it was more accessible for people with disabilities and more time for healing because the whole trip was a lot of heavy stuff to take in in such a short amount of time. There were also some great speakers at the award ceremony who were inspiring and real change makers. WWU should plan for more funding because I know many students wanted to go but didn't have the money because there were only a certain amount of funding especially for those who did pay out of pocket.