



**Sam Houston State University
Political Engagement Project Statement**

The Political Engagement Project (PEP) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) emphasizes three components of citizenship: *political participation*, *political knowledge*, and *political leadership*. SHSU has stated goals and developed and implemented programs and objectives to achieve these goals. We have also initiated an assessment of current and future programs and objectives.

Assessment

The Political Engagement Project committee at Sam Houston State University is pleased with the progress that has been made at this point. It is recognized that significant improvement needs to be made in the inclusion of more students, faculty, staff, and administration in the implementation of programs and activities through academic and nonacademic departments on campus. There are several academic departments, including History and Communication Studies, which will be targeted in the near future.

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Political Participation

Students will be encouraged to be politically engaged throughout their lives.

Objective 1: Increase voter registration among SHSU students.

Political Science

POL 261, Principles of American Government – National and State, is offered each semester. During the fall semester, there were 24 sections with approximately 1240 enrolled students. In the spring semester, there will be approximately 15 sections offered with about 850 enrolled students. At the beginning of fall semester, faculty delivered a presentation addressing the basics of voter registration and voting. Topics addressed included how to register to vote, Texas voter registration laws regarding voter residency and students, the basics of voting such as early voting and voting on election day. At the conclusion of the presentation, faculty helped students register to vote.

First-Year Experience

SAM 136, Introduction to Collegiate Studies, is a three-hour, writing-enhanced, elective, freshman seminar with a class size of approximately 25 students. Students read, write, and speak extensively on experiences and challenges that are common among first-year students. Topics covered in the class include goal setting, time management, writing and public speaking, relationships, stress management, values, and service learning.

During the fall 2006 semester, there were 24 sections of SAM 136 with approximately 515 enrolled students. Although students were introduced to civic engagement initiatives throughout the semester through class discussions and five service-learning projects were organized through the university and local community. The largest project was to assist the American Democracy Project (ADP) in registering students to vote and distribute election information.

There were three phases for the voter registration project. Phase One began on August 30 and continued through October 6, and included six sections of SAM 136. These students were trained in class about the process to become registered to vote as well as the process to become a poll worker in the community. The students volunteered their time every weekday during the time period to register students to vote. The voter registration tables were located in the middle of campus, and students spent three hours per day at the site to collect voter registration cards. Daily, the cards were deposited at the Dean of Students' office, which in turn mailed them to the Walker County Election Office for processing. Phase One required an intensive collaboration between Political Science, First-Year Experience, the American Democracy Project, and the Dean of Students' Office.

Phase Two ran from October 9 through November 7 and included two sections of SAM 136 classes. In this phase, student volunteers distributed election information to the campus population. Approximately 2,000 packets were distributed to the student population. After being trained in class, student volunteers were able to answer numerous questions concerning the voting process, who was running for various political offices, and voting locations.

Phase Three was the assessment process after the election.

Assessment: Over 700 students were registered to vote in the 2006 mid-term election, and over 2,000 election/candidate information packets were distributed to students. In the 2004 presidential election, 1,300 students were registered to vote. Since there is lower voter interest in mid-term elections, the PEP committee is very satisfied with the student voter registration for 2006.

From the student survey that was completed by the student volunteers in the SAM 136 classes, it was shown that the voter registration and election information distribution service-learning project had a positive impact on the students who participated, but also pointed out some areas of discussion that the instructors will need to facilitate differently in the future.

	Agree or Strongly Agree
Voter registration and election information can be used in everyday life.	64%
Service-learning showed me how I can become more involved in my community.	59%
The community work I did benefited the community.	51%
I have a responsibility to serve my community	63%
Most people can make a difference in their community.	80%
Participating in the community helped me enhance my leadership skills.	51%
I can make a difference in my community.	81%

Although the voter registration objective was fulfilled, the voter registration process needs to be improved. Election officials with whom the PEP committee has direct contact indicated that a significant number of the voter registration cards were inaccurate and/or incomplete. In such cases, letters were sent out to students to inform them of the need to fill out another voter registration card.

2007 New Developments: The problem of inaccurate and/or incomplete voter registration cards was extensive enough to warrant changes in the voter registration program. In 2007, student voter registration will take place in a more controlled environment, specifically classrooms and freshmen orientation. Faculty will deliver presentations on voting and voter registration to students enrolled in introductory political science and history courses as well as to students attending freshmen orientation. After the presentations, faculty will distribute voter registration forms to students and instruct them how to complete the forms.

Objective 2: Increase the number of SHSU students volunteering as poll workers.

The chairpersons of each Walker County political party, who are responsible for selecting poll workers, were contacted and provided with a list of SHSU students who wished to work the polls during the November elections.

Assessment: Walker County has the unique advantage of not having problems finding volunteers to work the polls. Several SHSU students were involved as poll workers; however, future contact with the political party chairpersons will be made to discuss other available roles for students beyond poll workers.

Objective 3: Increase SHSU student involvement in the election process.

Political Science 495, Directed Studies and Internships, is designed especially for advanced students who possess strong independent learning skills. The Walker County Elections Office offers an internship each semester. Internship duties include: Processing voter registration cards, maintaining voter rolls, helping set up for elections. The political science department also has internship positions with the City of Huntsville, Walker County District Office, Office of the Walker County Republican Party, Office of the Walker County Democrat Party, Houston Mayor's Office, and United States Representative Kevin Brady's Office.

Assessment: Walker County Election Office officials were pleased with the performance of the student intern in the fall semester and have offered to increase the number of internships offered per semester from one to three. In fall 2007, the department will offer an internship through the Sam Houston State University Political Engagement Project. The internship position is designed to introduce students to democratic government in the international context. The student who is awarded the position will be expected to conduct research in the area of developing democracies, write and present a professional paper at The Alliance of Universities for Democracy annual conference, and assist in the development of an international political emphasis in SHSU's PEP.

2007 New Developments: Three students will present papers at the 2007 Alliance of Universities for Democracy Annual conference. The students' papers address the development of women's rights in transitional nations.

Political Knowledge

Students will gain knowledge of government and politics.

Objective 1: Encourage students to develop an appreciation for current political events and politics.

Constitution Day

The Constitution Day program, sponsored by ADP and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and held on September 19th focused on activities designed to introduce students to the importance of the U.S. Constitution to basic civil rights and civil liberties through 5 educational sessions.

The opening session was a showing of "Are We to be a Nation?" (Part 6) of the PBS Series "Liberty: The American Revolution." This session fostered discussion among the audience members about the significance of the constitution.

A panel discussion by Dr. Tom Cox and Dr. Jeff Littlejohn of the history department on "The Civil Liberties Tradition in Modern America" focused on religious liberty and sparked an engaged discussion among the participants.

Dr. John Domino of the political science department spoke on "Making Sense of the Fray over Judicial Activism: Originalism, Strict Construction, or a Living Constitution?" which explained the debate over the judiciary as an on-going and vital part of the American constitution.

Dr. Glenn Sanford of the philosophy department presented on "Science and the Constitution: The Scopes Trial and the Continuing Controversy over Creation and Evolution" which allowed the audience members to explore the relationship between the establishment of religion and free speech.

Dr. Paul Finkelman, guest speaker and the President William McKinley Distinguished Professor of Law and Public Policy at Albany Law School, presented "Civil Liberties in Time of War: What We Can Learn from History." His timely topic stimulated debate and discussion among the participants.

Forum on the Governor's Race

KSHU-TV, the student-run cable television channel, produced a discussion on the Texas governor's race. Two student reporters interviewed Dr. Bob Biles and Dr. John Holcomb of the political science department. Because Texas had two independent candidates who ran for governor the discussion focused on the challenges of independent nominees, the history of multi-candidate races in Texas, and the types and likely effects of campaign advertising. The purpose of the forum was to provide students with a context for the governor's race.

Celebrating Democracy

The Celebrating Democracy program was held in the spring semester and focused on activities designed to emphasize the importance of political activism to a healthy democracy. This event was sponsored by ADP.

Assessment: The total attendance at Constitution Day was 322. Thirteen faculty members from five different departments either required or gave extra credit to students who attended. Unsolicited comments from faculty included, "I enjoyed the religious freedom discussion," and "My students' reaction to Dr. Finkelman is very encouraging - we may have some critical thinkers out there after all!"

Celebrating Democracy Week-long events included the following activities attended by approximately 200 students and faculty: (1) Speech by Dr. Samuel Munoz on the privilege of living in a democratic country, (2) Film, *Addicted to Oil*, followed by discussion session, and (3) Recognition awards for faculty and students for outstanding contributions to citizenship and democracy. In addition, ADP steering committee members handed out popcorn to over 500 students during the week. The popcorn bags had the following quote: "Democracy is like popcorn. The tiny drop of water within each kernel is heated up – with demanding questions, thoughtful deliberation, challenging conversations, and interesting debates. Then, given the right conditions, the tough outer shell of the seed explodes into something useful and nourishing. Share the popcorn with a friend and celebrate democracy."

Objective 2: Teach students how to obtain information about government.

Collegiate Readership Program

SHSU has been recognized by *USA Today* as one of the top 50 universities in the United States for commitment to civic engagement and global awareness on campus. The readership program distributes five newspapers every weekday to multiple locations on campus. The newspapers include: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Huntsville Item*. On August 17th, Kate Almanza and Mary Jo Lawry of *USA Today* presented on using that newspaper and others in courses at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Teaching Conference. On November 29th, the ADP and *The New York Times* Knowledge Network presented a luncheon workshop to faculty and staff which focused on how *The New York Times* and other newspapers can be integrated into courses. Mekelle Douglas of *The New York Times* and three faculty members (Mitzi Mahoney–Political Science, Lee Miller–Sociology, and Mike Vaughn–Criminal Justice) who are already using *The New York Times* in their courses presented. Sponsored by the Division of Student Services and Student Government Association.

Election Information

Election information packets included information about the voting process, voting absentee, voting locations, and candidate information in Walker County and surrounding counties.

Assessment: Currently there are six stations across campus where newspapers are distributed through the Collegiate Readership Program. Approximately 49 faculty members used *The New York Times* in their fall semester courses. At the end of the academic year, the average daily number of newspapers picked up by the SHSU community will be reported. Eight faculty members attended the August 17th presentation and 15 attended the November 29th presentation.

As part of the campus-wide voter registration initiative, over 2,000 packets of information about the local and statewide races were distributed.

Political Leadership

Train students to become leaders on campus and in their communities.

Objective 1: Introduce students to campus and community leadership opportunities.

Huntsville City Council Town Hall Meeting

On October 10th local governmental officials led a town hall meeting with students to listen to student concerns and ideas on how to better serve the campus community. Topics of concern included ways in which the university can be better integrated into the community, ways the downtown area can become more viable, and extending the sale of alcohol from midnight to 2 a.m. The alcohol curfew issue has attracted the attention of the university administration and students in a combined effort to promote this initiative with the city council. Sponsored by Student Government Association and the City of Huntsville.

U.S. Representative Kevin Brady

On November 1st Representative Brady, whose district includes Sam Houston State University, led a discussion with students on issues such as federal funding for college. The meeting drew hundreds of students, who asked questions relating to the war in Iraq, the minimum wage, and alternative fuels. Sponsored by the Office of the President.

Leadership Initiative

The Office of Student Activities inaugurated their Leadership Initiative series with Linda Armstrong Kelly, mother of Lance Armstrong, on October 10th. Among the leadership topics discussed was the need to develop and maintain ties with the community.

Assessment: The programs were covered in the student newspaper, *The Houstonian*, and the local community newspaper, *The Huntsville Item*. All three programs well-attended.

Program	Attendance
Huntsville City Council Town Hall Meeting	200
U.S. Representative Kevin Brady	400+
Leadership Initiative	400

Objective 2: Support students' leadership efforts.

Residential Life Leadership Development

The Department of Residence Life initiated a new program to develop and foster leadership among the students who live on campus. There are approximately 3,300 students living in campus housing. Of those, 55% are freshmen students who are required to live in the residence halls. The remaining 45% are upperclassmen who have chosen to remain living on campus. Campus housing is divided into 32 buildings, which house from 36 students to 530 students.

Living in a residence hall or small house at SHSU means living in a community. This community is a dynamic setting composed of diverse people representing various cultures, attitudes, and learning experiences. The residence life staff initiates programming to develop a strong hall community, to provide education, and to involve students in their own education. One goal of the programming is to offer creative and enjoyable activities for residents while providing opportunities for the personal, professional, academic, and social development of each student. Programming for the community/student is the responsibility of all who live and interact within the residence halls and houses. It is through this joint responsibility of programming that student development becomes an integral function of the residence hall experience. It is the people within this community, staff and students, who are the catalysts for the successful growth and development of the community and its members.

Hall councils fulfill the role of student government in the individual residence halls. They respond to the programming, educational, and social needs of hall residents. Participation in hall council offers the student the opportunity to develop skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, and decision making. Numerous ideas are exchanged during hall council meetings to help plan new events for the residence hall students. Although hall councils exist in the individual buildings, they are not isolated from other councils. Many hall councils collaborate to offer joint programs for the residents.

Hall councils are also a part of the Residence Halls Association (RHA) which is the campus-wide organizations of students living on campus. Representatives from every hall, house, and apartment complex on campus come together to exchange ideas, build community, and have fun. By maintaining active membership in RHA, hall councils may request funds for such things as social activities, physical improvements for the building, athletic gear, and philanthropic endeavors. Residence Halls Association is a campus wide organization composed of students living on campus. RHA provides a line of communication between residents, hall councils, the department of residence life, and university administration, while providing members with opportunities for leadership through programming and conferences.

Due to decreasing participation in both hall councils and RHA in previous years, residence life made a concerted effort to recruit more students who were interested in the leadership opportunities available in the residence halls. Instead of holding hall council elections during the second week of the fall term (as was the case in previous years), residence life began an intensive six-week programming effort to begin building community in the buildings. During RAs training prior to the fall semester all 80 RAs were challenged to build a welcoming community in their area by using a new program format. Labeled "Six Weeks of Magic," this program centered around resident introduction, interaction, involvement, and investment in the residence hall. From the six week program, natural leaders emerged and were recruited to run for a hall council elected position. In addition, these individuals attended a training session called TRACKS, Taking Risks and Capturing Knowledge Skills Seminar, to assist them in becoming a successful leader in their hall community. TRACKS focused on teamwork, philanthropy, fundraising, and building a community. In essence, these future leaders learn the basics of leadership while building their hall communities. Additionally, TRACKS was led by student peers who help the hall councils build community by showing them what is possible with the resources provided.

Assessment: So far the program initiated by Residence Life has been successful in identifying and recruiting student leaders. Over 70 students have been elected to specific hall council leadership positions this fall (up from around 25 students in previous years) and were invited to attend TRACKS, held in November 2006. After the training day, many students believed that the training was useful, and they were prepared to take on a leadership position in their residence hall. At the conclusion of the Spring 2007 semester, additional assessment will be conducted on the effectiveness of each area's hall council growth and involvement with the residents.

For the 2006-2007 academic year, hall council leadership has grown. More students have maintained their leadership positions in the residence halls throughout the spring 2007 semester. Due to the commitment to the residence hall, more students have renewed their housing assignment. In fact, we have had to cut off housing renewal because so many students renewed with us.

We will continue to grow the TRACKS program for the 2007-2008 academic year. Our hope is that the students who identify as leaders in the residence halls will continue on this track with other leadership opportunities elsewhere at the university.