



Research That Reaches Out Podcast

[Episode 2: Engaging Student Voters with Lauren Shinholster](#)

Hannah Nabi: Hello, and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, GA that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real-world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

We are here today with Lauren Shinholster, the Coordinator of Community Engagement at Mercer as well as the driver behind Mercer's voter engagement initiative. Lauren earned her undergraduate degree from Spelman College and a Master's in Public Health from University of Georgia. She came to Mercer in 2017 to run the Center for Community Engagement where she supports both the Office of Service Learning under the Provost and the Office of Campus Life in the Student Affairs Division.

Under Lauren's leadership, Mercer's footprint in the Macon community has grown tremendously, especially in the areas of tutoring and student-led engagement. Lauren is a close partner of Research that Reaches Out, both in the mission of her office and in the logistical support she provides to service-research courses doing work in the local community. On top of all the work she does with volunteerism and service-learning – did I mention she is a one-woman shop – she also leads the voter engagement effort at Mercer. This woman is a powerhouse, earning multiple awards for Mercer as a national leader in student voter engagement. I'm so excited to talk to her today. Lauren, welcome.

Lauren Shinholster: Thank you for having me. And thank you for that great introduction.

Hannah Nabi: All deserved. So let's start with the basics. What is voter engagement and why is it important for college students?

Lauren Shinholster: So voter engagement is really about your strategy or process for supporting voter participation, and it typically involves three things. First voter registration, then voter education, and then voter turnout or your Get Out the Vote efforts. In my time doing this work here at Mercer, I quickly realized that you have to have college students involved in every aspect of voter engagement. We know that students represent this powerful voting bloc, but they're also inexperienced voters. So just registering them to vote is not going to be enough. That's the start of the race. So for my office, I've worked with student leaders to inform every aspect of our voter engagement strategy and outreach. I trust the students to know what doesn't work for them or what will work. But

more importantly, you need those students involved because they're going to reinforce your message that voting matters.

Hannah Nabi:

All right, thank you. And for our listeners, it may not be apparent how voter engagement connects with Research that Reaches Out, so I'm just going to interject here with a little background before we continue. So Mercer's voter engagement initiative was actually born out of a student-led Research that Reaches Out project in 2015, and that project, which evolved into what is now the SoCon Votes competition, was the passion project for an undergraduate student named Joey Wozniak. And Joey is an incredible human being with a passion for voter enfranchisement who, after graduating from Mercer, turned this into his career.

So back in 2015 he pitched this idea for a voting competition between colleges at our annual Visionary Student Panel funding competition. And the first competition that Mercer participated in was what Joey started for the 2016 election, the SoCon Votes competition, which was for colleges and universities in the Southern Conference Athletic Conference. And that election also brought the start of the national competition, the All-In Democracy Challenge which Mercer also participates in. So Research that Reaches Out is particularly invested in voter engagement at Mercer because of its origins in Joey's Visionary Student Panel project.

So I want to ask you, despite all the time and the resources invested in getting students to be engaged voters, and as important as voting is, it's not a very sexy issue. It can be kind of hard to sort of rally the troops on this.

Nevertheless, you have led Mercer in awards from both the regional So Con Votes competition and the national All-In Democracy Challenge for high student voter turnout. What are some of the strategies that you and your student team have used to get students engaged?

Lauren Shinholster:

I think times are changing, so maybe voting is becoming sexier. We know that college students turned out in record numbers in 2018, so I'm certainly hoping that we're going to have that same success in 2020 despite some of the added challenges. But I think for us, having something like SoCon Votes to rally around has been a huge game changer for us. At Mercer, we're competitive so we like that challenge. We like seeing how we measure up against other colleges and universities.

So that was a great driving force for us, but I think at Mercer, we also greatly benefit from having a student body that is really bought into that service culture that we have here. So when you talk about civic engagement, going out to vote is really just going to be an extension of what we already do to serve our community.

When it comes to our actual strategy, I've learned to be very practical, which is really just self-preservation. We have a lot of great ideas and community partners that are coming our way, but we know that we can't do everything, and it goes back to being that office of one and only having a small number of students to work with.

But I work with Mobilize Mercer to accomplish a lot of our goals, and they're that nonpartisan group that you were talking about that helped really drive our action for the SoCon Votes competition. But with Mobilize Mercer, it was a small number of students – I believe they started off with just four or five. As students have graduated, we realized that we needed to build a robust group of students that can really power this work. So we're excited that in the fall, they'll be our newest programming board. And they're going to be able to have more events, more energy around our engagement, particularly when it comes to voter education.

When it comes to our voter registration work, we've learned to be very smart about how we spend our time. We can't do tons of tabling, so we've really concentrated a lot of our efforts within the first six weeks of the semester. Our most success has come from opening day, which is when our first year students are moving in. So just in that time alone, we're able to register over 300 students to vote, which is a third of our first-year class, in less than four hours. So we're really, really proud of that work and we want to keep that going each year.

When it comes to voter education, we do some of the typical events like debate watch parties, candidate forums. But one of the things that we were excited to host was a series of deliberative dialogues on social issues that matter to students. So we had groups coming in to talk about climate change and environmental impacts of engagement. So we're looking forward to coming back in the fall and doing that as well.

And then with voter turnout. We really encourage our students to vote early. We rely on groups, like from Housing and Residence Life, to do a lot of our Get Out the Vote initiatives, and then of course we want to celebrate all the work that the students are doing so we host debate watch parties. We partner with #VoteTogether to celebrate democracy, but I think one of the biggest tools for some of the success that we see at Mercer is having our students involved in our action planning. We have to create a civic learning and democratic engagement action plan for So Con Votes and the All-In Democracy Challenge, and so that allows us to be intentional about how we want to accomplish our goals and who we need to bring to the table to get this work done.

Hannah Nabi: Wow, that's a lot. I'm tired just listening. So you mentioned these deliberative dialogue events, tell me a little bit more about that.

Lauren Shinholster: Sure. So I don't know if you're familiar with the On the Table project that has come to Macon and also to Milledgeville. So On the Table brings together the community to talk about issues that matter to them. There may not be a set thing, but the idea is that you come together to share a meal, to talk about some issues that you want to put on the table. But going beyond just talking about the issues, it's really an action-oriented conversation. So hopefully you're leaving the table with some ideas to go out and solve some of those issues. Here in Macon, a lot of those conversations are around poverty, education, crime, or safety. And some of those issues we want to bring to Mercer as well. So we actually had a partnership going with On the Table and the Community Foundation to start On the Table Mercer. And On the table Mercer is going to be that deliberative dialogue where we have a meal and a conversation. The students selected various topics, so as I mentioned, climate change was one that they felt really passionate about, so we're going to start there and then just have a conversation. To get us started, we're going to limit it to Mercer students, but the hope is eventually we'll be able to invite anyone to the table.

Hannah Nabi: That's great. That really feeds into one of the goals that we've talked about before, that you have, is that community engagement isn't just about service and volunteerism. It's about building community. And I love that you're incorporating that into the voter engagement efforts. That's awesome. So you have access to some pretty cool data about voting for college students, and for Mercer students specifically. Tell us about the source of that and how you use it to inform strategy for the upcoming elections. And how do you teach your students to use this kind of data?

Lauren Shinholster: We participate in NSLVE, which is the National Study of Learning Voter Engagement out of Tufts University. And so we participate in NSLVE as a requirement of the SoCon Votes Challenge and All-In Democracy Challenge. And NSLVE has been an amazing tool. It's something that we used when we were establishing our executive board for Mobilize Mercer. But NSLVE looks at student clearinghouse data, and they compare it to voting records from all of our states and territories. And so from that data we're able to look at our voter registration rate and our turnout rate. But I think more important than that, we're able to look at some trends. So we're able to see, you know, the methods that our students are using to vote. We're also able to look at voting by age and gender and race and major and so on. So that information is valuable because we're a small force doing this work. We really have to narrow our engagement, and so what we've been able to see from our NSLVE data is that even though a lot of our students are from Georgia, most of them are voting via absentee ballot. So we need to focus a little more energy on educating about the absentee process.

We also know that we need to spend more time engaging with our first year students and our sophomores because they are registered to vote at lower numbers. When we talk about gender and we talk about major, we know that we have to work a little harder to get our men to vote. And that's something that we see nationally. So we need to look at what messages are going to resonate with them. And then for our majors, our education majors are blowing everyone else out of the water. They vote at the highest rate on our campus, which is a 67%. And then when we look at other popular majors like business and engineering, those numbers are 45% and 39% respectively, so that is not a great turnout. We know that we can do better in those areas. And so we have to work harder to make those connections to say, hey, politics and policy greatly impact business and engineering. This is how, and this is why you should be engaged in these issues.

Hannah Nabi: I'm going to put out a shameless plug for any faculty listening who teach research methods. Wouldn't that be a fascinating learning project to have students do a survey on campus of some of these target populations. So helping you out there, Lauren. You're welcome.

Lauren Shinholster: Thank you.

Hannah Nabi: So with the Covid-19 crisis, we've already seen elections postponed in Georgia and in other states. And we've heard about situations where the elections weren't postponed like in Michigan and how that has already been linked to new coronavirus infections. And we're even hearing some conversations in the news about uncertainties about what the November 2020 election will look like and how Covid-19 will affect those elections. How are college students affected by these kinds of changes and what do they need to know?

Lauren Shinholster: Voting can be a little confusing and challenging without a pandemic, so it's definitely more challenging now. For our students and the impact on them, I think the biggest thing is that things are rapidly changing. Here in Georgia, our presidential preference primary was supposed to be on March 24, went to May 19, and now we're June 9. So our ability to engage with voters has been hindered, so we're hoping that students are checking their emails and staying informed that way. But we know that it's going to make things a little harder for us. Going back to students being transient, there's the possibility that students may need to update where they're registered to vote. They may not want to be registered using their campus address; they may want to go back to their home address. Either way, students are just going to have to work a little harder to make sure that they're staying engaged beyond just checking their emails. I would recommend that they go to the website of their Board of Elections or

their state's Secretary of State. And although we really stress staying civically engaged, particularly in a time like this, I think you have to prioritize your health and safety. So we know that polling places are taking steps to promote social distancing and to try to make things as clean as possible, but there's only so much that you can do. I know that I'm personally making the decision to vote via absentee so I would certainly recommend to our students to vote that way or by mail as well. But if they don't have that option, if they have to vote in person, then I would say try to vote early. Do the best that you can to safeguard yourself. This election is going to be more difficult, so we have to do the work necessary, but prioritize your health and safety. I think that's the most important.

Hannah Nabi: So I remember for Georgia residents, reading a few weeks back, that the Georgia Secretary of State was just going to do automatic absentee ballot mail outs to every registered voter in Georgia. Do you know if that's still happening, or have they not, decided not to do that?

Lauren Shinholster: So all the Georgia, Georgia voters should have received the application to apply for absentee ballot. Those started going out probably about two weeks ago. The biggest issue that we're seeing is knowing where to send that information. So, for example, for a college student, if you're registered to vote using Mercer's address, then they may have sent that application to your campus mailbox. So if you didn't forward your mail, it could very well still be sitting in that mailbox and you wouldn't know until you return to campus. The best piece of advice is for our students is to go onto the State Secretary of State's page and you can request the application there and you can also submit it online.

Hannah Nabi: You work with students, I think 80-90% of Mercer students are Georgia residents, but we still have quite a few that live out of state. How do you help students who don't live in Georgia access their right to vote?

Lauren Shinholster: Well one of the things that we really rely on are external partnerships and those resources. So things like Turbo Vote or Rock the Vote - they're great for fifty-state voting assistance. One of the things that we kind of have going for us that really works in our benefit is the fact that we have most of our students voting here in Georgia. So that helps us with our communication, but when we ask students if they're registered to vote, we also have the Turbo Vote site pulled up, or the Rock the Vote site as well. And then we try to get our voter registration folks to be as knowledgeable about the different voting laws across the country. But we know that that's quite confusing too, so having those various resources that we can quickly pull up is so helpful.

Hannah Nabi: Our conversation is coming to an end. As we close out, I'd like you to leave us with some final thoughts on what students can do to be engaged, educated, and active voters.

Lauren Shinholster: So I want to say, I want students to give themselves some time to process everything that's going on. It's okay that this is not going to be the top of your radar. Eventually, we'll get back there. So stay the course. We are here to support you, whether you're on campus or off, and just stay engaged. Stay informed. You still have to do the work to find some of the information that you need, so you have to be an active participant in this process. But once again, we're here to support you.

Hannah Nabi: Great. Thank you, Lauren. And where can our listeners go to access more information about Mobilize Mercer?

Lauren Shinholster: So Mobilize Mercer's on social media. They are on Instagram. That was one of the things that they needed my – well I need their help - to inform some of our strategy moving off of Facebook and entering Instagram. So you can find information there. The Center for Community Engagement is still on Facebook, so we'll post a lot of information on that platform. But then also just check your email. Check your Bear Blurbs. We'll continue to post things on our website as they become available. Just stay engaged.

Hannah Nabi: Thank you, Lauren, for talking with us today about college student voting engagement. We appreciate your leadership and vision and best of luck in the 2020 competition.

Lauren Shinholster: Thank you.

Hannah Nabi: And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at QEP.mercer.edu and subscribe to our show at [SoundCloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com)