

## Better Campus Elections by Del Suggs

It's a problem on campuses across the country. Whether you have 600 students, or 60,000 students, it seems like almost nobody bothers to vote in campus elections. You might have great candidates or you might have terrible candidates. It doesn't seem to matter, because nobody votes anyway.

We're all too familiar with apathy on campus. It's a challenge just to get students to go to class, much less attend a program or event. When it comes to getting students to vote in campus elections, you might as well just forget it.

Except you can't forget it. Elections are important. The leaders your students select will set the tone for the entire campus. These student leaders may make great decisions to set your college on a new course towards service and involvement. Or they may set out to capture the "Top-Ten Party School" title. Elections are important.

There are a lot of ways to get more students to participate in your campus elections. Check out these suggestions.

### **Make voting simple**

The first technique for improving your election participation is to go online. If you are still using paper ballots on your campus, you will be relieved that you will no longer have to count all those votes by hand.

Consider this: did you know you can hold elections with your campus Blackboard or Moodle system? You'll have to work with your campus technology department to set it up, but many schools elect their campus leaders via Blackboard.

If you can't utilize your campus Blackboard system, here's another idea: Google Drive, Survey Monkey or Zoomerang. If your student services department has an account with any of the online survey sites, you can use them for balloting.

First, go to your survey account and create an electronic ballot. You can phrase your questions as multiple choice, and have each candidate as a possible answer. You can utilize the logic programming so that when students answer specific questions ("Are you a Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, or Graduate Student") then the survey will only allow them to answer certain questions. For example, you can use this method to insure that only seniors vote for the senior representatives for Student Senate.

There are also other safeguards you can put in place to limit election tampering, stuffing the ballot, and other election fraud. You should always have a warning at the beginning of the electronic ballot with warnings such as:

"You are only allowed to vote once. If you attempt to log-on

and vote a second time, all of your votes will be invalidated."

Even if you don't have the ability to track voters and determine if they are voting multiple times, that warning alone will deter most students from attempting to vote a second time.

You can also use specific online election software for your elections. There are free software programs available like "BallotBin," as well as inexpensive paid programs like "Balloteer." You might want to invest in your own elections software. Perhaps you can convince your Dean or President to make the purchase with school funds and use it for Faculty Senate elections, too.

Whether you use Blackboard, Moodle, your Survey Monkey account, or install software like Balloteer, you've still got to get students to vote. Here are a few quick suggestions to get your students to complete that ballot.

First, hold voting over several days, but not too long. It's important to have a sense of urgency over your elections. You could have two or three days of voting, but no more than a week. If you give students too much time, they will never get around to voting.

Second, send out emails to all of your students reminding them to vote. Include the link to the online ballot in the email, so they can click and vote easily.

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Third, announce and remind your students to vote on your Facebook pages and your Twitter feed. Always include that link to the online ballot.

Fourth, when you post banners and posters reminding students to vote, include a QR code on the poster which links to the online ballot. That way, a student can just whip out their smart phone, scan the QR code, and vote. You can't get any easier than that. You can create a QR code for free at [www.Goo.gl](http://www.Goo.gl) or [www.zxing.appspot.com](http://www.zxing.appspot.com).



### Getting Students to the Polls

If you still require that students vote at more traditional polling stations, then you've got to make an effort to get them there. That's your big challenge-- getting students to show up at the polls. I'd suggest that you do the same thing you do to get them to your programs and events: free food.

Entice your students to come and vote by providing free hot

dogs or hamburgers. But the free food isn't for everyone, just those students who vote. You can make the food available outside the polls, or give voters a coupon or certificate that they can exchange for the food. Hot dogs and hamburgers have an additional enticement, too. When they are cooked on the grill, that smell just fills the air. Students from a block away will come to vote once they smell that barbecue smoke!

If you can't cook burgers on the grill, then give away pizza. That's something you can do inside if the weather is bad, and it will always draw a crowd to vote.

Think about making your elections part of a larger event. How about this: don't just elect your student representatives, but also decide who has the best pizza in town. You can do this for free, too.

Here's how. Contact your local pizza restaurants, and let them know that your students will be selecting the "Best Pizza On Campus". If the store wants to participate, then have the store will deliver 10 pizzas to your student center at 11:30 am on the day of your elections.

Each student will then get to sample slices of pizza from each restaurant. When they get their ballot for the student election, they will also be able to vote on the best pizza. After you count the votes, you'll create a certificate for the winning pizza restaurant that

says "Voted Best Pizza On Campus" by the students at your school. You will have gotten students to vote, fed them for free, and made the winning restaurant very happy.

There are other ways to get students to vote. Give away door prizes, or include a random drawing in addition to the voting. Students will get free gifts just for showing up and voting.

And here is one more idea: use novelties to draw your students to the polls. You know how much students love balloon artists, body painters, wax hands, wacky photos, and all the wonderful novelty items that you bring to campus. Have your elections on the same day as these programs, and you'll have more voters than ever.

Campus elections are important. Students need to understand how democracy works, so that they can have a positive impact on their campus and on their government. Try some of these ideas, and see if they can help get your students to the polls.

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