

# SHSU - Action Plan

## I. Executive Summary (Overview)

This action plan was developed by Dr. Steven D. Koether, American Democracy Project Director at Sam Houston State University (SHSU). This plan outlines the civic engagement goals for the SHSU American Democracy Project for the 2024-2026 academic year. The goals include 1) building an ADP team, 2) initiating a university-wide civic engagement speaker series, 3) expanding deliberative dialogue training and events, 4) growing voter education and engagement, and 5) evaluating political learning and engagement.

The plan will be led by the SHSU American Democracy Project (a component of the SHSU Center for Community Engagement) and representative collaborations across SHSU and with community stakeholders. The ADP Action Plan embodies the values set forth by the SHSU Strategic Plan (i.e. student success and support, inclusiveness, and community engagement). By fostering civic engagement on campus, we aim to prepare students for meaningful roles in their communities beyond Sam Houston. Providing civic education enables praxis; students can take their learning from theoretical to practical. Our work is inclusive in that we strive to work with the full breadth of our student body, from in-person and online, from various demographics and backgrounds to the multiple locations students engage with SHSU.

Sam Houston State University comprises three campuses: 1) Main campus in Huntsville, Texas; 2) The Woodlands Center in The Woodlands, Texas; and 3) The College of Osteopathic Medicine in Conroe, Texas. The ADP office and team will integrate our work and services for all three campuses.

The plan will be updated every 3 years and uploaded to the ALL-IN website. The plan is, and will continue to be, based on SHSU community input and feedback from holistic evaluation (*based on a modified mixed methods IDHE model*) and leadership team direction.

Short-Term Goals: Growing our ADP office, beginning the speaker series, growing training programs for deliberative dialogues, and growing voter education.

Long-Term Goals: Integration of ADP work across centers/departments across the university, integrating deliberative dialogues into the university culture and practice, and shifting voter focus from mere registration and voter education to helping students (and the university) with long-term planning and intentionality with endeavors.

## II. Leadership (Coalition)

The SHSU Center for Community Engagement (CCE) is committed to promoting community partnerships, initiatives, and research that enhance student learning and meet community needs. The CCE also aims to strengthen the experiential understanding and commitment of our students to civic engagement. In so doing, the SHSU CCE houses the American Democracy Project (ADP). The CCE is

guided by a team of [CCE staff](#), [student leaders](#), [ACE faculty Coordinators](#), and a [community advisory board](#).

### **Team Leadership & Responsibilities**

Ms. Meira Wegmann will be coordinating the SHSU ADP work outlined within this plan under the supervision of Dr. Steven D. Kother (Director), Dr. Joyce McCauley (CCE Executive Director), and Dr. Lee Miller (CCE Director), with guidance and support from the larger CCE team, SHSU Student Affairs (Success and Involvement), the SHSU Student Government Association, and various university and community organizations. Should the ADP Director be unable to lead this plan, Dr. Miller (CCE Director) will take his place. Steven will coordinate and manage the SHSU ADP team (program coordinator, graduate assistant, and student workers) to accomplish the goals outlined in this action plan. In addition to the ADP team, Steven will work with a university coalition (below) to ensure transparency and collaboration.

Mr. Brandon Cooper (Student Success Officer) will be the liaison between the CCE and Student Success. Dr. Chelsea Smith (Dean of Students) will serve in his place should Mr. Cooper be unable to perform these duties.

Ms. Emily Figueroa (Associate Director of Student Involvement) will be the liaison between the CCE and Student Involvement. Dr. Meredith Conrey (Director of Student Involvement) will serve in her place, should Ms. Figueroa be unable to conduct these duties.

Mr. Jared Scott (Student Government President) will serve as the liaison between the CCE and Student Involvement. Ms. Maria Rojas-Caballero (Vice President) will serve in his place, should Mr. Scott be unable to conduct his immediate duties. Should a new vice president be elected, the newly elected vice president will serve in this role.

In addition to this team, efforts will be made to engage underrepresented areas, including: academic departments, athletic teams, politically affiliated student organizations, cultural and identity-based student organizations, career and major affiliated student organizations, Greek life, and the Student Government Association. Efforts will be multifaceted, involving both administration in these areas and creative student recruitment strategies (i.e. Motivote gamified involvement, team competitions, tabling, programming, etc.)

The ADP team will meet weekly, the CCE partners will meet monthly, and the larger coalition will meet four-five times annually.

### **III. Commitment**

The SHSU motto is, “the measure of a life is its service.” The SHSU community fully embraces this motto through its actions and commitments. The recently created SHSU strategic plan includes values espousing service and community engagement. In alignment with this plan, SHSU leadership created and appointed a new Associate Provost for Community Engagement position.

SHSU is one of the 119 U.S. colleges and universities chosen to receive the 2020 Carnegie Community

Engagement Classification, an elective designation that indicates institutional commitment to community engagement. This designation includes civic engagement as an integral component to community engagement. This honor marks the second time SHSU has received an official designation from the foundation.

Dr. Kenneth Hendrickson (Associate Provost of Community Engagement & Dean of Graduate Studies) signed a commitment to include SHSU as a participating university with the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge requires participating institutions to engage in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). The University will use the results of the NSLVE report to inform university-wide civic engagement and voter participation outreach.

In addition, Dr. Mike Stephenson (SHSU Provost) signed a commitment with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) American Democracy Project in 2024. The SHSU CCE team has also secured funding from the Houston Endowment to improve civic engagement from 2024 to 2026. As part of this agreement, SHSU ADP collaborates with Campus Vote Project to improve voter education. Funding from the Houston Endowment will also enable the SHSU ADP team to hire support staff and complete its goals.

The ADP team will grow from a single part-time coordinator with two ADP fellows, to include a full-time program coordinator, a graduate assistant, and five student workers. The ADP team will meet weekly to plan and assess programming associated with the goals in this action plan. The ADP Coordinator will meet with CCE leadership monthly to ensure alignment and further develop the university's commitment to civic engagement. The ADP Coordinator will meet with the university coalition monthly to ensure transparency and collaboration.

While voter registration and voting rates will be quantified using the NSLVE data from Tufts University, the university has purchased a phone application, Motivote, to help ADP track participation at events throughout the year.

## **IV. Landscape**

SHSU is a nationally recognized regional comprehensive R2 research institution serving the suburban and rural regions from Houston to Dallas/Fort Worth. Eight colleges serve 21,000+ students who are earning one of over 90 bachelor's degrees, 55 master's degrees, or 11 doctoral degrees. SHSU has been a minority-serving institution since 2020 and was designated a Hispanic Serving Institution in 2022. The students at SHSU are as diverse as the state it serves: 27.8% are Hispanic, 16.6% are Black or African American, 2.9% are Asian, 3.3% identify as multiracial, and 46.2% are White.

Every year more than half of graduates are the first in their families to earn a postsecondary degree. Institutional IPEDS reports indicate that most of our students work either full- or part-time while enrolled, and almost all (84% of undergraduates) rely on some form of financial aid assistance, through loans (50% of undergraduates), PELL grants (40% of undergraduates), and/or work-study. Even with these financial obstacles, graduates of SHSU use their degrees to transform their lives and the lives of their families. U.S. News & World Report now includes social mobility in its rankings of national colleges and universities based upon graduation rates of PELL-eligible students. According to this analysis, SHSU is ranked first in Texas and 26th nationally in social mobility. Even with these successes, there is work to be done. For instance, only 56% of PELL recipients earned a degree from SHSU within six years, contributing to a sizeable number of students leaving without a degree and burdened with student loan debt.

While voting rates are at or below national averages, university registration and voting rates continue to

rise. SHSU was awarded a silver seal from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge in 2020 and 2018.



SHSU continually receives data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) housed at the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University. This data gives colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates. The feedback given allows leadership in the CCE better to understand the university climate for political learning and engagement.

We have access to 2022, 2020, 2018, and 2016 NSLVE reports. In 2020 the SHSU student registration rate was 83.3%. In 2020, our voting rate was 59.5% and our voting rate among registered students was 71.4%. During this year, our voting rate was below the national average. Additional measures include:

1. Voter turnout increased for all racial/ethnicity groups in 2020, compared to 2016.
2. There was a significant increase in early voting at 82% (from 69% in 2016 and 67% in 2018).
3. The greatest increase by age group was with 18-21 year old voters with a 21% increase (from 36% in 2016, 30% in 2018, and 58% in 2020).

While the SHSU community has many strengths (commitment to service, open to new teaching practices, and desire to increase campus-wide engagement), according to our [2018-2019 campus climate evaluation](#), we do have some internal challenges to contend with:

1. Culture of Conflict Avoidance
2. Lack of Political Learning/Engagement
3. Lack of Institutional Transparency, Communication, and/or Collaboration
4. Lack of Mechanisms for Discussion/Deliberation
5. Slow to Institutionalize Inclusivity

External factors to consider when engaging in civic education programming might entail regional policies, practices, and laws. For example, students often do not know they must register to vote 30 or more days

before an election or which voter IDs are acceptable. To address this, we will include this information as part of our education events and in our communications.

## V. Goals & Strategies (Description of Work)

The goals include 1) building an ADP team, 2) initiating a university-wide civic engagement speaker series, 3) expanding deliberative dialogue training and events, 4) growing voter education and engagement, and 5) evaluating political learning and engagement.

### Goals

**1) Building ADP Team.** The CCE would like to strengthen and expand the coordination and evaluation of civic engagement at SHSU. To achieve this, we will hire a Civic Engagement Program Coordinator, Graduate Assistant, and student workers. The Civic Engagement Program Coordinator will oversee all the components of the Civic Engagement Program (speaker series, deliberative dialogues, and university-wide voter education) as well as the work of the graduate assistant and student workers. The Civic Engagement Graduate Assistant will aid in the coordination, implementation, event planning, maintenance of social media/advertisement and mentoring of student workers. The Civic Engagement Student Workers will set up, run, and break down civic engagement events across the three SHSU campuses and online.

**2) Speaker Series.** A new Speaker Series will be developed and delivered five months out of the school year to allow for holidays and breaks (September, October, February, March, and April). Speakers will be brought to SHSU who can generate interest from multiple disciplines and address topics of interest associated with civic engagement (building a culture of democracy, voter education, current policy and/or expertise associated with deliberative dialogues).

The speakers will be recorded. Recordings will be uploaded for additional viewing from students not attending the live sessions. These sessions will be available through the university learning management program (Blackboard) and Motivote (phone application) making them accessible to all SHSU students, staff, and faculty at the main Huntsville campus as well as The Woodlands Center and College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Although the focus of these speaker sessions will be on substantive issues associated with civic engagement, the ultimate goal will be for students to gain a larger context of how to engage in and learn from dialogues across division and/or political divides and, engage in policies - change through electoral feedback.

As part of this process, attendees will be randomly selected for post-event focus groups, which will be facilitated by an external facilitator. There will be two focus groups held per year (Fall and Spring) with about 36 students participating for the first two years of the Civic Engagement Program.

The outside facilitators are skilled at not introducing bias, not allowing certain members of the focus groups to overwhelm or intimidate or influence other members, delving into deeper themes or understandings than even the participants may be aware of, and compiling the results into a

rich but manageable format. The data compiled by the focus group facilitators relate to the educational component of this program by assessing what students learned from the speaker series. They will not introduce bias, which will allow for more valid assessments.

**3) Expand Deliberative Dialogues.** Deliberative Dialogues (DD) provides participants with a chance to come together across differences, to tackle seeming intractable problems. Such problems are ones that have many stakeholders, involve many nuanced variables, and have no easy solutions. DDs are the opposite of debate and come well before. The objective is not to eliminate the need for debate, rather to call for our community to understand problems, hear from stakeholders, and evaluate data before fully committing to a path forward, a vote, or a conclusion.

The purposes of deliberation are to seek an understanding of a problem, search for common ground and shared values, find blind spots, challenge assumptions, critically think, share lived experiences, and work toward a plan of action. DDs can occur in one-time celebratory events, in the classroom, in meetings, on-campus, or out in the community.

Dialogues are led by trained faculty, staff, and student moderators. Dialogues are then framed by classroom curriculum and/or an issue guide (e.g., National Issues Forum). Participants work through the issue by considering various forms of information (e.g., empirical data and lived experiences). Participants typically examine the benefits, costs, consequences, and tradeoffs proposed.



Moderators are integral to the DD process. Moderators must be trained to facilitate small groups in using an issue discussion guide that frames the issue by presenting the overall problem and then three (or more) broad approaches to address it. Moderators remain neutral and non-partisan, keep the deliberation on track, remind the group about the rules of engagement, and encourage participants to identify shared values and find common ground.

Sam Houston State University is a participant in the American Democracy Project through the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). The Center for Community Engagement would like to grow its work with DD beyond one-time celebratory events, through intentional integration into the university and community culture. We believe this can be achieved through bringing professional development to admin, faculty, staff, students, and associated community members across all SHSU campuses and departments (Main Campus, The Woodlands Center, and the College of Osteopathic Medicine). SHSU plans to increase the number of trained DD facilitators to 85 and DD moderators to well over 600 over three years.

The DD Facilitator training consists of a 3-day experiential, hands-on, professional development:

a) Day 1 will focus on the experience, purpose, and definitions of DD, b) Day 2 will entail the application, management, and creation of DD, and c) Day 3 culminates with participants leading a deliberative dialogue in their own setting. Costs associated with Facilitator Training include materials, promotional items, room reservations for training events, food during the events, and stipends for those who participates.

Participants for the Moderator Training will largely be recruited by participants completing the Deliberative Dialogue Facilitator training. Moderator training consists of a 2-hour, experiential, professional development. Should participants wish to learn more, they will be able to opt into earning a Moderator Certificate completing 'Perspectives' as well. Perspectives is an online series of modules, created and hosted by the Constructive Dialogue Institute, that explore the psychological roots of ideological differences. Participants who both complete moderator training and the Perspectives modules will earn CCE Moderator Certification. We expect to award 350 by the end of the program.

Initial, and continued, measures of success for the development and implementation of Deliberative Dialogue programs will be measured by the number of events, degree of collaboration across the university, number of participants at events, shifts in participant attitudes toward dialogue across differences, and likelihood to engage in civic activities (voting, policy discussion, continued dialogue). Participant attitudinal and likelihood data (mentioned above) will be collected via survey. Survey data will be gathered using digital surveys. Student participants will be asked to participate at the end of events and training. Data will be evaluated each semester to guide future planning and training.

**4) University-Wide Voter Education.** While course-based voter education found in introductory political science courses is critical, we believe such endeavors can be supported and must be supplemented by extra-curricular learning. In addition, course-based voter education mostly occurs in introductory common core courses that predominantly serve undergraduate students. This strategy can educate a significant number of students but does not include graduate or transfer students. It is also important to consider that learning takes consistent, repeated exposure and practice. Extra-curricular engagement with voter education can bolster classroom learning.

To improve extra-curricular voter education, and reach a broader SHSU audience, the CCE, Civic Engagement Program Coordinator, graduate assistant, and student workers will plan and execute voter education opportunities and events (such as ice cream socials, pizza and politics discussions, tabling, democracy walls, games to learn representatives and voter responsibilities, student perspective taking, engagement videos, etc.). They will also use the Motivote phone platform to encourage voter education, grow the university-wide 'Voter Education Collaborative', and attend state/national civic engagement meetings (Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting and the Texas Voting Summit) to grow collaborative efforts and learn additional/best practices for voter education.

Sam Houston State University participates in the Tufts University National Study on Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). Our NSLVE data would also be used to identify areas university-wide with lower voter and voter registration. Based on this data, we will grow intentional collaborations with departments and department-specific student organizations to engage students in voter education events, the speaker series (component 1), and deliberative dialogues (component 2).

This initiative would begin with newly arriving freshmen students attending our Bearkat Kickoff events and athletics in year 1 and would expand to the entire university by year 3. The Motivate application can be used to engage students in attending the speaker series (component 1), deliberative dialogues (component 2), voter education events (component 3), and more.

Continued engagement with the larger student body will be evaluated each semester for success through engagement with the Motivate application (completion of tasks for points). A dispositional survey will be deployed within a controlled group of students with access to the Motivate application to evaluate students self-reported perceptions, after engaging with programming, on whether they feel changed attitudes about the topic discussed, qualitative revelations about the topic discussed, gained knowledge of the voting process, improved attitudes toward the political process, improved attitudes about their ability to vote, and if they are more likely to vote.

SHSU acquired two Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows (typically work-study) in the fall of 2023. Fellows will not be are not funded with Houston Endowment funds. The fellows would, however, work synergistically with the CCE to table and be at events, enabling participants the ability to register to vote should they so choose.

**5) Internal Assessment.** An internal evaluator coalition of seven (7) individuals will derive from a representative array of stakeholders across the university (i.e., administrators, faculty, staff, students). The coalition follow the protocol outlined by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) - American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) to Assess and Improve Political Learning and Engagement on Campus (AIPLEC).

This evaluation will provide both quantitative/qualitative assessments of the SHSU civic culture. Topics addressed in the assessment include the structures, norms, human characteristics, and/or political forces that promote or inhibit university climates for political learning and engagement. The coalition will investigate and quantify university structures, norms, and practices. They will also conduct qualitative analyses (focus groups) of political learning and engagement of students (graduate/undergraduate), faculty, staff, and administration. From experience, some administrators may request interviews to maintain confidentiality. Coalition members will record the focus groups/interviews, take field notes, and complete a rubric reflecting the perspectives of participants. The data will then be analyzed using a protocol developed by IDHE (based on seven years of prior research on political campus climates). The coalition will analyze, discuss, and organize the data to construct a final university report. The report will be member-checked with representative demographics and used to inform future programming.

## **VI. Timeline**

### **Short Term Goals** (year one)

2024 Goals:

- Hire a Civic Engagement Program Coordinator to oversee the Civic Engagement Program and program staff (graduate assistant and student workers).
- Hire a Civic Engagement Graduate Assistant to aid in the development and management of the Civic Engagement Program.
- Hire five student employees to run events (speaker series, assist with deliberative dialogue



events and training, voter education programming).

- Establish Speaker Series with five speakers from multiple disciplines and topics.
- Hire external consultant to facilitate two focus groups (one in Fall and one in Spring) to assess results of the Speaker Series.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Facilitator Training for at least 10 faculty/staff/administrators.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Moderator training for 100 newly recruited participants.
- Purchase the use of Motivate software to track Civic Engagement Programming (all three components).
- Work with athletics, student organizations, Greek life, and low voter turn-out academic organizations/departments to engage with Motivate as a tool for documenting voter education involvement.
- Trips to other campuses to incorporate voter education events a minimum of 5 times a year.
- Trips to civic engagement meetings to learn best practices, share our work, and improve programming.

### **Long Term Goals** (subsequent 2 years)

2025 Goals:

- Continue Speaker Series after evaluation of previous year's series.
- Use external consultant to facilitate two focus groups (one in Fall and one in Spring) to assess results of the Speaker Series.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Facilitator Training for at least 25 faculty/staff/administration.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Moderator training for 200 newly recruited participants.
- Work with political science, deliberative dialogues facilitator/moderator training participants to engage with Motivate as a tool for documenting voter education involvement.
- Trips to other campuses to incorporate voter education events a minimum of 5 times a year.
- Trips to civic engagement meetings to learn best practices, share our work, and improve programming.
- Formulate Internal Evaluator Coalition (for 2026) to onboard, train, and begin the IRB process.

2026 Goals:

- Continue Speaker Series with a more developed program from previous year's results.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Facilitator Training for a minimum of 50 faculty/staff/administration.
- Provide Deliberative Dialogues Moderator training for 300 newly recruited participants.
- Work to grow participation with Voter Education programming with untapped organizations and departments across the three campuses.
- Trips to other campuses to incorporate voter education events a minimum of 5 times a year.
- Conduct Internal Evaluation (AIPLEC) across the three campuses. Analyze, discuss, and organize the resultant data to identify themes and findings. Create and disseminate a university climate report to all stakeholder groups.
- Trips to civic engagement meetings to learn best practices, share our work, and improve programming.
- Improve/Increase voter engagement by 10%+ during the presidential elections (4 yr) and 5%+ for non-presidential elections (2 yr) based on NLSVE reports.

## VII. Reporting & Evaluation

The specific metrics SHSU will monitor to determine the success of the Civic Engagement Program's short-term goals include the documentation of event and participant numbers, focus group evaluations of the Speaker Series, participant perceptions (surveys) of programming topics/endeavors, and participants' self-reported likelihood of continued civic engagement (deliberative dialogues, voter registration, voting). Long-term goals will be evaluated based on voter registration and voting rates (NLSVE), a comprehensive internal evaluation of SHSU political learning and engagement (AIPLEC), as well as an external evaluation of programming.

It is important to note that the Internal Evaluation of SHSU political learning and engagement (AIPLEC) at the end of this three-year program will be a repeated effort, allowing us to see if we have improved the university civic culture. The analysis requires the CCE to create an Internal Evaluator Coalition of seven individuals deriving from a representative array of stakeholders across the university. The coalition will then follow the protocol outlined by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) - American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE).

This evaluation will provide both quantitative/qualitative assessments of the SHSU civic culture. Topics addressed in the assessment include the structures, norms, human characteristics, and/or political forces that promote or inhibit university climates for political learning and engagement. The coalition will investigate and quantify university structures, norms, and practices. They will also conduct qualitative analyses (focus groups) of political learning and engagement of students (graduate/undergraduate), faculty, staff, and administration. From experience, some administrators may request interviews to maintain confidentiality. Coalition members will record the focus groups/interviews, take field notes, and complete a rubric reflecting the perspectives of participants. The data were coded using protocol developed by IDHE based on seven years of prior research on political campus climates. The coalition will analyze, discuss, and organize the data to construct a final university report. The report will be member-checked with representative demographics and used to inform future programming. Past evaluations catalyzed university-wide changes for the individuals that participated in the AIPLEC process. The selection of this collaborative has the potential to shape university-wide leadership practices and conversations.

Short-term goals will be evaluated annually, and results will be reported to the ADP team, administration, and our coalition. Long-term goals will be evaluated via the three-year assessment by an external evaluator. Results from this evaluation will be shared with the SHSU Community via the CCE website and through strategic member checks (i.e. deliberations on the results).