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Testimony for HB245

Ways and Means Committee, Thursday, Feb. 6, 2020

Election Law - Institutions of Higher Education - Voter Registration and Voting by Students (Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020)

POSITION: FAVORABLE

I am writing this testimony as both a recent college graduate and student leader from the Maryland Institute College of Art and as a Social Designer for Student Voting with Mile 22 Associates.

I first thank Delegate Eric Luetdke for introducing this bill and urge delegates to vote in favor of HB 245, the Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020. This bill ensures that students have the resources and information necessary to register and turn out to vote.

I'd like to begin with sharing my personal experience as a first year student who noticed there was nothing happening on my college campus in regards to supporting student voters. It was February of 2016 (primary season) and I realized that nobody had any idea how to cast an absentee ballot, nobody knew about voter registration deadlines, and there was nobody in our staff or administration helping students figure this out. So, I spent the entire academic year of 2016 harriedly attempting to provide thousands of students with absentee ballots and voter registration support with only the support of a few student volunteers who I convinced to help me table a few times a week. I remember my dorm room floor being covered in absentee ballots from every state. I remember sleepless nights trying to balance classwork, work, and running nearly all of the voting work for the 2016 election.

That was not acceptable. Fortunately my institution was able to reflect on that and take action. In preparation for the 2018 midterm election, MICA was able to build a cross-campus coalition of staff, administration, faculty and students called the Voter Access Initiative (VAI). The VAI put together the one of the strongest Action Plans for voter engagement in the country, according to the ALL IN Democracy Challenge. There was a staff member appointed to coordinate the voting work and support the students, like me, who had previously been all on their own. Now MICA is proudly a school that *votes* and *cares* about voting, with the highest registration rate in the country of **95.2%** of eligible students registered in 2018.

Unfortunately, not all schools have taken the same steps that mine did. In 2018, only 54% of Marylanders aged 18-24 were registered to vote, compared to 66% of all Marylanders over the age of 18 and the outstanding 95.2% of the Maryland Institute College of Art. The requirements of this bill will require every public university to do the essential work that my school did. This work paid off for every student who can now confidently cast their vote without confusion. I can

personally testify that students-- young students especially-- are not naturally equipped with the knowledge of how to navigate the democratic process. I spoke personally to hundreds that didn't know how to cast an absentee ballot, who didn't know how to register on campus, who didn't know who was running locally. Although peer to peer education is important, it should not be the burden of a few passionate students to make sure that young people know how to vote.

In addition to my personal experience, I've spent the past half a year studying what it takes for campuses to reach full student voter participation through Mile 22 Associates as a social designer. I've worked with over a dozen campus' stakeholders (including students, faculty and staff) as well as local and national advocates to understand what their actual needs are to help students vote, and the results mirror my personal experience. Campuses need plans, they need staff support, and they need to actively inform, educate, and support students. There's consistent evidence that taking the first step to register students to vote, as students navigate a process that's shrouded with confusing logistics and procedures, leads to continued participation and opens up a gateway that's desperately needed as an intervention in this process. We want a vibrant, participatory democracy, and students should be able to vote with confidence.

I know, as I've heard the stories and seen the data, that when students have the tools they will *turn out and participate*. The discrepancy is currently there, yes. In 2018, national turnout of voters under 29 was at 36% compared to 53.4% for all eligible voters. However, this discrepancy is not from a lack in passion, but a lack in education and support. Through passing this bill you have the opportunity to create an equitable democracy in which Maryland students are equipped to participate. I've seen the change firsthand at my college and through the campuses I've worked with. Maryland can take these steps to become a more participatory democracy. We have the opportunity.

I thank you for your time and urge you to give this bill a favorable report.