

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

ALL IN Contact Person:

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

Executive Summary

The Action Plan for MSU Denver is developed in coordination with the tri-institutional Voter Friendly Campus team, which includes representatives (faculty, staff and students) from all three institutions on the Auraria Campus (MSU Denver, University of Colorado Denver, and the Community College of Denver). 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 but less directly involved in the planning. 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 already has a strong record of voter engagement in key elections over the past decade or more. We 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. 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 MSU Denver and the Auraria Campus.

While MSU Denver does 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 the university. From the President, to the Faculty Senate, to the Classroom to Career Hub and the Center for Equity and Student Achievement, 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 the AVP for Undergraduate Studies has taken a lead role, together with the American Democracy Project committee, 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, yet connecting them to short-term leadership opportunities will create both valuable learning for the students and badly needed student voices for our work.

Leadership

MSU Denver's 2021 Action Plan is lead by two key groups – one specific to MSU Denver and the other broader group representing the entire Auraria Campus and a variety of civic partners.

MSU Denver American Democracy Project (ADP) Committee Members:

Dr. Katia Campbell

Associate Professor in Communication Studies and President, Faculty Senate

kcampb28@msudenver.edu

Dr. Robert Preuhs

Professor and Chair of Political Science

rpreuhs@msudenver.edu

Dr. Lori McKinney

Classroom to Career Hub, Service Learning Specialist

Lmckinn9@msudenver.edu

Dr. Nick Recker

Professor of Sociology

nrecker@msudenver.edu

Dr. Shelby Balik

Associate Professor of History

sbalik@msudenver.edu

Dr. Adam Graves

Professor of Philosophy, Denver Project on Humanistic Inquiry (D-Phi)

agrave13@msudenver.edu

Lisa Abendroth

Professor of Communication Design

abendrot@msudenver.edu

Dr. AnnJanette Alejano-Steele

Interim AVP for Graduate Studies

alejanos@msudenver.edu

Dr. Bethany Fleck Dillen

Professor of Psychology

bffleck2@msudenver.edu

Dr. Megan Hughes

Director, Honors Program

mhughe47@msudenver.edu

Alyssa Marks

Classroom to Career Hub, Associate Director of Industry Partnerships

amarks5@msudenver.edu

Jeremy VanHooser

Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Diversity Coordinator

jvanhoo1@msudenver.edu

The group above reflects participation in political and civic engagement work at MSU Denver. This

broad group meets less frequently, but 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. This group includes representatives from each institution (faculty, staff, and students), as well as key civic partners such as the League of Women Voters, New Era, and the Denver Clerk and Recorder's Office.

Commitment

MSU Denver was founded on the principle of providing access to students and community members who had not been served by the state's traditional higher education institutions. From its founding, the university has sought to ensure that MSU Denver 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.

Additionally, the 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 publically.
- 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.

Landscape

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 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 – among the largest of all fields – Engineering remains low and Mathematical Science and Statistics lost ground. 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: in particular, 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 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:

- Continue voter engagement efforts to reach a voting rate of 60% in the mid-term election cycle (compared to 54.8 in 2018), with a particular focus on demographic groups with lower voting rates in prior elections.
- Begin to focus on the assessment of the civic learning outcomes described above.
- 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 University Strategic Plan – our broad goals are to:

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

More specifically, because we are a non-traditional and non-residential institution, 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 and in particular there are three groups that demand ongoing attention:

- 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%.
- 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.
- 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 also possibly immigrants. We aim to achieve a voting rate of 55% for these students.

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. 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 event will likely be held in a virtual format to accommodate COVID conditions as well as students varied locations.
- 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 students groups (athletes, student organizations, etc.)
- 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 events may ne needed prior to the elections and 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)
- 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.
- 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.
- Hart Center for Public Service Hart Interns and MSU Denver 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: 1) a Hart Center sponsored 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, MSU Denver will make NSLVE reports publicly available and encourage use of the reports across the institution 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.