



Widener University

2022 Political Engagement Action Plan

Executive Summary

Widener University's 2022 Political Engagement Plan developed for the PA Campus Voting Challenge and All in Democracy Challenge was developed in response to our institution's historic mission and strategic commitment to civic and political engagement. The overarching goal is to continue towards incorporating a four-year educational approach to be re-evaluated in 2024. These efforts remain a partnership with the Center for Civic and Global Engagement who acts as an umbrella entity, aiding coordination across previously dispersed campus programs and initiatives, the Political Science department, faculty, community partners, and students. This partnership oversees implementation with encouragement and facilitates education and support for the voting process.

The intentionality of the political action plan is to leverage existing civic and political engagement initiatives, improve student voting rates, expand our two-phased political education model, and encourage civic preparedness, active citizenship, and critical engagement with complex societal issues.

Leadership

Widener's 2022 Political Engagement Plan will be coordinated and facilitated by the committee chaired collaboratively by LaShanda Patton, Assistant Director of Civic Engagement, Dr. James Vike of the Political Science Department and Campus Program Director of Project Pericles, Dr. J. Wesley Leckrone, Chair of the Political Science Department and Chair of the campus-wide Political Engagement Committee, Dr. Angie Corbo (title/Dept.), and Taylor Easter, Political Engagement Coordinator for the Center for Civic and Global Engagement Scholar's Program. This team will reach out to participating faculty and community groups to coordinate campus and local events.

The team has identified curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities related to political engagement that will be taking place on campus. The committee will create a forward-looking engagement plan for each academic year and help publicize political engagement activities on campus.

Due to the institution's return to fully in-person activities on campus, we will realign the Political Engagement Communications Network established in our initial plan. This year the team will widen recruitment efforts for faculty members and community partners who have indicated an intent to incorporate a political engagement component to one or more of their classes and organizational outreach. The team will stay in contact throughout the semester with this group to keep them apprised of political engagement activities and explore options to

enhance participation and content programming through stronger linkages to the curriculum and community engagement.

Members of the Political Engagement Planning Committee:

Administration/Faculty

- Catherine Feminella, Ed.D., Associate Dean of Students, and Commissioner, Chester Housing Authority
- Dr. Kim O'Halloran, Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies and Extended Learning
- Dr. Angie Corbo, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Communications Studies
- Dr. J. Wesley Leckrone, Chair of the Political Science Department and Chair of the campus-wide Political Engagement Committee
- Dr. James Vike of the Political Science Department and Campus Program Director of Project Pericles

Staff

- LaShanda Patton, Assistant Director, Civic Engagement

Student Groups

- Center for Civic and Global Engagement's Service Scholar's Program
- Student Government Association (President Megan Sharpe)

Community Partners

- Delaware County Voter Services
- League of Women Voters of Central Delaware County

Commitment

Widener University continually demonstrates its enduring commitment to increasing civic learning and democratic engagement through both words and deeds. The university has continually expressed this allegiance through communication of core values, programmatic and resource commitments, influential affiliations, and innovative initiatives. It is safe to say that the commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement is demonstrably weaved into the fabric of campus life.

Widener University remains a part of the Project Pericles consortium along with 30 colleges and universities that promote civic engagement and social responsibility within higher education. Periclean colleges and universities support curricular and co-curricular initiatives that prepare and encourage students to become active, responsible citizens. These initiatives span an array of efforts in the classroom, on campus, and in the community. As a partner of the Bonner and Maguire Foundations, Widener is among the many colleges and universities working to improve the lives of individuals and communities.

The Political Engagement Committee continues forward promoting political learning, civic discourse, and political participation. The committee's charge remains coordinating efforts across academic and administrative units while championing the development of active

democratic citizenship. The dual phase approach already in place will continue to offer students exposure to knowledge building, information sharing, and civil discourse exercises in a context that is more conducive to productive exchanges, while also offering experiential learning opportunities to enhance their ability to convincingly express preferences and effectively advocate for desired change.

During the pandemic, Widener's Common Ground conversations allowed university leadership to engage students, faculty, and staff in civil dialogue and teach them to listen to differing perspectives in meaningful ways. The initiative has continued to flourish as an ongoing effort to activate participation in a thriving democracy by engaging the Widener community in challenging conversations that explore differences in open and respectful ways.

Lastly, it is important to note that Widener has received many honors recognizing its commitment and fulfillment toward institutional values centered on civic and democratic engagement. The various honors include:

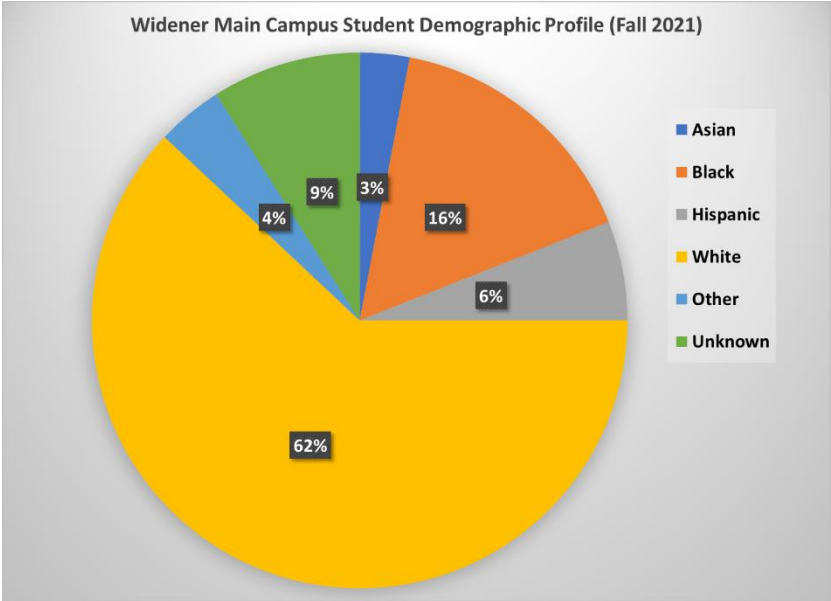
- Received “Gold-Badge” status recognition from the All in Campus Democracy Challenge for the 2020 presidential election voter registration efforts
- Washington Monthly magazine ranked Widener 34th nationally in the category of promoting public service (2019)
- Pillars of Academia ranked Widener as #1 in PA (#16 in the country) for producing the most altruistic and civically-minded students (2017)
- Widener was one of only 14 institutions named as finalist for the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll award (2015)
- NASCE data indicates that 79% of Widener undergraduate students participate in service or civic engagement; 27% higher than the national average (2017)

Current Campus Landscape and NSLVE Results

The current campus landscape for civic and democratic engagement on the Widener University main campus is strong. The campus culture features a strong commitment to civic and democratic engagement among the students and ample programming and curricular/co-curricular partnerships to further the agenda. We have a campus-wide institutional learning objective focusing on responsible citizenship and have received numerous national honors for excellence in related areas. The campus has expended substantial attention to achieving notable improvements across numerous measures of democratic engagement over the last decade and is proud to maintain a prominent position among peer institutions.

More recent attention has been directed toward building engagement and representative participation rates across the increasingly complex and diverse student body on the main campus. Notable changes in the demographics, residency status and academic pursuits of the main campus student body have necessitated reorientation of efforts to maximize engagement.

The following pie chart reports on the demographic profile of Widener main campus students in Fall 2021. It is important to note that Widener’s clear and reaffirmed commitment to equity



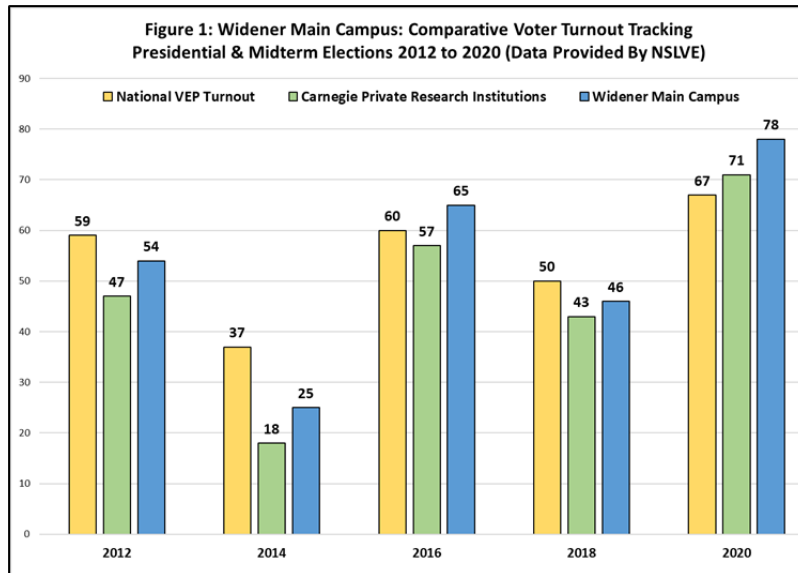
and inclusion extends into the realm of democratic engagement. Our “We’re All Widener” initiative features a commitment to diversity in which a plurality of viewpoints are valued, explored, and seen as opportunities for learning and personal growth. We value and encourage the exercise of political voice from all our students and are distinctly aware of and attentive to potential

disparities in participation rates among historically under-represented classifications of citizens.

Another significant development impacting the campus landscape includes the growth of graduate programs, with graduate students now constituting 42% of main campus students. This growth includes full-time residential programs, part-time commuter programs and substantial growth in online students. The growth of distance programs, rising rates of commuter students from the tri-state area, and remote access options for many programs poses specific challenges for targeted outreach in voter education-related programming. Delivery of timely and accurate information about voter registration deadlines, processes, and campaign-related content is increasingly challenging since more than 40% of main campus students now reside outside of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Since we previously noted Widener’s achievements and recognition in the area of student engagement, we will now move to an analysis of recent NSLVE results and items focused

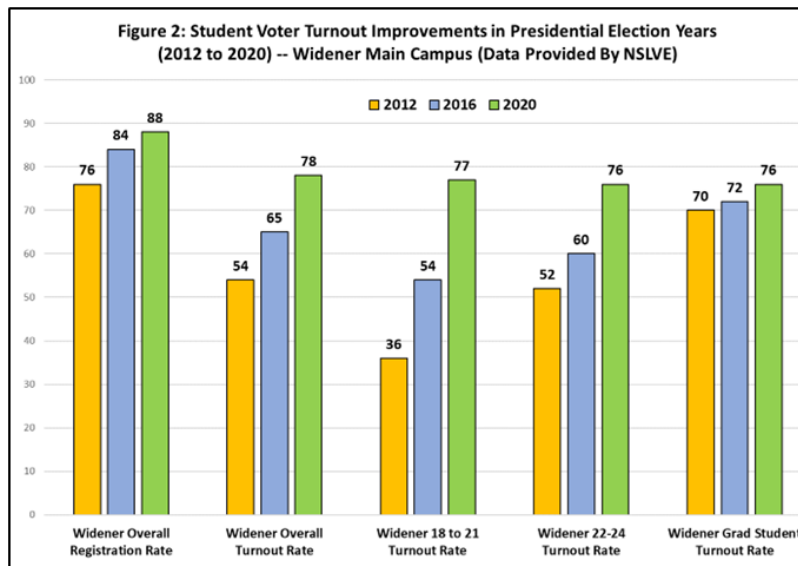
more narrowly on voter participation. Widener University has participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement project since the 2012 election. Figure 1 displays historical trends and key comparative results for aggregate voter turnout rates on the Widener main campus as gleaned from the NSLVE reports and national data. The campus-wide



Political Engagement Committee and the Center for Civic and Global Engagement have consistently relied upon this evidence to inform plans and efforts to improve engagement and voter participation rates on the main campus. Of particular note in Figure 1 are the significant step-level increases in campus-wide participation rates for each of the last three election cycles. Widener voter turnout has

exceeded comparable rates among our Carnegie classification peers in each cycle of record. Widener turnout exceeded the turnout rate nationally, as well as the turnout rate in our home state (Pennsylvania) and home county (Delaware) in the last two presidential election cycles. Widener’s main campus voter turnout rates in 2016 earned “Silver-Badge” status recognition, and turnout rates in the 2018 midterm election and the 2020 presidential election earned “Gold-Badge” status recognition from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.

Figures 2 and 3 display a more detailed breakdown of recorded participation rates across presidential election cycles. These figures are helpful in tracking overall trends and specifically

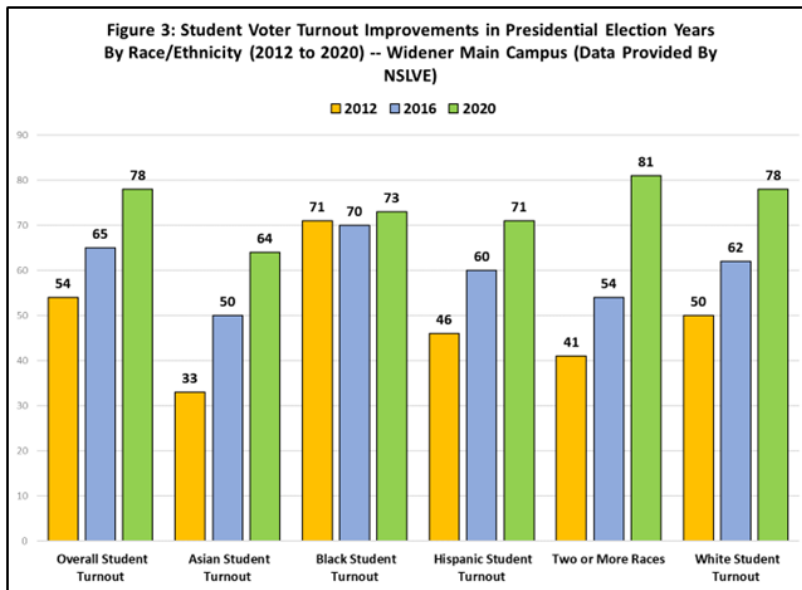


assessing the effectiveness of our plans and efforts in the 2020 election cycle. Notable data from Figure 2 highlights consistent improvement in registration and overall turnout rates as well as improvements across age bands and student status. Of particular note are the substantial step level improvements in younger student participation rates for both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Rates for the 18-21-

and 22-24-year-old student cohorts in the 2020 presidential election achieved par with the stable, yet consistently high, rate among graduate students on the main campus. The dramatic

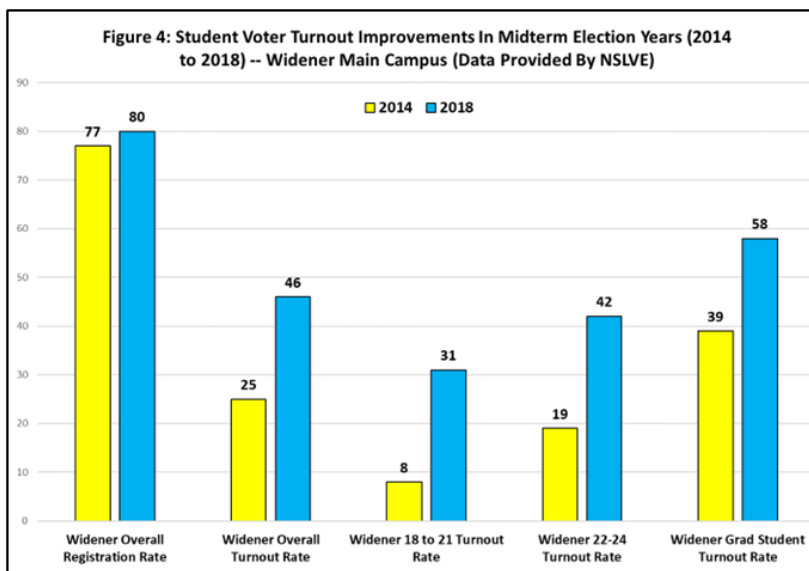
improvements among younger voters in the 2020 election reflects well on our targeted plans and efforts to engage younger students more effectively in the last election cycle while also nurturing and enhancing graduate student participation.

Figure 3 displays voter turnout trends in presidential elections broken down by the race/ ethnicity of main campus students. Given Widener’s clear and reaffirmed commitment to equity and inclusion, we are particularly attentive to concerns about potential disparities in participation rates among historically under-represented classifications of citizens. We are pleased to report from the evidence in Figure 3 that our aggregate upward trend in participation is largely representative across racial / ethnic groupings. Notable step level improvements for the 2020 election are evident for Asian students, Hispanic students, white students, and students indicating two or more races. Turnout among black students increased only modestly in 2020, relinquishing



standing as the group with the highest turnout rate among all groupings in prior elections. We are committed to continuing our efforts to assure an equitable and representative level of participation among our student body and intend to extend outreach to student groups and organizations representing minority student populations in order to reinforce this positive trend and reignite higher participation rates among black students in the future.

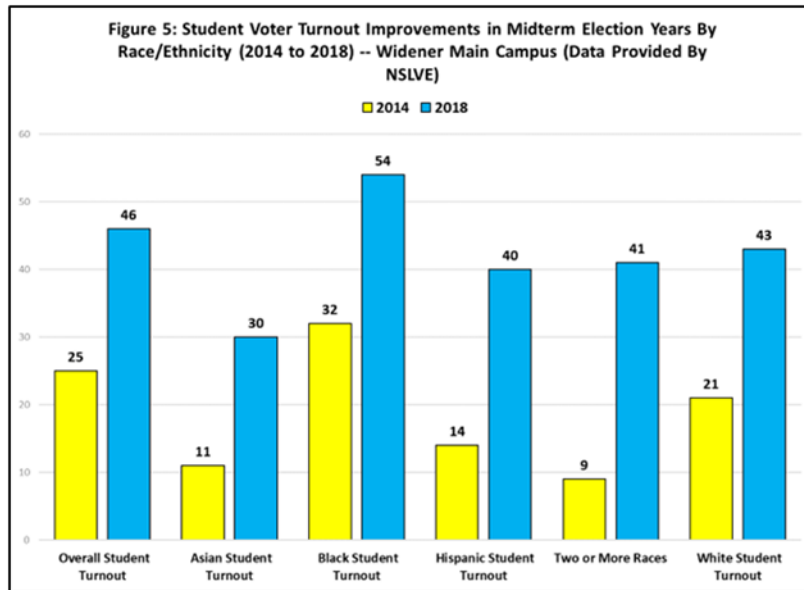
Figures 4 and 5 display more detailed breakdowns of main campus turnout rates from the midterm election cycles in 2014 and 2018. These data are particularly informative for analysis



and development of our action plan for the 2022 midterm cycle given historical participatory declines in non-presidential year elections. Figure 4 shows dramatic step level improvements across each age band and among graduate students during the 2018 election. Registration rates remained comparatively high for each midterm election cycle, especially when considered in context of expected reductions in registration rates from

presidential election years. This sustained high registration rate serves as an indicator of our continued commitment and successful efforts to mobilizing young voters as they matriculate into school. Although dramatic improvements in 2018 turnout rates among the 18-21-year-old cohort appear somewhat skewed due to particularly low participation rates in 2014, it is important to note that our turnout rate among the youngest voters exceeded nationwide rates and peer comparisons reported by NSLVE.

Figure 5 displays voter turnout differences in midterm elections broken down by the race / ethnicity of main campus students.



ethnicity of main campus students. The across-the-board improvements for the 2018 cycle indicate a balanced level of improved mobilization, with each subgroup experiencing turnout improvement at greater than or equal to 19%. As mentioned earlier, turnout among black students at Widener has traditionally exceeded the campus average. The challenge for sustaining and enhancing balanced, equitable and inclusive

participation in the 2022 midterm election will necessitate a blended communications and mobilization approach that features campus-wide elements as well as targeted efforts to build engagement and a sustain a participatory culture among historically underrepresented student groups.

Ongoing analysis of our two most recent NSLVE reports (from the 2018 and 2020 elections) and overall trends since our initial participation has informed our plans for the 2022 election cycle. We intend to pursue a comprehensive array of efforts to sustain and improve voter education and participation across the board for the 2022 election in comparison to 2018 rates. Areas we have identified that may be particularly strengthened include younger cohort students, graduate students, and students in programs and disciplines that have had lower participation rates in prior cycles. Academic programs that have had underwhelming participation rates identified in prior reports include students in Engineering, Business and some of the sciences.

Based upon a review of the 2018 midterm election turnout data, we intend to sustain and enhance our voter registration efforts heading into the fall semester to continue our consistently high rate of registered students. We will add special attention to addressing voter registration challenges due to the fact that our residential, commuter and online-only students come from numerous states with different policies and deadlines. This requires training and outreach commitments to help students make informed choices about their registration location. Given the evident success of our improved digital outreach efforts necessitated by diminished on-campus presence in the

fall of 2020, we intend to enhance our voter registration efforts in fall 2022 through blended digital and on-ground communications. We intend to target new undergraduate students through alliances with our First Year Experience (FYE), Living Learning Community (LLC) programs, Student Life offices and individual faculty members. We also intend to continue working with the Graduate Studies Office to enhance outreach and programming offerings to the broad range of full-time and part-time graduate students (including those attending remote-only programs).

Goals & Strategies

Institutionally, Widener University joined the national Wesleyan Engage Initiative and committed to furthering its three guiding principles:

- Developing civic preparedness is a core element of the mission of American higher education.
- Participating in American political life helps students learn from a diversity of ideas and people while developing skills for lifelong, active citizenship.
- Empowering students and teachers to engage with the complex issues facing the country are crucial facets of higher education's contributions to the common good.

Leverage existing voter education and registration efforts to continue to enhance voting rates, particularly targeting the 18-21-year-old age group.

- As technology continues to expand, continue the development and dissemination of digital content
- Partner with other university departments and faculty to execute voter education presentations with freshman seminars, living learning communities, and other relevant courses (Fall 2022)
- Partner with faculty to add voter registration and GOTV information directly into the course syllabi. (Fall 2022 and Spring 2023)

Participate in the PA Campus Voting Challenge, partnered with the All in Democracy Challenge:

- Increase student voting rates, help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship, and make democratic participation a core value on our campus.
- Convene a campus-wide working group that includes members from civic engagement, the student body, and any other relevant stakeholders.
- Continue ongoing participation in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) in order to measure our student voting rates.
- Develop and implement a data-driven action plan to improve civic learning, political engagement, and voter participation.
- Share our campus' action plan and NSLVE results with the Challenge in order to be eligible for a recognition seal and/or award.

Continue to expand the usage of our two-phase political education model in events and activities: (Phase 1) Empathy and Understanding and (Phase 2) Expression and Advocacy

- Federal/State Legislative information forum
- Fall Constitution Days

- Debate Watch Events (tentative PA Senate & Gubernatorial debates)
- Issue Awareness events (centrally organized and course-based)

Partner with other university departments and faculty to execute political education and voting presentations with relevant courses (Fall 2022)

- Numerous collaborating faculty currently being recruited for fall
- Target graduate programs and relevant courses

Partner with Human Resources to encourage staff to utilize a new election day policy in order to encourage access to voting on election day.

- Fall 2022/Spring 2023 outreach. The Volunteer Time Off policy can also be utilized for administrators, faculty, and staff who want to volunteer during election day. (Policy Approved May 2020)

Establish partnerships with community organizations who facilitate voter education and registration support

- Delco Voter Services
- League of Women Voters

Reporting

The plan will be shared via email with our key partners (including departments, student organizations, community partners, and senior leaders) for feedback in spring 2023. The plan will be implemented and assessed annually by the Political Engagement Committee. Widener will continue to participate in the NSLVE study and obtain results to gauge our institution's voting participation rates. The NSLVE data will be shared with the All in Democracy Challenge as a way to inform the public. Other proxy variables such as attendance at on-campus, class canvassing, and tracking voter registration data from registration drives will be utilized.

Evaluation

Confirming that we are successful in attaining our political educational goals, areas of strength, and future areas of focus makes evaluation an integral part of our work. The political action plan will be evaluated by a series of evaluation tools. The NSLVE study will remain a center piece for learning more about our institutional voter participation rates. However, Widener will utilize additional tools such as pre-and post-tests in our partner courses, institutional research related to citizenship and ongoing evaluation efforts of the Center for Civic and Global Engagement through partners like the National Assessment of Service and Civic Engagement (NASCE). The Center for Civic and Global Engagement will continue to implement event and program level evaluations. Widener will continue to provide evaluation efforts and reporting related to pursuing renewal of the Carnegie Foundation's Classification in 2023 for Community Engagement and national partnerships with the Bonner Foundation, Maguire Foundation, Project Pericles, and Wesleyan Engage 2020.