

The Role of the Governing Board in Promoting Student Engagement and Responsibility

How community colleges can prepare our students to meet their obligations to society and be responsible stewards of our democracy.

By George R. Boggs and Michael H. Gavin



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THE INCREASED FOCUS ON STUDENT SUCCESS HAS expanded the role of community college trustees beyond the traditional functions of being stewards of balanced budgets, the construction and maintenance of buildings and grounds, and student enrollment trends. Today's trustees are active in setting goals for increasing student completion and transfer rates, closing achievement gaps, and monitoring the progression of their students. Of course, trustees must be careful to stay at the policy level, the “**what**” of what the college does. They leave the procedures, the “**how**” of implementation, to the administration, faculty, and staff. Trustees monitor progress through the questions they ask and the data they request.

Mission statements are developed and approved in response to the “**why**” of what we do. In addition to preparing students for careers or transfer to four-year institutions, students learn to think critically, appreciate the arts, understand the impact of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and learn about different cultures and the history that has shaped our civilization. However, there is an area that needs more attention. We must better prepare our students to meet their obligations to society and to be responsible stewards of our democracy.

The government of the United States is the oldest of the current world democracies. For most policy decisions, our government is a democratic republic in that eligible citizens vote for representatives to make government appointments and to determine the laws and regulations that govern us. For our form of government to be effective, citizens must participate, including our community college students. They must become informed about issues and where policymakers and political candidates stand on them – and most importantly, *they must vote*. The author of our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, believed that

a successful democracy was dependent upon the education of the general populace. Understanding how our government works and how important individual participation is should be outcomes of learning for every student at our institutions.

Most Americans do not understand just how fragile our democracy is and why it requires broad and continual participation from citizens. According to the Baker Center at Georgetown University, 32% of Americans ages 18-29 believe non-democracies can be preferable to democracies (Ladd, Tucker, & Kates, 2018). The partisan divide has become so extreme that policymakers are often unable to work together for the good of our country and our people. Some Americans do not believe that their vote will make any difference or state that they are too busy to learn about the issues or the beliefs and values of policymakers and political candidates. While two-thirds of college students voted in the 2020 election, the community college student voting rate was ten percentage points lower (Fersh, D., 2024). Students of color voted at a significantly lower percentage than white students (National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement, 2024). It is time for community colleges to double down on our efforts.

Many individuals do not appreciate or understand the struggles and sacrifices that those who came before us faced to obtain the right to vote. In the early history of our country, voting rights were based on property ownership, granting the sole power of government to white males over the age of 21 and of the Protestant religion. After the Civil War, African American men were given the right to vote by the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. It wasn't until 1920 that the 19th Amendment was approved, giving women the right to vote. Then, in 1947, Native Americans were granted the right to vote. In 1965, Congress banned the use of literacy tests, poll taxes, and other obstacles

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designed to keep people from voting. In 1971, recognizing that young Americans were serving in the military and risking their lives for our freedoms, the voting age was lowered to 18. The right to vote in America did not come easily. People fought and died for a voice in the decisions that affect them; we shouldn't risk losing what they fought so hard for by not supporting our democracy and not voting. Learning about the issues and voting are civic obligations for a well-functioning democracy.

Some of our students enroll in political science classes where issues are studied and debated. However, we are advocating for colleges to do more. Colleges can create other ways to engage students through campus organizations and events. Speakers can be invited to share their views on issues or to participate in debates or forums. Issues that are important to students include the economy, tuition costs, inflation, student indebtedness, abortion and reproductive rights, climate change, health care, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and gun violence and Second Amendment rights. Students can also participate in service learning or civic engagement projects focused on encouraging all eligible citizens in our communities to register and to vote. Although colleges can provide venues for discussion of important local, state, and national issues, ***we truly understand these discussions must remain nonpartisan.***

Colleges must, ***unapologetically***, be proactive in encouraging students to register to vote and actually to vote.

Education for All and more than 40 community college-related associations and state systems have endorsed a nonpartisan campaign to encourage student voting. Our campaign brief, available at <https://efastudentvote.org/>, provides a wealth of information to assist college leaders in promoting student civic

engagement and participation in our democracy. We stand ready to help with this important effort.

References

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