

## **Executive Summary**

While some meaningful civic engagement endeavors have come to fruition at SUNY Plattsburgh since the last action plan was submitted in 2020, there is much room for further development. Over the next year, our central goal is to establish and codify a stronger institutional foundation and broader involvement in civic engagement initiatives from various campus stakeholders. We are fortunate to already have a strong home base for civic engagement endeavors at SUNY Plattsburgh in the form of the Institute for Ethics and Public Life, directed by Professor Daniel Lake. Our campus voting rates are below the national average, but have in fact increased slightly since the last midterm cycle, and successful recent campus-wide social justice initiatives are auspicious indicators of the potential for growing civic engagement at Plattsburgh. The basic imperative now is to involve a broader set of stakeholders across campus on a more consistent basis for three core initiatives: to design a publicly visible voter engagement campaign, to increase participation in deliberative dialogue programming, and to work more closely with university administration on integrating civic engagement endeavors with university-wide priorities (such as the evolution of the general education curriculum and diversity, equity, and inclusion goals).

## **Leadership**

The institutional home for civic engagement is the Institute for Ethics and Public Life, which was created in part to promote the values of citizenship and civic responsibility among students. Since assuming direction of the Institute for Ethics and Public Life in 2022, Associate Professor of Political Science Daniel Lake has invigorated the campus's commitment to civic engagement programming. The Institute hosts discussions on a wide variety of topics related to pressing societal issues that involve ethical considerations in some fashion approximately 10 times each semester. These events often feature SUNY Plattsburgh faculty members, faculty members from other colleges and universities, and community members as special guest speakers. Professor Lake has also been a leader in a multi-campus civic engagement coalition called "SUNY+" that formed initially to collaborate on programming for the national Constitution Day holiday every September. Joining him in a limited capacity for Constitution Day planning has been Assistant Professor of Communication Studies Ben Medeiros. In 2022 and 2023, the Constitution Day events have included discussions between members of the campus community and local elected officials about petitioning the government, and smaller-group breakout sessions reviewing current legislative efforts regarding particular topics.

## **Commitment and Landscape**

Since the previous Action Plan was delivered in 2020, SUNY Plattsburgh has launched its "Plattsburgh Next" strategic plan. Embedded in this plan is a strong commitment to promoting civic literacy and engagement as a cornerstone of the liberal arts education that students receive. The mission statement, for instance, asserts that the college "recognize[s] [its] unique location and commitment to social and environmental responsibility as integral to [its] identity," and explicitly foregrounds the college's ambition to prepare students for their "civic futures." Such language indicates that initiatives to promote voting and civic engagement are consistent with the stated priorities of SUNY Plattsburgh.

The revamped general education curriculum, called the "Cardinal Core Curriculum" (CCC) likewise indicates an institutional commitment to civic education and instantiates this

commitment in its curricular priorities. The CCC is designed to comply with the overall SUNY General Education requirements while foregrounding its own particular emphasis on “a rigorous and robust general educational experience in diversity and social justice.” In addition to foundational mathematics, writing, and information literacy courses and a foundational first-year seminar, each student at SUNY Plattsburgh is required to take existing university courses that are approved to fulfill CCC requirements in six categories – several of which pertain to civic affairs. These include:

- Human Communities, which “promote a critical self-awareness of individuals’ roles and responsibilities within communities.”
- US Identities, which requires that students “explore communities, histories, and institutions within the United States to engage students in critical examination of their roles in American society.” This goes beyond SUNY requirements, since all students are required to take a course in this area (SUNY only requires that it be an option).
- World Cultures, which “explore communities, histories, and institutions outside the United States to engage students in critical examination of their roles in a global society.”

Beyond the Constitution Day activities described in the previous section, the development of Black Solidarity Day at SUNY Plattsburgh represents a significant commitment to civic engagement and demonstration of the potential for such programming to gain widespread buy-in among faculty, students, and administration. It is therefore auspicious for our efforts in the coming year (and beyond) to further engage the SUNY Plattsburgh community in the promotion of voting and other forms of civic engagement.

The most recent NSLVE student voting data from 2022 paints a mixed portrait. On one hand, our overall voting rate (20.5%) is below the national average of 30.6%, and it is even below the average for public institutions (31%). Further, while national data is not available in the 2022 report for comparison, the contrast between the rate at which students registered (72.7%) and the percentage of whom actually voted (28.2%) suggests a relatively low “yield” for Plattsburgh. Yet knowing this helps to identify the path forward, and we thus plan to consider whether increasing voter yield should be a particular objective to focus on for the coming year. Further, our campus voting rate actually increased modestly from the last midterm survey in 2018, which contrasts with the national trend downward from an average of 39% in 2018 to roughly 31% in 2022.

## **Goals**

Our central objective in the coming year will be recruitment of student leaders to spearhead voter mobilization efforts leading up to election day and to then help with other civic engagement events (e.g. invitation of guest speakers and deliberative dialogues around specific issues) beyond November. While student involvement on an ad hoc basis has been present in the past, our belief is that such efforts will be more productive and ultimately sustainable if students are involved in creating and coordinating these activities on an ongoing basis.

One of our first tasks, therefore, will be to identify student leaders we can recruit for these efforts. Members of one existing student group, the campus chapter of Bridge USA, should be easy to get involved in our efforts due to their existing focus on promoting civic dialog on campus. In addition, their faculty sponsor is Dr. Lake. We anticipate reaching out to other student organizations that are likely to have an existing interest in issues related to citizenship and civic

engagement, such as the Communication Studies honor society, Lambda Pi Eta. Its members are likely to be interested in being part of these efforts because it requires that its chapters engage in civically-oriented activities already. In addition, we have an existing connection to it since its faculty sponsor is Dr. Medeiros. The campus has a number of other student organizations likely to be interested in voter registration and civic engagement, such as Greek organizations. These often have service requirements for their members, and thus represent possible sources of student involvement.

To this end, we are already working with the campus Office of Institutional Effectiveness to distribute a survey to faculty and staff that solicits suggestions for groups or individuals who might be interested in participating in civic engagement work and gauges willingness of faculty and staff to promote such work in their professional domains. The survey results will be used to direct our inquiry toward particular campus offices, student organizations, and individual students about committing to sustained civic engagement leadership.

With our group of core student, faculty, and staff partners assembled, we will develop a set of campus activities that promote voting and civic engagement such as:

- Voter registration campaign materials graphic design contest
  - This idea would leverage the connection between our existing leadership and the Communication Studies Department, which houses a robust graphic design curriculum and media production internship program
- Establishment of dedicated social media accounts associated with our civic engagement group
  - One of our goals is to assess the existing social media presence of organizations and groups associated with our civic engagement efforts and to determine whether existing group accounts can be dedicated for public messaging on civic engagement activities or whether a new set of accounts will be created. In either case, it will also need to be determined who is responsible for the activity on such accounts. Following precedent from the Communication Studies Department, such work might become the purview of a recurring 1-credit internship for a student to gain work experience with social media communications in a professional context.
  - More specifically, it is our ambition to run several concerted social media messaging blitzes at strategic times in the election cycle, e.g. National Voter Registration Day, (September 17), or during the 72 hours before the New York State absentee ballot deadline. Such an approach heeds the organizing best practice of timing the messaging of voting awareness campaigns around significant events and including an imminent call to action, which is thought to increase participation and, ultimately, turnout.
  - Using metrics made available by the online platforms utilized, it will be possible to roughly estimate the engagement with such messaging and the rate at which they were shared. While we have no baseline metrics against which to measure increased success in this area, industry standards typically call for a target engagement rate of 1-5% (meaning the percentage of those who see a piece of

content that take some action to “engage” with it, e.g. comment, share, or like).<sup>1</sup>  
We place our goal for the coming year at the more modest lower end of this range.

- In conjunction with social media messaging, it is also our ambition to conduct two get-out-the-vote tabling sessions during significant campus events
  - Such efforts will be enhanced with distribution of the paraphernalia and informative materials generated by student design leaders. They will also link students to complementary online materials and follow typical social promotion protocols, e.g. encouraging them to make public pledges to vote or share with several friends.
  - These events can leverage our existing connection with the League of Women Voters, who have provided tabling assistance during past years, and other interested community members.
  - While such events might be timed to electorally significant dates in the same manner described for social media messaging, they might also be productively timed to coincide with civic events that are promoted at the university level, such as Constitution Day and Black Solidarity Day.
  
- Following the collection of the aforementioned survey data on faculty and staff perceptions and support for civic engagement, we will identify opportunities for student representatives to make announcements about voting information initiatives in classes or at organizational meetings. A tentative goal would be for at least 10 such announcements to be made.
  
- Voting information session at orientations
  - We plan to request the opportunity to hold voting information sessions as part of both the orientations for individual departments on campus and the university-wide orientation as well given the recent directive from SUNY central to incorporate civic engagement
  
- Work with the General Education Committee on identifying ways in which voter education initiatives can be intertwined with the way in which the new civic learning competency mandated by the SUNY General Education requirements is integrated into the Cardinal Core Curriculum at Plattsburgh.

---

<sup>1</sup><https://blog.hootsuite.com/calculate-engagement-rate/#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20good%20engagement,in%202022%20with%20177k%20followers.>