



# STRENGTHENING MINNESOTA'S CULTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A guide for Minnesota State Colleges and Universities  
to discuss ways to improve civic life.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was assembled by the civic engagement workgroup of the Minnesota State colleges and universities. The guide is intended to provide campuses with strategies and tools for engaging students, faculty, and staff in a review of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement results, facilitating discussion surrounding the data and its interpretation, and developing future action steps related to the report and campus efforts to increase civic engagement.

We recognize not every Minnesota State campus has the capacity to create and implement a formal civic engagement action plan at this time. This guide will still serve as a comprehensive resource for these campuses to reflect upon and begin a robust conversation about civic engagement by analyzing their National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) results. These discussions will foster an opportunity for campuses to increase awareness and understanding of current civic engagement practices and spark ideas for future development. At the end of this guide, we have included a civic engagement campus report card developed by NSLVE to assist in the identification of resources and opportunities to support civic engagement on your campus.

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# LEVERAGING DATA TO ASSESS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**As a democracy, the United States depends on a knowledgeable, public spirited, and engaged population. Education plays a fundamental role in building civic vitality, and in the twenty-first century, higher education has a distinctive role to play in the renewal of US democracy.**

A CRUCIBLE MOMENT (2012)

Events over the past three decades are moving us toward “a citizenless democracy”<sup>1</sup> where we retreat from civic life because we struggle to work across our differences. To combat this challenge higher education leaders from around the country have joined together to embrace their role as laboratories of civic learning and democratic engagement. This guide is designed to provide the first step to hold a campus dialogue around how the colleges and universities of Minnesota State can become more intentional about how we build civic learning into our institutions.

Our state’s public colleges and universities are not just teaching institutions: they are also institutions with a responsibility to provide a broad public benefit and to support the development of the skills needed for participation in our democracy.

## IT IS PART OF OUR CORE MISSION

Reaching out beyond our campus is something that our institutions and students do on a daily basis. The strategic framework for Minnesota State says that we are to meet the “community needs” by helping to “solve real-world problems.”<sup>2</sup> Skills like communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and working in diverse teams are the skills students need for participation in our democracy.

## COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES AND OUR DEMOCRACY

At a time when our communities are so divided politically, our institutions can contribute to the civil dialogue that brings people together to explore differences and seek common solutions. This dialogue must also provide a space for different perspectives, especially those that have been marginalized, to be heard in order to seek a collective future. We can be the hub of an eco-system that encourages people to work together and ends the philosophical gridlock that can have a debilitating effect on institutions of higher learning.

## CIVIC LEARNING CAN PROVIDE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE THAT ENHANCES STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND PREPARES THEM FOR WORK, LIFE, AND CITIZENSHIP.

There is growing evidence that courses that offer hands-on experiences can increase the likelihood of student success in college. These types of learning experiences allow students to refine skills that prepare them for professional success and active citizenship.

## ACCREDITATION IS CONNECTED TO CIVIC LEARNING

In recent years, the Higher Learning Commission has included civic engagement as part of its Quality Initiative<sup>3</sup>. As institutions approach accreditation, it will be important to demonstrate college and university commitment to civic engagement through learning inside and outside of the classroom. Through this process institutions can work to build awareness, share best practices, and promote broad understanding of civic learning and democratic engagement.

<sup>1</sup> David Mathews, [https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible\\_508F.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible_508F.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.minnstate.edu/system/planning.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hlcommission.org/Accreditation/quality-initiative.html>

# CONVERSATION GUIDE

Recently, the colleges and universities of the Minnesota State system enrolled in the National Study for Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) as a way to gather important data to support a campus dialogue about student participation in voting. This dialogue is intended to generate fresh ideas that foster campus climates that support civic discourse and engagement. This conversation guide is based on best practices that have been collected by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Identify a workgroup of key stakeholders

Organizing a diverse group of stakeholders from across the institution is the first step in building a common vision for success and collective action. These stakeholders may include:

- senior administrators
- select faculty (particularly ones that have a role in curriculum development)
- student life offices
- equity and inclusion offices
- student leaders from the student senate and key student organizations (that should include the multi-cultural student organizations on your campus)

Charging the workgroup

Organize the first convening of the group by outlining their charge and share the NSLVE campus report. For this group to be successful, they should follow a set of principles to guide their work.

Here are some of the key principles that successful campuses have used <sup>4</sup>:

- Comprehensive – Activities should focus on local, state, and federal elections; include election and non-election related programming; and be politically neutral. Activities should focus on registering, educating, and turning out student voters.
- Continuous – Activities and group meetings should occur throughout the year.
- Integrated – Activities should blend in and out of class learning through engaging experiences.
- Intentional – Activities should be informed by data and connected to strategic goals.
- Deep – Activities should be embedded in the curriculum and co-curriculum of the campus and tied to the institution's learning outcomes.
- Innovative – Activities should improve existing efforts and include new and original ideas.

<sup>4</sup> These principles were adapted from the "Strengthening American Democracy" created by the National Student Lear, Student Vote Coalition in September of 2017

## BEGINNING DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION PLANNING

Campuses will be well-served to invest time and thought into the process they will use to engage stakeholders in dialogue and reflection on the NSLVE results and in building a shared understanding of how that data links to existing work and can inform future action. The following outline provides a sample framework for campus dialogue, and action planning is one example of how those discussions may be structured and the steps that a campus may take to use the NSLVE results. Campuses are encouraged to adapt this framework as appropriate to their local context and culture.

### Part 1 – Getting Started <sup>5</sup>

#### A. Explain the process, goals and why we're here:

- Develop a shared understanding of student civic learning and engagement.
- Increase campus-wide understanding of the registration and voting rates of students at the specific college or university.
- Identify strengths in promoting student civic learning experiences.
- Explore some strategies for increasing student civic learning and engagement.

#### B. Develop and agree upon a set of ground rules. Here are some suggested ground rules for the dialogue:

- Everyone's viewpoint counts equally.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time.
- If you are offended, say so and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize it.
- Confidentiality: it's okay to share ideas but not what individuals say.

#### C. Introductions:

- What brings you here? Why is this important to you?
- What connects you to this topic?

#### D. Review definitions of common engagement terms:

- Civic learning and democratic engagement is promoting the education of students for engaged citizenship through democratic participation in their communities, respect and appreciation of diversity, applied learning, and social responsibility.
- Civic engagement is any act intended to improve or influence a community through deliberation, collaboration, and reciprocal relationships and community-building.
- Democratic participation is civic engagement that involves democratic processes (e.g., when an organization puts a matter to a vote and there is democratic participation).
- Political engagement or political participation is civic engagement that emphasizes governmental institutions and/or power (e.g., voting in a local, state, or federal election).
- Voter registration is the process of successfully completing the application to be able to cast a ballot in an election.
- Voter education is the curricular and co-curricular activities offered to students and designed to facilitate civic learning and increase participation in elections.
- Voter turnout is the act of casting a ballot, in any manner (e.g., early, in person, absentee).

<sup>5</sup> The section in Part 1 and 2 have been adapted from the "Talking Politics – Guide for Campus Conversations about your Voting Reports" that we developed by the National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement.

## Part 2 – Understanding our students' political engagement broadly

### A. Review the NSLVE campus report.

- About the report:
  - » What does the report reveal about the voting behavior of students at this college or university?
  - » Does anything surprise you?
  - » Does the data reveal any problems? What are they?
  - » Is the level of engagement comparable across various groups of students on campus? What groups are not engaged?
  - » What is not included in the report that you might want to know more about?

### B. Broader perceptions of student civic engagement and campus support for civic engagement work.

- Perceptions of student attitudes and levels of civic engagement:
  - » What is the attitude of our students toward civic engagement, broadly?
  - » What are the ways that students engage?
  - » How do students feel about politics?
  - » How do students feel about voting?
  - » Do we think students are where they “should be” with respect to civic engagement? Why or why not?
  - » Are you civically engaged? How?
  - » What viewpoints on student political learning and engagement may be missing from this group? What would others say?
- Campus Assessment:
 

For this part of the discussion, you can use the Civic Engagement Campus Report Card on page 8.

  - » To what extent does this institution incorporate student civic engagement in its learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom? Do all students have access to these experiences? Why or why not?

### C. Imagining the civically engaged campus:

- Imagine for a moment that this campus is a place in which students have the knowledge, skills, motivations, and efficacy to engage public issues. What are the opportunities you think would facilitate these outcomes on this campus?
- Follow-up discussion
  - » What are some common themes among these images?
  - » Can we make statements about what each constituency on campus (students, faculty, staff, institutional leaders, the local community) will be doing?

## Part 3 – Next steps in action planning

### A. Campus plan exercise:

The group will be split into three smaller groups to develop a campus plan of action. Each group will receive a list of potential tactics that are common at campuses around the country. The task is to use these tactics to build a plan of action for your campus considering when you will deploy each tactic and the resources that are available on campus.

As part of the exercise they must also split their tactics into three categories: tactics that they can do right now without any additional resources, tactics that they can do with less than \$2500 in resources, and tactics that they would use to build their ideal plan (with resources not being an issue). Each group will present their plan at the end of the exercise with a panel of experts awarding scores to each group with a winner chosen at the end.

## B. Questions that drive successful action plans<sup>6</sup>

- Assigning leaders and a team
  - » Who (individual and/or office) will coordinate and oversee the implementation of your plan of action?
  - » What is the role of the working group? What are the members' responsibilities?
- Assessing current work and outcomes
  - » What internal barriers (e.g., limited funding, staff resistance, lack of leadership) might prevent the institution from successfully implementing your plan?
  - » What external barriers (e.g., election laws, voter ID laws, lack of proximity to polling location) might prevent the institution from successfully implementing your plan?
  - » What resources are available to help the institution successfully implement your plan?
  - » What additional resources are needed to help the institution successfully implement your plan?
- Setting goals
  - » What impact is desired? What knowledge, skills, and capacities (learning outcomes) does the institution want students to obtain through your plan's activities?
- Planning and documenting work
  - » What is the work? What are the planned activities?
  - » Who will do the work? Who is responsible for implementing each planned activity?
  - » Who is the work for? Who is the audience for each activity?
  - » Where will the work happen? Where will each activity occur on campus?
  - » When will the work happen? When will each activity occur on campus?
  - » What is the purpose of the work? Why is each activity being implemented and what is the goal for each activity?
- Implementing plan and assessing progress toward goals
  - » How will the plan be shared, internally and externally? Please state where the plan will be shared.
  - » Will the plan be made public? If so, how?
  - » Will the data used to inform the plan be made public? If so, how?
- Reviewing the plan
  - » What is the purpose of the evaluation? What does the institution want to know and be able to do with the information gathered?
  - » Who is the audience for the evaluation?
  - » Who will carry out the evaluation?
  - » What information (data, evidence) must be collected and how will it be collected? What are the performance measures and indicators of success?
  - » How will information (data, evidence) be analyzed?
  - » How will the results of the evaluation be shared?

<sup>6</sup> This section has been adapted from the "Strengthening American Democracy" created by the National Student Learn, Student Vote Coalition in September of 2017

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CAMPUS REPORT CARD<sup>7</sup>

Please list all assets that you can think of, not just one per box. When thinking about assets consider programs, structures, people, and activities that support civic engagement your campus.

CATEGORY	GRADE	EXEMPLARS ON CAMPUS
Policies and structures demonstrating institutional priorities (e.g., center or academic program)		
Norms, traditions, symbols, and events (e.g., Election Day parade)		
Classroom experiences (e.g., examining public policy or controversial issue discussions)		
Co-curricular programming (e.g., issue forums, debates, or simulations)		
Student-driven initiatives and clubs, activism or organizing (e.g., political parties)		
Collaborative Responsibility (e.g., student participation in committees responsible for institutional shared governance)		
Student service or off-campus experiences (e.g., an internship with a political campaign)		
Faculty political engagement (e.g., running for office or expressing political viewpoints; academic freedom on campus)		
Leaders and champions (e.g., faculty, students, administrators or others who promote political engagement or discussion)		
Free speech (e.g., an openness to dissenting perspectives)		
Physical spaces for discussion or political action (e.g., a campus office, center, cultural house)		

<sup>7</sup> This report card was developed by "Talking Politics – Guide for Campus Conversations about your Voting Reports" that we developed with the National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement.