SCAC Awards Application

July 15, 2026

This applicaton is for:	J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award
Project Title	Student Leadership Summit
County or Counties	Fairfield County
Application Contact	Gene Stephens
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Project Written Submission

Project Summary

In April 2024, as part of National County Government Month, Fairfield County started the Student Leadership Summit. The goal was to invite high school students from the 3 local high schools to visit, tour the County Administration Building, learn about everyday operations and careers available and to particpate in a student-led mock County Council meeting. The 3 schools bring students that are typically involved in their respective Student Government Associations and Journalism students from the Fairfield Post, a local newspaper run by students.

Once students arrive, they are given a tour of the County Administration Building, with stops at departments: Administration, Emergency Management, Sheriff's Office, Finance, Procurement and IT. The tour is followed by presentations from Fairfield County Administration, different department managers and elected officials from the local, state and federal levels of government. The presentations are interactive where the students can ask questions as well as testing their current knowledge of how local, state and federal agencies and officials work together.

The presentations are followed by a trivia game about Fairfield County; the schools compete to see which students know the most about their county. The students are then exposed to a mock County Council meeting, where selected students run the meeting with guidance from Fairfield County Council members. The last part is a discussion with the students about their concerns or queries when it comes to local governance.

In 2026, we invited the Fairfield County Chamber of Commerce and the Mayor of the Town of Winnsboro to talk about their respective organizations and show how they work with Fairfield County to address the needs of the citizens and community. This year we hosted 65 students and 5 chaperones from the 3 high schools.

The event in 2024 was focused solely on Fairfield County; it has evolved to include state and federal officials and the Fairfield County municipalities. We wanted to educate the students about how the county operates and how it impacts their families daily lives. Voter Registration is also in attendance to register 18 year old students to vote and encourage them to be cognizant of local governance and how to be involved as a citizen or elected officials.

Project Effort/Difficulty

Starting the program was very easy. Because of my relationship with the school districts, municipalities and NGO's, the schools were eager to particpate. The only cost associated with the event is the lunch provided to all students, chaperones and staff members that particpated. Fairfield County Administration covers this cost. In 2025, one of our local businesses paid for the meals for everyone.

The agencies that particpated in the 2026 summit were: Fairfield County; Sheriff's Office; Voter Registration; Town of Winnsboro; Fairfield County Chamber of Commerce and Senator Tim Scott's Office.

Every agency that we asked to participate immediately accepted the invitation. We accomplished the goals that we set out for the event. But each event shows us where we can expand it and make the experience better for the students.

Benefit/Importance of Project

As a former educator at Fairfield Central High School, I noticed how little students knew about their town and county and how it operates and provides the services that impact their lives. We wanted to start a program exposing students to how our county operates and works with other agencies to meet the needs of the citizens.

Without engaged citizens, local government doesn't know there are problems or identify problems that have been overlooked. Our goal is to expose our young people to county operations, how it impacts their lives and what they can do to be more informed citizens.

We do community forums/town halls for different studies and initiatives we are trying to accomplish but no young people are ever in attendance. This summit gives us an opportunity to talk directly to the students and hear their concerns and answer questions they have about how the county is governed.

Directly, it benefits the students and chaperones in attendance. But there are residual benefits that could impact the lives of every citizen. Some students may be inspired to work for local government; some may be inspired to run for elected office and try to make our home a better place to live. The more informed the students are, the bigger impact they can have in the future of Fairfield County.

Every student in attendance not only learns about how local governance works and how agencies work together but this program also gives them info that they can share with their peers and future colleagues. A more informed citizen base, can only benefit the county.

We accomplished our goal of educating our students and hopefully inspire them to want to be a part of local government.

After the event this year, several advisors and students have reached out to the county about being an intern or shadowing opportunities. To nurture this interest, have several student interns for the Summer and in the Fall we are expanding the program by adding shadowing days for specific careers in the county. Students will be able to sign up for days to shadow specific careers that interest them.

Project Originality/Innovation

I'm not really sure of other initiatives like this but there probably are some. The initial inspiration came from my time spent working at Fairfield Central High School. As a 3rd grader growing up in Orangeburg County, I remember visiting/touring the SC State House and hearing from the guides about how the state is run and the different legislative bodies that make decisions for the citizens.

I wanted to do something like that for our students at the county level. One aspect that I haven't heard of anyone else doing is the student led mock County Council meeting. During this meeting, current County Council members guide the students through a council meeting and learn some of the basics of Roberts Rules of Order. The students discussed topics, justified their position on those topics and voted on the action items.

Concluding Remarks

When I worked at Fairfield Central High School, I realized not only did I know very little about the local government but the students didn't either. many couldn't tell me who the Mayor of Winnsboro was. As the Chamber of Commerce President from 2018-23, I saw that many students didn't know there are great careers working for municipalities and counties.

When I started with Fairfield County as the Public Information Officer, my job was to dissiminate information to the citizens. I felt an obligation to spread information to our students as well so when its time for them to step up and lead, they will be better prepared and informed. The students and chaperones really enjoyed the experience but the staff and elected officials enjoy it as well.

Today's students are our future leaders and it is our responsibility to instill community pride and get them to understand that the future will be dictated by them; it's never too early to start preparing for the future.

It also gives us insight into what is important to them in that stage of life and for us to look for ways to make their lives better.

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Fairfield County Student Leadership Summit

Winnsboro, SC— May 3rd, 2026 — On April 30, 2026, Fairfield County proudly hosted its 3rd Annual Student Leadership Summit!

We were honored to welcome students from Fairfield Central High School, Richard Winn Academy, and Midlands STEM Charter School for a day filled with leadership development, collaboration and inspiration. These outstanding young leaders represent the bright future of our community, and it was incredible to see their passion, ideas and commitment to making a difference.

The students learned about how local government impacts their daily lives, careers available in local government, answered some Fairfield County trivia and participated in a Mock County Council Meeting. The student led Mock Council voted no to school uniforms for all students, no to switching to a 4 day school week and voted to approve a Gateway Signage Project.

Presenters: Vic Carpenter/County Administrator; Jonathan Burroughs/Deputy Administrator; Joseph Toledo/Community Development Director; Brad Douglas/Chief Deputy Sheriff's Office; Demetrius Chatman/Town of Winnsboro Mayor; Stacy Hare/Chamber of Commerce President; Courtney Jackson/Regional Director Senator Tim Scott's Office; Kim Roberts/Clerk to Council; Oren Gadson/County Council Member and Don Goldbach/County Council Member.

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For more information, press only:

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Fairfield County

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July 15th, 2026

Dear Selection Committee,

It is my pleasure to offer this letter of recommendation in support of Fairfield County's nomination for the South Carolina Association of Counties' J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award for the Annual Fairfield County Student Leadership Summit.

As Chairman of Fairfield County Council, I have witnessed firsthand the positive impact this program has on the young people in our community. The Student Leadership Summit provides an exceptional opportunity for students to gain a meaningful understanding of county government and the important role local leadership plays in serving our citizens.

Throughout the summit, students participate in guided tours of county government facilities, engage with department directors and county staff, hear directly from elected officials, and learn about the many services provided by county government. One of the most valuable components of the program is the mock County Council meeting, where students assume the roles of council members, debate issues, and make decisions that reflect the responsibilities and challenges of local governance. This hands-on experience gives participants a practical appreciation for public service, leadership, and civic engagement.

The Annual Fairfield County Student Leadership Summit has become an important investment in our future leaders. By exposing students to the functions of county government and encouraging active participation, the program helps cultivate informed, engaged citizens who better understand how local government impacts their daily lives. It also demonstrates that public service is both meaningful and accessible to the next generation.

The dedication of our county staff, elected officials, school partners, and community leaders has made this program a tremendous success. Their commitment to educating and inspiring our youth exemplifies the spirit of innovation and excellence that the J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award recognizes.

I am proud to support Fairfield County's nomination and strongly recommend the Annual Fairfield County Student Leadership Summit for this distinguished award. I believe this program serves as a model for counties across South Carolina and reflects our shared commitment to developing future leaders through civic education and community engagement.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

Clarence Gilbert

Clarence Gilbert/ Fairfield County Council Chairman