

# Developing an Active Citizenry Through Student Political Engagement

By Michelle R. Davis

Shortly before election day on the campus of the University of Houston-Downtown, hundreds of students gather for a rally to hear from inspirational speakers, interact with local artists and politicians, and applaud hip-hop groups and other musicians.

Then, en masse, the group walks several blocks to a polling station nearby and everyone votes. Texas law allows early voters to cast their ballots at any polling place, so organizers of the “Walk 2 Vote” event capitalize on that, said senior John Locke, the president of the Student Government Association.

While the Walk 2 Vote event is the centerpiece of the school’s nonpartisan efforts to increase political engagement and voting, those efforts in many forms are present on campus all year long, giving the University of Houston-Downtown a 50 percent student voter rate in 2012, a notable achievement, particularly with an overwhelmingly racially diverse and non-traditional student body; 71 percent of registered students voted in that election.

AASCU institutions are struggling to find ways to boost student political engagement at a time when college youth voting rates hovered around 56 percent in the 2012 election. They face logistical hurdles—voting regulations that can

make it more difficult to get students to the polls—as well as other pressures, including fears of being seen as partisan.

But some institutions and organizations have found ways to create an atmosphere on campus that promotes political activity as well as political conversations that take place in a constructive way, which translates to increases in registration and voting. Establishing those habits and practices when students are on campus can have important consequences for communities and countries said Nancy Thomas, the director of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University’s Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life.

“Because of the state of polarization in this nation ... it’s very dangerous if we can’t learn to talk across differences,” Thomas said. “What’s good for students in terms of political engagement is also what’s good for democracy.”

## Campuses Can Get Their Voting Data

So what is the state of youth voting? Only about 20 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds cast ballots in the 2014 election—the lowest youth turnout rate ever recorded in a federal election, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic

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Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), also based at Tufts.

Until recently, there was little information about what specifically was happening among voters on college campuses. However, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is examining newly available voter information taken from at least 825 campuses, including 150 AASCU campuses. To participate, institutions only need to opt-in to the study and in return will get a full report on the voting data for their own campus, and a guide for creating a campus-wide dialogue about those results, said Thomas, who is overseeing the effort.

So far, the project has determined that about 46 percent of students at participating schools voted in the 2012 presidential election. About 48 percent



of them were female, compared to 40 percent male. About 53 percent of college voters chose to cast their ballots in person, instead of using early voting or absentee voting. Only 19 percent of students on these campuses voted in the 2014 midterm elections.

While the data about specific campuses is not made public, some schools have released their voting information and have been shown to do particularly well.

“We want to encourage campuses to sign up for the (NSLVE) project,” said Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, the national manager for AASCU’s American Democracy Project, which works to promote intentional non-partisan political and civic engagement on AASCU campuses. “If campuses get their election data, they can use that as a starting point to improve their numbers.”

Campuses can also learn from the high fliers, like the University of Houston-Downtown. The school’s efforts to create political engagement on campus go way beyond voter registration drives and are year round, said Windy Y. Lawrence, the founder and director of the school’s Center for Public Deliberation.

Through the center, the campus hosts two or more forums per semester that often focus on controversial issues like immigration or guns on

campus. But these forums are structured so that attendees break into small groups to trade views instead of listening to a few speakers, for example. Everyone gets to express their views.

“We found that these forums absolutely change the way people think about politics and democratic activism,” Lawrence said. “Prior to participating, they think of debates as unproductive conversations between political candidates. Afterwards, they understand that politics can be productive and they are a critical part of that.”

The SGA plays a powerful and pivotal role on campus, she said, with mentoring from faculty. And the administration also sets a tone of support, she said. Past school President (and current vice chancellor of Antioch University and president of the university’s Santa Barbara campus) William Flores and his wife Noël Bezette-Flores founded an umbrella organization, the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, that helps the disparate community and political engagement efforts on campus work toward a unified vision, get funding and harness their power, without replicating each other’s efforts.

## Administration Encouragement Makes a Difference

Flores also incorporated political engagement into his Quality Enhancement Plan for the University, which emphasizes the need for students to use critical

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thinking to understand community issues and engagement.

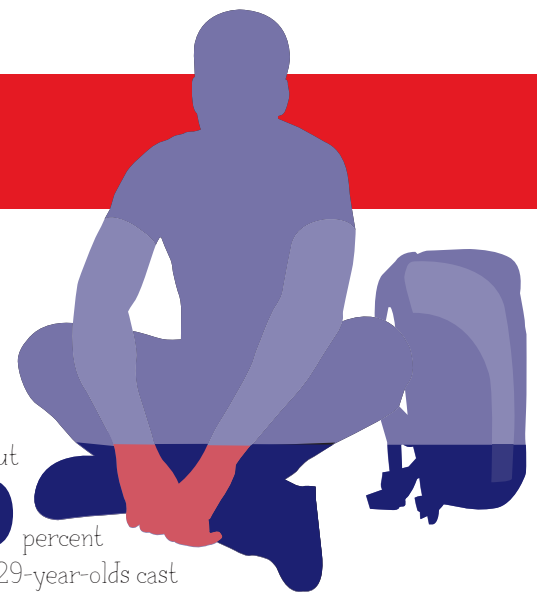
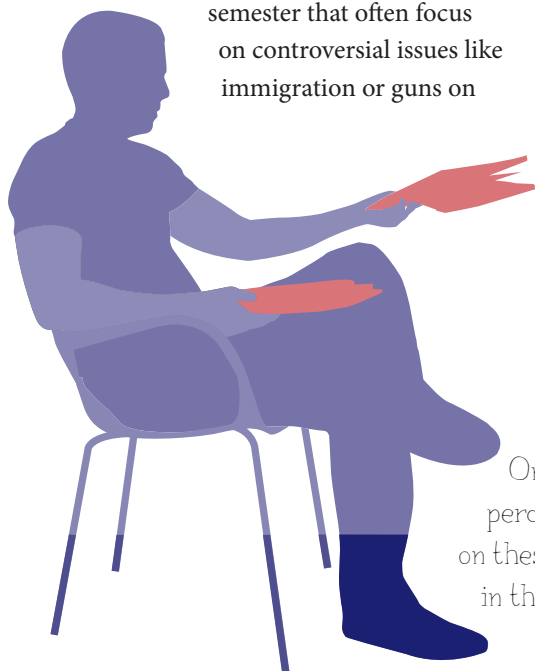
That administration support is critical in showing both faculty and students that participating in democracy by voting is important. At Indiana State University, President Daniel J. Bradley has gone to bat, in a public way, for student voting.

Bradley approached local county officials about placing a voting center on campus to encourage student voting. When those officials said it was too costly, Bradley said the university would pay for it. But when the county election board voted on the idea this year, the vote was split and, by regulation, it had to be unanimous. The university appealed, but was shot down.

The back and forth prompted media coverage, both on campus and off, as well as a raft of political discussion. Even though the campus didn’t get the voting center, the process of appealing and his very public push for student voting opportunities was important, Bradley said.

“If the campus is a place that can have debates without people getting angry and personalizing the issue, then it helps students understand what’s possible,” he said.

That administrative support is coupled with a robust political engagement initiative on the Indiana State University Campus. Carly Schmitt, an assistant pro



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fessor of political science who leads the American Democracy Project on campus, described a varied approach to getting students involved in the upcoming elections.

First up is voter registration. In addition to consolidating efforts around traditional registration drives and tapping student expertise around social media for marketing, Indiana State uses TurboVote, a non-profit organization whose software can easily register students and provide text and email voting reminders to help boost participation. Bradley will call attention to it and students will receive an email providing a link to TurboVote online.

“Once the administration gets behind an initiative like this and it emanates across the campus that this is a priority, then it gets buy-in,” said Schmitt, who is the campus coordinator for the American Democracy Project.

The Indiana State University campus had a 71 percent student voter registration rate in 2012. More than 56 percent of registered students voted at the polls that year, she said.

Schmitt, who has a paid graduate student to help with year-round efforts to promote political engagement along with about 30 student volunteers, has gotten creative. She organized a Tweet-up around the State of the Union and student tweets are displayed on screens in the library. About 80 students participated in an “Amazing Race” to the White House, modeled on the popular television show, that had students running to four different locations for clues and to answer political trivia.

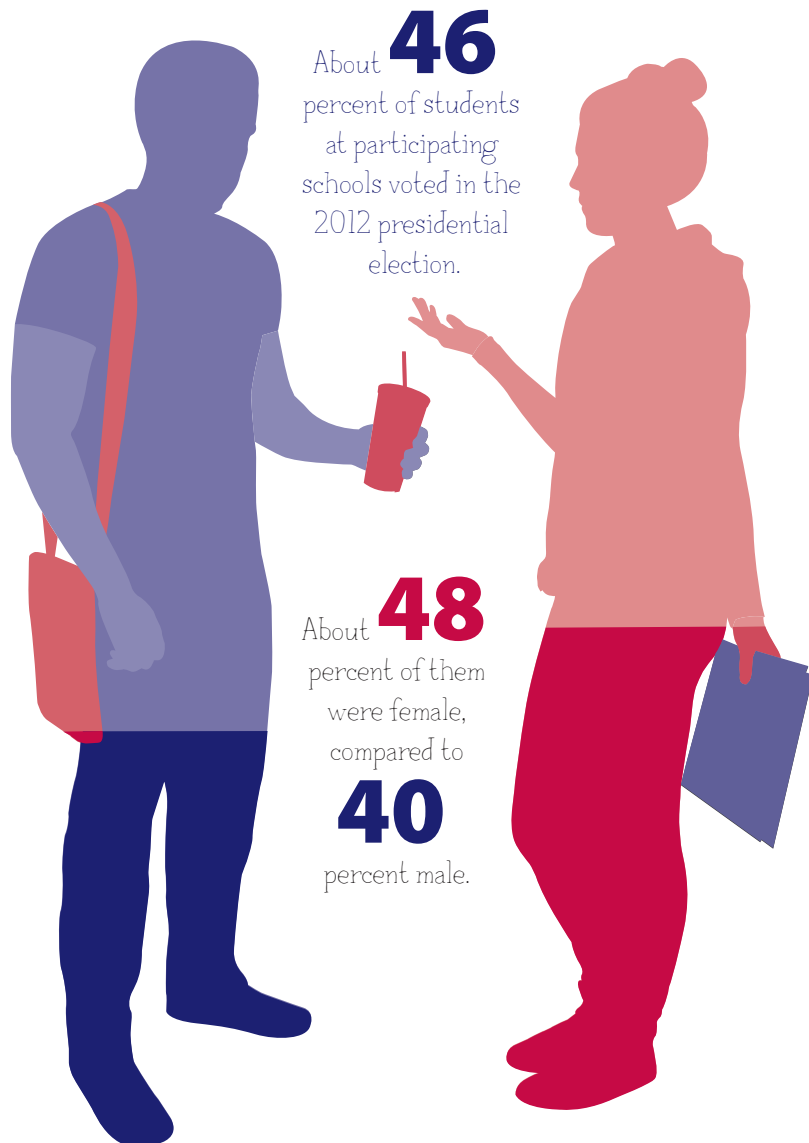
An “Iowa (M)aucus”—created to simulate that state’s political caucus, which is one of the first major electoral events in the presidential race and receives significant media attention—featured about 120 students playing the parts of the presidential candidates, as well as the caucusers, with similar success.

“They really bought into the atmosphere,” even finding candidate memorabilia to wear and display, Schmitt

said. “They were completely engaged. Our goal is to create events where students don’t check out.”

That type of interaction translates into political engagement, which ultimately transforms into voting and lifelong habits of civic involvement, said Thomas.

“There’s evidence that the old way of expecting young people to get involved—by candidates showing up and shaking



hands and saying ‘Get out the vote’— doesn’t work,” she said. “What’s grabbing students today is engaging in quality discussions around issues and being informed.”

In addition, Thomas said, the effort to promote student voting has to extend beyond election season. And political engagement has a lot to with campus climate.

“When visiting a high-voting campus, I see a high-level of social cohesion,” Thomas said. “Students feel deeply connected with each other and their faculty.”

## Connections Translate to Political Action

At the University of South Carolina-Upstate, based in Spartanburg, S.C., Abraham Goldberg, the director of Service-Learning and Community Engagement as well as an associate professor of political science, said his campus’ 77 percent voting rate for 2012 was no accident.

Goldberg said years of work created a campus climate that embraces and celebrates the student body’s diversity of race, age and experiences. A school initiative called “Spartans Care” was launched to help address and combat student stress and depression. It is a constant reminder for faculty to ask how students are doing and to prompt students to take care of each other. The initiative’s “R U OK?” logo is plastered to nearly every campus door, with an email address to link struggling students to help.

“There’s a deep, deep connection between faculty, the administration and students,” Goldberg said. “That connection creates an environment where students can walk in and explore challenging and controversial viewpoints in a safe space.”

Goldberg said there are voter

registration efforts on campus, but what he believes makes the difference is infusing the entire curriculum with political learning. For example, he advises English 101 and 102 students with their writing, which often reflect current events, political and social issues. History courses bring debates into class. Even biology class, for example, might tackle a local environmental issue and link it to political action and voting, Goldberg said.

“Our curriculum inspires students to get civically involved and that leads to voting,” he said. “It’s great to have voter registration, but that’s not why our campus votes more.”

Campuses are getting creative in their efforts to improve voter and voter registration rates. The NCAA’s Southern Conference has launched the first voter engagement competition in that Division 1 athletic conference, which includes several AASCU schools. “SoCon Votes” will feature each of the 10 conference schools battling in four rounds on get-out-the-vote efforts. In the first round, schools will sign-up for the NSLVE study. Awards will ultimately be given for the teams with the highest undergraduate student voter turnout in 2016 and the most improved voter turnout.

Some schools are also turning to behavioral science and work done by ideas42, a research organization, around techniques that can overcome student psychological barriers to voting. Their work has shown that making voting highly visible, providing clear steps to registration, appealing to students’ sense of pride, and normalizing voting can help boost participation.

But it can be a delicate balance to invite political engagement and discussion onto campus, Thomas said.

“Administrations need to talk to students and collaboratively come up with ground rules for civil discourse that has broad buy-in,” she said. “We can make

mistakes or say stupid things, but we can’t make people uncomfortable. That’s a fine line.”

Flores, the past president of the University of Houston-Downtown, said he understands the unease some college leaders might have around creating a campus where political discussions are welcomed.

“There’s a lot of scrutiny that presidents come under because we are the public voice of the university,” he said. “It’s incumbent upon us to stay above the fray, but at the same time to create the conditions that encourage the opportunity for critical thinking.”

The groundwork that Flores laid is continuing to expand in Houston. SGA president Locke said his organization is working to take the Walk 2 Vote effort national, providing a model to other campuses. Locally, the university SGA is widening its outreach—making the event about voting on campus as well as in the city of Houston.

To get there, students are creating fliers and using social media to market the event, and connecting with local media to advertise. They’re also partnering with other local colleges for the rally and with community organizations to extend voter registration drives into the community. But all of these efforts center on the value of exchanging ideas in a constructive way, working on issues, and improving the community, Locke said.

“It’s important to hear from people on different sides of the aisle and different perspectives to get the full view of an issue—to see the whole instead of just pieces,” Locke said. “The more people are informed about arguments on both sides, the better informed we are as voters.” **P**

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