

**Voter Friendly Campus Designation  
Campus Action Plan**

**Virginia Commonwealth University**



**VCU**

**June 8, 2020**

**VCU Votes Advisory Council**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2020, the VCU Votes Advisory Council convened to discuss major priorities for the calendar year. In pursuit of national excellence, the Council remained committed to completing a campus action plan through NASPA and Campus Votes Project for a second year designated as a *Voter Friendly Campus*.

This campus action plan provides an overview of VCU's leadership and commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. Furthermore, the document outlines bold, long-term goals and corresponding strategies to move closer to that vision in 2020. Virginia Commonwealth University is proud of its designation as a *Voter Friendly Campus* in 2019. The plan expands our work significantly by helping us understand the current landscape and culture to strengthen administrative structures and student communication.

Fortunately, VCU has a strong culture of voting that is backed by our institution's strategic plan, Quest 2025, and a presidential directive on experiential learning, REAL (Relevant, Experiential, and Applied Learning). More importantly, the Council is proud of the development of a standing student coalition to further civic education, engagement, and action. This plan will be implemented by members of the Council and Student Coalition to serve our two campuses, Monroe Park Campus and MCV Medical Campus. Although the scope of the plan is long-term, the Council will plan to review and update the document in January 2021.

## LEADERSHIP

The 'coordination' comes from the VCU Votes Advisory Council, which has representation from the following key office — REAL, ASPIRE, Service-Learning Office, University College (first-year student curriculum), and Student Leadership and Civic Engagement Office. Representing a cross-sector of upper-level administrators, faculty across multiple disciplines including key disciplines/programs (e.g. general education, public relations/media, political science), directors of strategic campus programs, student affairs, and student activities staff members, and living-learning program directors. 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.

Jacqueline Smith-Mason (co-chair)	Associate Dean, Honors College	Nicole O'Donnell	Assistant Professor VCU Robertson School of Media & Culture
Matt Tessema (co-chair)	VCU Student AGF Vote Every Ambassador	Nicole Patterson	Coordinator, Student Leadership & Civic Engagement, VCU Student Affairs
Nannette Bailey	Community Partner Coordinator	Lynn Pelco	Associate Vice Provost, VCU Community Engagement &

	VCU ASPIRE		Impact
Dr. Megan Becker	Assoc. Dir. of Residential Life VCU Student Affairs	Dr. Allie Reckendorf	Assistant Professor VCU Political Science
Dr. Erin Brown	Director VCU ASPIRE	Dr. Reuban Rodriguez	Associate Vice Provost and Dean of Students VCU Student Affairs
Lily Cox-Richard	Assistant Professor VCU School of the Arts	Dr. Jeff South	Associate Professor Robertson School of Media & Culture
Dr. Meredith Katz	Assistant Professor VCU Department of Sociology	Fred Tugas	Asst Dir, Student Leadership & Civic Engagement, VCU Student Affairs
Dr. Marcus Messner	Interim Director & Professor Robertson School of Media & Culture	Anne Carver Weakley	Instructor VCU Department of Focused Inquiry

The commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement at VCU continues to be well-founded, in part due to the continued support of several upper-level administrators. Their active participation and advocacy for the work aids in continued progress across key areas of the University:

- Dr. Marcus Messner, Chair, Robertson School for Media and Culture
- Dr. Lynn Pelco, Associate Vice Provost for Community Engagement and Impact
- Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, Associate Vice Provost and Dean of Students, Student Affairs
- Dr. Jackie Smith-Mason, Associate Dean of Honors College

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. To that end, a motivated group of students, faculty, and staff have formed the VCU Votes Coalition. VCU Votes is dedicated to breaking down barriers and increasing student awareness through civic learning and democratic engagement work. VCU Votes 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. Together, we hold weekly meetings with standing members coming from Campus Vote Project, NextGen, The Student Power Network, Virginia's League of Conservation Voters, and faculty from the VCU community.

VCU proudly sits in Virginia's state capital city, Richmond, affording the University strong, bountiful community and civic relationships. (Nannette - the strength of VCU's community relationships). These relationships enable the University to educate, develop new knowledge, and promote community

well-being through civic engagement. Nowhere is the value of these relationships more evident than in VCU's campus and community voter engagement activities. Since 2012, VCU students have partnered with the tenant council leaders of Mosby Court, a nearby public housing development, at their request to jointly host community-based voter education workshops, voter registration drives, restoration of voting rights, and get-out-the-vote efforts on Election Day. This example is just one of many of VCU's relationship-building efforts and its responsiveness to the community. These types of relationships have allowed VCU to establish itself as a strong and trusted partner among community organizations and community leaders.

## COMMITMENT

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

Commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement exists at the highest level of university mission to the implementation level of key institutional initiatives. For example, VCU's mission as articulated in its current strategic plan, [Quest 2025](#), states that it is "dedicated to the success and well-being of our students, patients, faculty, staff, and community through real-world learning that furthers civic engagement, inquiry, discovery, and innovation." VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences, the university's largest academic unit, also emphasizes civic engagement in its strategic plan, extending beyond student civic engagement to also include becoming a leader in integrating meaningful community engagement with real-world challenges ([Excellence Beyond Boundaries, Strategic Focus IV](#)). A 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.

### **Our nationally-recognized Living-Learning Programs advance our voting culture.**

VCU's Living-Learning Programs (LLPs) serve as national models for integrating co-curricular and curricular engagement opportunities. ASPIRE, a community-engagement themed LLP couples four sequenced courses with co-curricular requirements that include direct service. During their first semester, students participate in a Foundations course that highlights citizenship as it relates to the past, present, and future. This includes an emphasis on voting rights and their evolution over time. Students are encouraged to register to vote, learn about issues and candidates in their hometowns, and the local Richmond community, as well as participate in active voter engagement ranging from registration drives to attending panel events. ASPIRE's nearly 200 participants have far-reaching impacts on campus serving as Resident Assistants, student organization leaders, and representing nearly 40 majors. As such, the learning that occurs within the LLP often extends to other facets of their lives expanding the reach of VCU Votes voter engagement initiatives and opportunities.

### **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 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 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 major, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education level based on undergraduate and graduate enrollment. As a result, the NSLVE data helps VCU understand the student voting culture in a couple of ways. For example, the study compares the voting rate between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections and the data shows that VCU's voting rate increased from 16.2% to 48.6%. Further with respect to the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, the voting rate for VCU was 56.8% and 61.5% respectively. VCU has a strong culture of student voting and will continue to use NSLVE data to create strategies to sustain and further increase voter engagement.

### **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 is designated as REAL: Civic Learning/Engagement. Example courses in 2020 include Dr. Alexandra Reckendorf's Political Campaigns and Communication course in the Department of Political Science, Dr. Shelli Fowler's Reading Literature course that is focused on democratic engagement in the English Department and Dr. Nicole O'Donnell's VCU Votes course in the Roberson School of Media and Culture. VCU also offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses that focus on Community Studies (CMST). In addition to individual classes, VCU aims to enhance discussions about democratic engagement with first-year students through the Common Book Program. In-coming freshmen will read and discuss Carol Anderson's "One Person, No Vote" this fall.

### **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 Leadership and Civic Engagement in the Division of Student Affairs supports 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 on the Active Citizen Continuum model. 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.

### **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.

### **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, staff members committed to advancing voter engagement and preparing students with knowledge and skills for active citizenship. Currently, there are no university financial or personnel resources dedicated to assisting VCU Votes. Therefore, garnering institutional support from the highest levels of university leadership is crucial to advancing curricular and co-curricular based civic learning. 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 council, and strengthening civic learning and democratic engagement throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum.

## **Develop a communications strategy**

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 University Relations 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 Student Affairs. 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. Other ideas include creating a VCU Votes folder on the university learning management system, Blackboard, 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**

The Relevant, Experiential, Applied, and 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 the REAL initiative 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 begin. 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 AAC&U civic engagement VALUE rubric and other resources could be adapted to assess student learning outcomes.

Beginning in the Fall 2020 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 TWO:

### Effective Communication Plan about Voter Registration & Absentee Voting amidst COVID-19

VCU is committed to helping all students understand the importance of informed voting and civic engagement with a particular emphasis on first-year students because many of them will be first-time voters. Preparing students to effectively engage in democracy will be reshaped this year due to the COVID-19 virus. VCU's traditional information and registration tables at campus events, in residence halls, and other high traffic areas will likely not be feasible whether students return to campus or not in the fall for safety and health reasons. Thus, efforts are underway to change the majority of VCU's canvassing programs to digital programs and to encourage students to vote absentee. Currently, the VCU Votes Council is convening weekly meetings via Zoom to help make the messaging shift. The council has developed a working calendar and strategy for delivering voting-related information to students. The key elements of the plan are listed below:

Create an election-related section on VCU's website with a prominent link and online registration tools from the Virginia Department of Elections and other organizations.
Develop an online how-to guide for registering to vote, checking registration status, and voting absentee.
Emphasize absentee voting for all students in alignment with guidance from the VA Department of Elections who is encouraging all voters to vote by absentee mail due to COVID-19 and the passing of Absentee voting; no excuse required legislation. Provide educational and support programs to support this process, including absentee voter education and stamp sharing programs.
Send out campus-wide voice, text, and social media messages via Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter to keep students informed of voter registration deadlines, early voting timelines, National Voter Registration Day, etc.
Create a video on why voting matters, and invite university leadership to participate in the project.
Electronically distribute the Campus Election Engagement Project's (CEEP) nonpartisan candidate guide.
Share resources for faculty members to engage students in voting via their courses and course documents.

## 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 2020. 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.