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Voter Friendly Campus Institutional Plan 2020-2021

Overview

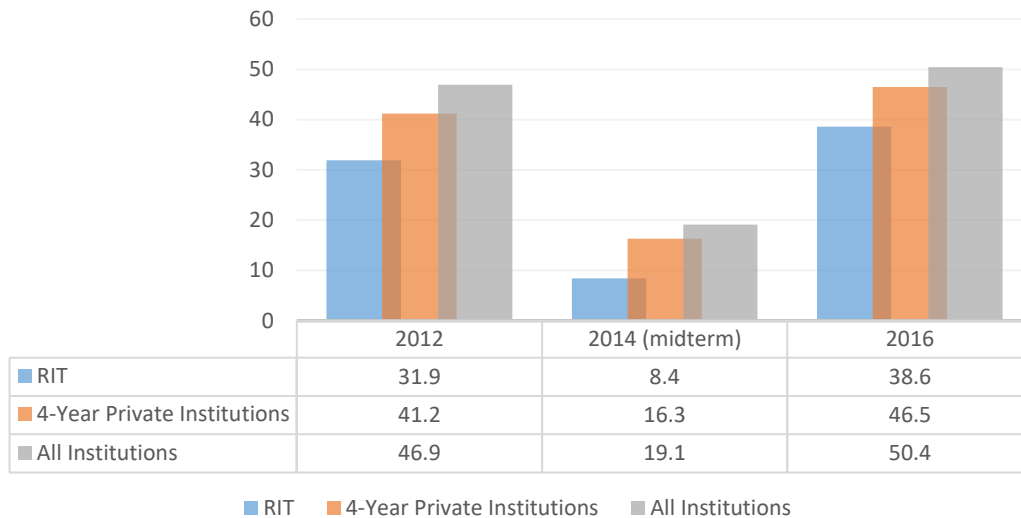
Why your school is interested in the designation and the top three goals for democratic engagement during the fall semester?

In the Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT) mission statement is a call to creatively leverage the strengths of our university to work for the *greater good*. Our 2025 strategic plan - *Greatness through difference* - furthers this call by outlining our collective commitment to the cultivation of global citizens and leaders who are prepared to address global interconnected challenges.

In furtherance of these objectives over the past few years, RIT has taken steps to enhance our efforts in the areas of community service and engagement, advocacy, community-based research, public policy research and analysis, and civic learning and democratic engagement. Centers and Institutes like [the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement](#) (CLCE) are emerging on campus in support of this work and are making meaningful inroads. Further, university initiatives such as ROAR the Vote are developing into full programs in support of these strategic efforts.

ROAR the Vote (RTV) was created in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election based on a need to expand voter registration and education efforts for students. In partnership with students, faculty, and staff from across the University, RTV seeks to elevate (and de-stigmatize) the discourse on campus related to civic and democratic engagement, develop meaningful and relevant opportunities for students to actively engage in civic learning and democratic engagement opportunities, and subsequently increase the percentage of students who vote in local, state, and national elections. While we have experienced some success in this space, there is still a great deal of work ahead of us; in each of the last three national election cycles, turnout among RIT students was significantly less than college students nationally.

Comparison of voting rates (%) among students at RIT, 4-year privates, and all Institutions that participated in the NSLVE (2012, '14, & '16)



Source: Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement

Following a comprehensive assessment of ROAR following the 2016 Presidential election and 2018 midterm elections, several changes and enhancements were made to RTV:

- The RTV website was updated to include [more detailed information](#) about the voter registration process; and since absentee voting is the preferred method for our students (and a barrier), the website was also updated to include detailed information about absentee voting with particular emphasis on the 4 states where most of our students vote: [MA, MJ, NY, and PA](#).
- A RTV Leadership Scholar was hired in the CLCE to facilitate peer-to-peer engagement in the area of voter engagement.
- We partnered with area colleges and the Monroe County Board of Elections to host the Election Fellows/Inspectors program giving RIT students the opportunity to work the polls on Election Day.
- A voter engagement module was created and integrated into Year One.
- We secured a multi-year agreement with Democracy Works for use of their TurboVote platform

Since the inception of ROAR the Vote some impressive changes have happened here at RIT including:

- A 7% increase in voting rates among RIT students from 2012 (32%) to 2016 (39%); and, a 10% increase (45% to 55%) in the voting rate among registered students during that same time period.
- An 18% increase in voting rates among RIT students from 2014 (8%) to 2018 (26%); and, a 23% increase (15% to 38%) in the voting rate among registered students during that same time period.
- A remarkable 83% of students described themselves as informed or very informed about the issues in the most recent presidential election (2016).
- 76% of students who registered were more aware of voter registration deadlines because of ROAR the Vote; and, three-quarters of this group also indicated that the campaign made them more aware about how to register to vote.
- Furthermore, among respondents who registered in Fall 2016 and voted absentee, 69% indicated that the campaign made them more aware about how to request an absentee ballot.

Though ROAR the Vote has been successful in its efforts thus far, we acknowledge that there is still work to be done. Our two most recent NSLVE data sets (2016, 2018) show that our respective institutional voting rates of 39% and 26% fall well below the national averages of 50% and 39%. RIT's interest in this designation is to not only recognize the good work we have already been doing, but more importantly serve as a vehicle to enhance the democratic engagement of our students, particularly related to voting and participation in the civic life of their communities.

Coalition

The ROAR the Vote Committee meets regularly during the academic year to set strategic direction, share information, address challenges, brainstorm ideas and plan events and programs. Currently, the committee includes:

Alex Tubridy – Civic Engagement Coordinator, ROAR the Vote Committee Chair (Staff)

Kerry Foxx – Director, Center for Leadership & Civic Engagement (Staff)

Erin Clegg – Coordinator, National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) Student Life Programming (Staff)

Heather Eggleston – Director of NTID Government Relations (Staff)

Karen Van Meenen – Senior Lecturer, Department of English (Faculty)

William St. Jean – Associate Director, Center for Campus Life (Staff)

Jacqui Stack – Assistant Director for Campus Life, Marketing (Staff)

Chelsea Petree – Director, Parent and Family Programs (Staff)

Sara Bayerl - Applications Administrator and Business Analyst, Assessment, Technology and Communications (Staff)

Marc Goldman – Associate Director, Residence Life (Staff)

Belinda Bryce – Program Director, Higher Education Opportunity Program (Staff)

Srikripa Kartik – Assistant Director, Center for Leadership & Civic Engagement (Staff)

We have engaged a diversity of faculty and staff to ensure we have multilayered support across the university. Internal partnerships across multiple Student Affairs and Academic Affairs units is critical for infusing our marketing efforts in the classroom, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. The work of the core team is also supported (and enhanced) by a number of additional external relationships and partnerships:

- a. Government and Community Relations serves as the liaison between the University and the local Board of Elections resulting in approval to continue an on-campus polling location for the 2020 elections.
- b. The Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement represents RIT on the [Rochester Regional Network](#) [of colleges]: *a consortium of institutions of higher education in the Rochester area.*
- c. The Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement represents RIT in the Upstate NY Vote Everywhere Coalition (in partnership with [The Andrew Goodman Foundation](#): a regional effort of local colleges and universities to increase democratic engagement on campus.

The primary point-of-contact for this initiative is:

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Participation Goals

- The percentage of eligible RIT students who vote in the presidential election will *at least* match the national percentage.
- The percentage of eligible RIT students who vote in mid-term elections will *at least* match the national percentage.
- The percentage of RIT students who register to vote will *at least* match the national percentage.
- Maintain campus designation as Voter Friendly Campus.

The above goals set a standard that remains aligned with RIT's commitment to the cultivation of global citizens. With RIT voting rates an average of 12 percentage points below the national rate in the previous two elections, we challenge ourselves by completely closing this gap. This premise is also applied to the RIT registration rate, which was an average of 7 percentage points below the national rate in the previous two elections. By raising RIT's rates in these key metrics by the immediate upcoming elections (2020 presidential; 2022 mid-term), RIT will be poised to surpass the national average in subsequent years, becoming a leading institution in civic engagement.

Fall 2020 Plan

Student Voter Registration & Voter Turnout

Despite ROAR the Vote's success in increasing both registration rate and voting rate at RIT, our campus continues to trail the national average for all institutions in both metrics. Our most recent dataset (NSLVE 2018) shows our registration rate at 67%, compared to 75% nationally; our voting rate at 26%, compared to 39% nationally. The most recent presidential election dataset (NSLVE 2016) shows our registration rate at 69%, compared to 75% nationally; our voting rate at 39%, compared to 50% nationally. In the first year of RTV 2.0, the goal is to match our institutional registration and voting rates with the national rates for the 2020 presidential election.

To achieve the goal of matching the national *registration* rate, RTV will implement an aggressive tabling campaign in fall 2020. Tabling events will occur in various locations on campus in collaboration with student organizations, colleges, and interested students, faculty, and staff. Regular tabling events will occur at two week intervals beginning with August orientation and ending at the latest national registration deadline (Nevada allows online registration up to 5 days before Election Day). Special tabling events will occur at beginning-of-the-year events (e.g. orientation, club fair, Apple Fest, etc.). This schedule will ensure *at least* 9 registration tabling events in the 10 weeks between orientation and Election Day. Tabling events should register students who are interested, provide information about the impact of voting locally or in home communities, provide information about local polling locations and methods of voting, provide information about registering to vote via absentee ballot, and answer questions.

To prepare for tabling events, all RTV committee members and student volunteers will attend a training session facilitated by myself (Alex Tubridy). The training reviews issues of partisanship, why we are nonpartisan, and how to work through the TurboVote system itself. The TurboVote system can be difficult to grasp given the various options students can select when registering to vote. Because of this, a flowchart will be created as reference material for both volunteers at registration events and for students to utilize. As volunteers become more comfortable with the TurboVote system and the many choices available when registering, they will be able to manage registration settings and provide training to other volunteers.

Further, RTV will establish an online presence specific to the marketing of voter registration and the process of obtaining and voting via absentee ballots. Facebook posts will be released via the CLCE page at least once a week starting in August 2020, to include registration deadlines, absentee ballot rules and procedures, and links to other helpful information. The RTV website will be updated to reflect current information and will include a video tutorial on how to register and/or request an absentee ballot using the TurboVote system.

To match the national *voting* rate, RTV will further utilize its online presence. Social media posts about the different methods of voting, an election countdown clock, rules and regulations that govern absentee voting and associated timelines, and other topics will be scheduled concurrent with the registration informational posts. Further, RTV will develop and host social events to bring students together, such as debate viewing parties, an Election Day party, and an election results party (to continue engagement post Election Day). These social events will be co-hosted with politically-affiliated student groups on campus, as an avenue to expose students to an opportunity for political discourse. The RTV committee will help maintain contact with the student groups, manage logistics for the social events, and attend events as representatives of RTV.

Civic Engagement

In our most recent program assessment (2018-2019), we asked students how often they spoke about the election (e.g. candidates, issues, voting) with other groups of people. Our results showed that respondents spoke about the election most often with friends and family members, while they spoke with RIT faculty and staff the least. A full 84.5% of respondents indicated that they seldom or never talked with a faculty member about the election; 76% seldom or never talked with a member of RIT's staff. While these conversations can be uncomfortable – especially given our general need to be nonpartisan - part of creating what “A Crucible Moment” calls a “civic minded campus” must, by definition, include participation by all members of the community. As a result, we will increase our efforts in this area as part of a longer-term strategy to further develop the campus culture around democratic engagement.

Following the 2020 presidential election, the focus of RTV will shift. Though voter registration events will still take place, they will be far fewer than election lead-up, as the program shifts toward the implementation of new initiatives. The first such initiative is under the working title “Tiger Talks”. The goal of the program is to promote active listening and dialogue rather than debate on difficult topics. In a space where students, faculty, and staff can approach what may seem like a difficult conversation in a respectful, educational, and constructive manner, attendees will come away with a greater understanding of others who hold diverse views and be able to form an educated opinion on challenging and complex issues our society faces today. Example topics could include national debt, immigration, universal healthcare, etc. Topics should be chosen based on student interest (community polling, current events). As the program develops, interested students will be able to facilitate each session, with the hope of identifying faculty/staff and community partners to serve as a co-facilitator. Ideally, the first Tiger Talk session would be piloted in fall 2020, with two follow-up pilots in spring 2021.

Facilitation of each Tiger Talk will follow a similar model to the National Issues Forums (NIF). “NIF forums encourage deliberative conversations where people look at choices for addressing an issue, listen to each other, and share their perspectives and experiences. Deliberation is not

about winning an argument, persuading others to adopt your views, or coming to an agreement. It is understanding and learning. Deliberation can help people overcome stereotypes and build trust. It helps us all be open to perspectives that are very different from our own. In many communities, deliberation has been the precursor to both personal and collaborative action". A session would begin with facilitators giving a background introduction and summarizing facts surrounding the topic of discussion, before giving prompts to initiate dialogue. Through these conversations, attendees will achieve the program goal of coming away with a greater understanding of diverse views and opinions. All facilitators will attend a training on the NIF model.

The RTV committee will also begin work to coordinate a partnership with the Congress to Campus program. Congress to Campus brings former Members of Congress together with students to increase civic literacy and participation. A bipartisan pair of former Members travel to college campuses for two-day visits. During the visit, former Members may conduct classes, hold community forums, meet informally with students and faculty, visit high schools and civic organizations, and do interviews and talk show appearances with local press and media. This setting allows students to discover, on a more personal basis, what participation in a democracy entails. The aim of Congress to Campus is to engage students and provide inspiration that will lead to greater democratic participation; whether it is in the arena of public service or something as simple as voting. The RTV committee will work with partners across campus to secure buy-in from various divisions, departments, and colleges. With the appropriate university buy-in, an application will be submitted to have a visit during the 2021-2022 academic year to align with midterm elections.

Reporting and Evaluation

Voter education and registration efforts at RIT are evaluated every two years utilizing a three-pronged approach: post-election survey results, TurboVote analytics, and the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement. The Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement in collaboration with the Office of Assessment, Technology, and Communication is primarily responsible for this work. The primary purpose of our evaluative work is to improve our practice in order to increase voter engagement among our students.

Historically, the post-election survey is sent to a random sample of 4000 students from the population who have all of the following characteristics: Domestic; 18 years of age or older; and, Taking at least one class at the Henrietta campus. The sample is stratified by race, gender, and undergraduate/graduate. The survey is distributed in November following either a mid-term or presidential election and is used to provide additional context for the quantitative data obtained via NSLVE as well as TurboVote.

Sample Survey Questions:

1. Are you registered to vote?
 - a. If not, why did you choose not to register to vote?
2. Did you use TurboVote to register?
3. How easy was it to register using TurboVote?
4. If registered, did you vote?
 - a. If not, why did you choose not to vote?
5. How informed are you about the issues in the recent election? What issues were most important to you?
6. Over the past few months, how often did you talk about the election with the following people: friends, parents/family members, other RIT students, faculty, staff?
7. How important is voting?

Following the distribution of the survey, the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement analyzes the data in conjunction with relevant data from NSLVE and TurboVote for the given year and produces a comprehensive report. The report is shared with senior leadership in Student Affairs and Government and Community Relations. The report is also shared with Assessment, Technology, and Community in the Division of Student Affairs and with Institutional Research as part of our ongoing reporting requirements for accreditation. Finally, the report is shared with the Roar the Vote Core Team in order to inform future practice related to voter engagement.

Following the implementation of both the novel Tiger Talks and Congress to Campus programs, specific learning outcomes related to each initiative will be implemented. These should include goals such as:

- After attending a Tiger Talk, a majority (51%) of students will describe themselves as either informed or very informed about an issue.
- After attending a Tiger Talk, 60% of attendees will have an increased likelihood to engage in conversation about the topic with someone whose stance differs from their own.
- After attending a Congress to Campus event, a majority (51%) of students will describe democratic participation as important or very important.

To assess the effectiveness of the new Tiger Talks program, a survey model will be used to analyze the effectiveness of the pilot sessions. The results of the survey will better inform our work with the program moving into the 2021-2022 academic year when it becomes a fully established program. The survey will be distributed to all attendees of the program throughout the academic year. Sample survey questions could include:

Sample Survey Questions:

1. Which Tiger Talks session(s) did you attend?
2. Before attending the session, did you have a formed stance/opinion on this topic?
3. Before attending the session, how knowledgeable were you of opinions that differed from your own?
4. After attending the session, how knowledgeable are you of opinions that differ from your own?
5. After attending the session, has your stance on the topics changed at all?
6. Before attending the session, how likely were you to engage in conversation about the topic with someone whose stance differed from your own?
7. After attending the session, how likely are you to engage in conversation about the topic with someone whose stance differs from your own?

Lastly, following the initial Congress to Campus program, we will use focus groups to gather feedback. Given how varied we expect the involved individuals to be (students, staff, administration, multiple departments and colleges, etc.), focus groups will allow us to hear from these different voices and increase the ability to explore multiple topics. While survey research has limitations on the number and type of questions asked, focus group queries will allow us to be more open-ended and interactive, so that an almost unlimited number of variables can be explored. In the years following the pilot of Congress to Campus, we will better be able to develop subsequent quantitative research. The focus-group discussions will help define the most important issues, and because respondents define those issues in their own vernacular, the actual dialogue will become a useful tool in future survey design.

Proposed Program Timeline

| Item | Point Person | Deadline | Notes |
|---|---------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| CLCE social media posts | Alex / social media coordinator | Ongoing | CLCE Facebook. If successful, form a RTV Facebook |
| Publish TurboVote tutorial video | Alex | August '20 | |
| Launch fall '20 tabling | Alex / RTV committee | August '20 Orientation | |
| Launch debate viewing parties | Alex / RTV committee | September '20 | |
| Pilot Tiger Talks | Alex | November '20 | Pilot sessions serve as a chance to begin building student coalition |
| Identify campus partners for Congress to Campus | Alex / RTV committee | May '21 | This will begin to build a faculty/staff coalition to support RTV |
| Submit Congress to Campus application | Alex | July '21 | For '21-'22 academic year |
| Build student coalition to lead Tiger Talks | Alex | September '21 | |