



How Colleges in North Carolina – And Beyond – Can Help Students Vote

Laura Elise Bennett, The Center For Just Journalism

In the past decade many states have made changes to their election laws, but few have gone as far as North Carolina. In 2013 the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Voter Information Verification Act, a law that shortens the early voting period, ends the pre-registration of teenagers, and requires that voters present specific types of photo identification at the polls beginning in 2016. Student identification cards issued by colleges and universities and out-of-state driver's licenses will not be acceptable to meet the new state requirement in most instances.

What steps can universities and civic organizations take to help students vote in this new context? Along with three other Master of Public Policy students at Duke University – Rebecca Kaplan, Lindsay Robinson, and Patrick Moran – I conducted a survey and investigated the efficacy of various practices on behalf of Common Cause North Carolina, a nonpartisan civic organization. Here I report a number of our important findings.

The Absentee Voting Option

Like all eligible voters, U.S. college students are entitled to register and vote in the jurisdiction they consider their primary residence. Many choose to vote absentee. Given the new identification requirements, Common Cause North Carolina was particularly interested in determining whether encouraging students to use absentee ballots would help them vote in North Carolina and elsewhere.

Because absentee regulations vary by state, we surveyed 76 undergraduate students at Duke University and asked them to identify the state in which they are registered to vote. Compared to other North Carolina colleges, Duke draws a high percentage of its students from out of state. Still, over 60 percent of respondents said they had registered to vote in North Carolina. Under the new identification law, such students may find it easier to vote in the state by absentee ballot than to obtain an approved form of identification. Any registered North Carolina voter can vote absentee, and the North Carolina absentee voting process does not have the same identification requirements as in-person voting. Informing students about their legal opportunity to vote absentee in North Carolina could be a valuable strategy to facilitate voting.

Although absentee ballots in North Carolina could help many student voters, many will also vote absentee in other states. When the surveyed students were presented with their choices, over 80 percent of those who are registered to vote in other states said that they would be more likely to vote absentee in their home states than to register anew and vote in North Carolina. However, students who wish to vote absentee in their home states may need to make use of notary services, because several states require that notaries or witnesses sign absentee ballots. Colleges can help. For example, the University of Notre Dame provides free notary services in several locations on campus; it advertises the service during election seasons and appointments are not

required.

Approved Forms of Identification for In-Person Voting

Absentee voting is no panacea. In North Carolina, absentee requests must be submitted to the county board of elections no later than one week before Election Day – a deadline certain to be missed by some. And of course students have the same right as other citizens to vote in person if they wish. Determining whether students possess a form of identification that enables them to exercise that right was a critical question in our research.

- **Passports.** Amazingly, although very few of the 68 survey respondents eligible to vote in the U.S. had a North Carolina driver's license, tribal enrollment card, or military identification card, all indicated that they have a U.S. passport. But Duke University students are not representative of out-of-state students at all North Carolina colleges and universities, so more research is needed to determine the actual rate of passport ownership among all students studying in North Carolina. What is more, some students may not realize their passports are necessary for voting and may not bring them along when they come to college each year.
- **No-fee North Carolina voter cards.** Universities can also help students obtain no-fee voter identification cards from the North Carolina Division of Motor Vehicles – and universities and civic groups can provide transportation to get students to the right offices. Once they get there, students who wish to obtain a no-fee voter card must provide proof-of-residency documentation. For students living in university housing, this may be difficult, as they have no lease, utility bills, or other commonly accepted proof-of-residency documents. Oberlin College tackled this problem by administering \$0.00 utility bills to students living in campus housing. Many schools, including Duke University, provide enrollment certifications that include student dorm addresses, which may satisfy proof-of-residency requirements. However, we were unable to confirm that the North Carolina Division of Motor Vehicles would accept Duke's documents. Universities should take proactive steps to ensure that the documentation they provide meets official muster.

Universities Can Adopt and Spread Best Practices

North Carolina is not the only state that has enacted laws that create hurdles to voting, and colleges and universities can learn from one another about the best ways to facilitate out-of-state student voting in these states.

Some colleges and universities have set up dedicated websites to provide students with voting information. However, single-purpose websites may not have high traffic. Using a more promising approach, the University of Florida includes links to voter registration information through its Integrated Student Information System website, a multi-purpose portal that likely gets much more traffic. North Carolina colleges and universities could take the same step.

Colleges and universities have an important role to play in grooming the next generation of American leaders. Helping students vote should be a priority, not an afterthought. Just as state legislatures imitate one another when they pass laws about voting procedures, colleges and universities can discover, spread, and learn from best practices to encourage student voting.

Research for this brief was drawn from Laura Bennett, Rebecca Kaplan, Patrick Moran, and Lindsay Robinson, "Best Practices to Facilitate Out-of-State Student Voting in North Carolina," North Carolina Common Cause, 2014.