

LAUNCH:

Initiative aims to increase student voter turnout

By Michael Reschke mreschke@heraldt.com Nov 5, 2018

Voter turnout among college students hasn't been great, but Lisa-Marie Napoli is expecting a significant increase over the last mid-term election.

"I've been at Indiana University for 23 years," she said. "I've never seen voter turnout efforts like I've seen this year."

Napoli is the chair of IU Bloomington's Big Ten Voting Challenge. She described the initiative as a friendly competition between Big Ten institutions. IU kicked off its campaign to increase voter turnout among its students in September 2017. Since then, faculty, staff and students have tried to increase awareness of the voting process. A lack of understanding when it comes to voting laws is often cited as a reason for low turnout among college students.

Many college students are first-time voters and unfamiliar with how to register, said Bernard Fraga, a political scientist at IU. In addition, a significant portion of students attend college in a different state than the one they grew up in. Those students must either decide to register in a new state, make arrangements to travel home to vote or figure out how to get an absentee ballot from their home state.

This has caused the majority of college students to opt out of the voting process. Nationwide, only about 19 percent of college students voted in the 2014 mid-term election, Napoli said. At IU, only 13.8 percent of students who were registered to vote actually did so four years ago.

While the Big Ten Voting Challenge doesn't set specific goals, Napoli said she'd like to see IU's participation increase to 20 percent of registered voters. Four days before the election, she was optimistic about achieving that goal.

"I think it's very likely," she said.

For more than a year, those working with the voting challenge have set up tables in high traffic areas on campus, such as the Wells Library and outside Ballantine Hall. They provide students with information about voter registration and voter ID laws. They organized social media campaigns and worked with other groups, such as the IU Student Association. It seems to be working.

"I've just seen more vigor in the students around me than I have in the past three years at IU," said Allissa Aardema, a junior double majoring in biology and political science.

Aardema said she's heard other students say they don't vote because they feel it won't make a difference. She started volunteering with IU's voting challenge to make sure her peers know they have an opportunity to influence the policies that will affect their lives going forward.

"It's important to make sure everyone understands their vote reflects the future they want to see," she said.

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