



# **Michael Watson**

SECRETARY OF STATE

2025 NASS IDEAS AWARD NOMINATION

## **“SOS Student Ambassador Program”**



Submitted by:

**MICHAEL WATSON**  
Secretary of State  
State of Mississippi

The Secretary of State’s Student Ambassador Program is a program between high school seniors, the Secretary of State’s Office, and Secretary of State Michael Watson. Through the program, students with a passion for leadership and state government are equipped to return to their schools as proponents of voter education and awareness. They also have regular interactions with officials from the Secretary of State’s Office, Mississippi Legislature, and various other state, local, and national leaders.

***“The SOS Student Ambassador Program is a great opportunity for young leaders to cultivate their affinity for public service and expand leadership skills. We are excited to take part in the development and growth of the next generation of Mississippians and look forward to providing a greater understanding of one of our greatest liberties, the right to vote.” –Secretary Michael Watson***

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General Subject Area of Nomination:  
Elections/Miscellaneous

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### HISTORY

It is no surprise young adults in the United States shy away from voting precincts on election day. Whether apathy, lack of understanding of the elections process, or even belief one vote doesn't matter, the youngest generation of voters in the U.S. is one of the lowest performing groups in the country and across the globe<sup>1</sup>. According to a U.S. Census Bureau<sup>2</sup> publication distributed after the 2022 federal election, voters aged 18-29 (of the citizen voting-age population) have been underrepresented in every congressional election on record, with 2018 marking the highest turnout in this category. Mississippi also marked the country's lowest turnout among voters with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Not only does Mississippi have a difficult time engaging citizens in voting, specifically young adults, but also retaining educated, young professionals. According to research conducted by the Mississippi State Economist Corey Miller, "College and high school graduates make up smaller proportions of the population in Mississippi than in almost all other states<sup>3</sup>."

Further, when comparing the number of individuals aged 25 and older with at least a bachelor's degree who moved away from the state to those who moved into the state from 2010 to 2019, the difference is negative in eight of the 10 years. During this period, only two other southern states experienced such loss. Arkansas recorded one negative year in 2019, and Louisiana experienced three negative years in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

While numerous other publications support these alarming statistics, the message is clear-- Mississippi needs to engage our young leaders and voters.

After a chance meeting with all officers of the 2021 ALA Magnolia Girls State, Secretary Michael Watson decided to launch a program aimed at engaging high school seniors with one of the focuses being the elections and voter registration process in our state. In the spring of 2022, the Secretary of State's Office launched its first application for the inaugural class of SOS Student Ambassadors to participate during the 2022-2023 school year.

### SIGNIFICANCE

The SOS Student Ambassador program, comprised of Mississippi's best and brightest young leaders, is a unique opportunity where students with a passion for leadership and state government are equipped to return to their schools as proponents of voter education and civic awareness. Through regular interactions with Secretary Watson, other leaders from the Mississippi Secretary of State's Office, state and local officials, and business and industry leaders, students who complete the program receive a first-hand account of state government in action, establish a network of like-minded peers from across the state, and experience the processes which ensure Mississippi is a better place for generations to come.

Utilizing thoughtfully scheduled and coordinated programming, students are mentored by leaders of all sectors in hopes of not only encouraging them to engage in the civics process but also investing and residing in their home state.

Any Mississippi student who meets the following criteria may submit an application for consideration:

- Grade Point Average of 3.0 or above

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/data-insights/young-people-are-less-likely-to-vote-than-older-people-often-considerably-so>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p20-586.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.mississippi.edu/urc/downloads/urcbraindrain\\_220526.pdf](http://www.mississippi.edu/urc/downloads/urcbraindrain_220526.pdf)

- Upcoming high school senior
- Proven satisfactory behavioral conduct
- Strong interest in state government and service

During the spring semester, the online application is released and requires completion of the following:

- Basic personal information
- Activities and awards within the school and community
- School counselor or administrator reference
- Personal reference
- Letter of recommendation
- 300-600 word essay

Once the application deadline has passed, all applications are reviewed by members of the Secretary of State's Office. Students with exceptional academic and service activities are selected to participate during the upcoming school year.

Components of the program include:

- A fall summit in Jackson (state capital) focused on the state's elections process and the Secretary of State's official functions.
- A spring summit in Jackson focused on the state's legislative process and voter registration drives.
- One to two regional summits on various Mississippi university campuses to highlight educational opportunities within the state.
- Monthly webinars with Secretary Watson and other Mississippi leaders. Each session gives the speaker an opportunity to tell his or her story and concludes with a question/answer period for the students.
  - Previous speakers include former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, current Mississippi Senator Roger Wicker, State Representative Zakiya Summers, Ole Miss Women's Basketball Coach Yolett McPhee-McCuin, Gabriel Prado (PraCon Global Investment Group Founder and CEO), Gerard Gibert (Venture Technologies Founder)

## IMPACTS/RESULTS

Since the program's inception, 193 students representing 121 high schools across all four congressional districts have participated. The 2024-2025 class is the largest to date—a 25% increase from the inaugural year.

Not only has our office assembled students to learn, but we have also empowered them to use the information accumulated to host voter registration drives in their respective schools and communities. Each student, utilizing information obtained via meetings and our office's Voter Registration Toolkit, has autonomously planned and conducted a voter registration drive for their peers.

→ *“Getting to hold a voter registration drive at my school was a wonderful experience; I was able to register one-fourth of my graduating class. Being able to encourage my classmates to exercise their democratic right to vote was truly rewarding. I was able to inform these classmates of where they could vote, how they could vote, and how often voting takes place. In addition, I was able to leave them with flyers and informational packets to further aid them in learning about our country's government. All in all, I am very grateful to be a Secretary of State Ambassador: an educational program that allows me to reach my community concerning various legislative and democratic matters.” –Riley Tingle, Perry Central High School (Class of 2024-2025)*

- *“I had a great time hosting the drive! Running the table was so rewarding — it was so fun getting to cross names off our list. We were especially happy at the end of the day when we realized we registered every eligible senior at our school! In total, that was about 25 students, and we felt really good about our 100% success rate. We plan to host another drive soon to register the students who have turned 18 since our last one.”* –**Morgan Smith, Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (Class of 2024-2025)**
  - *\*\*\*Click the link to view a news article from the registration drive: [Following voter registration drive, all eligible MSMS seniors registered for Nov. 5 election](#)*

With mentorship as one of the fundamental pillars of the program, our office conducted a joint ambassador summit with student leaders from across the Jackson Public School District in March 2024. This allowed students from across Jackson’s inner-city schools to participate in similar programming as the SOS Student Ambassador program. Through these interactions, students made connections and received information specifically geared towards local issues. Forging these relationships ensures Mississippi’s at-risk youth in the Capital City have positive experiences to build upon with government officials and leaders.

As mentorship is one of the fundamental pillars of the program, our office conducted a joint ambassador summit with student leaders from across the Jackson Public School District in March 2024. On this day, students from across Jackson’s inner-city schools participated in similar programming as the SOS Student Ambassador program. Through these interactions, students made connections and received information specifically geared towards local issues. Forging these relationships ensures Mississippi’s at-risk youth in the Capital City have positive experiences to build upon with government officials and leaders.

Most importantly, however, remains the feedback and lasting impact from the participants themselves.

- *“My time serving as an Ambassador for the Secretary of State’s Office was nothing short of amazing! The ambassador program does everything from introducing us to local, state, and federal officials, getting us interested in staying in Mississippi and giving back to our community, and also giving us a chance to go visit different colleges across the state! Whoever serves as the next ambassadors for this program will be extremely grateful that they have taken the opportunity to participate!”* –**Kye Webb, Pontotoc High School (Class of 2023-2024)**
- *“As the selected Junior Secretary of State for the 2023-2024 SOS Secretary of State Ambassador Program, I am excited to reflect on my enriching experience. Working closely with fellow ambassadors has been a highlight, as we collaborated on impactful projects like the voter registration drive. Engaging with the Secretary of State offered valuable insights into the workings of our government and the importance of civic participation. Through these interactions and the collective efforts of our team, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of our roles in shaping our community. This program has ultimately empowered us with the knowledge and skills to drive meaningful change and build lasting connections.”* –**Christopher Dawson, Provine High School (Junior Secretary of State, Class of 2023-2024)**
- *“Today we discussed the importance of voter turnout, and the issues surrounding our communities when it comes to misinformation. We got to hear from Secretary (Michael) Watson and his team on issues besides voting such as lands, businesses, school funding, and so much more. I am beyond excited to bring the information we’re learning back to Brookhaven and our schools.”* –**Maria Jose’ Barrera, Brookhaven High School (Class of 2023-2024)**
- *“I enjoy the opportunity to be able to network with like-minded peers of mine who are passionate about ensuring we help to foster a more sustainable and civically engaged society where everybody is well-represented and has a voice.”* –**Jermarius Everett, JPS-Tougaloo Early College High School (Class of 2023-2024)**

→ *“Being part of the Student Ambassador Program has given me the chance to share what I’m passionate about with the rest of Mississippi. I wanted to bring awareness to how important voting is, and the influence one vote can have from county sheriff to president of the United State. Being an Ambassador has helped me give a voice to Simpson County.” –Steven Berry, Mendenhall High School (Class of 2022-2023)*

## SUPPORTING MATERIALS

### PAST AGENDAS



**SOS AMBASSADOR FALL SUMMIT**  
AUGUST 19, 2024  
JACKSON, MS

**STUDENT AGENDA**

**SESSION 1**

- 9:30 AM-10:00 AM – Registration Meet and Greet
- Ambassador Headshots

**SESSION 2**

- 10:00 AM-10:30 AM – Secretary of State Agency Overview
- Carla Thornhill, Chief of Staff

**SESSION 3**

- 10:30 AM-11:30 AM – Elections in Mississippi
- Kyle Kirkpatrick, Assistant Secretary of State, Elections Division

**LUNCH**

- 11:30 PM-12:30 PM Lunch & Learn Q&A
- Chef Nick Wallace, Nissan Cafe
- Lunch provided by C-Spire

**SESSION 4**

- 12:45 PM-1:45 PM – Capitol Tour

**SESSION 5**

- 1:45 PM-2:45 PM – Panel with Secretary of State Michael Watson
- Baylea Blough, Assistant Secretary of State, Business Services & Regulation Division
- Eric Slee, Assistant Secretary of State, Securities Division
- Jessica Thorton, Fund-Raising Registration Analyst, Charities Division

**SESSION 6**

- 2:45 PM-3:45 PM – Reverse Q&A
- Secretary of State Michael Watson

**SESSION 7**

- 3:45 PM-4:00 PM – Promote the Vote Overview
- Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator, Communications & Publications Division

**SESSION 8**

- 4:00 PM-4:15 PM – Closing Remarks
- Secretary of State Michael Watson



**Mississippi Secretary of State**  
**Spring Student Ambassador Summit**  
February 26, 2024  
State Capitol Building and Galloway Fellowship Hall

**PARENT AGENDA**

**SESSION 1**

- 9:30 AM-9:45 AM – Registration Meet and Greet

**SESSION 2**

- 9:45 AM-10:00 AM – Morning Session
- Wade Hinton, Assistant Secretary of State, External Affairs
- Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator, External Affairs

**TOUR**

- 10:00 AM-11:00 PM – Tour of Governor’s Mansion, 300 E Capitol St, Jackson 39201

**LUNCH**

- 12:00 PM-1:15 PM – Lunch on your own
- We provided a list of suggested restaurants in your registration folder

**TOUR**

- 1:00 PM-2:15 PM – Tour of Old Capitol Museum, 100 State St, Jackson 39201
- Parking is on the lower level at the Old Capitol, along Capitol St., or in the visitor garage at the Two Mississippi Museums.
- ADA Parking is on the upper level of the War Memorial building next to the Old Capitol

**SESSION 3**

- 2:15 PM-3:15 PM – Session with Secretary Michael Watson

**SESSION 4**

- 3:15 PM-3:30 PM – Details about What’s Next





Grisham-McLean Institute  
for Public Service and  
Community Engagement

**2023 Student Ambassadors**

September 18, 2023  
University of Mississippi (Oxford, MS)  
Partnership with MS Secretary of State

- 9:30 am Arrive to The Inn at Ole Miss  
Park Cars and Restrooms
- 10:00 am Haley Harbour Center for Manufacturing Excellence (CME)  
Students tour with Tyler Biggs and Lo Magee, CME  
Parents visit with Enrollment Management Leadership
- 11:00 am The Pavilion – Club  
Coach Yolett McPhee-McCain, Head Coach Women's Basketball
- 11:30 am Lunch at the Pavilion – Club  
Keith Carter, Athletic Director
- 12:30 pm Olivia and Archie Manning Athletics Performance Center  
Neal Mead, Ole Miss Athletics
- 1:45 pm Gertrude C. Ford Ole Miss Student Union 323  
Honorable Michael Watson, Mississippi Secretary of State  
Dr. Martin Fisher, Office of Admissions
- 2:30 pm Student Union and Food Trucks  
Bookstore
- 3:00 pm The Inn at Ole Miss

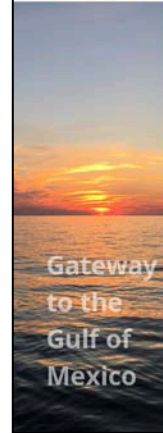
The Grisham-McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement  
P.O. Box 1848, University, MS 38677 | (662) 915-2052



**MARINE  
RESEARCH  
CENTER**

1030 30th Avenue  
Gulfport, Miss.

Dec. 11, 2023



**MISSISSIPPI SECRETARY OF STATE  
STUDENT AMBASSADORS**

- 9:30 a.m. — DR. JOSEPH S. PAUL  
*President, The University of Southern Mississippi*
- 10 a.m. — DR. LEILA HAMDAN  
*Research*
- 10:15 a.m. — DR. HEATHER ANNULIS  
*Leadership and Logistics, Trade and Transportation*
- 10:30 a.m. — JILL HENDON  
*Shark Research Program*
- 10:45 a.m. — DR. JORIS VAN DER HAM  
*Marine Biology*
- 11 a.m. — Break
- 11:15 a.m. — Lunch
- KEVIN MARTIN  
*Uncrewed Maritime Systems*
- CHRIS KIRBY  
*Fabrication Lab Demonstration*
- DR. KEMAL CAMBAZOGLU  
*Ocean Engineering*
- 12:45 p.m. — DR. REG BLAYLOCK  
*Aquaculture*
- 1:15 p.m. — Walk to Pier
- 1:30 p.m. — NIC ALLEN  
*Tour of R/V Point Sur*
- DR. GERO NOOTZ  
*In-water Demonstrations*
- 2:30 p.m. — Walk back to MRC
- 2:40 p.m. — DR. SHANNON CAMPBELL  
*Coastal Operations*
- DR. JACOB BRELAND  
*Admissions and Recruitment*
- 3 p.m. — Adjourn



**Spring JPS Student Ambassador Summit**

March 20, 2024 | 9:30 AM-3:30 PM  
State Capitol and Galloway Fellowship Hall

**STUDENT AGENDA**

- 9:30 AM – 9:45 AM Registration Meet and Greet, Capitol Room 113
- 9:45 AM – 10:00 AM Welcome & Overview of the Day, Capitol Room 113
  - Wade Hinton, Assistant Secretary of State, External Affairs
  - Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator
- 10:00 AM – 10:30 AM Secretary of State Operations Overview, Capitol Room 113
  - Carla Thornhill, Chief of Staff
- 10:30 AM – 11:00 AM Landing the Job: Resume, Interviewing & Internships Best Practices, Capitol Room 113
  - Lauren Armstrong, Chief Administrative Officer
- 11:15 AM – 12:30 PM Lunch & Learn with C-Spire, Galloway Fellowship Hall
- 12:30 PM – 1:30 PM Tour of Capitol
- 1:45 PM – 2:00 PM Meet & Greet with Previous Guest Speakers, Galloway Fellowship Hall
- 2:00 PM – 3:15 PM Session with Secretary Michael Watson, Galloway Fellowship Hall
- 3:15 PM – 3:30 PM Closing Remarks, Galloway Fellowship Hall
  - Wade Hinton, Assistant Secretary of State, External Affairs
  - Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator

**Mississippi Secretary of State  
Fall Student Ambassador Summit  
August 14, 2023 | State Capitol Building**

**STUDENT AGENDA**

- SESSION 1
  - 10:00 AM-10:30 AM – Registration Meet and Greet, Capitol Room 113
- SESSION 2
  - 10:30 AM-11:00 AM – Secretary of State Agency Overview, Capitol Room 113
    - Carla Thornhill, Chief of Staff
    - Bill Cheney, Assistant Secretary of State, Lands
- SESSION 3
  - 11:00 AM-12:00 AM – Elections in Mississippi, Capitol Room 113
    - Kyle Kirkpatrick, Assistant Secretary of State, Elections Division
- LUNCH
  - 12:00 PM-12:45 PM Lunch & Learn Q&A, Woolfolk Building Room 145
    - Lunch provided by C-Spire
- SESSION 4
  - 12:45 PM-1:45 PM – Capitol Tour
- SESSION 5
  - 1:45 PM-2:45 PM – Secretary of State Michael Watson, Capitol Room 113
- SESSION 6
  - 2:45 PM-3:00 PM – Promote the Vote, Capitol Room 113
    - Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator, External Affairs
- SESSION 7
  - 3:00 PM-3:30 PM – Business Services Overview, Capitol Room 113
    - Baylea Blough, Assistant Secretary of State, Business Services and Regulation
- SESSION 8
  - 3:30 PM-3:45 PM – What's Next, Capitol Room 113
    - Alex Gilbert, Outreach Coordinator, External Affairs
- SESSION 9
  - 3:45 PM-4:00 PM – Q&A, Capitol Room 113
    - Alex Gilbert and Wade Hinton, External Affairs Division



## AMBASSADOR PROGRAM OVERVIEW VIDEO

Click link to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaMP5AQG6dc>



## SUMMIT RECAP VIDEOS (\*\*\*)Click link to watch)

- [2023-2024 Ole Miss Campus Summit](#)
- [2023-2024 Fall Jackson Summit](#)
- [2023-2024 USM Campus Summit](#)
- [2023-2024 Spring Jackson Summit](#)
- [2024-2025 Fall Jackson Summit](#)
- [2024-2025 MSU Campus Summit](#)

## STUDENT VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVES




## JUNIOR SECRETARY OF STATE AWARD

\*\*\*Voted on by their peers after campaign speeches given



**2024-2025 APPLICATION FORM** ([\\*\\*\\*Click image to view document](#))



## 2024-2025 SOS Student Ambassador Application

**This document must be completed in its entirety to be eligible for review before the March 31, 2024 deadline. Late submissions will not be accepted.**

If you have trouble accessing the form, please contact [externalaffairs@sos.ms.gov](mailto:externalaffairs@sos.ms.gov)

**Today's Date \***

  
**Full Name \***



PHOTO COLLAGE

