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[How to Get Students to Vote in a Pandemic? Get Creative](#)

Danielle McClean | October 6, 2020

Helping their classmates vote in next month's election has not been easy for student organizers at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

In normal years, students would host large, in-person events and debate watch parties to get students walking through the busy campus to register to vote. This year, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, fewer students are walking through the campus and large gatherings are off limits.

The debate watch party instead went online, and students have been forced to think of new ways to educate classmates on the process and get them out to the polls, said Devon Gill, a political-science major.

Students have directed their peers to the university's new voting website, which breaks down the process, and have held voter-education Zoom calls for athletes, said Gill, a fellow with the nonprofit Campus Election Engagement Project. They have set up socially distant voter-registration tables and visited classes both in-person and online to walk students through the process.

"It's been adapting to the new virtual world that we're having to enter," said Gill. "We definitely have to get creative."

The pandemic has caused administrators and student leaders across the country to come up with creative new strategies to engage student voters.

For college students, many of whom are voting for the first time, casting a ballot can already be a more complicated process than for many other Americans. For instance, out-of-state students can vote in their home state or on their campus, where they may be registering for the first time. The pandemic has added new, complicating factors. As coronavirus cases surge in parts of the country, students are subject to possible isolation and quarantine procedures, or even the closure of their campuses.

Amid all that, voting can be confusing to many students.

Administrators and student leaders who want to help have a formidable to-do list before them: providing students with step-by-step instructions about how to register to vote, apply for an absentee ballot, vote by mail, vote in-person either early or on Election Day, and obtain an ID needed to cast a ballot, and the deadlines for doing all of this. To complicate matters, because of differences in state laws, there is no one-size-fits-all instruction for students, said Nancy Thomas, director of Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education.

Even with all of that information, voting can still be difficult, said Thomas. Students often have to drive long distances to make it to the polls or continuously track their mail-in ballot to ensure it's received by election officials and not rejected.

"In a normal year, our goal is to create a culture of voting on campus so that everywhere the person turns somebody is reinforcing it," said Paul Rogat Loeb, founder of the Campus Election

Engagement Project. “Creativity is really important because you just have to come up with other ways if the existing ones can’t.”

This fall, student activists at Prescott College, in Arizona, had to find new ways to help students through the voting process while avoiding face-to-face contact.

They are still giving out free tacos at voter registration tables and holding debate watch parties, among other events, but students are required to practice social distancing and wear a mask. At its voter registration dance party, students swayed to music through headphones in social-distancing circles under a canopy. The idea of the event was to help get students to talk about politics and voting in the open with their peers.

“You need to find ways to get people to come out of their little bubbles,” said Estela Felix Almeida, a sustainability management major and fellow with the Campus Election Engagement Project. “I want to eliminate the barriers and confusion the best that I can through education and creating very out-of-the-box activities.”

That student engagement does not always need to include in-person or online events. Students and administrators can make short videos, TikToks, or social-media posts that explain the voting processes in an engaging way.

While many of Western Carolina University’s traditional, large-scale voting events have been canceled, they still held a presidential-debate watch party that included eight people in a room and other students watching online. They have held in-person voter-registration events, but student leaders are also pushing students to register online through the Division of Motor Vehicles’ website.

They have created videos and online flowcharts and PDF forms walking students through the voter registration process, and promoted live-streams of down-ballot race debates on the university’s Facebook page.

“We have opened up a whole new world of virtual engagement,” said Lane Perry, executive director of Western Carolina’s Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning. “These are things that we could be doing even if Covid hadn’t been forcing us to do it.”

Colleges can also hold online office hours or hotlines that provide students with that one-on-one assistance that may be missing with the limitations or absence of in-person voting-registration tables, said Michael Burns, national director of the Fair Election Center’s Campus Vote Project.

Colleges that have a large number of out-of-state students face an extra challenge when providing such information, since each state has its own laws and deadlines.

Rutgers University typically promotes its RU Voting-Rutgers website, which breaks down the New Jersey laws and processes. This year it also launched a new website that provides that information for each of the other states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

Student leaders at Northern Michigan University have familiarized themselves with the laws and deadlines for not just Michigan, but also Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota since a large number of students come from those three states.

“It’s always been important to our mission to address that need because it’s something I face personally and members from my vote committee face personally,” said Emma Drever, president of Northern Michigan’s student government. Drever said she votes in her hometown in Illinois. “This is a sizable population of our student body, and we need to address their needs.”

While the pandemic has created extra challenges for student organizers, the creative methods that have been fostered because of it can be replicated and used to compliment the old voter-engagement strategies in the future.

Student leaders at Auburn University can continue collaborating with the college’s student housing in providing students with voter-registration information, said Michael Bennett, executive vice president for outreach of Auburn’s student government.

They can also keep passing along voter information to the university’s information desk so they can be prepared to answer registration-related questions by students, among other things. “Honestly, it’s opened our eyes,” said Bennett, “to things that we should have been doing before and reaching students in different ways.”