

**Obie Vote:
Oberlin College's Voter Friendly Campus Initiative**

End-of-Year Report – Prepared by Adrian Bautista, Assistant Vice President of Students

Institutional Leadership

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I. OVERVIEW

Oberlin College strongly embraces civic participation as part of its mission and a core element of a liberal education. While Oberlin College and the Division of Student Life have a strong history of democratic and community engagement, these efforts have taken on renewed strength in the past year through new initiatives like Connect Cleveland, Community 101, the El Centro Volunteer Initiative (ECVI), and the Career Communities initiative.¹

¹ Connect Cleveland is a new first-year orientation program that had all 800+ first-year students participate in a site visit to an organization in Cleveland. Community 101 was a new orientation activity consisting of a panel of community representatives (e.g., police chief, city manager, business owners) to discuss town-gown relations. ECVI is an umbrella student-led initiative that partners with Lorain County's oldest Latinx-serving social service agency to provide citizenship test classes, personal finance education, food distribution, and other services. Career Communities is a new way for students to connect with other students, alumni, parents, and faculty who share an interest or expertise in a particular employment sector.

VFC activities have created any additional layer of energy and collaboration on campus. Faculty, staff and students agreed that the coalition efforts were unprecedented and the results would reflect this sentiment.

Below please find our top 3 goals for democratic engagement during the fall 2018 semester were and reflections on success and challenges:

1. **Goal:** Coordination of campus efforts to maximize participation in electoral politics with the outcome of significantly improving rates of voter participation. While numbers do not tell the whole story, the documented increase in new and updated registrations was, we felt, impressive. These include:

- 611 new registrations
- 571 updated registrations

This is a total of **1,151** new or updated registrations on a campus of approximately 2800 students. These results would not have been possible without a committee that represented the campus and community.

Key to the coalition is representation across all campus constituencies (faculty, staff, students) as well as community organizations. Additionally, college members of the committee were connected to local, non-partisan organizations. Alison Ricker is co-president of the League of Women Voters of Ohio and a precinct official with the local board of elections. Alison designed a “Voting FAQs” sheet that was passed out across campus. Alison also worked with fellow committee member and community organizer Achilles Morales to coordinate distribution and collection of new/updated voter registration forms. The faculty members helped us secure, through our College of Arts & Sciences, a message from the Dean that included language for faculty to include in their syllabi. An email entitled “Useful voter registration information to share with our students” was sent to all faculty. This was unprecedented faculty collaboration. We invited the editors of the campus newspaper and designed a two-page spread entitled “Everything You Need to Know to Vote on Tuesday” that appeared in the edition the Friday prior to November 6.

2. **GOAL:** Improvement of the relationship with the local community by demonstrating deep campus engagement in local political issues, from schools to the opioid crisis.

The aforementioned committee cross-membership with the League of Women Voters in Ohio and United Citizen Power of Lorain significantly enhanced campus-community engagement. The FAQs sheet mentioned earlier was completed in conjunction with the League. We also distributed the League’s “2018 Lorain County Voters Guide” at VFC campus events and

designated sites on campus. The League co-sponsored an “Oberlin Candidates Night” at a local township hall and the VFC Coalition arranged for college rental vehicles to transport students (I was the driver). I am attaching the College Events Calendar posting for this event.

A significant event that had both campus and community participants was our 2018 National Voter Registration Day (flier attached). In addition to various campus offices, the following community partners had representation: The League of Women Voters, United Citizen Power, and Lorain County Rising. Members of these organizations also had an information table at the College’s 2018 Constitution Day event.

Another campus-community partnership occurred on First-Year Move-In Day as faculty, staff, students, and community partner volunteers engaged in voter registration at the residence halls while first-year students moved in with assistance from the parents/families.

Another great partnership was developed with Ohio State Representative Dan Ramos. Our coalition created a form for off-campus students (live in non-college housing) to use to provide their address. Alison Ricker arranged with Rep. Ramos’ office to receive those names and addresses and that office sent letters to each student so that students would have address verification. We also provided stamped, addressed envelopes to Rep. Ramos office. Fifty-seven students received a letter from Rep. Ramos. To make these students aware of this, we gathered the email addresses of all off-campus students and sent the following message:

“Are you intending to vote in Oberlin on Election Day, November 6, 2018? If so, you must bring an acceptable form of identification, verifying your residential address in Oberlin. One form of identification that is accepted is an official government document, dated within the past 12 months, that shows your name and address as it appears on the voter registration database (check: MyOhioVote.com).

Ohio State Representative Dan Ramos will send a letter to you that can be used for voter ID if you provide your name and current street address. Rep. Ramos is not a candidate in this election and will not use your information for any purpose other than sending the letter.

[Provide your name and address with this Google form.](#)

Form responses will be used by Alison Ricker, Head, Science Library, to address envelopes. She will deliver the stamped, addressed envelopes to Rep. Ramos' office. Be sure to take your letter with you when you go to vote on Election Day.

Alternatively, vote by absentee ballot, which does not require any form of identification other than the last 4 digits of your social security number. Print an absentee ballot request form at the Board of Elections website: <https://www.loraincountyelections.com/>.”

Heading into election day, a student volunteer approached multiple downtown Oberlin businesses and secured discounts for students showing their “I Voted” sticker on either election

day or the next day. These businesses included the popular Slow Train Café, Blue Rooster Bakehouse, Ben Franklin, and The Local (a coffee shop). I am including a photo of a tweet from the Blue Rooster Bakehouse announcing the 10% discount.

Finally, on election day, we typically set up a computer and printer at our campus gym which serves as a voting site in town. We do this for students who forget their utility bill (address verification) so that we can re-print if needed. This year, we partnered with Oberlin's other voting poll site, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, to similarly set up a computer/printer as students who live on the south end of Oberlin vote at this location. Additionally, coalition member Prof. Gary Kornblith and I emailed individual college-generated utility bills to individuals requesting them on election day (as they may have lost or misplaced the copy we sent to student campus mailboxes).

3. **GOAL:** Increased enthusiasm and understanding of the ways in which the electoral and political process can be a site of positive change and promote conversations across differences of opinion, countering cynicism and retreat to zones of like-mindedness.

The creation of our coalition was a new effort and the non-partisan spirit of the group surprised even us! There was an incredible enthusiasm simply to get students the necessary information to participate in the voting process. The non-partisan spirit itself felt like a significant shift on a campus that does have a liberal reputation which can seem to impact dialogue on challenging issues. The coalition never allowed itself to use our time to focus on sides of a political issue, only on the side of voter registration. It felt new and exciting to many people. We met weekly during the fall semester and are continuing to meet this spring

We created a [Dean of Students VFC Page](#) to share information and pictures of events. This was intended to create excitement and share information in a new way.

Our Constitution Day event was also an event that promoted conversation across difference as guest speaker and Republican Ohio Supreme Court Justice Pat DeWine's visit was intended to present a different perspective (Oberlin is unabashedly liberal). I am including a photo of this event from the College's website.

Finally, Oberlin's Hillel chapter sponsored an election day party that generated much enthusiasm. I am including a picture that shows one of the performers, Oberlin's men's acapella troupe The Obertones. Several of our volunteers were live streaming on Facebook, passing out swag, and just generally celebrating a day of voting.

II. COALITION

As I have shared in earlier sections of this report, our VFC Coalition was the force behind so much of our work and success. The coalition excellent representation from various campus constituencies as well as key community organizations. We met weekly throughout the fall semester and all members played key roles in organizational efforts. We were a very effective team and, as I mentioned earlier, did not have any issues in terms of partisanship. We also brought in key campus stakeholders at various meetings to network across the campus.

Members of the coalition include:

- Brendan Aleman, Student/Democracy Fellow
- Adrian Bautista, AVP/VFC Liaison
- Bonnie Cheng, Associate Professor, Art Department
- Monica Dix, Student/Geology & Politics; Oberlin Dems Co-Chair
- Jessica Grim, Head, Collections & Acquisitions (College Library)
- Gary Kornblith, Professor Emeritus, History
- Sophia Maffie, Student/Geology & Hispanic Studies; Volunteer, United Citizen Power
- Achilles Morales, United Citizen Power
- Zeb Page, Professor, Geology
- Tita Reed, Assistant to the President for Community & Government Relations
- Alison Ricker, Head, Science Library
- Maureen Simen, Coordinator, America Reads

I think it should be mentioned that Prof. Gary Kornblith contributed \$1000 of his own funds to assist with such costs as posters, flyers, and food for lunch meetings.

Second-year student and Posse Scholar Brendan Aleman was hired by the Dean of Students Office and served as our Democracy Fellow. Brendan interned for Congressman Luis Gutierrez (IL) and communicated regularly with faculty, staff, and students to maximize our voter engagement activities.

The Dean of Students Office was a key partner in assisting with costs for printing, use of campus facilities and transportation expenses. Our College Printing Office and Center for Information Technology were key partners in producing and distributing College-issued utility bills for students to use as proof of address. Our Student Union play a major role in securing meeting space as well as spaces for events.

III. ANALYSIS OF OUR WORK

We feel that we were quite successful along all four buckets of our democratic engagement work utilizing a variety of strategies. In a word, coalition members and volunteers “hit the pavement” hard and frequently. I have mentioned several of our strategies in earlier sections of this report but will summarize below by category.

Voter Registration

- As reported in an earlier section, we completed 611 new registrations and 571 updated registrations
- New Student Orientation. We started reaching out to first years and other students as soon as New Student Orientation started. VFC Coalition members worked with volunteers to conduct registration as students moved into the residence halls. This continued at other orientation events including Community 101, an event with a panel of local officials and business owners discussing campus-community dynamics. A representative from the League of Women Voters attended our campus resource fair to help register first-year students.
- Coalition members Alison Ricker (League of Women Voters) and Achilles Morales (United Citizen Power) coordinated highly effective hard copy form registration efforts at an array of campus events with a centralized drop-off location at our Science Library.
- National Voter Registration Day. Our coalition coordinated an event in our Science Center with a number of college and community organizations passing out information and with a registration table.
- Constitution Day. An informational and voter registration table was set up at the event.

Voter Education

- Our Dean of Students Office and The Office for Community and Government Relations posted voter information materials on their office websites.
- The Dean of Students Office sent out multiple all-campus student emails with pertinent voting information.
- We worked with the League of Women Voters to distribute a non-partisan FAQ sheet
- Student RAs distributed voter location and local issues information in the residence halls on their hall bulletin boards.
- The coalition worked with the campus newspaper (*The Oberlin Review*) to publish a two-page spread the Friday before election day with voting information.

Ballot Access

- In our printed materials (FAQ Sheet, Non-Partisan Guide, campus newspaper story, we made a concerted effort to provide access to sample ballots so that students could

familiarize themselves with what they would see on election day. We utilized sample ballot information on the Lorain County Board of Elections website.

- In similar fashion, we provided information on each candidate and ballot issues utilizing the vote411.org site. We provided directions on how to locate personalized information on candidates through that site.
- We provided a link to a pdf guide on local candidates via the League of Women Voters website.
- Coalition members were present at both voting polls in Oberlin to answer questions about issues and/or candidates.
- Not wanting to simply rely on information available online, we had paper ballots available at voter education tables and coalition faculty members also assisted students in verifying their voter registration information with paper copies and computers. And again, the League of Women Voters played a pivotal role in providing free materials throughout the months leading up to election day.

Voter Turnout

- The Dean of Students Office has never sent email blasts to promote voter education and registration; however, this past fall, multiple blasts were sent to both on-campus students and those living off-campus. Student leaders will be stationed at the polling location to assist students; student leaders will give out directions and transportation information.
- The Lorain County Community Organizer from United Citizen Power will be coordinating a team of student volunteers at polling sites.
- The Student Union will host an Election Day Party
- Our Democracy Fellow worked with student organizations to send voter reminders via their social network platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).
- Our RAs posted voter reminders in residence halls and coordinated meeting sites for those wishing to go to the polls together.
- We particularly focused on ensuring students had the materials they needed to vote. As most of our students come from outside of Ohio, we created multiple ways to ensure students would have the necessary residency documentation (utility bill mailings, printers at poll sites, volunteers on stand-by to email copies, letters from State Rep. Dan Ramos)

IV. SUCCESSES

What are your institution's top successes (up to 3) of your democratic engagement efforts in 2018?

- **Our VFC Coalition** – I mentioned that a coalition of faculty, staff, students and community members focused in non-partisan fashion on this type of engagement struck many as unprecedented. The ability of coalition members to not only work

effectively with their constituencies (e.g., faculty members getting our Dean to send syllabus language to all faculty), but to also work across constituencies was as energizing as any aspect of this project.

- **Programming** – Perhaps reflective of the coalition dynamics, we were able to bring many campus groups doing similar work and/or programs under the umbrella of VFC. Identity politics run deep at Oberlin, but all involved in democratic engagement recognized the effectiveness of “branding” this work or working in conjunction with the VFC coalition. Hence we had events in conjunction with offices/programs across the college – First-Year Move-In Day Registration, Community 101 Orientation Program, Constitution Day, National Voter Registration Day, Oberlin Candidate’s Night, Hillel Election Day Party, coordinated discounts with local businesses, and *The Oberlin Review* campus newspaper feature.
- **Campus/Community Partnering** – This was greatly facilitated by college faculty/staff coalition members who also play significant roles with relevant community organizations. I’ve mentioned Alison Ricker, our Head Science Library, who also plays a leadership role with The League of Women Voters. Prof. Zeb Page was our connection to Lorain County Rising, an organization whose mission includes “Inspire Voter Participation” and “Promote Positive Change”. Maureen Simen from our Bonner Center for Service and Learning engaged many community organizations in our events, particularly National Voter Registration Day. Community 101 was also recognized by our college president as an important new program in campus-community relations.

V. BARRIERS

What are your institution’s barriers (up to 3) faced in implementing democratic engagement efforts in 2018?

- **Capacity** – While our coalition was dedicated and effective, it still felt like an enormous amount of work handled by a small number of individuals. We can improve connections to relevant student organizations and leaders and hopefully harness their energy. Our Democracy Fellow was excellent, but his availability was often affected by his regular student activities. Finally, as our VFC coalition coordinator and the Assistant Vice President with a large portfolio of responsibilities, I often found myself scrambling to get things done.
- **Making it more fun** – While we had a Democracy Fellow and two additional dedicated students with the coalition, committee work and ideas definitely felt driven by faculty/staff members (who are not adolescents) and hence at times perhaps feeling a bit out of touch with student preferences and technology acumen. We realized this a bit late and hence the Election Day Party, which was student organized, was a priority.

While these barriers were real and challenging, the work of the coalition really resonated with the campus and produced an excitement (and non-partisan character) that seemed unfamiliar to, but welcomed by, many.

VI. BEYOND 2018

Local and state elections, legislative issues, and other democratic engagement activities should take place year round. Looking into 2019 and future years, how do you plan on continuing to engage and educate students about the democratic process?

- At our last fall semester meeting, the coalition brainstormed a variety of ideas looking forward. At the top of the list is maintaining a coalition meeting schedule. As part of this, we want to build an even stronger connection to our Ohio State Coordinator, Dylan Sellers. Dylan has been incredibly supportive of our Democracy Fellow and we want to collaborate more as a coalition. Dylan has been invited to our March meeting.
- At a small, teaching-focused liberal arts college like Oberlin, building greater faculty connections is a major priority. It felt like a huge success to get messaging to all faculty re: voter education/registration information to consider for one's syllabus. We have a vibrant Politics Department with faculty who are well networked with scholars and local politicians, like Sherrod Brown. Increased faculty involvement will also impact in a positive way student involvement, particularly if we can increase for-credit opportunities. With excellent faculty representation on our coalition, I have no doubt we will continue to make strides in this area.
- As I mentioned at the beginning of this report, Oberlin has renewed its commitment to increase engagement in our backyard and regionally. New First-Year Orientation events like Connect Cleveland and Community 101 reflect this and we must build on these for greater democratic engagement. We have a member of the Bonner Center for Service & Learning on our coalition and this helps. Our Assistant to the President for Community & Government Relations is also a coalition member. I've mentioned that other coalition members are also deeply involved with local community organizations. We must create a campus plan for voter engagement that builds on and expands our campus-community connections.

VII. NLSVE DATA

When you receive your campuses' NSLVE report, what plans are in place with your coalition to evaluate this data and to assess future initiatives?

We've been in touch with our Director of Institutional Research throughout this year and he will be invited to a coalition meeting during the spring semester to review NSLVE results with the coalition and additional campus constituencies. We will hold a brainstorming activity

at this session to develop ideas for future voter education and engagement, particularly in ways that best connect with our Gen Z students. We will expand our campus plan based on this feedback as we head into the election cycle.

VIII. PHOTOS AND STORIES

In addition to links below for stories/features, I will include in the uploading of this report other related items from our fall semester work.

- This is a link to the issue of *The Oberlin Review* with [Everything You Need To Vote on Tuesday](#) spread.
- [Dean of Students VFC Page](#)