

Student program improves community service

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Tulane University's CACTUS Academy strengthens campus-driven community service through a semester-long schedule of meetings, workshops and lectures designed for first-year students. (Photo provided by Tulane CACTUS)

As Tulane University continues its long tradition of community service, Tulane students are taking an active role in cultivating student leaders who are “community conscious.” [CACTUS Academy](#) is a leadership program designed to challenge students to view community service through a prism of race, class and gender.

The CACTUS Academy program is a semester-long schedule of meetings, workshops and lectures designed for first-year students who have not completed any service work in New Orleans.

“This program came about through some critiques that CACTUS (Community Action Council for Tulane University Students) lacked programming that prepared students to serve in the community,” said Nicole Caridad Ralston, faculty adviser for CACTUS Academy.

To make community service more meaningful for students and impactful for community members, the students leading CACTUS created this program with support from Tulane’s Center for Public Service and implemented it for the first time this fall.

“CACTUS Academy is a place to question, debate, and fully understand the meaning of racism, classism and gender inequality,” said Lipaz Avigal, a CACTUS council member who serves as a leader of the program.

CACTUS Academy also compiles a [calendar](#) of on-campus events that relate to its mission. Leaders-in-training are asked to attend five events, which allows students to tailor the program to their service interests.

“I’m in a social policy class, where we discuss Teach for America, how they came into New Orleans, replacing a predominately African-American teacher workforce with a predominately white workforce, and what that replacement means for local students,” said Sonali Chadha, a member of the academy’s fall cohort.

“It was interesting to have a speaker from Teach for America speak to the CACTUS Academy because it actually changed my view of that program.”

CACTUS Academy is currently accepting applications for the spring. [Click here](#) for more information.

Samah Ahmed is a junior majoring in public health at Tulane University.

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