



Debate Delivers Surprise Learning Experience

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As the student-run mayoral debate ended, an irate campaign manager gave harsh criticism to students and their faculty advisor. The manager took particular umbrage with one question: A student had asked the candidate why the voting public should trust him, after he'd been forced to step down from the same office over a prostitution charge two years prior.

This was one of the final questions of the evening. Although the candidate thoughtfully and calmly responded, his manager accused student debate organizers of being unprofessional and unethical. As the faculty member overseeing the debate, I quickly stepped in to defend the students. In fact, these students had spent most of the class debating the appropriateness of that question line. They concluded the prostitution charge reflected the former mayor's character, which is a major consideration for a candidate seeking to lead a town government, including the enforcement of its laws. The class acknowledged the question might be controversial, but should be asked. Now, the students listened to their instructor deliver that rationale to justify the question to the irritated campaign staffer. It was a learning, real-world experience that only this debate could deliver.

This class project in October 2019 was a first-of-its-kind student-run debate and public forum for candidates seeking elected office in the town of Bloomsburg. Bloomsburg University's Journalism Workshop, a class of 10 mostly upper-level students, hosted the event. The debate presented many challenges, but the real-world experiences that it provided made the project worth it — and worth pursuing again. This article

shares the story of this 2019 workshop and some lessons learned that should help us model a better plan for 2023 and beyond.

Why a Student-Run Debate?

Journalism plays important roles in a democratic society, including keeping people informed, keeping watch over government and powerful interests, giving ordinary people a voice, and connecting people and communities. However, ongoing news media consolidation and cutbacks have left many local newsrooms understaffed and unable to watch over government and business the way they once did.

These changes to the news industry have negatively impacted our communities and American democracy. As state and local government goes unchecked and its costs rise (Gao, et al., 2020), our public has become increasingly polarized (Darr, et al., 2018), and people have less news media that they trust (Fiorini, 2022). Faculty in journalism and mass communications programs play important roles in re-invigorating a public-service mission in the news media and inspiring students to carry the torch.

These roles motivated the Fall 2019 Journalism Workshop. With only one department faculty member at Bloomsburg University dedicated solely to journalism, the Journalism Workshop must serve as a flexible upper-level skills course. The workshops often draw students from many skill levels, academic interests, and professional goals. The workshops give students enough freedom to pursue work that will help them achieve their wide-ranging goals. The

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2019 workshop included telecommunications students interested in video production; political science students focusing on government and news media; students working toward public relations careers; and traditional journalism students. The workshop needed to accommodate all the students' goals.

Organizing a candidates debate for local offices could give students the academic freedom to pursue individual learning outcomes, while also reflecting course objectives of journalism as a public service: engaging students with the larger community; helping students develop a better understanding of local government and politics among the student body; and informing the broader public about the town's political candidates.

Event Preparation and Production

Early in the semester, students examined how news media cover government and politics. Lectures, readings, and class discussions covered the differences between issues-based coverage and horse-race coverage. We looked at the detrimental effects of horse-race-type coverage of politics and covered the benefits of focusing on important issues in media coverage.

With this base of knowledge, students envisioned an event that could focus on community-related issues while also providing a public service. We used our classes to brainstorm and solidify ideas in three areas: advance promotion, putting on the event itself, and post-event coverage. Post-event article production was the most straightforward. The students carried out promotional work by creating a Wordpress site, designing posters and press releases, and doing a social media campaign on Facebook and Instagram.

The most-involved aspect of preparation was one of the most crucial: A group of students conducted reporter-on-the-street interviews on campus, probing for issues related to local government that interviewees deemed most relevant, or around which they would like to see change or reform. Some students set out as reporter-videographer pairs and recorded video interview segments. Those more interested in print journalism conducted their interviews without cameras.

This exercise helped students to become more comfortable with interviewing and asking difficult questions—one of the most challenging aspects of journalism for many students—and it provided material to discuss in class and use at the debate. The recorded video interviews gave students footage they

could use at the event held in a large campus ballroom with a giant video screen. The footage allowed the class to set up each new question with a 20-30-second video clip from an on-campus interview that played on the screen.

The interview-generated issues focused on matters about policing, enforcing alcohol and minor drug violations, parking, and off-campus housing conditions. However, the students identified one issue (the former mayor's previous arrest) as interesting, but it didn't come up in interviews. Students reviewed past news articles, discussed the arrest's relevance to the election, and agreed to add the topic to the list of 10 to 12 questions prepared for the event.

More Votes, and Credit

Even with limited promotion, the debate drew more than 80 people that included a mix of students, faculty, and town residents. It ran for two hours, with separate sessions for the four council candidates and two mayoral candidates and a short break in between. It generated front-page coverage in the local newspaper, *The Press Enterprise*, which had a paid circulation of more than 15,000. Our students' articles and campus voter guide appeared in two campus media outlets, including a print campus newspaper and two student news websites.

Voter turnout correlated positively with the debate's attendance. Campus turnout is historically poor during local elections, when town, county and public school positions dominate the ballot. Turnout in the Fall 2019 local election, however, was markedly higher than in prior years. In 2013, just 8 of 4,400 registered students voted at Bloomsburg University's campus precinct, according to Columbia County records. In 2015's mayoral race, turnout was only slightly higher, at 35 of an eligible 2,384. In contrast, in 2019, weeks after our debate, turnout shot up to 98 of an eligible 1,899 voters. That represents a more-than 3.5-fold increase in turnout rate from 2015 to 2019, and an impressive 28-fold increase in turnout rate over 2013.

Students were excited about the higher turnout on campus. One student shared with the instructor that they felt "elevated" by successful debate and subsequent voter turnout. The campus democracy project director credited the students' work for the boost. This increased turnout gave the students valuable first-hand experience in understanding the news media's important role in democracy and elections.

Challenges and Lessons

The class' structure rewarded student initiative by allowing them to design their own contribution and volunteer for needed work over the semester. Grading was based on an evaluation of a semester's work portfolio and participation in class discussions. In end-of-semester reflection essays, several students identified the more flexible structure as a course strength. Other students, however, said they felt too unsure about their skills to take initiative in the course. Two students indicated feeling held back somewhat by their lack of confidence in engaging with their classmates in the hands-on preparation work. This may be a small number, but it represents 20% of the class, and there may have been others who didn't acknowledge similar feelings.

If the course is repeated in 2023 as expected, clearer expectations and activities encouraging early student involvement are needed to boost their confidence, and provide a better educational experience. More grading intervals, including low-stakes quizzes on class content covered and an earlier instructor evaluation of individual progress, should also help alleviate the stress of having a single portfolio evaluation at semester's end.

Conclusion

The student-run debate gave the class valuable first-hand experience in the news media's important role in serving democracy. The debate also gave students the opportunity to explore and hone skills across many areas. The class presented significant challenges in the form of uneven student motivation and confidence in skills and subject material, and in assessing student work. The instructor will institute clearer expectations and more frequent grading intervals to remedy those issues, while maintaining the footprint of a project that supports democracy, promotes voter engagement in younger adults, and creates learning experiences—even unexpected ones—that classroom exercises cannot provide.

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