University of Houston Clear Lake

Student Involvement and Leadership

VOTER FRIENDLY CAMPUS DESIGNATION 2021-2022 UHCL END-OF-YEAR REPORT

University of Houston – Clear Lake
2021-2022 Voter Friendly Campus Designation
End-of-Year Report
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Contents

The University Profile

The University of Houston – Clear Lake (UHCL) was founded in 1974 as an upper-level institution part of the University of Houston System. In 2014, the university expanded to welcome freshman and sophomore students to the campus. The institution began with 1,069 students and 60 faculty and has since grown to include over 6,758 undergraduate and 2,386 graduate students. In its short history, UH – Clear Lake has earned a distinctive reputation as a student-centered, community-minded, and partnership-oriented university with strong connections to area businesses, organizations, schools and individuals that enhance the regions educational, economic, cultural, scientific, engineering and professional environment.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching selected UHCL as one of 119 U.S. colleges and universities for its 2008 Community Engagement Classification. UHCL is also a five-time recipient of the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, the highest federal recognition a college or university can receive for its commitment to volunteering, service-learning and civic engagement. Under the leadership of President Ira K. Blake, UHCL has renewed its commitment to civic engagement and service through its Impact 2025 and Beyond strategic plan, recognizing community engagement as a pillar of the university's growth and central to the formation of well-rounded Hawks.

UHCL is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with almost 40% of students identifying as Hispanic and students of colors making up 65% of the student population. UHCL opened its first residence hall, Hunter Hall, in 2019 and remains a primarily commuter campus. About half of the student population are Harris County residents.

The Coalition

To execute the Campus Plan, the UHCL Voter Friendly Campus Coalition (VFCC) was assembled in the summer of 2020. It included a small group of staff representing Student Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Student Housing and Residential Life, and Student Involvement and Leadership. The VFCC also included one faculty member and a student representative who served as a Democracy Fellow with the Campus Vote Project.

Coalition Effectiveness

While time and energy was spent to recruit and formulate the VFCC, our coalition was not effective due to staff turnover and the evolving nature of the coronavirus pandemic. The coalition was comprised of very few members and all administrative and logistical duties were administered by a single staff member. Once the staff member left the institution, the coalition remained stagnate and did not move forward in its development.

While the VFCC leadership and members did not meet, the primary goals and objectives laid out by the

campus plan were maintained and achieved. The Office of Student Involvement and Leadership (OSIL) absorbed the leadership responsibilities of the coalition and sought to execute the campus plan, even in a limited, virtual, and socially distanced context. The OSIL staff crafted intentional and meaningful democratic engagement that included focused on voter education, registration, and access. Further detail and analysis of these goals are explored under the subsequent sections.

Coalition Evolution

The VFCC will be reestablished as a standing institutional committee. The coalition will be reimagined and comprise of representatives across multiple functional areas and include both, student and academic affairs representatives. It will actively involve senior university leadership and incorporate student representation into the framework of its charter. Once formed, the coalition will meet monthly and provide regular updates to the university leadership and campus community. The reimagined coalition will include leadership roles that will include specific responsibilities to maintain the logistical, financial, communications, and administrative duties of the group and its campus plan.

To refocus on the mid-term elections, the coalition will establish set goals and priorities in a new campus plan and collaborate with local partners to support student civic education and participation. The coalition will leverage the experiences of multiple academic fields and student backgrounds to execute timely and robust civic and voter engagement programs and services.

Community Partners

The OSIL team worked collaboratively with organizations, offices, and departments across the institution to achieve various components of the campus plan. These partners include:

- *Campus Recreation and Wellness: The Campus Recreation team provided space to host events, most notably serving as a polling site for the Harris County 2020 General Election.*

- *Campus Vote Project (CVP): UHCL worked closely with the Campus Vote Project to share training and non-partisan resources to students. The CVP also provided funding for a Democracy Fellow and hosted programs that were at no cost for our students. We used CVP standards to craft our programs intentionally around specific learning objectives.*

- *Dean of Students Office: The Dean of Students Office provided senior leadership and financial support to promote student engagement. The office staff collaborated with the OSIL team to connect students with resources and promote events and services.*

- *Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS): The Environmental, Health and Safety office worked with the team to assess program risk and compliance. EHS was instrumental in making sure events abided by federal, state, and university guidelines to provide safe learning experiences.*

- *Facilities Management and Construction and Custodial Services: The Facilities Management and Construction and Custodial Services teams organized spaces, setup furniture, cleaned, and sanitized to make all events and opportunities possible for students and community members at UHCL.*

- *Harris County, State of Texas: The OSIL team worked with Harris County to have full-time staff and students trained as deputy voter registrars. UHCL also served as a host for a Harris County polling site for both early voting and Election Day voting in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.*

- *Marketing Communications: Institutional, divisional, and office communications teams worked in tandem to execute large campus-wide marketing campaigns for voter education, registration, and turnout.*

• *Scheduling Department: The Scheduling Department facilitated the reservation and use of campus spaces for various events, particularly serving as a polling site for early voting in the Harris County 2020 General Election.*

• *Student Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The Student Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office was a key partner in many programs, especially the National Voter Registration Week.*

• *Student Housing and Residential Life: OSIL worked to target residents on campus in collaboration with Student Housing and Residential Life (SHRL). SHRL partnered to host election watch parties and bring voter awareness events to students in Hunter Hall.*

• *Student Organizations: Multiple students organizations hosted events and activities in collaboration with the OSIL. Student organizations also provided space for the Democracy Fellow and staff to share about ongoing civic initiatives and keep students informed on voting rights and procedures.*

• *The Signal and Student Publications: UHCL campus news sources including student publication like "The Signal" provided timely information about civic engagement programming, services, and events relevant to student voters. They kept campus leaders accountable and informed the campus community about the importance of voter participation.*

• *University President's Office: The University President's Office providing funding, institutional resources, and an innovative marketing campaign. The university president, Dr. Ira K. Blake, identified this initiative as an institutional priority and continues to be intentional by participating in civic engagement events and programs and advocating for these events.*

• *Vice President for Student Affairs Office: Leading the newly formed Division of Student Affairs, Dr. Aaron J. Hart provided funding and human resources to reach out to students and create high-impact learning experiences. Dr. Hart and the Division leadership facilitated cross-departmental collaboration and provided space to engage in inaugural civic engagement programs at UHCL.*

Student Involvement

Through the Campus Vote Project, we were provided a funded position for a Democracy Fellow. The Democracy Fellow was a student who actively participated in contributing to and implementing the campus plan. The Democracy Fellow provided insight into the student experience and served as an ambassador for event and activities hosted by the office.

As we embark on the campus plan for 2021 and beyond, we will engage once more with our new Democracy Fellow to serve as a co-facilitator for the development of the plan. We resolve to be more intentional about including multiple student contributors throughout the different steps and processes associated with the campus plan and all civic education programs on campus. The coalition will recruit students to serve in permanent seats on the coalition, adopt peer teaching models, and seek out organizational representatives and ambassadors for civic education on campus. We hope to engage faculty and staff to nominate students and include a diverse array of student experiences, including residents, commuters, full-time, part-time, humanities, sciences, and other classifications. The coalition will be led by the Community Engagement Coordinator who will work in tandem with a faculty member and student leader to provide direction for the coalition.

Overview of Goals and Accomplishments

The campus plan established in 2020 had two short-term and two long-term goals. In this section, each goal is described and analyzed with consideration to their execution at UHCL.

Short-Term Goals

Goal 1: Increase offered civic programming by increasing the number of programs to at least 2 programs per month during the semester.

Goal Achieved

The coalition and OSIL in conjunction with various campus partners established multiple events and programs to promote civic education on campus. Each month, UHCL hosted events in multiple formats to inform students on the voting process and provide space for students to become more civic-conscious leaders:

- *All In – The Fight for Democracy Twitter Watch Party: We participated with the Campus Vote Project in this national screening event to encourage student virtual engagement on Twitter and learn from impactful public servants and activists, like Stacey Abrams.*

- *Constitution Day: Building on our traditional Constitution Day programming, we collaborated with student organizations to host a panel about voting rights and the U.S. Constitution.*

- *Early Voting Polling Site: UHCL worked with Harris County to set designate on campus building as an early voting site for Harris County student and community residents.*

- *Election Day Polling Site: UHCL worked with Harris County to host Election Day voting for Harris County student and community residents.*

- *Election Night Watch Party: Students engaged in the residence halls and across campus virtually to watch as results came in on Election Night.*

- *Hawk the Vote: UHCL's very own version of "Rock the Vote," the Hawk the Vote event included t-shirts, masks, and registration initiatives for the university community.*

- *Rock the Vote: In celebration with the national voter engagement event, UHCL hosted large campus-wide events and marketing campaigns to bolster voter registration and participation in both the Texas primaries and the General Election.*

- *Voter Registration Monday: Mondays were celebrated at UHCL as days to promote voter registration on campus. OSIL staff held open office hours for students to register with deputy voter registrars easily on campus.*

- *Voter Trivia: This event engaged students before and after the election to promote awareness of voting statistics, facts, and procedures, through trivia games with giveaways for students.*

- *Voting 101: The Voting 101 program was an interactive virtual event engaging students in discussion about how to vote, from registration to the ballot box. This presentation was duplicated and presented in numerous settings with different audiences to engage diverse sets of students.*

- *Witness History – UHCL's Inauguration Watch Party: Students staff gathered in community to watch the historic inauguration via Zoom and socially distanced in the new Student Organization Center and you.*

Goal 2: Increase student engagement with political processes such as registration and voting by offering programs that incorporate voter education and registration.

Goal Achieved

In addition to the events listed above, the OSIL focused civic engagement efforts specifically on voter education and registration by incorporating voter registration as part of the GetInvolved involvement platform and setting voter education and registration as the central theme for all civic engagement programs through the office. The process of developing UHCL as a polling location was essential to our understanding of student needs and recognizing the various processes associated with voting and voter education. It provided our staff the first-hand experience to take back to our students and prepare them to register and participate effectively. This included signage and email communication that highlighted student voting rights and needs, and reinforcing services, programs, and civic involvement at Student Government Association and other organization meetings.

Long-Term Goals

Goal 1: Become part of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement and use the data to inform and improve future programming.

Goal in Progress

The OSIL team has submitted its participation form to join the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement and await the forthcoming results from the data analyzed in the 2020 election. On campus, we have begun the process of building capacity to analyze the report and interpret the results for implementation on campus. We anticipate receiving the data in early summer and developing a campus action plan moving forward.

Goal 2: Voting rate of 50% by 2022

Goal in Progress

This goal is still in an ongoing assessment phase as the OSIL team awaits voting rate data and the opportunity to compare it longitudinally over the past few election cycles and onwards till 2022. We do not have data currently to assess the percentage of voter participation at UHCL.

COVID and Social Impacts

Events in 2020 had an impact on the execution of campus programs that sought to achieve our goals. In the interest of public and student health, most events and services provided on campus related to civic engagement were transferred to a virtual setting. Events were transformed to be socially distanced and often took more time and space to safely execute. Furthermore, the ongoing political and social climate of the country from the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to the tumultuous transition of power and insurrection at the capital impacted the ways in which we sought to not only educate students, but how

we needed to support them. Navigating the emotional and mental trauma of the national discourse required collaboration with campus partners and recognizing the needs of our student populations in this moment. While these factors did not change the goals, the nature of their delivery and timeline was adjusted.

Analysis

There are four pillars of work for a well-rounded democratic engagement plan: voter registration, voter education, voter turnout, and student voting rights. The UHCL community sought to achieve each of these pillars through a diverse array of programs and services. The following is a breakdown of each pillar, how it was actualized, and the assessed student impact.

Pillar 1: Voter Registration

UHCL prioritized voter registration as a significant part of their plan. During the 2020 election, OSIL staff and student volunteers became Volunteer Deputy Voter Registrars for Harris County, as well as some of the surrounding counties (Montgomery, Brazoria, and Galveston). With this service available, the OSIL team hosted campus-wide events and tabled on different days and times to register voters. Additionally, staff held open hours for students and the university community to visit their office and become a registered voter. While not all voter registrations were documented in the GetInvolved platform, the office registered over 300 students in a socially distanced setting.

With consideration to the fact that UHCL has only recently transformed to enroll freshmen students and that civic engagement programming is at its forming stages, the OSIL team had little research and understanding of student civic engagement on campus. Throughout this process, UHCL came to recognize that a vast majority of students were in fact interested in registering to vote, but simply did not know how, nor did they have the resources or time to dedicate. Hawks were willing to commit to the democratic process when provided the steppingstones to achieve participation. We learned that our international student community represented a wide array of countries whose democratic processes we were not aware of. Finally, since our office had limited first-hand experience in voter education and registration programs, we began to recognize the nuances of voter engagement including where students can vote, and the challenges students faced to register and participate.

Pillar 2: Voter Education

The OSIL team in collaboration with staff, faculty, and student peer educators developed events that educated student on voting processes including the Census, electoral college system, voting identification, and registration. We provided programs that gave students space to engage in meaningful dialogue about important issues in local, state, and federal elections and encouraged exploration of personal identities and values as it relates to political participation. In addition to signage on campus and virtually throughout the election period, we provided practical guides for voter education including sample ballots and guides

to nonpartisan information. We worked with CVP and the League of Women Voters to provide students with valuable campaign information and designed bulletin boards in high traffic spaces that had information from all candidates in the presidential election.

Through our voter education initiatives, we recognized that students were receptive to interactive engagement programs, including one's they could participate in themselves. For examples, one bulletin board encouraged students to self-identify themselves with regards to various political ideologies. And hundreds of students engaged with the board and reflected on their political beliefs. We also learned that while students were excited about voting and the democratic engagement process, they were overwhelmed by the influx of information related to voting and needed a streamlined information source to gain knowledge on voting issues and processes.

Pillar 3: Voter Turnout

UHCL was successful in engaging students in a culture of voting on campus. Through an aggressive marketing campaign on an institutional level, students were encouraged to put on their "Hawk the Vote" t-shirts and turnout at the polls. From emails and social media competitions to giveaways and stickers, the campus community encouraged civic participation for students across campus. Additionally, the designation of UHCL as an early voting and Election Day polling location greatly impacted this experience and turnout for our students. While we did not track the number of students who voted at the UHCL polling site, we counted over 14,225 total voters throughout the early voting period and 275 voters on Election Day. Our efforts in voter turnout led us to recognize the various challenges our students and community citizens face in accessing voting sites. It also led us to navigate challenges between the institution and county to provide a safe and efficient polling location amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Pillar 4: Student Voting Rights

Student voting rights and recognizing students are advocates for change is central to the learner-centered approach of UHCL. Through our voter education programs and communicating with students in advance of the election, we made sure to provide students with resources and information about their voting experience. This included hotlines for voter rights advocates and ensuring students were prepared well in advance to cast their vote. For students residing in Harris County, we encouraged on-campus voting and for students in other counties, we provided support in helping them identify their nearest polling site and addressing transportation needs to get there. While our team did not seek to establish a peer-based voting rights advocate program, we are eager to collaborate with students to incorporate this into a develop a civic leadership program. We learned that students were not aware of the various rights they had as voters.

There are several hurdles and successes that student voters face at UHCL. Since UHCL is a primarily commuter campus, approximately 50% of the student population live outside of Harris County. As a result,

it can sometimes be difficult for the campus to serve as a "one stop shop" for all their voting needs. While UHCL is evolving, and the growth of office and student services staff is increasing, there is a persistent low student engagement rate that was even more negatively impacted by COVID-19. Additionally, in our efforts to create an inclusive community, we have ineffectively provided democratic engagement for our international student population. While we are beginning to establish new partnerships between international student engagement personnel and community engagement staff, there is a need that persists with this demographic. In terms of voting successes, students celebrate the creation of dedicated staff support to provide for community and civic engagement programs on campus. The UHCL's campus is also easy to navigate and makes participation in the civic process, particularly voting an easy feat.
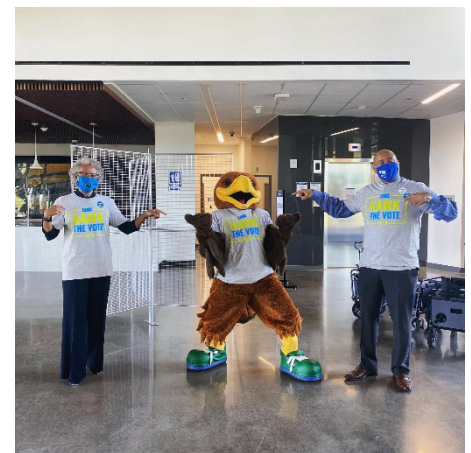
Successes

The university community celebrated several accomplishments in the democratic engagement process of 2020. Our top three success for civic engagement were:

1. Polling Site Selection: Being designated as a polling site for both early voting and Election Day allowed UHCL to provide students a prime space and opportunity to easily participate in the civic process. Developing this partnership with Harris County also allowed us to become more connected with and continue to give back to the local community.

2. Community Participation at Early Voting: As mentioned in the Analysis section, UHCL welcomed over 14,000 voters to campus during the early voting period of the 2020 General Election. Serving as a community resource and embracing voter turnout that vastly exceeds our own student population was inspiring.

3. Developing Civic Education Programs: While community engagement has been a part of the UHCL community, the launching of a robust civic engagement program for the first time in an election year has been a hallmark of our democratic engagement efforts in 2020.

Programs and services were assessed using the campus engagement platform, GetInvolved, powered by Anthology's Student Engagement platform, Engage. This includes event attendance and evaluation of student learning at, and satisfaction with, civic engagement programs. Additionally, civic engagement efforts were appreciated by the local community, including Harris County who wishes to establish UHCL as a polling site for the forthcoming local uniform election.

The success of the campus plan and our goals was supported on institutional level. The plan and programs received broad support from senior administrators, including the University President and Vice President for Student Affairs, both of whom identified these initiatives as an institutional priority. This was reflected in administrative policies and executive action by incorporating community collaboration, experiential learning, and civic engagement into the UHCL strategic plan. The successes in the execution of this campus plan will be shared with campus stakeholders through open meetings where students, staff, faculty, and administrators will provide feedback on their experiences and the growth of the university community. This report and its highlights will be widely shared through campus news outlets and social media platforms.

Barriers

UHCL successfully achieved the two short-term goals for the 2020-21 Campus Plan. We hosted multiple events and services focused on civic education and registration monthly throughout the campus plan's cycle. Additionally, we made progress in achieving our long-term goals, including the NSLVE Report and establishing a protocol to assess student voter engagement. However, the institution also faced multiple barriers in achieving its goals.

Campus Climate and Institutional Barriers

There were two primary barriers UHCL faced in implementing the campus plan:

1. Reduced Student Engagement: As a result of COVID-19 and overall limited campus engagement levels, it was often difficult to reach large numbers of students in both, virtual and in-person settings. Additionally, since UHCL is a largely commuter campus, student involvement in campus programs and traditions is low with most students coming to campus solely for class. The creation of the Division of Student Affairs just over a year ago is expected to strategically address low student engagement.

2. Loss of Staff: The attrition of multiple full-time staff members in the campus plan's home office, the OSIL, resulted in relearning and developing programs from scratch, as well as reassigning duties and responsibilities to fulfill the campus plan and all other traditional office programs.

Campus Climate and Institutional Barriers

On an institutional level, the campus plan did not have an effective leadership team. The lack of a centralized process for the campus plan execution resulted in multiple groups and offices seeking to provide services and offices with little collaborative support. As a result, student awareness of and engagement at these events and activities was diminished. Furthermore, the campus climate was heavily impacted by the rhetoric and trauma of the 2020 election cycle. Although they were motivated to learn and participate in programs, students often shared their feelings of negativity and apathy associated with the national dialogue. Emotional fatigue largely determined the overall feeling of students across campus.

As 2021 proceeds, UHCL aspires to define roles and establish processes that continue the learner-centered tradition in civic learning. We look forward to engaging with on-campus and off-campus partners that will share fiscal, administrative, and human resource responsibilities in the execution of civic engagement initiatives. We recognize that by involving the contributions of multiple groups, we can provide an innovative and more well-rounded culture of civic duty on campus.

Beyond 2020

As we begin a new chapter in American history, UHCL is excited to nurture existing programs and services, while simultaneously creating new initiatives focused on the 2022 mid-term elections and fostering year-round civic consciousness with our Hawks. With the recent onboarding of the new Community Engagement Coordinator and Democracy Fellow, we are excited to reconceptualize the coalition and the nature of civic engagement at UHCL. The coalition will commence the process of a new campus plan focused on 2021 and 2022 leveraging the collaborative talents and insights of students, faculty, and staff. UHCL will develop strategic partnerships across local, state, and regional organizations and leaders to better support student success. We envision crafting standard monthly programs and establishing campus traditions in which civic engagement is intentionally woven through. We will strategically unite experiential learning and civic education programs to encourage activism in multiple civic and political spaces. We will engage in critical dialogue with all stakeholders of the campus community and conduct formative assessment to provide students with high-impact learning opportunities consistent with their needs.

NSLVE Data

With the support of the coalition, we will analyze the NSLVE data and collaborate with NSLVE leaders, Institutional Research, and university administrators to interpret and extract meaningful and consequential outcomes. The coalition will identify gaps in voter engagement as it relates to gender, race, ethnicity, classification, full-time status, and other demographic information to focus attention on select groups through programming, services, and other resources. Demographic information will be instrumental in supporting the growth of students in specific student organizations, academic fields, and drawing out the needs of the various identity groups represented on campus. The coalition will present the data to the campus community and solicit the input of the campus community as it moves forward with transforming this data into goals. These goals will serve as the focal point of the next campus plan and be essential to the overarching objectives of all civic engagement and voter education programs at UHCL.