

Students visit Harvard for conference on political participation



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From conversing with politicians from across the country to learning about voter mobilization among millennials, two Rutgers students took a trip to Harvard University to participate in an intensive training conference led by Harvard's Institute of Politics.

The students traveled on behalf of the Eagleton Institute of Politics' RU Voting program and attended a seminar featuring political practitioners and expert organizers on voter registration and campus political engagement.

Antoinette Gingerelli, a School of Arts and Sciences sophomore, and Damilola Onifade, a School of Arts and Sciences first-year student, visited Harvard from Sept. 25 to Sept. 27 for a conference entitled "Campus Activation: Increasing Student Voting and Political Engagement." Students from 22 states attended, all from the "National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement," of which the Eagleton Institute is a member.

"National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement" is a collection of 27 colleges and universities around the country aiming to engage and encourage the next generation to improve communities through bipartisan politics and public service. Schools work on their own campus through collaborative efforts in three key efforts: electoral politics, career development in public service and civic education.

At the conference, Gingerelli, Onifade and other students around the nation focused on voter registration and outreach programs. They also received grassroots organizing training and learned to use technology for political engagement, while also using skills gleaned from conference experts to boost voter registration on Rutgers campuses.

Conference trainers included professionals with expertise in government, voter mobilization, communications, social media and marketing.

Some people they spoke to included two millennial generation politicians, including Congressman Joseph Kennedy, Congresswoman Elise Stanfik and Teresa Vilmain from the Institute of Politics at Harvard University.

From these speakers, they learned the difference between mobilizing and organizing, ways to use social media to engage the millennial generation and the importance of engaging this new generation in elections.

Elizabeth Matto, assistant research professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics and the director of the Institute's Youth Political Participation Program (YPPP), attended Harvard with Gingerelli and Onifade. She said the students brought back important skills to aid student engagement on campus.

"We talked to some real experts at a high national level offering their expertise, but also their advice," said Matto. "Two sessions really resonated with me on providing guidance and using social media. We learned skills on how you organize a movement and get a team of people organized and get them to mobilize on campus."

An important new skill learned was how to effectively use the tools of social media to encourage the student body to go out and vote, she said.

Onifade said her favorite aspect of the conference was also learning about social media from Benny Johnson, Creative Director of the Independent Journal Review.

"In Benny's presentation, he honed in on the importance of utilizing the tools of social media such as Vine and BuzzFeed to engage the millennial generation," said Onifade. "I was able to see that voting for our generation cannot be something that they view their parents only do."

Matto said she hopes students realize the importance of voting at a young age.

"Student engagement in politics is important because the habits you establish at this age will persist into adulthood," she said. "There's a lot of ways to be engaged but voting is one of the important ones."

Onifade said by using this skill, she hopes to tap into the resources that can engage students to be politically active.

She also said she learned from other schools ways in which they were able to hold successful voter registration drives depending on campus size and resources.

"This information will provide RU Voting with different perspectives on how to cater better to our different campuses and reach more students effectively," she said.

Charles Nary, a School of Arts and Sciences senior and the Undergraduate Associate for Rutgers University Eagleton Institute, said that students need to recognize the importance of being involved in politics to show that their voices and votes matter.

"We need to better show students that their votes are important. If they don't vote, politicians have no reason to cater to their ideas," said Nary. "I don't think many students think about it that way. We need to break the stigma that a single vote does not matter."

In the future, Onifade said she hopes to continue assisting with RU Voting.

"Getting students aware and engaged is something that I feel is important for our generation to truly be impactful," she said.