

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC CAMPUSES

Assessing Innovations in Democratic
Practice in Higher Education



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scott Warren, the co-founder and former CEO at Generation Citizen, and a current Visiting Fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins, worked with Madison Mandell, a Brown University student and a Co-Founder and Swearer Center Civic Engagement Fellow for Brown Votes, to engage in a comprehensive analysis to interview college students and administrators across the country to assess their activities to promote deep democratic engagement, including and in addition to voting. We recognized that much has been done in the university space around best practices in promoting voting but not around deep democratic engagement. The hope is this report will be helpful to universities across the country.

This report stems from a larger initiative taking place at Johns Hopkins University to map out its own engagement pertaining to democratic engagement. We felt that this type of report would be useful at a moment in time in which democracy is at risk and universities are exploring their own role in promoting democracy. While there have been efforts to focus on college-level voting, we are not aware of significant work to examine the larger context of democratic engagement in the higher education setting.

Through this report, we seek to provide examples of how diverse institutions of higher education have promoted and started innovative initiatives and practices that further democratic engagement. By democratic engagement, we mean the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values that individuals use to collectively solve public challenges through the political process. This includes deep political engagement, such as public debate, voting, advocacy for local issues, and engagement to tackle issues of inequity.

This report is by no means exhaustive—we have provided what we consider to be particularly effective innovations and interventions based on our interviews with students and organizations in the democratic-engagement space. We also acknowledge that we have only engaged with a limited number of schools and organizations—a full landscape analysis of every institution in the higher education sector would undoubtedly uncover more best practices. Our hope is that this report is a starting point, rather than a definitive document.

The information in both the innovative practices and challenges sections stem from experience with democratic-engagement initiatives, research, and work with different national democratic-engagement organizations and a series of interviews with students and staff from various institutions and organizations. Initial outreach for interviews was based on a network of personal contacts; we then expanded beyond this network with an active focus on interviewing a diverse range of individuals representing various institution types. These interviews were held virtually and lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. We conducted 22 in-depth interviews during a six-month period. Participants are noted in the appendix.

We determined the following to be broad categories of relevance:

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- 1 Culture of Democratic Engagement;**
 - 2 Academic Integration;**
 - 3 Voting;**
 - 4 Institutionalization;**
 - 5 Partnership and Coalition Building;**
 - 6 Accessibility.**
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These are not meant to be one-size-fits-all solutions; it is important to consider that certain practices are more effective in some particular contexts than others. Institutions of higher education, of course, differ in size, demographics and geography, funding and resources, and the amount of institutional support provided toward democratic engagement from the university itself. The practices highlighted, however, can often be adapted and modified to account for differing contexts and to cater to each institution's individual needs. For instance, various small- to medium-size schools have successfully implemented one-on-one voter outreach programs, establishing contact with every student on campus. A similar type of program would likely not be feasible at institutions with over 10,000 students, but the outreach model and target of particular sectors of campus could be modified. Students could focus their outreach, for example, on certain groups of students (such as within a particular major) that have historically low turnout rate according to the NSLVE data.

Ultimately, students and administrators at each school understand the culture and inner workings of their institution best, and the authors of this report cannot possibly be aware of what would be most effective. Our hope is that individuals gain inspiration from these promising practices in this section and apply them to their campuses. Many of the interviewees have indicated willingness to discuss their practices in more detail.

The innovative practices are organized categorically and are not meant to indicate any prioritization or reflection of values. The overarching categories emerged from our interviews and were selected based on patterns that we observed in terms of types of interventions. We have then provided more specific examples and case studies within each category, demonstrating which initiatives schools have implemented to achieve certain objectives.

CULTURE OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, universities have generally made concerted efforts to promote comprehensive democratic engagement throughout the entire campus. While voting is a critical component of civic engagement, it is just one of many actions that students can and should take to become and develop as engaged citizens. In order to effectively foster democratic engagement in a campus setting, campuses need to effectively curate and promote a culture of democracy in which democratic dialogue, behavior, and values are infused throughout courses, the broader community, and events and activities offered.

Crucial toward this engagement work is extending democracy beyond the campus confines and articulating the importance of becoming involved, humbly and effectively, in local issues. Institutions can foster a culture in which this type of local democratic engagement is accessible and encouraged.



Dialogue Opportunities

Creating spaces for dialogue is a necessary component of fostering a culture of democratic engagement at an institution of higher education. Deep, intensive, and repeated dialogues can serve as an opportunity for students to dissect certain relevant issues or to learn more about decisions being made that affect them on a local, state, and national level. Repeated dialogue opportunities are also important in allowing groups to go deep after building trust despite difference.

Institutions can facilitate dialogues in various ways, and students can have the opportunity to engage not only with one another and faculty members but also with community organizations and elected officials—actors outside the confines of campus. The following are innovative examples of effective dialogue opportunities:

Interaction with Local Officials and Legislators

At ASU, students have the chance to consistently hear from local legislators in an informal and comfortable setting over breakfast. Andrew Goodman Foundation (AGF) fellows run this event that takes place three to four times a semester. The format enables students to hear from local officials about relevant local issues and ask these officials any pertinent questions they may have.

These dialogues help students better understand their local context and establish relationships with key actors in their community, rendering the concept of politics as tangible rather than abstract and irrelevant. Legislators are also incentivized to participate for publicity reasons, and because students can be a powerful voting bloc, publicly elected officials realize they must be in tune with the needs of this particular constituency.

James Madison University (JMU) similarly encourages student dialogue with local officials. They achieve this via a program called “Traveling Town Hall.” Rather than relying on students to show up to a certain location, candidates are taken around in a van to various residential halls encompassing students in humanities, business, and STEM.

Students help craft questions and facilitate the event, and there are also unscripted questions for audience members. This event enables students to engage with local politics in the comfort of their own residence hall. The Traveling Town Hall is also open to community members in addition to students. Ultimately, the event encourages candid dialogue and intimate interactions with local officials and fellow community members.



Facilitating Discussions Concerning Local Politics and Issues

Lack of awareness and information is one of the largest drivers of low voter-turnout rates in local elections. Institutions often have the resources and capability to host discussions focused on local politicians or policies, which can take the form of panels or debates. In spring 2021, Columbia University hosted a Manhattan District Attorney Forum, during which students could hear candidates address topics specifically relevant to college students in New York City.

Another example of local actors creating space for conversations on local issues occurred when the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at UF hosted a Q&A event with Florida Secretary of State Laurel Lee. The director of government relations for UF and political science professors moderated this event with approximately 100 students attending. Students asked Secretary Lee about her duties overseeing elections, especially in the context of the election debates embroiling the country. UF also facilitated various discussions where city commissioners and students could interact.

Institutions can make these sessions with local actors accessible to students. It is critical for students to interact with local decision makers and increase their awareness about local issues. These discussions are also important from an accountability standpoint, as they can remind local officials of the importance of student voices and the need to represent student interests.

Discussions with Other Students

The Office of Civic and Community Engagement at Wake Forest University creates numerous opportunities for students to communicate across diverse viewpoints and engage with complex policy, social justice, and local issues.

One of these programs, Intergroup Dialogue (IGD), centers on conversation to raise awareness of social identities and build coalitions for social change. IGD has four stages: “group beginnings, exploring differences and commonalities, dialoguing about current social justice topics, and action planning and alliance building.” IGD fosters increased understanding of social identities and power systems as well as increased action-planning and critical-thinking capabilities.

ECU promotes a back-to-basics approach and hosts a civil dialogue program run by students, “Dinner and Discourse”, during which participants eat a meal and discuss a current issue. Students begin the conversation by establishing respectful guidelines for the discussion. Media clips are also often displayed to drive discussion. Eating together during these discussions creates a more open, welcoming, and comfortable environment in which students respect one another and feel as though they can share their opinions. There are usually three of these events every semester.

At JMU, inspired by the civic culture that flourished in public squares in ancient times, students decided to establish a tradition during which they set up tents in a main area on campus to create their own version of a public square. Students pose a question on a topic of interest; categories have included racial justice (in particular, the George Floyd murder and subsequent Chauvin trial and the intersection between race and policing), the census, the pandemic, and immigration justice. After the question is posed, students have the opportunity to write out a response on a note card—those cards are then displayed in the tent for anyone to read and engage with. The question and cards are a jumping-off point for discussion. This event incorporates an advocacy component, as students are ultimately tasked with proposing action items related to their responses.

These examples represent a prioritization of productive dialogue on campus with other students and community members. Deep democratic behavior and values depend on students recognizing the importance of inclusivity and listening to disparate voices. Universities can ensure that students are constantly exposed to divergent viewpoints, respect those perspectives, and recognize the value of both persuasion and compromise through the following activities.

Focus On Students Traditionally Less Likely to Engage Democratically

Many institutions have developed innovative methods of engaging populations of students that, according to NSLVE data, have seen historically lower rates of democratic engagement, including low voter-turnout rate. Students that major in STEM courses often fall into this category. In order to effectively mobilize these students, it is important to provide engaging events and programming that connects democratic participation to issues that these students study or are passionate about.

In early 2021, ASU hosted a “hack for democracy” during which students could sign up to evaluate democracy issues through a technological lens (for example, how to leverage AI to create a more efficient and equitable voting system). The event also featured guest speakers, including some local officials. This event was organized and hosted by an AGF fellow.

Another option to reach students in particular academic fields is for a university’s civic-engagement center (or student group) to partner with academic departments or centers. At JMU, the College of Business held a program on national debt and economic policy changes dependent on different presidential administrations. And in 2018, the JMU Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue hosted various conversations with students studying biology that highlighted the intersectionality of bioethical questions and policy making.

Students in Pirates Vote at ECU wanted to bring students’ attention to NSLVE data in order to inspire participation from areas of study with historically lower turnout. They did this by creating handouts customized to particular majors. In these handouts, students displayed NSLVE data as well as emphasized various ways in which voting and elections were consequential to that specific field of study. Students also distributed these handouts to faculty members in relevant departments.

Host On-Campus Polling Centers

Having polling centers on campus is not only important for accessibility purposes but also greatly contributes to the ethos of democratic engagement at the institution.



Many student groups have advocated for their institutions to work with local officials to acquire polling centers on campus. Students at ASU successfully brought polling centers to all three of their campuses. UT Austin also successfully acquired a polling center on campus that many students utilized. If there is not a polling center on campus, student voters often need to coordinate transportation to reach their designated site—a definite barrier to participation. Having a polling center on campus is especially critical for institutions with large in-state populations (meaning that the majority of students are living and registered to vote in that state).

It is also important to note that on-campus polling sites are usually only open for larger scale elections; institutions should advocate for the on-campus locations to function as early voting sites and also to remain open for local elections. Ultimately, campus polling centers greatly increase accessibility for students, faculty, and staff alike and also play a large role in fostering a culture of democratic engagement. These physical locations are a visual demonstration of the institution's prioritization of democratic participation. They also provide an opportunity for engaging activity on election days that can capture students' attention.

Recruit Poll Workers

Poll workers are essential actors for efficient election administration, but there has been a dramatic shortage of poll workers during the last few elections. Students and university personnel are prime candidates to staff the polls. Working the polls is an effective way for students to involve themselves directly in the election process and learn the intricacies of election administration. Working the polls can also instill public confidence in our election system. Students in Penn Leads the Vote at the University of Pennsylvania worked with the organization United for Democracy to recruit student poll workers for the 2020 election. Institutions can facilitate student efforts to mobilize their peers to work the polls.

Ensure that Election Day Is a Holiday

Institutions can give students, faculty, and staff Election Day off. Similar to having a polling place on campus, giving Election Day off increases voter accessibility and additionally promotes a culture of democratic participation. The day off from classes can also be helpful for students, faculty, and staff who plan on working the polls. It can also serve as an opportunity for democratic-engagement-related events and programming. Institutions like Brown University and Columbia have committed to Election Day being a permanent holiday on the academic calendar.

ACADEMIC INTEGRATION

Integrating democratic-engagement topics and practice into coursework is a vital way that institutions can deeply embed these values into their overall culture mission. It is essential for the conversation surrounding democratic engagement to enter and flourish in the classroom, and institutions can accomplish this goal in numerous ways. Institutions can offer courses related to democratic-engagement participation, local issues and activism, and international democratic comparisons. This can take place via stand-alone courses or by integrating and emphasizing democratic-engagement values in existing courses.

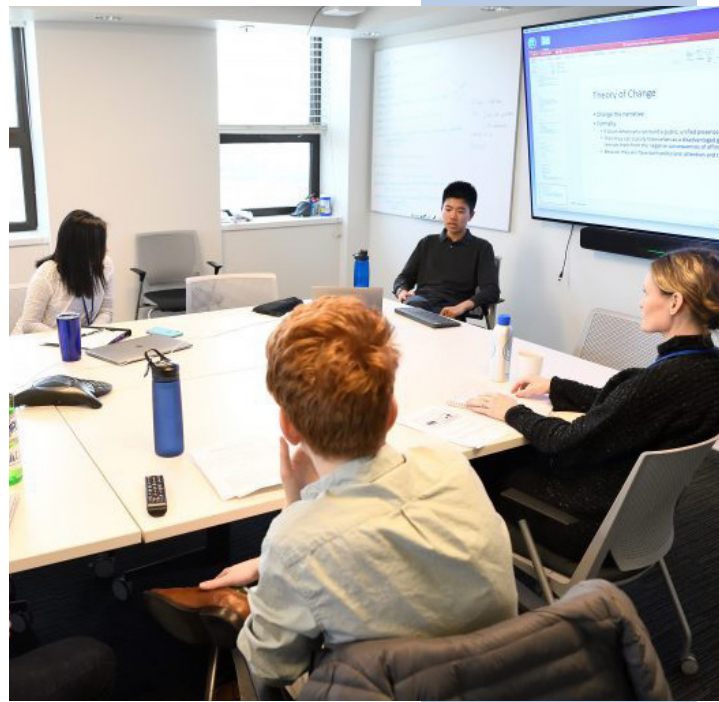
Faculty can play a critical role in this process by choosing to what degree they engage in this type of coursework, but institutions should encourage and facilitate faculty participation in civic-engagement initiatives both inside and outside the classroom.

Offering Courses on Topics Related to Democratic Engagement

Institutions can offer courses that specifically address topics that are related to democratic engagement. These courses offer students the opportunity to combine theory and practice by exploring these critical issues through an academic lens. Institutions like Stanford have incorporated various related courses into their offerings. For example, Stanford provides a course on deliberative democracy offered as a collaboration between the Center for Deliberative Democracy and the Haas Center for Public Service. This innovative practicum style course enables students to work on a deliberative polling project on campus.

The course “Hacking 4 Democracy: Elections 2020” offered in Fall 2020 at JMU is another example of an interdisciplinary academic course addressing complex challenges to democracy and society, including providing an opportunity for actual democratic practice. This course encourages students to understand all aspects of the election process—focusing on topics such as the Electoral College structure; the role of political action committees, interest groups, the media, and other key actors; campaign strategy and finance; and the importance of voter turnout. Teams of students then mobilize to develop solutions around ensuring voting rights (especially for traditionally marginalized communities), organizing GOTV campaigns, and educating about the importance of voting for preserving democracy.

The course draws on various disciplines such as political science, marketing and psychology, arts and design, technical communication, and computer science.





Conducting a Democratic Audit and Providing a List of Democracy-Related Courses

The University of Chicago has surveyed all of its undergraduate courses and provided a list to undergraduates of courses deemed to focus on democracy. That list is just a preview of all of these types of courses. The University of Chicago indicated interest in building on this approach to produce a more comprehensive format in the future.

Participating in a Cross-University Consortium on Democracy

Democratic Erosion is a multi-university consortium that helps students and faculty evaluate threats to democracy both at home and abroad through the lens of theory, history, and social science. This consortium has helped numerous universities focus on a similar type of work while connecting students across institutions to each other. It may be worth universities joining the consortium or

determining other types of related democratic consortia in which to participate.

Incorporating Democratic Engagement to Existing Course Materials

Faculty members can both serve as mentors to students and encourage democratic participation by connecting it to their course material or research. Although the focus on democratic engagement traditionally happens more in humanities-oriented courses, it can and should prove relevant in various ways in every academic discipline. Faculty members, particularly in fields that may seem distant from democratic engagement or have traditionally low student voter turnout, can make an immense difference by facilitating dialogue on this topic. For instance, professors in STEM fields can focus on the public challenges of climate change or engage in hack-a-thons around specific community problems.

Offering Extra-Curricular Democratic-Engagement Opportunities

While offering courses related to democratic engagement is essential to a holistic approach, institutions should provide a wide array of co- and extra-curricular opportunities to engage with related issues as well. One way to do this is for the institution to have an informal course taught after class hours.

ECU began such a program in 2017 called Citizen U. Citizen U facilitators held a workshop once a week for eight to ten weeks.

Topics ranged from voting to personal financial literacy to knowing one's rights in various circumstances. These conversations are often facilitated by community members and feature guest speakers. For instance, one conversation occurred between the police force and students regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. This workshop series taught students essential skills while also inspiring community organizing and activism. While students did not receive course credit for attending, this program fulfilled certain requirements for students in academic programs with co-curricular requirements. These series normally happen in-person but were held virtually on teams during the pandemic. Citizen U's success is evidenced by widespread replication from other universities in North Carolina.

Creating and Disseminating a Faculty Engagement Toolkit

Aside from connecting democratic engagement to their course material, professors can also encourage students to participate democratically and can contextualize and inform them about upcoming elections, local issues, or important public meetings. Many institutions we spoke with do not yet have a comprehensive centralized resource, but a faculty engagement guide or toolkit can be an especially useful resource for faculty members who have a desire to engage in democratic discussions but would like more guidance.

Student voting groups at various institutions have worked to create such guides. They can contain multiple resources and action items for faculty engagement. For instance, they may recommend that faculty include a suggestion for faculty members to post the TurboVote (or equivalent platform) on Canvas or their course syllabi.

In addition, these guides can contain suggestions to help faculty members discuss relevant political events with their students in a productive and nonpartisan manner. The faculty guide can be highly effective if they are endorsed by and distributed through official university channels. This past year, the president of Stanford disseminated the student-made toolkit to all faculty members via email. At ECU, faculty have access to a Canvas module containing voting information. This past year, the module was downloaded just over 200 times by faculty members.



VOTING

Encouraging students to register to vote, and to ultimately vote, is a critical component to ensuring students are democratically engaged. Universities have focused on the topic to greater degrees in recent years, meaning that best practices are aplenty, although there is significant opportunity for universities to learn from each other and improve on their efforts.

Conduct Voter Registration

Voter registration is a necessary bedrock first step in the voting process. Campuses have an opportunity to play a pivotal role in youth voter registration through facilitating voter registration initiatives. As of publication, only 19 states have automatic voter registration, making it likely that there are students who want to

vote but have never been presented with an opportunity to register. The most successful voter registration tactics appear to be initiatives that are incorporated into existing university systems that reach all students. If a comprehensive approach is not feasible, a more grassroots, student-driven approach to voter registration can also be effective.

Integrating Voter Registration into Existing University Systems

Integrating voter registration into existing university systems has proven to be an effective tactic to increase voter registration and, consequently, turnout rates on various campuses. This integration can happen in multiple ways and often depends on each institution's systems and voter registration tool—(such as TurboVote) if they pay for one.

Integrating Voter Registration into the Enrollment Process

Voter registration information and opportunities can also be incorporated into the enrollment process. This type of intervention is particularly effective as all students are guaranteed to view voter registration information.



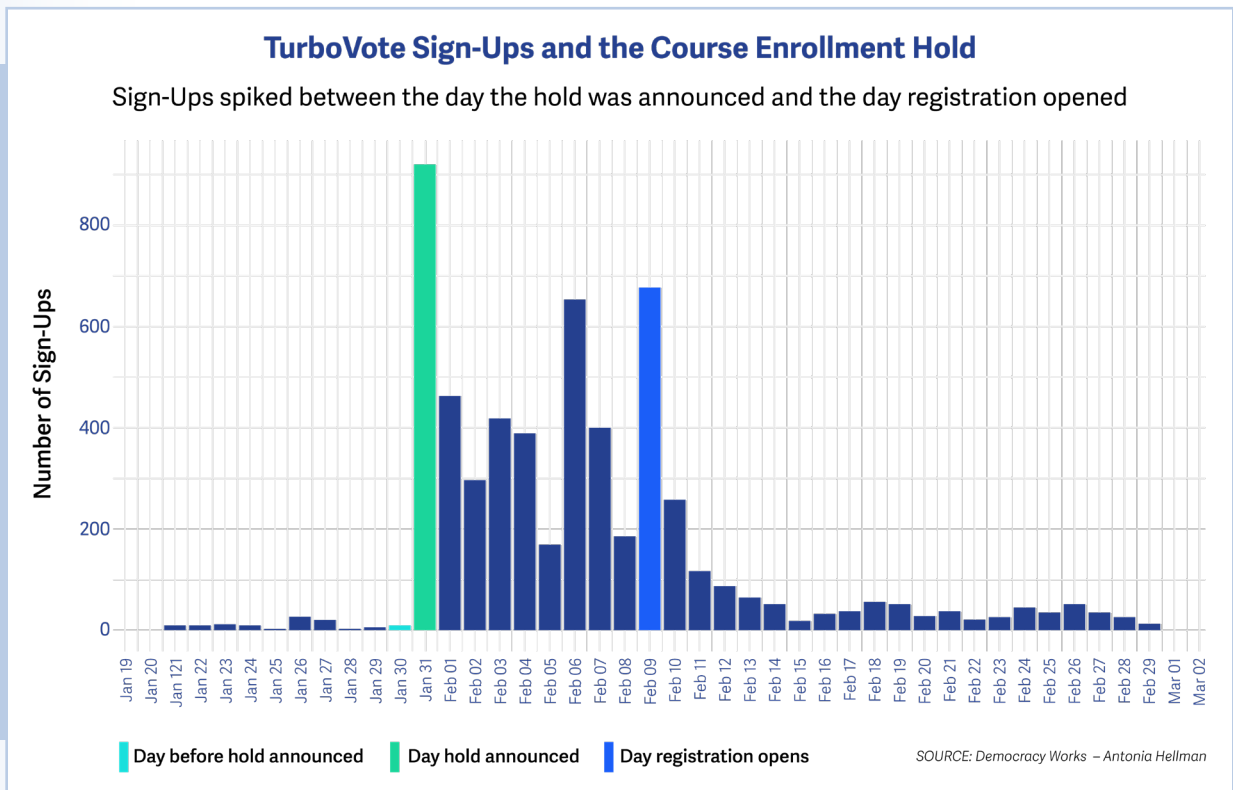
Harvard University employs this tactic: When students are updating their name and contact information during enrollment, one particular page that appears focuses on voter registration (an “iframe” of TurboVote). This is an opt-out system. Students who would like to register are directed to TurboVote, but students who are not eligible or interested can continue to the next step of the enrollment process.

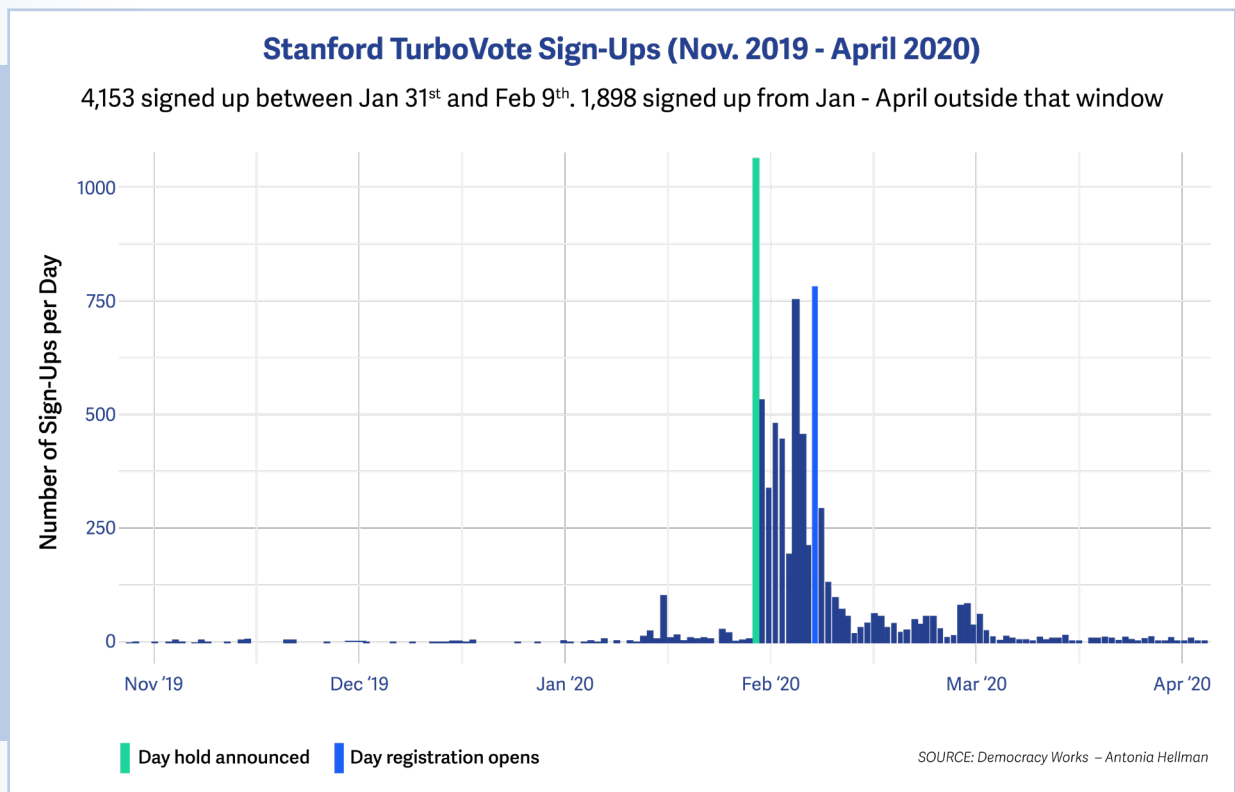
The Harvard Votes leader, Kevin Ballen, noted that the university received a “modest” number of sign-ups from this system. Ballen also noted the tone-setting significance of this system; incorporating voter registration into enrollment immediately signals the university’s prioritization of civic engagement to incoming students.

Integrating Voter Registration into Course Registration

Some schools, like Stanford, have incorporated a voter registration element into course registration. At Stanford, there is a page containing voter registration information and directing students to TurboVote on the course registration portal called “Axess.” Sean Casey, the co-Director of StanfordVotes, noted that this integration was the “single most effective thing we did” in regard to increasing turnout rates on campus. Stanford’s integration of TurboVote into course registration resulted in a large spike in the number of students registered.

The following graphs of registration numbers depict the efficacy of this practice.





Conducting Grassroots Outreach

Incorporating voter registration into university systems may not be feasible for institutions of higher education for various reasons. For instance, some administrators may reject this reform or the implementation process might take too long. In these cases, grassroots, student-driven voter registration efforts provide a viable and effective alternative.

These voter registration initiatives can take many forms. Students can, for example, set up tables during orientation and register both incoming and returning students. Cornell University students have established an effective registration model that has the potential to reach a wide range of students. Cornell Votes members conduct sessions training student group leaders of other organizations, clubs, and teams on how to register their own members to vote. The ideology behind this method is that students are most likely to engage and want to register and vote if they are encouraged by their peers or teammates who they admire and trust. This practice requires minimal effort but has the high reward of reaching a much larger cohort of students than traditional tabling methods. Additionally, this practice has the added benefit of naturally facilitating dialogue focused on democratic engagement in these spaces and within these communities on campus.

Promoting Voter Turnout

Voter-turnout rates for the 18-29 demographic have historically been relatively low. For example, only 43 percent of this age group voted in 2016. Alarming, an even smaller percentage—(29%) of this cohort voted in the 2018 midterms. While youth voter turnout did increase in 2020, ultimately, only an estimated 50 to 52 percent voted, lower than the rest of the population.

There is also a fairly large discrepancy between voter registration and turnout rates, signaling that a focus on turnout specifically is paramount. According to NSLVE data, the voter registration rate for students at two- and four-year public and private institutions was 75.6 percent whereas the turnout rate was only 52.5 percent. There are various explanations for these low turnout rates that we gleaned from our conversations. Interviewees indicated potential reasons including a lack of information surrounding election logistics, lack of information on candidates or issues for state and local elections in particular, lack of dialogue surrounding elections, voter apathy, and accessibility issues. Various institutions interviewed started innovative ways to address the discrepancy between registration and participation.

Hosting a Pledge to Vote

Harvard's pledge-to-vote form is an effective voter registration practice as it addresses two of the aforementioned challenges to high voter-turnout rates: lack of information and lack of community spirit/accountability. During the past 2020 election cycle, Harvard Votes Challenge (HVC) created a Google Form that students could fill out to express their student group's commitment to voting. The form asked student groups numerous questions, including why civic engagement matters to them and how they are creatively engaging their members to vote and to celebrate elections. Student groups who complete the pledge were displayed on the HVC website, encouraging a sense of community and fostering an ethos of participation. It can be powerful and inspirational to see the diverse array of organizations committed to voting—ultimately, the pledge-to-vote form helps normalize and encourage civic engagement.



Pledges that only ask students for a commitment to vote rather than providing students with additional resources are less effective. The Harvard form directed students to a voting toolkit with critical information condensed in one place, facilitating students' follow-through on their commitments. Overall, the pledge-to-vote form is an action-oriented way of disseminating information and resources as well as fostering a spirit of community participation in civic engagement.

Sponsoring a Classroom-Visits Model

Direct contact with students is another way to effectively disseminate voting-related information. A classroom representative model helps to facilitate this type of communication. Many institutions, such as UT Austin and Piedmont Community College, have implemented a system in which student representatives visit classrooms and deliver brief presentations or voting-related announcements. Students at Piedmont indicated that these visits were their most effective turnout tactic.

This method can prove effective as it can reach a wide array of students, including those not necessarily predisposed to vote. Students often value insight from their peers, and this is an excellent catalyst for voting conversations in classrooms. This format can also alleviate a common faculty apprehension of slipping into partisan rhetoric when discussing democratic engagement. Students who deliver the brief presentations are often trained to be nonpartisan. The visits can also be targeted to reach students in particular majors that have historically low voter-turnout rates. The in-person element of



the visits can prove highly engaging, but they can be conducted virtually if need be. In 2018, there were 85 classroom visits at JMU. After the pandemic began, students provided the tools and information digitally to faculty members. Ultimately, the fact that students know that their professors have approved these visits can help to confirm professors' commitment to democratic engagement in the minds of students.

Promoting Personalized Contact

Personalized contact can play a fundamental role in both encouraging voter participation and providing students with resources. One-on-one outreach is the most direct method of student outreach. One way to conduct personalized contact is via text. Harvard, for example, ran a text banking operation around election season. The registrar provided the HVC members with a list of all students at the college. HVC members then coordinated their

outreach to make contact with each individual. They conducted multiple rounds of contact, vital for developing a relationship, in which they reminded students about deadlines, asked them about their voting plans, and offered to answer any election-related questions. This practice can prove especially effective because all students are connected with a "voting expert" who they can always reach out to.

Creating a Civic-Engagement Hotline

The one-on-one outreach can also take the form of a student-operated hotline dedicated to fielding election-related questions and concerns. Students at UT Austin created a Google Voice number for this purpose. Students could call the number, and the student representatives would respond in real time.

The voting process can be overwhelming, and written instructions are often generalized and difficult to comprehend. The reliable hotline enables students to communicate with people they feel more comfortable talking to who can address their specific voting issue or concern. It is vital that students do not feel alone when navigating this often-complicated process.

Conducting Faculty Trainings

Pirates Vote at ECU held an election training for faculty members. In this training, faculty were informed about the election process and on-campus resources for voting. In addition, the North Carolina Campus Compact held a separate, well-attended training for faculty on deliberative dialogue. The training focused on the use of deliberative dialogue as a tool to develop students' ability to have constructive and critical discussions of public questions. The training included an overview of the theory of deliberative pedagogy as well as a practice forum in which participants receive tools for effective moderation.

Analyzing Voter Data

Analyzing data on voter registration and turnout helps institutions to understand voting trends and assess how they can best improve their participation. To receive and aggregate data, campuses should opt into the NSLVE data collection. This report calculates each campus's voter registration and turnout rates and breaks down the data into certain demographics such as class year, ethnicity/race, and even area of study. Institutions can use this information to target certain pockets of campus with historically low turnout rates. This data is also useful so that institutions can identify patterns and adjust their civic-engagement strategy accordingly. Various voter registration platforms, such as TurboVote, offer data points that institutions can examine as well. Institutions can also employ internal methods for assessing their efforts.

For example, JMU surveys students both at the beginning of their time on campus and again toward the end of their tenure; the survey is meant to evaluate the institution's civic-engagement efforts and determine if students are leaving the institution as more informed and active citizens than when they entered. The survey looks at civic engagement more broadly than voting behaviors.

Sharing Data with Faculty Members

Institutions can share any available democratic-engagement data to all faculty members. Faculty members most likely are not fully aware of how low the turnout rates on campus are. At Wake Forest for example, faculty teaching in departments with historically low turnout rates receive the NSLVE data in hopes that they would be more inclined to discuss civic engagement in class and encourage student participation.

Post-Election Reflection

Institutions' and GOTV programming often ends on Election Day. The lack of follow-up and dialogue post-elections is a major issue in the democratic-engagement space.

Understandably, students and administrators alike are exhausted by the fast-paced nature and high intensity of the election cycle and, thus, would like to divert their time and energy elsewhere once Election Day comes around.

Despite this fatigue, it is essential to create spaces for reflection, decompression, and further mobilization following notable elections.

Students at Clark Atlanta University (CAU) hosted a post-election reflection event in the fall of 2020. They invited students from Spelman College as well. Student leaders remarked that the election was an emotional experience for many students and that they craved an opportunity to process everything with others. Aside from creating an opportunity for dialogue surrounding these emotions, these post-election events can serve as a way to acknowledge and appreciate the labor that went into GOTV and election efforts. It is an opportunity to celebrate the impressive work that was done and recognize organizers' enormous contributions.

CAU students also mentioned that the event was a chance to acknowledge the burnout that students felt (in particular after a longer election season due to run-offs in Georgia). These events are also opportunities for students to have the "what comes next" conversation. Students have used these events to have conversations about their expectations for the officials elected and also think about accountability measures. Post-election reflection events thus serve as an effective opportunity to re-energize students and set the civic-engagement agenda going forward—a clear recognition that voting does not mark the end of democratic-engagement efforts.



INSTITUTIONALIZATION

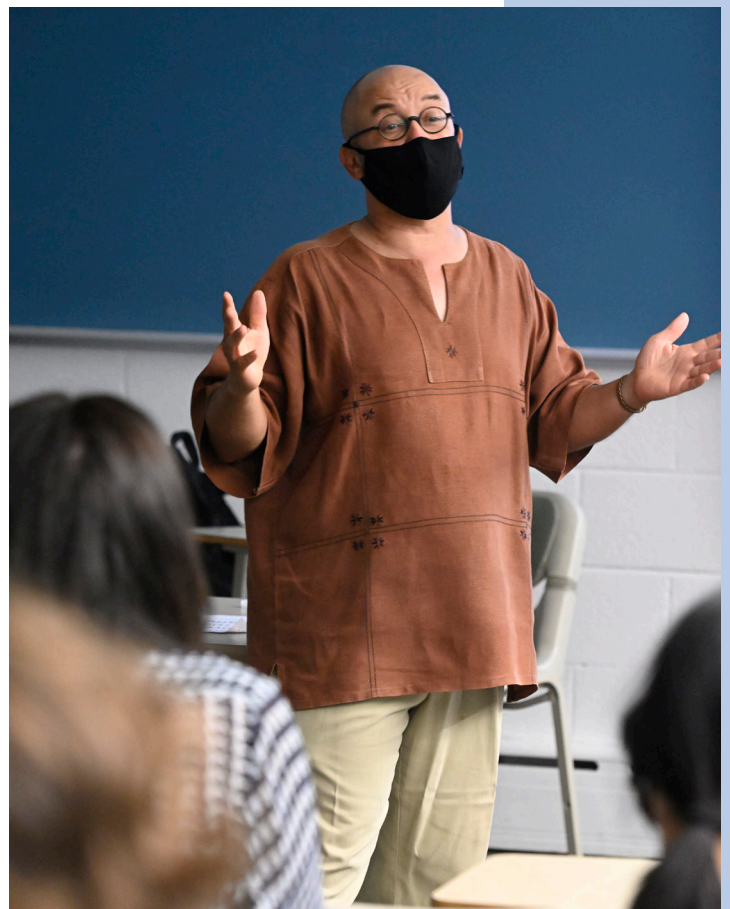
Campus efforts can reach more individuals if there is productive collaboration among key stakeholders on campus, including a diverse group of students and administrators. Working with administrators enables larger structural changes and initiatives—that students cannot implement on their own—to come to fruition. Administrators also have access to significant resources unavailable to students and the ability to provide funding for democratic-engagement efforts. Funding is critical to accessibility; students who rely on additional sources of income often cannot take on uncompensated democratic-engagement work, and these students should not be excluded from the space. Institutionalization is also important for sustainability purposes—initiatives must outstay the current students working on them. Democratic-engagement work should be occurring 365 days a year (rather than only during election season), and having a system in place is better than rebuilding each cycle.

Promoting Collaboration Between Students and Administration

Institutionalizing democratic-engagement efforts can begin with facilitating and formalizing communication among all stakeholders on campus. It is critical for all relevant actors at each institution to establish a democratic-engagement framework and understand everyone's roles in achieving the agreed-upon goals and values. This collaboration is essential to both identifying institutional priorities and determining how to implement them. Collaboration between students, administrators, and faculty can take many forms; following are some examples.

Connecting Student Group Work with Relevant Administrators or On-Campus Centers

Many students have expressed the importance of housing their democratic-engagement efforts at centers on campus. Partnering with an established center on campus truly expands the efficacy and efficiency of a student voting organization. While students have a better understanding of campus functioning at the student level, they are often unable to implement structural change without administrative support.



Administrators have a higher-level understanding of university operations and can help implement student ideas. Many student interviewees mentioned a desire for democratic-engagement work to be more centralized and consolidated on their campuses and to have a better awareness of when civic/democratic-engagement activities are occurring—hosting the efforts at an established center eliminates confusion by serving as hubs for all relevant efforts.

Establishing a System of Oversight Committees

Institutions should ideally have various levels of oversight and planning for democratic-engagement efforts. Democratic-engagement initiatives often require high levels of collaboration and coordination; therefore, it is essential that stakeholders have many opportunities to convene. Institutions need overarching visions and strategies in order to have comprehensive democratic-engagement plans. Establishing a multi-layered system can facilitate said coordination. Harvard, for instance, has three levels of oversight. In 2018, the Ash Center for Democracy and the Institute of Politics (IOP) founded the HVC, a group composed of students, administrators, and faculty that drives the institution's democratic-engagement agenda and efforts. This group worked together to establish a comprehensive oversight system leading up to the 2020 election.

The largest coalition at Harvard is composed of stakeholders such as the IOP staff, college communications, dean of students, head of residential life, head of public service, and head of orientation programming. This committee met monthly leading up to the 2020 election and was tasked with creating action plans and determining logistics for implementation.

Harvard also organized another committee, part of a university-funded initiative, composed of the different school teams (each school at Harvard had a democratic-engagement team). This group also convened monthly prior to the 2020 election and was tasked with developing overall strategy and supporting each team while also making larger administrative requests. University officials presented at committee meetings, and committee members also spoke at dean's meetings.

The third layer of the committee system was the individual school teams, the most active being the undergraduate team. Each team had elected or selected chairs leading the other members. These teams created communications materials, focused on capacity building, and were responsible for day-to-day operations and initiatives.

The various layers ensures that there are not significant gaps in the institution's democratic-engagement plans. This system has led to influential changes; students were able to discuss issues they noticed with receiving mailed ballots with mailroom representatives and developed improved systems addressing students' needs. Harvard's system incorporates student participation (HVC representatives) at all levels, which is vital to the success of the institution's democratic-engagement planning.

Stanford's democratic-engagement efforts are structured in a similar manner. The student group Stanford Votes works in tandem with the Haas Center for Public Service. Stanford also created a working group—composed of representatives from the president's office, vice president, provost for student life, faculty, student government, and Stanford Votes—tasked with overseeing the institution's democratic-engagement efforts. This group meets weekly, and its focus is broader than elections. Again, this committee brings together key stakeholders to brainstorm overall strategies and coordinate the logistics of implementing the plans.



Collaborating with Relevant Offices

Establishing a relationship with Residential Life can expand the reach of civic-engagement efforts at institutions that house the majority of students on campus. Organizations often post announcements about their upcoming events and projects in residential halls. Additionally, most dorms have an RA system; these RAs are often in charge of providing resources and support. There is an opportunity for RAs to provide students with critical democratic-engagement information.

For instance, at ASU, students collaborated with Next Generation Politics to help train the community assistants (CAs) to register students to vote. After successfully completing a pilot program, the head of housing permitted this programming for all CAs of the College of Liberal Arts and

Sciences. There is now a Canvas module with the training that is available to CAs on all of the university's campuses. Student leaders at ASU are hoping to extend future training beyond voter registration to include informed voting strategies.

Providing Presidential Support and Commitment

Many institutions expressed the importance of their presidents supporting democratic-engagement work. This support can be critical for tone-setting purposes (demonstrating that democratic engagement is a priority at the institution) as well as for practical purposes such as increasing funding for related initiatives. Institution presidents have expressed their support of democratic-engagement work in various ways.

Presidents Highlighting Democratic Engagement at Important Events

Presidents often have a unique opportunity to address the entire student body, faculty, and staff throughout various occasions each year. These are prime opportunities to communicate the importance of democratic engagement. Harvard University president Lawrence Bacow, for example, explicitly dedicated time to discussing democratic engagement in a 2019 commencement speech. Similarly, President Christina Paxson of Brown University discussed the work of the Swearer Center and Brown Votes in her speech to the newly admitted class of 2025.

Presidents Signing Commitments

University presidents have the opportunity to send a strong message to not only their institutions but also to peer schools by publicly declaring their commitment to encouraging civic participation. The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge's "Higher Education Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation" is an example of a statement presidents can sign. Presidents who sign this commitment agree to strive for full student voter registration and voter participation in all elections.

President Sending All-School Emails

It can prove powerful when presidents leverage their position by mentioning democratic engagement in emails to the entire institution. In particular, presidents can discuss the relevance of democratic engagement to the institution's mission, directing students to relevant resources and campus initiatives. Presidents can also send out emails to faculty encouraging them to play an active role promoting democratic participation. The Stanford University president, Marc Tessier-Lavigne, for instance, sent an email with the faculty toolkit, prepared by Stanford Votes, to the faculty before the 2020 election. Stanford Votes expressed that this practice was effective in terms of improving faculty participation.

Presidents Appearing in Videos and Media Content

Videos and photo campaigns are often effective mobilization tools. Videos are especially engaging, and students are often more inclined to watch a quick, entertaining video than read a lengthy email. Videos featuring prominent campus figures have the ability to capture the attention of the student body, which is essential when trying to inspire students and communicate a message. Students at UF included their president in a GOTV-themed video skit, with many students viewing and reposting the clip.

Integrating Democratic Engagement into Orientation

Orientation is a prime opportunity to communicate the importance of democratic engagement to new students, register them to vote, and provide them with necessary resources and information on local context.

Students must receive an overview of the institution's democratic-engagement practices as soon as they arrive on campus. Many primary elections are held in the early fall and midterm and general elections also occur relatively early in the year, so it is essential to connect with incoming students immediately. Various institutions approach their orientation programming differently; some opt for in-person voter registration drives while others create educational materials and modules to disseminate virtually to all incoming students.

Earlier this year, Princeton Vote 100 received permission from the orientation team to be part of the class of 2024's orientation programming. They designed a voting and civic-engagement learning module that was displayed on Canvas. The module also contained a walkthrough of the TurboVote platform. All first-years had to watch it and take a quiz at the end.



Creating and Disseminating Educational Materials

Distributing democratic-engagement materials during orientation effectively informs new students in a digestible way. Institutions often bombard students with important information during orientation, and it is unreasonable to expect students to remember it all; therefore, providing students with guides that they can reference as needed is a particularly effective strategy. Institutions should include information on community context in these educational materials as well. An understanding of the local community and context is pivotal for incoming students to participate effectively and responsibly in democratic-engagement efforts. These educational materials can take different forms such as physical guidebooks or virtual modules. Virtual models are often more interactive and engaging.

Consolidating Democratic-Engagement Opportunities on a Website

Institutions should consider adding or directly linking to democratic-engagement resources on their official websites. Oftentimes student groups or initiatives within the university create comprehensive websites containing a plethora of pertinent information for students, faculty, and staff. These websites, however, are often more difficult to access than the institution's main pages. Centers on campus facilitating democratic-engagement work can also link to these websites; for instance, the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania's website directly links to Penn Leads the Vote's website. Displaying and linking to these websites on more trafficked university sites leads to more usage of the resources and legitimizes the democratic-engagement efforts that such groups or centers are conducting.

PARTNERSHIP AND COALITION BUILDING

Democratic-engagement work at institutions of higher education should not be happening in a vacuum. It is critical to include a diverse array of stakeholders in this work, both at the institution and outside campus walls. Student groups leading these initiatives should always be looking to collaborate with other student groups on campus, even groups whose missions do not necessarily directly relate to democratic engagement,—such as club sports and affinity groups. For efficiency purposes, there should be collaboration among all groups doing similar work, including partisan organizations. This collaboration can take the form of partnerships for particular initiatives or events, or a more formal partnership with regular meetings and communication and overall strategizing.

External partnerships can be as fruitful as internal ones. There are various stakeholders both within the state in which the institution is located and ones that operate nationally who can be ideal partners in this work. These stakeholders often benefit from student labor and can offer students additional opportunities for engagement. They can also support and improve the existing work happening on campus.



Internal Collaboration

Collaborating with Student Groups on Campus

Institutions must ensure a diverse range of voices are at the table when it comes to democratic engagement. Individuals are affected differently by certain issues and driven by various factors to participate democratically, and it is paramount that as many of these perspectives as possible are represented. Representation expands the scope of the efforts and centers voices that have been traditionally ignored or overlooked in democratic-engagement work. One way to diversify those participating in democratic-engagement efforts is by taking advantage of existing infrastructure via student organizations.

Outreach to these groups must extend beyond motivating them to turn out to vote. A group's mission, whether or not they are cognizant of it, is frequently intimately connected to electoral politics. For example, an environmental protection organization can facilitate dialogue about sustainability policy and can highlight upcoming local elections pertaining to environmental issues or prepare informational guides on how local elected officials influence climate policy.



Following are some specific methods to achieve increased diversity in the democratic-engagement space on campus and to increase campus group participation.

[Ensuring that a diverse group of students runs democratic-engagement initiatives](#)

Institutions must make an effort to attract and cultivate a diverse group of students to spearhead democratic-engagement work. It is especially important that traditionally marginalized perspectives are at the forefront of democratic-engagement conversations and strategies. There are various ways that institutions can diversify their leadership. Princeton employs the cohort leader model: Administrators invite students who hold a wide range of positions on campus (such as sports captains, political leaders, etc.) to assume leadership roles in Princeton Votes 100. This method establishes a team of student leaders who represent various interests and stem from distinct backgrounds.

[Mobilizing student groups](#)

Democratic-engagement groups and initiatives should work diligently and create opportunities to partner with other student groups on campus when feasible. Those leading democratic-engagement work should take advantage of the preexisting organizational structures to achieve their objectives and incorporate more students. There are various ways to mobilize student groups in terms of voter registration and turnout.

[Being part of a pledge or challenge model](#)

Democratic-engagement groups can utilize the aforementioned pledge model to collect written commitments from leaders of student organizations promising to register all eligible members and actively discuss and encourage participation in elections. Groups can also organize voting challenges for student groups to further incentivize turnout.

For instance, this past election cycle Brown Votes facilitated a voting challenge intending to promote democratic engagement and foster a culture of accountability among college-aged voters, a demographic with historically low turnout. Brown Votes launched the challenge on National Voter Registration Day. They created a Google Form that leaders of organizations in which 100 percent of eligible members voted would fill out to win a prize and be featured on the official Brown Instagram account. Brown Votes publicized when groups completed 100 percent registration, the first step of the challenge, to motivate other groups. This strategy proved effective, and many of the athletic teams in particular completed this challenge.

Collaborating on Events and Panels

Hosting events and panels in collaboration with other student groups is an effective way to integrate these groups into democratic engagement work. Student groups often do not see their work as pertaining to democratic engagement, and these events create an opportunity to ensure that they are more explicitly tied together. These events also provide a great opportunity to extend civic-engagement work beyond voting and demonstrate connections between local and national issues and electoral politics. These events can take many forms: one-time occurrences, discussions, panels, or even discussion series.



Students leading democratic-engagement work at Northern Virginia Community College collaborated with the campus group Black Chats, an organization supporting Black community organizing on campus, to host a virtual event during which students discussed Black voter education as well as watched and analyzed a documentary on this topic. Many institutions held such events virtually this past year in light of the pandemic; this format, however, often enabled a more diverse group of speakers and attendees to participate.

Partnering with and Cross Promoting Groups Whose Missions Connect to Electoral Politics

The predominant democratic-engagement organizations on campus should make an active effort to collaborate with student groups whose missions connect in some way to policy or electoral politics. These groups

ideally can establish a symbiotic relationship, promoting each other's events and initiatives when possible.

For instance, in spring 2020, there was a question on the ballot in a Rhode Island special election concerning affordable housing. Brown Votes worked with HOPE, a local organization whose mission is to "conduct outreach and collaborate with community partners on projects that support structural reforms aimed at ensuring equitable treatment for housing-insecure individuals," to inform the student body of the importance of this referendum. Brown Votes included a blurb written by HOPE on the particular ballot question in their monthly newsletter. HOPE also referred its members to Brown Votes' resources to ensure they and other students on campus had all the information they needed to vote in the special election. Growing these partnerships allows groups to leverage their membership to spread key messages more widely. The collaboration also conveys the interconnectedness of electoral politics and local issues to the student body at large.

Connecting with the University's Athletics Department

Collaborating with student-athletes and sports teams on campus not only can engage more of the student body but can also capture both administrative and external attention. Sports teams play a prominent role at various institutions across the country, and the celebrity-like status of these teams can certainly be leveraged for democratic-engagement purposes.

Katya Ehresman, former president of Texas Votes at UT Austin, remarked that her organization's relationship with the administration significantly improved after they began collaborating with the athletics department. This collaboration gained students' and administrators' attention alike and increased the mobilization of students who have not traditionally actively searched for democratic-engagement information.

Collaboration with athletics can occur in various ways. At UF, the well-known football team created a video encouraging students to vote and provided some logistic information as well. Encouraging participation among the student-athlete population is also incredibly important.

Eric Reveno, associate head basketball coach at the Georgia Institute of Technology, recognized an opportunity for coaches to encourage democratic participation from their players. Working with writer, activist, and comedian Baratunde Thurston and consulting various civic-engagement organizations, he developed a four-month program called "Building America's Teammates—Coaching Athletes into Citizens." The goal of this program is to help coaches produce well-informed and highly engaged citizens working for the common good and to protect democracy. The program includes topics of the month such as "trust" and "power," and each month there are guided discussion resources, supplemental materials such as videos and readings, hands-on activities outside of team time, and ideas for larger scale civic opportunities such as community service projects. Reveno feels a responsibility as a coach to address civic engagement in a meaningful way with his athletes. He is hopeful that coaches at other institutions will share his passion and utilize the program as well.

Engaging First-Years

Habit formation begins as soon as students step on campus. First-years can be overwhelmed with every aspect surrounding the beginning of their college experience and are not yet as familiar with campus resources, so this group historically has a lower voter-turnout rate (particularly for primaries that happen in early fall). Institutions should ensure that they provide resources related to democratic engagement for these students and additionally make an effort to include these new student voices in the conversations about democratic-engagement improvements on campus.



Princeton Vote 100 actively mobilizes first-years via their first-year class council. This council disseminates information to fellow first-years and helps the institution identify gaps in democratic-engagement programming. Their fresh perspective and recent orientation experiences position them well to suggest improvements to current programming. The council simultaneously serves the purpose of training the future leaders of Vote 100, essential for sustainability of democratic-engagement efforts. Engaging first-year students is important from a cultural perspective as well, as it demonstrates the institution's commitment to democratic engagement at the onset of students' time on campus.

External Partnerships

Connecting with Local Stakeholders Doing Voting Work

Institutions should partner with local election officials for the most up-to-date information and allies who can help advocate for increased student voting access. For example, UT Austin collaborated with their county clerk's office and election administrators to acquire an on-campus polling location for students.

Collaborating with Local Organizations

Institutions should provide students with opportunities to engage responsibly with local organizations doing work in the community. It is optimal for this engagement to begin when students first arrive on campus and for it to be sustained going forward.

Wake Forest's "Dash Boards" program for first-years prioritizes early engagement and fosters a familiarization with community organizations. Nonprofits in the Winston-Salem area submit requests for proposals detailing what exact assistance they could benefit from to complete their work. The Office of Civic and Community Engagement then pairs students with a nonprofit organization based on how well a student's skills and interests align with the proposed need. This program is effective in various ways. First, it enables students to learn about local issues and play an active role in developing solutions.



Second, the program instills the value of community-driven work; students often enter these spaces motivated to enact change, but it is essential for them to respond to community needs rather than act how they believe would be most beneficial. Finally, because the program occurs during a student's first year, it can set a precedent for and encourage future community engagement both on campus and beyond.

Joining a Coalition of Local Organizations

Students at JMU have joined a coalition (the ALICE Coalition) of local organizations led by United Way. The Center for Civic Engagement at JMU helps students to join the coalition.

This coalition collaborates on advocacy projects related to local issues,—such as education, health care, transportation, and disability rights. This past year, the coalition focused on the housing crisis in particular; their efforts included a combination of direct service work and advocating for certain policy changes. The coalition had an opportunity to weigh in as the city council was attempting to tackle these issues. Joining this coalition not only enables students to learn about and understand local issues and the local advocacy space, but it also empowers them to take action alongside the leading community forces.

Collaborating with National Democratic-Engagement-Related Organizations

Many national organizations are doing tremendous work in the civic-engagement space, and institutions should partner with them to supplement their efforts. For example, VoteRiders is a nonpartisan nonprofit that provides voter ID assistance. They have various guides detailing each state's unique voter ID laws as well as a voter ID helpline to answer people's questions. Students in Columbia Votes developed a partnership with VoteRiders. The organization held a workshop and presentation on voter ID laws in the most popularly represented states at the university. VoteRiders also informed the students about volunteer opportunities to assist their voter ID educational work. Such partnerships can be mutually beneficial and fruitful for both the institution and the organization.

ACCESSIBILITY

Institutions should attempt to eliminate financial barriers to students' civic participation or their desire to partake in any democratic-engagement work. Furthermore, they should support student efforts financially. On the logistic side, institutions should always cover mailing costs and provide materials such as envelopes and stamps when necessary. On the opportunities side, institutions should find funding to support student labor and should also provide funding opportunities for students to engage in democratic-engagement work or internships off-campus as well.

Paying Students for On-Campus Work

In terms of student labor, it is important that there is a body of stipended students. Working on democratic-engagement initiatives demands an intensive time commitment, and students who rely on other sources of income may not be able to play a leadership role in this work without financial compensation. These are often the voices excluded from the democratic engagement space. Institutions can either pay students directly or they can partner with civic-engagement organizations that offer paid fellowship programs such as AGF, the Campus Vote Project, and the Campus Election Engagement Project. Students who play significant advisory roles to staff and administration and who coordinate the functioning of student-led democratic-engagement efforts on campus should be compensated for their time.



Creating Opportunities for External Democratic-Engagement Work

In addition to funding student efforts on campus, institutions should make off-campus democratic-engagement opportunities more accessible to all students and grow the civic culture. These opportunities should be made available to students at all times throughout their time at the institution—and, in some cases, even before arrival on campus—as well as during both the semester and summer. Students often want to participate in democratic-engagement-related internships or programs, but the lack of stipends and funding in this space can deter participation. Nonprofit and nongovernmental organization (or NGO) work is often unpaid; however, these experiences can be incredibly valuable for students and can inspire students to continue pursuing opportunities and projects in this realm.

Running Pre-Orientation Programs

Harvard has a pre-orientation program called “Sparking Public Service the Summer Before Harvard” or SPARK. This is a six-week program for incoming first-year students during which students design a public-service project in their community. Harvard supports students in this work with personal and professional development resources. Students earn a \$1,500 dollar stipend in addition to the mentorship. The purpose of the program is for students to cultivate a greater understanding of their communities and learn how to identify and solve problems. Students are also able to learn about the public-service pathways and opportunities available at Harvard. The hope is that students who participate in this program will be motivated to continue community engagement both at Harvard and beyond. This program is therefore not only fantastic in developing the culture of democratic engagement, but it is also wonderful in terms of student accessibility and access.

Advertising Democratic-Engagement and Nonprofit Work Opportunities

Many students who wanted to get involved in democratic-engagement-related internships remarked that their institutions clearly prioritized tech and finance opportunities for students. In order to increase accessibility, institutions have a responsibility to advertise and support students engaging in nonprofit and public sector work. Career fairs or presentations and panels from organizations are wonderful ways to expose students to such opportunities.

In April 2020, Stanford’s Haas Center hosted a virtual event during which students could learn about various organizations offering internships specifically related to democratic reform. These included think tanks, advocacy and litigation work, and organizations that take a holistic approach to protecting democracy. Presenting and legitimizing such opportunities to students is just the first step; democratic-engagement-related internships or projects are more often than not unpaid. Doing unpaid labor is not feasible for many students. Again, this financial barrier should not exclude students from participating in this work. Therefore, institutions should prioritize funding these opportunities as much as possible. For example, the Stanford in Government program, in collaboration with the Haas Center, offers students the opportunity to apply for stipends of at least \$5,500 to complete internships in the public policy and government arena. Institutions should also advertise external fellowships and scholarships. For instance, the Haas Center provides information on various fellowships students can apply for, including the Newman Civic Fellowship.

CHALLENGES

We have attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of effective democratic-engagement practices conducted by institutions of higher education in a moment in which universities are focusing more intentionally on the topic. While promoting these initiatives, we simultaneously recognize that there are numerous challenges that universities face in actualizing democratic engagement.

Following are themes that emerged frequently in interviews with student and university leaders. We do not think any of the challenges delineated below existentially impede an effective democratic-engagement focus but, rather, need to be taken into account as universities plan.

Ensuring Racial Equity and Anti-Racism Are Foundational

Throughout the country, institutions of higher education are discussing institutional efforts pertaining to prioritizing DEI, with many universities formulating specific strategic plans on the topic. These DEI efforts cannot be separate from the work

articulated in this report. It is crucial that in any democratic-engagement work, DEI is foundational, rather than ornamental, to plans around democratic-engagement. Efforts to educate and engage students in democratic issues must place equity at the forefront, recognizing that democracy in this country has always been inequitable and has always oppressed certain populations. Efforts to engage more young people in the democratic process must both recognize this reality and seek to correct it.

Articulating Concrete Definitions

It is, of course, difficult to concretely define democratic engagement. Some universities interchangeably use terms such as civic engagement, community engagement, and political engagement. The lack of congruence on terms or definition can make it difficult to determine which activities to prioritize. While no correct definition exists, institutions should aim to use more precise language when defining the scope of their efforts.



Approaching Democratic Engagement More Holistically

In recent years, many institutions have approached democratic engagement through the premise of expanding and improving voter turnout. This is important but insufficient. Democratic engagement must be more holistic and comprehensive than just voting. Comprehensive democratic engagement, as discussed through these best practices, involves setting a broader culture of democratic engagement, integrating coursework, and ensuring that any initiatives are not overly geared toward humanities students more so than students in other disciplines (such as STEM).

Incentivizing Faculty Participation

Many students and administrators in this study noted an opportunity to improve the comfort level and ability for faculty to engage with democratic content in their courses and at their institutions. Multiple interviewees discussed that faculty members were often hesitant to discuss democratic engagement due to a fear of slipping into controversial or partisan rhetoric. Additionally, some faculty members inherently see their role as limited to their specific subject expertise and therefore do not feel they have the ability or opportunity to go deep into democratic engagement. Other faculty members noted a desire to engage in issues of democracy but do not feel as though they are trained or have the necessary resources to facilitate these conversations with their students. There is an opportunity to ensure that faculty are equipped and comfortable leading democratic-engagement conversations in their classrooms.

Promoting Accessibility

Many students interviewed expressed a frustration in experiencing specific barriers in access to voting, specifically voicing a desire for their universities to do a better job of providing transportation to polling centers, especially when they are not on campus. Additionally, due to political gerrymandering, some campuses, such as CAU, have multiple polling locations depending on where students are living. This is not only complicated and confusing, but it also means that some students may have to travel even further to cast their votes.

Voting laws in certain states can also create additional barriers for students. Texas requires voters to both register and request mail ballots via paper rather than online. This proved especially difficult during a pandemic. Some states like Florida also have strict laws governing the voter registration process. Institutions should be responsible for familiarizing themselves with the voting laws of their particular state, educating students about such laws, and assisting students in any way possible to mitigate challenges to casting a vote.



Providing Sufficient Funding and Personnel

There was a general consensus that democratic-engagement initiatives do not receive adequate funding.

Faculty members often have to take on the burden of orchestrating democratic-engagement plans and work at institutions that lack a centralized body dedicated to this realm. These faculty cannot be expected to serve in this additional role in a sustainable way. While there are obvious financial disparities among various universities, each institution should think about how to prioritize funding democratic-engagement work within reason. Ideally, foundations and governmental support would augment these efforts.

Promoting Local Political Engagement

Many students feel as though the democratic-engagement efforts at their institutions are not focused enough on local democratic engagement. According to the New York Times, only 27% of voters vote in their typical municipal election. This percentage is even lower on campuses.

Interviewees expressed an opinion that students at their institutions were unaware about or apathetic toward local elections. In general, institutions focus their efforts on mobilizing students for larger scale elections, and local elections are not afforded the same attention. Institutions have a responsibility to encourage students to first seek out information and then participate in their local elections (regardless of whether or not students are registered to vote in the same state as their campus).

Students cited a shortage of nonpartisan resources on candidates, positions, and/or referenda as a barrier to participation in local elections. Many interviewees also noted that because some students do not have a baseline understanding of local politics and important actors, they often do not understand the power of their vote to effect change locally. Many students alter their voter registration status to the state of their institution, especially in swing states, to vote in presidential or midterm elections.

In addition to encouraging participation in municipal elections and working to provide students with reliable and nonpartisan resources, institutions have an opportunity to facilitate dialogue with relevant local actors. The fear of partisanship often hinders relationship building between students and local politicians. There are also instances in which local representatives' values do not align with those of the institution—institutions must then weigh if it is worth attempting to dialogue with these individuals, running the risk of clashing values.

Representatives who are not motivated to engage with students (especially when the majority of the student body does not share their core political beliefs) is a challenge to overcome when foraging these relationships. Interaction with community decision makers is a critical component of democratic engagement and is therefore worth attempting to foster despite the aforementioned hurdles.

Developing Responsible Local Democratic Engagement

Students interested in engaging with the local community often enter their institutions with a strong passion and desire to immerse themselves immediately and problem solve.

Despite this idealism, myriad issues exist with students jumping right into community projects or work. Students often lack substantial knowledge about the local context and its history. Additionally, students may not be aware of or engage with community activities already occurring.

Community members and organizations are best positioned to dictate the agenda and are obviously the most aware of specific local context. Therefore, student engagement should be based on the desires and needs of the community rather than a student's own ideas on what would be best. Institutions should ensure that students are educated on their local context.

Additionally, institutions can consider initiating a dialogue on characteristics of responsible advocacy with incoming students. The Swearer Center at Brown University, for example, hosts a workshop entitled "Providence is Not Your Playground" that both introduces students to the Providence context and causes students to reflect on how they can engage in a productive and conscientious manner.



Addressing Disconnect Between Administration, Faculty, and Students

Various students expressed their frustration in terms of feeling disconnected from administrators and faculty in regard to democratic engagement on campus. A common theme was students feeling unaware or uninformed of all the relevant programming offered by their institutions. Many also felt discouraged by the lack of clear channels of communication and an unclear chain of command. For instance, when trying to implement a larger democratic-engagement initiative, students are often passed around from administrator to administrator without any resolution.

This disconnect creates a barrier to students' ability to enact change and leads to wider negative ramifications on the institution's overall democratic culture. Decision-making at institutions can, in some sense, mimic a democracy. Student voices should be valued, and students should be part of the institution's influential decision-making bodies. It is hypocritical for an institution to preach democratic engagement to students while not embracing democratic values itself.



Simplifying a Crowded External Landscape

A considerable number of organizations work with campuses to improve democratic participation. Each of these organizations has slightly different focuses and approaches to their work, but they often share similar goals. These organizations can and must work to improve their communication with one another to avoid duplicative efforts and ensure that each of them is adding value to the space. Improved coordination would enable organizations to learn from one another as well.

While it is encouraging to see the proliferation of organizations in this space, the density of actors can often create confusion for institutions of higher education.

Many organizations are proactive and do outreach to institutions, offering partnerships and resources. It is difficult for institutions, especially those new to the democratic-engagement space, to decide with whom to partner. The difficulties and inefficiencies are amplified when multiple organizations are operating within the same institution. For instance, a few students interviewed noted that the organizations their institution was working with all had different voter registration platforms. This led to multiple voter registration links being promoted throughout campus, which not only confused students but also impeded efficient data collection.

Collaboration and coordination can mitigate confusion and inefficiency and enable institutions to benefit from each organization's unique strength. External organizations collaborating with institutions also have a responsibility to bring students together from the campuses they partner with; organizations such as the Campus Vote Project are developing channels of communication, such as the Student Voting Network, to connect students working in democratic engagement. These connections will increase practice sharing—facilitating relationships is more productive than pitting campuses against one another.

Each organization can and should hold a particular focus, and it is critical to capitalize on that—identifying the differences will reduce duplicate efforts.

Overall, it is difficult for an institution's democratic-engagement initiatives to lack centralization, which can occur when multiple external actors are operating on campus. This system has potential to work, but in order for that to happen, all key stakeholders must be aware of the complete picture and scope of efforts at all times. Conducting check-ins with all fellows and supervisors from the organizations along with any other groups or individuals spearheading democratic-engagement efforts on campus will facilitate communication and improve coordination. These check-ins can be formalized by the establishment of an ongoing democratic-engagement coalition.

Addressing Barriers to Entry in the Democratic-Engagement Sphere

It is difficult to enter the democratic-engagement space as a student or administrator new to the work. As mentioned above, there are a host of organizations and programs dedicated to this work. It can often feel very overwhelming. Despite many institutions having some form of democratic-engagement initiatives, there is an overall lack of information sharing of best practices. There is no concrete plan or guidebook to get started that fits every institution's needs. New members to this space may feel disconnected from other people doing the work and presume they have a significant amount of catching up and understanding to acquire before being able to participate in conversations. It is critical that experienced members in this space do not speak condescendingly or patronize those embarking on democratic-engagement work; they should instead be encouraging and serve as resources, providing the support they have the capacity to offer.

Broadening the Focus on American Democracy

As mentioned above, democratic-engagement work is often centered around voting. However, there are populations of students at all of these institutions who are not eligible to vote. Many students we spoke to felt as though their institutions were not doing enough to engage this particular population. It is critical that institutions do not neglect these students in their democratic-engagement initiatives and strategy.

Some students also felt as though their institutions were implicitly (or explicitly) promoting and glorifying an American conception of democracy. There are many solutions to include populations who cannot vote in an institution's democratic-engagement efforts; obviously, for this to happen, democratic engagement must be viewed more broadly than electoral participation. Institutions can encourage students to engage responsibly in their local communities.

They can also emphasize that democratic engagement entails participation in any decision-making body and encourage students to seek out these opportunities. Students can also take part in advocacy campaigns to expand voting rights to populations like "Dreamers" (students affected by the never-passed proposals in Congress called the DREAM Act). Institutions can also create opportunities to share information about international elections and democracy abroad.



There are various institutions that offer comparative democracy courses for instance; this education also combats the traditional emphasis and praise of American democracy.

Challenges Specific to Certain Institution Types

We encountered numerous challenges endemic to specific university systems. This included:

- **Multi-campus systems:** Within a multi-campus system, smaller institutions rely on larger entities for funding, meaning the larger institutions can oversee operations. Smaller institutions in these systems thus have less agency and are slower to act because they need approval from the larger institution. This is particularly difficult in the democratic-engagement space in which actors constantly make quick decisions and adjustments to be effective.
- **Exploitation of Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs):** Students at certain MSIs, a category inclusive of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), expressed their concerns of external organizations not engaging with them in a productive way. They noted that, in the past, certain initiatives and organizations have worked with them just to be able to say they are “diverse,” but these organizations do not help in a meaningful way or stay long enough to enact sustainable change.
- **Urban-rural divide:** A group of students, consisting in large part of Virginia community college students, are compiling information pertaining to the disparities within the community college system for democratic-engagement opportunities. They have noted a stark difference in resources between predominantly rural campuses and campuses in more urban environments. Campuses in rural environments are much more limited in their ability to access stable internet connection, which is a vital component to almost all democratic-engagement efforts. In addition, students leading this project have highlighted the difficulties in creating opportunities for community engagement as well as dialogue and relationship building with local actors in the rural, as opposed to urban, context.
- **Transient populations:** Some community college students we spoke to described the difficulties of engaging a transient student population. Because students are constantly coming in and out of the system, it is difficult to sustain any democratic-engagement initiatives. Students also noted that it is sometimes difficult to reach their peers when there is not much of an on-campus community culture, especially when a large percentage of the population do not live on campus and are part-time employees elsewhere. Ultimately, it is a challenge catering to diverse schedules and developing sustainable infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

This report comes out at a moment in time in which the idea of democracy legitimately seems to be at existential risk. Much work must be done to revitalize the concept in the United States and across the world. Universities, because of their role in educating young people and as institutions that cultivate and aggregate knowledge, can play a pivotal role in this democratic revival.

This report is meant to be helpful to that purpose, providing support to universities and institutions of higher education as they seek to effectively promote democratic engagement. It is not comprehensive—there are many universities and students we were not able to meet. We're hopeful, however, that this report shares innovative practices so that each campus can improve and use the activities of other campuses as leverage for their own efforts. We are also hopeful that this report is a good starting point for institutions, students, and administrators who want to start doing this critical work.

We will be exploring how to continue this work—through potentially opening up channels of communications among institutions and holding future conversations. The work to improve democratic engagement in universities will always be a work in progress, and we are excited to be a part of that progress.



INTERVIEWS

Interview with Patrick Mehler

Date: 1/20/21

Position: President of Cornell Votes

Interview with Zachary Kimmel

Date: 1/21/21

Position: Founder and Former President of Columbia Votes

Interview with Kevin Ballen

Date: 1/22/21

Position: Former President of the Harvard Votes Challenge

Interview with Campbell Streator

Date: 1/27/21

Position: President of Every Vote Counts National

Interview with Morgan Smith

Date: 1/29/21

Position: Leader of Princeton Vote 100

Interview with Megha Nanaki Parwani

Date: 2/1/21

Position: '22 Stanford University, Civic Engagement Coordinator at the Haas Center for Public Service.

Interview with Lucia Hornbacher

Date: 2/5/21

Position: External Partnerships Coordinator for Penn Leads the Vote

Interview with Sean Casey

Date: 2/7/21

Position: Co-Director of StanfordVotes

Interview with Katya Ehresman

Date: 2/8/21

Position: Leader of UT Austin Votes, Campus Vote Project Fellow, Student Voting Network Leader

Interview with Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, Stephanie King, and Catherine Fish

Date: 2/10/21

Positions: Executive Director, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Managing Director at ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge

Interview with Madeline Doane

Date: 2/18/21

Position: Virginia State Coordinator, Campus Vote Project

Interview with Carolina Hidalgo-McCabe

Date: 2/19/21

Position: All IN Campus Democracy Challenge Intern

Interview with Zoe Williamson

Date: 2/22/21

Position: Students Learn Students Vote Coalition

Interview with Richard (Alex) Flowers

Date: 2/25/21

Position: Campus Vote Project Fellow at Piedmont Virginia Community College

Interview with Chiara Grimes and Kayla Victor-Logie

Date: 2/28/21

Position: Campus Vote Project Fellows at Northern Virginia Community College

Interview with Katherine Marin

Date: 5/11/21

Position: Campus Vote Project Fellow at the University of Florida

Interview with Ayesha Ahsan

Date: 6/23/21

Position: Arizona State University alum who was highly involved in civic-engagement work

Interview with Alex Dennis

Date: 6/29/21

Position: Assistant Director at the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement at East Carolina University

Interview with Carah Ong Whaley

Date: 6/30/21

Associate Director of the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement

Interview with Marianne Magjuka

Date: 7/2/21

Position: Assistant Dean of Students at Wake Forest University

Interview with Christina Williams and Elisha Azize

Date: 7/21/21

Positions: Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows at Clark Atlanta University

Interview with Empress-Akira Sullivan and Mohammad-Mehdi Khan

Date: 7/26/21

Positions: Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellow at the University of Houston—Clear Lake (Sullivan); Coordinator for Community Engagement at the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership at the University of Houston—Clear Lake (Khan)

SOURCES

ⁱ A full glossary of other national democratic engagement initiatives is available online: *Decode the #StudentVote Graphics (flyer)*, Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition, no date, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1giXz4k-Y4N7RDitIS5Yag5lhbxKY564e/view>.

ⁱⁱ William Roberts, Danielle Root, and Michael Sozan, "Recruiting and Retaining Poll Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic," Center for American Progress, September 21, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2020/09/21/490586/recruiting-retaining-poll-workers-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Democracy Courses at UChicago," Chicago Center on Democracy, University of Chicago, last updated for "2020-21 Courses Related to Democracy," <https://democracy.uchicago.edu/courses/>.

^{iv} The homepage for Democratic Erosion is <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/>.

^v The Harvard Votes Challenge's "Pledge to 100%" form is available online at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdH0uPqOkkC6KUnuWY5rUXNGCz9M3JRXYgM4aTlgAMg78NdPQ/viewform>.

^{vi} "Facilitating Online Deliberative Dialogues," Campus Compact, event page for Oct. 1, 2020, event, <https://events.compact.org/dialogue20>

^{vii} "Presidential Commitment: Higher Education Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation," Initiatives, ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, <https://allinchallenge.org/presidents-commitment/>.

^{viii} The Penn Leads the Vote homepage is available at <https://www.vote.upenn.edu/>.

^{ix} The VoteRiders homepage is available at <https://www.voteriders.org/>.

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