

Poughkeepsie Journal

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1999

SINCE 1785 ■ NEW YORK STATE'S OLDEST NEWSPAPER ■ WWW.PJONNEWS.COM

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College students deserve to vote where they live

By Jonathan Becker

One of the great challenges for educators today is to engage students in civic and political processes. It is difficult to dispute the oft-repeated refrains of politicians and pundits that the youth of America are increasingly cynical and disengaged. In the 1996 presidential elections, a paltry 32 percent of those aged 18 to 24 voted (compared with a similarly unimpressive 49 percent for the population at large).

Sadly, Dutchess County politicians have chosen to reinforce this cynicism by systematically denying college students one of the most fundamental rights of a democratic society: the right to vote where they live.

In November's election, voter registration applications submitted by students of Bard, Vassar, Marist and Dutchess Community colleges were systematically rejected by the county Board of Elections. Students originally from other counties and states were denied the right

VANTAGE POINT



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to vote in Dutchess County even though they live here most, if not all, of the year, identify the area as their home and cannot legally vote elsewhere *in absentia*. Although some Board of Elections rulings disqualifying students were overturned in county court, the appeals process required students to appear before a judge on Election Day. This is certainly not a process conducive to participation.

Should students at Bard, Vassar and other colleges be allowed to vote in Dutchess County? Legally, the answer appears to be yes. Past court challenges to discriminatory practices against students in other New York counties have been successful. The state Board of Elections is currently unable to identify other counties that employ blanket

anti-student practices similar to those in Dutchess. If Bard and Vassar students had chosen instead to study across the river at the State University of New York at New Paltz or upstate at SUNY Albany, they could have voted without challenges from the Ulster or Albany County boards of elections.

Legal precedents aside, there are broader moral and educational issues at stake. Bard students are active contributors to this community. They conduct a wide array of arts, theater, written and environmental education programs for students in the Red Hook and Beacon schools, as well as for needy children at Astor Home in Rhinebeck and the Anderson School in Hyde Park.

Students active in area

They operate a tutoring and mentoring program for Rhinebeck Connections, an outreach program for teenagers. They run a poetry and writing program for senior citizens in Poughkeepsie. They provide critical support

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for the Grace Smith House, a battered women's shelter. They also serve as volunteers in local hospitals and on emergency medical services.

To welcome them into core community institutions but at the same time to exclude them from exercising their rights as citizens of the same community reeks of hypocrisy. It educates them to be apathetic toward, and cynical about, the political process. This is clearly the wrong message for this community to send to young adults.

Bard and Vassar students currently plan to litigate to

win their right to vote in Dutchess County. Although they will likely be victorious in the end, it will be a drawn out and expensive process.

There is a better way. If the elected officials of Dutchess County, Republican and Democrat, took the lead and articulated clear and public objections to the current discriminatory practices, they may be able to convince elections commissioners William Paroli Sr. and William Egan to adopt new policies concerning college students.

Even if they did not succeed in changing current procedures, the very act of opposing anti-democratic practices might do something more important: It might teach college students that political officials are not deaf to their plight. It might also show them that they are valued members of the community in which they live.

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