CEL Presentation Script

Who am I?
For those of you that don’t know me, my name is Josh and I’m a fourth year SASAH and creative writing student looking to work in mental health advocacy and, more generally, civic engagement after graduation.

Introduction Slide
That’s me! For the last 8 years, I’ve been passionately advocating for reducing the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness which is one of the major barriers to accessing help and maintaining wellness. I’ve also been working toward change for the mental health systems in my communities, particularly Western. This past year, I have been taking steps toward mental health reform through my role as Education Commissioner as part of the mental health advocacy club Active Minds Western. Given my long history with this movement and my professional aspirations, it made a lot of sense for me to use my advocacy work as my CEL project this semester.

Who are we? What do we do?
So, what is Active Minds and what we do at Western? For those of you unfamiliar, Active Minds is a transnational advocacy organization founded by a university student after her brother’s death by suicide. The organization, with its headquarters in Washington D.C., aims to change the conversation about mental health by empowering student voices. The organization is made up of university chapters with the majority residing in American institutions. While the Western chapter belongs to this parent organization, we have a fair amount of operational autonomy.
Active Minds Western

Active Minds Western, which recently underwent several structural changes, was built on five foundational pillars: advocacy, education, connections, brand awareness, and future growth. Taken together, these pillars serve our mission statement “to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness by promoting acceptance, educating students, and advocating for mental wellness.”

Organizational Structure

Active Minds Western has one of the largest executive teams of all USC clubs with over 50 members in various positions, from president all the way to intern, alongside over 150 general members. The executive breakdown looks something like this (reference graphic), with the organization split into seven portfolios: advocacy, external, communications, internal, events, creative, and finance. As you can see, the education portfolio falls under the internal umbrella. So that’s what the structure looked like at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, it looked more like this.

Organizational Structure 2

Due to some complications AKA university, we lost our education coordinator midway through the year, but I was lucky enough to work with these two lovely humans (reference graphic), Sam Bengall, VP Internal, who oversaw the implementation of the education portfolio, and my intern-turned-coordinator, Lena Schreyer, who helped me prepare and facilitate education workshops.

What We’ve Done.

So you have some idea of who we are, but what have we done? Last year, Active Minds researched, prepared, and published a set of policy recommendations in response to Western’s Student Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan which came out near the end of the year.
We campaigned heavily for a ‘yes’ vote on Western’s mental health plebiscite, and have run an intersectional needs assessment two years in a row. Our club currently sits on the university’s mental health ad hoc committee and provides ongoing input relating to mental health reform at Western. For all our work last year, we were crowned club of the year by the USC.

My Role

That was when my passion for advocacy really took off. Inspired by the work that was being done, I met with Tom Lee, last year’s Active Minds president, to create the Education Portfolio and add it to the Active Minds organizational structure.

Goals for the Year

This year, I set out to build the foundation of the Education Portfolio, increase mental health literacy within Active Minds through an executive workshop, increase awareness about mental health services on campus through wellness workshops, and stimulate conversations about mental health and mental illness on campus through informal events.

The Process

It was a big job and I didn’t feel confident. I had no idea what our community reception would be given our perceived lack of expertise, mental health literacy varied widely between members, and I had to play the entire year by ear because the portfolio was so new.

What I did

To prevent a seemingly inevitable choice paralysis, I focused on tangibles. Throughout the course of the year, I worked with my Education Coordinator to research, create, and facilitate five mental health workshops with a specific focus on action-oriented wellness strategies. I also attended and facilitated a few Community Hangouts which are hour-long community-building mental health conversations. Finally, I put together a turnover document that assesses the year and details a cohesive plan and timeline for next year’s Education Commissioner.
Program Impact

Alongside positive verbal feedback throughout, 85% of participants in the first workshop felt that they learned something new. After the last workshop, a participant actually asked me to present to her frosh which was a sure sign of success. I also facilitated several conversations during Community Hangouts that led to changes in the club structure and direction for next year. Overall, I would say I had a positive impact on the club as a whole, and the workshops were fairly successful, despite some problems.

Problems

What were those problems? Within the workshops, a notable lack of marketing led to low turnout, which, in turn, entailed a lack of contributions due to speaking anxiety. While this wasn’t an issue I could solve myself, I relayed it to my VP and we talked about implementing promotional changes for next year. Outside of the workshops, an inefficient workflow frontloaded a lot of the work which caused accelerated timelines and unnecessary stress. This stress was compounded by the uncertainty I felt due to differing education levels which made it difficult to direct the focus of the workshops. To combat this, I consistently fell back on the two R’s during content creation to keep it realistic and relatable. This shift ensured that workshops remained relevant for the students they were engaging.

What Did I Learn?

Over the course of the semester, I learned better time management and organizational skills as I balanced various commitments alongside mental health lows. I came to understand the value of establishing a clear project vision at the outset and engaging with feedback sources to tailor presentations to the given audience. Perhaps most importantly, I learned to ask for help when I needed it which allowed me to quickly adapt to new challenges – an essential skill in the ever-changing environment of advocacy work.
Thank You for Listening!

Throughout my time at Western, I’ve come to the same stumping conclusion: education is pretty pointless without action. To keep moving forward, we need to enact the knowledge we gain in our communities. For me, that means being a mental health advocate and doing what I can to help those around me. It means pushing progress along, despite how painstakingly long it can feel. I don’t know what action will look like for you, but if there’s one thing I hope you take away from this presentation, it’s that we all have the capability to make a remarkable difference in our communities. Thank you for listening.