



How Mass Communication Programs Can Facilitate Voter Engagement on Campus

Nicole H. O'Donnell, Marcus Messner, Vivian Medina-Messner,
Judi Crenshaw, Reuban Rodriguez, and Fred Tugas
Virginia Commonwealth University

College student voting has surged in recent years, and a report from the Knight Foundation suggests that seven in ten college students plan to vote in 2020 (Schwichtenberg, Cox, Hersh, & Krupnikov, 2019). Research shows that establishing a habit of voting at a young age is a predictor of lifelong voting behavior (Dinas, 2012). However, various state policies frequently make voting more difficult for college students (O'Loughlin & Unangst, 2006). Residency requirements, voter ID laws, first-time voter rules, a lack of online or same-day voter registration, and inconvenient polling locations all make voting less accessible (Anderson, 2018).

Mass communication programs can play a unique role in facilitating voter engagement and addressing these voting barriers. In this paper, we discuss how mass communication programs can design a special topics class that focuses on teaching students how to develop and implement a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaign. Virginia Commonwealth University has offered GOTV classes during the 2012, 2016, and 2020 national elections, and reflections on these experiences may provide similar programs with a framework for success.

Our GOTV efforts began in 2012 when our journalism faculty¹ developed the special topics course, "Social Media and the Presidential Election." Supported by a Campus Election Engagement Project

grant, this class focused on teaching the theory and practice of social media in political communication – especially in the context of the presidential election. Students worked in teams to develop a nonpartisan GOTV social media campaign and they set up tables on campus to help students register to vote. On Election Day, the class directed students to our on-campus shuttle services. They also interviewed students and other voters about their election choices with iPad kits and published the video interviews on the website of a local television station. Overall, voter turnout on campus increased dramatically between the 2008 and 2012 election and the students won a Democracy Cup award for their efforts. We have continued to adapt this GOTV class, offering it again during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections. The following section provides an overview of the steps we use to teach students how to run a GOTV campaign, with examples of classroom successes and challenges we have faced.

Teaching Students How to Plan a Digital 'Get out the Vote' Campaign

Mass communication courses can promote voter engagement while simultaneously teaching students the basics of campaign planning and social media strategy. In our class, students learn about the R.O.P.E.S. planning model (research, objectives, programming, evaluation, stewardship) and use it to guide their GOTV

Keywords: Political Communication, ROPES Model of Public Relations, Social Media, Voter Engagement

campaign. This model was developed by Kelley (2001) as a tool to assist nonprofit fundraising efforts and it has since been adopted widely for campaign planning (Waters & Bortree, 2010).

Research: Successful campaigns include well-researched, consistent key messages (Carroll Craig et al., 2014). As an initial class project, students conduct secondary research and compile a list of essential voting information that their teams can reference across their communication materials. This information includes voter eligibility and document requirements, registration, mail-in and early voting deadlines, and polling locations. Misinformation can hinder voting; thus, students learn about the importance of fact checking and they must verify their messages with the local Department of Elections before dissemination.

Planning a GOTV campaign is a great opportunity for students to learn about theory-driven message design. For example, we use the integrative model of behavior prediction (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006) to guide message strategies. Students conduct primary research via a survey to understand individuals' values, attitudes, perceived norms, and efficacy related to voting. They rely on the survey data to create messages that frame voting as easy, prosocial, and important. Students do not inquire about the candidates that others are voting for. Instead, they aim to highlight individuals' values that inspire voting. Students are tasked with collecting data from individuals across the political spectrum. For example, they send the survey to campus groups such as College Republicans, Young Democrats, and Turning Point USA.

Objectives: Several nonprofit organizations track student voting behaviors over a period of time. Students can use this information as a baseline to set an overall turnout goal. For example, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement reported that 61.5% of students from Virginia Commonwealth University voted in 2016, which was a 4.7% increase

from the 2012 election. Thus, our goal in 2020 is to see a turnout of 66.2% or more of eligible voters. Knowing this goal, students create S.M.A.R.T. objectives (e.g., specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, time-bound) for digital campaign engagement and event attendance (Doran, 1981). Students have the opportunity to modify their objectives mid-campaign and gain valuable experience making data-driven decisions.

Programming: Employers expect students to have professional, strategic social media experience. Wagner, Owens, and Cain (2018) analyzed 1800 job descriptions from top news companies and found that half of the postings requested social media skills. A similar study of public relations job descriptions found that one third of posted jobs requested these skills (Meganck, Smith, & Guidry, 2020). Students often express difficulty with shifting their social media use from the personal to the professional domain (Josefsson et al., 2016). It is an excellent real-world experience for students to create and manage GOTV social media pages utilizing strategic criteria and professional best practices.

Our campaign programming includes developing social media strategies and tactics, creating visually engaging content with Adobe or Canva, and managing an evolving content calendar (see Table 1). Students also gain experience generating real-time content, such as live tweeting debates and hosting social media story takeovers. At the end of the semester, students submit a team report and an individual portfolio. In their portfolios, they discuss their unique contributions, such as translating our key messages to Spanish, making posts about voter suppression, or volunteering to talk about voting registration at our partner community colleges.

We allow students to manage the social media accounts, with individuals assigned to a Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram team. Before receiving account

passwords, students complete accessibility training and they sign a responsible representation contract that discusses how they can maintain nonpartisanship, communicate professionally, and alert the professor to bullying comments/hate speech. Having the ability to post directly to these social media accounts affords students with an understanding of the level of professionalism and detail needed to communicate accurately for an organization.

Evaluation: It is rare for students to have the opportunity to run a campaign from start to finish and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Promoting a GOTV campaign during an election year offers an exceptional opportunity to demonstrate this evaluation phase. Campaign planners are broadly interested in measuring campaign outputs (i.e., how many messages were created/shared), outtakes (i.e., message reach and engagement), outcomes (i.e., voting behavior), and impacts (i.e., a change in civic engagement values) (Lindenmann, 2003). Students leave this class with a deeper understanding of the differences between these evaluation metrics and they see that social media engagement does not necessarily translate to meaningful behavior change.

Stewardship: A drawback to teaching a class focused on GOTV efforts is that it must be revived in a new political landscape every four years. The 2020 and 2016 classes at our institution each had previous campaigns to look to for inspiration; however, these campaigns were dormant between national election years. Thus, we developed a stewardship solution to have our students collaborate with an advisory council on campus that independently works to maintain voter engagement efforts throughout congressional, state, and midterm elections.

Working with an Advisory Council: As a designated service-learning course, our GOTV class works with an advisory council as a client and within the larger university efforts that include an election website with faculty expert testimonials, a speaker series, and a student news service reporting on the election races. This council includes a diverse range of faculty, staff, and students from departments across the university. Several mass communication faculty members serve on the council and work directly with the students to communicate event information and help to promote digital efforts. At the end of the semester, our students present their social media work to the advisory council and discuss legacy plans.

Conclusion

Students in the 2020 GOTV class created 400 posts for social media, growing their page audiences by 20% (Facebook), 26% (Twitter), and 77% (Instagram), since the 2016 campaign. Their content resulted in impressive overall post reach (sum=100,808), engagement (sum= 3,701), and profile views (sum= 3308). While we do not have voting turnout data yet, the students' GOTV messages received significant positive reception and several news outlets including the *Washington Post* covered their work. Establishing and sustaining successful student voter engagement takes time and effort on any university campus, but designated and regularly offered classes can make major contributions to building a campus culture around voting. Mass communication programs can lead the way by promoting voting while simultaneously teaching students how to get out the vote with nonpartisan campaigns that utilize social media.

Note

1. Course developed by Virginia Commonwealth University's Dr. Marcus Messner and Associate Professor Emeritus Jeff South.

References

Anderson, C. (2018). *One person, no vote: How voter suppression is destroying our democracy*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Carroll Craig, E., Huang-Horowitz Nell, C., Brooke, W. M., & Williams, N. (2014). Key messages and message integrity as concepts and metrics in communication evaluation. *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education*, 18(4), 386-401.

Dinas, E. (2012). The formation of voting habits. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22(4), 431-456.

Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a SMART way to write management's goals and objectives. *Management Review*, 70(11), 35-36.

Fishbein, M., & Cappella, J. N. (2006). The role of theory in developing effective health communications. *The Journal of Communication*, 56(suppl. 1), S1-S17.

Josefsson, P., Hrastinski, S., Pargman, D., & Pargman, T. C. (2016). The student, the private and the professional role: Students' social media use.

Table 1. Sample Social Media Content Calendar

| Mondays | Tuesdays | Wednesdays | Thursdays | Fridays - Sundays |
|------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Weekly event reminders | Value-based posts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight student voices | Key messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to register • How to vote early/absentee • How to vote in-person | Discuss candidates and issues | Creative freedom: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post or share fun, uplifting, and engaging content |

- Education and Information Technologies*, 21(6), 1583-1594.
- Kelly, K. S. (2001). ROPES: A model of the fund-raising process. *The nonprofit handbook: Fundraising*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 96-116.
- Meganck, S., Smith, J., & Guidry, J. P. D. (2020). The skills required for entry-level public relations: An analysis of skills required in 1,000 PR job ads. *Public Relations Review*, 46(5), 101973.
- O'Loughlin, M., & Unangst, C. (2006). Democracy and college student voting. *The Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement*. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.489.1986&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Schwichtenberg, A., Cox, D., Hersh, E., Krupnikov, Y. (2020). *College students, voting and the COVID-19 election*. Retrieved from <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/college-students-voting-and-the-covid-19-election/>
- Waters, R. D., & Bortree, D. S. (2010). Preparing for the expanding role of cybervolunteerism in the new millennium: An application of the ROPES model of public relations. *International Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 28(1). <https://www.ijova.org/docs/WatersBortree.pdf>
- Wenger, D. H., Owens, L. C., & Cain, J. (2018). Help wanted: Realigning journalism education to meet the needs of top US news companies. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 73(1), 18-36.
- All of the authors on this paper are members of the VCU Votes Advisory Council. We work together to promote voter engagement and civic participation on campus. Dr. Nicole H. O'Donnell, Dr. Marcus Messner, Professor Vivian Medina-Messner, and Professor Judi Crenshaw teach journalism and public relations courses in the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Reuban Rodriguez is the associate vice provost and dean of student affairs, and Fred Tugas is the assistant director for student leadership and engagement and the director of the VCU Votes Student Coalition. Corresponding author: Nicole H. O'Donnell, naodonnell@vcu.edu*

©Nicole H. O'Donnell, Marcus Messner, Vivian Medina-Messner, Judi Crenshaw, Reuban Rodriguez, and Fred Tugas, 2020. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.