

Winona State University

OVERVIEW

The mission of Winona State University is “A community of learners improving our world.” With this civic mission comes a responsibility to follow the core commitments in higher education to “educate for personal and social responsibility” and to “take seriously the perspectives of others” (AAC&U 2007). In 2006, WSU President Judith Ramaley embedded our civic mission and these core commitments through the American Democracy Project (AASCU 2002). Since the development of the American Democracy Project, WSU furthered its’ civic commitments through its leadership in the American Commonwealth Partnership (2012), which celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act and thought to reinvigorate democracy colleges such as Winona State.

Through President Ramaley’s retirement and the beginning of Scott Olson’s Administration, the civic mission at Winona State University is strengthened through the President’s commitment to the Minnesota Campus Compact’s 30th Anniversary Action Statement, which prescribes an institutional necessity in defining a democratic and deliberative role in creating civically engaged communities across differences, and across the university’s public space. President Olson also signed the presidential pledge to the “Ask Every Student” program and Winona State University is excited to be designated as a commitment campus.

This work is incredibly important to the identity of Winona State University as a steward of place, within the community, region, state, and nation. Serving the civic mission, WSU seeks to be at the forefront of civic engagement, through political engagement, democratic deliberation, and the development of civic infrastructure and capacity. Combined these elements educate the most marketable and successful students-citizens of the 21st century.

For the purposes of this application, the focus is on our political engagement and voter education, voter registration, and voter turnout efforts. Winona State University’s participation as a proud “voter friendly campus” changed a bit with the election semester during the COVID year. We were entirely remote for the Fall 2020 semester, so student leadership and creativity were vital to our success.

With thanks to the SLSV Implementation Grant, Winona State’s American Democracy Project hired 12 students, who formed and mobilized the “Warriors Vote” initiative. Surpassing expectations from previous years, this diverse group of students capitalized on the election holidays and launched a highly successful multimedia campaign.

From this student led effort, Winona State University received (again) the Democracy Cup (formally received as the College Ballot Bowl Award) from the Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon for the highest percentage of student voters at a public regional comprehensive institution. This is the third election Winona State has participated in the competition and subsequently received this award.

From the inception of the NSLVE initiative, Winona State has been a committed institution to the civic learning and democratic engagement of students. The data from 2020 increased the turnout rate 9.2%, earning the institution a gold badge through the All In Challenge.

In inspiring for sustained institutional culture change towards civic engagement and agency, the Voter-Friendly Campus Designation Campus Plan focuses on three main goals this Fall 2022 semester

1. Intensify and expand **voter registration**, aiming towards over 500 students.
2. Improve **voter education** across colleges, across stakeholders/voters, and across communities.
3. Increase **voter turnout** from previous midterm elections.

FLEXIBILITY/INNOVATION/ADAPTATION

Fall 2020 provided an unprecedented election semester landscape, which was addressed by our student-led team, Warriors Vote, to bring the campus votes plan to students and to meet them wherever they are at.

With the uncertainty of campus warning levels from pauses to shutdowns, many interruptions to campus life were the norm. Students used their connections and experience with coalition partners to expand their outreach and to do it through remote and sophisticated technological methods.

More specifically, COVID exacerbated the tensions between campus and community. Since students were often inappropriately blamed for the rising cases and the closure of in person delivery for K-12 schools and businesses, it seemed inevitable that the accessibility and value of student voting became contentious under the auspices of COVID. For example, Winona State's West Campus, which housed 800+ residential students in single rooms, voted across the courtyard at the Minnesota Conservatory of the Arts for the primary. Two weeks before the general election, the city of Winona announced, due to COVID, this voting location would not be open, and Ward 2; Precinct 1, which is predominately West Campus, would be voting across town at the Senior Friendship Center. Of course, this change was unexpected and highly stressful. The vast majority of students living on West Campus are first year voters and do not have transportation. Eventually the issue was resolved through our coalition partners, the Faculty Association and the American Democracy Project, who funded two buses from 8:00AM to 9:00PM to shuttle students across town to their new voting location.

Coalition

Winona State University received a Commitment Campus grant, which funded 12 students in the Warrior Votes Campaign. Comprised from diverse representation of student government, collegiate athletics, residential life, and teacher education, the student-led and student-driven campaign for student-voter registration, education, and turnout was the most successful campus election semester campaign to date. For example, WSU Athletics Student Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) adopted Warriors Vote as a Fall initiative, which led to the 15 varsity sports teams and over 330 student athletes

to be ALL IN to vote. The OR 100: Introduction to Higher Education sections, or first year experience equivalents, shared modules, content, and welcomed Warriors Vote team members to their classes, virtually and otherwise. With the challenges of the pandemic, the students developed creative content and outreach through multimedia channels, which were adopted by University Communications, the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference, the Faculty Association, and the City of Winona.

The coalition builds on the existing allies and friends found in the current work around the civic action plan, the Learning and Community Engagement All-University Committee, and the American Democracy Project. These groups have representation spanning administrators, faculty, staff and students, multiple bargaining groups, and distinct resources and ingenuity. This coalition expanded during Fall 2020 intentionally and organically. For example, with the last-minute change in polling location for students, the Faculty Association became a valued member of the coalition in unprecedented levels by committing \$750 for the bus to shuttle students to the polls.

In addition, Athletics became a new and valued coalition partner. With COVID and the reduction of the number of students living on campus (and voting from their campus precincts), there was an exacerbated need to reach student athletes. Student athletes were one of the groups predominately still present and active on campus. Through efforts with the SAAC and the NSIC conference, Warriors Vote reached an entirely new student population which had never been targeted for a coordinated campaign.

Meeting students where they were at also intentionally invested coalition building with Residence Life, especially during COVID. Since many students were relegated to their residence halls and taking courses entirely remotely, the connections with hall directors, residence assistants, and student living on campus, were extremely necessary and valuable.

Moving forward, these relationships and coalitions cultivated during a COVID election semester proved to be rewarding and to provide the connections and sense of belonging many Winona State students value. As was the case in Fall 2020, there will be a concerted effort to maintain and deepen these relationships with continued broad student representation from these communities.

Some of our partners we worked with include:

ON CAMPUS

WARRIORS VOTE

WSU Library

WSU All-University Learning and Community Engagement (LACE)

WSU American Democracy Project (ADP)

WSU All-University Lyceum Committee

WSU Athletics

WSU Residential Life

Inter-Faculty Organization (IFO) Government Relations Committee

WSU Faculty Association
WSU Student Senate
WSU College Republicans
WSU College Democrats

COMMUNITY

Winona County Republicans
Winona County Democrats
Winona County Administration
League of Women Voters-Winona
American Association of University Women-Winona

NATIONAL PARTNERS

CEEP: Campaign Engagement Election Project; 2 fellows
National Voter Registration Day
All In Challenge
Ask Every Student to Vote
Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference
Office of Minnesota Secretary of State
LeadMN
Minnesota Students United (formal MSUSA)

The inclusive list represents a coalition, which is sustained over multiple election semesters. These relationships continue regardless of elections and exist to best support campus and community efforts in civic education and engagement.

Analysis of Work: The Four Buckets

VOTER REGISTRATION

Working with NVRD, the WSU community registers hundreds of voters every Fall around National Voter Registration Day. In 2018, a midterm election year, over 5,000 students were registered to vote. For the second time, Winona State defended its Minnesota Ballot Bowl award with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State for registered the most students as voters of any state college or university.

In anticipation of the Fall 2020 presidential election, ADP proposed and received a university commitment and presidential pledge for the Ask Every Student program, to register every student through campus activities, classes, and housing and residence life.

GOALS, METRICS, & VOLUNTEERS:

Warriors Vote Instagram combined with Facebook Page:

115 posts and stories on Candidates, Voting history, Campus takeovers, All In, Virtual forum, Information, and Countdown.

Production of public service announcements and videos, which were shared by the University's social media platforms. Six videos total, with the most views of 1.7K and 1.1K for the video on voter registration and how to vote.

Included tabling, which wasn't allowed during COVID, only in-residence halls, where Warriors Vote was also permitted to canvass in the evenings, thanks to coalition efforts with Residence Life.

VOTER EDUCATION

Working with our partners and through our networks, voter education begins with adequate and proper signage on the two stages of voter participation—registration and turnout. The WSU Krueger Library continues to be a coveted public space to include voter guides and information. In addition, digital signage through the numerous screens around campus used. This proved to be the easiest access to students. During COVID, the library was the only area for students consistently open for students. We were fortunate for the library to have a prominent display with materials for students to take and to share. These were restocked daily.

In addition, the Library hosted the virtual space for our local candidate information, which included local candidate information and interviews to student submitted questions. We were very fortunate to have our two CEEP fellows work on the design of this platform, collect the candidate videos and then disseminate them in accessible ways not only for students but also for community. The use of voter education materials, like this, were intentionally designed to be shared with the campus and Winona community, and supported by the Faculty Association too.

In 2020, Winona State received TWO Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) fellows, who provided valuable voter education and ballot access. These fellows were valuable members of the Warriors Vote team, and facilitated a Microsoft Teams page with abundant resources and presentations to use for class and community visits. The Warriors Vote team not only conducted 50 class visits to FYE courses but also Zoomed into at least 25+ more classes.

BALLOT ACCESS

The state of Minnesota has Election Day Registration (EDS) and as a "consequence" often shares the lead in national voter registration and turnout by eliminating the burdensome transaction costs in two-stage process. Ballot access is guaranteed for our university community by having a central voting location hosted in Kryzsko Commons, the student activities union, and working with WSU Housing and Residential Life to include the list of on campus living students to facilitate the EDR and voting process.

Due to the fluid situation of COVID, when campus went into lockdown and activities suspended periodically, the focus was on signage in the library and residence halls. Yard signs (50) were placed and maintained along the frequented campus paths, and 1200 postcards were printed and distributed (x3) for students living in residence halls stressing voter registration, vote early, and vote!

VOTER TURNOUT (GOTV)

This is not a shortage of anticipated voter turnout enthusiasm and events at Winona State University the Fall of 2020, albeit will be different given the coronavirus pandemic. The American Democracy Project is committed to encourage GOTV through traditional GOTV activities through door-knocking, chalking, free food/snacks, and giveaways. These activities are created and implemented by the students for the students, so voting becomes the norm, the expected, and the trend. . In 2018, our partnership with Student Senate afforded us the opportunity to provide free transportation on election day for students not living on central campus. This was a heavily used option and extremely rewarding for the student, staff, and faculty volunteer drivers. At this time, it is unclear what the GOTV strategies will be. However, with the coordinated campaign efforts, the strength of the local and campus political party organizations, and the network of commitment partners, the original goal of “60 in 16” is higher than 2012 voter turnout, which was 58 percent for WSU students (NSLVE 2016), but it is anticipated to be much higher.

COVID tested our infrastructure and commitment to voter turnout. Please see previous description of the change in voting location for West Campus and the response of our coalition partners to solve the problem and support student voting.

In terms of voter turnout, the most concerning is earning and sustaining the voter friendly designation beyond 2020. In other words, how to sustain political (and civic) engagement through the students’ first years to the last. This may include multiple elections, presidential and not. For example, the mid-term WSU student voter turnout rate was 19 percent in 2014, and increased (+25.1%) to 44% in 2018. Hopefully this increase suggests we are learning, albeit still figuring things out. With the 2020 presidential election, there is greater concern regarding Winona State’s track record and the stakes are higher. During our recent presidential elections, student voter turnout actually declined from 58.2% (2012) to 53% (2016). This is disheartening to say the least. However, given the 2018 sure of voter turnout in the 2018 midterm, we are hopeful and looking to improve on our poor 2016 performance. While this observation stems beyond the timeframe of this designation and campus plan, it is noted that this is just the beginning to sustained efforts in voter registration, education, ballot access, and turnout.

SUCSESSES

- 1. Flexibility and innovation to meet students where they are during the time of COVID, and using social media and technical innovation to do so. For example, the six public service announcements were professionally produced by students and for students. The outreach and views were unexpectedly exponential.**
- 2. Providing a sense of community for a shared purpose of political efficacy, and responding to the student demand to create opportunities to make a difference through voting. In a semester where in person opportunities were not allowed, this was the welcomed pathway for students to be involved. For example, we led “voting tours” from campus to the Winona County building to vote early. These were attended with enthusiasm and led by students (and faculty) with a festive**

air. This gave students a reason to leave their rooms and residence halls and meet new people for a common purpose.

3. **Recruiting and representing a broad diversity of students in our Warriors Vote team and, in our outreach, encouraging voting from new and different groups. For example, all 15 WSU varsity sports were “All In.” Before 2020, student athletes were not represented.**

BARRIERS

1. **COVID**
2. **University business office to facilitate student payroll and receipts of activities.**
3. **COVID**

BEYOND 2020

Besides reaching voter registration, voter education, ballot access, and voter turnout goals and benchmarks, which will be evident through our forthcoming NSLVE Report on turnout in 2020, this process is intended to build for 2020 and beyond, encouraging and ensuring civic (and political) engagement beyond individual candidates and specific elections to restore and reinstate the health and value of our democracy. Indeed the final report will be an evaluation but perhaps more so an indication of consistently high voter turnout—presidential election or not. This would be an indication of the purpose of higher education to introduce students to lifelong citizenship and engagement.

GOALS

1. Developing resources to combine civic engagement and voter education, registration, and turnout with DEI efforts.
2. Embedding voter education, registration, and turnout in the first year experience.
3. Expanding social media outreach to meet students wherever they are at.

RESOURCES

The multiple partners and groups provide a wealth of combined resources, especially in terms of budgetary access, student passion and synergy, and broad constituency advocacy and support. For example, WSU has received the coveted and competitive Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State Ballot Bowl Award, 2016, 2018, which includes additional promotional materials and events. Likewise, several partner groups have also applied for additional resources to support election activities. For example, Students United (formerly MSUSA) is currently applying for a grant from the IFO (Inter Faculty Organization) to support their GOTV efforts on Minnesota State University campuses such as Winona State University. More specifically, the base budget of the American Democracy Project is appropriated for Constitution Day and National Voter Registration Day events and activities. And, finally, many individual faculty and courses encourage political engagement to meet certain university studies goal areas and learning (and program) outcomes, especially with our engaged course designations.

PLEASE NOTE: In spring 2022, Kara Lindaman is on sabbatical and Adam Gaffey is coordinating the American Democracy Project on campus. She will return in Fall 2022, when Gaffey is on sabbatical. On his return beginning Spring 2023, Gaffey will assume full time responsibility for coordinating the American Democracy Project, and all voter education and outreach, for Winona State University.