Every year, the University of Chicago attracts thousands of students who dream of making a positive difference in their communities, their countries, and their world. The Institute of Politics is where they learn how. Founded in 2013 by former White House Senior Advisor David Axelrod (AB ’76), the mission of the non-partisan Institute of Politics (IOP) is to ignite in University of Chicago students a passion for politics, public service, and civic engagement and to provide a forum for the debate and discussion of critical national and international issues.

One issue of particular importance to the health of our democracy in this moment is the country’s growing political and geographic divides. Now more than ever, communities nationwide are islands of rural red and urban blue, with little dialogue or interaction between them. While disagreement in American politics is not uncommon, the utter lack of understanding between urban and rural communities -- and the resulting dangerous caricatures each holds of the other -- is alarming. It poisons and paralyzes our politics, and calls for our urgent attention. As we look towards the upcoming 2020 election cycle and beyond, the IOP is asking: How can we equip urban and rural students to gain a better understanding of one another, have productive conversations across difference, and find shared solutions to the challenges that our communities are facing?

Through the IOP’s Bridging the Divide: A Public Service Leadership Program, UChicago students are building the skills and perspectives to carry out this divide-bridging work. Bridging the Divide first launched in January 2018 as a partnership between the IOP and Eureka College, a private Christian college in central Illinois. In 2019, Bridging the Divide added a third partner, Arrupe College, a two-year community college that serves a diverse, Chicago-based population, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue higher education. This year, the immersive program brought together 27 underclassmen from the three schools to address urban and rural divisions around three topics: the economy, workforce development, and immigration. During visits to Chicago, central Illinois, and Springfield, students spoke with elected officials and community voices about how each issue impacted their community.

In Chicago, students kicked off the weekend by observing a focus group of 2016 Clinton voters conducted by David Binder Research. Later, they met with local residents and leaders from the Metropolitan Planning Council, the Mayor’s Office, and City Colleges of Chicago to gain insight into how stakeholders are addressing the city’s economic and workforce development challenges. Finally, they discussed how to make progress on immigration reform with former Congressman Luis Gutierrez, the Illinois Business Immigration Coalition, and The Resurrection Project.
In Eureka and Peoria, students observed a similar focus group with 2016 Trump voters, then visited two faith-based nonprofits to understand how urban and rural downstate communities were tackling poverty. They visited an innovative career and technical school, spoke with the mayor of Bloomington, and learned about two small rural towns grappling with the challenges and opportunities brought about by a growing immigrant population.

For their final meeting in Springfield, students focused on applying the lessons from their Chicago and Eureka visits to policymaking and legislation. They spoke with state legislators, a gubernatorial advisor, a lobbyist, and a journalist to deepen their understanding of state-level politics and policy. Throughout the visit, students were asked to reflect: how do political divides limit the ability of elected officials from rural and urban areas to work together, compromise, and solve problems? How can those barriers be broken? And what can young people do to help?

All in all, students left Bridging the Divide with a deeper understanding of concerns of Illinois voters across wide-ranging geographies and how geography drives voters’ political attitudes. They developed strong relationships with peers from very different geographic, political, racial, and economic backgrounds. Finally, they identified opportunities to apply this divide-bridging work in their personal, academic, and professional lives moving forward. Some examples of students follow-up plans include: volunteering at organizations they learned about through Bridging the Divide, pursuing internships with legislators and organizations that are actively working across partisan and geographic divides, and developing innovative approaches to help their respective communities gain skills in media literacy and exposure to different perspectives. The IOP also facilitated opportunities for students to continue on their BTD journey, which included paid internships with many of the Chicago and Peoria organizations that they met throughout the program.

Moving forward, the IOP aims to work with higher education institutions across the country to develop their own Bridging the Divide programs. If our country is to make progress on the stark urban-rural divides that have paralyzed our politics, we need a network of colleges and universities doing their part to close those divides. We need to equip young leaders around the country with skills and perspectives that will help them understand one another, have productive conversations across difference, and seek shared solutions to the challenges faced by every community. **We and our partners would welcome the opportunity to share our approach in more detail with any interested parties. For more information, please contact Purvi Patel, the IOP’s Director of Civic & Campus Engagement at purvipatel@uchicago.edu.**