

Heart of a Tiger-Get out the Vote!

In a previous column on engaged students, I introduced Grace McCord and Madison Albers, two Fort Hays State University freshmen Student Government senators who meticulously researched, wrote a case for support, and then worked through several approval processes to gain support for moving a polling place on campus. Regardless of the pending campus polling place decision, I admire their resilience and passion to engage in civic life. I am encouraged to see these two remarkable students fully embrace active learning in pursuit of this goal.

Grace has lived her entire life in Hays, Kansas. Her parents raised her to be very involved in our community. "I was always playing sports, going to Girl Scouts, Youth Group, 4-H meetings, and all kinds of other community events. I assumed leadership roles in many of these organizations," Grace said. When she aged out of the Hays Rec sports programs, she started coaching youth softball teams during the summers. Grace also served on the local Girls Scout Advisory Council and volunteered at many church events.

Madison hails from Goodland, Kansas. "I loved growing up in a close-knit community with so many kind people," Madison said. Like Grace, Madison spent much of her youth serving her community through Kiwanis, organizing senior citizens dinners at Christmas, volunteering for a multitude of service projects, and singing at community gatherings.

Although from different communities, both Madison and Grace share a heartfelt commitment to service. During their college search, both Madison and Grace believed FHSU was a place they could thrive, given the small classes, tight-knit community, and the ethic of care embraced by our faculty and staff. "It is easy to make friends here," shared Grace.

What started as two independent paths, Madison and Grace would soon meet and become close friends. Both declared political science as their majors, joined the same learning community and sorority, and both were hired as student staff with the American Democracy Project.

The American Democracy Project (ADP) is a university-wide initiative designed to prepare the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. The goal of ADP is to produce university graduates who are committed to being active citizens in their communities with civic knowledge, skills, and values. This initiative provides numerous civic and political engagement activities that challenge and encourage students to find their place and make a difference.

What a perfect way for Grace and Madison to grow their friendship, serve their community, and earn a bachelor's degree – all while learning about who they are as individuals and servant leaders.

Through their work with the ADP, Grace and Madison have been focused on bringing a polling place to campus so students can more easily participate in our democracy at the local, state, and national levels. "We believe it is so important for FHSU students to be civically active because the more involved students are, the more say they have in the world around them," Grace said.

Madison explained that a big part of having a civically-engaged student body is working to raise our voting rate by making the voting process more accessible and understandable to all students.

Where to start? They wanted to understand the current state of affairs, which led them to focus on the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. This report examines student and institutional-level data on voting.

What did they learn? Namely that FHSU was falling behind the national college student voting average, and from this experience, a mission was born: improving FHSU student voting rates.

Next, they reached out to civic engagement centers at other universities for information about what they were doing to get their students to vote. They learned that all of the colleges that posted higher student voter turnouts had an on-campus polling location. Wichita State University, for example, had an almost 20 percent college student voter rate increase when the on-campus polling location opened.

They did more research, listened, took notes, identified key challenges, and devised solutions.

The pair next addressed safety and parking issues in a conversation with FHSU University Police. They also worked with student organizations for support and wrote a resolution for SGA to pledge senators as poll workers. Finally, they reached out to other organizations on campus for help, including the Staff Senate, Faculty Senate, and building managers. The cost issue was perhaps the most formidable challenge Grace and Madison faced, but that too didn't set them back. "We resolved the cost issue by proposing to move an existing polling place," shared Madison.

Grace and Madison knew they had one key asset on their side—engaged FHSU students. Grace shared that there is so much student support on campus, they knew they would have more than enough students to work the polls. They were also convinced that they could even send poll workers to other polling locations around Hays.

Throughout this process, Grace and Madison have learned networking skills as well as how to gather, evaluate, and present information persuasively. They also learned that there are many ways to accomplish a task, but the hardest part is choosing the right path. The pair's biggest takeaways were learning to prepare for possible failure, the value in pushing through difficulties, and embracing the need to return to the drawing board to rework their plans as necessary. "We used pushback to make our initiative better and better every time," Madison said.

"We have had so much help along the way and couldn't have achieved nearly as much without the help of many people," Grace said. In particular they said they are very grateful for the support of their political science faculty.

After FHSU, Madison plans to attend law school. She plans to focus on immigration law. She wants to give back and lift others up – or "pay it forward," as the saying goes.

As for Grace, "FHSU has already taught me so much, especially that helping others is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to be able to continue helping my community during my time at FHSU, so staying involved with all the organizations that I am currently a part of is important to me, but finding new causes to dedicate my time to is important to me as well. After college, I hope to go into advocacy work and continue to help others."

These best friends are learning and working together, focused on serving as a force for greater good. Their story is the essence of an FHSU education unfolding, our mission in action, and our hope for the future.