

2020 Campus Democratic Engagement Plan
McKeen Center for the Common Good
Bowdoin College
January 2020

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Summary

This Campus Democratic Engagement Plan was developed by an advisory group of diverse students, staff, and faculty, coordinated by the McKeen Center for the Common Good. See [Appendix 1](#) for a list of advisory group members.

This plan was developed to promote coordination and broad campus contributions to civic engagement efforts at Bowdoin College from January 2020 through January 2021, with a focus on the fall general election and March presidential primaries but with a broader goal of cultivating students who identify themselves as active and informed stewards of a stronger democracy. This plan is informed primarily by two resources: [Election Imperatives](#) from the Institute for Democracy in Higher Education, and [Strengthening American Democracy](#) from the Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition.

This plan will be implemented primarily by the staff of Bowdoin Votes, with important contributions to be made by advisory group members and by others who are drawn into collaboration due to their position and/or enthusiasm for the project.

As was the case with Bowdoin's 2018 plan, this plan includes both firm intentions and initial suggestions for how various departments might engage in this work. Collaborations and conversations with stakeholders will continue to develop throughout 2020.

Leadership

The advisory group is chaired by Andrew Lardie, who administers Bowdoin Votes for the McKeen Center. The members of the advisory group were recruited during summer and fall 2019, and have met monthly throughout the fall. The role of the advisory group has been to review past practices and give input on the plan as it has been drafted. After submission of this

plan, the Advisory Group will continue with a more fluid lineup and individual roles, enabling broader contributions to the execution of activities named in this plan.

The advisory group's longer term role and responsibilities will continue to evolve during 2020. We believe this body should eventually be recognized as a standing committee and will be pursuing conversations to that end during summer 2020.

The advisory group consists of faculty members from the departments of Cinema Studies and Computer Science and staff from Student Activities, Institutional Research, the Bowdoin Library, Bowdoin Athletics, and Residential Life. The group also includes students from the Bowdoin Orient (the college's student newspaper), the Bowdoin Men's Lacrosse team, and representatives of the Bowdoin Student Government. By the end of 2020 we hope to add a professor of Government and Legal Studies and student and staff representatives from the Center for Multicultural Life to gain more insight into our planning.

Bowdoin Votes also employs a McKeen Center Fellow for Election Engagement that is responsible for managing volunteers and implementing the plans laid out in this document. She is aided by four "Democracy Ambassadors" who are paid for their time working at Bowdoin Votes events.

We have also been collaborating with our fellow New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) schools. In October 2019, Bowdoin sent a delegation to Middlebury College for the first NESCAC Votes summit where we met with eight other NESCACs to discuss our action plans. We plan to have a check-in with these schools every semester to discuss our progress and learn from one another. We have set a [NESCAC-wide goal of 64% voter participation](#) in 2020 that we will hold each other accountable for.

Bowdoin Votes has also formed an essential partnership with the Brunswick Town Clerk that we will continue to foster. The clerk's office has a list of Bowdoin students and their residences that serves as proof of residence for their voter registration. This has made the registration process much easier for students as they do not have to provide an electrical bill or something similar as proof of residence. The clerk has also helped us track our progress by reporting the numbers of students who have voted in each election.

Institutional Context

In its [Statement On a Liberal Education](#), the faculty of Bowdoin concludes that "the success of a Bowdoin education is evident in the capacity of graduates ... to engage competing views critically, to make principled judgments that inform their practice, and *to work effectively with others as informed citizens committed to constructing a just and sustainable world* [emphasis ours]." This vision neatly mirrors the definition of *civic learning and democratic engagement* (CLDE) used by the SLSV Coalition in its [guide for developing Election Engagement Plans](#).

According to the SLSV Coalition, CLDE is “promoting the education of students for engaged citizenship through democratic participation in their communities, respect and appreciation of diversity, applied learning, and social responsibility.” The similarity of the values articulated by Bowdoin and the SLSV Coalition suggests that CLDE are implicit goals of Bowdoin’s entire curriculum and that they are also pursued explicitly in particular departments, programs, and courses.

CLDE are also goals of many programs in Bowdoin’s co-curriculum, particularly within the Division of Student Affairs’ [student life](#) departments which include The McKean Center for the Common Good. As the campus department dedicated to modeling and advancing Bowdoin’s historical commitment to the common good, the McKean Center was an appropriate launch point for an effort in 2016 to enhance students’ democratic participation. Outcomes from that cycle clarified the need for a collaborative apparatus of students, faculty, and staff that can provide a consistent, programmatic approach to facilitating CLDE among students.

Notwithstanding the importance of the language quoted above, and the centrality of the Common Good in Bowdoin’s understanding of its own culture, it is nonetheless consequential that civic learning and citizenship are not named explicitly in either Bowdoin’s mission statement or in the curricula for any of its departments. The absence of an institutional goal around citizenship means that CLDE are cultivated unevenly across campus life. This stands in contrast to Bowdoin’s education with respect to sustainability, where the addition of an Environmental Mission Statement during the past decade has provided the grounding for a long-term investment in all students’ education for sustainable living. As we continue to develop our coalition in coming years, we hope Bowdoin’s leadership will follow the models of institutions like James Madison University and Tufts University, embracing CLDE as institutional priorities on an equal footing with environmental stewardship.

Bowdoin Votes partners with many campus departments to inform and support its voter outreach and educational programming. Our goal is for this work to be informed not just by practical insights, but also by ongoing assessment of CLDE outcomes. We are still devising methods, and initiating conversations, to shed light on such outcomes. One promising approach we envision is to develop a CLDE Report Card that would be delivered to the faculty annually, and would include updates on data from NSLVE, as well as from a handful of questions featured on Bowdoin’s First Year survey and Senior Surveys. By looking longitudinally at each cohorts’ responses to questions such as “*how often did you discuss social, political or academic issues outside of class?*”, we may be able to detect slow changes in the campus culture. Making annual reports to faculty is one way to stoke faculty interest in integrating CLDE into teaching and research.

Arguably, the “bottom line” CLDE outcome is democratic participation: how many students vote. In 2016 Bowdoin began measuring voting rates by joining the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement \(NSLVE\)](#). NLSVE data comparing both voter registration and turnout among eligible Bowdoin students during presidential and midterm elections show that the

advent of the McKeen Center's election engagement effort coincided with significant increases in both measures for both the 2016 presidential and 2018 primary elections, compared with 2012 and 2014, respectively. These improvements have moved Bowdoin's voting rate from below average to above average.

By comparing local data on voter participation with NSLVE counts, we have also learned that our NSLVE-reported turnout rates are undercounted due to quirks in the way students' addresses are recorded by the College and the Town. For 2018 this undercount was calculated to be at least 15 percentage points, but the exact size is not knowable. Undercounts are a known limitation of the NSLVE methodology.

Bowdoin's improving rates of registration and voting are consistent with our impression that Bowdoin Votes makes a difference, and that additional efforts would make a larger impact. Going forward, the expansion of election engagement efforts will depend on departments' capacity both to implement them and to reconcile them with competing priorities. We have made progress toward identifying champions sprinkled around campus who can support the institutionalization of this work, and we are excited about the progress we can make in 2020-21.

Goals

Short-term goals 2019-20

1. Educate students on the issues & candidates that will appear on the ballot, as well as related topics such as polling, electoral reform proposals, and basic civics.
2. Run at least four voter registration drives before March 3rd primary.
3. Run at least six voter registration drives after the primary and before Election Day 2020.
4. Launch program to help students studying abroad register and vote.
5. Register students to vote. Target is 90% in 2020, as reported by NSLVE.
6. Increase students' voter turnout. Target is 64% in 2020, as reported by NSLVE.

Long-term goals

1. Integrate Bowdoin Votes into all aspects of the Bowdoin institution: residential life, academics, social scene, etc.
2. Bring the administration in on Bowdoin Votes (a statement from President Rose, a commitment or mission statement from college, etc).
3. Lower affective barriers to voting; promote students' beliefs that voting is important, intellectually approachable, and convenient.

Strategy

Below is a rough chronology of the tasks that comprise this plan. The list includes efforts that may require only McKeen Center staff and volunteer support to execute. Most of them are definite plans, while a few may be pruned back or abandoned depending on the capacity that is achieved through volunteer recruitment. Following the list is a table of additional ideas that would require cooperation from other departments, and we will explore these possibilities in early 2020.

Spring Semester 2020

January	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Map out components of <i>Bowdoin Votes</i> student-facing campaign, and develop SMART goals for each aspect of it• Revise "Where Should I Vote?" guide to compare impact of voting in home states vs. Maine• Compile guide on types of primaries (open, closed, mixed) by state• Table in Smith Union for absentee ballot request forms and Maine registration
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Host panel of international students to discuss democracy and voting in home countries• Compile calendar of CEEP activities married with campus events (eg speakers, athletics) and state-by-state voting deadlines.• Organize vans to the polls for primary day (March 3)
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize Super Tuesday returns viewing party• Send out survey about primary voting and Bowdoin Votes efforts
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Form lunch conversation groups to pair students/faculty/staff to talk about politics and current affairs• Collaborate with first-gen college students to initiate conversation about voting and politics• Present about absentee voting at meeting for students going away next year• Work with Off Campus Study to incorporate overseas voting materials in departure packets
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begin recruiting volunteers to help with tabling, event organization, etc. in the fall• Register students once they know their address for the fall

Fall Semester 2020

September	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruit and train volunteers to help with tabling and social media output.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Table at high turnout events (eg athletics, speakers) and other strategic dates (eg Nat'l Voter Registration Day). ● Film video with Clayton urging students to register and vote ● Dorm registration competition
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encourage leaders of various clubs, teams and affinity groups to personally urge their participants to register and vote. ● Hold absentee ballot party(s) for students registering outside of Maine (we provide photocopier, postage, etc). ● After registration push, run turn-out campaigns to motivate, create peer photo posts with #whyivote message; also myth debunking posts. ● Early voting walk to the polls (town hall) with campus celebrities-- Clayton Rose, Randy Nichols, etc. ● Get on advertising screens around campus (e.g. treadmill Bear - "exercise your right to vote")
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Registered students pledge to vote effort (need to track). ● Use social media platforms, Service News bulletin, and email (including by campus celebrities) to reach students electronically with reminders and updates. ● Distribute nonpartisan materials prepared by nat'l orgs (eg CEEP candidate guides, League of Women Voters ballot guide). ● Co-organize debate watching parties and topical debates with campaign representatives and/or faculty experts; aim to cover every statewide question on the Maine ballot. ● Offer stickers for students who submit 'voting selfies' at mail room (absentee) or polling place. ● Organize vans to the local polls on election day, including snacks, fun, and campus celebrities at the pickup point ● Host campus-wide election results viewing party ● Send out campus-wide <i>Bowdoin Votes</i> program survey on election day or soon thereafter
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Debrief with staff, and individually with collaborators (email, meeting, and/or survey) to get their feedback ● Analyze feedback, summarize findings, and make recommendations for 2019 and 2020.

Proposed collaborations

Activity	Possible partner(s)
Send every student registration & voting info, and reminders, for both Maine and their home state (electronic and/or hard copy)	Registrar Residential Life IT
Help students who are studying abroad get registered and vote absentee (before and/or when they are out of USA)	OCS office
Establish Election Engagement liaisons in each college house	Residential Life
Inter-dorm voter registration competition	Residential Life
Enlist athletic teams as volunteers and spokespeople	Athletics
Incorporate registration question into required online Enrollment Form and/or registration hold	Registrar
Pitch voter registration in person, to select high-enrollment courses	Various academic depts & specific faculty
In student media outlets, highlight issues relevant to young voters, including voting-themed newspaper column with rotating authors	Orient Bowdoin Commons Harpoon
Recruit campus celebrity(s) to 'send' some voting reminder emails to all students	Student Gov. President Dining, etc.
Political dialogue event(s) for students to engage Brunswick community members	What Matters series Make Shift Coffee House

Evaluation & Reporting

Evaluation of this plan's efforts will allow stakeholders to understand the effectiveness of our efforts, understand students' needs and preferences, and make informed adjustments to the plan's goals and strategies. We will measure not only the degree of democratic participation in 2020 (through NSLVE and numbers reported by the town clerk), but also investigate the degree to which success is influenced by factors such as student attitudes, the amount of resources devoted to the effort, or simple competition for students' attention, time and energy. Assessing outcomes from the 2020 cycle will 1) measure the efficacy of our nuts-and-bolts work, 2) deepen our insight into constraints on election engagement, and 3) suggest possible demographic areas and modes of engagement where there is room for greater reach.

Given that our efforts are aimed at all Bowdoin students who are eligible to vote, it would be ideal to survey the entire student body for feedback on the program. An imperfect, but more accessible approach, would be to post a survey link on our web and social media sites and invite supporters to opt in. We may take a 'pre' and 'post' approach to help measure impact, first surveying students in August and then again on election day or soon thereafter. Additional surveys may be created and targeted to students who participate in specific programs such as the inter-dorm registration competition or Pledge to Vote campaign.

We will ask students in person at our events and tables after the primary about outcomes related to our goals (eg did they register, do they believe voting was accessible) and about their impressions of the quality of particular efforts. This will be a third source of data in addition to NSLVE/town clerk counts and an online poll. We will also invite ideas for what could be done differently to reach and motivate students.

Data will be analyzed qualitatively for trends in both who responds and patterns in the responses. Relevant portions will be shared with collaborating departments as we re-tool for the next iteration of this plan in 2020, and to a lesser extent in 2019. Finally, some results will be shared in future iterations of our ALL IN plan.

Appendix 1: Bowdoin College Democratic Engagement Action Plan Advisory Group

Penny Mack '22, Election Engagement McKeen Fellow

Kangrok Ko '22, Communications McKeen Fellow

Alyce McFadden '20, Co-Editor-in-Chief of The Bowdoin Orient

Lauren Caffé '22, Bowdoin Student Government (BSG) Liaison to the McKeen Center

Nate DeMoranville '20, Student Center for Multicultural Life

Kendall Rogers '21, Men's Lacrosse

Mike Ranen, Associate Dean of Student Affairs & Dir. of Residential and Student Life

Nate Hintze, Director, Student Activities

Andrew Lardie, Associate Director, McKeen Center for the Common Good

Erin Valentino, Associate Librarian for Research, Instruction and Outreach, Library

Steve Papaccio, ETL Developer and Analyst, Institutional Research, Analytics & Consulting

Nathan Alsobrook, Head Coach, Nordic Skiing

Stacy Doore, Visiting Assistant Professor of Computer Science

Tricia Welsch, Professor of Cinema Studies and Director of Cinema Studies Program, Cinema Studies