



Historical and Contemporary Synopsis of the Development of Field Education Guidelines in BSW, MSW and Doctoral Programs

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Notes From The Field: Own Your Vote: A Novel Approach to Teach Social Workers about Voting Rights

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Abstract

Increasing voting access remains a central charge of social work's professional mission. To achieve this aim, social work educators must identify ways to engage students and professionals in addressing barriers to voter participation in the US. This Note from the Field describes a recently implemented active-learning series entitled *Own Your Vote*. By fostering community connections to further education around issues voter suppression and disenfranchisement, the *Own Your Vote* series serves as one example of how social workers, who are ethically bound to participate in social and political action, may engage both students and community members in promoting voting justice.

Introduction

Voting has long been an essential lever for social change. The social work profession has consistently acknowledged the importance of voting engagement activities dating back to public comments from the National Conference of Charities and Corrections at the turn of the 20th century (Abramovitz et al., 2019). Today, recognizing that congressional budgetary allocations favor areas with higher voter turnout (Martin & Claibourn, 2013), increasing access to voting remains a central charge of our social work mission to promote positive community change (see NASW [2017] code of ethics: 6.02 & 6.04). Yet, citizens from marginalized groups continue to experience barriers to exercising their right to vote. For instance, voter identification requirements, which are now in effect across 35 states (NCSL, 2017), disproportionately disenfranchise Black and Latinx individuals (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2017). To effectively advocate for the rights of our clients we must

educate social workers (current and future) on the effects of discriminatory voting policies as well as practices to promote voter participation.

To achieve these goals educators must identify ways to expose students to the myriad barriers to voter participation in the US. Toward this goal, our profession recently unveiled the Voting is Social Work initiative (www.votingsocialwork.org) which equips social workers with voting resources. This campaign is timely and provides much-needed guidance to our profession regarding nonpartisan ways to promote civic engagement. Yet, given notable politicization (Wines, 2019) voting rights education and advocacy within university settings can be complicated. And for social work programs housed within public universities—particularly those located in conservative areas of the US like the Deep South—challenges to addressing social justice issues must be strategically traversed given the conservative political landscape within which these institutions operate and the state appropriations upon which they rely. While we are mandated by our profession to pursue social change (NASW, 2017), ethical dilemmas can arise from these challenging juxtapositions—but so can opportunities.

Schools of social work located in the Deep South are strategically positioned to draw attention to and address these tensions by intentionally and reflectively problematizing what it means to “challenge social injustice” and dismantle hegemonic structures in these contested spaces. Perhaps unsurprisingly, little has been written about these challenges in scholarly literature, and what has been produced to date is limited in scope. On the whole, peer-reviewed manuscripts have focused on university actors in Deep South settings confronting stigma, sexuality, and health disparities (e.g., HIV, HPV; McCoy et al., 2020; Kasymova, Harrison, & Pascal., 2019). None have highlighted public

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university-driven stratagems to empower disenfranchised voices in “owning their vote.” Additional scholarly attention is needed particularly during the current climate of dismantling long-held hegemonic structures locally and nationwide.

Informed by our students’ expressed needs for additional opportunities to advance social justice initiatives within the school and surrounding community (Ruggiano et al., 2020) the University of Alabama School of Social Work’s Diversity Committee developed and deployed an active-learning series entitled *Own Your Vote*. Acknowledging the Diversity Committee’s mission to promote an understanding of diversity and affirm the value of incorporating diversity into all aspects of the educational experience, the *Own Your Vote* series sought to create a platform highlighting issues surrounding voter suppression and disenfranchisement to help students and community members gain awareness of systemic barriers to voting participation among marginalized groups. The *Own Your Vote* series serves as one example for how social work educators in the Deep South, who remain ethically bound to participate in social and political action, may engage both students and practitioners around issues relating to voting justice while providing meaningful benefits to the larger University and community.

Own Your Vote: Overview of Approach

Recognizing continuing threats to voting rights across the US, as well as insufficient information about voter suppression in many of the current curricular materials and texts, our Diversity Committee sought to address this need by developing a series of educational colloquia and accompanying activities. Given the relevance of this topic beyond the field of social work we collaborated with numerous University departments and community organizations to create open and inclusive interprofessional learning opportunities for our students, faculty, and the community at large. Wherever possible Continuing Education Units (CEUs) were provided to maximize engagement and emphasize the social work theory to practice continuum. With the exception of those that are clinical in nature, which focus on application of skills in real time, traditional social work CEUs are frequently

informational (Congress, 2012). This is especially true in macro social work practice given the non-licensure requirement of macro social work (Gianino, Ruth, & Geron, 2016). Hence social work students and professionals have been challenged by the “how to” of macro social change making (Barrett, 2011). Recognizing the need to not only inform participants but also extend guidance toward application the committee developed a two-pronged structure: a) an issue-focused seminar where participants gained information, and b) an application-focused outreach activity or “call to action.” This approach exposed participants to issues of concern while also applying social work knowledge to current practice issues.

Identifying the Issues

The *Own Your Vote* series was composed of seven community forums on topics addressing voting rights including voting restoration, voting access, undocumented citizens, women’s suffrage, and general information about registering to vote. These issues were specifically prioritized given their relevance to social justice concerns frequently highlighted in our state.

Importance of local relevance. In the wake of recent erosions of federal voting protection for historically disenfranchised groups (i.e., *Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013) Alabama and other parts of the Deep South have witnessed an influx of voter ID laws, voter roll purges, and other policies aimed toward voter suppression (Anderson & Durbin, 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020). As social worker educators within the University of Alabama, we are acutely aware of our state’s central role in the history of the civil rights movement. Acknowledging the wealth of history and, as a result, voting rights expertise within our own state we strategically solicited organizations and speakers from our own communities who represent the interests of marginalized groups adversely affected by measures deterring voter participation. This locally-sourced speaker series illuminated voting challenges through a variety of lenses—all focused toward promoting the foundational right to a free and fair election—to educate participants and increase connectedness among similarly-focused groups that may not otherwise interact.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, Hispanic

Interests Coalition of Alabama, Alabama Disabilities and Advocacy Center, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, League of Women Voters, and Alabama Arise were among the featured local organizations championing voting rights. Speakers explained how their efforts defending the voting rights of local citizens tie into the national issues of disenfranchisement and voter restoration. Through this educational series we engaged participants in dialogue in effort to enhance empathy and reduce political divisiveness.

Applying the Information

The Own Your Vote series was not only developed to educate participants about voting suppression of marginalized groups but also to provide an opportunity to challenge participants to actively engage in the process of defending voting rights and our democratic process. As a result this series aimed to consistently involve participants through an ongoing voter registration drive as well as specific “calls to action” relating to each topic in the Own Your Vote series.

Calls to action. For each installment of the Own Your Vote series, technology was leveraged to facilitate participants’ voter registration through TurboVote (www.turbovote.org), an online voting platform. In partnership with Vote Everywhere (an Andrew Goodman Foundation-affiliated campus organization) Own Your Vote attendees consulted with volunteers to check their voter registration status and, if necessary, complete the registration process.

In addition to this overarching call to ensure voting registration of attendees specific calls to action were tailored to the topics of each event in the series. For our first event in the series the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Field Director for Rights Restoration addressed voting barriers faced by previously incarcerated individuals—a pressing problem in Alabama given the state’s high rate of incarceration and disproportionate imprisonment of BIPOC (Sakala, 2014). After this event attendees were invited to attend a “lunch and learn” workshop building skills to communicate with legislators in writing. During this activity example letters were provided to participants including a request to abolish fees associated with voter restoration after incarceration—a key barrier to voting highlighted by our first Own Your Vote speaker. Yet, because

of the previously acknowledged challenges of operating this campaign within a public university situated within a historically conservative state, varied example letters were provided to participants to avoid appearances of politicization. This letter-writing workshop was hosted first within our own School of Social Work and, later that month, replicated within our community partner’s school, a prominent historically black college. Through supportive materials and one-on-one guidance committee members assisted Own Your Vote participants in drafting letters to their legislators. Other event-specific calls to action included completing the census (“Hard to Count” census event), sharing information about absentee ballots with the community (League of Women Voters’ “Suffrage Centennial” event), contacting legislators about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act (Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama’s event), and assessing the accessibility of local polling sites (Alabama Disability Advocacy Project’s event).

Own Your Vote: Strengths of Execution

Maximizing Engagement

To ensure success of the Own Your Vote series, the School of Social Work Diversity Committee quickly recognized the importance of building bridges with other programs across the campus, surrounding college campuses, and the Tuscaloosa community. Planning of this series began the summer prior to the first event in October 2019 and continued throughout the 7-month series. To begin engaging partners committee members were tasked with reaching out to other colleges and community leaders asking for support or ideas on how to address topics pertaining to voter suppression. Potential partners were engaged in a number of ways including attending interprofessional events across the University; soliciting support from the University’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; discussing event sponsorship with deans across campus; and networking with community organizations with aligned missions. The response rate was exceptional: through these sustained efforts, the Diversity Committee built 18 interdisciplinary partnerships within the University (e.g., Women & Gender Resource Center, College of Business, Departments of

Criminal Justice, Political Science, Gender & Race Studies, History, etc.) and 17 cross-community collaborations (e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center, League of Women Voters of Alabama, Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama, etc.) throughout the series.

Once identified partners were invited to our committee's ongoing planning meetings. This coalition of intercollegiate and community-based partners enriched the series in many ways, including representing diverse ideas throughout the planning process, increasing participation through partners' networks, and ensuring consistent event sponsorship (via funding, in-kind food and supply donations, etc.). Beyond shaping, promoting and sustaining these events opportunities for ongoing collaborations emerged from this planning process. For example, a number of committee members joined our city's NAACP chapter and, in turn, were able to connect the city's chapter to the campus NAACP chapter. These partnerships not only facilitated the Own Your Vote series but will continue to enhance ongoing and future community initiatives.

Leveraging Technology

Within the Own Your Vote series technology was key to successfully engaging students, faculty, staff and community members—both in promoting events and maximizing access to content. Promotion of the Own Your Vote series involved traditional mechanisms such as print media (e.g., flyers, a series brochure highlighting multiple speakers, etc.); email promotion through student, faculty, staff and alumni listservs; digital signage across campus; a series press release; and targeted media pitches for specific events. Yet, the campaign relied heavily upon more modern promotional techniques using the School of Social Work's social media accounts on various platforms (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) to brand and advertise upcoming events using a novel hashtag, #OwnYourVoteUA, often highlighting upcoming speakers through brief video clips contributed by the speaker. Social media was also leveraged throughout this series to increase participant engagement by live-streaming segments of events, posting video clips after the event to our social media accounts, and promoting speaker-led voting initiatives.

Given the large online learning presence of our

School of Social Work (with more than two-thirds of our MSW students enrolled in distance programs) increasing remote access for student and community participants was a priority. Beyond promoting events through social media we also live-streamed each event through Zoom with links advertised through all promotional materials. This practice extended opportunities for online participants to pose questions and receive CEUs through Own Your Vote events in the same manner as in-person participants. As a result of multi-modal promotional efforts and participant engagement techniques over 100 individuals attended each of the seven Own Your Vote colloquia throughout the 2019/2020 academic year, and a total of 27 CEUs were awarded throughout the series.

Evaluating Impact

To evaluate success and facilitate ongoing improvement, participants were asked to complete a 6-question evaluation form rating the event (on a scale from 1, "Strongly Disagree," to 5, "Strongly Agree") across criteria including relevance, integration of opportunities for active engagement (speaker and event), quality, and utility of information shared. Of a possible score of 30 (indicating perfect satisfaction across all events), the mean score of participants' evaluations (N = 121) across 6 events was 27.8 (SD = 3.9), suggesting the series was well-received.

Own Your Vote: Lessons Learned & Implications

Overall, the Own Your Vote series achieved its aims by educating participants to make informed electoral decisions while also empowering participants to advocate for voting rights of marginalized communities. However, implementation of this series was not without challenges.

Challenges in Execution

As previously noted, our committee recognized the challenges of advancing a progressive educational series about voting rights within a public university situated in a conservative state. While this reality prompted us to think carefully about the alignment of educational content with our professional values

(avoiding appearances of partisanship when addressing politically-charged issues including DACA and felon enfranchisement) we were also reminded of our state's history when faced with a racially-targeted "Zoom bombing."

Given the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, March and April Own Your Vote events were conducted solely online through Zoom. In March the event (promoting 2020 Census education and participation) was quickly hijacked by unknown attendees. These intruders used profanity and racial slurs, seemingly directed at the hosts and presenter. Within seconds, intruders gained control of the host's screen and shared pornography and threatening images (e.g., one intruder wore a bandana covering his face and brandished what appeared to be a rifle). This sordid situation was resolved by committee co-chairs, who quickly directed attendees to a secure, password-protected meeting. Yet, this experience reminded organizers and participants alike of the climate within which we conduct our work. After reporting this event through university channels (instructional technology; diversity, equity and inclusion; and campus police) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation new online security practices and limited promotional techniques were adopted in effort to avert similar harassment during upcoming events.

Recommendations for Future Efforts

As discussed, development and execution of this educational series involved the commitment of numerous stakeholders within the School, University, and surrounding community. Our committee was challenged by the project coordination elements of this series; yet over time we developed a number of strategies to streamline event planning and coordination. First, the committee leaned heavily on a cloud-based storage system to organize, plan, and memorialize events. Despite the learning curve around managing event promotion and technology, the committee developed a checklist to ensure the success of each event which evolved throughout the series as we identified new challenges. Other helpful practices included recording sessions (through Zoom) for later sharing through open-access platforms (e.g., YouTube); participating in post-event "debriefing sessions" to reflect upon successes, shortfalls, and possible improvements; and hosting events within

community partners' organizations, where events may be live-streamed on campus to ensure student access while expanding educational reach.

Given the time-intensive nature of developing and implementing student-responsive, community-engaged educational opportunities social work programs should consider incentivizing involvement for students, staff, and faculty. Efforts to intentionally integrate civic participation and voter engagement within social work education and field opportunities have been considered (Abramovitz et al., 2019) and strengthen our profession's commitment and ability to meaningfully address voting justice issues. Yet, because a central aim of this series was to more effectively reach diverse audiences and build university-community partnerships additional institutional strategies, such as designated faculty/staff time, may be necessary to ensure these types of campus-community collaboratives are developed and sustained.

Conclusion

The Own Your Vote campaign offers a framework through which to merge the educational needs of students, staff, faculty, and community. By leveraging university resources in partnership with surrounding communities social work educators can better achieve collective goals to promote voting education and participation, particularly in communities where minorities have historically been disenfranchised. Future series with varied social justice aims should be explored as opportunities for continuing education within university and community settings.

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