



Virginia Commonwealth University

CAMPUS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

2024-2025



VCU

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PURPOSE

At Virginia Commonwealth University, we believe that civic engagement and participation in the democratic process are fundamental to the development of informed, responsible leaders. VCU's commitment to fostering a culture of democratic engagement aligns with our mission to prepare students for their future career path, community leadership journey, and pathway of growth through equipping students with skills aligned with critical thinking and public discourse. By encouraging our students to participate in the democratic process—whether through voting, civic dialogue, or community action—we empower them to critically engage with societal challenges and contribute to the well-being of their communities.

This plan seeks to strengthen VCU's infrastructure for civic engagement, broaden participation in democratic processes, and cultivate a campus environment where all students are encouraged to listen, learn, and act in ways that enhance our local and global communities.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This campus engagement plan 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 2021-2022 and 2023-24. The 2024-2025 engagement plan reflects a renewed commitment from VCU to strengthen civic engagement after a brief period of disruption to the leadership and activities of the VCU Votes Advisory Council and the VCU Votes Student Coalition. This plan reflects the civic engagement aspirations of university leadership, including a new full time staff member dedicated to civic and community engagement, and a recommitment to our work advancing democratic engagement on campus. This action plan directly connects to the University's Quest 2028 strategic goals and the Division of Student Affairs Strategic Pillar of Transformative Student Experiences. Specifically, our goals are to: 1) develop a more robust infrastructure to strengthen civic engagement at VCU and 2) promote civic engagement and dialogue across differences by partnering with the Constructive Dialogue Institute. Pursuing these goals will help lay the groundwork for sustaining and expanding civic engagement initiatives at VCU.

Over the last decade, VCU has seen steady gains in registration and voting rates. VCU voter registration rate was 89.1% in 2020, up from 84% in 2016 and 2018. VCU's 2020 voting rate was 75.2% - nearly 10% higher than the all institution 2020 voting rate of 66% - and reflecting a 13% increase from our 2016 voting rate. VCU has seen 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.

VCU's strong culture of voting is backed by our institution's strategic plan, Quest 2028, as well as a presidential directive on experiential learning, REAL (Relevant, Experiential, and Applied Learning). After a brief hiatus in 2023, the VCU Votes Advisory Council has recently reconvened with new leadership and a commitment to furthering civic learning and democratic engagement work at VCU. Additionally, the VCU Votes Student Coalition, a standing student coalition to further civic engagement, is currently recruiting for a 2024-2025 leadership board who will lead co-curricular voter engagement work on our campuses starting in the summer of 2024. Under the leadership of a new full time professional staff member in the Division of Student Affairs, the Assistant Director for Civic and Community Engagement, This plan will be implemented by members of the Council and Student Coalition to serve our two campuses, Monroe Park Campus and MCV Campus.

This plan will provide a bridge for the VCU Votes Advisory Council to research and propose a more comprehensive structure that will serve university interests moving forward. This new plan will include outlining the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholder units, aligning this effort with other institutional priorities such as Every Rams 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.

LEADERSHIP

VCU's collaborative approach to coordination stems from the VCU Votes Advisory Council, which has representation from a cross-sector of upper-level administrators, faculty across multiple disciplines including key disciplines/programs (e.g. general education, political science), directors of strategic campus programs, student affairs, student activities staff members, and living-learning program staff. As a collective working group committed to increasing civic learning and democratic engagement, each individual brings incredible talents and social networks across campus, Richmond, and the Central Virginia region. In the summer 2024, the Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning hired an Assistant Director of Civic and Community Engagement. This new staff member is responsible for supporting the VCU Votes Advisory Council, supervising the student advisory council, and helping to implement civic and voter engagement initiatives on campus.



LEADERSHIP

CONTINUED

VCU VOTES ADVISORY COUNCIL

Name	Role	Representing
Jihad Aziz	Executive Director of University Counseling Services	Division of Student Affairs
Brooke Berry	Interim Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, Inclusion & Belonging	Division of Inclusive Excellence
Lauren Braun	Director	Orientation and Transition Programs
Verenda Cobbs	Senior Manager for Civic Innovation & Partnerships	Government Relations and Division of Community Engagement
Lily Cox-Richard	Associate Professor	School of the Arts
Jimmie Gahagan (co-chair)	Associate Vice President for Transformative Student Experiences	Division of Student Affairs
Laura Gariepy	Associate Dean for Research and Learning	VCU Libraries
Rebecca Halligan	Director	Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning
Kaylynn Hill	Assistant Director of Regional Alumni Engagement	Development and Alumni Relations
Kenzel Hill	Assistant Director of Residential Life for Conduct	Residential Life and Housing
Shanza Isom	Director of Engaged Transformative Learning	Office of the Provost
Kelsey Jones	Assistant Director for Civic and Community Engagement	Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning
Garrett Knudson	Assistant Athletic Director for Student Athlete Development	Athletics
JoAnna Raucci	Assistant Director of Residential Life for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Residential Life and Housing
Allie Reckendorf	Associate Professor Associate Chair	Department of Political Science
Jacqueline Smith-Mason (co-chair)	Sr. Associate Dean Director of Academic & Faculty Affairs	Honors College
Amanda Wintersieck	Associate Professor Director, Institute for Democracy, Pluralism, and Community Empowerment	Department of Political Science
Anne Weakley	Assistant Professor Common Book Coordinator	Department of Focus Inquiry
Gabe Willis	Associate Vice President Dean of Student Advocacy	Division of Student Affairs

LEADERSHIP

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On the student leadership front, student affairs administrators have capitalized on the grassroots efforts of active student organizers to work towards a shared vision. Formed in 2019, the VCU Votes Student Coalition is 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 civic learning and democratic engagement work. The coalition works with scores of academic departments, student organizations, and faculty members to reach as many students as possible. One of our strengths is the number of partners we have within our coalition and the resources that each partner provides. Typical partners include the following organizations: Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Vote Project, Campus Election Engagement Project, Campus Compact, and NextGen. Additionally, a new Voter Registrar was appointed for the City of Richmond in May 2021, which has proven to be a positive change for VCU's voter engagement efforts. For instance, the Registrar recommends VCU Votes develop a campaign around having students check their voter registration address to reduce the number of provisional ballots cast by students.

VCU VOTES STUDENT COALITION LEADERS

Name	Role	Representing
Roqia Ali	VCU Votes Fellow	VCU Votes Student Coalition
Merilyn Arikkat	VCU Votes Fellow	VCU Votes Student Coalition
Amya Ester	Senator	Student Government Association
Jackob Kirkland	Senator	Student Government Association
Sunshine Tomlin	Senator	Student Government Association
Olivia Washington	AGF Ambassador	Andrew Goodman Foundation

COMMITMENT

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. 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: 1) enhancing VCU's community impact 2) attracting students and faculty members to projects that deliver impact beyond our campuses and 3) 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. The Division of Student Affairs strategic goals emphasize Transformative Student Experiences which incorporates a holistic approach to help students integrate their within and beyond the classroom experiences. The Division's Strategic goals for 2023-2024, advocated for "creating and implementing a Civic Engagement plan and increasing the number of leadership and civic engagement programs for VCU students." 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

CONTINUED

Voter engagement activities beyond the classroom inspire student leaders to action.

Throughout the academic year, student leaders hold activities and events that promote student involvement, advocacy, and education through civic learning and democratic engagement work. We offer a wide variety of events that include diverse perspectives allowing for every voice to be heard. We provide 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 we make sure that student voices are heard throughout every step and action we do and take. We promote community outreach on and off-campus by taking full advantage of the proximity of our state's capital. The sheer number of grassroots organizations and student leaders prevalent in our work creates a pervasive culture surrounding civic learning and democratic engagement. We 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.



LANDSCAPE

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. While activism is frequently cited as the most visible form of democratic engagement on campus, strong interest in voter mobilization leadership opportunities, such as with the Andrew Goodman Foundation and Campus Votes Project, demonstrates a broad commitment by student leaders to further encouraging a culture of voter engagement at VCU.

Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement in the 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 of 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.

Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement in the Co-Curriculum

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 Engagement 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. 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. A sample of events from the past year include:

- Celebrating National Voter Registration Day on September 19, 2023
- Get Prepared to Vote a voter preparation event hosted in October of 2023
- Civil Discourse Forum hosted by the Department of Political Science and VCU Libraries on March 13, 2024

Identified Barriers

As a large, urban university with two campuses, VCU has struggled with decentralization that naturally occurs with its size and physical structure. In particular, obtaining engagement on the MCV Campus to garner more participation from graduate and professional students has been a challenge as most efforts have focused on the undergraduate student population. Additionally, student involvement has ebbed and flowed over the years with many activities being driven by faculty and staff. Targeted efforts will be made moving forward to strategically engage the MCV Campus and professional students as well as strengthen student representation and leadership. Another challenge is ensuring that students are aware of their voter status and polling location. Increased voter education and opportunities for students to check their voter status will assist with this barrier. Arguably the biggest barrier for the work of VCU Votes is the lack of financial resources devoted to this initiative. Dedicated funds to promote student engagement will assist with opportunities to have more events, bring speakers, and incentivize participation.

NSLVE Informed Strategic Engagement

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 for Democracy, Pluralism, and Community Empowerment 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.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The State Council for Higher Education for Virginia (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; know 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.” VCU’s approach to assess civic engagement is already operationalized in VCU’s ConnectEd General Education framework which includes the following outcomes:

- Communicative Fluency
 - Choose a variety of sources of evidence appropriate to the audience and purpose; select sources after considering the importance of multiple criteria, such as relevance, currency, authority, scholarliness, and bias or point of view
- Ethical Reasoning
 - Apply beliefs and ethical perspectives
 - Demonstrate the impact of ethical decision-making on civic contexts and structures
- Global and Cultural Responsiveness and agility
 - Demonstrate understanding of relevant historical, cultural and political contexts
 - Compare and contrast practical and ideological differences among cultures
 - Show appropriate contexts and methods for suspending value judgments
 - Demonstrate capacity for empathy
 - Demonstrate sensibility to actions’ consequent reciprocal reactions
- Information Literacy
 - Effectively synthesize, apply and share information to accomplish a specific purpose
- Problem Solving
 - Define complex problems, issues or questions
 - Develop and propose multiple solutions (demonstrating intellectual risk-taking and tolerance for ambiguity)
 - Evaluate potential solutions with awareness of contradictions, competing assumptions and consideration of context

LEARNING OUTCOMES

CONTINUED

In addition, the Division of Student Affairs has created shared learning outcomes for co-curricular experiences that include:

- Cognitive Engagement
 - Assess the credibility and relevance of facts and sources when faced with a particular opinion or set of opinions.
 - Formulate an opinion, viewpoint, or decision based on a variety of credible sources.
 - Integrate prior learning (past experiences inside and outside of the classroom) with their out-of-classroom experiences (including life experiences and co-curricular experiences such as volunteering and leadership).
- Humanitarian, Civic, and Social Responsibility
 - Understand that serving one's community is essential and identify ways to actively participate in community service.
 - Recognize that one has an obligation and create ways to benefit human welfare or society through practicing active citizenship and other social responsibilities.
 - Understand the impact of their individual decisions and actions on the surrounding community and environment.
 - Recognize and uphold ethically and socially responsible behaviors aligned with VCU community standards (e.g. Code of Conduct, Honor Code).



GOAL ONE

DEVELOPMENT OF A MORE ROBUST INFRASTRUCTURE TO STRENGTHEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

To maximize the impact of civic engagement efforts at VCU, conversations around short and long-term goals for VCU Votes must occur. One of the most important goals is creating an infrastructure to support VCU Votes initiatives. Currently, the VCU Votes Advisory Council is a network of students, faculty, and staff members committed to advancing voter engagement and preparing students with knowledge and skills for active citizenship. Garnering institutional support from the highest levels of university leadership is crucial to advancing curricular and co-curricular based civic learning. The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning has hired an Assistant Director of Civic and Community Engagement. This staff member will oversee this work in the Division of Student Affairs and serve as a catalyst to advance this work in the future. However, additional staff and budget resources are needed. Below are a few examples of goals and objectives that VCU Votes will address over the next few years.

Long-term Goals

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. This will entail three major objectives: developing a communications strategy, formalizing VCU Votes as a university committee, and strengthening civic learning and democratic engagement throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum.

GOAL ONE

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Develop a Communications Strategy

In 2024-2025, the VCU Votes Advisory Council will develop a communications strategy to inform the university community of VCU Votes' purpose and how it supports the mission, vision and values of the university. Currently, the VCU Votes Council is a very committed group of faculty, staff and students representing various areas of the university, including student affairs, community engagement, honors education, and various academic departments, such as the arts and political science. However, these networks are limited in their scope, which results in the need for more robust forms of communication and branding of VCU Votes.

This communications strategy will focus on building stronger relationships with campus partners. For example, VCU Votes must continue to cultivate a relationship with its Enterprise Communications and Marketing office 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. During this year the Division of Student Affairs will assume responsibility for hosting the VCU Votes website and the new Assistant Director for Civic and Community Engagement will work with the VCU Votes Advisory Council to build out resources for the entire campus. Other ideas include creating a VCU Votes folder on the university learning management system, Canvas, to make voter information easily accessible to faculty and students. This concept would result in the placement of voter information in one central location, rather than multiple websites where faculty and students must search for information. Additionally, the communications strategy will incorporate a social media plan to help drive specific information to various audiences throughout the academic year.

Alumni Networking

The VCU Alumni Association is a stakeholder group that VCU Votes has not previously engaged. Therefore, a short-term goal is to share the purpose of VCU Votes with the Alumni Association and gather information about their interests. Many alumni members are employed by VCU or are engaged in public service through elected office or board membership with non-profit organizations. The anticipated outcome is that by creating a partnership with the Alumni Association a host of civic engagement opportunities related to internships, undergraduate research, and invited speakers to lead discussions on a host of issues could provide students with skills and knowledge to become more civically engaged as students, as well as future alumni.

Experiential Learning

Transformative Learning 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

GOAL ONE

CONTINUED

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 forthcoming REAL graduation requirement.

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. Although these are long-term goals, VCU Votes could begin to identify key stakeholders who could provide guidance on how to advance these ideas. 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. Further, are there other incentives, such as training and resources that could be made available to help faculty infuse civic learning in their teaching?

Student Learning Outcomes

As the VCU Votes Council emerged over the past few years, the initial focus was to merely bring a diverse group of campus partners together to generate ideas on how to engage students in voter registration, voter education, and active participation in the electoral process. NSLVE data shows tremendous progress has been achieved, particularly in the areas of voter registration and voting among VCU students. However, learning outcomes beyond those broad focal points are lacking and necessitate the need to establish goals around student learning outcome statements and assessment of those outcomes. Essentially, VCU Votes needs to provide clarity by answering what students should know and explore how the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) civic engagement VALUE rubric, SCHEV guidelines for Civic Engagement, and other resources could be adapted to assess student learning outcomes.

Beginning in the Fall 2024 semester, there are several short-term goals that VCU Votes can address during the next three years. First, more conversations about civic engagement being a fundamental principle of higher education. These conversations should manifest at multiple levels, such as student leadership groups and at the colleges or schools with faculty and staff. Anecdotally, we know that some faculty and staff are concerned that discussing the importance of voting with students or among themselves might be negatively perceived because of the politically charged climate locally and nationally. Second, further develop the peer-to-peer student involvement programs in Student Affairs. Third, identifying and extending an invitation to any voices not represented on the VCU Votes Advisory Council and formalizing the Council is a top priority. Lastly, continuing to cultivate connections with university leadership, including the president, provost, and the university communications team. These are incremental changes that will serve as the foundation for creating and sustaining a culture of voter registration, voter education, and active participation in the democratic process among VCU students.

GOAL ONE

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Specific Action Steps

The VCU Votes Advisory Council will coordinate the following activities this year through three working groups: the Student Coalition, Communications & Mobilization, and the University Civic Engagement Plan. Each have the following charge listed below:

- Student Coalition Work Group
 - Charge: Create and implement Voter Registration Initiatives and Programming around specific VCU needs and national days and events
 - Priority Initiatives:
 - Tabling to encourage voter registration and engagement
 - National Voter Registration Day - September 17, 2024
 - National Voter Education Week - October 7-11, 2024
 - Vote Early Day - October 29, 2024
 - Election Hero Day - November 4, 2024
 - Election Day event to encourage voter participation Tuesday November 5, 2024

- Communications/Mobilization Work Group
 - Charge: Create and maintain a shared events calendar for the fall 2024 semester
 - Priority Initiatives:
 - Create a shared events calendar for the fall 2024 semester
 - Review data and brainstorm ways to mobilize students to vote
 - Create social media and other messaging to be used as needed
 - Outreach to help students know where their polling location is located and how to update
 - Prompt DSA message to all students
 - Encourage and support a Presidential video message to students about importance voting
 - Social Media/CT/VCU News Outlets

- University Civic Engagement Plan Work Group
 - Charge: Create a university-wide civic engagement plan to be shared with Provost's Council and President's Cabinet
 - Priority Initiatives:
 - Use this current 2024-2025 Civic Engagement plan as a foundation and expand to include university wide civic engagement initiatives
 - Develop an assessment plan for Civic Engagement

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 NASPA 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 TWO

PROMOTE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCE BY PARTNERING WITH THE CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE INSTITUTE.

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.

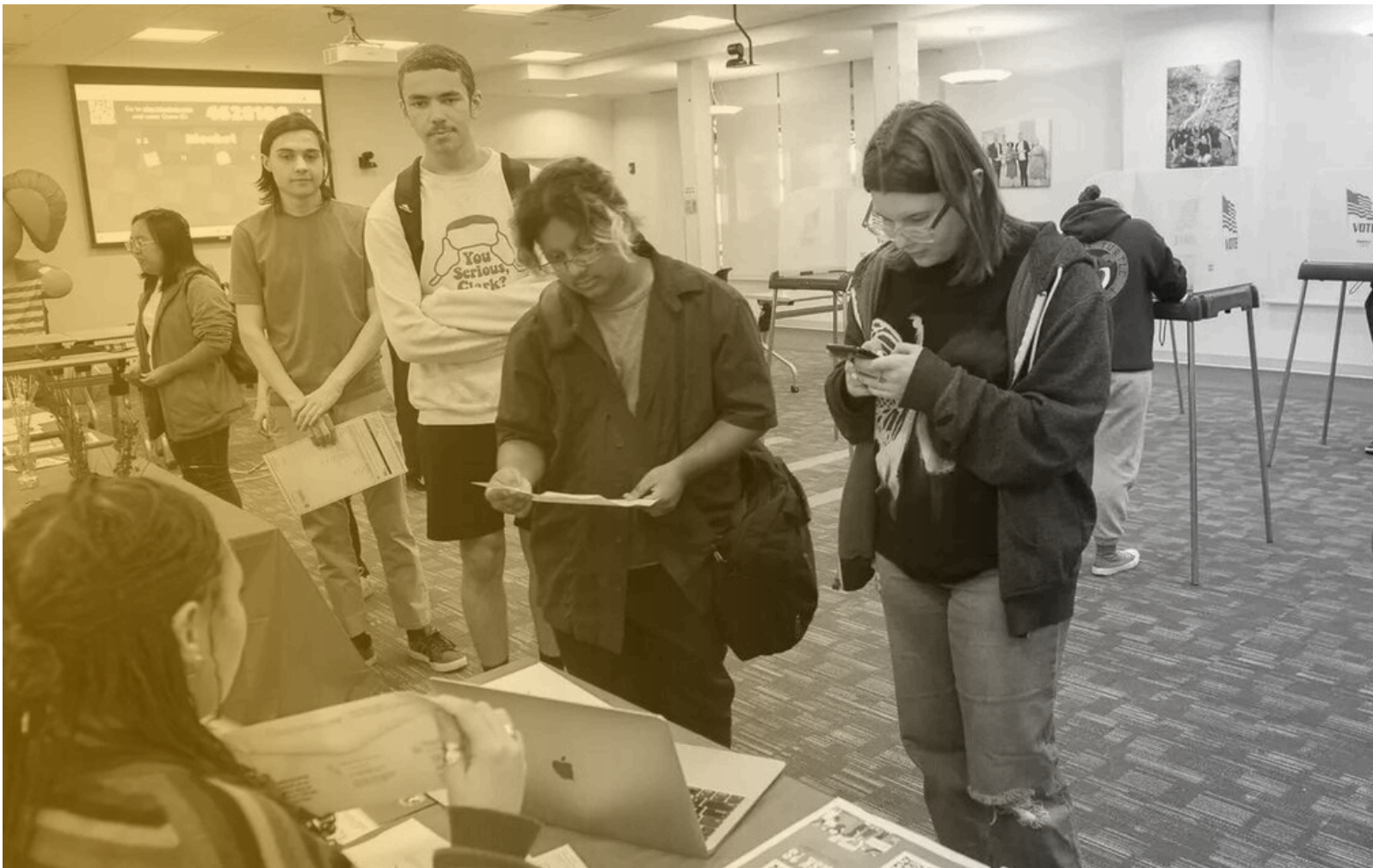
In order to promote these skills, VCU has partnered with the Constructive Dialogue Institute for the 2024-2025 academic year. The Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) is a national nonprofit that helps colleges and universities transform their campuses into learning environments that support dialogue across differences. Through a partnership with the State Council on Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), VCU will pilot the CDI online modules Perspectives with key student leaders during the 2024-2025 academic year. Our goals are 1) increase our student leaders capacity to have dialogue across differences and 2) promote students' understanding of civic engagement, free speech, and intellectual diversity.

The university will work with Constructive Dialogue to implement their Perspectives program. CDI describes Perspectives as "a blended learning program that distills rigorous behavioral science research into easily digestible concepts to foster openness to diverse perspectives and equip students with the skills to engage in conversations across lines of difference." The program includes six online lessons, which each take 30 minutes to complete. There are five ways schools typically roll out Perspectives with students: In courses (e.g., first-year seminars or gen ed courses); As part of pre-orientation; In pre-orientation, followed by courses; with student leaders; In residence life." VCU is planning to pilot Perspectives with key student leaders during the 2024-2025 academic year while at the same time making the curriculum available for faculty to incorporate into academic classes.

GOAL TWO

CONTINUED

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.” 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, and other student organizations, we will recruit a sample of students to complete the Perspectives Modules and provide feedback on their usefulness moving forward. From this pilot we will work with students to determine the most effective way to incorporate this training into required leadership training at the university. In addition, we will work with faculty and the Provost’s office to determine how to incorporate this foundational training into other courses at VCU and will seek to train more faculty on the value and effectiveness of the curriculum. Constructive Dialogue will support the university’s implementation of Perspectives for students and faculty in four distinct stages: 1) bringing the dialogue to campus by helping to determine our focus and create our plan, 2) getting buy-in by helping us develop an appropriate pitch to key stakeholders, 3) putting our plan into action by helping us develop strategies that will reach our target audience and achieve our goals, and 4) ongoing support by facilitating additional trainings and meetings we can tap into throughout the academic year.



GOAL TWO

CONTINUED

Specific Action Steps

The Division of Student Affairs is piloting several key initiatives related to promoting constructive dialogue and civil discourse this fall. Through a partnership provided by SCHEV, the Division of Student Affairs is piloting use of Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) during the 2024-2025 academic year. Specifically the Division will pilot CDI in the following ways:

- 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." We will actively pilot with peer leaders in the Transformative Student Experiences cluster and also expand the pilot to include other units in the Division of Student affairs
 - Encourage as a part of their training/onboarding process
 - Transformative Student Experiences Peer Leaders - SMC; APB, GSPB, SGA, LIA's, Transform Interns, ELP interns and mentors, VCU Votes Student Advisory Board, Housing - Sandrine and Justin - Becca
 - Exploring opportunities with Residential Life
 - Inclusive Student Ambassadors - Brooke
- The Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning will create and host 3-4, not-for-credit, 4 session dialogue/leadership program 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
 - Student Organization leaders of groups that promote dialogue
 - The Honors College
- The Division will also explore partnerships in implementing CDI within other units at VCU including but not limited to:
 - Inclusive Excellence
 - Faculty Affairs
 - DSA Student Employees
 - Explore opportunities to incorporate into Orientation starting in 2025
 - Other academic units
 - VCU Votes Advisory Council

In addition to these initiatives the Office of Student Leadership and Engaged Learning (OSLEL) will explore other opportunities to promote constructive dialogue by participating in the [Unify Challenge College Bowl](#) September 24 through October 9, 2024. OSLEL will also partner with the Department of Political Science to promote the Political Science Club's bringing the Braver Angels Model to campus.

STRATEGY

Our action plan has integrated strategies for our two goals in the goals section above, and we are including a reiteration of those strategies here for the sake of clarity. Our first goal is to develop a more robust infrastructure to strengthen civic engagement. We have identified three primary strategies to achieve this goal: (1) the VCU Votes Advisory Council, in collaboration with campus partners, will develop a communications strategy to inform the university community of VCU Votes' purpose and how it supports the mission, vision and values of the university; (2) transitioning VCU Votes to an official university committee as opposed to the ad hoc approach to this work that has persisted for the last decade; and (3) strengthening civic learning and democratic engagement throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum through increasing experiential learning opportunities, awarding campus community members demonstrating excellence in civic learning and democratic engagement, and demonstrating our commitment to civic engagement more clearly within student learning outcomes. Our second goal is to promote civic engagement and dialogue across difference by partnering with the Constructive Dialogue Institute. For this goal, we have identified two key strategies: (1) increase our student leaders capacity to have dialogue across differences and (2) promote students' understanding of civic engagement, free speech, and intellectual diversity.

MOVING FORWARD

Our campus action plan strengthens our commitment to civic engagement through long-term goals and short-term strategies at VCU. Moving forward, our campus action plan will be made available online once a new, centralized website for voter information has been identified. Additionally, all members of the VCU Votes Council are 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 as part of the orientation module in Summer 2024. 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 VCU Votes Council convenes formally each quarter 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