

Civic Engagement Action Plan

2024 - 2025

Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning
WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

I. Executive Summary

This action plan was developed by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) in collaboration with the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) student organization to communicate our strategy for increasing the registration, turnout rates, and education of voters at Western Carolina University (WCU). This action plan was also developed with the input of the Civic Engagement Action Planning Committee consisting of CCESL staff, Alyson UMBERGER and Dr. Theresa Cruz Paul, as well as WCU faculty members Dr. Todd Collins, Dr. Chris Cooper, and Dr. David DeJong. The planned activities outlined here will be carried out over the 2024 year, on and around our main campus in Cullowhee, North Carolina and our instructional site in Asheville, North Carolina.

This plan focuses on:

- **Creating a culture of civic engagement** - Civic engagement must be a system wide initiative that is included in both curricular and co-curricular activities. We will build a sustainable and long-range plan to involve multiple campus partners in discussing and supporting civic engagement. This will include discussions with campus leadership, messaging sent out by senior leaders, civic engagement in key campus events, and creating an advisory board to support this work. In addition to identifying campus partners and engaging senior leaders, we will increase student engagement through the growth of the Student Democracy Coalition student organization, developing a social media marketing plan, and creating a standing civic engagement celebration in the Fall semester.
- **Maintaining voter registration and turnout rates** - we will focus our strategy on building educational materials, designing pathways to reach this material (web, print, social, in-person), maintaining the current on-campus early voting polling place, and ensuring that student IDs are registered as valid voter IDs. This will include educating the CCESL staff and other close partners on voter registration processes and building print and video materials to explain this process to students. We will also update our current website and print materials to include information for Biltmore Park and distance students. In addition, we will create a structured plan to market this information and present opportunities for students to engage with the material through voter registration activities. Finally, we will continue to ensure accessibility to voting locations on campus and ease of use by utilizing student IDs as voter IDs.
- **Improving civic education** - We plan to provide civil dialogue events and work with first year experience faculty and staff to incorporate a civic engagement statement within their syllabus to help drive a culture of civic involvement. We plan to increase ways to incorporate civic engagement into the academics and campus culture of the university and create a space for all students to learn how to be engaged individuals before they graduate.

Civic engagement efforts at WCU are housed in the Academic Affairs Division in the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning. CCESL will carry out this action plan along with the Student Democracy Coalition, community partners, and WCU faculty and staff.

II. Leadership

Civic engagement efforts at WCU are housed in the Academic Affairs Division in the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) in the division of Undergraduate Studies. CCESL oversees all nonpartisan civic engagement efforts on the main Cullowhee campus and the Biltmore Park Instructional Site in Asheville, NC.

In addition to the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, a large portion of this work is supported by the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC). This student-led, nonpartisan organization provides leadership opportunities in civic engagement and education. CCESL provides the SDC with direction and staff support. The SDC operationalizes most ground-level programming and provides a student voice to develop nonpartisan civic engagement opportunities on campus. The Civic Engagement Coordinator (CCESL) will meet bi-weekly with the Executive Board of SDC to ensure clear direction, vision, and communication for civic engagement at Western Carolina University.

Civic engagement programming is led by the following individuals responsible for developing, implementing, and logistics of civic engagement and educational activities.

- The Executive Director of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning
- The Civic Engagement Coordinator in the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning
- The Executive Board of the Student Democracy Coalition
- Western Carolina University Phil and Connie Haire Institute for Public Policy

The following organizations support Civic Engagement work at WCU. These groups provide additional support, resources, and information to support the work of civic engagement at WCU.

- ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge
- The Andrew Goodman Foundation
- The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition
- Jackson County Board of Elections

In addition, civic engagement is supported by the work of the following individuals at WCU.

- Director of Parking Services
- Director of Public Safety
- Campus Activities Staff
- University Marketing and Communication
- The Student Democracy Coalition
- Department of Political Science and Public Affairs
- Department of Residential Living
- The Center for Career and Professional Development

Areas where we can increase engagement and leadership at WCU:

- Re-developing the Advisory Committee for Student Civic Engagement
- Partnering with Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Greek Leadership Council, and Student Government Association
- Identify academic departments, faculty, or courses that would connect with civic engagement work
- Partner with Admissions and the Department of Orientation to promote voter participation and civic commitment
- Building a stronger relationship with the Department of Intercultural Affairs, Mentoring and Persistence to Success (MAPS), the local chapter of the NAACP, and the National Pan-Hellenic Council
- Building a relationship with the university athletics department

III. Commitment

WCU was established as a Normal (teaching) school in 1889 to bring education and career/social development opportunities to the western region of North Carolina (southern Appalachian Mountain region). Like many institutions founded in rural areas, WCU was established to infuse one of the most important components and resources for community development and social stabilizing – education.

As such, our institution and campus leadership demonstrate commitment to improving nonpartisan civic education and democratic engagement. Our Chancellor, Dr. Kelli R. Brown, has publicly expressed the university’s commitment to civic engagement and democratic participation. Dr. Brown serves on the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge President’s Council and the Board Chair for North Carolina Campus Compact. Both of these organizations are focused on engaging students civically and creating a culture of civic engagement on college campuses.

Our campus already has several standing programs, institutions, and traditions that help promote civic engagement among our student body.

On campus, we’ve seen:

- Nonpartisan voter education resources promoted through the WCU Votes webpage and social media platforms.
- Political clubs or student organizations (such as Turning Point USA, College Democrats, and The Sunrise Movement).
- Campus leaders promote voting by participating in promotional videos and campus communication.
- On campus early voting polling location
- Nonpartisan voter registration tables
- Protests and rallies
- Signage promoting voting and elections
- Candidate debates
- Inviting candidates to campus on Democracy Day

On campus, we've experienced:

- Voting in student body elections
- Political speakers
- Registering to vote with a registration rate of 91.2% increased from 80.9% in 2016
- Civic Holiday events (such as National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, and Vote Early Day)

IV. Landscape

WCU as an institution has a higher voting rate than the national institutional average. According to the 2020 NSLVE data, WCU had a voting rate of 72% compared to the national institutional average of 66%. WCU is committed to maintaining our strengths and taking advantage of opportunities, while simultaneously working to improve our weaknesses and planning for potential threats to our civic engagement work.

Strengths

- We have a three-quarter time position whose job responsibility it is to foster civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- We have a coalition of people positioned to implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- We have processes in place for registering large percentages of our students.
- We have ways in which we communicate voting information to our students.
- We use readily available resources to develop and implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- We have sustainable or consistent funding.
- Voter engagement efforts on campus are nonpartisan.
- We have a working relationship with our local election office.
- We have working relationships with community partners invested in civic learning and democratic engagement.

Weaknesses

- A lack of regular scheduled programing geared towards civic engagement in non-election years.
- We do not know how civically educated our student body is.
- Frequently changing laws around voting and elections which may make it confusing for students.

Opportunities

- We have the opportunity to implement voter education and resources in new student orientation and first-year curriculum.
- We have the opportunity to increase engagement with student organizations, specifically ones who cater to populations that have historically had more barriers to voting.

Threats

- Potential inconsistency in on-campus polling place due to external variables outside the university’s control.
- Potential changes to laws around voting and elections that may impact our civic engagement programming.
- Potential resource constraints.

At present, the university has not conducted any recent surveys that gauge campus political climate. This is data that we plan to gather in the future to have a better understanding of student feelings towards civic engagement. Having this data will allow us to better adjust our goals and plans for civic engagement in order to best reach a majority of students.

WCU also has a myriad of student groups and organizations on campus that are supported by the university. Currently CCESL has a strong working relationship with SDC but interaction with other student clubs and organizations is limited. CCESL hopes to work more closely with other student organizations so that civic engagement efforts are diffused more evenly across campus and are more inclusive of diverse student perspectives.

Based on the data from NSLVE, we can see our students' voting habits. Having this data allows our university to gauge our strengths and weaknesses regarding civic engagement on our campus.

From this data, we can see that people in the 18-21 age range and the 22-24 age range have consistently logged lower voting rates. This is significant for our university because a majority of our student population falls into the category of 18-22. Our university is committed to continuing to target our civic engagement efforts towards young voters to increase 18–24-year-old voter turnout and build lifelong voting habits among youth voters.

Another notable pattern is the statistics that point to minority groups voting at a lower rate than white voters. Using this data, our university will make conscious efforts to amplify the voices of minority groups on campus by working to ensure equal access to civic knowledge and voting.

This data also points out that a weakness of our university is midterm election turnout. Low

	2016	2018	2020
18-21	53%	24%	70%
22-24	48%	31%	68%
25-29	59%	41%	69%
30-39	67%	54%	75%
40-49	76%	61%	81%
50+	77%	67%	82%

Midterm election turnout is a national trend, however, WCU is

	2016	2018	2020
Female	59%	34%	73%
Male	51%	30%	67%

committed to continuing civic engagement efforts all

year in hopes of creating a culture of civic engagement on our campus that will yield higher voter turnout in midterm elections.

Voting Rates by Age Group

Voting Rates by Gender

Voting Rates by Race/Ethnicity

	2016	2018	2020
Asian	34%	20%	49%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	54%	38%	57%
Black	50%	33%	64%
Hispanic	50%	28%	60%
Two or more Races	46%	28%	67%
White	58%	33%	74%

Enrollment Data:

The following tables provide a brief overview of the landscape of our campus. This information is based on data collected from 2022 when total student enrollment was 11,635.

Undergraduate	Graduate
85.57%	14.43%

Full Time	Part Time
77.58%	22.42%

Men	Women
41%	59%

In-State Students	Out-of-State Students
85.46%	14.54%

Less than 18 years old	18-24	25-34	35-44	45+
1.03%	70.18%	14.62%	8.79%	5.38%

American Indian/Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanics of Any Race	Multiple Race/Ethnicity	Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	White	Unknown/International
0.90%	1.30%	6.40%	7.70%	3.50%	0.10%	76.50%	3.60%

Residential	Distance
75.46%	24.54%

V. Goals

With this in mind, we have set three overarching goals to help expand civic engagement on our campus. These goals are expanding campus civic engagement, increasing voter registration and turnout, and improving civic education.

Foster a Culture of Civic Engagement

Short-Term Goals

- Establish an advisory board of 7-10 faculty, staff, students (distance/residential, grad/undergrad), and community members that will meet at least twice per year to discuss and plan civic engagement initiatives at Western Carolina University.
- Present regular briefs to the Dean’s Council, Provost Council, Staff Senate, Faculty Senate, and the Provost/Chancellor about civic education and voter engagement.
- Work with the Chancellor’s office to write and send out campus wide emails regarding the campus’ nonpartisan efforts regarding voting and civic engagement.
- Create and implement a social media plan that outlines post timing and content for Spring 2024 and Fall 2024.
- Increase the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) membership in Spring 2024 and Fall 2024.

Long-Term Goals

- Work with the Chancellor's office, Associate Provost, Deans, Orientation, and the Office of Retention to include civic engagement language in the opening ceremony, convocation, college-wide meetings, orientation, and first-year experience courses for the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters.
- Create language about WCU civic engagement for inclusion in the syllabi templates and work with relevant department to make us an option for faculty by Summer 2024.
- Identify 20 individuals or campus groups that support civic engagement at Western Carolina University by Fall 2024 to create a coalition to support this work.
- Grow WCU Votes followers on social media by 75% by Fall 2024.
- Redefine the roles of the SDC membership.
- Create a standing civic engagement celebration in the Fall semester each year that collaborates with student organizations and focuses on civic education and voter awareness.
- Host two civic engagement events per semester in partnership with a student organization or department on campus by Fall 2024.

Maintain Voter Registration and Turnout Rates

Short-Term Goals

- Create a voter registration schedule that includes a minimum of 5 voter registration activities through the Spring 2024 and Fall 2024 semesters.
- Train CCESL staff on the voter registration process for students and create open hours for voter registration assistance in the CCESL office and online by early Spring 2024.
- Update and redesign the WCU Votes website to include information for distance and Biltmore Park students by early Spring 2024.
- Create a marketing plan for all students, including Biltmore Park and distance students, to promote voter registration and participation by early Spring 2024.
- Maintain regular contact with the local Board of Elections to maintain and manage the Western Carolina University early voting polling place.

Long-Term Goals

- Create a voter registration video and Canvas course module for the Summer 2024 orientation.
- Maintain WCU early voting polling place numbers by advertising the WCU polling place in the Fall 2024 election based on the created marketing plan.
- Meet with Residential Living to brainstorm and establish a plan to promote voting registration and participation in the residence halls in Fall 2024.
- Create a transportation backup plan to ensure polling place accessibility each year regardless of polling location.
- Ensure that Western Carolina University applies each cycle for student IDs to be counted as an appropriate voter ID. Educate students about voter ID laws and be adaptive to state and federal election laws.
- Partner with the Mentoring and Persistence to Success and Intercultural Affairs office to market voter registration and promote voter turnout each semester.
- Incorporate nonpartisan voter registration into already established processes at Western Carolina University.

Improve Civic Education

Short-Term Goals

- Build a civic educational plan that regularly informs students about civic events and responsibilities through text/email/information tables by Spring 2024.
- Increase opportunities for civil dialogue through three planned events on relevant topics per semester starting in Spring 2024.

Long-Term Goals

- Facilitate the development of a civic engagement syllabus statement to be optional for incorporation by first year experience faculty and staff.
- Develop an optional Canvas module for faculty to incorporate into courses.
- Explore areas within the curriculum to collaborate with faculty to integrate nonpartisan civic engagement.

VI. Strategy

To accomplish our planned goals, we will adopt the following strategies to help bring our vision to life in the coming months and years.

Create a Culture of Civic Engagement

For this initiative, our primary strategy will be to build a sustainable and long-range plan to involve multiple campus partners in discussing and supporting civic engagement. This will include discussions with campus leadership, messaging sent out by senior leaders, civic engagement in key campus events, and creating an advisory board to support this work. In addition to identifying campus partners and engaging senior leaders, we will increase student engagement through the growth of the Student Democracy Coalition student organization, developing a social media marketing plan, and creating a standing civic engagement celebration in the Fall semester.

Short-Term Tactics

- Ensure messaging goes out to students from key stakeholders (i.e., Chancellor, Provost, Dean of Students) to promote voter turnout and registration.
- Build a strong advisory board of faculty, staff, students, and community members to focus on voter turnout, registration, and education.
- Increase student membership in the Student Democracy Coalition organization to support work on voter turnout, registration, and education.
- Create a marketing plan to address voter registration and turnout for students.

Long-Term Tactics

- Work with the appropriate departments to include voter registration and voter education in Orientation, Open Houses, Faculty/Staff Opening Ceremonies, College-Wide Fall Meetings, Convocation, and First-Year Experience courses.
- Include optional language in First-Year Experience course syllabi regarding the importance of voter registration and turnout.
- Identify potential faculty, staff and courses that support voter education and provide additional support to these partners.
- Identify potential student groups that may support voter education and registration initiatives as part of their mission.

Maintain Voter Registration and Turnout Rates

To address these goals, we will focus our strategy on building educational materials, designing pathways to reach this material (web, print, social, in-person), maintaining the current on-campus polling place, and ensuring that student IDs are registered to count as voter IDs. This will include educating the CCESL staff and other close partners on voter registration processes and building print and video materials to explain this process to students. We will also update our current website and print materials to include information for Biltmore Park and distance students. In addition, we will create a structured plan to market this information and present opportunities for students to engage with the material through voter registration activities. Finally, we will continue to ensure accessibility to voting locations on campus and ease of use by utilizing student IDs as voter IDs.

Short-Term Tactics

- Plan for voter registration tables to be available to students weekly leading up to and during the early voting period.
- Develop ways for students to access voting education materials through our website and drop-in hours within the office and online.
- Meet with identified campus partners to develop specific marketing plans to promote voter registration and turnout leading up to and during early voting.
- Identify ways to promote voter registration within the residence halls.
- Ask faculty to mention in their courses that early voting is happening.

Long-Term Tactics

- Work with the Coulter Faculty Commons to identify ways to incorporate a Voting Module into course shells for faculty.
- Create material to be used at each orientation for incoming freshmen and transfer students.
- Incorporate poll working as an opportunity for students to engage in voter registration and education.

Improve Civic Education

Increasing civic education is essential to our overall strategy to change the campus culture. We plan to provide civil dialogue events and work with appropriate faculty to incorporate a civic engagement statement within their syllabus to help drive a culture of civic involvement.

Short-Term Tactics

- Promote the practice of civil dialogue through discussions that engage students in relevant salient topics.
- Partner with the Office of Intercultural Affairs and the Department of Student Community Ethics to explore ways to collaborate on civic education.

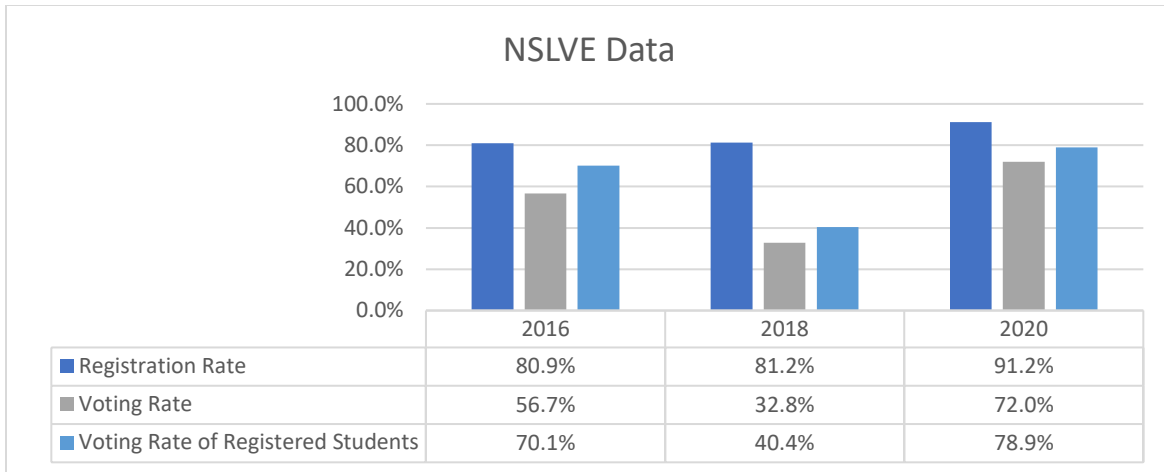
Long-Term Tactics

- More closely tie current initiatives in community volunteerism with civic education and engagement.
- Work with the faculty who teach service-learning courses to encourage inclusion of a civic engagement/education component into their coursework.

VII. National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)

Our campus has access to our National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data for 2020. In 2020, our registration rate was 91.2%. Compared to the data from four years prior, in 2016 in our NSLVE report, this rate increased by +15.3%.

In 2020, our voting rate was 72%, and our voting rate among registered students was 78.9%. Our voting rate was higher this year than the national average of 66%.



Our institution’s goal for the 2024 election year regarding voter registration and turnout is to maintain the numbers from the 2020 election. Our registration rate for 2020 was 91.2% and the voting rate of registered students was 78.9%. These numbers are above average, and we do not realistically think that we can increase these numbers much more. The 2020 election year was a unique one due to the political climate at the time. Given that voter turnout in the 2024 Primary was down in North Carolina, it is unlikely that we will be able to improve these numbers so maintaining our already impressive numbers is our goal for 2024.

VIII. Reporting

This action plan, the assessment of this action plan, and our NSLVE data will be included in our redesigned WCU Votes webpage for internal and external constituents to view. It will also be shared with the executive leadership team and the provost council. In addition, the report will be shared with our newly established advisory board and discussed with both the board and the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) for implementation. Our student, community partner, and faculty newsletters will feature the plan. We also intend to have a yearly advisory board and SDC meeting dedicated to reviewing, evaluating, and revising the report.

IX. Evaluation

To evaluate the success of our plan to create a culture of civic engagement, we intend to track the accomplishments of each goal by determining if the goal was met/not met. Please see below for assessment methods for each goal.

Goal	Assessment
Establish advisory board of 7-10 faculty, staff, students to meet at least twice per year	Count of number of meetings per year.
Present regular briefs to the Dean’s Council, Provost Council, Staff Senate, Faculty Senate,	Count of number of briefs presented to identified groups

and the Provost/Chancellor about civic education and voter engagement.	
Work with the Chancellor's office to write and send out campus wide emails regarding the campus' nonpartisan efforts regarding voting and civic engagement.	Count of number of emails to campus.
Create and implement a social media plan that outlines post timing and content for Spring 2024 and Fall 2024.	Creation of social media plan.
Increase the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) membership in Spring 2024 and Fall 2024.	25% increase in membership for each semester.
Work with the Chancellor's office, Associate Provost, Deans, Orientation, and the Office of Retention to include civic engagement language in the opening ceremony, convocation, college-wide meetings, orientation, and first-year experience courses for the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters.	Number of times civic engagement is mentioned in identified meetings.

Goal	Assessment
Grow WCU Votes followers on social media by 75% by Fall 2024.	Attainment of 75% growth in followers.
Redefine the roles of the SDC membership	Creation of new SDC constitution
Create a standing civic engagement celebration in the Fall semester each year that collaborates with student organizations and focuses on civic education and voter awareness.	Implementation of democracy week with at least three events.
Host two civic engagement events per semester in partnership with a student organization or department on campus by Fall 2024.	Count of number of events per semester.
Create a voter registration schedule that includes a minimum of 5 voter registration activities through the Spring 2024 and Fall 2024 semesters.	Count of voter registration activities per semester.
Train CCESL staff on the voter registration process for students and create open hours for voter registration assistance in the CCESL office and online by early Spring 2024	Count of number of staff trained in voter registration.
Update and redesign the WCU Votes website to include information for distance and Biltmore Park students by early Spring 2024.	Creation of new website.
Create a marketing plan for all students, including Biltmore Park and distance students, to promote voter registration and participation by early Spring 2024.	Creation of marketing plan.

Maintain regular contact with the local Board of Elections to maintain and manage the Western Carolina University early voting polling place.	Count of number of meetings with Board of Elections.
Create a voter registration video and Canvas course module for the Summer 2024 orientation.	Creation of video and course module.
Maintain WCU early voting polling place numbers by advertising the WCU polling place in the Fall 2024 election based on the created marketing plan.	Count of early voting polling place numbers.
Meet with Residential Living to brainstorm and establish a plan to promote voting registration and participation in the residence halls in Fall 2024.	Creation of residential living plan.
Create a transportation backup plan to ensure polling place accessibility each year regardless of polling location.	Creation of transportation backup plan.
Ensure that Western Carolina University applies each cycle for student IDs to be counted as an appropriate voter ID. Educate students about voter ID laws and be adaptive to state and federal election laws.	Application for voter ID.

Goal	Assessment
Partner with the Mentoring and Persistence to Success and Intercultural Affairs office to market voter registration and promote voter turnout each semester.	Count of events in collaboration with MAPS and ICA.
Incorporate nonpartisan voter registration into already established processes at Western Carolina University	Count of voter registration processes incorporated into Western procedures.
Build a civic educational plan that regularly informs students about civic events and responsibilities through text/email/information tables by Spring 2024.	Creation of civic education plan.
Increase opportunities for civil dialogue through three planned events on relevant topics per semester starting in Spring 2024.	Count of civil dialogue events.
Facilitate the development of a civic engagement syllabus statement to be optional for incorporation by first year experience faculty and staff.	Development of syllabi statement
Develop an optional Canvas module for faculty to incorporate into courses.	Development of Canvas module.
Explore areas within the curriculum to collaborate with faculty to integrate nonpartisan civic engagement.	Count of faculty meetings to discuss curriculum integration.

To determine the success of our initiatives to maintain voter registration and turnout rates, we intend to review our NSLVE data to adjust our action plan. Many of the goals in this section can

also be measured by determining if the initiative was completed or not completed. The key evaluation data for this section will be the NSLVE data and the voter registration and turnout rates.