

Engaging Student Workers in Elections

5 TIPS

For Launching a Student
Service Project

With the right preparation, student service programs can provide high-impact help with critical tasks, improve voter satisfaction, and give young people the chance to experience the work and planning that go into an election. This white paper will help you plan a program that engages the next generation in the electoral process. You'll learn how to:

1. Perform a needs assessment
2. Define and create the student positions
3. Recruit motivated student workers
4. Design an Election Day experience with impact
5. Build good will for a sustainable program

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It's well known—jurisdictions across the country are facing a shortage of poll workers. In its 2014 report, the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration put it bluntly: "One of the signal weaknesses of the system of election administration in the United States is the absence of a dependable, well-trained trained corps of poll workers."¹ That spells real trouble. Delayed openings, long lines at the polls, mix-ups with ballots, and struggles with equipment are all staffing-related problems that have made for unwelcome headlines.

As the commission noted, the responsibility for staffing the polls has fallen heavily—too heavily—on the nation's retirees. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has found that 20% of poll workers are over 70 years of age, and in some jurisdictions it is much higher (the National Social Science Association pegged the average age of Florida poll workers at 78). But the major time commitment of election work makes recruiting and retaining election workers a big challenge.

Now the good news—according to the EAC, half the states allow volunteers as young as 16 to serve as poll workers.² What if jurisdictions could create a public service program for students to lend a hand on Election Day? Many are already blazing the trail, partnering with schools and colleges to harness youthful enthusiasm and technical know-how.

1 Presidential Commission on Election Administration, 2014. The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf>.

2 U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2007. Compendium of State Poll Worker Requirements. Retrieved from http://www.eac.gov/election_management_resources/poll_worker_best_practices.aspx.

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1

Perform a needs assessment

A successful student service project needs a solid foundation. The first step is to perform a needs assessment—that is, determine your priorities and decide on the tasks where students can have the most impact. Conducting a needs assessment doesn't have to be a formal or complicated process—it can be as simple as gathering your stakeholders together to brainstorm their responses to the sentence, "If we had more time or expertise, we would _____."

Your stakeholders should include your staff, of course, but don't forget to gather input from current long-term election workers such as your polling place inspectors and Election Day coordinators. Not only will you learn more about what your community needs, but you will build in support for your student service project, helping your current poll workers feel excited about the students instead of viewing them as competition.

And speaking of the students—have you reached out yet to a local school or college to form your volunteer partnership? If not, it's time to do some research. Most schools have volunteer and public service programs that are always looking for projects. Student government and service clubs are another good bet.

Once you find a good match, be sure you meet with the volunteer coordinator and understand the needs on the student side. These days, most students are looking to build their resumes with volunteer work that helps them develop their skills and demonstrate their competency. Some may be motivated by a genuine interest in government, while others simply wish to rack up a few required community service hours as part of their college vitae. This is also the time to work out logistics such as how many students to expect, set expectations about training and transportation, and schedule shifts for students who have classes on Election Day.

2 Define and create student positions

Jurisdictions have created successful student service projects that include staffing the polls, providing Election Day technical support for voting equipment on-site or via a help desk, inspecting ballots, assisting with testing and mock Election Day scenarios—even acting as bilingual or multilingual election judges. Once you have defined the projects, take the time to write position descriptions. This exercise will help you with recruitment as you think through details such as:

- Job title
- Job responsibilities
- Qualifications
- Location(s)
- Time commitment
- Benefits (such as stipend, lunch, t-shirt, or certificate)
- Supervisor
- Contact information

With the positions in hand, the volunteer coordinator at your partner school should be able to take it from there, interviewing interested students and arranging for them to attend training and show up on time and ready to work.

3 Recruit motivated student workers

When the hustle and bustle of Election Day is underway, you don't have time to waste with volunteers who just take up space. According to a study by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)³, the federal agency that coordinates national volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps, volunteer programs fail for a number of reasons, including:

- Not matching volunteer skills with assignments
- Failing to recognize volunteer contributions
- Failing to prioritize training and managing volunteers

Let's face it—no one likes to feel like their skills are not being put to good use. If you want to attract bright and motivated volunteers, you will need to create opportunities for students to complete clearly stated objectives, be part of a team effort, and see the impact of their work on the community. The EAC recommends choosing personable staff to conduct the training and pairing student volunteers with experienced election workers who are open and friendly. Word of mouth is your best recruitment tool. If it's positive, your program will begin to grow roots.

³ Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2009. The New Volunteer Workforce. Retrieved from http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_new_volunteer_workforce

4 Design an Election Day experience with impact

You've laid the groundwork, but you still need to bring it home. The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin has found that student poll workers find the most satisfaction in learning about the behind-the-scenes hard work of the voting process. Students also report being impressed by the passion of staff and experienced poll workers for their civic duties.

You can help ensure that students have an enjoyable and meaningful experience on Election Day. Stay organized. Keep your commitment regarding job assignments, and ensure that their time is well utilized. Make sure they are thanked for their service. Who knows—a good experience may create a life-long volunteer.

5 Build good will for a sustainable program

Depending on your partnership with the school, you may have the opportunity to meet with the students after the election, thank them again, and discuss what was learned. Such discussions will build good word-of-mouth and provide ideas for improving the service project for the next time around. If you have the students' email addresses, you may also wish to send a thank-you email with links for volunteering again in the future.

Many students will want to share their activities on social media. It's a good idea to get familiar with the laws of your state regarding photography in or near the polling place and brief students about the reasons for it. Make sure there are some photo opportunities for them so they can share. You may even want to embrace a hashtag campaign so that volunteers across your jurisdiction can see and share with one another in the course of their day.

Summary

In addition to providing you with much-needed help on Election Day, student service programs increase public support for the election by involving a wider cross-section of the community. The volunteer hours help young people build their skills and competency as full participants in the electoral process, and create the next generation committed to America's civic future.

About Hart InterCivic. Hart InterCivic is a full service election solutions innovator, partnering with state and local governments nationwide to consistently deliver secure, accurate and reliable elections.

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