



## LET'S GET ENGAGED: A Non-Partisan Voter Registration and Get-Out-The-Vote Toolkit for University/Community Partnerships

In 2013, the students of Virginia Commonwealth University's living-learning community ASPIRE partnered with residents of nearby public housing development Mosby Court to mobilize and engage students and residents in Virginia's statewide elections. We've created this guide to encourage schools to adapt this model to your own campus and community, pulling together insights and practices from our joint GOTV effort. When using this guide, please keep in mind that all community-campus activities should comply with university policies and local laws.

### Here's What We Did:

Our Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) effort was conducted by VCU ASPIRE students and Mosby Court residents. ASPIRE is a living-learning program focused on community engagement. Mosby Court is a public housing development located less than 2 miles from VCU's academic campus. The partnership inspired the students, inspired the residents, and led the number of residents voting in Virginia's statewide elections to nearly double, from 608 residents who voted in 2009, to 1116 in 2013.

### Here's Why We Did It:

The idea for the nonpartisan GOTV effort came directly from leaders of the Mosby Tenant Association and Mosby residents participating in a leadership program. The leaders and residents indicated that they wanted to partner with the ASPIRE students to design a strategy for mobilizing voter turnout, first in the 2012 presidential election, and then in Virginia's 2013 statewide election, where both students and traditionally underrepresented constituencies tend to stay home.

The primary objectives of this effort were to:

- Increase the number of people who actively vote in the Mosby community
- Help develop leadership skills among the Mosby residents, and
- Empower residents to become civically engaged

We also hoped it would help the ASPIRE students recognize the power and importance of their own votes.

The ASPIRE students primarily assist with efforts that are of real concern to the community and have been initiated by community partners. Thus, the GOTV project was readily accepted by the students because it met the overall aim of ASPIRE. When considering such an effort, it is important that students not just sit in a classroom planning the project, but that they talk with community partners about their priorities as they relate to voting. This will ensure that the project reflects the interests and priorities of the community partner, which is critical for success.

### Here's How We Did It:

A plan was developed to guide the implementation of the GOTV project. This plan was based on a 3-pronged voter engagement model:

- Voter registration
- Voter education



- Getting residents to vote on Election Day

Before implementing the voter engagement model, key elements of community engagement practice were utilized to promote the highest level of participation by the Mosby residents. These practices included:

- Clarifying the purpose of the GOTV effort
- Building trust through the establishment of relationships
- Seeking commitments

Additionally, the students worked with residents to identify the resources in the Mosby community that could be used to support the project. Using an asset based approach helped residents to identify the strengths of their community—a community center, relationships with other organizations, a tenants' association, residents already trained to conduct voter registration, etc.

## Details About the Voter Engagement Model:

### 1. Voter Registration

The first step was to register eligible Mosby residents to vote. To reach the unregistered voters, the students and the Mosby residents were divided into small groups and went door-to-door to register voters in the Mosby precinct. The group also identified Sister Circle, a local nonprofit, as a potential partner and hosted a second door-to-door voter registration drive during a Mosby-based breast cancer walk sponsored by Sister Circle.

### Key Components:

- Two door-to-door voter registration events were held in the Mosby community in the month before the November election. The students and residents planned and prepared 30 days prior to the event, which helped everyone to gain a better understanding of community processes.
- Sister Circle was identified by the residents as a nonprofit partner—it's very helpful to identify partners to assist in your voter registration campaign.
- Students and residents were provided voter registration training to ensure that everyone complied with the laws and understood the rules.
- Students and residents were sent out in teams to knock on doors, both for safety reasons and to increase accountability. Going out in teams also helps students to apply what they'd learned about civic engagement to a "real life" event. Additionally, it builds relationships with partners like the Mosby residents.
- All voter registration forms were reviewed as soon as they were returned to check for missing information. The students and residents were required to return to the address listed on the form to complete them if there was missing information.
- It was discovered that many Mosby residents needed information about Restoration of Rights for those disenfranchised by previous felonies. Students worked with them to help them restore those rights. Then-outgoing governor Bob McDonnell created a relatively simple process to facilitate this for nonviolent felons, but most who were eligible did not know how to get their rights restored. Helping with this process also helped underscore to students the value of their votes.

### 2. Voter Education



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During the second step of the approach, ASPIRE students and Mosby residents hosted a voter education luncheon in the Mosby community. State delegate Jennifer McClellan talked with residents about the importance of voting. Michael Brown, former chair of the State Elections Committee, explained to residents what they should bring to the polls and what to expect on Election Day. Residents were able to register to vote during the luncheon. ASPIRE students greeted the attendees, served lunch, and distributed literature.

## Key Components:

- Provide food as an important incentive to motivate residents to attend voter education events.
- Provide Election Day information such as polling place locations and ID to bring to the polls, etc.
- Arrange for rides to the polls if necessary. This is important for public housing residents since many do not have cars.
- Discuss what's at stake if citizens do not vote and why it is important to vote every year. Give examples of close elections, like the 537 Florida votes that decided the 2,000 presidency, the 312 votes by which Al Franken won the 2008 Minnesota US Senate race, the 133 votes that decided Washington State's governor's race in 2004, or the 74 votes in 2012 that determined control of the Washington State Legislature.
- Use and distribute nonpartisan candidate guides, like [those created by the Campus Election Engagement Project](#) or the League of Women Voters.
- Invite elected officials and residents from other public housing developments to your event.

## 3. Get-Out-The-Vote

The last step was to turn out the vote on Election Day. Mosby residents and ASPIRE students started Election Day by pounding the pavement and knocking on doors reminding people to vote. They also provided people with info about the free shuttle to the polls, which was operated by St. Paul's Episcopal Church. It's estimated that 100+ Mosby residents rode the shuttle to the polls. After knocking on doors, students and residents passed out free doughnuts and T-shirts to those who voted.

## Key Components:

- Distribute flyers reminding residents to vote and giving instructions for riding the shuttle
- Make voting "easy" and fun on Election Day by providing free transportation to the polls, and handing out doughnuts and T-shirts.
- Ask everyone within sight if they needed a ride to the polls.
- Invite residents to bring friends and relatives to the polls, or otherwise remind them.
- Develop ways to build excitement around Election Day.

## Results: Sharply Increased Voter Turnout

In 2009, 608 people voted at the two precincts that served Mosby Court. In 2013, 1116 voted, an 84% increase. We believe that participation in the project, coupled with VCU's other campus-wide engagement efforts, played a significant role in increasing student electoral participation as well. In 2009, 474 students voted in the precinct that serves the ASPIRE students, and in 2013 944 students voted, a 99% increase. Our efforts clearly made a



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difference. We look forward to replicating them with other public housing developments in the city and hope schools in other cities will adapt our successful model with nonprofits serving underrepresented groups in your own communities.

## Lessons Learned:

- Trust and respect are the glue that holds together a successful campus-community engagement project.
- Personal contact such as door-to-door knocking is critical. Sitting at a voter registration table inside of a building is ineffective unless there is an event in the building.
- Community engagement practices are not prescriptive. Use the practices that work for your geographic area and the communities you are engaging.
- Plan ahead for when and where you will hold your GOTV events.
- Record names, addresses, and phone numbers of the people you register so you can follow-up with them and encourage them to vote.
- Invite as many residents as possible to participate in the engagement process
- Post flyers in multiple sites in the community.
- Take and post lots of photos
- Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate
- Have fun and celebrate your success!

For further information on the VCU and Mosby Court partnership, contact Nannette Bailey at [nabailey@vcu.edu](mailto:nabailey@vcu.edu)

For information on the nonpartisan Campus Election Engagement Project, see [www.campuselect.org](http://www.campuselect.org).

For information on what nonprofits can and cannot do in terms of engaging their constituencies in elections, see [www.nonprofitvote.org](http://www.nonprofitvote.org)