



2020-21 Voter Friendly Campus Designation Program Voter Registration and Engagement Action Plan

Executive Summary

As the flagship university in our state, the University of Mississippi is well-positioned to greatly enhance voter registration and engagement via the robust action plan articulated on the following pages. With broad-based commitment and involvement from students, faculty, staff, and administration, the Voting Engagement Roundtable, which was convened during the fall 2019 semester, stands ready to implement the action plan outlined herein. The action plan is both attainable and aspirational, forcing us to remain focused on completion of numerous, multifaceted goals and objectives. Ultimately, we feel confident that, when comparing 2016 to 2020 data, we will increase voter registration among students from 70.9% to 75% and voter participation from 35.4% to 40%.

A number of goals and objectives established by the Voting Engagement Roundtable align well with existing initiatives to which the University is already committed, such as the Ask Every Student Co-Designer Cohort and the All-In Democracy Challenge, but others identified in the action plan will enable us to achieve higher rates of student engagement. For instance, hosting DebateWatch events sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates will better familiarize students with national candidates and issues while serving as platforms to model civic dialogue and remind them of voter registration. The development of online new student orientation content will set a solid tone with respect to voter engagement. Most promising among objectives is the training of student leaders to facilitate voter registration drives and assist fellow students in the registration process, which research has proven to be especially challenging in Mississippi. Additionally, we look forward to supporting students in completing absentee ballots for their home districts and states, and assisting with transportation to the polls on November 3, 2020.

Voting Engagement Roundtable

The Voting Engagement Roundtable was convened in fall 2019 by the Division of Diversity & Community Engagement and the Dean of Students to bring together interested faculty, staff, administrators, and student leaders working on voting engagement efforts. This nonpartisan group provided a new level of coordinating infrastructure to share existing efforts related to voting engagement and promote new collaborative efforts around voter registration, voter education, and voter turnout across the institution.

2019-20 Membership Included: (* denotes student member)

- Erin Payseur Oeth, Project Manager, Office of Community Engagement (Facilitator)
- Dr. Brent Marsh, Assistant Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Students
- Dr. Cade Smith, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for Community Engagement
- Dr. Na Youn Lee, Assistant Professor of Social Work
- Perry Sansing, Associate General Counsel and Special Assistant to the Chancellor for Governmental Affairs
- Will Takewell, Associate Director of Student Leadership & Engagement
- Kara Alspaugh, Community Coordinator, Crosby Hall
- Carissa Chandler, Graduate Assistant, Office of Community Engagement*
- Charlotte Shackelford, Vice President of Associated Student Body*
- Lindsey Lowell, Chair of External Affairs, Associated Student Body*
- Jailien Grant, President of NAACP UM chapter*
- Katie Davis, President of UM Democrats*
- Jack Hall, President of College Republicans*
- Asia Guest, MS Votes, Campus Fellow*
- Isabel Spafford, President of MS Votes, UM chapter*
- Kynnedi Taylor-Henry, League of Women Voters board member*

2020-21 Membership Includes (in addition to above)

- Anthony Siracusa, Director of Office of Community Engagement
- Marcus Stokes, Campus Ambassador for Andrew Goodman Foundation*
- Je'Von Franklin, Campus Ambassador for Andrew Goodman Foundation*
- Jasmine Walker, President of Student Social Work Organization (SSWO)*
- River Woods, Public Relations for Student Social Work Organization (SSWO)*
- Ski Morris, Member of Student Social Work Organization (SSWO)*
- Connor Smith, President of UM Democrats*

University Commitment

Over the past several years, the University of Mississippi has been working to centralize its community engagement efforts. In 2017, the University formed a new Division for Diversity and Community Engagement and hired its inaugural Vice-Chancellor for Diversity and Community Engagement to bring new focus, visibility, and emphasis to this work and further institutionalize CE across the university campus. In March 2020, we hired our inaugural Director of Community Engagement that oversees a new administrative unit overseeing community engagement.

As a result of these efforts to highlight and advance community engagement, the University has received its first-time Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in 2019 and was designated a Lead Advisory Institution for 2019-20 as part of the NASPA Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Lead Initiative. A growing area of need identified in both our Carnegie and CLDE applications has been the need to strengthen our campus voter engagement efforts. The University has participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) since 2012. This data has been a valuable starting point for our Voting Engagement Roundtable that began in fall 2019 to bring together campus stakeholders committed to voter engagement efforts and growing new collaborative opportunities across campus.

With support from senior leadership including the Dean of Students, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for Community Engagement, Special Assistant to the Chancellor for Governmental Affairs, and the Vice-President of the Associated Student Body, as well as other student leaders, this working group has new momentum and focus in developing and implementing strong university-level voting engagement plans to reduce barriers, educate students, and boost participation rates. Further evidence of our institutional commitment to voter engagement is as follows:

- Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, 2020 Designation
- NASPA Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement Lead Advisory Institution, 2019-20
- Active participant in the National Study for Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), 2012-20.
- Official university partner with Andrew Goodman Foundation (AGF)
- Member of All-In Democracy Challenge
- Ask Every Student Co-Designer Campus cohort, 2020, working collaboratively with other universities to develop tools and resources to engage every student in voter registration opportunities (May 2020)
- Voting Engagement Roundtable Faculty Member Na Youn Lee received \$5000 award as part of Voter Empowerment Project through our Excellence in Community Engagement awards. (May 2020)
- Participant in MS Voting Summit convened through Mississippi State University (May 2020)

Seeking the Voter Friendly Campus Designation is important in demonstrating our ongoing commitment to advancing voter engagement across the university and to institutionalize voter registration, literacy, and engagement efforts.

Landscape

State Context

Based on a 2018 study that evaluated voting laws in the United States, Mississippi was found to be the state with the most restrictive voting laws and the hardest place to vote. (See Chart 1.)

Researchers found the southern state has the most restrictive voter registration policies, including not permitting early voting and requiring people to register no later than 30 days before an election. Although voters are permitted to vote absentee, they are required to have a valid reason. The state also doesn't permit online voter registration. (Mary Ann Liebert, 2018)

These policies make Mississippi a non-voter friendly state and suggest an even more pressing need for voter education, particularly for first time voters, and voter-friendly college campuses. Currently, there is only one university in Mississippi that has the Voter Friendly Campus Designation. As the flagship institution, we want to

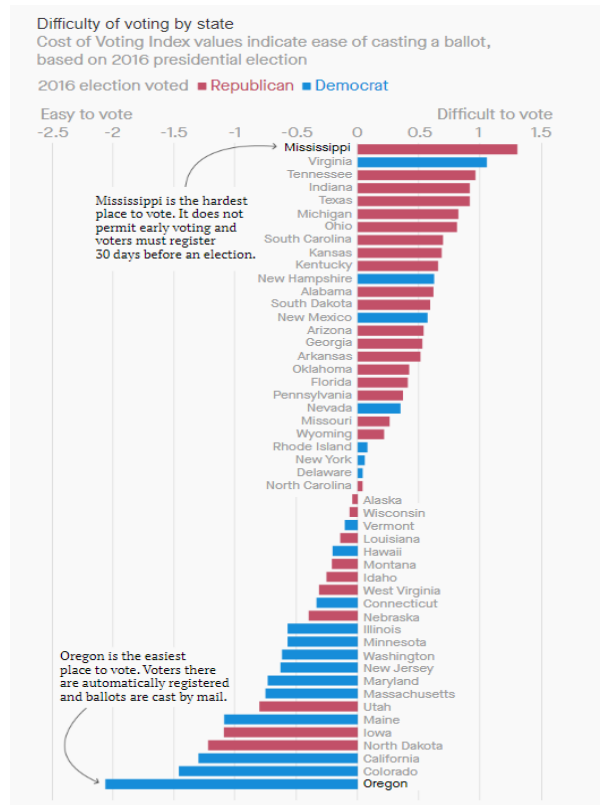


Chart 1. Cost of Voting in American States (Mary Ann Liebert,

be a leader in the state in changing the culture around voting and helping students navigate the voting process.

NSLVE Institutional Data

We have participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) since 2012. This data has provided valuable benchmarks and insights into student voting practices. According to the 2016 NSLVE campus report, the University's voting rate in 2016 was 35.4%, which is a decrease of five percentage points from its rate in 2012 and 15 percentage points below the 2016 voting rate for all institutions. Whereas the overall trend across all institutions shows an increase in voting rates from 2012 to 2016, UM exhibits a decrease in its voting rate between the two most recent presidential elections.

Interestingly, the registration rate went up by 0.6 points, from 70.3% in 2012 to 70.9% in 2016. This is partly due to the increase in student enrollment at UM between 2012 and 2016, which subsequently raised the total number of eligible voters from 20,080 to 22,354. Hence, 1,727 more students registered to vote in 2016 than in 2012. However, only 49.9% of the registered students, or 7,909, ended up voting in 2016, which is 192 fewer students and 7.5 percentage points lower than in 2012. Clearly, the increase in voter registration did not translate to higher voter turnout during the 2016 election.

As mentioned above, UM's voting rate was 15 percentage points below the voting rate for all institutions in 2016 (50.4% vs. 35.4%). In 2012, its rate was only 6.6 percentage points below that for all institutions (46.9% vs 40.3%). The difference is even more stark when the voting rates of UM are compared to those of other research institutions by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: UM's voting rates were 7.2 and 16.9 percentage points below those of other research institutions in 2012 (47.5% vs 40.3%) and 2016 (52.3% vs 35.4%), respectively.

All UM age groups except for those aged 25-29 displayed a decrease in voting rates from 2012 to 2016. However, the largest decreases occurred in age groups 18-21 (4.9 percentage-point drop) and 22-24 (4.5 percentage-point drop). Given that these age groups account for more than 80% of UM enrollment, it will be important to focus voter registration, education, and turnout efforts on young voters on campus. Moreover, in 2016, only 32.2% of UM undergraduate students voted compared to 42.8% of graduate students, and freshmen had the lowest turnout at 25.2%, followed by 29.4% of sophomores and 36.3% of upperclassmen. However, voter turnout slightly improved for part-time students, where 48.2% of part-time students voted in 2016 compared to 47.4% in 2012. In contrast, the voting rate of full-time students dropped 4.7 percentage points, from 37.4% in 2012 to 32.7% in 2016.

While 50.5% of UM female students compared to 38.6% of male students voted in 2012, the gender difference in voter turnout significantly narrowed in 2016 to 37.4% of female and 31.3% of male students having voted. Due to data limitations, it is difficult to discern a full picture of racial differences on the UM campus. However, voting rates have generally decreased for the following groups between 2012 and 2016: White (2.7 percentage-point drop), Multiracial (6.9 percentage-point drop), and Asian (0.3 percentage-point drop). Hispanic students were the only group whose rate increased between 2012 and 2016, from 20.4% to 23.5%. Data was not available for Black students.

Lastly, the top three voting rates in 2016 by UM field of study are as follows: Area, ethnic, cultural, gender, and group studies, 50%; public administration and social service professions, 49.4%; and education, 45.7%. The bottom three were engineering and engineering technologies, 25.6%; physical sciences, 24.8%; and other, 23.3%.

Goals and Strategies

Below are identified goals for voter registration, voter education, and voter turnout, along with strategies and action items for the coming year. Items with a check have already been completed. Overall activities can be completed regardless of fall campus plans regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional campus-based strategies are contingent on campus reopening in fall 2020.

Voter Registration: To increase our student voting registration rates to 75% for 2020 (from 70.9% in 2016).

Overall Activities:

- ✓ Integrate voting registration information into new student orientation for summer 2020.
- ✓ Update UM voting website (vote.olemiss.edu) with accurate information on voter registration for Lafayette County, in-state Mississippi, and links to out-of-state websites.
- ✓ Establish opt-in communication channels for students to receive text and email reminders for voting.
- Ask faculty to include voter registration information and resources in their syllabus or their course.
- Host weekly virtual office hours for voting registration to answer questions and provide support to students in accurately completing voter registration forms.
- Send text reminders and email updates reminding students of upcoming deadlines, registration events, and helpful info.

Additional campus-based activities:

- Integrate voter registration into new student move-in with Residential Learning to provide on-site tabling and trained student leaders to assist with registration.
- Provide multiple campus-based locations for voter registration across campus with trained student leaders to assist and review registration forms.

Voter Education: To provide at least 3 educational opportunities for students to learn about voting, offices, and candidates.

Overall Activities:

- Host a watch party in conjunction with the Presidential Debate Commission for at least one presidential debate and one vice-presidential debate, followed by reflection and discussion.
- Screen the documentary *One Vote* to engage students in reflecting on why they vote and the significance it has for them.
- Provide links to nonpartisan candidate information and resources on state and local offices through UM voting website.

Voter Turnout: To increase student voter turnout to 40% in 2020, up from 35.4% in 2016.

Overall Activities:

- Boost awareness of fall 2020 elections through social media, campus communication channels, academic and administrative departments, and student organizations.

Campus-based activities:

- Host an absentee ballot day to allow students registering in MS to get their absentee ballot requests notarized and to help them navigate the absentee ballot system.
- Partner with Outreach and Continuing Education department and Residential Life to coordinate transportation to the polls on Election Day for students registered and voting in Lafayette County.

Virtual/ remote activities:

- Host weekly virtual office hours to answer questions and provide support to students in accurately navigating absentee ballot process or accessing information on elections in their hometown.
- Send text reminders and email updates reminding students of upcoming deadlines, Election Day, and helpful info.

Institutionalization: To implement tools and resources to engage every student in voter registration.

- ✓ Apply to be a co-designer campus for the Ask Every Student initiative (accepted May 2020)
- Implement tools and strategies developed through the Ask Every Student Initiative
- Offer two fall training sessions for student leaders to learn how to assist in voter registration, how to check for accuracy, how to submit Lafayette County registration forms, and how to access voter registration guidelines and info for all 50 states.
- Train at least 20 student leaders in voter registration and engagement.

Evaluation and Reporting

The University of Mississippi is currently registered for the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and will again use 2020 data as a benchmark for our efforts. We will use NSLVE data from for 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 to guide our planning and subsequent reporting. This action plan will be shared broadly through the UM Voting Engagement Roundtable and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. It will be accessible through our webpage, departmental reports, newsletters, and existing campus communication outlets.

References

Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. (2016). 2012 & 2016 NSLVE Campus Report. Medford, MA.

Mary Ann Liebert, I. (2018). Cost of Voting in American States. *Election Law Journal*, 234-247.