

ALL IN Democracy Challenge
Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver)
Action Plan, December 2021
Revised May 31, 2022

ALL IN Contact Person:

Dr. Elizabeth L. Parmelee
AVP for Undergraduate Studies
MSU Denver
eparmel1@msudenver.edu

Executive Summary

The Action Plan for MSU Denver and its two Auraria Campus partner institutions (University of Colorado Denver or CU Denver, and Community College of Denver or CCD) is developed in coordination with the tri-institutional Voter Friendly Campus team, which includes representatives (faculty, staff and students) from all three institutions. This enables us to lean on one another and share resources, particularly time and staff resources when one partner is experiencing staff shortages or limited bandwidth. The MSU Denver American Democracy Project committee, listed below, is a partner in the work and assists with disseminating event information, and identifying interested students, but less directly involved in the planning than the Voter Friendly Campus team. Further, although a small group has taken the responsibility for drafting and spearheading the plan, we will rely on myriad partners, both on and off campus, to implement it.

MSU Denver, CU Denver, and CCD already have a strong record of voter engagement in key elections over the past decade or more. MSU Denver set a goal for the 2020 elections that we considered at the time to be a “stretch” goal of 70% voting rate and were extremely pleased to see that we surpassed the goal by more than 5 percentage points despite COVID-19 and the challenges it has created for engagement broadly. CU Denver and CCD similarly achieved high voting rates of 77.7% (up 8.5 points) and 65.7% (up 10 points) respectively. Nonetheless, we feel the need even more urgently to continue our focus and to extend beyond the act of voting. Not only do we serve a large population of students who are not eligible to vote due to immigrant status, but even our students who can vote, need encouragement, tools, and support to engage beyond their vote.

Given the nature of our shared campus, most activities and initiatives described in this plan will be implemented across the Auraria Campus, including all three institutions. We have developed a plan that aims to introduce and maintain activities and “buzz” across campus in a variety of venues and program areas, targeting areas that have shown less engagement in the past.

At its core, our Action Plan aims to enhance engagement “beyond the ballot box” – encouraging students to register, become informed, and vote, but to go beyond that act of voting to become advocates, open up civil dialogue, and educate themselves and others on issues of importance to their own identities. While this is a long-term plan that will go well beyond the 2022 calendar year and election cycle, the plan below provides examples of the programming and initiatives we envision. While COVID and the ongoing uncertainties that exist on campuses across the country make it difficult to plan any specific program without multiple contingency plans, the examples provided here will illustrate both our approach to engagement and the core values that inform this work at all three institutions on the Auraria Campus.

While our three institutions do not have a single center focused on civic engagement, we have discovered over the last several years that there are champions in every corner of each institution. At MSU Denver, those champions include the President, Faculty Senate, the Classroom to Career Hub and the Center for Equity and Student Achievement, while at CU

Denver and CCD there are likewise champions both at the top and in the grassroots. Thus the challenge is not to find people who are willing to help out, but rather to find effective ways of engaging this energy and to place students in the lead in developing programming that speaks to them. For that reason, while three key leaders have taken a lead role at each institution, the goal within the next year is to identify key student groups and organizations who can share in that leadership. Our students are busy with multiple jobs, family responsibilities and coursework taking precedence over other campus roles. Still, connecting them to short-term leadership opportunities will create both valuable learning for the students and badly needed student voices for our work.

Leadership

The Auraria Campus 2021 Action Plan is lead by a small team with representatives from each of the three institutions who also reflect faculty, staff, and student roles (see below). At each campus, these leaders are supported and joined by student, faculty, and staff teams with varied representation as well as community partners such as the League of Women Voters, New Era, and the City and County of Denver Clerk and Recorder's Office. Listing all the individuals involved in these efforts is unwieldy, but a sample group is listed below.

Auraria Voter Friendly Campus Team:

Elizabeth Parmelee, AVP for Undergraduate Studies, MSU Denver
Tierza Watts, Director of Student Life and Campus Community, CU Denver
Jaime Ingrisano, Assistant Director of Student Life and Campus Community, CU Denver
Toni Aho, Coordinator for Leadership & Community Engagement, CU Denver
Tammi Spicer-Dormuth, Asst Prof and Chair, Dept of Political Science, History, & Geography
Kathryn Mahoney, Associate Dean of Student Programming, Activities & Resources, CCD
Stephanie Puello, PhD Candidate and Student Progress Coordinator, CU Denver Grad School
Celia Reyes, City and County of Denver, Clerk and Recorder's Office

Student Leadership Groups:

MSU Denver Urban Leadership Program and Scholarship Support Program
MSU Denver Student Advocacy Council
CU Denver Student Government Assembly
CCD Student Government Association
Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society at CCD

Additional Campus Leaders and Partners:

Dr. Katia Campbell, Assoc Prof, Comm Studies & President, MSU Denver Faculty Senate
Dr. Robert Preuhs, Professor and Chair of Political Science, MSU Denver
Dr. Shelby Balik, Assoc Prof, History, MSU Denver & Tri-Institutional Constitution Day Committee member
Jeremy VanHooser, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Diversity Coordinator, MSU Denver

The group above reflects participation in political and civic engagement work at MSU Denver. This broad group supports the work of the Auraria Voter Friendly Campus team, which engages monthly, year-round, to plan events and initiatives for all three institutions at Auraria Campus. While each institution implements its own succession planning when one staff/faculty member leaves, the fact that each institution has multiple leaders involved has meant that the overarching group continues to meet and implement plans even when one or more members have left the group. This is part of the strength achieved by a tri-institutional team: while any one institution may be experiencing changes, departures, or other challenges at any given time, the other partners are able to carry on. This has made it possible to maintain momentum through changes in President, lay-offs, and even COVID.

Additionally, while the groups above are not representative of the full diversity that exists at all three institutions, the key leadership groups at each institution (Student Government, Urban Leadership, etc.) are highly diverse groups that broadly represent our student populations. We anticipate that by identifying less-intense ways for these students and groups to engage with voter engagement activities, we will expand the diversity of our leaders.

Commitment

All three institutions have strong access missions and are Hispanic Serving Institutions. For example, MSU Denver has sought since its founding in 1965 to ensure that all students are prepared to become active members of their communities, contributing to the transformation of their families and their neighborhoods, and reimagining what is possible. This vision is reasserted in the [2030 University Strategic Plan](#) through the pillar of being a Civic and Economic Catalyst. MSU Denver President, Dr Janine Davidson, has been actively engaged in voter engagement work, participating on panels, bringing high-profile speakers to campus, and putting her own capital behind new initiatives such as the [Hart Center for Public Service](#) and a recently launched Summer Internship in Washington DC. Dr. Davidson has also signed the All In Presidents Commitment and often posts on social media during campus events such as National Voter Registration Day and Vote Early Day.

Additionally, the MSU Denver American Democracy Project is supported by a mission statement and student learning outcomes that are being integrated in both curricular and co-curricular programs across the institution:

ADP Committee Mission Statement:

The American Democracy Project at MSU Denver aims to develop citizens who can demonstrate civic skills, knowledge, and motivation at local, regional, national, and global scales. The values that ground this work are self-efficacy, fairness, social justice, equity, diversity, collaboration, and personal and collective responsibility.

Civic Learning Outcomes: When students graduate from MSU Denver, they will be able to:

- Articulate a sense of responsibility and personal commitment to addressing global and local challenges.
- Demonstrate skills of influence and action, including persuasion, appropriate contacts, and understanding organizational arrangements.
- Demonstrate skills of communication and leadership, including taking responsibility for group outcomes, processes and products; speaking publicly.
- Demonstrate skills of political analysis and judgment, including the ability to weigh pros and cons as well as take trade-offs into consideration.
- Demonstrate skills of teamwork and collaboration, including managing conflict and navigating diverse positions.

While these examples speak to only one of the three institutions, CCD and CU Denver have similar missions and visions – all three proudly combining on a single campus as Hispanic Serving Institutions that largely reflect the demographics of the city and the metropolitan region and the aspirations of our communities – immigrant and native-born alike: to create a community that is equitable, affordable, and inclusive, with strong, authentic neighborhoods that are economically diverse and vibrant.

Landscape

Each of the three institutions represents a slightly different student population, but collectively we serve approximately 40,000 students – both graduate and undergraduate, two-year and four-year. A majority of students on the campus are non-traditional and reside

in the city of Denver or other cities of the metropolitan region, while CU Denver also serves a more traditional student population including a larger population of out-of-state and international students. CU Denver has one recently built, university-owned student residence, while there are also three other student residences near campus that are owned and operated by third party companies. Beyond this limited student housing, most students live with family – indeed many of our students are raising their own families while completing college and working one or more jobs. This creates the need for creative approaches to engaging students on campus – where many arrive with limited time to attend class before dashing back to the rest of their busy lives.

If the last two years have taught us anything, it has been to tune our efforts to the frequency where our students are found. In 2020, our students were on Zoom, social media, and Canvas. In 2021, though most campus functions have returned to campus, students continue to be both overwhelmed by the challenges life has given them and hesitant to engage beyond their classes and virtual spaces. In 2022 we are hoping that more in-person events will build engagement and we are also prepared to continue engaging students through social media, virtual events, and the classroom (virtual or physical).

A brief review of the 2020 NSLVE data for all three institutions shows that our earlier efforts have paid off, with increased voting rates across nearly all groups, whether disaggregated by demographics or field of study. Nonetheless, we continue to see lower voting rates in key sectors: students from minoritized backgrounds – Asian students in particular – have lower voting rates, as do students from particular fields of study. While Engineering and Physical Sciences made important gains at MSU Denver – among the largest of all fields – Engineering remains low and Mathematical Science and Statistics lost ground. At CU Denver, voting rates in Journalism and Foreign Languages and Literature remain quite low, while at CCD Computer and Information Sciences improved but remains low. We were pleased to see the significant increases in areas targeted by the 2020 Action Plan, but were also reminded that key groups need renewed attention. For example, at MSU Denver students in Exploratory (undeclared) status, who are typically first-year students, continue to show low voting rates despite small gains.

Current institutional efforts have focused on ensuring that every student has seen and heard multiple invitations to register to vote, and that a variety of events (primarily virtual) provide opportunities to connect with community leaders, elected officials, and candidates throughout the year. During 2021 the focus was on the importance of local elections as well as the ways that students not currently eligible to vote could be engaged and exercise their voice. The MSU Denver Dialogues program also provided students the opportunity to engage in civil dialogue on complex issues of race and identity. In 2022, we will build on these past efforts with programming focused on “engagement beyond the ballot box” and civil dialogue. We also realize that there is likely to be ongoing divisiveness and polarization in the broader national environment and strive to provide students with resources to mitigate the potential harm and trauma that results. These realities make it ever more important to engage our campus experts in the academic disciplines, in units focused on diversity and inclusion, and in the community.

Goals

In 2022 our goals are focused on three key areas:

1. Continue voter engagement efforts to reach a voting rate of 60% in the mid-term election cycle (compared to rates ranging from 43.6 to 58.6 in 2018 across all three institutions), with a particular focus on demographic groups with lower voting rates in prior elections.
2. Begin to focus on the assessment of the civic learning outcomes described above.
3. Strengthen civic and community partnerships that provide our students opportunities to engage beyond elections, including a preliminary assessment of impact.

In the longer term – by 2030 – as stated in the MSU Denver Strategic Plan – our broad goals are to:

1. Be the convener for problem-solving and forecasting community needs through civic discourse.
2. Enrich the greater Denver community through lifelong learning and engagement.

More specifically, because we are predominantly non-traditional and non-residential institutions, we cannot rely solely on “teaching 18-year-olds to vote”. We must, instead ensure that all of our students, regardless of age, documented status, disillusion with “the system” or life stories that have created deep distrust, are able to connect with communities that matter to them and recognize their agency in effecting change.

NSLVE Data and related goals

As noted above, our 2020 NSLVE data suggests that our efforts over the past few years are yielding positive results. That said, there is still room for improvement across the board at each institution. For example, at MSU Denver there are three groups that demand ongoing attention:

- 1) students from minoritized backgrounds continue to vote at lower rates than white students – and most concerning, two groups show *lower* voting rates than in 2016: Native American/Alaskan Native and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. While these populations are quite small and the small changes shown in the data could simply be mathematical oddities, it is also very possible that these minoritized groups are less visible and thus feel less central to the conversation. Newly formed student groups may provide us insight on strategies to address this. For the mid-term election cycle we would like to see each of these populations reach a voting rate between 50 – 60%.
- 2) students from particular fields of study continue to show lower voting rates and one field – Mathematics and Statistics – in fact dropped. We will continue to work with faculty in these fields to identify effective strategies to engage these students – in voting and beyond. For the 2022 mid-term election cycle we would like to achieve a minimum 55% voting rate across all fields of study.
- 3) students who have not yet declared a major (captured in the “Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Humanities” field) continue to show low voting rates. These tend to be first-year students who are younger and are also likely to be the first in their family to attend college and possibly immigrants. We aim to achieve a voting rate of 55% for these students.

CU Denver and CCD will also home in on students in the demographics groups and field of study with the lowest voting rates. For example, as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, CU Denver’s students that identify with these population have a stronger voting rate than the national averages (57% for Asian, and 54% for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander), however that rate is far below the rate for students overall (77.7%). CCD’s voting rates for Asian and Black students are low compared to national averages and also deserve attention.

Strategy

We have laid the groundwork for 2022 efforts and beyond by developing a variety of concepts, programs and initiatives specific to voter engagement that are now nearing institutionalization and becoming easier to implement each time. Participation in various national initiatives, including Student Learn, Students Vote, and Ask Every Student (as part of the Co-Designer Cohort) also brings creative ideas and opportunities to bear on the challenges we face – none of which are unique to our campus, only multiplied three-fold. Simultaneously, conversations have begun, with a focus on developing permanent curricular and co-curricular programs that go beyond individual departments, engage students campus-

wide, and connect students to engagement beyond voting. Below is a brief list of example activities, programs, and initiatives. Dates and details are in many instances still being planned. One new strategy we will implement this coming year, in part as a response to low student bandwidth, is to identify key student groups and organizations and ask each of them to adopt one event or program to engage with as leaders and volunteers. In the past, our efforts to have student members of planning committees have failed in part because students have little time for ongoing, monthly (or more frequent) meetings. Many students and groups, however, have indicated interest in helping out *on a single event or idea*.

Voter engagement initiatives and programming:

- Incorporation of voter registration more deeply into Freshman Orientation: Students are currently asked/reminded to register but the interaction is relatively passive. We are building creative ways to bring more attention to the importance of registering to vote for every student eligible to do so, while reminding others that not being eligible to vote simply means they engage in other ways.
- Identification of faculty champions in key departments and engagement of faculty across the board in sharing voter engagement messages during classes and in Canvas, developing voting-related assignments in a variety of disciplines.
- Hosting of candidate forums, ballot issue panels, and debate watch parties as the election season unfolds. These events will likely be held in a virtual format to accommodate COVID conditions as well as students' varied locations. In all such events we seek to ensure that speakers and moderators include a diverse population and that student leadership groups that reflect the diversity of the campus are sharing information with their peers.
- Sessions hosted by state and local officials highlighting Colorado's role as a model for other states for election integrity and ease of voting.
- Partnering with Denver Clerk and Recorder, League of Women Voters, and New Era for voter registration drives, including National Voter Registration Day. Current discussions suggest that MSU Denver will deploy college students to area high schools to assist in "pre-registering" high school students.
- Engagement with all civic holidays as well as Constitution Day throughout the fall of 2022.
- Social media campaign and contests with key student groups (athletes, student organizations, etc.). We will particularly focus on student groups that speak to our diverse students – for example the Latina sorority on campus.
- Post-election events and spaces to support students processing the impact of polarization and/or any potential violence resulting from the elections (recognizing, as well, that such triggers may occur prior to the elections and events and spaces will be deployed as needed).

Longer term "beyond the ballot box" initiatives:

- Congress to Campus program, bringing two former members of Congress to campus to meet with students in a variety of classrooms and events to discuss the experience of elected office and model civic dialogue (this is a program sponsored by the Association of Former Members of Congress) (Completed April 19 – 20, 2022)
- March 29th event *Beyond the Ballot Box* connecting students to community organizations, local officials, and alumni to share opportunities for civic engagement and activism regardless of citizenship or documented status. (Completed)
- Roadrunners Rise/Advocacy Days are typically held in both the spring and fall semester, connecting students to opportunities to engage in advocacy work at the state capitol and beyond (Completed).

- CU Denver Deliberative Dialogue on Policing brought together students and community members to learn about, discuss and develop understanding of various perspectives about policing and community safety. (Completed)
- MSU Denver public service internships and presidential internship in Washington DC. These are paid internship opportunities both locally and in Washington that pair students with government agencies and nonprofits as well as mentorship by leaders in public service.
- Enhancement of two existing courses at MSU Denver: 1) a course on Civic Virtues collectively taught by Political Science, Philosophy, and History, connecting students to the theoretical concepts of civic virtue and democracy while also exploring the application and praxis of these concepts to issues students care about deeply. 2) a Student Success Seminar designed to support first-year students in the transition to college.
- Development of a new course (not yet named) that will bring students together across social science and humanities disciplines to apply their learning to local issues in collaboration with community leaders. This course is modeled on similar programs at California State University – Chico, and Tarleton State University (Texas A&M) that have shown excellent results.
- Development of a consistent process for assessing civic learning outcomes, starting with a process for identifying existing assignments in courses such as service learning and community-based research, gathering artifacts and incorporating an assessment rubric that can be used across disciplines.
- Ongoing development of a database (Collaboratory) of existing civic and community activities and partnerships university-wide.

Reporting

As in the past, all three institutions will make their NSLVE reports publicly available and encourage use of the reports across institutions to inform future efforts. Additionally, MSU Denver is currently launching an effort to gather information about the myriad civic and community partnerships that exist across campus, create consistent information sharing and ensure that community partners are part of the conversation and planning process as new initiatives are launched. Working with community partners to assess the university's impact and identify strategies for improvement is integral to our recently developed Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan.

Evaluation

While use of the NSLVE reports is central to evaluating the impact and effectiveness of our work, the length of time between each action/event and the eventual NSLVE results makes it impossible to rely on NSLVE data alone to refine our efforts. As we are currently developing an assessment strategy for civic learning outcomes broadly, one element of evaluation will be our initial results of these assessment strategies. More basic methods of evaluation will also be relied on: number of students engaging in specific events, feedback after events, use of hashtags, and so on. As each initiative or program is implemented, team leaders will ensure that the question "how will we know if this worked?" is posed and answered.