

University of Virginia's College at Wise Civic Engagement Action Plan Fall 2020

Overview

UVA Wise CONNECTS will partner with the Office of Compliance and Inclusion at UVA Wise, as well as the newly established Election 2020 Taskforce, to engage our campus community in the 2020 election in various ways this fall. Given that many of our courses will be taught online due to the pandemic, and since many students may take a variety of in-person and online courses, we are hoping to develop ways to engage everyone in our electoral process.

Previous history

In 2016, our college didn't formally organize any outreach regarding registration and participation. After the election, the college organized an open forum for processing the election and realized that many voices felt shut out of government (<https://wcyb.com/features/weekend-drive/uva-wise-community-holds-forum-on-presidential-election>)

Goals

We hope to increase student voter registration across campus, as well as turnout. Specifically, we hope to encourage first time voters (freshmen) to engage in the political process. Most of the students who attend our college come from Virginia and the Appalachian region, and almost half can be considered low-income as indicated by their receipt of Federal Pell Grant Aid. Half of our students are first generation. Approximately 22% of our campus community is non-white, with many of those students being very active in our athletic programs. This year, we are already formulating ways to increase the registration of those students, including making Election Day a "Free Day" for all of our student athletes.

Our Plan

Before the pandemic, we established an Election 2020 Taskforce from partners across our campus community representing different stakeholders (faculty, administrators from student affairs, academic affairs, government relations, and students) to discuss ways that we can make our campus feel more inclusive and encourage engagement in the electoral process this fall. The questions we are currently addressing include things like (1) How can we encourage students to register to vote, especially since we are facing an unknown fall semester (in terms of online versus in-person courses), (2) How can we make sure all voices are heard and everyone is engaged in the electoral process, (3) How can we better engage communities who are less likely to vote and register, like our non-white, freshmen, and first-generation students, (4) As a college with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students, how can we help with the "costs" of voting (like transportation and education about the issues and candidates)?

Leaders across the college have already been appointed by our Chancellor to head this project, and those individuals include Heather Evans (political science faculty member and also co-director of the UVA Wise CONNECTS initiative), Tabitha Smith (Director of the Center for Diversity and Inclusion), Joshua Justice (Dean of Students and Chief Housing Officer), Tracy Barcus (Assistant Director of Residence Life), Huda Aden (Chief of Staff for the Chancellor), Kathy Still (UVA Wise Communications Director), and Jewell Worley (Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs). The group met in the Spring before the pandemic affected the operations at our college, and are beginning taking steps to engage students this fall. Our campus is also part of NSLVE and has been reauthorized to be included in the next wave of the study. We plan to use this data to also examine whether our efforts are effective for our college student population.

We will provide both on-site voter registration and will mail and email each student information about how to register for the election from their own homes at a time that is convenient for them. Luckily here in the state of VA, voter registration can be done online, and we want to encourage students to take advantage of that opportunity. We will also provide information about how to request an absentee ballot, which will be useful information for students who do not plan to vote in person due to the pandemic. We also want to encourage both our Democratic and Republican groups to engage in healthy deliberative dialogue with each other both during and after the election, and will have campus (and zoom) events to do so. Our campus community also has a libertarian group, and we do not want them to feel ignored during this time. Incorporating all three groups into campus conversations will be healthy for our community. We plan to invite a few guest speakers to discuss the importance of voting and to celebrate the anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

On the day of the election, we also want to make it easy for students to go to their polling places, if they wish to vote in-person. Since many of our students lack transportation, we plan to make our on-campus transportation service available to students for free that day.

After the Election

We plan to institutionalize our “Election Taskforce” for our campus, especially if we see significant success with these activities. We will hold a debriefing day towards the end of November, where we will speak with our campus administration about what worked, what didn’t, and how we can use these tactics in the next election season.

Timeline (tentative)

August 1 – Order all printing items for campus registration events and outreach.

August 14 – Beginning of School

August 17 – Place door hangers in student mailboxes (for on campus students) and mail information to students about voter registration and absentee voting.

September 7 - Online information sent to students about voter registration

September 15/16 – Voter Registration booth on campus.

September 22 – National Voter Registration Day! Voter registration booth on campus.

September 23 – Voter registration booth on campus.

September (dates to be determined) – Presidential Election Debate Event (faculty led event with refreshments)

September 29/30 – Voter registration booth on campus.

October 6/7 – Voter registration booth on campus.

October 13 – Deadline to register to vote – last voter registration booth on campus. Email sent to students about this.

October 23, 2020 – Last day to request absentee ballot by mail by: 5:00 p.m. Send email to all students about this.

October (dates to be determined) – Presidential Election Debate Event, VP Debate event (faculty led event with refreshments)

November 3 – Election Day – Transportation will be provided to polling locations in the area. Election night party.