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The Convergence of Libraries, Voter Education, and Civic Literacy

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to explore how libraries, particularly academic libraries, intersect with voter education in promoting civic engagement. After reviewing research on the library's role in democracy and civic engagement, I forged this connection through collaborating with librarians to develop an interactive workshop open to the Grand Valley community. The main goal of this workshop was to increase voter education and equip voters with tools to become better informed on candidates, legislation, and policy before the midterm elections of November, 2018. Participation in democracy is a lifelong practice and civic duty that begins with a strong educational foundation. I was optimistic that promoting civic literacy and voter education would improve the likelihood of voters going to the polls for the midterm election, as well as future elections, and allow voters to feel more confident in casting their votes. Using my skills as a library research consultant, working closely with librarians of different specialities, and creating relationships with various campus partners resulted in a successful voter education workshop.

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Background and Introduction

Participation in democracy is a civic duty for every eligible American. Currently, a small percentage of registered voters actually show up to the polls. In 2014, less than 20% of eligible college students voted according to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (IDHE, 2018). A major deterrent to voting is not being informed, and difficulty in locating the information necessary to cast a well-educated vote (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Embedded in the civic duty of voting is the responsibility to become an informed and educated voter rather than voting simply for the sake of voting, but this is no easy task. Voter education can be overwhelming and often lacks a clear starting point.

Libraries, public and academic, serve as nonpartisan havens of knowledge, full of resources that can alleviate the stresses of becoming an informed voter and instill habits of civic engagement. As they move away from mere physical access to materials, libraries become more valued for their importance to the community (Ptacek, 2013). Nancy Kranich (2012), Rutgers University Librarian and former American Library Association President, summed it up best,

> Libraries have long recognized their role in promoting access to a diversity of ideas, serving as depositories for government, community, and other useful information. But many are also expanding that civic role by facilitating the exchange and sharing of those ideas. Why? Because libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society. They also provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, safe civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse—spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems (p.75).

Specifically, academic libraries play a critical role in providing students the resources and skills to identify and evaluate information that must be applied in real world practice. They are a nonpartisan space for students and faculty to turn to for information, dialogue, and deliberation about problems that affect our society as a whole (Kranich, Reid, & Willingham, 2004). Recently, there has been a call to action for libraries to refocus their civic-mindedness and practice "deliberative democracy." This practice involves helping students access and understand information regarding complex social issues while simultaneously providing safe spaces for neutral, deliberative discussion of these issues (Kranich et al., 2004). There exists a responsibility and a duty in higher education to prepare the next generation of informed citizens. Academic libraries can act as catalysts in this endeavor through hosting workshops, deliberative forums, dialogues, assisting in research, and supporting students in their own research and initiatives regarding social issues. I believe that the library is the link between liberal education and civic engagement, where students can move beyond the classroom to learn about real world issues and employ necessary critical thinking and application skills to make decisions about how their lives will be governed.

Current Grand Valley Initiatives

Grand Valley is committed to instilling democratic engagement in its students, and this is evident in their on-campus engagement office, the Community Service Learning Center (CSLC). The CSLC has a section called "Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE)," specifically dedicated to promoting the education of students for engaged citizenship through democratic participation in their communities, respect and appreciation of diversity, applied learning and social responsibility. They focus on supporting discussion, educational programming, and professional development to help student affairs professionals provide

students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to make a difference in their communities. (GV's website/NASPA). Democracy 101 is a series of co-curricular events, panel discussions, and workshops focused on democracy in practice supported by the CSLC.They also sponsor voter registration drives every each year, participate in National Voter Registration Day each September by spending the week educating and engaging student voters, and have detailed information on their website about the logistics of voting. Each election season, there are vans to drive students to the polls, and festivities aimed at supporting and promoting voter participation.

Last year, Grand Valley did an outstanding job of sparking democratic conversation on campus with their "GVSU Votes!" campaign, and the associated events. For their efforts, Grand Valley was declared a "voter friendly campus" by the Campus Vote Project and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). This is the third time Grand Valley has received this prestigious honor, held by only 123 universities in the nation. Grand Valley undoubtedly cares about empowering students to be active and energetic participants in democracy, and strives to help students develop the skills and habits needed to make a difference in our society. However, I found a missing link that could be beneficial in achieving this aim: a true voter education platform. Grand Valley hosts many events, dialogues, and discussions about the issues in our democracy and possible approaches, but I felt there was no place for students to simply get the facts on issues and candidates on the ballot, free of bias. They have resources to help students see their sample ballots, but I wanted to take it a step further. One of the fundamental elements of the academic library is teaching students information literacy, a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information (ALA, 2000). Extending this concept to civic literacy, academic libraries have a responsibility to promote civic literacy, equipping

students with the knowledge, skills, and resources to become lifelong, active participants in democracy. In my work as a library research consultant, I have learned a great deal about information literacy and the importance of being able to determine what is reliable and reputable information. This was part of my inspiration to create a workshop around civic literacy in which students could learn about tools and resources available to them to access factual, unbiased information about relevant legislation, policy, and candidates they would be voting on.

Planning, Developing, and Coordinating Workshop

The library is my favorite place on campus. Through my job as a research consultant at the Knowledge Market, I have learned invaluable skills that will serve me long after my time at Grand Valley, including but not limited to creative problem solving, critical thinking, information literacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the importance of connection and conversation in peer to peer learning. Last April, I asked the Knowledge Market Manager, Jen Torreano, if I might create some kind of student workshop as my Honors Senior Project. Fatefully, she had just had a conversation with two liaison librarians, Emily Frigo and Leigh Rupinski, about creating a student workshop series. She put me in contact with those librarians later that same day, and the brainstorming took off from there. I cannot sufficiently explain how lucky I feel to work in such an environment that continually supports and encourages student initiatives and big ideas.

I began by exploring feasible ideas for a workshop with Emily and Leigh. I am incredibly passionate about social justice and democratic engagement, and I wanted to find a topic that could demonstrate the intersection between scholarship and real life. With the midterm election quickly approaching, we landed on the idea of doing a voter information workshop. Throughout the summer, Emily and I collaborated in my collection of resources and information about civic

engagement programs at other libraries and universities using their online library guides. In August, I met with government and open collections librarian, Elizabeth Psyck, to learn about open access government and nonpartisan online resources that would be helpful to include in my workshop. Through her, I received access to Grand Valley's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement reports from 2012, 2014, and 2016 to learn about voting behavior at our institution. Additionally, she introduced me to resources on congress.gov and Michigan.gov that allow voters to see how their representatives sponsor and vote on legislation, find candidate information, and locate sample ballots.

After collecting all the resources I would include in my workshop, I began the logistical planning side. First, I titled it "Vote Smart: The Basics of Becoming Informed." Emily helped me reserve a room in the library for October 12, 2018, so I would be able to deliver my workshop before the midterm elections. Then came promoting this event. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful Emily was in helping me promote my workshop across campus. She met with Melissa Baker-Boosamra, Associate Director of Student Life, Civic Engagement and Assessment, to create a partnership and include my workshop in the campus democratic engagement activities. Notably, many events from the Democracy 101 series take place in the library so there was a natural bridge to connecting with the CSLC. My workshop was included in the CSLC's weekly newsletter about all of the campus happenings regarding voter education and engagement. Further, Emily coordinated with the Housing department to pass on my workshop information so that RA's could share it with their residents. I created a small plugger that was distributed at the front desk of the Knowledge Market and was displayed on the screens throughout the library. I sent this plugger and the details to the Honors College to include in their weekly newsletter. Jen Torreano passed it onto the manager of the GVSU Libraries Twitter

account, where it was publicized in the weeks leading up to the event. She also emailed it to the entire Knowledge Market, including the Speech Lab and the Writing Center, and made it an option for professional development. I submitted a request and was ultimately approved to make my workshop a LIB 100 approved event. Emily shared the information with her colleagues that are liaisons to LIB 100 professors so they could share with their students directly. Lastly, I submitted as an event on the university's online event's calendar. With Emily's help, we made a thorough and comprehensive effort to publicize my workshop across campus.

I had never created a workshop before, so Emily was integral in helping me develop it. She gave me a library lesson plan template to glean inspiration, and provided insight about how to make it dynamic and engaging. We discussed how to adequately scale the workshop for the fifty minutes I had, including the number of outcomes I should include and how long I should spend on each topic I wanted to cover. We also discussed using a "think-pair-share" technique to have small groups discuss a topic at their tables and then come together as a large group to share in order to create active participation. I collected my resources, organized an outline, and created the presentation I would use on the day of the workshop.

Execution

There were roughly 23 people in attendance at my workshop, which I am told is fairly good for library programming. I used a powerpoint presentation to deliver the workshop, and began with a Kahoot using some of the data and statistics from Grand Valley's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement reports to establish active participation for the attendees from the beginning. Then, I delivered a mini monologue explaining why we were there and the importance of being informed and active participants in democracy. People often feel frustrated and let down by the government, and this can lead to giving up on being an active participant and

foregoing showing up to vote. I argue that the solution to this lies in the opposite; when you feel

frustrated by the government, voting is one of the most productive things you can do. Democracy

works as its truest form only when its citizens are dedicated to being fully and accurately

informed, and then act on that information.

My main topics focused on candidate information, legislation, and other helpful

resources. Each person that attended was given access to a laptop so they would be able to follow

along and find information most relevant to themselves. I demonstrated how to navigate the

Michigan Voter Information Center where each person is able to put in their personal

information and find their specific sample ballot. We went to vote411.org together so that each

person could access their voting guide that would allow them to compare the candidates and

issues on their ballot. We briefly went to congress.gov where you can see the voting record of

incumbents and how to see what legislation candidates are sponsoring.

I then moved into deconstructing legislation. Ballot proposals can be confusing, so I

facilitated each person in going to vote411.org where you can get a summary of the proposals.

We then went to ballotpedia.org where people can see how what is being proposed is different

than what currently exists. Through these resources, people can get a better understanding of

what each proposal actually entails and determine how it will personally affect them when

considering their vote. Lastly, I passed on a collection of helpful resources and information that I

thought would be relevant for voters going into the midterm. I discussed the deadline for voting

absentee, Grand Valley's voter vans (as well as Lyft and Uber's promotions on Election Day),

Grand Valley's CLDE resources, fact checking with FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.org, and the

importance of being an active and critical listener in the political realm.

I wrapped up the workshop, and left about five minutes for the attendees to complete an evaluation form. I was incredibly happy with how it went, despite a few missteps throughout. Jen and Emily told me that what I perceived as missteps were actually helpful because it required me to show participants how to navigate through the website to a particular page, rather than simply accessing it from a bookmark. It turned out to be as interactive as I had hoped for. The attendees were engaged, asked questions, and seemed receptive to the resources and information I was sharing. I had a plethora of resources, too many to include in the workshop, so I created a handout (See Appendix) for the attendees to take with them. I think the amount of content I covered during the workshop was appropriate for the fifty minutes, and I was able to touch on everything I wanted to without feeling too rushed. While I was content with the workshop itself, if I could change one thing, I would have delivered the workshop before the deadline to register to vote. Some attendees were not registered, and while they gleaned information for smart voting in the future, they were not able to participate in the 2018 midterms.

The last five minutes of the workshop were reserved for evaluations. I gave the attendees an evaluation form asking for feedback about things they learned, how well the workshop was organized, how they heard about it, and if they feel more confidence in their ability to cast informed votes. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive- a majority of the attendees said they felt they gained a deeper understanding of voter education and felt more confident they could cast an educated vote about candidates and policies. The most exciting feedback for me came from the responses to "How did you hear about this session?" There was a healthy mix of responses including the library service display, the LIB 100 events calendar, the Knowledge Market, LIB 100 professors, the GVSU events calendar, and the CSLC. This validated our

promotional efforts and proved that there was successful between myself, Emily, the library and our various campus partners.

After

Much to my surprise, the collection of student evaluations was not the end of my workshop. A writer from the Lanthorn and two students completing a journalism project attended my workshop. The students recorded part of the workshop, and interviewed me afterwards to learn about my motivation behind creating this project, while the writer from the Lanthorn asked me some questions and took down my information.The story of my workshop ran in the Lanthorn the following week. A link to the voter education handout I created was included on the CSLC's democratic engagement website. It was also published on ScholarWorks (an open-access repository maintained by the GVSU Libraries that showcases and maintains works by GVSU scholars) and was downloaded over 80 times before the midterm election. Further, we distributed over 50 hard copies in the Knowledge Market located within the library. Though my workshop only lasted fifty minutes, the effects could be seen in the following weeks leading up to the midterms and was more than I could have hoped for.

Creating and implementing this workshop was simultaneously one of the most stressful and rewarding things I have ever done. I am endlessly grateful for all of the people in the library and across campus that supported this project, and helped me bring my ideas to life. Being able to create my own workshop and share something that I am so passionate about with Grand Valley students and faculty was the culminating experience of my work in the library. I did not know exactly how to begin or how it would all come together, but I was not afraid of the challenge because I knew there would be people supporting and guiding me every step of the way. None of this would not have been possible without the people of the library that make me

feel confident and assured always. I am leaving the library and Grand Valley a stronger, more confident and emboldened person, leader, and citizen, and this is what is most rewarding of all.

Future Suggestions

I think Grand Valley needs to forge deeper connections with the community to stay up to date on local government and the relevant issues of the greater Grand Rapids area. Hosting guest speakers, holding forums about community issues, and highlighting what is going on in the community outside of campus can be a good introduction for students that are just beginning civic participation. The more exposure students can have to real world questions and issues, the better. Emily had mentioned to me that there was talk previously about pulling materials about government and electoral matters in the library during election seasons, and I think this is a great idea to increase the library's voice in the democratic conversation on campus. The library should advertise their ability to help students with civic literacy and gaining the information needed to make informed votes. While I am unsure about the logistics of this, I think a stronger connection between the library and the CSLC would be greatly beneficial to advancing Grand Valley's commitment to civic engagement overall. Branching these two sectors would provide students with a more comprehensive experience in civic engagement and democratic participation.

Most importantly, the library can encourage and support student exploration of public issues. Acting as a neutral entity, the library can assist students in framing social or political issues in their own way using unbiased, factual information. The creation of a Library Guide of voter resources, links to Michigan and national government websites about legislation, etc. may alleviate some of the stress about where to start for students that are just beginning democratic participation. Expanding their commitment to information literacy to encompass civic literacy will provide students the ideal opportunity to become engaged and educated about real world

issues that will remain relevant throughout their lifetimes. Gaining these skills in a liberal education environment is imperative to active, lifelong democratic participation and civic engagement.

My experience working with librarians Emily, Leigh, Elizabeth, and our campus partners was phenomenal, and I am exceedingly grateful for all of the support I received during this project. I am continuously overwhelmed by Grand Valley's dedication to supporting big ideas and providing students with tools and opportunities for success. The confidence and empowerment I have found at this institution will remain with me long after my time here is done. For three years, my job as a research consultant coupled with the supportive, encouraging employees of the library have instilled in me the curiosity and ambition to explore the important social and political issues in our society and take action to address them. As a result, I have discovered a deep passion for social justice and democratic participation, and I know I will continue to build on the foundation of civic mindedness that Grand Valley has imparted on me. Moving forward, this is what I will use to impact my profession, my community, and my world.

Appendix

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Smart Voting Resources

For Candidate Information:

- Find your voter information (precinct, jurisdiction, districts, etc.) and **sample ballot** at: https://webapps.sos.state.mi.us/MVIC/
- Compare candidates and learn about their platforms with your Voter Guide by typing your address in at: https://www.vote411.org/ballot
    *vote411.org can also be searched by state and topic, including state-specific information on absentee voting, ID and eligibility requirements, polling place details, and more!
- See how Senators and Representatives have voted on policy and legislation endorsements at: https://www.congress.gov – scroll down to "Current Members of Congress" and select your state OR
- Search senator and representative voting records by home address at: https://www.govtrack.us OR https://projects.propublica.org/represent/
- See where Congressional candidates' campaign funding comes from at: https://www.fec.gov/data/

For Information on Legislation:

- See what legislation proposals are on your ballot and a summary at: https://www.vote411.org/ballot OR http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/ballot-measures-database.aspx OR https://ballotpedia.org
- Search by topic for legislation in Congress that affects you at: https://www.govtrack.us

Helpful Voter Tips:

- You can fill out your sample ballot in advance and **bring it with you** to the polls.
- In Michigan, absentee ballots must be requested by November 3 at 2:00 PM and turned into your local clerk by 8:00 PM on Election Day, November 6.
- This year, Uber is offering free rides and Lyft is 50% off rides to polls on Election Day. Grand Valley also has Voter Vans from 7am-8pm.
- American Associate of State Colleges and Universities guide to informed voting: http://www.aascu.org/programs/ADP/VotingResources/InformedVoting.pdf
- GVSU Community Service Learning Center Democratic Engagement Programs: https://www.gvsu.edu/service/democratic-engagement-programs-187.htm

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