

Oakland University Center for Civic Engagement 2023-2024 Action Plan

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2018, Oakland University established its Center for Civic Engagement to:

- support efforts to enhance civic engagement and civic literacy;
- encourage student involvement in civic engagement and public policy through volunteerism, internships, and experiential learning;
- bring the campus and community together through non-partisan dialogue surrounding important issues of public concern; and
- promote research related to public policy to inform policy makers and the public.

The Center is the main avenue through which OU's efforts to increase civic literacy, democratic engagement and preparedness of students to be active participants in their democratic society.

The Action Plan for 2023-2024 was developed by the Center's Director with input from the Center's Campus Advisory Board. It establishes a course of action for the 2023-2024 academic year in the area of civic engagement on campus (as well as in the community) by leveraging the 2024 election cycle.

The Action Plan also takes into account some new realities that we must acknowledge when planning this kind of work. Importantly, Michigan has adopted online voter registration and is moving toward automatic voter registration. These changes will mean we do voter registration work in a different manner moving forward. We are not deterred by these new realities. We simply must adapt our work to them. We believe they will make our voter registration work easier and more efficient.

The components of the Action Plan will be carried out mainly on OU's main campus during the course of the next several semesters. It will be the responsibility of the Center director to implement the plan, with the help of the Campus Advisory Board.

Leadership

The director of the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) will lead the work outlined in the 2023-2024 Action Plan. The director chairs the Campus Advisory Board as well as the Founding Advisory Board (this group of individuals from off campus features alumni and prominent members of the community). The Campus Advisory Board's role is to help implement the CCE's plans on campus; the Founding Advisory Board helps set the overall direction of the CCE in terms of ideas for events and is an important tie to the community.

Members of the Campus Advisory Board are from all parts of campus. Included on the Board are faculty from disciplines such as communication, journalism, and political science; a student representative from our Student Congress; the head of our alumni office; the director of the Center for Student Activities; and the chief research officer. The group meets as needed but the director will work with individuals from the Board to take advantage of their individual expertise.

In addition to engaging with the members of the Founding Advisory Board, the CCE will invite other groups to partner with our efforts. In the past we have worked with a wide range of partners including the Patriot Week Foundation, the Great Lakes Civility Project, League of Women Voters, Oakland Area, National Voter Registration Day, the Michigan Secretary of State, The New Foster Care, Parents For Educational Equity in Rochester Schools (PEERS), Greater Rochester Area Inclusion Network (GRAIN), and different departments and offices on campus (e.g., Oakland University Student Congress, the Department of Political Science, the School of Nursing, the Division of Student Affairs and Diversity, and the Center for Multicultural Initiatives). These types of partnerships will be expanded as our work continues.

Commitment

The leadership at Oakland University including the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the provost, the president and the Board of Trustees could not be more supportive of our efforts. The development of the ideas behind the CCE were generated over a lengthy process, but once the goals of the CCE were well defined there has great support. There has also been incredible support from others on campus who hear about the ideals of the CCE. For instance, we have successfully with University Advancement on philanthropy. We are also working to communicate with alumni and the local communities.

We do not have a specific focus on democratic engagement in our general education curriculum. Students have course options that speak to this topic but it is not required. The CCE's plan is to use extra- and co-curricular events to enhance student learning. Down the road, the CCE would like to establish a certificate for students who, through attending and engaging with CCE activities, are certified as a "civically engaged student."

The institutional commitment to the CCE's work is found broadly in its four goals – student success, scholarship, community engagement and diversity. The CCE can contribute to and impact each of these areas. More importantly, our leadership sees this and has responded very well to the idea.

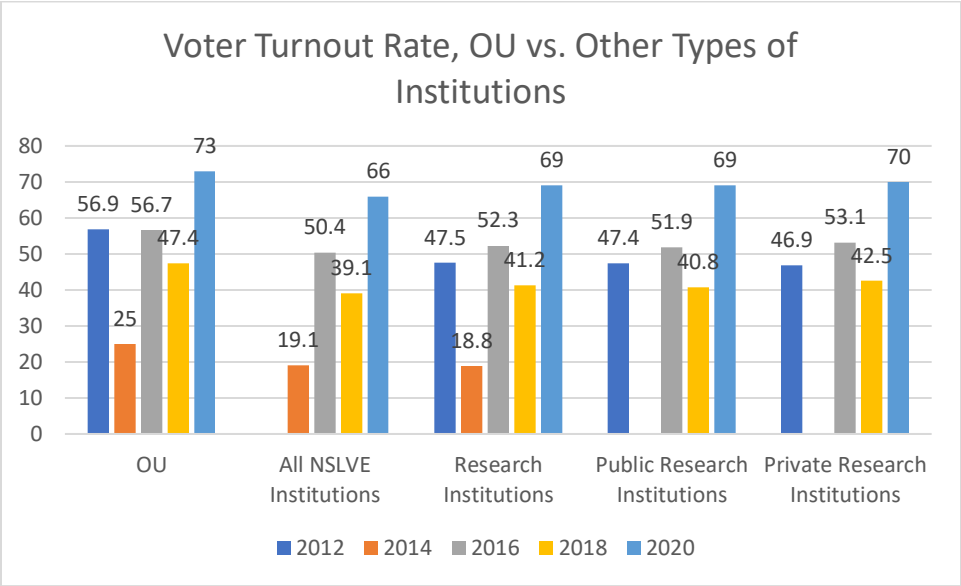
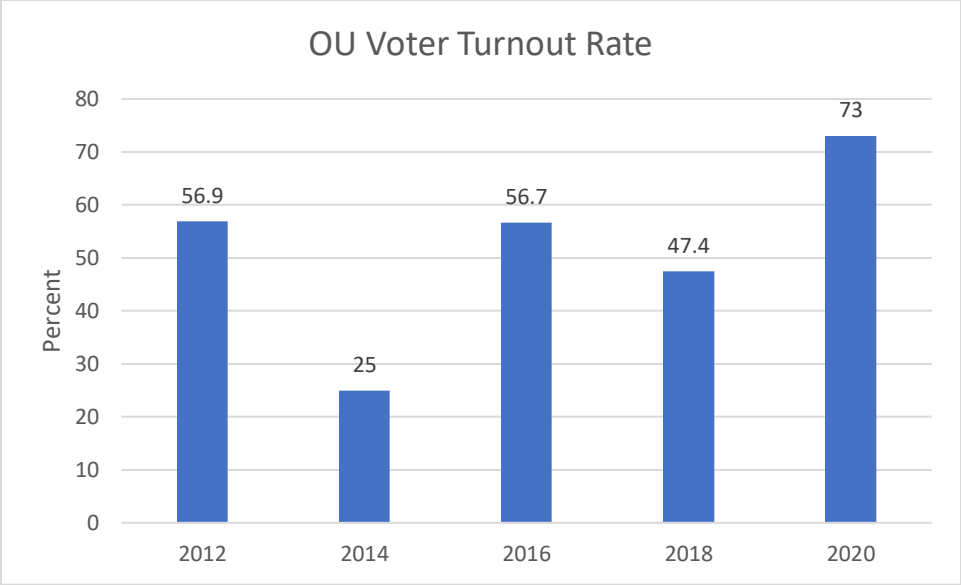
Landscape

The current democratic engagement landscape on campus shows mixed indicators. As noted above, there is currently no explicit goal, curriculum or learning outcome linked to civic and/or democratic engagement.

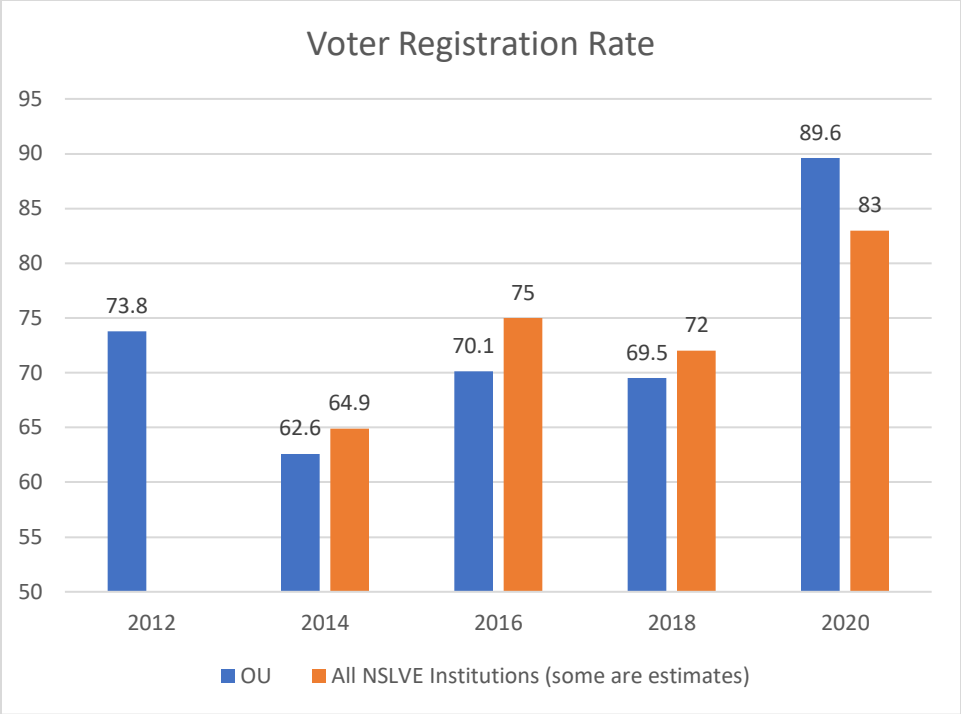
The activities of our students are also mixed.

We do not yet have our 2022 NSLVE data to report here. However, according to the most recent NSLVE reports available, Oakland University students are relatively high performers. In 2020, 73.4% of students voted which was higher (by 7.4 percentage points) than the voting rate for all other institutions; it was a large decrease from 2016 (16.1 percentage points).

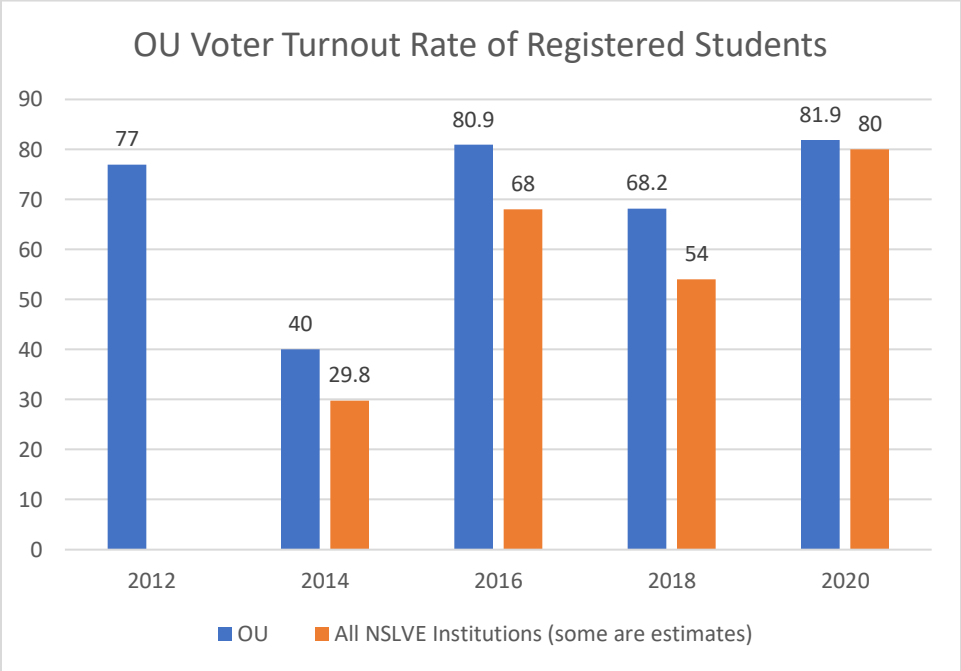
Relative to other institutions, OU compares favorably. In all years where we have data, OU outpaces other NSLVE institutions, including all the types of institutions measures.



An interesting change is seen in registration rates. While OU lagged behind other institutions on this front from 2014-2018, in 2020, OU students vaulted past other NSLVE institutions with nearly 90% registration compared to 83% nationally.



OU continues to see excellent participation from our students who are registered. Voting among the registered group was nearly 82% (higher than the rate for all other institutions).



There is a wide range of participation in terms of field of study (like many colleges and universities). Engineering and some other professional fields saw much lower voting rates compared to others including history, education, and philosophy.

Some somewhat dated CIRP survey data (we only have 2016 and 2018 available) also shows some mixed indicators. For instance, OU freshmen students engaged at varying levels in some civic activities including demonstrating for a cause (18.1% and 27.4%, respectively, in 2016 and 2018 said frequently or occasionally), volunteering (82.4% and 80.7%), voting in a student election (55.2% and 54.3%) or discussing politics (80.2% and 74.9%). Of note, our students engaged in these activities at lower rates compared to our peer institutions.

OU freshmen were also similar freshmen at our peer schools in terms of being open to having their views challenged (63.6% and 69.7%) and an ability to negotiate controversial issues (68.2% and 69.4%), but the overall percent who saw these as strengths of theirs was surprisingly high.

OU freshmen also reported a lower importance, relative to freshmen at our peer schools, for activities including keeping up with political affairs (36.6% and 34.1%, respectively, said this was either “somewhat” or “very” important). The low percentages are disappointing but important to know.

In addition, fewer OU freshmen report, compared to peer institutions, according to NSSE data, that they have discussions with others that include people with different views than their own. Interestingly, this difference disappears for seniors.

As noted, OU currently does not have a requirement of any kind that would guarantee students encounter civic engagement in their curriculum. CCE would like to develop, in the longer term, a certificate that recognizes students’ (and community members’) civic engagement in co- and/or extra-curricular activities; a more ambitious goal would be to create a minor in civic engagement.

Barriers – internal and external – are, at this time, impacted by the CCE being in its relatively infancy. Given that we launched only a little over one year ago, we face a lack of familiarity on campus and off. We have worked to build our name recognition (especially on campus) with different groups with the hopes of building relationships and expanding our capacity by bringing on other interested faculty, staff and students. That has started to pay dividends as a number of campus groups have approached the CCE about partnering on programs and events. Resources are important in any endeavor. As noted earlier, we have worked with University Advancement on philanthropic efforts; we have thus far secured \$130,000 in endowed gifts.

Goals

Before stating the goals for the next election cycle, it is important to revisit the contextual changes noted above. In 2018, voters adopted Proposal 3; this amended the state Constitution to bring reforms to how Michigan citizens engage in the election process. The changes include: automatic voter registration (opt out rather than opt in at the Secretary of State’s office), same-day voter registration, online voter registration, no-excuse absentee ballots, and others.

Given the voter-registration reforms, we are still discussing how that will change our approach to that activity and how we want to execute that work in the future.

Short-term goals:

- Identify the best way to provide voter registration for students (i.e., hard-copy forms vs. online registration at stations at various locations on campus, etc.) in the wake of Proposal 3.
- Maintain a roughly-90% voter registration rate. This folds into the point above about new voter registration methods. With automatic voter registration, we may be at or near the top end of what is possible. A change from recruitment to maintenance is likely a wise move.
- Achieve 75% voter participation among students in 2024 (based on 73% turnout in 2020).
- Participate in the Michigan Secretary of State's Michigan Collegiate Voting Challenge which will make awards in the following categories: highest campus voter turnout, most improved campus voter turnout, and highest student voter registration rate.
- Work with select departments and schools on campus that have shown relatively low turnout levels in past cycles to boost participation from those students.

Longer-term goals:

- Continue to build a culture where the CCE and OU are seen as the “convener of conversations” around issues of public importance and concern.
- Continue to explore a “civically engaged” certificate for students and community members based on attendance of and engagement with CCE events.
- Expand our interactions with current and former elected officials.

Strategy

Our strategy and tactics are still emerging, given that this draft was prepared in January 2022 and updated in May 2022.

Long-term Strategy

- Involve more campus partners
 - We need to better involve on a regular basis a wider swath of the campus community. This mainly involves reaching out to faculty and administrators in our professional schools – e.g., engineering, health sciences – to involve them in our work. This will help us reach goals like working with departments and programs that show lower performance in registration rate and voter turnout. We are about to remake our advisory board so this may be an opportunity to find and establish greater connections.
- Develop closer ties to university administration
 - This will help us take steps to “institutionalize” this work, be it in terms of annual reminders on the student web portal on voter registration or the development of a co-curricular “engaged student” badge or designation.

Short-term Tactics

As we have done throughout recent election cycles (as well as non-election cycle years) we will host a variety of events related to election and democratic engagement. While these plans are not well defined for Winter 2024 or Fall 2024 just yet, we have had great successes already in Fall 2023.

In June of 2023, we announced a new series in the Center for Civic Engagement – the Dennis Muchmore Public Policy Series. The inaugural event in the Series, “Breaking the Barrier: The Importance of Civility and Improving Political Discourse,” was held from 6-7 p.m. on Monday, September 18, in the Oakland Center Banquet Rooms and saw nearly 250 attendees. It featured two former governors of Michigan.

On September 19, 2023, the Center for Civic Engagement marked National Voter Registration Day 2023 by hosting two voting rights champions. As teenagers, Alice Moore and Denise Holt became original foot soldiers in the battle for equal voting rights in the United States when they marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1965. Carolyn Clifford from WXYZ TV in Detroit moderated a discussion with Ms. Holt and Ms. Moore during which they discussed their experiences championing voting rights in the 1960s as well as challenges that they see in today’s political environment on similar topics.

The audience for this event included the Oakland University community (i.e., students, faculty and staff), the boarder community, as well as, importantly, students from Pontiac High School.

This event was an incredible opportunity for OU and all attendees but especially the younger students. They had a chance to hear from two women who *lived* history. We were delighted to bring these historic figures to campus and share the opportunity with others.

In addition, we worked with Campus Vote Project to host over 200 students (college and high school) from around the state of Michigan for the Michigan Student Voting Summit. We also welcomed Michigan’s secretary of state, attorney general, several state legislators and a number of election clerks to the event as speakers.

We are in the planning phases for the next two semesters and can update you when there is more certainty around our plans.

Reporting

This plan will be shared via email with campus leaders and posted to the CCE website. We will also work to turn this text version of a report into a more eye-catching presentation so that it can be more easily shared with those interested.

As we usually do, we will work with campus allies to spread the word on our work – including voter turnout data – with the campus and the broader community. We will do, as we have done in the past, have stories for the OU News and Oakland Post (the student paper), written about NSLVE data as well as events we hold. We drafted a guest column for a regional news outlet earlier this year based on the NSLVE data we received on 2020, but the outlets passed because it was both too far removed from 2020 and too far from 2022.

Evaluation

The CCE director will work with campus leadership to determine assessment targets.

For some information, we will have to wait for the next NSLVE reports.