

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Kean University is a four-year, urban public research institution with its main campus located in Union, NJ. There are also satellite campuses in Toms River (on the campus of Ocean County College) and Jefferson Township, NJ, and Wenzhou, China, along with online degree programs. The University continues to be ranked by US News and World Report as one of the top 50 top-performing schools in the northern United States for social mobility-helping economically disadvantaged students succeed and graduate. This ranking is calculated by assessing the six-year graduation rates of students who received Federal Pell Grants compared with the graduation rates of other students. US News also ranks Kean as the ninth most ethnically diverse university in the northeastern United States. The publication's Campus Ethnic Diversity Index identifies colleges where students are most likely to encounter undergraduates from racial or ethnic groups different from their own, based on the total proportion of minority students leaving out international students.

Kean's student body is among the top five most diverse in the nation. Among undergraduates, fully two-thirds are BIPOC: 27.2% are Hispanic, 22.3% are Asian, and 17.1% are Black. The U.S. Department of Education formally recognizes Kean University as a Hispanic-serving Institution (HIS).

Based on these demographics, Kean students are among those who are most at-risk of being disenfranchised. Even in 2020, which had the highest voter turn-out in history, participation by BIPOC voters was 13 percentage points lower than their white peers.

In keeping with the University's commitment to developing transformative strategies that prioritize diversity, equity, and the student experience, also known at Kean as "equity in action," ensuring that every eligible student at Kean continues to have access to the ballot, voter registration and education will remain a top priority for the entire campus community.

## **LEADERSHIP**

An old African proverb says "It takes a village." While this is most often applied to raising children, it is equally applicable to teaching demographic engagement.

Responsibility for voter registration at Kean University is split between two departments-the Center for Leadership and Service, and the Human Rights Institute. Students working together on this effort are referred to as the Kean Voting Squad. Together, they take a multi-modal and interdisciplinary approach to educating students, faculty and staff about voting and civic engagement.

These efforts are supplemented by Kean's "village," which includes the following:

## Departments and Campus Units

- Athletics
- College of Liberal Arts
- Division of Student Affairs
- Division of Student Success and Retention
- Galleries at Kean
- Government Affairs and Community Partnerships
- Holocaust Resource Center
- Nancy Thompson Learning Center
- National Council of Negro Women
- Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Office of the President
- Office of the Provost
- PRISM (Kean's LGBTQIA+ Student Group)
- P.U.L.S.E. (Programming for Unique and Lively Student Experience)
- Residential Student Services
- Student Government

## Student Leaders

- Cougars in the Community (Student-Athletes)
- Graduate Student Government
- Greek Life at Kean
- Student Government Executive Board and Senate (Undergraduate Students)

## Community Partners

- League of Women Voters (NJ)
- Lesniak Institute for American Leadership
- Moms Demand Action (NJ)
- Union County Commissioners
- Pizza to the Polls

## **COMMITMENT**

Kean's commitment to human rights, civic engagement and service are evident in its mission statement and strategic plan:

### Mission Statement

Kean University is a public cosmopolitan university serving undergraduate and graduate students in the liberal arts, the sciences, and the professions. The University dedicates itself to the intellectual, cultural, and personal growth of all its members-students, faculty, and professional staff. In particular, the University prepares students to think critically, creatively and globally; to adapt to changing social, economic and technological environments; and to serve as active and contributing members of their communities.

## Strategic Plan

Goal 5 of the University's strategic plan is to "establish Kean University as a national center of excellence in human rights and civic engagement that builds upon our institutional commitment to equity, inclusivity and social justice and models for our students their role as contributing citizens of the world."

## **LANDSCAPE**

### Institutional Objectives and Outcomes

Supporting both the University's mission and strategic plan are its institutional priorities of Excellence, Equity, and Upstanders:

Kean's commitment to excellence and equity is embodied in its educational practices and services, while it is dedicated to creating "upstanders" by incorporating the importance of community responsibility and integrity in all campus life experiences for its students. Nowhere is this more evident than the University-wide commitment to civic engagement.

One of the first things Dr. Lamon Repollet did when he became the 18<sup>th</sup> president of Kean University was to sign on to the Higher Education President's Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. He also encouraged the University to take an active leadership position in the New Jersey ballot Bowl, hosted by the Secretary of State.

[Our combined efforts in conducting the Department of State's annual NJ Ballot Bowl competition along with the ALL IN NJ Campus Voting Challenge enables us to fulfill a critical core mission-promoting nonpartisan civic engagement through voting, particularly among our college student voters.](#)

[Tahesha Way, Secretary of State of New Jersey](#)

At the same time, Kean students, faced with the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, the "Me Too" and "Black Lives Matter" movements, and building on their own personal commitment to human rights and social justices, decided to make voter registration and engagement a key component of their 2020 programming.

### Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Inside and Outside of the Classroom

This combined commitment inspired academic departments and co-curricular units to come together to examine the intersection of voting and human rights, while highlighting the ways in which injustice could be addressed by voting.

All faculty in Kean's "Transition to Kean" Course (a one-credit, extended orientation program for all first-year students) incorporated civic learning in their curricula, as did faculty teaching HIST 1062: Worlds of History: Traditions and Encounters, a main requirement of Kean's General Education program. Collectively, more than 1,500 students participated in classroom conversations about voter education and domestic engagement.

Between January 1 and Election Day 2020, over 200 events brought together a diverse group of students from a variety of academic backgrounds to explore civic engagement. This resulted in 78.9% of eligible students registering to vote, 82.6% of registered students voting, and 65.2% of eligible students voting in the 2020 Presidential Election. Kean University placed number 1 in its Ballot Bowl Division that year.

### Challenges and Opportunities

Something happened, though, in 2019.

Despite it being a major election for New Jersey voters, with a hotly-contested gubernatorial race and the entire State Assembly up for election, voter registration among first year students at Kean dropped by 19 percentage points (from 64% to 45%) between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Research conducted by members of the Kean University Voting Squad over winter term showed three possible reasons for decreased participation:

1. Reticence of faculty to cede instructional time. After being remote for three semesters, many were unwilling to devote any significant time to issues not included in the curriculum.
2. General lack of knowledge about the electoral cycle in New Jersey. Without the attendant media coverage that comes from national elections, along with the daily discussions, both in-person and through social media, about the issues at stake, students were unsurprisingly unaware that elections were taking place.
3. Distrust of the election process. As conversations persist about stolen elections, fake news, missing ballots and compromised results, far too many students voiced disbelief that free and fair elections were in fact possible.

### **NATIONAL STUDY OF LEARNING, VOTING AND ENGAGEMENT (NSLVE)**

#### 2018 Midterm Election

- 71.3% of eligible students registered to vote in the 2018 Midterm Election
- 55.9% of registered students registered to vote in the 2018 Midterm Election
- 39.9% of eligible students voted in the 2018 Midterm Election

#### 2020 Voting, Registration and Yield Rates

- 78.9% of eligible students registered to vote in the 2020 Presidential Election
- 82.6% of registered students voted in the 2020 Presidential Election
- 65.2% of eligible students voted in the 2020 Presidential Election

#### 2022 Presidential Election

- 70% of eligible students registered to vote in the 2022 Midterm Election
- 51% of registered students voted in the 2022 Midterm Election
- 41% of eligible students voted in the 2022 Midterm Election

## **GOALS**

### 2024: Short Term Goals and Action Steps

In the short term, the goal was to replicate the 2020 midterm registration rate of 70% of eligible voters, while increasing voting rates to 75% of registered and 50% of eligible voters.

To do this, Kean's Voting squad continued its face-to-face outreach, with a focus on first-year students who are most likely to be unregistered. The Squad used Civic Holidays to educate all members of the Kean community about the importance of democratic engagement. Major emphasis was placed on meeting students where they are—highly trafficked areas of campus, including the Miron Student Center, Harwood Arena, the Nancy Thompson Learning Commons, and the Center for Academic Studies, while also hosting smaller events at campus outposts such as Liberty Hall Academic Center, Green Lane Academic Building, North Avenue Academic Building, NJ Center for STEM and East Campus, as well as Kean Ocean and Kean Skylands.

### Longer Term Goals

Information recorded as part of the Ballot Bowl competition will be used to analyze the success of all of the civic engagement efforts.

Data captured in the biennial NSLVE report will be compared to prior years, to track voting trends by method, age group, education level, undergraduate class year, enrollment status, gender, race/ethnicity and field of study.

During the Spring Semester, members of the Voting Squad will present their findings to the Kean community as part of the University's annual Research Days, April 15-17, 2024.

All of these records will be utilized to inform and structure future programming, the goal of which is to:

- Centralize and institutionalize voter registration and democratic engagement at the University;
- Recognize the Voting Squad as an official student group, making it eligible for additional institutional funding, support and training opportunities;
- Develop a succession plan to ensure qualified and committed student leadership over time;
- Incorporate civil rights and social justice throughout the curriculum, with an emphasis on General Education;
- Create a “Highly Established Action Plan,” and
- Situate Kean as a Platinum Seal Campus and model program for other colleges and universities to emulate.

### Strategy and Tactics

Utilizing the successful Fall 2020 model, the Voting Squad met with approximately 1,500 first-year students, using TurboVote to track registrations. Special efforts were made to

assist students whose name does not match their official ID, students who are homeless, and students who were formerly incarcerated. In addition, as part of the Human Rights annual conference programming, which this year will center on disability justice, a specific campaign for students with disabilities was developed.

Using three touch points: New Student Orientation, GE 1000 (Transition to Kean), and HIST 1062, members of the Voting Squad met with first-year students in person in an academic setting. The first of these meetings began in July, when new students enrolled in summer prep programs, such as EOF, Bridge to Success, and Project Adelante, began their undergraduate studies.

To keep voter registration front and center, communications pieces, including posters with QR code links to Kean's TurboVote site, were designed, printed and distributed to all offices around campus.

To assist potential voters in better understanding their ballots, including candidates and issues, a supporting educational social media campaign was also developed.

In addition, larger campus events were held to commemorate Civic Holidays, including National Voter Registration Day (NVRD) and National Voter Education Week (NVEW). The entire first floor of the student center was reserved, and the services of Keanu, the Kean mascot, were secured to celebrate NVRD. The Voting Squad partnered with campus groups including P.U.L.S.E. and National Council of Negro Women to host educational programming for NVEW. The Squad also researched changes in voting laws in New Jersey, updated voter registration training manuals and presentations.

This was just the second election cycle to offer early voting in New Jersey. To highlight this great opportunity for voters to cast their ballots, the Voting Squad hosted an Early Voting Day kick-off celebration on October 28 in the outdoor Learning Pavilion, adjacent to the main parking lot and academic buildings on the main campus in Union. This celebration included Vote Early banners, Keanu the Cougar, a DJ, balloons and photo booths.

The following week (October 31 through November 4), Vote Early Day events were held at seven different locations on all of Kean's US campuses.

On Election Hero/GOTV Day, the Squad took advantage of unseasonably warm weather and high traffic into the library by distributing pizza and soda to students, while encouraging them to vote on election day. Posters directed students to TurboVote so they could find their local polling places and learn more about the candidates and issues on the ballot.

