



Democratic Engagement Action Plan University of South Carolina Upstate



Introduction

The University of South Carolina Upstate serves approximately 6,000 students across Spartanburg's main campus and two facilities in nearby Greenville. It is a senior comprehensive public institution of the University of South Carolina charged with offering baccalaureate education to the citizens of the Upstate and to offer selected master's degrees in response to regional demand. Founded nearly 50 years ago as a response to Spartanburg General Hospital's plan to eliminate its diploma program for registered nurses, the University of South Carolina Upstate now offers academic programming in the Liberal Arts, Nursing, Education, and Business. The University adopted a metropolitan mission, thus acknowledging that its "fundamental reason for being is its relationship to its surrounding cities, their connecting corridors, and expanding population." (www.uscupstate.edu).

One of USC Upstate's most significant **assets** is the diversity of the students. Approximately one-third of Upstate students are the first in their family to attend college, and about one-third are classified as students of color. Three out of four students receive need-based financial aid. Over half of the current freshman class received a Pell Grant, and 28% of students who completed a FASFA come from families earning less than \$25,000 per year. USC Upstate serves military veterans, and other non-traditional students. Collectively, the students represent a wide-range of political, social, and religious beliefs.

The University of South Carolina Upstate participates in the National Study for Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). For the 2012 Presidential Election, the student voter registration rate was 77.3% and the voter turnout rate was 54.1%. Registration and voter turnout rates (69.3% and 19.1%, respectively) were significantly lower for the 2014 midterm. The campus was identified by NSLVE's research team as a positive-outlier, meaning the actual student voting rate exceeded predicted expectations. While very proud, **we can do better**.

The Democratic Engagement Action Plan is designed to prepare students to be **active, enlightened, and empowered** citizens in their communities. And, in many ways, political learning is already embedded in USC Upstate's academic and co-curricular programming. About 75% of the student-body is from one of the ten counties that compose South Carolina's Upstate region, and over 90% are from the state. Most will stay in the region following graduation. Preparing students for democratic engagement is a responsibility of higher education, and USC Upstate has the added incentive of ensuring that our graduates are prepared to lead in the exact same communities where the faculty, staff, and administration reside. Accordingly, the Democratic Engagement Action Plan prepares students for many different political and civic activities, voting in the 2016 election being among them.

Voter Registration and Education

The University of South Carolina Upstate designated a single staff person to serve as the campus's voter registration drive coordinator. Heather Rossi is USC Upstate's former AmeriCorps VISTA and joined the staff this year as the Volunteer Program Coordinator. Her responsibilities include preparing student leaders and campus organizations to host voter registration events. Heather is also establishing a partnership with Instructional Librarian Virginia Cononie to host voter registration drives on September 19 and October 3 (flyer is included at the end of this document). The voter registration deadline is October 8 for South Carolina's election, and vans are being arranged to drive students from student housing to the local polling station on Election Day.

Heather is coordinating a new Voter Registration Competition (see attached flyer). Student clubs and organizations will compete to register the most USC Upstate students for a \$250 cash prize and recognition as the winner of the first Ron Romine Award. Dr. Romine was a long-time faculty member at USC Upstate and sadly passed away this year. He was a tireless advocate for community engagement and political participation during his tenure at the institution he loved. Dr. Romine was a treasure and his legacy lives on.

The Student Success Center is also supporting voter registration and education. Susannah Waldrop, Director and Jane Addison, Academic Advisor are embedding voter registration and education into the University 101 curriculum this semester. There are 32 U101 sections and each has about 20 freshman students. Each section has an assigned “peer-leader” which are upper-classmen participating in a year-long leadership development program. All peer-leaders were trained by a political science faculty member on how to get students more interested in the election and how to register to vote. Each peer-leader will make a presentation to their respective University 101 sections prior to the registration deadline, while also teaching students how to access information about the campaigns.

Discuss Public Issues in the Classroom and on Campus

Students are more likely to become politically active if learning about public issues is embedded into the curricular and co-curricular undergraduate experience. The first-year writing composition program, a requirement for all USC Upstate students, has gained national recognition for its success in integrating learning about public issues into classroom activities. Though developed as an opportunity for students to build academic writing and critical reading skills, the faculty assign content that exposes students to important historical essays and articles on contemporary issues. Further, students engage in open-discussions and are challenged to articulate their perspectives and learn from the perspectives of others. The faculty also build opportunities for students to learn about and propose solutions to community problems in writing assignments and oral presentations.

USC Upstate will continue PREFACE, the first-year reading program, during the 2016 – 2017 year. The program includes a common book to be read by all students enrolled in the composition program. The selected book this year is In Defense of a Liberal Education by Fareed Zakaria. Dr. Monika Shehi and other program organizers are developing a speaker series where experts from across campus will discuss how the book is relates to public issues addressed in various academic disciplines. One particular PREFACE talk will directly link a liberal education to political and civic engagement, though all will connect liberal learning to engaging society.

A willingness – and even enthusiasm – towards connecting public issues in the classroom carries over into upper-division courses in countless academic disciplines. And, the emphasis on open-discussions with a diverse group of people carries over to co-curricular experiences. Engaging diversity is common practice for many USC Upstate faculty and students. An initial review of the recently release National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) shows that among first-year students, 65% “frequently” had discussions with people with different political views, 66% “frequently” had discussions with people from a different economic background, and 75% “frequently” had discussions with people from a different race or ethnicity. This type of engagement is critical for preparing students for meaningful democratic engagement.

Marketing the Election

The University Communications department, led by Assistant Vice-Chancellor Tammy Whaley, agreed to advertise the election to students by developing a “Make November 8 Your First Time” campaign. The campaign includes posters of Sparty, the campus mascot, wearing a Spartans Vote button and reminding students of Election Day and the voter registration deadline (see attached flyer). Faculty, staff, and administrators will also be invited to record 1 minute videos describing their “first time” voting in a national election.

During the Spring, 2016 semester, Associate Director of Metropolitan Engagement Kara Davis, developed a poster (see attached flyer) that included the voter registration deadline, absentee voting deadline, and Election Day. The poster also refers faculty and students to a website with links to the South Carolina Civic Health Index (authored by a USC Upstate faculty-member) and the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) campus report.

Service Learning and Volunteerism

USC Upstate offered about 30 different service-learning courses (some with multiple sections) over the past two semesters. In each class, students are provided opportunities to serve the community while employing skills and knowledge acquired in the classroom. This includes students in an African-American Studies course recording interviews with residents of a neighborhood undergoing a transitional period. The recorded interviews will be included as part of a large-scale (and well-funded) public art installation in the community. Students in a Spanish course are translating important documents for local non-profit organizations serving the region’s growing Hispanic community. Nursing students are developing a Teen Health Expo for local middle-school students to learn about healthy living habits. Criminal Justice students are serving as tutors for inmates at the local detention center who are preparing for a high school equivalency exam. USC Upstate’s faculty and students are incredibly enthusiastic about service-learning. Along with ensuring that the institution is actively serving the community, these courses build students’ personal efficacy and sense of civic responsibility that can facilitate future political and civic engagement.

Students also have access to volunteer opportunities outside of the service-learning program. This includes IMPACT and Alternative Break programs that are used to participate in up to week-long, intensive service experiences in disadvantaged communities. Most student organizations, clubs and athletic programs are very active with philanthropy and volunteerism. Opportunities exist for students to continue volunteering with the same organization following graduation, given that many will remain in the region for their entire lives. Student volunteerism is on-going and serves as a mechanism to learning about public issues in the community.

Simulations

Learning simulations are also an effective mechanism to prepare students for effective political and civic engagement. Dr. Trevor Rubenzer developed and currently advises USC Upstate’s Model United Nations team. It is open to students in any major, and provides participants the opportunity to represent a country in specialized committees with predefined public issues. Students conduct research, draft position papers, and make speeches while learning about the international negotiation process. These skills are

prerequisites for meaningful political engagement. Dr. Rubenzer has led this effort for many years, and USC Upstate's team continues to have great success in regional competitions. His informational meeting was held on August 31. Model United Nations presents a sustainable and successful example of using simulations to encourage political learning. Plans are also underway for the Library faculty and staff to conduct a mock election prior to November 8. The details of the program have not yet been released.

Welcoming Political Campaigns

USC Upstate welcomes political leaders and campaign surrogates to visit with the campus community. Last Spring, former President Bill Clinton and Olympic Figure Skater Michelle Kwan visited on behalf of the Hillary Clinton campaign and Cornel West visited on behalf of the Bernie Sanders campaign. The campus is working with Congressman Trey Gowdy and his opponent, Chris Fedalei, to visit campus this semester, but dates have not yet been set.

Conclusion

USC Upstate has a civic duty to prepare students for active, democratic engagement. Many efforts described in the Democratic Engagement Action Plan were specifically developed to enhance voter turnout in November. This includes the registration drives, the collaboration with the University 101 program, and the marketing materials related to the current election. Getting our students engaged in the election is incredibly important.

Other efforts were developed to prepare students for a lifetime of political and civic activity. Voting in the 2016 election will be an important step to fulfilling their duty as active and empowered leaders. However, it is only a first-step. USC Upstate serves countless students from under-represented, historically marginalized groups. **Preparing and empowering USC Upstate students for political activity can bring important new voices and perspectives into our democratic process.**

Register to Vote

*At the
Library
September 19
October 3*

Register to Vote

The Ron Romine Award

The Ron Romine Award will be awarded to the USC Upstate registered student organization who registers the most USC upstate students.

Voter Registration Drive Competition

The Office of Student Life Volunteer Services is sponsoring a voter registration drive competition between 9/22 & 10/6. USC Upstate registered student organizations can contact Heather Rossi at rossih@uscupstate.edu in order to participate.



**Volunteer
Services**

**For more information, contact
Heather Rossi at
rossih@uscupstate.edu, 864-503-
5106, Sansbury CLC 202**





MAKE NOV-8 YOUR FIRST TIME

Register To Vote By: **October 8**

Election Day: **November 8**

Visit www.uscupstate.edu/voterregistration for more information about registering to vote, how to find your polling location, and much more!

For more information, contact the Office of Service-Learning and Community Engagement at osce@uscupstate.edu, 864-503-5433, Sainsbury CLC 202.

UPSTATE



OFFICE OF
Service-Learning and
Community Engagement
at USC Upstate



Below is important information about the South Carolina Voter Registration and Election Day 2016!

Deadline to Register to Vote:
October 8, 2016



Deadline for Absentee Voting via mailed ballot:
November 4, 2016



Deadline for Absentee Voting in person:
November 7, 2016 at 5:00 p.m.



Election Day: **November 8, 2016**

Visit www.uscupstate.edu/voterregistration for more information about registering to vote, how to find your polling location, and much more!

For more information, contact the Office of Service-Learning and Community Engagement at oslce@uscupstate.edu, 864-503-5433, Sansbury CLC 202.



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