



Talking Politics



Guide for Campus
Conversations
about your
Voting Reports

Introduction

Over the past year, we visited five institutions with unpredicted high voting rates to study what those institutions might be doing differently from their more moderately or low performing peers. From these qualitative case studies, we identified characteristics of highly politically engaged institutions. Political engagement is a matter of campus climate, a complex ecosystem of interacting structural, cultural, human, and political factors that affect student learning. Among the most significant findings: politically engaged institutions support political conversations across campus and in the classroom. From these experiences, students examine public issues while simultaneously learning the arts of dialogue and inquiry, including issue framing, perspective taking, building consensus and community, and managing conflict.

Your campus voting reports represent an opportunity to organize a dialogue to increase awareness and generate action about your campus' voting data. We hope that through dialogue, colleges and universities will gain fresh ideas and inspiration and foster campus climates that support political discourse and engagement.

How to Use this Guide

Treat this guide as a roadmap, not a prescription, to leading conversations about student voting and political engagement more broadly. The structure is envisioned for diverse groups of 8 to 12 people, including faculty, staff and students, who meet twice for about two hours. Multiple groups meet over a period of time, usually between two and six months. Led by a facilitator, dialogue participants examine the institution's voting report in an intentional sequence:

- 1) Introductions, relationship building, and finding common concerns
- 2) Framing the issue and identifying the needs to be addressed
- 3) Envisioning a more politically engaged institution and the changes required to achieve a more politically engaged institution
- 4) Identifying institutional assets. The programs, people, capacities, and interests that either facilitate student political learning at your institution
- 5) Developing solutions
- 6) Identifying barriers to political engagement and brainstorming solutions to those barriers
- 7) Identifying next steps and actions

Strategies for Organizers

The role of the organizers is to create opportunities for a diverse group of stakeholders from across the institution to come together, build a common vision of success, and foster collective action.

Build a Coalition: Dialogues should be organized by a strong coalition of people, not an individual or small group, who represent different populations and functions on campus. Why? Coalitions make organizing manageable because tasks are shared. The most important role of coalition members is to capitalize on connections and affiliations to recruit participants to the dialogues. One individual or a small group will find it difficult to attract participants. People attend because they are invited by someone they trust. The more diverse and connected the group, the easier it will be to recruit participants.

Set Goals: The coalition members should discuss why it is important to engage the entire campus community in designing change and the kind of change being sought. Consider:

- Changes in individual behavior (e.g., increasing the percent of registered student voters who then vote)
- Bolstering existing or developing new networks (e.g., bringing together faculty representing multiple disciplines to collaborate on a program in student political engagement)
- Changes in institutional policy (e.g., revisiting the stated purposes of academic freedom and adding a statement about political speech)
- Changes in campus climate (e.g., embedding dialogue across institutional decision-making processes)

Pilot this Discussion Guide: Coalitions members should pilot the guide to learn the content and process. Coalition members who complete the dialogue become more enthusiastic about the initiative, making them better advocates and recruiters.

Train Facilitators: If your institution has not yet done so, identify a cadre of individuals who are either already trained facilitators or willing to learn to facilitate. Dialogue is not simply a matter of casual conversations. Americans tend to gravitate toward people who share their socio-economic status, social identity, values, political viewpoints, and interests. Facilitating meaningful and productive conversations across these and other differences are learned skills.

Support Facilitators: Create a system for facilitators to stay connected with each other, whether in person or on-line. It's important for facilitators to be able to share concerns and tips beyond the training. Consider bringing facilitators together periodically for advanced facilitation training.

Consider the Makeup of the Groups: Think about how participants are grouped. We recommend heterogeneous groups – mixing faculty, staff, students, institutional leaders, and members of the local community. The goal is not simply increasing voter registration and voting; it's to increase interest in public issues, policy, and social change, which is the responsibility of all on campus, not just students.

Logistics Matter: Physical spaces matter, from holding the dialogues in a room with the right lighting and acoustics, to whether the location is welcoming to all prospective participants. Bring the right supplies: easels, newsprint, markers, name tents or tags, water, food. Occasionally, facilitators need to prepare and post sheets of newsprint in advance.

Launch the Dialogues with a Kick-Off: Events to launch a dialogue series increase visibility, excitement, and credibility. A good kick-off event brings together a broad group of people (invited by a diverse coalition). Consider running an information session and even a mock segment of the dialogue to generate interest.

Provide Incentives for Participants: Food, extra credit, prizes help, but consider your students' needs for child care and transportation as well.

Be Strategic about Action and Next Steps: Too often, groups create a White Paper or plan for the institution or particular office that gets little traction. The ideal outcome is collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility for action. We divide action into three categories: what someone else (e.g., the administration) can do, what this particular dialogue group can do (either independently or with members of other dialogue groups), and what individuals can do.

End with an Action Forum: Find ways for the multiple groups to learn from each other. Usually, groups identify action ideas that overlap. Consider forming new coalitions to implement specific action strategies.

Session 1

Goals:

- Develop a shared understanding of student political learning and engagement
- Increase campus-wide understanding of the registration and voting rates of students at this institution
- Identify strengths in promoting student political learning experiences

SESSION 1
PART 1-2-3-4 30 minutes

Getting Started

Circle around and exchange names and your role on campus

 FACILITATOR TIP

Keep it short for now. The group will exchange stories after the review of the process.

Explain process, goals, and why we're here

The purposes of this dialogue are to:

- Develop a shared understanding of student political learning and engagement
- Increase campus-wide understanding of the registration and voting rates of students at this institution
- Identify strengths in promoting student political learning experiences
- Explore some strategies for increasing student political learning and engagement in democracy
- Settle on next steps.

 FACILITATOR TIP

These goals also reflect the sequencing of the discussion.

Approve ground rules

These suggestions are a starting point for coming up with your own ground rules:

- 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.

Getting to know each other



FACILITATOR TIP

Discuss why we are here

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

Understanding the language

Talk about the words used to describe civic participation

- What do the following words mean to you:
 - Civic engagement
 - Community engagement
 - Political learning
 - Political engagement
- Do we all agree, or are there multiple perspectives in this group?



FACILITATOR TIP

This section is supposed to be casual and an exchange of stories.

Ask people to be sensitive to time constraints and remind them that the discussion will get to the topic in more detail soon.

Make sure the group knows that there are no “right or wrong” answers to these last questions. We are just exchanging perceptions and opinions, not trying to reach consensus.

For this discussion, political engagement includes politics-as-usual and politics not-as-usual. It includes acts such as voting and running for office, as well as activism, community organizing, and political conversations.

Political learning and engagement



FACILITATOR TIP

Part 2 concerns what is happening on this campus specifically.

On this campus

- To what extent does this institution incorporate student political engagement in its learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom? For all students or just some? Why or why not?
- What viewpoints on student political learning and engagement may be missing from this group? What would others say?

SESSION 1

PART 1—2—3—4

45 minutes

Our students' political engagement broadly



FACILITATOR TIP

Give participants a minute or two to review the data.

About the report

- How are students here doing?
- Does anything surprise you?
- Do the data reveal any problems? What are they?
- Is something missing? What is not here that you might want to know more about?

Perceptions of attitudes and level of 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?
- Are you politically engaged? How?

Assessing the current situation

- Do we think students are where they “should be” with respect to political engagement? Why or why not?
- Is the level of engagement comparable across various groups of students on campus. What groups are not engaged

SESSION 1
PART 1-2-3-4

30 minutes

Imagining the politically engaged institution

! FACILITATOR TIP

Brainstorm

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) be doing?

It's important that groups know what they are working toward - an image of the "mission accomplished," when crafting action strategies. A vision does not need to be long-winded or lofty. But it's important that groups have a sense of the desired outcomes before imagining concrete actions. We recommend a statement or two for each constituency (students, faculty, staff, leaders, and the local community). Don't worry about grammar. Just capture the ideas.

Sometimes participants will suggest things that are action steps rather than vision statements. For example, "faculty development" might be the action strategy. Set up a parking lot in advance so that you can add to it as the brainstorm continues, but capture the corresponding vision, which in this case might be, "professors use current events in the classroom."

SESSION 1
PART 1-2-3-4

15 minutes

Wrapping Up and "Homework"

Summarizing

- What are the key takeaways from today?
- Did you hear anything today that surprised you or intrigued you?
- How did this session go for you? What worked and what would you like to do differently next time?

For Next Time

! FACILITATOR TIP

The next session will focus on what's already going on at this institution that plays a role in getting us to the vision we just created.

Hand out Report Card. Each item gets a grade, A to F. Jot down specific examples, similar to those in parentheses.

Thank participants for their time!

Campus Report Card

Please list all assets that you can think of, not just one per box. When thinking about assets consider programs, structures, people and activity.

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 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)		

Session 2

Goals:

- Explore some strategies for increasing student political learning and engagement in democracy
- Settle on next steps

SESSION 2
PART 1-2-3-4-5 15 minutes

Welcome back

Revisit the prior discussion

- Any additional thoughts about we discussed?
- Has anything relevant to our concersation happened on campus?

Review Goals

- Explore some strategies for increasing student political learning and engagement in democracy
- Settle on next steps.

SESSION 2
PART 1-2-3-4-5 30 minutes

Report card



FACILITATOR TIP

Create newsprint in advance with headers that match the Report Card. Have participants go around the room and add to each page of newsprint the program, structure, person, activity, etc. that they identified on their report cards. If they see one of theirs already listed, have them add a "check" or dot to it. If, as they read things that are listed, they remember other examples, they can add them

Questions for each category

- Which categories get high grades?
- Which categories get low grades?
- Do we all agree? Why or why not?

- Is this report card missing any categories that would be important to this campus? What are they and how would they be graded?
- Where are our strengths and where are our weaknesses?

SESSION 2
 PART 1-2-3-4-5 30 minutes

What needs to happen?



FACILITATOR TIP

Pull out any action ideas that were put in the parking lot before. Review the goal: that we are going to discuss options for action. Actions can include institutional policy changes, new programs, expanding existing programs, and individual and group commitments. The goal is not to produce a plan or set of strategies that will be turned over the administration for implementation. Avoid removing ideas at this point, use this simply as an opportunity to capture the groups best thinking on what needs to happen across the various facets of campus.

Where should we focus our energies? Some categories to consider

- Policies
- Curriculum
- Co-curricular programs
- Community based experiences for students
- New traditions
- Faculty development
- Staff development

Of these ideas that you generated, which

- Are most likely to facilitate change?
- Do you prefer?
- Can be achieved through individual action?
- Can be achieved through collective action of this group?
- Require additional resources?
- Require institutional support?

Barriers

- What barriers might prevent these actions?
- What are some strategies to overcome these barriers?

SESSION 2
PART 1-2-3-4-5 30 minutes

Finding common ground and next steps

 FACILITATOR TIP

Narrowing it down

- Identify a few actions that can be pursued by the group collectively
- Identify one action item that might be more appropriate for a special task force or working group.
- Select a few focus areas. Try to consider a mix of both long and short term goals/areas.

Next steps

- What do we recommend to others such as administrators?
- What can we as a small group do?
- What can I as an individual do?

 FACILITATOR TIP

Remind the group that they do not need consensus, but they do need to identify a few things that seem to take priority. If there is disagreement, you can also make a "minority report" or communicate dissenting viewpoints. Make sure that what is being reported out really is the will of the group and not just of a few effective advocates. You might want to poll them (or even do a secret ballot).

All too often, groups create pages of strategies that someone else, usually the administration, should do. Resist the urge to do that. If the group wants to make recommendations, limit them to one or two. Persuade the group to form new small groups to follow through on an action item. Create post-it notes that complete the sentence, "As a result of this discussion, I will..." Have them put their ideas up on the relevant newsprint with each report card area.

SESSION 2
PART 1-2-3-4-5 15 minutes

Wrap Up Questions

- What are the key takeaways from today?
- Did you hear anything today that surprised you or intrigued you?
- How did this session go for you? What worked and what would you like to do differently next time?

 FACILITATOR TIP

Thank participants for their time!

Plan in advance how you will wrap up the dialogue. A report? An email group? An action forum with other groups? Tell the group the plan. Make sure you have email addresses and phone numbers.