How to Help College Students Become Regular Voters

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Preparing students to participate in U.S. democracy — including voting — is central to the mission of higher education. Northwestern University has demonstrated notable success, by helping every student register to vote during college orientation, or request a ballot by mail, thus building civics into the college experience. If other colleges and universities follow the Northwestern example, the voting rate for college students can exceed that of other segments of the U.S. population.

Overcoming Obstacles to Student Voting

The low youth voting rate is largely a consequence of the frequency with which young people change their residence address — older people who have recently moved also tend to miss elections. Simply put, the longer someone lives at a given residence, the more they are likely to register, engage with the issues in the area, and vote. This transience effect is especially salient for college students, because they leave home just at the age they become eligible to vote. Even if they attend college near home, most are not yet registered. Those who move farther away often feel uneasy voting in a new city or state where they see themselves as temporary residents.

Northwestern University has demonstrated that the transience issue can be systematically overcome. The voter turnout for Northwestern students was a typical but dismal 49 percent rate in 2012, but the institution's voter registration program raised the rate to 64 percent in 2016 — well above the 58 percent national average for citizens of all ages.

The Northwestern voter encouragement effort has worked for several reasons. Most basically, by respecting the preference of many students to vote back home, the program has succeeded in helping students vote by mail if they prefer. In addition, voter registration is folded into the university's orientation process. When students first come to the university, a peer greets each student individually, explains voting choices and assists with registration — even with an absentee ballot application. Although students can easily decline these conversations, 95 percent of eligible students register to vote.

Notably, Northwestern's efforts avoid the use of email. Some studies have shown that students contacted by email are actually less likely to register than those not contacted at all. This supposedly efficient form of outreach has proved counterproductive. Newly eligible students wonder if their one small vote is worth the cost, and this sense of individual insignificance could be unintentionally confirmed by a message or campaign that is addressed to thousands of students at once. Instead, the Northwestern program affirms the individual value of voting by providing one-on-one attention to each potential voter. As an integral part of the welcome process, voter registration sends the message that civic participation is part and parcel of being a college-age adult.

The Northwestern Principles to Boost Student Voting

Schools starting new programs do not need to do everything at once, but these steps can help:

Talk to every student about voting. Individual peer counseling on voting is fully integrated into orientation to ensure that each eligible incoming student is assisted in registering to vote. This happens every year, not only during election years. In addition, several convenient campus locations help students register throughout the year.

Respect student preferences. Students who prefer to vote by mail in their home communities — or by mail in their college community — can be encouraged to request absentee ballots.

Use electronic outreach sparingly or not at all. Emails are not effective for getting students to sign up for a web service, register, or actually vote. On rare occasions, email can be useful for a very timely and narrowly targeted alert. But students are not provoked to act by email.

Get it all done at once. If a step must be completed later, only a fraction of students will complete it. And if the follow-up is by email, the loss is especially severe. So, all services — registration, absentee ballot applications, signatures, ID copies, addresses, stamps, and mailing — must all be provided in ways students can complete in a single in-person session.

Paper usually beats computers. Paper applications take half as much time as computer applications. The disadvantage of paper is the need to have many different forms on hand, especially for absentee ballot applications that vary by state. At Northwestern, outreach people use vote.org's online forms on laptops at most year-round locations, but also use paper forms from the same site during orientation and other events where high rate of applicants are helped.

Assist in form completion and check for errors. To novices, voting feels unfamiliar, individually insignificant, and burdensome. Trained peer assistants are essential, as they not only help ensure that steps are properly completed but signal that each students' vote matters.

Provide confirmation and follow-up information on paper. Especially around the beginning of the school year, students overlook most email. Each registered student should be handed essential information on paper, which is more likely to be read and physically retained. Students need to know how to confirm that they are registered; where, when, and in what ways they can vote; what is on the ballot; and how to get information about candidates and issues.

Get Out the Vote is about *choosing* to vote rather than "reminding" to vote. Electronic reminders have been shown to have no effect. Instead, Northwestern strives to build a culture of voting — using vans or marches to the polls, election watch parties, informational websites, the visibility of registration and absentee ballot stations, issue-oriented lectures, and "I-voted" stickers.

A recent Tufts University study tracked student voting rates at over 1,000 colleges and universities and found record-setting improvement results for Northwestern's model. Some other colleges and universities are also creating integrated voter registration programs. But many are still just sending emails and promoting web services. The United States has one of the lowest voting rates in the developed world. With 20 million potential voters in college, raising their voting rate by 15 percent — as Northwestern has done — would produce three million more voters. In turn, higher voter turnout will ensure a more robust, representative democracy and teach students the importance of civic participation.

Read more in Kim Castle, Janice Levy, and Michael Peshkin, "Local and Absentee Voter Registration Drives on a College Campus" *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement Working Paper 66,* **October 2009.**