



MERCER UNIVERSITY

CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

2022-2024

Action Plan



NOVEMBER 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mercer University Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Plan was written by Lauren Shinholster, associate director of engaged learning in the fall of 2022. 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 2020 election, and details the resources, plans, and goals for institutionalizing voter registration on the Macon undergraduate campus during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. While the action plan 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. At a university "where everyone majors in changing the world," Mercerians are encouraged to use their academic knowledge to address the world's most pressing issues. For most Mercer students, this capacity for change-making is nurtured through experiences like internships, service research, or traveling abroad through Mercer on Mission. However, increasingly, more Mercer students are recognizing their power to effect change by exercising their right to vote and motivating their peers to do the same.

In the years since the launch of SoCon Votes in 2016, Mercer University has made considerable leaps to strengthen our institution's commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. We see the value of our steps towards institutionalizing voter participation through Mercer's 2016 to 2020 voting gains. According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), Mercer increased its voter registration and turnout rates by 9 percentage points and 14 percentage points respectively. Despite these improvements, there are still noticeable gaps in participation.

We acknowledge the importance of supporting full participation in the democratic engagement process. Our voting records show that our students will engage in the democratic process if that process welcomes and values their engagement; therefore, we must be intentional, inclusive, and flexible in our programming and communication. The Mercer Votes Coalition stands at the forefront of our efforts to strengthen voter engagement. The coalition, led by key staff members and Mercer's Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows, fosters programming that specifically addresses voter participation gaps and provides a platform that supports informed voting, deliberative dialogues, and collective problem-solving. *Through the coordinated effort of the Mercer Votes Coalition, Mercer aims to accomplish the following short-term and long-term goals:*

- Achieve a 93% voter registration rate among all eligible voters during the 2022 general election

- Increase the 2022 voter turnout rate to 60%, an 11-percentage point increase from the 2018 general election
- Restructure the student organization, Mobilize Mercer, and establish the Mercer Votes Coalition ahead of the 2022-2023 academic year
- Achieve a 95% voter registration rate during the 2024 general election and an 80% voter turnout rate.

LEADERSHIP

Margaret Rooyakkers, assistant director of service and civic engagement, and Lauren Shinholster, associate director of engaged learning, co-lead the university's voting initiatives including the development and implementation of the civic learning and democratic engagement action plan. However, our voting progress reflects the shared commitments of many students, faculty, staff, and community partners.

Since 2016, Mercer has made intentional strides in strengthening support of voter engagement programming. While partisan organizations like the College Republicans and Young Democrats have had a longstanding presence on campus, there was a need to establish a nonpartisan student organization that could support voter registration and turnout. Mobilize Mercer was founded ahead of the 2016 presidential election as a vehicle for supporting the university's participation in the SoCon Votes challenge, the first Division 1 athletic conference championship for democratic engagement.

In recent years, the growth in voter engagement programming, the changing voting landscape in Georgia, and the impacts of COVID-19, have necessitated the restructuring of Mobilize Mercer. Mercer now has three Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows who champion our student-led voting initiatives. These fellows also serve on the leadership team of the recently established Mercer Votes Coalition.

The Mercer Votes Coalition comprises students, faculty, staff, and community partners. The coalition meets on the first Thursday of each month at 6 pm; however, the leadership team meets bi-weekly. The establishment of the coalition has served as a way to amplify voting messages and programming and form strategies to address participation gaps. Furthermore, the coalition has strengthened succession planning, as the primary voter engagement responsibilities no longer fall to one staff member or select student leaders. Coalition membership is renewed annually and recruitment of new members is ongoing.

Mercer Votes Leadership Team:

- Lauren Shinholster, Associate Director of Engaged Learning
- Margaret Rooyakkers, Assistant Director of Service and Civic Engagement
- Atia Bailey, Democracy Fellow, SGA Senator, Junior

- Chidimma Uwaomah, Democracy Fellow, Mercer Track and Field, Senior
- Carmen Benjamin, Democracy Fellow, Leadership Mercer, Sophomore

Coalition membership includes representatives from the following campus departments, programs, and student organizations:

- Division of Student Affairs
- Office of Campus Life and Student Involvement
- Center for Engaged Learning
- Office of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives
- Office of Housing and Residence Life
- Office of Academic and Advising Services
- Political Action Wednesday
- Social Justice Book Club
- Student Government Association
- College Republicans
- Young Democrats

Additionally, the following community organizations are represented in the coalition:

- Middle Georgia Votes
- Campus Vote Project
- New Georgia Project
- Georgia Muslim Voter Project
- Georgia Women (And Those Who Stand With Us)

COMMITMENT

“At Mercer, everyone majors in changing the world.”

Civic learning and democratic engagement are deeply woven into the fabric of Mercer University. From the University’s mission and vision statements to the growing number of service-learning and service-research opportunities offered, Mercer continues to demonstrate a commitment to equipping our students with the skills and knowledge to change the world.

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 a commitment to civic learning and engagement—Imperative 5: Achieving Meaningful Outcomes and Imperative 7: Being True to our Heritage.

Imperative 5: Achieving Meaningful Outcomes

Fostering collaboration and engagement in high-impact practices, such as service-learning and internships is a major focus of Imperative 5. Based on outcomes linking high impact practices to improved critical thinking, higher rates of retention and engagement, and greater appreciation of diversity, Mercer established a standard that every graduating senior would participate in at least one engaged learning experience. Since the rollout of the 2018 strategic plan, Mercer has completed the following in support of this goal —

- 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 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.
- Established the Center for Engaged Learning in fall 2020. The Center for Engaged Learning (CEL) supports high-impact practices and serves as a hub for collaboration. Recognizing the barriers to engaging in high-impact practices, the CEL sets out to increase capacity by providing professional development resources and funding opportunities for students, faculty, and community partners.

Imperative 7: Being True to our Heritage

Mercer's heritage reflects a commitment to dignity, intellectual freedom, and compassionate service. Holding true to these foundational values, Mercerians are encouraged to move past religious rhetoric and affiliations, and focus more on the use of our gifts and talents to meet the needs of our communities both



locally and globally. Since the rollout of the 2018 strategic plan, Mercer has completed the following in support of this strategic imperative—

- Founded the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Since its opening in 2019, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives has stood at the forefront of the university's efforts to create a culture of acceptance, equity, and justice. The office and its partners are responsible for efforts such as Diversity Day, International Day, the MLK Living the Dream March and Vigil, the Social Justice Book Club, and Mercer Mondays podcast.
- Increased engagement in service both domestically and abroad by expanding programs such as MerServe, Mercer on Mission, and the Peace Corps Prep Program. In 2020-2021, Mercer ranked fourth in the nation for Peace Corps Prep certificate-issuing institutions.
- Enhanced the tracking and promotion of civic engagement opportunities through the purchase of GivePulse, a volunteer management system.

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 student organization participation.

With 20 active fraternity and sorority programs and 160 student organizations on campus, Mercer students understand and embrace the importance of involvement and civic engagement. Students dedicate their time to building homes with Habitat for Humanity, hosting neighborhood cleanups with MerServe, and raising funds for pediatric hospitals with MU Miracle. Finally, Mercer students demonstrate their commitment to democratic engagement through involvement in organizations such as NAACP, Political Action Wednesday, the College Republicans, Young Democrats, Young Americans for Liberty, and Mobilize Mercer.

Striving Toward Full Voter Participation

Pursuing higher education is a significant investment of time and money. Providing a great return on this investment must be reflected in student outcomes and achieved through our university's programs, services, and commitments. In 2020, President Underwood signed the Higher Education Presidential Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation, signifying the importance of voting and democratic engagement for every Mercerian. Since making this commitment, Mercer has signed on as an Ask Every Student Commitment Campus and has made great strides to register every eligible Mercerian to vote. With a voter registration rate of 91% in 2020, we are heading in the right direction.



LANDSCAPE

There was great concern about COVID-19's impact on voting access in the months leading up to the 2020 general election. News reports of long voting lines, confusing absentee ballot procedures, and poll worker shortages dominated the media throughout the spring of 2020. At that time, it was uncertain if Mercer students would return to campus in the fall. Regardless of the decision, we knew that our students would need to create a plan to vote, and we knew that we would encourage them to vote early.

Simultaneously, while navigating the challenges posed by COVID-19, we then needed to address racial injustice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Mercer's Office of Counseling and Psychology Services (CAPS) along with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives led efforts to encourage deliberative dialogue in the aftermath of this social unrest. We also witnessed hundreds of our students, faculty, and staff use their voices as they marched both on and off campus.

Now, it is two years later. We are still navigating the effects of COVID-19, along with the challenges of misinformation, changing voting laws, and growing distrust in our political systems. According to the spring 2022 Harvard Youth Poll, 42% of 18-29-year-olds surveyed believe that their vote “doesn’t make a difference” and 56% agreed that “politics today are no longer able to meet the challenges our country is facing.” These statistics are concerning but illustrate the need to strengthen our voter engagement efforts, particularly in the areas of voter education and mobilization.

SoCon Votes

In the years since the launch of SoCon Votes in 2016, Mercer has increased its voting rate by 14 percentage points, reaching 73% in the 2020 election.

SoCon Votes, founded by Mercer alum, Joey Wozniak, was originally a vehicle to boost voter participation and friendly competition with our Southern Conference peers. Six years later, SoCon Votes and the student-led innovation inspiring the initiative, are now the blueprint for 12 athletic conference challenges.



National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Aligning with increased voter participation, Mercer students have also demonstrated increased rates of service-learning and civic engagement on the 2019 National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). Comparing freshmen to seniors, 76% of seniors reported that service-learning or community-based projects were integrated into “some” or “most” of their Mercer courses, while this value was 52% for freshmen. When looking at the survey data from 2016, the value added from freshman year (2016) to senior year (2019) was 34.4%. The 2019 NSSE also indicated that Mercer is successful in helping students connect their learning to societal problems. Seventy-three percent of seniors surveyed in 2019 made these connections “often” or “very often”.

Senior Survey-- Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS)

Mercer completed a survey of graduating seniors in spring 2021 utilizing the senior survey from the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS). When asked to what extent has Mercer contributed

to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in the area of civic engagement, 23% of surveyed seniors indicated “some”, 27% said “quite a bit”, and 34% responded “very much”. Only 15% of surveyed students responded with “very little”.

Challenges

Supporting civic learning and democratic engagement is a long-term investment in the voting habits of each Mercer student. To sustain this work, Mercer will need to address staffing and capacity challenges. Students are increasingly juggling demanding schedules, which has made involvement in the university’s voting initiatives difficult. Compensating students and campus partners for the work contributed to the voting initiative is paramount. Beyond voting, it is important for the university to acknowledge the work of Mercer faculty and staff, particularly those who incorporate high-impact practices into their teaching. In addition to addressing staffing and student engagement challenges, we must also consider external barriers. Georgia’s SB202 bill, “Election Integrity Act of 2021” shortens the window for voting via absentee ballot, prohibits mobile voting centers, and restricts the distribution of water and food to voters waiting in line. While access to drop boxes have been limited, the bill expands early voting access for most counties by mandating an additional Saturday for voting and optional voting hours on Sunday.

Resources

Despite the aforementioned challenges, Mercer is confident that our institution is primed for another successful election season. There are several available resources that are key to Mercer’s continued success—dedicated personnel and community partners, adequate internal and external funding, and civic-minded students. To reach the goals laid out in this action plan, Mercer’s Center for Community Engagement will secure additional funding via grants ahead of fall 2022.

National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)

An important aspect of Mercer’s voter engagement efforts has been the university’s participation in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). Organizing voter engagement data by factors such as age, gender, race, and method of voting, has allowed Mercer to tailor our voter engagement strategies.

Ahead of the 2018 general election, Mercer used its NSLVE data to set a voter registration goal of 80%. Narrowing the gap in voter registration rates between midterm and presidential elections was key in achieving a record turnout in 2018. Incorporating voter registration into Opening Day, our university’s first-year move-in, catapulted this success, with Mercer not only exceeding the 80% registration goal but nearly matching the 2016 turnout rate, just falling 6 percentage points short.

Recognizing that COVID-19 would impact our ability to continue the Opening Day voter registration efforts in 2020, Mercer used our NSLVE data to identify additional areas of opportunity. Absentee voting and in-person early voting have always been popular options for Mercer students. This pattern held true in 2020, with 83% of voters voting early or by mail. As a result, the Mercer Votes Coalition has increased its efforts to provide access to absentee ballot applications. With the support of the Tarver Library and Mercer’s Mail and Document Center, students now have a number of convenient locations for requesting a ballot.

Table 1. Mercer University Voter Registration and Turnout Rates

	Registration	Turnout
<i>2012</i>	83.8%	58.7%
<i>2014</i>	68.9%	27.7%
<i>2016</i>	80.0%	56.4%
<i>2018</i>	83.3%	49.8%
2020	91%	72.5%

Here are some notable insights from the 2020 NSLVE—

- 91% of Mercer students were registered to vote ahead of the 2020 general election.
- 72.5% voted in the 2020 election compared to 58.1% in 2016.
- 83% of Mercer students voted early or by mail.
- Voter turnout increased amongst all age groups and education levels.
- STEM majors achieved significant gains in voting participation with voting rates amongst biology majors increasing 15 percentage points and engineering majors increasing 20 percentage points.
- While male voters continue to lag behind students identifying as female, the voting gap is closing with 67% of men voting in 2020 compared to 73% of women. This gap was 12 percentage points in 2016.

GOALS

To build on the success of 2020, Mercer University has set the following short-term and long-term goals:

- Achieve a 93% voter registration rate among all eligible voters during the 2022 general election
- Increase the 2022 voter turnout rate to 60%, an 11-percentage point increase from the 2018 general election

- Restructure the student organization, Mobilize Mercer, and establish the Mercer Votes Coalition ahead of the 2022-2023 academic year
- Achieve a 95% voter registration rate during the 2024 general election and an 80% voter turnout rate.

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 has 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.
- 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
- National Voter Registration Day, **September 20**
 - Mobilize Mercer will be conducting voter register tabling throughout the day.
 - Tabling will be conducted on Cruz Plaza or the Connell Student Center to promote visibility.

Voter Education

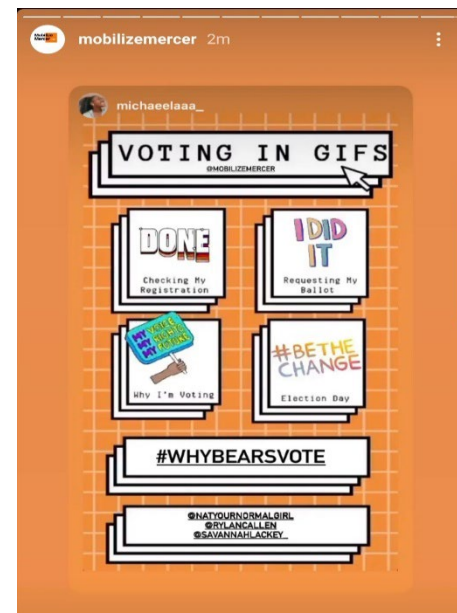
Voter education will be infused throughout our voter registration events; however, additional voter education strategies are listed below.

- Debate Watch Parties
- Voter Education Marketing/ Social Media Campaigns
 - The Mobilize Mercer social media will be rebranded as Mercer Votes Coalition. 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 28**
 - With a significant number of students voting early or via absentee ballot, Mercer will increase Vote Early Day programming. Two events are planned—“Don’t Wing It, Make a Plan to Vote” and “GOAT to Vote”.
- Election Day Shuttling, **November 8**
 - 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 8**
 - Mobilize Mercer will host an Election Night Watch Party that will include election-themed food and “I Voted” swag.



REPORTING

The All in Democracy Challenge Action Plan will be shared university-wide, along with the university’s 2022 NSLVE report. Both the report and action plan will be linked on the Campus Life and Center for Engaged Learning web pages. Additionally, Mercer Votes Coalition members will be sent a copy of each report.

EVALUATION

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

Additional measures that will be recorded throughout the academic year include:

- Number of events and event participants
- Event/presentation feedback
- Social media follows/growth
- Number of UNV presentations conducted
- Feedback via focus groups and/or interviews with the Mercer Votes Coalition (December and April meetings)

Questions related to this action plan should be addressed to:

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