

TurboVote Comes to MDC



BY TABITHA WHISSEMORE



At Miami Dade College (MDC), a new, automated voting system aims to give students the same open access to the democratic process on campus that they have to education.

TurboVote (turbovote.org) is an online service that sends voters text messages to remind them about upcoming elections, from school board elections to primaries to the presidential election. It also helps users register to vote and submit ballots by mail. Voters can receive pre-filled voter-registration forms or vote-by-mail applications, along with a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope so they can easily mail in the forms—much like Netflix, said Seth Flaxman, founder and executive director of TurboVote.

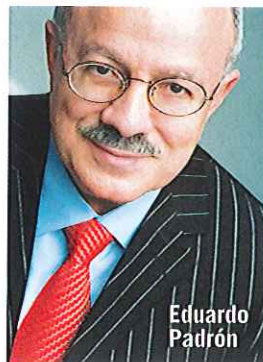
Although the technology is already in use at Harvard and Columbia universities, MDC is the first community college to use the service. The University of Miami and Florida International University will soon join MDC among the colleges using the service in Florida.

Flaxman said his site takes the “friction out of the voting process” so voters can “focus on the important part of picking who to vote for.”

Flaxman developed the site when he was a graduate student, after missing voting in three elections. And he wasn’t the only one. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 66.2 percent of college students didn’t vote in 2010 because they forgot, were out of town, or had work conflicts.

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Eduardo Padrón

stamp to change my registration and then keep track of when local elections were taking place,” he said.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation funded TurboVote’s expan-

sion to South Florida, allowing it to be accessible free of charge to MDC students. Non-students can use the service, too, but will be charged a printing and postage fee.

“It’s good to see students develop the habit of voting, because you need an informed and engaged public to have a healthy democracy,” said Alberto Ibarгүйen, president and CEO of Knight Foundation.

While the presidential election generates a lot of buzz, Ibarгүйen said the Knight Foundation is particularly interested in seeing how TurboVote engages citizens during the years between national elections, “where much of democracy happens on the local level.”

Eduardo Padrón, president of MDC, echoed Ibarгүйen. He said he knows that the online service will “make a big difference in getting people to the polls and more engaged.”

Lourdes Perez, the college’s dean of student services, said the size and diversity of MDC—the college serves nearly 165,000 students from all walks of life—make TurboVote a logical choice.

“It is the future now, and our students have always been dynamic and active in their communities,” said Perez.