

ALL IN Democracy Challenge
Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver)
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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 Auraria Votes Committee, 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 Auraria Votes Committee. 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 created. CU Denver and CCD similarly achieved high voting rates of 77.7% (up 8.5 points) and 65.7% (up 10 points) respectively. In our plans for 2022 we set equally audacious goals, with a focus on minoritized populations and are looking forward to the release of the 2022 NSLVE reports so that we can gauge our ongoing progress. Every election cycle is important, and we have grown and strengthened our structures to carry on our work every year and every semester, however the 2024 election cycle feels more important than ever. As this plan will show, we are truly going *all in* on voter and civic engagement.

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 continue and expand activities and “buzz” across campus in a variety of venues and program areas, including expanding outreach into the community.

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 the act of voting to become advocates, participate in 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 2024 calendar year and election cycle, the plan below provides examples of the programming and initiatives we envision.

While our three institutions do not have a single center focused on civic engagement, we have learned to leverage the interest and resources of partners at each institution. The Presidents/Chancellor of each institution support our work and have signed onto the All In Challenge, and we are supported by a wide range of Vice Presidents, Deans, Directors, and other leaders who contribute resources for various events. The challenge is to find effective ways of engaging this energy and to place students in the lead as we develop programming

that speaks to them. During the fall of 2022 we developed an effective structure that combined the time and energy of paid student staff (Voter Engagement Student Ambassadors), a Faculty Lead, and individual student organizations or teams that adopted specific events to support. This structure will continue to provide the backbone for our work in 2024.

Leadership

The Auraria Campus 2023 Action Plan is led by a 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. Finally, new partnerships are now taking shape with the County Clerk and Records offices of Jefferson County and Adams County, serving areas where many of our students and families reside.

Auraria Votes Campus Leadership Team:

Elizabeth Parmelee, AVP for Undergraduate Studies, MSU Denver
Toni Aho, Assistant Director of Student Leadership Programs, MSU Denver
Shayla Bischoff, Assistant to the AVP of Undergraduate Studies, MSU Denver
Christine Sheikh, Student Academic Services Specialist, MSU Denver
Cara DeGette, Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Production, MSU Denver
Tammi Spicer-Dormuth, Assistant Professor and Chair, Dept of Political Science, History, & Geography, CCD
Kelsi Dew, Assistant Director for Student Engagement, UC Denver
Calvin Knutzen, City and County of Denver, Clerk and Recorder's Office

Student Leadership Groups:

Voter Engagement Student Ambassadors
MSU Denver Urban Leadership Program and Scholarship Support Program
MSU Denver Student Advocacy Council
CU Denver Student Government Assembly
CU Denver Office of Student Life
CU Denver School of Public Affairs
CCD Student Government Association
Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society at CCD
Students for a Democracy Society (Tri-Institutional)

Additional Campus Leaders and Partners:

Dr. Robert Preuhs, Professor and Chair of Political Science, MSU Denver
Dr. Shelby Balik, Assoc Prof, History, MSU Denver, MSU Denver
Dr. Christina Foust, Assoc Prof of Special Education, Speech Communication, MSU Denver
Dr. Paul Teske, Dean of School of Public Affairs, CU Denver
Dr. Genia Herndon, Assoc Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, CU Denver
Dr. Christopher Coleman, Prof at CU Denver
Dr. Jennifer Taylor, Prof at CU Denver

This broad group supports the work of the Auraria Votes Committee, 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 or Provost, 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 are Hispanic Serving Institutions designed with an access mission. 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, creating changemakers who contribute positively to their neighborhoods and the region. 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, bringing high-profile speakers to campus, and investing resources in the new Institute for Public Service. As noted above, all three institution leaders have signed onto the All In Challenge and CCD and CU Denver have similar missions and visions – all three proudly combining on a single campus as Hispanic Serving Institutions and anchor institutions that reflect the demographics of 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 who reside on or near the campus. CU Denver has one university-owned student residence and there are 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 few years have taught us anything, it has been to tune our efforts to the frequency where our students are found. In 2022 we began to see an increased attendance at events on campus that grew further in the fall of 2023 – in particular in spaces conducive to creating community – less formal, more open, and less intimidating. We also honed our social media and virtual engagement, and our presence in the classroom through our student ambassadors and began reaching out into the community to build voter engagement beyond campus, particularly in areas with historically low voter turnout.

Our 2020 NSLVE data for all three institutions showed that earlier efforts have paid off, and we hope that our 2022 data, when available, will continue that trend. As soon as those data are available, we will be able to set new quantifiable goals, but in the meantime, we continue to focus on areas where we had underperformed in the past: minoritized

populations and certain fields and disciplines that show lower rates of registration and turnout.

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, both formal and informal, have provided opportunities to connect with community leaders, elected officials, and candidates throughout the year. During 2023 we focused on off-cycle municipal elections, including the Denver Mayoral election, and the Fall state elections, with one issue on the ballot that was particularly complex and polemic. We have also continued to emphasize the ways that students can engage and exercise their voices beyond the elections, regardless of eligibility to vote. In 2024, we will build on these past efforts with programming focused on civil dialogue, election integrity, and engagement in the public sphere beyond voting – all while ensuring that eligible students are registered and understand the importance of voting in the 2024 elections. We realize that there will be ongoing divisiveness and polarization in the national environment, and we 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 2024 our goals are focused on three key areas:

1. Continue voter engagement efforts to reach a voting rate of 80% in the 2024 election cycle (compared to rates ranging from 65.7 to 77.7% in 2020 across all three institutions), with a particular focus on demographic groups with lower voting rates in prior elections.
2. Develop a sustainable structure for student roles and engagement that recognizes the “problem” of students graduating and moving on to bigger and better things.
3. Continue to collaborate with and enhance our partnerships with local Clerk and Recorder offices, enhancing their capacity in the face of staffing shortages and building understanding of election integrity.

In the longer term our broad goals are to build a resilient tri-institutional infrastructure that withstands ups and downs and contributes to democratic participation community-wide.

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 ensure that all students, regardless of age, documented status, disillusion 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 2022 NSLVE data is not yet available. As soon as it is available, we will be setting goals based on the growth we have already seen and the areas where we may continue to see a lag. There is always room for improvement and in the past, we have noted specific populations – whether demographic groups or fields of study – where registration and voting are lower. For example, at MSU Denver we continue to build engagement among our Native and Indigenous students – a population that has grown dramatically over the past two years. As an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, CU Denver’s students that identify with these populations 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 2023 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 the American Democracy Project 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. 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 implemented in 2022 and have continued this year is to hire paid student ambassadors who are available to support events, speak to classes and join broader community events to speak with voters and potential voters about the importance of participation. We have also identified key student groups and organizations and asked each of them to adopt one event or program to engage with as leaders and volunteers. These two strategies have meant that we have much higher student presence and leadership in our work, even as our students continue to have busy lives and low bandwidth.

Voter engagement initiatives and programming:

- 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, all supported by Voter Engagement Student Ambassadors and a Faculty Lead.
- Hosting candidate forums, ballot issue panels, and debate watch parties as the election season unfolds. 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, Jefferson Clerk and Recorder, Adams 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 into these communities and to area high schools to assist in “pre-registering” high school students.
- Engagement with all civic holidays as well as Constitution Day throughout 2024.
- Social media campaigns 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.
- An “I Voted” and “Vote” sticker design contest in partnership with the Denver Clerk and Recorder’s Office.
- 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 and is currently planned for April 15-17, 2024).
- Event(s) focused on helping students think about the possibility of running for elected office at the local level.
- Advocacy Days typically held by each institution during the spring and/or fall semester, connecting students to opportunities to engage in advocacy work at the state capitol and beyond.

- Deliberative Dialogues and a Civic Engagement and Dialogue Week, currently planned for the week of April 15, 2024. These events focus on building dialogue skills among students and community members to discuss challenging issues in a civil manner.

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. As appropriate, the tri-institutional Auraria Votes committee will highlight areas of strength and challenge and collaborate with our local Clerk and Record offices to identify ways that our efforts can inform and support their work. In the past we have made press releases, published articles in campus newsletters, and worked with various media outlets to share the impact of our voter engagement efforts.

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. More immediate methods of evaluation will also be relied on: the 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.