Early Voting

Dear Colleagues:

With local and national elections on the horizon, the beginning of Census 2020 efforts and many other politically significant moments and milestones that will arise in the coming months, it feels timely to dispel a widespread myth about student voters. The myth that college students – generally, Generation Z – don’t care about politics or politicians and aren’t knowledgeable about the most significant issues of the day, is a recurring narrative that comes up around November every year. It is a narrative that is sure to re-emerge as the Presidential Election of 2020 rapidly approaches.

What that narrative overlooks is how swiftly the lives of college students are changing, how deeply invested many of them are in actively gaining credentials, such as bachelor degrees and advanced certificates, so they can shape their futures. That old story about disaffected college students suggests, too, that they routinely ignore the way policy decisions and political realities come to bear on their day-to-day lives.

But I have the privilege of seeing, firsthand, how Lehman College students make the American Dream real and also how they help to sustain it.

Earlier this year, the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University released inspiring data about our student voting rates showing that we are an institution where, on average, undergraduate and graduate students of all ages vote in Presidential elections at higher rates than their counterparts. While Lehman’s students are leaders in terms of civic engagement, their empowerment as voters is, thankfully, not an anomaly.

At Lehman, the majority of our students are first generation Americans and college students. They hail from 140 countries and a good many speak a language other than English at home. To gain a foothold on the ladder of economic mobility they come to Lehman, a college linked to the formation of the UN and the Declaration
of Human Rights, and named for a champion of social justice. They are some of the nation’s most committed and patriotic torchbearers of the American Dream, animated by what it promises. That is why it’s no surprise to me that even in The Bronx, a largely underestimated borough undergoing a kind of Renaissance, our students are natural leaders when it comes to voting in national and local elections.

We mirror the nation in that the fastest growing population in The Bronx is driven by immigration. So is the growth of revenue and money coming into the borough: In the past decade, the number of businesses in The Bronx has grown by 17 percent to almost 18,000. Private sector employment increased by 21 percent, reaching a record of 239,900 jobs in 2017. Most of the jobs that have been created in recent years are overwhelmingly going to minority women between the ages of 25 and 54. In the Bronx, 60 percent of all entrepreneurs are minority business owners. A number of them are patrons of Lehman College’s Small Business Incubator at CUNY on the Concourse.

These are not insignificant numbers, particularly because a good many of these entrepreneurs were educated at Lehman College. One of the major reasons that our catalytic institution is highly ranked in magazines that range from *U.S. News and World Report* to the *Wall Street Journal* is its efficacy in improving the odds for students and their families to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Lehman College makes a difference for low-income, non-elite students.

Regardless of where Lehman students and Lehman alumnae fall on the economic spectrum, they are connected by a spirit – energized by the legacy of Herbert H. Lehman himself – of humanitarianism, patriotism and civic harmony. That sense has already been on display on campus this fall in a series of events that I hope will bring even more students to the polls – and our elected officials have taken notice. We hosted a National Voter Registration Day event on campus on September 24th. The event, which began in 2012, registered 800,000 people nationwide last year.

Remember, even though we tend to focus on the Presidential Primary in June 2020 or the general election in November 2020, there is an election on November 5, 2019. In the city, there are a number of Charter Amendments on the ballot, and additionally in the Bronx there are office-holder elections for Civil Court, District Attorney, NY Supreme Court Justice and other offices. Starting October 26th through November 3rd, [early voting is available](#) in New York City at select sites.
And then there is Census 2020. The Bronx could lose two congressional seats and large amounts of funding if there is a significant undercount during next year’s Census. All New Yorkers have a lot at stake. That’s why CUNY is partnering with the City and the Census to provide additional resources to make sure every New Yorker is counted. On October 30th, we will host the first of several Census-focused events in the coming months, “Making Sense of the Census 2020,” from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at Lovinger Theatre (You can RSVP by sending an email to Events.Rsvp@lehman.cuny.edu).

Elections matter this year and every year. The nation’s students are primed and ready to make their voices heard at the polls in 2019 and 2020, and some 80 percent of students, largely in Generation Z, are likely to vote in next year’s presidential election, according to the learning group, Chegg. Lehman students represent a broad range of ages and life experiences, reflecting the immigrants, first generation students and majority Latinx Bronx residents. They are a big part of the future workforce and the civic and political landscape. By voting, they make their presence and essence known. Office-holders underestimate them all at their peril.

Sincerely,

Daniel Lemons
President