

2-2012

Policy and Practice: The Influence of Participation in the Vote Smart Challenge on Teacher Credential Candidates

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Recommended Citation

A conference presentation proposal for the Association of Teacher Educators, San Antonio, TX, February 11, 2012.

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Proposal: Roundtable Thematic Session

1. **Title:** “Policy and Practice: The Influence of Participation in the Vote Smart Challenge on Teacher Credential Candidates”
2. **Objectives of Presentation:** This Roundtable Session allows participants to explore how teacher credential candidates may increase their knowledge of policy as it affects their profession, specifically through participation in the Vote Smart Challenge. Participants will also discuss the impact Vote Smart potentially has on candidates’ future practice in the classroom in regards to teaching for democracy.
3. **Relationship to Conference Theme:** This conference focuses on creating global communities and increasing prospective teachers’ knowledge of future directions in the field. This session relates to that topic as it explores how teacher educators can guide their students through the multitude of policies that affect their field, as well as how we may better prepare them to transfer that knowledge to their own students. Programs like Vote Smart serve as vehicles toward a deepening of civic engagement, especially during election years.
4. **Abstract of Presentation:**

Recent research and scholarship indicates that students’ perceived levels of civic engagement has an impact on their acceptance of democratic principles, informed opinions on specific issues, and overall political participation. However, some scholars posit a current level of disengagement among younger populations due in

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part to the negative impact of the information environment and most recently a sense of cynicism occurring after the 2008 presidential election.

For years, scholars have indicated the significance of democracy and education. Teachers in K-12 and higher education have a three-fold responsibility to their students. First, they assist in the academic mastery of specific content. Second, students should obtain marketable skills upon graduation. The third responsibility, that of shaping active participants in a democratic society, is one that is both the hardest to develop, and at times the most difficult to maintain.

One method of investigating this concern is through a study of the Vote Smart Challenge. Richard Kimball, Project Vote Smart's President, states that the organization's goal is to provide a resource and platform for valid and unbiased political information. As such, it provides an opportunity for individuals to explore the viewpoints of elected officials and candidates for political office. This study explores that possibility, specifically asking how and to what extent participation in the Vote Smart Challenge at the Dominican University of California (DUC) influenced students' sense of civic engagement. The goal of the Challenge was to allow students a platform to investigate key issues related to their majors, and the policies of Meg Whitman and Jerry Brown, the two candidates running for the California Governorship in 2010.

Preparation included several months of research on specific topics, writing newspaper articles, creating posters, and designing PowerPoint presentations. The Challenge culminated in a ten minute presentation to fellow students, faculty and

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staff of the university, and community members. The audience then voted for the best presentation using real-time digital polling keypads.

This Vote Smart Challenge carried added import for the university as it occurred two days after a live, televised Gubernatorial Debate on campus between Whitman and Brown. The debate, moderated by Tom Brokaw, included 28 sponsors, 296 members of state, national and international media including the Washington Post, New York Times and Associated Press, and 800 guests. The DUC gained significant publicity as a result of hosting the event, thus contributing to the momentum for the Vote Smart Challenge later that week.

Through direct involvement in the Vote Smart Challenge as a faculty advisor for Team Education, and subsequent empirical research in the form of an online survey of student participants (N=16, representing a 59% response rate), this single case study uncovered some initial findings regarding students' participation, including an increased sense of civic engagement and increased knowledge of policy that affects their field.

5. **Description of Audience Participation:** The roundtable session offers an opportunity to explore these findings, ideas for future research, and alternate routes to embedding the ideals of Vote Smart into teacher credential programs.