

Mixed Greens

An assortment of fresh tossed ideas.

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005 On-campus ballot drop box

Shirley Forslof, Whatcom County Auditor, responded to voters' request that she place a ballot drop box on campus at Western Washington University. In this edition of Mixed Greens, she and WWU student Morgan Holmgren answer questions about the project.

Describe your on-campus ballot drop box project.

Shirley Forslof: Student officers at Western Washington University (WWU) approached me to ask for a drop box on campus. I agreed to the Monday prior to Election Day from 8 a.m. — 5 p.m. and on Election Day from 7 a.m. — 8 p.m. The box was staffed by WWU students. Approximately 6,000 ballots were deposited.

Here is my project time line:

Spring Locate student volunteers. Ask OSOS for contacts at your local college.

Fall Reconnect with student volunteers. Ask student organizers to suggest a location.

October Contact college staff to reserve space in the student union building. (Students may be able to do this.)

October Contact campus security to arrange for free public parking within easy access of the drop box site (students can do this, too).

October Ask campus security to provide a two-person team to transport ballots from the drop site building to the courthouse.

October Train students. Have them complete proper documentation.

October Meet with campus security at courthouse to review the necessary drop box logs. Show them where to park when they return the ballot box.

Prior to Election Week Students pick up drop boxes.

Election Day When box is full, students call security to pick up the box. Security returns it to the courthouse and delivers an empty ballot box to the students. This occurs several times a day.

Election Day evening After the box closes for the night, students returns the filled ballot box to my office.

Morgan Holmgren: Right now the program is run through the Associated Students (AS) Board of Directors office.

The Vice President for Governmental Affairs contacts County Auditor Shirley Forslof and gets the necessary information to plan the event. The Vice President will work with the AS Elections Coordinator to find people to work at the ballot box on campus and to get the word out among the students, faculty and staff.

We had the ballot box on campus for two days during the 2008 general election (Monday and Tuesday) and in 2009, because of the smaller size of the election, we had the ballot box on campus for a single day.

We use a room in our student union building to house the ballot box; we did it in a separate room because it provided us with a little more security. We have two students working at the ballot box at all times, which is normally from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. We asked the students working to keep a tally of the number of ballots collected.

Hint: contact the media to highlight this partnership with your local college.

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How did you benefit?

Shirley: Providing a ballot box drop site creates goodwill towards our office among students and the University as a whole. It facilitated the civic involvement of students and made it possible to locate a drop box on campus with little auditor's staff involvement because the students were enthusiastic, dependable, organized, quick learners and had a positive can-do attitude. It also provided an opportunity for staff to get to know the students and University staff. Having a drop box on campus increased the voter turnout from the university area from prior years.

Morgan: We benefit from having the campus drop box because it allows us to further our mission to promote effective citizenship and it gives our constituents an easier way to vote that does not include buying a stamp.

Would you recommend this to another county?

Shirley: Yes!

Morgan: Every University in the state should have something like this on their campus. This program allows students to save money and hopefully get them more excited about voting because they are able to go to a communal place and drop off their ballot, rather than just doing it at a mail box.

What resources did you contribute?

Shirley: This was sponsored by WWU student government so there was very little cost to my office for any of these services. In all, very few resources were expended by my office:

Three ballot drop boxes (clear plastic Rubbermaid-style tubs with a slit in the top, numbered seals, and security logs);

Payroll documents and minimum hourly wage for student workers; and

Training session for student workers.

Two Auditor's staff worked a half hour overtime waiting for the ballot box to be returned to our office.

Students contributed organization skills and their time. I believe they also facilitated more students voting and a discussion on campus regarding the importance of voting and civic participation.

Morgan: Western paid for on-campus advertising for the ballot box. This year the students' contributions included posters, banners, and a campus newspaper advertisement.

The auditor's office paid each of the students for the hours they were working at the box.

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Why do you think it's valuable to have a ballot drop box on campus?

Shirley: The drop box makes it easier for students, faculty, and university staff to return their ballots. Students mostly communicate through the internet and do not have a supply of postage stamps on hand for mailing their ballots. WWU is a residential university and many students do not have convenient transportation to ballot drop box at our courthouse. Also, it gives students a chance to involve more students in the election process by organizing ballot box staffing teams.

The cost and time commitment to the Auditor's Office is very minimal and the WWU students staffing the ballot drop box are dependable. What's more, the voter turnout from WWU increased from prior years. It provided a positive experience for the University and an opportunity for their students to be involved in the election process.

Morgan: It is valuable to have a ballot box on campus because it provides students, faculty, staff, and near-by community members with an option to vote that does not include unnecessary travel or purchasing a stamp.

Do you have any tips to share with those thinking of doing this next year?

Shirley: 1. Lindsay Pryor will put you into contact with students at your college or university. Find out if they are interested in having a drop box on their campus and willing to staff it.

2. Get the student's cell phone number and verify that the number given in the spring is the same phone number in the fall.

3. Keep in contact with the student(s) and maintain communication. Don't assume.

4. Let the media know what you are up to.

5. I encourage the auditors to involve college or university students in staffing drop box sites. I believe that they will find it a very positive experience for themselves, the students and their staff.

Morgan: The most important thing is to make sure that people know about the ballot box and where it is. We have had some trouble with people not knowing where to go for the ballot box because it is has been in a room that few students ever use.

Also make sure that your on-campus post office knows that there is a ballot box that doesn't require a stamp, which will allow them to direct people who are going buy stamps for their ballot toward the ballot box.

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