

University of Akron Voter Friendly Campus Action Plan

Executive Summary

The University of Akron is a vital, urban, public research university situated in the heart of downtown Akron. Enrolling 13,941 undergraduate students and 1,821 graduate students, UA (University of Akron) offers over 200 undergraduate majors as well as nationally top tier graduate and professional degrees.

Leadership

Corie Steinke- Coordinator, Civic Engagement Programs, Department of Student Life

Representative from ExL Center (experiential community engagement)

Representative from Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

Representative from political science

Student representatives from Undergraduate Student Government, College Democrats, and College Republicans

Partnerships and/or guidance from Summit County Board of Elections, Office of the Ohio Secretary of State, Freedom BLOC, Summit County Democrats, and Summit County Republicans

Commitment

Included in the mission of the University of Akron is a commitment to “develop enlightened members of society...and provides service to the community.” This is demonstrated due to the various entities on campus that engage in service, volunteerism, civic engagement, community engagement, and democratic engagement:

- serveAkron- Housed within the Department of Student Life, serveAkron coordinates intentional civic engagement programming and regular service opportunities for UA students including voting and democratic engagement (ex. National Constitution Day, National Voter Registration Day, voter registration deadlines)
- ExL Center for Experiential Learning- The ExL Center focuses intentionally on experiential community engagement, and “strive(s) to enable students to emerge as civically engaged, skilled and adaptable leaders, ready to take on real-world challenges.” While the ExL Center does not provide straightforward paths to voter and democratic engagement, rather the ExL Center connects students to partners to complete meaningful academic connections to hands on coursework related to issues in the surrounding community.
- Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics- The Bliss Institute is a “bipartisan research, teaching and experiential learning institute dedicated to increasing understanding of the political process with special emphasis on political parties, grassroots activity, civility and ethics, and hands-on learning through internships and events.” The Bliss Institute hosts events, forums, discussions, and programming and conducts research specifically targeting political engagement, open to all of campus.
- Department of Political Science- The Department of Political Science provides a robust and diverse undergraduate course schedule that includes curriculum on the history of government

and politics in America, various government entities, and the history and process of campaigns and elections.

Despite the above organizations existing at the University of Akron, there is not a specific unified center that is responsible for democratic and voter engagement.

Landscape

The perception of the campus landscape is largely anecdotal due to the decentralization of civic and voter engagement programming. Where one area may perceive students to be completely disengaged from voter registration, another area may see more engagement due to investment in community issues. Assessment is not consistently the same across all areas.

However, some internal and external barriers can be identified as obstacles to voter engagement including a lack of centralized leadership, student hesitancy to leave campus to vote, and student knowledge of voting options (ex. in person, early, absentee, etc.).

Goals (long term and short term)

There are two primary goals for the 2022-2023 academic year:

- 1) Engage key campus partners to create a more robust planning and programming committee that includes representation from faculty, staff, contract professionals, and students as well as off campus partners.
 - a. Centralize voter and democratic engagement efforts
 - b. Establish institutional goals and assessment plans to increase and evaluate student involvement in democratic engagement.
- 2) Continue to increase opportunities for voter education: how to register to vote, how to request an absentee ballot, differences between early voting and absentee voting, re-registration process, etc.
 - a. Increase opportunities for civic education and participation: awareness of issues, how/why to get involved in civic engagement, becoming a poll worker

Strategy

Because UA is new to the Voter Friendly Campus process, we are attempting to find an effective balance between trying new things and engaging students with programming strategies that have been proven to work for our campus. When serveAkron attempted two voter registration campaigns in the spring, we struggled to engage students in a meaningful way and found ourselves asking a lot of questions about our student population:

- 1) Do residential students understand how to access mail in ballots or re-register to vote?
- 2) Do commuter students understand how to access polling information or early voting?
- 3) Do students who are not interested in democratic engagement understand the consequences/privilege of disengagement?
- 4) How can students engage meaningfully regardless of their voting experience and interest?
- 5) How can we unite multiple campus entities to establish one powerful effort?

Those questions asked, broad range of programming ideas that attempt to address the needs of students. Because we know so little about the overall engagement and interest UA students have regarding voter and democratic engagement, programming strategy can be divided into three tiers of opportunities:

BASIC- Geared towards first-time registrants, first-time voters, inconsistent voters

- Voter registration at New Student Days
- Active National Voter Registration Day
- Voter registration information on various websites:
 - Civic Engagement/serveAkron- registration, re-registration, finding forms
 - Residence Life and Housing- registration, clear ID requirements, precincts and polling information
 - Alumni Association and Career Networks- re-registering after graduation
- Pocket constitution

INTERMEDIATE- Geared towards inconsistent voters, students basic interested in national issues

- Issues forums- local leaders, local advocates
- Newsletter with key election information- planning, nonpartisan events, registration deadlines, ballot deadlines, etc.
- Proof of residency forms documents
- Volunteering as a poll worker
- Walking or driving voter escorts

ADVANCED- Geared towards consistent voters, students who are interested in volunteering, students who are becoming interested in being more involved in the democratic process, students interested in local or regional issues

- “I vote because...” campaign
- Candidate forum
- Volunteering as a poll worker
- Walking or driving voter escorts

Critical to the success of our strategies is to engage commuter students, which is the largest bulk of our student population, as well as our residential students.

Reporting

The committee will report the action planning progress and results through Campus Digest (all campus faculty and staff email) and Zip Mail (all campus student email). A full, printable report will be available at the end of the spring 2023 semester.

Evaluation

To have a rounded picture of the action plan, it will be important to evaluate programs with qualitative and quantitative approaches. Not all programs and events will have the same goals due to the tiered nature of our engagement strategy, but all assessment approaches will be tailored for the goals.

Qualitatively, UA has access to many surveying apps through which students can give immediate and direct feedback. This would also be an effective way to conduct pre- and post- evaluations of students' understanding of the content. Student leaders can also be asked to ask two very basic, goal related questions to random attendees after each program. Lastly, because all students are required to check in at campus events with their student ID, there is an opportunity to discuss more in depth interviews with students who attended programs.

Quantitatively, event attendance and general satisfaction surveys can be conducted after programs. Growth in attendance or engagement in programs over the course of the semester may indicate growing interest in the strategies.

There are a few more covert options to be considered that require further exploration including:

- If the program was offered as an extra credit for a course, could the professor send brief surveys about the program and level of understanding?
- If the program was required for a class, could the professor require a follow up reflection assignment?
- Can we use related academic course progress as an indicator of program understanding?