

Campaign School reveals politics is about people



Meghan McCarthy

VIEWPOINT

Political operatives take life pretty seriously. I am sure our Founding Fathers did so as well, but they were not with us in a lecture hall at Yale in June where 80 women participated in the annual Women's Campaign School. I had the privilege of being one of them.

We had three categories of participants. There were the international women who are working on establishing and cementing democracy in their nation states. It was humbling to hear a woman from Tunisia discuss seminal elections and yet have a complex understanding of our system.

There were the women who had gone to school in Washington, D.C., and had worked in political campaigns across the country. They could play three degrees of separation by first name and election with every politician

I have ever heard of. Politics is their sport.

Finally, there were the women who are running for office or running campaigns — for mayor of Detroit, the Colorado House and the D.C. School Board, for example — sitting next to their behind-the-scenes counterparts in other races from across the country.

The composition of the group was multipartisan, and we were all there to increase the number and influence of women in elected and appointed office. There was so much diversity that we were each alone in our uniqueness, and because we were looking for it, we found we were more alike than different.

The daily academic content of the weeklong school included media training, campaign finance, fundraising, polling, ethics and so much more. It was inspiring and exhausting. I was worried about not having a political science background, but at the end of the first day, I felt my M.B.A was even more valuable. Running a campaign is not much different from running a small business. It feels entrepreneurial.

“Math, margins and message” was the formula taught for a successful political campaign; it is the same for a successful startup.

The election science was clear and fairly easy to learn, but the art of politics is people, and the campaign school had a curriculum to teach that, too.

We were divided into six work groups each of which had the task of developing a complete campaign plan for either of the two female candidates for New Hampshire state senate. Incumbent Kelly Ayotte is being challenged by former governor Maggie Hassan and the race has national implications. All of our “campaign” work was done outside of class time in order to simulate the intensity of the real thing. It was political boot camp.

We presented our campaign plans at the end of the week, one of the two candidates was judged the winner, and the Class of 2016 joined the “Old Girls Club” of 1,400 distinguished alumnae who include Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-Ariz.).

The Women's Campaign School was

founded at Yale in 1993, following the elections of 1992 when American voters sent as many new women to Congress as had been elected in any previous decade. It was designated the “Year of the Woman.” Though there have been gains in the number of officeholders who reflect the demographics of our country, the United States remains somewhere between 80th and 90th in the world for percentage of women in our national legislature.

We have all heard the saying, “All politics is local.” Throughout my time at Yale among 80 women who I am confident will change the world, I couldn't stop thinking about the women running locally this year and about all the women I want to help run in the future.

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