



Election Season 2018

Leading Students to Engagement

BY THOMAS L. BOWLING

The 2018 elections represent an opportunity, and an even greater responsibility, for student affairs leaders to engage students in examining the various forces shaping this fall's campaigns.

The time we are living in has been described as a “crucible moment on steroids,” as our country experiences more partisanship and divisiveness than ever before in modern history. Higher education has a unique responsibility to assert that facts do indeed exist, and we will not become resigned to living in a “post-truth” world.

Vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs) need to give students the tools to evaluate the reliability of different news sources and the basic knowledge of our political institutions. At a time when political “discourse” has been reduced to sound bites and tweets, how can we encourage students to become part of an informed electorate that will not be seduced by simple solutions? Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,000 colleges and universities, recently launched a new initiative, Education for Democracy, “to establish an expectation that every student will engage in courses, programs, and activities aimed at preparing them for effective participation in democracy.” Student affairs professionals can help engage tomorrow's civic leaders in a number of ways.

Focus on getting the vote out. In 2014, only 19 percent of college students voted, according to *The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement* conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University. While that turnout rate jumped significantly to 48.3 percent for the presidential election two years later, less than half of all college students voted in the 2016 elections. Consider hosting an event on National Voter Registration Day on September 25, 2018. Resources for campuses are available through its sponsor, the Campus Vote Project (see sidebar). Higher education must do more to help students understand that the health of American democracy depends on casting their ballots.

Stress the need for civility and curiosity. Student affairs leaders can create events that are bipartisan and ask students to confront conflict in an open, honest manner that communicates respect for the perspectives of others. VPSAs can encourage authentic dialogue about race, immigration, and other issues dividing the country. For guidance on how to engage our students in constructive conversations, turn to the wisdom of Parker J. Palmer, a founder and senior partner emeritus of the Center for Courage and Renewal. Palmer noted, “Good education teaches us to hold contradictions reflectively rather than reactively, a habit of the heart that lies behind all social, cultural, and scientific breakthroughs.”

The political and media landscape makes such reflection difficult in a hyper-connected world in which everyone is deluged by the content of inboxes, texts, tweets, and 24-hour news channels. Too often, media reports are likely to reinforce our biases and serve as armor to protect viewpoints. We must ask students to leave this armor at the door, and invite them to be genuinely curious about differences, not irrationally fearful of them.

Listen to students. Another way that students can be encouraged to respond to conflict more reflectively than reactively is to identify issues that are most important to them. What problems confronting their campuses, their communities, and their world do students want to address? What difference do they want to make? How can they develop their problem-solving skills to begin to make an impact during their college years?

Students can be invited to identify those leaders across the globe who are effectively working on important problems or challenges. What has contributed to the success of these leaders? What obstacles have they overcome? Is there an opportunity to build networks of college students around the globe who have similar commitments?

Democracy at Risk

Democracy is an experiment and is always at risk. This grand experiment requires educated and engaged citizens. Amid the rancor and vitriol that will only get louder and deeper between now and election day in November, VPSAs can join students in searching for constructive solutions to the current problems, understanding how political institutions can contribute to these solutions, and celebrating those finding ways to improve the quality of life for everyone on this planet. **LE**

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THE STUDENT VOTE COUNTS

Access the following resources to engage students in the political process this fall:

NASPA LEAD Initiative

naspa.org/constituent-groups/groups/lead-initiative/resources

NSLVE (National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement)

idhe.tufts.edu/nsleve

Turbo Vote

turbovote.org

ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge

allinchallenge.org

Campus Election Engagement Project

campuselect.org

Campus Vote Project

campusvoteproject.org

Campus Compact: Education for Democracy

compact.org/education-for-democracy