Promising Practices in Campus-Wide Civic and Voter Empowerment

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By examining the lived experience of Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators (CVECs) across the state of California, I curated promising practices for campus-wide civic and voter empowerment. I invite you to read the full manuscript, *Cultivating a Culture of Civic Engagement and Democratic Learning* found on the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement website. A single item on this list considered in isolation may not seem impressive, or particularly cutting-edge, but taken together– the list represents a source of inspiration for cultivating a culture of learning for civic and voter empowerment. The list is most relevant to faculty, staff, and students who are leading campus-wide efforts, in roles like the CVECs, but can be applicable to a number of roles on campuses.

To make these practices more accessible and prominent, I separated out the practices below.

- **Actualize the Action Plan:** The Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan can be a perfunctory step, or it can be a living document that sets achievable goals for influencing civic and voter empowerment. Utilize resources to improve the plans and attempt to set measures that can demonstrate tangible progress.

- **Be Present and Consistent:** Colleges and universities should consider the infusion of nonpartisan educational messaging and learning opportunities throughout the student experience. Some highlights included:

  - **Campus Events:** Presence, represented by communication and programming (both passive and active), at campus events, even those not considered civic engagement events (i.e. a soccer match or homecoming event), provide opportunities to engage with different student populations.

  - **Classrooms:** An effective, though labor-intensive effort is providing short workshops that faculty can request about voter registration and education. Campuses can also prepare digital toolkits for faculty to share in their classes, syllabi, and course management systems.

- ◦ **Communications:** Institutions should consider messaging beyond emails and social media, but also utilize other outlets like alerts in the course management system, information on the registrar's website when students register for classes, or, on occasion, a text message.

- ◦ **Outreach Efforts:** Maintain a constant, visible presence throughout the semester, hosting a booth/table for voter education year-round in different locations.

- ◦ **Train Paraprofessionals and Staff:** Partner with residence life, academic advising, and other units to cross-train student paraprofessionals on voter registration efforts (i.e. front desk in the student center, in residence halls, etc.).

- ● **Go Beyond Voting:** There were countless examples of promising practices to go beyond voter education, to truly incorporate civic engagement more broadly. These efforts are especially important to involve populations ineligible to vote. Some examples include:

  - ◦ **Civic Action:** Provide students with knowledge of civic action beyond voting (i.e. writing politicians, attending town halls, and volunteering as a poll worker).

  - ◦ **Community-Engaged Research and Learning:** Partner with faculty and departments to provide opportunities for students to get into the field to learn about and study civic issues.

  - ◦ **Curriculum Development:** Encourage academic governance to review academic plans and ensure students have the opportunity to take courses about American democracy and how to take an active role in it.

  - ◦ **Dialogue Groups:** Offer opportunities for students to engage in structured dialogue across differences, specifically on political and ideological issues.

  - ◦ **First Amendment 101:** Educate on topics of free speech, academic freedom, and inclusion. Help students understand their rights and campus policies.

  - ◦ **Engage Students Ineligible to Vote:** Understand the needs of and provide programming for populations of students who are ineligible to vote due to age, citizenship, or legal constraints.

  - ◦ **Expand Service-Learning:** Incorporate civic education into service-learning experiences by explicitly connecting societal issues to policy, law, politics, and engaging in democracy. Nonpartisanship is especially important in this space.

  - ◦ **Civic Leadership Conferences/Programs:** Organize civic leadership conferences and programs to expose students to government and politics, including career pathways and skill development around social responsibility.

  - ◦ **Local Government Excursions:** Plan regular trips to city hall and other local government offices. Help students understand how to learn about local history and issues that are being actively discussed by the community – including the institution's own role and position in relationship to the community.

- **Media Literacy:** In an increasingly complex digital information ecosystem, colleges and universities should be helping students understand the dangers of misinformation and purposeful disinformation, as well as ways to wade through sources when opinions are presented as facts.

- **Coalitions:** Although not required by the SCVEA, building a coalition helps to generate broader campus support. The institutions in the study that created both a civic and voter coalition highlighted a promising practice, one that allowed the efforts on voter engagement to soar, while fostering civic learning beyond voting.

- **Celebrate Civic Holidays:** Capitalize upon civic holidays, like National Voter Registration Day, Constitution Day, and National Voter Education Week to develop programming and communication efforts for the campus. These events have associated branding, collateral, and activities that help generate engagement.

- **Civic Education Basics:** In the excitement to engage students, colleges and universities should seek to offer baseline education to help students understand foundational knowledge that is necessary for them to engage in democracy.

- **Creative Program Ideas:** The CVECs, in collaboration with their student leaders and faculty/ staff partners developed creative program ideas outside of the civic holidays. Some creative examples included:

  - An "Election Fair," "Civic Festival," and "Rock the Vote" where CVECs/students invited organizations and candidates across the political spectrum to be part of the events — rounded out with music, food trucks, and fun.

  - Heritage months and identity-based celebrations that also infuse the history of voting and civic engagement within different communities on campus.

  - Leverage the arts, from hip hop to visual art and performance, poetry and more for students to express themselves in relationship with democracy.

  - Several campuses tapped into the allure of food for programs like, "Let's Taco Bout Voting, and "DoNuT Get Left Behind." Another particularly creative program was "Boba and Ballots," providing tea and educating about what/who was on the ballot. Many of these events engaged local businesses.

  - The use of live animals to draw a crowd, such as "Goat the Vote" seemed especially fitting for campuses in rural communities, or with an academic connection to live animals.

  - Trying to use existing holidays to program around, such as, Valentine's Day as, "the perfect date to register to vote."

- **Consistently Nonpartisan:** The CVECs shared several promising practices about how to stay consistently nonpartisan. To start with, colleges and universities should define how they operationalize nonpartisanship, and then train staff as well as student leaders on that approach (i.e. how to handle tough questions, when to consider co-programming, etc.). As people leading this work, CVECs should engage in training and self-work to understand their gaps in understanding, biases, and triggers when navigating difficult conversations.

- **Embedded into the Student Experience:** Incorporating civic and voter empowerment throughout the student experience and lifecycle.

  ◦ Creating opportunities for students to learn and engage from move-in day, through orientation, and at different points throughout the year – including those who are gearing up to graduate.

  ◦ Developing a communication and social media content calendar that mirrors the academic calendar, considering reminders about updating voter registration each year as students typically move each year.

- **Gamify Out-of-Class Efforts:** The California Student Vote Project's Ballot Bowl and similar competitions tap into healthy competition. CVECs and their students created other opportunities for gamification of learning. Some examples included:

  ◦ **Civic Knowledge Showdown:** Where students competed on teams to answer questions in front of a live audience.

  ◦ **Civic Trivia Night:** Leveraging the popularity of trivia to test student's knowledge about civics, but to make it educational as well.

  ◦ **Rivalry Competition:** A few of the campuses identified their rival and sought to capitalize on the Ballot Bowl competition by tapping into some healthy competition with a rival institution.

- **Get Local:** The CVECs were deeply committed to building partnerships in their local communities to facilitate learning experiences for students. Some creative examples included:

  ◦ **Advocacy Days:** Foster relationships with local government officials to meet with student leaders about issues that matter to them.

  ◦ **Candidate Forums:** Host local candidate forums (mayoral, city council, district attorney, state senate, etc.) on campus.

  ◦ **Careers in Government and Politics:** In off-election years, invite politicians and government officials to campus to talk about their paths to civil service.

  ◦ **Introduce Local Officials:** Consider ways to help students learn about who represents them currently, such as a landing page or information included in new student guides and transition efforts.

- ◦ **Invite Alumni to Participate:** Invite alumni involved in civic life to participate in campus events. One campus invited a panel of judges, all former students, to talk about careers in the legal system, being appointed or elected.

- ◦ **Student Issue Nights:** Find opportunities for students to learn about issues they care about. Some campuses in the study hosted regular program panels and speakers to address topics pertinent to students like renters' rights, food insecurity, student loans, etc.

- ◦ **Town-Gown Programming:** Co-programming with organizations like the International Town and Gown Organization to help students, faculty, and staff learn about local issues and foster a healthy reciprocal relationship.

- ◦ **Local Election Data:** Highlight the importance of local elections and as it relates to the lives of students.

- ● **Inclusive Programming:** The CVECs displayed intentionality by including diverse sets of perspectives and backgrounds, highlighting a promising practice given the underrepresentation of particular voices in the civic space. Some examples include:

  - ◦ **Academic Disciplines:** Partner with and encourage departments and students from academic disciplines that may not typically be thought of in civic conversations, especially STEM fields where student voting rates tend to be lower.

  - ◦ **Commuter Students:** Consider programming for students who do not live on campus, including the timing and availability of online opportunities.

  - ◦ **Out-of-State Students:** The barriers for students who are attending college out-of-state require additional resources and intentional outreach.

  - ◦ **Populations Ineligible to Vote:** This list includes underage students, formerly incarcerated students, international students, and undocumented students. These populations deserve to be engaged and represented in the programming offerings.

  - ◦ **Students from Racially Minoritized Communities:** Given the long history of oppression and, subsequently, deeply embedded distrust of democracy — design culturally responsive programming for students from racially minoritized groups.

  - ◦ **Student Parents:** Encourage educational opportunities for student parents to support their dependents in becoming civically engaged.

  - ◦ **Translating Materials:** Provide education and resources in different languages so students can connect with the material and share it with their loved ones as well.

  - ◦ **Students with Disabilities:** Work to ensure programming and outreach are inclusive for students with disabilities, including the availability of braille at polling locations, interpreters at events, physical environment considerations, etc.

- **Involving Student Governance:** Engage the democratically-elected campus student leaders in student civic and voter empowerment efforts. The caution, of course, is to not rely on students to solely lead these efforts. This is a concern for many campuses, as the students in student government do not always reflect the diversity of the broader student population. A few ideas worth considering:

  ◦ Educate new students about the role, function, and structure of student governance on the campus and how to get involved.

  ◦ Incorporate student elections into the overarching voter-engagement efforts for the campus, instilling the importance of voting on campus and off. This includes advertising the student election date in the academic calendar, reminders, etc.

  ◦ After ensuring it would not violate their governing documents, an Associated Students organization at one institution held a special session to vote on ballot propositions in the upcoming election. They hosted working sessions ahead of the meeting to study the issues and then take a vote as an organization.

- **Next Level Branding:** In addition to creating a school-specific voter organization or coalition branding effort, some campuses took branding to the next level.

  ◦ Incorporate local institutional symbols into branding. On one campus, they made a special get-out-the-vote outfit for their mascot.

  ◦ Leverage local celebrities. Campus Presidents, Deans of Students, coaches, prominent alumni, and everyone's favorite dining hall employees are just a few examples of local celebrities on a college or university campus. Engaging local figures on the campus to be part of communication and marketing efforts is a promising practice.

  ◦ Tie messaging to campus traditions, local histories of civic engagement, etc.

- **Peer-to-Peer Education:** Build a peer educator program where students are trained to support teaching their peers about registering and making a plan to vote, including access to a nonpartisan voter guide to prepare them to make informed decisions. Ideally, these students would be compensated for their work, and help provide support for programming beyond voter registration. Compensating students leading this work on behalf of the college or university is ideal. According to the Department of Education guidance, campuses should be permitted to use work-study funds to support this kind of effort.

- **Position Civic and Voter Empowerment as a Justice Issue:** Several of the CVECs advocated for positioning voting and civic engagement in support of the narrowing of equity gaps and sought to partner with broader efforts that led to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice on campus. Ensure students know where they can report concerns about voter intimidation and suppression.

- **Strategic Planning:** If civic and voter engagement is not present in the college or university strategic plan, find the goals that civic and voter empowerment can be incorporated into. Advocate for civic and voter empowerment to be included in future plans, including divisional planning efforts.

- **Truly Institution-Wide:** More than one CVEC took it upon themselves to incorporate educational efforts for the entire institution, providing programming and communication/outreach to populations such as their faculty and staff, graduate and professional students, and even employees and guests on the hospital campus.

- **Tied to Student Success:** Justify expenditures and the importance of the work by connecting into institutional focus on student success outcomes like retention and graduation. Engaged students perform better academically, have more enriching educational experiences, and civic engagement is even good for mental health — especially relevant amid the growing concern for well-being on campuses.

- **Unlikely Partners:** Look near and far, all across the campus for partners who may end up being particularly passionate about collaboration, bringing your work together with their own departmental missions and budgets. As referenced earlier, CVECs found unlikely partners in working with athletics and the library, but also a number of academic departments, some of which made natural sense, and others were just fortunate to find faculty who understood the importance of the work.

- **Voting on the Physical Campus:** Make voting accessible to students by hosting campus polling locations, vote centers, and drop-off boxes for absentee ballots. These efforts all take a tremendous amount of coordination and buy-in, but the need for and pay off as a promising practice cannot be overstated.

Additions or questions? Contact Alex at Alex.Kappus@gmail.com.