

# Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI



## Action Plan 2020

### Executive Summary

In the Fall of 2020, the Provost approached the Associate Provost for Community Engagement and asked him to form a committee to engage Roger Williams University in the 2020 All in Challenge. The Director of the Feinstein Center, the traditional coordinator of student voter registration, was chosen to chair the committee alongside a student leader. A committee was formed with students, faculty and staff who bring specific skills sets and a passion for voter registration to the task and who also represent different cohorts of students (i.e. graduate students, adult learners, students of color, etc.)

The charge of the committee was to encourage and facilitate student voter registration and voter turnout. The committee identified quickly that students needed basic information about how to successfully submit a ballot, especially given state-by-state differences in voting laws. Another priority identified was providing opportunities for students to explore key issues in the 2020 presidential election. The committee chose to function as an umbrella, promoting and supporting initiatives that supported our goals regardless of the department sponsoring the work. In that way, the All In Challenge committee became a hub for voter education/registration and election event information.

The committee held its first meeting on September 10, 2020 and will continue to work through the end of the academic year after election-related activities have ended. The committee will spend the remainder of the semester debriefing and prioritizing short and long term goals.

## Leadership

### The All In Challenge Committee

Adam Cavanaugh '23, *Co-Chair, Student Body Secretary, Campaign Relations Coordinator - College Republicans*

KC Ferrara, *Co-chair, Director, Feinstein Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement*

Kelly Blackhurst, *Head Coach Women's Field Hockey*

Lou Cirillo, *Town Clerk, Town of Bristol, RI*

Chrissy Gallardo, *Community Director*

Hannah Goodall, *Learning Commons Coordinator*

Dr. Allen Hance, *Associate Provost for Community Engagement*

Suzanne Harrington-Steppen, *Associate Director of Pro Bono Programs, RWU Law School*

Chris Higgins, *Community Director*

Zoila Quezada, *Director of Institutional Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*

Pamela Pereira, *Assistant Director of Retention and Student Services, University College*

Jason Regan '22, *Vice Presidents of College Democrats*

Dr. Joseph Roberts, *Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations*

Jill Rodrigues, *Director of Communications and Media Relations*

Dr. June Speakman, *Professor of Politics and International Relations, member of the RI General Assembly*

Tara Stanzione, *Community Director*

Leadership of this committee will always reside with Community Engagement to ensure that the commitment is institutionalized and not merely a passion project of a staff member. The co-chairs of the committee will always be a student leader and a professional staff member from Community Engagement.

This standing committee will function year-round and focus on voter education in between election cycles and voter registration efforts. Some committee members who leave positions key to the initiative will be replaced by their successors. There should always be representation from Athletics, Residence Life, Intercultural Affairs, Student Programs and Leadership, Community Engagement, and the Department of Politics and International Relations. Staff in these areas have related expertise or work directly with key groups of students.

Additionally, representatives from University College (continuing education) and the School of Law will sit on the committee. The students in these two schools are adult learners, native Rhode Islanders, and graduate students from various states. Their needs related to voter registration and voting differ from traditional undergraduate students and having representation on the committee ensures they are supported. Other members may be replaced/added to the board based on their own personal passion for voter registration. Many of the members of the original committee self-nominated because of their personal commitment to democratic engagement and there should always be space on the committee for these individuals.



## Commitment

Roger Williams University's commitment to democratic engagement is expressed in our institutional core purpose, which is "to strengthen society through engaged teaching and learning." Across their experience at RWU, students are actively encouraged to engage with diverse communities and investigate and respond to significant social, political, economic, and environmental challenges at multiple scales and through multiple modes of action. While our election-cycle voter education and registration efforts are a highly visible and unifying expression of our commitment to democratic engagement, RWU's broader efforts are embedded across curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. In recognition of this leadership in community and civic engagement RWU recently (in January 2020) received the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification.

Through our Community Connections program, held during first year orientation, RWU introduces all incoming students to opportunities for civic and community engagement – both in the classroom and outside. Students learn about RWU's service learning graduation requirement, which may be satisfied through a wide variety of civic engagement activities ranging from volunteer work with municipal agencies to public service internships to course-based projects with community partners. Multiple clubs and organizations, ranging from the Student Senate to the College Democrats and College Republicans to the Hawks' Herald (student newspaper), provide significant opportunities to participate in civic activities vital to democratic societies.

Through our Core Curriculum (general education program), all RWU students are required to take both a "Roger Seminar," which investigates the political, social, and religious ideas of our university's namesake, Roger Williams, with a focus on core principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and respect for cultural difference; and Core 102, the Challenges of Democracy, which traces the growing complexity of the idea of democracy by analyzing primary source documents and examines the idea of democracy, its inherent tensions, and its relationship to other concepts including reason, equality, liberty, order, and identity. At our annual commencement, in recognition of their commitment to civic engagement, all graduating students are commissioned as "Civic Scholars."

Finally, one of the most powerful facets of RWU's commitment to democratic engagement lies in our institutional resolve to interrogate the history of exclusions, barriers to participation, and structures of privilege and power that have prevented minoritized and marginalized members of society from participating in democratic decision-making processes. Our recently ratified Equity Action Plan identifies

current practices and future goals aimed at examining “the complexity of human history, grappling with its impact in our present day, and intentionally seeking to build a just community.”



## Landscape

Roger Williams University is made up of over 7,000 students, 4,000 of whom are full-time undergraduates on our primarily residential suburban campus. We have the offerings of a larger university, yet provide a student experience based on small classes and personal connections with faculty and staff.

- 100% of our courses are taught by professors.
- We offer 50 majors and over 70 minors.
- 98% of students receive scholarships and/or need-based financial aid.
- 20% of the fall 2020 class are students of color.
- Students participate in over 70 clubs and organizations.

Students are offered opportunities to gain a deep understanding of community-based issues and engage in problem solving through myriad academic and co-curricular opportunities.

- Approximately ⅓ of all internships for credit are in the public and non-profit sector.
- The Community Partnerships Center matches faculty and community-based projects that benefit Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts, while providing RWU students with experience in real-world projects that deepen their academic experiences. The CPC has overseen nearly 300 projects since 2010.
- The Community Engagement Fellowship Program provides opportunities for students who are deeply interested in community engagement to build their skills, increase their personal capacity to affect change, and have more impact on the community. Student fellows have served over 18,000 hours since fall 2017.
- The Department of Politics and International Relations facilitates three immersion experiences in Washington for Political Science majors: Washington Internship and Experiential Learning Seminar, Washington POLSC 400 - Washington Internship and Experiential Learning Seminar Public Policy Seminar, and Washington Independent Research Project. The course “Campaigns

and Elections” is not required of all PS majors, but is taken by many of them. The Department also coordinates internships at the RI State House.

- The Department of Politics and International Relations also brings a group of students to the College Convention, held every four years at New England College in Manchester, NH. Students attend four days of workshops on campaigns, party platforms, and election processes. Students meet and interact with over 30 presidential candidates and their surrogates from the major parties as well as lesser known parties.



- New majors Public Health and Gender and Sexuality Studies combine academic inquiry with exploration of related social issues and public policy.
- Challenges of Democracy, a course required for all students to graduate, engages students in tracing the growing complexity of the idea of democracy by analyzing primary source documents and examining the idea of democracy, its inherent tensions, and its relationship to other concepts including but not limited to: reason, equality, liberty, order, and identity.

RWU is the home of several organizations that tackle policy issues in Rhode Island:

- The Latino Policy Institute (LPI) stimulates public policy discourse by providing information and analysis of the Latino community in order to influence decision and policymaking to achieve greater social, political, and economic equity.
- HousingWorks RI (HWRI) conducts research and analyzes data to inform public policy and develop communications strategies in an effort to promote dialogue about the relationship between housing and the state’s economic future.
- The Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) partners with communities and schools to build capacity, alliances, and power through learning, relationships, and organizing. They support youth, families, and educators to organize, fight for, and win policies and practices that create equitable opportunities and just outcomes for every student.
- The Pro Bono Collaborative connects law firms, attorneys and law students to community organizations that need pro bono legal services for their organization and/or their clients.
- The Rhode Island Center for Justice is a non-profit public interest law center that partners with community groups to strengthen existing advocacy and service provision with legal representation and strategy. Their legal practice areas—including housing, immigration, workers’ rights, criminal justice, education, and utility shut offs—reflect the most pressing needs of low-income people in our state.



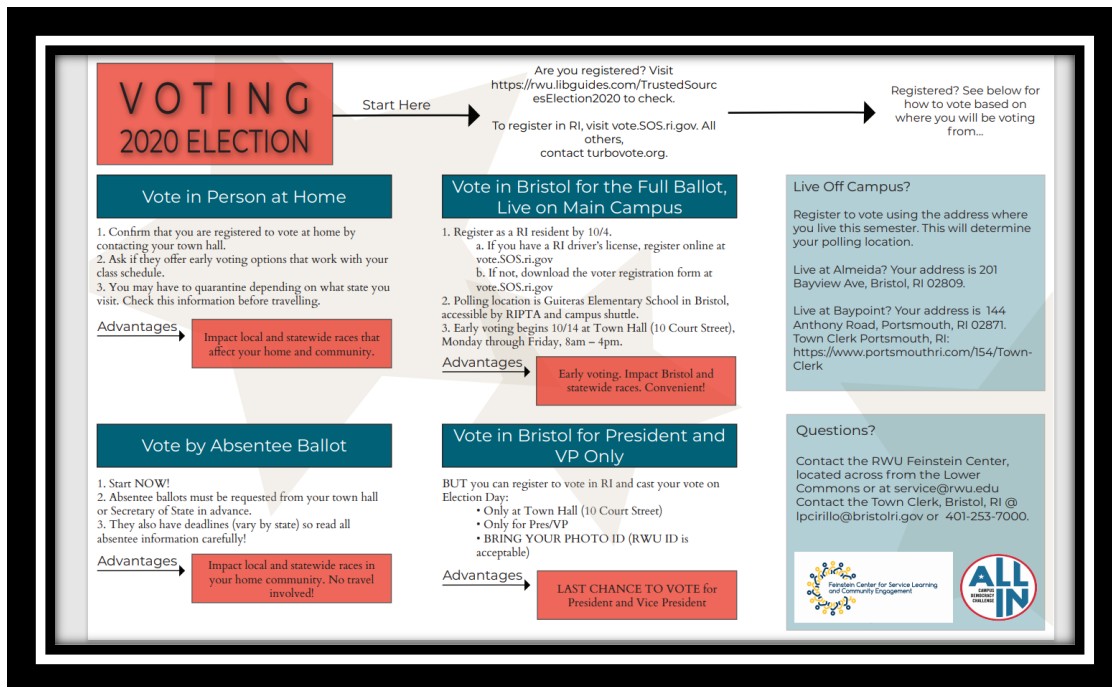
The Feinstein Center has taken the lead for coordinating voter education and registration efforts since 2002. While other departments also encouraged voter registration, efforts on campus were disparate and lacked the strength that comes from coordination and alignment. collaboration. The All In Challenge presented the opportunity to bring together various programs under one umbrella (*a more detailed account is in the Strategy section*).

RWU had not traditionally been regarded as a politically active campus. With the creation of the Feinstein Center in 1998 and the CPC in 2008, both students and faculty were provided with coordinated and supported opportunities to participate in community-based problem solving and policy work.

Over the last decade, RWU students have become more politically active. This has accelerated since the contentious 2016 election and with heightened awareness of national and global issues of injustice. Students' focus on voting has increased as well and they embrace the University's efforts to educate and register voters.

2020 has forced us to rethink how to engage voters. Traditionally, we would work with students to register to vote in RI because voting at home was too far away and students could not take a day off of classes to travel. Because of early voting and mail in ballots in many states, more students are voting in their home communities and no longer need to register here in RI. Therefore, our efforts have shifted more to voter education (*see graphic below*).





## Goals

Our participation in the All In Challenge has been a deep reflective exercise on democratic engagement across the curriculum and in our co-curricular activities. The following goals surfaced during this process:

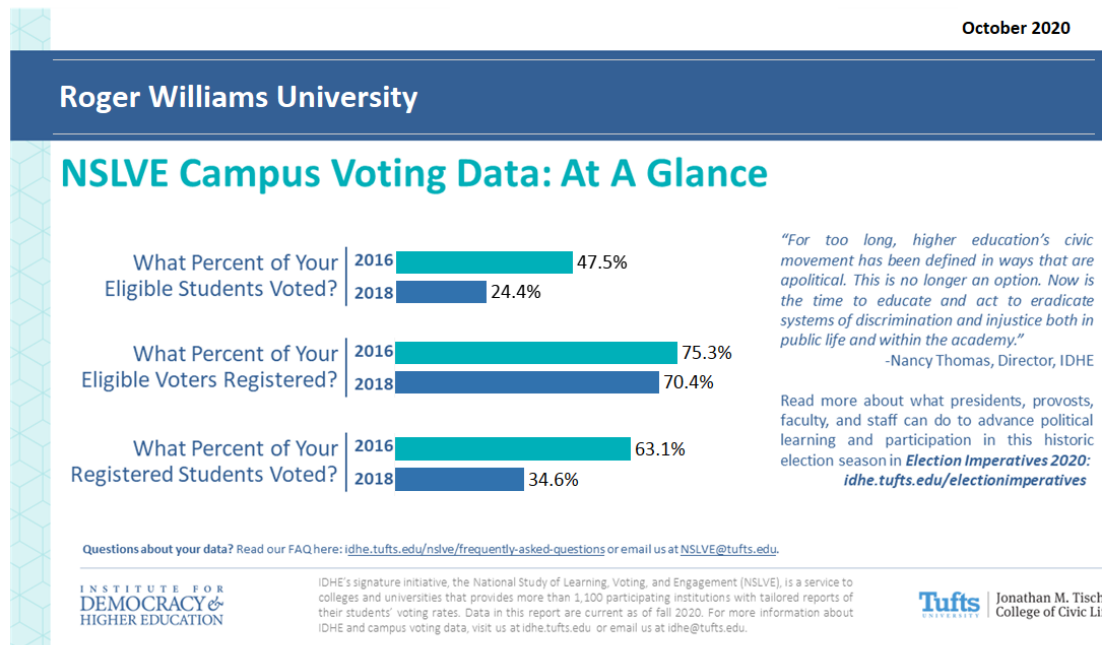
### Short term

- Reinstate polling location on campus (*it was suspended for 2020 due to COVID-19 prevention.*)
- Set 10 % increase over last midterm election participation by registered voters (from 34.6% to 44.6%).
- Ask faculty and staff who work with cohorts of students, such as Resident Assistants, Club/Org members, work study students, to mentor and hold students accountable for registering to vote.
- Work with Secretary of State's Office to coordinate student participation as poll workers.
- Meet with newly elected Bristol Town Clerk to identify new ways to collaborate that increase student engagement in polls and as registered voters.
- Co-sponsor "UnRegistration Day" with Class of 2021 and 2022 and Town Clerk's Office to clear rolls of unnecessary registered voters, provide resources for registering in new, post-grad community.
- Continue to provide University transportation to the polls for students voting locally.
- Conduct on-line survey about past voter education and registration events to identify gaps in University efforts and better assess needs and interests of students around democratic engagement.

### Long term

- The All-In Challenge will be a standing committee that operates year-round on voter education between election cycles.
- Include more faculty or academic leadership on committee as we seek to focus on the broader - and arguably deeper - strategies around democratic engagement. We must identify the types of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that lead students to become more engaged in the practices vital to thriving democracies.
- Imbed standardized learning outcomes in Challenges of Democracy course that focus on voter engagement and facilitate registration.
- Establish University Election Day biennial holiday to enable students, faculty and staff to easily vote in presidential and mid-term elections. The holiday will also offer a variety of “Democracy Day” activities such as panels, working polls, and service projects.
- Set and meet 100% student voter registration goal.
- Include All In logo on all voter education/registration events, regardless of department sponsorship to further develop the brand recognition.

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



We have attempted to collect data on student voter engagement on our own with little success. Online and in-person surveys have not yielded significant results. The lack of accurate data has prevented us from having a clear picture of how RWU students meet their democratic responsibility and privilege of voting. Even more importantly, this has prevented us from being able to assess our efforts and set goals. The data provided by NSLVE provides the most accurate picture available.



According to NSLVE, overall voting rates for RWU in comparison to all institution are:

2012 rate:	41.1% (-5.8)	<i>presidential</i>
2014 rate:	14.3% (-4.8)	<i>midterm</i>
2016 rate:	45.8% (-4.6)	<i>presidential</i>
2018 rate:	24.4% (-11.6)	<i>midterm</i>

When comparing presidential to presidential and midterm to midterm, students' rates are improving. One explanation for the increases in 2016 and 2018 is the contentious nature of the races. Still, RWU students continue to vote at rates well below the national average for their peers. We can use this data to set goals to not only meet the national average but surpass it. The All In Challenge committee will be a standing committee that will continue education and registration work year-round and in non-election years. The committee can actively respond to national issues and controversy regardless of the year and encourage students to prepare for the next election by voting.

There is also a low percentage of registered students who are both registered and vote:

2012 rate:	56.5% (-5.8)	<i>presidential</i>
2014 rate:	23.4% (-6.4)	<i>midterm</i>
2016 rate:	59.3% (-4.6)	<i>presidential</i>
2018 rate:	34.6% (-11.6)	<i>midterm</i>

This data illustrates our need to provide more tools for students to follow through on their registrations by casting their ballots. We have already begun to address this by providing detailed information on obtaining absentee ballots, paying for postage for mailing ballots and organizing transportation to local polls.

## Strategy

Each member of the All In Challenge committee contributed to the strategies employed to encourage democratic education and engagement. Members were added to the committee because they bring specific expertise and skill sets to the work. The strategy is, therefore, as diverse as the committee membership. The Feinstein Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement committed the time of the Director and Administrative Assistant and a budget of \$2,000.

### Marketing Strategies



- A visual brand was established and promoted to tie events and swag to the challenge events.

- To raise awareness of the program, we created a marketing slogan of “RWU a voter?”, hashtag #RWUVotes, and marketing URL [rwu.edu/go/RWUVotes](http://rwu.edu/go/RWUVotes).
- We linked our voter registration website to a QR code that was published on signs and stickers distributed throughout campus.



- Social media strategy included daily posts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Members of the committee used their own departmental social media pages to push out the committee's messages to a broader audience. Daily posts included program promotions and fun photos.



- The Hawk's Herald student newspaper published the “All In Tip of the Week” in the 4 issues preceding the election.

### Co-curricular strategies

- The Department of Athletics committed to 100% student athlete voter registration. Coaches became mentors to their teams and held each athlete accountable for following through to not only registering but voting.
- The University paid for postage for students mailing voter registration forms and absentee ballots.
- Students can book a complimentary ride to the polls on the Voter Van, which makes round trips to the polls on election day from 10am - 7pm.
- Events from various campus departments advertised by the All In Committee
  - September 22 - National Voter Registration Day, with voter registration resource tables on the sidewalk between the Law School and Campus Recreation Center from 11am - 3pm
  - October 13, 20 and 27 -The Intercultural Center's Netflix watch party "WHOSE VOTE COUNTS?"
  - October 21 - Voter Suppression and the Intersection with the Legal Field



- October 28 - Debate presented by the College Democrats and College Republicans.



- October 29 - Pre-election roundtable with the faculty from the Politics and International Relations Faculty
- Week of November 3 - Intercultural Center, QTRAC and SPLO are holding space for election reflection.
- November 5 - Post-election roundtable with the faculty from the Politics and International Relations Faculty

- November 12 – Intercultural Center roundtable with faculty on The stakes of the election and what made this election different, election security, the results, and what to expect moving forward/election debrief.

### **Academic strategies**

- Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality by Dr. Danielle Allen was selected as the Common Reading for the 2020-2021 academic year. The book was implemented across the curriculum and provided opportunities for dialogue and programming in a year of a Presidential election and national debate on issues of social justice. All new first year students read the year's selection as part of their Roger Seminar class after being introduced to the book during New Student Orientation.
- RWU received a grant from the Davis Educational Foundation to incorporate civic and community engagement opportunities more generally into the 43-credit Core Curriculum. Through course development awards and formal learning communities, faculty across disciplines will develop curriculum focused on learning outcomes critical to being an engaged citizen in a modern democracy.
- All new students are enrolled in Roger Seminar, a first-year seminar designed to cultivate investment in our institution, our region and its history, and the important legacy of the man for which the university is named. The course foregrounds crucial themes for first-year academic inquiry and practice: freedom of conscience, social justice, intellectual exchange, critical thinking, inclusiveness, and innovation. Prior to the start of the academic year, students engage in a local service project with their classmates and instructor.
- The Challenges of Democracy course, required for all students and outlined in detail in the Landscape section, continues to facilitate students' exploration of the history, challenges and individual opportunities related to American democracy.
- The honors section of the required Challenges of Democracy class created a website and marketing plan to encourage voter registration as a result of research into the history of voting and state-by-state voting laws.

### **Reporting**

All of the work undertaken by the committee and the follow-through by students should be reported to the campus community to encourage buy-in. It is also important that entities outside of RWU understand how committed we are to engagement in the democratic process. Therefore, we will share our NSLVE data and the goals and progress related to them. This is one way we actionalize our mission of engaged teaching and our public purpose. We also want to celebrate when we reach our goals.

### **Internal Reporting**

- Email to all students, faculty and staff
- Social media including Instagram, Facebook and Twitter
- Hawklink student engagement portal
- Hawk's Herald weekly student newspaper

- Banners hung in the Commons and Field House
- Report to Board of Trustees, President's Cabinet and Provost's Council (of deans)

We intentionally asked a representative from the Marketing and Communications office to be part of the committee. This enables us to reach external audiences as well including our local board of canvassers, Secretary of State's office, and our educational peers in the state:

#### **External Reporting**

- University's webpage
- Admissions materials
- Annual report publication
- Annual Community Engagement Celebration (200-300 external guests)
- Report to RI Secretary of State and Bristol Town Clerk's Office
- Report to Campus Compact

## **Evaluation**

Participation in the All In Challenge has prompted the entire campus community to reflect on our responsibility to model and encourage engagement in the democratic process. Although our strategy was built on the input from faculty, staff, and students from various campus departments, we know that there are gaps in our efforts. We may have missed the specific needs of certain cohorts of students or piloted programs that were not successful. The committee will meet after the election to debrief:

- Is there representation of campus cohorts missing from committee?
- What were the most successful initiatives (based on students' utilization)?
- What were the initiatives that failed and should be reconsidered before next election?
- What can we do to encourage students to become involved in the democratic process in between elections - statewide and national committees? creation of student groups focused on policy issues?

Additionally, the committee will create and administer a survey for students asking for their opinion on All In Challenge activities and ideas for future programs. This will help us determine where students are voting (absentee or in Bristol) and how well we communicated our activities and tools.

Information gathered through these reviews, both anecdotal and quantitative, will be used to create an action plan for 2021-2022 and beyond.

While we can perfect our ability to get students to mail ballots and drive them to the polls, our focus as an institution of higher education should be on the broader issues of Democratic education and exploration. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines democracy as "a form of government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodic free elections." Our students, the people, should have multiple opportunities to explore and develop their sense of democratic identity and, ultimately, their roles within that democracy. Therefore, our work in the years between elections will focus on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that lead students to become more engaged in the practices vital to thriving democracies.