



**GEORGIA
SOUTHERN**
UNIVERSITY

Increasing Civic Learning, Political Engagement,
and Voter Participation Amongst Students at
Georgia Southern University

Action Plan

Voter Friendly Campus Program Cohort
2022-23

Executive Summary

Georgia Southern University actively supports student engagement in the communities our university serves through community service and civic engagement. We are committed to taking the action steps associated with collaboration and communication to extend our existing efforts and further develop our campus and local communities in these areas. Georgia Southern University consists of 3 campuses and this action plan aims to involve faculty/staff/students across the university as well as the local communities of Statesboro, Savannah, and Hinesville.

Georgia Southern aligns well with the tenets of the Voter Friendly Campus initiative as Community Engagement, Student Success, and Inclusive Excellence are core pillars of our university [Strategic Plan](#). This plan focuses on contributing to themes stated in Georgia Southern's Strategic Plan and the Division of Student Affairs Strategic Plan. It also supports the Elections Divisions/Boards of Bulloch, Liberty, and Chatham Counties where Georgia Southern has campuses as well as the Georgia Secretary of State's Office. All aforementioned entities desire to have engaged and informed citizens working to make the state of Georgia a better place to live.

This initial action plan will have a timeline of implementation for Fall 2022 as it is scheduled to be reviewed and evaluated by Campus Vote Project beginning Jan. 31, 2023. Additional actions will continue beyond this timeframe as well. A review and update of action steps included in this plan will occur annually in June with all stakeholders listed in the **Leadership** section.

This plan was developed and led by the Division of Student Affairs and includes the following staff members:

- Jodi Kennedy, Director - Leadership & Community Engagement
- David Simpson, Director - Student Media
- Dr. Ken Gassiot, Associate Vice President for Student Development

The Division of Student Affairs will lead organization efforts for this plan and will be coordinated by the above listed staff members.

Leadership

- Jodi Kennedy, Director - Leadership & Community Engagement
- David Simpson, Director - Student Media
- Dr. Ken Gassiot, Associate Vice President for Student Development
- SGA Representative - Blake Robinson
- Academic Affairs Faculty Rep(s)
 - Laura Wessel, Josh Kennedy, Stacy Smallwood
 - Backups: Jessica Williamson, Reggie Simpkins
- Local/County elections official (TBD)
- Community Org Rep. (Michelle Ricketson from Hinesville Downtown Development Authority)

Meeting Scope and Duration:

- 2 times in the Fall semester and 2 times in the Spring semester
- Each meeting will last for 1-2 hours
- Discussion at each meeting will include a review of this plan, programming/education efforts, and discussion of perceived progress from all team members.

Commitment

Georgia Southern University includes in its mission to be a “learner-centered culture that prepares us to think, lead, teach, and serve.” It is through the university’s strategic pillars that our efforts to educate students, faculty, and staff about voter education as well as partner with the local community, align very closely and demonstrate a broad based commitment to voter education and civic engagement.

The mission statement for the Political Science and International Studies academic department is to “foster the development of civically-engaged students who will become productive citizens dedicated to serving their communities, their nations, and the world.” The department desires graduates of their program to “become life-long learners as they become cognizant of the institutions and processes of governance and the policies and historical and current events which shape their lives.”

The Office of Leadership & Community Engagement states in its mission to “utilize an integrated theoretical approach to learning, service, and leadership that empowers students to become active, global citizens who lead positive change.” The principles of Learn, Serve, and Lead are the hallmarks of this mission. This focus becomes reality for hundreds of students each year through leadership development, service to the community, and civic engagement. This framework guides decision making and supports the university commitment that all voices have space for participation, dissent and dialogue are welcomed on our campuses, and that students be actively involved in the community.

Georgia Southern University’s Statesboro campus currently serves as an early voting location for Bulloch County. This allows the university to educate students and the campus community around the importance of voting, the process to become a registered voter, how to apply for an absentee ballot, and also serve as a convenient location for students and community members registered in Bulloch County to participate in the voting process. Academic partners in this process include the University Honors College and the Department of Political Science and International Studies. Both groups are actively involved in promoting the volunteer opportunity to students so students can see both the steps needed to ensure a secure voting process and voting in action. A number of student organizations, including College Republicans, Young Democrats of Georgia Southern, and the Southern Leaders Program also organize voter registration drives for the campus community. These initiatives are led by the Dean of Students area and the Office of Leadership and Community Engagement, respectively.

The Dean of Students Office, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Student Union Facilities and Events, Student Activities, and the Office of Leadership and Community Engagement have been the primary partners in working with local officials in recent years. These departments created an educational curriculum and marketing campaign around voter registration, voter education and how to find candidate resources, sample ballots, researching propositions; and how to be involved in the democratic process after elections have concluded.

Landscape

Georgia Southern has strengths and opportunities in its pursuit to engage students in the community and be more civically engaged. Learning outcomes for students come from a variety of initiatives/departments/frameworks. Based on the alignment of those areas to civic engagement, it depends on whether or not stated goals include educating and involving students in civic engagement. Service to the community is a Georgia Southern hallmark and makes our university a distinctive experience for students. Georgia Southern students on average, collectively complete 45,000 hours of service each year. This environment helps shape a culture with students that service and engagement with the community as well understanding the diverse needs of citizens are a part of being a Georgia Southern student. The listed offices in the above section also demonstrate a collective commitment to engaging students in the democratic process.

In recent Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 surveys of all incoming students regarding a new university-wide transition success initiative for first year students called The Eagle Experience, a question was asked to gauge student optimism for being connected to the local community (Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville). The highest rating between the 2 semesters was a 78% Agreed or Strongly Agreed to this statement. Also asked within that survey was if students felt a sense of belonging at the university and a rating high of 84% Agreed or Strongly Agreed to this statement. Almost 800 students completed this survey in Fall 2021 with just over 200 completing it in Spring 2022.

According to the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) 2020 [survey results](#) for Georgia Southern University in the Campus Environment section (p. 12-13, Supportive Environment), slightly similar ratings exist between First Year students and Seniors for questions 14d (Encouraging contact among students from diff. backgrounds (soc., racial/eth., relig., etc.)) and 14i (Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues) with higher ratings occurring amongst First Year students. The number displayed indicates the percentage responding "Very much" or "Quite a bit" about how much the institution emphasized the listed statement. Much progress has been made in the last 3 years at Georgia Southern with diversity and inclusion efforts as well as voter education and perhaps the difference in ratings between those groups is a direct reflection of that.

[Student demographics](#) at Georgia Southern (2020-21) consist of 57.8% Caucasian/White, 27.1% Black/African American, Hispanic, 7.5% Two or More Races, and 2.6% Asian. We have not as an institution held strategic conversations regarding racial or identity makeup amongst students when mapping out civic learning and democratic engagement efforts. This would be an area in which we can give added focus to ensure promotion and communications are aimed not only at all students, but targeted student demographics that also represent the university's student profiles. We do have access to data on the racial makeup of students who engage in community service activities and can use that to create opportunity/awareness for certain identity groups that do not engage as much.

When focusing on internal and external barriers that prevent us from being successful, there are minimal obstacles in the way. Internally, we enjoy strong leadership support and stakeholder cooperation to engage in voter education efforts. There has been very little to no requests or need for funding to support voter education programming and service related experiences are connected to existing department budgets aligned with community service/engagement. We also enjoy the support of our involvement in the Voter Friendly Campus program from the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Office of the President. Externally, Georgia's voter engagement efforts have aimed to increase voter participation while ensuring there is integrity in voter participation. We also enjoy a good partnership with local county election officials and are seen as a strong

partner to assist with early voting efforts. We currently do not as an institution request student voter participation numbers from local counties in elections to know what is average, but if this information is available to us, we can work to use it as a standard for improvement.

Goals

By Summer 2022, create an event tag in Eagle Engage (the university's event/service/student org./experiences platform) to be used for identifying civic engagement/voter education programming.

By May 2023, additional service opportunities will have been identified to partner more closely with the local election boards in the 3 counties Georgia Southern has campuses.

By Summer 2022, initiatives/elements will be created that incentivize students to vote in local/county/state elections, even if these occur in a student's home area that is not in the county Georgia Southern has a campus.

By mid Fall 2022, a video will be produced in coordination with SGA to encourage students to vote.

By December 2022, host at least 5 on campus programs/tabling efforts aimed at voter education/civic engagement.

By Summer 2022, conversations will be had with the local election boards in the counties Georgia Southern has campuses on any access to voter participation numbers of Georgia Southern students who reside in those respective counties.

By May 2023, participate in multiple online/virtual webinars hosted by [All In](#) to gain further education and networking opportunities from other campuses.

Strategy

- Accomplishing short and long term goals stated above will involve utilizing the members identified in the **Leadership** section to create a task list with identification of specific members to make progress or serve as points of contact for task completion.
- On some goals, a more measured and systematic approach may be needed due to longer periods of time associated with achieving the goal, such as the work associated with applying for Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement.
- Communication and accountability will be critical to achieve all above stated goals. Progress of this plan and goal completion will be noted in the [Eagles Vote](#) website that is dedicated to voter education for Georgia Southern students as well as progress updates provided to the Student Affairs Leadership Team, Deans/ Directors/Department Chairs (Academic Affairs), and President's Cabinet.
- Consider submitting an Implementation Grant [application for funding](#) through the Ask Every Student organization.
- Voter education and programming efforts will include the following and be offered on all 3 campuses:
 - Initiatives:
 - Screenings of movies with themes of civic engagement, community transformation, or figures who have helped create change in communities
 - Voter registration tabling
 - Voter education sessions/programs (absentee ballot education, polling process logistics and education, Q&A sessions with candidates hosted on campus, and promotions that encourage students to educate themselves on a candidate's stance on issues, researching propositions, etc.)
 - Post-election involvement after local/state/federal elections in November that include volunteering/service/engagement
 - Campus departments/programs to assist in the above efforts could include:
 - Multicultural Affairs, Leadership & Community Engagement, Sustain Southern, Student Activities, Georgia Southern Libraries, student organizations, appropriate academic departments

It is hoped that through transparency and communication, trust, campus culture, and continued support will thrive.

Reporting

The 2020 [Student Voting Rates report](#) was provided by the Institute for Democracy in Higher Education because of being a participant in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). Georgia Southern is a current member of the Institute and Chris Olson is the university's representative. This report will be used as a resource to assist in outreach efforts, creation of goals, and evaluation benchmarks.

In an effort to demonstrate transparency, trust, and community engagement, this action plan will be:

- Posted on the [Eagles Vote](#) website
- Shared internally to:
 - Via email to student organizations through Student Activities
 - Via email to students involved in Leadership & Community Engagement programs
 - Via email and in person/virtual presentations to the Student Affairs Leadership Team, Deans/Directors/Department Chairs (Academic Affairs), and President's Cabinet
- Shared externally with partners with local election officials in the counties Georgia Southern has campuses

Consideration will be given to share our institution's NSLVE report linked above. This report will need to be screened and approved at a variety of levels in order to be shared publicly. If approved, the NSLVE report for Georgia Southern could be posted on an appropriate institutional website such as Eagles Vote and/or shared with external stakeholders. The goal in sharing the action plan as well as the NSLVE report would be to grow our voter education/civic engagement work across all 3 of our campuses.

Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation is critical to our success in this process and demonstrating measured growth in our efforts. The evaluation process should not simply be limited to an experience that occurs after all progression points have been completed, but centered on an ongoing process that shows flexibility and responsiveness to developments or changes. The following efforts will be incorporated into the evaluation process:

- The members listed in the **Leadership** section will serve as lead members of the assessment and evaluation process and treat each meeting as an opportunity to go over plan details and make adjustments as needed.
- The Democratic Engagement Action Plan Rubric will be used to aid in assessing the effectiveness of this action plan. Each member will individually assess the plan using the rubric followed by a group discussion and consensus that leads to an overall/group rating for each section.
- Focus groups and open input will be solicited from student groups, the Student Affairs Leadership Team, Deans/ Directors/Department Chairs (Academic Affairs), the President's Cabinet, and external partners aligned with the voting process.
- Georgia Southern is scheduled to participate in [NSSE](#) in Fall 2023. Those institutional survey results will be analyzed with a focus on specific questions in the Campus Environment section, specifically questions 14d and 14i.
- Institutional Campus Climate survey results will be analyzed with focusing on any question that offers insight into sense of belonging, comfortability in engaging/discussing civic engagement/political matters, etc.
- Consider student research on this topic through the [Southern Leaders](#) program and appropriate academic departments.
- Review the ["Ask Every Student" framework](#) and take appropriate action based on results.

Collecting input is a positive and strong step, but taking action and doing something with it is an even stronger step forward. All data points and sources will be used to take further steps that fill gaps or address issues related to increasing voter education and civic engagement as well as further shaping a campus environment that welcomes all perspectives, opinions, and beliefs. Any action steps associated with assessment and evaluation will include timelines for completion with measurable outcomes.

Resources

Georgia Southern University Strategic Pillars

<https://president.georgiasouthern.edu/performance-excellence/strategic-plan/strategic-pillars/>

Eagle Vote (student website to promote voter education)

<https://students.georgiasouthern.edu/eaglesvote/>

Voter Friendly Campus Google Drive folder for resource docs

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1NAsN2guj1q4dpigPJOaHg4Uo-wlai0Xa?usp=sharing>

Strengthening American Democracy Guide for Action Plans

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VmSZkdYZevJK9bGbb-uksuXYcJo1kCnr/view?usp=sharing>

Democratic Engagement Action Plan Rubric

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WaXWavBK8fwWnhhvFwnf-XRLh3zX7-dN/view?usp=sharing>

Voter Friendly Campus

<https://www.voterfriendlycampus.org/>

Campus Vote Project

<https://www.campusvoteproject.org/>

All In Campus Democracy Challenge

<https://allinchallenge.org/>

Student Learn Students Vote

<https://slsvcoalition.org/about/>

Institute for Democracy in Higher Education

<https://idhe.tufts.edu/>

2020 National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) - Student Voting Rates Report for Georgia Southern

https://drive.google.com/file/d/11B0uT5_m11x0Koi9lxu3PBCEoltFJBq9/view

Ask Every Student

<https://www.studentvoting.org/>

State/County Election Offices/Boards

Bulloch: <https://bullochcounty.net/elections/>

Chatham: <https://elections.chathamcountyga.gov/>

Liberty: <https://www.libertycountyga.com/318/Board-of-Elections>

State of GA: <https://sos.ga.gov/page/about-elections-division>