

Supporting civic engagement in a critical moment

As America reels from COVID-19 and social upheaval, two core exercises of our democracy are at risk. Both U.S. Census participation and voter registration rates are lagging in 2020, and college students are a vulnerable group in both efforts, with many in the age cohort eligible to participate for the first time. By leveraging their trusted, non-partisan voices to inform students about the census and voting, academic librarians can advance their educational mission while strengthening our democracy.

2020 census

College students are considered a particularly hard-to-count population in the census. An undercount in the 2020 census would jeopardize funding and representation for communities for the next decade. COVID-19 closed many campuses and displaced many students exactly when the census was beginning, resulting in a dramatic decline in response rates in areas where students live. For instance, the University District near The Ohio State University has only a 19.1% response rate, down more than 38 points from 2010, while a neighborhood near the University of South Florida has a 15.6% response rate, more than 47 points lower than in 2010.

When households—such as students living in apartments—don't respond to the census, the Census Bureau will attempt to use administrative records, including college rosters, to determine how many people are living at an address. However, these records are incomplete. Data is most accurate when residents self-respond.

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Academic librarians can inform students about the importance of responding to the 2020 census. Residents can respond online or by phone at 2020census.gov until at least September 30. (Some Congressional efforts are seeking to extend the census until October 31.)

The census counts residents where they usually lived as of April 1, even if the resident was not staying there on that exact date or if they have not returned to that address.

ALA's free publication, "Libraries and the 2020 Census: Adapting Outreach in Response to COVID-19," provides ideas for virtual and low-contact outreach activities. The publication and other resources are available at ala.org/census.

Voter registration and participation

Voter registration has also been unusually slow during the pandemic, as many places where people register to vote have been closed to in-person services.

Academic library staff can inform students about voter registration deadlines and options. The deadline and process vary by state: in several states, the deadline to register will be in early October.

ALA is a premier partner of National Voter Registration Day for 2020. ALA encourages libraries to sign up to participate in this important event, culminating in a nation-wide day of action on September 22.

Librarians can also remind users to update their voter registration if they have moved. In addition, library staff can educate users about local changes in voting processes due to COVID-19 and options to request a mail-in ballot. Students may need to request an absentee ballot if they are registered to vote at their college address but are currently staying in their hometown or vice versa.

For additional resources from ALA, visit www.ala.org/advocacy/voter-engagement. 