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Cover Page Footnote

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Engaging Students in Politics Through Service-Learning: A Guide to Best Practices in College Voter Registration and Education

Laura Merrifield Wilson

Abstract

Service-learning projects enable students to apply course concepts while connecting with and providing valuable services to their larger community. Such projects are particularly valuable in civic education, where students can act as the driving forces behind political engagement education and motivation efforts. “UIndyVotes!” is a student project focused on voter registration and education at the University of Indianapolis in Indiana. It aims to engage the campus and the community in upcoming elections. In its first two iterations (in 2016 and 2018), the project organized voter registration tables, door-to-door canvassing, and voter education programs. This case study assesses the efforts of the project, including its objectives, processes, programming, and partnerships, and recommends best practices for future campus voter registration drives. The improvements observed between iterations illustrate the value of organizing early, securing key partnerships, and delegating tasks via the university network and system available to students. This case study offers guidance and recommendations for how instructors can adopt and adapt these practices to create or enhance similar service-learning experiences on their own campuses.

In the fall of 2016, a group of students majoring in political science and their professor created “UIndyVotes!” a voter registration drive serving the campus and the larger community during an exciting election cycle. The initial pilot was successful, though sparse, and after learning from mistakes and challenges, a reiteration began for the 2018 election cycle. Like the initial drive, the 2018 drive was initiated by students who were invigorated by the election; but this time, faculty members outside the political science discipline, staff members across campus, and community partners were all interested in joining the effort. To prepare for an improved version of the program, the faculty leader analyzed gaps in outreach and inconsistencies in other components of the 2016 project based on feedback from students and community partners. Faculty, staff, and students from various academic disciplines and departments, including the Center for Community Outreach and Service Learning, Office of Student Affairs, the College Democrats, and the College Republicans composed a leadership committee. They suggested, arranged, and organized drafts of schedules and lists of programs while identifying and seeking funding from both internal and external sources.

Despite having the same name, mission, and objectives, “UIndyVotes!” Voter Registration Drive changed considerably from the 2016 pilot

program to 2018’s improved iteration. The project utilized community and participant feedback to expand its reach while improving the quality and quantity of activities in which participants could engage. Ultimately, the 2018 iteration of “UIndyVotes!” engaged more participants and achieved wider reach.

This case study analyzes the growth from the 2016 pilot program to the improved 2018 program, considering challenges and developments in terms of key features of the voter registration drive. It begins by comparing the project’s central components—defining its mission and objectives, designing the marketing materials, arranging mobilization, coordinating outreach and community partnerships, organizing programming, and securing funding—across the two cycles. Then, based on these initiatives and outcomes, it recommends best practices for organizing and implementing similar voter registration drives on other college campuses. Explanations and optional variations are also presented for consideration. Finally, the case study concludes with a discussion of the potential impact of projects like this and suggestions for further opportunities.

Literature Review

Voter registration drives have made a consistently positive impact on voter registration itself, though the estimated magnitude of that

impact has varied across studies. Seminal texts within the canon have long held that more difficult registration laws and procedures (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980) along with the burden of expiring registrations (Schlozman et al., 2004; Squire et al., 1987) can depress electoral participation. Nickerson (2015) noted that “a sizable number of citizens are deterred from voting as a direct result from voter registration” (p. 99) and that efforts to reduce this barrier lead to an increase in registered voters. The challenges associated with registration can be addressed with voter registration drives, which Cain and McCue (1985) determined provide the guidance and help that increases citizens’ likelihood of registering to vote (compared with the changes they will register independently).

Numerous scholars have found that an increase in voter registration does not necessarily translate into an increase in voter turnout (Gans, 1990; Hanmer, 2009; Knack, 2001; Martinez & Hill, 1999). But because registration is a prerequisite for participation, increasing registration increases opportunities for individuals to participate (if they so choose) and thus promotes the democratic principle of participation. As Kasdan (2012) argued, “Our democracy is strongest when all eligible citizens participate. And to do so, they need to be registered to vote” (p. 1).

Using a voter registration drive as a service-learning opportunity allows college students to engage in politics without partisanship or deep knowledge of the discipline. Studies have shown the positive effects of service-learning experiences on students’ academic performance, values, self-efficacy, and leadership, all of which are important factors in being a productive citizen and community member (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler et al., 1997; Kahne & Spote, 2008; Markus et al., 1993). Marullo and Edwards (2000) further argued that service-learning can stimulate social change by engaging students as “active promoters of a more just society” (p. 895). An experimental study by Markus, Howard, and King (1993) revealed that students who participated in service-learning sections of college courses strengthened their “belief that one can make a difference in the world” (p. 411). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) expanded upon this by arguing that service-learning experiences can nurture students toward justice-oriented citizenship that seeks to identify injustice and to address the causes of the problem, not just the symptoms. Such efforts can further benefit both the students and the community when community-university partnerships align in

mission and serve to advocate for and empower all participants (Strand et al., 2003a, p. 17).

Service-learning has not always been applied to political science courses, but more recent literature spanning the last three decades demonstrates exciting potential for growth and success in such opportunities. Morgan and Streb (2001) determined that students involved in service-learning projects in which they can help make decisions strengthen their own sense of citizenship, arguing that “service-learning is a great tool to develop better citizens” (p. 167). Battistoni (2002) found that incorporating a voter registration drive as a service-learning component into a political science course led to an increase in registered voters as well as an enhancement of students’ critical thinking skills. Megivern (2010) further argued that such opportunities constitute “justice-based service-learning” (p. 66), a particularly relevant concept that encourages political engagement by seeking to address problems without involving partisanship.

Other studies have evaluated the impact of service-learning projects on students’ civic engagement more generally, and many have reported that students’ participation in these programs has a positive impact on their political participation and outlook (Battistoni, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, 2009; Furco, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Winston (2015) found that this positive impact lasted long after participants graduated, particularly in terms of voting (p. 92). While Butin (2006) and Mitchell et al. (2015) have challenged the certainty of these claims, the likelihood of a positive correlation between meaningful service-learning opportunities like voter registration drives and strengthening students’ educational, social, and political development underscores the prospective value of this pursuit.

The interest in and need for student voter registration drives is growing; Scholarship in the field is increasing, and resources devoted to making campus drives more efficient and effective are becoming more prevalent. Rank et al. (2019), chronicling their work with campus-wide voter registration drives in 2016 and 2018, concluded that this work provides “significant, underutilized opportunities for learning” (p. 145). Building on Gould et al. (2011), Hylton (2018) found that students were more likely to exhibit increased social empathy and civic literacy through civic engagement, while Barnett (2018) affirmed the positive impact of service-learning on political

efficacy. Students' leadership in civic engagement activities has likewise garnered media recognition (Anft, 2018; Bennion & Michelson, 2018; Stockman, 2018) and coincided with new resources available to aid in the process. Programs such as the ALL IN: Campus Democracy Challenge (Civic Nation, n.d.), Ask Every Student (n.d.), the Campus Engagement Election Project (n.d.), and the Campus Vote Project (n.d.) offer thoughtfully crafted resources that focus on topics such as training, recruitment, classroom integration, and digital connections (the latter prompted by COVID-19 for 2020 drives). These tools are free and easily accessible for student voter registration drives, making the effort less challenging and likely more successful—particularly during the 2020 cycle, when many campuses were conducting courses primarily or exclusively online.

Organizing and Implementing “UIndy Votes!” in 2016 and 2018

Defining Mission/Objectives

The 2016 pilot and the 2018 program were both driven by a simple mission: students helping students register to vote. Beyond this mission, however, the two iterations differed substantially in terms of their registration and education goals. While the 2016 pilot focused solely on registering students, the 2018 program expanded its goals to include registering community members through tabling at community venues, such as the local YMCA, and through strategic canvassing in low-income neighborhoods as well as those neighborhoods likely to include eligible but unregistered voters. Similarly, the 2018 program had more robust objectives related to educational programming, with an emphasis on community outreach to appeal to both community members and students.

Both iterations of the program took place on the campus of the University of Indianapolis with a student population of around 5,500, and in the surrounding southside Indianapolis community, which is notable for housing the largest Burmese American population in the country (Hussein, 2017). After the 2016 pilot, however, it became clear that simply focusing on voter registration without considering the education component was not achieving the goal that had motivated the drive in the first place: preparing voters, through both registration and education, to participate in upcoming elections. In 2018, the program's mission expanded to incorporate voter education

so that once individuals were registered, they had opportunities to learn more about voting and the next election.

The 2018 program's educational efforts began with a mini-lecture series on campus that aimed to educate attendees about topics important to American democracy. As part of the series, a “Constitution Crash Course” was held on Constitution Day, replete with birthday hats, cake, and conversation led by a faculty panel, both to commemorate the document's birthday and to teach attendees about the Constitution. The series also included a “Know Your Candidates” panel in which faculty led a presentation and audience discussion on the major positions, candidates, and issues that voters would see on the ballot. This series was open and advertised on campus as well as to the larger community. The program also arranged “watch parties” for the televised Senate debates and election night coverage; participants were treated to both a social atmosphere (with pizza, refreshments, and prizes for attendees) and an intellectual discussion, as faculty offered remarks prior to the programming and a led a debriefing and critical analysis afterward. These events were facilitated through on-campus partnerships with the Honors Student Association, the President's Office, the Student Affairs Office, the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and the Department of History and Political Science. By incorporating a variety of events at different dates, times, and spaces, the 2018 program prioritized voter education alongside registration and made education opportunities accessible to a wider audience.

Designing Marketing

Marketing “UIndyVotes!” both internally on campus and externally to the community enabled the program to recruit new members, advertise activities, and generate excitement about the election more broadly. In the 2016 pilot program, marketing was sparse though consistent, relying almost exclusively on participants' initiative in maintaining email correspondence and social media. No dedicated sites were created for the program.

The desire to establish a more consistent brand and to facilitate greater outreach on campus and in the community led to a more strategic marketing plan for the 2018 program. The university's communication and marketing and IT departments helped in this effort. A dedicated website and email address were created for the program, using

“UIndyVotes!” name as the URL. The website included official, high-quality pictures taken by the university photographer; a comprehensive calendar of activities with dates, times, and locations; a list of community partnerships and sponsorships; and links to the project’s official email and social media accounts. The communications and marketing team designed a logo for the drive’s exclusive use. Accounts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allowed the project to interact with participants and followers, post advertisements for upcoming events, answer common questions about voting, share motivational quotations about democracy, and repost participants’ “Why I Vote” stories (with their consent). The latter strategy was particularly effective because program members could share or repost stories from the “UIndyVotes!” accounts, exposing their friends and followers to those posts.

Arranging Mobilization

Most participants in the 2016 pilot program were students enrolled in the coordinating Campaigns and Elections course. Other students who had heard about the project and indicated interest via word-of-mouth were also able to join. In total, 23 students and four faculty members participated in 2016. A more organized approach in 2018, beginning with a training 2 weeks before kickoff, garnered a higher response rate and netted 32 students, six faculty, and four staff members. Activities strategically corresponded with the curriculum taught in the Campaigns and Elections course. Canvassing efforts, for instance, coincided with the textbook chapter and class discussion on face-to-face mobilization techniques.

In addition, weekly critical engagement exercises (in which students reflected on their experience and related it to the reading and dialogue in the class) gave students space for reflection and connection; their responses ranged from being surprised that they were able to interact with potential voters as much as they did, to disappointment that some people declined to register, to excitement when others who were already registered still wanted to thank them for their work and share their passion with them. These weekly assignments provided invaluable assessments of what was effective and what could be improved in the program from the student perspective. Many students spoke about the challenges they faced while registering voters, including the complex forms that prospective registrants found confusing and intimidating and the negative responses that some students received

when asking people if they were registered. While most of the critical engagement exercises revealed students’ unanticipated positive experiences, their recognition of state differences in voter registration processes and the looming challenges of ballot access and voter disenfranchisement enabled critical discussion and analysis about the major contemporary challenges involving voting. Perhaps more than any other activity through “UIndyVotes!” this reflection exercise and subsequent conversation connected the daily work of the project with the larger national context.

Students enrolled in the coordinating course were required to attend program activities, but others across campus got involved as well. The leadership team expanded: While a single professor spearheaded efforts in 2016, in 2018 an Election Engagement Committee led the charge, including leaders from the College Democrats and College Republicans, the Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement, Indianapolis Student Government, Office of Student Affairs, and a specially designated student project coordinator. Thus, the 2018 program truly became a campus-wide effort. Members of the committee organized the events, recruited volunteers to participate, and, in some cases, helped donate money or supplies to offset expenditures (e.g., providing pizza for debate watch parties). The student project coordinator served as the student leader, exemplifying outstanding leadership, organization, and intellectual promise.

Participants were required to attend a 2-day, 2-hour training on how to register voters and respond to frequently asked questions. The first day of training was led by a representative from the Marion County Clerk’s Office, who discussed the voting process itself and brought in actual voting machines and mock ballots to allow participants to practice the voting experience themselves. The second day of training was led by a representative from the Indianapolis League of Women Voters, who taught the participants how to register others, modeled how to answer questions about the voting process, and facilitated role-playing scenarios in which participants pretended to register other participants and answer challenging but important questions.

While participating in the program, students in the Campaigns and Elections course were required to fulfill certain activity requirements in the categories of lecture, education, and immersion. In the 2016 pilot, students only needed to complete a minimum number of hours and often selected

activities with which they were already familiar and comfortable. This programming change gave students experience with all components of the project and prevented them from limiting themselves to presumably “easier” events or activities. It also aligned with the course’s objectives of exposing students to real experiences of voter mobilization, registration, and education.

Coordinating Outreach/Community Partnerships

Of all of the components that varied between the 2016 pilot and the 2018 program, the work with community partnerships changed most substantially. The debut of [project name] focused on convenience as a motivation for outreach, looking at groups and places that were geographically close to campus and thus easy to reach. The 2016 training was led by the Marion County Board of Elections (who returned in 2018 alongside the League of Women Voters), and off-campus outreach included working with the University Heights Neighborhood Association and the fourth-grade classes at Raymond F. Brandes Elementary School. These partnerships prioritized convenience and proximity to the university without considering impact, which limited the effectiveness of the work. This was especially evident in the canvassing effort in the surrounding neighborhood, which was comprised of older citizens who were regularly politically active and did not need to register to vote as well as students renting in the neighborhood who had already been reached through tabling on campus.

In 2018, the program began to reconsider its canvassing efforts; evaluating the places where residents were more likely to be unregistered and perhaps less informed about the election process led the program to consider a wider range of community partnerships. The service-learning and community partnership director on campus connected the program with two Indianapolis public housing neighborhoods, Laurelwood and Rowney Terrace, and with an adjacent community with a high Burmese American population and a welcoming homeowner’s association, Orchard Park. These neighborhoods each had leaders who were excited to partner with the program and felt that their community could benefit from its mission and activities. The university’s association with the Baxter YMCA also provided an off-campus opportunity to establish voter registration tables. The Y’s enthusiasm to participate was so great, in fact, that it advertised for [project name] and waived the membership fee for visitors coming

to the Y just to get registered. The elementary school activity was relocated to Jeremiah Gray Elementary, a school slightly further from campus that did not already benefit from a relationship with the university; the program was thus able to expand its reach into the larger community. In all cases, planning and meeting with community partners and leaders both before and during the events ensured that expectations were clear and that operations ran smoothly.

Organizing Programming

Programming is the central feature of any voter registration drive: It should not only support the mission of voter registration but also outline how that mission will be realized. Both the 2016 and 2018 iterations of “UIndyVotes!” used voter registration tables in key locations on campus (especially the dining halls, student center, and residence halls) and door-to-door canvassing efforts to reach potentially unregistered voters. In the 2016 pilot, volunteers primarily used paper forms to register voters; the 2018 program shifted to electronic submission because it was more efficient and more accountable than the paper forms. It is important to note that in canvassing efforts where internet access was less available or in cases where registrants did not have a state driver’s license (a necessary component of the online application), paper forms were always available as a backup and used as needed.

The 2018 iteration of the program included more education-based events, which ensured that the program was educating new voters in addition to registering them. Because Indiana’s voter registration deadline is 29 days before an election, the program was able to continue hosting educational events past the registration deadline in early October to keep excitement and momentum up before the election itself. In total, programming included voter registration tables in the student center and at the YMCA, door-to-door voter canvassing efforts in three neighborhoods, a mini-lecture series with a roundtable discussion on the Constitution, a “Know Your Candidates” panel about races on the ballot, two Senate debate watch parties, an educational activity with the fourth-grade classes, and an election night watch party at the student center.

Securing Funding

Because the actual cost of registering voters is quite small, a voter registration drive can be effective with minimal funding. Financial support

is crucial, however, to expanding a drive's aims and for creating cohesion and excitement among participants and registrants. As Nickerson (2015) noted, even grassroots efforts running voter registration drives can be expensive in terms of both time and money.

Expanding the drive's impact required coming up with more programs and more money to fund them. "UIndyVotes!" was fortunate to receive an Election Engagement Grant from the Indiana Campus Compact for both the 2016 pilot and 2018 program, which covered printing and materials (such as T-shirts, food, table decorations, and clipboards and pens for canvassing). When possible, free tools already available to the program were used, such as the university's website design and hosting resources, professional pictures, and email accounts. To subsidize other costs, the program partnered with various groups on campus who were willing to loan resources to help the effort. The President's Office allowed the program to rent the president's house for the Senate debate watch parties and paid for refreshments for attendees. The Office of Student Affairs loaned the program space in the student center and covered food costs for the election night watch party, and the Shaheen College of Arts and Sciences helped cover some of the printing costs for flyers and handouts promoting the debate watch parties and the election night party. Mapping out each activity, detailing necessary costs, and noting supplemental but not required costs allowed for the formulation of a flexible budget that focused on making the effort as effective, efficient, and exciting as possible without losing sight of the mission.

Best Practices for Voter Registration Drives

Start Small

The focus of a voter registration drive can be as simple and direct as registering voters; a successful voter registration drive only has to accomplish that task. As "UIndyVotes!" has expanded and evolved in two iterations, the program has broadened its mission and objectives.

It now seeks to include a wider target audience (both college students and community members) and to educate and engage voters (in addition to registering them). Because program administrators are constantly learning and improving, the project will naturally change over time while maintaining voter registration as its core focus. The COVID-19 pandemic required the program to significantly change how it reached voters ahead of the 2020 election (these changes will be discussed below),

but the challenges neither deterred nor distracted from the primary missions of voter registration and education. Though this case study highlights the program's six key components and how they improved from the initial pilot, each of these components could be pared down significantly to match the needs and resources available. They provide a general framework of how to organize and structure a voter registration drive on campus, with the benefit of flexibility to accommodate different situations.

Organize Early

One of the most notable differences between the two program cycles was the level of organization. In 2016, the activities, partnerships, and funding were secured just weeks before the program began, leaving little time to plan, advertise, and recruit; the 2016 program was solely focused on execution. Three months before the drive kickoff in 2018, however, planning began with the creation of a cross-campus leadership committee and the brainstorming of activities, partnerships, and sponsorships. This cushion also provided time to fully incorporate the programming into the partner class's syllabus, to build in opportunities for student reflection, and to cultivate successful community partnerships. The 2018 program was able to ensure, as Strand et al. (2003a) have argued, that the project was working with the community organizations on how to best respond to their needs—not just presuming what those needs might be (p. 16). With the unanticipated events of 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, some of what was planned had to be executed differently, but the early planning sessions still provided a starting point for later revisions. In this case, beginning the planning process months out was ultimately less effective because the plans made in January and February of 2020 inevitably had to be revised. By communicating regularly with the university, community partners, and students, the program ensured that everyone was up-to-date with details and that all the necessary protocols were being followed to fulfill the program's mission of registering and educating voters while adhering to public health guidelines. Adaptability and grace made it possible to adjust as needed without scrapping the project entirely.

Securing funding and creating a website, email address, and social media accounts were important tasks to complete early. They allowed us to determine where we could/should allocate

Table 1. Best Practices Summary

Practice	2016 pilot	2018 revision
Start small	Limited to canvassing	Included tabling in addition to canvassing
	Focused on immediate community	Expanded strategically based on community needs and connections
	Concentrated just on voter registration	Added voter education component
Organize early	Began during the semester, making curricular additions difficult	Started in late spring to devise and incorporate activities that directly related to material in the syllabus and course structure
	Reached out to potential partners weeks before event(s)	Built relationships months in advance to allow for discussion, mutual assessment of needs and services, and plenty of time for preparation
	Did not use any official social media	Created website, design, and social media a few months before kickoff
Create strategic partnerships	Created partnerships based on convenience	Built connections with the larger community
	Relied on individual networks	Tapped into institutional networks
	Used personal contacts as available	Identified key players on campus and organized leadership committee to guide decision-making and implementation
	Provided basic services without considering community difference	Worked to approach each community based on its needs (i.e., employing a translator or emphasizing education when voters were already registered)
Keep good records	Took paper notes and logs to track participation and engagement	Kept details about meeting notes, participants' contact information, discussions and agreements with partners, etc.
	Relied on the paper sign-up method	Utilized Google Drive to share information with everyone virtually and allow for real-time changes

money and to showcase our work in the service of both marketing and recruitment. These activities occurred over the summer. Training began after Labor Day, and 3 weeks of voter registration tables and door-to-door canvassing filled out the rest of the month. An early state registration deadline meant that the time between the deadline and the actual election was dedicated to voter education

efforts that kept up the excitement before the election and further prepared the new voters for the actual voting process. Planning these activities, partnerships, and recruitment, preparation, and implementation logistics required a few months of work before the kickoff to make the program as smooth and as impactful as possible.

Create Strategic Partnerships

Partnerships on campus as well as in the community are essential for a successful voter registration drive, and “UIndyVotes!” improved its quality and breadth of outreach when it included other organizations and groups in the effort. Rather than having one primary leader, a committee was organized to include leadership from key areas across campus (including the Student Affairs Office, the Office for Service Learning and Community Partnerships, advisors and student presidents from the College Democrats and College Republicans, a faculty representative, and a staff representative). Members of the committee brought different strengths and ideas to the table and were able to focus their individual efforts on key activities matching their interests. The diverse leadership committee was also able to widen recruitment efforts beyond just political science students and into other groups of students on campus interested in the program’s mission.

Additionally, off-campus partnerships focused on community voter outreach were identified based on need and potential for impact. These partnerships incorporated mutual respect, shared goals, and power in line with the standards set by Strand et al. (2003b). Though the community partners declined to participate via the leadership committee because of the necessary time commitment, the leadership from all involved organizations still communicated regularly to ensure that the project was addressing needs and was beneficial to everyone involved. Partnerships in neighborhoods adjacent to the school were identified based on which populations would most benefit, including people living in public housing, seniors, and more recently naturalized Americans. Each community exhibited unique needs that were voiced by community leaders, which the project then addressed to make the experience as successful for each group as possible. Following Megivern’s (2010) conception of justice-based service-learning—the idea that students should respond to community needs without prescribed assumptions—[project name] created fliers with voting locations, directions, and polling hour reminders in the public housing neighborhoods, as many residents were already registered to vote but were interested in more information about how to do so. In the neighborhood with a large Burmese American population, bilingual students accompanied each canvassing group to eliminate the language gap as a barrier to discussion. These relationships required fostering goodwill by

attending neighborhood meetings, passing out flyers explaining the drive, and meeting with key leaders within the community. The effort was well worth the investment.

This investment in partner communities was evident in the wake of the program’s reorganization due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Though some public health restrictions and institutional policies prevented the program from working directly with some community partners (i.e., door-to-door canvassing was paused as a safety precaution), the program nonetheless reiterated its commitment to the communities by continuing to meet and work with them, ensuring them that the pause in canvassing was only temporary and that the program still valued their partnership and wanted to resume work when it became possible.

Keep Good Records

Maintaining records of all activities, contact information, receipts, and expenditures is vital to running an efficient voter registration drive. Because communicating information regularly is a necessary part of the organization, having a full list of participants’ contact information, including contact information for community partners, makes communication easier and more consistent. Funding from grants or internal sources requires fastidious tracking of receipts, expenditures, and sales tax; maintaining a shared document with anyone responsible for purchasing can keep everyone on the same page with the budget. Document-sharing platforms (such as Google Workspace) are also helpful in providing resources to participants. [project name] used a survey on Google Forms to collect T-shirt orders, a spreadsheet on Google Sheets to keep track of participants and their contact information, and multiple Google Docs with helpful tips about interacting with voters and information used in those interactions (such as deadlines, locations, and phone numbers/websites of other sources). Utilizing shared resources such as Google Workspace, which allows multiple users to access and instantaneously change information, can be particularly beneficial when plans have to change, as happened frequently in the 2020 election cycle.

Discussion and Conclusion

This case study focused on the organization of a voter registration drive, ways to enhance and improve efforts, and best practices learned to make the most of this work. Comparing the initial 2016 pilot to the revised 2018 program reveals important

lessons about creating partnerships, creatively seeking resources, and thoughtfully planning before execution. Even when larger circumstances—such as the pandemic that coincided with the 2020 election cycle—require major shifts in approach, a program’s partners, resources, and planning remain critical components in producing a successful outcome.

The improvements incorporated in the 2018 program yielded promising results: 1,014 prospective voters were reached and 81 new voters were registered. Many of the voters reached were able to confirm and/or update their registration through the mobile secretary of state app on the iPads; while these interactions did not result in “new” voter registrations, they were very well received and played an important role in voter preparation and education before the election. The participants shared positive feedback from their experience as well, and many students noted their surprise at how enjoyable and effective the drive was. One student observed in his critical engagement exercise reflection for the course:

I was surprised by how interactive the experience was.... I was able to engage with way more people than I thought I would, which made the experience more fun. It wasn’t just sitting at a table like I expected, I was very active.

Another student expressed similar surprise: “With my expectations I thought a lot of people would have not been interested but surprisingly we reached more people than I thought. I actually enjoyed pulling up people’s polling places so they knew exactly where to go!”

Despite thoughtful improvement, opportunities for growth still exist and were incorporated in the 2020 iteration of the program. Using technology and new modes of outreach—particularly important in the 2020 cycle, when in-person contact was extremely limited—both required creative thinking and flexibility and provided new opportunities to connect with voters. Though the circumstances of the 2020 voter registration drive were undoubtedly more challenging, they also encouraged creative approaches and adaptable methods. Integrating technology to make the process more accessible will remain a part of the program’s approach long after the pandemic has ended.

Measuring impact in a voter registration drive is challenging, but doing so in a more precise manner will help to ascertain the program’s

effectiveness. Currently, the numbers are self-reported by students and organized by the student project coordinator. Considering the level of impact (how many students and community members attend multiple events) is also important and requires more strategic organization and tracking. Additional training in recording practices will be added so that students can be more consistent and accurate in tracking voter interactions, updated registrations, and new registrations. Finally, by continuing to maintain current partnerships and cultivating new ones, the program can ensure that it is able to achieve its mission of reaching students and community members in an effective and efficient way. Current community partnerships will continue, with the goal of pursuing additional activities developed in collaboration with partners and students to further improve outcomes.

This case study’s analysis of changes in how the drive was organized and implemented can promote understanding of how a similar effort could be organized elsewhere. Though the lessons learned in this case study derive specifically from the comparison of [project name] in 2016 and 2018, the best practices recommended here are applicable to many institutions and offer easy guidelines for practitioners who may be considering beginning a voter registration drive on their own college campuses. Creating a service-learning project that connects politics with the community in a productive way can be difficult, but using a voter registration drive to encourage participation in democracy and voter literacy and engagement proves to be one way that colleges can respond to this challenge.

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