2024 GUIDANCE FOR COLLEGE MAIL VOTING

IN PROUD PARTNERSHIP WITH:

CAMPUS VOTE PROJECT · COMMUNITY CAMPUS COALITION · LWV LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF OHIO · Common Cause Ohio

COLLEGES SHOULD TAKE EVERY POSSIBLE STEP TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO VOTE WHETHER IN PERSON OR BY MAIL & FACILITATE PATHWAYS FOR VOTING WITHIN THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY.

In 2023, the Ohio Election Protection network was contacted by dozens of college students who did not receive their absentee ballots in time to vote. Upon investigation, we concluded that recent changes in Ohio election laws increased the chances a voted ballot would not be counted. In this particular situation, shortening the time allowed for a mail ballot to be received after election day was especially harmful to students, considering the challenge of delivering mail on campus and the prevalence of USPS mail delivery delays.

Students attending universities live nine to 12 months out of each year in your city or community. They volunteer, work, pay taxes, and put millions of dollars into the local community – they are vital members of the community and deserve to participate in their community's civic life. Furthermore, institutions of higher learning play a pivotal role in educating and preparing students to be engaged, active citizens. Participation in our elections is a cornerstone of civic engagement and essential to a healthy democracy. This role is highlighted in the mission statements of many colleges in the state – from The Ohio State University's "preparing a diverse student body to be leaders and engaged citizens" to Ohio University's commitment that students "enter to learn, and depart to serve" and the University of Cincinnati's mission to "develop educated and engaged citizens." Colleges and universities have a unique and important role in ensuring their students are encouraged and supported in their civic lives. Therefore, college administrators should take every possible step to encourage students to vote, whether in person or by mail, and facilitate pathways for voting within the campus community.

Students cannot be denied the right to to vote in Ohio

Under Ohio law, students can vote in the community where they attend school, even if their parents live elsewhere. According to the Ohio secretary of state's [Election Officials Manual](#), Chapter 4: "A person's voting residence is the location that person considers to be a permanent, not a temporary, residence. That person's voting residence is the place in which the voter's habitation is fixed and to which, whenever the voter is absent, the voter intends to return." In other words, students get to decide, on an individual basis, how they define home. It's important to know that students cannot be denied the right to vote in Ohio should they choose to register here.

It is vital that students understand that to vote in Ohio they must register 30 days before election days (October 7 for the November 2024 election). They must also update their address every time they move (that could mean a new dorm address each year).

Colleges should inform students who either are registered to vote or plan to register in Ohio that they can vote in person using their [Ohio Identification, US passport or military ID](#), or they can vote by mail using their Social Security number. Voting in person, either during the early voting period at local boards of elections or at a polling place on election days, is relatively simple, provided the voter has access to the now limited forms of identification that are accepted. Colleges can facilitate in-person voting by advertising the types of IDs that are acceptable and assisting students in obtaining or updating IDs. Schools can also provide transportation to early vote at the board of elections by rerouting campus buses to voting locations on specific dates. Case Western Reserve University currently does this for students.

However, students often find that voting by mail is their best or only method of voting, either because they lack the ID required or they are registered in a location away from campus. In this case, schools can provide essential support to ease the multilayered burdens of voting by mail.

The Challenges of Voting by Mail

More than 2 million Ohio voters cast their ballots by mail in the last presidential election. In the November 2023 election, more than 400,000 Ohioans across the state cast their vote by mail. Many Ohio college students were among these voters.

Ohio higher education students face obstacles when voting by mail, especially when they live on campus. Mailroom policies, inaccessibility of postal stamps, and lack of transportation to drop off their ballot at a drop box add time to the delivery and return of student ballots. Even a one- or two-day delay can have a significant impact on whether a student's ballot will be counted. These student ballot return rates will vary county by county. In our review of three Mid-American Conference schools, we found that very few students take advantage of voting by mail. The Ohio State University stood out, where almost 10 times as many students requested vote-by-mail ballots. However, the ballot return rate to the board of elections was low. For the 2023 general election, the return rate for mail-in ballots in Franklin County as a whole was 93%, while the return rate for students living on or near campus at Ohio State was 45%[1].

To vote by mail in Ohio, a voter must print and mail an absentee request form to their board of elections. Then, after receiving a ballot in the mail, they must vote the ballot and return it in the appropriate envelope by either dropping it off at their county board of elections by 7:30 p.m. on election day or by mailing it. If mailed, a ballot must be postmarked the day before election day, and it must arrive at the board of elections no later than four days after election day. This short timeline for return poses serious problems for on-campus mail.

Worth noting is that statewide absentee ballots mailed by Ohio county boards of elections are 6" x 10" and will not fit in most dorm mail slots. Therefore, it is vitally important to have a system in place to ensure students are aware that they have received an absentee ballot so they may return it promptly.
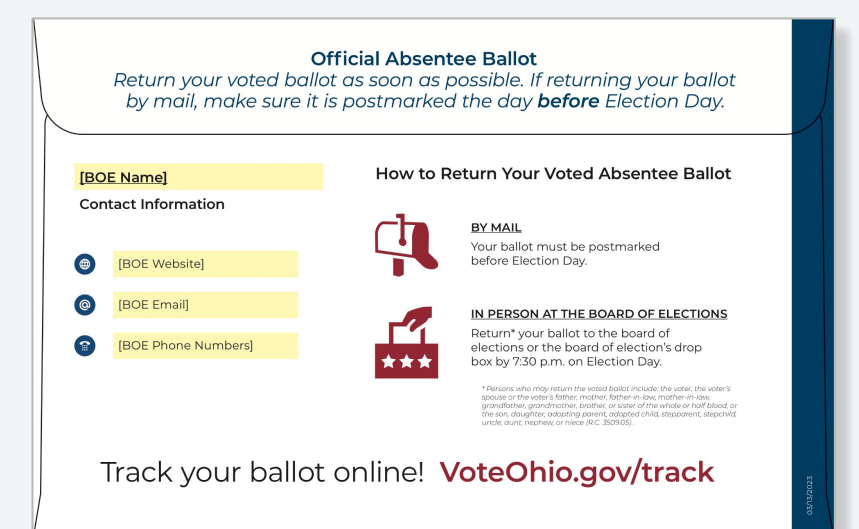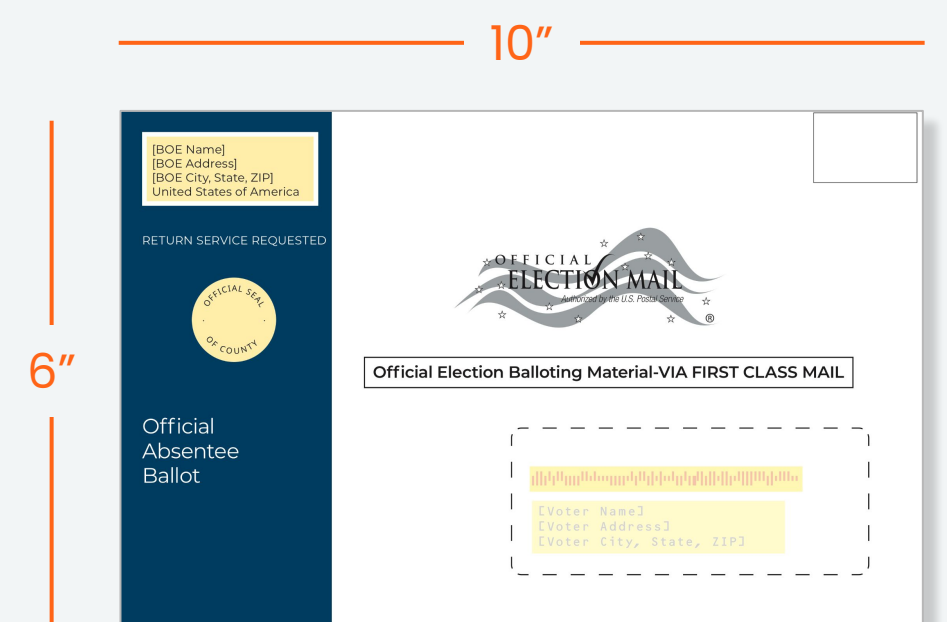
If students are registered and voting outside of Ohio, the mail also plays a crucial role in allowing them to receive and return their ballots. Schools should be aware that other states' deadlines and mail ballot processes may be significantly different from Ohio's.

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1. Data was extracted from the Franklin County Board of Elections website after the absentee by mail ballot counting deadline at precincts COLS 39-A and COLS 41-B through 41-I which are assigned to vote at the Ohio Union.

Ohio College Mail Voting

AT A GLANCE:

1 **Streamline mail delivery & notification systems in the mailroom**

2 **Highlight new, shorter deadlines for absentee ballots**

3 **Make registration and request forms widely available on campus with supports for returning ballots**

During this pivotal election year, we strongly encourage Ohio universities to implement the following policies to speed up the delivery of student mail and increase accessibility:

1

In the Mailroom

When official election mail from Ohio or any other state arrives for a student, the following policies can help ensure students receive this mail promptly and recognize its importance:

→ Train mailroom personnel to recognize official election mail and have them send notifications to students via email, text, and phone call, as is common practice with packages. Official election mail is denoted with a seal, regardless of the state it comes from. Attached is a visual of the Ohio ballot envelope and official election mail seal.

→ Suspend or amend policies that require students to pick up mail or packages in a certain amount of time before it's returned to the USPS as undeliverable from September through Election Day, when students will be sending in voter registrations and mail ballots.

→ Increase open hours for package pickup starting at least four weeks before Election Day. Consider staffing mailrooms heavily during business hours, with 24/7 pickup as an option.

→ Simplify student mail addresses where possible and educate students about their mailing and residential addresses.

Ex: Otterbein University students use a mailing address different from their physical dorm address.

2

Training & Education

→ Help students return ballots on time by providing information about deadlines and where they can (quickly) post mail near campus. Include deadlines in the academic calendar and display them in the institution's learning management system (ex: blackboard). See: toolkit from the Center for Civic Design for tips on effective voter education materials and free templates.

→ Review the U.S. Department of Education guidance for providing Federal Work Study (FWS) funds to employ students in civic activity to facilitate education and outreach. Civic activity can help your school reach the obligation of 7% of FWS funds for community service.

→ For additional resources and guidance, see the US Department of Education Toolkit for the Promotion of Voter Participation of Students.

→ See: tips and tools for collaborating with your location elections officials from Students Learn Students Vote.

3

On Campus

Students encounter significant barriers to obtaining the necessary materials to request and return an absentee ballot. The following recommendations would simplify the vote-by-mail process:

→ Make voter registration and absentee ballot applications widely available around campus, such as in dining halls, rec centers, and dorms.

→ Include voter registration and absentee ballot request forms in student orientation materials. Voters can request their ballot for each individual election beginning on January 1 or 90 days before the date of an election, whichever is earlier.

→ Include wall signage directing students to the absentee ballot request form via QR code.

→ Include wall signage and other materials with QR codes encouraging students to check their registrations. Registration problems get in the way of successfully navigating the mail ballot process.

→ Make paper registration forms readily available. Since students without an Ohio ID cannot register to vote online, they will need to register to vote through paper forms and using the last four digits of their Social Security number. Anyone with an Ohio Driver's license or ID can register online. Forms can be found on the secretary of state's website.

→ Widely disseminate information that illustrates the steps required for how to vote by mail on social media, wall signage, flyers, and emails to all students.

→ Provide students with pre-printed envelopes with their county board of elections name and address students can use to mail in their absentee request form and/or voter registration form.

→ Collect student absentee ballot request forms and voter registration forms and turn them in to the board of elections to alleviate one step for students. When doing so, one must also pay close attention to voter registration and absentee request deadlines, including deadlines for third parties to submit applications.

→ Access to stamps is vitally important, not only to request ballots but also for ballots themselves. Most students have limited or no experience in buying and using stamps for physical mail. Consider how students can get stamps – where are stamps available on or near campus? Make sure students know how to access stamps easily.

→ Provide transportation on Election Day for students to return absentee ballots to the board of elections. This is the only acceptable place to return mail ballots on Election Day. *(Note that Ohio ballots must be returned to the county from which they were sent, so this option is viable only for students who are registered in the county where they go to school.)*

ALL VOTING OHIO

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All Voting is Local (All Voting) is a 501(c)(3), nonpartisan, multi-state organization that fights against state and local voting policies that silence Americans' voices, particularly for Black, Brown, Native American, and other historically marginalized communities — not just in election years, but every year. We were founded on the principle that the problems people face when trying to vote are solvable if state and local decision-makers are accountable to the communities they serve. All Voting is committed to working with our partners to advance fair, more inclusive rules on voter registration, remove barriers that make it more difficult for people to vote, and ensure every vote counts. All Voting is on the ground in eight states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Within these states, we are active in more than 60 counties that are home to over 21 million people of color. During the 2022 cycle, All Voting programs expanded access for more than 635,000 voters.