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STRENGTHENING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

A Guide for Developing an Action Plan to Increase Civic Learning, Political Engagement, and Voting Rates Among College Students

About the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition

Colleges and universities are leaders in cultivating generations of informed, engaged citizens needed for democracy to thrive. With 20.2 million college students in the United States, institutions of higher education have a responsibility to help their students overcome the institutional and psychological obstacles that new voters often face. Recognizing the importance of getting college students more engaged in our democratic processes – as well as the need for hard data on how to do that – the Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition was formed to increase student voter engagement by building data-driven approaches. The Coalition is made up of nearly 200 nonpartisan national, state, local, and student organizations dedicated to finding and scaling data-driven approaches to improving democratic engagement among college students. It is managed by Young Invincibles, a Millennial research and advocacy organization that works to expand economic opportunity for young adults.

Throughout 2016, SLSV Coalition Partners worked with more than 168 campuses. From integration of voter registration tools to providing model campus engagement plans to offering expertise to campuses as they assess their voting rates using the National Survey of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), our partners ran a number of different programs and resources to increase campus voter engagement. Looking ahead to 2018, our strategic priorities include: building leadership and skills in the field, scaling advocacy campaigns at the federal and state levels that positively impact student registration and turnout, and actively encouraging campus administrators to publicly release their NSLVE reports and refine their action plans for the 2018 elections.

Table of Contents

Foreword

In its 2012 report, "A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future," the U.S. Department of Education's National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement called for higher education to reclaim its civic mission.

To help in this reclamation, the Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition was formed in 2015. This coalition comprises groups of nonpartisan organizations dedicated to helping college faculty, staff, and students implement data-driven strategies for increasing civic learning and democratic engagement. With the common mission of ensuring a more representative democracy, SLSV Coalition partners work in collaboration with higher education institutions to increase the number of college students participating in local, state, and federal elections.

Though the National Task Force and the SLSV Coalition believe that higher education has a responsibility to graduate civically informed and democratically active students, research shows that less than half of voting eligible college students routinely participate in federal elections. While voting is only one indicator of civic engagement, it is fundamental and measurable. The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) found that 48.3 percent of undergraduate students, at 1,023 higher education institutions, voted in the 2016 presidential elexction — 11.9 percentage points lower than the national rate among all eligible voters in that election, though 3.2 percentage points higher than in 2012.

We owe it to students, and society, to do a better job. Higher education needs to play a more active role in graduating civically informed and democratically active students — students with the knowledge, skills, and values to solve the country's most pressing problems and who understand that in order to have a strong and truly representative democracy, they need to participate.

We hope you find this guide useful and that it makes the work you do with students easier. It was developed based on best practices and informed by our collective experience in higher education and political organizing.

We look forward to your feedback and thank you for all that you do to educate the next generation of civically informed and democratically active citizens.
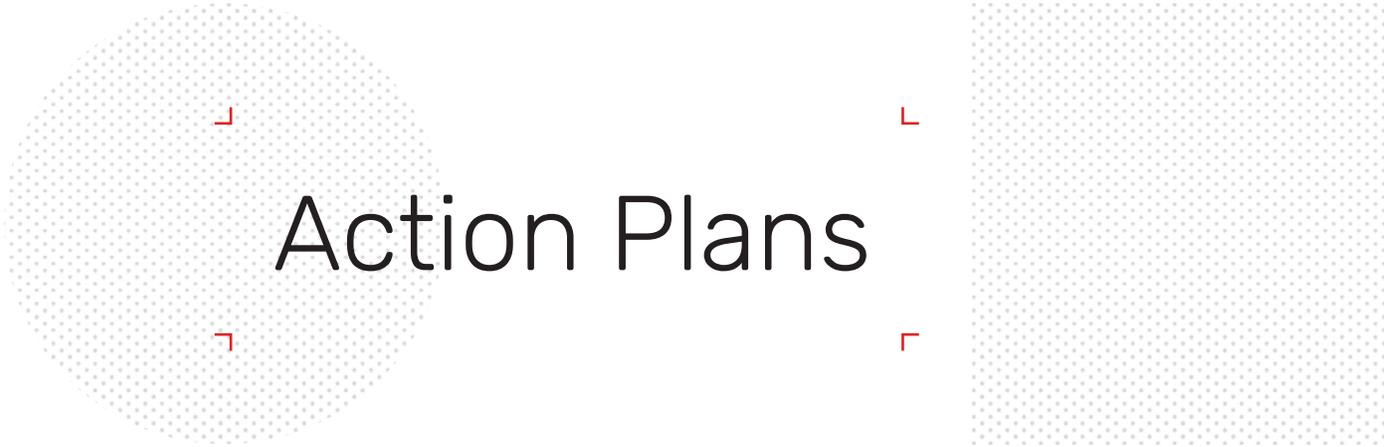
Action Plans

Introduction

This is a tool designed to help faculty, staff, and students write strong action plans to increase civic learning and democratic engagement on college and university campuses. It provides a framework for developing and documenting institutional goals and strategies. It is not meant to be prescriptive and should be adapted to your institutional context.

Completing the action planning process can help an institution assess current efforts, set goals, plan and implement activities, assess progress towards goals, and continuously work to improve civic learning and democratic engagement efforts. It is suggested that this work be collaborative and occur in a team setting. Depending on the campus, this may be accomplished in a committee, coalition, task force, or working group. The hope is that through this process, the institution will be able to garner additional support and resources, change culture, improve systems and policies, build lasting capacity, and ultimately institutionalize efforts.

It is strongly suggested that the completed action plan be shared on the institution's website, along with its National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) report. Together, these demonstrate an institution's belief in transparency and its commitment to broadening and deepening civic learning and democratic engagement.

The Action Planning Process

An action plan is a roadmap that documents specific strategies for starting new programs and initiatives, or improving existing ones. It takes goals and breaks them down into steps so that desired results can be achieved. It is a documented strategy to meet objectives, as well as to increase efficiency and accountability. Action planning is the process used to develop and document the action plan.

The following steps are a guide for carrying out the action planning process in general. These steps can be used for any initiative and should be amended to work within an institution's culture.

1
ASSIGN LEADER(S)

Action planning is a group exercise, not an individual task. For best results, choose a leader to facilitate the process. The leader may be internal, though an external facilitator can provide a neutral voice in discussions.

2
ASSEMBLE A TEAM AND DEVELOP A TIMELINE

A team helps establish a collective vision. Assemble a diverse team representing appropriate constituent groups, internal and external. Those involved should have clear expectations of their roles.

3
ASSESS CURRENT WORK AND OUTCOMES

Knowing what is already occurring, and to what extent, allows for discovering strengths and areas for improvement.

4
SET GOALS

Goal setting provides a roadmap to achieving desired results.

5

PLAN WORK

Strategically planning activities assists in accomplishing goals. Intentionally design activities to achieve goals.

6

DOCUMENT PLAN

An action plan captures the goals and activities in writing.

7

IMPLEMENT PLAN

Mobilize resources and execute actions.

8

ASSESS PROGRESS TOWARDS GOALS

A plan may take a few years to complete; therefore, it should be reviewed at least yearly to ensure that progress towards goals is being made. Use data to analyze the impact of activities and determine next steps.

9

REVIEW THE PLAN

Reviewing the plan allows for making adjustments along the way if progress is not being made towards goals. If change was successful, how can it be expanded? If change was not successful, what adjustments should be made? Revise the plan to ensure effectiveness.

10

REPEAT

Continuous improvement is a process that requires frequent review to ensure desired goals are achieved.

Guiding Principles

These principles should be kept in mind as the institution develops its action plan. A strong action plan, designed to increase civic learning and democratic engagement among college students should be:

COMPREHENSIVE

Activities should focus on local, state, and federal elections; include election and non-election related programming; and be politically neutral. Activities should focus on registering, educating, and turning out student voters.

CONTINUOUS

Activities should occur every semester or term of every year, not just during an election cycle.

INTEGRATED

Activities should be curricular and cocurricular.

INTENTIONAL

Activities and goals should be informed by data.

PERVASIVE

Activities should occur across campus and reach all students.

DEEP

Activities should not be marginal or add-ons. They should be embedded in the curriculum and co-curriculum of the campus and tied to the institution's learning outcomes.

INNOVATIVE

Activities should improve existing efforts and include new and original ideas.

Key Terms

Definitions of frequently used terms are included to provide a common understanding of terminology used within higher education and this document.

Civic learning and democratic engagement
is promoting the education of students for engaged citizenship through democratic participation in their communities, respect and appreciation of diversity, applied learning, and social responsibility.

Civic engagement
is any act intended to improve or influence a community through deliberation, collaboration, and reciprocal relationships and community-building.

Democratic participation
is civic engagement that involves democratic processes (e.g., when an organization puts a matter to a vote and there is democratic participation).

Political engagement or political participation
is civic engagement that emphasizes governmental institutions and/or power (e.g., voting in a local, state, or federal election).

Voter registration
is the process of successfully completing the application to be able to cast a ballot in an election.

Voter education
is the curricular and co-curricular activities offered to students and designed to facilitate civic learning and increase participation in elections.

Voter turnout
is the act of casting a ballot, in any manner (e.g., early, in person, absentee).

Template and Guiding Questions

This section provides a summary of the action plan. Just one to two pages in length, it should be clear, concise, and allow the reader to easily understand what the campus is doing and why. It distills the plan into just a few pages so that the reader can rapidly become acquainted with the action plan without having to read it all.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Who developed this action plan?

2. What is this action plan for and what does it seek to accomplish?

3. Where will this action plan be implemented?

4. Why was this action plan developed?

5. When does this action plan start and end?

6. How will this action plan be implemented?

> The following questions should be addressed in the executive summary.

This section describes the team that is responsible and accountable for the institution's efforts to increase civic learning and democratic engagement. Designating a leader(s) and establishing a working group that includes all relevant stakeholders increases the likelihood of success, long-term sustainability, and the institutionalization of civic learning and democratic engagement efforts on campus. Examples of stakeholders include student leaders, student affairs administrators, faculty, government relations staff, IT staff, local election officials, and off-campus, nonpartisan organizations. Including representatives from various on-campus departments, as well as off-campus organizations, ensures that efforts are collaborative, coordinated, and that a variety of perspectives are taken into consideration.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 Who (individual and/or office) is coordinating and overseeing the institution's work to increase civic learning and democratic engagement?

2 Who is chairing the working group?

3 What is the role of the working group?

4 How will working group members be selected?

5 What are working group members' responsibilities?

6 How is the working group inclusive of different campus and community stakeholders?

7 Who are the working group members and how are they involved?

a What academic departments and which faculty within academic affairs are involved?

b What units within student affairs are involved and which administrators are involved?

c Which students and student organizations are involved?

d What community and/or national (private, nonprofit, government) organizations are involved?

e Is the working group coordinating with the local election office? If so, with whom and how?

8 How often will the working group meet?

III Commitment

This section describes how the institution demonstrates its commitment to increasing civic learning and democratic engagement. A public institutional commitment is critical for improvement across campus; it signals to all stakeholders that these efforts are significant and long-term. Before action planning begins, it is important for the working group to first explore the motivations for the commitment and context within which it has been made. This process includes identifying how civic learning and democratic engagement are already reflected in existing institutional documents, plans, and culture.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 How does the institution and its leadership demonstrate commitment to improving civic learning and democratic engagement? Is there an explicit, visible commitment on the part of the governing board, president/chancellor, and senior leadership?

a Is the commitment communicated within the institution? To whom, specifically, and how?

b Is the commitment communicated outside the institution (i.e., to external stakeholders and the general public)? To whom, specifically, and how?

2 Is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement a pervasive - part of institutional culture? Is it ongoing, consistent, systematic, and sustainable across programs, departments, and the entire institution? How do you know?

3 How is the institution's commitment reflected in existing statements and documents (e.g., mission statement, vision, core values, strategic plan)?

4 What are the institution's overall civic, democratic, and/or political learning outcomes? Is there a process in place to ensure that outcomes are measured and met?

5 How is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement included in the general education curriculum?

6 How is educating for civic learning and democratic engagement included in the co-curriculum?

This section describes the current campus landscape, including climate, programming, and student engagement. A self-assessment of current work and data (e.g., established learning outcomes, assessment data, curricular and cocurricular activities, resources) provides the institution with a comprehensive understanding of current efforts and student engagement with those efforts. It also provides the opportunity for the institution to evaluate those efforts and determine areas of strength and those needing improvement.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 Are civic learning and democratic engagement overall campus learning outcomes?

2 What does assessment data show about the political climate and democratic engagement on campus? How does this data compare to that of peer institutions?

ASSESSMENT DATA EXAMPLES

› **Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement**
bcsse.indiana.edu
BCSSE collects data about entering college students' high school academic and co-curricular experiences, as well as their expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during the first college year.

› **National Survey of Student Engagement**
nsse.indiana.edu
NSSE annually collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college.

› **Campus Compact Annual Membership Survey**
compact.org/initiatives/membership-survey
This annual membership survey assesses the current state of campus-based community engagement and identifies emerging trends. It remains the most comprehensive and widely distributed review of service, service learning, and community engagement in higher education.

› **Higher Education Research Institute & Cooperative Institutional Research Program**
heri.ucla.edu
CIRP is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. The CIRP longitudinal program consists of the Freshman Survey (TFS), Your First College Year (YFCY) Survey, Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE), and the College Senior Survey (CSS).

› **National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement**
idhe.tufts.edu/nslve
NSLVE offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates and, for interested campuses, a closer examination of their campus climate for political learning and engagement, as well as correlations between specific student learning experiences and voting.

› **Community College Survey of Student Engagement**
ccsse.org
CCSSE provides information on student engagement. The survey asks questions that assess institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention.

3 How is civic learning and democratic engagement present in the curriculum?

a In which courses is it taught?

b In which courses is it listed as a learning outcome?

4 How is civic learning and democratic engagement present in the co-curriculum?

a In which departments is this included?

b What initiatives, programs, and activities focus on this?

5 What internal barriers (e.g., limited funding, staff resistence, lack of learship) prevent the institution from being successful?

6 What external barriers (e.g., election laws, voter ID laws, lack of proximity to polling location) prevent the institution from being successful?

7 What resources are available to help the institution be successful?

8 What additional resources are needed to help the institution be successful?

V	Goals

This section describes what the institution hopes to achieve in the long-term and the short-term. Long-term goals help the institution achieve its vision – what impact does the institution seek to have on campus? Long-term goals should be tied to the institution's mission and learning outcomes. Short-term goals break long-term goals into manageable parts. By setting goals, the institution can plan activities to achieve results and assess impact. It is suggested that prior to setting goals, there should be a clear vision of what the institution wants to accomplish and what it wants students to learn. With a clear vision, goals can be set to achieve the desired outcomes. Goals should be S.M.A.R.T – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. Goals should be concise and clearly define what will be done.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

LONG-TERM GOALS

1. What impact is desired?

2. What knowledge, skills, and capacities (learning outcomes) does the institution want students to achieve and graduate with in order to be active and informed?

3. What does the institution want to accomplish over the next 10 years?

SHORT-TERM GOALS

1. What does the institution want to accomplish in the next year or two? What needs to be accomplished in order to move towards the achievement of long-term goals?

EXAMPLES

› Increase student voting rates by 10 percentage points from 2016 by 2024.

› Add electoral engagement to "First Year 101" class syllabi in two years as a learning objective to the course.

› Incorporate civic education and democratic engagement into the general education curriculum by 2020.

EXAMPLES

› Add voter registration (local and out-of-state) information to the institution's website.

› Register 80% of incoming students to vote during orientation.

› Incorporate civic education and democratic engagement into 25% of courses.

› Institutionalize the practice of the president sending a letter to all students every semester about the importance of being civically engaged and participating in elections.

VI	Strategy

This section summarizes how the institution will work towards reaching its long-term goals and how it will achieve its short-term goals – it answers the Who? What? Where? and When? questions. The strategy is the plan to achieve goals and includes activities (tactics) that move the institution towards its goals. Documenting the work (curricular and co-curricular activities), as well as who is responsible for the work and when the work will be completed, will create a system of accountability and allow the institution to measure its progress.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is the work? What are the planned activities?

2. Who will do the work? Who is responsible for implementing each planned activity?

3. Who is the work for? Who is the audience for each activity?

4. Where will the work happen? Where will each activity occur on campus?

5. When will the work happen? When will each activity occur on campus?

6. What is the purpose of the work? Why is each activity being implemented and what is the goal for each activity?

> The strategy should include activities addressing voter registration, education, and turnout to support students at every step of the democratic process.

This section describes how the institution will report on the action planning process, share the action plan document, and share the results of implementing the action plan.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 How will the plan be shared, internally and externally? Please state where the plan will be shared.

2 Will the plan be made public? If so, how?

3 Will the data used to inform the plan be made public? If so, how?

VIII	Evaluation

This section describes how the work will be evaluated, how the institution will know if it is making progress, and when its goals have been reached. Included in this section should be what information (data) will be collected, as well as how it will be collected, analyzed, and used for improvement. Evaluating the work should be a continual process, so the action plan can be adjusted to reach the institution's goals.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of the evaluation? What does the institution want to know and be able to do with the information gathered?

2. Who is the audience for the evaluation?

3. Who will carry out the evaluation?

4. When will the evaluation be carried out and completed?

5. What information (data, evidence) must be collected and how will it be collected? What are the performance measures and indicators of success?

6. How will information (data, evidence) be analyzed?

7. How will the results of the evaluation be shared?

Acknowledgments

The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition thanks the individuals who helped develop *Strengthening American Democracy*. Their collective expertise and guidance moved an idea from a concept to a publication, and together they have made an outstanding contribution to the higher education community.

The following members of the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition, contributed to the development of this publication.

ALL IN CAMPUS DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE
allinchallenge.org

The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge believes that more young people need to participate in the electoral process. By recognizing colleges and universities for their commitment to increasing student voting rates, this national awards program encourages institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship. Hundreds of colleges and universities have joined the Challenge and have committed to making democratic participation a core value on their campuses. Together, they are cultivating generations of engaged citizens who are essential to a healthy democracy.

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PROJECT
aascu.org/programs/ADP

The American Democracy Project (ADP) is a multi-campus network focused on higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. ADP was established in 2003 through a partnership between the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and *The New York Times*. Membership is available to all AASCU institutions. The network currently consists of over 250 state colleges and universities and reaches 2.2 million undergraduate students nationwide.

CAMPUS VOTE PROJECT
campusvoteproject.org

In 2012, the Fair Elections Legal Network (FELN) launched Campus Vote Project (CVP) to expand its work around student voting issues. CVP works with universities, community colleges, faculty, students, and election officials to reduce barriers to student voting. Our goal is to help campuses institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote.

NASPA LEAD INITIATIVE
naspa.org/constituent-groups/groups/lead-initiative

The NASPA Lead Initiative on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (Lead Initiative) comprises a network of NASPA member colleges and universities committed to encouraging and highlighting the work of student affairs in making civic learning and democratic engagement a part of every student's college education.

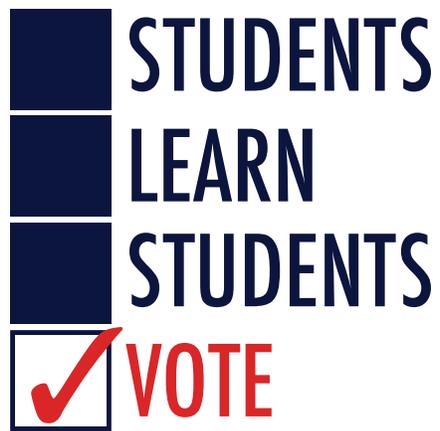### THE DEMOCRACY COMMITMENT
thedemocracycommitment.org

The Democracy Commitment (TDC) is a nonpartisan national organization dedicated to advancing civic engagement and democracy in America's Community Colleges. It strives to make democratic skills more available to all community college students who desire a voice and a seat at the table of local, state, and national discourse and action. To such end, TDC provides a platform for the development and expansion of community college programs, projects, and curricula aimed at engaging students in civic and democratic education and engagement.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES
younginvincibles.org

Young Invincibles is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to expand economic opportunity for young adults through policy analysis, consumer education, and advocacy. With offices in six major cities across the country, its research and organizing experts elevate the voices of young adults in top policy debates and provide solutions to major economic challenges for the next generation.

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