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IDHE ✓ **ACTION GUIDE**

Democracy Matters: Addressing Non-Statutory Barriers to College Student Voting

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Tufts UNIVERSITY | Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service

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About Us

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service is a national leader in civic education whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement. Serving every student at Tufts University, Tisch College prepares young people to be lifelong active citizens and creates an enduring culture of active citizenship.

The Institute for Democracy and Higher Education is dedicated to shifting college and university priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen public life and advance social and political equity. The Institute focuses explicitly on college student political learning and engagement in democracy. Located within Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, the Institute achieves its goals through research, resource development, and convening.

The National Study on Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) is the Institute's signature initiative. NSLVE is both a service to higher education—providing participating colleges and universities with tailored reports containing their students' registration and voting rates—and a national database for research. NSLVE provides the first and only objective measure of college student voting in the U.S based on actual student enrollment and publicly available voting records.

Overview

With support from the Bernard & Audre Rapoport Foundation, the research team at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University examined an important but frequently overlooked form of voting problems that can affect college students: non-statutory barriers to voting. Throughout history, the United States has sometimes struggled to properly calibrate its decentralized system of voting, balancing efforts to "preserve the integrity of the system" with concerns about a denial of civil rights and voter suppression, most often through statutory efforts to reduce turnout such as onerous photo identification requirements.[1]

Another largely unexplored layer of suppression involves discretionary decisions by election officials at the local or state levels. Unlike most democracies worldwide, the United States entrusts election administration to individuals who are mostly elected and aligned with a political party. These officials can *facilitate* voting, for instance, by placing easy-to-use voting machines in many convenient locations. Or they can delib-erately or inadvertently create obstacles to voting. The widely distributed nature of the system can inhibit accountability. The decentralized administration especially affects college students. It is also difficult to ensure institutional compliance with the provi-sion of the Higher Education Act that requires campuses to provide voting materials to students.

The effects of these often-unnoticed choices are more difficult to estimate than the effects of state laws, but they could potentially be even more significant. CIRCLE's

Campus Responsibility: Higher Education Act of 1998

The 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) (20 U.S.C. 1094(a)(23) requires colleges and universities to "make a good faith effort" to distribute voter registration forms to each attending student. Institutions may email students voter registration materials or a URL to download the form. In most states, institutions must request the forms from the state 120 days prior to the deadline for registering to vote. The regulation applies to both general and special elections for federal office, and to elections for governor or other chief executives in the state. In states without a voter registration require-ment or with same-day registration, campuses are exempt.

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[1] CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), based at the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, also contributed data on those forms of suppression by building national statistical models that incorporate state laws, state-level turnout, and a host of control variables. On the whole, CIRCLE finds that restrictive provisions had small suppressive effects on non-college-educated young people in 2012. The effects seemed to be cumulative—states with several suppressive provisions saw distinctly lower turnout among non-college youth.

analysis of national 2012 data found that state-level voting administration practices had no effect on youth turnout, but it is likely that local variation and implementation is much more important (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013). This project is one step toward understanding these dynamics and effects. In this document, a barrier is defined as a situation in which students intent upon registering and/or voting encounter an intentional or unintentional impediment that directly limits their ability to do so.

With the exception of curricular and co-curricular offerings to students in relevant fields such as political science, higher education institutions tend to tread carefully in the domain of politics, and especially electoral campaigns. According to the 2013 student survey from the Harvard Institute of Politics, 53% of college students engage in community service, whereas only 11% participate in a government and/or political organization or issue (Institute of Politics, 2013). Deficits in student learning *for democracy* are clear. Researchers from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching developed their *Political Engagement Project* because "higher education pays relatively little attention to undergraduate students' political learning," (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2010, p. 4). Elizabeth Beaumont formerly of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Political Engagement Project, wrote:

> *Unfortunately … young people's political experiences are typically left to happenstance and the influence of individual backgrounds. There are few politically focused learning programs on college campuses, in high schools, or in communities that reach out to youth from different backgrounds. This leaves many young adults, particularly those who lack other routes for gaining valuable civic resources, with few pathways and opportunities to move toward political agency and empowerment (Beaumont, 2010, p. 554).*

Some campuses are not prepared to help students across disciplines become effective democratic actors. We believe this needs to change, and while voting is not the only way to engage in democracy, educating students on how to register and vote, as well as how to make informed ballot choices, is an important role for colleges and universities.

About this Guide

Existing materials about college student voting are predominantly geared toward students and youth-focused NGOs. This leaves a gap, a lack of practical information for campus staff and faculty about building and sustaining the infrastructure for acting on their civic mission and fulfilling obligations under the Higher Education Act. Additionally, while much has been written about state policies, local campus- and county-level decisions are also important. This Guide provides examples of situations that can create barriers to voting—situations that could be prevented or addressed on college campuses. Institutions may not be adequately prepared to help students navigate all of the practices that can impact participation, and this Guide aims to assist campus administrators who are tasked with supporting student voting. This is not to

Policy-Related Challenges to Youth Voting

Over the past five years, state legislatures have voted on or passed a large number of bills related to state voting and registration law. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University and the Campus Vote Project at the Fair Elections Legal Network track these bills and provide youth, students, and institutions assistance navigating the new laws.

Brennan Center (2015) analysis shows that, between 2011-2012, 19 states passed more limits on voting. The Center's analysis also shows movement toward more bills that help facilitate voting and pushback on what legislatures passed.

In particular, laws that require voters to show photo identification have been a focus of organizations working on student voting. The Campus Vote Project developed a map showing which states allow students to use their college IDs to vote, which do not, and which fall somewhere in between: http://campusvote project.org/administrators/student-id-as-voter-id/

CIRCLE's Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge (2013) found that the total number of restrictive measures, such as strict photo ID requirements (some explicitly excluding student IDs from public schools) and limits on registration, is negatively related to statewide youth turnout of young people who have not attended college, after controlling for other factors that relate to turnout. Additionally, CIRCLE's Commission found evidence that same-day registration is related to higher youth turnout.

say that non-institutional, student-led efforts should be replaced, but rather that campuses can create environments where those efforts are easier.

In this Guide, we provide a review of non-statutory barriers (i.e., barriers not immediately linked to a law or regulation) that can impede college students' registration and voting. For each of the four barriers identified we provide examples, solutions, and resources that campuses can use to address the barrier.

Throughout this document we highlight the ways in which student voting is made more difficult and even outright discouraged, both of which we consider to be barriers. We are not arguing that the situations we describe and others like them are always intentional. Some may be, while others may be the product of unintended consequences or misunderstandings. However, campuses can play a larger role in grasping the nature of these barriers as a first step to preventing or addressing them.

Also note that this Guide is an attempt to translate election information and gather resources. While it is informed by research, it does not describe the results of a specific study. Rather, it is a practical resource that draws from broader research about college student political engagement being conducted at Tisch College. In addition to our experience with civic and political efforts within higher education, campus visits and targeted interviews also informed this Guide. We sometimes identify specific campuses that experienced non-statutory barriers that were covered by media, but for examples based on interviews, we do not include the name of the campus if it would be possible to identify a particular speaker, whether on or off campus.

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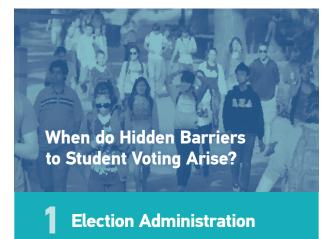
Identifying the Hidden Barriers to Student Voting

Our conversations with a variety of representatives of NGO's working on voting rights and/or mobilization unearthed mostly local dynamics that serve as barriers to student registration and voting. We define a barrier as a situation in which a student who is intent upon registering and/or voting encounters an impediment that directly limits their ability to do so. Whether it is deliberate or inadvertent, a barrier could include making registering to vote physically inconvenient; placing voting locations far from student residences; placing additional poll watchers in precincts near campuses to challenge student voter eligibility; or publishing misleading information about the possible consequences of registering to vote near campus rather than in a home town. In addition to election officials, university officials may hold either positive or hostile attitudes to student political engagement and may encourage or actively deter on-campus mobilization efforts. Through this work we identified four key areas where non-statutory barriers on campuses can be addressed.

On some campuses, non-statutory barriers have become routine, a matter of "how the system works." This attitude fosters a level of complacency. Campus can and should do more to identify barriers and address them. For each barrier, we explain how it can arise, give examples, and recommend actions to prevent or address it. The recommendations apply to all types of colleges and universities but should be tailored to meet each institution's unique circumstances.

Dynamics that are less explicit and direct, but symptomatic or cultural, such as a campus climate that discourages political engagement, are also beyond the scope of this Guide. Campuses should support environments and learning experiences in which students can develop political efficacy and agency. IDHE reports from our campus climate research will be available at activecitizen.tufts.edu/IDHE.

When do Hidden Barriers to Student Voting Arise?

1 **Election Administration**

2 **Voter Registration**

3 **Voting Process**

4 **Institutional Discretion**

Core Recommendations

Before we suggest recommendations for certain types of barriers, there are core areas that should be addressed, regardless of the situation:

✓ **Stand by your students and democracy. Defend the rights of your students to vote and encourage students to engage more broadly in civic and political life. The civic mission of higher education calls on institutions to educate students not only for jobs but for democracy.**

✓ **Formally assign the responsibility of coordinating your institution's registration and voter mobilization efforts to one staff person, administrator, or faculty member, who should build a working group that includes students.**

✓ **Develop and maintain a relationship with the local elections office. A strong working relationship, a reserve of good will, and conversations well before an election can help prevent many barriers.**

✓ **Nurture a positive relationship with your local community and be a good neighbor.**

The civic mission of higher education calls on institutions to educate students not only for jobs but for democracy.

For more, see the workbook at the end of the Guide.

Area-Specific Issues, Solutions and Resources

1 Election Administration

ISSUES

Most people are unfamiliar with how much preparation goes into the design and implementation of registration and voting processes. In response to the numerous barriers voters experienced, President Obama convened a Presidential Commission on Election Administration. The Commission's report emphasized the "complexity and variation in local election administration" and that "local institutions, rules, and cultures differ considerably" (2014, p. 9).

Election officials make a series of decisions that affect how smoothly registration and voting go. These important planning calculations include:

▶ **Polling locations on election day and, if applicable, for early voting**

▶ **Poll worker training**

▶ **Electronic or paper voter lists**

▶ **Communicating registration processes, polling locations, and voting hours**

▶ **The number of voting machines at each polling location**

Some administrative decisions cause long lines at a polling location. President Obama specifically identified long lines during the 2012 election as motivation for the Presidential Commission on Election Administration (Presidential Commission on Election Administration, 2014). In 2012, students at Hampton University faced a lack of sufficient voting machines, which caused "a growing line" (Election Protection, 2013, p. 37). Also in 2012, the Election Protection (2013) found that a decision to check in voters with an electronic voter list in Fulton County, GA, caused a series of problems for voters. As a result, students voting at Morehouse College, which is in Fulton County, "stood in line for up to seven hours due to this problem" (p. 27).

In response to the Presidential Commission's efforts to mitigate long lines, the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project designed a "poll worker and machine optimization tool" that elections staff can use to calculate the optimal number of poll workers and voting machines at a given polling location (Voting Technology Project, 2014). A

Presidential Commission on Election Administration

In his comments on election night in 2012, President Obama said about the way elections are administered: "we need to fix that" (Froomkin, 2012).

Through an Executive Order, President Obama created a bi-partisan Commission on Election Administration. Scholars, local and state staff who work on elections, and organizations whose work intersects with voting and elections, provided feedback and research on election administration.

The final report of the Commission was released in January of 2014 with four main recommendations:

- **Modernize registration**
- **Improve polling place management**
- **Allow and encourage voting before Election Day**
- **Standardize the certification process for new voting technology**

highly technical solution, this tool illustrates that determining the number of voting machines at a polling location may involve formulas that, while not absolute, can provide some clarity. As members of the community, campuses can be part of the conversation about the optimal number of voting locations and booths.

Whether located 10 miles from campus or centrally situated in the student center, polling locations matter. Campuses should check local processes and advocate, as is possible, with the election offices in their county to put a polling location on or near campus. Sometimes campuses deal with a distant polling location by arranging vans or scheduling walking in groups. The Political Science Society at the University of Southern Indiana led successful efforts to put a voting location on campus, and the University of Iowa had "satellite voting locations" on their campus in 2013 (Langhorne, 2010; Corless, 2013). Part of the Political Science Society's rationale was safe transport; the president of the Society told county commissioners, "If you don't have a car, and you don't have access to a motor vehicle, you simply cannot legally cross the Lloyd Expressway over to {West Terrace}," the original voting location. Campus representatives can learn the protocol for polling locations in their state and gather data with students to advocate for a new voting precinct and a corresponding change in polling location.

CASE–IN–POINT:

Several news sources reported that in the 2012 election, on-campus residents at the SUNY-Cortland campus voted at one of two polling locations, one centrally located and the other edge of campus (Leader, 2013). In 2013, the officials divided the campus into three precincts and three separate polling locations, none on campus. As a result, some students walked more than a mile to vote. Fortunately, NYPIRG arranged for vans to take students to and from the polling locations. The NYPIRG coordinator complained that the vans could not help all students at all times. "We believe that by having off campus polling sites, students are discouraged from voting," said Student Government Association public relations coordinator. "It also makes voting very inconvenient and inaccessible." The mayor of Cortland remarked, "If students were to walk, it would be about a mile...and there's a long stretch of road where there's no sidewalk. And in addition to that, it is Route 13, so it's not minor back road or side road" (Lindstrom, 2013). A change was made weeks before the election, and the mayor commented that the "only publicity that was done was a postcard. But the postcard is something you get every election. And I think people glance at it but they don't necessarily read it all the way through."

Over the past several years, there have been numerous media reports about campus polling locations being removed. Students at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina pushed back on the removal of an early voting location (Smutherman, 2013; Gutiérrez, 2013). At Appalachian State University in North Carolina, the student government launched a campaign to reinstate an on-campus voting location. In his letter to the NC State Board of Elections, the student government president wrote,

> *As students, we do not understand why there are individuals who seek to make voting more difficult for both students and local citizens. For many years, Appalachian State University has worked with the Town of Boone to create a unified community. Students have been responsible for providing countless amounts of services to the town. We are residents, and we consider the moving of this polling place to be an extreme disappointment (Russell, 2013).*

The students successfully reinstated the polling location (Markovich, 2014).

Election officials regularly communicate with registered voters prior to primaries and general elections. These communications have a range of purposes, including providing people with a sample ballot and reminding voters of polling locations and times. Sometimes important information is omitted. During the 2012 election, students

from the University of Pittsburgh went to vote and realized that their polling location had changed (Election Protection, 2013). In 2008, students at Virginia Tech received information from an elections staff member that gave them erroneous information about consequences to their personal administration and finances if they voted near the school (New Voters Project, 2012). In a 2012 release, the Fair Elections Legal Network wrote that, "The "self-guided" questionnaire is misleading and could dissuade students from voting. The Virginia Board of Elections needs to remove the questionnaire from their website and clearly state that students have a right to vote in their college community."

Administrative decisions by a local elections office can lead to changes in the way that registration and voting processes run. From addressing long lines to the actual polling locations campuses can play a more active role in making sure that election planning considers the unique circumstances of students' lives and that students are prepared for any changes that are made.

SOLUTIONS

To prevent election administration from becoming a barrier to your students' voting, we suggest the following:

1. **Build a relationship with your local elections office.** This effort should begin well before an election, when the office is not overwhelmed. Find out the best person with whom to speak. After you have developed a relationship with county elections staff, try to understand their timeline for election planning and decision-making.

2. **Ask and be clear about what information elections offices will be sending to registered voters, and make suggestions about what information will help students.** If changes are not possible, identify where you may need to target information to fill gaps.

3. **Stay in conversation with county elections staff about what will work best for them and your campus.** Make sure you check in well before another election so that you are abreast of what may be changing. If you plan to advocate for adjustments, you will already know who to reach out to and when the right time will be.

4. **Keep track of where students will vote and of any changes.** This is particularly important in more densely populated areas where students in one dormitory or apartment complex may vote at a different location than those in another residence.

5. **Every election, learn the aggregate number of your students who vote.** In addition to being important for tracking student civic participation, this information will also help you determine whether or not the numbers warrant changing or creating a new polling location.

The Campus Vote Project has specific suggestions for questions to ask during an introductory meeting with an elections official, such as

▶ If students live in a dorm or other non-traditional housing, what address information do they need to put on the registration form?

▶ Is there someone from your office who can come to campus to educate students and administrators about the requirements or run a registration drive?

▶ Do all students who live on campus vote at the same polling place? If not, can you help us identify who votes where? For example, which dorms are assigned to which polling places?

▶ What are the student-heavy polling places? How do you estimate how many student voters you will have?

▶ What are the most common problems that student voters have when they try to register or vote in [your town]? (Campus Vote Project, n.d., p.2)

RESOURCES

▶ **National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement**

Tisch College's National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE— activecitizen.tufts.edu/research/NSLVE) offers all colleges and universities in the United States a free and easy service. It can tell campuses how many of their students regis-tered to vote, how many voted, and what percent of those who registered voted. Campuses can also learn student voting patterns broken down by age, class level, field of study, gender, and race/ethnicity. NSLVE is not a survey, and campuses simply fill out and submit an authorization form.

To date, more than 800 campuses nationwide have signed up to receive a confidential, tailored report (see sample here: http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/ NSLVE-Sample-Report.pdf).

2 Voter Registration

ISSUES

Although seemingly straightforward, voter registration processes can be confusing or labor-intensive, especially for students who may not be able to use a dorm address or those new to the process. Students can be easily confused by which on-campus ad-dress to use. How election officials determine and respond to incomplete or incorrect information matters. In some cases, local officials resist students' registering to vote altogether.

Local officials who exercise discretion in telling students that they are not allowed to register and vote in the municipality where they attend school may represent the most high-profile non-statutory bar-rier. Although students won the right to vote locally while in college (Symm v. United States 1979), they occasionally encounter officials who do not agree (Campus Vote Project, 2013). One administrator reported that local resistance appeared to be an organized effort. The administrator explained, the "county clerk was not excited about students registering…and was not interested in students participating." Cam-pus officials suspected that the clerk "threw registration forms in the trash so students wouldn't vote … We had to call the state."

The registration and voting processes are address-dependent; it is not enough to live in a certain town or state. Students need a specific residential address to register and

CASE IN POINT:

After the passage of local ordinances that targeted students from Williamsburg four students announced their candidacy for the three (of five) open seats on the Williamsburg City Council (Hira, 2004). All were denied the right to register to vote by the voter registrar on the grounds that "the students could not establish residency in Williamsburg." The reg-istrar required students to complete a questionnaire in order to determine their residential status (Troy, 2006). The registrar determined that the students were not residents of Wil-liamsburg and therefore were not eligible to vote or run for office.

be assigned to a voting location. When a registration form is submitted (either via a hard-copy or online form), an official reviews the information for processing. An elections staff member reviews the form for completeness, for legibility, and some-times for whether or not they deem the address to be acceptable or permanent. The official's decisions, intentionally or not, can erect barriers to student voting. For ex-ample, students who live on-campus in dorms may not be able to register using their dorm address. Others may need to use the main campus address, and others a specific address worked out with an elections office depending on the location of the dorm— check with your local officials to be sure of the situation for your campus. Students are not likely to be privy to these dynamics and may submit accurate information about

a campus address but not know that a central campus address, for example, is required. In 2012, some students who at-tended Warren Wilson College in North Carolina directly benefited from close attention to registration addresses (Elec-tion Protection, 2013). Some students had used a pre-redistricting plan for on-cam-pus address usage, but the problem was identified and the county worked with the administration to resolve the issue.

CASE IN POINT:

At one campus, local election registration staff members were reluctant to supply cam-pus administrators with enough voter registration forms. When requested, they "doled them out to us in small quantities of 10 to 20 at a time." Campus officials theorized that "the county board is understaffed … I don't think they're prepared for the numbers of forms they have to process every year." In that particular state, students must reregister every time they move—even if between locations on-campus. As a result, "virtually every student needs to reregister every year." With several thousand students on campus (most of them changing residence at the same time), the local board did not have the resources to handle the rush of paperwork.

On one campus we examined, the local officials send confirmation notices to stu-dents, and if the post office or the campus returns the confirmation, then the person is not registered. While this process is a part of the The United States Department of Justice (The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, 2015), students often need to update their address information each year if they move, even between dorms. Noti-fying students about this provision and the possible need to change address informa-tion could prevent problems.

Voter registration is one of the most high-profile barriers identified in this Guide. The way in which election officials respond to the unique challenges of students can deter-mine the scope of the barrier. Campuses can support their students as they navigate this process. We are interested in seeing whether online registration reduces many of these discretionary decisions.

SOLUTIONS

To prevent the voter registration processes from being a barrier to student political participation, we suggest that institutions and the assigned person or group in charge of student voter registration use these strategies:

1. **Know the relevant voting laws for your state.**

2. **Educate students about important address requirements, processing details, or voting laws that may affect their registration**, particularly if they need to update their address should they change dorms or move.

3. **For students who want to register locally, be proactive and aware of what address they should use depending on where they live on-campus.**

4. **Make sure voter registration volunteers know this information** so that there is less confusion with elections officials and a process exists for dealing with incomplete forms.

5. **Drop off local registration forms, as opposed to mailing them, and stick around to make sure there are no problems.** If there are, you can help follow up and make sure the students get registered.

CASE IN POINT:

When we interviewed a campus organizer at a small state school, the person reported turning in students' voter registration forms to the board of elections every week. The organizer watches voter registration officials stamp them to make sure they are officially approved. If there is a problem with the registration form, the organizer emails the student to fix the issue. In addition, backup copies of each form are made, and a database of student addresses is kept.

RESOURCES

▶ **State-by-State Guidance about Students Voting Law**
Voting and registration laws vary greatly by state. Use resources from the Brennan Center for Justice, the Campus Vote Project and the Fair Elections Legal Network to understand what, specifically, may influence student voting in your state.

— Online guide with a review of laws by state: http://www.brennancenter.org/student-voting

— Handouts by state with specific information about deadlines, voting laws, and what students need to know: http://www.campusvoteproject.org/studentguides

— State specific guides with information about whether a state allows copying of registration forms: http://fairelectionsnetwork.com/state-guides/

3 Voting Process

ISSUES

Decisions made during the act of voting can also cause problems. Barriers can arise when a student goes to check in at a polling location depending on how lines are managed and when poll workers use discretion over provisional/affidavit ballot access.

During the 2012 election, Temple University students showed up to vote only to learn that they were not on the voting rolls (Melamed, 2012). The issue forced many to fill out provisional ballots. Unfortunately, election officials had not brought enough provisional ballots, causing additional problems. Some of the proactive steps mentioned in the voter registration section can help to prevent these issues and the need for provisional ballots.

Some of the problematic use of discretion in the voting process comes from paid poll workers. The poll worker system has been in place for a long time and is one way for members of a community to support democratic processes. The system also has downsides, as the report of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration points out:

One of the weaknesses of the system of election administration in the United States is the absence of a dependable, well-trained corps of poll workers. Workers report for duty only a few days a year, possibly as infrequently as once … Training is spotty and often consists of no more than a couple of hours. The quality of training in approximately 8,000 election jurisdictions varies markedly. … The Commission heard consistent testimony that effective poll worker recruitment, training and staffing are among the most important factors in determining the quality of the voter experience. There is evidence to this effect in studies that show that voter satisfaction and confidence correlate with positive appraisal of poll worker performance (2014).

CASE IN POINT:

One public, 4-year institution told us of several attempts to enforce residency regulations when students vote. A campus official reported that poll workers "ask students where they live" and "if the information is different, they deny the student the opportunity to vote—even if they are registered in the county." The administration did not view this resistance as partisan. Instead they believed that some poll workers think "students don't live here so they should not have a say."

We found several instances of voting barriers due to discretion of poll workers. Recently published research suggests that, when it comes to issues of identification, poll workers' actions are affected by their attitude on the subject and education level (Atkeson, Kerevel, Alvarez, & Hall, 2014). Students at the University of Connecticut were asked to wait in a separate line to vote apart from non-students (New Voters Project, n.d.).

Campuses can work with election officials to address the challenges that students can encounter during the act of voting. Poll workers may make mistakes such as erroneously telling students that they are at the wrong polling location or denying a prospective voter a provisional ballot. Campuses can help ensure they have the information needed to navigate these barriers during the act of voting.

CASE IN POINT:

At a public institution we visited, a campus organizer uses a database of the addresses where students are registered on Election Day. This is useful when students go to vote and are told they are not registered at the correct address. A team of trained volunteers makes sure people have their questions answered, or if someone gets turned away they have an advocate that can help.

SOLUTIONS

To prevent barriers at polling locations from disenfranchising students, we suggest the following:

1. **Take proactive steps during the planning and registration processes, like the ones mentioned in previous sections.**

2. **Many states allow individuals to use a web interface to look up their specific polling location, which can be a valuable tool for campuses.**

3. **Advocate with elections officials that poll workers be trained on and know accurate procedures relative to students.** Look into student poll worker programs that can help to reduce confusion by ensuring students who go vote will be aided by trained peers

4. **Work to ensure that your students' votes will be counted.** Institutional representatives need to know the law related to provisional ballots in the event that issues arise.

5. **Recruit someone who knows the law and can advocate for students to be present at the polling location and intervene if issues arise.**

Look into the student poll worker programs that can help reduce confusion.

RESOURCES

▶ **Election Protection Hotline**
A nonpartisan coalition of organizations provides voters with assistance should any issues arise while trying to vote. You and students can call 1-866-OUR-VOTE or 1-888-Ve-Y-Vota. Find out more at http://www.866ourvote.org/.

▶ **Student PIRG and New Voters Project**
Student PIRGs have been doing this work for several election cycles and could be a good partner on your campus. Voter Protection Campaign Toolkit suggests having a handout for students about what they need to know before they cast a vote.

4 Institutional Discretion

ISSUES

This Guide began with the assertion that higher education institutions have a mission and an obligation under the Higher Education Act to help students navigate what it means to be part of a democracy. Our experiences suggest that not all campuses are comfortable with this mission or with supporting related activities such as policy advocacy, student participation in electoral campaigns, and student groups aligned with political parties. Our experiences also suggest that not all campuses are aware of the Higher Education Act's language mandating that campuses make a good faith effort to provide voter registration materials to students.

Unfortunately, how far a campus must go to fulfill its obligations under the Higher Education Act is not clear. Campuses cannot ban political engagement, but administrators can make it more difficult, whether intentionally or not. In 2004, the Chronicle of Higher Education and the Harvard Institute of Politics conducted a national institutional survey to understand whether and how campuses were meeting this obligation. They found that "approximately two-thirds of the schools surveyed meet either the letter or the spirit of the federal Higher Education Act of 1998" (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2004, p. 6). This means that one out of every three campuses in the study didn't make voter registration forms widely available—an abdication of the most basic effort to support student participation in democracy.

Periodically, the U.S. Department of Education issues a "Dear Colleague" letter to campus financial aid officers or registrars, indicating that:

> *"Under your institution's Program Participation Agreement, if your institution is located in the District of Columbia, a state that requires voter registration prior to election day, or a state that does not allow voters to register at the time of voting, it is a "covered institution" and you must make a good faith effort to distribute voter registration forms to your students." (2013)*

This letter is directed to financial aid officers or registrars, not to people in academic or student affairs who are more likely to view student civic engagement as part of the academic mission of the institution. We are not aware of any instance in which the U.S. Department of Education pursued campuses for non-compliance. From our

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CASE IN POINT:

The Campus Vote Project (2012) reported that, in Ohio, voters must show a driver's license or proof of the street address at which they are registered. This makes proof of residence difficult for students living in dorms, where phone and bank statements are typically mailed to a P.O. box or sent elsewhere. To help their students, many public institutions issue letters or utility statements (for $0.00) that students can use at the polls to confirm their address (Campus Vote Project, 2012; Kinney, 2012; New Voters Project, 2012).

In response, Ohio legislators proposed an amendment that makes out-of-state students eligible for in-state tuition if their institution issues one of these statements to serve as proof of address for voting (Goodnight, 2013). The law would have resulted in public institutions losing up to $272 million a year in reduced tuition payments. The Ohio Senate removed the amendment from the state budget (AP and Messenger Staff, 2013).

reading, this letter simply suggests that campuses need merely email students about voter registration to be in compliance with the act.

While many institutions may technically be meeting this exceedingly low bar, some discretionary choices that campuses make (for example, to send an email reminder to students only) are barriers to student voting. This is especially the case with respect to students who are attending a university far from home and students who may not have other direct sources for the information.

Some new state voting laws place campuses in a position to make discretionary decisions about whether and how to help students navigate those laws.

SOLUTIONS

To support students, we suggest campuses build student registration and voting into existing, permanent systems and processes on campus:

CASE IN POINT:

In 2012, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a photo identification law that would require all voters to show ID when casting a ballot. The law required that student identification could be used for this purpose only if it included an expiration date. A coalition of voting organizations, which included Penn PIRG, the ACLU, Committee of Seventy, Project H.O.M.E., the Lawyers Committee, and Project Vote surveyed colleges and universities to understand how many institutions would meet this standard and only 15 of the 110 surveyed institutions met the requirements (PennPIRG, 2012).

Subsequently, Pennsylvania's Secretary of State issued a memo in April of 2012 suggesting that stickers with an expiration date applied to an ID could be used for voting. Many institutions assisted students by developing stickers with expiration dates. As part of the lawsuit investigation, one campus staff member commented that "we just wanted to make sure that we knew what the rules were and were articulating those fully to the student body (Grasgreen, 2012)."

1. **Take proactive steps during the election administration planning process, such as the ones mentioned in the first section, to prevent issues when students go to vote.**

2. **Incorporate voter registration into other programs and projects related to civic and public policy matters**, thereby connecting the political process to relevant activities concerning community and civic life.

3. **Assign a staff member responsibility for overseeing voter registration regularly** so that opportunities can be leveraged to integrate voter registration into related campus civic and policy-related activities. The Campus Vote Project suggests building support by developing ongoing connections to other groups on campus. Specifically, they suggest a strong connection with student government and working with a student specifically designated to help facilitate student voting (Campus Vote Project, n.d).

4. **Be aware of state voting and registration policy and how it influences students, to make sure that the campus is not standing in the way of student voting.**

5. **Assess what is and is not working to get students registered**, especially longstanding practices that have never been evaluated.

Limitations

As with any project, there are important caveats. We encourage readers to consult their state-specific laws before constructing an institutional strategy.

Over forty years have passed since the voting age was lowered to age 18. That may seem like a long time, but campuses are still trying to figure out how to negotiate support for student voting. While we are in the era of "big data," our ability to act on the types of barriers mentioned here is limited by the lack of systemic data. This is one reason the NSLVE project (activecitizen.tufts.edu/research/nslve) helping campuses calculate voter registration and turnout is groundbreaking. Yet the decentralized nature of the voting system makes systemic research challenging.

The lack of systematic data also means that, for the most part, this initial summary is limited to some of the instances of non-statutory barriers to voting that were made public. We heard additional narratives throughout our interview process which we do not cite here in order to guarantee full confidentiality of the interviewees and to avoid the potential for political repercussions—particularly with stories related to the behavior of local election officials. Additional instances of some of the barriers mentioned throughout, or of different barriers altogether, may have also been omitted due to a lack of awareness that something is a problem or that it could be changed.

The goal—a stronger, more inclusive democracy—is certainly worth the effort

Another limitation is coming up with a strategy for collecting such systemic data, as there is not one role or position on campus that always deals with student registration and voting. In addition, we began this project by trying to look systematically at campus voting rates, using a statistical modeling process to see which campuses "under-performed" a predicted rate that was based on demographic and political indicators. We hypothesized that some of those campuses would have barriers. However, as we collected other data, we learned of over-performing campuses having issues with non-statutory barriers.

Finally, as we have been looking at the levers for influencing these barriers, we are struck by the decentralization of the system. Most of what we detailed in this Guide has to do with individual decision-making. As a result, the timelines for campus, election official, and poll worker awareness-building are long. It will take time to reach the great number of stakeholders involved and share lessons learned. But the goal—a stronger, more inclusive democracy—is certainly worth the effort.

Next Steps

Colleges and universities have the potential to reach a broad audience to facilitate learning about democracy and democratic participation. The concerning lack of such opportunities suggests that schools are not living up to their potential. Higher education institutions can and should play an integral role in facilitating learning for and engagement in democracy.

Increasing student engagement in democracy calls for at least two broad courses of action on the part of colleges and universities. First, remove barriers to participation and in particular the most basic form of participation, voting, in the ways described throughout this Guide. Second, embed opportunities for political learning and engagement across curricular and co-curricular programs.

This Guide serves a tool for campuses to begin addressing the barriers to participation on campuses. The second, broader course of action for colleges and universities is to create and promote substantive opportunities to help educate students for democracy. Through the research from the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, we aim to provide campuses with additional research and resources to increase and enhance learning about the underlying causes of structural inequalities, and policy considerations to address these challenges.

Embed opportunities for political learning and engagement across curricular and co-curricular programs

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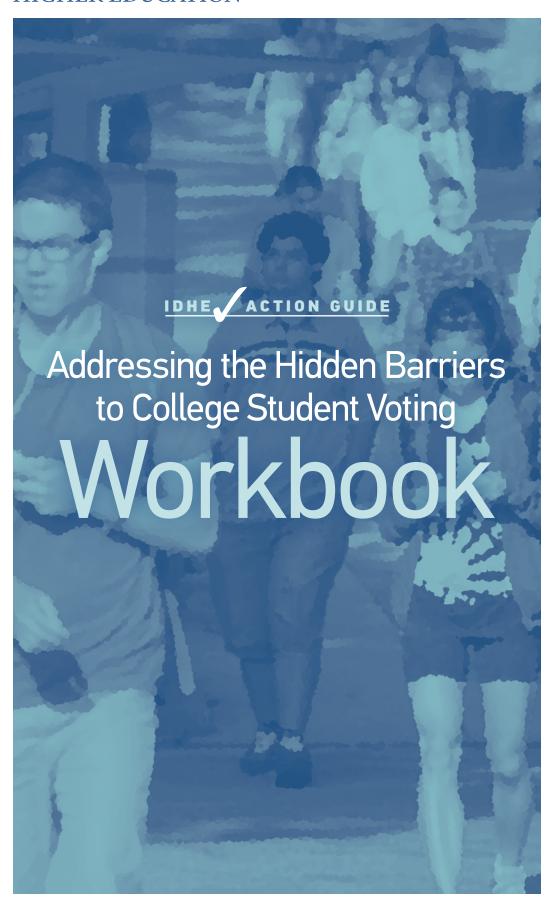
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IDHE ✓ ACTION GUIDE

Addressing the Hidden Barriers to College Student Voting

Workbook

This workbook provides a summary of the core recommendations identified in the IDHE Action Guide "Addressing Hidden Barriers to College Student Voting".

While it is informed by research, the recommendations outlined below are not the results of a specific study. Rather, the workbook is a practical resource for campuses looking to address the non-statutory barriers on their campus.

▶ **Core Recommendations**

▶ **Area-Specific Recommendations**

▶ **Resources**

Core Recommendations

✓ ## Stand by your students and democracy

An individual's right to vote is a core value of democracy. In the 2012 State of the Union, President Obama stated that "When any American, no matter where they live or what their party, are denied [the right to vote] … we are betraying our ideals." Voter registration is not just a legal obligation under the Higher Education Act, it is a part of higher education's civic mission in our democracy. While elections are partisan, advocating for your students' right to vote is not. If institutions remain silent and refuse to act, these barriers to voting will persist and perhaps intensify. By standing up for your students' right to vote, you stand for democratic values and our nation's ongoing experiment in self-governance.

✓ ## Ensure that at least one faculty or staff member on campus is assigned the responsibility to coordinate your institution's efforts

An often-used model on campuses is for a staff member to have program coordination in her or his job description, often in combination with student leaders. When someone is responsible for an activity, they are more likely to implement lessons learned, develop innovative ideas, and foster relationships with other offices on campus (e.g. Residence Life, Orientation, Online Communications) who are potential partners. This should be the case with student voting. Additionally, if there is a specific individual coordinating institutional student registration and voting efforts from year to year, the elections office will know whom to call if changes occur or problems arise (see below).

✓ ## Develop and sustain a relationship with the local elections office

Many of the examples we share in this guide involve local elections staff or activities that elections staff coordinate and control (e.g. poll worker training). A relationship with this office can go a long way toward understanding the exact processes that go into election planning, registration and voting. This knowledge can help prevent confusion or future barriers. In addition, establishing a relationship is a good way to find out about important changes that may result in barriers to student voting and to be in a position to make a case for adjustments. Don't assume a political motivation behind a barrier; in many cases, election officials lack the capacity to handle large numbers of voter registration forms or to serve large numbers of student voters.

✓ ## Nurture a positive relationship with the local community and be a good neighbor

When a community perceives that a campus and its students stand apart, students are less likely to be viewed as part of the community when it comes to elections. While students have a right to vote regardless, it may proactively smooth many dynamics if the campus and students are an integrated and integral part of your larger community. How this develops is likely to look different for each institution.

Area-Specific Recommendations

1 Election Administration

To prevent election administration from becoming a barrier to your students voting, we suggest the following:

☐ **Build a relationship with your local elections office.** This effort should begin well before an election, when the office is not overwhelmed. Find out the best person with whom to speak. After you have developed a relationship with county elections staff, try to understand their timeline for election planning and decision-making.

☐ **Ask and be clear about what information they will be sending to registered voters, and make suggestions about what information will help students.** If changes are not possible, identify where you may need to target information to fill gaps.

☐ **Stay in conversation with county elections staff about what will work best for them and your campus.** Make sure you check in well before another election, so that you are abreast of what may be changing. If you plan to advocate for adjustments, you will already know who to reach out to and when the right time will be.

☐ **Keep regular track of where students will vote and of any changes**. This is particularly important in more densely populated areas where students in one dormitory or apartment complex may vote at a different location than those in another residence.

☐ **Every election, keep track of the aggregate number of students who vote.** On top of being important for tracking campus participation, this information will also help you determine whether or not the numbers warrant changing or creating a new polling location (check local processes first).

The Campus Vote Project has specific suggestions for questions to ask during an introductory meeting with an elections official, such as

▶ If students live in a dorm or other non-traditional housing, what address information do they need to put on the registration form?

▶ Is there someone from your office who can come to campus to educate students and administrators about the requirements or run a registration drive?

▶ Do all students who live on campus vote at the same polling place? If not, can you help us identify who votes where? For example, which dorms are assigned to which polling places?

▶ What are the student-heavy polling places? How do you estimate how many student voters you will have?

▶ What are the most common problems that student voters have when they try to register or vote in [your town]? (Campus Vote Project, n.d., p.2)

2 Voter Registration

To prevent the voter registration processes from being a barrier to student political participation, we suggest that institutions and the assigned person or group in charge of student registration use these strategies:

☐ **The staff member in charge of student registration needs to know the related laws for their particular state.** Organizations like Campus Vote Project and the Brennan Center for Justice are good resources for specific state information explained in clear, simple terms.

☐ **In turn, make sure that students are aware of important details in state voting laws that may influence their registration,** such as the need to update their address if they move.

☐ **For students who want to register locally, the institution needs to be proactive and aware of what address they should use depending on where they live on-campus.**

☐ **Make sure voter registration volunteers know this information** so that there is less confusion with elections officials and a process exists for dealing with incomplete forms.

☐ **After dropping off the registration forms, stick around and make sure there are no issues with them.** If there are, you can help follow up and make sure the students get registered.

Take proactive steps during the planning and registration processes

3 Voting Process

To prevent barriers at polling locations from disenfranchising students, we suggest the following:

☐ **Take proactive steps during the planning and registration processes**, like the ones mentioned in the previous sections.

☐ **Advocate with elections officials that poll workers are trained and know accurate procedures relative to students.**

☐ **Help make sure that your students' votes will be counted.** Institutional representatives need to know the law related to provisional/affidavit ballots in the event that issues arise.

☐ **Organize efforts to have someone at the polling location who knows the law and can advocate for students if issues arise.** A Student PIRG chapter on your campus could be a good partner, as this is something Student PIRGs have been doing for several election cycles.

4 Institutional Discretion

In order to be continually supportive of students, we suggest campuses build student registration and voting into ongoing processes:

☐ **Proactive steps during the election administration planning process, such as the ones mentioned in the first section, can be one way to prevent issues when students go to vote**

☐ **Incorporate voter registration into programs and projects related to civic and policy matters,** thereby connecting the political process to relevant activities concerning community and civic life

☐ **Assign someone to think about voter registration regularly** so that opportunities can be leveraged to integrate voter registration into related campus civic and policy-related activities

☐ **The same person should be aware of state voting and registration policy and how it influences students,** to make sure that the campus is not standing in the way of student voting.

☐ **Assess what is and is not working to get students registered,** especially if there are activities you have been doing for some time but have not evaluated

A Student PIRG chapter on your campus could be a good partner

Resources

Throughout this Guide we have referenced several resources to help campuses implement some of our recommendations. Those resources are listed again here with some additional suggestions.

▶ **Meeting with Local Elections Officials**

http://fairelectionsnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/Meeting-with-Local-Election-Officials.pdf

A short guide from the Campus Vote Project, with suggestions for questions to ask your local elections official during your initial and subsequent meetings

▶ **Voter Protection Campaign Toolkit**

http://www.studentpirgs.org/sites/student/files/resources/Vote_Protection_Project_Packet.pdf

The New Voters Project (a project of the Student PIRGs) developed a campaign toolkit for ensuring students would be able to vote in the 2012 election. Still applicable for future elections, the toolkit provides recommendations and other specific tools for taking action.

▶ **TurboVote**

turbovote.org

A part of Democracy Works, TurboVote is a fee-based system that assists campuses with facilitating student registration and learning from various outreach efforts. In 2014, TurboVote launched a new feature to help students look up the right address for registration based on where they live, thereby mitigating confusion.

Assess what is and is not working to get students registered

▶ **State–by–State Guidance about Students Voting Law**

Voting and registration laws vary greatly by state. Use resources from the Brennan Center for Justice and the Campus Vote Project to understand what, specifically, may influence student voting in your state.

— Online guide with a review of laws by state (brennancenter.org/student-voting)

— Handouts by state with specific information about deadlines, voting law and what students need to know (campusvoteproject.org/studentguides)

▶ **Election Protection Hotline**

866ourvote.org

A nonpartisan coalition of organizations that provides voters with assistance should any issues arise while trying to vote. You and students can call 1-866-OUR-VOTE or 1-888-Ve-Y-Vota.

▶ **Institutionalizing Opportunities for Democratic
Participation and Political Learning**
http://fairelectionsnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/Creating-Change-that-Lasts.pdf
The Campus Vote Project also has specific suggestions for campuses that are thinking about sustaining efforts for student registration and voting.

In collaboration with the American Democracy Project, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ran the Political Engagement Project, which led to a wide variety of resources (http://archive.carnegiefoundation.org/educating_for_democracy/docs/index.html). The project engaged several campuses in using, documenting and assessing curricular and co-curricular programs for student political learning.

Forthcoming Tisch College research will address this broader topic in great detail, including through analyses of what can help to create a campus culture that supports student political engagement and learning.