

ALL IN CHALLENGE
SUNY Cortland
Executive Summary – August 2020

1. **Who Developed this Action Plan?** SUNY Cortland’s Action Plan, called *Cortland Votes*, was guided by the college’s Institute for Civic Engagement director, John Suarez, in collaboration with staff in Student Affairs, with faculty, and with our Cortland Votes Working Group members.
2. **What is the action plan for and what does it seek to accomplish?** This action plan commits SUNY Cortland to full (90% to 100%) voter participation for eligible students. It provides an overview of steps that we plan to take, and with whom, to achieve SUNY Cortland voter registration and voter turn-out rates of 70% in the November 2020 General Election, 80% in the 2022 midterm elections, and at least 90% by the 2024 presidential election.

By the end of the Cortland Votes Working Group’s second bi-weekly meeting, the enthusiastic participation of many members of the greater Cortland community led to a decision to expand the scope of this Plan to include all of Cortland County.

3. **Where will this action plan be implemented?** The Plan will be implemented at SUNY Cortland, under the leadership of the Institute for Civic Engagement. Our ten-(active) member Working Group is refining and enacting the plan. That Group includes students, faculty, staff, elected officials from both major parties, and staff of not-for-profit agencies.
4. **Why was this action plan developed?** Cortland Votes was developed to map a path to a consistent 90%, minimum, student voting rate. That “map” includes voter registration, voter education, and get-out-the-vote activities, as well as action to assess, refine, and report on the project.
5. **When does this action plan start and end?** The plan began on June 1, 2020, with the Working Group’s first meeting. The plan ends in December 2024, by which time student voting rates, for specific demographic groups and for the student population as a whole, should be at least 90%. By that point, we will have revised our plan for the next four years so that we integrate changes in demographics, technology, and the trajectory of local and global events.
6. **How will this action plan be implemented?** Under the direction of SUNY Cortland’s Institute for Civic Engagement, the Plan will be implemented through the Working Group, which will plan, promote, and conduct activities and events that register and educate Cortland County residents (including, of course, SUNY Cortland students), and that facilitate voting.

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Guiding questions: People

1. **Who is coordinating the plan?** SUNY Cortland's Institute for Civic Engagement.
2. **Who is chairing the working group?** The Director of the Institute for Civic Engagement, John Suarez
3. **What is the role of the working group?** The working group's role is to provide guidance on, information for, and participation in Cortland Votes materials, activities, evaluation, and reporting.
4. **How will the working group members be selected?** The Working Group's members were invited to join on the basis of their previous collaborations with the Institute and on their regular work's relevance to this project. The group has grown because we want to include people who
 - a. Represent contrasting political points of view
 - b. Can address major issues, such as antiracism.
5. **What are working group members' responsibilities?**

Individual member's responsibilities would fall into one of these actions: To

 - a. Train students on skills related to non-partisan communication
 - b. Research and create nonpartisan materials for voter education, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote events
 - c. Plan and conduct those events
 - d. "Market" those events
 - e. Recruit individual and organization partners
 - f. Collect data and assess progress.
6. **How is the working group inclusive of different campus and community stakeholders?**

The group includes campus organizations such as NYPIRG and the Young Democrats. One of our members is an intern with a Republican candidate for the 125th Congressional District. We are also partnering with the League of Women Voters of Cortland County, the mayor of the city of Cortland, members of the Cortland County Legislature, the county Board of Elections supervisors, and the chairs of the local Republican and Democratic parties.
7. **Who are the working group members and how are they involved?**
 - a. **What academic departments and which faculty within academic affairs are involved?**

Advisement and Transition Director, Abby Thomas, will support this effort through her work with her staff and through campus-wide messaging. Communications and Media Studies Professor Christine Knopf and English instructor Dr. Laura Dunbar will incorporate voting education into their syllabi, and David Runge, Director of COR 101 (First-Year Experience) will help COR 101 faculty members integrate the importance of voting into their course syllabi.
 - b. **What units within Student Affairs are involved and what are their roles?**

Our VP for Student Affairs, Dr. Greg Sharer, supports this plan. Within Student Affairs, the Associate Director of Residence Life, Robert Binnall, will work with his staff to help coordinate voting-related messaging and activities. The Director of Corey Union and Campus Activities, Kevin Pristash, will help the Group network, and he will help coordinate meetings and events that are free and open to the campus and to the greater Cortland community. The Director of Athletics, Mike Urz, will help promote civic participation by connecting it to civic engagement projects that athletes already conduct.

Which students and which student organizations are involved?

Alexis Pascarella, Student Coordinator, SUNY Cortland Cupboard; Callie Humphrey, Outreach Coordinator, SGA; Nick Gallardo, intern with the Claudia Tenney (R) Campaign; Raquel Berman, Student Representative, Environmental Sustainability Committee; Roman Rodriguez, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Student Government Association; Shaneya Simmelkjaer, President, Black Student Union.

c. ***Which community and/or national organizations are involved?***

Access to Independence, the Cortland County Board of Elections, legislators in the Cortland County Legislature, The League of Women Voters of Cortland County; the LGBTQ Center; NYPIRG; a teacher at the Smith Elementary School are involved.

d. ***Is the working group coordinating with the local elections office? If so, with whom and how?***

Yes: Robert Howe, Cortland County Board of Election's Republican Commissioner, and Thomas Brown, the Board's Democratic Commissioner, are both Working Group members, as are county legislators, Ann Homer (D), Beau Harbin (D), Cathy Bischoff (D), and Doug Bentley (D); City of Cortland Mayor, Brian Tobin (D), the Chair of the Cortland County Republican Party, Connie White, and the Chair of the Cortland County Democratic Party, Timothy Perfetti.

8. ***How often will the working group meet?*** The group has been meeting bi-weekly (remotely, of course), with the smaller teams meeting more often, as need be.

Guiding questions: Leadership –

1. ***How does the institution and its leadership demonstrate commitment to improve civic learning and democratic engagement? Is there an explicit, visible commitment to the part of the governing board, president, and senior leadership?***

Yes. This commitment is demonstrated by our mission statement:

SUNY Cortland is an academic community dedicated to diverse learning experiences. Students grow as engaged citizens with a strong social conscience fostered by outstanding teaching, scholarship and service. [Underline added.]

Students are required to take the general education *United States History and Society* course, which teaches democratic engagement.

SUNY Cortland's Communications Office promotes and reports on engagement-related, college-sponsored events. These links provide examples:

- <http://www2.cortland.edu/bulletin/news-detail.dot?id=66ac6685-ad28-4889-8f27-bf21d0a7bc4e&backUrl=/bulletin/issues/bulletin-19-20/bulletin-2-sept-10-2019>
- <http://www2.cortland.edu/bulletin/news-detail.dot?id=bdb8783-ab74-427b-bb6b-ef64e24ec817&backUrl=/bulletin/issues/bulletin-19-20/bulletin-3-sept-24-2019>
- <http://www2.cortland.edu/bulletin/news-detail.dot?id=6cd1c549-bc09-402b-8b54-0e5c4680b244&backUrl=/bulletin/issues/bulletin-19-20/bulletin-3-sept-24-2019>
- <http://www2.cortland.edu/bulletin/news-detail.dot?id=79df7789-8f28-470a-975a-810682ead899&backUrl=/bulletin/issues/bulletin-19-20/bulletin-5-oct-22-2019>
- <http://www2.cortland.edu/bulletin/news-detail.dot?id=5c22d01a-3736-4fe8-9d80-61c00d56643e&backUrl=/bulletin/issues/bulletin-19-20/bulletin-10-feb-11-2020>

- <http://www2.cortland.edu/news/detail.dot?id=33d3d15b-7366-4595-9819-cdd9a68d93fe>

The institution's leadership also demonstrates that commitment through its continuing support of this kind of work – including its funding of the Institute for Civic Engagement. Leaders include Erik Bitterbaum, President, SUNY Cortland; Greg Sharer, VP for Student Affairs; Robert Binnall, Director, Residence Life; Abby Thomas, Director, Advisement and Transition; Frederic Pierce, Director of Communications; Kevin Pristash, Director of Corey Union and Student Activities, and , Mike Urz, Director of Athletics.

The SUNY Cortland website also includes a voter registration webpage that provides links to voter registration forms and to absentee ballot forms (in English and in Spanish), to contact information for the Cortland County Board of Elections, and to the campus individual who is responsible for voter registration assistance on campus.

Leadership succession for Cortland Votes has been identified: Should John Suarez no longer lead this program, the Institute's Assistant Director, Dr. Laura Dunbar, will assume leadership.

a. ***Is the commitment communicated within the institution? To whom, specifically, and how?***

The commitment is communicated in a variety of ways: Civic engagement is named in our mission statement, and applied learning (experiential learning) is listed as a strategic goal. The college funds the Institute for Civic Engagement, our college president, Dr. Erik Bitterbaum, is a member of two civic engagement organizations (the National Campus Compact and the Campus Compact of New York and Pennsylvania), and the college provides \$10,000 in civic engagement scholarships, in addition to other civic engagement scholarships.

Courses in other subjects address this concern. Dr. Christine Knopf's COM 339 (Political Communication), for example, incorporates deliberative dialogues as a teaching medium for the civic decision-making process.

b. ***Is the commitment communicated outside the institution? To whom, specifically, and how?***

The college's Institute for Civic Engagement shares its civic engagement Newsletter with community partners, and each April it gives *Leadership in Civic Engagement* awards to deserving individuals and groups from on- and off-campus.

2. ***Is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement a pervasive part of institutional culture? Is it ongoing, consistent, systematic, and sustainable across programs, departments, and the entire institution? How do you know?***

Educating for civic learning and democratic engagement is not yet a pervasive part of our institutional culture, though elements of such a culture appear in certain courses, such as *United States History and Society*, *Political Communication*, *Introduction to American Government and Politics*, *Foundations of Democracy*, *Politics and Multiculturalism*, *Student Government Practicum*, and *Participation in Politics and Government*.

Educating for democratic engagement is also evident in co-curricular opportunities, such as in SGA and in certain SGA clubs – College Republicans, Young Democrats, the Political Science Association, and the Black Student Union. This plan aims to weave nonpartisan civic learning and democratic engagement into a wide range of academic courses and co-curricular activities.

3. ***How is the institution's commitment reflected in existing statements and documents?***
Our mission statement reflects our commitment: *SUNY Cortland is an academic community dedicated to diverse learning experiences. Students grow as engaged citizens with a strong social conscience fostered by outstanding teaching, scholarship and service.*

What are the institution's overall civic, democratic, and/or political learning outcomes? Is there a process in place to ensure that outcomes are measured and met?

Those outcomes are not, at present, specified in any one location; however, our Working Group aims to collaborate with administration and faculty to name and promote those outcomes, and to measure and assess our success in meeting those outcomes.

4. ***How is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement included in the general education curriculum?***

Educating for civic learning and democratic engagement are not explicitly included in the general education curriculum, though certain courses (such as those previously named) do include such lessons in their syllabi.

5. ***How is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement included in the co-curriculum?***

Educating for civic learning and democratic engagement are not yet explicitly included in the co-curriculum, though certain SGA clubs include related information in their work.

Guiding questions: Landscape

1. ***Are civic learning and democratic engagement overall campus learning objectives?***
Civic learning and democratic engagement are not yet stated as, nor acted-on, as overall campus learning objectives. This plan is designed to reach that goal.
2. ***What do assessment data show about political climate and democratic engagement on campus? How do these data compare to that of peer institutions?***
Although we lag behind our counterparts in democratic engagement on campus (per NSLVE data), we have made great strides in voter-registration and in voting percentages. In the same vein, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an undercurrent of divisiveness in the political climate among students, and that those students who do follow the news do so via social media.
3. ***How is civic learning and democratic engagement present in the curriculum?***
[Please refer to previous answers.]
4. ***How is civic learning and democratic engagement present in the co-curriculum?***
[Refer to previous answers.]
5. ***What internal barriers (e.g., limited funding, staff resistance, lack of leadership) prevent the institution from being successful?***
Faculty members' need to meet rigorous and credit-heavy curricular requirements could interfere with Cortland Votes reaching its goals, though – as noted earlier – we do have our administration's vocal and financial support for this work. As of this writing, we are also planning to apply for an *Alliance for Youth Organizing* grant that would give us additional funding to help us reach our goals.

6. ***What external barriers (e.g., election laws, voter ID laws, lack of proximity to polling location) prevent the institution from being successful?***

Having lost our only on-campus polling place interferes with success, though three of our Working Group members have been meeting with our county's Board of Elections to return that polling place to campus. A lack of transportation to off-campus polling locations also interferes. However, one of our long-term partners – NYPIRG – has been able to provide rides to polling places for many students.

Another set of barriers grows out of the Covid-19 pandemic, of course. Many of our classes will be conducted remotely, some will be a hybrid design. Transportation to polling places will be a challenge. We are alert to possible changes in preferred methods of voting, including calls for greater use of voting-by-mail. Related to this is the possibility that SUNY will ask students and faculty to start the fall 2020 semester remotely and/or later than usual.

7. ***What resources are available to help the institution be successful?***

On-campus resources include supportive administrators, faculty, staff, and students – such as those in our Student Government Association. More specifically, we have worked with faculty who have specific expertise, such as Professor Timothy Delaune (Political Science), an expert in Constitutional Law. Professor Delaune has twice presented on the US Constitution as part of our Constitution Day events. Other examples are Professor Christopher Badurek (Geography), who has served as a Deliberative Dialogue moderator. He, along with Professors Szilvia Kadas (Art and Art History) and Benjamin Wilson have conducted US Census-related projects with their students.

Another campus resource is our Cortland Applied Learning Practitioners professional development program, which – beginning in the 2020-2021 academic year, will reward faculty and community partners who blend participation in the democratic process into their applied learning (experiential learning) syllabi.

We also have off-campus resources: In addition to our Cortland County community partners, we have information resources through CIRCLE, the National Constitution Center, the Campus Election Engagement Project, and the National Issues Forum Institute.

8. ***What additional resources are needed to help the institution be successful?***

We are looking for additional funding for events. The League of Women Voters of Cortland County has offered to help us fund our activities.

Guiding questions: Goals

Long-term goals

1. ***What impact is expected?***

Aiming high, we expect that our efforts will raise voting rates to about 90% in 2024, as voter-related activities become more fully integrated into our academic and co-curricular cultures. We have a good deal of work to do: Per our NSLVE reports, our 2016 and 2018 voting rates were 35.8% and 22.1%, respectively. The 2016 voting rate was 2.1% higher than in 2012; the 2018 rate was 15.0% higher than 2014. While those rates show improvement, they pale in comparison to our Carnegie Classification peers: Our 2016 rate is 14.6% lower than other Carnegie Classification colleges; our 2018 rate is 17.0% lower.

More specifically, we want to engage students in certain demographics, especially those whose voting rates have been low, such as 18- to 21-year-olds, whose 2018 voting rate was 18.1%; males, with a 2018 voting rate of 19.6%, and Asian (12.4%), Hispanic (16.5%), and Black (19.6%) students.

We also want to assess our work on the basis of our graduates' self-reported voting rates and connections between those rates and our voter program, so we will continue working with Alumni Affairs on their surveys of our grad.

2. ***What knowledge, skills, and capacities (learning outcomes) does the institution want students to achieve and graduate with in order to be active and informed?***

We want our students to be able to

- a. Explain how the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government work and how they can participate in the work of those branches
- b. Access and assess information from a variety of sources
- c. Use their academic skills in civil and productive ways in civic decision-making processes.

3. ***What does the institution want to accomplish over the next 10 years?***

Over the next ten years, we would like to have nurtured a culture in which staff, students, faculty (regardless of discipline), the Institute for Civic Engagement, and our partners in the greater Cortland community, create voter-related events. These events would be part of an environment in which at least 90% of students vote in every election.

Short-term goals

1. **What does the institution want to accomplish in the next year or two? What needs to be accomplished in order to move towards the achievement of long-term goals?**

Over the next two years, we want to develop a system that routinely provides events that explore issues that students can act on and vote on. Students will identify connections between issues and their course work and their volunteer work, such as Relay for Life. We will provide "focused" voter-education events that address concerns of specific audiences on the basis of (for example) discipline or cultural background.

By the end of the 2021-2022 academic year, we would like to have an average of six events each semester, or one event every two or three weeks. Voter registration and get-out-the-vote activities would be integrated into the first month of each fall semester, especially in residence halls, and campus-wide on and before National Voter Registration Day.

To achieve these accomplishments, we need to nurture strong working relationships with individuals and groups, both on- and off-campus. These relationships would provide the necessary funding, planning, and social infrastructure for a culture of student civic participation. We need to track changes in students' interests, motivations, and methods of socializing; we need to incorporate changes in voting-related laws and regulations, and incorporate voter education-related reporting into annual reports.

Guiding questions: Strategy

1. **What is the work? What are the planned activities?**

Voter registration messages will begin in the second and third weeks of each fall semester, at tabling events, in residence hall floor meetings, and in our first-year experience classes (COR 101).

Depending on the timing and format (in-person or remote) of the fall semester, we might need to conduct our messaging electronically.

This is part of our work to register 18- to 19-year-olds, whose voting rates are especially low. The messages will be delivered by trained students, so that we have a more trusting, less imposing peer-to-peer relationship (than a professor/student relationship). We will also coordinate our efforts with SGA and SGA clubs

2. Who will do the work? Who is responsible for implementing each planned activity?

Teams of students, faculty, staff, and community partners will do this work. Training in those skills will be important because our working group's membership represents a wide variety of political perspectives, so we need to ensure a healthy working relationship between the group's members.

The work will be divided into teams, each of which will have a coordinator. Those teams will conduct training regarding skills in active listening, nonpartisan communication, and teamwork; develop issues-based materials; plan events; conduct marketing, and collect and assess data.

3. Who is the work for? Who is the audience for each activity?

Primarily, of course, the intended audience is made-up of students. Within that large group are students in specific demographics, such as 18- and 19-year-old students, students from traditionally-underrepresented communities, non-traditional students, athletes, and students in specific majors. Students in the natural sciences, for example, could be invited to participate in environmental sustainability-related voter-education events, so that those students can identify the relevance of their respective disciplines to current issues.

Other audiences are business leaders, not-for-profit agency supervisors and staff, local elected officials, and leaders in the faith-based community. One of the purposes would be to develop mutual understanding and trust with students so that we continue to foster stronger working relationships between campus and the greater Cortland community.

4. Where will the work happen? Where will each activity occur on campus?

The work will happen at venues on campus and in the city of Cortland; in each case, we will use venues that are appropriate to a given event. The initial planning (during summer 2020) will take place remotely because of pandemic social distancing. Beginning with fall 2020, planning – ideally – will be done in person at the Institute for Civic Engagement's office and occasionally at a community partner's facility.

Activities will take place at a variety of locations, mainly on the SUNY Cortland campus – especially, for the time-being, online through WebEx. By the spring semester (at the earliest), specific physical locations will depend on the nature of the event. A Community Roundtable will take place in the Park Center *Hall of Fame Room*. This event will describe our All In Campaign to the campus and to members of the greater Cortland community. Like virtually all of our events, this one will be free and open to the public.

Most of the events will be geared primarily for students; those events will include regularly-scheduled and special-event presentations, panel discussions, debates, and deliberative dialogues that we conduct in appropriately-designed rooms, such as Corey Union's *Fireplace Lounge* and Park Center's *Hall of Fame Room*. We will prioritize audience participation as a way of helping students feel ownership of topics. By spring 2021, we will notify faculty about events a semester in advance, so that they can more easily incorporate those events into their syllabi. Our as our Constitution Day events are one example.

We are also working to include people from the greater Cortland community to join our voter education events because we believe that such collaboration can strengthen civil civic engagement both on- and off-campus.

When will the work happen? When will each activity occur on campus?

Events will happen during the fall and spring semesters. The routinely-presented events will have consistent days, times, and places so that people can easily plan for them.

5. *What is the purpose of the work? Why is each activity being implemented and what is the goal for each activity?*

The purpose is to nurture a campus culture of civil and productive civic participation.

Guiding questions: Reporting

1. How will the plan be shared, internally and externally? Please state where the plan will be shared.

The plan will be shared through a variety of media, especially on campus. The Institute for Civic Engagement, for example, will post it at its webpage and provide access to it through its social media accounts and through its monthly newsletter. Announcements regarding events will be sent via our closed-circuit television system and through email and social media to people on- and off-campus. For on-campus announcements, we will also use low-tech approaches such as tabling, campus newspaper and newsletter articles, and paper posters. The paper medium will also have QR codes as a way of giving people additional information.

2. Will the plan be made public? If so, how?

Yes, the plan will be made public in the ways described above.

3. Will the data be used to inform be made public? If so, how? Yes, as described above.

Guiding questions: Evaluation

1. What is the purpose of the evaluation? What does the institution want to know and be able to do with the information gathered?

Evaluation will be used to help us refine our methodology so that it stays effective, especially as each year incoming students represent a “moving target” with regard to knowledge, interest, motivation, and communication channels. Also, vote-related laws and regulations can change, so we need to ensure that we comply and adapt to stay effective.

2. Who is the audience of the evaluation?

Our audience is our Working Group, administration, the Institute for Civic Engagement, and politically-oriented student groups.

3. Who will carry-out the evaluation?

We will recruit an independent team to evaluate our work. The Working Group will conduct a self-evaluation. This step – like the rest of this process – can be a valuable learning opportunity for

students in courses that teach assessment, so our plan is to work with faculty to integrate this work into syllabi.

4. When will the evaluation be carried out and completed?

Evaluations will be carried-out and completed after each election, with smaller, activity-specific self-evaluations conducted during the year. After each Cortland Votes event, data will be collected and integrated into an Excel page that tracks statistical data, with qualitative data stored and categorized in a separate Excel page. Ideally, event participants will be able to electronically submit their responses to post-event surveys, saving time and helping to ensure accuracy.

A Working Group Evaluations Team will evaluate the effectiveness of events on a rolling basis, ideally after each event, but by the end of each semester, at the latest.

5. What information (data, evidence) must be collected and how it will be collected? What are the performance measures and indicators of success? In addition to our NSLVE survey, we will record the number of volunteers and student participants at various events, and we will survey participants with regard to the educational and motivational value of those events, relative to them actually voting.

6. How will information (data, evidence) be analyzed?

We will have quantitative and qualitative data to analyze, looking for ways of refining our messaging. Statistical data will be analyzed through Likert-type measures; qualitative data will be analyzed through a coded approach that identifies “markers” indicating an events perceived value in dimensions of understanding, interest, personal relevance, and motivation. Together, these data and analyses can help us refine our efforts to integrate civic participation into our campus culture.

7. How will the results of evaluation be shared?

We will share our evaluation results in events that are open and free to the public, such as Community Roundtables and Sandwich Seminars, and through electronic formats such as the Institute’s monthly newsletter, its webpage, and its social media accounts.

Does this plan include a commitment to full voter participation for eligible students? Yes.

Was the Strengthening American Democracy Guide used to develop this plan? Yes, we used the guide.