



Boosting the Student Voice & Student Vote:

Leveraging Higher Education to Expand Participation in Democracy

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
The Need for Student Civic Engagement	6
Equity in Student Civic Engagement	8
Current Federal Higher Education Policies Related to Student Voting	10
The “Good Faith Effort” Requirement	10
Authority to Use Federal Work-Study Funds	11
Opportunities for the U.S. Department of Education to Support Student Voter Registration & Participation	12
Recommendation #1	12
Recommendation #2	13
Recommendation #3	15
Recommendation #4	17
Recommendation #5	17
Model Institutional Programs that Support Student Voting	18
Conclusion	20



Executive Summary

Higher education confers countless benefits to individuals and society. Among these are supporting and protecting democracy. Those who attend higher education are more likely to be civically engaged—including registering and turning out to vote—regardless of their political affiliation. But such outcomes are not accidental, and democracy is not a spectator sport. Both good policy and institution-level efforts must align to help students overcome structural barriers to civic participation. Limits on voting access and inequality in family financial resources impact who can register to vote, cast a ballot, volunteer, and engage in public service.

While college students have been voting at higher numbers in recent years, millions of eligible student voters are still missing from the polls. The U.S. Department of Education holds the power to improve student voter participation through non-partisan guidance, agency interpretations, regulations, and other administrative actions. With minor modifications, both Federal Work-Study and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) could serve as powerful tools to boost student civic engagement. The Secretary of Education can begin to enforce the voter registration provisions of the *Higher Education Act of 1965* and provide resources to K-12 schools and colleges through a voting toolkit. Institutions of higher education can also embrace model efforts and programs to help their students, faculty, and staff participate in democracy—working hand-in-hand with non-partisan voting and civic engagement organizations. These efforts are urgently needed to reinvigorate civic life and provide all students with opportunities to engage with their democracy.



Introduction

Most students seek a college degree or credential for better employment and earning prospects. But it is not just individuals who gain from higher levels of educational attainment, and it is not just our nation's economic might that improves. Our social and civic health also benefit substantially when more people enter and succeed in higher education. By nearly every measure, college graduates are healthier, happier, and more engaged in their communities.¹

Students get more out of their educational experience when they have inclusive opportunities to engage in community service and civil discourse, exercise their right to vote when eligible, and mobilize their peers for collective action. Civic engagement helps the local areas where students serve and prepares students for a lifetime of participation in their communities, states, and our interconnected economy and society.

"About one-third of college students did not submit a ballot in the 2020 presidential election, representing approximately 5.2 million undergraduate students and more than 1 million graduate and professional students that did not vote."

Participation in the electoral process through voting is just one example of how students in higher education can be civically engaged. However, it has the most direct consequence for policy that profoundly affects the lives of students, their families, and communities beyond. Accordingly, voting deserves special attention. Students certainly appear to be paying attention. In recent years, the rate at which college students turn out to vote has rapidly caught up to the electorate as a whole. But **even with the significant progress being made in student voter turnout, there is plenty of work to be done.** About one-third of college students did not submit a ballot in the 2020 presidential election, representing approximately 5.2 million undergraduate students and more than 1 million graduate and professional students that did not vote.²

¹ Gallup & Lumina Foundation. (2023, August). *Education for What?*

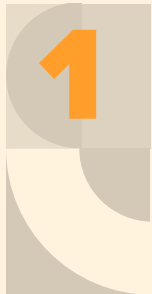
² Author calculations using voting data from Thomas, N., Gismondi, A. Gautam, P., & Brinker, D. (2021). *Democracy counts 2020: Record-breaking turnout and student resiliency*. Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University. The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement; and calculations using enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Digest of Education Statistics*.

There are plenty of reasons why not all students in higher education vote. Voting processes, requirements, and deadlines vary by geographic location. A wide range of non-profit organizations, including *ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge*, *Students Learn Students Vote Coalition*, *Campus Vote Project*, and institutions of higher education work to combat these informational and bureaucratic obstacles. But students encounter significant structural barriers and political antagonism to voting as well.

In recent years, a range of state-level policies have been introduced to hinder student voter participation. In five states, students are prohibited from using their student identification (ID) card to satisfy their state's voter ID requirements.³ Approximately half of all Texas college campuses have no on-campus polling place for Election Day, and a bill was recently introduced in the Texas legislature to ban polling locations at all colleges and universities in the state.⁴ In New Hampshire, legislators tried to effectively ban from the voting rolls all students who move to the state to attend higher education.⁵ The list of state restrictions on student voting goes on.⁶

For these reasons and more, it makes sense to examine potential policy levers that may impact student voter participation and could either eliminate barriers or contribute to closing participation equity gaps.

This brief will explore the following topics:



The need for increasing student voter participation.



Current federal higher education policies related to student voting.



Opportunities for the U.S. Department of Education to use its existing authority to support student civic engagement and voter participation work on- and off-campus.



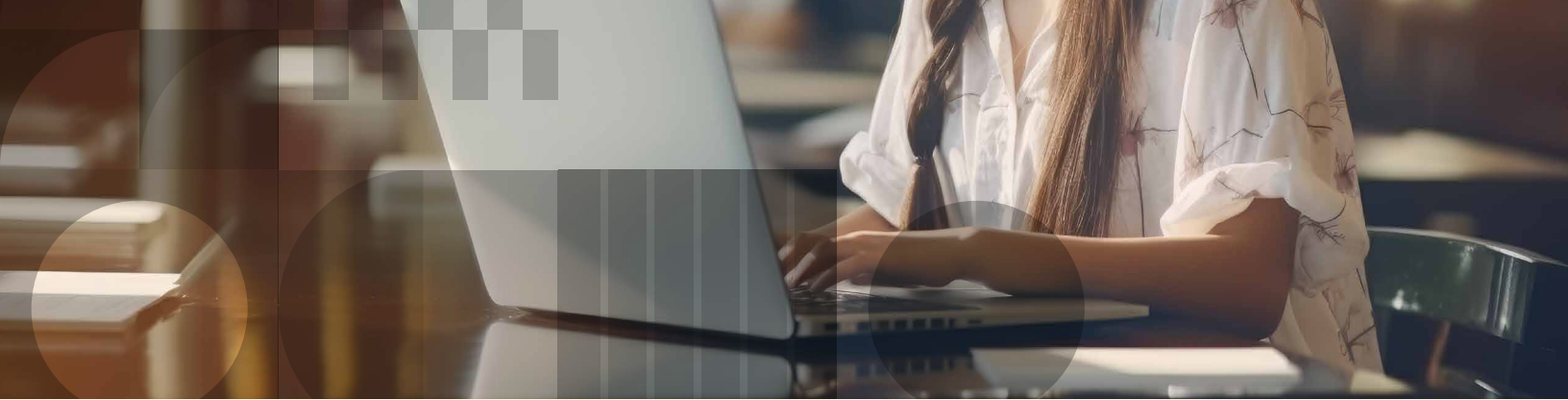
Model programs at institutions of higher education supporting student voter participation.

³ Voting Rights Lab. (2023, March). *Voting with Student ID in 2023: The State of the Law & Pending Legislation*.

⁴ Noel, Rebecca. (2023, February 17). *Polling sites on Texas college campuses would be banned under proposed bill*. Houston Public Media.

⁵ Vasilogambros, Matt. (2022, December). *College students push to ease voting access after midterm barriers*.

⁶ Democracy Docket. (2023, April 10). *Voter registration should be simple. Red states are making it harder*.



The Need for Student Civic Engagement

Like the general electorate, turnout among students is substantially higher during presidential elections and lower during midterms. An estimated 66% of eligible college students submitted a ballot in the closely-divided 2020 presidential election—up from 52% who voted in the 2016 presidential election.⁷ In the 2018 midterms, 40% of all students voted.⁸ Estimates of student voting rates in the 2022 midterms are not yet available.

Non-partisan, non-profit organizations and many colleges and universities are working to maintain recent progress, build upon it, and promote civic engagement and voting overall among students. For example, the *Student Vote Research Network*, formed in 2022, works to enhance collective grassroots efforts to turn out every student to vote.⁹ *ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge* has obtained pledges from over 500 colleges and universities to develop voter action plans for students and staff. And the national umbrella organization for institutions of higher education, the *American Council on Education*, has produced a guide for colleges and universities to support non-partisan voter participation efforts.¹⁰ **These efforts and others remain critical in the face of voter restrictions spreading across the country and have inherent benefits to students and their communities.**

Contrary to common belief, improving student voter participation is *not* a partisan matter. Most college students (54%) are independents or do not identify with either major political party.¹¹ Some 6 in 10 college students don't feel like either major political party represents their interests.¹² Voters aged 18-29, both in and out of college, also exhibit similar levels of independence—higher than other age groups.¹³

"Most college students (54%) are independents or do not identify with either major political party. Some 6 in 10 college students don't feel like either major political party represents their interests."

⁷ Smyton, R. & McAndrew, J. Tufts Now. (2021, October 28). *College student voting rates skyrocketed in 2020*. Estimates of voter turnout among college students specifically—as opposed to all youth—for the 2022 midterm elections are not yet available.

⁸ Institute for Democracy & Higher Education. (2022). *Topline Comparisons: National Rates*. .

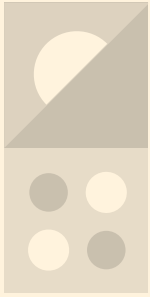
⁹ Student Vote Research Network. (2022, November). *State of the student vote: Fall 2022*.

¹⁰ American Council on Education. (2022, September 19). *How colleges can (and can't) support 2022 campaign activities on campus and help students vote*.

¹¹ Suri, Jeremi & Abrams, Samuel J. (2021, November 27). *Op-Ed: Gen Z students seem to dislike both political parties. What will make them change their minds?*

¹² College Pulse. (2021, June 8). *6 in 10 College Students Don't Feel Represented by Either Major Political Party*.

¹³ CIRCLE. (2022, November 16). *Youth more optimistic about democracy than older voters, less inclined to identify with major parties*.



The profile of “traditional” college students as young people studying at a residential public or non-profit four-year institution is also no longer accurate. College students live and work in a wide range of communities and hold diverse policy interests. Today, over half of all students in higher education attend either a community college or for-profit institution, 37% are over 24 years old,¹⁴ and approximately one-in-five undergraduates (and one-in-three graduate students) are parenting at least one dependent child while attending school.¹⁵ **Supporting voting among college students reaches a broad cross-section of society.**

Supporting college student participation in the electoral process also helps communities and students thrive. As more students are given opportunities and resources to be civically engaged, they are likely to help others do the same. Indeed, college students are eager to volunteer and generally do so at higher rates than their peers who do not attend college.¹⁶ Students engaged in civic processes form a rich source of future part and full-time public servants where they are badly needed. Local, state, and federal officials routinely report shortages in the number of poll workers and other workers needed to support free, fair, and secure elections.¹⁷

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Finally, students in higher education benefit from educational experiences that improve their knowledge of history and government, which has recently been reported to be on a national decline.¹⁸ Engaging students in civic learning, including conducting *non-partisan* voter registration, participation, and civic engagement work, should be widely available to students regardless of their income or financial resources or the type of institution they attend. These opportunities are in the public interest.

Unfortunately, one of the federal government’s largest tools to promote civic engagement is vastly under-utilized for this purpose. The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program provides more than \$1.2 billion in financial aid to over 800,000 students each year. Federal law allows students to use these funds for “civic engagement and participation activities” that teach civics in schools; raise awareness of government functions or resources; or increase civic participation.¹⁹ However, just **three out of every 1,000 FWS students** (0.3%) are working in civic engagement positions, according to the most recent U.S. Department of Education data.²⁰



¹⁴ Higher Learning Advocates. (2022). *Who are today's students?*

¹⁵ Institute for Women’s Policy Research. (2019, April 11). *Student parents by the numbers.*

¹⁶ Washington, Jessica. (2018). *Becoming Active Citizens: Motivations to Volunteer Among Undergraduate Students in a Liberal Arts College.* University of Richmond: School of Professional and Continuing Studies.

¹⁷ Schouten, Fredreka. (2022, September 6). *Groups race to recruit poll workers amid fears of shortages. Here’s how you can help.* CNN.

¹⁸ Camera, Lauren. (2023, May 3). *A National Concern: Student Scores Decline on U.S. History and Civics.* U.S. News and World Reports.

¹⁹ 34 CFR § 675.18 (g)(4)(i)

²⁰ U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Campus-Based Aid 2022 Data Book - Table 29: Federal Work-Study Students in Civic Engagement and Participation Activities for Award Year 2020-21.*



Equity in Student Civic Engagement

Institutions of higher education, policymakers, and foundations have rightly focused on closing equity gaps in opportunities for civic engagement.²¹ There are significant differences in voting by sex and gender (although little voting data exists for non-binary students) and by race and ethnicity. For example, some subgroups of students of color who are already registered to vote, such as Black women, turn out to vote at high rates—but many students of color still often face structural and policy barriers to registering to vote in the first place.

Across the four election cycles from 2012 through 2018, Black and Hispanic males *were registered to vote* at rates above the national average, but after factoring in lower turnout, they had below-average “*yield*” rates (meaning the total rate at which they participated in an election as a percentage of their registration).²² Asian Males had both below-average voter registration rates *and* below-average yield rates. Black, Asian, and Latine youth—both those in college and not enrolled in college—are substantially less likely to say they feel “qualified” to participate in politics—just 34% of youth of color feel qualified to participate, compared to 44% of White youth.²³ And among undergraduates, there are also substantial differences by class year—just 59% of first-year students voted in 2020, compared to 67% of fourth-year students.²⁴

“...just three out of every 1,000 FWS students (0.3%) are working in civic engagement positions, according to the most recent U.S. Department of Education data.”

Colleges and voting advocates are working to close gaps in student voter registration and turnout. Their most widely recognized effort is the “action plan,” which the colleges develop and then submit to three non-profit organizations.²⁵ These plans require colleges to establish quantifiable metrics and goals for voter engagement and identify their plans to achieve them, including teach-ins, extracurricular tactics, accompanying events, and more.²⁶ A total of 535 institutions of higher education had a student vote action plan in place for the 2022 midterms, up substantially from the 275 institutions that had a plan in place for the 2018 midterms (see Figure 1).²⁷

²¹ See e.g. *Coalition for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE)*, *Foundation for Civic Leadership*, and *Lumina Foundation*.

²² Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. (2020). *Data brief: College voting turnout gaps*.

²³ CIRCLE. (2023, January 30). *Youth are interested in political action, but lack support and opportunities*.

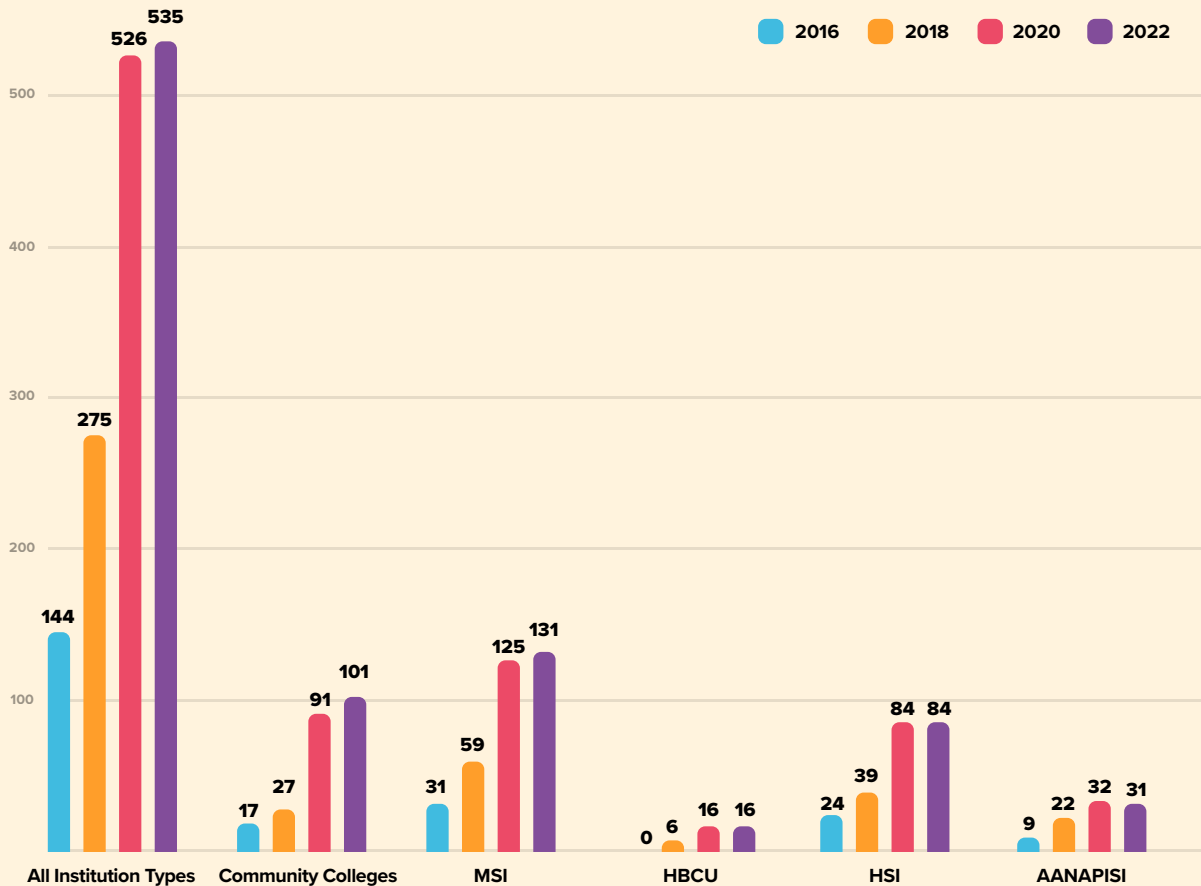
²⁴ Thomas, N., Gismondi, A. Gautam, P., & Brinker, D. (2021).

²⁵ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. Accessed February 2023. *What do campuses commit to?*

²⁶ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (2023, February). *Action Plan Examples*.

²⁷ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (2023, February). *2022 annual report*.

Figure 1: Voting Action Plan Submissions by Institution Type, 2016-2022



Source: ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (2023, March). Information provided to authors.

However, while the numbers are increasing, only a fraction of the campuses submitting action plans were community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), or other minority-serving institutions.²⁸ Overall, approximately two-thirds of students in higher education are enrolled at institutions that do not maintain an action plan.²⁹ Out of the 1,043 community colleges in the United States, just 101 campuses—less than 10%—had an action plan for the 2022 midterm election.³⁰ Additionally, data show that students at community colleges vote at lower rates than students at four-year institutions.³¹

Organizations that promote student voter engagement have noted room for growth: there are nearly 400 colleges that have indicated in writing they want to be a part of a non-partisan movement for 100% student voting but did not create or submit an action plan in 2022. And, due to widespread campus leadership changes and other challenges, 100 campuses that participated in the 2020 election cycle did not renew their participation for the 2022 state and federal election cycle.³² There is still ample time, however, to reengage these campuses for the 2024 election cycle.

All types of institutions of higher education should put action plan policies, practices, and processes in place to promote student voter engagement. **And local, state, and federal policymakers should assist institutions in closing participation gaps among eligible voters.**

²⁸ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (2022, August). *2022 ALL IN campus action planning interim report: 2nd action plan submission opportunity* and data provided to the authors by ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge for the 2022 midterm cycle.

²⁹ Student Vote Research Network (2022).

³⁰ Note: the number of community colleges (1,043) is maintained by the American Association of Community Colleges, *Fast facts 2022*.

³¹ Thomas, N., Gismondi, A. Gautam, P., & Brinker, D. (2021). *Democracy counts 2020: Record-breaking turnout and student resiliency*. Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University. The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement.¹⁸

³² Student Vote Research Network (2022).



Current Federal Higher Education Policies Related to Student Voting

The “Good Faith Effort” Requirement

The *Higher Education Act* (HEA) requires institutions of higher education to support student voter registration to establish eligibility to receive federal financial aid – student loans and grants – which is one of the largest revenue sources of colleges and universities. Specifically, 20 U.S.C. 1094 requires colleges to:

*“make a **good faith effort** to distribute a mail voter registration form...to each student enrolled in a degree or certificate program and physically in attendance at the institution, and to make such forms **widely available to students** at the institution.”* (emphasis added).³³

This part of the HEA also lays out timelines for colleges to request voter registration forms, applies the requirement to federal and gubernatorial elections, and permits institutions to use electronic methods to distribute voter registration information – for example, sending all students an email with a link to the appropriate voter registration website or form for the state in which the institution is located, as long as that communication is devoted exclusively to voter registration.

Federal Student Aid
An OFFICE of the U.S. DEPARTMENT of EDUCATION

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PUBLICATION DATE: April 21, 2022
DCL ID: GEN-22-05
SUBJECT: Requirements for Distribution of Voter Registration Forms

SUMMARY: This letter outlines the HEA requirement for certain institutions in most states (and the District of Columbia) to make a good faith effort to distribute voter registration forms to their students.

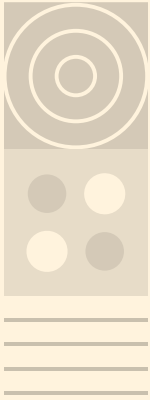
On April 21, 2022, the U.S. Department of Education (“the Department”) issued a guidance letter for financial aid administrators intended to help enforce the HEA’s “good faith effort” requirement to make voter registration information widely available to students.³⁴ The letter was partly in response to President Biden’s Executive Order 14019 directing

federal agencies to promote access to voting.³⁵ The Department reminded colleges and universities of their requirements under the HEA, stating that *“postsecondary institutions play a critical role in promoting and supporting participation in the electoral process.”* The guidance letter strongly encouraged institutions to *“make preparations over the next several months to fulfill [the] requirement...”* for voter registration activities and to ensure that *“students have the information they need to participate in the electoral process.”*

³³ DHEA Section 487(a)(23), codified as 20 U.S. Code § 1094

³⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid. (2022, April 21). *(GEN-22-05) Requirements for distribution of voter registration forms.*

³⁵ The White House. (2021, March 7). *Executive order on promoting access to voting.*



The Department’s action on the "good faith effort" requirement through its April 2022 guidance letter deserves recognition. This was only the second time the agency has ever distributed guidance on voter registration and HEA in the last decade (the previous time was in 2013). According to advocates, the April 2022 guidance letter was valuable given that some institutions of higher education are wary of supporting voter engagement activities due to fear of being accused of engaging in unauthorized “political” activities, even those that are clearly nonpartisan. The Department’s guidance assured institutions and voting advocates noted it contributed to dozens more colleges and universities submitting “action plans” and commitments that, in turn, heightened student voter turnout.³⁶

Authority to Use Federal Work-Study Funds

Even more significant, the April 2022 guidance letter included a crucial new clarification and noted opportunity – funding for student civic work. The federal law governing the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program allows students to receive funding for “civic engagement and participation activities” that teach civics in schools; raise awareness of government functions or resources; or increase civic participation.³⁷ Non-partisan voter registration clearly fits within the confines of what is authorized by statute and regulation.

But before the Department’s April 2022 guidance letter, the Secretary of Education had never officially and specifically opined on whether FWS could be used for voter registration work. The Department provided clarity, stating that “*If a student is employed **directly by a postsecondary institution**, the institution may compensate a student for FWS employment involving voter registration activities that take place on or off-campus*” (emphasis added).³⁸

Students can now use their FWS funds on-campus to help register fellow students as well as faculty, staff, and campus visitors to vote. They can do so in a variety of situations and circumstances, including while hosting voter registration drives or staffing on-campus activities to promote voter participation, as well as assisting voter participation efforts in the context of an existing FWS position like working in a student affairs or financial aid office, library, basic needs hub, campus civic centers, or other on-campus entity directly engaging with students.

Non-partisan voter registration is both popular and valuable to students. Colleges in at least ten states (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Illinois, Mississippi, Montana, Oregon, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wisconsin) have offered work-study job opportunities in civic education and participation at *no cost to institutions*.³⁹ And on average, students with civic education and participation in work-study jobs in those states earned approximately 40% more than the national average for FWS jobs (\$2,317 vs. \$1,647—a benefit of nearly \$700 per year).⁴⁰

Good policy can accelerate and expand the progress of non-partisan student voter engagement. The Administration has the power to act.



³⁶ Student Vote Research Network (2022).

³⁷ 34 CFR § 675.18 (g)(4)(i)

³⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid (2022).

³⁹ U.S. Department of Education. (2020, January 13). *Federal campus-based programs data book: Fiscal data – award year 2017-18: Civic education & participation activities (table 30)*

⁴⁰ Id.

Opportunities for the U.S. Department of Education to Support Student Voter Registration & Participation

Voting rights and higher education legislation has been stalled in Congress for years. In early 2022, Congress again was unable to overcome procedural obstacles (i.e. a Senate filibuster) to pass a voting rights bill through both chambers. There is no indication the HEA is likely to be reauthorized soon, preventing consideration of legislation such as the *Help Students Vote Act* that would strengthen statutory protections for student voter engagement.⁴¹

Given the challenges to adopting new statutory protections, President Biden’s Executive Order 14019 directed federal agencies to “consider ways to expand citizens’ opportunities to register to vote and obtain information about, and participate in, the electoral process.”⁴² A recent progress report graded the work of nine federal agencies to fulfill that mandate.⁴³ Many agencies did well, but the U.S. Department of Education ranked among the lowest and was graded as “falling behind.” The following recommendations address steps the Department can take to improve its standing prior to the next progress report.



Recommendation #1



Establish that a college’s statutorily required “good faith effort” is met when it provides students with the opportunity to register to vote or update their voter registration during major campus processes, such as when applying for a student identification card, registering for courses, or signing up for on-campus housing.

The Department is authorized to regulate the “time and manner” in which messages relating to voter registration are conveyed, including ways that colleges can meet their “good faith effort” requirement under the HEA.⁴⁴ To maximize the likelihood that students will receive *and* complete voter registration material, the Department should issue regulations that require voter registration information (such as a link to online voter registration, if available) be provided to students as students are taking other steps associated with enrollment or registration that require their attention, such as the course registration or student ID card application.

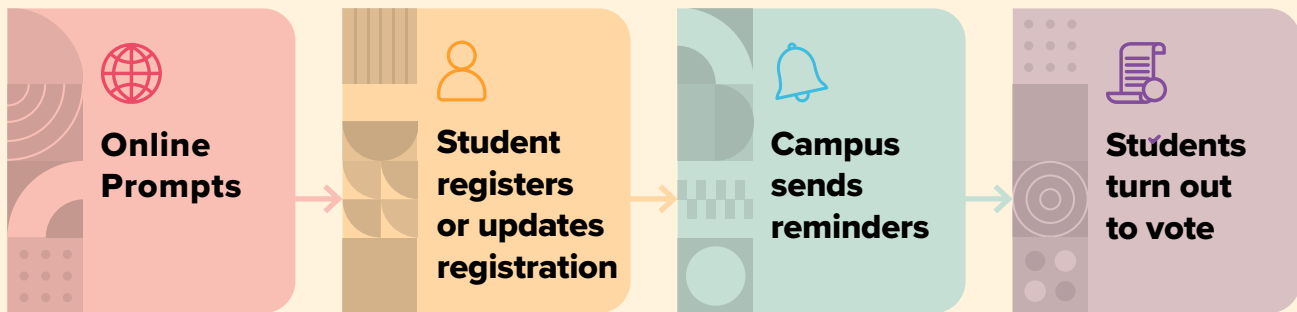
⁴¹ See Help Students Vote Act last introduced March 25, 2021.

⁴² The White House (2021).

⁴³ The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, ACLU, Demos, et. al. (2023, March 3). Strengthening Democracy: A Progress Report on Federal Agency Action to Promote Access to Voting.

⁴⁴ The Department of Education Organization Act gives the Secretary authority to “prescribe such rules and regulations as the Secretary determines necessary or appropriate to administer and manage the functions of the Secretary or the Department,” which of course includes compliance with the spirit, intent, and letter of the law as well as Administration policy. See 20 U.S. Code § 3474.

Rather than a *passive* paper or electronic message from colleges encouraging voter registration, institutions of higher education that receive over \$150 billion a year in public student aid support (independent of billions more in research funding) should be required to make the option to register to vote part of an *active experience* in which all eligible enrolled students participate.



While pursuing durable regulations, the Department can and should also issue sub-regulatory guidance establishing presumptive compliance with the HEA’s “good faith effort” requirement if institutions employ the aforementioned universal methods independent of partisan affiliation to ensure all eligible and enrolled students receive an opportunity to vote. Colleges can pair these notices with information encouraging students who are already registered to vote to double-check or update their registration information.

Lastly, it is important to know how colleges are complying with their statutory and regulatory requirements for voter registration. The Department should also increase the number of “program reviews” (similar to audits) that they conduct to ensure institutions are fully complying with the HEA’s “good faith effort” requirement and publicly release any data that reveals campus-level non-compliance.

The combination of “time and manner” regulations, guidance standards that establish presumptive compliance, and strong enforcement will ensure that institutions of higher education take the HEA requirements seriously, embrace model behavior, and increase student voter registration and turnout rates.



Recommendation #2

Clarify via Department guidance that students can access their Federal Work Study funds for non-partisan voter registration work off-campus when employed with a government entity or non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, such as state and local elections offices or the League of Women Voters.

The HEA allows—and in many ways encourages—students to use their FWS funds to work with *off-campus* entities, including government offices and non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations.⁴⁵ It is entirely appropriate for the Department to make clear that students may use their FWS funds for non-partisan voter registration and civic engagement with those non-partisan public

⁴⁵ See 20 U.S. Code § 1087-53 et seq.

and non-profit entities off-campus, just as the Department allows FWS to be used for identical non-partisan voter registration and civic engagement activities when students are directly employed by their respective public and non-profit institutions of higher education.

Unfortunately, after the Department’s April 2022 guidance letter, the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) included outdated text in its annual Student Aid Handbook for financial aid administrators indicating that any work with any off-campus entity related to voting, including with government agencies and non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations, **may not** be supported with FWS funds, even when the entity is not affiliated with a political party and the work is entirely non-partisan.⁴⁶

For example, the Student Aid Handbook handbook states as an example that non-partisan (student) poll workers *cannot* be compensated with FWS funds for routine or clerical activities and asserts that serving as a poll worker is *not* considered to be in the “public interest.” Contrary to this unsupported assertion, **non-partisan voter registration is manifestly in the public interest.**

The U.S. regularly faces shortages in the number of poll workers available to support elections.⁴⁷ In 2020, more than half of all election offices reported difficulty finding enough poll workers.⁴⁸ And most U.S. poll workers are over age 60, fueling a rising wave of retirements.⁴⁹ Not having enough poll workers often means fewer polling places and longer wait times—fueling dissatisfaction with the democratic process. Training students to serve as poll workers and other support roles with the aid of FWS could help address election personnel shortages. Many non-profit, non-partisan organizations also support and collaborate with local and state governments to register voters and answer questions about elections.

Further contravening and correcting the outdated text in the Student Aid Handbook, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) more recently has stated that it does not view non-partisan voter registration work as impermissible “political activity.” In fact, it finds that the *Hatch Act* allows even the most restricted federal employees to engage in non-partisan voter registration activities.⁵⁰ DOJ states that “[p]olitical activity is activity directed toward the success or failure of a political party, candidate for partisan political office, or partisan political group.”⁵¹ *Non-partisan* voter registration conducted by a state or local government entity, or non-partisan 501(c)(3) group like the League of Women Voters that is not party-affiliated, does none of those impermissible activities.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) even allows federal employees to receive paid time off to serve as non-partisan poll workers.⁵² Given that U.S. Department of Education employees (including political appointees) can engage in non-partisan voter registration drives and serve as poll workers, students with financial need should also be able to use their FWS awards to engage in the exact same non-partisan civic engagement activities while working off-campus.

⁴⁶ Office of Federal Student Aid. (2022, July 1). *FSA handbook 2022-2023, volume 6, chapter 2* states: “political activity, whether partisan or nonpartisan, does not qualify as work in the public interest. For example, a student is not considered to be working in the public interest if working at voting polls—even if he or she *only checks off the names of those who came to vote* and does not pass out flyers supporting a particular candidate.” (emphasis added)

⁴⁷ Schouten, Fredreka. CNN. (2022, September 6). *Groups race to recruit poll workers amid fears of shortages. Here’s how you can help.*

⁴⁸ U.S. Elections Assistance Commission. (2021, August). *2020 election administration and voting survey report.*

⁴⁹ Barthel, Michael and Stocking, Galen. (2020, April). *Older people account for large shares of poll workers and voters in U.S. general elections.* Pew Research Center.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Department Ethics Office. (2022, September 28). *Political activities, permitted and prohibited Activities:* “Further restricted employees may register and vote as they choose, assist in non-partisan voter registration drives...” etc...) (emphasis added)

⁵¹ Id

⁵² U.S. Department of Education. (2020, January 13). *Federal campus-based programs data book: Fiscal data – award year 2017-18: Civic education & participation activities (table 30)*

Institutions of higher education and other authorized employers receive up to 100% reimbursement to employ FWS students in work that qualifies as community service – avoiding the typical 25% match of wages that would otherwise be required for a position that does not qualify as community service.⁵³ This is a significant financial incentive for many institutions and employers. However, student work *cannot* qualify for the 100% community service reimbursement under FWS if their role is limited to the college campus community (i.e. students, faculty, and staff) itself.⁵⁴ Thus, the Department’s current guidance limits FWS-supported voter registration to a narrow range of activities that are both less cost-effective for institutions and less beneficial to local communities and elections.

If the Department clarifies its interpretation and allows for FWS employment at federal, state, or local government entities and non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations, more campuses will engage in true community service work to tap into the higher federal reimbursement rate. The colleges themselves will also gain additional pathways to satisfy the HEA's "good faith effort" requirement, and students will have more opportunities to find meaningful work that supports the public interest. **Institutions, students, local governments, non-profits, and nearby communities all stand to benefit.**



Recommendation #3

Limit waivers of the FWS community service requirement only to cases when a college or university demonstrates high levels of civic and community engagement, such as robust student voter registration or participation rates or establishing a campus vote coordinator.

Community service was never intended to be an optional part of the FWS program. In fact, in 1992, the late Senator Harris Wofford (D-PA) proposed that 50% of all FWS funding be set aside for community service. Ultimately, HEA was amended to require that institutions spend only 7% of their FWS funds on community service.⁵⁵ Out of more than \$1.1 billion in FWS funding awarded to nearly 600,000 students just before the pandemic in award year 2019-20, nearly 93,000 students engaged in community service with their FWS funds.⁵⁶ But there is considerable variation in community service at the institution level. The last major Department report on the FWS program found another nearly 100,000 students were not even aware they could do paid community service work.⁵⁷ Approximately 60,000 students reported they would have done paid community service if they could have found an opportunity that did not conflict with their course schedules.⁵⁸

⁵³ 34 CFR § 675.26(d)

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid. 2022-2023 FSA Handbook: “students must provide services that are designed to improve the quality of life for community residents or to solve particular problems related to those residents’ needs...A university or college is not considered a community for the purposes of the FWS community service requirements.”

⁵⁵ See Section 443(b)(2)(A) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA) and the corresponding regulations at 34 CFR 675.18(g).

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Campus-Based Aid 2021 Data Book (Award Year 2019-20): Table 23.*

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary. (2000). *National study of the operation of the Federal Work-Study Program: Summary findings from student and institutional surveys.*

⁵⁸ Id

FWS has historically been the largest federal investment in community service work in total dollar value, larger than AmeriCorps. Unfortunately, the benefit of FWS to community service is both little known and currently on hold. In her final days in office, former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos suspended the FWS statutory community service requirement by issuing a Federal Register notice that allows the suspension to continue until July 1, 2024—nearly 14 months after the expiration of the COVID-19 public health emergency declaration.⁵⁹

"[F]ormer Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos suspended the FWS statutory community service requirement by issuing a Federal Register notice that allows the suspension to continue until July 1, 2024"

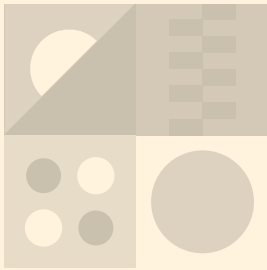
The across-the-board suspension of the 7% FWS community service requirement should end as soon as possible, given that this suspension does not benefit students or their communities. And, since there is a strong appetite among students to do community service work, **there is little reason to excuse colleges from the HEA's community service requirement going forward.** Colleges should easily be able to meet the 7% threshold through student voter registration and civic engagement activities.

Before issuing a blanket waiver of the FWS community service requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic, **the Department granted some 200 institutions of higher education individual waivers of the community service requirement simply if an institution claimed it could not meet the 7% spend-out requirement.**⁶⁰ These waivers were granted despite the HEA's clear intent to promote community service. Furthermore, there appears to be no objective standard that the Department followed in issuing individual waivers—such as requiring colleges to demonstrate the steps they took to advertise community service opportunities, connect with local government entities or non-profit organizations offering these positions, recruit students for available positions, or create positions to meet student and civic needs, including those related to participation in deliberative democracy.

Accordingly, the Department should announce a new process for institutions to receive a waiver of the FWS community service requirement, including strict standards laying out if and how the Department will evaluate or approve a request. For example, the Department could stipulate only campuses that demonstrate high levels of student voter registration and engagement (which can be assessed by the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement administered by Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education) or that establish a campus vote coordinator, could be considered for a waiver.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. (2020, December 11). *Federal register notice 85 FR 79856*.

⁶⁰ See U.S. Department of Education, Federal Campus-Based Programs Data Book 2018 (Tables 2 & 23)



Recommendation #4

Issue a Voting and Civic Engagement “Toolkit” for K-12 schools and colleges and universities on ways in which they can promote student voting and model programs.

On September 28, 2021, the Biden Administration announced, “*The Department of Education will prepare a toolkit of resources and strategies for increasing civic engagement at the elementary school, secondary school, and higher education level, helping more than 67 million students — and their families — learn about civic opportunities and responsibilities.*”⁶¹ It has been two years since the Department announced it would release a voting and civic engagement toolkit, and a recent update on the President’s Executive Order did not include any information about when the toolkit might be released.⁶²

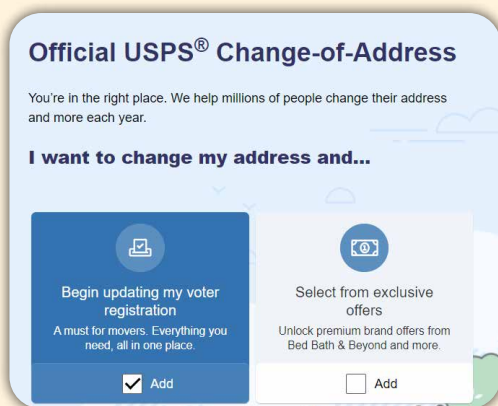
The Department has an admirable history in encouraging higher education to embrace civic learning and democratic engagement, including its 2011 “Crucible Moment” report.⁶³ The Department should build on this record by releasing the promised toolkit describing activities that schools and colleges can undertake to boost student and youth voter registration, engagement, and turnout, including those recommended above. These activities need not be limited to students who are voting age. In fact, several groups have suggested actions that may be taken at K-12 schools to boost civic engagement among non-voting-age students, such as required voter registration for high school commencement ceremony participation purposes when either authorized or not prohibited by state law.⁶⁴



Recommendation #5

Fully integrate voter registration into federal student aid processes and websites, including the FAFSA and StudentAid.gov.

Finally, the Department should actively help students and their families register to vote or update their voter registration when they are applying for federal financial aid or managing their student loans. The agency has taken a step in this direction, by adding a link to [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) at the bottom of their primary information portal, StudentAid.gov. This move was announced and celebrated by The White House.⁶⁵ Much more can be done.



The Department has not yet taken steps to proactively present voter registration information to students, their families, and borrowers who use the Department’s websites. Passive links buried on government websites are rarely noticed. For example, when using the **U.S. Postal Service** website to update a mailing address, users are immediately presented with active prompts to register to vote or update voter registration information.

The Department should likewise ensure that links to [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) on its websites, including the Free Application

⁶¹ The White House. (2021, September 28). *Fact sheet: Biden administration promotes voter participation with new agency steps.*

⁶² The White House (2021).

⁶³ The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future.* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

⁶⁴ See e.g., 50 by 2026, www.50x2026.org

⁶⁵ The White House. (2023, March 7). FACT SHEET: *The Biden-Harris Administration Continues to Promote Access to Voting.*



for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) filed by 18 million students each year, are presented to all users as pop-up boxes that can redirect to voter registration. Further, the Department should add references to [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) to the written information that financial aid applicants receive, such as the FAFSA Submission Summary (formerly known as the Student Aid Report). Such methods do not require the disclosure of any student or parent information. Campus organizing and civil rights organizations recently requested the Department add voter registration links and information to materials students receive after completing the FAFSA, and the agency should act on the request.⁶⁶

Model Institutional Programs that Support Student Voting

Voting advocates are regularly providing fresh ideas for colleges looking to support student voter participation.⁶⁷



**CAMPUS
DEMOCRACY
CHALLENGE**

ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge asks institutions of higher education to collaboratively develop action plans to support student voting and evaluate their results.⁶⁸ They also award a “Highly Established Action Plan” seal of recognition to campuses with especially strong action plans to support student voter engagement.



“Ask Every Student”—a joint project of ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, Campus Vote Project, NASPA, and the Student Learn Students Vote Coalition—provides campuses with specific guidance on how to meaningfully integrate and institutionalize processes to ensure every student has the chance to register to vote, such as during core classes, orientation, academic advising, and parking pass pickup.⁶⁹

NSLVE NATIONAL STUDY OF
LEARNING, VOTING,
AND ENGAGEMENT

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), administered by Tufts University’s Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, gives colleges and universities granular information on their student registration and turnout rates for each election year the campus participates.⁷⁰

Increasingly, colleges and universities are working to turn their students out to vote and supporting extensive non-partisan voter participation activities. For example:

⁶⁶American Civil Liberties Union. (2023, May 23). Comment on the Draft of the 2024-2025 Federal Student Aid Application Materials, Docket ID: ED-2023-SCC-0053-00001.

⁶⁷ Unger, Clarissa. (2022, October 25). *The best strategies no one is studying*. Student Vote Research Network.

⁶⁸ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge (2023).

⁶⁹ Ask Every Student. (2022). *About ask every student*.

⁷⁰ Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. Accessed March 2023. About NSLVE.



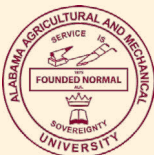
At **Northwestern University** in Illinois, FWS-paid and other staff provide voter registration materials to students during move-in day, and returning students help new students through the voter registration process while they register for courses or apply for student identification cards. The university makes available free-of-charge “voter vans” to shuttle students to and from polling stations on election day. Throughout the year, Northwestern hosts non-partisan civic engagement events to boost voter awareness and participation.⁷¹ In 2016, just 39% of incoming first-year Northwestern students eligible to vote were registered. By the end of the move-in period in 2020, that number increased to more than 96%.⁷² During the prior four-year cycle, Northwestern was one of only nine institutions nationwide that saw a greater than 15% boost in not just voter registration but actual voter turnout.⁷³



At **Clemson University** in South Carolina, students can take a first-year honors-level seminar on the role of citizenship in a democracy and use voting research to create infographics and social media tools encouraging their fellow students to vote.⁷⁴



At **Clark Atlanta University** in Georgia, students use the registrar’s list of students to ask every student about their voting plan, provide one-on-one support, and share reliable, state-specific information about voting requirements.⁷⁵



At **Alabama A&M University** in Alabama, residential advisors are trained in how to have conversations with students living in the dorms to ensure they are registered to vote.⁷⁶



At the **University of California Davis**, staff created webpages devoted to voter registration resources for students and integrated voter registration information into course scheduling, roundtable discussions, and Instagram takeovers.⁷⁷



At **Inver Hills Community College** in Minnesota, the institution holds seven annual events with voter engagement programming, including during student orientation, welcome week, and all Civic Holidays, and a sample syllabus statement and 15-minute curriculum about voting are provided to all faculty to include in their syllabi.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Stoner, Kayla. (2017, October 19.). *Innovative student voter model earns national recognition*. Northwestern Now.

⁷² Karter, Erin. (2020, September 28). *Northwestern students register to vote now*. Northwestern Now.

⁷³ Stoner, Kayla (2017).

⁷⁴ Clemson University. (2022, November 16). *Clemson University recognized as a 2022 ALL IN Most Engaged Campuses for college student voting*.

⁷⁵ Wolf, Maddie. (2020, October 23). *What would it take to ask every student on campus about participating in our democracy? Local leaders are on it*. Civic Nation.

⁷⁶ Id.

⁷⁷ University of California Davis. (2021, November 10). *Best in class: Student voting rate grows from 43% to 75.7%*.

⁷⁸ ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (2023, January). ALL IN Campus Highlights Report.



There is a wide range of best practices available to support student voting. According to the Students Learn, Student Vote coalition, integrating a three-to-five-minute conversation with students into at least one existing, active campus process, such as new student orientation, course registration, parking pass pick up, athletic program ticket purchase, or engagement with student affinity group organizations *substantially increases* the student vote.⁷⁹ And, local and state governments are also interested in supporting these institutional efforts. For example, eight state election officials now host a “State Voting Challenge” for the colleges in their state, and two states require public colleges to submit an action plan to support student voting.⁸⁰

Conclusion

There is significant room for improvement in registering and turning college students out to vote. Federal, state, local, and institutional efforts all play an essential role in helping college students register to vote, keep their registration up to date, and consistently cast their ballots. Increasing student voter participation with non-partisan civic engagement efforts is critical to supporting democratic institutions and building good citizenship. It is incumbent upon the U.S. Department of Education to maximize its regulatory and administrative authority to increase student voting on college campuses by removing arbitrary barriers and taking new actions to support the wide variety of efforts by students and institutions to turn out the vote. We provide suggestions. It is on the Administration to take action.

When we *all* vote, we *all* win.

⁷⁹ Students Learn, Students Vote (2023). *Ask every student framework*. See e.g., Stony Brook University employs Ask Every Student informed *step-by-step model* to enshrine one-on-one student outreach into student life processes.

⁸⁰ Student Vote Research Network (2022).