

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

**WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, DECEMBER 11, 2019**

### **Overview**

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 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. The Provost also sponsors the Illinois component of the "Ready to Run" program, which is 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 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 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.

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. Richard Hardy, Dean of the Centennial Honors College and Keith Boeckelman, Chair of the Political Science department often appear in the media to discuss election outcomes.

The university participates in the American Democracy Project, which coordinates Constitution Day activities and other events. Co- chairs Keith

Boeckelman and Richard Hardy are involved in civic engagement activities on campus that include moderating debates for Student Government Association elections. 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, including a WIU in D.C. program.

## **Leadership**

This report was prepared by Keith Boeckelman, Chair of the Department of Political Science, Richard J. Hardy, Director of Western's Centennial Honors College, and Amber Shupe, Vice President of the Associated Students of Political Science. College of Arts and Sciences Dean Susan Martinelli-Fernandez was also consulted as part of the preparation of this report.

## **Commitment**

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 specific 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.

## **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. Although rates of voting on Western's campus in 2012 (33.6 percent), 2014 (15.2 percent), 2016 (45.8 percent), and 2018 (30.3 percent) are below comparable institutions, the university showed increased turnout between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections and between the 2014 and 2018 mid-term elections. This

improvement exceeded that of comparable institutions. Specifically, in 2012, Western's turnout was 15.8 percent below Master's Institutions and 13.2 percent behind Public Master's Institutions. By contrast, in 2016, it fell 7.1 percent below Master's Institutions and 4.4 percent below Public Master's Institutions.

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, Education, and History majors were most likely to vote, while Computer and Information Sciences, and the Biological and Physical sciences were least likely to do so. Racial and ethnic voting patterns varied across the various elections, but generally showed increases between 2012 and 2016, as well as between 2014 and 2018. Between 2012 and 2016, voting increased across all age groups, class years, genders, racial groups, and majors.

New laws recently passed in Illinois should enhance voter registration and, hence, voting on campus. The state recently instituted a Same Day Registration law. 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.

## **Goals**

In general, Western Illinois University voter turnout rates average about 70 to 75 percent of the public Master's universities level. The exception was 2016, when it reached around 90 percent of the turnout at comparable universities. Based on these past patterns, a reasonable, yet attainable goal, would be for Western to reach 80 percent of the Master's university standard.

## **Strategy**

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

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

At times in the past, 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 insure that these student friendly opportunities for voting continue.

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

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, Latin American Student Association, and Associated Students of Political Science to mobilize their members and other students to register and vote .

*8. 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.

*9. 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.

### **Reporting**

The chair of the Political Science department and the Dean of the Honors College will prepare a joint report covering the extent to which the strategies above occurred. 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.