

# Campus-Community Partnerships

## for Electoral Engagement



One powerful way for students to magnify the impact of their voting, is to partner with non-partisan community organizations. And help them get out the vote among those they reach. Since 2012, students from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) have worked with residents of the nearby Mosby Court public housing project to help the project's residents vote. The partnership has inspired both students and Mosby residents, and helped Mosby's voter turnout nearly double during the course of the initiative.

There are other powerful models for campus-community engagement outreach. For instance, North Carolina A&T students registered voters in surrounding low-income communities on six successive weekends as a campus-wide service project. We encourage you to consider these approaches, perhaps combining outreach with critical reflection, for which you could give classroom credit. But if you're going to help students partner with an external community organization, the VCU-Mosby Court partnership offers excellent lessons to adapt.

## Background

Mosby community members from their Tenants' Association and from a leadership program worked with students in VCU's residential community-engagement program, called ASPIRE. Together, they designed a nonpartisan Get Out The Vote (GOTV) effort to mobilize voter turnout at Mosby, first in the presidential election and then in state elections like governor's races, when both students and Mosby residents tended to stay home.

### Their primary objectives were to:

- Increase the number of people who actively vote in the Mosby community
- Help develop leadership and civic engagement skills among Mosby residents
- Help students recognize the power and importance of their votes



## The students helped Mosby residents:

- Register to vote
- Restore their rights if disenfranchised felons
- Arrange rides to the polls if they needed them

The partnership let VCU students assist with real community concerns and learn from Mosby residents. In turn, Mosby residents saw their interests and priorities reflected in the project, which made them more actively engaged partners. Students first helped Mosby residents identify existing strengths and resources, including their community center, Tenants' Association, relationships with other local nonprofits, and residents already trained to conduct voter registration. The more they worked together, the more they built mutual trust.

# Bringing the VCU-Mosby Court Model to Your Campus

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As with campus-focused voter engagement projects, the VCU-Mosby Court partnership included three key elements, which you'd want to replicate in your plan:

- VOTER REGISTRATION
  - VOTER EDUCATION
  - GETTING RESIDENTS TO VOTE ON ELECTION DAY
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## Step 1: Voter Registration

Students and Mosby residents divided into small groups and went door-to-door to register eligible voters. The group also identified Sister Circle, a local nonprofit, as a potential partner and hosted a second door-to-door registration drive during a Mosby-based breast cancer walk sponsored by Sister Circle.

### KEY COMPONENTS:

- The Mosby community held two door-to-door voter registration events in the month before the November election. To ensure the events were successful, students and residents began planning and preparing 30 days before.
- Mosby residents identified Sister Circle as an additional nonprofit partner. Familiar local partners can always make voter registration campaigns more successful.
- Students and residents took voter registration training, to ensure that they understood and could comply with the relevant 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 helped students apply what they'd learned about civic engagement to a "real life" event. It also built their relationships with partners like the Mosby residents.
- All voter registration forms were reviewed as soon as they were returned to check for missing information. That way students and residents could go back to the listed addresses for anything else that was needed.
- Many Mosby residents needed information on how to restore their voting rights if they'd been disenfranchised by previous felonies. Students worked with residents to help get those rights restored. Although governors Bob McDonnell and Terry McAuliffe had created a relatively simple process to facilitate this for nonviolent felons, most who were eligible did not know how to get their rights restored. Assisting with this process helped students recognize the value of their own votes.

## Step 2: Voter Education

ASPiRE students and Mosby residents hosted a voter education luncheon in the Mosby community, where residents were able to register to vote. A local state delegate talked about the importance of voting. The former chair of the State Elections Committee explained what they should bring to the polls and what to expect on Election Day. ASPiRE students greeted the attendees, served lunch, and distributed voting-related information.

### KEY COMPONENTS:

- Provide Election Day information, such as polling place locations, and what kind of ID to bring, if required.
- Arrange for rides to the polls if necessary. (This is important for public housing residents, since many do not have cars.)
- Provide food, if possible; it's a strong incentive for people to attend.
- Discuss what's at stake if citizens do not vote, and why it is important to vote every year. Share examples of close elections, such as the 537 Florida votes that decided the 2000 presidency, the 2017 tied race that decided control of Virginia's House of Delegates, and the 133 votes that decided Washington State's 2004 governor's race.
- Use and distribute nonpartisan candidate guides, like [those created by the Campus Election Engagement Project](#) or the League of Women Voters.
- Distribute and collect commitments to vote.
- If you're engaging a public housing project, invite elected officials and residents from other housing projects, as well as other local nonprofits.

### Step 3: Get out the vote

Mosby residents and ASPIRE students began Election Day by knocking on doors to remind people to vote. They also provided people with info about a free shuttle to the polls, operated by St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and used by over a hundred Mosby residents. After knocking on doors, students and residents passed out free doughnuts and T-shirts.

#### KEY COMPONENTS:

- Distribute flyers reminding residents to vote and giving instructions for rides to the polls.
- Build excitement around Election Day by making it a visible community event. Hand out food and materials like I Voted stickers.
- Have participants document their efforts on social media to encourage others to vote.
- Ask everyone you contact if they need rides to the polls, and have a mechanism to provide this.
- Invite residents to bring friends and relatives to the polls, or find other ways to remind them.



For questions regarding VCU's ASPIRE organization contact [Nannette Bailey](#).

For more information on the nonpartisan Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP), visit us at [campuselect.org](http://campuselect.org). Or contact your state's CEEP Election Outreach Director.

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

### Results: Sharply Increased Voter Turnout

The VCU-Mosby partnership significantly increased turnout for both students and Mosby residents. Between 2009, when the collaboration didn't exist, and 2013, when it had been going for a year, turnout in the two precincts serving Mosby Court increased by 84%. Students involved in the project believed that their experience, coupled with VCU's other campus-wide engagement efforts, also played a significant role in increasing their own electoral participation and those of their peers, with the precinct that serves the ASPIRE students seeing a 99% increase during that same period. The partnership impacted both Mosby and the participating students, and VCU has since expanded the partnership to engage other Richmond public housing developments.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons for adapting this successful voter engagement model to your own collaborations with local housing developments or other nonprofits serving underrepresented groups:

- Trust and respect hold together successful campus-community engagement projects.
- Effective community engagement practices respect local context. Listen to the communities you're engaging.
- Plan ahead for when and where to hold GOTV events. Learn all relevant state or local rules, and any relevant rules of your school.
- Successful voter outreach builds on proactive personal contact, like door knocking. Simply sitting at a voter registration tables only works in conjunction with a high-profile event.
- Record names, addresses, and phone numbers of the people you register, so you can follow-up and encourage them to vote.
- Invite as many residents or participants of your partner nonprofit as possible to participate in helping engage their peers.
- Take and post photos to multiply the impact of your work and get others excited.
- Have fun, celebrate your successes, and then plan for further follow-ups.