



## **Tarleton State University and the American Democracy Project - 2022.**

**Overview:** The goal of Tarleton State University in 2022 is to continue our action plan to increase civic learning, civic and democratic engagement and participation, as well as voter participation among students at Tarleton State University. These initiatives that began as early as 2014 and have been improved upon annually. We implemented a comprehensive plan integrating the curriculum, student life, faculty development, and community-building initiatives to improve our campus climate for political learning. Even with the challenges presented by COVID, we increased our voter registration drives, our non-partisan election information centers, and candidate and issues information sessions.

The main focus is on the Stephenville with some expansion to our other campuses of the University. Along with the expansion of programs to our other campuses, we are also exploring collaborations with other universities in the region. Our working group coalition represents a wide range from, Academic Affairs, Student Life, The Dick Smith University Library, The Center for Transformative Learning, 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:** Our working group saw major changes and challenges. We will continue to refine and improve our coalition as we reflect on our effectiveness. The challenges of COVID and virtual learning placed simply continuing the education process in peril at times. This made the election simultaneously critically important on a conceptual level but almost impossible at the implementation level. We also partnered with our County Elections Officer for voter registration on campus. Our goal for this year is to continue to increase student involvement in our planning by recruiting members of our student government as well as fraternity and sorority life. We are also looking to develop alternative methods of outreach that are more effective in a virtual environment. Our 2021 working group contains the following.

### **Administration:**

- Denaë Dorris, Director of the Center for Transformative Learning.
- Darrell W. Brown, Student Affairs Executive Director for Community Outreach, Student Government, Fraternity & Sorority Life and Leadership and Service.

### **Faculty:**

- Amy O'Dell, Department Head of Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy.
- Christopher Gearhart, Department Head of Communication Studies.
- Casey D. Thompson, Assistant Professor of Legal Studies. Department of Government, Legal Studies, and Philosophy. Town Hall Coordinator, and American Democracy Project Coordinator.
- Marcie Reynolds, Assistant Professor 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.

**Analysis of Work:** We remain committed to increasing civic learning and democratic engagement through our long-term plans and investments. The university has committed to improving civic learning, our campus climate, and democratic engagement of our students. Our focus 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. We created the Center for Transformative Learning to foster this approach and these connections. We plan to continue these efforts in voter education while moving into the next phase of student-life based initiatives to foster more actions. We created a dedicated coordinator position to facilitate communications with the public as well as campus wide communications and efforts.

#### **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 Education:**

- **The Center for Transformative Learning:** The Center is a University wide initiative to provide faculty training and workshops, fellowships, and research-incentive seed grants, on multiple topics including civic engagement and community involvement.
- **Town Hall/Twigg Hybrid Model:** Every fall and spring term, The Tarleton Town Hall engages students in government courses for federal government and Texas government. Students conduct eight weeks of guided research 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 year. We plan to ramp up to double the participation in this program within the next three semesters.
- **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.

- **Living/Learning Communities:** Legacy Hall is a living and learning community for students enrolled in Texas government courses with a civic learning and democratic engagement focus. Legacy Hall has a capacity for 300 students and has served 140 students during the last two fall terms.
- **Constitution Day Symposium:** The University's Constitution Day Committee and our Honors College are sponsoring 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.

**Voter Turnout:** We utilized 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.

**Successes:** One of our goals was to achieve the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. We are proud to announce that we met this goal early in 2020. By following an evidence-based documentation of institutional practices for self-assessment and quality improvement on our high-impact teaching models and other civic engagement and service initiatives. We have tracked the number of registration pamphlets were distributed and we are developing a method to track "clicks" on the digital information distributed to students through campus communication tools. We are still evaluating our performance on full voter participation and the impacts of COVID on this year's results.

**Barriers:** We are reviewing data from the last two reports and the data shows that we are slightly behind peer institutions. One of our goals is to raise awareness of this information to promote a friendly competitive spirit to increase our voting rate. The NSLV report shows a slight increase in the voting rate from our 2012 report, 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, our focus has been on core classes and we have made significant improvements in participation but more faculty need to adopt the elements of our teaching models to enhance the civic learning and democratic engagement component of their core courses. More willingness from faculty to incorporate these elements into the courses would increase the impact and we are taking our results to the President's office for assistance in promoting our plan for civic engagement.

- External barriers include a strong negative view of government in our state political culture, demographic transition among groups that are statistically low in political participation, the lack of true online registration, and proximity of polling places for college. We are working with our county elections officer to get a polling place on campus. Additionally, we are working with our on-campus marketing department for civic engagement positive media. Lastly, we are reaching out to the fraternity and sororities to involve these organizations in the possible civic opportunities.

We have addressed some barriers through the adoption of public sphere pedagogy models. We have also had leadership, support, and resources from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to assemble the teaching teams and event management staff to make these programs successful. We are at a point where our challenge is physical space for classrooms and events. We will have to continue to think creatively to use the space we have in relation to future development of some of our current programs.

**Beyond 2022:** We have future goals related to the impact of enhancing our focus on civic learning and democratic engagement. Some are tied to our goals for our learning outcomes.

- Increase voter registration and voting through on campus registration drives with the ultimate goal to maintain a higher voting participation rate than the state average. We are partnering with our county elections office to continue to engage students and our community by utilizing our campus resources.
- Increase knowledge electoral process through events such as Constitution Day and opening our campus to include our community.
- Policy and political issues forums available to students and the community will become more frequent as face-to-face meetings return to our schedule.
- Service Day events are expanding to more social organizations on campus.
- We have the ambitious goal of creating cross discipline collaborations on assignments connected to civic engagement. This is still 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.

[https://apps.naspa.org/cfp/evt\\_frm\\_user.cfm?event\\_id=2603](https://apps.naspa.org/cfp/evt_frm_user.cfm?event_id=2603)

<https://www.tarleton.edu/cee/documents/Service-Learning-Magazine-2017.pdf>

<https://www.tarleton.edu/scripts/press/display.asp?id=6297>