



Virginia Commonwealth University

# CAMPUS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

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2025-2027



**VCU**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This campus-wide engagement plan, which is designed to span two academic years, provides an overview of VCU's leadership and commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. Virginia Commonwealth University is proud of its designation as a Voter Friendly Campus in 2025-2026. The 2025-2027 civic engagement plan reflects a renewed commitment from VCU to strengthen both curricular and co-curricular civic engagement efforts at VCU and connect this work to our strategic goals and core learning outcomes. Faculty and staff from a number of academic and administrative units across campus including the Division of Student Affairs, Division of Community Engagement, University College, the Honors College, VCU Libraries, the Department of Political Science and the VCU Votes Advisory Council and the VCU Votes Student Coalition have contributed to the development of this plan. This document directly connects to the University's Quest 2028 strategic goals and the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia's (SCHEV) Policy on Student Learning Assessment and Quality in Undergraduate Education competencies which includes Civic Engagement. Specifically, our goals are to: 1) Create a new university-level Civic Engagement Committee 2) Develop infrastructure to strengthen civic engagement and 3) To promote dialogue across differences among the VCU community. Pursuing these goals will help lay the groundwork for sustaining and expanding civic engagement initiatives at VCU.



# DEFINING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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In 2017 the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) adopted a *Policy on Student Learning Outcome and Quality in Undergraduate Education*. “This policy identifies critical competencies for student success and establishes guidelines for the assessment of student achievement” specifically in four core learning outcomes including: Civic engagement, Critical thinking, Quantitative reasoning, and Written communication. In the policy, SCHEV defines Civic Engagement as “an array of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors that in combination allow individuals to contribute to the civic life of their communities. It may include, among other things, exploration of one’s role and responsibilities in society; knowledge of and ability to engage with political systems and processes; and/or course-based or extra-curricular efforts to identify and address issues of public or community concern.” In light of this SCHEV policy VCU has currently defined Civic Engagement as: “Civic engagement involves developing the skills for meaningful dialogue and critical inquiry with those holding differing viewpoints, rooted in mutual respect. It emphasizes active listening—genuinely understanding others’ perspectives—and inquisitive questioning to explore underlying ideas. This process encourages personal growth and a collaborative exploration of complex issues, fostering shared understanding through critical reflection without the need for consensus” (Provost’s Office, fall 2024). These two definitions form a foundation for the practice of civic engagement at VCU.

One dimension of civic engagement includes voter registration and voting rates. Over the last decade, VCU has seen steady gains in registration and voting rates. VCU voter registration rate was 80% in 2022 down from 84% in 2018, but still up from 71% in 2014. VCU’s 2022 voting rate of 34% was slightly higher than the national average of 31%. VCU saw an increase in the voter participation rates of students across myriad demographic factors between 2016 and 2020, including a 15% increase for undergraduate students, 10% increase for graduate students, a 16% increase among first generation students as well as increases and turnout among both full-time and part-time students. We are committed to increasing voting rates to pre-COVID levels through the work of this Civic Engagement Plan.

VCU’s strong culture of civic engagement is backed by our institution’s strategic plan, Quest 2028, as well as the President and Provost’s directives on transformative learning. Several units directly support the work of civic engagement on campus, including but not limited to: the Provost’s Office, the Division of Community Engagement, the Division of Student Affairs, The Honors College, and the Department of Political Science. In addition, interested faculty, staff, and students have served on the Votes Advisory Council, which is an informal standing committee that is committed to furthering civic learning and democratic engagement work at VCU. The VCU Votes Student Coalition is a sponsored student organization that is supported by the Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning (OSLEL) who leads co-curricular voter engagement initiatives.

# PURPOSE AND LEADERSHIP

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this plan is to guide VCU's efforts to increase civic learning and democratic engagement in the upcoming 2025-2026 and 2026-2027 academic years. In addition, this plan articulates a vision to support the advancement of civic engagement as an institution. This plan includes an outline of the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholder units, aligning this effort with other institutional priorities such as Every Ram's a Researcher, promoting the University's commitment to transformative learning, and addressing critical needs for the resources needed to advance this work. This plan directly supports both Student Success and Thriving Communities goals outlined in Quest 2028, and the university's Carnegie Community Engaged Classification renewal effort.

## EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

VCU's collaborative approach to the coordination of Civic Engagement is represented by the cross-section of faculty, staff, and students who are directly contributing to advance this work at VCU. The following lists represent some of the offices, units, and councils that currently support the work of civic engagement at VCU.



# PURPOSE AND LEADERSHIP

CONTINUED

## ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Name	Role	Representing
Andrew Arroyo	Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs & Associate Vice Provost for Academic Programs	Provost's Office
Katrice Hawthorne	Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness	Provost's Office
Stephanie Cai	Undergraduate Assessment Coordinator	Provost's Office
Shanza Isom	Undergraduate Assessment Coordinator	Provost's Office
Jacqueline Smith-Mason	Sr. Associate Dean Director of Academic & Faculty Affairs	Provost's Office
Amanda Wintersieck	Associate Professor, Director, The Institute	Provost's Office

## GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Name	Role	Representing
Alexis Ehrhardt	Vice President for Government Relations	Office of the President
Verenda Cobbs	Senior Manager for Civic Innovation & Partnership	Government Relations
Vacant	Senior Director for State Government Relations	Government Relations

## DIVISION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Name	Role	Representing
Maghboeba Mosavel	Vice Provost for Community Partnerships	Division of Community Engagement
Verenda Cobbs	Senior Manager for Civic Innovation & Partnership	Government Relations
Shari Garmise	Executive Director for Collective Urban and Regional Impact	Division of Community Engagement

# PURPOSE AND LEADERSHIP

CONTINUED

## DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Name	Role	Representing
Aaron Hart	Vice President for Student Affairs	Division of Student Affairs
Jimmie Gahagan	Associate Vice President for Transformative Student Experiences	Division of Student Affairs
Rebecca Halligan	Director	Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning (OSLEL)
Kelsey Jones	Assistant Director for Civic and Community Engagement	Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning (OSLEL)

## VCU VOTES ADVISORY COUNCIL 2024-25

Jihad Aziz, Student Affairs	Rebecca Halligan, Student Affairs	Allie Reckendorf, Political Science
Brooke Berry, Development & Alumni Relations	Kaylynn Hill, Development & Alumni Relations	Jacqueline Smith-Mason, Honors College
Lauren Braun, SEMSS	Kenzel Hill, Student Affairs	Amanda Wintersieck, Political Science
Verenda Cobbs, Community Engagement	Shanza Isom, Provost's Office	Anne Weakley, Focused Inquiry
Lily Cox-Richard, School of the Arts	Kelsey Jones, Student Affairs	Gabe Willis, Student Affairs
Jimmie Gahagan, Student Affairs	Garrett Knudson, Athletics	
Laura Gariepy, VCU Libraries	JoAnna Raucci, Student Affairs	



# VCU VOTES STUDENT COALITION

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The Division of Student Affairs capitalized on the grassroots efforts of active student organizers to work towards a shared vision. Formed in 2019, the VCU Votes Student Coalition is now a sponsored student organization committed to creating a collaborative, inclusive, and engaged community on and off-campus. The VCU Votes Student Coalition is dedicated to breaking down barriers and increasing student awareness through non-partisan civic learning and democratic engagement work. The coalition works with academic departments, student organizations, and faculty members to reach as many students as possible. One of their strengths is the number of partners within and the resources that each partner provides. Membership in the Coalition typically includes student leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds who are supported by organizations like the: Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Vote Project, Campus Election Engagement Project, Campus Compact, and NextGen.

Although the many VCU employees and students referred to in this section have made significant contributions to civic engagement at VCU, we propose formalizing a committee with a clear charge to further extend this work. This proposal will be detailed more fully throughout this proposal.



# COMMITMENT AND FUTURE DIRECTION

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## **Our commitment exists at the highest levels of the University.**

A strong commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement exists at the highest level VCU's mission down to the implementation level of key institutional initiatives. For example, VCU's mission as articulated in its current strategic plan, [Quest 2028](#), articulates a student success goal in which "all students engage in inquiry, discovery, innovation, experiential learning, civic engagement and creative expression to prepare them for the future of work." In addition, the university's goal of Thriving Communities includes "Actively seek community partnerships and opportunities to elevate awareness and collaborative action between VCU and communities." VCU is also recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as a Research 1 institution that has also received its [Community Engaged Classification](#) which it reapplied for in the spring 2025.

This recognition represents the depth and comprehensiveness of our commitment to civic and community engagement. In the summer of 2023 the Provost launched a strategic initiative to reposition VCU academic offerings to embrace its future as a premier urban research university. One of the final recommendations coming from this process was to "build on VCU Community Engagement Work." This emphasis will strategically guide the university in the coming years and includes:

- enhancing VCU's community impact
- attracting students and faculty members to projects that deliver impact beyond our campuses
- re-earning the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification in 2025.

The work of civic engagement strategically supports these goals.

Civic engagement also shows up in the classroom. Although there is not a required course that embeds civic engagement in VCU's curriculum. Service-learning courses and courses that emphasize civic engagement are prevalent in the curriculum. Another key institutional initiative, VCU REAL, has also built civic engagement into its priorities for making high-impact experiential education a defining characteristic of a VCU education. In addition, the Division of Student Affairs strategic goals emphasize Transformative Student Experiences which incorporates a holistic approach to help students integrate their learning within and beyond the classroom experiences. The Division's Strategic goals for 2025-2026 advocate for "establishing a culture of civic responsibility" and specifically to "enhance civic engagement and community involvement by providing educational workshops, expanding initiatives that promote dialogue across difference, and organizing and expanding community service events." All of these connections provide evidence that civic engagement is a part of the fabric of the university and not simply an episodic activity.

# COMMITMENT

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## Inspire student leaders through transformative learning

Throughout the academic year, student leaders in the VCU Votes Student Coalition and other registered student organizations hold activities and events that promote student involvement, advocacy, and education through civic learning and democratic engagement work. The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning has been able to recognize the VCU Votes Student Coalition as a sponsored student organization for the 2025-2026 academic year. This moves the Coalition from an informal connection through the VCU Votes Advisory Council to recognize the Coalition in a similar way to how the Student Government Association, Activities Programming Board, and the Fraternity and Sorority Life Councils and Sport Club Councils operate. The Coalition offers a wide variety of events that include diverse perspectives allowing for every voice to be heard. The organization provides students with nonpartisan election information to make sure that students have as much information as possible to make an informed decision regarding local, state, and national elections. By providing students volunteer opportunities, internships, and fellowships that revolve around civic engagement the VCU Votes Student Coalition makes sure that student voices are heard throughout every step and action they do and take. The organization promotes community outreach on and off-campus by staying active in local politics and taking full advantage of the proximity of our state's capital. The sheer number of grassroots organizations and student leaders prevalent creates a pervasive culture surrounding civic learning and democratic engagement. The Student Coalition's focus both on specific issues that affect us all and the ways we can create impact through civic engagement and our democratic processes. We hope by being actively involved with our VCU community we can create a more informed, involved, and empowered student body.



# STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

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As mentioned earlier, VCU defines Civic Engagement as “developing the skills for meaningful dialogue and critical inquiry with those holding differing viewpoints, rooted in mutual respect. It emphasizes active listening—genuinely understanding others’ perspectives—and inquisitive questioning to explore underlying ideas. This process encourages personal growth and a collaborative exploration of complex issues, fostering shared understanding through critical reflection without the need for consensus.” VCU has operationalized this definition in three learning outcomes which are:

1. Mutual Respect and Curiosity in Civic Dialogue - Students will demonstrate mutual respect and curiosity in civic conversations, recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives when engaging in civic discourse.
2. Listening Rather than Responding - Students will demonstrate active listening skills during civic discussions, focusing on understanding rather than immediately responding to differing viewpoints.
3. Dialogue for complex social issues - Students will demonstrate the ability to engage in evidence-based dialogue on complex social, political, or civic issues, critically analyzing differing perspectives.

These outcomes form the foundation of VCU’s assessment of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia’s (SCHEV) Student Learning Assessment competency for civic engagement. If this plan is approved we hope to revise and update this definition and these outcomes in the 2025-2026 academic year to better align with SCHEV and with current institutional practice. VCU reports annually on its findings to SCHEV therefore, creating a permanent Civic Engagement Committee will not only strengthen the university’s ability and alignment around these outcomes but will help coordinate our efforts between curricular and co-curricular experiences that powerfully work together to enhance student learning and success. In light of these outcomes we recommend three broad institutional goals.



# GOAL ONE

## Create A New University Level Civic Engagement Committee

### **A New Administrative Structure:**

In order to maximize opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to participate in civic engagement activities, a 2025-2026 goal is to evolve the current VCU Votes Advisory Council from a largely grassroots group of passionate university stakeholders to a university-charged committee or council. We recommend that a formal university-wide committee be established to oversee these efforts and ensure coordination between key stakeholders.

A university-level Civic Engagement Committee will also have processes and procedures to ensure its ongoing sustainability, including:

- A formal charge that has been approved by leadership in the President's Office, Academic Affairs, Division of Community Engagement, and Division of Student Affairs, the existing members of the VCU Votes Advisory Committee, and other university governance structures such as staff senate, faculty senate, Deans Council, University Council, the University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, the University Graduate Council (UGC).
- Clear accountability to specifically designated leaders, ideally with reporting lines to both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs leadership.
- Appropriate membership structure, including nominating procedures, term lengths, and established committee leadership.
- Sufficient resources to support the work of the committee, including potential course release or other mechanisms to ensure committee leadership can focus on achieving the objectives of the committee.
- Mechanisms to request funding or other resources.

Developing a more formal structure and accountability for a Civic Engagement Committee will reflect VCU's commitment to civic engagement, and enhance the group's ability to carry out the objectives of this plan. This committee will include several subcommittees within its structure to reflect the pieces of civic engagement that are most relevant and in alignment with VCU as an institution. Some initial goals of the committee would include:

- Revise VCU's current definition of Civic Engagement through a shared governance process. The definition should be consistent with (or even identical to) SCHEV's definition for civic engagement
- Coordinate university curricular and co-curricular civic engagement activities in partnership with other VCU entities or external partners.
- Assess and report on VCU's civic engagement activities annually.

### Membership:

Being a university-level committee the membership should be reflective of the work of the university. We recommend the following membership structure:

- The Committee would initially be co-chaired by the current VCU Advisory Council Leadership who would serve a two year term and after that would rotate:
  - The Associate Vice President for Transformative Student Experiences in the Division of Student Affairs
  - The Senior Associate Dean and Director of Academic and Faculty Affairs in the Honors College
- 1 representative from each academic unit on both the Monroe Park and Health Sciences campus who serves for a 2 year term
- Representatives from each of the following units:
  - Athletics
  - Division of Community Engagement
  - Division of Student Affairs
  - Government Relations
  - Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success
  - Academic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness
- Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness (or designee)
- Ex-Officio members would include
  - Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
  - Vice President for the Division of Student Affairs
  - Vice Provost for Community Engagement
  - Vice President for Government and External Relations



The Civic Engagement Committee would consist of subcommittees focused on these branches/facets of civic engagement work at Virginia Commonwealth University:

- Democratic Engagement (formerly the VCU Votes Advisory Council) - This subcommittee would come together to address these goals:
  - Increase Voter Participation and Access
  - Cultivate a Culture of Civic Learning and Dialogue
  - Build Institutional Capacity for Democratic Engagement
  - Foster Community Partnerships for Broader Impact
  - Evaluate and Report on Impact
- Community-based Civic Engagement - This subcommittee would come together with these outcomes:
  - Support and strengthen the Division of Community Engagements Community Engagement Council.
  - Strengthen Reciprocal Partnerships with Local Communities to strengthen Civic Engagement
  - Increase Institutional Participation in Community-Identified Priorities
  - Promote Civic Learning through Community Engagement
  - Advance reciprocity in Community Engagement Practices
  - Build Infrastructure for Sustainable Community Engagement
  - Monitor, Evaluate, and Share Impact
- Transformative Learning - This subcommittee would come together with these outcomes:
  - Advance Pedagogies that support civic learning and democratic participation
  - Support Faculty and Staff development in transformative Civic Pedagogy
  - Strengthen reciprocity and community impact in learning partnerships
  - Assess and communicate impact on student learning and civic growth



# GOAL TWO

## Develop Infrastructure to Strengthen Voter Engagement at VCU

Currently, civic engagement at VCU draws its historical foundation on literature such as [A Crucible Moment](#). [The Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future](#) is a 2011 report by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. The report calls for colleges and universities to take a more active role in preparing students to be informed, engaged citizens. It emphasizes that civic learning should be an essential part of every student's education, across all disciplines—not just political science or history. The Crucible Moment is instrumental in strengthening voter engagement at VCU as it identifies the tools students need in order to be civically engaged. The tools needed for students to be civically engaged consist of: civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values, and civic action which are briefly described below.

### Civic Knowledge

- Understanding history, government, laws, and current events
- Knowing how systems of power work—locally, nationally, and globally

### Civic Skills

- Critical thinking, problem-solving, and media literacy
- Communication: public speaking, writing, listening, and debating
- Organizing: how to plan, collaborate, and mobilize for action

### Civic Values & Commitment

- A sense of social responsibility and ethics
- Respect for diverse perspectives and inclusive participation
- A personal belief that your voice and actions matter

### Civic Action Experience

- Hands-on involvement: volunteering, service learning, advocacy that is non-partisan or completed in a way that ensures all sides are represented equally.
- Practicing democratic processes: voting, participating in town halls, leading initiatives
- Reflection on real-world issues and learning from lived experience

These tools help students move from just learning about democracy to actively living it—in their schools, communities, and future careers.

### **Understanding the Current Landscape of Student Voting Culture**

Virginia Commonwealth University is dedicated to empowering students to vote through campus voter registration, education, and mobilization efforts and participates in the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement \(NSLVE\)](#). Participation in NSLVE allows VCU to ascertain the culture of voting by providing information on how many students register to vote and who votes based on various demographic data, including academic major, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and education level based on undergraduate and graduate enrollment. In addition to NSLVE data, student leaders have anecdotally expressed their pride in the strong culture of student activism at VCU in support of numerous social and environmental causes. Student organizations are often campus leaders in organizing expressive activity related to their organization's mission.

VCU benefits from the contributions of Amanda Wintersieck, PhD, associate professor of political science at VCU, who also serves as the Director of the Institute at VCU. Dr. Wintersieck, a current member of the VCU Votes Advisory Council, is deeply knowledgeable about national trends in voter engagement among college students, as well as VCU specific engagement trends. Dr. Wintersieck, along with Dr. Allie Reckendorf, provided a thorough overview of this information during an April 2024 meeting of the VCU Votes Advisory Council in preparation of strategically engaging our student population for the 2024 election.

Several fields of study with the lowest voter participation rates were identified, including computer and information sciences (65%), physical sciences (65%), engineering (66%), mathematics (67%), visual and performing arts (68%) and business management and marketing (69%). These academic majors and their associated departments will be a key focus VCU Votes leaders as we seek to strategically engage voters on campus. Among our key considerations for our students this election are low turnout as a form of protest, confusion about their registration location, provisional balloting problems, that our student athletes do not get the day off, and our many first generation and low-income students, which have historically had disproportionately lower voter turnout rates.

### **Develop a more robust infrastructure to strengthen voter engagement**

From 2025-2027, VCU will work to strengthen voter engagement utilizing several key strategies including: 1) a communications strategy; 2) Creating awards; 3) is working towards increasing voter engagement in both the curriculum and co-curriculum its civic engagement efforts alongside the strategic plan for the institution.

(1) Communications Strategy - Specifically, the Civic Engagement Committee will develop a communications strategy to inform the university community of the VCU Votes Student Coalition's purpose and how it supports the mission, vision and values of the university. This communications strategy will focus on building stronger relationships with campus partners. For example, VCU Votes in all its facets must continue to cultivate a relationship with its Enterprise Marketing and Communications to publicize stories about its work, so there will be increased visibility of civic engagement programs and education about voter registration, absentee voting, voter identification requirements and when and where to cast a ballot. Similarly, developing relationships with other campus partners, such as Orientation and Residential Life and Housing, and other departments that fall under Strategic Enrollment Management and the Division of Student Affairs will be critical. Similarly, positive change cannot take place without faculty involvement. This change could entail developing specific courses or simply including important dates about voting in their syllabi, such as the deadlines for voter registration and absentee voting. The vision is to create a culture of voting and civic engagement more broadly at VCU. Over the past several years, great strides have been made. VCU is an urban campus and served by multiple polling locations. Therefore, the volume of voting precincts connected to the campus can be a barrier to voting for students. Ultimately, a polling location was established on campus to serve specific residence halls and the university provides transportation to other polling locations that serve other residence halls and a plethora of off-campus housing where numerous VCU students reside. Although these efforts have a

tremendous impact on reducing barriers and galvanizing students to vote in elections, other initiatives can help to cement advancing and sustaining a strong culture of civic engagement at VCU. Therefore, the most significant long term goal is to develop an infrastructure to validate and support VCU Votes as an overarching term for civic engagement efforts focused on voter engagement at VCU.

(2) Awards - Promoting the creation of awards to recognize faculty, staff, and students for their efforts in advancing civic engagement could be a meaningful way for VCU to demonstrate its commitment towards furthering civic education. Similarly, actively incorporating civic learning experiences in teaching, research, or service could be considered as a part of the university promotion and tenure criteria. For instance, where might funding come from to support awards and other forms of recognition or guidance on how to approach conversations with university leadership about integrating civic learning into faculty responsibilities. VCU has been awarded for its civic engagement efforts through being named a 2025-2026 Voter Friendly Campus Designation. One of the co-executive directors of VCU Votes Student Coalition, Merilyn Arikkat, was also recently awarded the ALL IN! Voting Honor Roll distinction for her work with voter education and civic engagement work at VCU.

(3) Strengthening voter engagement throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum Virginia Commonwealth University promotes democratic engagement and civic learning in the curriculum in several ways. As noted in the commitment section, the VCU REAL initiative prioritizes civic engagement and encourages faculty to consider this when designing courses. A variety of core and elective classes across the university are designated as REAL: Civic Learning/Engagement. In the spring 2024, 3,374 students participated in a course that embedded Civic Learning and Engagement. Examples of courses in 2023-2024 include the VCU Votes course taught in the Department of Political Science and VCU Honors College; Humans of RVA taught in the Honors College; Writing for Social Change taught in the Department of English; and Human Trafficking taught in the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. The Relevant, Experiential, and Applied Learning (REAL) initiative at VCU promotes opportunities for students to engage in a diverse array of high impact practices, including service-learning, undergraduate research, and internships. Given that civic engagement cuts across many disciplines, numerous experiential learning opportunities could be designed with voter engagement as a core competency. Therefore, a natural next step would be to create a pathway within Transformative Learning at VCU for civic engagement. In addition to creating this pathway, VCU Votes could support the REAL initiative by providing resources and training to help faculty design experiential learning opportunities and assist students with identifying courses with a civic engagement designation, similar to service-learning, to help fulfill the REAL graduation requirement. Virginia Commonwealth University demonstrates a commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement through a variety of co-curricular experiences on campus. The Office of Student Involvement and the Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning in the Division of Student Affairs along with other units support civic learning outcomes through programming series such as voter education, Alternative Breaks, cultural immersion programs, and large days of service. Student peer leaders facilitate a vast majority of these programs and are trained in how to promote dialogue. These peer leaders, in addition to a number

of student organization leaders, leverage their civic knowledge to thousands of students engaging in co-curricular experiences annually. A number of academic units also plan co-curricular events for the campus and local community. The VCU Votes Student Coalition in coordination with the Civic Engagement Committee will implement the following activities this year:

- Priority Initiatives:
  - Intentional tabling prior to voter registration deadlines to encourage voter registration and engagement within Virginia and out of state students registering in the state of VA
  - National Voter Registration Day - September 16, 2025
  - National Voter Education Week - October 6-10, 2025
  - Vote Early Day - October 28, 2025
  - Election Hero Day - November 3rd, 2025
  - Election Day event to encourage voter participation Tuesday November 4th, 2025

All of these efforts will support the University's application to renew our Voter Friendly Campus Designation started through a partnership between Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project and NASPA's (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) LEAD Initiative in 2016. These efforts also directly support the University's renewal of our elective classification for Community Engagement through the Carnegie Foundation.



# GOAL THREE

## Promote Dialogue Across Difference

In today's increasingly polarized political climate, one of the most important skills for college students to learn is how to listen and communicate across differences. The American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) identified one of the core learning outcomes for students as civic communication. Demonstrated at the highest level this involves a student who "tailors communication strategies to effectively express, listen, and adapt to others to establish relationships to further civic action." One of the fundamental skills in civic communication is learning to listen to one another and dialogue across differences.

In order to promote these skills, VCU has established two opportunities to promote dialogue building and facilitation to better enhance this work on our campus and to bridge voices and build community. The framework for dialogue will center around the pillars of respect, curiosity, listening to understand, and developing a shared purpose.

The first opportunity is to educate students through dialogue workshops that teach active listening, conflict resolution, and empathy-building exercises that are easily connected to their various roles as peer leaders on campus. VCU has a strong relationship with students who serve as peer leaders across campus. At VCU a peer leader is "a student who has been selected and trained to serve in a leadership role that supports student success." There are currently over 600+ students documented as peer leaders at VCU. As a part of our work with peer leaders across the Division and other key leaders such as the Student Government Association; Student Leadership Executive Board (SLEB), and other student organizations, we will begin to embed and promote two homegrown critical dialogue training models for our student leaders co-curricularly. The implementation of dialogue training will take place through the Peer Leader training modules, which are a requirement of all peer leaders to complete to receive their REAL (Relevant, Experiential, and Applied Learning) level 3 graduation requirement. Dialogue is an essential skill for students serving their peers to be able to continue to communicate effectively and support conversation and mediation through differences. The framework of the Peer Leader modules will include subject matter focused on peer leadership while also asking students to attend one of several offerings of in-person dialogue training. There may also be opportunity to build out practice labs with role-playing, reflection journaling and group debriefs using the shared framework. This would be a collaborative process with Peer Leader Initiative units to build out and implement into student peer leader training throughout the year.

The second opportunity will emphasize the practice and facilitation of dialogue at VCU. It will encompass the principles and toolkit laid out in Crucible Moment through a series titled "Crucible Conversations" that focus on creating structured environments where individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives can engage in thoughtful, respectful conversations. This program would aim to further understanding, empathy, and action within our RAMily. Through the Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning, there will be several opportunities throughout the academic year that would work to establish these conversations. "Crucible Conversations" would be a two part program working through civic skills, learning, experiences, and advocacy. All of these

# GOAL THREE

## Promote Dialogue Across Difference

would be used as a part of a students' toolkit to improve dialogue and deepen civic engagement at VCU. The format would allow students to interact through dialogue circles and will center around small group facilitated conversations, identity exploration, and reflection of assumptions and lived experiences.

The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning (OSLEL) has also purchased the Courageous Dialogue toolkit through Leadershape. Leadershape's Courageous Dialogue curriculum provides the materials and resources to facilitate 2-hour in-person programs that will help students practice the skills and principles surrounding dialogue. Participants will learn a process of engaging in open, authentic, and respectful conversations with others, will understand how to take responsibility for the dialogue and engage in the entire process, will learn techniques to practice expressing their values and in turn, and will be open to the possibility of those being changed because of interactions with members of their community. Courageous Dialogues will be promoted to campus partners with an opportunity for OSLEL professional staff to facilitate the program to their students and staff.

During the next two academic years VCU and other institutions in the Commonwealth have the opportunity to participate in celebrating the 250th anniversary of our nation in the Commonwealth known as [the VA250 project](#). This anniversary celebration will provide a unique opportunity to engage in deeper conversations around the history of democracy and specifically how Virginia helped shape the birth of our nation. The Institute will introduce Democracy in Dialogue, a deliberative dialogue initiative. Supported by a grant from the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) and in partnership with the College Debates & Discourse Alliance, this program offers structured, moderated conversations inspired by the Braver Angels model, designed to foster civil discourse, critical thinking, and collaboration across political and ideological divides. Launched in tandem with Virginia's celebration of the 250th signing of the Declaration of Independence, Democracy in Dialogue will be an official host of VA250s Public Square debates.. Each session emphasizes respectful disagreement and thoughtful engagement, providing participants with the skills and experiences needed to navigate democratic discourse. The program hosts several events each year at VCU, with 75–100 participants per session. Events include a shared meal, facilitated deliberation, and guided reflection. While specific debate topics vary this year, all focus on the theme: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."



# GOAL THREE

## Promote Dialogue Across Difference

### Specific Action Steps

The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning within the Division of Student Affairs will pilot several key initiatives related to promote constructive dialogue and civil discourse this fall:

- The Division’s Peer Leader Initiative supports over 600 students who are “selected and trained to serve in a leadership role that supports student success.” The Division will incorporate the framework of civic dialogue with peer leaders through developing and piloting a new peer leader module during the upcoming academic year.
  - Explore opportunities to incorporate as a part of their peer leader REAL level 3 certification
  - Pilot opportunities for further training through “practice labs” which can be held throughout the year in departmental peer leader meetings and/or training.
  - Create collaborative partnerships for further implementation with the New Student Orientation and Residential Life and Housing units.
- The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning will create and host 2, not-for-credit, days of dialogue that would have a digital badge associated with it and promote to:
  - First-year students during Weeks of Welcome
  - Transform and ELP Living Learning communities, The Honors College
  - Student Organization leaders of groups that promote dialogue
  - Transformative Leadership participants, graduates, and facilitators
  - Faculty and Staff within key partner units
- The Division will also explore partnerships in implementing stand alone trainings or facilitated dialogue within other units at VCU including but not limited to:
  - Faculty Affairs
  - DSA Student Employees
  - Explore opportunities to incorporate into Orientation starting in 2026
  - Other academic units
  - VCU Votes Advisory Council



# ASSESSMENT, ACCOUNTABILITY, MOVING FORWARD

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## Assessment and Accountability

In order to ensure these goals are met, assessment and accountability are critical. Creating a standing university-wide Civic Engagement Committee will ensure that all areas of university have representation. The Committee should be chaired by staff and faculty that represent units that are critical in seeing these goals accomplished such as the Division of Student Affairs and Division of Community Engagement. Also ensuring ex-officio representation from the Provost's Office will allow assessment data collected from curricular and co-curricular initiatives to be easily reported and sent to SCHEV to address VCU's compliance on an annual basis. The Division of Community Engagement is deploying [Collaboratory](#) to track and showcase the university's community engagement and public service activities. As mentioned on the division's website Collaboratory is "a one-of-a-kind software that helps institutions understand the full landscape of their engagement — the who, what, where, when, and why of activities, partnerships, and more, designed with and for their communities. Through Collaboratory, faculty and staff can strategically document, understand, and elevate their engagement work. The platform highlights interdisciplinary collaboration, community partnerships, and institutional impact, helping VCU: Align with community-identified needs, streamline data for accreditation, reporting, and funding, and demonstrate real-world impact of engagement efforts." Collaboratory was specifically developed to track two core domains of engagement: community engagement as well as civic engagement.

In addition, the Division of Student Affairs launches its service section of [RamsConnect](#) which will allow for better data reporting about the nature and types of civic engagement partnerships that are happening across the university. For these reasons we believe VCU is well positioned to quickly become a leader in the Commonwealth in promoting civic engagement among students, faculty, and staff giving us yet another reason to celebrate how we are an Uncommon university.

## Moving Forward

Our campus action plan strengthens our commitment to civic engagement through long-term goals and short-term strategies at VCU. Upon approval, our campus action plan will be made available online once a new, centralized website for civic engagement that has been identified. Additionally, all members of the current VCU Votes Council will be encouraged to share the plan with their units and divisions, focusing on how individuals can contribute to the overall action plan.

For students, the plan will be made available online for viewing. Moving into the fall semester, Student Affairs will integrate the plan into Weeks of Welcome communications, particularly to student organizations with shared mission and goals.

In evaluating our progress, the current VCU Votes Council convenes regularly allowing the group to use the action plan as a basis for discussion and success. In addition, Institutional Research has developed a dashboard to track experiential learning in the classroom, which includes civic engagement and learning. Furthermore, members of the Division of Student Affairs are in conversation about how to integrate student engagement data across units. We believe these ongoing conversations will provide the VCU Votes Council more seamless, integrated data to better evaluate our overall progress.



**VCU** Division of  
Student Affairs