

University of Washington – Seattle: Voter Engagement Action Plan

Introduction

The Voter Engagement Committee (VEC) has taken on the All-In Challenge for the University of Washington-Seattle. UW has a long-standing goal of cultivating civic engagement in order to nurture productive and contributing world citizens. However, while the values have been in place, there has yet to be an overarching, implementable plan for civic engagement that outlines, and specifically targets the “barriers” which have prevented students from voting on the UW campus. In efforts to increase not only how many students are registered and voting, but also how voting and democratic participation is discussed within this community, the VEC is writing this action plan.

This plan comprises the analysis of the VEC and how this committee has interpreted UW’s strengths and areas of growth through the lens of civic engagement. The VEC has outlined the areas where UW students lack the support and/or resources to participate in the political processes and will specifically address these areas throughout this plan and the implementation of this plan. Additionally, this is a living document and will be adjusted to best adhere to the needs of the changing community. This adaptability is necessary to ensure the best results for those that this plan will affect and serve.

UW’s community has worked on voter engagement before. There are a number of RSOs on campus, as well as the Associated Students of the University of Washington’s Office of Government Relations, that have committed countless hours and years to registering new voters and the reminding them to vote. Thus, this plan will be divided into different categories to clearly address how the VEC will exist and foster influence within the dimensions of civic engagement that can be improved. The first category will be defining the VEC, followed by analyzing UW’s areas of growth, and finishing with the plan for the future to best increase voter engagement on campus.

Voter Engagement Committee

The VEC is comprised of students, faculty, and administrators in order to promote civic engagement from multiple avenues. While the VEC is the larger coalition of different

communities on campus, a smaller group called HuskiesVote will entail the RSOs (student groups) and individual students who participate in the VEC. HuskiesVote will consist of students, and possibly the RSOs they represent, who are committed to contributing time and resources to VEC and increasing voter registration and turn-out. In other words, the VEC serves as the steering committee and HuskiesVote serves as the implementation team.

HuskiesVote will organize and create useful documents and tools that other members of VEC, and the general UW community, can use to generate discussions about voting. The goal of these smaller initiatives will be to provide straight-forward, clear information about voting, voting deadlines, and civic engagement that can be easily shared throughout the campus. These projects will be in the form of infographics, events and event fliers, as well as reminders regarding important voting deadlines; ultimately, creating a 'voting toolkit'. VEC will utilize this toolkit and use the broader faculty and staff network to spread the information to reach more students.

To create this 'voting toolkit' HuskiesVote will have in-person meetings to delegate which students and/or RSOs will complete certain features of the 'toolkit.' During these meetings, HuskiesVote will consider the best methods for fostering positive, productive discussions regarding our experiences on campus with topics related to voting. The goal of these discussions is to shape which tactics, based on the experience of students at the University, will be used for increasing voter registration and turn out in that election cycle. That being said, there will be consistent techniques used, including hosting events and sending out reminder emails.

In the week before fall quarter begins, HuskiesVote will meet and generate a calendar that will outline the events and reminders for the weeks leading up to the election. The goal will be to have two HuskiesVote meetings in September and October, while having three meetings in November. VEC will be meeting according to the calendar that HuskiesVote has created, in theory this will be once a month after school begins leading up to the election. These guidelines are subject to change as HuskiesVote addresses the needs and outline for that particular election.

For the 2018-2019 year, HuskiesVote intends to create a website and brand that students can associate with voter engagement and use for resources. These entities will allow HuskiesVote to be more accessible for the individual student as well as create a stronger coalition between the

various members of HuskiesVote. Creating this coalition will utilize various funds including donations from the Washington Student Association and UW's Residential Community Student Association.

UW's Areas of Growth

During the evaluation process, VEC analyzed the barriers that prevent students from voting at the UW-Seattle campus. It was important and informative to discuss how the UW-Seattle campus provides or prevents avenues that foster democratic participation. The discussion has led to three categories that define UW's barriers and areas to improve: Access, Visibility, and Information. As the HuskiesVote creates the 2018 'voting toolkit,' addressing these realms will be the main priority.

Access alludes to the 'what and when' of voting and the voting process. This can be seen with the difficulties present when accessing ballot boxes, campus-wide discussion, or informative events. For example, this barrier includes the campus' one ballot box (which is on the edge of the university). Additionally, this barrier includes the student who wants to vote, but is unable to easily access the realm of voting, like out-of-state students. Knowing how to maneuver the absentee ballots can be a difficult and overall confusing. Thus, the 'voting toolkit' will create tools to make this process easier. Examples of how to confront this barrier include posters regarding the location of the ballot box, mass emails with the location, links to informative websites and deadlines, and presenting at different RSO meetings to inform their members.

Addressing the barrier of access will also target the involvement of international students on the UW campus. While international students are often unable to vote, it is important to the VEC to involve them in events focused on issues which may affect them, as well as involve international students in promoting voting to other students on campus. To help foster an inclusive environment, HuskiesVote will center some events around information regarding a general topic or theory (i.e. cyber security, patent rights, the electoral college). This will help broaden the conversation and include students who may not be eligible to vote, but are still affected by the outcome of elections, and interested in being involved.

Improving the second barrier on the UW campus, visibility, will also help us bring in out-of-state voters (as a distinct group with their own barriers to voting) and international students (who may be ineligible to vote). This barrier involves the ‘where and how’ of voting. Visibility pertains to the deadlines, such as the last day for online registration (in the beginning of October). For obvious reasons, deadlines are important, and voting becomes significantly harder when the deadlines are confusing or not obvious. However, while the ‘where and how’ of the election is important, the ‘where and how’ needs to be clear for the events hosted by VEC to inform the UW-Seattle community on the current political debates and candidates.

The last barrier is Information, which consists of the ‘who and why’. Knowing how the community will respond and interpret the information presented regarding voting is incredibly important for increasing civic engagement. Therefore, the events and infographics will contain who is running, different political stances on societal issues, and how students will be impacted by different policies. The one comment to make on this barrier is that the information will be presented while respecting different viewpoints and values, and remaining neutral and nonpartisan. There are various sites and organizations that work on presenting information regarding candidates and ballot measures through a more neutral framework, HuskiesVote will use these as reference points to continue engaging students by providing the information that leads to discussions about civic engagement and politics.

Future Plans

As previously mentioned, HuskiesVote creates the schedule for the three months leading up to the election at the first meeting held a week before the fall quarter starts. The end of September will be focused on organizing VEC. October will be focused on registration and events that involve the general debates and overall political issues being discussed. Lastly, the beginning of November will focus on reminding everyone to vote. This will be done through email, posters, and announcements. The schedule will address the three barriers that are a part of UW-Seattle’s voting environment. VEC will build upon the previously established networks (between faculty, staff, and departments) in order to spread the ‘voting toolkit’ created by HuskiesVote. Through this network, the voting conversation will be accessible within different fields and areas of

campus; ultimately, this will increase civic engagement as more students are presented with the why voting is important, how to vote, and discussions that foster productive debates regarding politics and society.

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