



Ways and Means Committee

**Testimony on behalf of The Maryland Association of Community Colleges and
the Maryland Community College Chief Student Affairs Officers**

Submitted by

**Dr. Bryan Newton, Vice President for Enrollment Management & Student Services,
Wor-Wic Community College
February 6, 2020**

**Bill: HB 245 Election Law - Institutions of Higher Education - Voter Registration and Voting
by Students (Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020)**

Position: Favorable Testimony with Amendments

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 245, the Student Voter Empowerment Act of 2020. All sixteen Maryland community colleges are committed to engaging students in civic participation and making them aware of their right to vote. The Maryland Association of Community Colleges and the Community College Chief Student Affairs Officers are supportive of this legislation with amendments to ensure that we can practically implement the legislation while preserving academic requirements required by college and program accreditors.

We recognize that participation in our elections continues to be challenging. In the 2018 general election only 59.06% of eligible voters in Maryland cast ballots, and in our last presidential election only half of young adults ages 18-29 nationwide voted. The number of people engaged in our elections continues to stagnate even as the process of voting becomes easier in many jurisdictions. Maryland's community colleges understand that we have a responsibility to educate students about their civic duties and that we must encourage students to take the time to vote.

Each of our sixteen community colleges already engage in substantial efforts to make students aware of their right to vote, and our student activities offices work with student clubs and organizations to host voter registration drives and implement initiatives to increase awareness of the importance of voting. At my college, Wor-Wic Community College, our Director of Student Engagement collaborates with the local Board of Elections to host voter registration drives throughout the year and we facilitate student club and organization initiatives to increase engagement in civic activities. In the months before federal, state and local elections our Director of Student Engagement regularly reminds students of voter registration deadlines, early voting locations and the hours for voting on election day. This legislation mandates these types of activities and requires colleges to report on our efforts.

While we are supportive of the need to empower students to vote, our first commitment is to uphold academic standards and to ensure that we meet national and state accreditor requirements. HB 245 requires a student voting plan that includes a policy allowing students to be excused from class to vote. This is problematic for community colleges that require a minimum number of instructional minutes and that have many students, particularly in allied health programs, participating in required clinical rotations at local employers. Missing critical class time impacts the learning environment, and in the case of clinical rotations, may be contrary to employer policies.

Further, unlike our four-year partners where most students live on campus, community college students often travel significant distances from their homes to attend classes and their polling locations are far from campus. For example, Wor-Wic Community College serves three counties on the Lower Eastern Shore and transportation from rural areas is often challenging. It can take a Wor-Wic student several hours to travel to campus from locations such as Pocomoke or Crisfield using existing public transportation. Excusing a student from class to vote will result in some students missing several required classes as they travel to and from distant polling places.

Given the accessibility of early voting and absentee voting in Maryland it makes sense to steer students toward these alternatives instead of negatively impacting the classroom with unnecessary absences. HB 245 already requires a student voting plan to include plans for dissemination of information about the process and deadlines for requesting and returning a ballot by mail, as well as the locations and dates for early voting. These efforts will give students every opportunity to vote without missing critical class or clinical time. We would ask that HB 245 be amended as follows:

AMENDMENT 1

On page 7, beginning with line 2 delete the words A POLICY ALLOWING STUDENTS TO BE EXCUSED FROM CLASS TO VOTE

Community colleges are known as democracy's colleges for our uniquely American commitment to provide universal access to postsecondary education. As part of our mission we prepare students for economic prosperity and to become active participants in their communities. Voter registration and participation by our students is important and will be strengthened by the requirements of HB 245.

The Maryland Association of Community Colleges and the Maryland Chief Student Affairs Officers recommend passage of this bill with the proposed amendment, and we thank you for your consideration.