

# **SUNY Oswego – All In Action Plan**

Dr. Allison Rank

SUNY Oswego's primary political engagement program is a voter mobilization campaign entitled Vote Oswego. Started in 2016 by Dr. Allison Rank (Assistant Professor, Political Science) Vote Oswego recognizes the power of voter mobilization campaigns to engage students as citizens and voters as well as providing a significant opportunity for service-learning in a variety of disciplines. This plan outlines the major components of the Vote Oswego 2020 campaign. It is important to note that Vote Oswego operates on two distinct levels: the campaign and the campaign-as-course. The plan describes each in turn. Because the objective of the campaign-as-course program is to encourage students to take on the role of organizers, many specific details of the plan will be filled in or adjusted by student leadership teams throughout the semester.

## **Vote Oswego – The Campaign**

Vote Oswego's mission statement reads: "To help Lakers make an impact in general and mid-term elections by educating students about the importance of political participation, making voter registration fun & easy, and encouraging students to submit their absentee ballots & make it to the polls." Vote Oswego's staffers (students at SUNY Oswego) set goals around voter registration, absentee ballots requests, and getting out the vote and pursue those goals using a variety of grassroots tactics.

In setting goals for Vote Oswego 2020, students will draw on a combination of NSLVE data from 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 and data produced by the Vote Oswego 2016 and 2018 campaigns.

### *2016*

In the first year of Vote Oswego, 76.6% of SUNY Oswego students were registered to vote (up from 68.3% in 2012). Registered students voted at a rate of 54.6% with an overall voting rate of 41.8%. While we cannot make causal claims about the influence of Vote Oswego, we feel confident that the presence of an active grassroots campaign for nonpartisan voter mobilization contributed to the considerable jump in the voter turnout rate between 2012 and 2016 (33.2% to 41.8%, an 8.6% change).

The 2016 campaign relied heavily on classic grassroots/campus tactics (tabling, phone banking, and class announcements) for both voter registration and get out the vote (GOTV). The campaign collected 1,054 voter registration forms and 1,583 absentee ballot requests. The GOTV strategy included an Absentee Ballot Party where students get free stamps and mail their ballots as well as a traditional party at the polls event.

The 2016 campaign staffers wrote a campaign post-mortem to be given to the 2018 campaign staffers along with the NSLVE reports.

### *2018*

In 2018, Vote Oswego tripled our voter turnout rate from 8.8% to 17.9%. The turnout among 18-21-year-olds actually increased by 500%. And, the voter registration rate held steady from 2016. This campaign build on the knowledge developed in 2016 and continued the absentee ballot strategy as well as working with the same grassroots tactics. The campaign benefited from the addition of an official creative team (Rebecca Mushtare's ART 333: Experience Design course) who designed our tabling materials for the Last 72 Hours of voter registration as well as for our Absentee Ballot Party.

As quite a few of the original stumbling blocks from Vote Oswego's first outing were accounted for the 2018 planning stage, we subsequently noticed a significant set of challenges that we hadn't observed in 2016 particularly related to voter education. Those will be detailed in this strategic plan.

*2020*

While the details of the campaign plan will be fleshed out by student leadership (see the campaign-as-course section for details) the following section describes the campaign goals, staffing, and strategy.

### Campaign Goals

Vote Oswego's overall goal is to increase the influence of young people on elected officials. Our strategy for accomplishing that goal is to ensure the electorate includes more young voters, particularly from SUNY Oswego. Our campaign, then, is particularly focused on specific, measurable objectives that fit within this strategy.

**Voter Registration Objectives:** Drawing on the numbers from 2016 and 2018, Vote Oswego 2020's objective is to collect a total of 1,500 (external goal)/2,500 (internal objective) forms. By forms, we mean voter registration and absentee ballot requests combined. The decision for Vote Oswego to offer an absentee ballot strategy stems from our experience in 2016. Many of our students are already registered and/or would prefer to vote in their hometown elections. By incorporating absentee ballot requests into our grassroots strategy, Vote Oswego can convert more of our registered students into voters. The 2016 campaign collected approximately 2,600 forms. Given that this is a midterm rather than general election, the team opted to set a relatively low external objective while setting an internal objective we expect to be challenging but possible.

**Voter Turnout Objectives:** In the previous general election, only 41.8% of the Oswego student body turned out to vote. Our objective is to move that number to 50.1%. In order to do this, we will offer a robust voter education and get out the vote strategy including a two day long Absentee Ballot Party. We will treat the Absentee Ballot Party Days as Election Days for the purpose of GOTV strategy. For example, all students who requested an absentee ballot with us will receive a phone call and text invitation to the Absentee Ballot Party. We will also phone bank all students who register to vote at local polling places and offer a visibility campaign encouraging students to vote.

### Campaign Team

Seven individuals serve as the campaign leadership team.

**Campaign Manager:** Dr. Allison Rank, Assistant Professor of Political Science; Dr. Rank oversees campaign fundraising, campaign strategy, and takes the lead role in coordinating Vote Oswego's work with faculty and student affairs staff. She serves as the site supervisor for the Vote Oswego internship program and is the instructor of record for the three-credit Vote Oswego class (POL 386).

**Creative Director:** Rebecca Mushtare, Associate Professor of Art; Prof. Mushtare oversees the creative work created for Vote Oswego including the drafting of a Vote Oswego brand guide, tabling and promotional designs for Last 72 Hours and the Absentee Ballot Party, and the creation and updating of [voteoswego.com](http://voteoswego.com).

**Voter Guide Director:** Brian Moritz, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies. Prof. Moritz oversees the creation of Vote Oswego nonpartisan voter guide which will provide information on process, candidates, and issues.

**Interns (Media, Coalitions, Data Analyst, Education, and Volunteer Coordinator):** Selected through a competitive interview process in Spring 2020 five interns serve as the leadership team for Vote Oswego. Already hired, the interns come from a variety of majors including political science, public relations, and applied math. In addition to role-specific responsibilities, each intern attends weekly leadership meetings, takes a lead role in training staff, and serve as the on-campus faces of all campaign outreach.

**Grassroots Team:** Students enrolled in POL 386 serve as the primary staff of Vote Oswego. Given they are seeking to run a grassroots campaign, emphasis will be placed on the need for this team to recruit and train others to perform grassroots tasks.

**Creative Team:** Students enrolled in ART 333 and ART 417, courses on experience design and web design respectively, will serve as the design arm of the campaign.

### Campaign Strategy

The following section outlines the major phases of the campaign including the specific benchmarks for each phase.

**Phase 0: New Student Orientation (Summer 2020):** Planned by Dr. Rank, Takeena Strachan (Student Association President), and Alyssa Steele (Orientation Coordinator, Student Affairs) Vote Oswego will run tables to register students at New Student Orientation sessions through Summer 2020. We expect to collection 40% of our forms during this phase.

Phase 1: Training & Recruitment (Weeks 0-2): Planned by Dr. Rank, this phase runs from the week before school starts through the second week of school. While all tables offer voter registrations, absentee ballot requests, and pledge to vote cards, our main objectives are to (1) train the Vote Oswego staff on grassroots skills and (2) develop a list of students interested in volunteering with the campaign. Vote Oswego will take part in a variety of Welcome Week activities. "Welcome Week" refers to the activities planned by the Student Affairs Office (including Campus Life, New Student Orientation, Res Life, and more) that begin the Friday before the first week of class when first year students move in and continue through the first week of classes. Vote Oswego will have tables at multiple events including picnics, concerts, comedians, and more. Additionally, Dr. Rank will schedule class raps (someone from VO goes to a class and gives a brief speech about the importance of voting, distributes & guides students through completing the forms, and makes a pitch for volunteers) through her faculty contacts. We plan to collect 10% of our forms during this phase. This phase should be most appealing to new students and those interested in volunteering with Vote Oswego.

Phase 2: National Voter Registration Day(September 24): We hope to have a day-long party on the quad as well as registration tables at dining halls throughout the day. We plan to collect 20% of our forms during this phase. This phase should be the most appealing to students who are attracted to what the crowd is doing, excitement.

Phase 3: Last 72 Hours (October 10-12): Planned by assigned Grassroots staff with tabling and promotional materials designed by the Creative Team, this phase has tables at set locations across campus for consistent, advertised hours through the voter registration deadline. We plan to collect 30% of our forms during this phase. This phase should be most appealing to students who need to feel the urgency of the deadline and those who would prefer a calm, quiet environment in which to register.

During each of the first three phases the campaign will (1) register students, (2) help students request their absentee ballots, (3) ask students to pledge to vote, and (4) ask students if they want to volunteer with Vote Oswego.

A database team will be working to check forms and contact students to correct forms submitted with errors (e.g. forms without signatures, birthdays in place of date of signature). The database team will also use the pledge cards and submitted forms to construct our volunteer and GOTV call lists split by poll and absentee voters. All students interested in volunteering will be contacted and invited to either a training or scheduled directly into a shift where they will receive on-site training.

Phase 4: Get Out the Vote: All pledge to vote cards will be mailed back to students during this phase having been updated with the specific information for our Absentee Ballot Party or with specific polling locations. In the week leading up to the Absentee Ballot Party and Election Day respectively, we'll hold GOTV phone banks. In addition, each event will include voter education materials and stations where students will be entered to win prizes in exchange for texting a GOTV message to at least four friends.

**Absentee Ballot Party:** Many Oswego students choose to register at their permanent address and vote by absentee ballot. Thus, Vote Oswego's primary GOTV efforts will come through an Absentee Ballot Party which provides a central location for students to mail their ballots along with free stamps, snacks, games, and I voted stickers. The Creative Team will design the party experience as well as promotional materials. Ideally, the party will take place over two days in order to catch students who have different schedules on Monday/Wednesday/Friday and Tuesday/Thursday.

**Election Day:** On Election Day itself, we will have a table in the student union near the on-campus polling location with I voted stickers and snacks. We'll also host a results watch party that evening.

**On-going: Voter Education:** Throughout all four phases, the campaign staff will offer options for voter education. This is the primary area where Vote Oswego needs to improve its performance over 2016 and 2018. We've applied for an internal grant to fund having iPads at our tables. The goal for the new technology is to improve the quality of our voter mobilization program. Many students do not understand that their voter registration is linked to a specific address and the consequences of that choice. Having tablets at the table will facilitate our ability to meet a variety of objectives related to voter registration, education, and mobilization. First, we can help individual students look up if and where they are already registered and walk through what that means (e.g. if they need an absentee ballot, to reregister at their campus address, and what elections they will vote on) which will allow them to make more informed choices about their registration. Second, we can facilitate the use of materials produced through our collaborations (e.g. the online journalism and web design teams) by making it possible for students to send themselves digital copies of voter education materials, pledges to vote, plans to vote, and more. Digital pledges to vote and plans to vote have become standard procedures for many campaigns and have a demonstrated impact on turnout. In addition to these digital efforts at our tables, we will continue trying to facilitate an education strategy in conjunction with the residence halls including voter education bulletin boards, a whiteboard strategy, and an educational event plan.

## **Vote Oswego – The Campaign-as-Course**

Up until now, the plan has focused on Vote Oswego as a voter mobilization drive. And, from the perspective of the broader campus, that plan is correct. For faculty, university staff, and students involved in the campaign, however, Vote Oswego has a second, equally important mission and a second mission statement: "To build civic capacity within the Oswego community by registering, educating, and mobilizing voters while offering students an opportunity to learn the nuts and bolts of planning and executing a grassroots campaign." In other words, Vote Oswego seeks not just to organize students but leverages the opportunity presented by a voter mobilization drive to train students in grassroots organizing skills along with providing learning opportunities for students in a variety of disciplines. Given Oswego's rural location, recognizing and creating opportunities for students to engage in real, meaningful work – in fields ranging from grassroots organizing to web design to technical writing – can significantly add to our

students' educational experience. The following section shows how Vote Oswego fits within the academic lives of participating students.

### Affiliated Courses

**POL 386: Vote Oswego (Allison Rank, Campaign Manager):** This three-credit course serves as 'home base' and Grassroots Team for Vote Oswego. Enrolled students learn about grassroots campaign strategies along with a specific focus on youth political participation. Each student takes on a leadership role at some phase in the campaign. Students draw on political science research in order to develop their campaign strategy. Because campaigns are an iterative experience where events, phone banks, and tables are held repeatedly over the course of the semester, they offer an ideal service-learning site. During Phase 1, Dr. Rank will train students not only on how to canvass and phonebank but also on how to plan and run these events as well as where they fit in an overarching strategy. For example, students will be given the goal of planning a table that will collect 50 forms and the set of rates (e.g. forms collected per hour of tabling, number of yeses to a volunteer shift per hour of phone banking) relevant to setting up then event. Classes will include debriefing recent events and using what was learned to improve the next events. In preparation for Phase 4, the students read campaigns and elections literature from scholars such as Gerber & Green to ensure their get out the vote strategy incorporates evidence-based strategies and tactics. Moreover, students in the course exercise decision-making power over budgetary decisions, campaign objectives, and campaign priorities. Once the campaign ends, the students read a variety of campaigns and elections literature in order to develop an assessment of what did/didn't work about their campaign and why and use that knowledge to draft a campaign report for the 2020 team.

**ART 333: Experience Design (Rebecca Mushtare, Creative Director):** This course will serve as the Creative Team for Vote Oswego. Students in this class will take on Vote Oswego as a client and create both promotional and table designs for two different phases of the campaign. By bringing a design perspective to the campaign, the Creative Team will ensure Vote Oswego pays attention to different campus audiences. Initially, the team will create personas that all teams use in developing raps and promotional materials.

POL 386 and ART 333 will meet in the same time slot and hold joint classes throughout the campaign, which will benefit students from both disciplines. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who enroll in a practical political skills class are not representative of the average potential young voter. Yet, they perceive themselves – their knowledge about politics and elections as well as their commitment to voting – as average. As a result, they will plan a campaign that appeals to people like them. And, to be honest, political science lacks a specific set of tools for teaching students to do anything else. Design students, on the other hand, are regularly taught the need to consider their audience and to design for them rather than for themselves. Introducing the tool of personas and user testing to the campaign will be of considerable value for ensuring the Grassroots Team's outreach appeals to a wide variety of students. At the same time, the Grassroots Team will provide the Creative Team an opportunity to work

with a client. The Creative Team will need to determine the client's needs and present models of their work for feedback and approval before it can move into production. Both teams will have the opportunity to see the impact of their work at events such as the Absentee Ballot Party.

While these three classes along with the internship will form the core of the campaign team, students from across campus will take advantage of Vote Oswego to meet community service hours. In 2016 over 200 students volunteered on the campaign. We expect to exceed this number in 2020.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Vote Oswego 2020 will play a critical role in not only mobilizing SUNY Oswego students to vote in the upcoming midterm election but prepare a variety of students with the civic and political skills and knowledge to take part in campaign efforts of all stripes long after they leave Oswego. In the last election cycle, periodic references appeared about the benefits of adopting voting as an identity (I am a voter) rather than just an activity (I voted). Vote Oswego's campaign-as-course model provides students the opportunity to take an even more powerful identity – organizer.