

Election Offices Need Staff

Colleges and Universities May Have the Answer

By Anna Diaz

Election offices are facing a staffing crisis as the 2024 election approaches. Local election offices and colleges can tackle this problem together by making use of the existing [Federal Work Study Program](#) to place students with understaffed election offices. This report poses — and answers — key questions that college administrators and election officials may have about pursuing such a program. Notably, as the report details, such a program would not require new federal authorizing legislation, and there are no legal barriers in the way of expanding work-study community service partnerships to include election offices. It merely requires colleges and election officials to work together to tackle the urgent problem of election office staffing.

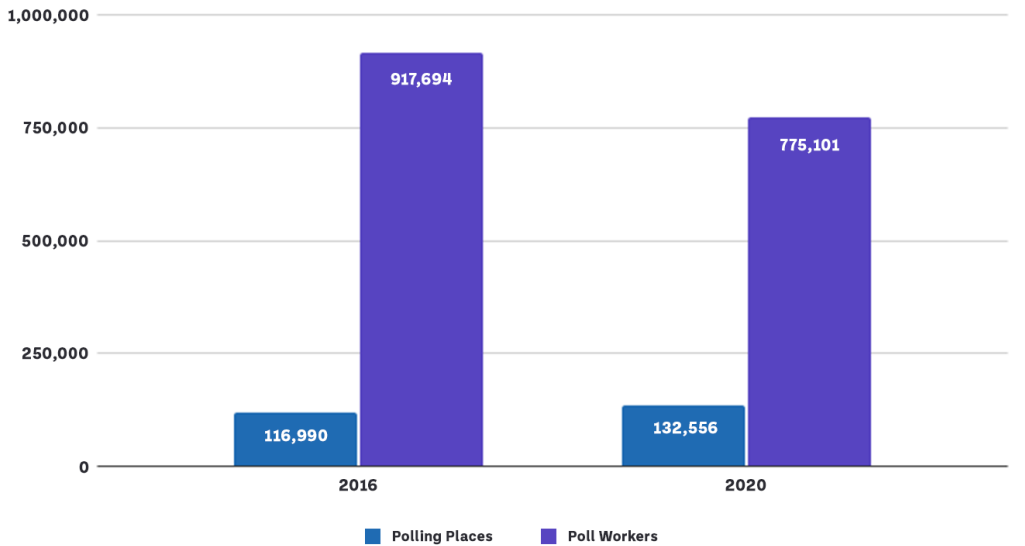
With the 2024 election on the horizon, it is crucial to come up with a fresh approach to address this issue. One promising solution is to tap into the vast pool of college students across the nation and recruit them to serve as election workers in their local election offices through school-run programs.

Are we running out of election workers?

Election workers have traditionally operated behind the scenes and out of the public eye. The effects of the COVID pandemic, threats and harassment from conspiracy theorists, insufficient resources, and growing demands on their limited time have made it increasingly difficult to staff election offices and polling places. During the 2016 election, [election officials operated](#) 116,990 polling places with 917,694 poll workers, according to the Election Assistance Commission. [In 2020, the number](#) of polling places increased by 13% (15,566) while the number of poll workers decreased by 15% (142,593). In these past two presidential election cycles, more than [half of poll workers](#) across the nation have been older than 60 years old.

The loss of experienced poll workers and election officials is a growing concern, largely attributable to the [perceived dangers](#) and [political concerns](#) that come with the job. Ensuring election offices are properly resourced for the 2024 election is essential to improving voter access and confidence. Properly staffing elections offices helps to prevent mistakes, ensure proper ballot preparation, and reduce lines at the polls.

Number of Polling Places and Poll Workers in 2016 vs. 2020



Source: Issue One analysis of EAC data

Could higher education take an active role in the election process?

The 2020 election resulted in record-breaking voter turnout by college students. However, these efforts were primarily student led. More college and university administrators should take it upon themselves to facilitate connections between their local election offices and their schools to encourage voter participation — and civic engagement to support elections behind the scenes.

There are deeper ways to engage with and support our democracy than just voting. Working as a poll worker or in an election department could provide students with in-depth knowledge about our election system and a sense of the importance of local government service. Getting students into election offices will not only help solve the critical shortage of election workers, it could also help create a new generation of more civically engaged young Americans. The best way to accomplish this is through a program that already exists — the Federal Work Study Program — which would use federal funds to give students the opportunity to work in election offices.

What is the Federal Work Study Program and how does it work?

The Federal Work Study Program (FWS) is a financial aid program introduced under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 that helps college students cover their educational expenses while also providing them with valuable work experience. There are approximately 3,400 participating institutions that provide aid to more than 600,000 students nationwide. Through FWS, students can secure part-time roles, both on and off campus. 90% of the federally funded money must be allocated to on-campus employment, but 7% must support students working in community service jobs. This 7% could include election work. The combination of election officials' dire need for poll workers ahead of the 2024 election and the FWS community service requirement has created a need on both sides.

A similar effort under the Help America Vote Act placed students as poll workers in nearby election offices but has received only occasional funding and was active at only a select number of colleges. Now is the perfect time for election offices and colleges to build strong partnerships that place students in local election offices through a more widespread program.

Could working in an election office be considered “too political” for the FWS program?

When working off campus through FWS, the general rule is that “work must be in the public interest.” The federal student aid office provides six key points to determine when work is not considered in the public interest.

Jobs are not eligible to count as FWS community service jobs if the work:

- primarily benefits the members of an organization that has membership limits, such as a credit union, a fraternal or religious order, or a cooperative;
- involves any political activity or is associated with a faction in an election for public or party office;
- is for an elected official unless the official is responsible for the regular administration of the routine operation of federal, state, or local government;
- is work as a political aide for any elected official;
- takes into account a student’s political support or party affiliation in hiring him or her; or
- involves lobbying on the federal, state, or local level.

Superficially, these guidelines may deter schools from considering potential collaboration between their students and local election offices. However, working in an election office does not violate these principles. Notably, while some election officials are elected, the work of all election officials is centered on the regular administration of routine government responsibilities in a nonpartisan fashion. The mission of election offices is to facilitate processes that support our free and fair elections. The nature of the work does not involve promoting or advocating for any particular political party or candidates. Indeed, election officials and poll workers are expected to remain neutral and not engage in partisan politics or exhibit signs of favoritism during their work.

What would working in an election office be like for a FWS student?

To the general public, the work of election officials may appear to be only the work that goes into ensuring the smooth functioning of Election Day. However, preparing for an election is a full-time job. Moreover, elections are taking place all the time at the local, state, and federal levels, not just once every two or four years, and require significant preparation months before any election is conducted. The work itself is varied and would introduce students to varied challenges. Many roles within an election office handle administrative work, operating polling sites, handling voter registration, working in Human Resources, facilitating voter education and outreach, and recruiting poll workers. Simply becoming a poll worker typically requires two weeks of training in voter registration, voter

equipment, and cybersecurity details. By working in this field, students would gain valuable skills in areas including project management, technology and cybersecurity, data analysis, communications and customer service experience, geographic information systems, accounting. They would also gain an overall knowledge of election laws and regulations and an introduction to legal and policy issues.

A FWS position in an election office for a quarter, semester, or full year would be valuable to overworked election officials and for students who would gain both a diverse set of skills and an appreciation for civic engagement and democracy.

How can colleges and election offices take action?

Colleges should proactively connect with nearby election offices to determine their need and capacity for employing students through FWS programs.

While schools might already have a set procedure for establishing new partnerships, the following steps would be useful guideline for establishing work study positions in election offices:

Step 1: Obtain approval from the financial aid office.

Each college's financial aid office is responsible for overseeing and reporting federally granted funds. This office can provide the necessary information to help kickstart a new partnership with a local organization and ensure its eligibility under federal regulations. Each college's FWS supervisor should connect with the financial aid office to begin the initial steps for proposing the new partnership with election offices.

Step 2: Establish a relationship with the local election office.

Prior to reaching out, FWS administrators at each college should put together a proposal detailing the following points:

- A description of the FWS program with guidelines and requirements.
- Benefits of the partnership for both the students and the election offices.
- Long-term benefits from the local partnership.
- Opportunities to further develop the relationship between the election offices and the universities to foster the growth of the program.
- Main points of contact for the school should the election administrators have any follow up questions.

Once this information has been compiled, the FWS administrators would request a meeting with administrators from local election offices to further discuss the needs of the election offices.

Step 3: Develop a program structure that works for the school as well as the election offices.

Since FWS is administered by the schools, there might be specific institutional requirements

(meetings with program director, reflections, etc). It is essential the college administrators work with election administrators to ensure that the experience meets all their requirements for the new program.

Step 4: Advertise the new opportunity to students.

Once the program has been approved on both ends, students can see the position posted on the schools' listings. Some institutions might also blast email available positions to students as part of their FWS program.

Conclusion

Although there can be unanticipated events in any election involving staff or voting equipment, the growing staff shortage is one that can be proactively addressed with the help of nearby colleges and universities. Election offices and colleges hold the key to a mutually beneficial relationship that would add more personnel to election offices while also fostering a sense of civic empowerment and education among young Americans.

Beyond the immediate impact on election efficiency, the mutual partnership between election offices and colleges would create a pipeline of talent and expertise, facilitating a steady flow of capable professionals interested in pursuing careers in public service and government. The long-term benefits of these localized partnerships could be transformative for our electoral system. By encouraging enthusiastic college students to take an active role in shaping our democracy, we can pave the way for a stronger, more inclusive, and participatory political landscape in years to come.



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