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“How do you get college students politically active?” And that’s what The Drake Democrats is trying to answer. The Drake Dems is an organization with many purposes but the main one is to get more college students interested in politics – especially local and state politics.

The group’s president, Patrick Rynard, himself a senior in politics, said it’s all about education for students, by students.

“I try to educate them as much as possible about who the elected officials in Iowa are and what big political races are coming up in the state,” Rynard said.

Students recently got a taste of the local political scene when both gubernatorial candidates came to speak at Drake.

“Some Drake students may be very interested in politics, but if they don't even know who the Democratic candidate for governor is, they're probably not to get involved,” he said.

This past November both the Democrat and Republican organizations on campus were working hard trying to make sure students got registered to vote. The Drake Dems went knocking on doors of fellow students from 7 a.m. until 9 p.m. on Election Day to get students to vote. Rynard said there was a much higher turnout of college students this election cycle than in the 2002 mid-term elections.

“This involvement becomes very important when the government, whether it be the state legislature, governor, or Congress, works on issues that really affect college

students. The new Democratic-controlled Congress has made one of their first priorities cutting student loan interest rates in half, which will save college students thousands upon thousands of dollars in student loan debt.

Also during the election, the Drake Dems coordinated efforts with the Iowa Democratic Party as well.

“I think that volunteering is one of the most important parts of being involved in the political process, because while all the high ups—the advisors, the campaign directors, and all those people—play an important role in an election, it's really the volunteers that get a candidate elected,” said Jill Shesol, a sophomore in public relations and political science and the group’s public relations officer.

Rynard pointed out the Drake Dems’ Web site, which includes a list of ways to get involved and a blog to keep the more than 500 Drake Democrats up-to-date about what is happening at Drake, at the statehouse, and in Washington.

“The Dems look out for what's going on in politics in general, and if we see something we disagree with... we let people know. Freedom of speech, baby!,” Shesol said.

But it’s not just door knocking and campaigning the Drake Democrats do. They also provide opportunities for students to get directly involved in their party’s organization.

“Through Drake Dems, I've tried to get interested students in contact with various campaigns and job/intern opportunities,” said Rynard, adding he personally worked on Governor-elect Chet Culver’s campaign.

According to the Drake Democrats' Web site, many other candidates have either passed through Drake or Des Moines, and it gives students the opportunity to mingle with both lawmakers and their staff.

"We try to keep in good communication with the state and local Democratic parties. We don't do too much with Des Moines liberal groups, though we do work with other liberal groups on campus. Right now we're trying to build up good relationships with all of the possible presidential candidates and their campaigns," said Rynard.

Shesol also said being a part of the Drake Dem's has given her opportunities she might not otherwise get.

"During the election I worked for the Iowa Democratic Party doing field work. Since then I've taken some time off... I'm going to Washington, D.C. next semester to do a 'study abroad' program at American University. There's a whole lot I have to do to get ready for that, and hopefully I'll be doing a bit to help the Democrats out there once I arrive," she said.

Both Rynard and Shesol said working with students and with Drake Democrats has allowed many students the opportunity to become involved in the political process, even if only by voting.

"I think we're having a significant impact in politics right now by getting youth more involved in the Democratic Party," said Rynard.

Shesol agrees but takes a more realist stance.

"I think that it is so important that people are at least politically aware. I would love it if everyone went even further and was politically active, but I'm a realist, I know it's not going to happen. I think that college is the time that a lot of people start to define

who they are going to be for the rest of their lives. Drake Dems is giving people that starting point for at least identifying themselves as political, and hopefully starting to get them involved in politics,” she said.

Both Rynard and Shesol agree as well that once you get politically active it’s a hard habit to break, and that’s what the Drake Democrats are hoping to do, one student at a time.

If you are interested in joining the Drake Democrats, contact Patrick Rynard for more information about the organization’s weekly meetings.