

Tech start-up helping colleges institutionalize voter registration on campus

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What if registering to vote as a college freshman were as commonplace as attending orientation or signing up for classes?

This is what the creators of TurboVote ^[1] — an up-and-coming tech startup that strives to make voter registration as easy and “awesome as renting a DVD from Netflix” — are hoping could happen in the near future.

The nonpartisan nonprofit has launched [The New Standard for Campus Voter Engagement](#) ^[2], an initiative to “institutionalize voting in the class registration or freshman orientation process of every college in America by fall 2014.”

Ten college and university presidents and 47 student body presidents have signed on, with the presidents pledging that their institutions will make an effort to provide all students with all the information and materials they need to vote in every election.

Colleges can partner with TurboVote ([founded by Harvard University graduate](#) ^[3] Seth Flaxman two years ago), in order to make reaching that goal possible.

After signing up (for free) on TurboVote, users fill out voter registration forms or vote by mail forms online. TurboVote prints the filled-out forms and mails them along with pre-stamped envelopes addressed to each user’s local voting election board. TurboVote also sends users texts and e-mail reminders when an election at any level of government is approaching — from the presidential election to a local school board race.

It costs \$1.60 per form, but if a student attends a college that partners with TurboVote, the institution pays the mailing fee and a small fixed sum that helps cover other costs.

Last year 58 colleges partnered with TurboVote. The startup is in the process of renewing those partnerships and hoping to reach 100 by September. In May the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation [announced](#) ^[4] it would invest \$1 million in TurboVote over three years.

“What’s very exciting about the technology is that it drastically lowers the barriers of institutionalizing voter registration,” said Sam Novey, who is the director of partnerships at TurboVote.

Around 11 million eligible voters ages 18 to 24 are in college, about a quarter of all eligible young voters, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. Voters from ages 18 to 29 represented 19 percent of all those who voted in the 2012 presidential election according to the early National Exit Poll conducted by Edison Research, an increase of one percentage point from 2008.

Sometimes registering to vote can present the biggest hurdle for young people. Or, if a student is registered in his or her home district, sending absentee ballots can be inconvenient and complicated. There are different rules from state to state, forms can be difficult to find online, and it is easy to miss deadlines

“In many cases if you have to navigate the labyrinth of forms to vote absentee, that can be enough of an impediment that you might not make that effort,” said Lewis Duncan, president of Rollins College in Florida, which partnered with TurboVote last year.

Last year Rollins registered 20 percent of students for TurboVote by setting up tables with laptops and iPads at new student orientation and listing it on the online check-in for students, said Micki Meyer, the director of community engagement at Rollins.

TurboVote’s new challenge, and what the New Standard advocates for, is going beyond tabling to integrate voter registration into a “bottleneck process,” like course registration, where registering will be the default, and students will have to “opt out” of it rather than “opt in,” Novey said.

Novey envisions colleges implementing TurboVote into freshman orientation, similar to the way programs such as [AlcoholEdu](#) ^[5] or Sexual AssaultEdu are used on many campuses. Freshmen are required to complete the online education programs or they may risk grades being held.

If colleges around the country can institutionalize alcohol education programs, they can also institutionalize the “90-second process” of signing up for TurboVote, Novey said.

Of course the spread of alcohol education programs has been in part by colleges making them obligatory. Duncan said he would never make signing up for TurboVote mandatory. But colleges are taking the steps to ensure every student at least knows about the option.

The first step administrators can do to make this happen is to appoint a staff member to be responsible for supporting institutionalization effort, Novey said.

At Miami Dade College in Florida — one of the first institutions to introduce TurboVote on campus — that person is Josh Young. Young, the director of Miami Dade College's Institute for Civic Engagement and Democracy, said his efforts last year taught him that voting registration needs to be embedded in key processes like admissions. Around 3,000 Miami Dade students registered to vote through TurboVote last year. But with 174,000 students — making the eight-campus community college the largest in the nation — that number is relatively small.

“What TurboVote has been telling us is that you can do presentations, pass out fliers, hold events, but the key is really to make this a part of the process that students pass through when engaging with institutions on the web,” Young said.

Young received approval from Miami Dade President Eduardo J. Padrón to meet with the college registrar about embedding TurboVote into college websites. For instance, after finishing the online admissions process, there may be a pop-up window prompting students to sign up, Young said.

In two weeks, each of Miami Dade's direct-entry students from high school will receive an e-mail from the college encouraging them to sign up for TurboVote.

“And those are things that all colleges can do and more and more are doing it,” Young said. “This is kind of what's been missing in the past — using technology to make the whole voting process easier.”

Along with Duncan from Rollins and Padrón from Miami Dade, the other presidents who have signed the pledge are from Dominican University, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Nova Southeastern University, Roanoke College, Tallahassee Community College and Virginia Western Community College.

Technology ^[6]

Source URL: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/03/tech-start-helping-colleges-institutionalize-voter-registration-campus>

Links:

[1] <https://turbovote.org/register>

[2] <http://newstandard.turbovote.org/>

[3] <http://harvardmagazine.com/2011/09/kennedy-school-alumni-launch-turbovote>

[4] <http://techpresident.newvirtuallife.com/news/23831/turbovote-gets-1-million-knight-smarter-route-ballot-box>

[5] <http://www.outsidetheclassroom.com/solutions/higher-education/alcoholedu-for-college.aspx>

[6] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/technology>