

Group gives voters information

Project Vote Smart provides voters with non-biased information about candidates

By Teri Meeuwsen
Higher Education Reporter

It's one of those years again. Voters have a mess of information to sift through during election year. Each candidate stands up for his or her views on any given issue while the mud flies between opponents. So much starts flying so fast, how do voters know what is true and what is just candidate-bashing?

One way is by using Project Vote Smart, a national non-partisan organization that focuses on providing citizens with unbiased information about the political system, candidates and elected officials.

"It's the only place of its kind," said Jennifer Stewart, internship director of Project Vote Smart. "It's really important because it gives out non-biased info, and that's important because when it comes down to it, all that voters are relying on are the 60-second sound bites."

Every legislative candidate and race in each state is covered and researched through the National Political Awareness Test, and the information is made available over the Voter's Research Hotline and the Vote Smart Web site, she said. The project also publishes a reporter's source book, Vote Smart Web Yellow Pages and a self-defense manual to help voters and researchers find information

about any candidate.

During the 1992 election year, Project Vote Smart received more than 200,000 calls, with 34,000 on election day alone. The project tracked approximately 1,300 candidates at all government levels.

The project was founded by former Senators Barry Goldwater, George McGovern, Bill Bradley, Mark Hatfield and other national leaders. Approximately 90 percent of the research and work is done by volunteers and college interns, Stewart said.

"We're a really young staff," she said. "There are less than 20 people in both Project Vote Smart centers. We don't know what we'd do without the interns." The internship program allows students from across the country and around the world to be directly involved at the two major centers in the United States: one in Boston and the other in Corvallis.

"Being in Corvallis gives us the distance we need from Washington to be unbiased," Stewart said.

Students spend an average of 10 weeks in the basement of lecture halls at Oregon State University or Northeastern University doing political research, answering calls on the Voter's Research Hotline, creating press releases, tracking current legislation and stuffing envelopes.

Gundula Stoll, a journalism graduate from Germany, said working at Project Vote Smart is very interesting.

"It's something I've never done

before," she said. "I'm learning a lot about the political system and what's important to the U.S. political system. I didn't regret coming here a single day."

Students and recent graduates majoring in political science, communications and journalism are encouraged to apply, although all majors are accepted. Scholarships are available based on need.

Students have a good chance at getting good internships or jobs after working at Project Vote Smart, Stewart said.

"There are students who got internships at the state capital or in Washington," she said. "It's very prestigious. If [the employers] are getting a student who interned with us, they know they are getting someone who is accurate, resourceful and really good at getting info."

Project Vote Smart is supported through individual memberships and foundation grants that are specific to certain programs, Stewart said.

"We have over 50,000 members who are interested in various programs," she said. "They believe in the program so much they want it available to everyone. We don't accept funds from any government organizations or lobbying groups. There's no appearance of them anywhere."

For more information about the internship program, or to help sort out the upcoming elections, call 1-800-622-SMART, or visit the Project's Web site at www.vote-smart.org.

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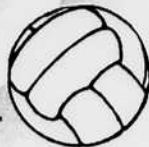
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