# Transforming Campus Voting Drives Into Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Projects

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## Abstract

During the 2016 election season, the authors—a collection of staff, faculty, and students at a rural, four-year comprehensive college—piloted a new format for a student-driven, campuswide, nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign anchored in a political science course and supported by a credit-bearing internship and advanced graphic design course. We argue that this project offers a model for how collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs can transform the nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign into a site for interdisciplinary, cross-campus service-learning projects that benefit the student participants and the campus community. This article outlines the advantages and challenges of the project and concludes with recommendations for those interested in implementing a similar program.

*Keywords: voter mobilization campaign, service-learning, interdisciplinary*

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Presidential elections bring a flurry of activity to college campuses. Charged by the 1998 Higher Education Act to assist students in registering to vote, many campuses make civic engagement activities a feature of campus programming at least every 4 years (Kiesa, 2016). The mission statements of many colleges and universities include a commitment to engaging students as citizens. As part of this commitment, campuses across the country embrace the responsibility to introduce students to voting by offering not only registration but also civic education and get out the vote programming. Nonprofit organizations such as Rock the Vote and the New Voters Project stand ready to assist campuses in this effort by providing campaign materials and paying organizers to run large voter registration drives. Schools can hire organizations like TurboVote to email students links to voter registration forms as well as text students reminders about local registration deadlines and elections. Furthermore, interested faculty, student organizations, and student affairs staffers contribute to efforts on their campuses to run voter registration tables, include voter registration forms in the paperwork given to all incoming students, and draw on established rivalries among residence halls or athletic conferences to drive healthy competition around voter registration (Stockman, 2018). Organizations such as Civic Nation and Campus Compact support faculty, staff, and students in pulling together efforts and initiatives from around a campus into cohesive, campus-specific plans for voter registration, education, and mobilization.

During the 2016 presidential election, college campuses' efforts resulted in a 3% increase in the voter turnout rate of college students. According to *Democracy Counts: A Report on U.S. College and University Student Voting*, released by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, college students' overall voter turnout increased from 45.1% to 48.3% while voter registration rates among college students held steady around 70% (Thomas et al., 2017). Out of the 1,023 higher education institutions included in the study, over 75% posted gains in voter turnout rates from 2012 to 2016 with close to one third posting gains of 6% or higher. Clearly, the combined labor of nonprofits, campuses, and national coordinating organizations to mobilize students paid dividends at the 2016 ballot box.

Despite the growth in college student voter turnout, there is still room to improve, particularly when it comes to incorporating election activities within the academic classroom. The barriers to incorporating election work into academic or service-learning activities appear to be twofold. First, practical publications about student voting focus on the role of students and nonprofits while ignoring faculty and administrators (Kiesa, 2016). Second, ethical concerns regarding partisanship and student labor lead even professors who regularly seek out service-learning opportunities for their students to resist crafting projects centered around presidential or midterm elections (Bennion, 2006; Redlawsk, 2018). Instructors have sought to square the ethical challenge by asking students to volunteer with the mechanics of elections by serving as poll workers (Csajko & Lindaman, 2011; Mann, Alberda, Birkhead, & Ouyang, 2018), running exit polls (Emery, Howard, & Evans, 2014), or crafting specialized projects such as coordinating a candidate debate (Boeckelman, Deitz, & Hardy, 2008), building campaign websites (Caughell, 2018), producing a nonpartisan voter guide (Bardwell, 2011), or creating a fact-checking blog (Bardwell, 2011) as part of a course on political communication or campaigns and elections.

Although the projects listed in the previous paragraph are certainly valuable, we argue that nonpartisan voter mobilization drives offer an underrecognized and underutilized opportunity for cross-divisional and cross-disciplinary service-learning. A true service-learning experience places equal value on learning and service and should be mutually beneficial to students and the community (Furco, 2003). Ideally, service-learning helps students to grow personally by developing passion, curiosity, and interpersonal skills; supports them in thinking critically about course content in context by tackling ill-structured problems that are complex and open-ended (Eyler & Giles, 1999); and challenges participants to include political engagement (policy and decision-making change) as a component of civic engagement (Walker, 2000). A voter mobilization service-learning project should help the community build capacity and satisfy the particular needs of the community. Service-learning is most effective when the project is embedded in the discipline/coursework and includes a strong and consistent reflective practice that integrates regular feedback from the community. One factor that differentiates service-learning from related practices of volunteerism, internships, and fieldwork is the faculty member's role as a mentor and coach (and, sometimes, project manager), providing emotional and intellectual support while also pushing and challenging students (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Student affairs offices, as well as off-campus partners, can create effective voter mobilization campaigns; however, faculty participation adds "valuable academic context for phenomena such as voter-engagement and voter-regulation patterns and election events" (Eaves & Husser, 2017, p. 995). Although creating ongoing collaborative relationships can be a daunting task, collaborative projects that use the specialized knowledge of faculty and student affairs professionals, including each collaborator's specific understanding of who our students are and what they need (Price, 1999), increases the chance of the project's success (Schuh & Whitt, 1999). Moreover, because campaigns rely on such a wide variety of skills—grassroots organizing, strategic planning, event planning, data analysis, graphic and web design, and communication and rhetoric, among others—professors from a variety of disciplines can use a voter mobilization campaign as an opportunity to collaborate and offer a service-learning experience for students.

In 2016, the authors—an assistant professor in political science, an associate professor in graphic design, a student affairs staff member, and an undergraduate political science student—collaborated on a student-driven, campuswide, nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign: Vote Oswego. We argue that Vote Oswego offers a model for how collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs can transform the nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign into a site for interdisciplinary, cross-campus service-learning projects that benefit the student participants and the campus community. We begin by describing the campaign structure and major campaign projects. We measure the impact of the campaign on the college campus through deliverables commonly used by nonprofit organizations engaged in mobilizing youth voters, including voter registrations submitted, get out the vote contacts made, volunteer hours, and media hits. We assess the campaign's impact on students enrolled

in the involved courses through pretests and posttests as well as written reflections and interviews. We conclude that centering the voter registration and mobilization drive in a course can meet, if not exceed, the outcomes of a traditional voter mobilization campaign, as well as offering an opportunity for students in fields ranging from political science to event planning to graphic design to gain practical experience in their field. The article closes with plans for our next phase of research as well as recommendations for those interested in running a similar campaign.

## Context

The State University of New York at Oswego (SUNY Oswego) is a rural college with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 7,000 students. At the time of the study, 27% of undergraduate students were low income, and the student body was approximately 50% female and 50% male. Seventy-two percent of undergraduate students identified as White (non-Hispanic), 8.4% Black (non-Hispanic), 11.2% Hispanic, 2.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.7% two or more races (non-Hispanic), 1.9% non-resident alien, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.2% unknown. The college provided more than $80 million in need-based grants, loans, and work-study awards.

Despite administrative, faculty, and staff commitment to experiential learning, our students face a series of challenges in securing meaningful internships or service-learning opportunities. First, many of the positions require travel to the nearest urban center in an area with limited public transportation options. As a result, a car and financial resources are preconditions for students applying for internships. Second, although rural areas have significant need, the small nonprofits and government offices that serve the population often lack the capacity to provide oversight and mentorship to interns. Third, many students balance work with full course loads, making an unpaid internship with significant travel obligations—which would likely take away time from either needed paid work or hours spent on a degree—a difficult proposition. Ultimately, then, internships remain out of reach for many interested students. Similar concerns leave faculty hesitant to incorporate service-learning experiences into their courses.

Every 2 years, however, campuses have a chance to run political campaigns as they make a good faith effort to register students to vote. On SUNY Oswego's campus from 2010 to 2014, a graduate student supervised by the college's Office of Business and Community Relations coordinated voter mobilization programming. The campus, along with others in our university system, used posters and t-shirts provided by Rock the Vote. The graduate assistant organized debate and election results watch parties and recruited student volunteers to sit at tables in the student union with voter registration and absentee ballot request forms. Undergraduate students volunteered at the programs and tables but did not have an opportunity to design materials, take on leadership roles, or engage in guided reflections to connect their experiences with course material.

Data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) for 2012 shows that of the SUNY Oswego students eligible to vote in the 2012 presidential election, 68.3% were registered to vote, and 33.2% (or 48.7% of those registered) cast a ballot (NSLVE, 2016). Nationally, in 2012, 69% of college students ages 18–24 were registered to vote, and 45.1% (or 65.3% of those registered) cast a ballot (Thomas et al., 2017). Thus, in 2012 SUNY Oswego students approximated the national average in terms of registration (68.3% at SUNY Oswego compared to 69% nationally) but fell significantly short of the national turnout rate (33.2% at SUNY Oswego compared to 45.1% nationally). Although we cannot state a definitive cause for this discrepancy, we theorize that the low turnout rate stems from the desire of many students to remain registered at their permanent, rather than campus, address. Absentee voting in New York places additional burdens on students, including submitting an absentee ballot request postmarked at least a week prior to Election Day and mailing the completed ballot so that it is postmarked no later than the day before Election Day. We suspect that the added complications of requesting an absentee ballot and the lack of a dedicated turnout strategy for absentee voters contribute to the lower turnout rates among our students. Thus, the campus community would benefit from a more aggressive, targeted voter mobilization campaign rather than "one-size-fits-all" programs like Rock the Vote.

In fall 2015, we proposed that the campus replace Rock the Vote with Vote Oswego. Vote Oswego would be a student-run, nonpartisan voter mobilization drive that pulled together resources from student affairs as well as academic affairs. We structured the program to address the needs of (1) students interested in political work but without the means to take on an internship or otherwise commit to volunteering with a campaign away from campus or outside their coursework and (2) the campus community, which we believed would benefit from a more robust, strategic voter mobilization campaign. A three-credit course in political science anchored the campaign. The political science professor teaching this course also hired and oversaw the work of five interns who served as coordinators for teams of students from the course. Other students and faculty, most notably through a graphic design course, supported the campaign by producing relevant campaign materials. Ultimately, Vote Oswego transformed SUNY Oswego's voter mobilization drive from a project using materials produced off campus and staff-planned activities to one where students combined knowledge of their peers with research on youth voting and training on specific skills to develop and run a voter mobilization drive for their campus community.

### Overview of the Project: Vote Oswego

Preparation for Vote Oswego began during the 2015–2016 academic year. During this time we built the logistical framework for the campaign through fund raising, created campaign materials, recruited interns, and, most important, built connections among various stakeholders. Our objective in creating Vote Oswego was to broaden the campus commitment to voter mobilization to a campaign that not only mobilized the campus community but did so in a way that created service-learning opportunities for students in political science, communication studies, and graphic design.

This campaign involved an interdependent set of service-learning projects. First, for students enrolled in an elective course offered by the political science department, POL 300: Vote Oswego, the campus at large served as the community site. Town and gown divisions often lead us to define the community as what exists beyond the campus boundaries. Yet Hill and Lachelier (2014) point out that because students contribute to the city economy, use city servic-

es, and are impacted by political decisions made at the city, county, and state levels, members of the campus should also be considered part of the community (p. 63). Moreover, the mission statements of many institutions of higher education—including SUNY Oswego—establish a responsibility to instill within their students a sense of civic obligation. In staffing a nonpartisan voter mobilization drive that drew attention to and created opportunities for civic engagement on campus, Vote Oswego offered a service to the campus community. Second, for students in ART 417: Web Media II, the campaign headquarters (POL 300) served as a community partner. A strong online presence is a critical component of a political campaign—particularly one directed at college students. For both classes, the voter mobilization drive provided students an opportunity to build on discipline-specific knowledge—of campaign tactics and communication design, respectively—to tackle an ill-structured problem under the supervision and mentorship of a faculty member with the intention of benefiting both the students in the course and the campus at large.

### POL 300: Vote Oswego

The course description for POL 300 included the following language:

> Students will learn the nuts and bolts of building and running a political campaign including how to set and revise campaign goals, develop a coalition, work with the media, recruit and train volunteers, and develop and articulate a unified message. The students in this course will not simply be volunteers for a campaign. They will be campaign staff involved in making decisions about the direction of the campaign.

Twenty students enrolled in the course. In addition, junior- and senior-level students were invited to apply for a three-credit internship with Vote Oswego. The interns served as liaisons between the campaign manager (the instructor of record for POL 300) and the students enrolled in the course. Nine students interviewed for the position; five were hired. Both the course and the internship were open to all majors, though most students came from political science and public relations.

Course framing encouraged students to see themselves as members of a campaign staff, and this expectation was communicated through the syllabus, which stated campaign goals alongside learning objectives for their roles as staff members and their roles as students. Drawing on a background in political organizing, the instructor for POL 300 established the rules for nonpartisan campaigning, outlined the campaign's objectives, and ran trainings on grassroots strategies, including tabling, phone banking, and class announcements. The campaign had three phases: registration, education, and get out the vote. The instructor planned the first 2 weeks of the course in order to ensure that the students and interns (1) quickly entered the field to test and build their grassroots skills from Day 1, (2) saw an example of the types of opportunities they should take advantage of on campus, and (3) recruited student volunteers. Staff from student affairs played a key role in scheduling these first 2 weeks by granting Vote Oswego permission to take part in numerous programs during Welcome Week (SUNY Oswego's name for the programming that takes place starting the Friday prior to the start of the first week of school to introduce the new students to the campus and then welcome all students back for the new year).

By week 3, the interns and POL 300 students were responsible for planning campaign events, making budget decisions, recruiting and scheduling volunteers, and more. Perhaps most important for distinguishing this experience of a voter mobilization campaign from previous efforts on SUNY Oswego's campus and on many other campuses, students used their expertise about the campus and their peers, with guidance from the instructor, to create the campaign materials and campaign strategy rather than relying on materials produced generically by a third party or a strategy created by a campaign organizer or a staff member in student affairs. For example, within the first 2 weeks of the semester, the POL 300 students pointed out that many students came to tables looking not to register but to learn how to request an absentee ballot so they could vote in their home districts. The instructor pushed the students to consider how the discovery of this unexpected population should be considered in light of the campaign's goals as well as their growing knowledge of best practices for political campaigns. The students ultimately chose to count "forms" (meaning voter registration and absentee ballot requests) rather than just voter registrations toward their totals. More impressively, they crafted a get out the vote (GOTV) strategy that combined their knowledge of the campus's structural barriers to absentee voting and contemporary research on voter turnout strategies.

## ART 417: Web Media II

While a professor in the political science department worked with students on the campaign calendar, budget, strategy, and tactics, a professor in the graphic design program used Vote Oswego as a service-learning opportunity for ART 417: Web Media II, as well as a project for other graphic design students. Similar to the campaign staff approach in POL 300, nine students in ART 417 worked as staff of a simulated design agency, where the instructor acted as the creative director. In this arrangement, the students in POL 300 served as the community partner the design students were working with. The design students worked together over a 4-week period to research, plan, and launch a website that the Vote Oswego campaign could use as a resource during the GOTV phase. Design students worked within the brand identity already established (by a previous design student in spring 2016) and collaborated with students in POL 300 on the content of the site.

During the research phase, design students studied who the audience of the site would be—this included campaign staff but also members of the campus community with varying knowledge of the election process. This provided design students an opportunity to design a project about a topic they were not experts on, a frequent scenario for professional designers. The goal of the website was to answer commonly asked questions and to refer students to additional resources they might be looking for as Election Day neared. The design team succeeded at organizing content to meet the needs of the audience because they themselves had so many questions about the election process. Ultimately, student designers launched a site that worked across all devices but was optimized for mobile use and social media sharing. Interactive components, subtle animation, and original illustrations made for a site completely unique to the campaign and its target audience.

To complement the work of the web design

team, additional design students in the SUNY Oswego design club on campus created residence hall posters and buttons the campaign used to encourage students to get out and vote.

## Community Services Office

Housing components of the project in academic disciplines links the organizing, event planning, and graphic design to academic learning while providing an interdisciplinary component to the project. At the same time, the project also bridged academic and student affairs. At SUNY Oswego, civic engagement programming rests with the Community Services Office (CSO), whose mission is to engage students in community and civic engagement programs in order to inspire a lifelong commitment to active citizenship that contributes to the common good. During the 2016 election season, the CSO planned debate watch parties as well as the election night party. Students from Vote Oswego contributed ideas for programming and volunteered during these events. Moreover, the Community Services staff supported new programming—such as the absentee ballot strategy—proposed by Vote Oswego. The CSO staff provided their expertise on hosting an event, and the students from Vote Oswego contributed ideas born of their experiences campaigning on campus as well as classroom discussions of research on youth political participation. This model allowed CSO, as the community partner, to act as a coeducator, which placed value on experts "in the real world" outside academic affairs. Ultimately, Vote Oswego revealed the potential for the campus community itself to function as a service-learning site as well as the potential for a nonpartisan voter mobilization campaign to function as an interdisciplinary, collaborative project that brings together faculty, staff, and students from across campus.

## Measuring the Impact of Vote Oswego

We assessed the impact of Vote Oswego on the campus community by comparing our results to the results of previous campus voter mobilization programs as well as to objectives set out for the campaign in terms of voter registrations and absentee ballots collected, media hits, and coalition partners. We assessed the impact of participating in Vote Oswego on students enrolled in POL 300 and ART 417 through pretests and posttests of their political activism, civic skills, and political efficacy. We also collected data through reflection activities and student interviews. All instruments received approval from the Institutional Review Board at SUNY Oswego. We review each in turn.

## Impact on the Campus Community

Our goal for the community as a service-learning site was to improve voter mobilization—including registration, education, and get out the vote efforts—both through hard numbers and by creating a sense of excitement and urgency around the election. We evaluated Vote Oswego on the types of deliverables typically used to evaluate a nonprofit youth vote mobilization campaign: voter registrations collected, GOTV contacts (direct interactions designed to motivate registered voters to submit an absentee ballot or go to the polls) made during the first week of November, coalition partners developed, and media hits secured. Although information on the coalition partners, media hits, and get out the vote contacts from the previous elections remain elusive, we know that the campus collected approximately 700 voter registration and absentee ballot forms in 2010 and approximately 1,300 of the same forms in 2012. Thus, Vote Oswego set its goal at 2,000 forms (approximately 25% of the student body). Stated campaign goals also included developing 10 campus coalition partners, securing eight media hits, and making three times the number of GOTV contacts as voter registration forms collected.

Ultimately, the campaign exceeded three of the four goals. The students collected 1,054 voter registration and 1,583 absentee ballot requests for a total count of just over 2,600 forms. Over 30 clubs and organizations, 25 faculty members, and Greek Life and Student Athletics became members of the coalition and contributed class time or volunteer hours to the campaign. More than 250 volunteers (students who were not enrolled in POL 300, the related internship, or ART 417) contributed a total of 450 hours to Vote Oswego. The campaign also created a buzz around its efforts on and off campus by securing nine media hits. Despite these successes, Vote Oswego had only 1,103 direct interactions with voters during the final week of November, falling far short of the stated GOTV goal of making three times as many contacts as voter registration forms collected.

Data provided by NSLVE revealed an in-

## POL 300 - Pretest
## For each of the following political and civic skills, how would you rank yourself in relation to other people your age?
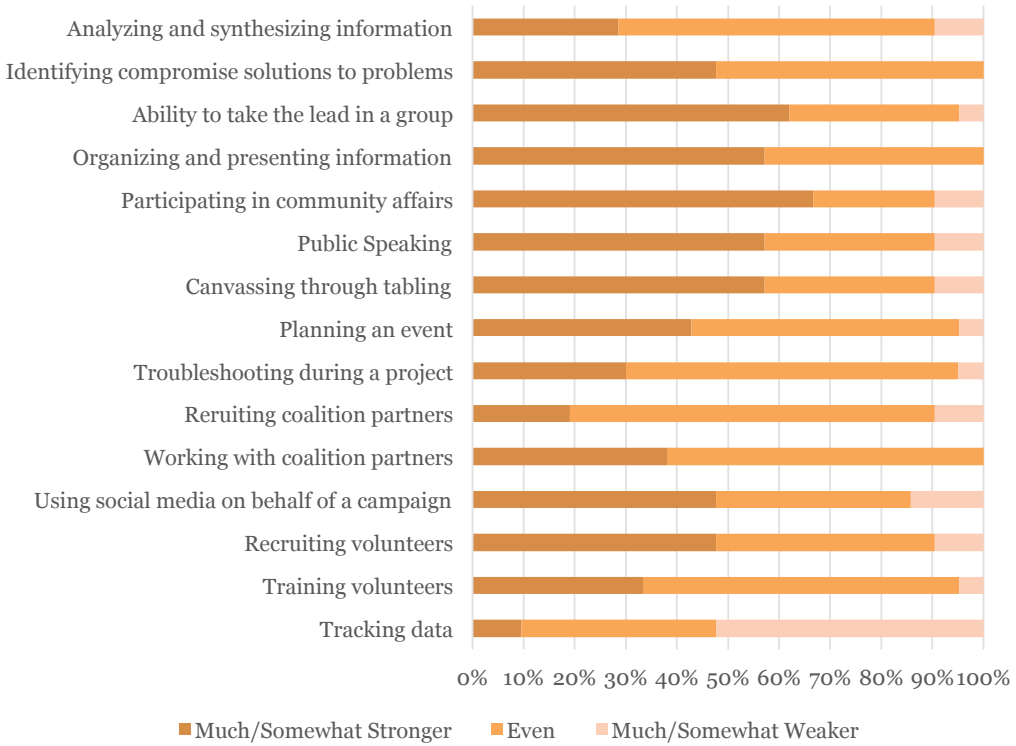


*Figure 1. POL 300 Political and Civic Skills Pretest*

crease in both the voter registration and voter turnout rates in 2016 compared to 2012. The voter registration rate increased from 68.3% in 2012 to 76.6% in 2016, and the voting rate increased from 33.2% to 41.8% (NSLVE, 2016). Although SUNY Oswego remains below the all–institutions voting rate of 48.3% reported by NSLVE, these numbers mark a clear improvement over the registration and turnout rates reported by NSLVE in 2012. Our research design does not allow Vote Oswego to take the credit for these results. However, we feel confident concluding that transforming the voter mobilization drive into a collaborative service–learning project had the desired effect of engaging SUNY Oswego students in the 2016 presidential election.

We now turn to a discussion of the impact of participation with Vote Oswego on students enrolled in POL 300 and ART 417. Pretests were administered at the beginning of the campaign, with posttests administered after Election Day. A number of students dropped each course between the pre– and posttests. As a result, more individuals have taken the pretests than the posttests, which leads us to be cautious in drawing conclusions from our results. We do, however, believe that they offer preliminary data that support the effectiveness of the program. We also supplement the quantitative data with reflections (POL 300) and interviews (ART 417).

### Impact on Student Participants—POL 300

We expected POL 300 to help students with a stated interest in political careers to better understand the realities and challenges of political campaigning by serving as staffers for Vote Oswego. Pretests conducted during the first week of class on students' political and civic skills (see Figure 1) revealed that many of the students rated themselves highly in comparison to their peers regarding their abilities to perform campaign

## POL 300 Students
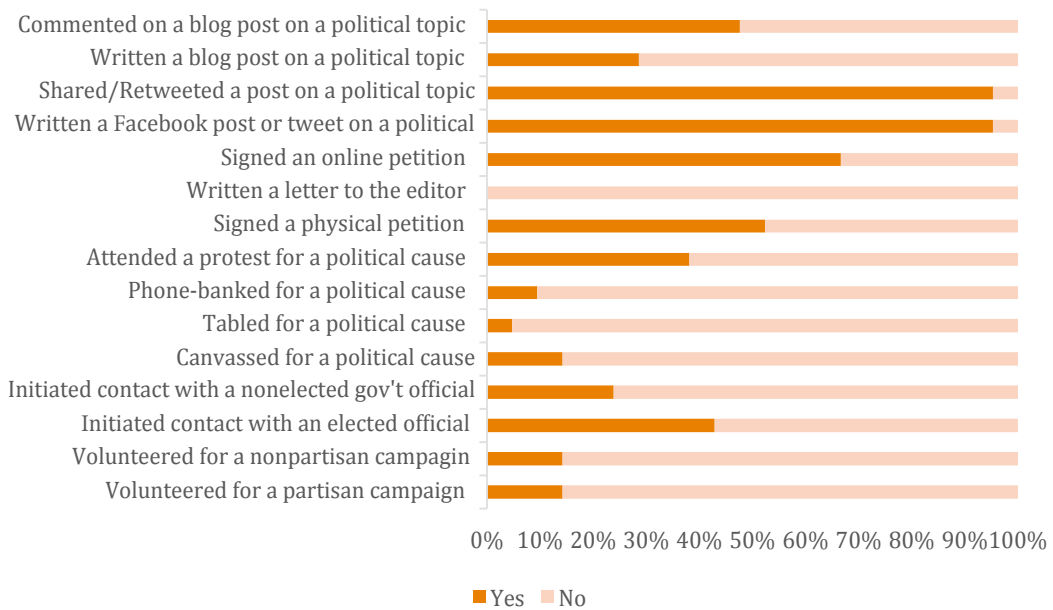## In the Last Twelve Months, Have You...



*Figure 2. Political Participation of POL 300 Students*

tasks. For example, close to and in a few cases over 50% of the students rated themselves as much or somewhat stronger than their peers in their ability to participate in community affairs, canvass through tabling, use social media on behalf of a campaign, and recruit volunteers. In addition, just over 30% of students rated themselves much or somewhat stronger than their peers at training volunteers and troubleshooting during a project.

As Figure 2 shows, however, the students' positive assessments of their skills mask a relatively low level of political involvement. Although 90% of the students had engaged in political activity on social media, and more than 50% had signed a physical or online petition, fewer than 30% had initiated contact with an elected official, and fewer than 20% had volunteered for a partisan or nonpartisan campaign, canvassed, tabled, or phone banked for a political cause.

In other words, the students had confidence in their skills and willingness to engage politically in an online forum, but few had been exposed to the realities of a political campaign. Frankly, these results matched our expectations about students who would enroll in the class—we expected

to see a group of politically interested and motivated young people seeking an opportunity to be exposed to the realities of a political campaign. The results of a posttest conducted during the final week of the course (displayed in Figure 3) also indicate that the experience led students to increase their self-assessment of their skills compared to their peers. Participants assessed themselves as improving in their ability to perform a variety of specific campaign tactics (tabling, recruiting and working with coalition partners, training volunteers, and tracking data) as well as skills ranging from analyzing and synthesizing information to identifying compromise solutions to problems, taking the lead in a group, and troubleshooting during a project.

This growth in a broad set of skills—particularly regarding analysis and critical thinking—reinforces for us the promise of having students engage not just as volunteers with a campaign but as coordinators of a campaign. Each student spent an average of 7 hours per week in the field—registering voters, training volunteers, phone banking, and more. As a whole, the class contributed over 550 hours to the project. Throughout the entire campaign, the instructor pushed students to adjust and readjust campaign

## POL 300 - Posttest
## For each of the following political and civic skills, how would you rank yourself in relation to other people your age?
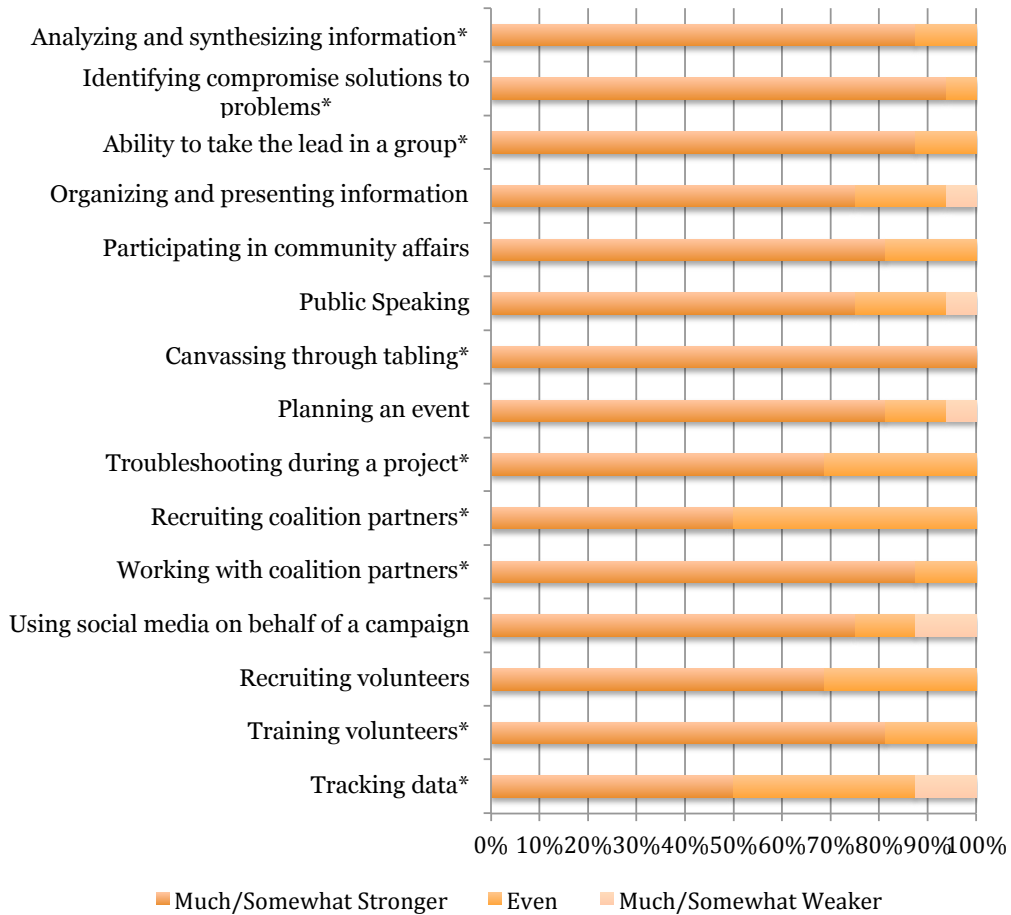
Analyzing and synthesizing information*
Identifying compromise solutions to problems*
Ability to take the lead in a group*
Organizing and presenting information
Participating in community affairs
Public Speaking
Canvassing through tabling*
Planning an event
Troubleshooting during a project*
Recruiting coalition partners*
Working with coalition partners*
Using social media on behalf of a campaign
Recruiting volunteers
Training volunteers*
Tracking data*

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

■ Much/Somewhat Stronger    ■ Even    ■ Much/Somewhat Weaker

*Figure 3. POL 300 Political and Civic Skills Posttest.*
*\*Indicates the change between pretest and posttest is signifcant with a p-value of .95*

plans considering the prior week's outcomes and their growing knowledge about campaign strategy. In other words, the course allowed students ample opportunities to practice the grassroots tactics key to local campaigns with the added layer of reflection and mentorship required to transform the experience from volunteering to service-learning.

The students' end-of-semester reflections expressed an appreciation for this structure. Indeed, nearly half of the students communicated that they had learned more than they expected over the course of the campaign, particularly with regard to the complexity and moving parts required for a campaign to succeed. The following lines from student reflections are indicative of how students viewed the experience:

> I have learned that campaign work has extensively more depth than what I thought. The intricacies of building a coalition, working with that coalition, gaining a visibility, and a variety of other issues are things that campaigns consistently face in order to achieve the goals the campaign establishes.

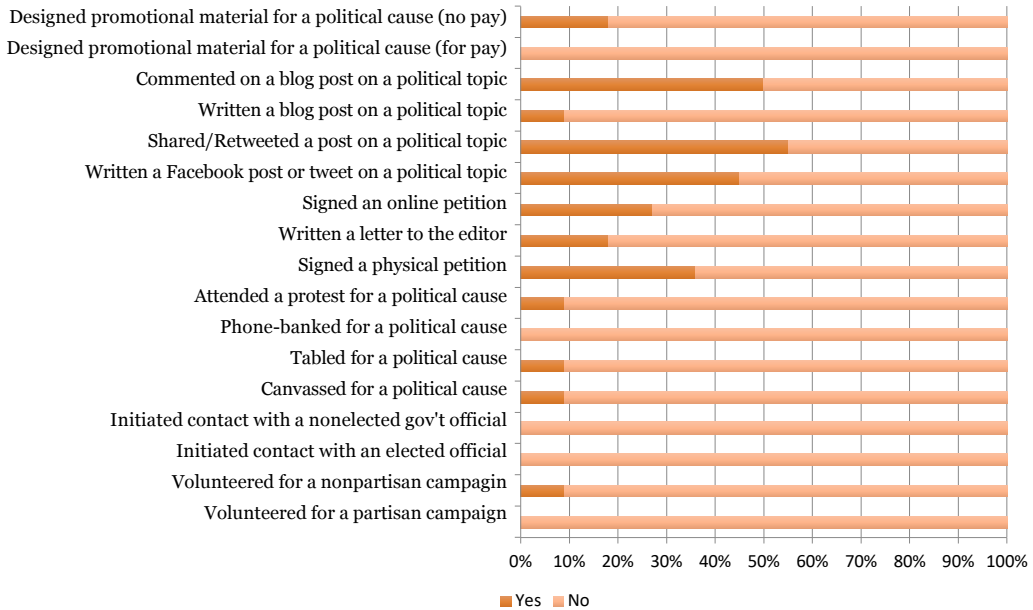ART 417 Students
In the Last Twelve Months, Have You....



*Figure 4. Political Participation of ART 417 Students*

I had hoped to gain campaign knowledge and experience. I did not exactly know what that knowledge would be but at the end I definitely got some valuable experience and I acquired new skills and knowledge about the inner workings of a campaign.

It is very time consuming and detailed. It is also complex and requires a lot of different skills and groups. You have to plan everything in advance.

I learned that campaign work is not as glamourous [sic] as it seems. It's a lot of hard work.

We take assurance from these comments that this course fulfilled our intention of introducing politically motivated but undertrained students to the skills and knowledge fundamental to campaigning.

### Impact on Student Participants—ART 417

Although the majority of students enrolled in POL 300 for the express purpose of gaining political experience through an elective campaign practicum, the students enrolled in ART 417 had no such intent. Similar to POL 300 students, to the extent that ART 417 students engaged in politics, they were most likely to do so through social media, commenting on blog posts, or signing a petition (online or offline). Notably, however, they were approximately half as likely to engage in these activities as the POL 300 students, and no one enrolled in ART 417 reported having initiated contact with an elected or nonelected government official (see Figure 4). Two of the students had previously designed for a political campaign. Throughout the design process (and after the election), most of these students indicated that this was their first election as eligible voters and commented on how much they learned about the election process and the candidates by gathering and organizing information for the website.

As we established earlier, POL 300 students explicitly enrolled in an elective with the knowledge they would become campaign staffers, but ART 417 is a regularly offered course focused on advanced web design skills. Vote Oswego offered an opportunity to work with a "client" on a real-world project while being mentored by a faculty member. Consequently, there were large learning gains on the process of design, research methods, and so on. Student designers working on this project had limited experience working on projects where they

## ART417 - Pretest
## For each of the following political and civic skills, how would you rank yourself in relation to other people your age?
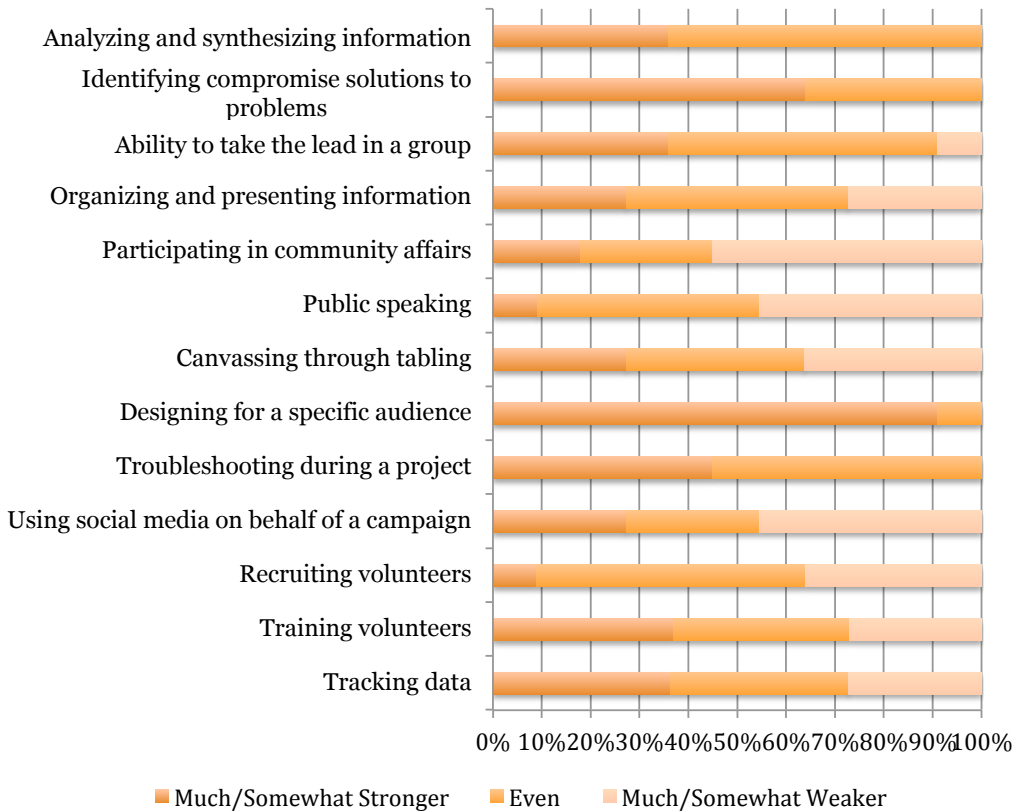


*Figure 5. ART 417 Political and Civic Skills Pretest*

did not have control over the goal or intent; such experiences are crucial to preparing students to enter the field as professionals. Students logged over 300 hours on the project and quickly learned that research, design, and revision phases take much longer than they expected. They had the opportunity to perform audience research, including empathy maps and personas, which the students had only completed in hypotheticals previously. This particular project also challenged them to focus deeply on the mobile experience of the website, given the audience and the intended uses of the site to supplement interactions with campaign staffers. Community-based projects also have the added complexity of collaborating with another team of people who need to provide feedback and content. Negotiating the time needed for these exchanges was something new for many of the student designers.

We administered the same pre- and posttest to ART 417 as was given to the POL 300 students to see if designing for a political campaign would have an influence on their assessments of their political and civic skills (see Figures 5 and 6). Notably, although the POL 300 students reported increased self-assessments of their abilities from the pretest to the posttest, the ART 417 students did not have any statistically significant increases in their self-assessment. In fact, the only statistically significant results for ART 417 students was a decline in those students' confidence about their leadership skills. This finding is supported by in-class reflections where students reported challenges collaborating as a group and dividing design tasks because of their limited experience with these scenarios. Students found themselves in leadership roles they had not experienced before and had difficulty supporting other team members. Time man-

## ART 417 - Posttest
### For each of the following political and civic skills, how would you rank yourself in relation to other people your age?
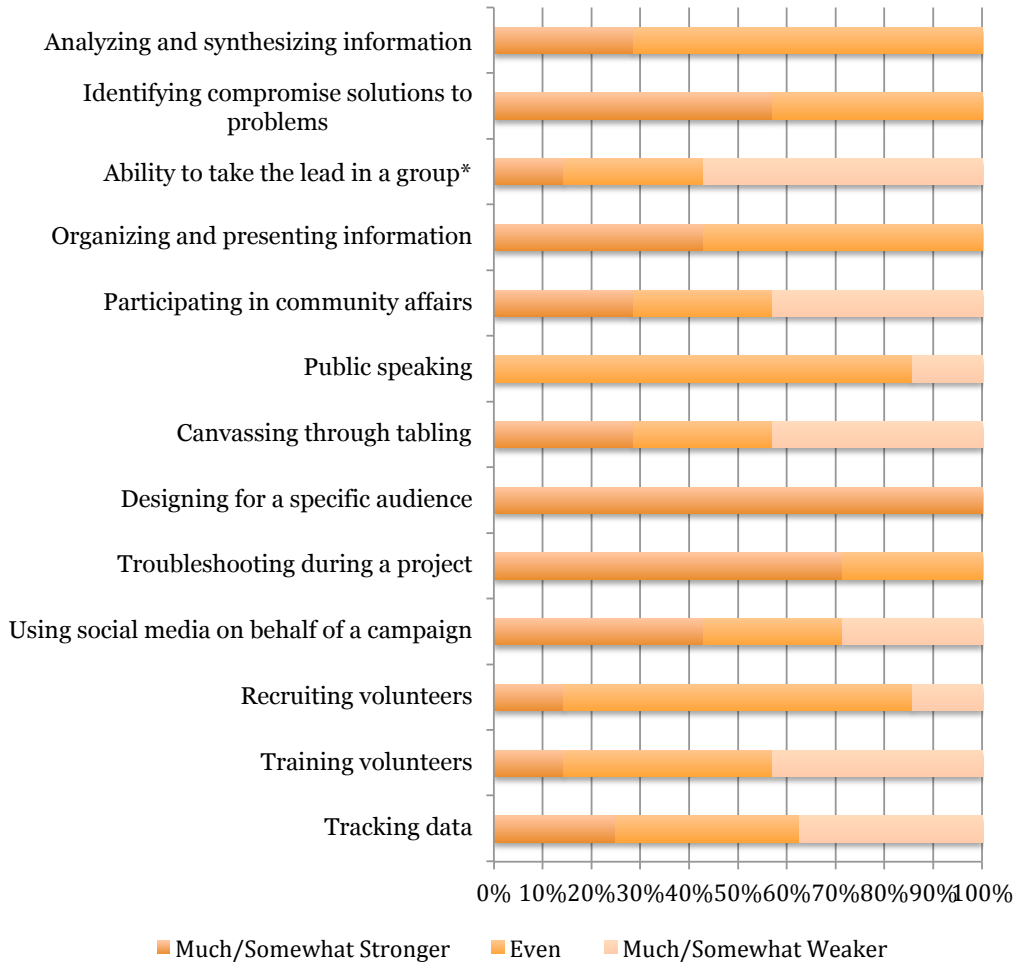


*Figure 6. ART 417 Political and Civic Skills Posttest.*
*\*Indicates the change between pretest and posttest is significant with a p-value of .95.*

agement, scheduling, and completing tasks by stated deadlines were additional challenges students identified in these reflections that were not captured in the survey.

This result is not surprising, given that this learning opportunity allowed the students to check their perceptions of their skill sets, and many recognized and openly discussed their need to develop better leadership, teamwork, and collaboration skills. Moreover, although the POL 300 students had the satisfaction of meeting the majority of their goals, the ART 417 students had a different experience. The website analytics indicated that the site made a minimal impact (143 unique visitors in October and 192 unique visitors in November, with about 20% of visitors staying for longer than 30 seconds). Spikes in site usage (October 25–28, November 2, and November 6–7) coincided with promotion of the site on social media and scheduled phone banks (some of the intended uses of the site). In this respect, the design students saw the potential for impact but realized that their work, ultimately, had minimal impact. In the next section, we outline our proposal

for better incorporating design students into the broader project.

The design students struggled during the research and planning phase of the site to gain empathy for students who might have a different relationship to the election than they had (i.e., connecting or understanding students who were very politically engaged, those who had voted previously, etc.) and designing for those segments of the student body. However, two of the nine students involved in the project developed additional politically motivated work in their portfolios in the spring semester.

In an interview, one of those students was asked about her new interest in political work. The student indicated that the 2016 presidential election was the first major election she could vote in, which also meant it was the first time she had a reason to pay attention. During the project she gained awareness about the candidates and the process, and she regularly used the site herself to learn what she needed to do to vote. It wasn't until gathering content for this project that she even knew that there were midterm elections. She indicated that had she not been involved with the project, she likely would not have voted. The project motivated her to better understand the issues at stake and caused her to seek out additional information so that she could be an informed voter. She now sees her own ability to combine her journalism and design training to inform and make an impact. Following Vote Oswego, she started a personal passion project about the Bill of Rights that targeted high school students. She took on the project after realizing what could be gained from projects outside traditional class assignments. Although the survey did not indicate advances in political facility, reflections and interactions with the design students indicated that they gained foundational knowledge of the political system that they would not otherwise have had. Through reflection after the project, they also indicated their clearer understanding of the ways they could increase the impact of their work and the responsibility they have as designers to do so.

## Implications and Next Steps

The results of our assessment have convinced us of the value of a student-driven, nonpartisan voter mobilization drive as a service–learning project, given the positive impacts on both the campus community and participating students. That said, our experiences during the 2016 election also indicate opportunities to improve both in the performance of the campaign as a voter mobilization drive and the capacity of the campaign as an opportunity for service-learning. In the following section, we offer suggestions for improving future campaigns on our campus as well as changes that should be made to improve our ability to assess the impact of this service–learning project on students. We capitalized the opportunities presented by the 2018 election cycle to test a number of the suggestions included below and will continue to refine our process and methods in preparation for 2020.

### Improving Vote Oswego

First and foremost, this project will benefit from regular communication among the faculty and staff. Essentially, the instructor of POL 300 needed to consult with the community services coordinator as though she was the site supervisor for a service-learning project. In addition, the instructor of ART 417 needed to consult with the instructor of POL 300 as though she was the site supervisor for a service–learning project. Although the individuals in these three positions would send periodic e-mails with questions or updates, no regular communication was established. Students experienced a corresponding lack of communication. Certainly, the POL 300 and ART 417 students would likely have gained more from the experience if they had communicated more directly with one another. To address this issue in the future, we plan to schedule these two classes to meet at the same days and times so that both groups of students can be seen as campaign staff working together for one community partner, the campus's community services office. This will facilitate the groups' ability to have joint campaign meetings and consultations. This will also provide a time when members of the broader campus community—for example, the Community Services Office—will know campaign members are available. Additionally, it would be helpful to all involved for participating faculty and staff to have specific leadership roles defined, like campaign manager (POL 300 instructor) and media/design advisor (ART 417 faculty), so that students are able to understand their roles and the roles of the faculty/staff in the project. It is important that faculty and staff fill some of these

top organizational positions so that there is continuity between semesters and campaigns as well as appropriate mentorship and supervision in place for students to be amply supported while they learn.

Second, we realize that involving faculty and students from multiple disciplines in strategic preplanning in the spring semester prior to the implementation of the campaign would help make all media components of the project more effective. For example, in these early stages, campaign staffers and designers could collaboratively complete preliminary audience research and develop a brand guide (beyond that of just a logo) that the campaign could start using at the beginning of the fall semester. Such a method would also reflect the way political campaigns work. Even staff turnover from semester to semester would mimic the natural ebb and flow of staff working on campaigns.

Extending the preplanning process would assist us in making a third improvement: expanding the role of the design team in the overall process. In getting the project up and running, the political science professor initiating the campaign failed to recognize the potential contributions that design students could make to the project beyond their web design skill set, including their skills in design thinking, social media, and so on. This undervaluation may have contributed to the ART 417 students' finding the project less satisfying. Such a shift would allow the ART 417 students to play a strategic role in the campaign, which would mirror the control, experience, and timeline the POL 300 students had in the pilot project.

During the 2018 election, we addressed these challenges by scheduling the political science and design courses at overlapping times. As a result, the two teams, including faculty, could meet with each other regularly during the semester. This scheduling provides multiple benefits such as facilitating communication among the campaign teams, allowing the grassroots and design teams to better understand each other's roles in the campaign, and increasing the interdisciplinarity of the experience by exposing the teams to the assumptions and tools of both fields.

### Next Steps

Following the preliminary success of the Vote Oswego pilot in 2016, we modified our practice for the 2018 elections and hope to expand the scope of this research to involve multiple campuses for the 2020 election. If multiple instructors capitalize on their campuswide voter mobilization projects for service-learning and put similar questionnaires into the field, we will be better situated to understand the impact of participation on the political and civic skills of students.

In addition to the improvements outlined in the previous section, during the 2018 iteration we began the process of adjusting our methods and instruments to establish a clear set of criteria for other campuses to meet to participate in the 2020 study. A number of key changes will be implemented by 2020: exercising tighter controls on data, aggregating data from multiple election years to increase the sample size, collecting longitudinal data on student campaign staff, and collecting data related to campaign volunteers.

First, notwithstanding our confidence in the validity of our surveys, reflections, and interviews, the pretests and posttests in courses affiliated with the project will be more tightly controlled so we can run paired t-tests. Additionally, reflection assignments across courses involved in the project will also be more closely aligned. For example, during the 2018 iteration, faculty agreed upon the wording of reflection assignments and deployed them at similar times during the campaign.

Second, a larger sample would increase our ability to understand the impact of these service-learning experiences on students. In order to increase our sample of SUNY Oswego students, we will take a two-pronged approach: (1) involve additional courses in the project and (2) aggregate data collected over multiple election cycles by using similar curricula and consistent reflection and survey instruments.

Next, we will add a longitudinal study of students enrolled in the affiliated courses. After each subsequent midterm and presidential election, we will follow up with alumni of the program to assess their perception of how participating in Vote Oswego influenced their careers and participation in philanthropic, civic, and political affairs. Comparison of the later numbers to those collected on college graduates by national organizations as well as by SUNY Oswego's alumni office will make it possible

to develop hypotheses about the long-term implications of structuring voter mobilization drives as recurring service-learning experiences.

Finally, as previously noted, over 200 students volunteered with Vote Oswego in 2016. This was a significantly larger number than the number of students who served as staffers on the campaign—and a population we did not previously collect data from. Volunteers receive a brief training at the start of a shift that now includes an embedded brief survey with questions about recruitment tactics (e.g., Where did you first hear about this volunteer opportunity? Did you receive a confirmation call before this shift?) and the choice to volunteer with Vote Oswego (e.g., Have you previously volunteered with a political campaign? Why did you choose to join Vote Oswego as a volunteer?). The results of this survey will support a rigorous assessment of volunteer recruitment tactics as well as providing data on how the broader campus views the campaign.

## Conclusion

As individuals committed to creating service-learning experiences for students at a rural college, we have come to the conclusion that nonpartisan voter mobilization drives offer significant, underutilized opportunities for learning. First, having the campus itself serve as the site for service-learning and internships eliminates the transportation and oversight barriers that hinder students and faculty from taking part in experiential learning. Second, campaigns require expertise from fields such as technical writing, graphic design, public relations, and political science. Thus, although it is important that an instructor with experience in grassroots organizing serve in a central role, the project provides an opportunity for and becomes more realistic through interdisciplinary collaboration. Third, because a voter mobilization campaign has natural stages—voter registration and get out the vote—it offers a built-in timeline for students to learn skills, test them in the field, and reflect on the results with faculty support multiple times over. Although this project requires considerable planning and coordination among staff, faculty, and students, we believe the project outlined in this article provides a framework that other campuses—particularly rural campuses—can adopt to benefit their campus community.

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