

# **Saint Mary's University of Minnesota**

## **Democratic Engagement Action Plan**

*“Someone struggled for your right to vote. Use it.”*

- Susan B. Anthony

### **I. Executive Summary**

In the recent past, students at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota have significantly increased their presence at the polls. Though the increase in the turnout among the student body is promising, we realize that the next step is continuing to grow participation. Looking ahead to the 2022 midterm elections and the 2024 presidential election, the College has created the Cardinals Count Committee to develop and implement a plan to sustain this trend in voter engagement. In developing and fulfilling this plan of action, the committee intends to foster civic education and reduce the barriers to political participation in a non-partisan manner. The plan centers on our undergraduate campus in Winona, MN

Saint Mary's seeks to nurture and empower students to ethical lives of services and leadership. Part of that commitment is the development of students who will be engaged in the civic life of their communities. With that mission in mind, we have several aggressive goals:

- Register 92% of undergraduate students
- Increase the turnout rate to 94% of registered students, for an overall turnout of 83%
- Engage in non-partisan programming to increase voter education, including development and dissemination a comprehensive guide for national, state, and local candidates
- Remove barriers to participation by assisting with absentee and mail-in voting, early voting, and student transportation to the polls and developing a flowchart to assist students with the registration process.

This action plan will begin during with fall 2022 and will continue through the 2024 elections. We will implement this plan through the leadership of the Cardinals Count Committee.

This Action Plan represents a snapshot in time and will be adjusted as necessary moving forward as we recognize the need to be creative and flexible.

## II. Leadership

Ann Merchlewitz, Senior Vice President and University Secretary, and Riley Hall, Vice President for Public Affairs of the Student Senate, will lead the university's work to increase nonpartisan civic learning and democratic engagement. They will be supported in this work by the Cardinals Count Committee. The committee is diverse and inclusive of representation from different parts of campus, including student leadership, representation from different perspectives and areas of expertise, and leaders who can help with outreach and power building by bringing more people across campus into our work. This wide representation from across campus will serve the university well.

The Cardinals Count Committee consists of the following individuals:

Students:

- Shamat Abraha '23, Minnesota (Student)
- Maria Flynn '23 (Student Senate / Class Officer)
- Sophia O'Neil '23 (Student Senate President)
- Joseph Schauf '23 (Student Senate Vice President for Financial Affairs)

Faculty:

- Carolyn Ayers, Ph.D., Professor, Language, Literature, and Culture
- Chris Bobier, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Theology and Philosophy
- David Lynch, Ph.D., Professor, Psychology and Social Sciences
- Lawrence Price, J.D., Associate Professor, Business and Communication
- Joseph Tadie, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Theology and Philosophy

Administration:

- Timothy Gossen, Ed.D., Vice President for Student Life
- Niki Peterson, Dean of Students

Our group plans to meet every two months over the lunch hour on the Winona campus.

The duties of the Cardinals Count Committee include the following:

- Reviewing appropriate voting data specific to Saint Mary's students and utilizing it to inform plans and decisions
- Working as a team to implement the voter engagement plan
- Contributing creative ideas to engage student populations currently underrepresented in the voting process
- Being a campus liaison with one or more of the following state or national college voting initiatives: ALL IN, Ask Every Student, LEAD MN, or the Campus Election Engagement Project
- Registering students to vote by utilizing National Voter Registration Day and Vote Early Day

- Planning and implementing non-partisan voter education resources, programs, and initiatives.

The committee will also partner with voting officials from the City of Winona and the County Elections Office to actively invite Saint Mary's students to be trained as poll judges and polling location assistants.

### **III. Commitment**

Saint Mary's mission statement promotes "awakening, nurturing, and empowering learners to ethical lives of service and leadership." Our Lasallian core values call for students to show concern for the poor and to advocate for social justice. The university is also guided by the Lasallian value of respect for all persons, especially when it comes to political beliefs. In recent years, Saint Mary's has demonstrated a strong commitment to civic engagement in the study body. The university's vision speaks to the transformation of individuals through an education that develops ethically-guided graduates leading their communities.

An avenue to achieve both this mission and vision is civic engagement, especially voting. This focus has translated to recent efforts to increase voter registration and voter turnout, especially in the 2020 election. In the months leading up to the election, the student presidents of both the College Democrats and College Republicans collaborated for a series on civil discourse. The duo encouraged students to engage in political discussion civilly and called upon the rest of the nation to do so as well in an MPR interview, a Minneapolis Star Tribune op-ed, and various other newspaper articles. The clubs also worked together to speak to classes and encourage students to register to vote and to request an absentee ballot. Together, these efforts have been successful in fostering civic engagement.

In addition, our commitment to inclusion and human dignity is an integral part of our Lasallian Catholic heritage and history, founded in the teachings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who created and led an inclusive, respectful community of teachers and learners committed to educational excellence and faith expressed through service. As noted in the "Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions and Hopes," distributed in 2020 by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we believe: "That another world is possible, and that education is a fundamental force for building it. Our educational perspective aims to build societies where peace, equity, social justice, civic participation, the raising up of common dreams, and respect for freedom and differences are possible. We visibly demonstrate our commitment to the building up of a more democratic and just society, as well as our option for an integral and sustainable human development that benefits everyone. To educate for peace is to educate for justice and solidarity."

Our commitment to civic engagement is also reflected in the Integratus general education program. Among other areas of study, the curriculum for that program is designed to help students grow in community engagement and social responsibility. Through these avenues, Saint Mary's hopes to foster a spirit of civic engagement in the student body.

Our commitment begins at the top. Our president, Father James P. Burns, is a significant advocate of voter engagement and civil discourse. He supports our efforts wholeheartedly and continues to foster a campus where students can engage in political discussion civilly.

## IV. Landscape

The civic engagement landscape at Saint Mary’s is very encouraging. In 2020, our voting rate was 77.2%. Voter participation rates rose 5.2% from the 2016 election. In the 2018 election cycle, without the added benefit of a presidential election, the College had nearly a 62% voting rate.

We benefit from being close in proximity to a local polling location, Radiant Church which is next door to campus. Minnesota laws and landscape also allow for early voting, mail-in voting, and day-of registration. We encourage students to consider alternative forms of voting that do not require a mass of Cardinals to be physically present at the polls on election day.

The following tables provide a brief overview of the landscape of our campus.

### Enrollment by student level and full- and part-time status: Fall 2020

Undergraduate	Graduate	Full Time	Part Time
1,329	3,823	21.00%	79.00%

### Residence of first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates: Fall 2020

In-State	Out-of-State	International Students
57%	42%	1%

### Enrollment by gender all students: Fall 2020

Men	Women
33%	67%

### Percent all student enrolled by age: Fall 2020

18-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49	50-54
26.5%	20.7%	15.5%	11.6%	16.3%	7.4%

### Percent of all students enrolled, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2020

Asian	American Indian / Alaska Native	Black	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	White	2 or More Races
4%	1%	8%	7%	0%	66%	0%

Our institution has also utilized the following data gathering tools:

- National Survey of Student Engagement

It helps to inform our institution's civic learning and democratic engagement efforts by assessing student engagement.

### NSLVE Data

Year	2016	2018	2020
Registration Rate	84.4%	83.8%	86.9%
Voting Rate of Registered Students	85.4%	73.5%	88.8%
Voting Rate	72.0%	61.6%	77.2%

Our most recent NSLVE data does indicate some gaps, most notably lower percentages of voters among students who are identified as Black (65%) and Asian (62%). We are committed to working with student organizations, the Vice President for Inclusion and Human Dignity, and the Student Senate Vice President for Multicultural Affairs to increase this turnout. This area will be a focus for us this year, with a goal of growing both percentages at least 10%.

We already have a reasonable number of voters who exercised their absentee ballot option in 2020, with 59% of our voters voting this way. This is good to build on, as we will publicize this option even more this year.

## V. Goals

Before setting our civic learning and democratic engagement goals on campus, we took the following information into consideration.

We know our campus faces the following challenges internally when it comes to get out the vote efforts and registering voters:

- We do not have processes in place for registering large percentages of our students.
- We do not have ways in which we communicate voting information to our students.

With that said, we know our campus has the following strengths when we approach our voter engagement work:

- We have a coalition of people who are positioned to implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- We use the resources readily available to develop and implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- The voter engagement work on our campus is distributed throughout many offices and areas of expertise.
- Voter engagement efforts on campus are nonpartisan.
- We are able to engage student leaders for the leadership of our initiative.
- We have a working relationship with our local election office.

Because we believe that civic engagement is embedded in the fabric and mission of our institution, the Cardinals Count Committee elected to set aggressive goals for the 2022 election cycle. We feel confident about the positive strides we have made in increased registrations and increased voting, but we also believe that with an organized committee and the structures suggested by ALL IN, we are well positioned to set goals that stretch us. While we may not meet all our goals, the committee decided it was appropriate for us to aim high.

With this in mind, we have set four goals that we would like to achieve over the next academic year:

- Student registration rate: 92%
- Voting rate of registered students: 94%
- Grow voter turnout for Black populations and Asian populations by 10% each
- Overall student voting rate: 83%

We have also set three goals that we would like to achieve over the next five years:

- Develop systems to sustain voter registration and voting efforts over the years so that we have consistency in our efforts.
- Work with faculty to regularize civic engagement in general education courses.
- Work to have Student Senate adopt voter registration and voting as goals for each year.
- Embed voter registration in New Student Orientation
- Work with faculty to create a placeholder in their curriculum regarding civic engagement and voting

## **VI. Strategy**

Below, we have outlined a series of strategies describing how we will bring this vision to life in the coming months and years.

### *Strategies for Voter Registration*

- Involve multiple campus organizations to increase student participation
- Engage with all of the politically affiliated student organizations and ask them to name a representative to the Cardinals Count Committee

- Have key offices and the Student Senate sponsor events

#### *Strategies for Voter Education*

- Engage students across the political ideological spectrum
- Develop a website for our voter education materials, including our action plan
- Host debate watch parties
- Logistics and educational efforts
- Increase the understanding of our systems and civic engagement
- Disseminate a voting guide highlighting major issues and where the candidates stand on each issue
- Research and educate on local Winona ballot candidates and issues

#### *Strategies for Outreach and Partnership*

- Sponsor activities that highlight the college's commitment to the importance of voter education beyond the current student population
- Work with the City of Winona to encourage student participation as polling judges and assistants
- Seek to host more candidates and debates on campus
- Partner with Minnesota agencies to facilitate voter trainings for interested students and Saint Mary's employees.

#### *Strategies for Removing Logistical and Knowledge Barriers*

- Resolve transportation issues
- Have a shuttle running between campus and Radiant Church during the common hour as well as during the dinner hour
- Assist students with registration and voting
- Help students determine if they are or are not registered to vote
- Have the first-year courses embed voter registration into the Integratus curriculum
- Utilize various communication platforms to inform students of registering to vote and voting (early/absentee or in person)

#### *Strategies for Student Senate*

- Create a simple flow chart for all students with steps for voting options.
- Include information and encouragement for absentee/mail in ballots and early voting options on social media
- Provide out-of-state student information and assistance
- Utilize resources from [allintovote.org](http://allintovote.org)

#### *Long-term Strategies (Beyond Fall 2022)*

- Embed voter registration in New Student Orientation
- Work with faculty to create a placeholder in their curriculum regarding civic engagement and voting

These are tactics that we **are already doing** in the **short term** (within the next year):

- Engage students across the political ideological spectrum
- Work with the City of Winona to encourage student participation as polling judges and assistants
- Have a shuttle running between campus and our polling place during the common hour as well as during the dinner hour
- Assist students with registration and voting
- Provide information and encouragement for absentee/mail in ballots and early voting options
- Help students determine if they are or are not registered to vote

These are tactics that we **plan to do** in the **short term**:

- Involve multiple campus organizations to increase student participation
- Engage with all of the politically affiliated student organizations and ask them to name a representative to the Cardinals Count Committee
- Have key offices and the Student Senate sponsor events
- Develop a website for our voter education materials, including our action plan
- Research and educate on local Winona ballot candidates and issues

These are tactics that we **hope to do** in the **short term**:

- Disseminate a voting guide highlighting major issues and where the candidates stand on each issue
- Host debate watch parties
- Seek to host more candidates and debates on campus
- Partner with Minnesota agencies to facilitate voter trainings for interested students and Saint Mary's employees
- Create a simple flow chart for all students with steps for voting options

These are tactics that we **want to do** in the **long term**: Embed voter registration in New Student Orientation

These are tactics that we **hope to do** in the **long term**: Ask faculty to create a placeholder in their curriculum regarding civic engagement and voting

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

Our campus has access to our National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data for 2020. In 2020, our registration rate was 86.9%. In comparison to the data from four years prior in our NSLVE report, this rate increased.

In 2020, our voting rate was 77.2% and our voting rate among registered students was 88.8%. During that year, our voting rate was higher than the national average.

In our NSLVE report, we had racial data for the following groups:

- Asian: 62% voted
- American Indian / Alaska Native: 69% voted
- Black: 65% voted
- Hispanic: 72% voted
- White: 81% voted
- 2 or More Races: 69% voted

For the racial groups that have recent voter turnout data, we saw the following groups increase in voter turnout compared to four years ago.

- Hispanic
- White
- 2 or More Races

## **VIII. Reporting & Evaluation**

We plan to share this Action Plan internally when it is complete by taking the following actions:

- Email to members of our campus coalition
- Email to campus administration
- Email to the President
- Share in Today (daily newsletter)

We plan to share this Action Plan externally when it is complete by taking the following actions:

- Post it on the university's website

We also plan to do the following to make our plans, data, and reports public:

- Create a comprehensive website for our voter education materials, NSLVE data, and action plan
- Create a poster infographic with main points and a QR code leading students to our voting website with more detailed information
- Send an email to students with a link to the website mentioned above.
- Partner with political student organizations and professors and classes to promote the website to their students
- Grant permission for the ALL IN Challenge and NASPA (Voter Friendly Campus) to publish our data and action plan
- Work with our Marketing and Communication office to create press releases about our efforts for internal and external use
- Borrow other popular campus social media accounts (Student Senate, Student Activities Committee, Saint Mary's, etc.) to disseminate information

We will collect feedback on this plan by regrouping with the Cardinals Count Committee to debrief and reflect.

We plan to evaluate our success by:

- Reviewing our NSLVE data and looking for improvements year over year
- Tracking participation in programming
- Disseminating a short survey to determine the value of the programming and what students learned
- Engaging students across the political ideological spectrum for programming
- Asking various political clubs to be involved and report count of their members
- Reviewing the number of voter guides distributed or viewed (online)
- Seeking out feedback throughout the action planning process from people outside of our action planning team
- Revisiting our goals, identifying goals achieved and not achieved, and adjusting our short and long-term goals accordingly

Our plan will be continually evaluated and revised throughout the upcoming months leading up to the fall elections. Following the election in 2022, our key leaders and contributors will reevaluate and perform a thorough and comprehensive review of this Action Plan and our efforts, making notes and revisions for future years.

## **Appendix A: Tactics and Timeline**

### **May-June-July**

Request creation of a “brand” for this initiative

Submit graphics request for items:

- Door hangers
- Social media posts
- Posters
- Stickers

Develop a website with information, materials, events, contacts, etc.

### **August**

Ask key offices to sponsor or co-sponsor events

Become familiar with allintovote.org and its uses

Communicate with faculty about including election engagement in courses

During orientation/welcome week, hold a voter registration event

### **September**

Have a voter registration booth at the club fair

Hold a register to vote contest

Promote National Voter Registration Day on 9/22. If we become a partner campus we can get posters & stickers.

Provide education around logistics and deadlines for pre-registration

Utilize the students on the committee to work on the implementation of the voting plan

Seek out visit and debate opportunities with candidates

Promote early voting opportunities, absentee or in person

Begin social media campaign

### **October**

Speak in classes on the importance of voting and explain how to register and request an absentee ballot

Promote “Vote Early” day on 10/24

Host debate watch parties

Continue social media posts (student to manage content)

Create a big bulletin board with registration information until deadline and then election/candidate information

Begin tabling with information on registering and the candidates

Distribute a non-partisan voter guide, including local ballot issues & candidates.

### **November**

Provide shuttles on election day

### **Miscellaneous ideas**

Use “All in to Vote” tool as a one-stop-shop for all students despite their situation

Create special email communications to out of state students and in-state students

Host a panel of faculty to discuss the importance of voting  
Continue civil discourse series

## **Key Dates**

May 13: online absentee ballot application opens

August 25: new student move-in, Orientation begins

September 23: early voting period begins in MN (absentee ballot or in person)

September 20: National Voter Registration Day

September 23-25: Family Weekend

October 28: Vote Early Day

November 7: early voting period ends in MN

November 8: ELECTION DAY