

IDHE REPORT

Campus Stories

What are higher education institutions doing to increase political learning and engagement?

BY INGER BERGOM

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 with unpredicted levels of 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.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE PRIME sites for teaching skills and habits for becoming active, engaged citizens of our democracy. Many college students are eligible to vote for the first time during college, and most colleges and universities aim to teach civic competencies for lifelong participation in a diverse, changing society.

What is happening on college campuses to increase college student political engagement and learning? Indeed, myriad strategies exist to engage students in political life, particularly during a general election campaign. We collected stories from several campuses participating in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement about how they use an election season as an opportunity to increase political learning and engagement campus-wide. This report highlights the practices described by NSLVE campus representatives, in their own words.

Although elections spur efforts to involve students in politics, teaching for political learning and engagement should be a year-round charge to support students' development of political agency and civic mindedness. We hope that the examples presented here of efforts made "on the ground" in 2016 at campuses across the country inspire programming and initiatives that teach for these outcomes regardless of the election cycle.

What are institutions doing to provide opportunities for students to become politically engaged during the 2016 election?

The primary ways in which campuses provided spaces and opportunities for students to get engaged were 1) discussion forums or campus dialogues around politically related topics, 2) presidential debate watching events, and 3) mobilization efforts to increase voter registration and turnout in the 2016 election. Other strategies included inviting local or state politicians to campus to interact with students and engaging in partnerships with community organizations to provide voter guide resources or mobilize for voter registration and turnout.

INSTITUTIONS PROVIDED DISCUSSION FORUMS OR spaces for dialogues around the election or politically related topics. Some discussions were moderated by a member of the campus community, such as a political science professor, while others were informal dialogues or organized around a panel of speakers followed by an opportunity for discussion.

*“In order to engage students in dialogue around the election, we are utilizing our Democracy Wall to pose weekly questions throughout the election season. The Democracy Wall is a space in the Student Activities Office located in our student Union where NDSU students, faculty, and staff can come together to **engage in dialogue around relevant civic issues impacting our local, national, and global communities.** Topics/questions are chosen on a weekly basis and individuals respond to the topic/question accordingly. Questions include: ‘Who won the first presidential debate? Why?’ ‘How would the election of each presidential candidate impact your life?’ ‘Why are you voting?’ So far, students have been engaging in conversation around the topics and having written dialogue with other students, many with differing perspectives.”*

- North Dakota State University

*“We’ve been working with the university’s chief diversity officer to **train faculty, staff, and students to facilitate politically charged dialogues** and to host post-debate discussions (the next day) -- a pilot initiative to test models of political discourse. We’re approaching this election as an **opportunity to establish or bolster habits of political discourse and engagement year-round, not just in an election season.**”*

- Tufts University

*“The Center for Leadership & Service (Division of Student Affairs), the Department of Political Science (College of Arts and Sciences), the Honors College, and the University of North Texas Libraries co-hosted a Constitution Day program entitled, ‘Second Amendment and Campus Carry: Rights vs. Safety.’ The program included a pro Second Amendment speaker from Texas Law Shield and a pro gun safety speaker from Texas Gun Sense **in a forum setting, and students asked questions via the twitter hashtag #UNT #ConstitutionDay.** Approximately 5000 U.S. pocket Constitutions were passed out that week in several of the freshman-level American Government classes.”*

- University of North Texas

*“We brought students together with faculty, staff, and political leaders to **talk about the importance of voting** and why they should Rock the Vote. We launched our social media ‘I Rock the Vote Because....’”*

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- SUNY Adirondack

“During the primary race, the college held a **student panel discussion on the issues that were important to students in the primary election**. The panel discussion was moderated by a political science instructor.”

- Highland Community College

“Vox Populi (Voice of the People) was created as a collaborative effort between Student Congress, Hope Democrats, Hope Republicans, Residential Life, the Student Activities Committee, and students who are not affiliated with any group. Vox Populi is working to help students, staff, and faculty practice civility in controversy. They have planned a number of **discussions and panel events leading up to the election**, including ‘Was Jesus a Republican or a Democrat?’, ‘Social Media and the Election,’ ‘Why Politicians Lie and Why We’re OK With It,’ and ‘How to Talk to Your Family About Hot Topics.’”

- Hope College

“We will host a **policy panel** open to the campus and the community including political science professors and our college’s President.”

- Hobart & William Smith Colleges

INSTITUTIONS LED AND SUPPORTED MOBILIZATION efforts to increase voter registration and turnout in the 2016 election. They provided a wide variety of opportunities for students to learn how to participate in the election. Offices, centers, and student groups across campuses worked together to coordinate events and initiatives for educating students about how to register to vote, learn about candidates and ballot issues, and cast their own ballot.

“Two projects center around **making democracy more understandable and accessible**. We publish a newsletter every week called the Citizen Bulletin which **updates students on the actions of the representatives in Hyde Park from alderman up to President**, and we also occasionally **publish polling videos which collect different students’ thoughts on the state of democracy** to raise awareness about how people’s peers are thinking.”

- University of Chicago

“We have held a **week-long voter registration drive** where we registered 400 students to vote—100 more than last year. With this, students from all around the world were able to learn how to vote, register, or contact their local office to receive an absentee ballot. Students who registered to vote or brought a friend to register to vote received a donut.”

- Southern Utah University

“We have worked on both the ‘technical’ and ‘motivational’ sides of voting, drawing from several years of work by the Andrew Goodman Fellows (who wrote a voting strategic plan two years ago), IDHE findings on practices of highly politically engaged campuses in the NSLVE study, CIRCLE research, energy in Tufts political science department, and experience. **We hired a voting coordinator**, a recent graduate, who works with under-

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graduate and graduate students on all Tufts campuses (and a wide range of student groups) to **run voter registration drives, organize rides to the polls, and support student-led events (a concert, speakers).** We signed up for and broadly promote TurboVote, registering a total of 1,366 students in less than one semester. We're working with local election officials to ensure that students can exercise their civil rights to vote. A lot of the work has been in partnership with political science faculty, who hosted debate watches that were packed."

- Tufts University

"Governors State University student governance created the GSU Rocks the Vote Campaign. **The entire student senate trained through the County Clerk's Office to become deputy registrars to actively register students to vote.** With this initiative they are able to register any citizen in the State of Illinois to vote and speak to the importance of becoming politically engaged citizens. The Rock the Vote Campaign has been ongoing for the entire year and they have registered over 200 voters."

- Governors State University

"**On National Voter Registration Day, several organizations on campus hosted voter registration and information tables.** An early voting location will be provided on campus."

- University of North Texas

"We have had a **coordinated, campus-wide effort to educate students about voter registration** with literally thousands of students [making] announcements directly in the classroom about how to register to vote locally. To date, we have registered over 500 new voters and this effort will now shift to voter education about candidates and referendum questions so that our student voters can make educated choices at the polls."

- University of Maine

"NYU's Student Resource Center has been very involved and remains central to our effort: promoting voter registration beginning with Welcome Week, the Wellness Fair, CAB and Grad Life events in addition to **providing NYC voter registration cards for voter registration drives, delivering voter registrations to the NY Board of Elections, and mailing absentee voter registrations for students who want to vote in their home state.** Over the course of the last six months, several student clubs, schools and centers at the university held voter registration drives where students were directed to NYU Votes."

- New York University

"North Dakota State University (NDSU) **purchased TurboVote in order to (hopefully) simplify the registration, absentee ballot, and election process for students...** We have laptops set up throughout our student Union as well as buttons, flyers, and posters promoting TurboVote. We also are specifically targeting faculty/staff about TurboVote so they can easily answer questions students have regarding voting. The main thought behind TurboVote is that if students don't know how to vote, they won't be politically engaged. The easier the process, the more likely they are to vote."

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- North Dakota State University

INSTITUTIONS OFFERED PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE WATCHING events. These events were sometimes billed as parties with a celebratory, fun tone and were occasionally followed by discussions for reflecting on the debate content. This past election season, many campuses reported unexpectedly high levels of attendance at the debate viewing events.

*“We are hosting **debate watch parties for all of the presidential and vice presidential debates, complete with lots of free pizza and soda pop.** We host these in student housing but invite all students, plus their friends and families, to attend (Local media loves covering these events!).”*

- Indiana University South Bend

*“We hosted a ‘Debate Watch Party’ for the first presidential debate. The last time we had such an event, about 40 students attended. **This time, we had roughly 230 students show up and an over-capacity crowd.** Many students stayed after the debate was over for a **facilitated discussion** in which we talked about the role of debates in helping voters make an educated choice, the positions taken by the candidates, what they learned from the experience, and the role of the moderator.”*

- University of Maine

*“**Governors State University academic and student affairs have collaborated to develop debate watch parties** combining the GSU Rocks the Vote Campaign, which allows students to gain knowledge about the candidates and political issues and [gives them] the opportunity to register to vote on the spot.”*

- Governors State University

INSTITUTIONS INVITED POLITICIANS TO CAMPUS. Representatives from two campuses described inviting local or state politicians to campus to debate or answer students’ questions.

*“We [hosted] a series of **live candidate debates to educate people about the candidates on their ballots.** Races include school board, county candidates (council, commissioner, recorder, surveyor, treasurer, coroner, circuit court judge), state house (multiple districts), state senate (multiple districts), U.S. Congress.”*

- Indiana University South Bend

*“The Michael O. Leavitt Center for Politics and Public Service has had a debate watch party, a discussion on third party candidates at a Pizza & Politics, and has had **state politicians stop by the campus to interact with the students** and answer any political questions they might have.”*

- Southern Utah University

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INSTITUTIONS PARTNERED WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY organizations. Several institutions reported collaborating with off-campus organizations such as League of Women Voters to support voter registration and turnout efforts or create voter information guides.

*“Utica College **partnered with Citizens in Action and the League of Women Voters** to register students. Other collaborative programs included ‘Decision 2016’ which featured MTV’s Real World star Nick Brown talking to students about the importance of voting, ‘Text Wars’ -- an interactive game-show focusing on presidential politics -- and a campus survey of student presidential choices conducted by the student newspaper.”*

- Utica College

*“We are also working with the **League of Women Voters and the South Bend Tribune** to produce and promote an online voter guide with positions statements on a wide range of issues available to all voters at Vote411.org.”*

- Indiana University South Bend

*“[A professor in] the Social Sciences Department and other faculty, our Student Association, Communications Department, the OCC Politics Club and **our community partners as well including the League of Women Voters of Syracuse and County Board of Elections** have all played key roles in assisting with this effort.”*

- Onondaga Community College

What is your campus doing to support political learning and engagement for all students? We would love to hear from you. Please contact us at idhe@tufts.edu to share your stories.

You can [see a list of participating NSLVE campuses](#), [join the NSLVE study](#), and [sign up for IDHE updates](#) on our website. You can also follow along with our work or engage with our office on Twitter [@TuftsIDHE](https://twitter.com/TuftsIDHE).