

# IDHE REPORT

## Using your NSLVE Reports

BY IDHE STAFF

The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education is dedicated to shifting institutional priorities, practices, and culture to increase student political learning, equity, and engagement in democracy. The Institute's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is both a service to colleges and universities — providing more than 900 colleges and universities nationwide with tailored reports containing their students' voter registration and voting rates — and a database of 8.5 million student records, which is used for research on college student political learning and engagement. The Institute also conducts other research, including studies of institutions high (and low) levels of student political engagement. These reports stem from that research to bridge theory and practice.

IDHE is a part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, a national leader in civic education whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement.

**T**HE NATIONAL STUDY OF LEARNING, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) offers a free service to participating colleges and universities nationally. Each institution receives a multi-page report containing aggregate student data such as the number of students eligible to vote, the number and percent that registered to vote, and the number and percentage of students who actually voted. As the fall semester and election season approach, college and university leaders are asking, *what should we do with our reports? What are other institutions doing?*

We have talked with dozens and surveyed the more than 800 colleges and universities that have joined NSLVE. Based on these conversations and survey responses, we suggest the following:

### 1. Create and charge a task force responsible for action

When they authorize participation in NSLVE, signatories select one individual to receive the report, and often that person is a director of institutional research or the president. While these and other senior administrators should of course know the results of the reports, they may not be in the best position to take next steps.

*All* of the institutions that responded to our survey share their reports with senior administrators, select faculty, office of community engagement, and/or students. Senior administrators almost always receive a copy, but it can also be sent to an office (the office of civic engagement), a department (political science), or a person (the director of community engagement or the president of the student government association).

Sharing is good; *strategically* sharing is better. The president or vice president for academic affairs can convene a task force and charge that group with responsibility for sharing and using the campus reports. Each institution is different, but in our experience, all campuses have at least one and often many faculty members and administrators who are widely respected—when they talk, others listen. Create a small working group of people with positional authority, the well-respected voices on campus, and “an implementer,” someone who will facilitate action. The working group need not be permanent or time consuming. They need to convene, plan, and act.

## 2. Share the reports with the faculty across disciplines.

One president explained that the report is used “to emphasize that voting should be informed by the positions of the candidates running for office. That takes time to listen, read, reflect, and discuss with peers and mentors. Active citizenship requires more than just paying taxes and voting.” At this institution, reviewing the report is coupled with conversations about informed voting.

At another institution, the entire faculty meets once per semester and the report was shared at that meeting. They were asked to discuss within their department the implications of high and low voter participation to that field, and how they could engage students.

Another institution wrote that the report “has spurred a faculty member to develop... interactive sessions [on] the presidential candidates’ debates and political process.” We have seen action from a broad range of departments, including political science, history, art, theater, English, engineering, math, chemistry, African-American Studies, women and gender studies.

Many professors are interested, but they need help identifying the public relevance of their field. They can be coached to consider policy conversations (*what are the proposals by the candidates on health care, income equality, etc.*) or election matters (*does the composition of elected officials reflect the composition of the American public, or what is the math behind polling?*) or election ethics (*are the candidates telling the truth, or in what way does big money affect politics?*). Students from all disciplines care about issues such as the cost of college, jobs and the economy. Our research suggests that issues matter to students and those campuses that talk about matters of political consequence broadly and often have higher voting rates. This needs to be an academic goal.

We view academic clubs (e.g., the Chemistry Club or the Student Society of Engineers) as ideal venues for discussing the reports and political issues. These entities are often student-run, but most have faculty advisors and even regular activities with entire schools or departments. Send the report to department chairs and faculty advisors to these disciplinary groups and ask them to discuss the report and develop action plans.

## 3. Send the report to faculty responsible for curricula.

Another approach is to share the reports with an academic committee directly responsible

### Campus Checklist for Using Your NSLVE Report

- Create and charge a task force responsible for action
- Share the reports with faculty across disciplines
- Send the reports to faculty members responsible for curricula
- Share the reports with students broadly and selectively
- Convene campus-wide dialogues on the reports
- Use the data or at least participation in NSLVE for assessment purposes
- Display the data
- Create or join a competition or recognition program
- Bring us in to help you get unstuck

for cross-curricular learning, such as the first-year experience, general education, senior theses or capstones, honors programs, leadership programs, etc. One institution wrote:

*We share the results with the University's General Education Committee (one of the faculty committees) every year as part of a document of assessment results of multiple direct and indirect measures to try to get at student learning in the four learning goals. One of these goals, Personal and Social Responsibility, includes the objective of civic knowledge and engagement, both local and global. As part of specific recommendations for improvement in General Education Program for 2014–2015 (and 2015–2016), the committee recommended: "In light of the results of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement the General Education Committee recommends that the University community initiate an "awareness campaign" related to voter registration and voting with an eye towards the next presidential election in the fall of 2016. This campaign could be similar in scope to the one intended to raise awareness on the importance for students to file their FAFSA forms in a timely manner enlisting faculty, staff, and students."*

Elections are often everyone's business and no one's job. Try to embed political learning in required curricula.

#### 4. Share the reports with students broadly and selectively.

All colleges and universities support student governments, and many support clubs and groups that register voters and take students to polling places on Election Day. On one campus, all recognized student clubs are required to register voters — the fraternities and sororities, the student engineering society, the chess club. (On this campus, the student government provides financial support to clubs and groups, and registering voters is a prerequisite to receiving funding.) On another campus, the report is shared with students in fields or demographic groups identified in the report as being a low-voting group. One institution with a low voting rate for one demographic group wrote, "We hope to heighten the awareness amongst Latino students of the need for civic participation."

At most campuses, students create partisan groups such as "Young Dems," "Young Republicans," "Students for [candidate]" as well as nonpartisan voter mobilization groups. These groups should be provided with the report so that they can see how many students voted in 2012 and 2014, and where the strengths and weaknesses are among different students.

#### 5. Convene campus-wide dialogues

Many campuses use the reports as the framing document for campus-wide conversations about civic responsibility and engagement. Campus conversations involve a lot of constituencies and can effectively facilitate change. Campuses interested in this option can download [Talking Politics](#), a discussion guide that we created. On page six, we've suggested that discussion participants complete a "report card" that considers a range of institutional programs and attributes (e.g., student leadership programs, institutional policies and mission statement, election activities, and traditions). Participants take stock of how their institution is doing on any of these categories and plan action strate-

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gies to address deficits identified in the process.

At some point in the process, institutions may feel the need to bring in outside expertise. One institution hosted a series of dialogues and brought in an outside expert to talk with students and staff on youth engagement and election strategies broadly.

On another campus, the data inspired one professor to create a series of discussions connected with debate-watches for the 2016 election open to all students, faculty, staff, and members of the local community. At those discussions, the professor will disseminate the NSLVE data for discussion.

## 6. Use the data or at least participation in NSLVE for assessment purposes

NSLVE is the only objective measure of student civic participation in higher education. By using 2012 and 2014 data as baseline information, campuses can implement and measure through comparisons the success of a broad range of interventions, such as new courses and programs and voter registration and mobilization efforts.

That said, one participating NSLVE campus wrote, “Relevant academic departments will use the report data for their program review reports, and the College will use the data for accreditation reports.” Others include NSLVE data in annual reports (see example [here](#)).


Participating institutions may or may not want to disclose their data publicly, but the mere fact that they participate in NSLVE demonstrates interest in civic learning. Accreditors, program reviewers, and even the Carnegie “Engaged Classification” designation could inquire as to whether colleges and universities participate in NSLVE, not to gauge an institution’s success or failure but as evidence of institutional commitment to student engagement in democracy.

## 7. Display the data

Many NSLVE institutions post the report online so that it is available to anyone, or in some cases, available but restricted to members of the campus community. While we think this is useful, we also believe it needs to be coupled with the actions described above. We are also learning of new and creative ways to display the data. Campuses have turned the data into short [infographics](#), a [video](#), and, at one campus, a display crafted by the visual arts department.

## 8. Create or join a competition or recognition program

We undoubtedly do not know them all, but we are aware of many initiatives for which campuses use their NSLVE data and compete for a prize or recognition for the highest voting rates or the most robust plans to mobilize voters. Some are regional groups of campuses such as the [Southern \(athletic\) Conference](#). The “[Voter Friendly Campus](#)” designation, awarded to campuses that make it easier for students to register to vote and participate in democracy, is being organized by NASPA and the Campus Vote Project. And the [ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#) recognizes campuses that commit to improving democratic engagement and voting. Along with national competitions, institutions can choose to create their own internal competitions. We do not endorse any



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of these specifically, but if your institution is spurred by competition or incentives, these are options for 2016. You can also create a friendly competition internally, say, between class levels, student groups, or disciplines. Another great option is to become a Voter Education Partner with Dominican University's [College Debate 2016](#) initiative.

## 9. Bring us in to help you get unstuck

We're here to help, particularly with efforts to create and sustain a campus climate for political learning and engagement beyond the election. We have given keynote addresses and run interactive sessions with campuses convened by region (e.g., the Florida community and state colleges, a Chicago consortium of campuses, Tennessee regents and institutional leaders). We've also run multi-campus workshops organized by existing consortia (e.g., Massachusetts Campus Compact). These can be one-time activities or a series tailored for your group. For all of these, we start with the campus reports and aggregate data for that cluster of campuses, and then move to what campuses can do, based on our qualitative research on highly politically and electorally engaged campuses.

One institution convened a group of thirty people — faculty across disciplines, heads of many administrative departments — and hosted IDHE director, Nancy Thomas in a one-hour video conference call. In that session, she walked the group through the report, discussed some strengths and weaknesses, and talked about what the institution could do with the data.

Contact us at [idhe@tufts.edu](mailto:idhe@tufts.edu) to set up an appointment.

Sign up to receive periodic research and practice reports, updates, and announcements at <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/research/nslve/join-our-contact-list/>.

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