STEP 3

Example of a Conversation with a wise Community Leader

This is an example of a student interview with a wise, relevant human resource.

Below find the transcript and write-up of an interview a student conducted with a Mr. Tim Male, City Councilman from Takoma Park, Maryland. Mr. Male had knowledge and experience regarding the question the class was focused on—i.e. the impact of lowering the voting age in local elections to sixteen years old. This write-up was eventually edited, shortened, and integrated into the class' literature review. Conducting this interview, as other students explored academic articles, helped the class see that a focused and respectful conversation with a person was simply another way to engage with a helpful source.

While we formally introduce interview techniques in the next step of the research process, we have found over and over students—high school student and Bill's students at Duke-- are really good at learning research methods by doing them and then later learning the fine points of the method so they can refine their work. In this case, several students who had never done an interview were presented with an opportunity to interview the perfect person—someone who was responsible for doing exactly what their research question was asking about: lowering the voting age in local elections. Rather than miss this opportunity we provided some pointers, helped them refine and test their questions and supported the students as they conducted the interview.

Notes from the interview with Tim Male[1]:

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[1] What we have done here is to include the first two questions with the responses that our student recorded. After that, we are including the remainder of the questions that he asked and the write-up of the conversation. You may want to share the questions with your students because these questions provided valuable information that could only be answered by a person who had undergone the experience of lowering the voting age in his community.

Conducted by William _____ on 1/31/15 at 8:00am

1.   **What gave you the idea to lower the voting age in Takoma Park?**

I was discussing how to increase voter turnout with another councilman. I found an article on the Scottish Independence Referendum that allowed 16-year olds to vote and got the idea from that.

2.   **How did people first respond to the idea? Specifically, what was the response of the kids, and the other politicians inside and outside of Takoma Park? Were there any other groups of people whose opinion you were concerned about?**

The kids of Takoma Park supported the idea. About 10% of the kids ages 16 and 17 in Takoma Park (about 40 people) showed up at a city council meeting, in favor of the idea. Most of the people on the council thought it was an unusual idea but were not vehemently opposed to it. Because they did not really have an opinion either way about it, it was easy to convince them to support the idea.

3.   Did the views of any of these groups change as you worked on the process of lowering the voting age?

4.   What arguments did you use to convince people that lowering the voting age was a good concept? Were there any specific sources you used to learn about how to lower the voting age, or its impact?

5.   Who were your biggest critics, and what were they're arguments? Were you able to win them over or did they win you over in some areas?

6.   Did the actual outcome of the elections in which 16- and 17-year olds voted prove you or your critics wrong?

7.   What was the process of lowering the voting age like? How long did it take to get the

voting age lowered? What were the costs associated with lowering the voting age? Did

you have to utilize the resources of any professionals to lower the voting age?

8.   Thinking of the entire process, what were the biggest difficulties you faced?

9.   Did you face any lawsuits upon trying to lower the voting age? Was there any conflict

between state and local laws when trying to lower the voting age?

10.   Were there any unexpected outcomes that came from lowering the voting age?

11.   Having been through the process of lowering the voting age, would you do it again?

Write up of the interview with Mr. Male for the literature review.

I recently conducted a telephone interview with Tim Male, a member of the Takoma Park,

MD city council. Mr. Male instigated a successful movement to have voting rights extended to

teenagers age 16 and up in local Takoma Park elections. In this interview, my main goal was to

learn about the process Mr. Male followed to lower the voting age in his community, and to

understand the arguments he encountered both for an against this goal. In my interview*, I*

managed to gather a great deal of information pertaining to these questions, along with some

other tangential information.

Mr. Male described quite a few things about the process of lowering the voting age, and

how the result was good for the community. One very important detail he mentioned was that

the entire process had no cost associated with it. Although this may not hold true for Rye Town,

in Takoma Park they didn't need to do any community outreach programs or registration drives,

because Maryland pre-registers people to vote when they get their driver's licenses. Also, in

preparing to change the voting age, the officials of Takoma Park didn't have to conduct any

original research; they just contacted other people who had studied the topic. Even the act of

altering the town's charter was free, because the city's attorney made the alteration as part of his normal job at no additional cost.

Beyond telling me that the change in the voting age had no cost, Mr. Male also revealed quite a bit about the process of changing the voting age. His first step in the process was to research other entities that succeeded in lowering the voting age, and to see how the end result had impacted their elections and communities. Along with researching the social repercussions of lowering the voting age, he also needed to research if it was legally possible. For this, he examined the Maryland State Constitution. Some states specifically say that anyone under the age of 18 is barred from voting. Maryland's State Constitution is a bit more ambiguous. It says that anyone who is 18 or older can. The Maryland State Constitution does not say anything about individuals who are under 18. (Note: After the interview, I looked at the New York State Constitution and noted that the wording is very similar to that of the Maryland State Constitution).

After he had researched the topic, Mr. Male proposed lowering the voting age to 16 to the rest of the city council. At first, his fellow council members thought that it was a very strange idea. Members saw no reason to lower the voting age at first, but they were not strongly opposed to the idea either. They really did not have strong opinions on the topic either way. This meant that it was possible to convince the city council to agree with the proposal. Some members did try to slow down the process of lowering the voting age, however. Most of their attempts were just meant to delay an actual vote on lowering the voting age. For example, some council members wanted to conduct original research on the impacts, and others wanted to put the issue up to a referendum. Both of these tactics could have effectively shut down the amendment to the town's charter. It should be noted that Takoma Park has a history of

implementing very progressive voting regulations, so they may be more open to new ideas than officials in Rye Town. It's also worth noting that local elections in Takoma Park are separate from County and State elections and do not overlap across multiple communities. The only elections analogous to those in Takoma Park are the village elections of Rye Brook and Port Chester, and even these are somewhat unique as Port Chester elections are held under the guise of consent decree with the Department of Justice and Rye Brook's elections are conducted by the County of Westchester under the guise of state laws and regulations.

Another topic I learned quite a bit about was the arguments and counter arguments people used when discussing the concept of lowering voting age. The arguments in favor of the amendment were that it would increase voter turnout, and that teenagers are capable of making the decisions necessary in voting. Research studies in communities (worldwide) where 16 and 17-year olds have the right to vote show that teens do have the political knowledge and motivation to cast informed votes. (Note: While Mr. Male mentioned these studies, he did not provide any sources – this information needs to be further verified.)

The arguments against the amendment varied greatly. Some people complained that the voting age should not be lowered because they didn't want to stand online to vote with people dressed the way teenagers dress. And other people said that they didn't want to force teenagers to grow up faster than they already have to do. The latter argument was the most difficult one for people in favor of the amendment to counter, because it made a lot of sense, and was true. In today's society, kids are forced to grow up quickly. A teen can be tried as an adult when he/she commits a crime, start driving at 16, work at 14, and be sued for piracy at any age. Those arguing against lowering the voting age suggested that it would only be another pressure on kids to grow up even faster. However, people in favor of lowering the voting age countered that this

line of thinking should not bar teenagers from voting. Even if it speeds up how fast kids have to grow up, allowing teens to vote is granting them a privilege at a younger age, not imposing a penalty.

  The interview I had with Mr. Male was very informative. I learned a lot of information that I think will be very useful in guiding our research on the impacts of lowering the voting age.