

An aerial photograph of the Western Carolina University campus, showing various academic buildings, green spaces, and parking lots. A faint rainbow is visible in the sky above the hills in the background. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

2020 - 2021

Executive Summary

The Civic Engagement Action Plan 2020, drafted in collaboration with the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC), the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) at Western Carolina University (WCU), and the Advisory Committee for Student Civic Engagement on campus, is built on nearly a decade of high-level, sustained student-led, institution-supported civic engagement efforts and over 125 years of community engagement in & across the western region of North Carolina.

*The purpose of this plan is to focus on the practical preparation of engaged citizens for the democracy we want to see tomorrow. **This must start today; this must start now.***

This plan, and the people operationalizing it, seek to increase the quality and quantity of engagement of our Catamount student body and regional constituents by intentionally and reciprocally engaging the community, faculty, staff, and community in the civic engagement process by focusing on the following:

- **Voter Registration** – including individual tabling, class-based drives, online voter registration, etc. with the goal of Asking Every Student to register (~12,000), and at a minimum have ~70% of WCU students registered to vote
- **Democracy Celebration** – including recognizing student leadership, measuring impact, public communications with the goal of raising the profile of WCU's SDC through press releases, news stories, opinion/editorials, and participation in various national recognition programs
- **Voter Engagement & Advocacy** – including preserving on-campus polling, voter shuttling, absentee information, etc. with the goal of having ~4,000 voters at the WCU on-campus polling place and shuttling ~500 on election day in fall 2020, ultimately reaching a student voter engagement level of 9,000 students (75% of our student body)
- **Voter Education** – including issues forums, debates, website information, “what’s on the ballot” programs, etc. with the goal of engaging ~1,200 student attendees (10% of our student body) in our educational programming

These efforts are housed within the Academic Affairs Division at WCU, specifically within the CCESL, and will directly impact WCU students on the Cullowhee campus and the Biltmore Park Instructional Site. Operations are made possible by the SDC and partnerships with national non-partisan organizations like the Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Election Engagement Project, Campus Vote Project, and North Carolina Campus Compact.

This plan will specifically run from May 2020 to May 2021 and include preparation for the 2020 election, the 2020 election, and the post-election semester. A review of the plan and its effectiveness and impact will be conducted in late spring 2021 and used to inform the next iterations of future plans. It will be implemented by students, faculty, staff, and community partners through the SDC, CCESL, and the advisory board on student civic engagement at WCU.

The planning committee recognizes the realized and potential impacts of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on all operations, processes, and policies associated with this action plan. Civic and democratic engagement must continue, and the planning team sees this as a teachable moment where we can continually learn how to meet students on their terms.

Leadership

The Student Democracy Coalition is a key leader organization in the operationalizing of this plan. Its work in collaboration with the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning and the Advisory Committee for Student Civic Engagement at WCU provides access to student leadership, staff from both academic and student affairs, faculty, and community partner perspectives. This collaborative and reciprocal team helps shape programming, approaches, and strategies for meeting WCU student civic engagement goals.

This work is chaired by the following positions who are responsible for oversight and ensuring the successful implementation and management of the action plan (this team meets weekly):

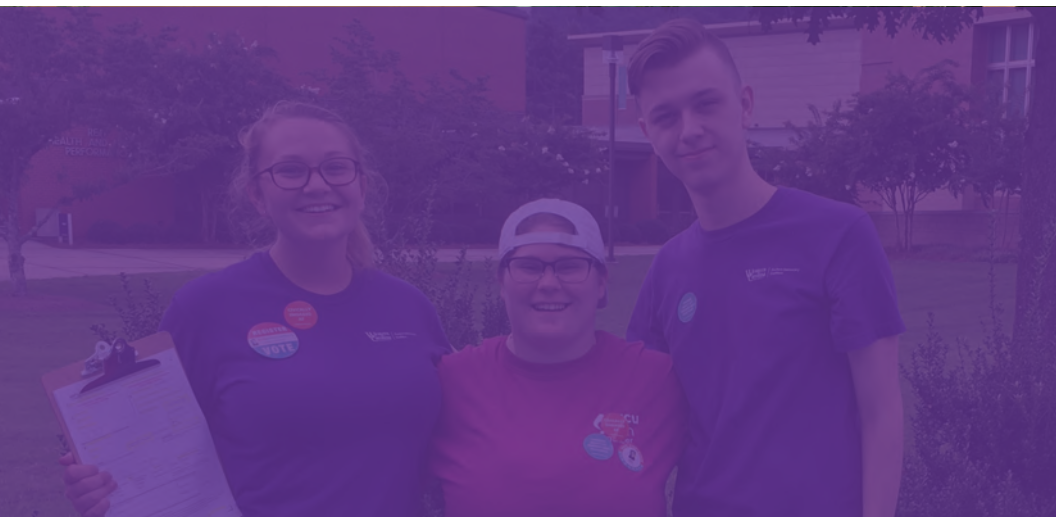
- Executive Director of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning
- Lead Chair of the Student Democracy Coalition

This work is supported by the following positions who operationalize much of the ground level programming (e.g., managing voter registration efforts, ideating and implementing voter education/outreach programs, and managing petitions, on-campus polling place, etc.):

- Assistant Director of Student Community Engagement
- Leadership Team – Student Democracy Coalition (each are on stipend fellowships):
 - Marketing/Communications Chair
 - Educational Programming Co-Chairs (2)
 - Registration Programming Chair
 - Advocacy/Voter Engagement Chair

This work is supported further by the Advisory Committee for Student Civic Engagement which serves as a sounding board and brain trust for considering and informing decisions associated with the plans. This committee includes the following members who meet 4-5 times over a 3-month period leading up to an election:

- SDC Advocacy/Voter Engagement Chair (student)
- SDC Registration Programming Chair (student)
- Chief Diversity Officer (staff)
- Director of Parking Services (staff)
- Director of the Public Policy Institute (faculty)
- Director of Public Safety (staff)
- Director of External Relations (staff)
- Social Media Marketing (staff)
- University Communications Writer (staff)
- Assistant Directors of the University Center (staff x2)
- Director & Early Voting Coordinator of the Jackson County Board of Elections (community x2)
- Engaged Faculty Representative (faculty)
- Student Affairs Leadership Programming Representative (staff)
- Student Affairs Diversity Programming Representative (staff)





**VOTING IS THE
MOST POWERFUL
TOOL WE HAVE
TO SHAPE OUR
COMMUNITY.**

**DR. KELLI R. BROWN
CHANCELLOR
WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**

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.

The founders of WCU recognized the importance of formalized higher education for their community's and state's development and continue to invest on these fronts today. This regional institution quickly outgrew its facilities and increased its faculties, but never lost its roots and purpose. That purpose is boldly stated and pursued through the 2020 mission, vision, and strategic plan created in 2012 and updated in 2018.

We believe that the sun is setting on the era of apathy and rising boldly on a future of informed, passionate, and steady democracy.

In 2017, the Campus Compact Civic Action Plan (CAP) was adopted to guide civic engagement at WCU. The CAP brought into focus five principles, two of which are most relevant to this plan:

- We prepare our students for engaged citizenship to deliberate and lead for public good.
- We harness institutional capacity to challenge prevailing inequalities in our democracy.

These two principles illuminate the path between two points that can assist institutions in navigating both charted and uncharted territories by focusing on a core purpose of higher education – preparing an engaged citizenry for a lasting democracy. At WCU, citizenship and civic/social responsibility are perceived and pursued as crafts that can and should be learned within a higher education context. Imperative to understanding learning as a process is recognizing how learners' beliefs, values, and experiences influence how meanings and perspectives are constructed. This point seems to be a primary concern of experiential educators and practitioners who align with pedagogies that work directly with local communities, and have the greater intention of 1) creating relevance in student learning, 2) addressing collaborative opportunities within a local community, and 3) cultivating a culture of community and civic engagement in students.

Partisanship or political leanings are not the focus of this larger purpose. The focus is about students finding the purpose, understanding the purpose, and tuning their voice to align both foci through whatever partisan or ideological perspective aligns with their values and beliefs. With this, citizenship should be viewed as a craft that equals a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts. By identifying the skills of a citizen as a set of skills or as a craft, we illuminate its potential to align with educational strategies to expose, connect, test, and confirm this body of knowledge with students' perspectives and personal experiences. This is the premise for recognizing citizenship as a domain of knowledge dependent on experience and solidified in reflection. The CAP focuses on preparing and supporting students on their journeys towards a brighter, richer, more inclusive democracy.

Landscape

Western Carolina University creates learning opportunities that incorporate teaching, research, service, and engagement through on campus, off campus, on-line and international experiences. The university focuses its undergraduate, master’s and three doctoral programs, educational outreach, research, creative, and cultural activities to sustain and improve individual lives and enhance economic and community development in Western North Carolina and beyond. Our updated 2020 strategic plan embraces student civic engagement through three veins: Academic Excellence, Student Experience, and Regional & Community Engagement.

Academic Excellence

- 1.2. Fully integrate into the liberal studies program and into each major and minor at both undergraduate and graduate levels an emphasis on those core abilities expected of all WCU students: integrate information from a variety of contexts; solve complex problems; communicate effectively and responsibly; practice civic engagement; and clarify and act on purpose and values.
- 1.3: Embed and support realization of WCU’s areas of distinction:
 - A. Cultural and environmental immersion;
 - B. Service and outreach;
 - C. Experience-based learning.

Student Experience

- 2.1: Foster a student-centered campus culture that enhances the student experience, promotes active citizenship and inclusion, and celebrates institutional traditions.

Regional and Community Engagement

- 4.1: Strengthen relationships and communication between the WCU and our external partners.

Relevant Data Points for Benchmarking and Goal Setting

There are many different sources of data that inform our civic engagement trajectory and impact (NSSE + Civic Engagement Module, WCU Student Experience Survey, NSLVE, etc.). For the purposes of this plan, NSLVE data has been and is instrumental in informing our decisions.

	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020 (goal)
% of students voted	4565 (51%)	1750 (17.5%)	4830 (46%)	3457 (31%)	9000 (75%)
% of all students voted (peer)	46.90%	19.70%	50.40%	39.10%	?

*NSLVE data has supported time and again what we know to be true. **Students are choosing to use the best voice they have -- their vote -- and are demanding to be heard.***



Civic Engagement In & Across the Curriculum

Aspects of Civic Engagement are found in myriad places within and across the institution in both curricular (e.g., Liberal Studies Curriculum, First-Year Transition courses, Service-Learning Designated Courses) and co-curricular (e.g., Days of Service, Alternative Break Experiences, and a vibrant Student Government Association and 100's of Registered Student Organizations) spaces.

For example, in the Liberal Studies curriculum, students will recognize behaviors and define choices that affect their lifelong well-being; and students will apply appropriate disciplinary methodologies to answer questions and propose solutions to problems within the human and natural worlds. In Service-Learning Designated Courses (100+ courses across all academic colleges) students apply, test, evaluate, and critically reflect on the effectiveness of course-based knowledge as a tool for addressing and navigating real-world projects with local community partner organizations.

Another curricular area is the transition course model that helps prepare students for life at WCU – which explicitly includes being an engaged citizen (e.g., the Community & Civic Engagement Module in Blackboard addresses the value of service, citizenship, and how students can become the best citizens they can be).

Finally, co-curricular efforts include a deep and wide portfolio of community service oriented projects across 130 community partnerships, ~20 direct service programs annually, ~3-4 alternative break experiences annually, ~10-15 awareness/advocacy programs annually, a civic leadership development program called Catamount Leaders Active With Service (CLAWS), and many other initiatives designed to meet students where they are and engage them where they are needed.

Goals

The ultimate impacts of WCU's student civic engagement education efforts focus on the following longer-term, overarching goals. Through civic engagement programming the general goals are for students to:

- Foster capacity as civically-minded leaders in practical and local ways.
- Foster citizens who recognize the partnership between themselves and their community.
- Foster citizens who recognize the relationship between their vote and decisions that shape their community.

Practically, this includes specific goals focused on voter registration, voter engagement, the integration of civic engagement into and across the curriculum, and the positive impact on student civic identity development and engagement.

- Increase **student voting rates** by 25% from 2012 (51%) - 2024 (75%).
- Embed a required **Community & Civic Engagement** component in the First-Year Transition curriculum in a universally accessible platform by fall 2020.
- Develop a student-centered civic leadership development institute, **Catamounts Leaders Active With Service (CLAWS)** by fall 2020, designed to develop a cohort of (~20) student leaders interested in community and civic development.
- Increase **Service-Learning Course Designations** designed to engage students with the **community, through problem-solving, and with critical reflection** by 10% annually.

The **Student Democracy Coalition** specifically will:

- Continue to develop **leaders** and invest in our **partnerships**.
- Manage the **vote.wcu.edu website**, which houses information focused on how to register, to educate voters on the process/candidates/issues, and to learn where/when to vote.
- Sustain and maintain the **on-campus polling location** for all current and future midterm and general elections in perpetuity.
- Focus on **voter registration** through traditional means (e.g., tabling, classroom visits, etc.) and map and develop the process for **North Carolina's DMV Online Voter Registration** information campaign by fall 2020 with the intention of increasing voter registration rates incrementally to 90% by 2024.
- Continue to monitor and respond to the **voter policy and procedures** in NC.
- **Educate voters** through programs (e.g., live debates/debate watch parties, issues forums, 'meet the candidates' programs, etc.).

IT IS SO IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, AND COALITIONS LIKE OURS WHO FOCUS ON VOTER REGISTRATION & EDUCATION CAN REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

HANNAH FRASER '20
STUDENT DEMOCRACY COALITION



Strategy

Our strategy captures the ground-level programs developed and implemented to achieve our longer and shorter term goals across three primary categories: Registration, Engagement, and Education. All programs that are scheduled will be added to the vote.wcu.edu website as well as all marketing materials. Additionally, we recognize the continued impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on our strategy. We have adjusted accordingly, and will continue to do so in a timely manner, to meet students on their terms.

Voter Registration

Voter registration efforts will include the following initiatives led by the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) and supported by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL):

- Bi-weekly tabling in teams of two on the lawn or in the UC from August - Fall Break 2020.
- Classroom presentations from ~10 trained SDC ambassadors focused on voter registration and election/issue awareness from August - October 2020[∞]
- Major events (e.g., Break the Tie - National Voter Registration Day, Valley Ballyhoo, etc.).
- North Carolina Online Voter Registration[∞]

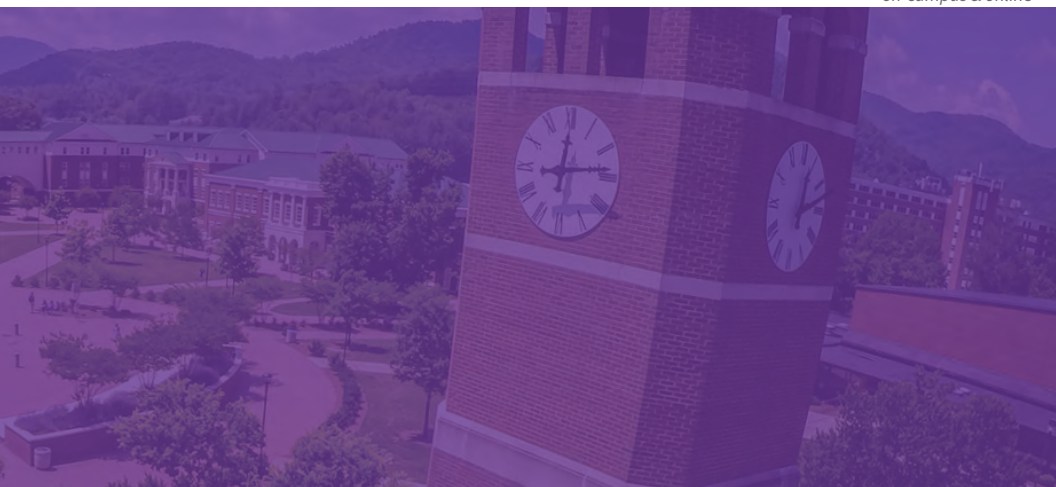
In March of 2020, the NC Department of Motor Vehicles partnered with the NC State Board of Elections to develop and integrate an online voter registration process for North Carolinians who have a NC State Issued Driver's License or Identification Card and a known Social Security Number to re-register or register for the first time through the NCDMV online platform. WCU's SDC has stepped up as a leader for mapping and increasing awareness of this process for eligible voters.

Voter Engagement

Voter engagement efforts will primarily focus on managing and maintaining the on-campus polling place and be led by the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) and supported by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) and the Advisory Committee for Student Civic Engagement. The goal is to engage ~9,000 students in the voting process, which is 75% of WCU students:

- Plan and manage the on-campus polling location during early voting (October 17 - October 31, 2020).
- Organize, market, and drive the voter shuttle on Election Day 2020 (9:00 am - polls closing)
- Absentee ballot request and submission process included on vote.wcu.edu[∞]

[∞] = on-campus & online





Voter Education

Voter education efforts will include programs that introduce voters to the issues and the candidates, while also educating voters on the voting process. These efforts are led by the Student Democracy Coalition (SDC) and supported by the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL). The following initiatives are the focus for the fall 2020 semester:

- First-Year Transition course will be available for all incoming first-year students and will include access to voter registration/education resources[∞]
- Facilitating summer Orientation sessions to motivate and inform students on voting, civic engagement, and the 2020 election[∞]
- Chancellor Kelli Brown will record two videos for students inspiring them to register and then again to vote in the 2020 election[∞]
- Two issue forums (Democracy 100%) will be facilitated in the fall to address two different issues of relevance to student voters and to the 2020 general election (e.g., immigration, health-care, etc.). These topics will be based on a survey facilitated at Valley Ballyhoo or in an online forum based on plans for the fall[∞]
- Debate watch parties will be organized for all Presidential and Vice-Presidential debates and SDC will support any in-person candidate debates associated with other relevant races in our district[∞]
- One Meet the Candidates program will be organized, which will invite every person and issue representative to a 1-day event similar to Democracy Day or Stroll to the Polls where students will get to meet with and learn about every candidate in attendance[∞]
- What's on the Ballot & Ballot Breakdown[∞]
- Develop and prepare an exhibit showcasing WCU's work in support of Women's Suffrage[∞]
- The vote.wcu.edu website will be maintained and updated as new information is made available[∞]
- Census 2020 will still be relevant through October 2020 and will be included in its own marketing effort that runs from June - October 2020[∞]

[∞] = on-campus & online

Reporting

Transparent reporting of our plan along with the data we use to determine our impact is essential to the success of our civic engagement efforts. This will be achieved by sharing the plan internally and externally with our stakeholders.

Specifically, the plan will be shared on CCESL's website, distributed to all upper-administrative leaders, faculty, SDC, CCESL, and advisory committee members which includes the local Jackson County Board of Elections. The plan will be made externally and publicly available through the All In Challenge website and through any other partner who would like to share our plan on their website. The primary data sources for informing our impact include NSLVE data, Jackson County Board of Elections daily voting data, and internal data collected from our specific registration, education, and engagement programs (e.g., attendance, participants, clicks, etc.).

Evaluation

This evaluation seeks to better determine the impact of the civic engagement efforts associated with this plan. The audience will include administrators, students, faculty, staff, and community partners and will be facilitated in collaboration with CCESL, SDC, and select data sources. Continuous and informal assessment is vital to improving the action plan as the year progresses, but the majority of the evaluation will be conducted and completed by June 2021 with the NSLVE data reporting in fall 2021.

As noted, the primary data sources for informing our impact include NSLVE data, Jackson County Board of Elections daily voting data, and internal data collected from our specific registration, education, and engagement programs (e.g., attendance, participants, clicks, etc.). The performance indicators of our success include:

- Voter registration rates (NSLVE; Jackson County Board of Elections)
- Voter engagement rates (NSLVE; Jackson County Board of Elections)
- On-campus polling place engagement & usage rates (Jackson County Board of Elections)
- Attendance & participation in SDC programming & initiatives (internal data)
- Marketing & advertising (clicks & impressions)

Data will be analyzed on a rolling basis as collected to inform specific programming and initiatives in an appropriate manner. Results of the evaluation will be reported on CCESL's website, distributed to all upper-administrative leaders, SDC, CCESL, and advisory committee members which includes the local Jackson County Board of Elections.

*We strive to prepare graduates who are **committed to engaging in meaningful actions as citizens of our democracy.***

Conclusion

This plan was designed to build on over a century of civic and community engagement with our region, and primarily focuses on the efforts dedicated to student civic development. We do this with a very long list of partners both on and off campus, in and out of our region and state, and across our nation as a whole. In this, universities do what we are qualified and called to do. We do what works best. That is, we plan, we clarify goals, we organize support and resources, we engage, engage, engage, and ultimately lean into and learn from our experiences and the collective experiences of others.

