Graduating Students into Voters

Overcoming the Psychological Barriers Faced by Student Voters
A behavioral science approach

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Look inside to find:

Why students may fail to register and vote, based on ideas42's behavioral science research

Evidence-based solutions college leaders can use to improve the effectiveness of their registration and turnout efforts

What is Behavioral Science and Behavioral Design?

Program and policy designers must make numerous assumptions about human behavior. Most of the time, they assume that people are rational decision-makers, able and willing to calculate the costs and benefits of every choice, and to consistently follow through on their developed intentions. This assumption also permeates colleges and universities. For instance, policy-makers assume students will overcome minor hassles to complete the FAFSA in order to receive financial aid. Colleges assume that providing information about the importance of attendance will help students show up to class. This kind of thinking is often flawed, and in some cases is built on false assumptions.

Though we may wish to be, humans are not always perfect decision-makers. We use fallible rules of thumb or succumb to biases and self-control problems when making decisions and taking actions. We procrastinate and struggle to resist temptations. We are sidetracked by tiny hassles. We look around to see how our friends and neighbors behave and often just follow along. Research has convincingly shown that these and many other influences on our behavior are frequently overlooked in program and policy design, despite being predictable and systematic. We can deliver better results by considering these influences and using them to design programs and policies that account for the ways we actually behave.

These behavioral insights arise from the fields of psychology and behavioral economics. Along with allied domains, this body of research is known as behavioral science. Behavioral design is an approach to program and policy design that leverages insights from this research to improve outcomes by accounting for the psychological factors that impact our decisions and actions.

How Behavioral Science Can Help Students Register and Vote

To live up to the fundamentally American dictum of a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," all people must act to elect it. The low rate of political participation among college-aged youth threatens this tenet of our democracy. Behavioral science can help to integrate students into our democracy by illuminating the psychological barriers they face, and by designing interventions that overcome those barriers. In the summer and fall of 2015, ideas42 conducted an extensive literature review to inform our proprietary behavioral mapping process, which resulted in hypotheses about the behavioral barriers faced by student voters and administrators. To test these hypotheses, we interviewed more than 80 people, including students, administrators, university presidents, and civic engagement practitioners. In this brief, we summarize our findings and offer program design recommendations. Our hope is that college administrators and student leaders will use these actionable guidelines to improve their registration and turnout efforts on campus. Armed with these principles, we believe colleges and universities can successfully execute on their mission to educate civically-engaged youth.

About ideas42

At ideas42 we believe that a deep understanding of human behavior and why people make the decisions they do will help us improve million of lives. We use insights from behavioral science to create innovative solutions to tough problems in economic mobility, health, education, criminal justice, consumer finance, energy efficiency and international development. We're a nonprofit that has a wide range of partnerships with governments, foundations, NGOs and corporations. Our impact is global with more than 50 active projects in the United States and 17 countries around the world.

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About the Foundation for Civic Leadership

The Foundation for Civic Leadership (FCL) is a grant-making, nonprofit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. FCL strives to improve the next generation of civic engagement by removing barriers so that more students are able to participate in civic life. Programs that FCL supports include funded public service fellowship opportunities, research on student civic engagement, and promoting civic engagement best practices among higher education institutions.

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How To Use This Brief

This brief has two sections: one discussing common barriers to voting, and one identifying solutions. They can be read in either order. Use the graphic below to decide where to start.

I want to UNDERSTAND why students do or don't vote.

Read Section 1:
"How Students Decide Whether to Register and Vote (or not)"
on page 4.

This section describes eight behavioral barriers students face when deciding whether or not to register and vote. These barriers fall into three categories: **(1)** New Voters, Not Youth Voters; **(2)** Identity and Self-Expression; **(3)** Psychological Distance

I want PROGRAM IDEAS to help students vote.

Read Section 2:
"Design Principles to Register and Turn Out Students"
on page 11.

This section details nine behavioral design principles that can help to overcome the behavioral barriers. They are ordered by when they can be implemented, from summer through Election Day.

Section 1:

How Students Decide Whether to Register and Vote (or not)

Through our research we identified three categories of behavioral barriers, yielding eight insights. In *Section 2: Design Principles to Register and Turn Out Students*, we describe design principles created to overcome these barriers.

1 New Voters, Not Youth Voters	**2** Identity and Self-Expression	**3** Psychological Distance
1a. Students are uncertain about the details and implications of registering and voting	**2a.** Most students do not view themselves as "voters"	**3a.** Students do not think concretely enough about voting
1b. Students are insecure about their level of political knowledge	**2b.** Students may be uncomfortable registering at school and unsure how to register at home	**3b.** Students do not link political participation and their everyday experiences
1c. Students overestimate the difficulty of registration and voting	**2c.** Voting is not visible on campus, so students don't think it's common	

1. New Voters, Not Youth Voters

We can better help students vote when viewing them as new to the process rather than just young.

Most students gain the right to vote at a transitional time in their lives. Many are on the verge of adulthood, living away from home for the first time, and experiencing new responsibilities and freedoms. Though researchers and politicians have traditionally differentiated students from other voters on the basis of their youth, we find this characterization obscures the true barriers they face. Rather, it is the novelty of the voting process, their new residence, or a new and developing identity that largely determines whether they vote or not. We know that when so-called "youth voters" are successfully reached at their places of residence with Get Out The Vote (GOTV) efforts, they're just as likely to vote as older adults.[1] It is their "newness," and the anxiety, unfamiliarity, and confusion that accompany it, that gets in the way of students voting. Below, we present the barriers implied by this new insight.

1a. Students are uncertain about the details and implications of registering and voting.

Research suggests that when we experience ambiguity and uncertainty about a choice, we will shy away from it.[2] As new voters, students are experiencing ambiguity and uncertainty about the electoral process. They don't know how to vote, whether registering at home or school will impact their residential status or financial aid, whether they need to vote on every issue, or what the voting experience will be like. Students feel as though making a mistake with this governmental process could have dire consequences. Rather than risk messing up, they choose not to participate at all.

1b. Students are insecure about their level of political knowledge.

Many students believe they don't know enough to participate and many avoid asking questions about voting and politics as a result. In particular, students believe they should not vote on *any* issue unless they are informed about *all* of the issues. In fact, many incorrectly believe they must vote on every ballot item for their vote to count. Interestingly, students tend to view voting like they view academic tests: you shouldn't just guess or leave blanks—you ought to be informed. One student summed up this perspective articulately: he said, "voting is not a multiple choice test."

Students license themselves to disengage from politics because they think that "getting smart" enough to vote on the issues would take an immense amount of time. Most students are extremely busy, or at least feel pressure to seem so. Some students use that fact as a self-serving avoidance strategy. Not having the time to "get smart" allows them to avoid political action, thus avoiding

the anxiety and insecurity that often surrounds a difficult or controversial choice. While a lack of knowledge may be a problem in and of itself, unrealistic expectations about what makes a student "smart enough" to vote can also keep them from the polls.

1c. Students overestimate the difficulty of registration and voting.

Registration and voting frequently involve a series of annoying hassles. Something as simple as not having a stamp to mail a registration form or needing to look up the address of their polling place can be enough to derail students from following through on their intentions to register and vote.[3] Students who have completed the notoriously tedious and complex FAFSA may be likely to believe that another government-run process—registering to vote—is similarly difficult. This—and other factors—leads students to vastly overestimate how hard it is to register and vote.

THE IMPACT OF MOVING

3.75x

What underlies the relationship between registering to vote and age? It's no secret that older Americans are more likely to be registered to vote than younger Americans, but the reason might not be what you expect. Ansolabehere et al. (2012) contend that registration has a lot to do with how frequently people move (and as a result, how frequently they need to change or update their registration). Young people move a lot, and older people move relatively infrequently. **18-24 year-olds are 3.75 times more likely to move than Americans 40+ in any given year, but the actual probability that someone registers to vote, independent of whether they have moved, is constant across people's lives.**[4] This insight helps us to pinpoint a real problem related to registration for students: namely, that they move a lot. Giving students the guidance and support they need to register when they move can help.

Being new to voting means students face many uncertainties and hassles that can deter them. Ameliorating hassles and uncertainty is important, but is not the whole solution. Helping students adopt identities as voters can increase their resilience in the face of hassles and institutional barriers. In the next section we investigate the interplay among identity, self-expression, and action, regardless of the costs.

2. Identity and Self-Expression

We can help more students vote when we understand that voting is as much about identity and self-expression as costs and benefits.

For many of us, voting is more than a rational weighing of costs and benefits or an isolated attempt to influence an election's outcome. Instead, it's a statement about our identity and a form of self-expression. Failing to account for this may explain why previous interventions that sought only to reduce the cost of voting haven't delivered an electoral transformation. The following three insights are built on this understanding.

2a. Most students do not view themselves as voters.

In a 2015 Harvard Institute of Politics poll, only one in three 18-24 year-olds surveyed agreed with the statement, "Voting is a part of who I am."[5] Why is this so important? Because when we think of ourselves as voters—when "voting is part of who we are"—we are more likely to vote than when we just think of voting as an action we perform.

Why don't students think of themselves as voters? One simple reason is because they have not voted before. Another possibility is that they think of voters as being people unlike them, such as their highly politically-oriented peers or older adults. For most young people this suggests that voting is "not for someone like me," but rather for the "policy kids" or "adults." Changing this perception— making voting seem like a part of the "student" identity and normal for all students to do—is perhaps the most important challenge to overcome in order to help more students vote.

2b. Students may be uncomfortable registering at school and unsure how to register at home.

Identity also plays a large role in where a student chooses to register. When a student who moves away for college wants to register to vote, she faces the complicated decision of whether to register at home or school. It is common for students to feel uneasy registering in a place they have just moved. Registering in a new place may feel like abandoning your roots and coming to terms with the possibility that you may never return to your hometown. This is a particularly uncomfortable choice to make at a time when so many other parts of life are changing. A Northwestern University survey showed that out-of-state students preferred voting absentee in their home state 2:1,[6] suggesting the importance of home-state identity.

When universities explicitly frame the choice as "register here or not at all" (or implicitly do this by making in-state registration vastly easier), they may be unknowingly disempowering out-of-state students who feel most connected to their hometown or home state. Allowing and even encouraging

absentee voting for those who want to vote "at home" will enable those students to vote in a way that is consistent with their existing identity.

2c. **Voting is not visible on campus, so students don't think it is common.**

Throughout our primary research, we heard that voting and election-related activities aren't visible on campus. This is troublesome because people often look to peers and the visible cues around them for guidance on how to behave. If a student just arriving on campus seeks clues as to whether he should register to vote in the upcoming election, he is unlikely to find any, and may conclude that voting is not the norm.

Norm perceptions are powerful influences on behavior. We are more likely to participate in an activity when we perceive it to be common among our peers, and less likely to participate in it when we perceive it to be uncommon among our peers. Consider this example: though youth are less likely to vote than other segments of the population, they are equally likely to boycott a product or sign a petition.[7] Why might this be? For one, occurrences of youth protests are often very visible and memorable. Because we can easily recollect images of rebellious youth protesters, we are prone to overestimate how often young people protest. As a result of this overestimation, protesting is perceived as a norm for young people and thus they are more likely to conform. Unlike protesting, student voting is rarely visible and doesn't create vivid memories for onlookers. Making voting more visible will make it seem more common, and go a long way towards establishing a norm of political participation to which other students will conform.

THE POWER OF DESCRIPTIVE NORMS

5.45%

Research shows that we frequently act in ways consistent with how we think our peers behave, especially when we're unsure how to behave ourselves. Emphasizing that a behavior is common (i.e. describing the norm) can increase the likelihood that an individual will act in accordance. **Gerber and Rogers (2007) assessed the impact of descriptive norms on voter turnout and found that telling people that voting is common increased the number of individuals who said they intended to vote by 5.45 percent.**[8] For instance, the message "While most students do not vote, you can change this on Election Day" communicates an undesirable norm ("most students do not vote") and can backfire.[9,10,11] On the other hand, messages that instead convey the desired norm ("Join millions of other student voters at the polls on Election Day") have proven successful in numerous real-world environments.[12,13]

Adopting a voter identity is crucial to overcoming hassles in registering to vote and voting. But without an understanding of how political issues affect their everyday lives, students may fail to successfully follow through on their intentions. In our final barriers section, we explain how psychological distance affects students' desire to vote, and their ability to execute on that desire.

3. Psychological Distance

We can help more students form and follow through on an intention to vote by making the details of voting more concrete and by linking abstract political issues to their everyday lives.

> *For many students, the details and consequences of voting are too abstract. This "psychological distance" depresses student registration and voting, independent of the perceived importance of voting. In fact, the majority of students we interviewed stated that voting is important, expressed the desire to vote, and felt that they should. Because voting is an infrequent act that many students have not yet experienced, however, they are unable to generate a simple plan to execute on this desire to vote. Combined with the perceived disconnect between political issues and their everyday lives, many students fail to form or execute on an intention to vote.*

3a. Students don't think concretely enough about voting.

Many students intend to vote but fail to follow through because they don't plan out the logistics. They don't consider *when* to vote (Before, after, or between classes?), *how* to get there (Is there a bus? Can I walk?), *where* the polling place is (Is there one on campus or nearby?), and *with whom* they will go (Are my friends going? Can we go together?). This is because, as new voters, students often lack knowledge of the process. Without this knowledge it is hard to anticipate and overcome obstacles on Election Day. Concretizing the act of voting can help overcome this barrier. Interventions such as asking students to make a simple plan (that accounts for when, where, how, and with whom they'll vote) have been shown to strengthen students' commitment to voting and encourage follow-through.

3b. Students do not link political participation and their everyday experiences.

When we experience something frequently or personally, we can say it is psychologically close to us. That is, we picture it in our minds with all its details and specificity. Conversely, new experiences are often pictured vaguely and with abstraction; in other words, they are psychologically distant. Voting is psychologically distant for many students. It is a new process, and they perceive it abstractly. In fact, many students do not see voting as a practical activity that has personal, real-world implications. Rather, voting seems like an "adult" task that requires adopting ideological views that feel too abstract. Moreover, individual candidates fail to make sufficient links between their platforms and the issues that impact students' lives. This is illustrated well by the national debate over the minimum wage: it's an issue that would impact many students' lives concretely, but its abstractness makes it hard for many students to engage. To lessen psychological distance, administrators should avoid abstraction and make salient the relevance of politics to issues students care about.

THE POWER OF MAKING A SIMPLE PLAN

9.1%

In our competitive, high-stakes and sometimes nasty political climate, it might come as a surprise that one of the best methods to get people to vote is entirely innocuous. In one study of over 287,000 registered voters, researchers saw an **increased turnout of 4.1%—and up to 9.1% for single-voter eligible households—simply by asking voters what time they would vote, where they would be coming from, and what they would be doing beforehand.**[14] These questions helped them to form an implementation intention: a simple plan that helped them to concretely think about how to execute on their intention. Meanwhile, standard appeals to vote showed almost no effect.

From Barriers to Breakthroughs...

In the following section, we present a set of design principles to address the eight barriers we've identified above. These principles are the result of our rigorous, evidence-based behavioral design process.

Section 2:

Design Principles to Register and Turn Out Students

Below are nine design principles that can help to overcome the barriers discussed in Section 1.

As students arrive on campus	First several weeks on campus	Final weeks before Election Day
Offer identity-consistent registration	Provide tangible benefits now	Empower student leaders
Reduce ambiguity and uncertainty	Make voting salient	Get students to make a simple plan
Make it nonpartisan	Reveal voting as a widespread norm	Normalize the "first vote" experience

Design Principles

If you read Section 1, you have a good sense of the behavioral factors that impact a student's decision to vote. Below, we offer design principles that school leaders can use to improve efforts focused on student registration and turnout.

As students arrive on campus

The first three principles, **in teal,** are things you can do before students arrive on campus.

First several weeks on campus

The next three principles, **in green,** are things you can do the first several weeks students are on campus.

Final weeks before Election Day

The final three principles, **in orange,** are things you can do in the final weeks before Election Day.

For each design principle, we present:

Design Principle

✓ **Do**   *The design principle explained in one sentence.*

✗ **Don't**

✓ How to make this principle a reality

✗ How to avoid common pitfalls

As students arrive on campus

When students arrive on campus, especially for the first time, they are confronted with new and unfamiliar surroundings. It's important to present registration and voting in a way that accommodates their mindset at this time of transition. By making registration identity-consistent, allowing students to register easily at the address of their choosing, reducing the ambiguity and uncertainty around the process, and ensuring nonpartisanship, you can offer students a smooth entry into our political process.

Offer identity-consistent registration

"It's your thing, do what you wanna do." — The Isley Brothers

✔ Do

Make registration easy and hassle free for both local and absentee.

- ✔ Say, "**Would you like to register here in [school's state], or in your home state? Either option only takes two minutes.**" This creates a forced choice moment that makes registration seem expected.

- ✔ **Make the moment of registration highly visible** and salient to cue up "student-as-voter" identity (See "Make Voting Salient").

- ✔ **Integrate registration into a standard process.** For example, offer easy registration opportunities when student get their photo IDs or during course registration.

- ✔ **Appeal to students' sense of pride.** Remind them they can represent their hometowns and states by voting.

- ✔ **Compile a list of FAQs about local and absentee registration and be prepared to answer them.** This website can help: http://www.brennancenter.org/student-voting.

✘ Don't

- ✘ **Don't** pressure students to register locally.

- ✘ **Don't** present absentee registration as more difficult or full of hassles.

As students arrive on campus

Reduce ambiguity and uncertainty

"We're trained experts here to help you."

✓ Do

Provide basic information about the process and experience of registering and voting.

- **Give honest time estimates for every step of the process.** This will reduce ambiguity about how long it will take to register to vote, and it will promote action. You can tell students that registration takes only two minutes.

- **Give students an overview of the major steps** in the process from registration through Election Day.

- **Give students basic resources** that answer questions such as whether absentee registration would affect their financial aid or whether they need to de-register at home in order to register at school.

- **Concretize key information.** For example, hand out informational cards that give directions to the nearest polling place, detail dates and times the polls are open, and prompt students to make a plan to vote.

✕ Don't

- **Don't** emphasize that voting is a difficult and complicated choice. Students know that voting is important and already treat it as such. Additional pressure could lead them to abstain.

- **Don't** use jargon that a new voter would not understand. If a technical term must be used, make sure to define it clearly.

As students arrive on campus

Make it nonpartisan

"It's not how you vote, it's that you vote."

✓ Do

Encourage students of all viewpoints to participate.

✗ Don't

- **Offer students nonpartisan resources,** like ballot guides from The League of Women Voters or other nonpartisan groups.

- **Emphasize the identity that all students share as voters** and participants in democracy, not the divisions they may have from voting for different candidates.

- **Tell student volunteers to leave their pins and colors at home.** They should dress like a regular day in school and in nonpartisan colors.

- **Emphasize the value of the act of voting** rather than the choice of candidate or the election's outcome.

- **Don't** juxtapose red and blue alone, as they have partisan connotations.

- **Don't** allow any student or faculty volunteers to wear partisan paraphernalia at school-organized registration events.

First several weeks on campus

When students are getting settled on campus, they are especially attuned to their new surroundings. They look around to see what others are doing and trying to find out what is normal and where they fit in. By making voting salient and distributing voting swag, making voting feel common for all types of students, and providing small tangible benefits—like free pizza—at registration, you can make voting part of normal student life.

Provide tangible benefits now

"Don't underestimate the power of free pizza."

✔ Do
Capture attention and prompt immediate action.

- ✔ **Offer free food and swag** to attract students to registration events. This will engage students who would otherwise not necessarily be drawn to a registration drive.

- ✔ **Make events salient.** Hold events offering free food in high traffic areas. Play music and post large signs to attract the attention of passersby.

- ✔ **Make benefits scarce.** Offer food or swag on a limited-time basis. This can help motivate students to take action now.

✖ Don't

- ✖ **Don't** integrate registration into student activities fairs. This could equate voting with the French Club, for example, and may overload students with sign-up requests.

First several weeks on campus

Make voting salient

"I'll believe it when I see it."

✓ Do
Expand the visibility of voting and political engagement.

- **Distribute visible voting swag to students.** This could be bags, drawstring backpacks, pins, or t-shirts, for example. Allow students to customize them—for example, by writing on a t-shirt why they are voting—to make it more personal.

- **Create signs that emphasize action and norms.** For example, describe when and where to vote combined with a message such as, "Join fellow [college name] voters and be a voter on Election Day."

- **Make room for student groups and clubs** to create swag and organize around the issues that matter to them.

- **Let registered students show off.** For example, give them "I registered" temporary tattoos or a small American flag or sticker to post in a public area.

✗ Don't

- **Don't** distribute voting swag to only the most politically engaged students. Don't leave out non-political student groups.

- **Don't** use partisan voting swag.

First several weeks on campus

Reveal voting as a widespread norm
"Everyone's doing it."

✓ Do
Make voting feel common, like going to class or to the dining hall.

✗ Don't

- **Emphasize that many students are already voters.** If your turnout rate is high, emphasize it. If your turnout rate is low, choose a different reference point, such as the absolute number of students ("thousands of your peers voted in the last election").

- **Appeal to students' identities as voters.** Appeals to identity ("be a voter") rather than actions ("go vote") have proven most effective in promoting turnout.[15]

- **Spotlight diverse student leaders.** Encourage exemplars to make public their intention to vote, including athletes, club presidents, and other student leaders.

- **Don't** leave voter registration up to partisan groups. This may alienate less politically engaged students.

- **Don't** emphasize that many students don't vote.

- **Don't** make voting seem hard or tedious.

Final weeks before Election Day

As Election Day approaches, many students may be registered but still on the fence about participating. They may be nervous, unsure how they will vote, unclear on what others are doing, and unsure about what they should do. Many students need help overcoming the jitters and uncertainty of voting for the first time—whether at the polls or by mail. You can help them by using student leaders to support and follow up with their peers, by having students build simple voting plans, and by normalizing the "first vote" experience.

Empower student leaders
"The messenger matters."

✓ Do
Encourage a diverse group of student leaders to rally their peers.

- **Train existing student leaders.** Train RAs, tutors, or other student leaders to build voter engagement into their existing programming.

- **Provide school-branded registration materials.** These materials can be distributed to clubs and sports teams, or provided in dining halls and other public areas.

- **Make it personal.** Encourage one-on-one outreach at two key points. First, encourage registration as students arrive on campus. Second, encourage turnout just before Election Day.

- **Create accountability.** Student leaders should tell their peers they will follow up after Election Day to ask about the voting experience.

✗ Don't

- **Don't** pressure students to vote. Instead, communicate that it is normal for students to vote, and that peer leaders are here to help.

- **Don't** encourage peer leaders to wear partisan paraphernalia or deliver partisan messages.

Final weeks before Election Day

Get students to make a simple plan

"A goal without a plan is just a wish."
—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

✔ Do

Help students to create a simple plan to follow through on their intention to vote.

✘ Don't

- **Help students make a simple voting plan at registration.** Ask students where and when they'll vote, how they'll get there, and who they'll go with. Then, email them or text them their responses within a week of Election Day.

- **Make voting plans public.** Encourage students to post their voting plans in a public, high-traffic place.

- **Encourage students to form groups** and go to the polls together.

- **Keep plans simple.** A voting plan should fit on a 3x5 card and be no longer than 50 words.

- **Don't** assume students know where their polling place is or how to get there.

- **Don't** encourage students to make complex plans.

Final weeks before Election Day

Normalize the "first vote" experience
"There's a first time for everything."

✔ Do
Normalize basic questions about registration and voting.

- ✔ **Treat voting as it is: a completely new subject.** It's better to treat everyone as a beginner and provide lots of basic instruction.

- ✔ **Provide simple FAQs about registration and voting.** Post them in public, high-traffic places like residence halls, cafeterias, or bathroom stall doors. Ensure they are readily accessible.

- ✔ **Create an honest student voting narrative.** Have students who have voted before tell the story of their first vote, including their thoughts, fears, and anxieties. These could be text, short videos, or shared live.

- ✔ **Launch a #myfirstvote campaign.** Encourage public sharing of these #myfirstvote stories through social media. Get students, faculty, and school administrators to share their stories. Encourage them to ask their family or mentors about their first vote.

✖ Don't

- ✖ **Don't** let the politically oriented students ask all the questions. Their fascination with the nuances of the political process can exacerbate the anxieties and insecurities of less knowledgeable peers.

- ✖ **Don't** overload students with information—stick to the information they need to take action.

Conclusion

This brief has presented behavioral insights about the barriers to student political engagement and has offered design principles with the potential to increase participation. Though some insights and recommendations are common-sense best practices that won't surprise anyone who works regularly with students, others are more nuanced, and many may be counterintuitive. We hope every college campus leader who reads this brief will discover something new and valuable for her quest to boost civic participation on campus.

Of course, registration and turnout are only intermediate outcomes on the longer road to increased civic learning and engagement. American higher education plays a fundamental role in our democracy – preparing young adults to be integral participants in public life. Voting is one critical element of that mission, but certainly not the only one. For our society to thrive, we need to increase a broad spectrum of civic behaviors. If electoral participation spurs civic engagement and civic learning, then we have a fundamental social need to graduate students into voters.

Traditionalists might argue that increased civic learning must precede participation to create lasting change. Insights from psychology and voter engagement research suggest an alternative view: voting increases civic learning. By voting, students can overcome their insecurities about political engagement, develop a political identity, and reduce the psychological distance between their everyday routines and political issues. In fact, the act of voting itself may create a desire to be politically knowledgeable. Hence, increasing voting behavior could be the key to increasing civic learning. Furthermore, increasing civic participation among students will ensure that policy-makers consider their interests alongside other groups who currently turn out *en masse.* This alone may be worth the effort, independent of the impact on civic learning.

The time is right to advance our collective knowledge regarding civic learning and engagement. Let's build a solid civic foundation for the next generation of citizens.

Did you know?

Section 487(a)(23) of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that references the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) **requires that "covered" institutions must make a good faith effort to distribute voter registration forms to students.** The definition of a covered school can be found here: http://tinyurl.com/studentvoter.

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