

# **ALL IN CAMPUS DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN**

**WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, December, 2023**

## **Overview/Executive Summary**

This plan was written by Keith Boeckelman, Professor of Political Science and Interim Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Other campus units involved include the WIU Multicultural Center, the Honors College, the Political Science Department, and student organizations, such as the Associated Students of Political Science and Student Honors Association. The purpose and goal of the plan is to improve voting and civic engagement on campus. The plan will be in place for the 2024 federal elections. The plan will be implemented by the planning team and other campus units, and seeks to carry out the action items at the end of this report.

## **Leadership**

This report was prepared by Keith Boeckelman. Others involved include Political Science chair, Greg Baldi, Multicultural Center Director Katy Valentin, Honors College Dean Lorette Oden, and College of Arts and Sciences Interim Dean James Schmidt.

## **Commitment**

There is no specific office at Western Illinois University that is responsible for civic learning/democratic engagement. Most such activities are initiated through the Political Science Department, the Multicultural Center, and the Centennial Honors College, in conjunction with other university units. These entities include the Provost's Office and the College of Arts and Sciences, both of which have supported WIU's involvement in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and the All In challenge. In the past, the Provost has also sponsored the Illinois component of the "Ready to Run" program, housed at Western. This initiative, sponsored by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, trains first time women candidates to run for office. The university's Multicultural Center coordinated programs to educate students about the 2020 election, as well as encouraging voting. This initiative, Campus Cares: Civic Engagement 2020, provided information on how to vote, developed a voting guide, initiative pre- and post-election discussion groups, as well as many other activities. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning coordinates with NSLVE to generate university level voting data.

The Political Science Department and the Honors College foster civic engagement both inside and outside the classroom. Both encourage in-depth simulations and other experiential learning opportunities as part of the curriculum. For example, instructors use simulation games developed by the Reacting to the Past Consortium to help students use historical events to illuminate the enduring role of citizens in politics. The Political Science Department, along with the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Honors College, supports out-of-class experiences, such as Midwest Model United Nations, Model Illinois Government, and the Mock Trial Team. The Honors College provides a number of offerings promoting civic engagement, including “Inside State Government.” This course typically includes a field trip to Springfield, the state capital, and the opportunity to interact with government officials. Other Honors courses that promote civic engagement include a class on citizen politics, a course on leadership taken by incoming first year students in the college, and one entitled “The Democracy Game,” that emphasizes historical aspects of constitution writing. The Honors College also has offered specialized courses that emphasize travel to civically significant sites, including the U.S. Supreme Court, the United Nations, and civil rights museums.

The university participates in the American Democracy Project (ADP), an initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, whose goal is to provide all students with a quality civic education. ADP leaders help coordinate Constitution Day activities and other events, such as moderating debates for Student Government Association elections. Keith Boeckelman has also attended several annual meetings of the American Democracy Project. Finally, the Political Science Department, as well as the larger university, supports various public affairs internship opportunities.

During presidential election years, the political science department, along with other university units, has sponsored viewing parties where students can watch election returns. After the election, Political Science sponsors a post-election panel discussion analyzing the results. Political Science department faculty regularly appear in the media to discuss election results and other current affairs issues.

One of the university’s major goals, according to its strategic plan, is to promote social responsibility. Specifically, under this criterion, the plan states, “We create an environment that fosters and promotes civic engagement.” Moreover, the plan includes an action item stating that the university will “Promote civic engagement and service learning in order for students to enhance local, national, and global perspectives.” Doing so includes charges to:

- Support service learning, internships, student teaching, and other forms of experiential learning that promote civic engagement.
- Engage in activities associated with the American Democracy Project
- Actively participate in the annual Federal Constitution Day

The university has a general education curriculum. Although it does not reference civic engagement specifically, it notes that “a generally well-educated student will demonstrate ... an understanding of the differences and relative power among peoples, both in the United States and across the globe.” To meet this requirement, students take courses in political science, history, sociology, anthropology, geography, and related fields that deal with matters related to civic engagement. The university has also begun to offer dual enrollment courses in American government at high schools in the region, in order to foster civic knowledge and engagement more widely.

## **Landscape**

Western Illinois University participates in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement associated with the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University’s Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. Rates of voting on Western’s campus in recent elections were: 33.6 percent in 2012, 15.2 percent in 2014, 45.3 percent in 2016, 27.5 percent in 2018, and 57.3 percent in 2020. The university showed increased turnout in the 2016, as compared to 2012, and the 2020, as compared to the 2016 presidential elections. Improvement also occurred between the 2014 and 2018 mid-term elections. Western falls behind comparable institutions (i.e., public Master’s granting universities), but has shown relative improvement since 2012.

Not surprisingly, older students, upper classmen, and graduate students were the most likely to vote, as were women. Looking at fields of study, Multidisciplinary studies, English, Visual and Performing Arts, and History majors were most likely to vote, while Physical Sciences, Law Enforcement, and Parks, Recreation, and Leisure majors were least likely to do so. Between 2016 and 2020, voting increased across all age groups, except the very oldest category, class years, genders, racial groups, and majors. There were dramatic increases in Not-In-Person voting (24 percent) between 2016 and 2020, accompanied by a slight decline in In-Person on Election Day voting (2 percent). Examining racial groups more closely, turnout increased the most among Hispanics (18 percent) and the least among Blacks (2 percent). During this time period, the university lost its African American Studies major, which may have hampered engagement efforts geared towards Black students. A revised version of this program has been reinstated, and outreach towards African American students should be a top priority.

Illinois has passed several laws in recent years that should enhance voter registration and, hence, voting on campus. For example, the state now allows Same Day Registration. It also now has an Automatic Voter Registration provision that will register citizens to vote when they sign up for a driver's license, state identification card, or state services. There is no voter identification requirement in Illinois.

## **Goals**

In general, Western Illinois University voter turnout rates average about 70 to 75 percent of the public Master's universities level. This level has improved in recent presidential elections; in 2016, it reached around 90 percent of the turnout at comparable universities, while falling slightly to 88 percent in 2020. In the 2018 midterms, Western students voted at 77 percent of the level of comparable universities. Based on these past patterns, a reasonable, yet attainable goal, would be for Western to achieve 80 percent of the Master's university standard during midterm elections, and 85 percent for presidential elections.

## **Strategy**

The strategy for achieving the goals above will include several components, as listed below.

### *1. On-campus polling place.*

Previously, an early voting and/or Election Day polling place has been located in the WIU Student Union. We will work with the McDonough County Clerk's office to ensure that these student friendly opportunities for voting continue.

### *2. Voter registration links on Political Science and other social media sites.*

In the past, we have put a voter registration link on the political science department web site, and will encourage other departments to do the same. We will request that the university's main web site also contains a link to publicize registration and voting.

### *3. Increasing student voter registration, especially for new students.*

We will work with community organizations, such as the McDonough County League of Women Voters, to enhance student voter registration. We will invite

the League to register students in classes, and set up a registration event in a highly-traveled area, such as the Student Union. Furthermore, we will work with the Vice President for Student Services and the Director of Admissions to allow the League to offer new students the opportunity to register to vote. This latter initiative will be particularly valuable in increasing rates of voter turnout among underclassmen. We will publicize voter registration opportunities through the “My Western” portal, which provides campus specific information to new students.

#### *4. Student government*

We will work with the Student Government Association and other student organizations, such as Pan-Hellenic Council and Residence Hall Government, during the election season to publicize opportunities to register and vote on campus. We will attempt to create specific voting and registration centric events that will be enjoyable and motivating for students.

#### *5. Working with the First Year Experience Program (FYE) to publicize registration and voting.*

WIU has a First Year Experience initiative that includes a general education course consisting only of new students. We will work with FYE administrators to publicize registration and voting through this program.

#### *6. Working with the Western Courier newspaper and University TV station to publicize voting and the All-In Challenge.*

Members of the planning team will set up an interview with the *Western Courier*, the student newspaper, as well as approach the student-run broadcast news about stories publicizing registration and voting.

#### *7. Working with student organizations to promote registration and voting.*

We will reach out to politically-focused organizations, such as the College Republicans, College Democrats, Black Student Organization, Latin American Student Association, and Associated Students of Political Science to mobilize their members and other students to register and vote. The campus chapter of the NAACP, for example, plans to register students to vote during the 2024 Homecoming events.

#### *8. Working with the Multicultural Center to encourage registration and voting among underrepresented groups.*

During the 2020 Election, the WIU Multicultural Center spearheaded an initiative known as Campus Cares: Civic Engagement, designed to make students aware of opportunities to participate in the 2020 election and to feel comfortable doing so. Specific initiatives included: publicizing early voting, providing a how-to-vote guide, pre-and-post election process groups, circle chats and more. We would like to build on this initiative in the 2024 federal elections to provide programming that will enhance civic engagement.

*9. Emphasizing the mechanics of voting in Political Science courses.*

Political science instructors, especially at the introductory level, will help students understand the “how-tos” of the registration and voting processes. We will encourage them to include voter information on syllabi, such as links to online registration.

*10. Working with the Honors College to publicize registration and voting.*

The Centennial Honors college will use its newsletter and web presence to publicize opportunities for registration and voting. The President’s Leadership class for first year students will cover the upcoming November election and voting as a classroom topic. The Student Honors Association will develop initiatives to enhance civic engagement and voting around the 2024 election.

*11. Reaching out to the reconstituted African American studies option to encourage increases in black student voting.* As mentioned above, black students at Western showed the lowest increases in voting between 2016 and 2020. Based on this, we will work to reach out to African American studies students to inform about and encourage voting.

## **Reporting**

The chair of the campus American Democracy Project, in conjunction with the chair of political science, dean of the Honors College and Dean of Arts and Sciences will prepare a follow-up report concerning success of these efforts. This report will be shared with the upper administration of the university, as well as with the university relations office to publicize activities in the local media.

## **Evaluation**

Keeping in mind that many factors in the political environment can shape turnout on an election to election basis, we will use NSLVE data to assess changes in voter turnout among WIU students. We will also examine how many of the

strategies above were carried out, and track the number of student voter registrations our outreach efforts capture.