



ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge | 2020 Action Plan

ALVERNIA UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

The Mission of Alvernia University states as a primary goal that we educate to form “engaged citizens and ethical leaders with moral courage.” As a Franciscan Catholic institution, Alvernia is deeply committed to principals of justice, civic learning, and community engagement. The Franciscan values of humility and collegiality are applied in real world experiences where students learn to respect diverse populations and understand the impacts of poverty and marginalization.

Our development of an ALL IN Action Plan corresponds with the mission and vision of our institution. The civic engagement initiative at Alvernia began under a previous Vice President of University Life, but has continued with support of the current President and Provost, as well as concerted effort from key individuals across campus. The development of this specific plan was done with input from the individuals below, with leadership undertaken by Sr. Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions for Transfer Services and Veterans Affairs, Bret Krotee, and Professors Dr. Janae Sholtz and Dr. Victoria Williams.

At Alvernia, we see participation in the electoral process as the foundation of being an engaged citizen and an ethical leader. The right to vote is fundamental to our democracy. So it is only fitting that if our mission is to encourage civic engagement, we should inspire our students to both register to vote and vote. Consequently, the immediate purpose of our ALL IN Action Plan is to raise voter awareness, increase voter registration, and increase voter turnout. We are planning a series of targeted announcements and special events in order to give specific attention to voter registration, voting encouragement, and voter education. While the focus will be on traditional undergraduate students on our main campus, since it dovetails with our 19th Amendment activities described below, we will be making a concerted effort to reach all Alvernia students, including satellite campuses in Schuylkill County and Philadelphia, as well as our online students, through social media and other university-wide communication. Long term goals include a heightened visibility of Alvernia’s efforts to increase student participation in the democratic process. Activities will be planned and coordinated by our team leaders, who will work with our Marketing Department, The Holleran Center for Community Engagement, Student Activities, The Office of Residence Life, Student Government, and the Faculty Council to promote staff events.

Leadership

Our efforts are led by a campus-based group of faculty, staff, and student leaders, while being supported by others in our community. Leadership and planning responsibility centers on the following individuals:

- Designated point of contact and coalition leader is Bret Krotee – Sr. Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions for Transfer Services and Veterans Affairs
 - Faculty leadership is provided by Dr. Janae Sholtz (Philosophy) and Dr. Victoria Williams (Political Science).
 - Staff from the Holleran Center for Community and Global Engagement, led by Dr. Rudy Ruth, Director of the Holleran Center.
 - Staff from the Student Activities Office, under the direction of Karolina Dreher, Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life.
 - Faculty members including Professors Tim Blessing (History), Diane Kraft (Biology), and Jodi Radosh (Communication).
 - Student involvement from the Student Government Association and our campus Political Science Club.
 - Support from the local community include the League of Women Voters, State Senator Judy Schwank, and local community leaders involved with encouraging civic engagement among the greater Reading, Pennsylvania community.
- * With roles in Admissions, Athletics, and the Veterans Center, team leader Bret Krotee has vital insight on ways of appealing to the Alvernia student as well as keen awareness of the importance of protecting America's democratic process and values. Should Bret step away from this position at any point, a replacement point person would be selected by the Provost in consultation with the faculty representatives in this group and the Director of the Holleran Center for Community Engagement.

Commitment, Landscape, and Goals

Alvernia is a private, Franciscan university that offers undergraduate, graduate, and adult education programs. The main campus is located in Reading, Pennsylvania, with branch campuses in Philadelphia and Schuylkill Counties. Total enrollment approaches 3,000 students, approximately 1,400 of whom are full-time traditional undergraduates. The male to female ratio is approximately 38/62. Our entering freshman class is composed of approximately 450 students, largely from Pennsylvania, but with a significant number of students from New Jersey, New York, Maryland and Delaware, with a scattering of students from other states across the country. Our adult and graduate populations are almost exclusively from Pennsylvania.

Alvernia's undergraduate student body is racially diverse, with students of color representing between 25-30% of the student body. Our *Reading Collegiate Scholar Program* provides generous scholarships to graduates from both Reading High School and Reading Area Community College, where minorities, mostly Hispanic, make up a significant portion of their population. Alvernia's commitment to addressing the needs of diverse and vulnerable populations extends to support on campus, with an Academic Success Center devoted to helping students develop various study skills needed to succeed. We are recognized as a Veteran Friendly Campus and have a Veterans Center on campus to support the specific needs of our military population.

The most popular major at Alvernia is nursing, with approximately a quarter of the student body selecting that major. Other strong Allied Health Programs include Occupational Therapy, Addictions and Mental Health, Athletic Training, and Physical Therapy tracks. Unique majors include Social Work, Criminal Justice, and Computer Science. Alvernia plans on adding Engineering and Esports in fall of 2021. We have a vibrant core curriculum that is explicitly designed to work in tandem with co-curricular offerings to produce well-rounded citizens regardless of the narrowness of their majors.

Students have a well-honed responsibility of service to others; however, this does not translate into political engagement of activism, and with the exception of voter registration, efforts to encourage student political participation have tended to rely on a small portion of highly aware students. We most recently received NSLVE data in September of 2019 and were recognized as a university committed to increasing college student voting rates, receiving a Silver Seal for achieving a student voting rate between 30-39%. While we are proud of a ‘Silver’ designation, this plan lays out a path to improve substantially on that rate in the future.

Our university is going through a significant transition phase that will involve many discussions about strategic planning and vision for the institution moving forward. At this point it is premature to promise to intentionally and specifically incorporate civic learning and democratic engagement as core pieces of the university’s learning outcomes; however, the actions of the administration thus far and the general university mission and educational ethos lend themselves well to continued efforts in this direction.

Alvernia encourages social responsibility by embracing “*Real World*” Learning, which manifests through co-curricular, off-campus service and volunteer experiences, as well as through study abroad opportunities, often geared towards educating the student through community improvement projects. One of the student learning outcomes of our SEARCH general education curriculum is to “recognize personal, social and ethical responsibility for leadership in the local and global communities”. Well-regarded faculty leaders who are engaged in the ALL IN collaboration will help to ensure plan goals are incorporated in discussions about the university’s general educational curriculum, co-curricular service projects, and activities of relevant student clubs.

Alvernia has a tradition of engaging in initiatives supporting civic learning and civic engagement. In regards to curricular civic learning, Alvernia has a robust service-learning program, with between 20-30 courses offering a service component, where students can apply their learning with community partners. The *Holleran Center for Community Engagement* provides students the opportunity to develop their civic awareness and use their individual talents to improve the surrounding communities through service projects and outreach. As described in their purpose, “community service is an integral part of students’ learning experiences, contributing to their intellectual, social, and spiritual growth and development and providing a framework for students’ roles as members of both local, regional and global communities”. Alvernia requires students to complete a minimum of forty hours of community service. Programs such as the *South Reading Youth Initiative*, which provides education and mentorship for inner city children, and the *Bog Turtle Creek Farm*, which makes healthy, fresh produce available to families in the City of Reading are two major programs spearheaded by the Holleran Center.

President John Loyack was appointed in June 2019 and has made an explicit commitment to tying the university even more closely with the local community. His investment in moving a part of our campus to downtown Reading, purchasing a building and entering into local partnerships, is branded as the *‘Reading CollegeTowne’* initiative and purposefully moves the university toward deeper community civic engagements with our local community. As with so many once-thriving industrial cities up and down the East Coast, Reading’s population currently faces many struggles including high levels of poverty and marginalization. By making the development of CollegeTowne an institutional priority, Alvernia builds on a service-oriented tradition at the university, positioning us to raise awareness of social justice and the need for civic engagement both in our students and among members of the local community. Led by the *O’Pake Institute for Economic Development and Entrepreneurship*, Reading CollegeTowne has expanded the level of community engagement to include economic development and community improvement at a city-wide level, championing economic redevelopment in the center of the city. Civic engagement, understood in terms of improving the community through reciprocal relationships, is clearly a priority at the institutional level at Alvernia.

Provost Glynis Fitzgerald also joined the university in June of 2019. One of her first initiatives was to convene a small group of faculty leaders to plan ways to commemorate and celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. The group launched a project to raise voter awareness and remind our students of all genders the value of our liberty to vote. In honor of the work of the suffragists who fought the long, hard battle to win the vote for women in America, this group created the 100 Percent for the 100th Anniversary (‘100 for 100’) Campaign, with the aspirational goal of having 100% of the women and men at Alvernia (students, faculty, and staff) registered in time to vote in the 2020 Presidential election. This initiative will be ongoing throughout the upcoming academic year, participating in nation-wide year-long commemoration and celebration of this century of progress for women. Alvernia has already hosted several events in support of this awareness-raising campaign. Two of the members of that planning committee, Dr. Sholtz and Dr. Williams, also work on the ALL IN democratic engagement efforts, emphasizing the institutional commitment to the importance of voting and civic engagement on Alvernia’s campus.

Going forward, we will continue to look for ways to explicitly link political engagement with Alvernia’s community engagement and service-learning efforts. We realize that many students learned very little about government or politics in high school, and we recognize that the current political climate makes it intimidating for many to want to participate in dialogue about political issues. We will also continue to encourage every student to understand that involvement in the democratic process is a civic duty and luxury denied to many around the world. Our political science department offers courses to help students from all majors navigate the confusing world of politics.

The university also has a commitment to civil dialogue on campus, and programming around ‘difficult dialogues’ has been integrated into our First Year Seminar classes as well as in campus-wide events facilitated and moderated by students in the university’s Honors Program for the past two years. Honors students have led civil dialogue workshops and fostered student-led discussion within the classroom that model methods of conflict de-escalation and respectful debate connecting these important skills to the importance of becoming informed, engaged citizens in a diverse world. These skills are the hallmarks of a healthy democratic process.

Strategy

As demonstrated above, Alvernia University is committed to ongoing citizen engagement and education. While voting is a primary goal and principle outcome of our efforts, we hope to give students the tools they need to become more politically aware and knowledgeable, and ultimately to inculcate a spirit of democratic values and citizen engagement on our campus and in our community.

For the near-term, our plan is to focus on short-term tactics to increase voter registration and participation. Our efforts will be in two distinct, but related phases. Initially we will concentrate on voter registration efforts. Later in the fall, we will focus our attention to voter education and encouragement. After the Presidential Election, we will analyze data to determine next steps.

- ***Voter Registration: Goal 100% for the 100th Anniversary***
 - Each incoming student will receive a voter information sheet stating how to access the Pennsylvania voter registration online form, with a note of personal encouragement to register and to vote, as well as a referral for information about registration in home districts in her/his New Student Orientation (NSO) folder.
 - Following our New Student Orientation, a series of periodic communications will be sent to all students using email and social media (and other forms of communication, when possible) focusing on voter registration. This will continue up until the Pennsylvania voter registration deadline in early October. These communications will include information about the voter registration process and state voter deadlines.
 - Regular announcements will be supplemented around important voting or citizenship related days, including the commemoration of September 11th, Women's Equality Day, Constitution Day, and National Voter Registration Day. All communication will include information about where to obtain a Pennsylvania voter registration form on campus (and online) and about registration in the home districts of our students.

- ***Voter Education***
 - Specific reference to voter registration and voting encouragement will be included in the remarks at New Student Orientation.
 - Spring semester 2020 Course offering: POS 290: Election 2020 Bootcamp. Course Description: Your crash-course in American politics & contemporary debates impacting the 2020 presidential election. Become a part of the national conversation! Learn about things that impact your life! Actually know what's going on in the news!
 - Our Constitution Day commemorations will include sessions featuring faculty, staff, and key student leaders. We will also reach out to local organizations for support and/or educational offerings. There will be a voter registration table located on campus.
 - Our Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life will stress the importance of student voting at the University Life Session during Undergraduate, Graduate, and Adult Education Orientation (August and January starts). This session will also take place with our affiliated programs at the Reading School of Health Sciences (August and December starts).

- ***Voting Process***
 - Following the Pennsylvania voter registration deadline, our announcements will shift to voter education and voting encouragement. We will provide information about securing and submitting absentee ballots, the location of polling places, and how to vote using a voting machine (NEW machines in 2019).
 - Our campus hosts the polling place for our district. We will provide information to students about the location of their polling location and the hours students can vote.

- ***Voter Turnout***
 - We will encourage students to share their plan to vote under the hashtag #100for100 on social media platforms. According to data submitted by the previous manager of our campus program, in 2018 approximately 75% of our students registered to vote and 50% of those actually voted. Since 2020 is a Presidential election year, we anticipate that both figures will be increase.

- ***Voter Support***
 - We understand that the election climate, especially during these unprecedented circumstances, can cause additional stress and anxiety. At times like this, living our core values, especially collegiality, is the responsibility of each member of our Alvernia community. In response, the university has organized many events and resources to help collegial discourse and support our community with coping with the additional anxiety that a contentious election cycle can bring. Our hope is to create constructive dialogue and to enhance the overall mental and emotional well-being of our campus.

2020 – 2021 Timeline

- January 14 Dean of Students and Director of University Life host voting session at School of Graduate and Adult Education Orientation
- February 6 100% for the 100th – 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment – Discussion, followed by showing of Iron Jawed Angels; Voter registration table available
- May Multiple email updates regarding online voter registration and mail-in and absentee ballots due to COVID-19.
- August 26 Women’s Equality Day commemoration through social media blasts and posters throughout campus
- August 27 Voter registration information sheet and notes of encouragement in NSO folders
- September 1 Periodic voter registration encouragement announcements begin
- September 17 Constitution Day commemorative activities, with voter registration and voting encouragement theme
- September 22 National Voter Registration Day information table and space for students to take a picture or record a video expressing why they vote
- October 5 Announcements shift to voter education and voting encouragement
- October 19 Voter Registration Deadline (PA) email
- October 27 Campus wide email from the President to encourage voting, support, and Safety
- November 2 Student Government Association email stressing respect and perspective

- November 3 Election Day
- November 4 Post-Election evening of Prayer, Healing, and Conversation
- November 16 Assessment commences
- December 7 Assessment analysis commences
- Spring 2021 Campus activities corresponding with ongoing national celebrations of the centennial of the 19th amendment.
- January 4 Assessment results dissemination to key staff, faculty, and student leaders for use in shaping future efforts

The group leaders will monitor responses to early outreach activities and meet to strategize ways to increase engagement and participation at future events or improve interaction with social media messaging. The Political Science Club will be our primary point of contact for student volunteers to staff registration drives and host political awareness events, and other members of the coalition will be involved in promoting, participating, and evaluating the success of initiatives. The work of the ALL IN Coalition will work in unison with that of the 100 for 100 initiative, so the ongoing collaboration between those groups will shape fall semester activities.

Reporting & Evaluation

In the past, we have used outcomes of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), which we most recently received in September of 2019. It is evident that Alvernia has taken positive strides when comparing previous data. From 2014 to 2018, 370 more students voted. Additionally, the registration rate increased by 11.1% and voting rate increased by 16.8%.

We look forward to sharing this plan with members of the campus community and the local community. Already our work on our “100% for the 100th” initiative has been announced to students via flyers, social media, and voter registration and information tables in populated student areas on campus. We will share the initiative in our respective student life and academic divisions of the university to build culture throughout campus. After the election, we will regroup to review our progress and assess a path forward for ongoing voter engagement and education. In particular, we hope that we can generate some positive local press about our efforts to raise awareness of the vital role Alvernia University is playing in civic education.

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