



University of Houston Civic Action Plan

Academic Year 2024-2025

Prepared by:

Eric Smith: Associate Director – Center for Student Involvement

Katy Kaesebier: Director – Center for Student Involvement



University of Houston

Civic Action Plan – 2024

Executive Summary

This Civic Action Plan has been developed for the University of Houston for the 2024-2025 Academic Year by the following individuals:

Eric Smith: Associate Director, Center for Student Involvement

Katy Kaesebier: Director, Center for Student Involvement

This plan was developed to bring together the various areas doing civic learning and democratic engagement work on campus into one coalition to consolidate duplicated efforts, unify an approach for the institution, identify gaps, and enhance programs and offerings with the goal of increasing voter registration and turnout. According to the Harris County Clerk’s Office, more than 2.6 million residents in the county are registered to vote. However, in the most recent primary election, voter turnout was only 14.6%. In the 2020 presidential election. The University of Houston has nearly 300,000 alumni globally, with 63% living in the greater Houston area and 75% in the state of Texas. The university is committed to investing in civic learning and democratic engagement because increasing voter participation by UH students will hopefully lead to students becoming life long voters. Because many students remain in the Houston area and Texas, this plan could have a real impact in making sure that Houstonians and Texans exercise their constitutional right to vote and make their voices heard. The university’s strategic plan has a focus on local impact and this would align with that goal.

This plan will be implemented at the University of Houston – Main Campus as well as the University’s Sugar Land location. Both of these campuses are located in the greater Houston, Texas area. The bulk of this plan will be implemented in-person as most students participate in an in-person experience at UH. If there are opportunities to include virtual options in events, these will be implemented where they will realistically increase the reach of the event. This plan will be implemented for the 2024-2025 Academic Year, beginning in August, 2024 and concluding in June 2025. At that point, this plan will be revisited and updated based on assessment and evaluation. The short-term and long-term goals of this plan will focus on voter registration and participation. The coalition will work collaboratively to implement the programs and initiatives needed to



accomplish these goals as outlined in the plan. The coalition will be facilitated by Eric Smith and Katy Kaesebier from the Center for Student Involvement with support from the senior level administrators listed below. The strategies listed in this plan are meant to engage all students at the university. This will be accomplished by engaging representatives from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Government and Community Relations, Student Government, and Student Organizations. Please see the information in the plan below for a more complete picture of where the institution stands now, where we are hoping to go, strategies, goals, and evaluation methods.

Leadership

This plan will be implemented by a coalition of individuals who will come from multiple facets of campus including student affairs, academic affairs, and community and government relations. This group is in its formative phase and membership is still pending in some areas. Some may be marked as “hopeful.” This group and its efforts will be reported to the senior leadership of the coalition and will be held accountable to the plan. The members of the coalition will include:

Facilitators

Katy Kaesebier – Director, Center for Student Involvement

Eric Smith – Associate Director, Center for Student Involvement

Senior Leadership

Donnel Young – Dean of Students (Hopeful)

Keith T. Kowalka – Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs

Jason Smith – Vice President of Government and Community Relations (Hopeful)

Coalition Members

Representative TBD – Faculty Senate

Representative TBD – Office of the Provost

Representative TBD – Student Housing and Residential Life



Whitney Johnson – Staff Council

Ximena Mondragon – Government and Community Relations

Representative TBD – Student Government Association

Omar Castanon – Metropolitan Volunteer Program

In Addition to the individual members of the coalition, this group will work with registered student organizations, although the student leaders for these groups will change each year. We hope to build a consistent working relationship with organizations which focus on democratic engagement and political topics.

Registered Student Organization Partners

Student Government Association

Metropolitan Volunteer Program

Texas Rising

Young Conservatives of Texas

Turning Point USA

Democrats UH

Hobby School of Public Affairs Student Groups

In addition to our on-campus coalition members and partners, we have identified a number of community partners who we hope to build stronger relationships with to enhance our offerings for students with a focus on increasing voter registration, education, and participation.

League of Women Voters

Campus Vote Project

LULAC Texas

Houston in Action



Center for Student Involvement
Division of Student Affairs

At the university, the Office of Government and Community Relations works with Harris County to manage an on-campus polling location for election day voting. The nature of their office puts them in an ideal position to work with the university and Harris County partners on this task. They are working with the Harris County Supervisor of Elections Office and hoping to be able to offer the polling location for early voting as well for the November 2024 presidential election. In addition to the Office of Government and Community Relations, other members of the coalition will possess unique strengths that they will bring to the work. This committee is in the initial stages of development and many of these strengths remain to be seen, but these individuals and groups have been selected because they represent and interact with diverse populations of students, faculty, and staff on campus. The institution as a whole, draws strength from its demographic diversity. In the future, it may become necessary to bring more people from across campus into the coalition as our work grows and evolves. We will expand the coalition by working with senior level administrators to identify individuals from the departments who would be a good fit. Current members have been identified because they work with or represent specific populations and together, cover the whole campus. This has been done in efforts to mobilize this work immediately, but we want to reach a broad audience to obtain true campus-wide engagement as we move forward.

The committee has been formed to include representation from all facets of campus life, including student, faculty, student affairs staff, and those who work with the surrounding community. This group is supported by upper-level administrators including the Vice President of Student Affairs, the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, the Dean of Students, and the Executive Director of Operations and Local Relations. We hope to garner support from the Provost, Vice President of Government and Community Relations, and the University President as we continue our work.

Ideally the entire working group would meet monthly. Subcommittees would be developed to work on things like voter registration events, educational events, election debate/event watch parties, and marketing would meet more frequently in between large group meetings. Some initial ideas for subcommittees include Marketing, Voter Registration, Voter Education, and Special Events. We are hoping that these subcommittees will not only allow the committee as a whole to be more productive and focus our efforts based on members' interests, but also promote engagement from individual committee members and lead to a strong retention rate of members



with minimal turnover. We also intend to keep adding people to the committee over the summer to do a more strategic full launch in August when students return from summer break. If an individual member is no longer able to make the commitment to the group, stops showing up, or leaves the institution, we have created backups. We have included multiple individuals who represent the various areas of campus to account for certain levels of attrition, however, if needed, the work group would make efforts to identify new representatives to insure an even workload across the team. The Center for Student Involvement (CSI) serves as the central hub for civic engagement programs at the University of Houston and these programs are led by the Leadership and Civic Engagement team within CSI including a full-time Leadership and Civic Engagement Program Manager who manages university leadership programs and assists with the planning and implementation of civic engagement programs, and an Associate Director who oversees the Leadership and Civic Engagement area of the office and manages civic engagement programs as a portion of their job duties.

Commitment

At present, civic learning and democratic engagement are not explicitly included in university's mission and vision. Efforts to support student voter engagement are decentralized across campus coming from areas such as the Center for Student Involvement (CSI), Government and Community Relations, SGA, the Dean of Students Office, and others. Our goal is to centralize these efforts to increase our impact on student voter engagement. The University of Houston does outreach to the local community to engage local voters in elections. The university hosts a polling location in the Student Centers and is one of only two polling locations in the Third Ward, a historically underserved community. The Office of Government and Community Relations does community outreach, offers shuttles from a local church to campus for voters, and provides on campus directional signage and social media content to engage local voters and make voting at UH easier. They have also done direct outreach to ask voters in the Third Ward community what it is that they need to vote successfully. On campus, the Vice President of Government and Community Relations sends out information about the on-campus polling location and non-partisan resources to learn about candidates and issues ahead of each election. In addition to their work maintaining and marketing our polling location, Government and Community Relations hosts "UH Day at the



Capitol” in which approximately 200 students join with faculty, staff and alumni to discuss the priorities of the university directly with legislators and supports “Big 12 Day on the Hill where the Student Government Association meets with members of congress in conjunction with other Big 12 schools to discuss issues facing those schools.

Recent legislation in the State of Texas prevents us from specifically including tenets of diversity, social justice, equity, and inclusion in our Civic Action Plan. We are able to prioritize supporting First Gen, low income, and underserved student populations. Additionally, RSOs are able to apply for university funding that is generally available to all student organizations and continue to use university facilities for events and meetings, even if their express purpose is conducting DEI work. These organizations would be able to conduct specific outreach and host more specific and targeted events for historically underserved students, even if staff led initiatives are not permitted. There are also some exceptions where DEI work is able to continue where we is connected to academic research conducted by faculty.

We are also looking to express our commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement by working with the senior level administrators on our committee to gain presidential support for the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge so that we may better track our progress and hold ourselves accountable to our work. In addition to the University of Houston, there are three other universities in the University of Houston System. The University of Houston Clear Lake and the University of Houston Downtown have both expressed commitment to democratic engagement and have been awarded the Voter Friendly Campus designation.

Although this group is committed to enacting change and increasing student engagement in the democratic process, we recognize that we have a long way to go. At this point, civic learning and democratic engagement is not a pervasive part of institutional culture. It is the hope that this committee will be able to influence campus culture to demonstrate an ongoing and consistent commitment to the democratic process. In regard to student voter turnout, this is not specifically mentioned in existing mission, vision, and values documents. There are, however, many references to community engagement and being responsible partners to our local community. In particular, the institution and Division of Student Affairs promotes and tracks involvement with the university’s home in Houston, the Third Ward. The university strategic plan includes community involvement and partnership, volunteering in the Third Ward, and being responsible neighbors. The division specifically tracks volunteer hours with Third Ward community partners and encourages



organizations like the Metropolitan Volunteer Program to connect students to these partners through service opportunities. We hope to continue to grow this initiative over time with the hope of becoming part of university strategic documents in some fashion in the future.

Civic engagement is also part of select coursework at the university. There are courses available to Honors students and Political Science majors which cover subject material related to civic learning and democratic engagement. At present, civic learning and democratic engagement is not included in the core curriculum of the university. The government and political science component of the core curriculum covers U.S. and Texas government, constitution, and politics.

Landscape

This committee recognizes that, at present, the landscape at the University of Houston for civic learning and democratic engagement has many areas of opportunity and growth to reach its fullest potential. The goal of this committee and this process is to identify areas of current strength and critical areas where immediate work is needed to enhance offerings and ensure that students at UH are easily able to successfully vote in an informed manner. At present, civic learning and democratic engagement are not part of campus-wide learning outcomes although many areas on campus are doing democratic engagement work. One of the goals of this committee will be to centralize some efforts and create a central hub for information about offerings to contribute to an overall increase in voter registration and participation.

As previously mentioned, civic learning and democratic engagement is not part of the core curriculum, however it is the focus of a number of courses available to Honors and Political Science students. It is part of the subject material in the following courses:

HON 3331 - Introduction to Civic Engagement

POLS 3343 – Democratic Theory

POLS 4355 – Political Views and Civic Engagement in the United States

At present, it is unknown if civic learning and democratic engagement are listed as learning outcomes in any other courses across the academic colleges. While it is not known whether or not this is listed as a learning outcome, there is a large group of professors who have formed a coalition



Center for Student Involvement
Division of Student Affairs

to work together to inform students about events, initiatives, and involvement opportunities on campus in an effort to increase student engagement on campus. We hope to collaborate with this group to market our programs and initiatives to help us reach our goals of increased student voter registration and turnout.

There are many co-curricular opportunities for students to engage in on campus including the residential curriculum for on campus residents, the Ignite Leadership Program which is open to all students, and a number of university sponsored and advised involvement opportunities. These include Fraternity and Sorority Life, student organization leadership, resident assistant positions, and more. Although civic learning is not present in each of these opportunities, it is covered in some such as the Ignite Leadership curriculum. This group will explore ways to incorporate it into other cocurricular opportunities where it fits the experience and can be incorporated by staff.

In addition to co-curricular experiences, there are many events throughout the year with civic learning and democratic engagement as a focus. One such event is our Constitution Day event where we sustain our federal mandate to celebrate the holiday and try to make it fun and exciting for students. Student Housing and Residential Life has offered passive programs in different residence halls as well as tabling focused on voter engagement. In the future we hope to work with members of the coalition to host a variety of events focused on these topics from different sources to split up the work and reach diverse audiences. Some examples of potential events and event sponsors include the following:

Voter Registration Drives – Registered Student Organizations, Student Government Association

Voter Education (how to vote, where to vote, voting absentee and by mail) – Center for Student Involvement

Debate Watch Parties – Center for Student Involvement

Candidate Town Hall – Government and Community Relations

Voting History in the United States – work with faculty

Being located in Texas, the University of Houston faces a number of challenges in making voting easy and accessible to all students and community members in the surrounding area. As



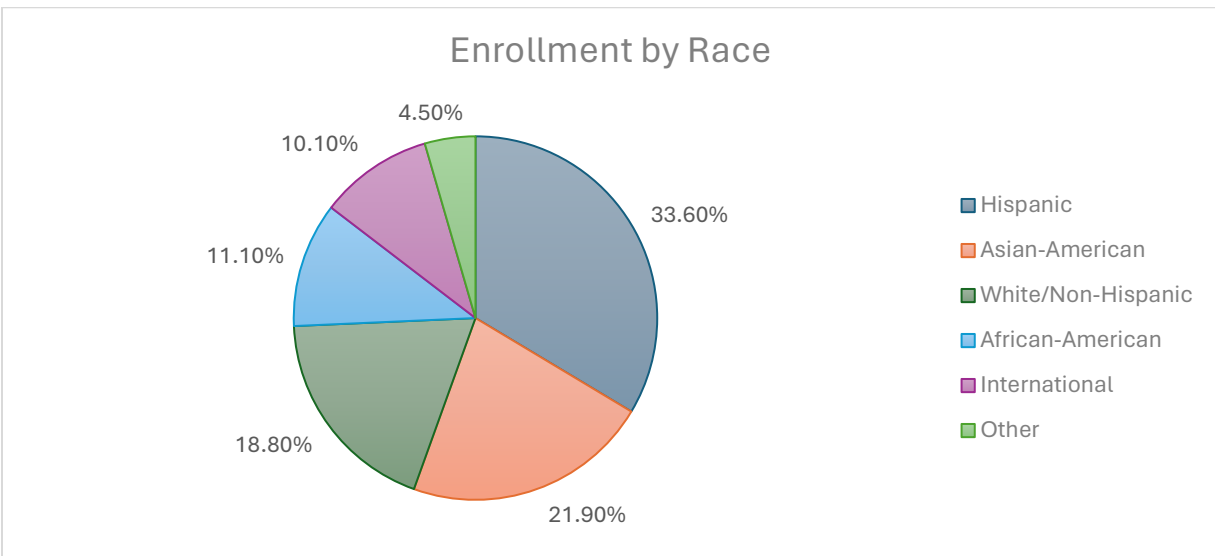
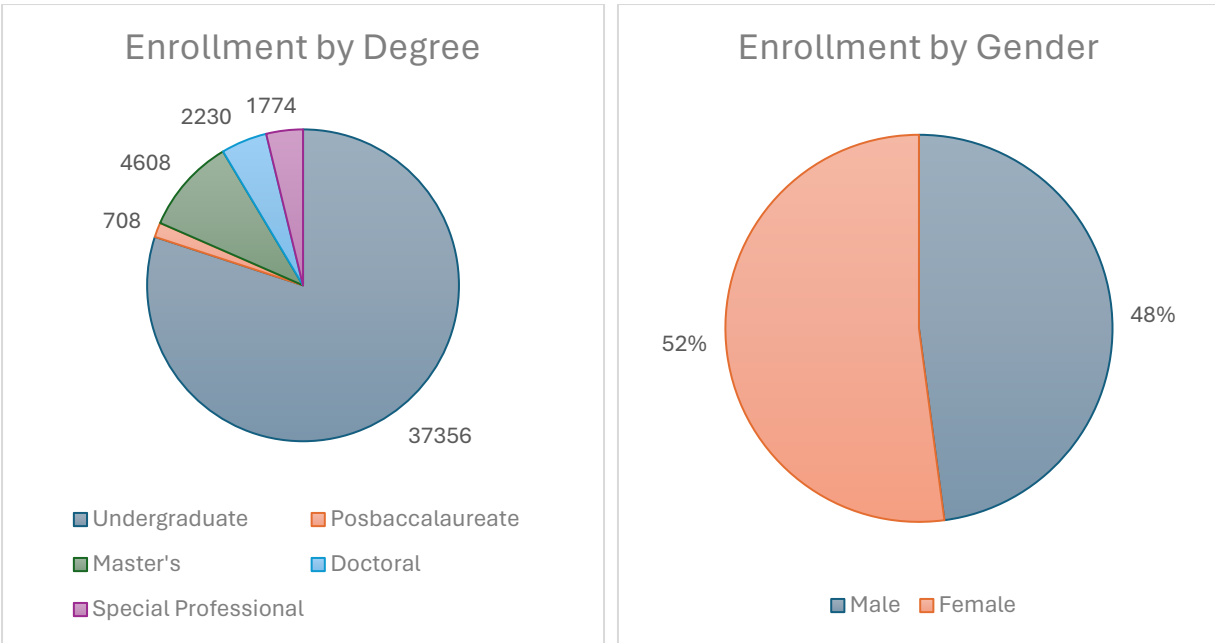
previously stated, the university is one of only two polling locations in the Third Ward area of Houston. As part of their direct outreach to the local community, the Office of Government and Community Relations found that some community members were intimidated to come to UH to vote due to the size of campus, unfamiliarity, and other reasons. As a result, they began shuttle service for election day from a local church that would bring voters right to the building with the polling location, increasing voter access. While this is a great effort, it may be difficult for many residents of the Third Ward to travel that far to get to the church or to campus to vote. Additionally, voting by mail in Texas is limited to individuals who are 65 years of age or older, sick or disabled, out of the county during the election, expecting to give birth, or confined in jail (Texas Secretary of State, n.d.). Many residents of the local community, although must be guaranteed time off to vote, may experience lost wages as a result of taking time off to travel to their polling location, waiting in long lines, and voting. This may deter some voters in the community.

In addition to election policies, Houston's size may present another challenge to voting for students in particular. The greater Houston area consists of seven to nine counties, depending on the source. Students may have a number of commitments on election day such as class, work, family obligations, and more. Traveling back to their home county may take an extended amount of time, especially in a large city with substantial traffic. If a student is not aware of early voting options and locations, they may find it difficult to vote. While the university's early voting location is very helpful for students who reside in Harris County, residents of other counties must vote in their county of residence.

Another important component of the landscape at the University of Houston is its diverse demographic makeup. UH draws strength from its diverse student body, faculty, staff, and community. In addition to the demographic data provided below, First Generation students represent 44.5% of enrolled students. Looking to the future, we look forward to comparing these statistics to future NSLVE data in order to better identify underserved populations and gaps in programming and voter engagement efforts.



University of Houston Student Demographic Data



The final piece of the current landscape of this work at UH includes resources available to implementing this Civic Action Plan. Our coalition, though in the initial stages of development, will cast a wide net to bring in numerous individuals and departments so that efforts will be more sustainable given work loads across the institution. Although the Center for Student Involvement will take the lead on coordination and facilitation of the committee, there is no individual who has



civic learning and democratic engagement as their sole job responsibility. This work will only constitute a portion of each committee member's job duties or will be performed on a volunteer basis alongside their normal job duties. We intend to utilize resources provided by the university and the surrounding community to bring success to these programs and initiatives.

Goals

Short-Term Goals

We have set our sights high with our long-term goals because we understand the critical need to engage college students in the democratic voting process. To ensure the long-term vision is within reach, the institution must generate and maintain buy in from all facets of campus life, including both Academic and Student Affairs along with university administration at large. This committee is working to centralize knowledge of voter engagement efforts on campus and support our partners across campus in those efforts. Additionally, the coalition will need resources of time and staff assigned to this project to engage students with voter registration, voter education events, and more. The institution will involve representatives from different areas of campus including Academic Affairs, Student Life, Student Housing and Residential Life, Dean of Students, student organizations, and others on campus. Off campus, the institution will engage community partners such as the Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery County Supervisors of Elections, the League of Women Voters, LULAC, among others to bring together the university and community components. During the next three years, we will strive to accomplish the following to stay on track to reach our long-term goals:

1. Engage community partners such as the Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery County Supervisors of Elections, the League of Women Voters, LULAC, and more
2. Host voter registration drives throughout the year
3. Increase marketing efforts for on-campus polling locations
4. Reach 50% eligible voter turnout by 2027
5. Earn the Silver Seal from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge from the 2028 presidential election



In 2020, Tufts University researchers reported that 66% of college students exercised their right to vote in the presidential election. Looking at the 2024 primary elections in Texas, 4% of the Democratic vote and 2.3% of the Republic vote were 20 years old or younger. While we were unable to secure voting percentages of UH students, these numbers demonstrate extremely low numbers for voter turnout for the college age group. Our most immediate need is to focus on voter registration and education to help our student population understand the value of their civic responsibility. In tandem with this goal, we will spread awareness about on-campus polling locations through multiple outlets across campus and support students as they develop their personal plan for voting in upcoming elections.

Long-Term Goals

According to the Harris County Clerk's Office, more than 2.6 million residents in the county are registered to vote. However, in the most recent primary election, voter turnout was only 14.6%. In the 2020 election season, only 12.44% of registered voters exercised their right to vote for the Republican primary, and 12.92% voted in the Democratic primary. For the presidential election, 66.73% of registered voters, and 52.39% of eligible voters cast a ballot. UH has nearly 300,000 alumni globally, with 63% living in the greater Houston area and 75% in the state of Texas. These numbers reflect the critical importance of this effort on the overall voter engagement in the state. It is the hope of this committee that all students who graduate from the University of Houston will leave with a strong understanding of the democratic process including their rights as voters, the importance of all elections, including local and state elections, and how to talk about civic engagement with their peers to encourage them to participate in our democracy. The following goals will hopefully be achieved over the next ten years:

1. Maintain an active early polling and election day location
2. Increase the visibility of elections for our student population (e.g. debate watch parties, voter registration drives, etc.)
3. Centralize civic learning and democratic engagement initiatives so we can maximize campus-wide efforts and impact



4. Earn the Platinum Seal for voter participation from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge

Each of these goals will be broken down into smaller sub-goals with concrete action plans to accomplish the goals over the allotted time span. Although the university's large international student population will not be able to participate in voting in U.S. elections, it is the hope of the committee that these educational efforts will encourage those students to participate in their own country's democratic process as they are able. The goals laid out by this committee are set for the entire student population, and resources and efforts will be made available to all students.

<https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/voter-registration-data-shows-houston-gaps>

Strategy

To accomplish the goals mentioned above, this committee will employ short-term and long-term strategies. To better focus our work toward these goals, we will coordinate our work into three areas: voter registration, voter education, and marketing the on-campus polling location along with education around voting options for those voting outside of Harris County. For example, we hope to have our Registered Student Organizations take the lead on voter registration initiatives while the Center for Student Involvement will coordinate collaborations to host voter education events. We will work with the Office of Government and Community Relations and Student Government Association to better market the on-campus polling location.

In regards to voter registration, we can begin to use the Ask Every Student Toolkit to assist in voter registration efforts. In particular, we can work towards the Student Life Integration component. One strategy we hope to employ is to train staff and student leaders to be deputy voter registrars who will be able to accept and submit voter registration paperwork. We would have these trained staff and student leaders at key Weeks of Welcome events which target first year students to help students get registered right as they get started on their collegiate journey. Additionally, to capture students from all class standings, we would work with RSOs to continue to encourage students to register to vote and make sure they have a plan to vote in upcoming elections. These events and tabling sessions would most often occur at the university's centrally located Student



Centers, in public plazas with high traffic, and other event locations such as our park area where many events take place. Although students who are eligible to vote in U.S. elections are our primary target audience, we hope to be able to provide some resources and connections to international students to be able to participate in elections and the democratic process within their home countries, if it is available. With the support of the coalition and sharing of resources, RSOs, departments, and involved faculty will be empowered to enact these strategies according to the agreed upon timeline.

We plan to get things started with an initial onboarding training for the committee to make sure each member is on the same page and is able to add their expertise and ideas to the foundation of our plan. Next, we will identify the individuals we wish to move forward with the Volunteer Deputy Voter Registrar training and work to get them trained as a cohort. Finally, we will split into our work groups and begin the semesterly planning for events and tabling sessions.

In the long term, we hope to see some shifts in our campus culture as a result of these strategies. For instance, voter education events with 50-100 attendees at least twice per semester and a strong coalition with members from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Government and Community Relations, and student groups which meets regularly will show us that we are building a campus culture committed to civic learning and democratic engagement. Due to Texas Senate Bill 17, the University of Houston is not able to consider tenets of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in its goals and strategy. The goals laid out by this committee are set for the entire student population and resources and efforts will be made available to all students. We are able to focus on First Gen, underrepresented populations, and low-income students. We will track our events and efforts to register voters to see how well our numbers align with the makeup of the student population. As these efforts will focus on engaging all students, these would ideally align with each other.

To be successful long-term beyond a single election cycle, it will be important for this committee to take steps toward sustainable practices. Sustained commitment will evolve from consistent resources and event offerings. Although not available right now, a staff member who has civic engagement as a significant portion of their job duties to serve as the lead on this project will help move this project forward. Commitment from various senior leaders that have been outlined in



this application will sustain the long-term success of our vision. Ideally, these programs will be led collaboratively across the committee, representing all facets of campus life from staff, to faculty, to students. Representatives from the Center for Student Involvement will serve as the catalyst to encourage partners to enact programs and initiatives in their respective areas. As this coalition is in its formative stages, this plan is being developed. It will be the goal of the coalition to engage student leaders and provide them with resources to enact successful programs and successfully transition knowledge from year to year. By working with the entire coalition to enact programs and initiatives to increase voter registration and participation, this committee will be able to function as a whole, ensuring continuity of programs, even in the face of turnover and transition.

The overall long-term vision can be tracked by voter participation as stated in the goals section. The end goal is to reach the platinum level of voter participation as awarded by the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. This goal is not likely to happen in one year, therefore goals of increased voter participation will be set each year.

Reporting

This action plan will be managed and communicated with the coalition via a shared platform such as Microsoft Teams. Internally at the university, the plan will be communicated via members of the coalition to their respective areas such as Registered Student Organizations and departments at team meetings, divisional presentations where applicable, and other meetings. This plan, action items, progress, data, and evaluation will be maintained in a shared location such as Microsoft Teams for the coalition to stay up to date, notify others on the coalition of their efforts, and track progress.

Externally, this plan will be published on appropriate webpages, available on our involvement platform provided by Anthology, called Engage (Get Involved on our campus, and potentially on Motivote, a third-party voter engagement software pending further research and potential subscription to the service. Data collected from this plan will be made public, specifically student voter participation presented by the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, on their website and shared via university web pages, social media, etc. We are also hoping to use the third-



party platform Motivote which will integrate with our Get Involved platform. This will also allow us to better track and report data.

Evaluation

Throughout the year, at the conclusion of the election cycle and at the end of the spring academic term, we will conduct evaluations of this plan. At consistent points throughout the year, we will perform check-ins to make sure that our efforts are on track. These may look like timelines for programs being reviewed by the committee, progress updates on data points such as submitted voter registrations, or pulse checks on some of the grass roots engagement efforts. A more formal evaluation will include post event surveys, tracked number of voter registrations submitted at the institution, and tangible movement on support of the institution such as a completed registration for the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. The purpose of these evaluations will be to see in which areas progress is being made, where we will need to focus efforts in the future, and track the committee's overall success over an extended period of time of making civic learning and democratic engagement a core component of the culture at the University of Houston. The evaluation will primarily address our audience of students with their participation in events and voting, though faculty and administration will be another audience as we work to imbed civic learning and democratic engagement into campus culture. The results will be used to make voter education and engagement programs and events better and more attractive to a wider audience. Results will also be used to identify gaps in programming that we have not yet identified and see where that can fit in to a revised and revisited future plan. We will measure success by metrics to include increased number of registered student voters, increasing number of attendees at civic engagement events hosted by members of the committee, increased polling numbers at our on campus polling location, and our progress towards the seals awarded by the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.

The evaluation will be composed, carried out, and analyzed by the committee as a whole to promote a single unified effort. This will help to avoid over surveying students and keep data in a shared location so that we can minimize duplicated efforts. We will work with campus partners such as Institutional Research to gather baseline data that may be needed and to compare our



Center for Student Involvement
Division of Student Affairs

sample to the student body as a whole. We will publish our evaluation efforts in a public location such as a website and also share our progress in divisional meetings and with faculty. In addition to our effort, the Office of the Provost and the Office of Government and Community Relations are both currently preparing an application for the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement. Both offices have members on our coalition and we will work together to streamline our efforts so that students and community members will have a more cohesive experience and we can share a unified message about the university's commitment to the community and our Democracy.