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Social Work Students Engage Communities with Voter Empowerment Project

Faculty and student researchers examine barriers to voting, host registration drives

 JULY 21, 2020 BY SARAH SAPP

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UM social work students Andrea Munn (left) and Jana Smith collect surveys in the Marks community at the Blues and Mules Festival in 2018 as part of efforts to better understand community needs and barriers to voting as part of the Voter Empowerment Project. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – Nearly a dozen social work students at the [University of Mississippi](#) have gotten hands-on experience in their field this year as they applied professional principles while working to promote voter registration and boost political and civic engagement in north Mississippi communities.

The students have been involved with the Voter Empowerment Project, or VEP, an endeavor of the UM [Division of Diversity and Community Engagement](#) that was recently recognized with the [2020 Excellence in Community Engagement Award](#).

"We wanted to increase social work students' knowledge of the impact of local and state voting policies on marginalized communities," said Amy Fisher, associate professor of social work. "We also wanted to teach social work students community outreach and advocacy skills that could help increase voter registration and turnout, enabling students to see advocacy in action by using those skills in their local communities."

"We hoped to instill professional confidence and efficacy in students through direct, face-to-face exposure to local residents, policymakers and policy advocates."

Social workers are known for connecting people in need to essential social and health services, but their professional mission and ethical obligations extend much further into engagement in social and political action. This includes work to help ensure all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services and opportunities necessary to meet their basic human needs and protect their civil rights.

Communities with high voter turnout report greater well-being and more resources and attention from elected officials – benefits that advance the mission of social workers across the country.

Guided by social work faculty members Patricia Digby, Na Youn Lee and Amy Fisher, the student-led project established strong partnerships with local and nationwide organizations, such as Mississippi Votes and the Campus Election Engagement Project, to engage communities through registering voters and listening to their assessments of community needs and barriers to civic and political engagement.

In 2018, VEP students helped Mississippi Votes and the campus Associated Student Body register nearly 100 new voters on National Voter Registration Day and had a rare opportunity to meet Freedom Summer veterans who played an integral role in the civil rights movement.

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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

Students also mailed out 57 complete registration forms in just two weeks of their group's independent voter registration drive. They set up booths in high-traffic venues and canvassed door-to-door in Oxford and Tupelo, visiting high schools to register new voters.

The project also offered new research opportunities for the Ole Miss undergraduate and graduate students involved.

Students collected about 270 self-administered surveys of community members in 11 regions of the state, which included questions about civic engagement, political trust and efficacy, barriers to voting and sociodemographic characteristics. Consistent with existing literature, there was a strong positive correlation between past and future voting.

Also, more than two-thirds of the participants claimed they felt "very close/close" to their community of residence, which was correlated with voting. Believing that the government cares about people like themselves was associated with voting.

"Contrary to conventional knowledge, there was no relationship between voting and education, suggesting an important consideration for rural social work," Lee said.

"As for student learning, many of our students are first-generation college students who come from families that have lived in the state for generations, often in racially-segregated, marginalized communities that lack resources that support personal development and social mobility, such as quality public education. Pre/post tests reveal that our students felt they empowered not only their communities, but also themselves through this project."

A sub-group of the students conducted a photovoice research sub-project to better understand the barriers that deter people in rural communities from participating in voting. Photovoice is a participatory research method that addresses gaps in research through the perspectives and voices of community members who take photographs in varying environments and provide contextual narrative.

The sub-project recently was accepted for poster presentation at the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting to discuss how social workers can identify barriers to voting in rural areas and critically think of ways to promote political literacy and voter turnout among rural residents.

The study was designed to help better understand how a lack of access to essential resources in rural Mississippi can alter people's immediate concerns and limit their political and community engagement.

As longtime residents of the communities they studied, social work students Austin Conner, Mikala Turner and Andrea Munn collected 107 photographs of local resources and venues in two north Mississippi communities – one rural and one small city with populations of less than 2,000 and about 20,000, respectively – two weeks before the 2018 mid-term elections. The team held several 90-minute focus group sessions where students contextualized the photographs via storytelling.

Previous research indicates rural areas struggle with access to employment, public transportation, quality health care, food outlets and infrastructure, which in turn may reduce engagement. The team built the study's conceptual framework around **Maslow's theory** on the hierarchy of needs – that basic, survival-based needs, such as shelter, food, and water, must be met before a person can be concerned with personal and emotional security, social belonging, and political and community involvement.

The study revealed resources varied considerably by community type, which could arguably influence people's political and community engagement, Conner said.

First, significant differences exist in the food environment. The rural town has limited access to fresh and affordable food, and more than 70% of all food outlets are fast-food restaurants. The small city, on the other hand, has four farmers markets and plentiful non-fast-food outlets.

Second, the towns contrast in infrastructure. For instance, the small city has sprawling networks of steady flowing traffic and well-maintained roads, attracting new business to the area. Contrarily, the rural town's few paved roads are cracked and deteriorated, with a single stoplight.

The rural town lacks community resources that enable safe and healthy living, such as parks, entertainment centers and health clinics. Findings reveal differences in public transportation access, wait times, parking and ambience in polling stations, which could influence political psychology and behaviors.

The findings suggest that rural residents face more basic, survival-based concerns that prevent them from actively engaging in the sociopolitical sphere, Conner said.

"Unfortunately, this vicious cycle between a lack of resources and political disengagement further widens the gap between rural and nonrural areas, leading to greater exclusion and inequities," he said.

Munn said the overall project reinforced her understanding of the larger, national **"Voting is Social Work"** campaign – a social work voter mobilization campaign that works to integrate nonpartisan voter engagement into social work education and practice.

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"This project really showcased that voting itself is social work," Munn said. "Everyone has a voice. Everyone has the right to influence change, and everyone has a right to be heard via the ballot box."

"I want to advocate for people and give people the tools to advocate for themselves for change in their own communities. Voting is one of many tools for that."

Lee, Digby and Fisher expressed gratitude to the 11 social work students who committed time and energy to the VEP: Conner, Munn, Turner, Anna Claire Prather, Brianna Scobey, Daphanie Cooper, Haley Lackey, Maisy Sysyn, Meredith Mincy, Torie Patton and Victoria Narezo.

To learn more about voter engagement tools, visit <https://votingissocialwork.org/>. To learn more about social work programs at the university, visit <https://sw.olemiss.edu/>.

The **Department of Social Work** is part of the **School of Applied Sciences**, which offers professional preparation programs that integrate academic study, clinical training, creative research, service learning and community outreach, leading to the development of leaders whose professional endeavors will improve health and well-being.



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