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What Motivates College Students to Vote?

My name is Caroline Harralson and I am a student at the University of Kentucky. Over the last several months I have been emerged in the issue of voting on our campus. This year only 1,678 students voted in our Student Government elections. At a school of over 20,000 students that is a very small percentage of eligible voters who are showing up at the polls.

This became an important issue to me since I first came to college. I watched many of my friends who were involved in high school show no interest in what was going on around campus. They did not know any of the candidates and they did not seem to care what happened to the organization that carried the most weight in conveying student interests to the administration. From this discourse, I set out this semester with goals in mind.

- 1) Increase voter turnout in the SGA election
- 2) Make voting available on-line
- 3) Increase student interest in SGA

Needless to say I failed at all 3 goals. Our voter turnout went down from previous year about 230 votes, and I was told voting on-line had already been discussed and the SGA had decided that it was not practical. It is hard to measure whether I increased interest in student government, however, based on the previous two, I believe interest has not increased.

While at this point in my endeavors I became frustrated. That did not stop me. I started simply talking to people I know about voting. I asked them why they thought

students had apathy and what they thought might change that. These discussions changed my outlook completely. I was no longer concerned with just getting everyone to the polls because I realized that it took more than that to get people involved. In order for students to vote, they must strongly believe that what is happening affects them personally and that by voting they are not only taking a stand about something, but also they believe their stand will make a difference. Students who are not voting for these reasons probably should not be voting. This was a turning point in my process, and from here I took two new steps.

- 1) I developed a survey on voting

- 2) I created an information sheet to publicize the SGA election

The SGA election on campus is not highly publicized, and I felt it might be beneficial to post sheets telling students how and where to vote. This is a copy of the sheet I distributed:

I particularly liked the "one vote" statistics on the information sheet above. I believe that it makes you think about what a difference can be made with one vote.

Immediately after the elections I distributed surveys. While it is hard to create something that will be a good measure of why people vote, I worked hard at trying to make a survey that will determine some of the things that are directly related to voting at the University of Kentucky. I also worked hard to get a versatile group of students to take the survey.

Here is a copy of what I wrote from the survey I compiled the information and came up with the following results:

- Less than 10% of students who voted were involved in an organization
- of people surveyed believed voting was important

- Less than 15% understood the platform of a candidate
- 80% said they felt uninformed about things on campus

While these statistics are probably not completely accurate about all of the students at UK, they do help give me a better idea of why we have such an apathy problem on campus when it comes to voting. I have come away from my experience believing that:

- 1) people involved on campus are more likely to vote.
- 2) the number of people running is directly related to the voter turnout
- 3) an issue had to impact students directly before they feel strongly enough to vote on their own.

From working on this project I have learned to really talk to people about your issue before you get started. I think some of my most beneficial moments were when I was just talking to people about what they think. I also learned to stop blaming people for not being voters. I was initially sort of pointing a finger at people who I felt were wrong for not voting.

The answer is to just be a publicist, and to help people find the issues that get their adrenaline pumping and that they could talk about all night long. I strongly believe that there is an issue on campus that everyone would be passionate about, it is just matter of finding it!