



## **Civic Engagement, Tarleton State University, ALL IN, and the American Democracy Project – 2024/2025.**

**Executive Summary:** The purpose of the 2024 Action Plan is to build on the momentum of existing endeavors to increase civic learning, civic and democratic engagement and participation. In addition, some ambitious goals to increase voter participation among students will be undertaken for this presidential election year. These plans are mainly grounded in the College of Liberal and Fine Arts in the Department of Government, Legal Studies and Philosophy. However, all plans are developed in close cooperation with the Center for Educational Excellence, the office of Student Engagement and Success, and with the full support of the President's and Provost's Offices on the Stephenville, Texas campus.

This year marks a decade since the beginnings of strategic efforts to track improvements. One of the largest challenges has been to implement a comprehensive plan to integrate curriculum, student life, faculty development, and community-building initiatives. The goal for this 2024/2025 school year is to improve the campus climate for political learning and to better connect with the City of Stephenville, Texas and the surrounding region. Thankfully, there has been measurable incremental growth every year in voter registration drives, non-partisan election information centers, and candidate and issues information sessions.

The main focus is on the Stephenville campus with some expansion to our other campuses of the University, especially the Fort Worth, Texas campus as that location grows. Along with the expansion of programs to other Tarleton campuses, opportunities to collaborate with other universities in the region are continuously explored. The working group represents a wide range from, Academic Affairs, Student Engagement and Success, The Dick Smith University Library, The Center for Educational Excellence, The College of Liberal and Fine Arts, The Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy, The Department of History, Sociology, Geography, and GIS, The Department of Communication Studies. We were able to utilize the resources from Students Learn Students Vote, NASPA, NSLVE, Engaged Scholarship Consortium, Campus Compact, and our county election offices.

**Coalition:** The administration on campus is growing and changing under the leadership of a new president. With President Hurley's leadership, much of the campus structures have been reorganized to streamline communication and cooperation amongst stake-holders. The working group saw major changes and challenges as well. We have partnered with our County Elections Officer for voter registration on campus. A goal for the upcoming year is to involve the on-campus student government more in the Working Group planning sessions. The plan is to recruit members of the student government as well as members from fraternity and sorority life to increase outreach to students. The 2024/2025 working group contains the following. Additionally, the University has very recently created a Community Engagement Council with members from all facets of campus. The first goal of the Council will be to submit our recertification application for our existing Carnegie Classification. However, the plan is for the Council to continue indefinitely to address campus to community connections and ensure a succession plan. The communities identified are on the local, state, and national levels which would include voter participation.

**Administration:**

- Aimee Shouse, Acting Dean of the College of Liberal and Fine Arts.
- Lesley Leach, Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and Development.
- Diana Ortega-Feerick, Vice President for the Division of Student Engagement and Success

**Faculty:**

- Amy O'Dell, Department Head of Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy.
- Christopher Gearhart, Department Head of Communication Studies.
- Marcie Reynolds, Assistant Professor of Political Science. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy.
- Eric Morrow, Associate Professor of Political Science. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy. American Democracy Project Steering Committee Member.
- Casey Thompson, Assistant Professor of Legal Studies. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy. American Democracy Project Coordinator.
- Bolek Kabala, Assistant Professor of Political Science. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy. Town Hall Coordinator.
- Gary Douglass, Instructor of Political Science. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy.
- Andrew Anderson, Instructor of Political Science. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy.
- Winston Dawson, Communication Studies and Texan Debate Coordinator.
- Callie Price, Department of Biological Sciences and Sense of Place Coordinator.

**Student Life:**

- Campus Student Government
- The Legal Studies Organization
- A goal of the 2024/2025 year is to incorporate voter registration into the fall orientations.

**Commitment:** We remain committed to increasing civic learning and democratic engagement through our long-term plans and investments. The new administration in the Office of the President has endorsed and committed to improving civic learning, our campus climate, and democratic engagement of students. This has included a recommitment to the NSLVE this year by the President. The focus to date has been on classroom-based efforts to inform students of the necessity of civic engagement and connect these teachings with various communities regionally and nationally. Through the expansion of the Town Hall Teaching Model, the program has grown from 300 students per semester to approximately 1,200 students every semester. The program brings in experts from the community and region to engage with students and challenge students on how to become more engaged. A plan is in place to continue these efforts. The Legal Studies Program has added a one-hour credit class requiring students to engage with a local civic or governmental entity and write a reflection on the experience. Based on the success of the program, the goal is to expand to other programs. Additionally, increases in voter education and registration efforts are planned while moving into the next phase of student-life based initiatives.

### **Voter Registration:**

- We utilized TurboVote, a national nonpartisan initiative to increase voter participation, engaged more than 1,100 students this academic year, providing an avenue for deeper civic engagement and political discussion. The Student Leadership Programs (SLP) office cohosted debate watch parties with the political science department, an election watch party and an inauguration watch event. This allowed students a platform to engage in meaningful discussion about civic policy and differing opinion, maintaining a positive discourse and respect for peers. TurboVote also guides students through local elections and efforts are in process to encourage student involvement
- We partnered with the County Elections Office to provide information on voter registration and had stations staffed with volunteers from different student groups to hand out the information. These students were trained to answer basic questions about registration.
- Voter registration is one of the more forward facing initiatives and is a visible commitment to civic engagement outside of the classroom.

### **Voter Education:**

- **Student Engagement and Success:** is a new initiative through the merger of multiple former departments to provide increased connections with the students to campus life and civic engagement with the community.
- **The Center for Education Excellence:** provides faculty training and workshops, fellowships, and research-incentive seed grants, on multiple topics including civic engagement and community involvement. This effort is university wide to expand opportunities to the other colleges of the university.
- **Sponsored on Campus Watch Parties:** As this is an election year, we are planning multiple debate and election watch parties. Our state holds most of our state-level elections during the mid-term cycle making this a very active year. The goal is to promote engagement and show the campus commitment to civics and embed in the culture.
- **Voter Turnout:** We utilize the University's messaging systems to send students emails and text messages with important dates for registration, voting, and locations to encourage participation. These messages included links to increase the understanding of the voting process to encourage turnout.
- **Student Voting Rights:** Any College or University faces challenges with student voter registration and participation due to the geographic diversity of the students. We partnered with the County Elections Office to provide students with information about absentee ballots and voting by mail. We are continuing our efforts to have a polling location on campus. While the Stephenville campus has students from almost every state in the nation, the main body of students are from our state and therefore the Secretary of State's Voter Registration website is a main source for the students. The University serves many "First Time in College" (FTIC) students. Many initiatives exist to assist FTIC students with well-being and financial-readiness. Adding voter registration to the FTIC programs is a goal of the 2024/2025 year.

### **Civic Engagement in Academics:**

- **Town Hall Teaching Model:** Every fall and spring term, The Tarleton Town Hall engages students in government courses for federal government and Texas government. Students conduct a semester long guided research project on different policy issues. Once their research is complete, students participate in an evening event to discuss their respective policy issues in small groups with policy consultants, experts, and professionals from the Stephenville community and surrounding region. Students formulate an action plan related to the role of government and how this role changes. Approximately 1,200 students participate in Town Hall each academic semester. This program has ramped up from 300 students per semester to quadruple in size as the impact on student retention and engagement has been proven. This program now has four full time faculty and 25 student workers to engage with students.
- **Texan Debate:** Every fall and spring term, The Texan Debate engages students who are enrolled in communication courses in research on current policy issues. Students participate in a full day debate event that concludes with an evening debate on the issue. Preparation for the debate and the research on the debate issue focus on civic learning and democratic engagement. Approximately 800-1,000 students participate in Texan Debate each academic year.
- **State Level Public Official Speaker Series:** For the past two semester's, a member of the State of Texas Plural Executive to address students on campus as to the duties, challenges, and future of the particular department. Additionally, the students engage in a question and answers session with the official. To date the Agriculture Commissioner and the Comptroller of Public Accounts have addressed the students. The goal is to have one member of the state government each semester. This project had required extensive collaboration between the faculty, the President's Office, and the state government official's offices.
- **Constitution Day:** The University's Constitution Day Committee and our Honors College sponsor a symposium in which two of our faculty covered the Electoral College, its founding, and its modern-day necessity. This symposium will be open to all students, the public, and faculty. All faculty are encouraged to integrate this event into their curriculum as an assignment to encourage participation. There is also a planned Constitution-based scavenger hunt with prizes to engage students in a more active and entertaining manner.

**Successes:** The University successfully achieved the goal of obtaining Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and the classification is up for review and renewal in 2025. Efforts are currently in the works to create a strategic team for the review and renewal process and this Working Group will be an active participant. Just as with the initial classification, the university will follow evidence-based documentation of the institutional practices on high-impact teaching models, civic engagement initiatives, and other student opportunities to track performance.

**Barriers:** Texas is generally a difficult political climate. The culture of the state is distrusting of government and anything connected or associated with government. A large portion of the student body arrive on campus with this same innate perception. Understanding this has become a starting point for conversations on the role of government in many academic settings. While early in the process, it is

possible that these informal connections in multiple academic settings are impacting the negative perceptions of government and opening students to the possible benefits of civic engagement. Additionally, in reviewing data from the last two reports, it appears that Tarleton is slightly behind peer institutions from other parts of the country. One of our goals is to use the information to raise awareness in the student body and to promote a competitive spirit to increase our voting rate. The NSLV report shows a slight increase in the voting rate from earlier reports, but it is clear that more coordinated efforts are needed to raise engagement in this and other areas.

We have identified some internal and external barriers to success.

- Internally, the University has traditionally been “siloes” with any attempt at civic engagement limited to core government classes. With the assistance of the new administration, significant improvements in participation across the campus have been achieved. However, more faculty need to adopt the elements of teaching models to enhance the civic learning and democratic engagement component in other courses. More willingness from faculty to incorporate these elements into the courses would increase the impact.
- External barriers, as mentioned earlier, a strong negative view of government exists in the state. The lack of true online registration and proximity of polling places to the university are seen as substantial barriers by most students. The University is still working with the county elections officer to get a polling place on campus. Additionally, the campus marketing department has assisted in positive media campaigns to encourage civic engagement and voting.

We addressed some barriers through the adoption of public sphere pedagogy models. We also had leadership, support, and resources from Academic Affairs and Student Engagement and Success to assemble the teaching teams and event management staff to make these programs successful. Although, while the new Presidential Administration appears to be successful and supportive, the mere fact that a transition and reorganization is occurring has slowed progress temporarily. There is also a challenge of physical space for the events since the growth. However, a new events center is under construction on campus and should be available next year for events. Until then, creative planning is very necessary to use the space available for the current programs.

**2024/2025 Goals and Strategies:** The Working Group has established future goals for civic learning and democratic engagement. Some are tied to curriculum-based learning outcomes while some are more qualitative.

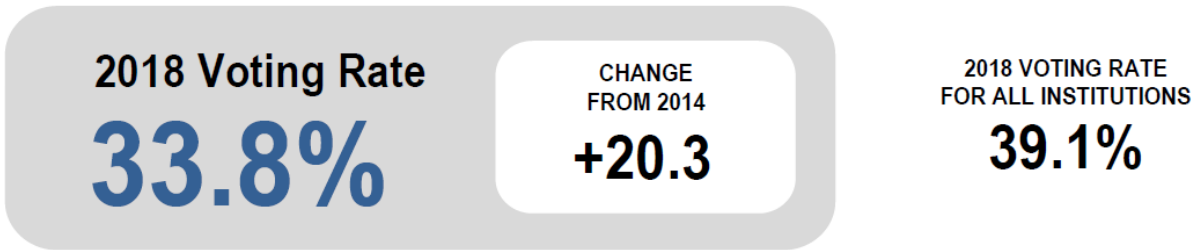
- Increase voter registration and voting: Our strategy is to use the upcoming election year as a conversation starter, to engage through on-campus registration drives, debate watch parties, issue forums, and other events connected to the core government classes as well as classes in each college on issues pertaining to different majors.
- We also use the University LMS (Canvas) to communicate with students on important events and dates such as civic holidays, voter registration dates and places. The University is in the process of transitioning to a standard syllabus software and we are setting a goal of adding voter dates for all syllabi.

- The ultimate long-term goal is a higher voting participation rate than the state average. This is the metric we are using to measure growth and success. We plan on using surveys of both students and faculty to measure success and also strategies for growth.
- Increase knowledge electoral process through events. One continuing strategy is to leverage the annual Constitution Day event to show the importance of participation. Additionally, opening the campus to the community for election related events, and the public official speaker series.
- Service Day events are expanding to more social organizations on campus. The university holds an annual service day in which campus organizations are strongly encouraged to select a community need to address with its membership.
- As a long-term goal, we are creating cross discipline collaborations on assignments connected to civic engagement. This is an ambitious goal and in a conceptual stage.
- Expand the process for training Texas Volunteer Deputy Registrars as per the Texas Secretary of State’s Guidelines.
- A polling location on campus is a long-term goal.

**Reporting:** The University Action Plan, once approved by the President and Provost office, will be available on the University website. Additionally, the Community Engagement Council will utilize the Action Plan in the Carnegie reclassification process.

**Evaluation:** The president’s office has reauthorized participation in the *National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)* through Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. We also use GivePulse to measure student attendance as civic engagement events such as Constitution Day, the Public Speaker series, and the Issues Forums.

## Voting and Registration Rates





<b>2018 - November (Gubernatorial)</b>	
Registered Voters	15,793,257
Voting Age Population (VAP)	19,900,980
Percentage of VAP Registered	79.36%
Turnout	8,371,655
Percent of Turnout to Registered	53.01%
Percent of Turnout to VAP	42.07%