

Virtual Poll Worker Training: Engaging the Next Generation in Elections

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VIRTUAL POLL WORKER TRAINING:

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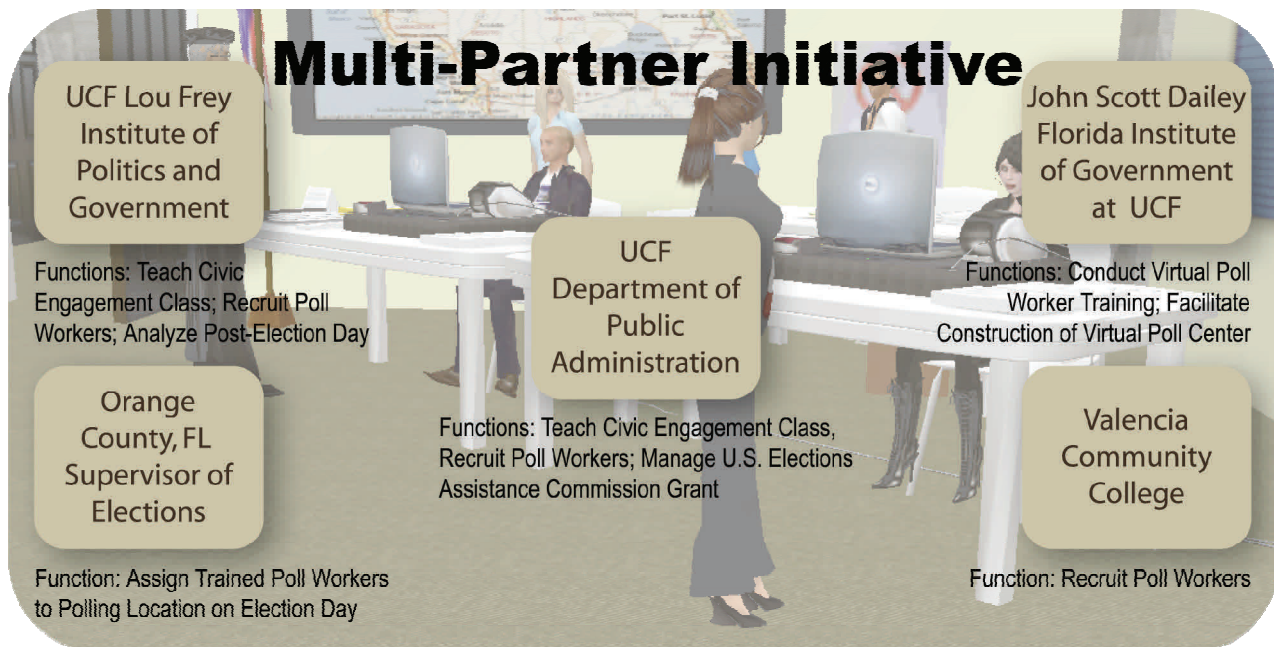
Civic engagement has decreased dramatically over the last two decades. In comparison to older Americans, youth have demonstrated the lowest levels of political and civic interest and knowledge.

One avenue for encouraging increased civic participation is involvement in the elections process. The average poll worker age nationally is 72. The U.S. Elections Assistance Commission and the Supervisor of Elections in Orange County, Florida are committed to attracting more college-aged youth.

Working the polls on Election Day gives students a unique civic engagement experience that helps them better understand how democracy functions in real time while at the same time solving the need for sufficient poll workers on Election Day.

Still, college students' experiences may make meeting the mandatory training requirements more difficult than for those not enrolled in college. In Florida, current training requirements mandate that potential poll workers complete approximately six hours of face-to-face training, in two separate sessions. These face-to-face sessions normally take place at the county Supervisor of Elections office.

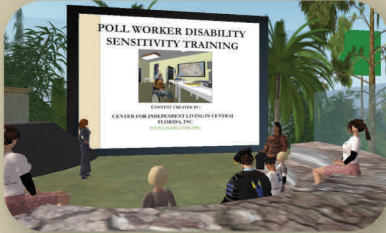
A team of faculty and researchers at the University of Central Florida crafted an innovative, technology-based platform for recruiting and training college-aged poll workers. This was accomplished through the creation of the UCF Virtual Voting Center ©.



Three-Step Virtual Poll Worker Training



Step 1: Orientation to Virtual Environment. This includes training on how to navigate the virtual world, and how to control and manipulate the avatar. Participants complete a scavenger hunt throughout virtual environment as part of training.



Step 2: Poll Worker Sensitivity Training. This is an interactive lecture that replicates face-to-face training, introducing participants to the positions in a polling center and how to communicate with diverse voters.



Step 3: Voting and Poll Worker Simulation. This last stage gives participants the chance to simulate an elections process as ePoll Book Inspectors by checking voters in, managing ideal and non-ideal voters, and preparing for face-to-face Election Day service.

Located on the online@UCF space in Second Life, the UCF Virtual Voting Center© is patterned after a typical one-story community center found in Central Florida. Entering the building via the ramp or the steps, the visitor encounters her first real documentation from the Supervisor of Elections. One display board displays a map of the county with that particular precinct highlighted. The other board, in both English and Spanish, are the Voters' Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, a notice about voting fraud and a notice referring to the Florida statute banning photography within 100 feet of the voting space.

Inside the front door is a fully immersive, interactive voting space. Set up in the exact

formation of a perfect voting space, the UCF Virtual Voting Center© is a state of the art system. To the left of the door is a near perfect replication of a DS200 Optical Scanner, which is the device into which a voter inserts her ballot. Beyond the scanner, along the left and opposite wall are voting booths. On the wall opposite the front door is a touch screen tabulator for disabled voters. In the far corner diagonal to the door is a table setup with a laptop computer, several pads of ballots, pens, and pencils. This is the Internet Oath Person's table. Through the door on the avatar's right is the focal point of ePoll book training, two ePoll Books are set on two tables .

These two computers are the ePoll Book Inspector's work location. As with other objects in this space, the computers are interactive. Students simulated an election, interacting with the laptop computer to check in voters, who were role played by faculty and other students.

The majority of students appreciated the training opportunity within the virtual environment and felt prepared for real-life service as a poll worker. Students reported enjoying : interactivity, potential for global connections, convenience of training, and efficiency of training. Students who enjoyed the training also cited the potential for a cultural learning experience in the expansive virtual world, ease of use, and the ability to be creative.

Students reported that the virtual training was as efficacious as what they might receive face-to-face. Survey data collected from clerks at polling locations where virtual trainees worked verified that students trained through this medium were as well prepared and performed at the same high level as individuals trained via more traditional face-to-face means.

Based on this assessment, the UCF research team recommends elections officials to consider the UCF Virtual Voting Center© as a complement to existing face-to-face training.



"Prior to the Second Life training, I presumed that Second Life was not the proper way for the poll worker training to be conducted. The reason that I made such a statement is because I perceive myself and many other students as hands-on learners. However, the technology did not create any limitation in experiencing the full intended experience of the training. The environment was like any classroom environment where the student was given the opportunity to play the role of a poll worker, which provided the hands-on learning that I had hoped for. This hands-on learning experience is no different than the one that students would have received in the classroom."

- Student who trained in the UCF Virtual Polling Center©



Efficacy: Is Training in Second Life as Effective as Face-to-face Training?

- College student poll workers were trained to serve as ePoll Book Inspectors. These persons check in voters when they arrive at the polling place.
- Assistant Clerks, who supervise ePoll Book Inspectors, provided performance feedback through a survey about the ePoll Book Inspectors at their polling location on November 2, 2010. Those surveyed had both Second Life trained and face-to-face trained ePoll Book Inspectors.
- This approach allowed a comparison of various performance measures between those trained face-to-face and those trained in Second Life.

Training in Virtual Environments - *the Pros*

Reduced travel costs for attendees

All that is necessary to access a virtual environment is a computer with an Internet connection.

Synchronous large group training

Virtual environments make simultaneous instruction of large, globally situated groups easy.

Ability to inexpensively simulate almost anything

Almost every type of device, reaction, or facility is replicable in a virtual environment.

Multiple platforms for communication

Attendees can communicate through text or verbal chat in groups or in private person-to-person.



Training in Virtual Environments - *the Cons*

Technology

Virtual environments are inefficient on old computers with outdated graphics or video cards.

Bandwidth

It is recommended that users have high-speed Internet access; Free or public WiFi is not recommended.

Learning Curve

The software and virtual platforms require instruction and familiarization for effective engagement.

"Isn't this a game?" attitude

Due to the use of avatars and 3-d platforms, virtual environments are often viewed as games instead of collaborative platforms.

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Members of MuniGov2.0 (www.munigov.org), serving as volunteer voters and reviewing the virtual space

Alameda County, California, sharing technological resources



UCF Virtual Voting Center[®]

