

**1. Tell us about the 2008 version of your poll worker program. How did it differ from the version that you ran in 2006?**

This year we wanted to make two major changes to the program to ensure a high quality experience both for students and for the Boston Election Department.

First, we recruited faculty to use the poll worker program in their courses. Instead of recruiting students directly and thus getting a wide swath of students who might apply but not really understand what they were getting themselves into, we focused mainly on faculty who would require it in their courses (or offer an alternative). This offered plenty of time for students to prepare ahead of time, to understand the rigors of working a 15-hour day, to offer a safe space for students to ask questions which many first-time poll workers have, etc.

Over the summer we convened a luncheon for the participating faculty to discuss the program. The Chair of the Board of Election Commissioners from the Boston Election Department joined us and emphasized what needs the City had.

Secondly, we cast our net wider than just our own university. We recruited professors from the University of Massachusetts, Boston and from Roxbury Community College. Our own school, Suffolk University, has a diverse student population from not only all over Massachusetts, but all over the United States and the world. We wanted to ensure that we had a group of students who were also from Boston itself, who knew the City and offer them an opportunity to serve.

Making connections with other faculty was a fruitful experience.

**2. What did you learn this time about using students as poll workers? Did the strategies that you outlined in your article continue to hold true this time around?**

Students had the opportunity to serve as poll workers in both the Massachusetts State Primary election in September and in the presidential election in November. The Boston Election Department wanted poll workers to work in both elections for two reasons: first, it was useful for first-time poll workers to learn the ropes during a relatively quiet election; second, since they must recruit 1700-1900 poll workers every election, it was much easier

to ensure space and continuity by recruiting people for September. It was hard to recruit students for the September election, however. First, all poll workers in Massachusetts must be registered voters in Massachusetts. Since there is a twenty-day registration deadline, the deadline occurred in August *before* students had even arrived to campus in September. Although many of us tried emailing students over the summer (and even last spring), drumming up excitement to register was challenging and not all students made it in time. Student enthusiasm for working in September was also challenging. I'm not sure whether it was because it was a state primary and there was not overall excitement about the particular election or because it was only two weeks into school and students were nervous about missing a day of classes. Perhaps it was a combination of both. In any event, we dealt with a few last minute student cancellations which obviously puts a severe strain on an election department. However, I spoke to a few students and was able to change their minds. I learned that talking directly to students about commitment can make a huge difference. I think some students did not truly understand that elections really do depend on people; if you sign up to be a poll worker you are making a profound commitment to your community which must be honored.

### **3. How has the project influenced your work as a faculty member?**

I had the opportunity to teach a course on elections to a fabulous group of students. As part of the class, I divided the students into teams — a “texting team” in charge of texting all poll workers to remind them to attend trainings; a “mapping team” in charge of ensuring that students knew how to get to their assigned locations; a PR team, etc. The experience of putting students in the drivers’ seat was so exciting and clearly fulfilling for all of them. The classroom buzzed; the students were engaged; the level of enthusiasm was high and they developed a very nuanced level of knowledge about election administration and the critical issues facing the American election system. A few students told me after the class was completed that they now wanted to go into election administration, either on the legal end or on the administration end. They all said they had never considered it before taking the class. That was deeply fulfilling for me. Overall, the entire experience just brought home once more that experiential learning is critical to student development. Helping students get out into the world, helping them experience issues both from the analytical perspective provided in the classroom and from the pragmatic perspective of the real world has genuine consequences for them and for their life’s work. Being a part of helping to shape those experiences is truly gratifying.

**4. With elections every two years, how do you sustain a poll worker project? What sort of administrative support is necessary?**

In Massachusetts at least, elections do not just happen every two years. We have municipal elections during off-years and some of those elections prove the most challenging for election officials because they are relatively low-profile, thus it is even harder to find enough poll workers. I think making the poll worker program part of a class really makes a difference to sustainability. If it is part of your syllabus it becomes sustainable.

In an ideal world, the necessary administrative support required is having a person, on campus, who can manage the communication between students, the Election Department, and the professors and who can also keep track of all of the students, sending reminders, etc. to them and answering their questions. The emails fly fast and furiously the few weeks prior to the registration deadline and the few weeks prior to the election.

**5. What do you think is the future of college student civic engagement?**

Institutional support for civic engagement opportunities will determine how robust the future is for civic engagement among college students. This does not always mean financial support, although that helps. Many colleges have done an exceptional job ensuring that students have access to civic opportunities outside the classroom walls. Schools that have explicit civic missions — a service learning requirement, an expanded classroom requirement (as Suffolk does), a faculty who urge students to engage with public policy, either through reading the newspaper, or interviewing public officials, or even observing public space — send key messages to students that engagement matters, that it makes a difference. Students often feel very intimidated when they arrive to college — the community might be new, the buildings are new, etc. Finding ways to connect them to the broader world helps them adjust and expands their world-view.

I call voting a “gateway drug.” Once you’ve voted once, you are far more likely to vote again. I think the same can be said about a lot of civic experiences — getting students in the habit of reading newspapers develops the routine; getting students in the habit of serving provides them with a sense of efficacy that then prepares them for opportunities down the line. Helping them pick up the phone for the first time to speak to an elected official or a government agency helps them realize they can pick up the phone again, and again, and again.