Considerations for Voter Registration at Public Colleges & Universities

Under the federal Higher Education Act, public colleges and universities (PCUs) must provide voter registration information to all students. PCUs have a tremendous opportunity to modernize the way they provide students with voter registration information and services, including adopting Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) and leveraging application programming interfaces (APIs) for online voter registration (OVR).

Automatic Voter Registration

AVR leverages existing sources of information that people already provide to a variety of state agencies in order to process new and updated voter registrations for eligible citizens who don't decline, resulting in more accurate voter rolls and greater voter access. Several factors should be addressed when considering PCUs as AVR agencies.[1]

- The PCU must collect all the information needed to confirm voter registration eligibility, including name, date of birth, citizenship status, and residence, and be confident in the quality of the data they collect.

- In particular, care needs to be taken to ensure proper processes are in place to collect and communicate correct information on student citizenship status and address of choice. PCUs should identify methods to straightforwardly filter out data from students who have not confirmed that they are citizens or otherwise presented proof of ineligibility during the registration process.

- Students should have the option to determine their preferred address for voter registration, since a student may want to remain or become registered to vote at their home-of-origin address rather than their school address. Design and user interface experts, such as the Center for Civic Design should be consulted on this issue. This may impact in-state and out-of-state students to different degrees. Since students often move year to year, tracking local address information is a necessary challenge for keeping registrations up-to-date.

- PCUs should consider the optimal time to provide voter registration services to students, taking into account when students will have occupied their student housing for residence purposes as

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[1] For more extensive discussion of automatic voter registration for college and university students, see "Automatic Voter Registration at Public Colleges and Universities" by Professor Michael J. Hanmer.

well as voter registration deadlines. For any effective AVR system, it is essential that the data are transmitted, verified, and processed with sufficient time to meet any voter registration deadlines for upcoming elections.

- PCUs should consider the best opportunity to engage students with AVR. One option would be to incorporate AVR into class registration. Another option is to task academic advisors, whom students know and trust, to prompt students to provide or update their voter registration information.

- AVR transactions should take place electronically with an expectation of privacy, so that there should be minimal risk that undocumented students are identified to others as having an undocumented status. Information on students who are noncitizens or whose citizenship status is unknown will not be transferred to elections officials.

- State election officials should understand the potential for PCUs to have differing technological capacities to electronically transfer voter registration data to elections officials. In particular, consider how, or whether, a student's signature image is collected by a PCU. If a signature image is required to complete a voter registration and it is not yet collected in a manner in which it can be transferred electronically to elections officials, technology may need to be upgraded.

Online Voter Registration Application Programming Interfaces

Even if they do not adopt AVR procedures, PCUs can still streamline registration by using application programming interfaces (APIs) for online voter registration (OVR) made available by their state. OVR APIs allow the state's existing online voter registration form to be integrated into a third-party website.

- With an API, third-party entities can submit registration forms electronically, rather than on paper. Using the API, voter registration groups like the League of Women Voters can collect voter registration information on their own websites or mobile apps, and this information is then securely and seamlessly transmitted to the Secretary of State for review, verification, and registration. Entities that use the API must apply to use the system and be approved by the Secretary of State for security purposes.

- Several states, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have developed APIs for use by third-party entities. Maine and Oregon similarly have discretion to create APIs.

- In these states, PCUs can apply to use the API, allowing them to seamlessly integrate voter registration into online transactions such as enrollment. Students enrolling in classes or otherwise using the university website can register directly through that website, with any information provided for enrollment already pre-filled. This information would then be automatically and electronically transmitted to the Secretary of State for processing.

- API integration is preferable to simply providing a link to the state's official online voter registration (OVR) website. When offered an OVR link, fewer people take the additional step to click through to the state's official OVR website, and those that do have to re-enter the same information (name, address, date of birth) already provided for the agency transaction. API integration is likewise preferable to simply providing a student a paper registration form.

- PCUs should consider if they meet the technological and security requirements for use of an OVR API available in their state. In Pennsylvania, several universities are already working to use the state's API to integrate voter registration for students.

Benefits of Voter Registration at Public Colleges & Universities

- When students exercise their right to vote in the first election in which they are eligible, it increases the likelihood that they will develop the habit of voting throughout their lifetime.

- Modernizing their efforts to advance and facilitate civic participation by adopting AVR or utilizing OVR APIs helps PCUs meet their mission to help prepare students to be actively engaged citizens and leaders.

- Integrating AVR or OVR APIs into enrollment and other student transactions allows students to seamlessly and electronically register to vote without leaving the university website or unnecessarily re-entering information, saving time and increasing uptake.

- While AVR and OVR APIs rest on the behavioral science findings that streamlining registration encourages positive outcomes, students maintain the opportunity to decline voter registration should they so choose.