

# DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

## GROUP NARRATIVE REPORT

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## Before the event:

As a group, we met during an entire class period for a brainstorming session to decide our project. Many ideas were mentioned throughout the hour we were together. These included holding a fair for off-campus residents discussing safety and neighborhood issues, a community service project, providing students with an informational packet on candidates for the upcoming Presidential election, or conducting a survey-based experiment.

While there were a number of ideas, the group combined these ideas into a single democratic action. We decided that an on-campus event would be most engaging to the Providence College community. Given our discussions on the importance of voting and political participation, a voter registration drive on campus seemed to be the most logical solution. The decision was made based upon a consensus from the entire group.

Once the group decided on the event, we discussed ways in which to organize and promote it to the student body. Along with the registration drive, we planned to have a local politician come and speak to those in attendance. In order to draw students, a prominent individual would be the ideal speaker for the event. Names that came up in our discussion included Senator Jack Reed, Congressman Patrick Kennedy, Congressman Jim Langevin, Mayor David Cicilline, and Secretary of State Matt Brown. We agreed that it was necessary to provide incentives such as prizes and food. At the conclusion of the meeting, we decided that with such a large group, it would be best to break up into smaller, more directed committees with specified purposes.

The three committees that were formed were Logistics, Funds, and Advertising. Students volunteered to join committees based upon personal preference and interest.

The Logistics committee was composed of Chris Nebons, Eric Nelson, Joe Boncore, Nate Farrant, and Steve Rennau. Will Cromie, Joe Wendelken, Alex James, and Scott Sheridan comprised the Funds Committee. The Advertising committee was made up of Shereef Ahmed, Kat McLaughlin, Colleen Thorp, and Lauren DeMauro.

After we broke down into committees, we discussed the functions of each subgroup. The Logistics committee would be responsible for booking a room for the event, obtaining sponsorship from the Political Science Department, formulating an agenda, and securing all necessary materials for the event. The Funds committee was responsible for securing financial donations for the prizes and food, researching the prices of and purchasing raffle prizes, and exploring the cost of refreshments. The Advertising committee oversaw on-campus promotion of the event. This included soliciting and booking a speaker for the event, making posters and posting them around campus, placing advertisements in *The Cowl*, SAIL Digest, and over WDOM radio, coordinating an e-mail about the event to all political science majors, and encouraging professors to promote the event to their students.

Chris volunteered to speak with the director of McPhail's and within one week, we had a date of November 12 set for the event. With regards to sponsorship, the Funds committee approached Dr. Trudeau, the Head of the Political Science Department and was able to obtain a monetary donation along with sponsorship. The Advertising committee immediately contacted Patrick

Kennedy by both telephone and e-mail. Staff within his office confirmed that Congressman Kennedy would be able to attend and speak at the event, but unfortunately a week later, the Congressman's travel schedule changed and consequently, he would be unable to attend. We then contacted Secretary of State Matt Brown, who accepted our invitation. Once we had a speaker, the Advertising committee was able to begin the task of promoting the event.

Once all of the subcommittees had performed their necessary tasks, the group met as a whole three times leading up to the event. At these meetings, we discussed each group's progress and opened up a forum for each individual to express his or her opinions and provide the other groups with ideas and feedback. Together, we came up with an agenda for the evening, and along with this agenda, it was decided that members of the class would register students to vote the afternoon leading up to the event in Slavin Center. A discussion ensued regarding the raffle and how it would be conducted - whether eligibility to win the prizes would be through registration or attendance at the event. After deliberation, it was decided that it would be in the best interest of the event to conduct the raffle based on attendance. The Funds committee came back with a few ideas for raffle prizes, such as a DVD player, restaurant gift certificates, or tickets to a PC sporting event. The group voted to award winners with a grand prize of a DVD player and a runner up prize of a \$25 gift certificate to Borders.

After all our preparation, we were ready for .....

#### The Event:

Our democracy in action project took place on November 12, 2003. The day started around noon when we set up the voter registration table in lower Slavin. The members of our group took turns working at the table in hourly shifts. There were at least two group members at the table at one time, allowing for optimal student outreach.

We could reach more students by having more members at the table. In case one was busy registering a student, there was another one there to talk to more students passing by. From the time we started up until the actual event started, we registered 84 students; over two percent of the student population here at Providence College.

We discovered the many different reasons people had for registering; most students had no idea they could register in up to seven states. Since the national election is in November, and all students are in classes at that time of the year, they realized the convenience of registering to vote in Rhode Island. Because of this, the students discovered that they did not have to go home to vote, nor did they have to send in an absentee ballot. Other students were not registered at all, and did not know of the vehicle they could use to do so. They took advantage of our table in Slavin to finally take the initiative to register. As students were walking by, the members of our group at the table tried to engage them in dialogues regarding the importance of voting and civic participation. Many students were wary, but as we explained to them that registering to vote does not necessarily commit you to vote in any election, they became less apprehensive and more open to our ideas.

Right before the actual event took place, the group had an hour to collect their thoughts and reflect on what was going to happen as the event continued. We all sat down and began to mentally prepare for Secretary of State Matt Brown to arrive. We came up with questions to ask him, if the opportunity arose at the end of his speech. At about this time, the food arrived that we had ordered from Ronzio. We got 11 pizzas and five bottles of soda. As people began arriving, the food began to disappear. With about 15 minutes remaining before Mr. Brown arrived, we realized that this lack of food was going to be a problem if we hoped to keep the attention of the new arrivals. We all discussed the problem and realized that we should pool our remaining funds together and go out and purchase more food. Steve and Eric took on the responsibility and left to get more soda. Democracy in action, problem solved!!

Matt Brown arrived at approximately 7:45 pm, 15 minutes after we had originally planned. At this time we had about 50 or 60 people in the audience, all excited and waiting for the speech to begin. His speech lasted for about a half hour during which he discussed the importance of voting and community participation. As Matt Brown said, "You can make a difference by volunteering in your community and by voting... more are convinced that the first works better." He went on to talk about how each student or individual in the community could make a difference by reaching out and sharing your ideas with other people. It is very hard to make a difference or open people's minds on an issue at a large level if you do not start on a very small level. In order to originally make a difference, each person should start discussing his or her ideas in small circles.

By sharing and contemplating ideas, the group learns more from all the members, and slowly all the individuals touched by the group will reach out and start their own small circles. In this way, ideas are shared on a larger level than intended, and more people are reached and enlightened. Matt Brown also made sure to mention that, although most people think community service is the most important action one can perform, voting is equally important and necessary in a democracy. He stated that, despite previous ideas, each individual vote is important, because those who vote reap the benefits of the results. The example Brown used was that 75 percent of senior citizens show up to the polls on Election Day as compared to only 11 percent of young adults. Students tend to be apathetic and believe that elected officials are doing nothing to help them, but this is because they do not show up to vote. Candidates tend to center their campaigns and their ideas toward the elderly, in the ways of Medicare, Social Security, and retirement issues, simply because these are the people who are voting on the issues. He explained that one can not be apathetic and angry at the government, if they themselves do not get out and vote.

They are bringing the problem on themselves, perhaps unknowingly. After concluding his uplifting and inspirational speech, he received and answered a few questions from the audience, including people that were not in our class. The questions pertained to topics such as how student leaders can get more people involved in political action especially when the student population tends to be more concerned with frivolous and trivial topics such as the Mr. PC Pageant. At the conclusion of the questions, Mr. Brown thanked everyone for coming and told us that if anyone was going to make a difference in the political arena, it was going to be the people in McPhail's that night, those people who took an interest in the important issues of our day. Before he left, the group asked Matt Brown to choose the winning raffle tickets. He picked out two numbers and two lucky girls won; one received a gift certificate and the other a DVD player. The event

concluded, and we are proud to call it a success. We registered voters, and reached many members of the Providence College community on very important issues. Hopefully, the students who witnessed the event will heed Matt Brown's words, and political participation and voting will increase at Providence College. We are proud to have successfully completed a project that was definitely democracy in action.

#### What we learned:

Throughout this democratic action, we were faced with some tough decisions concerning the direction of the action and the delegation of the group. When we first convened into our group, we ran into the problem of where to start. We decided to have one individual act as a scribe and write all of the ideas of the group onto the board. We had a large brainstorming session where everyone basically spoke their mind, giving out ideas. This gave rise to one of our main problems, and in turn, one of the things that we learned while doing this project large, truly democratic groups are extremely hard to manage and many ideas are put forth, all of which do not necessarily coincide with one another. This presented us with a dilemma of how to construct an action that would somewhat incorporate everyone's ideas something which took patience, understanding, and cooperation, three characteristics that are not usually present when one simply does an action by his or herself.

The next decision that we had to make and the next thing that we learned was that large groups need to be delegated into smaller groups in order for the overall group to attain its goal and work efficiently. To solve this problem, we decided to break our large group into three smaller groups. We borrowed this idea, in part, from the U.S. Congress, and nearly all of the people in the group would now agree that delegation is a good idea in a democracy. In a group like ours where we attempted to be truly democratic, with no leaders and a unanimous consent policy, we found that it was very difficult to grant everyone's wishes and to make sure that the committees were responsive to each other, not only to themselves.

Our group meetings throughout the action provided an insight into a serious difficulty facing democratic actions. Scheduling meetings that accommodated everyone was impossible, even scheduling the smaller committee meetings was difficult. This was a constant obstacle, and in some ways impeded our ability to accomplish our tasks. But in spite of this problem, we learned about the nature of participation. Those who made the effort to attend the meetings made the majority of the decisions, while those who did not accepted the responsibilities that were delegated to them.

Matt Brown's impact on the group was contained more in the fact that he came and spoke than in the message that he gave. While as all found his speech interesting and informative, it was his presence that taught us about the willingness of politicians to reach out and encourage the participation of young people. The focus of our project was an attempt to give students a chance to learn about the opportunities for participation that existed, and Matt Brown provided that. Another thing that we learned was about students and democracy in general. We learned that it is not easy to get the students to make democracy a priority in their lives.

We were up against another large event on the Wednesday night that Matt Brown came to speak,

namely the Mr. PC competition. The celebrity host drew a big crowd, and as far as we could render, the competition took a lot our potential participants. We were still able to attract a crowd of 60 students, but for the most part, while promoting the event, we heard the excuse, “Sorry, I’ve already got my ticket to see Mr. Belding!”

We can only speculate reasons for this. Maybe the students are so swamped with schoolwork that during their free time, the last thing they want is to do more work learning about candidates. Possibly they want something a little more relaxing. Perhaps politics just isn’t interesting to students. However, the bottom line is that it can be difficult and frustrating trying to get the voice of the young heard, because the students do not commit themselves easily.

# The buzz went on for two weeks!!!

NOVEMBER 20, 2003

## PC too “chic” for Cicilline

BY MICHAEL J. RAIA '05  
Associate Editor-in-Chief

“Whomever the Democratic candidate is,” Providence Mayor David Cicilline wittily replied when Thomas Giordano '04 tried to pry a presidential endorsement from the Democratic politician.

Mayor Cicilline is a brilliant politician. On Monday night, the Board of Programmers allowed students to see his political talent first hand, but so few took part - showcasing the level of student apathy at PC.

Apathy may be the wrong word, seeing as more than 850 students waited outside the doors of Peterson last week hoping to catch a glimpse of Mr. Belding, the host of BOP's Mr. PC Pageant. Students are genuinely active at PC, but they seem to ignore those events on campus that hold substantive value—reemphasizing the theory of the “PC Stupid Chic,” first argued in the April 26, 2001 issue of *The Cowl* by Dave Holman '03.

The “Chic” theory began with PC students' refusal to answer easy questions in class. It goes beyond that though, and encompasses our student body's unwillingness *to* ask questions outside the classroom – questions that move beyond our course syllabuses.

While I agree that mindless stimulation is a great way to relax and calm oneself from the inherent stresses of college, why do students intrinsically avoid educational vivacity so often? Mayor Cicilline told those students who did attend that they are “the future of this city.” Alright, I will concede this is a clichéd statement and it has been drilled into our heads since third grade, but the man makes a valid point - the same point that another local politician made on this campus last week.

While so many PC students were scrambling for seats in Peterson last Wednesday, about 50 students listened to Rhode Island Secretary of State Matt Brown (D) talk about youth voting and civic engagement. Like Cicilline, Brown emphasized the importance of volunteering, but he focused on the startling reality that many students do not vote. But Brown did not notice the “chic” theory at work - at least not until he was made aware that the Mr. PC pageant was a likely cause to the forum's low attendance. The “chic” attitude, though, helps degenerate the role of representative organizations on this campus.

Student Congress rarely has to answer to a disgruntled student body, because the student body never voices its dismay in a public manner. (To their credit Congress is usually receptive when voices – particularly the voices from this page – are publicly voiced.)

This publication receives a good number of letters to the editor; however, they rarely come from current PC students. Looking through *The Cowl* archives, a drastic drop in reader participation (letters, Web polls, guest commentaries) can be seen over the past two years. Reader response to a college newspaper is not a rock-solid case study of the rumpus society, but it should be viewed as an important contribution to the College's social capital.

The mayor's farm proved, to me, to be another example of the "PC Stupid Chic" theory. PC students should move past the cool apathy of our campus culture and start asking questions like those that Giordano and other PC students asked the mayor.