

# Civic Engagement & Democratic Engagement Action Plan for Voter Registration, Education, & Engagement

*Pennsylvania Western University - California, Clarion, & Edinboro Campuses & Global Online*

## Executive Summary

### **Background**

Pennsylvania Western University is committed to the holistic education of our students. Our university is fortunate to extend these educational efforts across the California, Clarion, and Edinboro campuses, and even offer online opportunities for PennWest Global Online students. This integration presents unique challenges but more importantly, it offers the opportunity for our campuses to use best practices in civic engagement education. This includes providing an immersive experience in the classroom and virtually, as well as a broad range of extracurricular involvement that students can take advantage of to complement their academic work.

As a university, we are consistently working to fulfill our mission to provide transformative, lifelong learning opportunities through innovative, nationally recognized programs delivered in inclusive, student-centered environments. Becoming a participant in the All in Campus Democracy Challenge is a means for Pennsylvania Western University to expand learning opportunities for students. Penn West's focus will continue in long-term commitment to civic engagement education as integration continues.

### **The PennWest Coalitions**

PennWest is fortunate to have established Coalitions on the California and Clarion campuses. These coalitions have representation from student affairs, academic affairs, student volunteers, student organizations, and community partners. These Coalition members, led by our students, work together to develop, and implement the action plans on each campus to continue to advance the success of civic engagement learning efforts and opportunities for students.

The PennWest Edinboro campus will continue to work to establish a Coalition following the same outline as the other campuses. The establishment of this coalition will provide a strong start to increasing educational opportunities on the Edinboro campus that match the opportunities on the California and Clarion campuses.

These coalition efforts are ongoing as we continue to work through the integration. We have newly appointed members, and we are trying to establish who members can be as the roles of student leaders, staff, and faculty have shifted with the integration. Our goal is to have all three coalitions working cohesively to provide opportunities across campuses. If one coalition is planning an event, virtual options for the event will be offered to accommodate our online students, or students unable to attend in-person.

## **2024 Action Plan**

The PennWest Action Plan will outline our efforts to align civic learning across the three campuses to provide equal learning opportunities to our students. Additionally, our goal with our Action Plan is to use best practices to provide students with as many opportunities for learning as possible. Our coalitions will work to ensure we are staying on track with deadlines and goals. As we continue to align and implement opportunities, this will need to be a very flexible document as success can look quite different on each of the PennWest campuses.

## **Leadership**

### **Coalition Members & Campus Partners**

PennWest is fortunate to have a dedicated staff member to Civic Engagement learning opportunities as part of their everyday role. This staff member serves as the Chair of the Coalition on their campus to assist with the overall implementation of efforts across each of the campuses, including online opportunities. The Chair is responsible for maintaining contact information for coalition members, holding any items for civic engagement events, such as voter registration information, giveaway items, posters, etc. Our Coalitions have many students, staff, and faculty who volunteer to assist yearly. Many of the offices and student organizations partner with us yearly as Campus partners who contribute to all planning and programming efforts.

Coalition Volunteer Members & Partnerships include participation from:

- **Campus Offices**
  - Dean of Students
  - Communications & Marketing
  - Health & Wellness
  - Residence Life
  - New Student Programs
  - Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion
  - Student Engagement
  - Student Development
  - Alumni Relations
  - Frederick Douglas Institute
- **Faculty**
  - Political Science
  - Education
  - Communication
  - Biology, Geology, and Environmental Sciences
  - Earth Sciences
  - African American Studies Program
  - Library Sciences
  - Health & Human Services
  - Business, Economics, and Enterprise Science

- Student Organizations
  - Student Government Association
  - Black Student Union
  - Greek Life
  - Allies
  - College Democrats & College Republicans
  - Orientation Leaders
  - Young Democratic Socialists of America
- Additional Student Volunteers
  - Student Trustee(s)
  - Student Government Association President(s)
  - CEEP Fellowship Students

### **Leadership Responsibilities within the Coalitions**

Aside from the Chair's responsibilities previously mentioned, the co-chairs of the coalition oversee organizing and running the monthly meetings and providing Coalition members with minutes from the meetings. Co-Chair positions are typically held by a student on each of the campuses, who may also serve in a fellowship position, to offer direct input to planning and programming efforts. It is also their duty to assist in planning events with campus and community partners. All coalition members must help plan and volunteer at various events throughout the semester.

### **Coalition Meetings**

The Coalitions are scheduled to meet monthly during the Academic Year, but meetings can be called more often if needed. Following events, each Coalition will meet to debrief and collect group consensus on how the event went, make notes for improvements, or review surveys given during the event. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings occurred in person each month, but with the pandemic, Zoom has been utilized as the main meeting platform. As we approach a new Academic Year, campuses will utilize hybrid opportunities for meetings. Coalition members can choose to be in person or Zoom into the meeting, as our campuses offer meeting room spaces for this hybrid meeting model. Most, if not all, communication between Coalition members is done through email.

### **Coalition Partners**

In addition to our coalition and campus partners, we also work closely with members of each local community. We expect this list to grow as we continue to establish community partners that will assist with co-host events throughout the semester. Through these efforts, we hope to continue to build long-lasting relationship with the following groups:

- American Democracy Project
- Ask Every Student
- Campus Election Engagement Project

- Campus Vote Project
- Civic Nation
- Local County Democratic Party & Republican Party
- League of Women Voters
- Local Election Offices
- Nation Voter Registration Day Committee
- Voter Friendly Campus
- Rock the Vote

## **Commitment**

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education initiated the integration of California, Clarion, and Edinboro University, thus making them Pennsylvania Western University starting July 1, 2022. As our new website states, PennWest may be a new name, but its history spans 165 years of tradition and academic excellence. The PennWest vision is the model for future success, it is built on the strengths of each university to offer every student a richer experience. As our Executive Leadership Team works to establish strategic goals for PennWest, we know that each of our campuses will continue to promote the core values of community, integrity, and responsibility with all our work. As our campuses continue to work towards integration, there will remain a high priority in student experience and success, national impact and visibility, and community engagement. As we develop more strategic goals, we will align them with the PennWest Action Plan for civic learning opportunities.

## **Landscape**

PennWest has a strong student population projected for the 2024-2025 Academic Year. 14,477 students span across the three campuses, California, Clarion, & Edinboro, and include Global Online.

At PennWest, we have a large list of student organizations that vary from politically motivated groups to student government, or even Greek Life. Across our campuses, we have been fortunate to have these student organizations involved in the planning and execution of civic engagement learning opportunities. In-person events can include events such as debate watch parties, Constitution Day presentations, civic learning topic discussions, debates, and more. Aside from in person events, our campuses promote learning opportunities virtually and across social media that include the voting challenge, Constitution Day presentations, Voter Registration countdowns, and much more.

The California and Clarion campuses have had the opportunity to have CEEP fellows serve on their campus, which has assisted with the continued focus of civic education opportunities. These fellows have provided an individualized focus to our campus programming efforts which have proven to be extremely successful. California has gone a step further connecting with faculty members to provide voter registration information for inclusion in courses when appropriate. This is a model we will work to implement at the Clarion and Edinboro campuses.

Due to Act 77 being passed within the state, work has begun with community partners to create accessible voting education and registration campaigns. PennWest will focus on these accessible

opportunities this upcoming academic year to offer more opportunities to our students, no matter what campus they are part of.

## **NSLVE**

In review of the NSLVE (National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement) (National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement) data, each of the PennWest campuses had above the 2020 voting rate average of 66% and above the public institutional average at 65%. California held a 66.4% voting rate in 2020, which was an increase of 12.3 from 2016. Clarion held a 67.4% voting rate which was an increase of 12.9 since 2016. Edinboro had a drastic increase with their voting rate holding a 69.2% in 2020 which was an increase of 16.6 from 2016. All of the PennWest campuses saw a large increase in students utilizing in-person voting from the 2016 and 2018 election. Across the board, there was an overall increase in early vote & not-in-person voting since 2016 and 2018.

While all campuses have seen a decrease in undergraduate enrollment since 2016, over half of the enrolled students participated in voting during the 2020 election. There has been an increase specifically in graduate students' involvement in voting at all three campuses, which shows that efforts in targeting this education level have proven to work. With strong undergraduate participation in the election, the age group section of each NSLVE report solidifies campus progress since 2016. The PennWest campuses are hoping to maintain our excellent records of both voter registration and student voter turnout, even as we move into a mid-term election year which shows lower turnout rates than presidential election years.

## **Goals**

### **Short Term Goals**

Student involvement in civic learning varies vastly across our three campuses. Our short-term goals for the upcoming year will work to create consistent opportunities across campuses for our students while also looking to increase efforts from previous years.

- California, Clarion, & Edinboro Campuses
  - Continue to identify and use best practices across campuses for civic learning for our students
  - Implement online specific civic learning opportunities for Global Online students and continue social media programming
  - Continue to offer diverse programming to encourage civic engagement, political action, and voter mobilization
  - Celebrate National Voter Registration Day & Constitution Day
  - Voter Registration prompt implemented into Campus Labs
  - Campus-wide announcements with information about in-person and absentee voting will be posted
  - Create Voter Registration Portals for all PennWest Campuses
  - Election Day reminders and FAQ will be distributed via university-wide announcements, social media, and flyers

- Continue CEEP Fellowship positions to assist with civic learning planning and programming efforts.
- California
  - Align Coalition practices with other campuses
  - Increase Voter Registration & Voting rates to 2-5% above the 2018 rate, based on NSLVE
  - Host traditional yearly programs such as “Ask an Expert,” debate watch parties, etc.
  - Create 1 new campus specific event for civic engagement
  - Student Government Association will organize walks to the polling place where students who reside in campus related housing vote
- Clarion
  - Align Coalition practices with other campuses
  - Host traditional yearly programs such as NVRD Tabling, debate watch parties, etc.
  - Register 100 students during National Voter Registration Day
  - Create 1 new campus specific event for civic engagement
  - Programming for civic engagement learning during Homecoming weekend
- Edinboro
  - Create a Coalition based off the models in place at the California & Clarion campuses
  - Create a social media presence for campus civic engagement
  - Create a yearly program calendar with the help of Coalition members
  - Register 50 students during National Voter Registration Day
  - Create 1 new campus specific event for civic engagement
  - Programming for civic engagement learning during Homecoming weekend
  - CEEP Fellowship Program implementation

### **Long Term Goals**

In addition to the short-term goals listed above, the following have been identified as key long-term goals to work on overtime, with no set deadline.

- California, Clarion, & Edinboro Campuses
  - Register 75% of incoming students during Orientations and Welcome Week
  - Voter Registration promotions with Athletic Teams
  - Receive Voter Friendly Campus Designations for each campus
  - Host 1 event per semester with a Community & Campus Partners
  - Continue to add new and retain existing Campus & Community Partners
  - Maintain at least 60% student engagement throughout every election
  - Maintain campus specific voter registration webpages, pending the integration website
  - Develop strong social media presence for PennWest civic learning opportunities to be shared across campuses
- California

- Continue to build 15-year tradition of success, maintaining partnership with American Democracy Project
- Continue efforts to grow beyond the leadership of our founder, Dr. Melanie Blumberg, so that our voter education, registration, and mobilization efforts become a permanent part of the campus culture.
- Clarion
  - Work to implement Voter Registration programming into Welcome Week
  - Using the California model, work with more faculty on the inclusion of civic learning
  - Continue work in building a strong coalition for civic engagement
- Edinboro
  - Work to implement Voter Registration programming into Welcome Week
  - Using the California model, work with more faculty on the inclusion of civic learning
  - Advance civic learning to align with practices in California & Clarion campuses

## Strategy

### **Voter Registration**

Pennsylvania Western University will take a three-pronged approach to registration across all three campuses; we expose students to opportunities to register in the classroom, on campus, virtually, and in the community. Various first-year oriented classes, and even upper-level courses, may offer bonus points to students who are registered to vote. Other classes offer opportunities to get registered in the classroom. In addition to class involvement, there will be opportunities to register on campus. There will be various tabling series hosted throughout the semester where students can stop to get registered or apply for an absentee ballot. Tables will be in central locations on each of the three campuses. When students approach a table, they will be given a QR code scanning them to their campus portal to register to vote. We will be using the portal, from ALL IN, to then help track how many students we have registered for this election year.

On top of these methods, members of our coalition will attend various community hosted or co-hosted events to allow both students and community members the opportunity to register to vote or apply for absentee ballots. Our campuses will look to host mock caucuses, film nights, and watch parties. Nonpartisan hosted watch parties allow students to gain a perspective of candidates and issues without feeling uncomfortable or ostracized by their peers.

An additional strategy we will be promoting this year is a friendly competition among our athletic departments to encourage voter registration. We will be using the Coach's playbook to spearhead this new project and involve our athletics departments.

### **Voter Education**

We have a wide variety of methods to distribute information to students about voting, including face-to-face and indirect communication. We engage students face-to-face through tabling series, speaker series, and engagement nights. These events allow students to discuss how to register and vote with their peers. We can also share various information on the history and importance of civic engagement

through these events. We also reach out to students indirectly through posting informational flyers, sending campus-wide emails, and publishing articles through Campus Labs and campus specific newspapers.

### **Voter Engagement**

To ensure PennWest students are not only registered, but involved, our coalitions will work alongside the University and campus partners to remove as many barriers as possible. On each campus, we have flyers and signs letting students know what to take to the polling centers. This ensures that students who are registered to vote have readily accessible polling stations. For those who are voting in their home district, we will stress the importance of a voting plan. If the students live off campus, the coalition and campus partners will provide rides to the off-campus students' polling places.

### **Available & Additional Resources**

As our plan states above, we work with many different offices, student' organizations, and community partners that help make all our programming and education efforts possible. With these connections, we are able to host various events not only in-person but virtually to accommodate all PennWest students. We also have Campus Labs, which is an online platform for students, staff, faculty, and the community to see our list of events, new articles, resources, and announcements to keep everyone up to date on opportunities. This platform will be used for tracking event attendance, receiving reviews and surveys, and even registration space for our campus or community partners.

PennWest currently lacks strong budgeting for coalitions to program without partnerships. Our Coalitions will begin to investigate grant opportunities to help support civic learning programming efforts for not only in-person events but also virtual events. Communications and Marketing on campus will be utilized to help build strong communications on what programming is available to our students. This team can help create a consistent message, no matter what campus will be hosting the event. Emails will be created for students to contact about questions they have on voting or other learning opportunities.

### **Tentative Calendar of Events**

We will be working with Communications & Marketing to send out deadline reminders of when to register to vote in each of the elections, election dates, vote early day, etc.

### **Fall 2024 Semester & Spring Semester**

Monthly meeting dates for the Coalitions must be established to then begin working on dates for events below. Traditional and new events held on each campus, such as debate watch parties, civic engagement nights, guest speakers, tabling series etc. will be determined by each campus specific Coalition. Campuses will partner in events in-person and virtually offer students a variety of educational opportunities. More of this will be determined as integration continues.



- September
  - Tuesday, September 17, 2024 – Constitution Day & NVRD
- October
  - October 7, 2024 – October 11, 2024 – National Voter Education Week
  - October 29, 2024 – Vote Early Day
- November
  - November 4, 2024 – Election Hero Day
  - November 5, 2024 – Election Day

## **Reporting**

The PennWest Action Plan will be shared with the coalition at the first meeting of every semester, alongside the NSLVE report. As in previous election cycles, the campus will work with NSLVE to gather and publicize voting related data. Our campus will allow the All in Challenge to post our NSLVE data on their website. We will also share this data with our campus through announcements and with the public through press releases. Throughout the semester, we work closely with Communications and Marketing to publicize events and to report measures of our success through the university website press releases and social media.

## **Evaluation**

NSLVE data has been extremely helpful to provide campuses with voter registration and voter turnout numbers. To see the effect of our civic learning efforts, we will utilize surveys and evaluations through Campus Labs as the platform can send them out to event attendees. The use of the surveys and evaluations would allow us to continue to improve our students' engagement as well as tailor and improve upon any events we host. Evaluations will also help us advocate to make civic learning a university-wide priority.

Survey and evaluation information will be shared with Coalitions members to create group discussion on student feedback. The coalition will implement a two-pronged method – we will track our efforts' success through the NSLVE Report and our own tracking methods. We track attendance at our events and provide surveys and evaluations so we can continue to use the most effective methods to educate and register students. At the end of the semester, we will compile all the data and use the next NSLVE to evaluate our success. Any events that were unsuccessful, or not as successful as the rest, will be adapted to encourage better participation and educational opportunity.