

Mercer University Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Plan 2020

I. Executive Summary

The Mercer University Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Plan was developed by the Center for Community Engagement (CCE) in fall 2020. The action plan reflects the shared commitment of Mercer students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community partners. Its development provides a stage for reflection on the 2018-midterm election, and details the resources, plans, and goals for integrating voter registration on the Macon undergraduate campus in 2020-2021. While the action plan primarily focuses on voter engagement programming for Macon undergraduates, many of the action items can be widely adopted by Mercer's Regional Academic Centers and the university's Atlanta, Savannah, and Columbus campuses.

At Mercer, it is understood that our institution plays a critical role in the promotion of civic learning and democratic engagement. We acknowledge the importance in supporting voter registration, education, and turnout. We also recognize the many systemic challenges that voters often face when accessing their right to vote. Democracy deserves full participation; therefore, the work to support student voter participation must be a sustainable institutional priority. We can see the value of our steps towards institutionalizing voter participation in Mercer's 2014 to 2018 voting gains. According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), Mercer increased its voter registration and turnout rates by 10.1 and 22.2 percentage points respectively. However, despite these record setting numbers, there are still noticeable gaps in participation.

We know that many students will engage in the democratic process if the process welcomes their engagement; therefore, Mercer will strengthen its commitment to democracy by meeting students where they are. CCE-led voting efforts will largely focus on the incorporation of voter engagement programming via Opening Day (move-in day) and Mercer's UNV (first-year experience) courses. The CCE will work with Mobilize Mercer, the university's democratic engagement programming board, to foster programming that specifically addresses lower participation amongst STEM majors. Furthermore, the CCE and Mobilize Mercer will provide platforms that support informed voting, deliberative dialogues, and collective problem solving.

Through these coordinated efforts, Mercer aims to accomplish the following goals during the 2020 election:

- Achieve a 85% voter registration rate amongst all eligible voters

- Increase the voter turnout rate to 60%
- Improve voter turnout amongst STEM majors by 10 percentage points

II. Leadership

The Mercer University Center for Community Engagement (CCE) serves as a clearinghouse for undergraduate civic engagement opportunities. The CCE, in partnership with local and regional agencies, advances student learning and leadership by preparing Mercer students to address a variety of community needs. Voter engagement programming was integrated into CCE services ahead of the 2016 presidential election. This move was done in support of Mercer's participation in the SoCon Votes challenge, the first Division 1 athletic conference championship for democratic engagement. While the CCE primarily leads the coordination of voter engagement programs, there are a number of students, faculty, staff, and community partners advancing this work.

Campus leaders supporting civic learning and democratic engagement at Mercer include:

- **Lauren Shinholster:** Coordinator of Community Engagement and Mobilize Mercer Advisor
- **Dr. Douglas Pearson:** Vice President and Dean of Students
- **Jadon Murad:** Undergraduate student and Co-Chair of Mobilize Mercer
- **Tessa Gebert:** Undergraduate student and Co-Chair of Mobilize Mercer
- **Savannah Curro:** Undergraduate student and Director of Programming, Mobilize Mercer
- **Carrie Ingoldsby:** Director of Campus Life and Student Involvement
- **Austin Rayford:** Area Coordinator, Housing and Residence Life
- **Christian Wells:** Associate Director, Housing and Residence Life
- **Grace Day:** Coordinator of Academic Programs, Academic and Advising Services
- **Dr. Ansley Booker:** Director of Diversity and Inclusive Initiatives
- **Dr. Christopher Grant:** Chair of Political Science Department, Professor, and Advisor to Young Democrats
- **Kylie Brown:** Undergraduate student and President of Young Democrats
- **Alexander Hanberry:** Undergraduate Student and President of College Republicans
- **Adam Griggs:** Research Services Librarian

Mobilize Mercer

Mercer continues to foster a student-centered environment that empowers students to take an active role in leading voter engagement. Students are necessary to reinforce the message that voting is the

norm at Mercer. More importantly, our students are vital for informing the strategy that leads to the development of programs and services.

At the forefront of Mercer's student-led work to increase voter participation is Mobilize Mercer. At the time of Mobilize Mercer's founding in 2016, it was considered a student organization. However, in fall 2020, Mobilize Mercer was recognized as the university's newest programming board; a move that formally places oversight of the organization under the purview of the Center for Community Engagement and the Office of Campus Life and Student Involvement.

Community Partners

Mercer's voter engagement efforts are supported through a vast network of community partners including, Austin Advocates, the People's Advocacy Group, Middle Georgia Votes, the League of Women Voters, and Georgia Equality.

CLDE and Mobilize Mercer Meetings

To accomplish the goals set forth in this action plan, the CCE and Mobilize Mercer will meet biweekly. The larger working group will meet at least once per month to share resources, evaluate plans and improve strategy.

III. Commitment

At Mercer, everyone majors in changing the world. The university's commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement is deeply woven into the fabric of the university. This commitment is reflected in the university's mission and vision statements and throughout our 2018 strategic plan.

Mission Statement

Mercer University's mission is to teach, to learn, to create, to discover, to inspire, to empower, and to serve.



Vision Statement

To change the world, one student at a time.

2018 Strategic Plan Imperatives

Mercer University's 2018 Strategic Plan outlines the university's vision for the decade ahead. The plan includes two imperatives that underscore the commitment to civic learning—

Imperative 5: Achieving Meaningful Outcomes and Imperative 7: Being True to our Heritage.

Imperative 5: Achieving Meaningful Outcomes

Since 2018, Mercer has completed the following to achieve meaningful outcomes in support of civic learning and democratic engagement—

- Created the Engaged Learning Council to facilitate the coordination of engaged learning experiences including study abroad, service-learning, internships, fellowships/scholarships and service-research. The work of the Engaged Learning Council has provided a solid foundation for the proposal of the Center for Engaged Learning.
- Appointed a dedicated Fellowship Coordinator, a move that led to a banner year for national fellowships and scholarships in 2019-2020.
- Ensured that more than 90 percent of undergraduate students have an internship/field experience prior to graduation. Mercer understands that by enriching the academic experience through engaged learning, students will be better equipped to affect change once they graduate.

Imperative 7: Being True to our Heritage

Mercer's heritage reflects a commitment to dignity, freedom, and compassionate service. Mercer supports openness and inclusion, along with freedom of inquiry and expression. Over the past two years, this advancement to a more inclusive Mercer, has been demonstrated in the establishment of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives.

Core Curriculum

Preparing Mercer students to change the world is a shared responsibility. The commitment to developing change-makers is witnessed just as easily in Mercer's co-curricular experience as it is in the curricular. Mercer's core curriculum for General Education builds on the assertion of commitment to civic learning by offering two tracks— the Great Books Curriculum or the Integrative Curriculum.

The course sequence in the Great Books Curriculum allows students to explore complex issues on race, class, and gender. A description of the Great Books Curriculum reads, “Through this survey of political, religious, philosophical, and scientific thought, students can increase their skills in disciplined thinking and effective writing, can heighten their moral and ethical reflectiveness, and can understand how the seminal ideas of the past have formed our twentieth and twenty-first century selves.”

In the Integrative Curriculum Program, students complete three multidisciplinary courses—Understanding Self and Others, Building Community, and Engaging the World. A description on the ‘Building Community’ course reads, “The broad topic for this sophomore level course is community – how communities are formed, cultivated or threatened, and the role citizens play in preserving public good in communities and nations.” The ‘Building Community’ course is enhanced through service-learning and has provided opportunities for Mercer students to tutor in Bibb County elementary and high schools, volunteer at a local day shelter, and work with animal rescue organizations.

Co-curricular

Beyond the curriculum, Mercer enhances the academic experience through cultural, social, and educational programming; community engagement and volunteerism; leadership development; and Greek Life and student organization participation.

With 20 active Greek chapters and nearly 150 student organizations on campus, Mercer students understand and embrace the importance of involvement and civic engagement. Students dedicate their time to rebuild homes with Habitat for Humanity, host food drives with MerServe, and raise funds for pediatric hospitals with MU Miracle. Finally, Mercer students demonstrate their commitment to democratic engagement through involvement with organizations such as the College Republicans, Young Democrats, Young Americans for Liberty, and Mobilize Mercer.

IV. Landscape

In 2016, Mercer University participated in the inaugural SoCon Votes competition. Since its start, SoCon Votes has served as a rallying tool for coordinating voting efforts across Mercer’s campus. Mercer was proud to win the 2016 competition, and even prouder to build on this success during the 2018 election earning both highest voter turnout and most improved.

NSLVE

An important facet of Mercer’s participation in SoCon Votes and the larger All in Democracy Challenge has been the university’s participation in that National Student of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). By organizing voter engagement data based on age, gender, and fields of study, for example, NSLVE has enabled Mercer to tailor our voter engagement strategies.

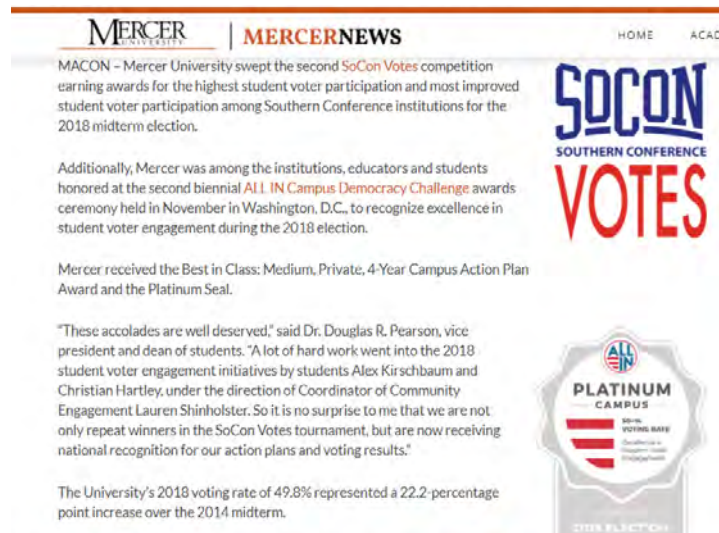


Table 1. Mercer University Voter Registration and Turnout Rates

	Registration	Turnout
2012	83.8%	58.7%
2014	68.9%	27.7%
2016	80.0%	56.4%
2018	83.3%	49.8%

A major focus ahead of the 2018 midterm election was raising the university’s voter registration rates to match the registration levels typically seen in presidential election years. Mercer was successful in reaching this goal, primarily due to Mobilize Mercer’s efforts to incorporate voter registration into Opening Day, our university’s first-year move-in. It is believed that this effort to integrate voter registration into the move-in process translated to record gains in our voter turnout, Mercer saw a 22.2 percentage point increase in its midterm voter turnout rates. Additionally, there was a competitive gubernatorial race that energized first-time voters on Mercer’s campus. However, despite these high voter registration and turnout rates, there is concern regarding the disparity in voting participation amongst the university’s STEM majors.

Voting, By Field of Study

Mercer’s NSLVE breakdown based on field of study follows the national trend of lower voter turnout amongst STEM majors—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. To address the lower voting rates, the CCE will work with student leaders in the STEM field that can act as voting ambassadors and function as liaisons between their classmates and Mobilize Mercer.

Field of Study, Highest Voting Rates (2018)	Rate	Field of Study, Lowest Voting Rates (2018)	Rate
Education	67.2%	Physical Sciences	33.3%
Public Administration & Social Service Professions	64.2%	Visual and Performing Arts	33.3%
Theology and Religious Vocations	64%	Liberal Arts and Sciences	36.6%
Social Sciences	63.7%	Biological Sciences	37.3%
Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies	61.1%	Engineering	39.1%

Internal Barriers

Mercer is very fortunate to have supportive faculty, staff, administrators, and students who are willing to lead the charge to increase democratic engagement. However, as with most initiatives, additional staffing and funding can lend itself to increasing the number of events that can be conducted, as well as the quality and reach of those events. This year, the additional barrier of COVID-19 has further stressed staff and student availability to lead our voter engagement efforts. Furthermore, it has altered our voter engagement strategy—reducing the capacity of events and moving events online or outdoors.

External Barriers

While Georgia has taken strides to reduce barriers to voting, there are still significant challenges, including the impact on COVID-19 on absentee/ mail-in voting.

- Voter ID requirements- Georgia does not accept school IDs from private institutions
- Polling Location- While the nearest polling location is less than 2 miles from campus, it may prove difficult for some students to vote if they do not have access to reliable transportation.
- Voter registration deadlines- Georgia does not offer same day voter registration. All Georgia voters must be registered to vote by October 5 for the general election on November 3.
- Mail delays- Like the rest of the country, there has been significant delays in mail delivery that will likely affect the receipt of absentee ballots and their return. To combat these delays, a major focus this election year will be in-person early voting and the utilization of official drop boxes.

Resources

Despite some challenges, Mercer is confident that our institution is primed for a successful election season. There are several available resources that are key to Mercer's success—dedicated personnel and community partners, adequate funding, and civic-minded students.

V. Goals

To build upon the accomplishments of 2018, Mercer University has set the following goals:

Long-term goal: **Raise voter turnout rates to 70% by 2028.**

Short-term goals:

I. Raise the voter registration rate to 85% in the 2020 election.

Mercer was proud to achieve an 83% voter registration rate during the 2018 midterm election. In 2020, we will build on this rate by reaching 85%. An 85% registration rate would be a record number for Mercer. To achieve this growth it will be necessary to energize low propensity voters, like STEM majors.

II. Achieve a 60% voter turnout rate in 2020.

III. Increase STEM turnout by 10 percentage points

Mobilize Mercer will take care to promote voter registration and education amongst STEM majors. Targeted emails and voter registration tabling in high traffic STEM locations will be conducted.

VI. Strategy

Various strategies will be undertaken to increase voter registration, education, and turnout at Mercer.

Voter Registration

- Ask Every Student
 - Mercer is an Ask Every Student Commitment Campus. Mercer had already taken strides to integrate our voter registration into our move-in process; however, COVID-19 altered the move-in day procedure and impeded the ability to register students to vote as they moved in. Instead, Mobilize Mercer shifted its attention to UNV, our university's first-year seminar/experience course.
 - Through a service-learning partnership with Dr. Chris Grant's Campaigns and Elections class, students were trained as Ask Every Student voting ambassadors for

our campus. These students were then tasked with conducting voter registration presentations in at least two UNV classes. Additionally, these students were assigned to table with Mobilize Mercer during National Voter Registration Day.

- Mass Emails
 - Email reminders about voter registration deadlines and voter engagement events will be sent via “Bear Blurbs”, a weekly email blast sent out every Monday.
- Student Organization Presentations/ Event Co-sponsorships, **September and October**
 - Mercer has a diverse array of student organizations on campus. Mobilize Mercer will work closely with student organizations and programming boards to identify opportunities for collaboration.
- Constitution Day, **September 17**
 - Mobilize Mercer will host a Zoom gathering that encourages voters register to vote and participate in a letter writing campaign to local officials.
- National Voter Registration Day, **September 22**
 - Mobilize Mercer will be conducting voter register tabling throughout the day.
 - Tabling will be conducted on Cruz Plaza to promote visibility.



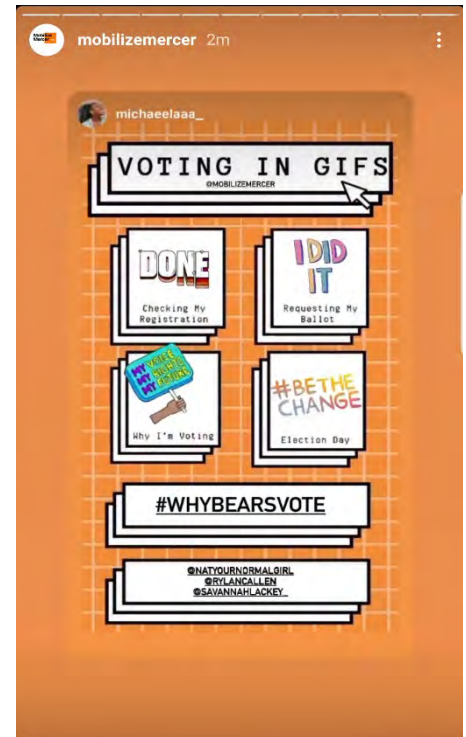
Voter Education

Voter education will be infused throughout Mobilize Mercer’s voter registration events; however, additional voter education strategies are listed below.

- Debate Watch Parties
 - Mobilize Mercer will provide opportunities to increase voter education by hosting debate watch parties. This year, every debate watch party will be co-hosted by Mercer's College Republicans and Young Democrats.
- Voter Education Marketing/ Social Media Campaigns
 - Mobilize Mercer will grow its Instagram account to increase voter awareness. Students will be encouraged to participate in social media challenges to increase our reach.
 - Flyers, posters, and banners will be displayed throughout campus and regularly updated.
 - Op-ed pieces from faculty, staff, or administrators may also be featured in The Cluster, the student news site at Mercer.

Voter Turnout

- Social Media Campaigns
 - In the days leading up to Election Day, Mobilize Mercer will launch their "I vote because..." campaign. The campaign will feature prominent student leaders who represent a diverse cross-section of Mercer's student body.
- Vote Early Day, October 24
 - Georgia will offer 3 weeks of early voting, including one Saturday—October 24. To celebrate early voting, Mobilize Mercer will host an Early Voting Pep Rally.
- Election Day Shuttling, **November 3**
 - A potential barrier to voting may be transportation. To address this barrier, Mobilize Mercer will collaborate with local organizations to promote free Uber rides to the polls.



- Election Night Celebration, **November 3**
 - Mobilize Mercer will host an Election Night Watch Party that will include election themed food and “I Voted” swag.

VII. Reporting

The All in Democracy Challenge Action Plan will be shared university-wide, along with the university’s 2020 NSLVE report.

VIII. Evaluation

NSLVE will be the primary evaluation tool to determine voter registration and turnout rates.

Additional measures that will be recorded include:

- Number of events and event participation
- Event/presentation feedback
- Social media follows/growth
- Number of UNV presentations conducted

Questions related to this action plan should be addressed to:

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