

How My Students Led a Voter Registration Drive, and Why Yours Should, Too



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By Jacquelyn Whang

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Growing up as a first-generation immigrant, I never felt that this country was my home. We didn't talk about voting or politics at our house. My parents focused on making sure my brother and I did well in school, because they saw education as the family's pathway into belonging here in America.

In college, I learned about systemic oppression and our nation's legacy of policies that discriminate against marginalized groups. It was there that I saw the power of our vote as a young generation. I became a teacher to empower young people to take ownership of their right to belong, and to have a say in how their country is governed.



That's what led me to organize a voter-registration drive last year at the high school where I teach. I wanted to go beyond the lessons I taught in the classroom. With my students, I organized a project to increase voter engagement by pre-registering and registering young people on our campus to vote. Here in Compton, Calif., most of my students are immigrants or students of color. I wanted to help them step into their roles as active participants in their community.

I began to research some student-led opportunities for political engagement. I scrolled through Instagram and found an organization called **The Civics Center**, which trains young people to start voter drives. They were offering a workshop at the University of Southern California, so I posted this opportunity on my Google Class.

Getting Started

Five students attended the workshop, where they met students from other neighborhoods who had conducted voter drives on their campuses. My students told me that the workshop was inspiring because they got to meet young people who wanted to be activists, not just students. The Civics Center led them through the steps of mapping out a voter drive and campaign, including timelines, outreach plans, and voter registration procedures. As students of color, they saw injustice all around them. They were excited to do something about it.

As soon as my students came back to school, they hit the ground running. They organized a follow-up meeting and took steps to make the drive happen. Their first step was to create a core group of leaders. The original five who attended the workshop voted for the president, vice president, and secretary.

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Hoping to create excitement among their fellow students, they decided to create a club called "Future Voters." The vice president set up an Instagram account and followed the other Instagram accounts on campus, from student leadership to the football team, to spread the word that Future Voters had begun. The group designed T-shirts with our logo. I got a friend to produce enough shirts for free that students and teachers could wear them across campus before and after the drive.

Finding Their Power

As students imagined inviting friends into the club, they revisited their "why." Every student had unique and personal reasons for being involved, but they shared a common purpose: to get their peers registered to vote. The Civics Center connected us to **EmpowerLA**, the city's department of neighborhood empowerment, which sent people to campus to talk with our students. They talked about the importance of voting in a community like Compton, where residents have traditionally been marginalized.

Students soon came to see themselves as young representatives of a resilient city with a voice. They began to believe that their votes matter, and that they're not crippled by society's view of them based on social or citizenship status. Some students in our project were undocumented, so they weren't able to vote, but they were still active in exercising their political strength through organizing and being activists for change.

Students learned that it was important for them to know not just the process of voter registration, but cultural responsiveness skills. We created a script to read when registering students, which included important details about voting and being sensitive to students' unique circumstances, such as their immigration status or whether they had a stable place to sleep.

This was a very important step; some details can have major consequences. For example, registering students who are not citizens to vote can jeopardize their process for getting green cards. My students also learned that students without an address can still vote; they simply must explain the general location where they sleep.

Only a few weeks after we'd started, the club had grown from five to 12.

The president and vice president asked for—and got—permission from the principal for the lunch drive. Their idea was to have an event in the outdoor lunch area, where they could register students to vote, play cool music, and give out free nachos. Students made posters to advertise the lunch drive, and they announced it on the intercom.

Learning Lessons

On the day of the lunch drive, club members were overwhelmed by the number of students who showed up. The pressure did get to the students, and they made some minor mistakes. For instance, they forgot to detach the receipts from 70 of the voter-registration forms. Since California law requires that new registrants get these receipts, our students had to tear them off, one by one, track down each student, and provide them. But lessons like this were important for next time.

After the lunch drive, they decided to target 11th and 12 grade students during their morning advisory period.

The advisory period is quick—15 minutes—but just enough time to register a class. The team organized packets of voter registration slips, bag of pens, and candy for all students, whether they were eligible to vote or not.

The entire drive took three days, and was a success—more than 200 students registered! We threw a pizza party to celebrate.

This experience was transformative for all of us. I got an opportunity to see the future generation inspire their peers and take action. One of the students shared her experience as an undocumented resident with me afterward:

"I know I won't be allowed to vote once I turn 18," she wrote in a note. "But just because I can't vote doesn't mean I can't have any influence in my government. Future Voters helped me get people in my community to exercise their right to vote."

The club was about more than just registering voters and future voters. It was about including our youth's voices in creating a better nation for all of us.

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