

Election Watch '08 offers new perspectives, unforgettable experiences for hundreds of K-Staters

Article by Luke Redington

On Tuesday, November 4th 2008, the First Year Seminar Pilot Study hosted Election Watch '08, a co-curricular event that brought together hundreds of students to share the experience of a key night in our nation's history. In order to accommodate this highly interactive gathering, the Union's Grand Ballroom was transformed into a high-tech convention center. Multiple large screen televisions displayed election coverage from various news sources around the world. The perimeter of the expansive room was lined with student-created displays that innovatively demonstrated connections between subject matter from their classes and major issues in the general election.

Conversation hummed throughout the room on a variety of topics related to the election. "I liked being able to talk about politics with the other students there," says Sarah Thompson, Freshman in Animal Science. "No one really much wanted to talk politics around campus, so it was interesting to be able to hear the views of other students in an open and non-hostile environment."

Although the event officially began at 7:00 pm, students from many First Year Seminar classes arrived early to set up displays. Several instructors of FYS classes incorporated activities into their curriculum that helped students prepare for Election Watch 08. English instructor Robin Mosher encouraged her FYS students to create a display that demonstrated the ways in which skills used to analyze literature can help one analyze speeches made by political candidates. Thompson, a student in Mosher's class notes, "We worked on the [display] boards in class and I thought that was a good time where we got to know each other much better than we would have without the project." In addition to examining each other's displays, students participated in small group discussions. Midway through the evening, students gathered in groups of eight and engaged questions about their political views and their perceptions of the role politics plays in their lives.

After the discussion, most students shifted their attention to the large screen TV's for the announcement of incoming election results. Others tracked real-time election results online. A large, exuberant crowd cheered the announcement of Barack Obama's victory with songs and embraces. Even after the structured part of the evening had concluded, a significant number of students stayed to celebrate and socialize.

Election Watch '08 exceeded the expectations of those who planned it in several ways. Over four hundred students attended, well over the anticipated number. The high attendance resulted not only from robust turnout by students within the FYS classes, for whom the event was originally designed, but also from collaboration between the FYS, the Union Planning Council, the Student Governing Association, and The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy. All four organizations made unique contributions to the event's success.

The planners were also pleased to see the diversity of academic disciplines represented at the event. FYS classes in geography, human development, English, women's studies, and sociology were among those whose students took the lead in sharing with the peers about new perspectives on current issues gained from their courses. Dr. Kelly Welch, who taught a FYS section of Introduction to Human Development, felt impressed by her students' efforts in preparing for Election Watch 08. "They coordinated their own teams, they coordinated their own meetings, and planned their presentations," Welch said. "They took the initiative and far surpassed my expectations!"

The main planners were Dr. Greg Eiselein, Professor of English and Dr. Emily Lehning, Assistant Vice President of New Student Services. Eiselein and Lehning co-direct K-State's FYS pilot study.