

Civic and Voter Empowerment Recommendations for College Presidents & Senior Leaders

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Amid political polarization and student unrest, colleges and universities are often in a position of reacting instead of proactively fostering the campus climate. The following recommendations for college and university leaders encourage campus-wide civic and voter empowerment. California is the only state with a comprehensive state law to encourage college student civic and voter engagement, but under the Higher Education Act and encouraged by the [U.S. Department of Education](#), institutions of higher education are at a minimum required to make “a good faith effort” to distribute voter registration materials to their students. The recommendations below are relevant for leaders both inside and outside of the state of California to go beyond the minimum and to live up to higher education’s civic mission. The insights are informed by my research through the [UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement](#), *Cultivating a Culture of Civic Engagement and Democratic Learning*. Even in a state where this work is encouraged, evidence suggests leaders need to do more to support civic and voter empowerment.

1.1 18 Recommendations for College Presidents and Senior Leaders

- **Inventory Current Efforts:** How do you know students are gaining skills to engage in democracy through the curriculum and co-curriculum? What programs encourage student civic and voter engagement? Gain an institutional understanding of your current efforts.
- **Incorporate Civic Engagement into Institutional/Divisional Strategic Plans:** Chances are, your institution’s mission, vision, and values speak to your civic mission. As you review your institutional and divisional strategic plans, what tangible steps are you taking to help students learn about their democracy and how to engage with it?
- **Understand Your Numbers:** Registering to vote and casting a vote are quantifiable metrics that can help you understand the state of civic engagement. Dig into data found in other institution-wide assessments, and opt into others ([NSLVE](#), [IDEALS](#), [MSL](#), etc.).

Civic and Voter Empowerment Recommendations for College Presidents & Senior Leaders

- **Appoint a Coordinator:** Appointing a Coordinator for Civic and Voter Empowerment (CVEC) is a critical step toward prioritizing this work on your campus. Just as naming people to lead other efforts you prioritize, this is a critical decision to ensure progress.
- **Honor CVEC Commitment:** If you're not able to devote an FTE to the CVEC role, make a small investment in the person selected. Providing a stipend, supplemental pay, professional development funds, a course release, etc. all demonstrate institutional value.
- **Designate a Cabinet-Level Champion:** At least one cabinet member should be thinking about and supporting the CVEC's work for cross-institutional buy-in.
- **Remove Barriers:** Staying close to the CVEC, the cabinet will become aware of barriers to student civic engagement unique to your campus context. Strategize as a Cabinet to realize a more fully embraced, institution-wide approach to civic engagement.
- **Encourage and Review an Action Plan:** Cabinets should encourage, and review campus plans for civic and voter empowerment. Provide feedback and support to the CVEC.
- **Allocate Funding:** Ensuring the CVEC has a reasonable budget to plan and organize programming and efforts to support student civic and voter empowerment is critical.
- **Foster Whole-Campus Buy-In:** While folks in student affairs absolutely are appropriate leaders of this work, consider ways to create whole-campus buy-in – especially academic partnerships and opportunities for community-engaged learning and research.
- **Encourage and Support Coalition Work:** Many campuses establish a coalition to support this work. Institutionalize the coalition in your campus structure. Be present. By attending a meeting and engaging directly, you offer the work credence and credibility.
- **Be Vocal and Visible:** Presidents, Deans of Students, and other visible figures can make a big difference in cultivating student awareness of and excitement for democracy.
- **Talk About and Be About It:** Participants in the study indicated their institutions were adept at proclaiming civic engagement as a priority but lacked true investment.
- **Embed Voter Education:** Campuses should own their role in supporting voter education efforts by embedding voter education and access into campus functions.
- **Celebrate Progress:** This work is often thankless and can be very stressful. Consider opportunities to celebrate the work on your campus in formal and informal ways.
- **Year-Round Emphasis:** It would be tempting to only think about democracy in the fall of presidential election years. Thinking about it year-round is an important practice.
- **Connect with Election Officials:** Ensuring connectivity between the cabinet and election officials (state and local) is a key practice for ensuring strong relations.

- **Join Your Colleagues:** Through associations, state systems, and various organizations, you can join with colleagues who are also attempting to prioritize this work:
 - 1.1 Campus Compact invites Presidents to sign the “[Action Statement](#)” to affirm commitment to the public purposes of higher education.
 - 1.2 The Institute for Citizens & Scholars [College Presidents for Civic Preparedness](#) is a consortium to advance free expression, civil discourse, and critical inquiry.
 - 1.3 The Constructive Dialogue Institute is partnering with Credo on [the 2024 Leadership Institute](#), advancing free speech and inclusion at the cabinet-level.
 - 1.4 Explore the [Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement](#) through the American Council on Education to prepare educated, engaged citizens, strengthen democratic values, and more.
 - 1.5 The Campus Vote Project and NASPA recognize “[Voter Friendly Campuses](#).”

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