

Strengthening Civic Engagement

Within the Tiger Community

2020 Action Plan



**CAMPUS  
DEMOCRACY  
CHALLENGE**



**NORTHEAST**  
MISSISSIPPI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Northeast Mississippi Community College

Booneville, MS

## **I. Executive Summary**

Higher education institutions have historically served a vital role in preparing students for a lifetime of democratic participation. Northeast Mississippi Community College (NEMCC) has identified as one of its institutional goals “To provide a program of student services that will facilitate the educational, career, personal, and social growth of students.” To help with this effort, a campus Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee has been formed to facilitate the college’s promotion of democratic values among its student body. This effort to institutionalize civic engagement will begin during the Fall 2020 semester and encompass the main campus in Booneville, MS and two satellite locations in New Albany and Corinth.

With the support of President Ricky Ford, this and subsequent action plans (developed by the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee) shall serve as a transparent document that (1) supports NEMCC’s assessment of its ongoing civic-minded efforts, (2) sets both short- and long-term goals, and (3) improves the democratic engagement opportunities and outcomes for students. While the work of this committee shall be conducted in a non-partisan manner, much attention will be directed at influencing the exercise of our most fundamental right: voting. This will include campus activities such as voter registration initiatives and participation in related programs (e.g., Campus Voting Project, All In Campus Democracy Challenge). The current action plan features campus endeavors intended for 2020 and beyond; however, modifications to succeeding plans will occur as needed.

## II. Leadership

Primary objectives of the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee will focus on providing direction for NEMCC's efforts to promote civic and electoral engagement. The committee will be responsible for making available voter registration applications, pertinent information about upcoming elections, and relevant nonpartisan election information for students. The following faculty members are included as working members within the committee:

- Will Bowlin, Instructor of History and Government (committee coordinator)
- Eric Smith, Instructor of History and Geography
- Elizabeth Grisham, Instructor of History

A discernible strength of this group is their collective interest in fostering student engagement in civic affairs. Yet, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – as well as the committee's formation during the summer – the current composition of the committee is limited.

Modifications to the group's size and campus representation are expected after this first year of implementation and once the committee becomes more established.

Ultimately, the committee will be comprised of direct *and* indirect contributors. During the Fall 2020 semester, it will communicate with Student Services staff, campus outreach and communications staff, other administrators/faculty, and various student leaders to carry out the stated goals (refer to Section V). In addition, it will coordinate with the Prentiss County Circuit Clerk's office, as well as other circuit clerk offices within NEMCC's five-county district, to ensure that students have direct access to fulfill the voter registration process. Similar to most campus committees at NEMCC, this group will meet and coordinate on an "as needed" basis according to scheduled events.

### **III. Commitment**

NEMCC strives to prepare its students to be engaged and informed societal members. Engaging students as voters and voter advocates includes institutional efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills that students will need to participate in democracy, policy making, and social action.

To fulfill this objective, NEMCC commits itself to:

1. Dedicate a campus committee to coordinate and lead efforts to inform eligible students of their ability to register and vote in all applicable elections.
2. Make voting information available to all students through various channels.
3. Remain politically neutral in all civic-minded efforts.

NEMCC has previously hosted several events that demonstrate a commitment to civic learning within the college's co-curriculum. Examples include voter registration drives, a 2016 debate between conservative and liberal advocates, and guest lectures that pertained to topics such as civic action, policymaking, corrections system reform, and journalism. Yet, a primary purpose of this document is to assist in the development of systemized methods of achieve the goals and strategy outlined in Sections V and VII. While civic learning currently takes place in courses such as U.S. History, American National Government, and Intro to Sociology, a more concerted categorization of this subject's inclusion in the college's general education curriculum will ensue. Creating an institutional culture of civic engagement is a long-term endeavor. Consequently, much work will be required to promote such an atmosphere that is widely communicated and evident within the college's curriculum and co-curricular activities.

#### **IV. Landscape**

This document adopts the Institution for Democracy and Higher Education's (IDHE) definition of *voter engagement*, wherein "Voter engagement encompasses efforts to increase the knowledge and develop the skills students will need to engage in democracy, politics, policy making, and social action." It also embraces the four pillars of voter engagement identified by the Campus Vote Project: (1) promote voter registration; (2) tackle the information deficit; (3) reduce barriers to voting; and (4) empower students as voter advocates. As alluded in the previous section, NEMCC has not yet institutionalized civic learning and democratic engagement as a college-wide learning outcome. However, it is possible to incorporate such assessments into the college's newly-developed Core Learning Outcomes.

According to NEMCC's responses from the 2018 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a civic-minded evaluation can be made from the following item: "Participated in a community-based project (service-learning activity) as part of a regular course." According to 606 student responses and compared to the "small colleges" cohort (in parentheses), 64.9% of NEMCC students responded "Never" (74.1% cohort), 21.6% responded "Sometimes" (18.9% cohort), 8.5% responded "Often" (6.4% cohort), and 5.0% responded "Very Often" (3.2% cohort). Future data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) will help NEMCC further appraise its standing on democratic participation (see Section VI). However, an external barrier related to Mississippi's voting procedures is its lack of online voter registration and an early voting period (outside of absentee ballots). Such barriers will necessitate increased attention toward communicating the current voting policies and other pertinent information to the campus community.

## **V. Goals**

The goals set forth by this document, while currently incomplete, will drive the future direction of the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee. Ultimately, these goals will become more specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound, inclusive, and equitable (S.M.A.R.T.I.E.).

### **Long-term goals:**

Such goals will be defined at a later point, once the committee is expanded to provide better representation of the college's faculty/staff.

### **Short-term goals:**

- By the end of the Fall 2020 semester, the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee will become a permanent campus committee and include cross-campus representation of NEMCC faculty/staff.
- The institution will continue to maintain contact with local election officials and establish the most effective methods for providing all enrolled students with voter registration opportunities and other voting-related information.
- By the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, the committee will establish measurable civic engagement benchmarks.
- In accordance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and Section 487(a)(23) of the Higher Education Act, the institution will have voter registration forms readily available to all students who are physically in attendance. Additionally, the institution will distribute an electronic message devoted entirely to voter registration, which will include the appropriate internet address (e.g., MS Secretary of State's office) for students to access registration forms and/or other relevant material.

- By the end of the Fall 2020 semester, the committee will develop a social media presence to efficiently distribute pertinent information to the campus community.
- The committee will work with the college's communications office and institutional technology office to include voter registration and voting information on the website.
- The committee will sponsor or co-sponsor guest lectures.
- The committee will lead the institution's participation in various campus-centered civic engagement initiatives.

## **VI. National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)**

The initial NSLVE Participation Authorization Form was submitted to IDHE at Tufts University on May 29, 2020. Data will not be available to NEMCC for the 2020 election cycle; however, future reports will be assessed according to an institutional voting participation goal of 20%.

## VII. Strategy

Kevin Kruger, NASPA president, asserts that “campuses can lay the structural and organizational framework needed to carry out their civic mission in preparing students to be engaged active voters and to further student’s civic participation.” By applying this mindset, the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee will work in concert to achieve the following by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year:

- work with NEMCC administration and staff to bestow “permanent committee” status to the group
- seek committee representation from each academic division and various offices across the campus
- participate in National Voter Registration Day on September 22 (or, the week of)
- participate in the Ask Every Student initiative, Campus Vote Project, and All In Campus Democracy Challenge
- sponsor or co-sponsor at least one guest lecture event
- collect a comprehensive inventory of civic-minded topics instilled in NEMCC coursework and promote the expansion of this pedagogical focus
- confer with the Office of Planning and Research about the prospects of integrating civic learning into the institution’s Core Learning Outcomes

## **VIII. Reporting**

This document will be evaluated on an annual basis and revised as needed. Such modifications will be necessary to ensure that the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement committee (specifically) and NEMCC (broadly) meets its short- and long-term goals. While the internal and external sharing of this and other relevant reports is still under consideration, it could eventually involve the Office of Planning and the Research, the college website, and/or other appropriate measures. At the current time, no plans have been made to make NSLVE data externally available. Rather, it will be used to gauge the student body's level of democratic participation and influence future institutional actions.

## **IX. Evaluation**

This document and all subsequent results are intended to help NEMCC prepare students not only for academic success, but to also instill a sense of civic duty and motivation to become active citizens within their communities. The evaluation process will help the committee and institution determine whether the above-stated goals and strategy were met. Various sources of data and feedback can assist in this effort. Such information sources include, but are not limited to: the number of voter registration applications completed on campus, attendance for sponsored events, and responses/comments from campus voter initiative organizations. Data of this sort will become available intermittently throughout the academic year and shared with NEMCC administration and other suitable personnel (and via social media in some instances). By the end of the Spring 2021 semester, the committee will review the material in its entirety to assess its progress and ascertain any modifications for the following academic year.