

Bridgewater College 2024 Nonpartisan Democratic Engagement Action Plan

Developed by: Bobbi Gentry

Executive Summary:

Working with campus and community members, Bridgewater College’s administration, Student Association, Campus Vote Team, the Center for Engaged Learning, the Department of History and Political Science and Civic Engagement Scholars, this ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge Action Plan was developed to promote civic engagement for all students, voter education, voter registration, and voter mobilization of every student at Bridgewater College. Our Democratic Engagement Action Plan focuses on empowering students to develop programming, create resources for educational purposes to be used in curricular and co-curricular environments, and encourage participation in local, state and national elections.

As Bridgewater College’s Mission Statement says we are invested in developing graduates who are “distinguished by their collaborative spirit, reason, and resilience of mind in service to a diverse and global community.” As part of the 2025 Strategic Plan, this Action plan fits nicely into the goals of “ensuring high-impact practices for all students” and “Enhancing the continuity of curriculum [and] career preparation”. With these goals in mind, this action plan will focus on inclusive programming for all students, even those who are not eligible to vote, and focus on the impact of civic, community and political engagement on future communities and careers.

In our thinking about democratic engagement, we purposefully work to include all students in our efforts. In supporting diversity, equity and inclusion, we will endeavor to create programming that all students can participate in regardless of their voter eligibility. We recognize that not all students are eligible to vote, but all students can participate in civic activities. In this vein, we will be sure to create inclusive opportunities for all students to participate in thinking about solutions to the challenges that we face in our communities, state and nation.

We are not alone in our efforts to engage in civic life. While this plan focuses on the Bridgewater College campus in Bridgewater, Virginia, we will be working in partnership with the town manager, Jay Litten and with national organizations of the Campus Vote Project, Students Learn Students Vote, and the Scholars Strategy Network Election Enhancement Grants team. Additional efforts will be made to connect with the local Registrar of Rockingham County, Lisa Goodin, the State Board of Elections, and Virginia ELECT.

This nonpartisan democratic engagement action plan was developed by Dr. Bobbi Gentry, Associate Professor of Political Science in consultation with the Campus Vote Team and students, who are Civic Engagement Scholars as part of the BC Votes: Empower Civic and Community Leaders of Tomorrow. Virginia is unique in its election landscape because it has an election every year. This year's focus will be the presidential election of 2024 to be held in November. Our work began early in the Fall 2023 semester with celebrating Civic Holidays, and programming focused on voter registration, civic engagement, and Election Day Destress Fest. The purpose of this action plan is to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement and student voter registration, education, and turnout in the 2024 election. The goals for Bridgewater College for the 2024 election are: Create three programs to engage students in the election process, register 100 students to vote, and provide information about how students can engage in community action.

Leadership:

Our leadership team includes the following campus members, campus groups, and organizations:

Dr. Bobbi Gentry – Associate Professor of Political Science

Sebastian Kochall –Civic Engagement Scholar, Student, Freshman, History Major

Jordan Mongold—Civic Engagement Scholar, Student, Freshman, History and Political Science Major

Tony Nesselrodt –Civic Engagement Scholar, Student, Senior, History Major

Katie Yoder –Civic Engagement Scholar, Student, Senior, Political Science Major

Leadership Succession: While Dr. Gentry is currently running BC Votes, Dr. Benjamin Erickson has been at Bridgewater College for ___ years and will continue work on civic and voter engagement efforts. The current students come from both Seniors and Freshmen, which allows for an easy transition next year and important learning moments for all students.

Campus Vote Team consisting of Dr. Robert Hammill, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs; Dr. Benjamin Erickson, Director of Community Engagement; Dr. Gauri Pitale, Associate Dean of Diversity Equity and Inclusion; Madeleine Martin, Assistant Director of Career Development and Technology; Whitney S. Smith, Assistant Dean of Students; Seiya Nomura, Coordinator of First Year Experience and Orientation, and Taylor Baugher, Learning Services Librarian.

College Political Party Advisors: Dr. Holly Caldwell, Dr. Alma Trujillo Ruiz

Partner Organizations: Campus Vote Project, SSN Election Enhancement Grant Awardees

Efforts have been made to include local election officials in our Campus Vote Team both from the local and state level through emails and phone calls in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. New efforts will be made to reach out to the Local Board of Elections and local Registrar Lisa Gooden. In order to include local government support, Jay Litten, Town Manager of

Bridgewater Virginia, is working with Dr. Gentry and the Civic Engagement Scholars to improve the relationship with the college and to have student voices heard by local government. Ben Hovland, US Commissioner for the Election Assistance Commission has said that he will work with Bridgewater College to promote voter education and civic engagement.

Commitment:

As Bridgewater College's Mission Statement says we are invested in developing graduates who are "distinguished by their collaborative spirit, reason, and resilience of mind in service to a diverse and global community." As a part of this mission, characteristics of democratic engagement already exist such as collaboration, reason, service and commitment to a "diverse and global community."

Bridgewater College's mission statement focuses on empowering "students to lead principled lives of purpose and consequence". Within the mission statement, the emphasis is on values and purpose. The four ideals of Bridgewater are: Goodness, Truth, Beauty, and Harmony. The goal of Goodness is carried out in the statement: "We Strive to produce graduate who engage the world with compassion, integrity, and humility, and who seek to build peaceful and just communities. The goal of goodness meets democratic and inclusive norms of justice, peace, and empathy.

The value of Truth is expressed with the statement: "We embrace the open exchange of ideas leading to new understanding and knowledge through a liberal arts education that instills in students the skills and habits of mind to think critically and independently." Democratic norms are also embedded in this value since it encourages the exchange of ideas, habits of mind, and critical thinking. For any democracy, being able to think independently and evaluate problems and solutions is important for an educated electorate.

Bridgewater's value of Harmony also speaks to a commitment to democratic values of engagement and a more inclusive society. Harmony is articulated with the statement: "We celebrate the diversity among us while promoting civil discourse. We prepare graduates to live and work in community with others, to thrive as educated citizens, ethical and selfless leaders, and to be active participants in a global society where they serve with respect for dignity and worth of every person." The statement of Harmony has embedded within it values of diversity, equity, and inclusion—not just on our campus—but in our communities and in our graduates.

As part of the 2025 Strategic Plan, this Action plan fits nicely into the goals of "ensuring high-impact practices for all students" and "Enhancing the continuity of curriculum [and] career preparation". With these goals in mind, this action plan will focus on inclusive programming for all students, even those who are not eligible to vote, and focus on the impact of civic, community and political engagement on future communities and careers.

Campus leadership is in support of the efforts of BCVotes, a program which is funded by a grant from the Scholars Strategy Network Election Enhancement Grant for the 2023-2024 election cycle. On example of the public commitment by the President of Bridgewater College was to wear the BCVotes T-shirt to a blood drive held on campus. Bridgewater College does not have a current signatory to the ALL IN Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. Because the President has supported efforts on campus, we hope that he is willing to sign the ALL IN Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. A conversation with the

Associate Provost in October 2023 was the first step in the process to ask the President to sign the ALL IN Presidents' Commitment.

Institutional commitment can come in many forms, and at Bridgewater these forms are institutes, funding and faculty leaders. The Center for Engaged Learning promotes global citizenship goals. The Zane D. Showker Institute for Responsible Leadership provides opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and engage in positive solutions to local, state and global problems. Specifically, the creation of the Director of Community Engagement position in 2022 is an effort to provide leadership opportunity for faculty and to provide a direct contact on campus who is building relationships with non-profit partners, community members, and students. The Kline-Bowman Institute for Peace and Justice is a long-standing source of funding for engagement activities of students, including funding for the Students Learn Students Vote National Summit participation by three Bridgewater College student in November of 2023.

Embedded into the Foundations in the Liberal Arts (FILA), Bridgewater College's general education program, are key skills that we expect students to engage in and support education for democratic engagement. All students take a course in Oral Communication and Effective Writing, so that they are able to express themselves in a global environment. All students also take courses that are identified as World Cultures and Global Dynamics, so that they can understand citizenship in a global context. While every student takes a Social Science course, these courses can be in a variety of fields of study including Political Science, Sociology, and Psychology. These courses provide the context for understanding human behavior. As part of our program, all students take courses in Ethical Reasoning and Experiential Learning. The skills of Ethical Reasoning include making ethical decisions, discussing current dilemmas in ethics, and making arguments about ethical choices—all of which support engagement in a democratic society. Lastly, all students complete a course in Experiential Learning, which means that they apply the theory in the classroom to a course that specifically engages with their community.

We are currently developing a culture of civic learning and democratic engagement. While Bridgewater has fulfilled its federal requirements for providing information about voting, there has been little investment specifically in civic engagement and democratic activism. This Action Plan is part of a new beginning to expand a foundational culture of opportunities for engagement and to take specific steps to create ongoing, systematic, consistent and sustainable programming that becomes a larger part of achieving the mission and goals of the institution.

As a part of the assessment of our Foundations in the Liberal Arts program, we currently use the American Association of Colleges and Universities rubrics to evaluate Oral and Visual Communication, Ethical Reasoning, Quantitative and Scientific Literacy, Written Communication, Critical Thinking, Research and Information Literacy, Cultural and Intercultural Competence and Public Discourse. These assessments are part of the learning outcomes for the general education program for all undergraduates at Bridgewater. The assessments are completed by faculty who teach the specific skills and knowledge in each category and assessment reports about these student learning outcomes are discussed in Working Groups that attempt to address and improve these outcomes on a yearly basis. Effort will be made this year to connect with each of the Working Group chairs to focus these efforts with the civic learning and democratic engagement opportunities of the BCVotes project and this Action plan. Contact has already been made with the First Year Seminar Director to discuss adding a module to Canvas for all first year and transfer students—which will embed an intentional piece into the general education curriculum. The First Year Experience and Orientation Coordinator is

already part of the Campus Vote Team and is interested in promoting civic learning and engagement into the Orientation programming—which will include a co-curricular component.

This is the first action plan that Bridgewater College has developed and submitted to ALL IN.

Landscape:

Bridgewater College is a private 4-year institution and joined the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge in 2023. Our institution is designated as the following: Predominantly White Institution, Rural Serving Institution. Bridgewater College has 1597 students. Bridgewater College has authorized the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and will receive campus voting data for the 2022 election in fall 2023.

Bridgewater College participates in the following initiatives to support the development and implementation of our nonpartisan democratic engagement efforts on campus:

Campus Learning Outcomes: Bridgewater College has just started to engage in initiatives that support student voter registration and civic engagement. The foundational elements are present with institutional mission and goals that support key skills in democratic engagement; however, taking specific steps in making civic education as part of the institutional learning outcomes is just beginning.

Assessment Data: Our assessment data is limited to the Beginning College Student of Student Engagement and the National Survey of Student Engagement. Please see the data below with our NSSE 2022 data and comparisons.

National Survey of Student Engagement First-Years Data			
NSSE Question	Bridgewater	Peers	Regional Carnegie
2b. Connected your learning to societal problems or issues	51%	53% (-2%)	54% (-3%)
14i. Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues	56%	50% (+6%)	51% (+5%)
16e. Doing community service or volunteer work (Number of hours per week)	1.7 hours	1.8 (-0.1)	2.0 (-0.3)
18j. Being an Informed and active citizen (reported as mean between 1-4)	Mean 2.6	2.6	2.7 (-0.1)

National Survey of Student Engagement Seniors Data			
NSSE Question	Bridgewater	Peers	Regional Carnegie
2b. Connected your learning to societal problems or issues	57%	68% (-11%)	66% (-9%)
14i. Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues	42%	53% (-11%)	49% (-7%)

16e. Doing community service or volunteer work (Number of hours per week)	2.6 hours	2.5 (+0.1)	3.0 (-0.4)
18j. Being an Informed and active citizen (reported as mean between 1-4)	Mean 2.8	2.9 (-0.1)	2.8

With this data, we can see trends and areas of opportunity for improvement. One major success is the fact that our students report that their Bridgewater experience helps them become an informed and active citizen. For both First year students and Seniors, we need to connect learning with social or political issues. This is an opportunity to be more intentional in our working within the curriculum. For our seniors, more work needs to be done by encouraging seniors to attend events about important issues.

Curriculum: Civic Learning and Democratic engagement within the curriculum is addressed with required courses in global issues, at least one course on ethical reasoning, one history course, one course that has experiential learning, and one course in social science. These courses are required of all undergraduate students at Bridgewater.

Co-Curriculum: Outside of the curriculum, co-curricular clubs and organizations exist to support students in their civic learning, such as Bridgewater Student Association, College Democrats, College Republicans, Virginia 21 (an organization that empowers students to be engaged citizens and advocates for issues important to them, virginia21.org/About-Us).

BCVotes is a program funded by a grant from the Scholars Strategy Network, which empowers civic and community leaders of tomorrow. This program provides opportunities for student voter education, civic learning, and events to promote engagement. As a second-year grant awardee, Dr. Gentry previously worked to promote civic engagement on campus with the Valley Votes Project and learning from that opportunity facilitated improvement of the program and focused the effort on Bridgewater College's campus.

Students are an integral part of clubs and organizations on campus. Additionally, students are the ones who create the events, programming, resources, and ideas for the BCVotes program. These students who applied to be Civic and Community Engagement scholars not only participate in the program but are leaders who represent Bridgewater College on the national stage. Three Civic Engagement Scholars attended the National Students Learn, Students Vote Summit and brought back ideas about how to improve our programming. Two of the Civic Engagement Scholars are now representatives to the Bridgewater Town Council and have monthly meetings with the Town Manager, Jay Litten. The Civic Engagement Scholars are leaders on campus and are central to the efforts of BCVotes.

Internal Barriers: Internal barriers that currently exist at Bridgewater College include no single dedicated person on campus who organizes civic engagement efforts. While the institutional mission and goals include aspects of civic and democratic engagement, there is no specific intention to support civic engagement efforts, such as with curricular or leadership commitments. We do not currently assess the number of students who engage in voting, and just joined NSLVE in 2022. There is some resistance on campus to encourage voter registration and efforts to register voters are sometimes seen as political.

External Barriers: Barrier to student participation have actually decreased in the state of Virginia with new laws such as same day registration and voting; however, some barriers still exist. Students are allowed to register at their college address or may vote absentee at their

parents'/guardians' address. Virginia state law does not allow presumption of residence based on status as a college student in Virginia (Virginia Code 24.2-103).

Student IDs are acceptable forms of voter identification for college students. The election law is difficult to explain with the same day registration and voting. Voters in Virginia are required to register 22 days before the upcoming election to cast a regular ballot, but if a student does same day registration and voting, they are casting a provisional ballot. Making this information clear is a challenge and will be a part of the efforts made with voter education. Absentee ballot applications must be received by 5pm 11 days before the election.

At present, there are no polling places on campus. The closest polling station is 420 College View Drive, Bridgewater, VA 22812, which is a 1 minute drive from campus or an estimated 9 minute walk from campus. Efforts are currently underway to have a polling place on campus. A meeting with the Town Manager, Jay Litten, resulted in support for a campus polling place. The Associate Provost is currently investigating the opportunity to have a polling place on campus. Future conversations with the Local Registrar may result in a polling place on campus, those conversations will take place in January 2024.

Upcoming elections where Bridgewater College exists are:

- March 5, 2024—Presidential Primary Election
- June 18, 2024—Primary Election (Candidate lists are not currently available for this election)
- November 5, 2024—General and Special Elections (Candidate lists are not currently available for this election)

Voter Registration Deadlines to Cast a Regular Ballot

- February 12, 2024—Presidential Primary Election
- May 27, 2024—Primary Election
- October 14, 2024—General Election

Student Body Demographics: The most recent enrollment data from Fall 2022 indicate a campus that is majority undergraduate and predominantly white campus with 66% of students identifying as White, 11.7% identifying as Black or African American, and 7.3% identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Thirty percent of students at Bridgewater are awarded Pell Grants. Eighty percent of students live on campus and only twenty percent live off campus. The average age of a Bridgewater College student is 18 years old. As of Fall 2022, we have 76.2% of our student body is from Virginia, 21.4% from out of state, and 2.4% from other countries.

Factors Leading to Success: The largest external factor is the Scholars Strategy Network Grant for Election Enhancement, which is BCVotes. Most of the grant goes to pay Civic Engagement Scholars for their time in creation of events, resources, and ideas for engagement. At present, Bridgewater College has the external resource of Motivote to track voter registration and engagement. Motivote is a program that uses psychology to encourage civic and voter engagement. By setting up teams and competitions, students are more likely to engage with programming, make a plan for voting (if they are eligible) and vote. We also use materials from the Ask Every Student Toolkit including pledge cards, sticker ideas, and information for voter education.

Internally, Dr. Gentry is an expert in youth voting behavior and does work on election laws and their impact on college students. We also have engaged students who are interested in working with their peers to get more participation of college students in civic and community life. The

Civic Engagement Scholars are a major part of the Action Plan and work to create and implement ideas for programming, incentives for engagement, and strategies to empower their fellow students to participate in democratic action.

Additional Resource Needs: At present, the current needs for Bridgewater College to be successful are the commitment by the administration to support ALL IN, facilitate programming in areas where there has been resistance including checking out laptops from the library and lack of co-curricular programming, and an institutional commitment to civic and democratic engagement.

Goals:

Our institution's nonpartisan democratic engagement goals are:

Short Term Goals:

1. Add voter registration to new and transfer student orientation for Fall 2024.
2. Have our president sign the ALL IN Higher Education Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation by March 2024.
3. Create five programs that provide civic and voter education to students in Spring and Fall 2024.
4. Create inclusive materials that encourage all students to be able to engage in civic opportunities in Spring and Fall 2024.

Long Term Goals:

1. By 2028, increase the number of students who are registered to vote by 5%.
2. By 2028, increase the number of students who vote in the election by 5%.
3. By 2028, the number of Seniors that report that their Bridgewater College experience helped them become informed and engaged citizens by 7%.

In 2020, the national student voter rate for our type of institution, Private BA, was 75%. We will receive our 2022 numbers from NSLVE in 2023 and will review how those numbers compare to our national counterparts for Congressional Election years. In order to make our work more inclusive, we want to encourage ALL students to engage in civic activities. We recognize that not all of our students are eligible to vote, but we want to be intentional in encourage all students to engage in their communities, discuss important issues they face, and empower students to have their voices heard at all levels of government.

Strategy:

Bridgewater College will implement these strategies to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement and student voter participation.

Campus Culture: A campus that is committed to civic and democratic engagement would include a curriculum that is dedicated to knowledge and skills for the practice of democracy, programming from academic and student life departments that supports civic education and civic learning both in and out of the classroom, and an administration that supports these efforts with a public commitment to every student engaging in civic life.

Strategies to achieve this are:

1. review the current learning goals of the FILA curriculum and speak with faculty about how to achieve civic learning in the classroom,
2. work with Student Life to have co-curricular programming, and
3. work with the administration to make their support public, such as signing the ALL IN Higher Education Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice and Accessibility: In our work to encourage more civic participation on our campus, we will endeavor to make sure that we provide resources for all students regardless of their ability to vote. We will make specific effort to work with affinity groups across campus to create a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive civic engagement efforts. We will address issues of access to the polls by working with the Local Registrar to have a polling place on campus. Lastly, we will address historical voter suppression efforts and current college student voter suppression efforts to discuss how justice can be sought for those who have been disenfranchised.

Sustainability: For the future of programming, there needs to be a commitment to staffing and resources for continuous efforts for civic and voter engagement. Luckily, Virginia has elections every year, so there is always an election cycle. One strategy to improve sustainability is to include the responsibility for civic engagement into the responsibilities of the Director of Community Engagement. Long term, a staff member dedicated to these efforts should be hired.

Institutionalization: Dr. Gentry is currently responsible for the BCVotes Program and coordinating the Campus Vote Team. Additionally, Civic Engagement Scholars are a new part of Bridgewater College's civic engagement efforts, but are currently funded by an outside source. We could work to provide institutional funds for student efforts in programming. The current BCVotes program has seniors and freshmen, which provides a clear succession for future years. The Director of Community Engagement, Benjamin Erickson, is the successor from the faculty side and Dr. Jamie Frueh, Associate Provost, is the administrator who has worked at Bridgewater building the Center for Engaged Learning and his support is integral to the success of continued programming at Bridgewater College.

Timeline: In the short term, we have identified students, faculty and staff who are dedicated to civic engagement efforts at Bridgewater. The creation of BCVotes in Fall 2023 is just the beginning of a larger effort to institutionalize civic and voter engagement on our campus. For this next year, we will strive to create programming that engages students, assess those efforts and improve those efforts for the future. For long term goals, we would like to build resources and leadership capacity to continue this work for decades to come. We would like to begin analyzing our data from NSLVE and make specific goals for creating inclusive, diverse, and equitable programming for all students.

Campus Culture: Making civic and voter engagement an integral part of the Bridgewater College experience is a monumental task. Our strategy is twofold: 1. Campus Leaders such as the President commit to efforts to encourage civic and voter engagement and 2. Build student leaders who are empowered to create programs that engage students, answer common questions, and identify barriers to engagement, so that we can create more opportunities for students to engage in their democracy.

Specific and Measurable Activities:

- Have Civic and Voter Engagement information with tables for 24 days in the Spring and 24 days in the Fall 2024 semester.

- Create events like Primary Election Watch and Discussion, Presidential Debate Watching Parties, and public discussions of important issues like Voter Suppression
- Celebrate National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day and Election Hero day with food, activities, and civic engagement information
- Develop programming for First Year orientation and First Year Experience courses in the forms of PowerPoints, Canvas Modules, sample presentations and information kits

Evaluation and NSLVE Participation:

We will evaluate our action plan in the following ways:

- As of Fall 2022, Bridgewater College is now a part the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and will receive campus voting data for the 2022 election.
- We will track our programming efforts by the number of students who participate in events, and media coverage of our work.
- We will continue to use the data from the National Survey of Student Engagement and compare data from appropriate election years, meaning comparing presidential years, for example 2020 and 2024, and congressional election years, 2022 and 2026.
- We will track our engagement in programming with Motivote. Motivote can provide us with numbers of students who make a plan to vote, number of students who review voting information, and who engaged in a civic or community activity.
- Lastly, we will work with Institutional Research to examine if Bridgewater College has the resources to participate in the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement.

Reporting:

Action Plan Sharing Internally: This action plan will be shared with Faculty, Staff and Students with the dedicated BCVotes website. Emails from the President/Provost about voter registration and information will reference the action plan and website. The action plan will be communicated with faculty at open faculty meetings. Student Life will communicate with student organizations and clubs about the action plan and will encourage clubs and organizations to partner for programming efforts. The Campus Vote Team will discuss the action plan in the next Campus Vote Team meeting, and Civic Engagement Scholars will review and make recommendations for programming based on the action plan. The Bridgewater Town Manager, Jay Litten, and Local Registrar, Lisa Goodin will have the action plan emailed to them and an invitation for a meeting to discuss the action plan will be included.

Action Plan Sharing Externally: Our campus action plan will be posted on our campus page on ALL IN's website <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/bridgewater-college/>. Our institution has given ALL IN permission to publish our past NSLVE reports, which can also be found on our campus page above.

As our first Action Plan, this is an opportunity for Bridgewater College to celebrate the good work of current campus stakeholders—enthusiastic students, supportive faculty and staff, and an administration that is open to finding ways to support civic and democratic engagement efforts. This action plan will be a rallying point for Bridgewater to make a clear commitment to Asking Every Student to engage in their community, state, nation, and world to address issues that matter to them. Students are not only the future of our democracy, but they are the essence of advocacy, kindness, and future thinking that we need now.

In conclusion, BCVotes is possible because of the dedication of our Civic Engagement Scholars—current students who are dedicated to educating others about civic opportunities, faculty and staff who are a part of the Campus Vote Team, and the Scholars Strategy Network with their financial support and continued guidance by Britah Odondi.