



University of Pittsburgh 2024 Voter Engagement Action Plan

December 2023



University of
Pittsburgh

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Executive Summary

As one of the country's top academic institutions for research and innovation, the University of Pittsburgh has long held a commitment to democratic engagement and is committed to working on a University-wide level to create a more democratically engaged institution. This commitment has been demonstrated repeatedly, including the development of the Pitt Votes program in 2019 and the 2022 launch of the Civic Learning Distinction as a complement to any undergraduate program of study. These institutional efforts are reinforced, and often spearheaded, by the student leaders and organizations committed to engaging their peers in informed, productive voting. As a result, the University of Pittsburgh is a leader in student voter registration and voting rates. The current available data, based on the 2020 election cycle, places student body registration at 90.7% and the voting rate at 78.5% (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, 2022). The University has earned a Voter Friendly Campus designation from NASPA and the Campus Vote Project in March 2021 and Gold Medal Designations from the ALL IN Democracy Challenge for the 2018 and 2020 elections.

As the University's own program for engaging in this work, the Pitt Votes program has developed this Voter Engagement Action Plan (Action Plan from this section on) for the academic year of 2023-2024. In this report, we aim to explain the current status of student voter engagement at the University of Pittsburgh, note some of the many factors that influence our students' engagement with democracy, lay out ambitious goals for the institution, and detail the strategies that will be employed to meet those goals. This plan builds upon the 2022 Plan and contains several improvements and additional details to improve the comprehensive nature of this document.

Mission

The mission of the Pitt Votes initiative is to foster a more civically engaged student body by making voter registration, education, and advocacy tools accessible to all students and by encouraging a long-term commitment to civic action and engagement from both students and the institution.

Land Acknowledgement

We recognize that the University of Pittsburgh occupies the ancestral land of the Adena culture, Hopewell culture, and Monongahela peoples, who were later joined by refugees of other tribes (including the Delaware, Shawnee, and Haudenosaunee), driven here from their homelands by colonizers. We honor these traditional Native inhabitants of this place and uplift their historic, unique, and enduring relationship with this land, which is their ancestral territory. We pay our respects to their Elders and their past, present, and future people, community, and culture. While we cannot change the past, we commit to continued gratitude for the gifts of nature, along with ongoing respect, care, and stewardship of the land, each other, and future generations. Learn more about land acknowledgement from the [University of Pittsburgh Office of Sustainability](#).

Leadership

There are numerous offices, groups, and individuals at the University of Pittsburgh contributing towards our culture of civic learning and democratic engagement. The official stewards of this work on campus are the professional and student staff involved with the Pitt Votes program, housed under the office of PittServes in the Division of Student Affairs. The program is included as one of the responsibilities of a full-time staff member in the Office of PittServes, employs one Graduate Student Assistant, and utilizes a small number of undergraduate students completing fellowships for other civically-minded organizations at the University. These are also the individuals primarily responsible for the creation and implementation of the Action Plan. See Appendix A for names of individuals.

Professional and Graduate Student Staff

Operation of the Pitt Votes program is one of the responsibilities of the full-time Civic and Community Advising Program Manager, who also acts as an advisor to undergraduate students pursuing the Civic Learning Distinction and oversees other programs such as the Civic Engagement Fellowship, Student Civic Engagement Council, and the America Reads Program. Pitt Votes is the sole focus of the Office of PittServes' Graduate Student Assistant, who is a student of the Master's in Higher Education program at the University that serves in this role 20 hours a week for 1 to 2 years.

Student Fellows

The rest of the Pitt Votes team is made up of a small number of undergraduate students who work with Pitt Votes as part of their fellowships with two other organizations, Civic Influencers or the Campus Vote Project. These Student Fellows do not have a set number of hours dedicated to Pitt Votes, but instead attend weekly meetings and collaborate amongst themselves and with other University organizations to put on events, host voter registration drives, and complete various projects under the supervision of the Graduate Student Assistant. They also provide input regarding Pitt Votes' priorities and directions, including assisting in writing and editing this Action Plan. For the 2023 – 2024 academic year, there are six Student Fellows working with Pitt Votes.

The Pitt Votes Fellows are important student leaders in the Office of PittServes. They serve as democracy content specialists to all student leaders who operate within the office, as

well as to the larger University student body. Their work is designed to cultivate a civically engaged student body by making voter registration, education, and advocacy tools accessible to all students and by encouraging a long-term commitment to civic action and engagement from both students and the institution. Collectively, the Graduate Student Assistant and undergraduate fellows are referred to as the Pitt Votes Student Team.

Other Leadership and Support

The other professional staff in the Office of PittServes do not directly engage with the work Pitt Votes does, but they do often provide support in ideating and logistics. Additionally, due to the temporary absence of a Director in the Office of PittServes, the Assistant Dean of Students for Community and Inclusion is supporting the work via direct supervision of the Civic and Community Advising Program Manager. This additional supervisory support has allowed Pitt Votes to continue its work and kept vital communications with higher leadership open during the search for a new Director.

Of course, there are multiple offices and organizations on campus who play a large role in the success of the Pitt Votes program and in promoting democratic engagement on campus, including:

- The Office of Engagement and Community Affairs
- The Office of Government Relations and Advocacy
- The Division of Student Affairs, Office of the Dean
- The Office of Residence Life
- The Institute of Politics
- The Mascaro Center for Sustainable Innovation
- Student Government Board

Pitt Votes also utilizes the guidance and resources of larger coalition networks, such as the Students Learn Student Vote coalition and DemocrACCy.

Development and Implementation of the 2024 Action Plan

This plan was written primarily by the Civic and Community Advising Program Manager and Pitt Votes Graduate Assistant, with assistance from the Student Fellows in developing particularly the Goals and Strategies sections. The Pitt Votes team is also responsible for the

implementation of the plan, the details of which are contained in later sections. However, the work is primarily divided so that the Program Manager advocates for needed changes on a systemic level, the Graduate Student Assistant develops plans and tools meant to address short-term (1 – 2 year) goals, and the Student Fellows take responsibility for specific programs and projects. All three positions aim to involve the other two whenever possible, and there is often heavy overlap between these different spheres of influence.

Commitment

The University of Pittsburgh has remained at the forefront of research and innovation through continuous changes in the landscape of the city, region and beyond. As these landscapes transform, the University has utilized critical reflection and dialogue to create comprehensive, collaborative initiatives that maintain its status as a leading institution. In this spirit, the University launched an updated five-year Plan for Pitt in the Fall of 2021, centering around six values: academic excellence, community, collaboration, sustainability, innovation, and inclusion. The University's mission focuses its successes in the areas of (1) its people, (2) its programs, and (3) its purpose.

Specifically, the Plan for Pitt places emphasis on expanding opportunities for civic and global engagement within its programs area. Action items within this area include prioritizing student skill development in civic engagement, expanding opportunities for community-engaged scholarly and creative work, strengthening coordination and connection between engagement initiatives, and prioritizing impactful and meaningful engagement. This emphasis was a result of the intentional inclusion of a variety of populations who exist in the Pitt community in determining what the University should prioritize in the upcoming five years (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). Pitt Votes is included in this institutional commitment. Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members have expressed a desire to improve the civic commitment of members of the University through various initiatives.

Within the *Plan for Pitt*, civic action will be a priority in coursework, research, student programming and overall university culture. The Pitt Votes initiative will be empowered to emphasize the importance of voting as a form of civic engagement with the help of these institutional commitments.

Landscape

Campus Political Climate

As described previously, the University has outlined a strong commitment to civic engagement in its five-year *Plan for Pitt* (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). Accompanying the recent emphasis placed on engagement at the University-level is a commitment by various schools, departments, offices and student organizations to take a collaborative approach to increasing all forms of engagement at Pitt. In addition, there are countless collaborative efforts occurring between the University and community stakeholders including support around education, entrepreneurship, public health, environmental sustainability, etc. These programs are supported by Pitt Vote campus partners, including the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs, the Office of Government Relations and Advocacy, the Division of Student Affairs, the Institute of Politics, the Mascaro Center for Sustainable Innovation, and Student Government Board. Based on NSLVE data (discussed in further detail in a later section) the University of Pittsburgh performs well in voter engagement— its 2020 voting rate of 78.5% is roughly 9% higher than the average voting rates of similar institutions participating in the study (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, 2022).

Curriculum

The University of Pittsburgh-Pittsburgh campus comprises 16 schools and colleges and 646 degree and certificate programs with an extensive variety of curriculums. Within the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences, which houses more than 10,000 undergraduates, General Education Requirements include courses relating to social science, historical analysis, global awareness, and cultural understanding. There are further curricular opportunities related to civic engagement within several specific schools, programs, and departments, such as the School of Social Work, the Urban Studies program, the Department of Political Science, Pitt

Public Health, the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, the Global Studies Department, and more. These programs include but are not limited to the following majors, minors, and certificate programs: Non-Profit Management Certificate, Human Rights and Social Justice Certificate, Certificate Program in Leadership and Ethics, Bachelor of Arts in Social Work, Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies, Bachelor of Arts in Law, Criminal Justice, and Society, Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Bachelor of Philosophy in Political Science, Bachelor of Science in Public Health, Public Policy Minor, and more.

In the Fall of September 2022, the Urban Studies Program and the Office of PittServes launched the Civic Learning Distinction as a continuation of Pitt's maturing commitment to strengthening communities through engaged scholarship. The Civic Learning Distinction provides students with a mechanism to gain recognition for their civic learning inside and outside of the classroom. Students must demonstrate their learning by completing 9 academic credits of a civic learning attribute course, as well as the completion of 3 high impact activities, which include, but are not limited to, student leadership experiences, research fellowships, or a civic-focused internship. The launch of the Civic Learning Distinction was an important milestone in the University of Pittsburgh's commitment to advancing students' civic learning.

Co-Curricular Opportunities

Multiple entities within the University have collaborated to create the Civic Pathways Initiative, originally created at Stanford University, to assess where students may want to engage with their surrounding communities on a local, national, and global stage. The Civic Pathways Initiative aims to create community engaged experiences visible and available to students along with supporting them as they have community engagement experiences that support their educational journey. The Office of PittServes utilizes the Civic Pathways to differentiate service opportunities listed in the volunteer portal, as well as during the Signature Days of Service. Policy and governance is one of the pathways available through this initiative and will serve as an additional framing device to further support students in broadening their understanding of public service. Students have opportunities for cocurricular engagement within but not limited to the Institute of Politics, PittServes, Community & Government

Relations, the University Honors College, the Outside The Classroom Curriculum, Residential Life Learning Living Communities, and the Civic Learning Distinction.

In 2014, the University of Pittsburgh Provost created the “Year Of” initiative to engage the campus community in thematic programming. The 2023 to 2024 theme is the Year Of Discourse and Dialogue. This theme was created by university leaders to engage faculty, students, staff, and community in conversations related to respecting divergent viewpoints. Through this theme the University seeks to probe ways to harness the power of differing views and perceptions to enrich the campus community through open inquiry and academic discourse (Year Of, n.d.). The Year of Discourse and Dialogue presents a unique opportunity for Pitt Votes to continue to develop students’ civic agency, which involves the capacities of citizens to work collaboratively across differences like partisan ideology, faith traditions, income, geography, race, and ethnicity to address common challenges, solve problems and create common ground.

[Office of PittServes](#)

Founded in 2016, the Office of PittServes aims to enhance students’ personal growth and development by providing meaningful opportunities for service and reflection at the University of Pittsburgh. Students who engage with the Office of PittServes will cultivate relationships within the greater community, complement their classroom learning experience, and lay the foundation for a lifelong commitment to service. The Civic Pathways for Public Service provides a guiding framework for civic engagement within the Pittsburgh community. The Policy and Governance pathway is defined as participation in political processes, policymaking, and public governance. The Pitt Votes program was created to better support students in engaging in democratic processes and to empower students to step into leadership positions on campus to further support their civic development. The Pitt Votes Student Fellows play a large role at the University in fostering a more civically engaged student body by making voter registration, education, and advocacy tools accessible to all students and by encouraging a long-term commitment to civic action and engagement from both students and the institution.

[Pitt Vote Student Fellows](#)

Pitt Votes Student Fellows implement peer-to-peer messaging and education strategies in order to bolster student leadership and democratic engagement on campus and in the local community. Fellows collaborate with other student organizations to share resources and provide voter education and registration training with the ultimate goal of creating a campus-wide democratic engagement infrastructure. Fellows' campus-wide voter registration efforts through tabling and direct conversation with peers to expand the network of democratically engaged students and actively invest in our local community. Fellows facilitate democratic education events that include step-by-step guidance and training to other organizations on campus, covering topics such as voter registration, Pittsburgh elections and candidates, mail-in ballots, and more. The Fellows' work creates a network of informed students who can pass on this information to other current student leaders, and to future campus leaders. This model of organizing and commitment to expanding knowledge and resources exemplifies a system of successful peer-to-peer engagement and investment in campus democratic engagement at large.

Student Organizations

There are several student organizations related to political engagement and/or advocacy at the University of Pittsburgh, including but not limited to College Democrats, College Republicans, College Libertarians, Women in Politics, the Student Government Board, Pitt Program Council, the Graduate and Professional Student Government, the ACLU Club, and Bridge Pittsburgh. These and other identity-based student organizations, such as the Black Action Society and the Asian Student Alliance, have worked tirelessly in recent election years to increase voter registration and turnout rates on campus. Pitt Votes will work alongside student organizations to continue their efforts while providing access to additional resources and tools.

Demographic Makeup

The following University of Pittsburgh demographic data was taken from the institution's Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and was most recently updated to reflect Fall 2023 demographics. Note: Starting in 2021, Pitt began collecting more diverse sets of gender identity categories for incoming students. Race/ethnicity and gender categories used are those defined and used by the U.S. Department of Education.

- Undergraduate population: 24,487

- 56.7% female, 43.3% male, .1% another/ unreported
- 63.5% White, 16.6% Asian, 5.8% Black or African American, 6.6% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% Two or More Races, 0.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.5% Race Unknown
- Graduate population: 9,254
 - 59.6% female, 39.8% male, .6% another/ unreported
 - 52.5% White, 23.6% Asian, 6.9% Black or African American, 6.8% Hispanic or Latino, 3.3% Two or More Races, 20.2% International, 0.8% American Indian or Alaskan Native, .4% Native Hawaiian/ other Pacific Islander, 6.8% Race Unknown

(Office for Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion, n.d.).

Budget

The current Pitt Votes budget allocation is from the Office of PittServes budget. There is additional funding possible from the Student Government Board and various academic departments pending program implementation. Budget allocations will vary from year to year and will be carefully managed to evaluate future needs. It is estimated a programming budget could range from \$5,000 up to \$15,000 annually.

The Pitt Votes Graduate Student Assistantship is a 50/50 fully paid assistantship through the School of Education and the Office of PittServes within the Division of Student Affairs. The Office of PittServes is committed to paying 50% of the full tuition cost of the Graduate Student Assistantship to provide support to the Pitt Votes program. The additional funding is provided by the School of Education. This partnership between academic affairs and student affairs further supports the University of Pittsburgh's commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement.

State Policy

The Pitt Votes initiative commits to sharing up-to-date information about voting laws for students, so they are aware of all their voting options. Automatic voter registration in PA was implemented by Governor Shapiro and is supported by the National Voter Registration Act. This means that Pennsylvanians will be automatically registered to vote through part of the state ID and driver's license approval process. This process removes barriers to registering voters and increases voter registration. It also helps with maintenance as individuals update their driver's

license when changing addresses, which allows them to update their voter registration at the same time (Vigdor, 2023; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).

Act 77 amended a PA election law from 1937 and was enacted in 2019 just before the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation offers significant reform, fostering greater accessibility and ease of voting. For instance, it increased the availability of mail-in and absentee voting, extended the voter registration deadline, and eliminated straight-party voting (County of Berks, n.d.). In the 2020 general election, many Pennsylvanians took advantage of these changes, with almost 40% using a mail-in ballot to cast their vote (U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2021). These reforms also help university students, many of whom use mail-in ballots to vote in elections in their home state.

Although Act 77 had widespread bipartisan support when passed, it has since received backlash from the right-wing after the 2020 election. Challenged multiple times, this legislation has nonetheless been upheld in the PA Supreme Court. However, it remains a contentious issue in the State of Pennsylvania (Wang, 2022).

Goals

Short-Term

Vision

The short-term vision for democratic engagement at the University of Pittsburgh focuses primarily on building stability and consistency for the Pitt Votes program and working on coordinating other related initiatives on campus. The University is fortunate to have many deeply engaged individuals and organizations among students, staff, and faculty, resulting in high voter registration and turnout when compared to peer institutions. However, connections between these efforts are limited and often based on individuals with significant relationships, and work is lost once those individuals leave the University. Pitt Votes would like to position itself as a hub for these efforts in the next few years, facilitating communication and increasing the efficiency and impact of all who engage in this type of work.

Goals

- A. Develop a consistent onboarding process for student staff transitioning into the Pitt Votes Student Team with trainings and materials relevant to the work
- B. Implement consistent learning goals for both student staff and participants of our programs, annual events, and cross-campus partnerships to improve the year-to-year consistency of Pitt Votes
- C. Decrease amount of duplicated democratic engagement and civic learning work at the University of Pittsburgh, especially in voter registration efforts
- D. Have 25% or more of Resident Advisors trained in voter registration
- E. Offer at least one deliberate path of engagement for any student, staff, or faculty interested in working with Pitt Votes, such as through coalitions or volunteer opportunities
- F. Increase the number of students able to provide direct input and guidance to the Pitt Votes operations and priorities
- G. Utilize Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change as learning outcomes for Pitt Votes educational programs

- H. Increase rates of registration and voting in fields of study known to have both low percentages of voting / registration and high numbers of non-voters (such as Mathematics & Statistics, Computer & Information Sciences, and Engineering) by 3% - 10% each
- I. Sustain at least an 90% voter registration rate in the University of Pittsburgh student body every year
- J. Increase to at least a 60% voting rate of registered students during midterms and maintain an 85% voting rate of registered students during the presidential election
- K. Obtain better insights and data on the registration rates and voting habits of marginalized student populations at the University of Pittsburgh

Long-Term

Vision

The city of Pittsburgh is home to a wide variety of initiatives and organizations working towards making voting more accessible and responsive to the needs of Pittsburgh residents, many of whom already engage with the University in some way. The city is also home to multiple universities and colleges, and the University of Pittsburgh itself has reached beyond the city through satellite campuses. The vision is that once democratic engagement and civic learning efforts are coordinated and stabilized internally, The Pitt Votes program turn its attention to increasing institutional commitment to these efforts and spreading the wealth of resources available to the local community and other institutions.

Goals

- A. Explore having Election Day as class-free or class-optional to offer greater access to day-of voting for students
- B. Develop relationships with some of the voter engagement organizations located in Pittsburgh that are tied to positions or projects, as opposed to individuals
- C. Secure additional full-time staff hours dedicated to the Pitt Votes program
- D. Coordinate civic learning and democratic engagement efforts with University of Pittsburgh's regional campuses (Bradford, Greensburg, Johnstown, and Titusville)
- E. Integrate voter registration training into Resident Advisor orientation

- F. Take advantage of recent clarification of federal work-study regulations to compensate more students for voter engagement activities
- G. Increase the registered students voting rate by at least 5% for both midterms and presidential elections

Strategies

Priority Strategies

These strategies are integral to achieving the goals stated in the previous section and are either currently underway or are planned to start implementation within the next year.

Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change Learning Outcomes

The Pitt Votes program is dedicated to creating a more just, civically engaged, and democratic future for University of Pittsburgh students. To do this, Pitt Votes will utilize the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Theory of Change developed by NASPA as learning outcomes for future educational programming. These learning outcomes include the following:

Civic Ethos

Civic Ethos refers to the development of students' everyday practices to develop civic values of open-mindedness, civility, ethical behaviors, and care and concern for peers, community, and global citizens.

Civic Literacy & Skill Building

Civic Literacy & Skill Building refers to the cultivation of foundational knowledge about democracy over time, both within the United States and the world. This includes students' understanding of key historical social movements and campaigns, as well as the development of critical thinking about complex social issues.

Civic Inquiry

Civic Inquiry refers to the practice of inquiry about civic life within students' general educational studies and within their major. This includes cultivating deliberate consideration of differing viewpoints and the ability to describe civic intellectual debates within one's area of study.

Civic Action

Civic Action refers to students' capacity and commitment to engage with diverse populations and work collectively to address common concerns. It also refers to a students' ability to analyze systems to strategically plan and engage in public action.

Civic Agency

Civic Agency refers to students' capacities to work collaboratively across differences like Gpartisan ideology, faith, socio-economic status, geography, race, and ethnicity to address common challenges and create common ground. This requires a set of individual civic skills, knowledge, and predispositions to enrich sustainable student civic action (Hoffman, Domagal-Goldman, King, & Robinson, 2018).

Pitt Votes recognizes that further growth is needed to utilize the CLDE Theory of Change as student learning outcomes. Included in this effort will be the creation of assessments in the Summer of 2024 to collect quantitative data to determine where more progress is needed to support students' learning at Pitt Votes educational programs. These assessments will be distributed to students who attend Pitt Votes programs in the Fall of 2024. Additionally, these assessments will inform the creation of new educational programs for the Spring of 2025 and beyond in partnership with campus departments and offices. This practice will support the larger institution and its commitment to create a democratic and just future for University of Pittsburgh students.

University of Pittsburgh Student Democratic Engagement Coalition

As noted in previous sections, the University of Pittsburgh enjoys a large number of passionate people and organizations dedicated to the democratic engagement and civic learning of students, staff, faculty, and the surrounding community. Student organizations especially contribute much to efforts around voter registration and education on political topics. However, communication is often lacking between the organizations and Pitt Votes and amongst the organizations themselves, leading to frequent duplicated efforts and lack of clarity regarding who is "in charge" of certain initiatives. Pitt Votes believes that we are in a unique position to help coordinate efforts across these organizations and aims to create more sustainable and equitable democratic engagement through creating a coalition centered on this work.

The Pitt Votes Student Team has developed these five purposes for the coalition:

- Coordinating communication and efforts between organizations
- Increasing access to reliable and relevant information for student voters
- Increasing access to voting to students broadly and to specific populations

- Increasing student engagement in elections and civic life
- Guiding Pitt Votes' mission and work

The current vision is for Pitt Votes to organize and oversee the coalition, which would meet once a month during the Fall and Spring semesters. Working groups based on specific areas of work, such as establishing Election Day as class-free or class-optional or providing input on Pitt Votes' decisions, would arise and meet as needed. The Coalition itself would not have the aim of producing programs or events as an entity itself, but rather to encourage collaboration between its members and offer a way to share resources and knowledge amongst student leaders. At the time of writing, the Pitt Votes Student Team is reaching out to various organizations to attend interest meetings regarding the Coalition, which will be held the first week of December, so the vision is subject to change based on the thoughts and needs of its members.

Core Frameworks for Pitt Votes

Pitt Votes achieves information, data, and system processes, but due to the nature of higher education resulting in a constant turnover of staff and students, much of that historical knowledge has been lost or recorded in pieces scattered across dozens of digital folders and documents. The process of keeping consistent records, organizing materials, and offering something for future years to build upon is a time-consuming process that demands more attention than is often available to any one person. The 2023 – 2024 academic year, for these reasons, has called for and allowed a focus on building out a foundation that the program can utilize for years to come. The specific ways we are going about this include:

- Creating a template for program planning that hosts all relevant information and can easily be referred to in future years
- Developing a specific onboarding process for the Graduate Student Assistant and fellows that includes education on topics such as non-partisanship, equity in electoral processes, and orientation to resources such as NSLVE data, Students Learn Students Vote, and the ALL-IN Campus Democracy Challenge

- Defining a set of signature programs to be carried out every year, such as a t-shirt giveaway and tie-dye for National Voter Registration Day and campus-wide Election Prediction Contests before general elections
- Bringing our learning outcomes further into alignment with the Civic Learning and Engagement Theory of Change developed by the professional higher education organization NASPA, including utilizing the Theory of Change to develop learning outcomes
- Integrating equity-based frameworks into the core of Pitt Votes, such as the Developing Racial Equity Consciousness model developed by the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems

Each of these are developed collaboratively with the entire Pitt Votes team so that everyone from the professional staff member overseeing the program to the student fellows carrying out the mission have their collective wisdom and passion represented in these new efforts to strengthen the program.

Voter Registration Training Curriculum

While several organizations and groups perform voter registration on-campus, there is little in the way of training on voter registration, especially tailored to the context of registering someone to vote on a college campus. This creates both an inconsistency in the knowledge levels between the different organizations doing voter registration and a barrier to entry for anyone looking to be a part of these efforts.

In response to this gap, the Pitt Votes Student Team has developed its own training. The 45-minute presentation includes not only how to register someone to vote in Pennsylvania and start the process for individuals with out-of-state permanent addresses, but also covers the difference between governmental and state electoral laws and advice on how to stay non-partisan while in conversations with students regarding voting and elections. The training is in the final stages of review and is expected to be available for request by student organizations and campus offices starting Spring 2024. An online version of the training is also planned for development over the next semester.

Additional Strategies

These strategies require further development and are intended to be steps taken after the priority strategies are in place.

Future Coalitions

Student organizations are just one of the sources of democratic engagement already happening at the University of Pittsburgh, as staff and faculty are heavily involved as well. Pitt Votes decided to start organizing with student organizations first due to existing connections and ease of access, but we do plan to additionally launch a staff and faculty coalition or coalitions with similar purposes and structures.

Re-Launching of Student Ambassador Program

One of the listed strategies of our 2022 Voter Engagement Action Plan was the use of the Student Ambassador Program, which trained volunteers from the student body on some of the work Pitt Votes does. The program was successful but did not have enough structure to last through a transition between Graduate Student Assistants. Pitt Votes is eager to return to this idea and will be able to apply the tools and strategies we develop in the short-term to create a more sustainable volunteer program in the long-term. Ideally, this will include the ability to compensate students for their efforts through work-study and therefore increase the diversity of students who could become an Ambassador.

Institutional Advocacy

As described elsewhere in this plan, the office of PittServes is temporarily operating without a Director and temporarily without an Assistant Director. These positions are vital to engaging with higher administration and securing more resources for the office and programs, including Pitt Votes. Once a Director is hired, the Pitt Votes team hopes to meet with them and lay out some of the most pressing needs of the program and co-build a strategic plan.

Strategic Flexibility

Higher education is a constantly shifting field that often experiences turnover, ideological shake-ups, and changes in resource availability. We are well aware that the strategies described may not come to pass as planned or not be relevant to the campus context of the future. We plan to address this by keeping focus on the goals and an understanding of the individual strategies as tools to meet those goals instead of goals in and of themselves. In implementing these strategies, we will ensure there is plenty of room to pivot or incorporate

new ideas depending on the current viability of the strategy and the input of the staff and students who will be involved in this work in the future. Additionally, continuous self-assessment on progress toward goals will provide essential information on when changes need to be made and how we can better serve the University student body in becoming democratically engaged and civically educated.

Sustaining Current Strategies

It is also important to recognize the work needed to sustain currently employed strategies that are working well alongside envisioning new strategies. In Pitt Votes and across the University, these include:

- Tabling in various areas across campus to register students to vote
- Fostering a campus climate that encourages respectful dialogue and offering resources to sustain multiple democratically engaged organizations
- Having polling places for students on-campus in various academic buildings
- Enriching opportunities such as the Civic Influencers and the Campus Vote Project fellowships
- Offering a fully funded Graduate Student Assistant position dedicated to Pitt Votes
- Continuing to develop awareness of the Civic Learning Distinction as described in the Landscape section

These strategies have allowed the University of Pittsburgh to achieve impressive voter registration and turnout rates and must not be taken for granted.

Reporting

In a similar manner to the University-wide practice of including a wide variety of voices in decision-making, the Pitt Votes initiative will seek feedback from students, faculty, staff and other members of the University community on our plan for action. We are committed to receiving input on the Action Plan not only when it is initially published but continually as we work towards our outlined goals.

This will be achieved through the following steps:

- Sharing of the plan internally with the individuals on the Pitt Votes Student Team and organizations in the Democratic Engagement Coalition, along with University leadership.
- Providing it for review with the All in Democracy Challenge and the Campus Vote Project.
- Sharing the plan with other internal constitutions upon request.
- Include feedback survey with the publication of the Action Plan on website for anonymous feedback
- Include physical copies or instructions for digital access of 2024 Action Plan at all tabling events and other programs

Through the above steps we hope to ensure the 2024 Action Plan includes the voices of all University communities and creates a space for open dialogue about the points included in the plan.

The Pitt Votes initiative also intends to make NSLVE reports widely available. The most recently published report is published on the Pitt Votes institutional commitment webpage. Whenever an updated NSLVE report is received, the initiative will update the webpage and share it with the individuals on the Pitt Votes Student Team and the Democratic Engagement Coalition along with University leadership.

Evaluation

Comprehensive and continual evaluation of the initiative's efforts to increase voter engagement is key to create successful outcomes that reach further and last longer than a single election cycle. Much like other aspects on this plan, the assessment of the initiative's efforts will take a collaborative approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data from perspectives across the University campus and beyond to understand how a wide array of populations and entities are being impacted.

Communication within the Democratic Engagement Coalition, its subgroups, and associated organizations will serve as an evaluation tool. Leadership will conduct timely check-ins with students, coalition members, collaborators, and other stakeholders to understand how broad goals are being achieved and adjusted accordingly to any challenges that arise. Additionally, the coalition-wide meeting that occurs once per month will allow a deeper evaluation of all aspects of the Action Plan to occur.

Beyond those directly engaged with the Pitt Votes office, it is important to understand how campus and community partners are responding to the work being done. Members of the Pitt Votes Student Team will conduct regular check-ins with student organizations and their leaders to understand how these students are responding to various initiatives. These check-ins will allow open communication in an effort to collaborate on ways to improve on goals or outcomes.

The Pitt Votes program is utilizing the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change as a framework for program learning outcomes for the general undergraduate student body at Pitt. These outcomes include the development of students' Civic Ethos, Civic Literacy & Skill Building, Civic Inquiry, Civic Action, and Civic Agency. Assessment of these learning outcomes will further support Pitt Votes Student Fellows and Office of PittServes staff in designing Pitt Votes educational programs.

Quantitative Assessment Steps:

- Analyzing and distributing NSLVE data to gauge overall voter engagement improvement and identify gaps in voter participation on campus

- Assessing students' civic learning as defined by the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change
- Tracking student attendance at associated campus events and presentation
- Monitoring engagement with outreach tabling at larger campus events and in high-traffic areas on campus
- Tracking voter registration through TurboVote to assess which programming efforts are most effective
- Collaborating with the County Board of Elections to breakdown student voter turnout rates at on-campus polling locations

Conclusion

The Pitt Votes initiative considers this a working document with expected additions and changes. Extended strategies will come with the changing times and the team will remain flexible to ensure positive outcomes. The intended outcomes could shift to ensure all student needs are being fulfilled. The Pitt Votes initiative would like to thank all University of Pittsburgh faculty, staff, and students who contributed to the creation of this plan and who support voter engagement work on campus. The Pitt Votes team is eager to continue to support University of Pittsburgh students as they engage in democracy through education, mentorship, and collaboration.

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Appendix A

Individuals Involved

Below is a list of individuals directly involved in the work of Pitt Votes and the creation of the 2024 Voter Engagement Action Plan.

Name	Role
Sydney O'Hara	Civic and Community Advising Program Manager
Gretchen Natter	Assistant Dean of Students for Community and Inclusion
Lorant Peeler	Graduate Student Assistant for Pitt Votes
Olivia Pinocci-Wrightsmen	Civic Influencers Student Fellow
Claire Gatz	Civic Influencers Student Fellow
Ruby Scupp	Civic Influencers Student Fellow
Daphne Planter	Civic Influencers Student Fellow
India Krug	Campus Vote Project Fellow
Hailey Quinn	Campus Vote Project Fellow