

Civics Engagement Focus Group Engages Students at Allen

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On April 9, 2024, Allen Community College welcomed a guest speaker from the Kansas Apple Seed. The speaker from Kansas Appleseed led a focus group on civic engagement with about twenty anonymous students in attendance. Kansas Appleseed is a state advocacy organization that involves civic engagement and focuses on 3 different subjects thriving (SNAP and children hunger), youth and adult justice, and foster care.



The discussion started with a couple of ice breakers questions, such as: What is your name, what are your preferred pronouns, and what is the most impressive thing about yourself? These icebreaker questions helped the students get to know each other and allowed the students to feel more comfortable. After ice breakers, the speaker went straight into questions about civic engagement and voting.

The first question asked was "What first comes to mind when you hear civic engagement?". Some of the answers included voting, volunteering, group gatherings, schools, families, churches, parks, and politics. When discussing the question, students explained how they could be involved with civic engagement and how these things can affect the community.

Discussing the topic of politics sparked a question of "Are you planning to vote in November?" Most did say yes, they would be voting in November, because it allows them to use their voice, follow personal convictions, do their civic duty, and helps shape our country for the next four years. Those who said no, they would not be voting in November, had very common responses. They believe that their vote doesn't matter, that they have not been paying attention to make an informed decision, or that politics are too one-sided.

The speaker followed up the students' responses to the question of whether or not they would vote in November by asking, "What barriers to voting do you think exists?". Some answers to the question included: not knowing where to vote, how or where to register to vote, how to get to the polling place (some find it too far to travel), fear of information being stolen while voting, difficulty finding childcare during the election, and not having enough knowledge of candidates. Many of these difficulties came with a solution, but there also seemed to be some that either couldn't be worked around or require very tedious planning.

Another topic discussed was concerning food insecurities. Students were asked, "Do food insecurities and other economic issues affect voting?" Two responses that stood out the most were "If you are starved/starving, you aren't worrying about voting.", and "People don't want to leave work and lose hours."

These responses moved the discussion to SNAP and other food security programs. One student said the following about these programs, "Families that work suffer and families that don't tend to get free money and waste it". From saying this, they clarified that they meant many people who work a nine to five and work every day tend to barely be able to make ends meet and aren't able to get SNAP or other benefits, but there are some families that either barely work or don't do much at all and receive more help.

Students were then asked if a candidate were to help with food insecurity, would students be more likely to vote for them, and many students responded with no because they would rather vote on more than one belief, or they would need to reevaluate them.

After the discussion, two of the student participants were interviewed about what their thoughts on the discussion were, if they enjoyed the discussion, and if they felt heard and understood.

One student responded with "I think the thing I enjoyed about it was just the freedom, so the freedom to state my own opinion, and talk with one another about our opinion, and to debate differencing opinions with other people without it getting too intense or rowdy. I definitely did feel heard. Everybody was actively listening, for the most part, except for some in the very back. Overall, I enjoyed it, and I got to talk about thing that you don't get to traditionally talk about in a class at Allen."

Another student responded with "I did enjoy the focus group. I think it's great to see everyone's thoughts on how to get the community more into voting. I think they will take the feedback to improve what we have, but moving forward in Kansas, I don't think it would relate to me much because I am from New Mexico".