



DRAFT - Voter Engagement Action Plan
2020

Submitted December 15, 2019

Transylvania University Mission and Values

Through an engagement with the liberal arts, Transylvania University prepares its students for a humane and fulfilling personal and public life by cultivating independent thinking, open-mindedness, creative expression and commitment to lifelong learning and social responsibility in a diverse world.

Executive Summary

This action plan is prepared by a team of Transylvania University students, faculty and staff. Its purpose is to lay out a plan for improving voter turnout and voter engagement in the 2020 election, using data from the 2014/2018 NSLVE report and university demographic data. The action plan will be implemented in coordination with the stakeholders, with action steps for Campus and Community Engagement and the Student Activities Board.

Stakeholders

Tevin Monroe, Assistant Director of Campus & Community Engagement
Voter Engagement Action Plan coordinator

Amy Castle, Assistant Director of Human Resources

Dr. Stephen Hess, Assistant Professor of Political Science
Peace Corps Prep coordinator
Political Science program director

Dr. Michael Covert, Interim Vice President of Student Life and Dean of Students

Madelyn Frost, Assistant Director of Residence Life
Staff Engagement Team chair

Dr. Rhyan Conyers, Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness
NSLVE Reporting Designee

Jordan Hancock, student leader, '20
Student Government Association (SGA) president

Sarah Agard, student leader, '20
Omicron Delta Kappa president

Landscape

Transylvania University is a small, liberal arts institution in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. Transylvania's student population is generally over-engaged, where many students take on multiple leadership roles, jobs, internships and volunteer positions.

Transylvania students are very politically active and aware. Of the more than 60 recognized student organizations on campus, at least three are overtly political. Many more are

more covertly political, such as diversity/multicultural organizations. In fact, to highlight the civic engagement of our students, Washington Monthly magazine ranked Transylvania as #10 liberal arts institution for public service.¹

Student engagement in civic/political life is not fully reflected through the number of student organizations. Rather, it is through the action of these organizations. Students have engaged in partisan political dialogue through the three active student organizations, hosting speakers to campus and having educational events. It is difficult to quantify political activity, but it is felt and seen. Conversations around free speech, healthcare policy and other hotly-debated topics can often be overheard in the university's library and coffee shop. Earlier this semester, a rather public Twitter exchange between two students ended in an in-person conversation in the coffee shop. This is a sign that things are moving in a positive direction: that our debates and disagreements are not just online, but happen in real time, in a face-to-face setting.

2014 and 2018 National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) Report *2018 Election*

In 2018, Transylvania students voted at a rate (38.3%) comparable to all university students (39.1%). Around half (48.9%) of registered students voted in 2018.

Change from 2014 to 2018

From 2014 to 2018, the registration rate dropped 3.5 percentage points (81.8% in 2014; 78.3% in 2018). Though a lower registration rate could imply that the voting rate also declined, that is not the case. The voting rate of all students actually increased 10.9 percentage points (27.4% in 2014; 38.3% in 2018).

Demographic data

The NSLVE report breaks down voter turnout by the following demographics: voting method, age group, education level, undergraduate class year, enrollment status, gender and race/ethnicity. Much of this data is incomplete or not relevant to the Transy student population where all students are undergraduate, most (98.9%) are enrolled full-time, all are in either the 18-21 or 22-24 age group.

The data that are conclusive are gender and race/ethnicity. Men (37.1%) and women (39.0%) voted at approximately the same rate. White students had the highest turnout (40.7%), Black students had the second highest turnout (35.3%) and Multiracial students had third highest (26.7%). Data on Hispanic and Asian students were not collected.

Field of study

The report details voting rates broken down by field of study. For the purposes of this action plan, we look only at the 2018 data.

1

<https://blog.transy.edu/2019/08/washington-monthly-ranks-transylvania-among-nations-top-10-liberal-arts-colleges-for-public-service/>

The three fields of study with the highest voter turnout are: English language and literature (66.7%); History (58.8%); Social Sciences (57.8%). Broadly, these are the social sciences and humanities.

The three fields of study with the lowest voter turnout are: Business, management and marketing (29.5%); Parks, recreation, leisure and fitness studies (29.8%); Biological and biomedical sciences (35.9%). Though not in the bottom three, the students with undeclared majors make up a large population (445 students) and their voter turnout rate is markedly low (36.2%).

Implications of the report

There are a few lessons to be taken from the NSLVE report. Firstly, the slight decline in voter registration from 2014 to 2018 did not result in a decline in voter turnout. This suggests that voter turnout, on the whole, is not purely a function of registration rates. Said another way, voter registration is not the primary way to improve turnout.

Field of study data is particularly interesting as we consider which groups of students to do targeted voter turnout advocacy. The largest group of students were those with undeclared majors. This group is nearly half of the student population (45.9%). At Transylvania, incoming students are not able to declare their major until their second semester, and must declare their major before the end of their sophomore year. So, it is likely that the undeclared students are mostly first- and second-year students. Further data analysis through the institution's Registrar office can clarify this.

Goals

The 2018 voting rate was 38.4%, up 10.9 points from the 2014 election. Given this upward trend, we believe we can increase our voting rate in the 2020 general election by another 10 points to a total of 48.4%.

Strategy

Time off on election day

Kentucky's general election is Tuesday, November 3. In order to get to the polls on election day, both faculty/staff and students must find time in their day to find transportation to their designated polling location.

According to Transylvania's Employee Handbook, "A regular employee may be given leave time up to 4 hours as per KRS 118.035 of which up to 2 hours will be with pay if such time off is necessary for the employee to vote." Human Resources office can ensure that all staff are aware of this policy, both so that staff can get themselves to the polls, and also so that supervisors allow their supervisees to vote.

As for faculty/students finding the time to vote between classes, students are encouraged to speak with their faculty about missing class.

As of the time of this report being submitted (December 2019), the 2020-21 academic calendar has already been published, with no room to make November 3 a no-class day. Although there is not space to modify the academic calendar, the Dean of the University has the

authority to encourage or require faculty to be permissive with student attendance on election day. The Student Government Association can speak with the Dean and request this messaging be sent to faculty.

Educating the campus

The Student Government Association can work on a marketing campaign to educate the student body about election day, why voting is important, and encouraging students to register to vote absentee (when applicable).

Targeted messaging

The populations with the lowest voter turnout in 2018 are business, fitness, biology, and undeclared majors; as well as students of color (Black and multiracial students). As SGA crafts its messaging, they can use this to their advantage. They may consider working with the Black Student Alliance, the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, or faculty in the sciences. They may consider hosting events in the science building on campus. They may consider engaging with first year seminar courses, or doing programs in first- and second-year residential halls.

Student voter engagement

We see a need on our campus for a nonpartisan voter engagement student organization. Our current political student organizations are all inherently partisan (College Democrats, Young Americans for Freedom, etc.) There is currently no forum for students to do nonpartisan voter engagement work.

A good model for a voter engagement student organization is VEPAC, the Voter Empowerment and Political Awareness Coalition at Berea College (also located in Kentucky). The coordinator of this action plan is professionally connected to the adviser to VEPAC. With the release of this action plan, students who are interested in founding a voter empowerment organization can look to this model for creating an organization on Transylvania's campus.

Reporting

This action plan will be made available to the Transy community (students, staff, administration and faculty) via TNotes, the university's daily email, once it is completed (slated for early Fall 2020).

Evaluation

The success of this action plan will be measured based on the voter turnout in the 2020 general election. In particular, we would like to see the turnout increase by 10 points, to a total of 48.4%. This would set us above the average for other institutions.