

ALFRED UNIVERSITY: CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

All In Campus Democracy
Challenge Plan



Executive Summary

Currently, Alfred University's civic learning and democratic engagement work focuses on voter registration, voter education, ballot access, and ensuring that Alfred University as an institution works to "get out the vote" within our campus community. This work is the result of a coalition of campus partners led by Tricia Debertolis (Associate Dean of Students) in collaboration with Corey Fecteau (Service Learning Coordinator) and Abby Griffith (Director, Judson Leadership Center). In turn, this coalition collaborates with a number of local community partners to encourage increased civic engagement by our student body. As an institution, it is invaluable for us to continue to be a part of the All In Campus Democracy Challenge, as it ensures that we are continually processing, assessing, and reflecting upon ways in which to improve student voter registration rates at Alfred University. We hope our involvement continues to aid us in increasing overall civic engagement on our campus, and we would like to use our designation as an All In Challenge institution to leverage an increase in upper level support of our campus initiatives. This support would in turn provide us with an opportunity to mentor more students and continue to work with them to generate new campus and community engagement opportunities.

Leadership

This campus-wide All In Challenge: Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Initiative is led by Tricia Debertolis (Associate Dean of Students) in coordination with Corey Fecteau (Service Learning Coordinator) and Abby Griffith (Director, Judson Leadership Center). This committee works in turn with both faculty and staff to serve the voter education needs of Alfred University's four colleges. Our faculty partners include Dr. Emrys Westacott (Professor of Philosophy) and Dr. Gary Ostrower (Professor of History); the coalition also works in close conjunction with the Alfred University Faculty Senate. Staff members from across the Division of Student Affairs help to ensure that voter registration and education is a vital part of their departmental programming. The coalition also actively partners with the Allegany County Board of Elections, whom we meet with regularly to ensure that staff and faculty are receiving the most up-to-date training on voter registration protocols, absentee ballots, and primary/general election deadlines.

Current Model

To increase voter registration rates on our campus, campus partners sent out campus-wide emails with registration information, reminders, essential links, and additional data at key times throughout the calendar year. Our University President, Mark Zupan, also sent out a special campus-wide announcement reminding our student population to register to vote. We hosted voter registration drives on Constitution Day and National Voter Registration Day. On Constitution Day, we collaborated with our political science department and an outside speaker specifically selected by our faculty partners. During National Voter Registration Day, we created multiple booths on campus that were equipped with trained staff. These staff members were able to help students register to vote and answer any questions students might have had regarding the registration process. In order to increase ballot access, we provided voter registration forms to our Center for Academic Success (Alfred University's disability services office). We also ensured CAS staff members were trained to assist students in completing their registration forms.

In the hopes of improving voter education within our community at large, we hosted an "issues forum" in collaboration with our faculty and the campus Green Party group. Our campus also hosted a roundtable to discuss the upcoming presidential election; we completed this event with support from AU's Women and Gender Studies program and the Judson Leadership Center. We also partnered with AU's Political Science Club to host debate watch parties at one of our main campus theater spaces. Our coalition also conducted voter registration drives at these watch parties.

One incredibly successful program we would particularly like to highlight is Alfred University's Art Force 5 Team. In 2006, Drawn to Diversity was founded at Alfred University as a creative approach to furthering the institution's historic commitment to equality and social justice. In 2008, Alfred University launched Art Force 5 as the program's outreach team. The program was founded and is currently directed by Dan Napolitano, Assistant Dean of the School of Art and Design. Art Force 5 champions creativity over conflict through non-violence workshops and impactful,

Current Model

community-based art. The team has shared this message with over one hundred audiences at preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, community centers, museums, schools for incarcerated youth, colleges, and professional conferences. Art Force 5 enforces creativity's ability to promote equality and strengthen communities, and they are invaluable part of our civic learning and democratic engagement work.

Alfred University has also developed Social Justice Studies, an interdisciplinary minor that reflects Alfred University's commitment to social justice and honors the university's roots in 19th century social justice movements. Social justice movements work toward a society characterized by equitable distribution of various kinds of resources (political, economic, cultural, etc.) to all identity groups. In the Social Justice Studies minor, students develop the tools to analyze and the vocabulary to talk about systems of advantage and disadvantage that perpetuate inequality at the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural level. They acquire familiarity with social movements and strategies that have been used historically to dismantle systemic inequality and to effect social change. They examine their own identities and actions in light of their learning, and engage in experiential learning—getting outside of the classroom environment to develop and implement action plans and then reflecting on their experience.

Concepts of Service Learning is an example of how Social Justice Studies students are incorporating action and reflection into civic engagement. This course combines topical readings, videos, and classroom discussion with semester-long service projects in the local community. Students also reflect in writing on their service experience and understanding of course materials, and the course culminates in a final project where students present their findings and service work to the class. Concepts of Service Learning also incorporates class visits from local politicians and non-profit organizations to build student understanding of the structures of communities, how communities actually are governed, and how to best utilize existing resources to create change.

Current Model

To safeguard equal ballot access our campus community, we met with the local board of elections to ensure we correctly understood the registration procedure for college students. In collaboration with our local board, our office then generated sample registration ballots anyone on campus could utilize to ensure students were registering correctly for their district. This training was essential to our overall registration success rate, as evidenced by the positive remarks we received from the Allegany County Board of Elections concerning the voter registration forms they received from Alfred University.

In order to ensure our students “get out the vote,” we regularly send campus-wide emails outlining important dates and upcoming elections along with a wealth of information regarding absentee ballots and early voting registration. In these emails, we also provide links to help students access their state ballot requirements. Additionally, New York State absentee ballot requirements and forms are readily available on campus. Finally, we also created and printed signs to direct students to their local polling place.

Our current model proved very successful in terms of increasing our campus voting registration and active voting rates. According to NSLVE data from 2012 to 2016, our campus experienced a nearly ten percent (9.8 %) increase in registered voters. Alfred University’s overall voting rate increased by over 10 percentage points (10.9 %), bringing us significantly closer (within 10%) to the national institutional average.

Going Forward: Long-Term Goals and New Strategic Initiatives

In addition to continuing the aforementioned initiatives, we also hope to add several new strategies going forward. We have recently worked to publicize our upcoming local elections via assorted digital platforms, and we are currently in the process of creating a graphic representation/map of the voter registration process to utilize in our future voter registration campaigns. Several of our faculty partners are also eager to create a poster or sign campaign on campus to help broadcast our voter registration goals in the hopes of motivating students to strive for higher turnout across campus.

We will also offer a voter registration table at our new student orientation this fall. This booth will be staffed by our preexisting coalition in collaboration with multiple faculty partners. We will hold a faculty training session before and during orientation to ensure our faculty have the most up-to-date information regarding voting registration and our current campus goals and initiatives. This will, in turn, allow us to partner more effectively with our institution's Faculty Senate, whom we will be visiting throughout the upcoming academic year. One of our short-term goals is to ultimately launch a more formal voter drive with our faculty partners for the upcoming midterm elections—with the long-term goal of building upon this initial collaboration for the 2020 election season.

Alfred University faculty and staff are often incredibly involved in our off-campus community. The current mayor of Alfred, NY is a theater professor from our College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and many of our

Going Forward: Long-Term Goals and New Strategic Initiatives

faculty and staff members serve on the Alfred Village Board or the Alfred-Almond School Board. In highlighting the accomplishments of these individuals and in encouraging campus debate via talks or panels containing these figures, it is our hope that we can model civic engagement and the importance of the election process to our student body at large via "real-life" individuals.

Finally, both our Concepts of Service Learning and Women's Leadership Academy courses will highlight voter registration in the coming year by including it within their curriculum. Students in Concepts of Service Learning will be involved in a service learning project centered around voter education and voter registration on campus and in the community at large. The WLA Gender and Leadership course will have voter registration built into its current curriculum; students will also be encouraged to think about spring capstone projects that speak directly to this issue. Several faculty partners already include voter education and registration within their syllabi, and it is our hope that we will be able to encourage more to do so via our growing ties to both the community at large and to Faculty Senate.

In short, we intend to continue to build upon—and improve upon!—our existing strategies for increasing civic education and democratic engagement on our campus in anticipation of the 2018 midterm elections. For the upcoming midterm election season, we would like to maintain (if not improve upon) our previous 10% increase in voter and registration rates, with the more long term goal of steadily

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increasing our overall voter and registration count by approximately 5% for the upcoming 2020 election. This would bring us more in line with the national institutional voting average of 50.4%, which—despite an impressive increase in voter registration and overall voting rates across campus—Alfred University still fell 8.4% short of as of 2016. Ideally, we would like to strive to surpass this average by steadily increasing our registration and voting rates over the course of the next two election cycles. Another area of concern that we will focus on based upon our analysis of NSLVE data is increasing our overall rate of absentee ballot voters. Many students have expressed confusion about this process and the attendant deadlines, so we will be working to increase outreach and education on all fronts. Our NSLVE data showed a marked percentage drop in absentee voters (-3.9%--though this was perhaps offset by a significant increase in in-person voters), and it is essential that we continue to provide outreach to ensure students are able to overcome barriers going forward.

Reporting and Evaluation

This plan will be shared amongst all campus partners, including the core coalition, the Division of Student Affairs, and Faculty Senate. The plan will be distributed via email, and we are currently in the process of finding new ways to publicize our NSLVE data and campus plan via our institution's newly redesigned website and social media streams.

The Alfred University All In: Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Initiative will be evaluated throughout the year via course evaluations, surveys from organized events, and directed feedback sessions with faculty partners. Attendance records for each organized event will be collected and feedback will be elicited from Faculty Senate and various student groups. Comparison to the previous year's data and feedback will be important indicators of success (for example: increased attendance, increased campus awareness of individual initiatives, etc.).

This information will be distributed amongst coalition members and relevant campus partners for discussion and further analysis in conjunction with NSLVE data findings.

Any questions pertaining to this initiative may be directed to:

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