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9-25-2018

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Recommended Citation

Derrick, Halleigh, "Department of Social Work Hosts Voter Empowerment Seminar" (2018). *University of Mississippi News*. 1352.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/1352>

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Department of Social Work Hosts Voter Empowerment Seminar

Speakers offer insights on professionals' role in activism

SEPTEMBER 25, 2018 BY HALLEIGH DERRICK



Amber Cain (left), of Florence, discusses ways to influence policy change with Clark Ross, of Oxford, at the recent Voter Empowerment Seminar. Photo by Halleigh Derrick

OXFORD, Miss. – With the November primaries around the corner, **University of Mississippi** social work students examined their professional responsibility to affect change through the power of voting during a recent Voter Empowerment Seminar.

"Voter empowerment is a way to engage more with the community," said Amy Fisher, associate professor of social work. "Voting is an incredibly important part of social work."

Existing evidence indicates that voter engagement increases individual well-being, advances civic participation and increases social justice, all central goals of the social work profession.

The seminar was part of the **Department of Social Work's** Voter Empowerment Project, a yearlong, student-led community engagement project funded by the Council on Social Work Education and supported by Mississippi Votes and the Campus Election Engagement Project.

Fisher joins Na Youn Lee, assistant professor of social work; Patricia Digby, visiting clinical instructor; and Austin Conner, a master's student in the department, in steering committee work for the project.

Mississippi Votes is a nonpartisan organization that offers programming and outreach strategies to empower young people, encourage civic engagement and educate communities on voting rights through place-based grassroots organizing. Arekia Bennet, the organization's executive director, addressed voting history and laws in Mississippi, barriers to voting and why voting matters.

"It is important to lift up the history of Mississippi's voting past in order to understand where we are now," Bennet said.

Bennet encouraged students to explore barriers to voting and why voting matters. She emphasized that as social workers, it's important to know what is going on around the state in terms of voting.

Amber Cain, a senior psychology major from Florence, is taking a social work course as an elective and attended the seminar.

"I learned a lot about measures taken that make voting more difficult not only in Mississippi's past, with things like literacy tests and taxes, but also modern-day (barriers) like difficulties with transportation, lack of online technology and Mississippi having the longest list of felonies that make you ineligible to vote," Cain said.

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Campus Briefs

Civil Engineering Professor Receives Most-Cited Paper Award

OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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Ole Miss In the News

Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to



UM students work in small groups to create a voter action plan during the Voter Empowerment Seminar, hosted by the Department of Social Work. Photo by Halleigh Derrick

The **Campus Election Engagement Project** is a nonpartisan national organization that helps administrators, faculty, staff and student leaders at American colleges and universities engage students in federal, state and local elections. Chris Shefelton, Southeast regional director of the group, explained how students can actively use their voice to promote change.

Students were divided into teams and given a position, either for or against various voting policies, such as automatic voter registration. Shefelton illustrated step-by-step how to construct a plan to influence policy change.

The conference also included a presentation by Tanya Smith, executive director of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work. The institute works to increase political participation and influence of social workers and the communities they serve through education and training, research and agency-based nonpartisan voter engagement.

Smith encouraged students to think about how they are building political power in their communities.

"Shift your thinking of social work from being a helping professional to an empowering one," Smith said. "We are training your capacity to be evangelists for voting."

The seminar included social work students from the Oxford campus and from Tupelo campus via distance learning technology. It also was recorded for dissemination to the social work program housed at the UM DeSoto Center campus in Southaven.

"Social work as a profession works at multiple levels," Lee said. "Faculty and staff started this Voter Empowerment Project pilot in hopes that our students get to try social work at the macro level, in our surrounding communities and in the state of Mississippi, and develop a special social work professional identity."

For more information about the Department of Social Work, visit <http://sw.olemiss.edu/>.

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