



Voter Engagement Action Plan 2020  
Submitted May 2020

## **Transylvania University Mission and Values**

Through an engagement with the liberal arts, Transylvania University prepares its students for a humane and fulfilling personal and public life by cultivating independent thinking, open-mindedness, creative expression and commitment to lifelong learning and social responsibility in a diverse world.

## **Executive Summary**

This action plan is prepared by a diverse team of Transylvania University students, faculty and staff. Its purpose is to lay out a plan for improving voter turnout and voter engagement in the 2020 election, using data from the 2014/2018 NSLVE report and university demographic data. The action plan will be implemented in coordination with the stakeholders, with action steps for the Office of Campus and Community Engagement and the Student Government Association.

## **Stakeholders**

Tevin Monroe, Assistant Director of Campus & Community Engagement  
*Voter Engagement Action Plan coordinator*

Shawnetta Okpebholo, Assistant Director of Human Resources

Dr. Stephen Hess, Assistant Professor of Political Science  
*Peace Corps Prep coordinator*  
*Political Science program director*

Dr. Michael Covert, Interim Vice President of Student Life and Dean of Students

Madelyn Frost, Assistant Director of Residence Life  
*Staff Engagement Team chair*

Dr. Rhyan Conyers, Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness  
*NSLVE Reporting Designee*

Jordan Hancock\*, student leader, '20  
*Student Government Association (SGA) president, 2019-20*

Sarah Agard\*, student leader, '20  
*Omicron Delta Kappa president, 2019-20*

*\*When new student leadership for Student Government Association and Omicron Delta Kappa are elected (in Fall 2020), they will be added as stakeholders.*

## **Landscape**

Transylvania University is a small, liberal arts institution in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. Transylvania's student population is generally over-engaged, where many students take on multiple leadership roles, jobs, internships and volunteer positions.

Transylvania students are very politically active and aware. Of the more than 60 recognized student organizations on campus, at least three are overtly political. Many more are more covertly political, such as diversity/multicultural organizations. In fact, to highlight the civic engagement of our students, Washington Monthly magazine ranked Transylvania as the #10 liberal arts institution for public service.<sup>1</sup>

Student engagement in civic/political life is not fully reflected through the number of student organizations. Rather, it is through the action of these organizations. Students have engaged in partisan political dialogue through the three active student organizations, hosting speakers to campus and having educational events. It is difficult to quantify political activity, but it is felt and seen. Conversations around free speech, healthcare policy and other hotly-debated topics can often be overheard in the university's library and coffee shop. Earlier this semester, a rather public Twitter exchange between two students ended in an in-person conversation in the coffee shop. This is a sign that things are moving in a positive direction: that our debates and disagreements are not just online, but happen in real time, in a face-to-face setting.

## **2012 and 2016 National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) Report 2016 Election**

In 2016, Transylvania students voted at a rate (59.2%) slightly higher than all university students (50.4%). A good majority (70.0%) of registered students voted in 2016.

### *Change from 2012 to 2016*

From 2012 to 2016, the registration rate dropped 1.9 points (86.5% in 2012; 84.6% in 2016). Though a lower registration rate could imply that the voting rate also declined, that is not the case. The voting rate of all students actually increased 3.5 points (55.7% in 2012; 59.2% in 2016).

### *Demographic data in 2016*

The NSLVE report breaks down voter turnout by the following demographics: voting method, age group, education level, undergraduate class year, enrollment status, gender and race/ethnicity. Much of this data is incomplete or not relevant to the Transy student population where all students are undergraduate, most (98.9%) are enrolled full-time, all are in either the 18-21 or 22-24 age group.

The data that are conclusive are gender and race/ethnicity. Voter turnout for women (61.8%) was higher than that for men (50.5%). White students had the highest turnout (61.5%), Black students had the second highest turnout (54.1%) and Multiracial students had third

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<https://blog.transy.edu/2019/08/washington-monthly-ranks-transylvania-among-nations-top-10-liberal-arts-colleges-for-public-service/>

highest (48.5%). Data on Asian students was not collected, and the Hispanic population is a small (6.19%) percentage of the campus.

### *Field of study*

The report details voting rates broken down by field of study. For the purposes of this action plan, we look only at the 2016 data.

The three fields of study with the highest voter turnout are: History (80.0%); Visual and Performing Arts (79.3%); Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies (79.0%).

The three fields of study with the lowest voter turnout are: Business, management and marketing (50.5%); students with undeclared majors (51.9%); Parks, Recreation, Leisure, and Fitness Studies (52.7%).

### *Implications of the report*

There are a few lessons to be taken from the NSLVE report. First, the slight decline in voter registration from 2012 to 2016 did not result in a decline in voter turnout. This suggests that voter turnout, on the whole, is not purely a function of registration rates. Said another way, voter registration is not the primary way to improve turnout.

Field of study data is particularly interesting as we consider which groups of students to do targeted voter turnout advocacy. The group of students with undeclared majors is quite large (345 students), and it had one of the lowest turnout rates. At Transylvania, students cannot declare a major until their second semester, and must declare by the end of their second full year. Therefore, the undeclared population is made up of all first-year and sophomore students. Though it is the case that some students enter college before they are old enough to vote, this is a very small group (less than 15 students each year) and likely they would turn 18 by November. Virtually all first-year and sophomore students who are American citizens would be eligible to vote, so they are a group worth targeting.

## **Goals**

### *2020 Election goals*

Transylvania University's president, Dr. John Williams, has signed the ALL IN Challenge's Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. To that end, the goal of this action plan and its stakeholders is to aspire to full voter participation. Our strategies include outreach that should reach every students' attention, paying particular attention to the population of first-year students - many of whom will not have entered college being registered to vote.

In addition to the university's commitment to full voter participation, we have set secondary goals that would show meaningful progress over past years. The 2016 voting rate was 59.2%, up 3.5 points from the 2012 election. Given this upward trend, we believe we can increase our voting rate in the 2020 general election by 5 points to a total of 64.2%.

### *Long-term goals*

We envision a campus community in which voter participation for all eligible students is the expectation. Prospective students and families will choose Transylvania because of its

commitment to civic engagement. To that end, the stakeholders of this action plan see the need for the following long-term goals:

1. Establishment of a nonpartisan voter engagement student organization or coalition.
2. Establishment of a university closure on Election Day so that all students, staff and faculty have access to voting.
3. Transportation resources to assist students, faculty and staff with getting to the polls. Currently, the polling site for on-campus students is .5 miles from the campus, which can present a barrier to some.

These goals will be considered in future years. They are not feasible in regards to the 2020 elections for two reasons. First, Transylvania will welcome a new President and Dean of the University on July 1, both positions which will be required to enact goals 1 and 2. Second, uncertainty around COVID-19 and social distancing guidelines complicates the possibility of accomplishing goal 3.

## **Strategy**

### *Response to COVID-19*

Kentucky's primary election was originally scheduled for May 19. At the time of this report being submitted, the election is delayed to June 23. Many other states have outright cancelled their primary elections, due to the Democratic nomination essentially given to Joe Biden. If Kentucky's governor decides to cancel the June 23 primary election, we will suspend our efforts to promote primary election engagement. We will follow local, state and federal recommendations regarding social distancing when doing voter engagement. This may mean, for example, a "register to vote here" table set up in the Campus Center, with hand sanitizer available for those who walk up to the table, and disposable pens that students will take with them once they are used.

### *Partnership with TurboVote for Higher Education*

Transylvania will partner with TurboVote for Higher Education for a "trial period" during Kentucky's primary election season. If we find this partnership meaningful, we will pursue a full partnership in the 2020-21 fiscal year. This partnership would allow meaningful voter engagement work with out-of-state students. Rather than having to educate ourselves on how absentee voting works in each state that our students are from, we can refer students to this platform, where they can receive state-specific information.

### *Time off on election day*

Kentucky's general election is Tuesday, November 3. In order to get to the polls on election day, both faculty/staff and students must find time in their day to find transportation to their designated polling location.

According to Transylvania's Employee Handbook, "A regular employee may be given leave time up to 4 hours as per KRS 118.035 of which up to 2 hours will be with pay if such time off is necessary for the employee to vote." The Human Resources office can ensure that all staff

are aware of this policy, both so that staff can get themselves to the polls, and also so that supervisors allow their supervisees to vote.

As for faculty/students finding the time to vote between classes, students are encouraged to speak with their faculty about missing class.

As of the time of this report being submitted, the 2020-21 academic calendar has already been published, with no room to make November 3 a no-class day. Although there is not space to modify the academic calendar, the Dean of the University has the authority to encourage faculty to be permissive with student attendance on election day. The Student Government Association can speak with the Dean and request this messaging be sent to faculty.

### *Educating the campus*

The Student Government Association can work on a marketing campaign to educate the student body about election day, why voting is important, and encouraging students to register to vote absentee (when applicable).

The Office of Campus and Community Engagement will work with first-year programs such as First Year Ambassadors (a summer pre-orientation), First Engagements (Fall orientation) and First Year Seminar. Every single first-year student attends First Engagements and First Year Seminar, so this is an effective way to engage with each first-year student.

Voter registration tables will be set up in the Campus Center in the first month of class to encourage students to register to vote. Tables or other forms of education will also be set up in the weeks before the general election, to remind students to actually vote.

### *Targeted messaging*

The populations with the lowest voter turnout in 2016 are business and undeclared majors; as well as students of color (specifically, Black and multiracial students). As SGA crafts its messaging, they can use this to their advantage. They may consider working with the Black Student Alliance, the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, or faculty in the sciences. They may consider hosting events in the science building on campus. They may consider engaging with first year seminar courses, or doing programs in first- and second-year residence halls.

### *Student voter engagement*

We see a need on our campus for a nonpartisan voter engagement student organization. Our current political student organizations are all inherently partisan (College Democrats, Young Americans for Freedom, etc.) There is currently no forum for students to do nonpartisan voter engagement work.

A good model for a voter engagement student organization is VEPAC, the Voter Empowerment and Political Awareness Coalition at Berea College (also located in Kentucky). With the release of this action plan, students who are interested in founding a voter empowerment organization can look to this model for creating an organization on Transylvania's campus.

## **Reporting**

This action plan will be made available to the Transy community (students, staff, administration and faculty) in June 2020. At that point, the TurboVote for Higher Education partnership will also be announced.

### **Evaluation**

The success of this action plan will be measured based on the voter turnout in the 2020 general election. In keeping with Transylvania's interim president signing the Full Student Voter Participation commitment, we aspire to see full (that is, 100%) voter participation among eligible students. Our secondary goal, if that first goal is not met, is a voter turnout rate of 64.2%. This would set us above the average for other institutions, and would demonstrate an upward trend from the past two general elections.

With questions about this action plan, feel free to contact Tevin Monroe, voter engagement action plan coordinator: [tmonroe@transy.edu](mailto:tmonroe@transy.edu)